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THE KING OF PANGO PANGO
AND OTHER STORIES

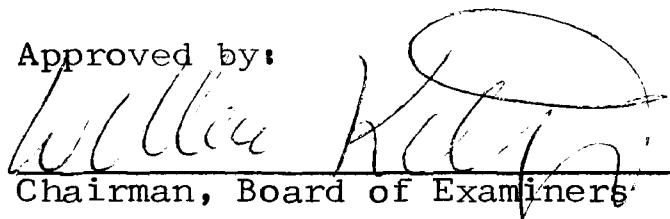
By


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B.A., The University of Michigan, 1976

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA
1978

Approved by:


Chairman, Board of Examiners


Dean, Graduate School

12 21-78
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THE KING OF PANGO PANGO

In 1944, my father met the Prince of Pango Pango. They were in the army together in Nancy, France. A photograph shows my father, boyish, in a plaid kilt and a beret standing beside the Prince. The prince, whose name is long and difficult to pronounce in Samoan, who my father called simply, Pango, is a large man with a big round stomach and a round balding head. The Prince is also wearing a kilt, but it is too small, so he holds it together with one hand at his side. He is wearing dark socks and you can see his garters. Both my father and the Prince are stinking drunk. The photograph is old. There are creases in it and it looks as if it had been put through an olive-drab wash.

"I told you, Brother," my father has called me that ever since my sister was born, "what ole' Pango said. Said all they do is 'fish, diddle and dive for pearls.' Hell, half the time they don't even wear clothes." My father's eyes brightened up when he said this like they do when he goes to the mail box expecting the registered letter announcing the results of the Irish Sweepstakes.

The two of us were on the roof. We had gone up to

adjust the leader wires on the antenna. We finished and were just leaning back on the slope of the roof. It was quiet. The sun was out and the roof warm under the seat of my pants and on the soles of my tennis shoes.

I looked out over our back yard into the neighbor's, the Pollards. From that height, it was an amazing thing to see. Plaster elves with red pointed hats were all over the yard, carrying wheelbarrows full of flowers, fishing in little plastic bowls buried in the ground. Metallic globes on pedestals and bird baths, like toadstools, sprung out of the putting green lawn. I could see Elmer Pollard, watering can in hand, stooping amid rows of sunflowers and tulips wearing a yellow straw hat with a built-in green plastic visor.

"You can say what you want about ole' Elmer," said my father. "But that's one hell of a back yard."

I looked beyond Elmer Pollard to the new high school. Sprinklers sent gigantic sprays arching out over the shiny green grass on the football field. Two people jogged around the black oval of the track. The day was clear; the sky a rich powder blue. Contrails seemed so close you could almost touch them. My eyes followed a small path that led from the school to a gate in our backyard. I looked down into the turquoise of our swimming pool. It appeared to have no water in it at all. I could hear the faint gurgle of water running down the strainer into the pool filter.

"I bet ole' Pango," said my father, "is king of the whole goddamn island. At least, that's what he said. He said he'd be king."

"I didn't know you knew any royalty," I said.

"Oh shit yes," said my father.

The sun was hot. I took off my shirt and walked over to the edge of the roof. "You know, I never thought about it, but this would be a hell of a dive," I said. "If you got out far enough you wouldn't have any trouble."

My father walked over to the edge. He wasn't wearing a shirt. He had on a pair of tan slacks and white tennis shoes with ship's pilot wheels on their sides. He stood there on the edge looking down into the pool. The deep end was the closest to us, less than fifteen feet from the back door of our house.

I tried to imagine what it would be like to jump into the pool. I could almost do it. My stomach tingled. I had the same feeling at Waterman Elementary School when I tried to look over the banister into the stairwell. The building was old and I could never get close enough to the edge to look down. I didn't think about getting hurt, just the horrible jar of hitting the marble floors, the jar your whole body feels when you step off a curb you haven't seen.

"Well," said my father. "Who goes first?"

I looked down at the pool. I was thirsty. I thought how good a cold beer would taste, but I knew there was none in the house.

"Christ, Dad. Look. You have to hit right in the center, otherwise, you'll hit the sides of the pool." I shivered when I thought of getting a bad footing off the roof and landing on the pool's cement edging.

"Then you're not goin'?" asked my father. He was serious. I stood with my knees slightly bent and felt the sun on my shoulders and back and on the top of my head.

"Come on," I said. I started for the ladder. "Let's get something to drink."

"Then get out of the way," he said. He went half way up the roof. He bent over and took off his shoes. Then his pants. He stood there on the roof, barefoot, in a pair of light-blue, low-rise Jockey shorts. He said, "Move" with a frightening determination.

The wind parted the salt and pepper hair on his chest. I looked at the hole the size of a golf ball in his right leg where he was hit in Normandy. He had almost lost the leg. One drunk night at four in the morning, he told me he took out his revolver and held it with both hands on the doctor when he heard the doctor talk of taking it off.

"Come on, Dad," I said. But he was already running down the slope of the roof, his arms dangling loose at his sides. The expression on his face scared me. His bare right foot hit on the edge of the roof. The shingles creaked and the drain pipe rattled. And then I imagined him crumpled on the cement, white shattered bones sticking out of his tanned skin. But he was in a good arch over the pool,

feet first. Just before he hit, he tucked into a cannon ball. Water splashed over the side of the house and went in through the screen where my mother stood washing the dishes. She screamed, thinking my father had fallen off the roof.

My father came up slowly, white bubbles fizzing all around him. The cement around the pool was wet. He didn't start laughing at first, he blew water out of his nose, then wiped the hair off his forehead. He looked up at me with a big grin on his face.

"You're out of your mind!" yells my mother from the screen door. My father just laughs.

"So, Brother, you're not comin down the easy way?" he said, as I started down the ladder.

"No," I said. "Not today." Then I climbed down the ladder carrying his shoes in one hand and his pants slung over my shoulder.

Marshall is small--eight thousand. Before the Dutch Elm disease the streets were lined with gigantic elm trees that buried all the yards and curbs with their leaves in the fall. The elms had to be cut down. The wives of the Jaycees replanted them with oaks, but their trunks are small, the size of a young girl's wrist. Two of these oaks are in our front yard. Our house is new, Colonial yellow. The taxes are high, but we are close to two schools.

It was the summer after my first year of college. My father and I had been doing a lot around the house. We

painted it and put up a fence around the back yard so that my father, or anyone else for that matter, could skinny dip without the neighbors calling. That summer, right after the fence was up, I even caught my mother out there, splashing around without a stitch.

I had a room downstairs in our house. It was like an apartment of my own. I had a small refrigerator in my room that wasn't plugged in and an extension phone on the nightstand by my bed. I answered it late at night when my father called.

The phone rang one Saturday morning at six. It was my father; his voice low, the words a little slurred. Typewriters and office noises were in the background. I could hear my mother pick up the extension.

"Brother," said my father, "I need you to do a little somethin for me. Christ, I'm in jail."

Adrenaline tingled in my stomach when I thought of the night before. My mother never liked the old man to drink around the house. So he kept a bottle in the garage. Three or four times during a TV show he'd get up and go outside. "Where you going, Dad?" "Just out here a minute." He drank Bacardi or lime-flavored vodka so you wouldn't smell it on his breath. By eleven o'clock he'd be drunk. Then my mother would hide the keys to the car.

That night my old man got a wild hair--maybe to make a last call someplace or to see some girl or maybe just to drive around. He had to get out. And, anyway, he liked his

new car. A '67, rose-beige T-Bird with white bucket seats. He paid eighty a month for that car, as much as a lot of people paid for rent, and the old lady had the keys hid someplace and he couldn't find them.

From deep in his diaphragm, he yelled, "Keys! The Goddamn keys!"

"You don't need to go anyplace. You're drunk."

"Keys! Goddamn it, the keys!"

The yelling cut through the walls and the floors and I walked up the stairs into the dining room. My mother sat at the table, her hair freshly done and shiny black from the beauty shop.

"Give him the keys," I said.

My father stood, swaying back and forth in the doorway with one hand in his pocket. "He'll kill himself," said my mother, and a ring, a cluster of diamonds, sparkled in the light from the fixture above the dining room table. A diamond, she tells her friends, for every year of their marriage and a few more for all the crap.

"Just give him the keys. You'll come back in a little while, won't you, Dad?"

"I'm gonna stay out all night!" he yelled and then he turned to me. "Might just end up in Pango Pango." He winked.

"We need groceries tomorrow. You better be back in time to get groceries," said my mother from the hallway leading to their bedroom. From a closet she dug out one of

her old pocket books, a dark-blue one with beads all over it where she kept things. She glared at my father, her chin dimpled, as she handed him the keys.

I thought of her, then, when we first moved up North; she had the same look in her eyes. My uncle moved us in his new light-blue '57 Chevrolet station wagon. I rode up front between my father and my uncle. The three of us had gotten flat-tops for the trip up. My mother rode in the back with piles of clothes and blankets and pillows on either side of her. She spread mustard on sandwiches with a plastic knife. Her hair was in a pony-tail and she cried most of the way.

"Now Beautiful," said my uncle, looking in the rear view mirror, "don't worry a bit. You're gonna like it up here, I swear."

"Sure she will," said my father and he took a slug off a Coke in a green bottle that didn't shine any more because of the scratches.

My mother wiped her eyes with the side of her hand and gave us each a sandwich.

Before my father left that night, he put on a light-blue V-neck sweater and a pair of alligator loafers. He bent over to polish the loafers. The smell of the polish reminded me of Sunday mornings, getting ready for church, my father putting the part in my hair as I stood on the lid of the toilet, when we used to do things like go to church.

He looked good as he went out the door. His hair was just beginning to gray around the temples and he's never weighed more than one-sixty-five in his whole life. I didn't think about when he was coming back, because I had no idea. He always showed up or called, and he's never been gone for more than a week.

So now he was in jail. I sat on the edge of my bed with the telephone receiver cradled between my shoulder and neck. I picked up the clock; it was six in the morning.

"The jail?" I said.

"Yeah, Christ," said my father. "Just a minute. I got to do somethin. Hold on."

As I sat listening to the office noises in the background, the airy voices of men talking, I thought of the first early morning call I got from my father.

It was late on a Friday night the summer I graduated from high school. Paula and I had been parked behind a cemetery on Twelve Mile Road, drinking vodka and Coke. We rolled around in the front seat of her father's black Dodge, rubbing naked chests, until Paula got sick. She threw up down the side of the car and into the slot the window receded into. I tied her long hair, which hung almost to her belt loops, back in a pony-tail and managed to clean off the door as best I could.

When I got her home, she was slumped over in the seat like she was dead. "Christ, Paula. Pull yourself together."

"Fuck you," she said. "Let me sleep."

"You can't sleep here," I said.

I went around to her side of the car and pulled her out. I held her as we walked up the steps to her house. I knew everything would be all right, because her parents slept with an air conditioner running and Paula always slipped into her room by a back staircase. "Here are the keys," I said and she took them. We stood in the doorway, kissing, until her next-door neighbor's car lights flashed on us as he pulled into his driveway.

I walked home. I got in sometime after two and instinctively checked the kitchen counter for my father's watch. He was in bed when his watch was on top of a pile of letters and bills at the end of the counter. It wasn't there.

On my way downstairs to my room, the phone rang. I ran to answer it. A woman's voice asked, "You Sky's son?"

I said I was.

"He say tell you come over here an get him."

"Where is he?"

"410 Roosevelt. You comin?"

"Roosevelt? Let me talk to him."

"Honey, he ain't gonna do you no good to talk to now. You just better come get him."

"Is anything wrong? Where's Roosevelt?"

"I'm tired and I wanta go to bed. Roosevelt's off Emmet. Just come get him." She hung up.

I went into the kitchen and made a cup of instant coffee with hot tap water. My mother heard me. She came into the kitchen in a shrimp colored house coat, holding the neck closed at the collar.

"That your father on the phone?"

"Yeah, kinda. I'm going after him."

"I don't know what he's into," she said. "He called some colored boys over to pick him up. No tellin what you'll get into goin over there. I wouldn't go. Let him get out of his own jams."

"I shouldn't be too long," I said.

My mother went back into her bedroom and got the keys to the car.

I took the back way to Battle Creek. I drove with the bright lights on, the small red light in the shape of a thunderbird glowing from the middle of the instrument panel. No other cars passed me on the way. I drove the length of Emmet street before I found Roosevelt. It was in a bad part of town. Most houses had green asphalt siding meant to look like bricks. A few places had tar paper additions. Cadillacs, Buicks and Oldsmobiles with FM antennas and whitewalls four inches wide were parked in driveways or in front of the houses in the dirt.

Four-ten was dark. No porch light. No cars in the drive. I pulled in and left the engine running. No one came to the door. I rechecked the address and knocked again. No one came. I went around to the side of the house. I

thought maybe I could knock on a window. A dog barked inside.

Just as I started around to the back of the house, a white Riviera screeched to a stop across the driveway, blocking the T-Bird in. Three black men got out and walked around to the front of the T-Bird. One guy looked inside. The driver's pants were the color of Orange Crush.

"What you doin?" he shouted.

"I've come to pick up my old man. You know him? S. K. Shakely?"

The three of them moved closer. "Whatcha doin around that house?"

"I said I've come to get my father. Look, I'm not doing anything."

One of the men behind the guy in the orange pants said, "The mutherfucker . . ." They started toward me.

I said, "Look . . ." and didn't know what else to say. One guy had something in his hand.

They were right up to me, there was no place to run, when the porch light came on. The porch had been screened in and boxes were stacked half way up the screens. A black woman stood in the doorway. Behind her was my father. My father had his hand over his eyes shielding them from the bare overhead light-bulb and the glare of the T-Bird's headlights.

"That you, C. D.?" said my father. He looked around to where I stood. He squinted, "Well, Brother, whatcha doin

over there?"

"All the lights were off. I was going around to the back."

My father stood there a moment, then he looked at the three black men, then again at me. "What the hell?" he said. He walked off the porch and we met in the lights of the T-Bird.

"C. D." said my father, "this is my son here, S. K. Jr."

I offered my hand to the black man in the orange pants. We shook.

"Look, man," he said. "I didn't know no nothin 'bout you."

"Sure," I said.

"Jesus," said my father, "what the hell time is it?"

I told him about four o'clock. He shook his head. Then he looked up at C. D. He hunched me in the ribs with his elbow. "I bet, Brother, you don't know about ole' C. D. here. 'S' got one of the biggest guns in Battle Creek." My father measured up on his forearm and winked at me.

C. D. leaned against the hood of the T-Bird and smiled up at my father.

"Go ahead, C. D. Show him." My father kept looking at me. "I swear, Brother. It's the biggest goddamn thing you'll ever see."

The two guys chuckled. One guy said, "Yeah. Go ahead, C. D."

C. D. shrugged his shoulders, then shook his head looking down at the gravel in the driveway. Without looking up, he reached across the front of his pants and undid a row of four snaps on the side. I heard the tappets ticking in the T-Bird's engine. I could feel the engine's warmth; smell gas and anti-freeze. C. D.'s orange pants dropped down to his lean thighs. He wore a pair of black nylon bikini underwear. The black woman in the doorway says, "You not gonna show it, C. D.?" She came to where we were standing.

C. D. reached into his underwear and pulled out the biggest cock I had ever seen in my life. It didn't look real.

"Lawd in heaven!" said the black woman. She put her hand to the side of her face, her mouth wide open.

My father just shook his head. C. D. stood holding it in his hand, looking down at it without cracking a smile, as if it were a baby or a rainbow trout. One of the guys walked closer to get a better look. "Whoo-oo, C. D." C. D. put it back in his pants. My father winked at me again. "A real monster," he said.

"It's unbelievable," I said.

C. D. asked if we wanted a drink. He went to his car and brought back a pint of R & R and offered it around. I didn't take any and when it got to my father he took the bottle and then looked at me.

"Christ, Dad," I said. "It's late. We better get going."

He hesitated a moment with the bottle in his hand. "Yeah, Brother. You're right. Momma's gonna have a fit." He passed the bottle back to C. D.

I drove and my father sat beside me smoking a cigarette. My father broke out laughing. He looked over at me. I thought you'd shit," he said, "when ole' C. D. whipped out that big ole' thing."

"Believe me. I've never seen anything like it."

"Wears a jock strap most of the time," said my father. "Never slows him down, though. Jesus, does he get it." He sat back in the seat and didn't say anything for a while. Then he leaned forward a little and said, "Reminds me a lot of ole' Pango. Pango'd get it when nobody else would. Jesus, that guy could live."

"What was he doing in the army, anyway," I said.

"Interpreter. He knew French and German like he knew English. I never heard him, but they say he could talk Chinese."

My father looked straight ahead, out over the hood. "What a cockster," he said. "I told you, didn't I when he inspected that whore house full of French girls. He just walked to the head of the line, there's guys lined up down to the street and says he's the Government Whore House Inspector. He used tongue depressors to spread those girls'

things apart. And he got the two best ones for us. Pretty things too."

He laughed hard and then wiped his eyes. We drove without passing any cars. The first bit of light was just beginning to show.

My father opened the glove compartment, looked through the eight track tapes and then put a Merle Haggard tape into the tape-player. There was a burst of sound. Merle Haggard sang, "Tonight I'm going to love somebody to death" and my father turned the volume down low enough so we could still talk.

"Listen," he said. "I haven't told your Mother, but I'm gettin out."

"What do you mean 'gettin out'?"

"Well, I'll tell ya. Thought I'd get out to see ole' Pango. Without your goddamn mother along. Livin with that woman is gettin old, Brother."

"What in the hell are you going to do in Pango Pango?"

My father glared at me in disbelief. He pushed the button that controlled the power window. It moved down smoothly. He threw out his cigarette and then turned back to face me. "What'm I gonna do in Pango Pango?" he said. He looked out over the hood. "Nothin', but a little fishin', a little diddlin' and a little divin' for pearls. Pull over here."

He got out and took a leak looking over a field of

new corn and beyond it the expressway. He stood in the yellow interior light facing away from me, the door wide open.

And now he's on the phone. It's six in the morning and there's a silver glow outside the window. I hear my mother breathing on the extension.

"You there, Brother?"

"Yeah," I say, "but where are you really?"

"The jail."

"You're serious, right?"

"Aw--they're all screwed up. I haven't had a drink since I left the house."

"Jesus, Dad."

My father doesn't say anything. I hear voices mumble in the background. My father laughs and says, "Yeah, boy."

"What?" I say.

"Oh it's ole' Sorecock's son. You know him. The cop."

My mother yells in, "You're still drunk."

"Aw--hush up. Tell her to get off the line, Brother."

"Hush up, yourself. What a mess you're in," says my mother.

"OK, OK," I say. "Now Dad, what do you want me to do?"

"Is she off the line?"

"Yeah, she's off the line. Go ahead."

"I need a hundred dollars. Pick up my check from Gus at the terminal. Go ahead and sign my name on the back."

And my mother says, "Don't you have any money?"

"Tell her to get off the line."

"OK, but don't you have any?"

"It's in the car and they got the car someplace."

"The bank doesn't open until ten."

"I know. Get here when you can. I've got a surprise."

It was a gray morning with a fine mist in the air, almost rain. I didn't feel bad about forging my father's name because our names are the same. I signed the check, the bank-teller knew me, she was pretty, but I just wanted to get out of there, I didn't feel like talking.

The next-door neighbor loaned me his station wagon and I parked it across the street from the jail. The jail hooked onto the courthouse. I walked past a couple trustees trimming the grass along the edge of the sidewalk. Their cover-alls were faded and looked too clean.

I pulled open a thick glass door. Several black ladies and a guy with long sideburns and an enormous pot belly stood waiting, leaning against the wall. A couple people sat at the desks where you take the written part of your driver's test. Two Mexican guys I went to high school with nodded hello to me. I felt their eyes on me after I passed.

I walked over to a window with chicken wire mesh running through it and talked through a hole. I told a young cop who stopped typing and looked up that I had come to get my father, S. K. Shakely. He told another cop who was just standing around, leaning against a counter, to get Shakely. He disappeared. The room's walls were painted half light-green and half dirty white with a lot of paint chipped off showing bare concrete. A calendar with a cop and a little girl and a big yellow school bus hung taped to the wall. I could smell cigar smoke coming through the hole in the window.

I saw my old man. He walked in front of a big cop wearing a gun and my father looked small, boyish compared to him. The cop had a big gut and wore his gun belt under it.

The young cop at the typewriter pointed to a door and told me to come back to where they were, that papers had to be filled out. My father stood at the counter, signing his name, the big cop beside him.

My father looked up and said, "Jesus Christ, Brother. I've been waitin for you. The two of us got somethin to do today."

I asked him what and he said, "Tell ya a little later."

He looked as if he had just woke up and I handed him the money. His face looked bad, a lot of deep lines. I wanted to get out of there. I was sweating. The big cop walked across the floor to get a drink, the leather on his gun belt creaked as he walked.

My father took a pink copy of some paper, folded it and raised his sweater and put it in his shirt pocket. His hands weren't too steady. He asked the young cop when he could pick up the car.

"Anytime after twelve."

My father nodded. "OK," he said. "Will do."

The young cop said, "Bye now" as we walked out the door.

My father and I didn't say anything as we walked through the waiting room. My father whistled a country tune I couldn't recognize. I saw the two Mexican guys and they nodded goodbye.

Once we were outside, my father asked me how I got down to the jail. I told him that I borrowed the neighbor's car.

"Good," he said. "That's good."

I got into the car and put my arm along the back of the seat and then turned to back out of the parking space. When I looked around my father handed me a small folder. It was from a travel agency. I opened it while my father watched me, his eyes wide open, his tired look gone.

I held two tickets on United Airlines flight 142 leaving Chicago at Five P.M. with a four hour lay over in Los Angeles, arriving in Honolulu at Three A.M.

"From Honolulu we get a boat and in just a little over a day and a night we're in Pango Pango. What do you think of that?"

We were out in traffic and a car behind us honked. "Just a minute," I said and I pulled back into the parking space. I rested both my arms on the steering wheel. We were to leave that day.

"So, Brother, what do you think?"

"You're out of your mind," I said.

"It's been said before," he said.

"Does Mom know?"

My father shook his head no.

"I've got it all taken care of," he said. "Got a month and a half off work, maybe more if I push it. Got the tickets and we're leaving at five o'clock tonight."

"This is something you talk about for a long time before you do it. You just don't get the tickets and go. What's Mom going to do?"

"There's money in the bank."

I glanced down at the tickets in my hand. My father checked through his pockets for a cigarette. He pushed the cigarette lighter in on the dashboard. I shook my head. He waited for an answer. I tried to think. The first thing I remembered was my father jumping off the roof into the swimming pool. Then I thought of another time. We were on a corner in downtown Detroit. My father poked me in the ribs and pointed to the man beside him. It was Mickey Mantle. I had just broken my arm playing midget league baseball and it was casted up to the elbow. Jesus, I wanted his autograph. My father wouldn't do anything. He mouthed, "Ask him."

I just stood there looking at Mickey Mantle's broad shoulders in his gray suit. My father gritted his teeth, "Ask him." The light changed and I barely managed to tap his arm. He stopped right there on the cross-walk and signed my case, Mickey Mantle in big script handwriting.

"I don't know," I said. "We'd have to pack and it's ten o'clock now."

"We'll just take a little and buy it when we need it."

"When are you going to tell Mom?"

"Thought maybe we'd call her from L. A. or Hawaii."

"She'll never forgive us."

"It'll be good for her. Hell, a vacation."

I leaned back in the seat. In five hours we'd be on a plane, sipping drinks out of clear plastic cups. I looked at my father taking a drag off a cigarette, the window beside him rolled down a couple inches to keep the smoke from bothering me. I broke out laughing.

I've always wondered what was under one of those grass skirts," I said.

"Well," said my father, "We better damn sight find out."

"You better believe it," I said, and it was fixed.

I was a little nervous, though. I comforted myself thinking about the pictures of the South Seas I'd seen in National Geographic. I thought of coconut and vanilla plantations and mango trees. I thought of lagoons and water falls, of Tahitian women with beautiful skin and the sand and the ocean.

I looked at my father. He tried to look calm, but his eyes sparkled.

"Does ole' Pango know we're coming?" I said.

"Hell, no," said my father. "We'll surprise him."

The End

DRIVING DOWN TO NASHVILLE

The old woman watched the road ahead as if she were the driver; her left hand braced against the dashboard. She turned slightly toward Leon.

"It's unforgiveable, Leon," and she put her hand to her throat, "what that woman does to you."

Leon looked straight ahead at the stream of red tail-lights, at the occasional white headlights of an on-coming car. The heat from the floorboard was too much around his ankles; his socks were hot. He opened the vent in the window.

"What's her spell, Leon? What she got over you? Is it them kids? What?"

Leon heard the old woman but kept the lyrics to a sad old Hank Williams' song going in his head. They were more important to him at that moment than anything. More important than his wife leaving, more important than having to miss work and more important than anything his mother could ever say.

He shook his head. He listened to the cracks in the road clicking, to the hum of the snow tires on the back of the camper.

Morning light was just beginning to illuminate fence posts and alfalfa fields and the gentle roll of the countryside. The mustard yellow center-line seemed to glare with a power of its own as Leon blinked his eyes and searched the dial of the radio to keep himself awake. His stomach was all messed up. He would be all right when he got something to eat.

The kids were asleep in the back of the camper. They didn't mind the drive at all. They enjoyed missing school; it was like a vacation. The frightening confusion of the week before didn't exist now. They were on their way to get their mother. That was all that mattered.

The last week seemed a blur to Leon. The days blended into one long monstrous day. Only two things stood out in his memory and even they seemed more like stories someone had told him than what actually happened.

He had written a check and the bank teller told him he had no money in the account; all the money had been withdrawn. Leon said it was impossible and that someone had made a horrible mistake. The teller then showed him the check in his wife's handwriting that had been used to take out all the money. Dazed, Leon rushed home. But she wasn't there. She had called his mother to watch the kids and she had left. No one knew where she had gone.

He remembered that. And the call he received last night from his wife, interrupting the drunk he was on,

telling him she was in Nashville and that she wanted to come home.

That was all Leon knew of the week before. But he didn't like thinking about it. Ever so often it crept up on him, though. When he was driving and everything was quiet, or maybe when he was alone in the bathroom of a truck stop, it hit him like a gas pain. The adrenalin would tingle in his stomach. For an instant then he was terrified.

Inside the cab there came the sounds of crunching gravel, the popping of rocks thrown up against the fenderwells, as Leon turned off the road into the driveway of a cafe.

Jackie, the youngest, with ebony hair like her mother's pecked on the window separating the camper from the cab. "Where are we?"

"Just crossed the line into Tennessee. Come on. Get your brothers up. We're gettin somethin to eat."

Jackie was the first one out, wondering where the bathroom was, shivering with her arms around herself. John, the eldest, followed. Bobby next, rubbing his eyes, trying to get the sleep out of them.

"Where are we?"

"Tennessee," answered Leon. Vapor flowed like smoke from his mouth.

"This where Mom is?"

"No--we're gettin somethin to eat."

"Oh."

Leon felt wide awake after the breakfast and coffee. His mother sat beside him in the cab with a brown grocery sack full of sandwiches and fruit at her feet, working a crossword puzzle. Leon's neck was tight. He rolled his head around, then stretched his arms out as far as he could in the driver's seat.

He wore the green wool shirt he always flew his birds in. He felt some anxiety wondering if his next-door neighbor would look in on them like he said he would.

Leon kept a pair of hawks on the property he rented. He had built a mews with chicken wire over the windows a short distance from the back of his house. Most nights after work, near sunset, he would stand at one of the wire covered windows, squinting to see the hawks perched high near the roof of the mews. On weekends when he weathered the hawks on stumps in the back yard, he would spend hours in a chaise lounge watching them. They sat on stumps in the open sun and would take in the whole sky above them as they moved their heads smoothly to either side. They bathed themselves in a small tin of water he placed near the stumps.

Leon thought of the last time he had flown the red-tailed hawk. He remembered reaching a bluff overlooking a small glade, the setter poised by his leg. Beech and a

light scattering of maple with a floor of trilliums like frost or light snow girdled the glade like an amphitheater. With his free hand, Leon wiped the perspiration off his forehead. The other hand, steady, held the hawk while it adjusted its claws to get a better grip into the gauntlet. The sky was overcast. A cooling breeze ruffled the silver nap of the bird's feathers and sent a soft, swift chill over Leon. Hyacinths and yellow lady slippers bent slightly in the breeze.

Leon continued on over the bluff; his gaiters attracting beads of moisture from the ankle-high grass. The setter scouted ahead. His coat was like red brushed aluminum in the dim sunlight.

The cab was quiet except for Jackie letting out an occasional muted yell fighting with her brothers and the tinny sound of the radio at low volume. They were forty miles outside of Nashville. Leon's wife was born near here. Leon had traveled these roads many times driving down to see her before they were married. This stretch of highway worked on him like the scent of an old girlfriend's perfume. He felt warm and lonely and sentimental.

His mother slept, snoring lightly with her head back and her mouth open, the crossword puzzle on her lap.

They passed the dance hall. It was windowless cinderblock, pale green, a rectangle surrounded by blacktop that had been dusty gravel before. The second time they

went dancing he had taken his wife there. No other girl he had ever been out with had such a pleasant fragrance about her. Every whiff of her perfume made his stomach go crazy as they sat in the car drinking the pint he brought along, listening to the radio. All he wanted then was to keep her beside him and feel her warmth and the slight movement of her chest as she breathed.

By the time they had finished the pint, they were ready to dance. And they did, until the lights were turned up and a tall man with a cowboy shirt chased them out of the place. They danced all the way to the car.

It was a warm summer night with the air cool and fresh enough to make Leon feel like he could drive forever. The moon was out and they were still a little drunk. Leon had his hand on her knee and she leaned her head on his shoulder. Leon took the long way home. He wanted to drive all night with her. They passed her house.

"Well, what do you think?"

She nodded with her head still on his shoulder. She squeezed his arm.

They kept driving that night, all the way to Elisabethtown, and stopped at the Sandstone Motel. They checked in as a married couple and giggled on the way to their room. They both woke early but stayed in bed until two in the afternoon. They sent out for a pizza when they finally got up and ate it in the room without any clothes on. Leon couldn't remember when he had felt better.

Leon's mother choked on something and turned blue; her knuckles were white against the dashboard. Leon pulled the camper onto the shoulder.

Jackie peered through the window going into the cab. "Is she dying, Daddy?"

A man was already in the phone booth. A cigarette burned in the hand that held his forehead. He occasionally gestured with the same hand. The windows were fogging. Leon stood with his hands in his pockets, waiting, his arms tight against his sides. His coat was open.

The man left, but the smoke from his cigarette lingered behind, sweet. Leon entered, shut the door and looked over to see his mother and kids watching him from the camper. He looked down at the tires.

Dialing. The dial cool against his fingers. The receiver smelling like smoke. Leon hesitated before dialing the last number. Vacant stares, a few nods. Leon tracing the outline of the telephone with his finger.

He hung up.

He climbed back into the camper. "She says she's ready and he took off for a while."

"It's not right, Leon. Goin right up there. And him. How you know he's not gonna show up?" The old lady lit a cigarette.

Leon shook his head and threw the one he was smoking out the vent.

"She give you directions?"

"Yeah--it's not far."

The old lady sat back in her seat. The kids were quiet. Jackie lay on her stomach and the boys played cards. Leon held the steering wheel with both hands.

The red-tailed hawk was heavy. The muscles in Leon's right arm tensed when he thought of the bird's weight. His mind returned to the day that he had flown the hawk. He was at the north end of the glade by the edge of a cornfield. The setter was in point. Leon paused a moment and looked into the sky, then at a row of oaks on the other side of the cornfield. He walked into the corn to flush up a grouse. Three broke loose with an awkward knocking together of their wings and a brief rustling of the corn plants as they took to the air. Leon let them fly ahead a good distance, then released the hawk's hood with his teeth. He lowered his fist, rolled it slightly, and then the bird was flying hard and fast in pursuit. He reached down and patted the dog's shoulder.

One grouse lagged behind. It made a quick dart to the right, isolating itself from the other two. The hawk was above it now. She angled down from her high pitch, gaining speed rapidly in the stoop. The grouse looked back and tried one last time to dive out of the way, but was overtaken and knocked out of the air instantly with a blow from the hawk's talons. The hawk followed the grouse to the

ground, landed beside it and picked at the grouse's feathers.

When Leon arrived, he extended his arm and the hawk hopped to his fist, planting its claws firmly into the leather of the gauntlet. He cut off the grouse's head and gave it to the hawk. She picked at it daintily. He dropped the rest of the grouse into a leather pouch slung over his shoulder and replaced the hawk's hood. He whistled for the dog. He came running low through the grass, his ears back. From his coat pocket, Leon took a feather and gently stroked the bird. The setter was panting.

The apartment house looked like a place out of a detective magazine where a gruesome murder might have taken place. It had a flat roof and black wrought iron railings peeling paint leading up cement steps. The apartment his wife was in was on the ground floor. A white late model Cadillac parked near the door had the initials JHB on the license plate.

Leon stopped at the door. He looked at his hands. They were dry and the fingernails needed to be clipped. The wind was blowing. His neck was hot and throbbed and his ears burned. Leon stood there, looking at the door, looking at the number, thinking he should have clipped his fingernails.

He knocked and stood with his hands in his pockets, his coat open. The lock rattled.

A big man in a red Ban-lon shirt opened the door. He didn't say anything right away, then he called over his

shoulder, "He's here." He walked away from the door, leaving Leon standing with his hands still in his pockets in the open doorway. Half-way across the room, he turned and motioned to Leon. Leon stepped self-consciously in and pulled the door shut behind him. He stood there by the door while the man walked over to a red vinyl covered bar. He looked at Leon. "Want a drink?"

Leon shook his head.

The man fixed a drink for himself. Leon nervously scanned the room. The curtains were pulled and everything had a greenish tint. He noticed his wife's coat crumpled in a pile on a chair. He liked that coat; he had helped his wife pick it out. Now it looked unnatural, like seeing the same coat on a fat lady in a shopping mall.

Leon's wife appeared in a doorway of a room right off the one they were in. She didn't look right, either. Her eyes were swollen. She was wearing a new dress. "Just a minute. OK?" she asked.

Leon nodded with a blank stare. She disappeared into the room again. Leon stood there listening to the muted, airy rush of the highway outside and the TV mumbling in the background. The man belched.

"She's really got you. Doesn't she?" The man grinned and shook his head. He laughed. "That's too bad."

Leon stood with his hands in his pockets, looking into the room into which his wife had disappeared. He saw an

unmade bed with yellow sheets. The floor was shiny linoleum and shoes were scattered under and around the bed. Leon was hot. He had kept his coat on.

"I guess you just don't have what it takes, pal, to keep her home." The man leaned against the bar holding his glass in both hands. A diamond ring in the shape of a horseshoe on his middle finger caught what light there was in the room and sparkled.

Leon got a broader stance on the floor, looked down at his feet and back into the room where his wife was. He turned over and over in his pocket a lock-washer he had found on the floorboard of the camper.

"But, I tell you, pal. I'm damn glad you got here when you did, because she's driving me crazy." The man took a drink. "She's whacko, pal."

Leon's wife walked back into the room carrying a blouse and a coat and some other things on hangers. Leon thought she looked childish.

The man pointed to her and shook his head. He said to Leon, "I wouldn't put up with it." Then he walked over to her and began to go through the clothes she had on the hangers. He ripped a black dress from one of the hangers. "I didn't say you could have that." Some of his drink spilled on the floor.

She looked up at him, her eyes wide open and starting to tear. She tried to stop herself. Her face wrinkled up; tears dropped down her cheeks.

Leon turned to walk out the door, his wife behind him. The man poured himself another drink. He called after Leon. "You poor bastard. All I got to say is I'm glad it's you." The man made the gesture of a toast with his drink.

Leon paused in the open doorway. He stood there until his wife whispered, "Come on" behind him. He walked straight to the driver's side of the camper. His mother's and children's eyes followed the woman to the passenger's side and watched her get in.

"Hi Mom."

"Hi Mom."

"Hi."

"Hello Elouise."

Leon's wife reached through the window going to the sleeping quarters of the camper and tousled the two boys' hair and touched Jackie on the cheek. The old lady looked straight ahead.

Leon stopped at the first packaged liquor store on the way and left the engine running while he went in. He came back with a six-pack of beer and a carton of Coke. He handed the Cokes to the kids in the back and took a can of beer from the plastic ring for himself and offered the others to his wife and mother. His wife took one and handed the rest back. Leon slid them under the seat.

His wife sat up straight in her seat, her mouth firmly shut, staring out over the hood. Leon placed his beer

between his legs and turned up the volume on the radio.

Leon thought again of that day when he put the red-tailed hawk on a perch outside to weather. Hunks of cumulous clouds hung suspended in the sky. The sun was out and made the hawk's silver plumage shine dully. He untied the bird's hood. It looked slowly from side to side and Leon ran the back of his finger along its neck. Juncos, some chickadees and a pair of cardinals jumped around and made broken chirping noises in the trees near by. Leon put his hand in front of the bird's beak and it pecked his finger. He took out the feather again and stroked along its neck and down across its back. The hawk adjusted its talons on the perch, stepping slightly to the right. It spread its rust-colored tail.

Leon walked over to the chaise lounge. He sat down and moved its back into a reclining position. He felt tired and he liked the feeling. The sun was on his face. He closed his eyes. He watched the hawk, then, in his mind's eye; he watched it circling silently in the clear air above him, climbing until he could just barely see it, then hanging there above him as if it were floating.

The End

JUNGLE BEACH

Before I went to Jungle Beach, I could count on the fingers of one hand the people who had seen me naked. I don't even think Paula has looked that closely at my body. She can't see a thing without her contacts--maybe a blur. If I had known you had to take your clothes off at Jungle Beach, I wouldn't have gone. But then I wouldn't have met Miranda or had the opportunity to board her Volkswagon menagerie. When we sat on that rock stark naked and she asked me, "Do you believe in loops?" I didn't know what she meant. I do now and I believe.

While Paula was on the Cape attending a weekend workshop in Reality Therapy for the Classroom, I stayed at a campground on Martha's Vineyard. That Sunday, I walked over to the next campsite to see if anyone knew of a good place to swim.

A woman sitting by a tent on a picnic table strewn with a copy of Peterson's Field Guide to the Birds and several empty yogurt containers was breast feeding a naked baby with a large, black dog lying at her feet. The woman's breast was tanned as darkly as the rest of her body. I couldn't keep my eyes off it.

I asked her. Her husband poked his head out of the tent. They both agreed. I had to go to Jungle Beach.

The path to the beach wound through dunes that were covered with thorny shrubs and a few trees. I had to duck under branches in the way. By the time I got to the bluff overlooking the beach, I was ready for a swim.

Up in the air just over me a man in a yellow and red striped hang-glider flew without any pants, dangling his feet. All he had on was a red crash helmet and a pair of hiking boots.

I looked down. The cliffs were steep. The beach looked like the midway at a county fair. People passed each other walking down the beach, girls with long, sun-streaked, blonde hair--no bathing suit marks--and dogs, and guys with big hollow spots in the sides of their asses. I felt like a kid sizing up a new ride at an amusement park.

Someone said excuse me. I looked around and it was a man, graying at the temples, wearing nothing but an orange back-pack and a Nikon. I stepped aside and watched him climb carefully down to the beach.

He paused at the bottom of the cliff and looked up and down the beach. He spread out his towel next to a small clay pool just below me. Hunks of silver driftwood lay scattered half buried in the sand around him.

As I eased my way down the loose rock of the cliff, I thought of Howie Fitzwater. He'd do anything to get to a

nude beach. He's got a house full of kids and a wife who picks him up every day from work. Every lunch he carries into the breakroom a folded copy of "Fun 'n Sun" magazine and looks at the pictures. He leans against the coffee machine, hefting his crotch the way some men pull their cuffs out from their jacket sleeves. "Hot damn!" he yells when he comes to a good one. "Look at that one, boys." Then he holds it up for all of us to see. "I tell ya," he says, "the human body is beautiful. Nothin' dirty about that." Then he grins with his greasy finger sliding back and forth across the crotch of some wholesome nudist getting ready to serve in a game of badminton.

It felt better knowing Howie wasn't there walking beside me, grabbing his balls and grinning, jabbing me in the ribs every time he spotted a good one.

I walked down the beach, catching all the good ones I could, but very cunningly, I thought, out of the corners of my eyes. I forgot to take off my shoes. They were full of sand. I sat down in front of three girls. Their bathing suit marks were bright pink; they rubbed cream into the pink areas. One girl had a towel over her top half.

I took off my pants. It was much easier than I thought it would be. I looked at my underwear. It was the first time I'd ever seen my dirty underwear in natural lighting. I stuck them in one of my pant legs.

The sand conformed to the cheeks of my ass as I sat on my towel. My cock looked strange relaxed between my legs.

It was like a separate being. Some kind of animal. My pubic hair was rustled by the breeze. It felt good.

I stretched out on my back. The sun felt like a heavy oil spread over my body. The ocean crashed on rocks. I sensed my kinship with pre-historic man, with the apes. I wanted to growl.

I leaned up on my elbows. Not far away a man and a woman played catch with a Frisbee. The woman kept bending over in front of me. Who said men like to be teased with bikinies and g-strings? This was the essential woman. Hairy pink-wrinkled eroticism. An erection was not far away.

I needed a swim. I stood up, my first total exposure. I walked slowly, feeling the breeze on my ass. Wind had never touched there before. Then I ran. The sand flew; my cock flopped against the inside of my thighs.

I dove into the ocean, swam hard through the waves, tired and treaded water facing the beach. From out there, it looked like an enormous curtain call for Ole Calcutta. A small plane flew low just off shore. Everyone gazed up toward it.

Back on the beach, the sun slowly sank into my bones. Something came between the sun and me. I heard a voice.

"What?" I said, squinting.

"I said, this is my spot on the beach. I come here every day and this happens to be my spot."

A girl with firm, uplifted breasts and long, brown hair hanging straight down her back stood in front of me.

Why would she use such a line? It didn't matter. It got me and I'd even seen the movie she'd taken it from.

"It is, is it?" I said.

She nodded, slightly smiling.

"You've heard about the early bird," I said.

"Well," she said and laughed. "It doesn't look like I get the worm today, does it?"

She walked away.

I jerked around to see where she went. She was no more than fifty feet from me, bending over, spreading out a towel on the sand. She had a book under her arm.

I lay on my back. Jesus. My stomach went crazy like it did when I was in high school before a date. Then I thought of Paula. The last thing she told me before I got on the ferry was to enjoy myself and not to get into any trouble. She was kidding. I laughed and told her there was nothing to worry about. And I guess I believed it myself until I stood on those cliffs and saw that guy flying bare-ass over the beach.

I was shaking a little when I finally walked over to her.

"Hi." She put down the book; one of Carlos Castaneda's. She looked at my creamy white bathing suit marks. She was tan all over, even her fingers and feet. "First day on the beach, huh?"

"Yeah," I said. "I feel a little like Peter Cottontail."

She smiled. "My name is Miranda," she said. "Sit down."

I told her my name. I asked her if she came to the beach much.

"For the last few weeks, I've been about every day." She sat with her legs crossed, Indian-style and with her dark hair and tan, she looked Polynesian.

"This has got to be," I said, "the most beautiful beach I've ever seen." I started to relax, but ever so often a chill came over me.

She nodded, still smiling. The wind blew some hair across her cheek. She pulled it out of the way of her mouth. "I simply refuse to go to a straight beach. It all seems so unnatural." As she spoke she rocked back and forth, and when she wasn't speaking with each rocking motion she let out a moan, barely audible, the pitch of a baby cooing, but more visceral, like the sounds you make as your back is rubbed. "Clothes confine me," she said.

I thought about that pink, velvety mark on my waist made by the elastic band on my underwear. I asked her if she knew anything about the beach.

"It's owned by some senator's son. He lets anyone use it who wants to. He even comes here himself sometimes."

"Oh really," I said. I could feel my heart beating, the pulses in my arms, neck and head.

There was a silence. Then I asked her if she had read any other of Carlos Castaneda's books. She said she had.

She thought Don Juan was a real person living in Mexico.

"Really," she said. "I read an article written by a man who met him. Don Juan is a very together human being. And he eats peyote--he's got to be cool."

She laughed and I did too. I began to wonder what I was getting into.

"Have you ever been down the beach?" she asked.

I said I hadn't so she stood up and put a marker in her book. "OK," she said. "Let's go then."

"You have to understand. It's a Gestalt. The whole person. Intellect and feeling. We think, of course, but more than that we feel. By far, though, feelings are the hardest to deal with. They've been ignored for so long."

I nodded. What could I say? I was stealing looks at her whenever I could and watching for a secluded place to lie down away from the beach. Nothing mattered. I was single again, walking down the beach, feeling the spray and hearing the roar of the surf.

"For instance," she said, "I'm sexually attracted to you." The blood rushed to my face. "But don't think for a minute that I want to fuck you."

"Right now," she said, "sex would only complicate this experience for me. And I don't want that. I just want to walk and to share the simplicity of this experience with someone. That's all."

I looked away and nodded. I was mad at myself for assuming so much and embarrassed that I had been caught. I shocked myself. It was the first time I had actually forgotten I was married. Hell, I was on the make.

But there was nothing I could do. Walking back, it was impossible to be unaffected by the smoothness of her legs and the shaking of her breasts. My desire was even greater. But I stopped myself. What was I doing? I was meeting Paula the very next day. It was crazy. Guilt would destroy me. This woman was right. Sex would only complicate things for both of us.

We stopped to rest on a large, flat rock warmed by the sun. My thigh touched hers; she pulled it away. She rocked back and forth as she had done before, still making that strange cooing noise. I had to have her closer to me.

"Do you mind if we touch each other?" I asked. She looked at me startled. "No, I mean just the sides of our bodies touching--our thighs and our sides. I think it would feel good."

She moved closer. I moved to just touching. She continued her rocking and cooing. It was too much. "I think I'll take a swim," I said. I got up.

"What's wrong?" she called after me. "Got a hard-on?" She laughed. I jumped into the water.

When I got back, she came closer to me and asked me to sit down. She asked me if I believed in loops.

"Loops?" I said.

"Yes, loops. Like a helix. Spirals. Like Yin-Yang." I didn't understand. "Wow," she said. "It's hard to describe." She paused. "You know, like . . ." and she drew in the air the symbol for infinity. "A loop."

"Like a film loop, you mean?"

She thought a moment. "I'd never thought about it, but . . . yeah. Sure. A film loop."

"Like a bicycle chain."

She agreed hesitantly. "But bigger. Like an ecosystem with everything changing and taking each other's places. A loop. What's inside the loop never stays there. Eventually it becomes the outside." She didn't say anything for a while, then she said, "Loops fascinate the shit out of me."

"They're crazy things," I said.

"You're OK," she said.

After we finished putting on our clothes, ready to leave, she asked me if I needed a ride somewhere. I said that I did, that I didn't have a car.

Her Volkswagon micro-bus was parked about a quarter of a mile down the road from the path that led to the beach. I felt funny with my clothes on. Without pants, my paunch wasn't as noticeable.

Miranda asked me if I was in a hurry and if I would like some wine. We drank a bottle sitting outside on the grass in the bus's shade. She told me she had been alone

for the last week. Both her lovers, a man and a woman, had left the coast and weren't coming back for a couple more days. She said she loved them both equally. She said she had never felt more complete in her life.

The back of the bus had been made into one large bed. Several tapestries and down sleeping bags covered a plywood platform. A green parrot, Miranda called Earth, hung on a wooden perch from the top of the bus. Occasionally, it screeched something that sounded almost like, "Wow, man."

Miranda lay on her back, on the tapestries and sleeping bags and rubbed her stomach, purring like a cat. She wore an earthen colored batik blouse that softly outlined her breasts. She took it off.

"Clothes," she said. "I can't stand them." She took off her shorts. She was not more than a foot from me--I could smell her--and I didn't know what to do. And then I saw the snake.

It stretched along the side of the bus, half covered by the tapestries and sleeping bags, easily seven feet long.

"Jesus," I said. "Is that a goddamn snake?" I pulled away as far as I could. I crouched, my right side pushed up against the windows of the bus. It was the biggest snake I'd ever seen.

"Look," she said. "Relax. It's a boa. OK? It's cool."

"It's alive, right?"

"Of course it is." She dug through the layers of sleeping bags and tapestries and pulled up its head. "We've had him so long, I forget." The snake moved its head slowly away from her hands and rested it on her thigh. The snake's head was as big as a flowerpot.

"Jesus," I said.

"Boa's aren't dangerous," she said. "They're really very gentle." She ran two fingers along part of the snake's white belly.

It was warm inside the micro-bus. The late afternoon sun baked through the windows. I perspired. I could smell hamsters and cedar chips. The parrot watched from its perch as if it knew something.

"Look," she said. "Just relax. Go ahead. Touch him."

I shook my head and reached for my rolled up towel.

She put her hand high up on the inside of my thigh.

"Look," she said and she looked into my eyes. "I should have told you." I flushed warm. "He won't hurt you."

I leaned back against the windows along the side of the bus. I looked at her sitting there. I looked at her breasts and at her firm waist and at her crotch and at the boa's head.

"He likes you to rub him like this."

She took my limp hand and rubbed my fingers along the snake's belly. It felt strangely alive, but rubbery. The snake was still. If I pushed hard enough I could feel the skin move slightly.

"See," she said and she reached over and unzipped my pants. "It's not that bad, is it?"

"No," I said. "Not really."

She raised up and put the boa's head on my thigh.

"I'll be right back," she said. I looked at the boa there on my thigh. Its eyes were open and its tongue would flicker out and lick the air. I could feel the weight of the snake's head on my leg. I didn't move until she came back from the front of the bus.

"Have you ever snorted cocaine?" she asked. She held an intricately carved wooden box in her hand.

"Maybe the snake would be better back where he was," I said.

"Hold this." She handed me the box and took the snake. I looked at the outside of the box. The cocaine made me nervous, but I'd trade the snake for it any day.

She opened the box. With a fingernail on her little finger over two inches long, she scooped into the white powder. She put it up to each nostril and inhaled twice. "Jesus," she said with her eyes closed. "Sex and cocaine."

She handed the box back to me. I didn't know exactly what to do. I looked at the white powder rolled in a plastic bag in the bottom of the box and then closed the lid.

"I better warn you," she said. "I get a little wild when I snort coke."

I glanced over to the snake. He was back where he was before and not moving. He blended in so well with the rolls of tapestries and sleeping bags that you could almost forget he was there.

Miranda looked at me, then growled. She came toward me on all fours. She grabbed my shirt-tail and opened the shirt by popping off half the buttons. She undid my pants. As my shirt and pants flew toward the front of the bus, I heard keys and change scatter. "You better hold on tight," she said.

She dove onto me, driving her head into my crotch, licking and biting, locking her legs around my neck. I couldn't breathe. I panicked. I was smothering. I kicked and squirmed, but she didn't budge. I managed to raise her up so that I could get two good breaths. Outside, a long haired boy without a shirt walked beside a girl in cutoffs. If I could yell . . . maybe

But she was on my face again. Her rich animal musk warm and humid. All I could see was flesh and a rainbow painted on the ceiling of the bus. The parrot screeched "Wow, man; Wow, man." And I thought, what a hell of a way to die.

After a lot of struggling and sweating and rolling, I got her off my face. I rolled over toward the other side of the bus. The sun gilded Miranda's skin. Neither of us said anything. We just looked at each other, trying to get our breath.

She pinned me again. She was moaning and licking and growling and then I realized what the lump under my back was. The snake moved faster than I ever thought possible. It wrapped itself around my leg twice and I felt it sliding dully out from under me. My fright was the fright I felt as a kid during the elephant parade that always began the Barnum and Bailey Circus. What held those galloping beasts together was so delicate--simply being trained by a man to loop a trunk around another's skinny tail. I knew it would take so little to send them stampeding into the crowd, knocking down the tent posts, crushing everybody. I thought of Clyde Beatty. I loved him when I was a kid. I thought of him in his white suit, carrying a chair.

I looked down and saw the snake's thick head in my armpit. Its tongue could touch my face.

Miranda yelled into my crotch. "Wow, he's got you in a loop!"

"A loop?" I yelled.

"Yeah," she yelled between licks. "A loop . . . a fucking loop!"

I felt the snake tightening its grip; it had curled twice around my body. A fucking loop. I began to scream. Miranda did too, alternating between screaming and licking me. The parrot screeched, bits of feather floated in the air. The roar was deafening. I came.

Miranda rubbed my semen into my chest and into her breasts and into as much of the snake as she could reach.

She raised up off my face. I could breathe. I was exhausted. I lay there trying to get my breath and it wasn't that bad lying on the snake, its body curled around my leg with its head snugly in my armpit.

"You're pretty good," she said.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm tired."

"Sleep then," she said.

I lay there for fifteen or twenty minutes. The snake was easy to untangle, like unwinding a garden hose the diameter of french bread. Miranda was at the other end of the bus, sitting with her legs crossed and her eyes closed, meditating. I didn't want to disturb her.

I gathered up my shirt and pants as quietly as possible. I found what change I could, my keys were up against a five inch Buck knife strapped under the driver's seat. I looked around the bus, at the green parrot swinging slightly on its perch, at Miranda still without clothes, now with the snake's head in her lap.

On my way out I spotted the hamster cage. There were four or five hamsters, one spinning on a wheel that squeaked, while the others slept together in a ball in the corner of the cage. I picked out the one on top of the pile and reached in to get him. I put a handful of cedar chips in my shirt pocket and then held him up to my nose. He blinked slowly. "Hi there, fella," I said and I put him in my shirt pocket.

Paula likes all kinds of animals and I know she wouldn't

mind this little one. It was early evening and the sun was almost gone. I walked down the road, smelling the sweet, heavy scent of the resin from the pine trees. Ever so often, the hamster would stick his head out of my pocket and wiggle his nose at me.

The End

T-BIRD

The driveway to the house was long. In fact, if you started back behind the house like Clay Summerset did in his father's '57 T-Bird, all the way back past the clothes-line, down a small depression and up again, you could floor it and usually get into third gear before you had to slam on the brakes, spraying gravel and dust, to keep from lunging out into traffic or continuing on across the crown of Partello Road and end up smashing into the maroon '41 Willys Bruce Dudley had for sale in his front yard.

Sometimes Clay drove the turquoise T-Bird fast down the driveway. He would grit his teeth, knowing any minute his mother would be standing in the doorway of the house, waving him back, ready to take the keys and keep them until he could drive the car responsibly as he had promised, not causing the great clouds of dust to blow across the yard, covering the windows of the house with a golden film that could never be cleaned; it just slid around on the pane.

But Clay didn't always drive fast. Just sometimes. Mostly, he cruised very slowly, never shifting out of first gear. With the top down and the radio tuned to WILS and with his arm hanging out the window, he drove back and forth, up and down the driveway.

Clay was almost sixteen. Almost old enough to drive down the long driveway and instead of stopping, keep on going up and onto the pavement and then turn left, heading straight for Michigan Avenue. Downtown. And don't think for a minute he wasn't ready for it. Itching for it.

It was in the middle of summer and as Clay, wearing a light-blue Henley neck T-shirt and white Levis, walked toward the T-Bird parked in front of the open garage door, he saw his father bent over scraping off in layers the thick accumulation of dry cut grass from the underside of the lawn mower. His father looked up and motioned Clay over with a putty knife.

"Clay," said his father. "Listen a minute." Clay's father sat the lawn mower back down on all four wheels and reached for a tall frosted glass with a picture of the Machinaw Bridge on it and took a good swallow. He always drank screwdrivers in the morning.

"Clay," he said. "You're goin' to be sixteen. You're gonna have your license." His father brushed some hair out of his face with the back of his grass stained hand. Clay could see the curly hair, some of it gray, on his father's chest sticking out the open collar of the red cotton alligator shirt he was wearing. "I'm gonna tell you somethin', Clay," he continued. "I'm leavin' your Momma."

Clay shifted the weight from his right leg to his left. He could smell the musty hay smell of the grass mixed with

gasoline together with the cool, dampness of the whole garage; the smell of dirt and rusted bolts. He had heard this before. His parents already had one divorce. Clay didn't remember much about it; he was young. But now as he stood there in the garage, he thought of the warm night he sat on the davenport with his mother and some man watching TV. They were watching "The Red Skelton Show" and all of a sudden there was a bright flash from outside the picture window and a man in a dark suit running away. A man, his father said later, who had been watching the house, a man whom he had hired from the Fat Man Detective Agency to get a picture of his mother with a man. It had shaken Clay up pretty badly. He still wouldn't go in the living room at night without the curtains drawn. When he thought about it now, it got him in the stomach and down the inside of his arms.

But his father had always talked of leaving. Those few times he did leave, he always came back. After the divorce was final just two weeks, Clay's father called his mother every day, sent her long stemmed roses wrapped in tissue paper and put boxes of vegetables on the front porch. Clay's parents were married again by a Justice of the Peace in Angola, Indiana long before the notice that their divorce was granted appeared in the local paper.

"You talk so much about leaving," said Clay, "but I don't believe you."

"Just you wait," said his father and Clay could tell that he had started drinking early in the morning. Clay looked at his father and wanted to shake him or grab a handful of the thick hair on his chest and twist it until he acted right.

Clay sighed loudly and rolled his eyes back in his head.

"Smart ass," said his father and he took another big drink of his screwdriver. He sat on his haunches and looked with narrow eyes at Clay.

Clay didn't say anything for a while. Neither did his father; he just tilted the lawn mower back again. Then Clay said, "There's something wrong with the Bird. Will you take a look?"

His father nodded and stood up. They walked to the front of the car. "Pop the hood," said his father, "and we'll take a look at it."

As Clay reached inside the car to pull the hood release button, he thought of another time, a time before his family moved up North, when his father sold neon signs. His father would take him to the shop, right off the main street in town, where for extra money he painted cars on the sidewalk. He showed Clay how they bent the glass for the signs. They drew the shape of the letters for the signs in chalk on the cement floor and then with a torch and a couple pair of metal tongs, bent the glass into shape.

One Christmas his father made a Nativity scene out of neon. He didn't leave anything out. There was the baby Jesus in a manger with a yellow halo; and Mary standing over the manger in blue with another yellow halo; and sheep and the Wise Men. Clay's father used all the colors they had at the shop and the star of Bethlehem twinkled over the whole works. He built it in a frame so that you could take it down from the picture window after Christmas. They only had it up once, though, in '56, because a man driving by from Richmond said that he liked it and offered Clay's father three-hundred dollars. He sold it the day after Christmas. Clay could still remember how much he liked to sit in the living room with the lights off, listening to the transformer hum underneath the picture window while everybody ate popcorn balls and looked at all the colors and shapes in the neon glass from the back.

But that was in Virginia, in the Shenandoah Valley, and his father didn't work neon any more. He sold freight for a truck company. And Clay was pretty sure he had a girlfriend.

Clay first realized it when he went with his father to the Bedford Valley Rescue Squad Carnival and Picnic. The two of them did not tell Clay's mother or sister that they were leaving; they just hopped into the T-Bird and left without saying a word to anyone.

It was Saturday night, warm, almost sunset and Clay's father seemed excited, like Clay remembered him on those

vacations they used to take, when the whole family would go to Atlantic City or Florida or Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, when his father joked around and acted more like a regular guy than a father. Clay and his father put on the straw hats they each had for driving in the T-Bird with the top down.

Even before they got out of the car in the parking lot, they could hear the gasoline engines of the electric generators, snapping noises like fire-crackers that were part of some ride and the high-pitched screams of young girls on "The Whip."

The first person they saw once they were inside the gate of Baily Park was Clay's uncle Abe, Clay's father's older brother. He leaned up against a red fiberglass boat on a trailer smoking a short cigar, talking to a small group of men with crew-cuts and short sleeve shirts and big bellies. Abe's job was to organize the carnival each year and he had been doing it for six years. He always gave Clay and his sister and whoever else came along free passes to all the rides.

Abe spotted them as they walked toward the boat. Just then Clay caught for the first time that night the warm, sweet smell of carmel corn and cotton candy that reminded him of all the carnivals he had been to with his family. He thought of his father and himself on some ride while his mother, holding his sister's hand, stood waiting for them by the ticket box until the ride was over.

Abe yelled from where he stood, waving a stack of green tickets in his hand.

"Hey, Juny!" Abe had called his brother that since they were kids. "Come here, goddamn it. Take a drink and fill out some goddamn raffle tickets."

Abe held the tickets in one hand, the flask in the other and the cigar in his mouth.

Clay's father took a pull off the flask and handed it back to Abe who passed it around to the men standing in front of him.

"How you doin' there, Hank?" Abe asked Clay.

Clay nodded and said, "All right."

Abe looked down the midway. "Well, Jesus," he said. "You boys ain't been down the midway. Fill out these tickets and we'll get goin'."

He gave a handful of tickets to both Clay and his father. While they filled them out, Abe asked where Clay's mother and sister were.

"Left 'em at home," said Clay's father.

"I get it," said Abe and he smiled a big toothless grin. He only put his teeth in on Sundays when he went to church. During the week he kept them in his shirt pocket. "I see," he said. "The boys out on the prowl."

Clay's father winked at Clay.

The three of them walked down the midway, stepping over black cables stretched across the dusty lane, stepping around dirty faced little kids eating candy apples and

popcorn; large hipped, stretch-panted women pushing babies in strollers. Everything seemed to have a yellow tint from the lights on the concession stands. Blue tatoos on men's arms looked green.

"Stop right here," said Abe and they stopped in back of a crowd who watched three girls in grass skirts dance on a stage that folded down from a semi-trailer. Above the girls in large letters painted to look like bamboo was TREASURES OF TAHITI. To the right of the trailer, in a ticket box with another grass skirt wrapped around it, a man talked through a loud speaker. "Amanda, darling. Now show the good people part of the ancient dance the women on those magical islands in the South Seas use to attract their mates."

Amanda smiled, then turned around and began to shake her ass to the stepped up rhythms of a bongo drum. Men whistled cat-calls. The two women on the stage beside her, one a black woman; the other oriental, stood with their hands on their hips watching Amanda. Amanda's hair was orange.

"We better get in there now," said Abe, "before they get all the good seats."

"Maybe," said Clay. "I'll just look around for a while." Things were happening too fast.

"Won't even think of it," said Abe. "Come on."

Clay looked at his father. "Come on, Clay. Hell, you've never been in one of these things. Or have you?"

Clay shook his head. By that time they were already

at the head of the line.

Abe led them to three seats on the second row back. The place filled up. The stage was like the one facing the midway, but it was painted blue to match the blue canvas of the enclosure.

The three girls shimmied out onto the stage, not in their grass skirts now, but in sequined gowns, followed by a skinny boy with greasy hair who played a midnight blue Silvertone electric guitar. Abe handed Clay's father the flask.

"Sonovobitch, Juny. This is good."

The girls danced to the electric guitar music, each moving in her own way. They threw off bits of their sequined outfits as they danced. A fat man in the front row kept yelling: "Take it off. Take it all off." Clay watched, entranced.

In a few more minutes the girls were down to a small black patch that did not cover their pubic hair. Amanda with the orange hair could shake one tit while the other remained motionless. The black woman stuck her head between her legs. The oriental woman, who had an appendectomy scar five inches long, took off her patch completely and scooted along the floor. A man to the right of Clay whistled cat-calls and slapped his thigh. The fat, bald man in the front row was sticking out his tongue.

"What da ya think of that, Hank?"

Clay just shook his head and stared at the girls.

"Come on, you guys," Abe said after a while. "That's about as good as it gets. Only goes down hill after that." He pointed down with his thumb.

They got up together to leave out the back door of the tent. Clay was the last to go. He stood there a moment and looked through the cigarette smoke, heard the men yelling and whistling. Amanda pulled a yellow scarf between her legs.

Outside, Clay's stomach clenched when he thought someone might see him come out of the tent. His father and uncle waited in front of the grass skirted ticket box. His uncle looked at him, grinning. "How's that, Hank, for hootchie-cootch?"

Clay blushed and looked down the midway. He wanted to get away from the front of the place as quickly as he could.

"I think I'll get a Coke," he said.

"Hang on," said his father, "and we'll all get one."

Every few feet Abe stopped to talk to someone he knew. They moved slowly down the midway, until they stood in front of a booth where different colored race horses flashed across a screen. While Abe talked to a man and a woman wearing identical aqua colored nylon jackets, Clay's father watched the horses, holding his hands clasped behind his back. Clay leaned against a tent pole.

A lady walked up behind Clay's father and tapped him on the shoulder. She might have been attractive if she hadn't been wearing so much make up. Clay's father turned

away from him, toward her. They stood very close to each other; the woman talking about something. His father nodded, looking down at the ground.

Clay knew what was going on. He didn't think about it, though. He concentrated on the race horses flashing across the screen. He picked out "Time to Run" and kept his eyes on its red light throughout the race. It was in third and coming up fast on the second place horse and was neck to neck with the first place horse, "Second Chance." Clay caught himself wishing with all his soul that "Time to Run" would win. He could hear his uncle laughing in the distance.

Clay felt a tap on his shoulder.

"Clay," said his father. "I'd like you to meet somebody. A friend of mine. This is Eva, Clay."

Eva nodded and smiled. She wore a tan slack suit and didn't have a bad shape. Clay could see lines, though, around her mouth and he thought she had a horsy look about her face. He said hello.

"I wonder where he got all the good looks?" said Eva. She looked at Clay's father, then back to Clay. "Hope he's not the rounder his old man is. Don't know if a town could handle two of them."

"He's a good kid," said Clay's father and he pinched the muscle on Clay's neck above the collar bone. Clay didn't know where to look.

"He's as tall as you are, Clay," Eva said as she

looked at Clay's father.

"Yeah," he said, "And he makes me walk the chalk now." He laughed.

"I bet he does," said Eva and no one said anything. "Look," she continued. "Enjoy yourselves tonight. Take care. Nice meeting you, Clay." Then to Clay's father, "I'll see you." He nodded. "Bye now," she said to the both of them.

Clay turned back around to watch the horses on the screen, but saw only their colored lights flashing on and off.

"Come on, you guys. What ya standin' around for? I got somethin' to show ya."

Clay followed his uncle and father down the midway. He thought his father looked different. Everything looked different. Clay felt the same distance from things that he felt when he took " Contac " to clear up a head cold.

His uncle stopped in front of a side show attraction. A barker in front of the entrance claimed the woman inside bit the heads off snakes and drank their blood like Coca-Cola. A picture of the woman, bare-chested on a large piece of plywood outside the tent showed her wild-eyed, biting into a snake.

"It's the damndest thing you ever seen," said Abe.

They got into a line that led up steps to a railing overlooking a square yellow canvas pit. As they walked up the steps, Clay turned around and asked his father who the

woman was.

"Just a woman I know."

Clay stopped on the stairs and held up the line.

"Are you sure that's all?" he asked.

"For Christ's sakes, you're as bad as your mother."

Someone said to move along. Clay walked on up the stairs.

When he got to the railing, he looked down into the pit. A woman sat cross-legged, in the center of the pit, in the middle of a snarl of garter snakes that looked like earthworms in a can. The woman's hair was dark and matted and her teeth were badly decayed. Clay looked up at his uncle on the other side of the pit. He smiled at Clay and his father. The pinkish outline of his false teeth showed through the pocket of his white shirt.

The woman picked up a snake and played with it a while, letting it wind around her arm. Then she put the head in her mouth and bit it off. Some of the men cheered and whistled and the women screamed. She spit the head at an older woman with heavily rouged cheeks and a pocket book slung over her arm. Then she held the rest of the snake's body up in the air as if it really were a Coke bottle and drank the blood.

Clay felt sick. His father just stood there staring down into the pit and his uncle shook his head.

"Let's go," he said as he pointed to the door. He kept shaking his head on the way out. "Ain't that the

damndest thing?"

Clay was ready to go. His shoes were covered with dust and he felt dirty and worn out. The cool night was soothing. He and his father didn't say much on the drive home. When his father suggested that he take the T-Bird the rest of the way in, he said that he better not, that he was too close to getting his license to screw up now.

His father said that was right, that he better not.

Clay got his driver's license a week before his father moved out. He enjoyed the license every bit as much as he dreamed he would. He headed straight for Michigan Avenue and joined the line-up of cars that circled endlessly around the fountain in the center of town. He honked and waved to people he knew only remotely and he found out that other T-Bird owners would blink their lights at him when he passed them on the highway. Clay begged his mother to send him on errands.

On one of these errands, he met Donna. Though he had never talked to her before, he knew that she and her parents had just moved to town from Chicago and that her father was getting a Master's degree in computer programming at Western Michigan University. At school she was quiet and always sat toward the back of the room.

Clay spotted her at the check-out aisle in the grocery store and they smiled at each other and Clay thought that he might like her. She had blond hair and thin legs and at

the time he didn't even notice how full and well formed her breasts were. She was fifteen years old.

He pulled along side her in the T-Bird with the top down as she walked, carrying a small bag of groceries.

"You don't know me," he said, "but I'm Clay Sommerset. Would you like a ride?"

She looked at the T-Bird. Clay was glad he had waxed it that morning. The turquoise paint had a dull shine that glowed in the sun. Then she smiled at Clay.

"Sure," she said.

Later she asked him if it was his car.

"Well, not exactly. It's my father's, but I can get it any time I want."

"What's that?" she asked.

"It's the button," said Clay, "that controls the convertible top."

"This is a great car," she said.

"Yeah," Clay said.

They went out on their first date on a Saturday night. After standing around feeling awkward at "The Depot," a church sponsored dance that a group of concerned parents formed to keep the teenagers off the streets and out of trouble during the summer, they went out, on Donna's suggestion, to the Stuart Lake landing to park.

It had been raining earlier in the day so Clay had left the top up on the T-Bird. They talked for a while,

until they ran out of things to say. Then they listened to the sounds around the lake; frogs, a fish or two jumping, and from the other side of the lake a distant radio. They kissed for the first time.

No one had ever told him and he had never done it before, but Clay had no trouble undoing Donna's blouse and taking her bra off.

"Clay," said Donna, "I've never let anyone do this before."

"I understand," said Clay and he buried his face in her chest.

"Clay," Donna said after a while. "Can I touch your cock?"

Clay could feel his face tightening as his mind went blank. "I don't know," he said and she touched him gently, expertly, although he didn't know that.

She took off her pants, then slid her panties down around her ankles.

"Try two fingers," she said. "Ohh, that's good. Now three." Donna's face burned against his cheek.

"Clay," she said again after a while, "Clay, let's do it."

Things were happening too fast. Tonight was the first time Clay had ever touched a girl where her clothes usually were. His face went tight again. He could smell Donna on his fingers as he put his hand over his mouth to clear his throat.

"Donna," he said. "I think we're losing our heads."

Donna sat up in the seat and turned her head away from him and looked out the steamed up side window. "OK," she said. "Take me home."

She pulled up her pants and put on her bra, leaning forward in the seat.

Clay had his hands on the steering wheel. "I just think we're rushing this, Donna. I think we should talk about it." And then he gave her his class ring.

He avoided her around school and he didn't call her for a long time, but he drove that night, smiling in the dark, with Donna leaning on his shoulder and his free hand cupped over her right breast. He smelled his fingers all the way home.

Clay parked the T-Bird in front of the garage and left the keys in the ignition. At the screen door he heard his father yelling that he was leaving, that he wasn't coming back. Clay felt tired. He wanted to go to bed, he wanted to think over what had happened earlier with Donna. But before he realized it, his father called him out into the living room and handed him two one-hundred dollar bills.

"Take care of that ole' buddy," said his father. "I'm depending on you to watch things around here."

"You're not really going, are you?" said Clay.

"You better believe it," said his father. "One of these days you'll understand when a man can't get the things he needs at home, he goes someplace else."

"Stop talking your filth," said his mother from the kitchen.

His father left out the front door. He had one clean shirt in his hand.

"He'll be back," said his mother. She sat in front of an ashtray and a cup of coffee, smoking a cigarette.

"He always has before, damn his soul."

Clay's mother didn't have a car. When she wanted to go someplace she called her niece who would stop by in the afternoon to pick her up. Clay rode an old Schwinn bicycle too small for him. It had a yellow banana seat and tiger striped handle grips. He never rode it downtown. He parked it in an alleyway and walked through an orange Rexall Drug Store to get to the main street.

Once, when parking his bike behind the store, he caught a glimpse of Donna out of the corner of his eye, walking with two other girls. He stooped down quickly to tie his shoe. Then the other one. Then he re-tied the first one. By that time, they were gone.

Clay saw the T-Bird three times the month that his father was gone. He spied it first parked in front of Bill's-Buy-Rite. The top was down and it needed a wash. A pair of women's sunglasses were on the dashboard. Clay stood on the sidewalk by the car until the woman he had met at the carnival came out the door of the grocery store, walking toward the car with a bag of groceries. Her hair

shined blue-black as if it had just been done at the beauty parlor. Clay watched her tie a green-checked scarf around her hair before he rode away on his bike.

The second time, he was standing in line waiting to see some movie at the Bogar Theater. The line was long; it stretched half-way down the block to Strong's Antiques. Clay glimpsed a reflection of a turquoise T-Bird passing in a plateglass window. He couldn't tell who was driving.

Ricky Wheeler, a short, thin boy with blond hair and blond eyelashes, who wasn't sixteen yet, but who had ridden once or twice around the fountain with Clay, spotted it first.

"Hey, Clay. Isn't that your T-Bird?"

Clay felt the adrenaline tingle in his stomach. "No," he said.

"There's a woman in it." A couple people in line looked down the street toward the T-Bird.

"It's not our T-Bird," Clay said. "It's another one."

"It looks just like it," continued Ricky. He stood on his tip toes to see over the line. Someone else said, "Yeah, it sure is." And Ricky said, "Hey, that's your T-Bird!"

Clay turned away and didn't say anything. He looked at his reflection in the plateglass window. His hair blew over to one side. A cowlick in front kept his hair from laying flat. He looked at all the heads of the people standing in line in the reflection. He thought he saw the T-Bird

drive by again and he started, but it was a light-blue Falcon instead.

The last time Clay saw the T-Bird that month he was mowing the lawn close to the road when his father pulled up next to him. His father motioned for him to come over to the car. Clay turned off the lawn mower and walked to where his father had parked along the side of the road. His father had just gotten off work.

"Get in a minute," said his father. "And we'll go for a quick ride."

Clay got into the car and the first thing he noticed was the ashtray full of cigarette butts with red lipstick marks.

"How you been Clay?" "Everything been goin' OK?"

"Yeah," said Clay and he looked at his father as he drove. He noticed that his father wore a new sweater made out of some fuzzy material like mohair or angora. He also had a new diamond ring in the shape of a horseshoe.

"When are you coming back?" asked Clay.

"I talked to your Momma on the phone and she said she didn't want me back. Said she wants a divorce."

"She was probably just mad."

"No, Clay. That's what she wants."

"Christ, Dad. You know how she gets."

"I love that woman, Clay. Why don't you talk to her."

"Where'd you get that ring?" asked Clay.

"A fella owed me some money. There's a carat an' a

half worth of diamonds there. They're all flawless, except this one in the corner." His father put the hand with the ring back on the steering wheel and pointed to the flawed diamond with his other hand.

"I thought, Clay, if you could talk to her, she'd change her mind."

"Mom said you moved in with that woman."

"Sometime you'll understand why a man does the things he does. I'll tell you right now. I love your Momma."

Clay looked out the side window as his father turned around in one of the neighbor's driveways.

"Do you need anything?" asked his father. "How about your sister?"

"We're fine," said Clay.

Neither of them said anything for a while. Then Clay asked how the T-Bird was running.

"Not too bad," said his father. "I think the clutch might be goin', though."

Clay flushed red. "Damn it. Why do you let her drive it?" His eyes teared up.

"I let her borrow the car a couple times. Is that all bad?"

Clay was silent for a moment, then he shook his head. "She'll wreck it."

"No she won't, Clay."

They drove back to the house in silence. "OK, then,"

said his father. "Now talk to your Momma for me. Give me a call."

Clay nodded. "I will," he said.

Clay opened the car door.

"Here's the phone number," said his father. "And here." Clay's father handed him a piece of paper and a twenty dollar bill.

"What's that for?"

"Take it. You might need it. Buy yourself a Coke." His father looked serious, then he smiled. "Take it. Here."

Clay reached for the number and the money. "Thanks," he said. He paused with the door open, leaning one hand on the car's top. He looked in through the windshield down the road. Then he blurted out, "It's a mess around here without you." He shut the door and made sure it was tight.

His father nodded, looking down the same empty road. He didn't say anything for a moment. And then, "Yeah, I know." He looked at Clay. "Call me."

Clay watched him turn around in the driveway and then drive out of sight.

His mother was at the screen door when Clay got back to the house.

"I told him not to come around here." Clay's mother brushed her hair, which was just beginning to show gray, back with one hand and held a cigarette with the other.

"He wants to come back," said Clay.

"He thinks he can go, do whatever he wants and then come back and everything will be all right. Not this time."

"We can't live like this," said Clay. "This is crazy."

"He's crazy," and his mother turned around and walked into the dark kitchen and sat down at the breakfast counter with the red formica top. Clay could smell the pork chops for dinner frying in an electric skillet.

"He gave me twenty dollars."

"That's right. He'll spend it all and when he doesn't have any more, he'll come back."

"He said he loved you."

His mother sat there smoking a cigarette, looking up the driveway, almost as if she expected her husband to drive down it any minute, ready for his dinner. "That man," she said. "That man can cause more trouble. He's always been like this. Since he was a kid."

Clay's mother and father had grown up together in the same small town in Virginia. Clay's father had told him the story. After the war, Clay's father came back with a slight limp and wanted to go out with Clay's mother. She wouldn't have anything to do with it. "He's too wild," she told her friends. She did think he was nice looking, though. On their first date, all they did was go out and park. Clay's father let her walk all the way back to town. She vowed that she would never see him again. "My grandfather,"

she said, "had a church named after him. What would my people think?"

They were married in less than a year.

Clay's father moved back in over the weekend.

"Look, Clay," said his father after he had been home a day, after one of those few times when he had slept with his wife with their bedroom door closed. "I want you to do somethin' for me."

They were outside in the driveway and Clay's father squinted as he watched Clay squatting down polishing the front bumper on the T-Bird.

Clay looked up.

"I've got some things at Eva's. I want'a know if you'll go with me to get 'em?"

Clay continued to polish the bumper. The sun reflected off it so brightly that he could barely look at it. "Does Mom know about it?" Clay asked.

"She thought it would be a good idea," said his father. "She said somebody ought to be along. She's right."

"When do you want to go?" asked Clay.

"Anytime you're done."

Clay drove. His father sat beside him wearing a pair of tan pants and one of the straw hats they wore when they drove with the top down on the T-Bird.

Eva lived out of town on a county road between Kalamazoo and Battle Creek. Old oak trees lined the road

and the sun filtered through their leaves making it seem as if the sun flashed on and off.

Eva's house was a sprawling ranch house with a brick front and wrought iron work and a circular black-top driveway.

"A sixty-thousand dollar house," said Clay's father as they pulled up the drive. They parked in front, next to a big red Oldsmobile with a black vinyl top.

A labrador came running at them from the side of the house, barking with his ears back. When the dog saw Clay's father, he stopped barking and started wagging his tail. He jumped up and licked Clay's father's hand.

"Yeah, Midnight. That's a good dog."

"He's a beautiful dog," said Clay.

"Yeah, it is," said his father.

His father tried the front door, but it was locked. There were two doors that opened out and each had a doorknob in its center.

Clay's father knocked.

Eva opened the door. She wore a pair of white shorts and a Navy blue tank top blouse that you could see her bra through. She looked at Clay, then at his father.

"Well?" she said.

"I've come to pick up my things," he said. "I shouldn't be long."

Eva laughed and opened the door further. She stepped back from the doorway. "You just can't make up your mind,

can you?"

Clay's father didn't say anything as he stepped into the living room. Clay followed. The living room was cool, the drapes were pulled. Clay looked at a large brocade davenport and above it a picture of two mallard ducks flying over a lake.

"I put some of it in boxes," said Eva. "You'll have to get the rest yourself." Clay noticed now that she did not look as good as she had at the carnival. Her legs were slim and tan, but her thighs, flaccid and covered with tiny networks of wrinkles.

Clay followed his father back into the bedroom. The bed was covered with a cream colored quilted bedspread. All the furniture in the room was blond. Two cardboard boxes sat on the floor. The one with TOMATOWS written on its side had a few shirts in it and a couple pairs of underwear. The other one had glass in it; something that looked like a decanter set and a Blue Willow shaving mug. Clay's father handed him one of the boxes and he took the other one out to the T-Bird.

There were a few other things. Some tools in the garage and a barbecue grill outside and a portable TV. "That's about it," said his father. "You'll have to help me with the stereo."

Clay didn't know his father had bought a stereo. He had seen one in the bedroom. It was big; the speakers were the size of end tables. Knick-knacks were arranged on

their tops.

Eva was in the bedroom when they returned. Clay's father pointed to the speakers, one on either side of a book case. "Clay, you'll have to unhook the speakers there from the back. Just wind up the . . . "

"Wait a minute," interrupted Eva.

Clay's father continued. "Clay, just wind the cord on those prongs there on the back of the speakers."

Clay walked toward the speakers. Eva stepped between Clay and the speakers. "Just a minute," she said and she glared at Clay's father. "The stereo stays. I haven't asked for anything out of this whole mess. I want the stereo."

Clay felt chilly. He shivered, though it wasn't cold in the house. His father looked at him, then at Eva.

"No," he said. "We're takin' the stereo. Come on, Clay." Clay hesitated. "Come on, Clay. Let's go." He turned the stereo sideways on the bookshelf and unplugged it from the wall outlet.

Eva moved closer to Clay's father. "Clay, I don't want a scene here in front of your son."

"We're not gonna have one. Clay?"

"I'm telling you right now to leave that stereo alone."

"Clay," said his father. "I'm not gonna tell you again. Get the speaker and we'll go."

"Goddamn you. I deserve that stereo."

"Clay, you gettin' it?"

Clay looked at the knick-knacks on top of the speaker. One was an oriental woman in a rickshaw. The hair looked real under the clear plastic on the figure's head. He bent over to disconnect the wires and Eva grabbed his arms from behind. He felt her fingernails burning into the back of his biceps. "Don't touch that!" she yelled.

Clay's father pulled her away from Clay. She turned around and screamed. The scream vibrated and re-echoed in the bedroom. It seemed to fill the entire house. It made Clay jump. She slapped Clay's father hard across the side of his face. He stood there staring blankly at her. Then his face took on an expression Clay had only seen once before, when the car fell off the jack as they were changing a tire on the freeway. Clay's father slapped her back. She was stunned. She began to cry hysterically, holding her hands to her face. "You rotten bastard. You rotten fucking bastard," she cried.

"Come on, Clay," said his father. "Grab those speakers."

Clay didn't move. Eva stood in the middle of the room, barefoot, crying. Clay looked at her from the side. Her face was twisted and ugly. She reminded him of one of the girls at the strip-tease show at the carnival or Donna with her panties pulled down around her ankles in the front seat of the T-Bird.

"Look, Dad. Let's just go. Forget the stereo. Just go. OK?"

"I'm not goin' to leave that stereo."

"It's just a stereo. Come on. It's not worth it."

His father stood a moment looking at the stereo in his arms. He looked around the room, at Eva standing there, her hands still clutching her face. He dropped the stereo back down on the bookshelf sideways. "Let's get out of here," he said.

Clay was the first out of the house. He sat down behind the steering wheel of the T-Bird and waited for his father to get in.

They drove without saying a word to each other. The wind blew Clay's hair around on his head. His father reached into a storage compartment behind the front seats and got Clay's straw hat.

"Here, put this on."

Clay took the hat from his father. They continued on in silence.

After a while, his father said, "You were right, Clay. I wasn't thinkin' straight."

Clay didn't say anything, but concentrated on the driving.

"Damn, I didn't want that to turn into the mess it did."

Clay nodded his head.

"Listen," continued his father. "You acted right. I don't know what I was thinkin'." He squeezed Clay's shoulder.

Clay sat back in the seat and put his arm out the window. They didn't say much more on the way home.

Neither Clay or his father mentioned the morning at Eva's after that. His mother never knew what went on. His father sold the T-Bird at the end of the summer.

As Clay stood at the screen door watching the local cop who bought the car for twenty-five hundred dollars drive it down the driveway, he thought of the neon Nativity scene his father made that Christmas in Virginia. He thought of all the colors from the back, the Star of Bethlehem twinkling. He didn't need that T-Bird. It was a car, something to go from one place to another, nothing more. It looked good going down the driveway. The turquoise paint had that dull shine he liked so well.

Clay jumped up in the doorway and with his fingertips on the dusty part of the moulding did pull-ups until he was winded. Then he dropped down and walked into the kitchen feeling his heart beat. He looked around the room, at the knots in the knotty pine paneling, at the brown tiles on the floor. His father was hammering something in the garage. There was a hiss and the faint smell of his mother's hair spray coming from the bathroom. He stood there a moment and then walked over to the phone, black on the red-formica counter-top and he dialed slowly, deliberately, Donna's telephone number.

The End