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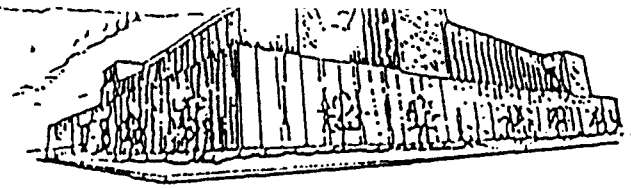
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GIRL WITH LARGE FOOT JUMPING ROPE

by

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B.A. Middlebury College, 1991

M.A. Middlebury College, 1994

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master in Fine Arts

The University of Montana

1995

Approved by:


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Cool Moss

It was the summer of theme parties. The Millers started it in June with line dancing. They found some group from Texas who called themselves "Get In Line!" and we watched and followed these sequined wonders stomp through the Achy Breaky and the Mason-Dixon. Then the Bissels topped them a few weeks later with a psychic named Francine. She read palms, tarot cards, was even able to talk to Lena Bissel's great-grandfather, but like so many spiritualists she had no sense of humor and no patience and did not appreciate Chuck Hubert's zombie walk. Soon the Makendricks transformed their annual July Fourth pool party into what would have been a spectacular kite party had there been any wind. Laura Makendrick broke into very public tears. And eventually Zoe and I made a stab at it. We concocted a "Foods of the World" party which quickly turned into a "Drinks of the World" party. Once again Charlie Hubert performed his zombie walk -- a few people always seem to egg him on -- and a table was broken, certainly no antique. I don't know if it was because we were all restless that summer and needed something new. Normal costume parties felt passé, dissolute, like Maria Antoinette in a tiered, moth-eaten wig. Instead, there had to be a something learned even if it was that borscht does in fact taste like shit and a healthy

supply of rum can save almost any party.

Tonight belonged to the Greers, Bill and Tammy. In the circle of our acquaintances they dwell in the third ring: the friends of friends with money. Lots of money. I sat downstairs on the couch and waited for Zoe to get ready. We were running late but I didn't care. An awful rumor had spread that there would be no alcohol served, something about false courage and a numbing of the brain. Yes, I thought, it'll do that to you. Thank God. So I was having a drink which quickly turned into a series of drinks, all lit with gin. That summer I was drinking gin. But I wasn't smoking.

The television was on and my five-year-old son was propped a few feet from the screen. Static raised his fine blond hair. The beginning of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* was playing on the VCR. Ray loved it. I knew because he had his hands jammed down his elastic pants and he mumbled something about cars -- "Vroom, Vroom" -- and squeezed his groin like a toy horn. It had happened in May that he discovered the first joy of the pleasure principle. We tried to thwart him by continually slapping him on the wrist and looking angry and pointing a finger to the ever-watchful sky, but he still carried on, our little boner boy. And nowhere was off limits. Restaurants. Birthday parties. He could pin the tail on the donkey with one hand. For a while we considered building a cardboard skirt, like the kind that prevent dogs from scratching their recently pinned ears, but instead we used it as a gag around shocked friends. It seemed to put them at ease.

"He'll grow into it," I told the nervous babysitter. She was sitting on

the edge of a chair, her knapsack still hugging her shoulders. Her name was Gwen and she had a large head and a large nose. I wondered if the kids at school were merciless towards her. Sombrero face.

She giggled. I thought of following up with a joke about Dick Van Dyke but I didn't know if she'd even know who Dick Van Dyke was and I didn't want her to just hear the words dick and dyke. So I offered her a soft drink instead.

"No, thanks. I'm fine." She also had a bad complexion. I figured babysitting was a relief to her on Saturday nights.

"We won't be late," I told her.

"That's fine. I mean, it doesn't matter." She shrugged her knapsack. "I have lots of work." And she smiled without showing her teeth. I thought the worse: braces and receding gums.

"And he's easy," I said, gesturing towards Ray. "After this, another video, and if he's still awake after that, pop in another." I went over to the folding table that acts as our bar and made myself another drink. "He's seen them all a hundred times, the same damn movies, but still..." I had nothing to end the sentence, no overall conclusion, so I just let it peter out.

There was silence except for the TV and Truly Scrumptious singing her eponymous song. It seemed to fill the entire room. I sat back down and waited. I could hear Zoe's steps on the floor above. I didn't want to rush her. She was always feeling rushed. With the awkward teenager, the child, the drink in my hand, I had that familiar feeling that I was waiting at an airport

lounge for a late plane, and the more I waited the more I became convinced that the plane would crash over Ohio or skid into the ocean and that this drink would be my last drink and that this moment would be my last memory of the things that littered the ground. I knew it was just the gin. Over my son's shoulders Truly swung back and forth, her gossamer veil fluttering behind her, and as she smiled and sang and sang and smiled, I waited for a large bird to swoop down with razor-sharp claws.

Soon Zoe came downstairs and I was relieved to see her. She gave me an expression of exasperation. "Sorry I'm late," she said.

"No problem." I lifted my glass to show her that I was taking advantage of the lag time.

She turned to the babysitter. "You must be Gwen."

The babysitter stood up. "Yes, hello, Mrs. Scott."

"Well." Zoe's hands dropped lifelessly to her side and she took a deep breath. She was beautiful, tanned from the summer, and her hair had recovered some of its youthful blondness. "Just put him to bed when he gets tired. He's had dinner but if he gets hungry give him a fruit roll-up. They're in the cupboard." I used to love to watch Zoe think. Her eyes have these attractive pouches and when she thinks it seems like she's searching them. "Oh, and the Greers' phone number is by the kitchen phone, along with the emergency numbers."

All during this time the babysitter was nodding her huge head. "Got it," she said.

Zoe turned to me. "Okay, we're off." She walked over to Ray and slumped her knees against his back. "Ray, we're going," she said in a louder voice.

"Yep."

"We'll be back in just a little bit." I knew that Zoe wanted a child that would cry at such moments, that would wrap his helpless arms around her and wail terribly, but Ray just sat there, hands down his pants, watching a stupid car that could fly.

I ruffled his hair and said, "Have a good time." As Zoe made her way to the front door, I topped off my drink and took it with me. "Bye now," I said again.

The Greers don't live very far away but they live just far enough away so that we know we don't live in the truly nice neighborhood. "You know they're not serving any booze," I said.

"Yes."

"They've got more money than anyone and they're not serving booze. That just doesn't seem right. There's no heavy machinery involved." Zoe was quiet and looked like a weightlifter before attempting a clean and jerk. I wouldn't have been surprised to see chalk on her hands. "You all right?"

"I'm not in the mood for a party tonight," she said.

"I hear you. Especially a party without booze." The sky had a grenadine glow. A volcano had erupted in some distant island in the

Philippines. A whole town was destroyed, fifty-seven people died, but it made every sunset that summer seem straight out of Hollywood.

"They have a surprise in store." Zoe pushed down the visor and checked her make-up in the pop-up vanity mirror. She wiped at the corners of her mouth. "I hate surprises," she said.

"Me too." And while we didn't look at each other as we passed under tree-lined streets, I knew that there were eyes on the both of us and that we were somehow talking to those eyes, a third party viewer, a witness to all of this. "Surprises are for suckers," I said. Salt air filled the car; the ocean was close. The houses and front lawns grew progressively bigger. I rolled down the window so that the rushing wind could blow through the stillness.

"Malachi."

"What?"

She paused for a second. I thought she was going to say something that would force me to pull the car over and face her. At that time there was no melodrama in our life, no affairs, no money problems, no addictions, and we still thought that the people on daytime talk shows were freaks. But we were bored.

"What?" I said again.

Zoe reached over and clicked on the radio. The volume was too high but neither one of us bothered to turn it down. I didn't drive any faster, just a flat 35 mph.

The Greers' driveway was filled with cars and edged with standing

torches. Mature trees were tastefully lit with spotlights. We had to park on the street along with a few other late arrivals, and then we followed the bending line of torches. The house was large, white with black shutters. During Christmas they placed an electric candle in each window. It was quite dramatic. And during Easter they had a huge Easter egg hunt. They put a hundred bucks in the big egg. Kids would sprint and dive into bushes. But Ray was hopeless. He'd just eat the first chocolate bunny he came across.

"How do I look?" Zoe asked me.

"Fine."

"Really?"

"Yes."

From behind the house a noise sounded. It wasn't a party noise, that mingling of chitchat, music, and laughter; it was more like an angry swarm of mosquitos, or worse yet, a solitary two hundred and fifty pound mosquito. Mosquito-man. My mind tripped onto a late night movie I had recently seen -- *The Island of Dr. Moreau* -- and I remembered those failed genetic experiments. Boar-man. Weasel-man. Orangutan-man. They terrorized a bare-chested Michael York. And as awful as they were, I wanted them to catch him and rip his body into pretty blond shreds.

"Take my hand," I said to Zoe.

We circled around some bushes, a bit of mulch, a bird bath, and then walked through a gate which opened onto a beautiful back lawn -- almost an acre and a half of perfect Bermuda grass -- and off to the side, huddled in a

circle, our group of friends hummed a perfect C. Their heads were lowered. Their arms were intertwined. Just behind them a fifteen-foot stretch of coals glowed hot. It was like a strange pep rally

"Are we playing State tomorrow?" I whispered to Zoe.

"Maybe it's a barbecue."

We stood still and no one noticed us. No one said, Hey it's the Scotts. No one offered us drinks or cheese puffs. The circle was closed and we didn't want to be one of those pushy couples. Besides, we were late; we had no rights. So we just watched as the hum slowly grew around them. A neighbor's dog howled.

"What is this?" I whispered to Zoe.

"I have no idea."

The hum then reached a breathless pitch, and faces and arms slowly lifted up towards the sky. They looked like chanting refugees waiting for the helicopters to drop down food. I recognized them all. Finally, it ended with a lung emptying *Ah*, and then people cheered and smiled and one man, a tall guy in a shiny suit, said, "Did you feel the power?" Everyone nodded. "Yes?" he asked. He looked around the group. "Well that's the power of positive thinking." He made a point of training his eyes on each and every person. "That's the power you hold trapped within your body." He fisted his hands. "The power you never let out." Raised his finger. "Why?" Paused. "Because of fear."

Still no one noticed us. Attention was focused on this man. He had a

manufactured face, smooth and with only a few lines to delineate a mouth, a nose, eyes. His voice was a personal whisper spoken to a crowd. I was sure he had a set of self-help videos in the trunk of his car, maybe an infomercial in the works. "Fear," he continued, "is what we have to overcome. Most of us are still children. We are afraid of the dark, afraid of the unknown, afraid to succeed. Why? Because if we try to succeed, if we put ourselves on the line, we can fail." I tried to catch the eyes of a few friends by making quick faces, but no eyebrows raised in recognition.

"Maybe these are the Stepford friends," I said to my wife.

"What?"

"You know, robots."

"Shhh."

"Now." The man clapped his hands. It was like a hypnotist breaking a trance. "I see some new guests have arrived." He gestured towards us like a game show hostess displaying a brand new washer and dryer. "So I think it's a good time for a break. But remember, let's psych each other up. We're part of a team." And then, with surprising quickness, he left the group and came over to us. "Hi," he said. "I'm Robert Porterhouse."

"I'm Zoe Scott, and this is my husband Mal."

We shook hands. He had a pinky ring. A family seal. I hate pinky rings. He also had an expensive gold watch that hung loosely from his wrist.

"Well, are the two of you ready?" He asked.

"For what?" I said.

He grasped our forearms. "To change your life. To become who you want to be."

I smiled. "A baseball player? Sure."

I could tell by the way Zoe looked at me that she wanted to hit me on the arm, but instead she quickly pushed her voice over mine. "Why not," she said. I was a little put off by her enthusiasm. We used to laugh at our born-again friends.

"Great, Zoe. You have to align your belief system so that you get what you want."

"Even if it's a bigger house? A Porsche," I said.

"Sure, if that's what you want."

"How Eighties," I said.

"No Mal, it's about what you want." He poked the air in front of my chest. "What's in here." He glanced over our shoulders. "Now, I've got to check on things. I'll see you in a few." And he walked away.

I turned to Zoe. "And that night, Malachi Scott learned how to live."

"Don't be such a cynic."

I grabbed Zoe by the arms. "Did they get to you too?" I made a plea to the heavens. "You bastards!"

"Jesus, how drunk are you?"

"Not enough for this crap."

"You're going to make a great bitter old man."

"It's the gin. But thanks anyway."

Zoe used to like this kind of banter, thought it was smart and urbane and very round table, but now she turned away and made a disparaging sigh. "So clever," she said.

The circle had broken up and smaller groups formed. Bill and Tammy Greer saw us and waved and came over. Nervous enthusiasm creased their athletic faces. He was of Norwegian descent. She was of Finnish descent. They both wore the same shade of blue.

"Hey, you guys," Tammy said.

We apologized for being late, then I gave Tammy a kiss and Zoe gave Bill a kiss and Tammy gave Zoe a kiss and Bill shook my hand. After that, we had little to say.

"So," I said. "What's going on here? A barbecue? A little luau?" I swung my hips.

"No, no," Bill said. He shook his head. "Something a lot more...powerful."

"Okay," I said. "Powerful."

"Yep." Bill turned toward the burning coals. A man in asbestos boots was spreading them with a long metal rake. "We're going to walk across those coals." He spoke like a man with a crazy dream.

Tammy curled her arm around Bill and gave him a squeeze. They were terminally in love; if one died, the other would soon follow. "And we'll never be the same," she said.

"That's what I've gathered," I said.

Bill gave us a spirited thumbs-up sign. "And we can do it. We really can."

"Together," Tammy said. "And with Robert. Isn't he the greatest?"

Zoe nodded. "He seems very motivational."

To show my solidarity in the world of backyard adventure I took Zoe's hand. We were like the suckerfish on the belly of a large predatory shark.

"Super," I said.

"He's very well regarded," Bill said. "In his field."

"I'm sure."

Tammy giggled. She was sweating. It wasn't dainty sweat. She needed a towel. "And we can do it. I know we can." I could see the old Wisconsin cheerleader surfacing.

"We can," Bill agreed.

And then Bill and Tammy hugged us. A great big hug. Their skin smelled of apricots and the beach, with a trace of smoke mixed in, and while at first I thought the whole thing absurd and silly, I soon found my head resting on Bill's shoulder and my arm wrapped tightly around Tammy's waist.

Eventually we separated, and they left us for another couple that wasn't mixing properly. "Walk on coals?" I said to Zoe.

"We're guests."

"I'll put on a silly hat. I'll run wildly with a hopeless kite. But hot coals. That's beyond the call. I don't remember Martha Stewart mentioning

any hot coal and canapé party."

And -- thank God -- Zoe smiled, and for that moment found me amusing again. "You're the worst."

We decided to separate because we hate couples who cling, so she went off in one direction and I went over to Phil Bissel and Chuck Hubert. They were lingering by the coals. They both looked defeated.

"No drinks, Mal," Chuck said.

"I heard."

"I can't believe they expect me to walk on fire sober. I mean, with a few drinks, maybe." Chuck reached down and ripped up a clump of grass. "I've done worse." From his palm he picked out single blades and dropped them to the ground. "And no food either."

"What?" I said.

"Nope. We can't eat until we've done the firewalk."

"Bribery," Phil said. He was a fat man who milked his baldness for humor. "There's no way I'm doing it."

"They have champagne when we finish. The good stuff." Chuck grinned. "I might make a sprint for it now." He made a cartoon gesture of running -- left leg raised, elbow bent. "Hold me back!"

I stared at the coal bed. It had a mesmerizing effect. I pictured a buried city beneath it. Everything laid to waste and eventually covered in ash. "It's a shame to ruin such a nice lawn," I said.

Chuck spat onto the coals. "Oh, you think our man Bill wouldn't

think that through. See those stakes?" He pointed. "That's where the pool is going."

"A pool?"

"Yep, Bill's putting in a pool, has the contractor and everything, and these coals are in the deep end."

"That's smart."

Phil threw an ice cube on the coals. "I don't know what he's thinking," he said. "There just no chance."

Herb Frankel came over and mimed golf swings. "Boys been playing?"

"No."

He patted me on the back. "How're things? Work all right?"

"Fine." They all knew my job wasn't going well, but some people, like Herb, pretended to empathize, while others just pretended everything was fine.

"It's a tough market. No rhyme or reason. Have to sweat it out." The glow from the coals made it look like Herb's face was wrapped in red saran wrap. I imagined him suffocating. "You going to do this shit?"

"I can't imagine."

"How about you, Chuck? A little zombie walk across the coals."

Chuck's face turned sheepish. He always regretted his drunken performances. "I don't think so." Then he lifted his glass of soft drink. "No booze."

I tried to spot Zoe, but I couldn't find her. The sun was down and the

night was here and the coals now looked like a very cheap hell that housed very cheap souls. More people came over -- the Vollopes and the Burnhams, two couples who always vacationed together; and Leslie Pomeroy, heavily medicated on a new antidepressant. She threw an espadrille onto the coals. It burned quickly, and we all watched.

The man in the asbestos boots warned people not to disturb his spread. "It's essential that it stays pure."

"Are they just briquettes?" someone asked.

"No. We get this stuff from Hawaii."

People were impressed.

I was drinking 7-Up with three wedges of lime, but it didn't fool me. Nothing fooled me. At that moment I knew the ending to every mystery novel, and all the people around me were stupid. These are moods I get in, most often when I'm in a car. No one knows how to drive except me. But standing next to those coals, their bloom shimmering against faces, I saw each person as an old man and an old woman and I saw them alone and waiting and still cold by the fire. I guess it was the gin. I should never drink on an empty stomach.

Zoe appeared at my side. She was holding a Coke. "It's happening soon," she said.

"What?"

"Tammy wants everyone by the coals. She was ringing a dinner bell."

"I wish Ray was sick," I said suddenly.

"Huh?" She had a look of disgust on her face.

"Not sick sick, not dying sick. God no. Just sick enough so that we had to stay home."

"Please. Don't get this way." Zoe slipped off her shoes. She has tiny feet, and I'm always glad that she never paints her toenails red.

Bill and Tammy Greer walked over with Robert Porterhouse. Bill cleared his throat in a stagy way and everyone hushed. "Well, okay, great. It's great having everyone here, just great. I'm so glad you're all here. Yes. Anyway, it's going to be an exciting night. A bit scary." He chuckled nervously. "But, it could be really special. Now I'm going to turn it over to Robert. So, here's Robert."

Some people applauded.

Robert Porterhouse loosened his tie. He took off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves. He smiled a lets-get-down-to-business smile. I was starving. The coals made me think of the simple cookouts we used to have. He gathered us into a tighter circle -- it was like camp -- and he told us the story of his life.

"My first memory was of fear. The bogeyman. He was an old man with sharp teeth and long dirty fingernails and he was hungry for children. He used to live under my bed. Whenever I wet the sheets, and I did quite often, I would tell my mother that it was the bogeyman. He made it impossible for me to go to the bathroom. Why? Because he would've grabbed my ankles and dragged me under. As basic as that. It's that fear that

stops us from doing what we really want to do."

I looked around the group. I wanted to nudge a few people and make loopy gestures at my head.

"So," he continued, "how do we get over this bogeyman that lives inside of us? Do we turn on the lamp and check under the mattress? Does that solve the problem? No, because we all know that the bogeyman can't be seen in the light. Only in darkness. That's when you see his glowing red eyes and you smell his rotten breath. Sure," he put his hands in his pockets and paced, "I know what you're saying: those are kid's fears, and as adults, we grow out of such fears." He let the word linger in the air. I felt on the verge of being startled, like when you know that the necking couple in a movie is doomed. "Or do we?" he asked.

The silence lasted even longer this time. Robert knelt down and ran his fingers through the grass. Then he started confessing. "I was twenty-three years old. I flunked out of college. I was a hundred and forty pounds overweight. I had no money. No job. I could barely get up out of bed. In fact, sometimes I spent the whole day in bed. Now what kept me there? What brought me so low? It was fear. I still had that bogeyman under my bed. I still thought that if I made one step I'd be finished."

Fireworks would have been so much more fun. We could have leaned against each other and oohed and aahed at the exploding dandelions and the fluttering snakes.

"How did I break the domination?" He stared at Clare Worden. She

was surprised and she smiled and lifted her hands as if she were drying nail polish. "Well, something bigger than me made me take that step. It was 1989. And there was an earthquake -- a pretty big one -- and I'm in bed." He began to act out the scene. It felt very Native American. "Suddenly, my whole apartment collapses, the second floor becomes the first floor. I'm thrown out of bed. I'm in a t-shirt and underwear. And I have to get out. All the windows are broken. There's glass everywhere. A ton of it. I also smell gas. But I still don't move. I'm too scared. And then I hear it, someone crying for help. Then I hear more people crying for help. I know I have to do something. So I concentrate on those cries and I walk and I crawl and I carry those people out of the building. At that moment my mind was completely focused on the task. And I kept on repeating to myself, 'Save Lives. Save Lives.' That day I took five people out of that building. Most of them were elderly, helpless. And when it was all over, and I was wrapped in a blanket and drinking coffee, I didn't have one cut on either foot."

Some people sighed in real wonder.

"Is this a miracle?" He shook his head. "Absolutely not. This is the power of the self. At that moment I overcame my fear. I took a step, and with that step the bogeyman disappeared. Now I'm not all that smart. There's nothing 'special' about me. I've just learned a way to align my belief system so that I get what I want. I've empowered myself through positive thinking. Now, I know how this sounds, a whole lot of new age mumbo jumbo. But I swear to you, and I hope to show you, that with the mind

focused, with it directed, there's nothing you can't do. Absolutely nothing."

And for the next hour he tried to convince us that this was all true. He had us doing exercises, meditations; we played games of trust. Everyone reluctantly joined in. We were all gracious guests. Bill and Tammy orchestrated everything like amphetamined cruise directors. But the rest of us were becoming grumpier and grumpier as time wore on. I was dizzy with hunger, and a slight headache had crept in. I watched Zoe fall into the arms of Jasper Cunningham. Then he fell into her arms. They giggled. Jasper brushed aside his too long hair and tucked it behind his ears. He acted like a tennis pro. And once again I thought I knew how everything would end.

"The heat from these coals is over 2500 degrees Fahrenheit," Robert Porterhouse told us. "Right now it's hotter than the sun."

"Really?" someone said. I think it was Chuck.

"Yes."

People murmured.

"And we will walk on it without burning ourselves. Right?"

Everyone shouted, "Right!" It was one of the first things we had learned: interjections empowered.

Then Robert slipped off his loafers, slipped off his socks. The man with asbestos boots prepared a discreet little first aid station which no one was meant to notice, but everyone did. Tammy Greer looked like she was ready to cry. Sweat poured down her face. "Okay," Robert said. "Here I go." He stared straight ahead as if his eyes were connected by wire to a distant object. "Cool

moss, cool moss," he said.

We all chanted along with him. "Cool moss, cool moss."

He quickly goose stepped across the red-hot coals. I was ready for his feet to catch on fire, for his legs to bubble and melt, but he kept on moving and within seconds, was finished. He let out a whoop. All of us applauded. He came to the group and showed us his feet. They were dirty, a bit red, but unblistered. "You see, that's the power of positive thinking." He was talking excitedly. "Your mind can do anything."

People smiled. They nodded their heads. There was exhilaration in the air, a sense of the possible. But no one followed his example. Everyone just lingered around the coals. It was like a classroom of kids who don't know the answer to an easy question. Even Bill and Tammy had lost their eagerness. Some people excused themselves to go to the bathroom.

Robert Porterhouse walked across the coals again. Once again everyone cheered, once again he showed off his unscathed feet. "That's the power."

The third time he did it people barely noticed. I was standing with Zoe and Jasper. "This is pitiful," Jasper said.

Zoe nodded.

"I mean," he repeated, "just pitiful."

Robert was clapping his hands, patting people on the back. His face was desperate. "We can do it," he said.

Herb Frankel laughed.

Someone said, "No, *you* can do it."

More people laughed.

Then I slipped off my cheap shoes -- I wasn't wearing socks -- and started across the coals, a glass of flat 7-Up in my hand. There was silence. No one said, "Cool moss, cool moss." A plane flew overhead and I wondered if they could see me. My feet felt the heat in little pricks, like walking across gravel, but I just pretended that Bill and Tammy's pool had been put in, and it was a pool party instead of a hot coal party and I was in the deep end treading towards the floating lounge chair in the shallow end. Before I began I was finished.

Robert ran over and hugged me. "Yes. There it is." His face was all relief. "And how are your feet."

"Fine," I said. I lifted them up. They were covered in ash.

Robert turned to the rest of the group. "See. It can be done."

Chuck Hubert shook my hand. "That's the farthest I've ever seen someone go for a drink."

"Well," Zoe said, "that was interesting."

Robert stayed close to me. I was his first convert. "Don't you feel like you could do anything?"

Now that I was his shill, I said a loud "Yes!"

People weren't convinced. Robert and I both walked across the coals again. Then we did it hand in hand. Soon, we were skipping. Well, maybe not, but by that time Tammy was locked in her bathroom, Bill was apologizing, and everyone was drinking the champagne and eating the

caviar, the toothpick-harpooned shrimp, the sliced ham. Robert packed up his motivational devices. "Some people just aren't ready," he told me.

"Yeah," I said.

"But I'm proud of you, Mal."

"Thanks, Dad." I was well into the champagne. "You're not a failure either."

"What?"

"You're not a failure."

"I know that."

When the rum was brought out people cheered. Robert had already left. He drove an El Dorado. Everyone sat by the coals like it was a spent bonfire. Bill brought out hot dogs and metal spits and people started to roast weenies. Chuck Hubert somehow got a hold of the asbestos boots and started to do his zombie walk across the coals. There was laughter and applause. Tammy came back outside. She was smiling. "Oh, that Chuck," she said. Soon everyone was trying on the boots.

After a while the party started to break up, and Zoe and I left. The drive home was quicker than the drive there. "How're your feet?" she asked.

"Fine."

"I still can't believe you did that. Crazy."

I concentrated on the corridor of light and tried to keep the car within it.

"You of all people," she said.

"Did you have a good time?" I said.

"It was ridiculous."

"Yeah." I didn't even try to make her laugh.

When we got home the tv was on and Gwen was lying on the couch watching a late night movie. She quickly got up. I wanted to help her with her head. "Hi," she said.

"Hey," Zoe said. She leaned against a chair. "Everything go all right?"

"No problem. A little tears in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, but otherwise, fine."

"The child catcher, right?"

"Yeah."

I walked over to the bar and made myself a proper drink. "Poor Ray hates that guy. 'Children,'" I said in a shrill voice.

Gwen giggled.

"But he was good?" I asked.

"Just fine."

"Good."

Zoe sighed and then abruptly said, "Well, Mr. Scott will drive you home. I'm bushed. Thanks a lot." She started to make her way upstairs. "Sorry we're so late," she said behind her.

"No problem."

Gwen didn't live very far away.

"Did you have a good time?" she asked me.

"It was all right. Same old stuff."

The sporadic oncoming traffic lit up our faces. Gwen's face looked like a second moon. I wanted to talk, my adrenaline still flowing, and for some reason I wanted to tell her something wise, something that would help her better understand this awkward life. "My grandmother and grandfather used to live out on this island in Maine," I said. "A beautiful spot. Islands all around. And on one of the islands adolescent kids used to get dropped off for three days of survival."

"Take a left," Gwen said.

"Here?"

"Yeah."

The headlights, like searchlights, ran by a corner house. I half-expected to see a fleeing convict, his striped prison garb frayed and muddy.

"Anyway, it was some Outward Bound program." I glanced towards her. "They were given something like a hook, some fishing line, five matches and a knife. That was it. With that they had to make do."

"A right." She was carefully watching the street.

"Right?"

"Uhuh."

"Well, I used to visit my grandparents during the summer. It was great. Really nice."

"Sounds it," Gwen said.

"And my grandparents had this sailboat, and we used to sail around quite a bit."

"Okay," Gwen sagged forward. I thought something might be wrong. A stomach cramp. "You're going to want to make a right pretty soon. The next right. It pops out of nowhere."

"Got it," I said. "And I remember the three of us making sandwiches, a ton of them, all neat in their little bags, and when we got to this survival island my grandfather would honk the fog horn."

She said, "This Right."

"Here."

"Yeah."

I made the turn. I wondered if the people inside could see the lights dash across their walls; I hoped it didn't wake them up or put them into a bad dream. "Well, it was unreal."

"The party?"

"No, no. You see, from the woods these kids would come out, all cut up and covered in bites. They looked miserable. And these kids would wade into the water, and my grandmother, my grandfather and myself would toss them sandwiches -- ham and cheese, turkey, roast beef, chicken salad, egg salad, tomato and cheese."

She turned and looked at me. "Neat," she said.

"Yeah."

We were still a few streets away. Sprinklers were clicking from lawns.

It's my favorite sound. And then I just reached down and turned off the headlights. The night sky suddenly appeared.

Gwen didn't say anything. She didn't move. "A left," she said.

"Left?"

"Yeah."

In the darkness, for a moment, things felt present. My friends were my friends and my wife was my wife and my feet did not burn.

I flipped down the turn indicator. It clicked along with the sprinklers outside.

POX

Mary, half-asleep over her coffee, watches her daughter hunch over a breakfast of Rice Krispies with skim milk. She smiles. Though Claire is thirteen and has denounced, in writing, everything that has to do with her parents, she still cannot eat cereal without spilling milk down her chin. "Wipe your chin," says Mary.

Claire looks up from the newspaper. "I have rabies."

"From Jack?" Jack is Claire's third boyfriend this school year; they've been dating for a few weeks. He's fifteen, drives a moped covered in bumper stickers, and has a habit of calling the house after ten at night. Mary suspects that he smokes cigarettes (hopefully not pot) and probably drinks beer (hopefully not hard alcohol) and most likely has had sex (hopefully not with Claire).

"Jack?" She raises her eyebrows which are plucked in a thin, exact line; Mary knows the pain in doing this and has long stopped caring about her own. "Oh God," Claire says, "you're just so funny." She flips a page of the newspaper with a swatting motion, like she's killing a fly. The milk stays on her chin.

Mary lowers her head. "Well, I try," she says, and when she says this, it

makes her feel foolish, like trying is somehow pathetic. Mary rearranges herself in her chair. There is no such thing as pleasant teasing anymore; everything now is a nasty form of solitaire

"Can I rip out an article?" Claire asks -- her thumb and index finger are poised and ready to start tearing away at the newspaper. She has long, well-kept fingernails.

"Your father hasn't read it yet."

Claire looks annoyed. "He only reads the sports," she says.

"Well, I haven't read the paper either."

"You read the paper, that's a joke."

"Of course I read the paper. Everyone reads the paper." Mary pulls her robe tight and reknits the sash.

"You read about movies," Claire says. "You read the gossip and advice columns." She takes a deep breath. Her face is pale and clammy, like wet dough, and she seems to be uncomfortable, fidgety, her back periodically rubbing against the wicker caning of the chair. "Trust me," she says, "you won't read this article, neither will Dad."

But Mary can't give in now. "Maybe I will, maybe it's something of utmost importance to me, maybe it'll change my life. Besides, we can save the newspaper, and after school you can do whatever you want with it."

"Locusts."

"What?"

Claire sighs again. "The article's about locusts."

"Where?" No matter what the circumstances, it is a mother-daughter conversation and it feels nice to Mary.

"In Ohio, outside Cincinnati."

"In Cincinnati?" Mary had envisioned distant Africa with fields of threadbare crops while off in the horizon the sky teems with hungry insects. But Cincinnati seems too close for such biblical plagues; it's as if Lake Erie was the Dead Sea. "Figure that," says Mary.

"Well can I rip it?"

"I'd like to read about locusts in Cincinnati. I have a friend who lives in that area."

Claire relents. "Whatever. Just save this article, okay."

"Of course." Mary gets up from the table and goes over to the counter to refill her coffee cup. Her daughter's new hobby is natural disasters. She's keeping a scrapbook filled with clippings of floods and earthquakes and tidal waves, of tornadoes and hurricanes, of fires, and now -- Mary notes -- of locusts. One calendar year of earthly cataclysm. "Seeing that being thirteen sucks," Claire told her, "I want to see how it sucks for the whole world." At first Mary found the endeavor depressing and a bit disturbing, but after a while she decided that it was a normal reaction to the catastrophe of the teenage body (she had read that once in the newspaper, but it concerned a boy who ripped the wings off of moths). And anyway, it's a good way to learn about geography, ecology, and random acts of weather.

A squeak sounds from the pipes and a new silence settles in the

kitchen -- Ron is finished with his morning shower -- then another squeak and water once again rushes through the pipes -- Ron is shaving. Mary knows her husband's particular noises; they are the only things that still resonate with familiarity. The rest of him has slipped into mystery. Ron has recently taken to shaving his head because he's sick of being bald, but while this style looks good on sleek athletes, it makes Ron look like a cancer victim. And sometimes Mary wonders if there isn't some terminal secret that her husband is keeping from her, a truth he doesn't think she can handle. On bad days Mary imagines he only has days to live, on good days total remission, a miracle. But as she listens to her daughter spoon soggy Rice Krispies to her mouth, as she hears the commuter traffic pick up outside the window, Mary senses that even her husband's noises are starting to fade. He opens and closes doors quietly, he walks quietly, he eats quietly, he blows his nose quietly, he dresses and undresses quietly, and when they make love, he fucks her quietly. These new silences scare Mary more than anything else. They're getting harder to fill.

"Claire?"

"Yeah?"

"Nothing."

Mary watches her daughter's earrings: little gold balls that dangle and catch the soft light of the sun. They were a gift from Jack, and she's been wearing them every day for the last two weeks. Again, Claire squirms in her chair, and she reaches behind her and scratches at the hollow of her back.

Mary asks, "You got ants in your pants?" The cutesy expression just slips from her mouth and she immediately wishes that she hadn't said something that once appealed to an earlier version of her daughter. "You got an itch?" Mary asks again.

"I'm fine," Claire says.

Mary walks over to the kitchen table. Her daughter stiffens as if Mary holds military rank. "Are you all right?"

"Look I'm fine, okay." she says, then she blurts out, "Why don't you just fuck off?"

Mary flinches.

"Just get away from me."

She steps back. "What's gotten into you?"

"You," Claire says.

And then Mary notices it, two angry red welts, scratched raw, on the nape of Claire's neck. A healthy amount of make-up has been dabbed on to try to cover them up. Mary wants to reach out and touch them, but she doesn't dare. "Are those mosquito bites?" she asks even though she knows it's too early in the year for mosquitoes.

Claire pushes up the collar of her shirt. "They're zits, okay."

"You don't have pimples," Mary says.

"I do now."

Mary gently touches her daughter's neck. "Don't," Claire says, and she gets up and carries her empty bowl over to the sink.

"Do you have any other itchy spots?"

"It's a fucking zit, Mom." Claire grabs her backpack. "I'll get a ride to school."

But Mary blocks the kitchen door. She holds her cup of coffee like brass knuckles. And while she is ready for a fight, ready for the cruel names, the condescending tone, she isn't prepared for Claire's tears and sudden collapse into her arms. For a clumsy moment it's as if the world has stopped spinning and memories are allowed to float forward like a wake catching up with a boat. Mary rocks with her child back and forth, but then lukewarm coffee spills onto her hand, and her robe comes open, the sash falling to the floor. "I can't believe this is happening to me," Claire tells her. "It's so typical." Mary shushes her and slowly untucks her blouse. She slides a hand up underneath and, for a second, she settles on the bra-strap that slings her small breasts to her narrow frame. The skin on her daughter's back is raised in an ancient braille, and there is an odd smell, a roasted chestnut smell.

"Is this going around school?" Mary asks.

"I don't think so." Claire shivers, and then she says again, "I just can't believe this. I feel so stupid." Her forehead is warm against Mary's shoulder.

"I think you have a fever," Mary says. She kisses the top of her daughter's head. She holds her tightly. It's like she's seven again.

Mary finds Ron upstairs in their bedroom. He's dressed in a blue pinstripe suit and he's sitting on the bed tying his shoelaces. He glances up

when she walks in -- "Hey," he says -- then he goes back to his shoes. Shaving nicks cover his scalp; it looks like he's been pecked by a bird.

"We have a problem," says Mary.

Ron finishes his knot then stands up. "What that?" he says. There's no concern in his voice, and Mary hates that.

"It's Claire. I think she has chickenpox." Mary watches his face for some reaction, for surprise or shock or sadness, for anything, but he just stares ahead like he's looking at a family photograph he doesn't quite remember. "Ron?"

"Chickenpox?" he finally says.

"Yes, her back's covered in them."

Ron goes to the bureau and grabs his watch, a gold Timex, and stretches the elastic band over his wrist; he sweeps house keys and change into his palm and slips them in his front pocket; he takes his wallet and tucks it in his back pocket; and while these are all simple acts, meaningless, Mary treats them like signs that have to be figured out before something's too late. "Well," he says, "I suppose we should call the doctor."

"It's too early. I'll call at nine."

Ron turns towards her, but he doesn't say anything.

Mary says, "I called the school, to let them know."

"Good idea." He then nods and stares down at his feet. His hands are in his pockets. It's like they're suddenly on a blind date, Mary thinks, a blind date that's lasted fifteen years. "So," Ron says.

"Well, have you ever had chickenpox?" Mary asks.

"No," he says.

Mary leans against the doorjamb. "That's not good, because neither have I."

Mary will stay at home with Claire, that's what they've decided. It isn't much of a debate, but they pretend to take in all the issues, the pros and the cons, and weigh them like there is some justice involved. For the last two years Mary has been a temp who works only in the afternoons for five hours a day. She is paid six dollars an hour. She does this work to keep busy and to have a little extra spending money. She also finds it exotic, like the lives of transients sometimes seem exotic. Ron is a medical supplies salesman. He makes his money, quite a bit of it, by commission, and a missed day could be a missed sale. Mary knows where the scales hang. "Of course I'll stay," she finally says. "No point in us both getting sick." Ron bends forward and tells Mary that he could stay. "No, I'll stay," she says again. "I'm probably already infected." Mary is surprised by how much she enjoys saying infected, and she says it again to herself. Ron runs his hand over his scalp. He closes his eyes. Mary wonders what he's thinking; she wants to ask him but she doesn't want to fill his silence with her own voice. Instead, she wishes that his bald head was like the Magic Eightball of her youth, something she could hold in her palm and shake and slowly the answers would emerge from within the eerie blue liquid.

Before Ron leaves for work he pokes his head into Claire's bedroom and says, "Tough break." She looks up, gives him a quick salute and says, "Thanks Mr. Clean." Ron lingers by the door for a second, his hand absently turning the doorknob back and forth, then he waves and disappears. Mary says goodbye to him at the front door. "Take care," he says, and she nods. She's waiting for one of these moments to be the last moment. It's almost a fantasy. Ron runs away, Claire runs away, and Mary is left behind, alone. Sometimes she thinks she should've had more kids, a whole household full, but she can't get away from the fact that she hated the pain of birth. It was like being ripped in two. Mary goes to the kitchen phone. Abandoned, she says to herself, and she goes down the list of what she might become: a crazy woman, a kindly woman, a bitter woman, or just an old woman.

Mary calls Claire's school. "Well," the school nurse says, "we'll keep an eye on things here." She sounds excited, anxious, and Mary imagines her going through medical files, pulling them and creating a pile of potential victims. Mary calls the pediatrician. He tells her, "If either of you get a temperature well-over 104, come to the hospital. Otherwise, just wait it out. If the itching gets really bad, I can give you both some prescription cortisone." The doctor seems tired, his wife is dying from a rare bone disease. Mary calls the temp agency. "Oh, yeah, no problem," a secretary says. Then Mary calls her best friend. "You've got to be careful with chickenpox," Leslie warns her. "It can be bad for an adult."

"I know," says Mary.

"They have a vaccine now, I saw it on CNN. It'll be obsolete in about a year."

"Typical."

"I just can't believe the two of you haven't had it." She says this like chickenpox is a bestseller that everyone has read.

"Strange, huh."

Leslie says, "It can make a man sterile."

"That's mumps."

"Oh. How is Ron anyway?"

"All right."

They talk for a little while longer, then Mary hangs up and pours herself some more coffee. She thinks of Claire upstairs. She used to let her take sick days from school so that the two of them could do something together. "Wanna play hooky?" she'd ask her in the morning, and Claire would bounce up and down. They'd go to the zoo or a matinee or sometimes the mall, and when they came home the day was their secret.

Mary goes into the downstairs closet, shuffles through tennis rackets, loose tennis balls, galoshes and boots, and comes out with a stack of games: *Clue*, *Monopoly*, *Masterpiece*, *Chutes and Ladders*, *Candyland*, *Trivial Pursuit*, *Risk* (which is still in its plastic shrink-wrapping), *Life*. She holds them forward like a sacrifice as she climbs the stairs. Masking tape has been used to keep the corners of some of the boxes together, and there is dust and

an oddly mournful smell. It reminds her of moving, of packing everything up until everything is consumed by cardboard.

The doctor had mentioned distractions; "They're essential," he said, "otherwise she'll go insane." And after she hung up with him, Mary wondered what he had meant by insane, if Claire could actually lose her mind and scratch herself into bloody madness. She wished that the doctor had used a different word, a word like nuts or bonkers or loony, a word with a little less weight to it. Insane constricted all thoughts to straitjackets and padded cells.

Mary walks into her daughter's bedroom. Claire is scratching at the back of her arm. "Try not to scratch," Mary says.

Claire snorts.

"Seriously, you'll scar." Mary notices new spots on her daughter's forehead, on her neck; she can't believe the speed of the thing. She goes over to the bed and sits down. "I brought some games," she says.

"Oh great," Claire says, "*Chutes and Ladders*. Just perfect."

Mary spreads the boxes out and asks, "How are you feeling?"

"Like an idiot."

"No, I mean temperature wise." Mary touches Claire's forehead. It's warm but not burning. Earlier the thermometer had read 101 degrees; Mary now guesses it's about the same. "Don't you want to play a game?" she says.

"What do you think?"

"A little *Clue*, maybe?"

"Just leave me alone."

Mary stays on the bed and looks around the room. The walls are bare. Posters and magazine advertisements have been taken down in favor of a new austerity; some bits of masking tape remain behind like the remnants of squashed bugs. When Claire was three and Mary was twenty-seven, the two of them had painted a mural on the walls -- a jungle scene with monkeys and tigers and a family of toucans. The trees were thick, happy snakes hung from the branches, and the ceiling was a brilliant daytime blue (Mary's hair became flecked from the dripping paint; "The sky is falling! The sky is falling!" she said to a giggling Claire). Mary's artistic skills are limited, but at the time all of this seemed like a good idea to her, something creative to do on a rainy day. Ron even joined in. He painted a surprisingly vivid golden retriever. It was his boyhood dog. "I don't think he'll last very long in this jungle," Mary told him. Ron nodded and smiled. "Poor Amber," he said.

It took them a month to finish, and in the end, it made the room almost uninhabitable. Garish creatures stared out from the walls, their proportions so off, so twisted, that there was no reason to believe that the bodies could ever move. It turned smiles into expressions of pained resolve. Ron called it the jungle of genetic failure, and Mary felt ridiculous. But Claire loved it. She named the animals -- the crippled tiger in the corner was Andre, the bird on his shoulder, more of a scavenger than a friend, was Priscilla -- and she would talk and laugh with them. Sometimes, with her stuffed animals as supporting players, she would create vivid scenarios of

being lost in the wilds of Africa.

Mary was relieved when Claire finally asked for the mural to be painted over. "I'm sick of it," she said. "It's too babyish." The next day Mary rolled a first coat of primer over the walls. Whiteness slashed through the trees, the animals. It scared her how quickly something could disappear. And later, when the primer dried and the sick jungle still lingered through the whiteness, it scared her how hard it was to make something pass away completely. It took three coats of primer and one coat of eggshell white to return the room to civilization.

"I hate this," Claire says.

Mary turns towards her. "I'm sorry, honey," she says. "Can I get you some more juice?"

"No," she says.

"You can't think about it," Mary says.

"Easy for you to say."

Claire grabs one of the games -- *Clue* -- and opens the box.

"Do you want to play?" Mary asks again.

"No." Claire picks out the miniature murder weapons: the knife, the wrench, the revolver, the rope, (the candlestick is missing), the lead pipe. Claire inspects these artifacts from a tiny killer.

Mary tries to tempt her daughter by opening the board. The diagram of a mansion appears. There was a time when the three of them would play these games, would stretch out on their stomachs and roll dice and move

colored pieces in a circle; Ron would always be the bank, and Claire would always be the color red. Music played from the stereo, and in the winter there would be a fire in the fireplace. Sometimes a friend of Claire's came over and the two of them would gang up against the adults, citing obscure rules and shouting "No no no no no" at the smallest infraction. The house seemed smaller then, and Mary would always linger by the windows of real estate agencies and gaze at the larger houses for sale. Ron was starting to make good money. They bought a second car, used. They took a vacation to Hawaii. Mary remembers walking on the beach with Ron and Claire, and while they weren't the type of family to whoop, they all seemed on the verge of letting loose some sort of howl of joy.

Mary stares down at the *Clue* board. She scans each room and thinks about them as scenes of tragedy, as places where petty violence occurs. All those colorful characters -- Mrs. Peacock, Professor Plumb -- yet the victim is nameless, a person no one cares about. There is no loss in that death, only entertainment. Then the whole idea of playing this game suddenly seems wrong to her, offensive, and she can't believe she let it slip into her daughter's life, into her own life.

Claire throws *Monopoly* from the bed, tosses it like a frisbee. "Ugh," she groans, and she starts to scratch at her neck like an animal. Her long fingernails do damage; they open up the blisters and make the redness wet. "Fuckfuckfuckfuck." She punctuates each fuck with a heel to the mattress.

"Don't do that," Mary says.

"Just leave."

"You'll scar."

Mary gets up and goes to her bedroom. As she searches through the drawer of her bedside table (nail polish remover, emery board, lip balm, tweezers), she thinks, When do things become irretrievably lost? In the novels she reads those moments are always underlined by adverbs -- *utterly*, *completely* -- and the hero is often on a boat watching the shore taper into a thinning line. But in reality there is no precise chapter, no single trauma, that determines a life.

She finds what she's looking for and walks back into her daughter's room. Claire has given herself over to scratching her face. It is a face that is too big for her body, like a puppy's paw, but when she grows into its features, the awkwardness will turn exotic. Mary reaches out and grabs Claire's hand.

"Just get away from me," she spits.

Mary doesn't say anything. She pins the arm against her side and starts with the nailclippers. Keratin boomerangs fly into the air, it's almost satisfying to watch. Claire weakly hits Mary with her free hand, but Mary doesn't stop. She holds each finger and cuts the nail down to the quick. She remembers when these fingers were tiny and squeezed anything placed within the palm; she hated to pare those nails in fear of cutting off a finger. "Bitch," Claire yells. When Mary's finished, she goes downstairs and moves the kitchen tv into her daughter's bedroom.

"It's like she's a drug addict," Mary tells Leslie on the phone, "and she's going through some sort of withdrawal. It frightens me."

"God, just hope she never gets into drugs. Could you imagine?"

"And she calls me a fucking bitch."

"It's just the age. You should hear what Taylor calls me."

"Well, I hate it. I mean, I used to really love her, but now...."

"It's hard." Then Leslie asks, "How do you feel?"

"All right."

"No signs of anything yet?"

"Nope."

"Maybe you won't get it. Who knows?"

"Yeah."

They hang up, and Mary calls Ron.

"How're things going?" he says. He's in his car and the connection is bad, it's like he's frying bacon on the dashboard.

"All right."

"Yeah?"

"Uhuh."

"We'll, I'll be home around seven."

"Should you come home?" Mary asks. "I mean, you might get sick," she says.

"What am I meant to do?"

"I don't know." Mary tries to hear his breathing through the grease

splattering static. She envisions him driving off into the distance, fading in the horizon, absolutely gone.

"Well," he says.

"I don't know," Mary says again.

He tells her, "I'm about to go through a tunnel," but she doesn't say anything; she just waits for the line to sizzle.

At around two in the afternoon the doorbell rings. Mary comes downstairs (she was reading a magazine at Claire's desk while Claire watched tv; they didn't say a word to each other). Mary opens the door to a woman and a boy -- mother and son, she figures.

"Hello," the woman says with a smile. The boy has his finger stuck in his ear and he's humming something.

Mary looks at the two of them and says, "Hello." When she sees the woman glance at her watch Mary realizes that she's still wearing her bathrobe and her slippers, and her hair must be piled on top of her head. "May I help you?"

"I'm Freda Paulsen, I'm a friend of Janet Grey. You know Janet, right?"

Mary nods. Leslie and Janet Grey are good friends, childhood friends. Janet is rich and every year she takes Leslie on some extravagant trip to a spa in New Mexico.

"Well." Freda Paulsen takes deep gasps before she talks as if every sentence is a dive underwater. "I hear your daughter has chickenpox, and my

boy Stevie." She gestures at the boy (he must be around six years old), and Stevie, like a dog, glances up at his name. "Well, he hasn't had chickenpox yet and I'll tell you, I'd really like him to get it out of the way. It makes sense. So" -- another gasp -- "I was wondering if he could just go and talk to your daughter for a little bit." With her shoulders hunching up, Freda Paulsen smiles again. If a turtle could smile, Mary thinks, it would resemble Freda Paulsen.

"I don't know," Mary says. "Claire's tired, and I doubt that she feels like entertaining." For a second she considers bending over Stevie Paulsen and giving him her own diseased kiss, but she doesn't.

"Please, it'd be a huge favor to Stevie." The boy looks up again. Like his mother, he has no lips. And Mary stares at him. He's oblivious to his mother's cruel wish. She will care for him, will fix him soup, will play Lego with him, will give him the proper dose of children's medicine; she will do all of these things, and he will think of her lovingly. The few pock marks that remain will be accepted.

Mary shows them in. Freda Paulsen almost hops with excitement. "Oh, thank you," she says as she leads the boy through the door.

They walk up the stairs, and Mary pictures her house as some sort of sick ward. She hears Freda Paulsen heavy sniffing and she wonders if the woman is trying to test the air for any subtle change, for any sign of a viral cloud that she could lift her son's head into. "C'mon, Stevie, keep up." The boy still has his finger in his ear.

Mary leans into Claire's room. "Hey, Claire," she says.

Claire has cornered herself in pillows. A talk show is on the tv.

"Claire?" Mary goes over to the bed.

"What?"

"There's this friend of mine who wants you to say hi to her son."

"Huh?"

"Well, she wants him to get chickenpox."

Claire looks over towards the door. Freda Paulsen waves, and Stevie is now singing, "Billie Jean's not my lover."

"That's a bit sick, Mom."

Mary agrees with her eyes. "Well?" she asks.

Claire smiles. "Bring the brat over."

Freda Paulsen pushes her son into the room. "Stevie, go say hi to the nice girl," she says while remaining by the door.

Stevie dances in and stops by the bed. His mouth spits guitar noises, and his finger remains in his ear.

"Hi, Stevie," Claire says.

Stevie nods.

"Get closer, Stevie," Freda Paulsen says. She makes pushing gestures with her hands. "And take deep breaths."

Mary is near enough to hear everything Claire whispers to Stevie Paulsen. They're awful things, distasteful things. "You'll be infected," she tells the boy. "Stevie, you'll be infected and you'll die and nobody will care.

Your skin is going to blow up, and you're going to scratch it off like wet paper. Do you hear me, Stevie?" Stevie has stopped singing. His finger pops out of his ear. Mary glances over at Freda Paulsen. Freda extends her neck and smiles. Claire continues, "Your weenie will shrivel up, Stevie, it'll shrivel up and fall off in your sleep. You're going to die, Stevie. Do you hear me? Worms will eat you."

Freda Paulsen says to Mary, "It's too bad Stevie can't climb into bed with your daughter; it's what my mother did to me. But that was in Quebec."

Claire slips her hands from beneath the sheets and slowly brings them to Stevie face. She holds his head like a bowl and leans in close to him. She breathes hot air onto his face. "There is no Santa Clause," she says. "He died of chickenpox." Stevie then starts to cry; there's no build up, no sniveling, just a long, solid wail.

Freda Paulsen sprints over to his side. "You all right, honey?"

Stevie can make no sense.

"Oh, honey." She picks him up in her arms. She mouths, "I'm sorry," to Mary and makes an apologetic grin.

Both Claire and Mary turn away.

After the Paulsens leave, Mary calls Leslie again. Leslie says, "I'm sorry Freda came over. I told Janet about Claire and Janet must've told Freda."

"Her boy burst into tears."

"That's too bad. He's a wimpy kid. Scotty can't stand him; they're in

the same daycare."

"Oh," Mary says. She had given Stevie a handful of Fig Newtons before he left. The boy smiled and said, "Thank you." His tears had turned into a runny nose.

"But that Freda is something else. She's had surgery." Leslie pauses, then says, "Had her face done."

"Oh."

Leslie's voice becomes louder. "Are you all right?"

Mary sits there at the kitchen table. She knows that if she really answers the question, tells her friend that she's losing her family to a slow, tedious death, Leslie would end up telling other people, she simply couldn't help herself. "I'm tired, I guess."

"Do you need anything?"

"I'm fine."

"Because I'm here."

"I know."

Soon, they hang up, and Mary, a little bored, starts searching for her old childcare book. She can't remember the last time she thumbed through Dr. Spock. Five years ago? She checks the bookcases in the living room, she opens drawers, and she finally finds it nestled between two cookbooks on the kitchen shelf. The cover is torn, stained with coffee, and two forgotten phone numbers, like tattoos, are written across a smiling baby's head. Mary flips to the index -- the pages have yellowed -- then she turns to the chapter on

chickenpox. Dr. Spock tells her that a bath of oatmeal can temporarily relieve the itching of the varicella. She wonders if this is some family myth, a cure passed down through generations of Spocks. Mary's great-grandmother used olive oil for everything, cooking and health alike; she would mix it with garlic and crushed parsley and serve it to anyone who had a cold. They would laugh, but it worked.

Mary opens the cupboard and grabs a rounded carton of Quaker Oats and a bottle of Bertolli olive oil. She also grabs a squeeze bottle of Mrs. Butterworth maple syrup and a can of Hills Bros coffee. Soon, Mary is packing an old wine crate with boxes of Rice Krispies, Frosted Mini-Wheats, a can of Delmonico peaches, packets of Jello, pucks of rice cakes. Everything, Mary thinks, all that she has. She loads the crate -- a plastic-wrapped pillow of Merlino's rotini nestled on top -- and goes upstairs into her bathroom. There she fills the tub with warm water, and as the water rises, she pours and dumps and squeezes in everything. It makes the tub look like a feeding trough. The rice cakes that float on the surface resemble the exfoliating pads that Mary used when she cared about her skin. Frosted Mini-Wheats play in the current like the torsos of fat retirees in Florida, and Rice Krispies school together and talk with sonar clicks. Mary stirs the mass with her arm, then she licks her hand. Cinnamon, she thinks, and she rushes downstairs and grabs the whole spice rack from the kitchen counter.

When she's done, she walks into Claire's room. "I have something that's going to help."

Claire looks up at her mother. Her face seems defeated, stained by the betrayal of her body. "What?" she says. Her voice is different now, ragged by the blisters on her tongue and throat.

"Just come with me." Mary pulls down the sheets and Claire reluctantly rolls out of bed. She wears flannel pajama bottoms and a t-shirt -- it's a picture of a mushroom cloud with the caption "Bad Hair Day." Mary wants to hold her hand, but she doesn't.

In front of the bathtub, Claire says, "What's this?"

"It's my own secret remedy."

She points at the thick, brown water. "You want me to get in there."

"Yes."

"No chance."

"It'll help, I swear."

"No."

"It'll help." Mary leaves the bathroom and sits on her bed. It's still unmade. "It'll help," she says again. "I promise." She waits, her arms wrapped around her because she's starting to feel a chill. Get in the bathtub, she repeats to herself, then, after a minute, she hears the slosh of thick water as it adjusts to its displacement.

"Gross," Claire says.

Mary steps back into the bathroom. Her daughter is sunken in the quicksand, just her head pokes out. "How is it?" she asks.

"Nasty."

Mary kneels next to the tub. "Rub it all over," she says.

Claire sweeps a handful of the slop onto her face. "What is this stuff?"

"The whole store," Mary says. She picks up a soggy rice cake and massages it into Claire's scalp.

"Is this cereal?"

"Uhuh." The brown fluid is warm, and the smell of maple syrup overwhelms all of the other smells except when Claire moves, then the smell of coffee wafts through the air. "Just soak in it," Mary says. She watches her daughter close her eyes and rest her head against the curve of the tub.

Claire says, "I feel like a banana in a cereal bowl."

Mary laughs. She takes a washcloth and washes the back of Claire's neck, she washes her arms. Skin glistens brown. "Is it helping?" Mary asks.

"Kind of."

"Eat some."

Claire licks around her lips, then she says, "Are there peaches in here?"

Claire's boyfriend comes over at around 6:15. "I heard about the chickenpox," he tells Mary at the door.

"Yeah," Mary says.

Jack has short hair, shaved like a marine, and he wears a red poncho even though it's not raining outside. "I brought a movie," he says, and he lifts up a plain blue box. "I thought maybe Claire and I could watch it." He also has flowers in his other hand.

"Flowers?" Mary says.

Jack turns the same color as his poncho. "Well, yeah."

"Come on in, I'll get a vase." Mary goes into the kitchen, fills a vase with water, and comes back into the living room. Jack stands there awkwardly, like a delivery boy waiting for a tip. He hands Mary the flowers. "Lilies," she says.

"Do you mind if we watch a movie?"

Mary pauses. "No," she says. "You'll have to grab the VCR from the living room."

"No problem." Within three minutes he has the machine disconnected. This impresses Mary. Then he gives her a quick nod and bounds up the stairs. She hears Claire's squeal -- it's like she's seen a mouse -- and then there's the sound of the door closing. Distractions, she thinks.

She sits in the living room and wonders why the phone doesn't ring. Why isn't Ron calling? or Leslie? or anybody? Why doesn't someone try to convince her to change her long distance calling company? Mary smells her hand. The bathtub clogged terribly when she tried to empty it -- the drain overwhelmed by a soggy mass -- and Claire had to take a shower standing ankle-deep in slop. But it had helped. Mary closes her eyes. She feels the fever pressing against her forehead, and it's starting to hurt to swallow now, but she won't try to resist it, she'll give her body over to whatever comes. It's a piece of her daughter so she tries to think of the virus as a gift. The two of them will share something one more time, a childhood illness, while Ron

will probably stay in a hotel room or over at a friend's house.

She looks at the coffee table and notices the lilies that Jack brought. They are quite lovely. Mary, tired and lonely, picks up the vase and goes upstairs. She listens by Claire's closed door. She hears nothing. Mary opens the door, she doesn't knock. The blue glow from the tv flickers against the walls like a lit swimming pool at night. Jack and Claire are lying on the bed -- he's leaning against her -- and they both turn from the tv and glance over at Mary. Claire makes a gesture with her hand, a come-here gesture, and Mary walks over and sits at the end of the bed. She rests the vase on her lap, the flowers peaking just below her chin.

On the tv, the volume muted, there's fuzzy footage of a large dinner party. It must be in Indonesia or somewhere like that, Mary thinks. Men sit at the table. They're all smiling at a monkey that's being passed from person to person. People make faces at the monkey; they tease the monkey with food. Mary wonders what kind of a movie this is, a documentary of sorts. Soon, one man -- a waiter -- takes the monkey and slips its body into an opening in the middle of the table. The head is held up by two pieces of wood pushed around its neck. The animal's eyes dart around the room, they're desperate for something. Then the waiter lifts a hammer, slams it down once on the monkey's head, slices open the skull with a large serrated knife, and spoons out wet globs of the monkey's brain into the bowls of the smiling men.

"Whoa," Jack says.

"Cool," Claire says.

Mary asks, "What is this?" but before she can get an answer she hears the click of the front door opening downstairs. Her stomach tenses. Ron's home. There is silence. He must be just standing there. On the tv now a Japanese man eats live fish; they squirm hopelessly on the plate before he casually catches them with his chopsticks. Mary hears the door shut, she hears the joists creak, she hears the cushions thud as her husband's body lands on the couch, and sitting in that fragrant blue light, she thinks that she can almost hear him breathe in the diseased air.

Lazarus Pissed

The first and last thing I remembered was the stench. In the end, it was as if the odor was entering my nose like water; it filled my lungs and squeezed my breath away until finally, nothing, and I was finished. And in the beginning, it was that odor again, this time mixed in with the smell of my own four day decay. There was also the bile that had slipped loose from my anus. I was not pleased. Wrapped tightly in graveclothes, some sections eaten away by what I can only assume were rats, I remained flat on the slab hoping that it was a dream and that I was still dead. But then I heard His voice, "Lazarus, come out," He whispered. He never spoke above a whisper; His voice, as you can imagine, carried. "Lazarus, come out," He said again. Now I'm not a strong man, in my life I had happily resigned myself to being a follower of goats. It wasn't a great job but I enjoyed it. Every day I would care for my flock then I would come home to my two sisters and we would eat and we would talk and then we would sleep. That was about it. I assumed I'd lead this kind of life until the time I'd die. Well, the winter cough I developed quickly spread throughout my lungs. It also seemed to settle behind my knees because I had a hard time keeping up with my goats; they would leap ahead over rocky hills and I would trip and fall and then spit

something up. A few people thought it was the beginning of a plague -- some people always think that it's the beginning of a plague -- but no, this sickness was my own, and soon I had to stay in bed, and a couple of days after that, I died. End of story.

"Lazarus, come out." I think He was upset that He had to say it three times, but to be woken up from a divine and supposedly permanent sleep with such a curt command, well, I was not pleased. But like I said, I am a follower of goats, so off the slab I rolled. My chin cracked against the ground. I chipped a tooth. I had forgotten the skill my sister Mary has in wrapping a corpse. She once won a ribbon for best preparation of the dead though my uncle Sid was still alive at the time. Anyway, there I was on the floor like an oversized grub, and the only way I could manage to get to my feet was by climbing the jagged wall of the tomb with my face. It was a bloody ascent. And when I was finally up the only way I could manage to move was by means of an embarrassing little hop. Now I'm not a proud man, my reputation in Bethany was as a decent goat-herder who rarely complained, but hopping out into a crowd of five thousand people when your cranky, shit-soaked, and recently dead, was not my idea of fun. Then I heard Him say, "Unbind him, and let him go." When they unwound the cloth from my face I saw Him with His perfect hair, His perfect teeth. He was standing in the middle of this cheering throng. They chanted, "Messiah! Messiah!" His arms were stretched out like a Y, and His head was bobbing up and down. My sisters were at His knees. Martha, who was a bit in love, was trying to anoint His

feet again, but a few of His disciples (Thomas, I think, and maybe Peter) ushered her away. It was in that glare of the impossible noon sun, in the dust and dirt, in the smiling faces of Caleb the Shoemaker (I owed him money) and Zadok the Skinner (he enjoyed throwing rocks at me), it was in all those rheumy eyes and pocked complexions that I wanted to crawl back into my tomb and curl up with death again. But He came to me -- now His arms like a T -- and I knew that I had to embrace him. I even kissed the hem of His robe because it was expected. The crowd loved it.

An hour later, we ate a meal Mary prepared. It was, as usual, unedible. She was so concerned with unclean meat that she cooked the flesh until it resembled a greasy piece of lava. Of course when He picked up his mutton leg it was a perfect pink medium rare. "Well," I said to Him, "thank you." "No problem," He answered, His mouth stuffed with food. "Do you have any wine?" He asked. Martha jumped up and ran to the cask. He turned to Judas and cracked, "I don't mean to whine." It wasn't even a very good joke but water shot out of Judas' prune of a nose. The rest of lunch was spent in silence. Occasionally He would whisper something to Peter and Sal, and they would laugh. The only other thing He said to me was, "Hey, could you pass the salt," and when I handed it to Him He didn't even say thanks. An hour later, two hours after raising me, He left with his entourage of fifty. That was it. He kissed my sisters, winked at me, and then was gone. He was heading to Jerusalem; it was a long trip. By the time His waving white robe disappeared over the hill, a crowd of two thousand surrounded my house. "Hey Lazarus,"

some of them yelled, "come out." And when I did come out, it was always the same. A few would say, "Heal me, heal me," and they'd flutter withered arms or infected wounds. Terribly deformed babies were lifted to my face; "Please, please," the parents would plead. The blind, the deaf embraced me. The retarded spat. And they all would say, "Lazarus, Lazarus, touched by the Messiah, save us." Covered in their drool, in their gleet, in their secretions unidentifiable, I would stand amongst them, helpless. Now I can turn goat's milk into cheese, I can make a goat shadow puppet with my hands, but all in all, that's about it. "I'm sorry," I'd say to them, but they wouldn't listen, and many of them couldn't hear. "Lazarus, Lazarus, you are the resurrection," they'd shout, and they'd want me to tell them, in detail, what death was like. All I could report was that it's nothing like Bethany. It's cool with no humidity. There's no dust, no smell. And while you don't see anyone, you can feel everyone. But they wanted more. "Will we be happy?" they asked, and I'd kick at the earth. "I was," I told them. "Will we be rejoined with our beloved Mothers?" "Will we be rich?" Blah, blah, blah, blah. After a while, I just stayed inside, away from that pawing mass.

But recently one of the chief priests came to Bethany. They rarely visit our town and when they do, they usually slaughter one of my goats. "Lazarus," Zerubbabel said at my door, "how are you feeling?" "Fine," I told him. Zerubbabel, uninvited, stepped into the living room and continued with his talk, "Because we chief priests are very concerned about your health," he said. Sure they are, I thought. "Now," Zarubbabel sat down and

picked up a fig, my fig, "you were dead, right? That's what we heard at the temple. Old Lazarus was dead. We were upset, of course, you always had the best goats." He ate the fig, its black meat staining his mouth. "But here you are." "Yes," I said. "And looking good," he said, "looking very good. Death has cleared up nicely. But anyway, we high priests, well, we're very interested in this whole recent...phenomenon." He smiled at his word choice. Seeds were caught in his misshapen teeth. "So we'd like you to come to the temple for a few tests?" "Tests?" I said. "Yeah, you know, I mean, it's a miracle and we want to study it. Just some blood letting, some skin scrapping, a few samples of your heart. Nothing major." He then wiped his hands and got up. His long robe kicked up mourning ash. "So, how about three thirty, side entrance of the temple. We'll send a cart for you. Okay?" I nodded. "Good," he said, and he left.

Now I'm not a smart man, I only know goats, I know when it is best to milk them, I know when to move them to a new hillside, but still, even I know what the high priests are up to. You see, I'm dangerous. I am a walking advertisement for the resurrection. Product placement in the desert. And what did I get in return? Life. The most powerful people in the land want to put me back into the earth, deep and painfully buried, and the weakest people want me to relieve them from their constant pain. Is that living? "Lazarus, come out." So I fled from my house, left Bethany, left Martha and Mary. The crowds didn't notice me slip out the back door; for them, there is only one entrance. And now I walk with my favorite goat

Emma. I am a fugitive from nature, raised for no reason, for no cause but to make my body sponsored by Him. It's a public relations prophecy. I should do bazaar openings. But instead, I've taken to drinking. I kick all beggars in the shin. The crippled I laugh at. I save no one because I can't save anyone. Emma and I have walked through Geba, through Hazor. I killed a man in Gazara. And I heard what happened to Him in Jerusalem. Dead then risen. I wonder if He felt the pain, if He really felt the pain. No one, not even a God, deserves to be crucified. Supposedly, He's been seen on this road, breaking bread. I follow the crumbs. When I find Him, I will offer Him Emma, then I'll poke Him in the eye. He is the resurrection, there is no doubt about that, He is the savior, but the next time I begin to rot I want it to be final. I will come out for no one, not even for the mournful bleat of my goats.

Graffiti

It wasn't a bad job for someone like me, pushing mops and cleaning blackboards. In fact, it was the best job I'd had in a long time. Sometimes I even enjoyed scrubbing the tiny urinals, the tiny desks. It put me in my own little world.

I was sitting at one of those desks, my legs splayed out like wings, and I was talking to Alister, the other janitor. We were on one of our many breaks. Being a night janitor took only two hours of real work; the rest of the time was spent smoking or drinking or sometimes shooting hoops at the gym with the security guard.

"I made my bathroom light go off," Alister was telling me. "I was in bed and I didn't want to get up so I just shot my brain at the switch and it clicked off." He snapped his fingers. "Like that." Alister had been the janitor at St. Vincent's Elementary for twelve years and was long too accustomed to ammonium chlorides. His eyes were glass buttons, and the corners of his mouth collected a milky substance. "Here, watch." He stared at the discarded bucket and mop in the middle of the classroom. His palms went to his temples, and his face strained and pushed. It was a game he liked to play. "There," he said, his face loosening. "Did you see that?"

"What?"

"The handle, it twitched." Alister had fantasies about sitting back and letting his mind do all the work. Like Mickey Mouse in *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, he'd tell me. "Someday, Dave, it'll happen. This place'll be plugged into my brain."

Under the 60 cycle hum of the fluorescent lights, I didn't disagree.

Once in a while, during the day, I'd pretend to leave something behind in the custodial closet and I'd come back to the school and walk the familiar halls of the first and second and third graders. The teachers were mostly women. They were beautiful and all seemed recently married, a few years away from having kids themselves. The girls and boys must have loved them, the Mrs. Andrews, the Mrs. Kirklands. I'd eavesdrop on basic math, on beginning English, on weather patterns and why it rains, and during storytelling I'd stop and bend down and pretend to tie my shoes for a good five minutes. Those soft voices, the gentle pronunciations. But most of the time I tried to coincide my visit with recess or lunch. Then the children would be hopping down the halls and they would brush against my sides. I'd lift my arms. It was like being carried on a stream of pigtails and bowl cuts.

Vince the security guard came around quite often. He kept his uniform shirt unbuttoned over his white undershirt, and he liked to walk around with an apple stuck in his mouth. He was intrigued by the power of

his own teeth, especially their ability to grip and scar. Vince had visions of State Patrol, of those crisp hats and black .45's, and he wanted to better understand the criminal mind. He liked talking to me because for a short time I had been in prison.

"Now how did it work?" he asked.

"What?" I was erasing a blackboard with a damp cloth.

"The scam."

Alister shook his head; he was leaning on a mop. "Man, you're stupid."

"Shut up," Vince shot back.

"It was no big deal," I told him. I made my way along the blackboard, the words, the numbers disappearing under each sweep of my hand. The newly wet slate looked like a windshield at night with a long expanse of empty road stretching out in front of it. Then it fogged dry.

"C'mon, just tell me again." Vince sat down at the teacher's desk. Nothing could've looked more inappropriate.

"It was called 'End Hunger Now.'"

Alister lazily moved the mop in an arc the circumference of his feet. "They were going to save Cambodia," he said.

"No, Ethiopia."

"Right, Africa." Alister bent down to the lip of the yellow bucket and listened like it was the opening of a shell. He said a hollow "Charity."

Vince had a big smile on his face. "And it was all phony."

I nodded.

"How much did you take in before Johnny Fuzz?"

"About a quarter of a million. But I was just the footman. I answered phones, took credit cards numbers."

"Shit." Vince leaned forward. "And they sent you to the pen for that?"

"I also had bad checks floating around."

"Hello," Alister said into the bucket.

"But Walla Walla. They must've loved you there, taking food from starving niggers."

I silently made my way to the erasers. Books and tv, I thought, that's what prison is, with flashes of incredible violence thrown in-between.

"Shit, the big house," Vince said with adolescent awe.

Alister started to laugh. He gripped the side of a desk and pushed himself to his feet. A bit shaky, his face red, he waved at us. "Hi, Earthlings," he said. Then he grabbed a mop and dumped its gray yarn into the bucket. It looked like he was drowning a dog, a small dog with a long wooden tail.

I walked by the community center three or four times before I finally went in. The building was an old bomb shelter built for the east side of the community. The outside walls were four feet thick and windowless and had been painted pink in absurd hopes of making the place look dainty, like a giant box of kleenex. But I had always pictured the inside to be a place where children cut out construction paper flowers and stuck them to the walls;

where old people smiled and collected raffle tickets for some upcoming dance while popular retirees practiced their barbershop quartet. Instead, it was all white light and metal furniture, and a curtain, a ratty red velvet, which hid something away -- rations of 1950's food? gas masks? Of the three desks, only one was occupied and the occupant, a Mrs. Cherkin, according to the plastic nameplate on her desk, looked as if she had been trapped inside this bunker since a war known only to her. The dandruff on her shoulders could've been dust.

"So you want to volunteer?" she asked me. She rolled a pencil in her hands.

"Yes."

"Anything specific? Do you want to pick up trash or something?" Her desk was uncluttered except for a piece of magnetized kinetic sculpture that moved in impossible ways. It was a rhinestone cowboy desperately hanging onto a horse, or maybe a bull. Light glinted off its gems and threw dime-sized spots on Mrs. Cherkin's chin, forehead, blouse, nose. "Mr. Davidson?"

"Excuse me?"

"Yes. What are your interests?"

I wanted to concentrate on what she was saying, wanted to make sure I made a good impression, but the dots dancing on her face distracted me. I felt like I was disco dancing with a partner I didn't know. Maybe it was some sort of test to catch the incompetent, the insane. "I just want to be a volunteer."

"Yes, I know, Mr. Davidson. Now, there are some pamphlets I can give

you on organizations you can join." Mrs. Cherkin fanned out a stack of pamphlets. She held them as if she were saying, *read them and weep*.

"Are they for the community?" I asked.

"Well, mostly for national organizations that have chapters here."

I shook my head. No more organizations. I had decided that I wanted to be on my own, to be the mysterious loner that rode into town and did random acts of goodness for the weak and incapable. "Anything else?"

"Well," she tapped the pencil against the tip of her nose, then ran it down her septum and philtrum in what seemed to be a private act. "We have a board where people pin up notecards asking for help." She pointed the pencil to a corner. "It's the Good Samaritan Board."

I looked over and nodded. "Okay, thanks," I said.

"Yep." Then she didn't say anything else. Her eyes went back down to her desk, to some true crime paperback. I felt that the second I left her sight she forgot that I had existed, even briefly, in her life. It is a sensation I often get, that I'm just a delivery boy or something, that everything is in brief exchange.

The Good Samaritan Board was tacked with yellow, blue, and white slips of paper. It was a mosaic of pain. A paraplegic needs someone to rub his useless legs. A stroke victim needs someone to give her twice weekly drives to the physical therapist. A functioning autistic needs someone to save his garden. A veteran needs someone to help with recent history. A terminal cancer case needs someone to adopt her dog. I stood, hands in pockets,

reading up and down, taking in every scrawl of pen or pencil, every word underlined and punched with exclamation. Please! Thank You! All these wrecked bodies waiting at home for a savior, and I simply had to reach out and pick one. You, the cripple, I'll save you. But the choices were too many. It was like being at a video store with all those movies and trying to pick out the perfect one, the one with a little drama, a little action, a little comedy, the one that would salvage your Saturday night.

While I was trying to decide an old man came up to the board, stopped right next to me. Everything about his face was a brown shrivel except his ears; his ears were huge.

"You play cards?" he asked me.

"Cards?"

"Yeah, cards."

"Well, poker, I suppose."

The man shook his head. I could've sworn I felt a draft from those ears. "Poker's no good," he said.

"Sorry."

"Don't play bridge?"

"No." I was feeling uncomfortable. The man's lips were also huge, like plastic lips from a novelty shop. I could barely look at him.

"Shame," he said, "'cause our fourth just died. Just died. Wasn't sick. Just got up one morning and died." He pinned a notecard to the board. "He was a shitty player, but still, you need someone in that chair."

I grabbed at a random piece of paper, ripped it off its tack. I never once thought about destiny or chance, those are things I don't like to think about, I simply wanted to get out of there. Outside, I held the notecard like a ticket of admission. Written in a textbook cursive, the letters were round and connected. A blind woman needs someone to read to her. By the time I was halfway down Main Street, in front of Red's Saloon, draft beers for a buck, I had the phone number memorized. The digits added up to forty-one which had nothing to do with anything but is something I always do with phone numbers.

The patrons of Red's were hunched over the bar; it looked like they were stationed on an assembly line picking out the bad peanuts from the good. On the raised tv a nature program played. A tortoise, long past struggling, was dying on its back. An English voice narrated and made things sound beautiful.

I went over to the phone. On the fourth ring, someone answered.

"Hello?"

"Yes, hi, is this Mrs. Freninger?"

"Yeah. Did I win a prize or something?" She spoke in a bored deadpan.

"Well, no."

"Didn't think so. Not me. So what do you want?"

I felt like I was selling vacuum cleaners. "Well, Mrs. Freninger, I'm

calling about your--"

"Car? I sold it. The kid screwed me, too."

"No, no, I'm calling about your notice for someone to read to you."

"Jesus, I put that up ages ago."

"Well, I'm looking to do some volunteer work."

"Are you a misdemeanor or a student?"

"Neither, really. I just want to do something decent."

"Ha. Help the little old blind lady, huh?"

"Well..."

"What movie star do you look like?"

"What?"

"C'mon, I'm not going to touch your face, I find that whole concept disgusting and uninformative."

"I guess a skinny, shorter, non-ethnic Victor Mature." *The Robe* was my favorite movie as a kid. But I probably look more like Joey Bishop.

"He was a lousy actor. Well, Victor, can you read clearly?"

"Sure."

"Did you go to college?"

"Yeah." I spent a year at Spokane Community College.

"What do you do for a living?"

"I'm a carpenter." My mind was still on *The Robe* and I figured everyone trusts a carpenter. No one trusts a night janitor. Or Joey Bishop.

"Well, Victor--"

"It's Dave."

"I don't know Dave, I know Victor Mature. Why don't you come over at six o'clock on Thursday. We'll have a trial read." Then she gave me her address. She didn't live far. Before hanging up she told me she had a dog. "A German shepherd," she said with an edge of threat.

At work, Alister sat at a third grader's desk. He looked like a big, stupid eight year old. In his hand he held a Mr. Clean-soaked rag like a dandy's nosegay. Occasionally, he brought it up to his nose. "Yesterday," he said, "I was changing the channels with my head. Flick, Oprah. Flick, QVC. Flick, CNN. Flick, Stovetop Stuffing. I swear, my mind on remote control."

I was wiping down the blackboard. *The boy was sad. The boy is now happy. The boy will be sad again.* "A bit depressing," I said.

"No, I was doing it. I've got power." Alister took another hit from the rag then started to scrub the desk. "'Mr. Vickers is a fag.'"

"What?"

He pointed to the desktop. "Says it right here, 'Mr. Vickers is a fag.'" Alister laughed. "'Mr. Vickers sucks cock.'"

I walked over to Alister. He smelled like a freshly cleaned bathroom.

"'Mr. Vickers eats kids crap.' Jesus, these kids are something."

"Missed the possessive," I said.

Alister breathed on the desk and rubbed the writing away.

I stood out in front of Mrs. Freninger's house. It was a nice house, a house that belongs in a row of houses. Alone, it would look ridiculous, like a prop. But here, with the other houses on this street, it fulfilled a moving picture of community.

I was smoking, watching the windows, but there wasn't much to see. Gauzy curtains blurred the inside. I had a nervous feeling, like stage fright. Disabilities and deformities make me anxious. I try to act naturally by striking some nonchalant pose between noticing and not noticing, but in the end, I'm not a good enough actor. Each gesture I make is forced and my voice is stilted and I wind up offending everyone. I finished the cigarette and flicked it on her well-kept lawn. That's how forest fires are started, I thought. I climbed the steps, opened the screen door. After adjusting the collar of my shirt, I knocked. It felt like a date, a first date, and yes, the obvious pun does not escape me.

She was quick to answer, the door opening in a sudden jerk. "Yes?"

"Hello, Mrs. Freninger." She was taller than I thought a blind woman should be, and firmer, but I was glad to see that she wore dark glasses. I was fearing dead milky eyes, or worse, empty sockets. The only other thing I noticed, besides her sharp nose, well-defined chin, and pulled-back gray hair, was that she wore a healthy application of Tulsa red lipstick.

"Is this Victor?"

"Yes."

"You smoke, Victor?"

"Yes."

"You drink?"

"Well..."

"I hate the smell of smoke and drink. And I hate cologne, especially Brut and Canoe."

"I don't wear cologne."

"I know." She paused and angled her head like she was looking me over. "Well, come in and sit down in the far right chair; it has the best light." She moved aside so that I could pass by, then she paced to the couch, maneuvering around a coffee table and a sleeping dog. Everything in the room was clean and tidy except for an incredible amount of dust on the lampshades. Books were arranged in numerous bookshelves, and completed color-by-number canvases hung on the wall, most of them of a nautical or fruit theme.

I squirmed in my chair. "Nice place," I said.

"How old are you?"

"Thirty-one. Nice dog." I clicked my tongue but the dog didn't move.

"Some society gave him to me. But I'm sorry, I'm not going to let a stupid dog lead me around. Too degrading. And canes are out of the question. Tap, tap, tap. I don't think so."

My left knee rocked up and down. "Well..."

"A year ago, Victor. Went to get my lashes dyed but the beautician screwed up and sprayed the junk in my eyes. I sued and lost. My husband's

gone; he ran to California to pursue some absurd acting career. I don't watch TV because sometimes his voice comes on telling me to buy a Buick or a Friendly's shake. I've lived in this town all my life and no one likes me which is fine. Most are pleased that I'm blind. But I can get by all right. A hired friend comes over three times a week. She's Mexican."

"Well..."

"I just wanted to let you know my sad tale, Victor. Now yours."

"What?"

"C'mon, spill it."

I leaned forward and lifted one hand high in the air, then another, then I proceeded to wave them wildly, like I was on a rollercoaster. "I moved into town recently. I'm a carpenter, a freelance carpenter." Is there such a thing? I still have no idea. "I've been to college," I said. I started to pretend to swim, cupped hand stroking after cupped hand. "I wanted to be a doctor but was no good in science." I pinched my nose and drowned. "I grew up in Hartford." I've never been to Hartford, or Boston for that matter, but I added for authenticity, "I hated that dump." During this whole performance her face remained unchanged.

"Fascinating, Victor." She crossed her long legs. She wore black stockings. "On the table by your left hand is a book. Pick it up."

It was Adam Bede by George Eliot. I knew Middlemarch, Dorothea Brooke and Lydgate and all the rest; I had read it in jail like many other soft timers at Walla Walla. It helped you get an early parole. The warden

believed that literature could rehabilitate, could save the non-violent offender, and he especially liked Eliot's sense of justice. But this book I had never heard of.

"I love George Eliot," Mrs. Freninger said. "So detailed, everything placed before you. But I've never read Adam Bede. I hate the title." She sat back, her arms stretching along the slope of the couch. I stuck my tongue out at her. I picked my nose. "Please, read," she said.

The spine cracked. I coughed a few times, then swallowed. I put my feet up on the coffee table. "*Book one, Chapter one, The Workshop.*" I paused for effect. "*With a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes to reveal to any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past. This is what I undertake to do for you, reader. With this drop of ink at the end of my pen, I will show you the roomy workshop of Mr. Jonathan Burge, carpenter and builder, in the village of Hayslope, as it appeared on the eighteenth of June, in the year of our Lord 1799.*" I stopped and looked to her for approval. I had read flawlessly.

"Sounds like you and Mr. Burge have a similarity," she said.

"What?"

"Both carpenters."

"Oh yeah, right."

She sat back. "Continue please, and a little slower. Punctuate."

I read for an hour, my throat becoming unbearably dry and sore. Halfway through, as the sun lowered, lights clicked on all over the house.

"They're on a timer," Mrs. Freninger answered. And when I finished the fourth chapter, *Home and Its Sorrows*, I closed the book. It was time for work. "Well, thank you, Victor." She seemed pensive, a bit tired. Light reflected from her dark glasses like glowing pupils. I flapped my arms in a bad impersonation of a chicken, then I grabbed my crotch, But still, her face didn't change, and the dog by her side hadn't moved since my arrival. As I was leaving Mrs. Freninger asked me to come close to her. She lifted up a tape recorder. "Give me your phone number, Victor."

Alister, myself and Vince shot hoops in the school gym that night. We played HORSE. Alister couldn't sink a thing and was out almost instantly, but he didn't care. He loved the smell of the Pinesol soaked into the floorboards. Vince and I were even at H-O.

"So what's this blind lady like?" Vince asked.

"All right." I missed. H-O-R.

"Are her eyes all fucked up, white and freaky?" Before Vince shot the basketball he liked to bounce it against his head a few times. It annoyed me.

"No, she's attractive." I missed again. H-O-R-S. "Kind of like Barbara Stanwyck, an older Barbara Stanwyck, like when she was in *The Big Valley*."

"Huh?"

"You know, that *Bonanza* ripoff, with Lee Majors and Linda Evans."

"Ah shit, too bad she's doesn't look like Linda Evans." Vince picked at his undershirt. "Then we could go over there and just fuck the shit out of

her. How'd she know who the hell it was? The perfect crime." Vince winked at me then shot the ball and missed. H-O-R.

Alister clapped his hands. "I made you miss. I saw the ball and I pushed it to the left. Barely had to think about it."

"Right."

"I did."

"Shut the fuck up." Vince retrieved the ball and slapped at it like he was slapping a face. Then he passed it to me.

I stood at the foul line and asked, "How many meanings are there to the word foul?"

"Just shoot, will you?"

I missed.

Alister pointed at me. "Sorry, Dave, I had to be fair."

Vince made an opposite hand lay-up, something I'm lousy at, and he won. "I'll tell you what, I'll give you an exclamation point."

"That's all right, I'm done."

We had to help Alister to his feet; he'd been feeling dizzy. "Thanks guys," he said. "For a second there I thought you were throwing around my head."

"The mirror is doubtless defective. The outlines will sometimes be disturbed, the reflection faint or confused; but I feel as much bound to tell you as precisely as I can what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box,

narrating my experience on oath."

"Excuse me, Victor." Mrs. Freninger rose from the couch and made her way to the middle of the room. "I hate to stop you, but I need to pee." She left down the hall, each step confident. I heard a door shut.

I got up, moved a lamp, moved a side table, moved her glass of water to the farthest edge of the coffee table, moved a throw pillow, moved a porcelain figurine, an elephant, to the middle of the floor, moved the hour hand of the Grandfather clock back two hours, moved the dog to the other side of the room, moved a painting, moved the couch six inches, moved a wastepaper basket. It was a long pee. When Mrs. Freninger returned she still maneuvered with precision, still plopped down onto the couch, still found her glass of water. "Victor," she said.

"Yes."

"Have you been drinking?"

"Yes."

"Well you stink. And you're reading's a bit sloppy. Continue."

When I came back a few days later, the house had been returned to its original state. But Mrs. Freninger didn't say a word, gave no hint of knowing anything. And I would rearrange her furniture again.

I had started drinking during the day, at first in my apartment, then out at Red's. I met a woman there, a one-day stand. She was paying for her drinks in change pulled out of a sock. "I was going to do my laundry," she

said. "But fuck it." I smiled. I was smiling at everything. "You certainly could use a wash," she told me, and she reached over and grabbed me by the belt. Her name was Shala. The other people at the bar looked over, some shook their heads while Shala and I hit it off. She liked to giggle and lean into the curve of my neck. "You're funny," she said. I don't remember making any jokes, but I went with it. We left together. Back at my apartment, our clothes off, we started to fuck in a clumsy roll. She smelled like bleach. She guided her tits into my mouth. She wanted me to grab at the Saturn tattoo on her inner thigh. "Pinch it," she said. And she wanted me to suck the Jupiter tattoo just above her collarbone. "That's right, suck it," she said. I felt like I was hurling through space, untethered to the mother ship, and my oxygen was running out. "Bite Neptune," she ordered, but I couldn't find the little green planet eighth from the sun. "C'mon, bite it," she said. And I found myself having momentary visions of a past. They came in little flashes, but they didn't make any sense to me. It was like watching a stranger's slide show. "C'mon." She slapped me on the side of the head.

Soon, I began to change the story. At first subtly. Adam Bede loosens up a bit, enjoys a laugh in the middle of stern pronouncements. "*It smells very sweet,*" he said; *'those stripped uns have no smell. Stick it up your frock and it will smell a plenty, and then you can put it in water after.'*" Mrs. Freninger never seemed to notice and remained unmoved on that couch. After a while, I made up whole paragraphs, introduced new characters, and,

in general, caused chaos in the tiny village of Hayslope. Only once did she ever question anything.

"Victor."

"Yes," I said.

"Is there really a character called Dinah Shore?"

"Yes."

"I hated Dinah Shore, the singer Dinah Shore, not the young Methodist preacher. She I like. But the singer, too sunny."

It was on a Tuesday that I decided to stop showering for a while. And I didn't brush my teeth anymore. I also began to eat meals heavy with garlic and onions. The odor that came from me was strong, like wet leaves burning.

"Jesus, you're ripe," Mrs. Freninger said to me at the door. "Can't you take a shower before coming here?"

"Sorry, I had to finish building a porch." I walked over to the chair and plugged in a tape recorder. I rested it on the side table.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Just getting ready." I sat down.

She moved towards the couch but paused in the middle of the room.

"Do you want anything to drink?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Some water?"

"No thanks."

She took her seat. "Okay," she said. "I'm ready."

I pushed down the play button; the cheap tape player began to whirl. My voice emerged from the tiny speaker distant and breathless and secretive. It was strange to hear. *"Book Five. Chapter XXXVI. The Journey in Hope. A long, lonely journey, with sadness in the heart; away from the familiar to the strange: that is a hard and dreary thing even to the rich, the strong, the instructed; a hard thing, even when we are called by duty, not urged by dread."* I watched her face closely. She must have recognized the difference, it was obvious, but she didn't let on.

"A little louder, please," she said.

I reached over and turned up the volume. My voice rose.

"Thank you," she said.

A pair of binoculars hung around my neck, and I lifted them and focused them on Mrs. Freninger's face. I had to squint to smooth out the blurs. It was amazing to watch her so close. She was in the adolescence of late middle age where beauty turns sluggish on its way to the shady side, that's what George Eliot might've said about her. Freckles gave away an old love for the sun. And a thin scar, about a half-inch long, slanted into her heavily made-up lips. I tried to imagine her face when the loose skin was tight to the bone and youthful, and I pictured her as Hetty, the love of Adam Bede's life, churning the butter on Hall farm.

"Victor."

I reached over and pushed down the stop button. It made a plastic click. "Yes."

"Oh, nothing." She waved her left hand as if she were holding a cigarette. "Go ahead."

I started the tape again and continued to watch her every reaction. She smiled when Hetty met a Swede named Sven, a muscular man. I could tell by the arch of an eyebrow above her dark glasses that she liked their scene in the woods when Sven teaches Hetty phrases from his native land.

"You are lovely," Sven said.

"Yes, I know." Hetty ran ahead, her lithe body dancing between the trees. "Chase me," she said.

"What?"

"Chase me." And she slowed down so that all he had to do was make seven quick leaps to catch her in his arms.

We both listened with growing curiosity.

While cleaning the classroom one night, Alister fell to the linoleum floor and started to roll as if he were on fire. He shouted at things I couldn't see. I dropped on top of him and restrained him. He battled me all the way. "I'll bend you across this classroom," he warned me. Bend was his new word.

"Just calm down," I whispered in his ear. Then foam started to spill from his mouth. I didn't think humans actually did that. I tried wiping the stuff away -- it was warm on my hand -- but he seemed to have an endless

supply. "Just calm down," I said over and over again.

"I can bend it all, Dave," he shouted. Some bubbles shot through the air, some even flew.

"Of course you can." I began yelling for help.

"No problem," he said.

A beard of froth hung from his chin. I felt like I was holding a crazed Rip Van Winkle struggling against his sleep.

A light flickered. "I did that," he told me.

"Sure," I said.

And later, before the ambulance arrived, a bird flew into one of the windows. "I did that," he told me again. And that was strange.

At our next reading I began to write notes to Mrs. Freninger along the baseboards of her house, in the corners, on sills. *The President stinks. I want to fuck your mouth. Down with meat.* I drafted my words in a crimped hand, the letters blocked and unidentifiable. I usually did it while reading. I'd walk around the room and choose a spot. "I hope you don't mind me moving, I need to stretch my legs."

"No, not at all."

I used a felt-tip pen. *Rock and roll will never die. Eat my dust. Cunt.* From a distance the phrases looked like resting centipedes. And sometimes they seemed to scurry.

"Victor, how much longer do we have to go?"

"After *The Hours of Suspense*, fifty more pages."

"Good." Mrs. Freninger rubbed the light hair on her arms. "It's getting quite exciting."

I closed the book and put it on the sidetable.

I visited Alister at the hospital. He was in a room with another man who got a hernia trying to lift a car. "I just wanted to see if I could do it," he told me. "You know, like if my kid was trapped under a tire or something."

An IV ran into Alister's arm. He looked tired, and pale, but certainly better than the last time I saw him. Flowers from some loved one stood on the bedside table, and there was also a card from Vince. It was surprisingly sweet. "They use an industrial cleaner, XL something," Alister said. "You can smell the ammonia."

I nodded. The doctors didn't know what the problem was. They were doing tests.

"EEG's and maybe, if I'm lucky, an MRI." Alister was smiling for some reason.

I sat on the bed.

"It could be a brain tumor," he said.

"Jesus."

"Or it could be something else." He placed his hands over his skull. "I can't wait to see what's inside."

We watched tv, an old rerun of *Gilligan's Island*. I knew exactly what

was going to happen -- I had seen the episode at least a dozen times -- but Alister watched with growing anticipation as Gilligan bungled all hopes of getting off that island.

"He's going to crush the transmitter." Alister pointed at the screen and said, "Right now," and Gilligan tripped and fell.

For two weeks I avoided Mrs. Freninger. I wasn't in the mood to read. And I preferred Hetty trapped in jail, the hangman's noose still pages away. During the day I sat in my apartment and watched bad soap operas. It didn't take long to reacquaint myself with the plots. They were all the same. And the talk shows that followed were also the same. Everything passed as intrigue. At night I worked with a new guy; his name was Stan. He was humorless. Under his breath he made comments about secondhand smoke. His only delusion was that he thought this job was temporary.

Then Mrs. Freninger started to call me. "Victor, why didn't you come over?"

"Sorry, I was busy."

"That's no excuse. We're close to the end."

"I'll be by Thursday."

And when I missed that meeting she called again, her voice a little more anxious.

"Victor, get over here," she said. I pictured her kicking the dog in frustration.

"Tomorrow," I said.

"I need to know how it ends."

"Tomorrow."

And over the next few days when the phone rang, I didn't bother to pick it up.

There is a moment in Adam Bede, towards the end, that I now read over and over again. It's about love's gradual approach: *Those slight words and looks and touches are part of the soul's language; and the finest language, I believe, is chiefly made up of unimposing words, such as "light," "sound," "stars," "music" -- words really not worth looking at, or hearing, in themselves, any more than "chips" or "sawdust." It is only that they happen to be the signs of something unspeakably great and beautiful. I am of the opinion that love is a great thing and beautiful thing too, and if you agree with me, the smallest signs of it will not be chips and sawdust to you; they will rather be like those little words "light" and "music," stirring the long-winding fibres of your memory and enriching your present with your most precious past.*

On Monday I left work early, in the middle of cleaning a classroom, and Stan overreacted. He said it was bullshit, he even used the term unprofessional, but I just waved him away. When I burst through the school's metal doors, there was nothing outside. It was three in the morning.

I don't know what I was expecting, but there was nothing except a mist not yet fallen into dew, and I felt like I was a boy again, and I was sick, and my mother had set up a humidifier in the corner of my room so that I could finally breathe. Then I started walking.

Mrs. Freninger didn't live far away. The windows of her house were dark, like the windows of all the other houses on that street. The only light came from a few scattered streetlights. They looked like showers without their shower curtains. I sat on the steps and smoked a cigarette. Things seemed southern though this was the northwest. I flicked the butt on her lawn and knocked for a full minute until she opened the front door. The suddenness of her arrival startled me.

"Hello?" she asked through a screen door.

"It's me," I said.

"Victor?" Her chin bumped against the screen. It was dark, but I could see that she wasn't wearing her glasses.

"I hope I didn't wake you."

"Well, actually, no. I was awake. I'm a bit of an insomniac." She moved aside to let me in.

I went from lamp to lamp and turned each light on, even the torchiere. She was wearing a silk bathrobe that looked like the skin of a peach. And I saw her eyes for the first time. They were completely black as if each pupil had been poked with something sharp and the ink had bleed into the iris and the rest of the eye. "I thought we might finish Adam Bede?" I looked for the

dog, but he wasn't there. He must've been asleep upstairs.

She paused in the middle of the room. "Yes, please," she said. "I need to see how things turn out." She walked over to the couch and sat down. She ran her hands through her hair, tied it up in back with some sort of knot. Her knees were pinched together, like a schoolgirl, and she looked cold. "Yes, that would be nice." She smiled quickly.

I took off my clothes. She heard me undo my belt, heel off my sneakers. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm tired. I need to get comfortable."

Mrs. Freninger nodded. She pulled her legs up into her chest and held her feet in her hands. She rested her chin on her knees.

Naked now, I held Adam Bede in one hand, a black Magic Marker in the other. I started on the left side of the room, and as the pen flowed in large and small loops over the wall, I told her my story. Soon, my pen would touch her.

Hotel India

There was the tapping -- clink, clink, clinkclink -- it came from the rusted J pipe that curled below the bathroom sink. To most people it'd be an annoying sound, like a leaky faucet or hammering at an early hour in the morning, but to Bellman the sound carried a charge of excitement, an intelligence. As a kid he always loved the story of Alexander Graham Bell and Thomas Watson, of Bell screaming into the clump of wire and metal, "Mr. Watson, come here, I want you!" That first phone call happened as a result of pain -- acid had spilt onto Bell's thigh and he needed his friend to help him -- and because of that essential desire, Bellman felt a connection to Bell that went beyond the shared, cup-like syllable in their names.

Before the tapping began, Bellman had a plant. It was a sick begonia. Bellman sat in his chair, a Barcalounger stuck broken in the lounge position, and watched this wilted thing for any signs of life. "It's a leafy cockroach," the florist had said, "it could live in a closet." And she laughed and looked around the shop as if expecting the other flora to laugh along with her. For thirty-five dollars, Bellman bought it, but for fifty dollars more he could have gotten a kitten with all of its shots. The local pet store was having a sale, all the kittens were turning into cats. On his way home from work Bellman

liked to tease them by running his fingers up and down the store window. He could hear their viscious little claws scratching against the glass. A cat could maul his plant, Bellman thought, and get sick on the leaves. But he would care for it, would clean up its vomit.

Bellman grinned. Too bad his building didn't allow pets of any kind. It was agreement number six on the lease, a month to month arrangement. Two hundred and seventy-five dollars rented the tenant a room with a Murphy bed, a sink, a toilet, a refrigerator, a tub, a stove, and one overhead lightbulb. That was it. Nothing else was included. The building, a post-war creation of a government architect, wasn't a home but a transitory place populated by the young and old. There were only a few children, and even fewer middle aged residents, and both always seemed to scream.

Bellman maneuvered out of his chair -- no easy feat, he had to roll off the side -- and went to the window. The sill was a perfect place for a cat, just enough space to stretch out and take in the few moments of sunlight. He removed the plant, some leaves fell, and he opened the window. It squeaked horribly. The air outside was greasy from someone's cooking, and music, a samba beat, echoed along the corners. Evening filled the courtyard, made it bottomless except for the pigeons that darted in and out like oddly evolved fish in a sea of oil. The birds had taken over a long time ago, shitting on windows, roosting on ledges. But nobody cared. Sometimes people just dumped their garbage out the windows. Cans and bottles made a racket. And there had been one suicide since Bellman had moved in. It came from above,

the tenth floor, a retired civil servant on a good pension. He had jumped naked one Sunday morning. Unfortunately, he only made it to the fifth floor, to Mrs. Manuel's new deluxe air conditioner. Splayed out, his arms and legs dangled over the side as if he was in the process of getting a massage. The drop had been long enough to kill him but short enough to spare the well-installed air conditioner. Mrs. Manuel, with a broom, prodded him off so he could finish his fall. She told the police she didn't want any dead naked body dragged through her apartment. Almost everyone agreed with her.

Bellman stared at the duplicate building across the courtyard. He liked to envision a high wire that would stretch across the maw, and with a drumroll and a spotlight, he would make his way from the ledge to the wire costumed in red and blue tights and a cape that snapped in the wind. The bamboo pole would balance him, and each slow and deliberate step would curl around the cable until he reached the window on the other side. "Hi, I'm Bellman. Apartment 4-D. Nice to meet you." Cheers and applause.

Bellman leaned out the window and spat. After a few seconds he heard the wet impact. That fleeting space between his mouth and the ground pleased him. Then he took down a pair of binoculars that hung on a nail and focused them on the fourth floor, on a window that flickered with a blue glow, a television set, a newsman sitting at a desk. He clicked on his TV, clicked through the channels until a voice matched the distant man's lips. "--continuing in Geneva. Paul Frankel is there with the story." With his elbows on the sill, Bellman watched the six o'clock news. Occasionally,

pigeons streaked across his view.

Hours afterwards, he made himself soup and a grilled cheese sandwich. Bellman's meals were always a variation of lunch. It was a median, nothing as hopeful as breakfast or as drastic as dinner. He preferred it that way. And he chewed and swallowed standing up. It helped his digestion. Otherwise, he felt blocked. Bellman dipped a corner of his sandwich into the mug of tomato soup. He ate in the dark. His lone lightbulb had burned out a few days ago and he forgot to buy a new one. For light he kept the refrigerator door opened. It also helped to cool things a bit. The summer was hot in New York, the hottest the newspapers could remember. Every day the front page had a cartoon of a sweating thermometer. At the museum where Bellman worked, the other guards battled for positions in front of air conditioning vents. But Bellman didn't care, he liked to roam a gallery. He knew the number one rule -- "Watch people without disturbing them. No one should get the feeling of being watched." -- and he obeyed that rule to the letter, but he listened with impunity. Foreign tourists were his favorite. He would smile knowingly and nod as if he understood every word they said. He knew how to say, "The restrooms are on the second floor," in seven different languages, but sometimes, by mistake, he'd answer an Italian in Spanish or a German in Dutch.

The lights from the building outside resembled Christmas decorations nestled in a tree; they even twinkled. Bellman pulled down his Murphy bed and rearranged the sheets. It was not a comfortable bed but he had learned

how to get snug by stretching his body along the fissure of the mattress. It was like sleeping in an old scar, the way the skin folded in on itself. From his bed, Bellman could hear the pigeons, and a siren dopplered down 8th avenue on its way to the hospital on 27th street. Bellman wondered if Nurse Pselvaro was on duty, if she was waiting by the emergency ramp with fresh sutures. Her hands were like china though her cuticles were bitten red, and she seemed like someone who'd be comfortable in a large sunbonnet. When Bellman gave blood for the blood drive, when he sat in the uneven chair and extended his arm, she tied the rubber tourniquet with a bow. "The P is silent," she said as she gently tapped the soft white skin of his arm. Bellman filled his pints in two minutes. "Filibuster," Nurse Pselvaro said, and with one smooth motion she slipped the needle out, slipped on a cotton ball, and crooked his arm like a man deep in thought.

"I don't need the money," Bellman said suddenly. He was going to go see a movie on his blood, even buy a large popcorn and a supersoda, but now he didn't want to seem desperate like the threadbares next to him.

"Okay, but you have to have orange juice." She grinned and handed him a glass of orange juice. Bellman drank it slowly and made sure not to make any sipping noises.

"Nice juice," he said.

"Well, thank you, Mr." -- she paused and looked at her clipboard -- "Bellman." The motion both devastated him and filled him with hope; she didn't remember his name but at least, for a moment, it was on her lips. "We

have to watch you, Mr. Bellman," she said. His heart almost stopped. "You know, to make sure you don't faint out there on the street." Bellman sat back and let his vision loosen until everything became covered in the warm fur of the lightheaded.

In bed, Bellman ran his hand along his arm. The Band-Aid had been off for a few days, and the slight bruise had faded, but his insides still seemed to flow with Nurse Pselvaro's control. He wanted to call her, to see her again, and whenever he heard an ambulance he wondered if she was hurrying to get his blood so that the two of them could save a life.

Bellman picked up the telephone and dialed 411. A woman's impatient voice came onto the line. "Information. What borough please?"

"Hello."

"What borough?"

"Bellman."

"What?"

"The name is Sherm Bellman, B-E-L-L-M-A-N."

"What borough?"

"No, Bellman, B-E--"

"I know that, okay, but what borough."

"Oh, Manhattan."

"Thank you."

Bellman heard typing in the background. He wondered how many people worked the graveyard shift at Directory Assistance. "Late, huh," he

said.

"Yep, and my kid's sick."

"Sorry. The flu?"

"I wish. Okay, is it the Bellman on 33rd street?"

"Yeah. He's about five foot six, brown hair, thirty-five years old."

"I don't need that, sir."

"Do you have a lot of other people working with you?"

"A handful. You don't get many calls at this hour, mostly drunks looking for parties. Please hold for the number."

"Hope your kid gets better."

"No chance."

An electronic voice switched onto the line. Bellman listened to his phone number with a certain amount of delight. He let it repeat. And then he dialed his number and took in the busy signal. A beacon to Bellman. Every night he went through this same routine; it made his day feel finished like talking to a lover before sleep. And he preferred just hearing a voice because people, with their tilts and slants and inclinations, were much harder to read. Their bodies said things he could never understand, no matter how hard he tried.

He hung up the phone. Bellman had counted forty-nine Bellmans in the phonebook, forty-nine Bellmans wandering around New York City. And he had never met one of them, not by chance, not by design, though he wondered sometimes at the women who walked without moving their arms

and the men who wore overcoats in the summer. Those might be Bellmans. But even so, none were Ohio Bellmans, the Bellmans who kept to themselves and made no sudden movements. It was a prized family trait passed down from generation to generation like a useless decanter. "We are flies on the wall," Bellman's father told him. "People pass us by. They don't smile and they don't frown. And Sherm, they don't swat." It was the Bellman wisdom. "Keep to yourself, it's the only company you can trust." It was sewn on throw pillows. But Bellman had left all that behind, left the fifteen Bellmans in Harmon, Ohio. He did it for simple historical drama, to be the first Bellman to leave town. He had no dreams of anything, had no skills, but as the bus pulled away and the fifteen hands made fifteen tentative waves, Bellman didn't care about his future, his life was now an unspoken story at their dinner table.

Bellman leaned back in bed. He would call Nurse Pselvaro sometime soon. There was only one Pselvaro in the phonebook, a Nancy from Queens, and he would call her or maybe just stop by the hospital. They could go out. They could walk along the Hudson and smell the salt breezes. He would try. In the darkness, the shadow that was his plant seemed to move, seemed to paw at something in the air. He imagined it slinking toward his bed, hopping up and curling at his feet.

Bellman didn't sleep straight through the night. Instead, he woke to a muffled noise that sounded like a drunk shouldering his way down the hall.

It was a noise not unfamiliar to Bellman. The man who lived in 4-G always came in late and stumbling, but Bellman didn't hear his usual jangle of keys or squeak of cheap shoes. This sounded more like something being dragged. Bellman slumped forward and listened for more noises, any new noise, but all he heard was a distant car alarm. The digital clock glowed a red 4:53, its light almost bright enough to read by. For nine minutes Bellman watched the numbers stiffly change position, and in nine minutes he fell back to sleep.

In the morning, while brushing his teeth, Bellman heard another noise that was new to him. At first he thought it was just the building; it was old and like old buildings made stretching sounds. But this wasn't a groan, it was a more of a clink, a series of three clincks that went fast then slow then fast again. Bellman turned off the water. With the sudsy toothbrush still in his mouth, he crouched below the sink and pressed his ear to the pleasantly cool curve of the pipe. The clincks were clearer, sharper, and again they repeated their cadence of three fast, three slow, three fast. Bellman took the toothbrush out of his mouth and casually tapped it a couple of times against the pipe. It made a tinny sound which seemed pitifully insignificant, but they were quickly answered with more frantic clincks. Bellman smiled. There was something here, he thought. He started to drum on the pipe with more enthusiasm, adding rhythm and cadence. He tried to communicate joy at finding a friend in the building, an urban pen pal. Bellman paused and listened. There was no beat to his partner's reply, just the set structure of slow and fast clincks. It was boring. And Bellman had to go to work. He tried

tapping a goodbye, tried to say that he'd be back around six, maybe seven, but he was sure that the person on the other end didn't understand a word he tapped because the pipe kept on clinking long after Bellman had stopped.

Bellman's duty at the museum was the Abstract Expressionists. He loved to linger around those paintings, the blocks of color, the swirls of paint. Whatever he saw seemed to belong to him and no one else. It made loneliness feel more comfortable. He also liked to watch people's reactions to the paintings; it was much more interesting than their reactions to Baroque sculpture or Flemish landscape. Ramirez, his partner for the week, didn't feel the same way. "I hate this fucking area, freaks me out." Ramirez liked to add a dash of color to his slate gray uniform. Today he was wearing a red carnation and a low hanging fob. "I'll take the Realists any day. One Courbet for all the Motherwells." Bellman was the only guard with this permanent station. It was mainly due to the fact that most of the guards couldn't stand the Abstract Expressionists. Some didn't think it was art, and others suffered bad dreams and invariably lost weight. "I don't know how you do it, Bellman," Ramirez said. "Day in, day out, I'd be in the bin." Ramirez shook his head and then left for a Pollock on the other side of the room. Bellman had barely heard a word. He was thinking about that clinking in his bathroom. By the side of a large red canvas, a Barnett Newman, Bellman fell upon the notion of Morse Code, of a hand with a piece of metal pinched between its thumb and index finger. The clincks had that quality. Bellman

wished that he had been a boy scout with that sixth sense of short and long. But his parents had always been against such organizations; they called them paramilitary, two turns away from Hitler youth. "They brainwash," his father told him. "Better to know nothing but yourself." Every Wednesday Bellman's classmates used to come to school dressed in their perfect blue uniforms with their knotted yellow kerchiefs, and Bellman would watch them communicate with secret handshakes and unbreakable cryptograms. During recess they'd sit with him and talk and laugh in pig Latin. They'd pass notes to Bellman written in invisible ink. Soon, even the words the teacher scratched onto the chalk board seemed covert.

A tour shuffled into the Gallery. The tour guide, Katrina de Svenka-Harris, a woman who always wore a scarf dramatically thrown over her shoulder, nodded at Bellman and then spread her arms as if she were presenting a feast to the peasants. "Ladies and gentleman, Abstract Expressionism." Bellman had heard the talk well over a thousand times, but still he listened. He liked the woman's accent, the way words and sentences merged into a continuous flow. It reminded him of home, of his grandmother's Slavic voice. But this tour guide was certainly not a Bellman, the woman practically danced around the gallery, sighing and interjecting at each painting, sometimes shuddering so that the most observant witnessed her complete rapture for art. She started, as always, with the Reinhardts, the Rothkos, the Stills, and the Newmans. She took a deep breath and almost embraced a canvas. "Here, we find ourselves face to face with the paradoxical,

contradictory phenomenon of an art that assumes a metaphysical role, that tries to become a pure concept, an absolute idea, and yet in so doing succeeds in making the picture more of an 'object' than ever before, reducing it of necessity to the essential elements of its structure: the canvas, the frame, the rectangular or in any case geometrical shape of its border and the simplified colors of its background."

Bellman watched her mouth. He enjoyed knowing what word would come next, and sometimes, in a whisper, he'd sing an analytical duet with her. Not too long ago he had found her collapsed on the roof of the museum. She was staring out over Central Park. "Oh, Hi Bellman," she said. She didn't try to re-wrap her scarf or bring herself to her feet; she remained on the ground like a woman tipped out of a wheelchair. Bellman answered with an awkward hello, and she said, "Did you know Central Park was designed by Frederick Law Olmstead and Calvert Vaux? It took them twenty years to build, from 1853 to 1873. Over 843 acres. Yes, their design was brilliant. The park they envisioned was to be picturesque and restful but also efficient; traffic was to flow around and through it without endangering its serenity. I think they succeeded." As she spoke, she looked as if she were listening to a distant opera. Bellman wanted to sit down next to her and eat his sandwich, but he didn't. He moved over to the Johnson wing instead.

And now Katrina de Svenka-Harris and the tour drifted to the other side of the gallery, to the walls that held Pollocks, Klines, Motherwells, De Koonings and Gustons. Her hands made slashes in the air as she spoke. "The

second trend of Abstract Expressionism was defined by 'action painting.' They were created in psychological conditions of unrestrained vitality, with the result that the hand, the arm, the whole body of the artist 'forgot' to depend on the mind and the will and were liberated in a sort of sacred frenzy, mindless of all decorum, all rules of composition and all aesthetic device. The measured style of the results achieved in this way in no way diminished this unique revelation of chaos." No one in the crowd seemed to listen to her. They checked the museum guide to see what was next on the horizon. Pop Art. Bellman was sure that they'd be more pleased with the Warhols and the Lichstensteins. Everyone was.

During the talk Bellman formulated two plans -- he always thought best when someone was speaking. He would go to the public library and get a book on Morse Code, and he would call Nurse Pselvaro. Bellman was pleased. Those plans were weights, they held him down.

A husband and wife and their child walked over to the red canvas. They stood like three people waiting for a very late bus. The father shook his head. "So absurd," he said. "Untitled."

The mother nodded. "Tim could do that."

"What?" The boy glanced at his mother, his father, and then at Bellman.

The man wagged his finger. "It's a bad joke."

"A joke on the museum, that's what it is." The woman tucked her purse under her arm as if such a place wasn't safe for valuables.

The boy wrinkled his face. "A joke? Like funny?"

"Oh, nothing."

Bellman stared straight ahead and didn't watch the family move away.

After work, his civilian clothes on, Bellman went into the local library and walked over to the information desk. There, sitting by a computer and a large stack of books, was a woman wearing a sweatshirt with the caption, "The Early Bird Gets The Bookworm." Pinned to the sweatshirt was a nametag that read "Estelle." Her hair was done up in a typical bun, so tight that it seemed to force her mouth into a lipless smile and her eyes into a state of childish horror. It didn't put Bellman at ease.

"Yes, may I help you?" she said.

"Yes, well, I'm looking for a book."

"Of course you are." She picked up a book and waved it at Bellman.

"We've got books."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me, you have ears. I hate when people say *excuse me* or *pardon me* or *what was that* even though you know they heard you perfectly well. Is it a power thing to force someone to repeat themselves?" She spoke with a constant tone of helpfulness as if that bun had also stretched her vocal cords to register only a friendly pitch.

Bellman showed her his library card hoping it would calm her down.

"I just want a book on Morse Code."

"What?"

"I just want a book on Morse Code," Bellman repeated.

"There's a book for everything." She typed something into her computer then read from the screen. "Symbols and Signs. Electrical symbols; map and chart symbols; cultural, historical, and recreational symbols; weather symbols; business and monetary symbols; musical symbols; proofreaders' marks; diacritical marks; Dewey decimal system; religious symbols; zodiac signs; birthstones and flowers; international road signs and travel symbols; semaphore code; distress signals; ship's bell time signals; international radio alphabet and Morse code. There you go." She wrote on a piece of scrap paper and coyly slipped it to him. "Go to the third floor," she said. She seemed defeated.

"Third floor?"

"Yes. Anything else? No romances, no thrillers." She emphasized *romances and thrillers*.

"No."

And then she said, "I've had a bad day."

Bellman nervously backed away from the desk and made his way to the well-worn stairs, each step scooped like a piece of melon.

Bellman spread a blanket under the sink and propped a pillow against the chipped tiles. He opened the book and rested it in the hollow of his crossed legs. A fork was in one hand, a pad and pencil in the other. Like a

conductor before the beginning of a performance, Bellman tapped on the pipe. Clinks sounded back. Eyeing the alphabet and its adjoining script of dots and dashes, Bellman carefully went about introducing himself. "HI. IM BELLMAN."

He stopped to let the clinking answer, but Bellman had problems matching the sounds with the letters on the page, and quickly, he fell behind. "SLOWER," he tapped.

"I MA FOHN CRMLHT. I MA GEINU HEFD TOMTAGE. PMEASB JALL PTLICE."

Bellman reread what he had copied, tried to make sense of the jottings on his notepad. He couldn't. But instead of asking again, he tapped, "I UNDERSTAND."

"THOJK VOG."

Bellman didn't know what to tap next. What do you ask? How do you start? Finally, he came up with a question. "ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?"

"NQ. I AM HUNFCUVVED TO CVE SPNK. I AM HXNGTY. I AM VIRKD. I AM IN JAMBER. JALL PTLICE KOY."

Bellman tapped, "GOOD. EVERYTHING WILL BE ALL RIGHT." Excitement overwhelmed him. He leaned his head against the pipe and closed his eyes. Through the maze of plumbing there was someone else; it was like a wire stretched through two tin cans, but when Bellman had tried that experiment as a kid, it never worked. "YOU WILL BE FINE."

More clinking filled his ears, but Bellman didn't bother to try to

translate. Instead, he imagined a delicate hammer pounding out an ancient golden bowl, something to drink wine out of, something to pass in a circle of touching knees. "YES, YOU WILL BE SAFE," Bellman thought to himself.

Someone threw a light bulb out of a window. It made a pop like an old photographer's flash. The pigeons exploded in the courtyard. Soon, another light bulb fell. Onto the pipe Bellman tapped "HAPPY NEW YEAR."

Bellman brought his book, *Understanding Codes*, to work and studied it during his breaks. While standing guard he would tap his ABC's against the floor with the heel of his shoe, and under his breath he'd croon the International Radio Alphabet. "You got a song?" Ramirez asked. Today he was wearing purple suspenders.

"What?"

"You look like you got a song. I've got one." Ramirez snapped his fingers and began to sing a song that Bellman didn't recognize. "Can't get it out of my head. Just stays there." Ramirez meandered to the other side of the gallery.

After reading and rereading what he had translated from the clinking pipe, Bellman determined that it was a man being held hostage, that he was handcuffed to the sink, that he was beaten and desperate and without hope. Bellman was going to call the police but decided to wait a bit longer. He had checked the newspapers. The heat wave was still the focus of attention, that and a man killed and half-eaten by his pet pit bull -- *MAN'S BEST FRIEND?*

But nowhere was there any news of a kidnapping or a missing person. So Bellman decided to give it another day. He wanted more details. He even envisioned busting into the apartment himself and freeing the poor man. "Hi, I'm Bellman, 4-D," he'd say. Maybe his picture would be on the front page of a newspaper; it would knock off the sweating thermometer and the grainy picture of legs peeking out from under a white sheet. *HERO*, it would read. And maybe -- now Bellman was really tapping his feet and some patrons looked at him like he was going to spread sand on the floor -- Nurse Pselvaro would read it, see his kind face, remember that extended arm and those good veins. Oh, the stories the Ohio Bellmans could then tell at the dinner table. His left foot changed tempo while he chanted to himself, "Papa Sierra Echo Lima Victor Alpha Romeo Oscar."

Katrina de Svenka-Harris and her tour entered the gallery. As usual, she glanced over at Bellman and smiled, but her eyes were different now, not alive and excited, but glazed and medicated, and her wrap was trailing behind her like a stream of paisley blood. "Ladies and gentleman, Abstract Expressionism." She made a large gesture with her arms and turned a complete circle. She didn't end at just one, but kept turning until she stopped in dizzy frustration. The tour looked nervous. "In their paintings," she said, and as she talked her body swayed, "the image becomes a ritual, a magical, sacred event and, you know what, we need to sit on the floor, we need to lie on the floor." She plopped down onto the ground. A few followed, but the rest of the tour shuffled into a neutral corner. "Feel the walls, the walls

enclosing us like a frame." She started to roll side over side, knocking into people's legs. No one else joined her.

Ramirez was the first to stop her. He gently placed his hands against her shoulders and lifted her to her feet. "Mrs. de Svenka-Harris, you all right?"

She looked like she had just been in a car wreck. "I'm fine," she said.

"Maybe you should go home."

"Maybe."

Her blue eyes, an uninteresting shade, locked onto Bellman. They didn't plead but seemed to ask for something dire but basic, like an old lover's new address. A different Bellman would have stepped forward and comforted her, would have soothed her back into herself, done something, but this Bellman, the thirty-first Bellman in the phone book, leaned weakly against the wall and let Ramirez take her down in the elevator. The second they were gone, he moved to the center of the room. The tour thought for a moment that he might be taking over so they huddled around him in prehistoric fashion and waited for some torch to be raised, but Bellman just stood there like a wax guard in an exhibition of authority.

Bellman left work early and didn't tell anyone, didn't even go downstairs to the basement, to the guard's changing room. He just walked through the lobby and out the front door in full uniform. It was her eyes that made him feel so awful, the way they held onto Bellman like he could save

her before she fell. When people touched a canvas or leaned in too close or took a restricted photograph, he had no problem stepping in and pointing a finger and saying no. But with Katrina de Svenka-Harris, he just watched her like she was a grainy image on the six o'clock news.

Outside, well past noon and still hot, children and old women lingered by the fountain in hopes that stray mist might splash their faces. The steps of the museum were covered with sitting people, some eating hot dogs or pretzels, and others reading newspapers or books. A man dressed in a ratty clown suit juggled seven rubber balls. Two men played cards. Bellman walked by these people and tried not to notice anything. He was still on duty. As he passed the expensive apartment buildings of Fifth Avenue, he felt the eyes of doormen on him as if he was a rival on their turf. Postmen, bus drivers, cops, everyone in uniform seemed to look at him with a certain amount of disdain. He wondered if they could somehow sense that he had abandoned his post.

It took him almost an hour to walk to the hospital on 27th street. The complex was old and failing, at one time the state of the art but now medieval. One newspaper headline referred to the place as *THE VULTURE'S NEST*. Only the desperate and the unconscious were treated there; the rest went elsewhere. Bellman waited by the entrance. His plan was simple. He would bump into Nurse Pselvaro and then say, "Remember me?" He hoped that his uniform would impress her like her uniform impressed him. They both served people, he might say, but he really wasn't sure what he would

say. Hi. Hello.

"Hey Mister."

Bellman did not turn though he knew the person was talking to him.

"Hey Mister, please, I need some help." The man stepped in front of Bellman's face. He was young with particular patches of facial hair that made his head resemble a coconut. "You gotta help me."

Bellman ignored him.

"It's my baby. My baby needs milk. She's starving for milk and I got no money. I just need to get some powdered milk. My girl's crying."

Bellman knew the scam. He was often approached with stories about wallets being stolen and sick mothers and bus fare back home to Kansas. For the first few years he believed them all, and he handed out change freely. There was one woman he was particularly kind to. She sat between a deli and a newsstand, a cat peeking out from within her parka. Rugged companionship, that's what Bellman felt when he passed the two of them. He gave her quarters because he didn't want to seem cheap, and one day, in a moment of inspiration, he gave her some Tender Vittles Cat Food. She examined the carton with disdain, holding it aloft with two fingers. Her mouth could barely curl out a God Bless You. In that instant, hard luck stories became lies, and children, animals, and misspelled signs became props.

"I swear, man," the man continued. "She's got to have her milk. Listen, I know what you think, you think it's some crack-head ploy, but look, I tell you what, you can come to the store with me, you can buy the milk for

me. Okay? She needs the milk." The man put his hands together and pleaded. "C'mon."

Bellman stared over his shoulder and watched the people come and go through the sliding glass doors.

"She's only seven months old and she's so small, a helpless little thing, and I can't do a thing 'cause I lost my job doing something stupid and my wife, well, she has a tough time with it. C'mon, I'll take anything. It kills me to do this, to beg like this, I'm a man, but..." His chin lowered and he started to cry for the phantom child. Bellman had also seen this before, this extreme behavior, but there was a power in this performance, a skill, and he put his hand in his pocket and brought out a dollar. The man became silent. Bellman handed over the money like it was a tip for services rendered. The man palmed it. "My baby thanks you," he said, and he quickly moved down the block.

Other people milled around the entrance to the hospital, most of them smoking cigarettes. Some wore hospital green, and Bellman tried to spot traces of blood on the bib. No one seemed to be pleased, not in this heat, and he wondered what this all looked like from above, from the roofs of buildings. Like a maze, he figured, an inveterate lab experiment. There was an end, there had to be, but when the dollar left his pocket, such a possibility seemed to evaporate in the fumed air. Charity, like telethons on tv, was entertainment now.

Bellman went to the pay phone at the corner of the block. The inside

was papered with pamphlets advertising various strip shows and escort services; the phone sex money on the ground fooled him, as always, for just a second. He dialed information.

"What borough, please?"

"Hi."

"Hello. What borough, please?"

"Manhattan. Bellman."

"What street."

"I don't know."

"Do you know the first name?"

"I forgot it."

"Well, they're forty-nine Bellman's listed."

"I'd recognize the name if I heard it."

The operator sighed and said, "Well," then she started to alphabetically inventory the New York Bellmans. "Able. Albert. Alison."

Bellman leaned against the phone booth. Sirens blared in the street. He imagined Nurse Pselvaro running down a long hall, her thick-soled shoes silent. Somebody was losing blood.

"Charlie. Claire. David. David. Eliot."

And Bellman, his hand held over the phone, intoned along with her, "Bravo. Echo. Lima. Lima. Mike. Alpha. November."

At home he didn't bother to take off his uniform. He didn't bother

with food. He didn't bother to look out his window. He simply walked into his bathroom and settled underneath the sink. He didn't tap. He placed his ear against the sweating pipe and listened to the wash of distant water moving throughout the building. It sounded like gas.

The courtyard began to fill with night, and when the level of darkness reached Bellman's window, he picked up a fork and tapped.

The pipe clinked back, "THANK GOD. THOUGHT YOU WERE GONE. WHERE'S POLICE. NEED POLICE. PLEASE CALL POLICE. IN DANGER."

Bellman could now understand every clink. He paused. He didn't know where to begin or how to begin.

"AM BEATEN. AM THIRSTY. PLEASE CALL POLICE. LIFE OR DEATH. WILL BE KILLED."

"HI," Bellman tapped.

After a short delay the clinks answered, "HELLO. CALL POLICE."

"HOT OUT," Bellman tapped.

"POLICE. PLEASE."

"VERY HUMID."

"POLICE. NOW. NOW."

Bellman put the fork into his mouth and ran his tongue along its tines. He enjoyed filling those narrow metal spaces. Pigeons rippled outside, their wings a deck of cards being slowly shuffled. Music played, a waltz. Bellman stared into the rusted pipe and wondered what his reflection would be in perfect chrome, probably elongated and obscured, a fun house mirror. He

thought of tricks and carnival barkers. The two headed calf floating in a tub of formaldehyde. Tilting a head up to look at the trapeze and the high wire, knowing that there is no net. Bellman curled an arm around the pipe. And soon he'd begin to tap again, and he'd tap over the clinks, the single gunshot, the knocks at the door, the sirens; he'd tap through everything, and when the taps opened a thin leak in the pipe, he'd pretend to be caught in the sights of a water pistol.

"POLICE NOW. PLEASE. HELLO. SOS."

When the shadow that was Bellman's plant seemed to hop off the sill and slowly frond its way towards the bathroom, he began: "BELLMAN DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO BE BELLMAN UNTIL WELL INTO HIS THIRTY-FIFTH YEAR."

Anonymous

At dusk, before I leave the office, I find myself leaning against the window and staring down at the polluted river that cuts through the middle of town. Some people still try to fish it, mostly the older ones -- the younger ones have no recollection of any trout -- and these characters wade knee-deep in the oily water, casting and mending, casting and mending, determined to remember this place as the unspoiled West. Their hunched-over futility sustains me. And as I watch them my hands start to shake. It is at these moments that I'm glad my life doesn't depend on precious work. Sometimes, usually in the afternoon, I get these God-awful visions that I'm a surgeon, and this pen is a scalpel, and my desk is an operating table, and I stand there and have to make the first cut even though I know it's going to be a bloody mess. I'm a small man but I've proven in my life that I'm not a delicate man.

For the last eleven months I've been going to AA after work. It's helped. There's always a group around, some bleary-eyed, others impossibly chipper. In our soberness we all swim together like men tossed off a cruise ship. It has a recreational feel. We drink coffee and smoke cigarettes and chew gum and tell those stories, the same stories, of being drunk and reckless.

John is the one up and talking tonight. "My name is John and I'm an

alcoholic."

We chant back to him, "Hello, John."

"I came here three years ago to this day."

Someone starts to applaud and soon everyone joins in. A few whoop.

"Thank you." He smiles and nods like a politician. "Thank you."

John's a big man, bearded, and he wears a red bandanna tight around his receding hairline. It is, he claims, his trademark. John's other trademark used to be scaring people. He was arrested for beating his wife and kid, for beating his second wife and step-kid. And he shot a neighbor's cat through the eye. But now, since he stopped drinking, the people in this town treat him like a converted heathen. They pat him on the back and make teasing comments about his growing weight; they even trust him with putting together the July Fourth Barbacue though they don't let him near the fireworks.

"I was a mess for most of my life," he continues, "always drunk, always angry at something. Thirty-four years wasted." He shrugs his shoulders like a boxer. "Thirty-four years causing pain to people and myself." There is silence in the room. John's eyes flicker with emotion and his voice wavers. He still seems moved by this story even though he's told it many times. That always impresses me. "I was not a happy man," he tells us, "no real reason, I just wasn't happy." People nod. It is a small group, seventeen men and three women, and tonight there's a new guy. He's young, in his late teens, and he wears a baseball cap turned backwards. A few of us sneak glances to the

corner where he sits tilted in his chair. It looks like he's doing wheelies which makes me nervous. We all look at him like he's an earlier incarnation of our sorry selves, and we try to smell his breath like concerned parents. Gin? Vodka? Whiskey? We want to know.

John has now worked up a sweat. "I don't remember my first drink," he says, "and I don't remember becoming a drunk. It just happened. I was a mean drunk and a stupid drunk. I once pissed on a cop car just to get arrested. Just wanted to go to jail. Cops looked at me like I was crazy. Yep, and I was." A slight smile lifts his lips. "I remember drinking a bottle of tequila and driving my car through Wexler's Photomat. Glass everywhere, glass and film and a large cutout of a smiling woman. Thought for a second I killed someone." John shakes his head. He glances over at Rhian and winks. They are the first couple of our AA group, sober in love. They sometimes invite me over for pie and coffee, and we sit and talk, and soon the conversation turns to the previous damage of our lives. Then one of us clicks on the tv.

"Yep, it was bad, all bad." John wipes at his beard and says, "But one day I walked by this place and a power, some power, a higher power, lifted me up these stairs and led me through this front door. It wasn't easy. I fell often. Once got so drunk on Canadian Mist that I made a mission of hitting everyone in town, one punch to the face. I was quickly arrested." Some people who remember this incident chuckle. "But eventually, thanks to God and my friends here, I made it. I faked it until I made it."

We chant back, "Fake it until you make it," and then we applaud. The new guy also applauds though no sound seems to come from his hands.

"Utilize, don't analyze!"

And we repeat, "Utilize, don't analyze!"

After meetings I go out with Andy. He's a friend from AA, probably my best friend. He and his wife have invited me over for Thanksgiving. He hasn't had a drink in over five years, and things, as he puts it, are back on track. We frequent the same bar to prove to ourselves that we really haven't changed that much. We sit on the corner barstools. People call it Amen Corner.

"Hey guys," Viv says to us.

"Hey Viv," we answer back. Heads along the bar look up. Most of them know us, most of them are acquaintances of some sort. A few nod, lift their glasses, then sag back over the bar and resume their construction of cocktail-straw rafts. They make me think of older Huck Finns, after the adventures.

Viv sets down a coke and a cup of coffee. I drink the coffee. "How's life?"

"Just fine," Andy says.

The tv behind Viv's shoulder plays the weather channel. In this town people are obsessed with the weather.

She asks, "Any new disciples?"

"Possibly."

Viv smiles and offers a toast. She drinks Maker's Mark. "Well, to life."

We join in on the toast. Then Viv ambles down the bar to refill more glasses. There are many gin drinkers tonight. She jokes with everyone, flirting with them by pouring liquor from obscene heights. It falls in an impossibly straight line; you could measure a newborn by it.

"How're things?" Andy asks me.

"Fine, I guess."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," I say.

"Allyson's baking you some banana bread," he says. "Without nuts this time."

"Great," I say.

Andy is a few years older than me. He's a personal companion at the Loving Mother's Nursing Home. How he ever became a drunk, a vicious drunk from the stories he tells, is a mystery to me. He looks like someone you'd see at the Salt Lake airport. I ask him if anyone's talked to the new guy yet.

"I don't think so." Andy twists a red paper napkin around his finger.

"I've never seen him around," I say.

"Me neither."

The two of us like to think that we know all the drunks in town. The

town is close to being a city, in fact, is officially a city, but no one living here or passing through would ever call it that. There's nothing tall except for one building which everyone uniformly considers a mistake. It's where I work.

"He didn't look too bad," Andy puts in.

"No, he didn't."

"Nope."

There's a lull, and I glance around the bar hoping, like an adolescent boy, that some woman, a magical stranger, will come over to talk to me, to ask me to shoot pool or help decide what song to play on the juke box. Of course it doesn't happen. The tv shows the flooding in California -- cars are swept away, and the tops of houses, like odd boats, sail through the muddy water. A few people in the bar cheer, cheer right on through the video of a dead bloated dog. California is not a popular place in these parts.

"I'm thinking of sponsoring the new guy," I tell Andy. "Do something," I say.

Andy reaches over and nudges me in the forearm. "I think that would be great."

"Yeah?"

"Just great."

Andy was my sponsor. He came across me on a late Monday night. I was leaning against a department store window, and I must've looked like a mess, especially with those high-breasted mannequins behind me. And this thin blond man stopped and asked me if I wanted some coffee. That was it.

Coffee. I heard that and I started to cry, to really bawl. It's funny how a word can set you off, and they're never the big words, the words you invest your life into. No, it ends up to be a word like coffee. It's almost embarrassing.

People start to laugh at the end of the bar, and for a moment I think they're laughing at me. But no, someone is telling a story like a comedian. It seems to involve fucking a woman because he makes motions with his groin. Or maybe it's about riding a horse. Or playing pinball. I don't know, I can't hear a word he says, but the people around him roar.

I ask Andy about John Doe, an old man at the nursing home.

"Still in love," he says. "They've decided to keep them apart."

"Poor guy."

"Yeah, poor JD."

John Doe is in his eighties and has become a celebrity of sorts. He was found a few months ago wandering around the dog track, picking up lost bets and stuffing them into the pockets of his bathrobe. He was dressed for bedtime, for sleep -- that's what one reporter wrote -- and he resembled someone who'd just lost his house to a midnight fire. When asked questions about who he was or where he lived, he merely stood there, his big eyes focused on some distant thing, and said, "Dogs. Fast dogs." That was the only sense he made. Otherwise, his words came out jumbled and random, thrown out like dice. The local newspaper carried the story: *Senile man abandoned at track, family sought*, and soon it became national news, a comment on the state of things. The President made a reference to it, and the FBI became

involved. Photographs circulated. But still no one came forward. Christened John Doe, he was placed in the Loving Mother's Nursing Home. People had been so moved and upset by his plight that they sent in contributions to create a fund for his care. A testament to the kindness of America, one politician said, and soon after that, the old man was forgotten again.

"This guy lives right in the present," Andy tells me. "Every hard boiled egg is his first hard boiled egg."

"One day at a time," I say with a smile.

"Yeah, but it's like a soap opera."

At the Loving Mother's Nursing Home it seems that JD has fallen in love with Mrs. Park, a woman also lacking in sense. And the funny thing is she's fallen in love with him. Whenever they see each other they start to coo and hold hands and whisper and giggle; they kiss; they run their arms along each other's body. One time he slipped his hands up under her skirt.

"Well, it seems nice to me," I say.

"Yeah, sure, let them have their fun." Andy shakes his head. "But I tell you, the place can't have that. I mean, they're going at it in the common room, and families are visiting, and Mrs. Park's daughter and grandchildren are visiting. They don't want to see Granny with her legs spread apart. Nobody does."

"Still, if they're happy," I say.

"They don't know what they are. They're too far gone. Hell, they forget each other the second they're separated. It's no Romeo and Juliet."

"Still..."

We order another round from Viv. She puts a cherry in the coke and a swirl of whipped cream in the coffee. The bar is becoming crowded. More people start to drink draft beer. The weather in Arizona is beautiful, a dry 80°, and I wonder why I don't move there. Andy begins to tell me about the time he once drunkenly sneaked into the backseat of someone's car, someone he didn't know, and rode home with her. When she pulled up to her house he stayed in the car. Andy's voice trails off. There's really no point to the story, I've heard it before. He stayed in the car all night long then woke up and crawled home.

Back in my apartment, I watch late-night tv while drinking a Sprite. I've squeezed in a lime which resembles, in a strange way, a life boat from a green ocean liner. I sit on a disintegrating couch I've clumsily covered with a white sheet. It looks stupid, like a ghost couch. I used to live in a house, a house that had this wonderful mailbox that was shaped like a house. The front pulled down, and when you put it back up, the shadow of a cat remained in the upstairs window and the planters continued to hold their geraniums. I imagined the family that lived inside: the beautiful wife, the child, and their loving smiles when the husband came home with roses in one hand and a teddy bear in the other.

The news is on, and once again John F. Kennedy's life is shown in three minute clips. It's the anniversary of his death and a constant replay of

his assassination and funeral has been playing on tv. It all winds up with his attractive family in their black suits. Jackie, before those owlish sunglasses, carried death well. It's something my mother always admired -- the beauty, the strength. And then there's John-John saluting at his father's graveside. It all seems too perfect to be real.

I go to my bedroom and check the closet. My only suit is a seersucker, a worthless suit, something I bought when I was younger and envisioned myself going to plenty of formal picnics. But I do have a blue blazer and a pair of dark pants, and I wonder if that would be appropriate for a funeral, if it looks mournful enough. Since I can't drink anymore I want to be prepared for such basic things. I slip on the blazer and try, for a second, to eulogize someone I love.

"Ladies and gentlemen...." I stop. I can't get past an opening line without feeling silly.

Outside, I hear two people walk by.

"You're the worst," a woman says with a flirty lisp.

"C'mon," a man answers.

"Really."

"C'mon."

Then the radiator starts up with its frightening knocks.

I go to church before work because I feel that I have to. *If you bring the body, the mind will follow*, that's what they say at AA. I sit in a pew and try

to pray, but mostly I wonder about how much it hurts to be crucified or crucified upside down or flayed in the hot desert. I spend about fifteen minutes there.

On my way out I run into the priest. "Hello," he says.

I have a hard time looking him in the eye. "Hello."

"It's going to be a nice day today, mild for this time of year."

I nod.

"And the weekend is going to be gorgeous." During the summer his skin tans to an incredible shade of brown.

"Great," I say. "Excuse me, sir?"

"Yes." He smiles and tilts his head.

"I was wondering what you wear to a funeral?"

"Regular vestments really, a cassock and an alb."

"No." I stumble with my words. "I mean what do I wear to a funeral?"

His face becomes serious. "Well, a dark suit is fine, something dark blue or steel blue. A charcoal grey works quite nicely. Then just a white shirt and a dark tie. That's it."

"How about a blue blazer and a pair of dark pants?"

"That's fine." He steps closer to me. "Did you lose someone?"

"No, just curious."

He looks disappointed.

At tonight's meeting I sit close to the new guy, just a fold-up chair

away. He's wearing a flannel shirt, the kind of shirt I used to wear to bed, and his watch is ten minutes fast. There is something frantic about him, not in his eyes or in his body, but in the space that surrounds him. It's like he's soaked in gasoline.

At 7:30 things get started, and Richard steps forward. He's the leader tonight. "I'm Richard and I'm an alcoholic."

"Hello, Richard."

Richard is a lawyer in town. He fled Southern California five years ago because, as he says, life got a little wacko. "It was positively Fellini meets Oliver Stone," he once told me, and then he smiled and shook his head, "I'm so fucking L.A. it's sad."

We begin with a serenity prayer, then Richard asks if anyone has an anniversary or if anyone has anything to say or if anyone wants to be on the committee for the dance next month. No one says a word. "Well, okay, I guess I'll just proceed with what I want to talk about tonight." Richard opens up the Big Book and reads, "'We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.' That's step two, for anyone here who might not know, and that step was by far the most important step for me."

I hear the new guy hum a derogatory sigh. I can't say that I blame him. I don't know what holds my sanity in place.

"Picture this," Richard says, his fingers making a frame. Richard could tell a story about buying milk at the corner store. "You're on the beach and yes, you're drunk. It's three in the morning and waves lick at your ankles.

Now why are you here? Because you're an idiot. You haven't lost your job or beaten anyone or wrecked your car into a school bus, and your wife and three kids haven't left you, they're at home asleep in their beds, but still you're an idiot. You're playing games, and the games have gotten longer and more confused. And you lie there, sand stuck to your face, and you stare at the sky, at all those stars, and suddenly those stars come down and surround you. It's true, as crazy as it sounds, they come down and pick you up, like a thousand glowing cotton balls."

The new guy starts to make little sneezing sounds, like a cat, and he covers his face with his hands. His whole body shakes. I get nervous thinking that it's a seizure, and my imagination prepares for a collapse and for my likely intervention. I'll force open the mouth, I figure, and I'll jam my wallet in there, that way he won't bite off his tongue. I've seen it done before. A few people look over. I wonder if they're thinking the same thing.

"And these stars lift you up," Richard is still saying. He is too involved in his story to notice what I'm noticing. "They lift you up into the sky and you can see the whole crazy city, the lights, the cars, all that movement, but up here, cradled by these soft stars, you know that you're going to be fine, that there is a plan and it includes you. That Jesus is your savior."

It's clear now that the new guy is not having a seizure but is laughing and doing a bad job holding it in. Almost everyone is looking back now, and I feel guilty by association, like I was the one who whispered something snide in his ear.

Richard stops. I stare at him to distance myself from the madman to my left. "I know it's a silly story," he says. "But it's what happened to me. I can't describe it in a sensible way. It was an awareness." Richard's face has an enviable calm. "And I know it saved my life."

The new guy suddenly stands up. "Hi, I'm Michael, and I'm an alcoholic." He smiles and then lets out a loony laugh. Everyone laughs along with him, and some lean toward him and shake his hand, pat his back. I feel like I've missed some big cosmic joke.

"That, my friend, is the hardest step," Richard says.

Other people make similar statements.

The new guy nods. "Thank you," he says. "I'm not very good at talking, not like you guys, but..." He pauses. "But I'm hoping to get things straight," he says.

"Well, your best thinking got you here," Richard tells him.

There is applause.

The new guy sits down and tilts back in his chair again.

I edge towards him. "Hey Mike," I say.

"Michael. I prefer Michael."

"Right, Michael. I'd like to be your sponsor."

"Sponsor?" He smiles. "Sure, you can be my sponsor."

We exchange phone numbers and addresses, and I tell him that I can be reached day or night, for anything, and while I certainly mean what I say, I feel stupid making such claims.

That night, I periodically get up from the tv and go to the closet to try on my blazer. I've gained a little weight over the last eleven months, eating mostly fast-food and Clark bars, and the jacket is too tight around my sides. But that pressure relaxes me, and I think about the way cattle are slaughtered, the pneumatic stabilizer that squeezes them in place, their first and only hug before the brain bolt finishes them off. As a teenager I did such work.

In the bathroom I stand in front of the mirror and work on my gestures of mourning: a hand to the face, head downturned; two hands to the face, head upturned. I decide upon stoic resolve, hands held behind my back and my face creased with control. But sometimes I break down.

In the middle of all this the phone rings. My heart stops. Past a certain hour there is nothing scarier than a ringing phone, and I stare at myself and realize that all this pretending is worthless. I can hide nothing. I take off the blazer and walk to the phone.

It's Michael. He wants a drink. He's sitting in his apartment watching tv and he wants some beer. "I'm just so fucking bored," he tells me. "It's driving me nuts."

"Just hold on, I'll be over as soon as I can," I say. And then I add, "Be strong," but I regret saying something like that.

I hang up and call Andy. Allyson answers. "Yes," she says anxiously. I can hear Andy mumble something in the background.

I tell her it's me.

"Is everything all right?" she asks. She has a wonderful voice, a voice that Andy often talks about. It saved him, he said.

"I'm fine," I say.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry to call this late but is Andy there."

"Hold on," she says, and I can hear the phone being passed through the air.

"What's up?" Andy says.

I feel like using jargon, saying something like Code Red, but instead I tell him that the new guy is in trouble. "He wants a drink," I say.

"Well, let's go over there." I can hear the concern in his voice, and for some reason I get teary-eyed.

"Yeah," I say.

"I'll come by and pick you up." And Andy hangs up.

I turn off the tv and decide to wait outside. I sit on the curb. It's a lukewarm night and I don't see my breath, which disappoints me. A few of the maples still hold onto their leaves, though many of them are bare and look raw under streetlights. The people I loved moved to the southwest, to a place of subtle seasons, not these egregious swings. They started new. I stayed behind because I was still drinking. I wasn't invited anyway. I helped them load the station wagon, insisting, like an ass, that it should be packed a particular way. They watched me silently as I nudged boxes and beat down

duffel bags into the nooks of the backseat; I stretched bungee cords across the small bike on the roof. I did it all. And there is a point where you think things will suddenly correct themselves, not in a gradual movement, but in catastrophic change, that spaces will be filled in a mass tectonic shift, and you'll turn to the people who are leaving you, you'll stare into their eyes, and you'll wait for them to come back long after they're gone.

From a distance two headlights approach. Soon I can tell it's a pick-up, Andy's pick-up. It stops next to me.

"So what's up?" he says when I get in. A George Jones tape is playing. "Is the kid okay?"

"I don't know."

I tell him where Michael lives and Andy cuts a sharp U-turn. He reaches under his seat and hands me a brown block of something wrapped in cellophane. "It's banana bread," he says. "Allyson wanted me to give it to you."

"Well thank her for me."

"Will do." We stop at a red light and Andy asks me how I'm doing.

"Fine," I say.

"You look worn out."

"I'm not."

We drive the rest of the way without speaking. When we get to Michael's apartment Andy asks, "What number?"

"Nine," I say.

We climb the stairs, three flights. Both of us are out of shape, and by the time we knock on the door to number nine, we're out of breath. We must look pitiful.

The door opens. "Hey," Michael says.

"Hi," I say.

"Is that for me?" He gestures toward my arm. I've brought the banana bread with me, carried it like a football.

"No," I say, "but you can have a piece."

"No thanks," he says. He doesn't look nearly as bad as I expected. He's not pale and sweaty; he's not shaking; he's not screaming at invisible things crawling out of the walls.

"You all right, Michael?" I ask.

"I don't know." He sits down on a couch. His apartment is nice, well decorated with things that look new. Posters of mountains hang on his walls. There is a fish tank with colorful fish darting around. The windows even have curtains. "I'm just antsy," Michael says.

I sit down next to him. "You'll get that way," I tell him.

"It's not even like I'm a drunk or anything, I mean," he says, "I'm just doing this whole thing because my family is a bunch of drunks and I figure I'll be a drunk too. This is kind of like a pre-emptive strike, I guess." He spins a throw pillow on his finger. "'Cause I can be a drunk. Do it out of boredom. You can only watch so much tv, or read, or take so many craps."

Andy and I don't say anything.

"Don't you get bored? He looks at me the same way dogs and children look at me.

"Sure," I say.

"I'm not a very popular guy," he says. "Never have been. And I try."

"Well..." I don't have anything to say, and I just sit there and find myself staring at the fish tank, at these fish that suck up pieces of blue gravel and then spit them back out. I wonder why they do it, if it's because of cleanliness or hunger or some other need that only gilled creatures can understand. And as I'm watching them, I guess I have a little breakdown, or look like I'm having a little breakdown, because Andy starts rubbing me on the back, and Michael is going into the kitchen to get me a glass of water.

"You all right," Andy whispers.

I tell him I'm fine.

"You sure."

Yes.

I drink some water. I slurp it down.

"Let's go for a drive," Andy says.

Michael agrees, and then we're up.

We drive west, leaving the center of town. Andy has rolled down the windows so that the rushing air gives us a sense of speed. It's a dark night. The road starts to curve. They have me in the middle and I have to constantly watch out for the gearshift.

"So where are we going?" Michael asks.

"Just driving," Andy says.

In the distance a papermill glows. The smoke that lifts from it looks toxic and deadly. I unwrap the banana bread and tear off a chunk. Crumps fall on my lap. And then I pass the loaf around. Instead of nuts, Allyson has put in raisins. They get caught in my teeth.

"This is good," Michael says, and he congratulates me.

After a while of driving up and down the highway, Andy takes a left and then a right and parks the truck in an almost empty parking lot. A long one story building is in front of us, it's shaped like an E, and I see the sign: Loving Mother's Nursing Home. There is little appeal to this place.

"What are we doing here?" Michael asks.

"It's where I work."

"Oh."

"Now," Andy says, "we've got be quiet, okay. Just follow me."

Michael gets out, and before Andy gets out I stop him and ask, "What are we doing here?"

"I have no idea," he says.

The three of us walk to the front door, it's a glass door within a whole glass wall, and Andy pulls out some keys and unlocks it. "Now, silence," he says.

Michael has a big grin on his face.

Inside it smells of antispetic mixed with babypowder, and I feel like I've

taken a swig of Listerine. It's quiet. I pinch my nose and blow out my ears. Before we can make our way down the hall a flashlight beam appears and totters towards us.

"Olie?" Andy whispers.

"Yeah."

"It's Andy." Andy walks down the hall and meets the flashlight halfway. I hear their murmuring but can't make out anything they say. They seem to be having a disagreement.

Michael comes over to my side. "We going to fuck with some old people?"

"I don't know."

Andy walks back. He's smiling. "If anyone catches us," he tells us, "let me do all the talking

"Sure, sure," Michael says.

We follow Andy down a hall of closed doors, then we turn and walk down another hall. It's dark. I can hear machinery, a pumping sound, it's probably keeping someone alive, oxygen maybe, a respirator of some sorts, and I feel like I'm scuba diving on a sunken wreck.

Andy stops by a door. "Okay," he whispers, "you guys go in there and sit tight. Don't do anything." He opens the door and we quietly slip in. The door closes behind us. It's a small room, big enough for only a bed, a chair, and a bureau. There is a window, but its shades are drawn. Michael and I lean against the wall, he's taller than I am, and we listen to the labored

snoring of the person in bed. It's too dark to make out any features, the head is only a slightly paler smudge of everything else.

"What's going on?" Michael asks. His breath is warm in my ear.

"I think that's JD."

He seems satisfied with my reply. "Old guy, huh?"

"Very."

My eyes adjust, and I can see that they've shaved him and cut his hair.

He sleeps with his arm casually rested behind his head.

Michael taps me on the shoulder. "He some old drunk?"

"No," I say.

"My grandad was a drunk."

I don't answer him. I just keep a silent watch.

A couple of minutes later Andy opens the door. It scares me. He's pushing a wheelchair with an old woman in it. Her mouth is gaped a little too wide, and she sways her head like a retarded child. I ask him if it's Mrs. Park, and he nods.

Andy wheels her over to the bed and slowly pulls back the sheets. John Doe doesn't move. Andy bends over, and Mrs. Park raises her arms and wraps them around his neck. With incredible ease and gentleness he lifts her and places her in bed. And then he tucks them in.

"Are they married?" Michael asks me.

"No."

Andy comes over and leans next to me. He doesn't say anything.

Soon, the old woman moans -- only circumstance tells me it's not pain -- and nestles her head against the old man's chest, and he wakes up and looks over and chuckles as if they have some private joke between them, like sneaking into bed was something they did as teenagers and now, after all these years, is something they still do to amuse themselves. His arm slips down and curves around her shoulders. They kiss.

"Lets flip on the lights, scare the shit out of them," Michael says.

Andy puts a finger to his lips.

The bodies move slowly and with great effort now, like people caught in impossibly thick tar, and he struggles to get on top of her. It is not graceful work, it rarely is, but finally it's done. And I wonder if these motions feel familiar or unfamiliar to him, if in his rotten memory there are such moments still floating around or if this is all just new and wonderful.

"Holy shit," Michael says, and he starts to crack up.

I stand there and watch them. They whisper things to each other, things we can't understand.

Girl with Large Foot Jumping Rope

My kid makes a controlled slide downstairs and stops in-between me and the tv. He's a funny kid. People say he looks a lot like Becky -- the slim nose, the oval mouth, the curly blond hair while my hair is straight and black like a well-groomed Indian -- but every time I look at him I see my eyes and I see my chin and I know that this is my boy. "Hey, Sport," I say. I call him Sport, I don't know why, I just do. I like the way it sounds. "What's up, Sport?" It makes me *feel* like a father.

He doesn't say a word, simply stands there, Pledge-of-Allegiance straight. He's seven years old and short for his age -- I guess it's a real issue at school, you know, with all the teasing, all the stupid names -- and he does this crazy thing with his lips when he's upset, kind of curls them like a disgusted Frenchman. He's doing that now. "Everything all right, Sport?" I say.

He nods, but it's unconvincing.

Then I glance down and notice his feet, his socks really, those white athletic socks that kids wear all the time. Tube socks, we used to call them. Well, these socks are soaking wet, so are the cuffs of his pants. It looks as if he's been dancing in some fountain in Paris, like in the movies.

"What's up, Josh?" I say, dropping Sport and putting a little sternness

in my voice, the you-can-tell-me sort of voice, a cop's voice, the good cop. Becky is the bad cop.

It comes out in one burst, and since he's an emotional boy, he starts to cry, and I can't understand a word the poor guy says, but whatever it is, it breaks my heart. I lean down and take him in my arms and rub the back of his neck and whisper, "It's all right, it's all right," in his ear even though I have no idea what he's done. But he's a good kid. His feet leave wet marks on my lap, and he curls in under my armpit. And Jesus, I almost get weepy.

"I'm sorry, Dad," Josh says after he's mostly controlled himself. He wipes at his eyes and nose with the sleeve of his shirt. But when he breathes, his body shudders. "I just, it just happened," he says.

I brush aside some loose hair and touch his cheek. "Tell me what happened, Sport."

"The toilet's all clogged up." And then he has another fit, this time smaller and probably crafted for my benefit.

"Is that all?" I say. "Is that the whole problem?" And I give him a big, carefree smile. I show him the gap in my front teeth, the gap I can shoot a spray of water through. His face relaxes a bit. He's an oversensitive kid -- Becky and I know that -- and we try to pass on to him a sense of fun, a *joie de vivre*. If something breaks, it's broken, no big deal. If a friend calls you a name or throws dirt at you, shake it off. For a month we played that stupid song *Don't Worry, Be Happy* hoping its groove would sink in. But it's not really working, and anything can set him off. I once had to save Josh from a

moth because it was fluttering too close to his face; sure, it was a big hairy moth, but he was sobbing like it was the end of the world. It just shatters me. The boy's seven years old, he should be surrounded by cars and stuffed animals and all those stupid toys those perfect kids advertise on tv. He shouldn't be depressed yet.

"Well, Sport," I say, and I talk like we're going on an adventure, "why don't we just go up there and figure this thing out. Okay?"

"Okay," he says.

I lift him up and then set him on the ground. There are wet blotches all over my pants. "Hey Sport," I say, pointing to my groin. "Looks like your Dad peed in his pants." He gawks at me oddly, like he doesn't know it's a joke, and then I start to laugh so he'll get to laughing, and finally he does, and it's a great laugh, it's my laugh, opened mouth and joyous -- a man's laugh, my father's laugh -- and we laugh some more when Josh's socks flap around like soggy clown shoes. Yep, my eyes, my chin, and my laugh; the rest is all Becky.

I was supposed to take Josh to school, actually just walk with him to the bus stop, but I decided that it'd be much more important for him to spend the day with his Dad. I had plans. The zoo was on my list, so was a movie and some ice cream, and then we were going to come home and make dinner for Becky -- turkey and sweet potatoes with marshmallows on top. It was going to be a good day. But I got tired, I got tired getting out of bed, I was so

tired I couldn't take a shower and I love taking showers in the morning. Becky says it's a stage, a "guy thing." I don't know what that means but I'm taking vacation days from work because I know if I go there I'll do something stupid like toss a computer through a window or fling sharpened pencils at my secretary; I'd probably call Joe Lester a fucking fat-ass drunk and he'd pull that gun he keeps in his bottom drawer. In the end, no doubt about it, I'd get fired. So now I sit at home in my suit because it makes the boredom seem more productive. "Just wallow," Becky told me before she went to work, "like a duck, quack, quack."

Josh and I walk upstairs. I can see little footprints blurred on the rug. They're smaller than my hand. I point to them and say, "You'd make a lousy criminal."

Josh is quiet, solemn even. As we get closer to the hall bathroom, he begins to move slower, lingering before each step.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury," I say, "the defendant's footprints lead straight to the bathroom." I tousle Josh's hair and then reach down and pull his hand out of his pocket so I can hold it in mine. "It's no big deal, Sport," I say.

He looks up at me. We're in front of the bathroom door. It's closed. Taped to the door is one of his colorful drawings of a military airdrop. Stick figure paratroopers hang in a flak-filled sky. They're huge, much bigger than the plane they've jumped from, and this lack of perspective seems to have cost them their lives. Death comes with a red crayon.

"I'm not going to be mad," I say to Josh, "and I love you." I grab for the doorknob, and I must admit this feeling of suspense settles in my gut. Turds, I'm thinking, are there going to be turds? I imagine them floating near the lip of the toilet bowl, my son's turds, and I even have an awful image of a few that have slipped over the side like barrels over Niagara Falls. And this strange thought comes to me: I haven't seen my son's shit in a long time. When he was a baby, then a toddler, Becky and I seemed to be always dealing with it, the diapers, the potty training; but now that he's a middle-aged boy, shit, like so many other things, has snuck into his private world.

"Dad?"

"Yeah?"

Josh makes a gesture with his head, a small tilt -- I've seen Becky do the same thing a thousand times -- and I realize that I'm just standing there.

"Right," I say.

I open the door. We both pause in the doorway as if we're waiting out an earthquake. There is water on the floor, about a half-inch, and it smells dank, like mop water. I look over to the toilet -- the red-shag seat cover is closed -- and I see no traces of shit on the linoleum. To lighten things up, to take the worry out of Josh's face, I stride in and do my best version of Gene Kelly. I belt out "I'm singing in the rain, just singing in the rain, what a glorious feeling I'm happy again" and dance around the bathroom making delightful splashes with my shoes. But Josh's seems even more troubled, his wonderful chin lowered so that a crescent of soft flesh appears. "C'mon," I

say, and I make a face. I go over to the toilet, lift the seat and peer down inside. There are no wads of toilet paper, no floating turds; the water is clear and only slightly higher than average. "This is nothing, Sport," I say. Josh steps into the bathroom. His socks are now gray. "We're you going number two?" I ask.

"Uh...no," he says.

"Well, what happened?"

Josh is not a good liar; he's like Becky that way. You can see it in their eyes -- too many scenarios whirl around their heads. For them lying is like trying to pick a good peach. "Nothing," Josh says.

"Then how'd it clog?"

"I'm sorry," he says.

"No, don't worry about it. I'm just curious."

"I don't know."

"Well," I say. And we both stand there. I feel like we're flushing his soon-to-be-dead goldfish down the toilet, saying a few words before Raphael and Leonardo swirl away to the great beyond. "Well," I say again, and I reach over and push down the metal handle.

Josh looks up at me.

"It's a test," I explain.

The water rises with incredible speed. I think of those sub movies when a depth charge hits its mark and men rush for the closing hatch. Josh steps back as the water swells over the side -- it's almost lovely -- and spreads

across the floor. A stray Q-tip floats by. Flotsam or jetsam? I never can remember which is which.

"Oh," Josh says.

"I guess it's still clogged."

He nods.

"Well, Sport," I say, "why don't you hustle downstairs and get us a mop." Josh turns and scoots down the hall. Fresh footprints appear on the rug. I survey the scene then reach over and grab the plunger from the corner. There is something satisfying about a plunger, something constant -- that after all these years of evolution, of technology, the plunger has stayed the same, has retained its simple design of slim wooden rod pushed into rubber suction cup. You buy one plunger and it will last you your entire life; it will, in fact, outlast you. Those are things you don't think about in a hardware store.

I slowly lower the plunger into the top-full toilet, but no matter how slow I go, the displaced water overflows and makes more of a mess on the bathroom floor. I position the plunger over the suck hole -- I don't know what you call it but it looks like a heel stamped into the porcelain -- and I start to pump in a poking motion, the kind of motion you use to bring a lame fire back to life. The water churns. It sounds like someone is running through mud. I give it about six good thrusts, stop for a second, then give it four more thrusts. There is no release of whatever it is that's caught down there. "Jesus," I say. And then I do something really stupid, I flush the toilet again.

The water rises. I slam shut the toilet seat and sit on the shag cozy.

While I'm waiting for Josh, I notice a bulge underneath the drenched bath mat. I lift up a corner and find this book that my brother Bruce gave me for my birthday. It's a bizarre book filled with medical photographs from late in the last century. When I got it in the mail Becky shook her head and said, "Typical." Bruce lives in Virginia, and during the summer weekends he reenacts Civil War battles. He really looks the part, long beard, bad teeth, and he has the rebel yell down pat. "It's our history," he always tells me, and every Saturday he gets killed in the first wave of the first battle of Bull Run. Poor Josh is very scared of him -- I don't blame him -- and I tell him that if his grandfather were alive today, he'd be just like Uncle Bruce. So I start to leaf through this book. The pages are wet and some of them tear, but the pictures are still incredible. Civil war veterans, young guys, barely in their twenties, coldly display their amputations, their stumps, and the awful infections that sometimes resulted. Their eyes are so proud, unflinching; I can almost hear them say, *Look at this shit*. And then there are other horrendous photographs of tumors run amuck, of dermatolysis, of elephantiasis, of people savaged by their own bodies. Some of it is hard to take, and sitting there I can't believe my Josh looks at this stuff. I come across one picture that's earmarked. It's titled *Girl With Large Foot Jumping Rope*, and it's a picture of precisely that. This bonneted girl, a very normal looking kid, wears a lovely dress which has an intricate collar and a pinned rose. She could've

been going to church. In her raised hands she holds a jump rope. But something is very wrong with her foot, her left foot; it's huge, about six times the size of her other foot. A special boot -- it looks like a prizewinning eggplant -- has been crafted by some miracle cobbler. And she stands there, ready to jump rope even though you know there's no way she's going to be able to do it with that foot of hers, and her face, a sweet face with close-cropped bangs, looks at you with slightly arched eyebrows. It's sad, but it's beyond sad; it's so sad it seems to slip into the hopeful.

"You tired, Dad?"

I lift my head and look over and see Josh. He stands there holding the mop tight across his chest like it's an old rifle.

"Tired?"

"Yeah."

"No." I get up and put the book back down on the toilet seat. Water has seeped through my shoes and my socks are now wet. I want to ask Josh about the book, but I don't. "No," I tell him, "I'm fine."

Then Josh breaks down again -- it's like his face is made of clay, the way it can crease and sag and fall apart -- and while he sobs he tries to talk. It sounds Arabic. "It's all right, Josh." I take him in my arms; we must look pinned together by that mop.

I make out a word. "Leaking," he says.

"What?"

"It's leaking downstairs."

I take the mop, lean it against the wall, and carry Josh downstairs. "What was it you flushed down the toilet?" I ask him.

"Nothing," and then he adds, "I swear, Daddy."

We walk into the living room and Josh points towards the back wall. There is a dark stain on the carpet. I look up and see a slight seam that the water works along. It drips about every fifteen seconds. "Oops," I say. The two of us stand below it. With Josh in my arms, I feel like I'm showing him the moon for the first time. Josh reaches up and touches the ceiling. Water slides down his finger. "We're making a mess," I say. Josh presses his palm against the ceiling. "That's dirty water," I tell him, and we go into the kitchen and grab a bucket from the closet.

Josh sits on the sink and watches me mop up the bathroom floor. His head rests against the medicine cabinet mirror; it makes him look like a Siamese twin. That'd be a tough way to go through life, especially if you had to share a skull. But today they can separate you; they can fix you, but I wonder if you'd look at your brother or your sister and try to see where you once fit -- kneecap to kneecap, spine to spine -- if to you your body was nothing but a piece of a puzzle.

I have to wring out the mop with my hands. "Ugh," I say. When I turn around to soak up some more water, the yellow handle knocks over some shampoo. "I'm a spaz," I say.

"A spaz?" Josh has his toothbrush in his mouth even though he's not

brushing his teeth.

"Someone who's uncoordinated, clumsy."

"Oh."

I finish mopping the floor, then I clean the bathtub by running the shower for a bit. "Now the toilet," I say. I turn to Josh. "What's in here?"

"Nothing."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"You sure?"

"Uhuh."

I let him get away with lying. I guess it doesn't matter. He seems to be calm at this moment and I don't want to spoil it; I don't want to spoil anything. I pick him up -- he splits from the mirror -- and I tell him to go downstairs and watch tv. "The afternoon is the good time, Sport," I tell him, "when all the best shows are on."

I pick up the book from the toilet and rest it in the curve of the sink, then I grab the plunger and lift up the seat cover. I'm determined to clear whatever's down there.

I hear that sound again, the sound of the person running through mud. He's running faster now because something is chasing him, and it scares the shit out of him. The person glances back. He can't see a thing, but he knows it's close behind. The man loses one shoe, then another, then he

trips and falls but quickly gets back up. The mud starts to dry and cake on his skin. It's slowing him down.

I begin to sweat all over -- I'm in pitiful shape -- and my shirt sticks to my back. So much water everywhere. But my adrenaline is really moving. I look over toward the doorway and see Becky. She's holding Josh's hand. They both watch me, and I smile. I must look crazy, the way I'm trying to churn this water into something, anything, but I don't stop.