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SOFTLY AND TENDERLY

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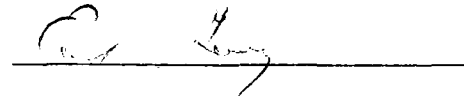
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Master of Fine Arts

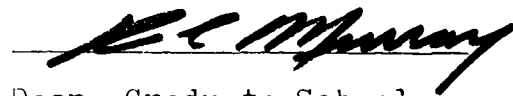
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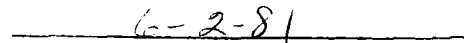
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SOFTLY AND TENDERLY

My mother tells me, from reading the paper, that Nicko Deems has been killed. I keep thinking about last year's revival and Nicko sitting in the pew in front of me, both of us wondering if we needed to get saved or not. He was nineteen and he wore his uniform and he knew he was going over there pretty soon. I was eight and a coward, but I'd decided to do whatever Nicko did about getting saved. My sister Carol Ann was playing the piano every night for the revival, looking over her shoulder now and then to smile at Nicko. Now Carol Ann's moping around the house, crying over Nicko because he's dead.

I don't play the piano anymore. My mother gave up on me last year when I couldn't get the hang of the Lone Ranger's theme song. I had that song for my lesson five straight weeks and finally my mother said to forget it. She was tired of wasting her money. I guess I'm just not musical. Carol Ann can play almost anything. She goes to high school in town and she can play all the

hymns except maybe some with a lot of flats or sharps. And my other sister Lena can play, too. Lena's only a year and a half older than me but she's always been at least three years ahead of me at the piano, playing stuff like "Clair de Lune". She got to go straight home from school every afternoon and practice her lesson for an hour. If it hadn't been for the time I set the garage on fire, which wasn't really such a big thing cause it's not really a garage, it's just a carport, I could have gone home right after school, too. Maybe if I could have practiced more I would have made it at the piano. But my mother figured I was too young to be on my own like that so I had to ride the number three school bus out to the country every day, all the way out to Eric Meling's house. My mother has a job out there working for Mr. Meling who has about a thousand acres of oranges and his own nursery where he raises trees from seeds and buds them when they get big enough. My mother works in his nursery. I was supposed to go out there after school so she could keep an eye on me.

Eric is in the same grade with me. Last year he was the biggest second grader in the whole school, bigger than half the third graders, even bigger than one kid in the fifth grade, Dewey Patterson, who has a gland problem. Eric also had awful crooked teeth and it was

hard to understand him whenever he talked. He got mad when you couldn't understand him right away and for just about nothing he'd slug you in the stomach or knock you down on the black top. I always tried hard to understand Eric. I even faked it sometimes.

I thought Eric and I were friends, at least as good of friends as you could be with Eric Meling. So I was pretty surprised the third day I rode the bus. I'd barely got off at his house when he pulled me off the road and started beating the crap out of me behind an orange tree. I hadn't done anything to make him mad and there he was riding me like I was a horse, pulling on my t shirt and kicking me in the ribs with his tennis shoes.

At home that night I couldn't stop thinking about the way he beat me up. I was supposed to be practicing the piano. I was working on the Lone Ranger's theme song for the second week and I had a lesson on Saturday. But my heart just wasn't in it. It wasn't the first time I ever got beat up, not by a long shot. I guess I was getting tired of it.

"You're supposed to practice your lesson," Lena said. Lena's the clumsiest girl I ever saw. She wears big glasses and she thinks God sent her a little brother just so she could have someone to boss. I heard her

praying one night, 'Thank you God for Buddy, though he's such a trial to me sometimes.' My mom and Carol Ann were in the kitchen peeling potatoes.

"You're not supposed to twirl your baton in the house," I told Lena. She just kept right on twirling with this dreamy look on her face like she was thinking about marching in the Christmas parade or maybe in a halftime show at the high school. I saw those majorettes at the football game, wearing white boots and swim suits. They looked all right.

"I can't play," I told Lena, I hurt my hand." And that was the God's truth. When Eric Meling knocked me down I'd shoved a big sticker in my palm. I'd been trying to dig it out all afternoon.

"I don't hear that piano," said my mother from the kitchen. So I started acting like I couldn't find my book and when I found it I knocked it back behind the piano and had to sweep it out of there with the broom. I was hoping my dad would come home soon. He hated the way I played the piano.

Lena started humming "Stars and Stripes Forever." She always liked to hum that or "Washington Post March" so she could twirl her baton better.

"I can't practice if she's going to hum," I said. I was half way off the bench before my mother started

hollering.

"Buddy!"

I thought about knocking the music book off the rack again but I could see I better not use that one anymore for a while. My mother was watching me pretty hard. She went over to the big drawer by the sink and started banging around in there after that pancake turner, the one she always hits me with.

Even with my mother coming after me I couldn't do justice to the Lone Ranger until I got that thorn out of my palm. The thing felt like it was six inches long and I expected to see it poke out between my knuckles at any minute. I just managed to get the end of it between my teeth and pull it out. I didn't know what to do with it then. I didn't want my mother to see it and ask a lot of questions, so I opened up the Baptist Hymnal and dropped that thorn down in the middle of "Amazing Grace". I bent over the keyboard then and waited for my mother to kill me.

All of a sudden there was a big crash and the sound of glass falling all over the living room. My mother just stood there with her eyes closed. We both had heard that sound before.

"I didn't mean to," and old Lena started to blubber, holding her baton in one hand, looking at what's left

of the overhead light fixture all over the floor.

"You're supposed to twirl outside," I told her. I guess I shouldn't have said anything. My mother got me good with the pancake turner. I let out a yell and my book fell off the piano again and Lena started crying for real, hopping around on one foot cause there was glass in the other.

About that time the front door opened and in came my father, looking like he wished he'd worked late again. Ray-gun, our dog, was the first one to greet him.

That night was the first night we went to the revival. My mom was saying we should have gone to the revival sooner, being as how it was only a one week revival and not a two week like the year before. And my dad saying one week was plenty for him. I was glad I didn't have to go before that night cause they were sure to have a youth choir and I didn't want to get stuck in that. If they'd tried to get me into that I was going to tell them 'I sure would like to but I missed the first three nights and I don't know the songs. I don't want to hold the rest back.' I practiced saying that a few times to myself in the car on the way to the

church.

My mom kept checking the rear view mirror to make sure that Carol Ann made it to the revival. She was riding with Nicko Deems in his pickup. Nicko had been coming around our house for about a year, I guess, ever since Carol Ann started wearing short skirts and being so hateful in the morning. I liked Nicko pretty much. He used to give me money to go for a coke. But one night my mom thought she smelled beer on Nicko's breath and she asked my dad to have a talk with him. My dad refused. He liked Nicko, too.

We got to the church without losing Nicko and Carol Ann. I never figured we would lose them, we only lived four blocks from the church. Before we went inside I read the title of the sermon, "The Blood of the Lamb," on the little sign in the church yard. I had been hoping they might not have a sermon, just show slides like they did sometimes of Lottie Moon - Missionary to China, or the Sunnyview Boy's Home. But no such luck. It looked to me like a long night.

Carol Ann went up front to play the piano, leaving Nicko to sit there by himself. He always sat straight as a board and all the old ladies of the church would eyeball him and whisper to each other. All except for

Grandma Roberts who just looked the other way while she fished a hanky out of her purse. We sang four hymns and they took the offering. I noticed Nicko put a dollar in the plate. Once I got a whipping for taking some money out of the plate. Lena told on me.

The visiting preacher was a thin man with a raspy voice like he needed to cough if he just would, and boy he could preach. He started telling all about Jesus dying on the cross, the nails in his hands and the nails in his feet and the crown of thorns on his forehead. Pretty soon that sticker in my hand didn't seem like such a big thing. That preacher had a way of making me feel awful, like I was the one who did all those things to Jesus. He told about the soldier sticking a sword into Jesus' side and all the blood and water running out. That's when I saw Nicko was starting to sweat. Nicko was a big man, taller than my dad, and when he started to sweat and shiver I started to feel even worse.

That preacher wasn't one of those long-winded preachers, I'll say that for him. He preached til nine o'clock and then he asked Carol Ann to come play the piano so we could sing the invitation. While she played the first few chords to warm up, the preacher asked how many of us were sorry for making Jesus suffer, and I started to raise my hand. Then I saw it wasn't a question you were

supposed to answer like that. The preacher said if we were sorry, why, to come down and be saved.

We started singing "Just As I Am" and I never felt so terrible in all my life. I was about to go down the aisle when I thought to look at Nicko. He was standing there, like he was at attention, not bothering to read the words out of the hymnal. The sweat stood out on his forehead. I told myself I'd get saved if Nicko did.

Pretty soon the hymn was over and Nicko went out of the church quick and waited for Carol Ann in his pickup.

I had more friends in school last year than just Eric Meling and I decided I wasn't going to hang out with Eric anymore. I spent most of the next morning talking to Dexter Patton and Rudy Valendez. Rudy's folks worked with my mom and Eric said they were wet-backs, but my mom said she never saw anyone who worked as hard as Mr. Valendez.

Soon as I started ignoring Eric he came around acting like we were best friends. He didn't exactly say he was sorry but he let me use his baseball mitt and he gave me an Abba-Zabba out of his lunch. When it came time to ride the bus home he even saved me a seat. I was keeping up my guard but I sat next to him. I couldn't

see any way to avoid it.

"Do you cuss?" Eric asked. The bus had just started up and I was looking out of the window at all the orange trees. That's about all anybody grows in our county. There's money in oranges. Eric's father built a new house last year.

"Cuss?" I said, trying to think fast. I was afraid to say yes and afraid to say no. I didn't know as many cuss words as Eric did.

"Not when my mother's around," I told him. He got out his ball glove and began to pound it, trying to make a pocket. He was the only kid in school with a first baseman's glove.

"You go to church?" he asked.

I didn't know what to say. I've got this pin at home that says I went to church every Sunday for two years and never missed. I wear it on my sport coat. After getting the pin I did miss one Sunday to go fishing with Nicko. It was just before he went over there and my dad said I could go. I still wear the pin. We didn't catch any fish.

I knew better than to admit to Eric how often I went to church. He'd call me something like a choir-boy or worse, the way he called Marvin Wallace a morphadite because Marvin's parents were Jehovah's Witnesses. Still,

I did go to church all those Sundays and just the night before I'd been feeling bad about helping to crucify Jesus. It's one thing to lie about practicing the piano when your mother's at the grocery store. It's something else to lie about going to church.

"Sometimes," I said, trying to make my voice sound low and rough the way Nicko's did.

"We used to go," said Eric, pounding his mitt.
"When I was a kid."

When the bus stopped at Eric's house, we bailed out and crossed the road. I felt like running but I didn't. Eric was faster than me. It wasn't until I heard the bus start up again that I thought to say something to Mr. Mullins the bus driver. He was an old man with white hair but he was bigger than Eric.

"You want to fight?" Eric asked.

I was trying to think of an answer when Eric landed one square on my jaw. I fell down in the dirt and decided the best thing to do was just to lay there and wait for Eric to go away.

When I got home that evening I must have surprised my mother by going straight to the piano and pounding away at the Lone Ranger for a half hour without once

trying to sneak away or knock my music book off the rack.

I was thinking I finally had Eric Meling figured out. He was a Philistine.

I learned all about Philistines in Sunday School. That's one of my favorite parts of the Bible, that and the time Joshua blew his trumpet so hard the walls caved in around this city. My mother said she'd buy me a trumpet if I'd ever make any progress at the piano.

One time Samson killed about a million Philistines and all he used was the jaw bone of an ass. Ass is a word that's in the Bible. I used to wonder why Samson used a thing like that to kill Philistines. Of course, they didn't have guns in those days, or good knives.

While I played the piano, Lena hung over my dad's recliner, staring at the side of my face. She'd had her baton put away again after breaking the lights. It wasn't the first time.

"What happened to you?" she wanted to know. My mother was frying a chicken, trying to listen to something mushy that Carol Ann said Nicko Deems said. Though I knew Nicko never said anything that stupid in all his life.

"What do you mean?" I said to Lena.

"Looks like somebody clobbered you." She stuck a new piece of Juicy Fruit into her mouth. I don't

know where she gets the money for candy, or where she keeps it. I looked in her drawer once.

"Who did it?" she asked.

"Eric Meling."

"Why? What did you do?"

"Nothing." And that was the God's truth. I hadn't done anything. I wished Lena would go away. I could tell the way my stomach started to shake that I was about to start crying. Somehow, getting beat up's not as bad as thinking about it afterward. Pretty soon I couldn't tell the white keys from the black ones. The piano sounded worse than ever.

"That's enough for today," my mom said from the kitchen. She sounded tired.

"Meling, huh," said Lena. She started rolling her eyes and hanging even further over the back of the chair like she was going to tell me something. What, I never heard, because the recliner unfolded and Lena went flying into the coffee table, knocking over all of Carol Ann's books, my dad's Bible, and the big bowl of plastic fruit my mom always keeps there.

My mother came out of the kitchen with her pancake turner.

"What's going on here?" she wanted to know. Lena started stacking Carol Ann's books back like they were

and gathering up all the plastic grapes and apples. I could hear my dad's truck in the driveway and here came Ray-gun flying through the living room. He barely missed getting whipped himself with the pancake turner.

Lena got the recliner back to its normal position and started snapping her gum.

"Eric Meling," she said.

"Yes," I told her. "That Philistine."

That night we went to the revival again and we were almost late because Nicko didn't show up until the last minute and Carol Ann refused to ride in the car with us saying Nicko had promised to come take her.

"Well, I hope he comes," said my mother. "A lot of folks are praying for that boy, you know."

"Oh mother," said Carol Ann, turning red. But I knew she was praying for Nicko, too.

We all made it into the church just before the doxology. and I noticed that Carol Ann wasn't mad at Nicko by the time they got to church. Ruby Johnson was sitting at the piano and she had to get up and let Carol Ann take her place because everyone knows Ruby Johnson can't play anything like Carol Ann. Sometimes Ruby just fakes it with her left hand.

I looked in the bulletin and saw the preacher was going to preach on "The Wages of Sin." I didn't want to think about it. So I watched Nicko sitting in front of me, studying the baptismal behind the preacher. There's this picture painted right on the wall back there of a lake with two mountains. When I look at it now, it makes me think about the time me and Nicko went fishing.

After we sang the "Old Rugged Cross," and "The Lily of the Valley," they took the offering and Nicko put another dollar in the plate. Then we sang "Love Lifted Me" and the youth choir sang a song about heaven. I kept hunched over, drawing battleships and cannons on my bulletin, hoping no one would notice I wasn't singing in the youth choir.

Then that preacher started in about "The Wages of Sin." You had to give it to him. He knew his Bible. He kept talking about the last judgement and the firey furnace and never having a drink of water. And right at the end he stopped and prayed for the lost souls in that church. He had Carol Ann come and play the piano real soft and everyone was supposed to close their eyes and look into their own heart. I raised my head and looked at that preacher and he was staring right at Nicko and Nicko was staring right back, not even pretending to pray.

We sang the invitation, "Why Not Tonight," and I saw Carol Ann look at Nicko and smile kind of sad, but Nicko wouldn't look back. He just stared at the painting in the baptismal like he knew there were fish in there. We didn't get saved that night either.

The next morning I thought about telling my mother I was too sick to go to school. I'd had about all of Eric Meling's friendship I could stand for one week. But like I said, I wasn't old enough to stay home alone. I'd have to spend the day with one of the old ladies of the church who would hover over me all day long. One time I did fake being sick and spent the day with Mrs. Tollison. A funny thing happened. First she went to the store and brought back chicken soup and saltine crackers and two big bottles of Seven-up. I ate most of that about nine o'clock while I was watching "Jeopardy" on tv. Then she gave me some aspirin and asked me would I like some Pepto Bismol. I said yes, thinking Pepto Bismol looked like it would taste good. Sort of like Strawberry Quick. Then, just before "Password" came on, she brought this vaporizer out of the closet and filled it full of hot water and a big gob of Vapo-rub. She told me to breathe deeply, and I'd be feeling better in no time.

God if I didn't get sick. My mother had to take off three days from work to look after me.

So I didn't fake it that morning. I forced myself to get dressed and went in and ate a bowl of cereal. The guy pole-vaulting on the cereal box looked kind of like Nicko except he was skinnier than Nicko. Lena told me to hurry up or I'd be late. She'd found her baton and said she'd give me a dime if I'd sneak it out the back door for her.

We walked to school together. She was chewing gum and twirling her baton. Every now and then she'd throw it way up into the sky. She could throw it pretty good but she didn't really have much idea where it would land. It was dangerous being around her so I asked her for my dime and went on ahead of her to school.

It wasn't a very exciting day for a Friday. We had a spelling bee. I was a pretty good speller last year but I misspelled "honest" and I went out early. Eric Meling almost won the contest because of his crooked teeth. The teacher couldn't understand him either, and she always gave him the benefit of the doubt. The contest finally came down to Eric and Kathy Uota, this Japanese girl who could spell just about anything. The teacher told Eric to spell "friend" and he couldn't. Marvin Wallace, who sat right behind me, gave a little laugh

from inside his desk and Eric thought it was me. When the teacher sent everyone out to recess, I stayed inside and cleaned the chalk boards.

I was thinking about the talk I'd had with Nicko the night before, after we all got home from church. Carol Ann was mad at him because he wouldn't get saved, so I got a chance to talk to him without anyone asking me why I didn't go out and play on the highway.

"Nicko," I said, "what's a good way to beat up somebody who's bigger and stronger and meaner than you are?"

He laughed and said I should try to settle things without fighting, like I was taught in Sunday School. I told him yes, but things never work out like they say in Sunday School. He said I was right about that and then he asked me if I wanted to go fishing with him again sometime soon. He left without saying goodnight to Carol Ann.

I cleaned all the chalk boards in the classroom then went and beat the erasers in the sink. I could see Eric outside the window waiting for me to come out. I started scrubbing the sink with cleanser then and my teacher wanted to know if I felt ok and I told her yes, only I'd noticed for a long time that sink needed to be cleaned. She looked out the window at Eric Meling pounding his baseball mitt and she smiled at me. She

went back to grading papers.

I prayed then. I prayed that God would protect me from Eric Meling. He could make Eric miss the bus. I could just see Eric running to the bus, the bus already moving, Eric getting flattened underneath the back wheels when Mr. Mullins shifted gears and drove out the gate. But I didn't know for sure if my prayer would work. Two nights in a row I'd gone to that revival and I hadn't gotten saved. God keeps track of things like that.

That afternoon when Mr. Mullins brought the bus out of the bus garage I was the first one to get on. I slid way down in my seat and held my breath and crossed my fingers and watched the bus fill up. I kept hoping someone would sit next to me before Eric got there. Rudy Valendez ran right by without even seeing me. Kathy Uota went by, smiling from winning the spelling bee. I was still praying when Mr. Mullins started the bus and I said to myself that praying was really something and I'd have to do it more often.

Then I looked out the window and here came Eric running for the bus with his ball glove tucked under one arm like a football.

"Go," I shouted to Mr. Mullins but he just sat there staring through the windshield while Eric climbed the stairs and sat down next to me. Lena was the last one

to get on the bus. She went all the way to the back seat where she could twirl her baton without hitting anyone, where I couldn't even ask her why she was riding the bus.

Eric didn't say anything to me. He worked on his glove and whistled through his crooked teeth. I thought about getting off the bus at the first stop sign and running home. But I knew I couldn't get away with it. Mr. Mullins knew everyone's stop and he'd never let you get off anywhere else without a note.

When the bus pulled up at Eric's house, I pretended I was asleep.

"Come on," said Eric. I sat there as long as I could. Lena passed me in the aisle. I could see Mr. Mullins looking at me in his big mirror. I smiled at Mr. Mullins and he frowned at me and I got off.

Lena was walking down the road, twirling her baton and throwing it into the air, squinting at it and either running after it or running to get out of the way. I decided to duck into the orange grove and run all the way to the nursery through the trees. I barely made it into the grove when I ran right into Eric on his bicycle. He'd gone around the corner to his house to get it and was riding through the trees to cut me off. His bicycle was red with chrome fenders and it had a raccoon's tail

hanging from the handle bars. I'd bet you a dollar Eric Meling cut off that raccoon's tail himself.

"Can you steer?" asked Eric.

I don't know how to ride a bicycle yet. I was going to ask Nicko to teach me but then he went away.

"I'll pump you," said Eric. He had two big dirt clods, one in each hand, and I could see another one sticking out of his pocket. I got up on the handle bars and Eric pedaled, steering with the tips of his fingers.

"When we get close to your sister," he said, "you have to steer so I can hit her with these."

"I can't steer," I told him. I didn't want to be a partner to any of Eric's meanness. But I was glad those rocks weren't meant for me and I couldn't just refuse to steer his bike. I wasn't that brave. I wasn't Samson or the Lone Ranger. I wasn't Nicko Deems.

"You have to," said Eric.

"But I can't."

"Steer!" Eric took his hands all the way off the handle bars and at first we went in a straight line. Then I guess I leaned too hard to the right cause we started to go off the road towards this big orange tree. I tried to lean the other way and there we were going back across the road, Eric hanging one way off the bike, me hanging the other. Eric started to cuss.

"Stop it, you God damn homophiliac," said Eric, getting his feet on the ground. He spit on the road. "Buddy, you must have veneral disease the way you steer a bike."

He made me get off his bike, made me hold it for him. Lena was watching from the side of the road. She could see right away what he had in mind, the way he crossed the road towards her with a dirt clod in either hand. I thought sure she'd turn and run. Instead she took the gum out of her mouth and stuck it on the end of her baton.

"You get out of here, Eric Meling," she said. I wanted to go help her but I couldn't. All of a sudden I just couldn't move.

Eric threw all three of those dirt clods at her. He missed twice which surprised me. He'd never have missed, throwing at me. He nailed her the third time. Then Lena started swinging her baton back and forth and she took out after Eric, calling him a whole lot of bad things I didn't even think she knew how to say. I could hardly believe it. She started beating Eric over the head with the fat end of her baton and Eric started hollering, "Ow, ow, stop it you . . ." and it was like for once he couldn't think of any words. He took off through the orchard, forgetting all about his

bike. Lena just stood there. She was crying. She always cries when she's mad.

"You better come on," she said after a minute. I started to unfold the kick stand on Eric's bike to prop it up beside the road. But then I looked around and Eric wasn't watching so I pushed his damn bike over on its side right on top of the white line and left it there. When I caught up to Lena I could see that her baton had a big dent in it. She couldn't twirl it anymore, and that was my fault, too.

We got home late that night, too late for me to practice my piano. My lesson was the next morning and I knew I was going to catch it when Mrs. Nickels found out I still couldn't play the Lone Ranger. But we just barely had time to eat dinner and get ready for the revival. Carol Ann was already dressed when the rest of us got home and she sat there at the piano and played "In the Garden" real quiet. She was looking out the window, wondering if Nicko Deems was going to come and take her to the revival or if she'd have to ride in the car with the rest of us.

We were all getting in the car and I could see Carol Ann was mad enough to cry when Nicko pulled up in his

truck. Nicko smiled at me and messed up my hair and Carol Ann said, "Sometimes I think you really come over here to see Buddy," but she wasn't mad at him for long.

When we got to the church the first thing I did was check and see what the sermon was going to be on. "Ye must be born again," it said on the little sign in the church yard. Nicko stood there reading that sign for a long time, smoking a cigarette and listening to Carol Ann play the piano inside. I stayed outside with him but it was like I wasn't really there. When we heard the first chords of the Doxology we went inside.

That preacher and Nicko started right in staring at each other before we were even done singing the hymns. The harder that preacher stared at Nicko, the taller Nicko stood when we sang. When we were supposed to be praying I peeked at the preacher and it was just like I thought. He was staring at Nicko during the prayers, too. Nicko stared back for a while. Then he started cleaning his fingernails with a little pocket knife he always carried with him. The day we went fishing he gave me a knife just like his but my mom took it away from me. She put it up until I'm older.

When they took the offering Nicko put another dollar in the plate. I put the dime in that Lena gave that

morning. We sang "Dearest Lord Jesus" and "Blest Be the Tie" and there was some special music by Elda Johnson with Ruby playing for her. Elda sang "His eye is on the Sparrow," and I thought that was funny because Elda kind of reminds me of a sparrow the way she's so little and can sing real high like a bird.

Then that preacher started in. "What must I do to be saved?" he shouted. "Ye must be born again!" I started drawing ships as fast as I could all over my bulletin. As soon as I filled that up I started in on Lena's bulletin. The preacher told us all to imagine the world would end tomorrow morning at six A.M. "Are you right with Jesus?" he asked. I knew I wasn't. I knew I was the blackest sinner that ever lived. That preacher went on and on and I thought about all the times I'd cheated and said bad words and stole money out of the offering plate and picked up the other phone to listen in while Carol Ann was talking to Nicko.

I realized I'd better get saved cause if the world ended at six A.M. tomorrow I'd go straight to hell while Lena and Carol Ann and my mom and dad and Grandma Roberts and Elda Johnson all went to heaven. I know Nicko was thinking hard, too. He put his knife away and folded his arms and stared down at his feet. When that preacher asked Carol Ann to come play the invitation and asked us

all to pray, I told God that all I needed was for Nicko Deems to get saved and I'd be right there behind him.

We started singing then. "Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling." The preacher asked everyone to sing real soft, and while we were singing he kept on pleading with the sinners in the church. "See by the the portals he's waiting and watching," and Carol Ann playing better than I'd ever heard her play before. She moved her right hand up an octave and played the high notes pure and clean and sweet.

I was watching Nicko edge towards the aisle. He was sitting near the right hand aisle and I was closer to the left. Every inch he moved towards his aisle, I moved an inch towards mine.

"Come home," the song said just as sweet as could be. "Come home. If you are weary, come home."

Then that preacher started to sing and when he sang there wasn't any of that raspiness in his voice. He knew all the words without looking at the book and as he sang with his eyes closed, I saw Nicko slip out into the aisle on his side and I said praise the Lord and I got out into the aisle on my side and headed for that preacher.

When I got down in front, Nicko wasn't there. I looked where he had been sitting and then I saw him

slipping out the double doors at the back of the church. That preacher was standing by the pulpit, holding out his hand to me, but he was staring at the back door, too. The back of Carol Ann's neck was turning dark red and she wasn't playing very well. I don't know what got into me. I side-stepped that preacher and ran down the aisle out the door after Nicko. I just saw the tail-lights of his pickup leave the parking lot as I ran down the steps. Inside the church I could hear folks still singing even though Carol Ann had quit playing. Then pretty soon the voices stopped, too, and all I could hear was the wind machines running in the orchards somewhere and I knew it was supposed to freeze.

That was last year's revival when I was still playing the piano and Eric Meling got beat up by my sister and Nicko Deems used to come over to the house almost every night. I never did get saved, but there's a new revival starting up Monday and this year, without Nicko around, I probably will. My mother says Nicko is dead and I guess it must be true. She would never lie about anything like that. A lot of things are different from last year. Eric Meling's father had a heart attack and Eric got braces and Ray-gun got hit by a car. Lena may

have to have an operation on her eyes.

I liked it last year having Nicko around all the time. I thought once he got out of the army he'd come back and see us. Just say hi. But we never heard anything from him. I know they have chaplains in the army, who are kind of like preachers and kind of like regular guys. And I wonder sometimes if Nicko Deems maybe got saved over there before he died. I don't know if they have revivals over there but it wouldn't have to be a revival. You can get saved anywhere.

GOALIES

When I pulled myself out of the water, it was nearly dark and the temperature was falling. The fog had rolled in through the golden gate, across the bay and all the way up University Avenue, silently surrounding the gym and the pool. The cement deck was cold enough to burn my feet as I ran into the locker room.

"You looked good out there, Skip." Belfanti leaned against the shower wall, hot water drumming over his muscular shoulders and down his back. Belfanti had stretch marks on his biceps from hours in the weight room. "You doing something different?"

"Yeah," I said, pulling off my suit and slipping under the next shower head. "Charly showed me a couple of things." I could feel the muscles in my lower back relax as the water played down my spine.

"You couldn't pick a better coach," said Belfanti. "He was a hell of a goalie."

Charly was six years older than I was, which seemed like a lot of years when I first met him. He was playing goalie in the first water polo game I ever saw, part of a summer tournament down in Visalia where I grew up, where Charly grew up before me. I couldn't believe the game I was seeing played. It was all fists and elbows and a round yellow ball passed low over the water. I didn't have to know much about water polo to know Charly was having a brilliant game, blocking three penalty shots in the second half, taking the last one squarely in his face. He shook it off, smiled when his coach came to the edge of the pool and asked if he were all right. But Charly didn't forget that shot, or the heavy-set fellow who had rifled the ball into his face, trying to beat him some way. During the closing seconds of the match, in heavy traffic down in front of the goal, Charly and the other fellow started in throwing punches, neither of them paying any attention to the referee's whistle or shouts from the bench. Both of them were thrown out of the game. But when Charly pulled himself out of the pool and walked across the pool deck, kind of cocky in that white suit back before anyone else was wearing a white suit, you couldn't help but be impressed.

He worked the rest of that summer as a lifeguard at the junior college, and after that tournament I made a point of swimming every day. It was Charly who en-

couraged me to become a goalie.

"You've got the reach," he told me, "your arms are already as long as mine." It was true. Charly wasn't a big man. I was only thirteen and I was already a couple of inches taller than he was. I was open to suggestion that summer. I was going to be a freshman in high school and I wanted to be good at something. The only thing I'd ever been any good at was swimming and playing the trombone, and that hadn't gotten me anywhere.

"You're not afraid, are you?"

"No," I told him, trying not to think about the way the ball had slammed into his face. That was about the only lie I ever told Charly.

"I'm going to teach you something," he told me the first summer we played together. It was just after Charly had finished his last season of college ball. I was sixteen. We were sitting in his VW in the Safeway parking lot, watching the cars cruise up and down Mooney Boulevard. It was late and the Safeway was closed. We sat there a lot that summer.

"Remember what I'm telling you," Charly said. We'd had the radio on and he turned it down.

"You'll have a workout some afternoon, along towards the end of a season. October." We were drinking beer, the first beer I'd ever tasted. It was so bitter it almost choked me.

"You'll be cold and tired, sitting in the goal just after the sun has gone down, trying to follow the ball. You'll want to take a leak so bad you can taste it, and coach will yell at you and somebody will take a shot that'll make your fingernails bleed. That's when you'll take a leak, right there in the pool cause you'll figure that workout's never going to end."

A carload of girls honked and waved from the lot of the car wash across the boulevard. Charly opened up another beer, ignoring them.

"Goalies are tough," Charly told me, his eyes closing halfway as he stared through the cracked windshield of his car. "Goalies aren't afraid. Goalies are quicker than normal human beings."

I finished dressing and walked out through the darkened gym. I thought about asking Belfanti if he wanted to go for a beer, but he'd already left by the time I got out of the shower. The fog had settled in thick. Fog made me feel all alone, even in the city. Fishing

my cap out of my jacket pocket, I pulled it down over my wet hair and headed for the Rat.

The street vendors had all gone in off of Telegraph, taking their candles and shiny rocks and pottery. Their absence left the avenue with an empty, spooky feeling in the fog. A copy of the Barb lay scattered half over a pile of loose stools left by someone's dog. It hurried me along, down the stairs, into the Rat.

Charly was behind the bar. He waved to me as he opened a Guinness and set a glass right side up where he knew I would sit.

"How'd it go?" he asked, digging in his tub of ice cubes under the bar. "Did you try it?"

"I did." I poured the Guinness into my glass, watching the heavy dark foam. Charly and I used to talk about going to Ireland just to drink Guinness. Real Guinness, Charly would say. "Keeping my hips high seems to help."

"I thought it would." Charly measured bourbon and water into a short glass and passed it across the bar. A tired looking woman sat there. She looked like a Kelly girl, temporary help, as she took the drink and swiveled on her stool to face me.

"You a goalie, too?" she asked, her eyes crinkling as she took a drag on her cigarette. She looked a little too thin to me, a few years too old for the Rat.

"Can't you tell?" Charly asked. "Look at those arms, that gleam in his eye, that crooked nose where the beast Svenson keeps smashing him with penalty shots." He went to the cooler after beer for a customer. The woman was laughing, her voice high and thin like a girl's.

"I'm Lydia," she said, "like the tatoed lady."

"What's that mean?" I asked.

"You know." She gave her stool a spin and began singing.

"Lydia oh Lydia
oh have you seen Lydia
oh Lydia the ta-
toed lady . . ."

She seemed disappointed I didn't know the song.

"Groucho Marx," she said.

"Beats me." I poured the rest of my beer into my glass, repeating her name to myself. I'd heard somewhere that's what you should do to remember someone's name. I didn't know why I would want to remember hers.

"What do you do?" I asked.

"Me?" She signalled Charly for another drink, then stubbed her cigarette out in an ash tray.

"I get drunk a lot." She lit another menthol, was careful to blow the smoke away from my red eyes. But the draft from the back door carried the smoke back into

my face.

"You want another, Skip?" asked Charly.

I slid off my stool, putting a dollar and change on the bar. "Gotta go."

"You going to Robbie's?"

I nodded.

"Getting pretty thick."

I forced myself to smile. I couldn't see what difference it made to Charly. I laid an extra dollar next to Lydia's glass.

"Buy the lady a drink," I said, "but first make her show you her tatoos."

Lydia stuck her tongue out at me in the mirror behind the bar.

I met Robbie in Professor Orgel's Shakespeare class.

"Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks!"

She laughed when Orgel repeated the lines from Lear, his voice growing big, filling the lecture hall. Shakespeare was Charly's idea.

"Goalies read Shakespeare," Charly pronounced one evening when I admitted I didn't know what courses to take. Charly was big on Shakespeare. But he never did warm to Robbie. After a couple of quarters of

Shakespeare, I found myself taking courses on Milton and Beowulf, even a sociology course on the emerging role of women in third world countries. Anything to be with Robbie.

I asked her once which of the plays she liked the best, thinking she would say Lear or maybe one of the comedies.

"Othello." She surprised me. "But Iago should have been a woman."

We made a habit of walking across campus together Thursday afternoons. We could hear black men playing congas in the plaza, their rhythms echoing against the walls and cobblestones and out into the street. Perhaps it was the drums, she said, that made her think of Othello.

"And yours?" she asked.

"Hamlet."

"Why?"

"Hamlet would have been a goalie," I told her. She laughed and reached out to take my arm, holding it close against her breast as we walked the rest of the way to her apartment.

"Why a goalie?"

I told her the litany that Charly had worked out for me.

"Goalies are tough."

Goalies aren't afraid.

Goalies are quicker than normal human beings."

"Goalies hear voices?" she asked. But she agreed to have dinner with me that night anyway, and later she made love to me on a broken down couch in the apartment she shared with a friend.

It seemed like the shooting drill would go on forever.

"Last one," I shouted. I felt my breath burning the back of my throat, my stomach slowly tightening into a ball of nausea. Kicking my tired legs, my legs, my kicking my tired kicking fucking legs rhythmically, I pulled my hips up high in the water, sculling shallowly with my hands. A line of players drifted at mid-pool, each man floating a yellow ball in front of him. Yellow balls on blue water. Tanned faces.

Jon Svenson drove on the goal. His body was long and lanky, like flexible two by fours as he moved through the water with powerful strokes.

Four yards out, Svenson dipped his head lightly into the water, then rared back, chest rising beneath him, water pouring off, calling for the yellow ball from Belfanti.

I rose to meet him, chest filling with air, legs driving, driving, tired. Blue water. Svenson looked away from me as he hurled the ball, tan ball, blue faces, and no idea where the ball might go, Svenson had no idea. Head shot! the words screaming inside of me, hands drifting in to cover my face, no, blue hands, tan sky, yellow goalie. The ball.

The ball bounced off the water into the upper corner of the goal, slapping the canvas, falling back to the water. Not a head shot. The ball hadn't come close to my head. But I had covered up.

"Nice shot, Jon," said Belfanti, as I slipped from the goal, placing my red burning face in the cool water before me. The freshman, Patching, swam into the goal and the drill continued. Svenson moved slowly back to mid-pool, backstroking casually, scowling at me through eyes too small for his face.

He knew then.

He knew I was afraid.

When I was seventeen Charly arranged for me to visit the University, take in a football game, meet the polo coach.

"Don't let this guy scare you," said Charly while

we walked through the gym. The entrance to the pool was in the back and we had to pass by the gymnastics room on our way. Short trim girls were bouncing across the floor mat and a Japanese fellow was dusting chalk all over his hands, staring blankly out the door.

Coach Cutino was a tall man with a thick mustache and a bronze head that was smoothly shaven. He was completely naked when we walked into his office.

"Hey, Charly," he greeted us and Charly introduced me to him. Cutino had just gotten out of the shower, was drying himself off. He had surgical scars on both knees, and when he turned around I saw another across the small of his back.

"You're a wreck, Cutino," said Charly, grinning.

"Still kick your ass," growled Cutino, pulling on the bottom half of a pair of sweats.

They talked. I stood around feeling nervous and foolish, admiring the trophies and pictures and a series of losing betting tickets from the race track over in San Leandro.

"I need goalies," said Cutino, fixing an eye on me. The way the other eye tended to drift frightened me. "I've got a good senior goalie now, and a couple of freshmen trying hard to flunk out of school."

"What about Weeks?" asked Charly. "I thought he was looking good."

"I think Weeks fell in love with the trainer," grumbled Cutino. "He's always in there for something. Chickenshit."

That afternoon, sitting on the sunny side of Memorial Stadium, I let Charly talk me into playing college ball. I guess there really hadn't ever been any doubt I would, not after the afternoon I saw Charly walk across a pool deck in a white suit.

"People are going to think you're a flake at first," said Charly, "just because you're a God damn goalie. Don't let that bother you. Goalies are tough."

"Good workout?" Charly asked. The Rat was filling up. Already the music from the juke box could barely be heard over the sound of shouting and laughter. The adjoining room, the one where alumni and businessmen ate too-large sandwiches for lunch, was packed with young men from the frat houses up on the hill, each one thinking he had the world's original hard-on. The girls would arrive soon, would sit in groups of three and keep Charly busy mixing drinks out of tequila and grenadine.

Lydia smiled from her bourbon ditch. "Hey, Chip."

"Skip," said Charly.

"That doesn't matter," said Lydia, drunk. "I'd know him anywhere. He plays goalie."

"Some days better than others," I said. Charly put a Guinness on the counter.

"Rough one?" Charly asked. I pretended I didn't hear him, wishing I hadn't come in. A short thick Tri Delt was standing on a chair, about to drink from a full pitcher of beer. He did the same trick every Thursday night for his short thick friends. He spilt a little of the beer down the front of his shirt.

Lydia moved over to sit next to me. Her breasts were hanging loose beneath a thin cotton blouse and she needed to do something about her makeup. I felt sorry for her, somebody's wierd sister.

Charly was watching me. His eyes, I noticed, were blue. A soft blue. I wondered why I had never noticed that before.

"Patching looked good today," I told him.

"He's young."

"He looked good."

"I don't know if he's tough enough," said Charly.

"I don't know if I'm tough enough."

Charly closed his eyes half way, tilting a pitcher underneath the tap and filling it slowly.

"What's eating you?"

"Nothing," I said. "Wait on your customers."

He started to say something but checked himself. He set the full pitcher up on the bar and began filling another.

"You don't look so tough to me," said Lydia. She laughed at her joke, spilling most of her drink onto the floor. She leaned back on her stool, a cigarette hanging from the corner of her mouth. Svenson and Belfanti came down the stairs into the Rat, Svenson's wide face a peculiar shade of red.

"I gotta go," I said.

"What's your hurry?" Charly poured another pitcher to the top with amber fluid.

"This place gets to me sometimes."

"Finish your beer," said Lydia.

"What's wrong with this place?" asked Charly.

"Too many Greeks."

"What's wrong with Greeks?" asked Lydia.

"They're assholes," said Charly.

"They're kids having fun," said Lydia.

"I don't want to argue." I wanted to leave.

Charly set up six schooners on the bar, arranging them in two triangles. "What is it Skip?" Charly asked, softly.

"Svenson," I told him. "Svenson thinks I'm afraid,

Charly."

"Svenson's a jerk," said Charly. "Svenson doesn't count."

The stairs were crowded as I shoved my way towards the door. Lydia was laughing behind me. Looking back, I saw her laughing at herself in the mirror.

"How come I never see your room mate around here?"

I'd brought a chinese dinner over to Robbie's from a little mom and pop cafe in Oakland. Robbie was picking the last grains of rice from the greasy paper carton with her fingers.

"She's got a class," she told me. "That's why I only let you come on Thursdays. We can be alone."

Her apartment was in an old building with steam heat and thin walls. I had dinner with her every Thursday night. She made me leave before ten, telling me I needed my sleep for Friday's game.

"What if I'm not willing to settle for Thursdays anymore?" I asked. It was a question I'd been wanting to ask all that fall. But it was as much my fault as hers that things were the way they were. I was out of town with the team almost every week end.

"Hamlet, you seem tense tonight." She had taken

"You like madrigals?" she asked.

"I don't know anything about it."

"You should," she said. But there was no sense of an accusation in her voice. Something wistful, instead.

"I don't know anything about a lot of things."

"Well, you know about Hamlet now," she said.

"Yes."

"And Grendel."

"Yes," I said, "not to mention women in Cuba."

"What else is there?" asked Robbie, her eyes laughing gently as she leaned over me. When she kissed me I could taste the onions from our dinner.

"I don't know. I'd like to find out."

"When?" she asked.

"I don't know. After water polo."

"After water polo," she repeated, trying to mimic my voice. "There's always water polo, isn't there?"

I turned the stereo up louder so that the Mexican couple that lived next door wouldn't hear the broken springs on the couch.

"Will you come to the game tomorrow?"

She tilted her head towards me, an earring flashing in the soft light. A turquoise earring. The color of water in spring.

"We'll see," she murmured, kissing me lightly.

Swimming easily across the pool, trying to loosen up my legs after the half time break, I was surprised I hadn't been taken out of the game. I was drifting, unable to concentrate. Patching was surprised I hadn't been pulled, too. I could see the disappointment on his face. He sat alone on the end of the bench, his hair bleached by the sun and the water until it had taken on a fine light note of green. Green like mine. Patching wanted to be me. I could almost have let him.

Belfanti controlled the ball on the swim off, lofting a long slow pass all the way back to me. I began directing the team, my team, calling out to them in a deep voice I only used for water polo. Svenson set up in the hole, raising his arm, frowning over his shoulder at his guard.

"Ball in!"

Svenson drove his shoulder into his guard, backing him up towards the far goal. The ball landed softly in front of him, an arm's length from his angry face. I listened for the whistle, the automatic foul. Nobody let Svenson control the ball in front of the goal. But the foul didn't come. Svenson smiled grimly, gripped

the ball in the palm of his hand. He shifted to his left as if for a sweep shot, then turned quickly and let fly a back hand with a broad whipping motion of his long right arm. The ball entered the goal, grazing the goalie's shoulder and his ear. The referee signaled the score with his flag and the scoreboard registered the point.

A cut opened slowly over the right eye of Svenson's stunned guard. The other coach was shouting at the ref, trying to stop the game. Time was called, the injured man helped from the pool. He was blinking back a mixture of blood and water, staining a white towel red.

Svenson floated on his back, spitting a long stream of water into the air from between his teeth. He hardly bothered to make it seem an accident. The referee stood at the pool's edge, frowning and biting at his whistle, wondering if he had blown the call.

At the far end of the pool, the ball was put into play again, passed, worked down gradually to mid-pool, passed. Two players worked a neat pick in front of our goal, leaving Belfanti caught in the middle, unsure which man to guard. The ball came smoothly to the man on my right, and I moved laterally, calling to Belfanti to take the other man.

The shot was hard, wide, ricocheting off the post and back into the field. I struggled to stay with the

ball, hips sinking, second shot coming. I felt the ball against my fingertips, just, then it slipped back into the mass of watery elbows. I whipped my legs, felt a sudden pain, pushed down with both hands. As my shoulders cleared the water the third shot came at my face, no time, it slammed into me, red sky purple water, and the ball flying across the deck, the referee trotting after it. The crowd stood, stamping rhythmically on the wooden bleachers.

I shook away the pain that had started behind my eyes. Taste of blood. I could ignore that. But something else was wrong. Something in my groin. I put my hand into my suit, rubbing my groin to the side of my shrunken penis. With each gentle kick of my right leg, the pain was growing. Something was torn, something inside. There was nothing to do.

"Cutino!" He looked at me curiously. The ref let the whistle fall from his mouth. Nothing to do but take myself out of the game.

I sat on the trainer's table, naked except for a short white towel over my lap. Under the towel I held a large chunk of ice, rubbing my injured groin in small circles.

"What the hell's that supposed to do?" Charly was standing next to the steel table, a deep frown on his face.

Belfanti looked in on his way up from the showers.

"You ok?" Belfanti asked.

"I guess."

"Hi Charly." Belfanti said. "Take it easy, huh?" He backed out of the trainer's room and I could hear Svenson laughing in Cutino's office.

"What was the final score?" I asked Charly.

"Seven Four."

"They didn't score off Patching?"

"He got hot."

I pulled the ice from under my towel and dropped it into the sink. "Was Robbie there?"

"I didn't see her." Charly handed me my clothes. "Buy you a beer?"

"Maybe later. I want to go to Robbie's for a while."

"Sure Skip." There was an edge in his voice I hadn't heard before. Not in all of our years together.

"I guess the season's over for me," I said. I wanted to say more. I wanted to say goalies were suckers and I wished I'd never learned to swim. The pain in my groin cut me off as I lifted my leg to pull on my pants.

From the sidewalk I saw the light in Robbie's apartment. I could just hear the music playing through an open window. Madrigals. I pictured her sitting on the couch, her legs crossed Indian style with a big book in her lap. Maybe we'd go out to eat and I could tell her about it. Her shadow passed from window to window as she left the kitchen.

I walked stiffly up the stairs, thinking about sex, wondering if my groin would still be cold when Robbie put her hand there. She might think that was funny. I knocked on her door, shifting my weight from foot to foot, trying to find the least painful position.

When she opened the door part way, she was surprised to see me.

"Hi." I smiled at her embarrassment. She was wearing a bathrobe, had her hair pinned on top of her head. The right side had fallen free against her neck. "Aren't you going to ask me in?"

"Just a minute," she said, looking over her shoulder, "my room mate's not dressed." A door shut inside the apartment.

I leaned my head against the wall out in the hallway,

Someone had left a message on the wall for a woman named Dorothy. 'Dear Dorothy, you think you're so hot . . .'

"I missed you at the game," I said.

"Who won?"

"We did." I couldn't read the rest of the message.

"I lost."

"Oh? Good."

I frowned at her, wondering why she didn't listen. She still hadn't invited me in. A familiar sound came from inside the apartment. The sound of someone pissing into a toilet. Pissing from a long way away. She was blushing at the sound.

"It's Friday," she said. "You don't come on Friday."

"Robbie," a man's voice came from inside the apartment, "Can't you ask your friend in?"

"It's Friday," she said again.

"It's ok," I said, "I just stopped by to say hi."

Suddenly I was back in Professor Orgel's classroom, watching a girl laugh at a quotation from Lear.

"It was nice of you," she said. "I'll see you soon."

"Sure Robbie."

"Thursday?" she asked softly.

I walked down the stairs, careful not to let her see me limp.

When I got to the Rat, the bar was crowded. Another bartender was working behind the bar, not Charly. The bartender wore a short red vest that Charly would never have worn. Charly was standing at the bar, a bottle of Guinness half empty in front of him.

"Let's have one for Skip," said Charly. The vested bartender set one up in front of me.

"I thought maybe you'd bring Robbie down for a beer or two."

"That's done, Charly."

"I'm sorry."

I found myself looking for Lydia's face in the mirror behind the bar. Her stool was taken up by a huge black man I'd seen before pumping weights in the gym.

"Where's Lydia?"

"She finally got picked up," said Charly.

I laughed half into my beer, sending some of the foam onto Charly's arm. Charly smiled and wiped the beer away. He put his arm around my shoulders.

"By who?" I asked.

"You'll never guess. Take a wild guess."

"Svenson," I said, trying not to laugh.

"You're close."

"Belfanti?"

"Put them together," said Charly.

"Svenson and Belfanti?" I set my glass down on the counter and laughed until I had to sit down.

"Lydia!" I waved at the bartender, asking for two more.

"Sorry about your girl," Charly said quietly.

"You already knew?"

"You know lots working here."

"I suppose," I said, drinking at my beer and wondering if I wanted to get drunk.

"You know what she told me once? Goalies hear voices."

Charly laughed. I found myself wondering about Lydia. I thought about her small breasts and the wrinkles around her eyes. I wondered if she could take care of herself.

"Will she be ok?"

"Who?" asked Charly.

"Lydia."

"She's kind of like a goalie," said Charly. "Have you forgotten? Goalies are tough." He waited for me to respond. "Come on, goalies are tough . . ."

I looked at him. His face was red and his eyes were full. Blue eyes the color of water in spring.

"Jesus Christ, Charly," I leaned over the bar and

looked into the mirror at our reflection. "I'm not a goalie. Can't you see, Charly? I'm not your fucking goalie."

I watched the beveled glass as Charly sat his beer down on the bar, and, turning slowly, walked out of the frame of the mirror.

WHITE GLOVES

I remember he came on a Monday to start the fence because my little boy, Buddy, had his tonsils out the week before and the doctor said he wasn't to go outside until Tuesday. Buddy's sisters were both in school that year, so once his father went to work Buddy and I just had each other for company most days. He'd been a sickly boy and we were hoping that having his tonsils removed would make a difference. When the man came to build the fence it was all I could do to convince Buddy to stay indoors another day. Buddy was like any four-year-old. He thought the man needed some help.

His name was Jack. He worked with my husband, Ernie, in at the hardware store in town. Ernie's a clerk and he likes his job. I was worried when he first went to work there because the owner's a Jew. I don't have anything against the Jews. It's just I always heard they were stingy people and I was worried that they might work Ernie awfully hard. Ernie's a good worker and never

complains much. He sometimes lets people take advantage of him. But the way it turned out, the owner of the store, Mr. Hoffman, was about as nice a man as I ever met. He looked just like president Eisenhower. I guess what everyone used to tell me about Jews wasn't all true anyway. I never knew any as a kid.

Buddy watched the man from the window and wanted to go outside but I told him he had to wait until tomorrow and that the fence wouldn't be built in one day. The man was building one of those chain link fences between our house and the little piece of land where the water tower sits. I don't like the looks of those fences much, but Ernie said maybe we could plant some climbing roses next to it. I watched the man from the kitchen window. He couldn't see me from there. He dug two holes, one at either end of where the new fence would go. Then he mixed up some cement in a wheelbarrow and put a shiny metal fence post in each hole. When he had the posts straight up and the holes filled with cement he threw his wheelbarrow into the back of his truck and drove back towards town. Buddy and I sat at the window and made up stories about what the fenceposts really were.

That night when Buddy's father came home, he told me this fellow Jack was Jewish, too. But according to Ernie, he wasn't a practicing Jew. I figured that was like my

father who was a life-long Baptist but not any kind of practicing Baptist. Jack was engaged to Mr. Hoffman's daughter Elaine.

I never met Elaine but I heard her name mentioned a number of times. I knew she'd been to college and loved to ride horses. Mr. Hoffman kept her horse in a stable behind the store. Elaine was a social person, and I saw her name in the paper once or twice for things the ladies in town were doing. I don't know when I started thinking this way, but I always thought of white gloves anytime I heard the name Elaine Hoffman. I was sure she was pretty.

Tuesday Jack came again and this time there was no keeping Buddy indoors. It was all I could do to get his shoes and socks on before he ran out to the garage and got the little shovel his grandfather gave him for his birthday. I watched out the window. He ran up to Jack and Jack got this startled look on his face. I guess he wasn't used to children. Then I could see Buddy was going to be shy the way he is sometimes and afraid to speak to a stranger.

Jack tied a string between the two posts he had cemented in the ground the day before and then he measured

off eighteen or twenty holes to dig. Buddy followed after him. Neither one of them spoke a word to the other. When Jack started digging post holes, Buddy started digging little holes in the lawn. I was going to tell him to stop, but I figured since he'd been sick and cooped up inside, I'd let him do what he wanted for a while. When twelve o'clock came and Jack sat down in the shade of his truck to eat a sandwich, Buddy came running in and wanted a sandwich, too. I made him one and right away he ran back out the door and sat down in the grass and ate his sandwich, watching every move Jack made. They still didn't talk to each other.

Jack was a handsome man. He was dark complected, but that could have been partly from working in the sun all the time the way he did. He was better looking than Ernie, although Ernie is not in any way ugly. Ernie's just so ordinary looking that he's a little bit homely. Jack had thick black eyebrows and a small mustache. Most men don't wear a mustache around here, and if they do it's a big scruffy thing. Jack's was neat and trim. I was feeling a little bit jealous of Elaine Hoffman, thinking about her wedding night.

Ernie and I have a good marriage. Everyone remarks on that. But the night we got married just didn't go right. We were living in San Francisco then and after

the wedding we drove to Santa Cruz for the weekend. We stopped and got some hamburgers on the way and the meat must have been bad, because as soon as we got to the motel room Ernie started throwing up. He was sick off and on the whole week-end. In a way everything worked out ok because I was scared, and with Ernie sick, I was able to be good to him and take care of him without knowing what to do in bed. I'd never slept with a man. Still, I was a little bit disappointed. I'd been worrying about what to do for months. Then it turns out all I had to do was keep emptying the waste basket every time Ernie threw up. I figured Jack and Elaine's wedding night wouldn't start out with a basket of bad hamburgers.

After lunch I felt like taking a bath. I had a lot to do around the house but I just started thinking how nice it would be to close the door and have a long hot bath in the middle of the day. I like to let the water run slow. The pipes are kind of noisy and I can lay back and close my eyes and pretend I'm a little girl again. I sometimes think I daydream too much but I can't seem to help myself. I got in the tub and started thinking about the summer I stayed at my aunt Millie's. Her husband was named Albert and he was good looking, too. I remember one day I surprised him. Aunt Millie had just mopped the kitchen floor and instead of tracking

mud across the linoleum on the way to the bathroom, Albert just stepped around behind the barn. I came running around the corner and saw him making water in the weeds and he saw me and neither one of us said anything. I don't think we ever spoke to each other again after that.

He didn't come Thursday. Later I asked Ernie why Jack had skipped a day and he said it was to let the cement harden. I was kind of glad he hadn't come because Buddy had started to run a little fever and I wanted him to stay indoors. At the same time I found myself looking out the window all day long, wanting to see Jack working on the fence.

I hadn't done much around the house for two or three days what with Buddy being sick. So I got busy cleaning. I washed all the windows and caught up on the laundry. When Buddy took a nap in the afternoon I baked him some tollhouse cookies. Seemed like whatever I did I kept thinking about Jack. Sometimes I'd think about Jack and Elaine and their wedding night. They'd probably have a nice motel room someplace and champagne. And she would stand in the door wearing white gloves. But most of the time I just thought about Jack and the way his

brown shoulders looked when he worked in the sun. It was one of those days when I had more energy than I knew what to do with. After I baked the cookies I cleaned up all the dishes and then I got out the vacuum. I turned over the braided rug in the living room. If you turn it over, the other side looks bright and new, almost like you just bought a new rug. I was going to wait and do that just before Ernie's mother came out to visit. But I went ahead and did it that afternoon instead, just to keep busy.

I made Ernie a nice dinner and thought when he came home maybe we could sit out in the back and watch the sun go down. I was planning to put Buddy to bed early and to make up to Ernie until he'd want to love me. I was thinking I'd like to do it twice. We used to do it twice when we first got married and it was always nice that way.

Then Ernie called and said he was sorry, he forgot to tell me he had to work late taking inventory and he wouldn't be home for dinner. They'd just have a sandwich there at the store. I felt kind of bad. It's not that I didn't believe Ernie. I knew he'd come in about eleven o'clock, completely bushed, still wearing the brown shirt with Hoffmarts Hardware written on the back. I watched tv until ten and then I went to bed.

Thursday Jack came to put up the wire on the fence. Buddy ran out to watch. He got his shovel and then, when he saw that Jack wasn't going to do any digging, he ran and put his shovel up and got a hammer instead. Jack wasn't using a hammer either, but it must have seemed more appropriate to Buddy.

I watched Jack slip the fittings onto the fence posts and lift the heavy rolls of wire out of the back of his truck. When he carried the wire the muscles on his arms stood out and a thick vein swelled up on his forehead. He took off his shirt again and worked in his t-shirt. I thought it was funny he never took off his t-shirt. It was July and it was awfully hot outside, and the white t-shirt made his shoulders look even darker. A tuft of black hair came out his shirt at his throat.

I'd been planning to get into Buddy's room and clean it up while he was outside watching Jack. I knew Buddy had brought in a jar full of butterflies and hid them under his bed and forgot all about them. I was going to throw them out when he wasn't looking. Instead I went into my bedroom and looked at myself in the mirror.

I was still nice looking. I hadn't let myself go like some of the girls I knew from high school. I took off my jeans and blouse and stood in front of the mirror. Ernie was putting on a little weight after being married seven years but I still could fit into my going away clothes, a corduroy suit with a lacy white blouse. I took off my bra and stood sideways before the mirror. My breasts had been bigger when Buddy was born. But they were still firm.

I sat at the night table and went through my make-up and cologne. I was thinking about a boyfriend I had in high school. Before I met Ernie. He was a basketball player, kind of shy. I remembered how after a dance once he brought me home and we sat in his car. He wanted to touch my breasts and I wouldn't let him. It seemed like the thing to do back then. Boys always wanted to touch my breasts and I wouldn't let them, not until Ernie. Later, I wished that I had. It wouldn't have been such a terrible thing.

I put on a little powder and my good slip and went to the kitchen window. Jack had all the wire up on the fence. It shone in the sun. It looked new and hard, like it might hurt you if you fell against it. He was walking along the fence, checking it to see that everything was ok. He looked like he was getting ready to

leave.

I ran and threw on a summer dress and went out into the yard. I set one of the sprinklers on a dry spot in the lawn just so I'd have something to do. Jack was gathering up his tools and Buddy was hammering sticks into the grass.

"It's a nice fence," I told Jack. I pulled my hair back and held it in a pony tail. I wished I'd put on a little make up.

"Thank you," he said. He threw the left over wire into the back of his truck.

"I was watching you build it." I took Buddy by the hand. I felt like I couldn't catch my breath. I had to raise my free hand over my eyes to shade them from the sun.

"I know," said Jack without looking at me. "I saw you."

I felt my face turn bright red. I tried to laugh but nothing came out. He wouldn't look at me or smile. He just put his tool box into the truck and then got in himself and sat for a minute before driving off. He never did speak to Buddy.

That night Ernie came home early and took a shower

and shaved before dinner. I knew he was going to try and make it up to me for working late the night before. I made a casserole and he said it tasted fine but I thought it tasted like cardboard. I let the noodles get too dry. After dinner there was a movie on tv. There was a man in the movie who reminded me of Jack and it made me feel sad somehow that he was done with the fence and wouldn't be coming back. Ernie was sitting next to me on the couch and kept squeezing my arm and making little jokes. I laughed at his jokes and thought about Jack.

We went to bed and I really wasn't in the mood to have Ernie love me. I let him take my night gown off. He was rubbing my breasts and I was wishing his hands were softer. I put my hand on his shoulder and closed my eyes tight and pretended it was Jack's shoulder, hard and brown and hot from the sun. I kissed him and thought of Jack's mustache and Jack watching me stand at the window in my slip. Pretty soon I felt him going inside me, and it wasn't Ernie, it was Jack loving me and me loving Jack and Ernie was far away or maybe he never existed.

We finished together and lay there holding each other and I thought I might cry like I used to when I first got married. He asked me if I wanted to do it again

but it was just Ernie. Jack was gone. So I said, no honey, and rolled over and waited a long time before falling asleep.

Friday Buddy and I just sort of hung around the house. We watched some cartoons and Bob Barker, and Buddy kept going out and slapping the fence with a board. We were thinking about getting Buddy a puppy now that the yard was fenced all the way around. I was looking through the paper for free puppies when Ernie came home around ten o'clock.

"Honey, are you sick?" I asked him when he came in the door. He looked pale.

"I'm ok," he said. "Buddy, run out to the truck and bring in my lunch pail will you?"

As soon as Buddy went outside Ernie sat down on the couch and I could tell he had some bad news.

"I didn't want to tell you in front of Buddy," he said. "Jack's dead." He said it like he hardly believed it himself.

"Dead? How?"

"He killed himself," whispered Ernie. "Last night. He shut himself up in his garage and ran the engine on his car until he gassed himself."

I started to cry. "Last night?" I asked Ernie.
"Last night while we were loving?"

"Oh god," said Ernie. "Don't say that."

We had to pretend Ernie had the flu so Buddy wouldn't ask a lot of questions.

Ernie didn't go back to work until Tuesday. Monday was the funeral. Mr. Hoffman asked Ernie to be one of the pall bearers. I wanted to go to the funeral, but then we would have had to get a baby sitter for Buddy and we didn't want him to know about Jack. So I stayed home. We had found Buddy a puppy the day before, so Buddy and I spent the day playing with the puppy and trying to think of a name for it.

Ernie came home from the funeral in time for lunch. I fixed some tuna sandwiches. I noticed Ernie had set something white on the counter. A pair of white gloves.

"What are those?" I asked.

"We wore them at the funeral." said Ernie. "Mr. Hoffman brought them and asked the pall bearers to wear them."

"Why?" I refused to touch them.

"I don't know," said Ernie. "When we were done, I didn't know what to do with them. So I brought them

home."

"Take them back," I told Ernie.

"Why?" he asked, but he could tell I wasn't fooling.

"Take them back, Ernie. I don't want those in my house."

Tuesday he took the gloves back to Mr. Hoffman. He said he wanted to keep them to remember Jack by, but he'd take them back if I felt that strongly about it. Ernie liked Jack and was sorry we'd never asked him in for supper. Ernie thought maybe we could have shown him some kindness that would have helped him deal with whatever made him kill himself like that.

I told him to just quit talking about it all the time. There wasn't any point to it. We were happy and we had a right to think about happy things. I told him we didn't have anything to feel guilty about.

A MAN WHO RAISED RABBITS

There was no traffic in Ivanhoe by the time Si Franklin fed and watered his rabbits and, slipping through the side gate, headed downtown. He didn't go through the house because the preacher was in there talking to his wife, Ostie, about the boy.

He didn't care for preachers. He had only called this Brother Wilkins to the house as a last resort. Ostie would listen to a preacher when she wouldn't listen to her own husband. They had to do something about Isaac.

Si made his way along the roadside, occasionally stepping out into the road to walk around a car or a pickup parked in front of a clapboard house. He didn't bother to look where he walked. Other folks would watch out for an old man in a black coat who walked with a cane. When he passed the grade school, he noticed the school children were all indoors. Most mornings the playground was full of screaming, red faced children

playing ball and beating each other up. This morning, Old Glory and the state flag with the bear made the only noise that came from the school yard.

He passed the Ivanhoe public library, glancing in at the librarian who was posting something on the wall. He had never been inside the library, although he thought he might enjoy it. He liked books and he liked quiet places. The back yard with his rabbits. The Tack Room.

He was on his way to meet his friend Jimmy at the Tack Room now. A man could sit there all day and play dominoes or checkers, maybe drink a beer along in the afternoon or take a nap seated against the wall. It was an old man's tavern, especially during the series when a black and white Philco was brought out from beneath the bar and dusted off.

Si felt himself growing warm from his walk. He was wearing two sweaters underneath his wool jacket and he wondered if he might have over-dressed. Warm for November. He passed the drug store, slowing to linger in the shade of the town's only awning, then crossed the street to walk past the dime store and the doctor's office, boarded up now that Dr. Fealy had moved away.

He stopped outside the new post office. Funny the way they had built it right alongside of the old one. Some of the older folks still tried to enter by the old

door as if they didn't trust the newer, heavy doors that made so little noise.

He peered in to see if Jimmy were there after his mail. The post master, Mr. Thornton, smiled and winked. Si thought how a stranger might take Thornton for the friendliest man in town, the way he winked at everyone. The truth was Clarence Thornton had been winking since '43, the year he'd parachuted over Germany with his legs on fire. 'Probably even winks when he spansks his grandkids,' thought Si. Still, Thornton was an ok guy, for a Baptist.

Si moved on past several boarded up store fronts, one time bars or cafes. The only cafe left in town took its name from the blue neon sign that flashed over the sidewalk. Breakfast . . . Lunch . . . Dinner. It was empty except for a heavy-set Mexican woman mopping the floor behind the counter.

There had been bacon in the ice box that morning. A thick slab, mostly fat. Si had put four pieces in the bottom of a pan and thought, if you fed bacon to a rabbit that had just thrown a litter, she wouldn't eat her young. Why was that?

He didn't like the way the bacon fit into the pan

so he changed to an old cast iron skillet, one that looked like it could fry a lot of bacon. He stirred up eggs and milk, added a spoonful of butter, wondering if maybe he should have melted it first.

Looking around the kitchen for something special to add to the eggs, he took an onion from on top of the ice box and chopped it up until tears came to his eyes and he cut the table cloth. He threw the onion into the skillet with the eggs, making a note not to give any of the big pieces to the boy. He adjusted the flame on the range to keep the eggs from smoking so much.

"You cooking?" Ostie asked as she brought Isaac into the kitchen. "Si?"

"I guess I can fry a few eggs." He was sorry for the tone of his voice but he hadn't apologized. Not at six thirty in the morning. She made a familiar sound with her tongue, then lifted Isaac into his high chair.

"Granpa's cookin'!" the boy crowed.

"Granpa's burning the bacon," said Ostie. "Watch this baby while I get dressed."

"God Bless This House," read the sampler above the door.

"God damn that woman," said Si.

He stopped outside the hardware store, his eyes arrested by a Black and Decker jig saw that had been run halfway through a sheet of plywood and propped up in the window for display. He wondered what the saw cost. More than he had, probably. Further into the store he saw rolls of chicken wire and rabbit wire. He thought about the rabbit hutch in his back yard. He had meant to take a close look that morning to see if it needed mending.

He'd heard a rabbit scream in the middle of the night. The old buck. Lying in bed, he'd listened for it again, half prepared to get up and take a look, hoping he wouldn't hear anything more. He had pulled the blankets closer against the cold.

It had been impossible to go back to sleep and he'd found himself thinking about the buck, about the day he bought him from a man at the fairgrounds. Eight years ago - it surprised him to count it up. The buck was older than Si had realized. Could be that was why the does had been kindling such small litters. This last time the younger doe hadn't even been pregnant, unless she had done away with her young before Si had a chance to check her. It seemed unlikely. There hadn't

been any blood on the wire.

He moved away reluctantly from the window of the hardware store. The boy liked those rabbits. Isaac would beg to go along every morning to feed them and change their water. He always wanted to carry the coffee can full of green pellets. They rattled when he walked, sounding like rain on a tin roof.

"You're not eating those are you?" Si would have to ask the boy each morning. Isaac was only two and had eaten some of the pellets once. Si supposed the boy had wondered why the rabbits waited so eagerly for them. The pellets would taste . . . green, thought Si. He hadn't interfered with the boy's curiosity then, not even when Isaac decided to try the little round turds that fell through the wire onto the ground. Isaac had made a sour face, had tried to spit them out. When he began to cry, Si tried to hush him up, but Ostie heard and came out the back door wanting to know what was wrong with the baby. Seeing the green stain about Isaac's lips, she railed up at Si, Isaac cried louder yet, and Si finally had to go to the house and bring the boy a glass of milk and a graham cracker.

He stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, shaking his head from side to side.

"Damn kid," he said aloud. Through the weeds of

a vacant lot, he could see the back of the Baptist church. Brother Wilkins would be telling Ostie now. Wilkins would make her accept that they were too old. Quote scripture. He'd show her the brochures for that place down in Bakersfield. Ostie wouldn't be speaking when he got back home. This time would be the worst.

Breakfast . . . Lunch . . . Dinner. The sign over the cafe blinked out its message. Si belched painfully, wishing he hadn't put onions in the eggs. He wondered if Jimmy were waiting for him in the Tack Room.

"Si, you're late."

Jimmy sat in the sun filtering through the front window, his thick glasses reflecting the light. He wore his sparse white hair cut short so he wouldn't have to comb it.

"I couldn't get away," said Si, pulling up a chair. He made a face and exchanged the chair for one with four sound legs. "Had to tend to the rabbits."

Jimmy smiled. "How's the old buck?"

"Fine," said Si. He shuffled the dominoes about the table. "How are you feeling this morning?"

"Ok. For 84."

"87."

"I forget." Jimmy laughed a high foolish laugh that made Si frown.

"Let's play."

Maxwell brought two cups of coffee to the table. Soon the only sound in the Tack Room was the click, click of the large white dominoes that Jimmy brought downtown with him every day in a black cloth bag. His bones, he called them. Si watched Maxwell walk back to the bar. Maxwell's complexion was pasty this morning. His white shirt sagged over his belt.

Maxwell had obtained the lease to the tavern right after Nixon was first elected. He'd had great plans. He had nailed a lot of old harness from the wooden rafters, had even tried to make a scenic arrangement from three bales of straw and a reproduction milk can. It hadn't done any good. The only customers he ever had were pensioners like Si and Jimmy. None of them bought more than a beer or two no matter how much the place looked like a barn. Young people went to town. Maxwell had sadly watched the straw bales fall apart, gradually sweeping them out the door. He began selling peanuts in the shell and he didn't mind when Jimmy dropped the shells on the floor.

"I decided, Jimmy." Si played the 5-6 on the end of a long train of polished, white dominoes. He thought

about cheating and saying it was the double five, but didn't. Jimmy couldn't read without a magnifying glass, but he never miscounted the dots on his dominoes.

"What did you decide?" asked Jimmy, staring at his bones.

"I'm sending him away. Down to Bakersfield. They got that home down there, place is supposed to be clean. The preacher's telling Ostie about it this morning."

"Which preacher?"

"Wilkins. The Baptist."

Jimmy turned his empty gaze out the window. Clarence Thornton, after a quick cup of coffee at the Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner, smiled and winked in at the old men.

"Was that Thornton?" asked Jimmy.

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

Jimmy shrugged. "Felt him wink I guess."

Si drew a new tile from the bone yard and scrunched up his nose. "I suppose you think I'm doing the wrong thing."

"Doesn't matter what I think."

"I can't raise him Jimmy. I'm too old."

Jimmy nodded as he tallied his score in large x's on a piece of scratch paper.

"I'd be almost a hundred before the boy was old enough to vote," said Si.

"Yes," said Jimmy, "you're pretty old. Awful old."

Si looked up from his dominoes. "Not as old as some folks I know." He let himself glare into Jimmy's dull eyes.

"You know what your trouble is, Si?" Jimmy took off his glasses and polished them on the tablecloth. "You always want to call the shots. You always want to win. Well, sometimes it doesn't work that way."

"You want to argue or you want to play dominoes?"

"You're a wrongheaded son of a bitch, Si," said Jimmy.

"Well, you haven't got any answers." Si played his domino and drew another.

He had played dominoes with his daughter the first summer she spent in the brace. Her hip. The doctor warned them not to let it go. That summer she had only been seven, losing teeth, coming to him to have him pull them once they were loose in her gums.

"Get that one, Daddy."

"You're sure it's loose?"

"I think so."

Once she accused him of pulling the wrong one. He wondered if that were possible. His hands had been

strong then. He had always worked with his hands, one way or another. Driving railroad spikes for a dollar a day. Hoeing cotton. Then working at the packing shed, loading crates of oranges and lemons. "Ye are the salt of the earth," his daddy had been fond of saying. "And when the salt hath lost its savour?" What was the answer to that?

Evelyn wore the brace for five years. Ostie took her shopping for new clothes the day the doctor told her she could take off the brace for good. She hardly limped. Only a little, when she got tired. Ostie wanted her to look pretty to the boys at school. That had been important to both of them. He should have put a stop to that then, never should have spoiled her over that hip.

Si played dominoes all morning. At noon he decided not to go home for lunch. He borrowed five dollars from Maxwell and walked across the street to the cafe where he ordered hamburgers and milk shakes for himself and Jimmy. He bought a pack of Roloids, almost forgetting to tell the girl behind the counter, Clarence Thornton's niece, to hold the onions on the burgers.

"You got a date?" she asked, winking just like her

uncle. Somebody ought to smack her, thought Si.

While the hamburgers were being grilled Si walked down to the post office to see if his check had come.

"Not until Friday," Clarence Thornton said, winking with both eyes.

"Well, God damn the U.S. mail," said Si. "God damn the social security, too. In fact," he tapped his cane twice on the floor, "God damn the whole federal government."

Thornton frowned and old Mrs. Stofer, who had come in behind Si, dropped her purse.

Si took the burgers back to the Tack Room. He felt guilty after cussing in the p.o. so he left Thornton's niece a fifty cent tip. Jimmy was napping when Si re-entered the tavern.

"I'm not too hungry," said Jimmy.

"Did you eat any breakfast?"

"I had some coffee."

In the end Si took most of Jimmy's hamburger out in the alley and tossed it over the fence to a collie bitch that lived in the next yard.

They switched to cribbage in the afternoon, and Si began to win when he could keep his mind off of Isaac.

"Let's have a beer," said Jimmy after losing three games in a row.

"Sure."

"Feeling any better?"

"I like to beat you," said Si.

Maxwell set two drafts on the bar and punched the keys on his cash register. Jimmy handed him a creased dollar bill and slowly returned to the table where Si sat shuffling the cards. Halfway across the room, Jimmy stopped. He stood completely still, except for the two schooners of beer that trembled lightly in his hands. One after the other, they slipped through his fingers and fell to the floor.

Si looked up as Jimmy began to sway on his feet.

"Jimmy?"

A soft cry came from the older man's lips, high pitched like the sound he made when he laughed. He fell face long onto a table, sliding to the floor before Si could reach his side.

"What's wrong?" shouted Maxwell, making his way around the bar.

Si knelt beside his friend. He turned him gently onto his back, pushing the broken beer glasses away. Jimmy's face was white, save for a large bruise filling in over one eye where he had hit himself in falling.

"Jimmy," whispered Si, "what's the matter?"

Jimmy made the noise again, a keen cry that tapered off into a bubble of saliva. As Jimmy's eyes lost their dull focus, Si recognized the sound. It was the same sound the rabbits could make when he butchered them.

"I think he's dead," said Maxwell, bluntly. He hurried outside to summon help. Si tried to make Jimmy comfortable. He took off his jacket and folded it up to make a pillow for Jimmy's head. Soon Clarence Thornton came across the street with Maxwell trying to keep up.

Thornton came into the tavern, looking the place over curiously. It occurred to Si that Thornton had never been inside the Tack Room.

"Right there, he just fell down right there." Maxwell pointed at Jimmy's prone body.

"He's not just drunk?" asked Thornton, turning up his nose at the beery smell.

"I think he's dead," said Maxwell. "I better call an ambulance. I wish Fealy was still here."

Si got to his feet, letting Thornton kneel in his place next to Jimmy. In the confusion he made his way carefully out the door into the alley, where he vomitted in the weeds.

Si heard a siren approaching from the highway as he knelt behind the tavern. He felt weak and damp. There was a bitter taste in his mouth. From the other side of the redwood fence, the collie barked at him.

He made his way out of the alley, keeping his eyes on the ground in front of him, at times leaning heavily against the dusty buildings. He wanted to go home and lie down, but he knew he would have to face Ostie.

He crossed the street and entered the post office. Clarence Thornton hadn't returned. The sliding windows were all down, locked in place. Si leaned on the metal table next to the exterior window, gazing out through the tinted glass. A crowd had formed across the street in front of the Tack Room. A long blue ambulance was parked at the curb, its red light flashing slowly.

Si turned away from the window. He noticed the sheaf of wanted posters hanging on the wall. He flipped through them, lingering over the pictures of women. An angry young face reminded him of Evelyn. Evelyn's forehead had been creased just so when she stood in the driveway with her bags, waiting for her friend to come and drive her to the bus station. He read the poster. The face

on the wall was wanted for tampering with the mail. He wondered what that meant exactly. Opening someone's letter? More than that. Evelyn's poster would have read: fornication, child abandonment, breaking her mother's heart.

He left the post office, careful not to look across the street. They would be bringing Jimmy out. He didn't want to see that, Jimmy's body with a blanket pulled up over his face. Two children on bicycles raced past. School must be out, thought Si. He remembered the bicycle he had bought for Evelyn the summer her hip got bad. She had never learned to ride it. You had to bend your leg to ride a bike. The bike was still in the back of the garage, leaned against the wall on flat tires.

Si continued down the sidewalk, away from the Tack Room and the ambulance parked at the curb. He decided to walk to the packing house. Maybe someone he knew would be there, someone to talk to. He hadn't been down to the packing house in years.

He took the path through the vacant lot beside the hardware store, coming out into the parking lot of the Baptist church. He heard the siren on the ambulance again, one short blast and then it was shut off. Si leaned against a mulberry tree in the church yard.

He saw the preacher walking across the grass, his head cocked to one side, puzzled.

"Si? Are you all right?"

"Just resting a minute."

"Would you like to come in and sit down? There's some coffee on."

"You wouldn't have a beer, would you preacher?"

"No." The preacher said it firmly. Authority, thought Si. Fire and brimstone. And temperance. Grape juice instead of wine.

"Did you tell Ostie?"

"Yes," said the preacher. "She took it hard."

"You made her agree to it, though?"

"I couldn't make her agree to anything, Si. I showed her the literature. We prayed about it."

"Did she sign the papers?"

"She won't sign. She says you have to sign."

Si pushed himself away from the tree and set out for the packing house.

"Si wait," called the preacher. But he couldn't wait. The sun was beginning to fall in the sky. The men would be quitting soon. When they quit work, five o'clock, he could walk home, just like he had for the eighteen years he had worked for Sunkist. Ostie would have dinner ready.

He remembered the day Toland Harris had been crushed to death on the loading dock. Toland had just been a young kid, not very bright. The whole place had shut down for the rest of the day. There hadn't been any order given. The men just picked up their lunch boxes and went home. It was the only day Si could remember getting home from work early. He had thought about stopping for a beer but had decided against it. He had beer in the ice box, and figured maybe he could get around to painting the back porch if he went straight home.

He had walked up the driveway that afternoon, noticing that the car was gone. He remembered thinking, Thursday afternoon, and Ostie would be visiting her mother in the rest home. The front door was locked. That surprised him. He never bothered to lock a door, not in Ivanhoe. He wasn't sure if he even had a key to the front door on his key ring, but after trying several he found the right one.

As he stepped into the living room he heard the back screen-door shut. He wondered if Evelyn were home. He thought, too, that he smelled cigarette smoke. He went through the house slowly until he came to her door.

"Daddy," she said, red faced, as he swung the door open. She was dressing, her bed unmade. "What are you doing home?"

"There was an accident," he told her, thinking, she was only fifteen. She made him leave the room so she could finish getting dressed. He had sat down heavily in the kitchen, too tired suddenly to even pour himself a beer.

He stared through a chain link fence at the weathered siding and the sign that read "Sunkist," except that the "k" was barely visible any more.

"Sunkist!" shouted Si to a young man driving a forklift. The forklift made too much noise for his voice to be heard. The man shielded his eyes from the sun in order to stare at Si.

"I used to work here, you know," shouted Si. "Right over there." He pointed towards a broken down conveyor belt. The man followed his finger and shrugged, driving off on his forklift. The five o'clock siren blasted from the fire house.

"God damn Sunkist," said Si.

When he walked up his driveway he saw the boy standing on the couch looking out the big front window. Isaac had been looking out the same window the day his mother had left.

She had stood by the hedgerow, refusing to look over her shoulder at her son. Si had come outside to talk to her.

"You're not coming back, are you? Ostie thinks you're coming back, but I don't believe you are."

"I might come back," said Evelyn. "Or I'll send for the boy."

"You won't," said Si, wishing he could say nothing but unable to keep still. "You only came back this time to leave the boy with us."

She was impatient. Her ride was late. "I can't take care of him now. I already told you that."

"And we can, I suppose. Your mother and I are supposed to raise a baby?"

"You did it once."

"For God's sake, Evelyn. What do you think we're made of?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

He had wanted to beat her then, to hit her with his cane, to punish her like he had never done when she was a girl. She must have sensed his anger. She picked up her bags and moved a little closer to the road.

"You're nothing but a tramp," he said.

She smiled. "If I am, you've no one to blame but yourself."

Isaac came out of the house with the coffee can. He had been waiting for Si to come home so they could feed the rabbits. Si wondered if he should go inside first and say something to Ostie. He decided to feed the rabbits before it got dark. He opened the door to the garage and turned on the light. Isaac saw a mouse run from the sack of rabbit chow. His eyes grew wide as he pointed under the tool bench where the mouse had disappeared.

Si laughed. "It's all right," he told the boy, dipping the coffee can into the sack of feed. "They don't eat much."

Isaac had already forgotten about the mouse. He had found Evelyn's bicycle parked behind a stack of empty boxes. He wanted his grandfather to make it go. The training wheels were still on the bike and the wire

basket still hung from the handlebars. Si had forgotten them, had forgotten about the afternoon he spent putting the bicycle together. He lifted Isaac up and set him on the seat. His legs were too short to reach the pedals.

"You should have a tricycle." Evelyn had one once. He wondered what had happened to it.

"Come on." He lifted the boy down, handing him the coffee can. Isaac ran ahead of him through the yard.

The hutch was built up against the back fence. A few slow flies floated up over the manure piled under each cage. Isaac watched the old buck twitch his nose with impatience while Si fed the does and the three young fryers. The buck stamped his feet on the wire and Isaac laughed. Si let the boy hold the hose as they filled the water dishes, rinsing the green scum from the sides of each one. He showed Isaac how to turn the water off when they were finished.

"You've got your mother's eyes," said Si. "Whoever the hell your daddy was, you've got Evelyn's eyes."

He had finally asked her that, the afternoon she stood in the driveway waiting for her ride. Si had been wanting to know, wanting to ask for three weeks, ever since she had showed up at the door with Isaac in her arms.

"At least tell me," he said, pointing his cane at

her, "who his father is. You could at least tell me that."
She had remained silent, watching the road for her ride.
"God, don't you even know?"

Trembling, she turned on him. "Daddy," her voice broke as she spoke. "Maybe I don't amount to much, but how are you any better than me? You don't want to raise that boy either."

A white Chevrolet pulled into the driveway and a frowsy looking woman got out, smiling lazily at Si, helping Evelyn with her bag. Evelyn had quickly gotten into the car.

"You'd rather raise those God damn white rabbits than your own grandson." The car backed out of the driveway and headed for town, running the stop sign at the corner.

Ostie turned on the kitchen light as the sun began to dip behind the back fence. Si didn't want to go in yet. He watched the young fryers feeding, two does and a buck. They were three and a half months old and needed to be butchered. He had been putting it off.

He left Isaac playing in the yard to get a bucket and his skinning knife from the garage. A short length of wire hung from the lowest branch of the walnut tree

that grew beside the hutch. He set the bucket down beneath it. Reaching into the pen of fryers, he grasped one of the does by the loose skin of her back and carried her over to the tree. He set her down on the grass. When he was younger, he had been able to snap a rabbit's neck with a turn of his wrist, but he had lost the strength in his arms. He raised a short length of pipe and brought it down hard behind the rabbit's ears. He hung it by one hind leg from the wire and waited for it to stop kicking.

He could see Ostie standing at the kitchen window, keeping an eye on Isaac. Over her shoulder he could just make out the sampler she had finished last Christmas. As long as they had been married there had been a sampler in the kitchen that read "God Bless This House." Then she had sewed up another one. The new one had a couple that looked like George and Martha Washington standing over a rhyme stitched in red, white and blue.

"Women's faults are many,
Men have only two.
Everything they say,
And everything they do."

Si had laughed the first time he saw it. Then the thing started to bother him until he'd taken to sitting in a different chair in the kitchen, one with its back to that sampler.

Lately, Ostie insisted on keeping Evelyn's post card

on the kitchen table. A picture of two young boys riding motorcycles across the desert. On the back, "Sorry. Best this way. Try and send some money." Si didn't know who was supposed to send money to who.

"Throw it away!" he had shouted at Ostie. "She's not coming back. Can't you see?"

"I'll keep hoping she will," said Ostie. She wouldn't let him have the post card.

Si took down the skinned and gutted carcass and laid it on a newspaper on the grass. He would have to move quickly to finish before dark. He pulled another of the fryers from the hutch and carried it to the tree. Turning it over he noticed he had the other little doe. Her white fur was thick and smooth. Too bad he didn't do something with the fur other than bury it in the garden. This one was prime.

He had always raised white rabbits, New Zealand Whites. He had thought once about experimenting with another breed but had decided against it. Colorful rabbits were only harder to kill.

He had brought the first rabbit home when Evelyn was nine, a black and white Giant Checker with one droopy ear. One of the men at work had given the rabbit to

him, saying she was an old doe that never had amounted to anything. Si had built a makeshift hutch for her out of odds and ends laying around the garage. He told Evelyn the rabbit wasn't to be a pet, but Evelyn had named her anyway.

Twice that summer, Si carried the rabbit in a cardboard box to a commercial breeder's near Tulare. When she failed to conceive the second time, he told Ostie not to buy anything for Sunday dinner.

Evelyn came home from Sunday School just as he was finishing up the butchering. She had known all along it was going to happen but she cried anyway. Si tried to be stern with her, but he ended up taking her into his lap to comfort her, ignoring the way her brace pressed into his legs.

"It's a hard lesson, girl," he had told her. "But not worth crying over. Good lord, she was just a rabbit." He felt his daughter hated him and it scared him.

"Just a rabbit," he repeated, rocking her back and forth. "Wait til you find out about people." He only raised white rabbits after that.

Si removed the last of the fryers from the hutch, the young buck. He carried it to the base of the walnut

tree. As he searched in the dark for the length of pipe he had been using, the rabbit hopped away, feeding on the Bermuda grass that grew thick along the fence. Isaac was trying to catch the young buck. He followed it across the yard, but was afraid to reach out and grab it.

Si caught the rabbit behind the ears and held it for Isaac. The boy ran his hand along the thick, white fur, then touched the long, pink ears tentatively. He smiled up at his grandfather, running off a string of syllables that Si didn't understand at first. He wanted to hold the rabbit for himself.

"God damn it, Isaac," said Si softly. From inside the house, Ostie turned on the porch light, spreading long shadows across the back yard. Si noticed his hands were covered with blood and fine hairs from the fryers.

He set the boy down on the grass and placed the rabbit in his arms. Isaac was only able to hold onto the rabbit for a moment before the young buck found his legs and hopped free. He went back to feeding on the Bermuda grass, Isaac following him slowly along the fence.

"God damn it," said Si. He watched his grandson chase the rabbit into the garden. So much like Evelyn. Wanting to ride the bike before he could reach the pedals. He should have got rid of that bike a long time ago.

No sense keeping all that junk stored in the garage.

Si wondered if things would have turned out differently if he hadn't killed that flop-eared rabbit. The rabbit would have died anyway, eventually. He'd only been trying to make sense out of things. If the rabbit was barren, then butcher her. Maybe Jimmy was right. Maybe he tried too hard to make things make sense, tried too hard to call the shots.

He wiped the knife off on his pant leg. When he thought about it, nothing made sense. Not Evelyn, not Jimmy, not the boy. It was like the algebra problems he'd tried to help Evelyn with her first year in high school. No matter how hard they worked, often as not they couldn't come up with the answer written in the back of the book. It wouldn't bother her. "I'll find out tomorrow," she'd say, drifting from the room. And he would stay at the kitchen table until two or three, puzzling over the problem from every conceivable angle. Finally, he'd go to bed, muttering to Ostie, "This time the God damn book's wrong."

That's all he knew how to do. Figure things out as best he could and then go to bed. He'd made up his mind. Why was he standing here in the middle of his back yard, while his grandson trampled over the last of his garden in the dark, chasing a rabbit that should

have been butchered three weeks ago?

Si stood next to the hutch, looking down the row of cages until he came to the old buck.

"What do you think?"

The buck stared back at him with his cool, pink eyes. He stamped his hind legs against the wire, proudly. Si had kept him a long time. He wondered how long a rabbit could live.

"The way I see it, there's a decision to be made." He'd left his jacket with Jimmy. He shivered now in the night air. "It's either you or that little one running around in the garden. I've got no use for two buck rabbits."

The buck loosed a long stream of urine into the manure under the hutch. In the kitchen window Si could see Ostie standing at the sink. She would be wondering why it took him so long to come in from the rabbits. She would want to give the boy a bath.

"All right," said Si. "we'll start over then." He lifted the old buck out of his cage and carried him to the walnut tree. Some things were even harder to figure than algebra. He found the blood stained pipe lying next to the tree's gnarled roots. It had been there all along. He knelt in the grass, looking away from the buck to his house. The house looked warm and

bright all lit up against the night. When he was done here, he would go inside and make it up to Ostie. He'd watch the look on her face when he told her to throw those papers away. Maybe he could get her to take that sampler down. He'd give the preacher a call tomorrow. Tell him God had spoken to him through a rabbit. The hell with that, he'd tell him right out he wasn't so old as he'd thought he was and not half as wise. He'd tell him something.

He wondered what Ostie was fixing for dinner.