

1989

Mainlining

Philip L. Simpson

Eastern Illinois University

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MAINLINING

(TITLE)

BY

Philip L. Simpson

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

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THESIS ABSTRACT

Mainlining

by

Philip L. Simpson

Mainlining is a collection of six original stories and a prose foreword. The six stories, each of which can stand on its own but when read together form a unified whole, divide into two sections. The first section introduces three main characters, and the second section details the various fortunes (and misfortunes) of these three main characters and additionally introduces a wide range of secondary characters. When analyzed as a group, these characters provide some insight into the collective experiences and emotions of the people living in Mainlining's fictional community of Lincoln.

Lincoln is a small city bearing more than a little resemblance to certain existing "rust-belt" areas found throughout the Midwest. The stories in Mainlining sketch a broad overview of the social, economic, and psychological pressures affecting the residents of a declining region, thus echoing the work of selected "regional" authors (for example, William Faulkner).

Mainlining's prose foreword briefly mentions some of the literary influences that have helped shape the stories in this collection. The foreword clarifies the creative

link between these stories and the inspirations given by authors such as Bret Harte, Stephen Crane, Mark Twain, Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, John Steinbeck, and Ken Kesey.

The first section, Origins, presents a teenager, known only as Jeff, as he is seen through the eyes of his closest friend, Scott Richards. The young Jeff, who will appear as an adult in later stories in the collection, is characterized by his fascination with death, which quickly grows into an obsession overshadowing the more traditional and "acceptable" concerns facing American teenagers. The progress of Jeff's obsession is watched by Jeff's puzzled friend, Scott. Scott is reserved, quiet: too afraid to let a girl named Doreen know he is interested in her. Jeff refuses to let Scott passively observe anymore and tries to shock him out of his reticence by, as Jeff calls it, "taking him along for the ride." What happens to Jeff and Scott during this time is told in the story "Roadkill," which comprises the first section.

The second section, Destinies, relates the events of approximately six years later in the lives of Jeff, Scott, and Doreen. The first story in Destinies, entitled "Starlet," takes place on the night when Doreen, former girlfriend of both Jeff and Scott, meets a human predator who specializes in small-town girls working in isolated bars. The second story, "Fishing," centers around Detective

Williams, a cop in the process of losing his perspective and who regains it through an investigation involving Doreen and Jeff. The third story, "New Semester," tells what happens when Scott comes back to Lincoln and renews his neglected friendship with Jeff. "Connection" is the next story, which describes one woman's wish that Jeff and Scott represent relief from Lincoln's dismal choices for existence. The last story in the collection, "The Toast," is Scott's goodbye to his friend Jeff.

The tone of the stories in this second section is one of resignation. The characters involved are fully aware of their limited options, and the ways in which they select their options form the interest of the stories.

To Paul Hemen, who would have understood, and to Angie
Jones, who does understand

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FOREWORD

For me, writing has always been a way to capture a given scene or set of scenes and give it permanence. It also serves as a way to show people or masses of people in conflict and the various human reactions engendered by such conflict. I have never used storytelling as a convenient tool to codify whatever my version of truth is or to construct clumsily authorial morality plays. It is not my intention to write essays that masquerade as fiction. What I attempt to do, with varying degrees of success, is to present reasonably accurate depictions of events as they might really happen and characters as they might really act. In this sense, I suppose that if a label must be given, my work strives to be realistic. However, I also tend toward the exaggerated, the sentimental, and the melodramatic. I'm not sure exactly why this is, but I've long since stopped apologizing for it and have tried creating a synthesis between realism and exaggeration. I do so by concentrating on the extremes, both in character and situation.

The first step in such a synthesis is to write about characters who lend themselves to such exaggeration. I have had the good fortune to encounter, and even be friends with, people who through sheer force of character seemed to impose their own internal programs upon the external flow of events. This can either be constructive or destructive,

depending upon the skill and inclination of the individual imprinter, but it is never boring. In a very real sense, people such as this are authors of their environments, and I try to capture something of their personalities in my own fictional characters.

I also find it necessary to write about situations that are readily explosive, either physically or psychologically. Such situations may not expand in the way some formalized fiction requires them to expand, but expand they will. There are many real-life situations that are inherently disastrous: the bar fight, the lovers' quarrel, the car with bad brakes, the business meeting, the final exam that hasn't been studied for, and so on. Any one of these situations could rapidly combust into something chaotic, frustrating, and usually completely different from what is expected. During such times, people experience what is known in the vernacular as "living on the edge." This refers, I believe, to the enhanced mental awareness of catastrophe that operates in times of crisis. It is this psychological region I am interested in exploring because I think characters reveal their components here. I want to know if a character is going to survive the crisis physically or psychologically. I do not morally judge a character for success or failure in this regard; what I am interested in is the character's process of survival or

non-survival. I write the story in order to see this process.

The ideal story setting for me, then, is one that provides a wealth of such "on-the-edge" situations. For this particular collection of stories, I have found the fictional setting of Lincoln, Illinois, to be such a setting. Lincoln is an economically sinking region, and the day-to-day desperation found in this type of area produces many extremes in human behavior. I believe these extremes have a characteristic regional stamp--in other words, the local variables shaping character are unique to a certain area. I have thus cast in my lot with the literary regionalists as well.

As a last guiding principle, I present the story and let the reader make of it what he or she will. I don't like stories that obviously force characters and situations into too-artificially escalated conflicts culminating in clearly defined climax or epiphany. I haven't seen many situations in life follow such orderly patterns, although the widespread appeal of art is due to its skillful imposition of pattern upon chaos. The real trick here for the writer is not to make this imposition a glaring intrusion. It is impossible to avoid authorial manipulation. It is in the nature of the beast, so to speak. What is possible is to hide the tricks authors use to create their alternate, orderly realities. Invention can be submerged skillfully

enough to make the reader forget he or she is being manipulated by an author. This is the fine line I try to walk; I want the reader to sense echoes of life's chaotic nature but also to discover a subtle pattern emerging. This pattern has to seem to be coming from the characters' reactions to the story's internal environment, not from me as an author.

This is exceedingly difficult to accomplish, and I have read widely in a search for guidance. In my attempts to learn writing from all kinds of authors, I have tended to gravitate toward authors commonly labelled as "realists" and "humorists" and "local colorists." For example, I have long been fond of Bret Harte, who wrote the famous short story "The Luck of Roaring Camp." He also wrote stories such as "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" and "The Idyl of Red Gulch." Harte is considered to be a local colorist or a sectional writer or a regional writer, depending upon which literary critic is doing the labelling, and my attraction toward his writing is based upon his melodramatic stories of the gold-mining days in the West and not upon his attempts to define morality with this setting. It is, in fact, Harte's rather heavy-handed moralizing which gives me my main reservations about Harte's skill as a writer. Regardless of this, his stories are humorous, and they certainly are colorful. They capture the flavor of a certain region even though that region may have been nothing like the way he

described it. This doesn't bother me (much). The technique he uses is valid. I have always enjoyed the following passage from "The Outcasts of Poker Flat":

A horseman slowly ascended the trail. In the fresh, open face of the newcomer Mr. Oakhurst recognized Tom Simson, otherwise known as "The Innocent," of Sandy Bar. He had met him some months before over a "little game," and had, with perfect equanimity, won the entire fortune--amounting to some forty dollars--of that guileless youth. After the game was finished, Mr. Oakhurst drew the youthful speculator behind the door and thus addressed him: "Tommy, you're a good little man, but you can't gamble worth a cent. Don't try it over again." He then handed him his money back, pushed him gently from the room, and so made a devoted slave of Tom Simson.

Mr. Oakhurst is a gambler who has been exiled with a group of others from the western town of Poker Flat. He is classically calm in temperament and always knows the "right" thing to do. His character is revealed perfectly in the preceding passage. He lives on the fringes of traditionally respectable behavior and yet refuses to take advantage of the naive Tom Simson on Oakhurst's field of combat. He has a code of conduct which suits him, so he operates according to its precepts. I have tried to incorporate something of this attitude into my own fictional character Jeff, appearing in this collection of stories.

Something else I find valuable in Harte's writing is his matter-of-fact reporting of incredible events. Spectacle is sufficient in and of itself without an author's

coaching. The following passage from "The Idyl of Red Gulch" is representative:

Sandy was very drunk. He was lying under an azalea bush, in pretty much the same attitude in which he had fallen some hours before. How long he had been lying there he could not tell, and didn't care; how long he should lie there was a matter equally indefinite and unconsidered. A tranquil philosophy, born of his physical condition, suffused and saturated his being.

Sandy, passed out in the street only a short distance from the local saloon, presents the kind of sight people stop to stare at. Harte figuratively stops to stare at him too in the story's development, but he does not describe this scene in sensationalistic terms. To do so would be overkill. This is another valuable technique I have tried to emulate. For example, in my story "Fishing," there is a scene where Detective Williams is called to the scene of a murder and later to a beach where a body has been discovered. I consciously tried to present the scenes in bare-bones (if you'll pardon the expression) detail.

Stephen Crane is another writer I have learned from. His work is commonly described as naturalistic. He also employs the matter-of-fact reporting technique Harte uses. This approach can be seen in his works Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, The Red Badge of Courage, and "The Open Boat," among others. The scene in The Red Badge of Courage where young Henry, confronted by his first battle,

flees in terror has always stood out vividly whenever I remember the story, yet the actual language Crane uses to describe this scene is understated. For example:

Directly he <Henry> began to speed toward the rear in great leaps. His rifle and cap were gone. His unbuttoned coat bulged in the wind. The flap of his cartridge box bobbed wildly, and his canteen, by its slender cord, swung out behind. On his face was all the horror of those things which he imagined.... He ran like a blind man. Two or three times he fell down. Once he knocked his shoulder so heavily against a tree that he went headlong.

By the physical details Crane chooses to describe, an impression of frantic speed is developed. The bulging coat, the flapping cartridge box, the swinging canteen--all of these reinforce the point that Henry is running for his life. Crane does not merely tell the reader Henry is terrified; he shows the reader this. It is through passages such as the preceding one that I learned the value of emphasizing certain external details to reflect a character's state of mind. From these selected details, a reader can draw his or her own inferences as to what the character must be experiencing. Yes, this is still authorial coaching, but it is of a subtle bent.

I read Crane for another reason: the sheer delight I feel as he sets up a scene's atmosphere. In his story "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky," I have always admired the skill

with which Crane structures his two rapidly converging plot elements. The story sets up Jack Potter on one side, Scratchy Wilson on the other, and then releases them to speed toward their confrontation. Potter, of course, is unaware of the fatal reception Wilson plans for him when he (Potter) arrives in the town of Yellow Sky. On the other hand, Wilson has a surprise waiting for him; he does not know Potter has married and given up his gun. Crane sets up a classic western scenario, wherein the lone gunman must face the lone lawman, and then completely foils all expectations of a melodramatic gunfight. This, to me, completely excuses the stereotypical nature of the story's plot and characters. This sense of expectation early in the story has been deliberately phrased in these overly dramatic terms. Crane enjoys setting up the reader with a stock western scene and then ending it with the unexpected. I can't help thinking Crane must have enjoyed writing passages such as the following one, which takes place in a saloon:

The drummer's tale was interrupted by a young man who suddenly appeared in the open door. He cried, "Scratchy Wilson's drunk, and has turned loose with both hands." The two Mexicans at once set down their glasses and faded out of the rear entrance of the saloon.

The drummer, innocent and jocular, answered: "All right, old man. S'pose he has? Come in and have a drink, anyhow."

But the information had made such an obvious cleft in every skull in the room that the drummer was obliged to see its importance.... "Say," said he, mystified, "what is this?".... "It means, my friend," <the young man> answered, as he came into the saloon, "that for the next two hours this town

won't be a health resort.".... "But say," <the drummer> cried, "what is this, anyhow? You don't mean there is going to be a gun-fight?"

"Don't know whether there'll be a fight or not," answered one man grimly; "but there'll be some shootin'--some good shootin'."

All of this dialogue is interspersed with descriptions of the saloon bartender pulling shutters over the windows and of the saloon patrons becoming quiet and gloomy. It is a scene rife with menace and foreboding, but it is also laced with humor. The increasingly nervous drummer, the gun-weary but resigned townspeople who have lived this before--the tension between these two opposing viewpoints produces this humor. The final confrontation between Potter and Wilson is also funny because of Wilson's complete befuddlement in light of the knowledge Potter is not carrying a gun. In this story, Crane uses the conventions of melodrama and then completely upsets them with an unexpected anticlimax. It is a technique I have tried to utilize in my stories "Fishing" and "The Toast." For example, Detective Williams does not resolve his case through inductive skill or his former rigid adherence to laws and codes. He follows an obvious trail left by a killer and finds he must let that killer (Jeff) go in order for some crude justice to prevail. Similarly, Willie Tipton, who is a violent and embittered thief, finds he can let a victim go once hunter and natural prey find some common middle ground.

Crane is also well known for his attempts to transcribe regional dialects as accurately as possible. Such attempts lend themselves to self-parody easily, and I'm not certain Crane successfully avoids this danger (especially in Maggie: A Girl of the Streets), but he does a conscientious job of remaining faithful to the spirit of the regional characters he is portraying through authorial devices such as dialect transcription. The following quote, from a secondary character in The Red Badge of Courage, is typical of Crane's efforts to render dialect:

"Oh, there may be a few of 'em run, but there's them kind in every regiment, 'specially when they first goes under fire.... Of course it might happen that the hull kit-and-kaboodle might start and run, if some big fighting came first-off, and then again they might stay and fight like fun. But you can't bet on nothing. Of course they ain't never been under fire yet, and it ain't likely they'll lick the hull rebel army all-to-oncet the first time; but I think they'll fight better than some, if worse than others. That's the way I figger."

From this and other writings, I was able to reassure myself I could write down what the people around me were saying, even if what I was hearing didn't exactly match the McGraw-Hill College Handbook grammar rules. It was okay to write ungrammatical sentences in quotes! This was quite a revelation to me. I applied this literary device with a vengeance, shocking and offending not a few teachers and readers during high-school writing classes with liberal

sprinklings of profanity, as well as ungrammatical constructions, throughout my fictional dialogues. After a while, the novelty of this wore off and I curtailed the extravagances, but I still have more than a little strong language in the dialogue of some of my characters. It has to be this way because that's the way I believe certain characters should be portrayed.

This, naturally enough, brings me to Samuel Langhorne Clemens, aka Mark Twain. He is one of the undisputed masters of writing convincing regional dialect. I don't think it's necessary to quote any of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn here, since the work is so well known, but Twain is able to make Huck and Jim sound authentic. For the sheer joy of watching a skilled artist at work, I have often reread the passages where Huck and Jim converse. These passages are infinitely more convincing to me than Crane's attempts at street speech in Maggie: A Girl of the Streets. I previously mentioned my attempts to record accurately the colloquialisms and quirks of the spoken language as it varies from region to region. I won't go much further into it here other than to say Twain does this recording with a seeming effortlessness that makes me feel envious and not a little inadequate in my attempts to do the same thing. I hate him a little for this, but neither can I stay away from his work.

Twain wrote extensively about the effects of environment on character; so, too, did Theodore Dreiser. Dreiser has a mechanistic view of human character as shaped by environment, a view which I lean toward in many of my own stories. This is not to say he doesn't recognize what we commonly refer to as spiritual or noble qualities. He simply doesn't have much faith in their long-term survival. His message is: go ahead, live the life of high ideals and good intentions and noble aspirations; this will be some consolation to you as a dim memory when the demands of survival reduce you to just another predator clawing economic and therefore physical existence out of a harsh environment. Sister Carrie is a famous example of Dreiser's treatment of this subject; Carrie manages to adapt to city life and survive, while Hurstwood ends up committing suicide, alone and unable to cope with his wretched existence any longer. In my own work, such fates are certainly possible but not quite as inevitable as Dreiser would have it. Adaptability is the hope for survival, and I think adaptability has many forms, not all of them savage. Witness, for example, the transformations (for lack of a better word) of Detective Williams in "Fishing," Willie Tipton in "The Toast," Scott in "New Semester," and Beth in "Connections."

Dreiser often writes about the conflict between what we have been conditioned to believe is moral and what we actually feel. This is a neurotic condition I find

fascinating to write about, and it is reflected in the following passage from his short story "Free":

And here was the rub with Mr. Haymaker, at least, that he could not make up his mind whether in his restlessness and private mental complaints he were not even now guilty of a great moral crime in so thinking. Was it not true that men and women should be faithful in marriage whether they were happy or not?.... The churches said so. Public opinion and the law seemed to accept this. There were so many problems...if people did not stick. Was it not best...for him to stand by a bad bargain rather than to cause so much disorder and pain, even though he lost his own soul emotionally? He had thought so...and yet--How often had he wondered over this?

This quiet torment is captivating, even if not particularly pleasant to read about. Passages such as the preceding one inspired me to infuse some of my own characters (notably Jeff, Scott, and Doreen) with doubts about the wisdom of socially dictated conscience. In the dichotomy between what is approved of by the enveloping culture and what is actually felt by the enveloped individual lies drama. I am often more concerned with exploring this concept in a story than I am with making sure the story proceeds in successively worsening plot conflicts terminating in resolution. As a representative example of this, note my story "Connection" in this collection.

Sherwood Anderson does an interesting twist on the short story format. In his collection of stories entitled Winesburg, Ohio, Anderson dispenses with the notion which

says a short story must be a unit in and of itself. He has also done away with the notion a story must have a clearly defined climax. He does not do away with the concept of story resolution itself; he subtly ends his stories and yet leaves the reader with the sense that there are still loose ends which will be taken up in his characters' ongoing lives. Anticlimax, or the unexpected, is so much a part of our lives I believe any attempt at realism must reflect this. These two notions, to me, are valuable tools for letting the writer free himself or herself of too-rigid formats.

In his introduction to the 1970 Viking Press edition of Winesburg, Ohio, Malcolm Cowley says: "In structure the book lies midway between the novel proper and the mere collection of stories....it is a cycle of stories with several unifying elements, including a single background, a prevailing tone, and a central character." This is the approach I have taken for this collection of short stories. Jeff is the character around whom the stories revolve; I suppose he is my spokesman for Lincoln, Illinois. Yet each story involves a situation distinctly separate from the other stories in the collection. It is Jeff's presence that connects them. This parallels the function Anderson's character George Willard fulfills in Winesburg, Ohio. George Willard is intellectual spokesman and father confessor to Anderson's town of "grotesques" (Anderson's

term). Anderson's characters are linked by their attraction to George. I have consciously mimicked this in my creation of Jeff.

There are further similarities. George inspires intellectual and physical action in his circle of grotesques, all of whom have previously been unable to express themselves. Jeff does this same service for his friends. At the end of Winesburg, Ohio, George leaves town, and his grotesques must carry on in the best ways they can. Jeff also "leaves town," albeit more dramatically and terminally, but the principle is the same.

In short, I find the structure of Winesburg, Ohio to be an effective one. I don't want to present an unrelated bundle of fragments in this collection of stories. The stories are unified to a certain extent, but hopefully they contain enough internal logic to stand on their own. This apparently has worked well for Anderson; stories from Winesburg, Ohio are often anthologized separate from the others. This dual structure (separate and yet part of a larger whole) of an individual story in a collection is a vital and engaging approach.

Ernest Hemingway also did something similar with the Nick Adams stories in the collection In Our Time. Each Nick Adams story is a freeze-frame of a certain stage in Nick's development. I have tried to utilize this same technique in my work. I appreciate the documentary feel

Hemingway gives to his writing, not just in the Nick Adams stories but in all his stories and novels. Much has been written about Hemingway's style, but suffice it to say he provides a bare minimum of words to describe the situations he is writing about. The reader has to fill in much of the minute detail because Hemingway has only provided an outline of it. This technique produces a style that is deceptively simple. Great complexity underlies a Hemingway story; the reader is given hints of the subtext throughout but is largely left to discover it on his or her own. It may seem odd to mention Hemingway and subtlety in the same sentence, but his work is indeed subtle. It suggests richness of detail and emotion without hitting the reader over the head with it. His story "Hills Like White Elephants" is a classic example, one I have gone over again and again to see just how he crammed so much story into so few words. The woman in the story, who is soon to have an abortion, never really directly states the turmoil she is experiencing. She strongly hints at it, and the reader gets the message even if her lover doesn't. Abortion itself is never mentioned, yet there is no doubt abortion is the issue once all the clues are gathered. I believe this to be a far more effective approach than the kind of overwrought exposition which may sometimes plague stories. I have used this technique extensively in my collection of stories, particularly in "Starlet." Much of my character Doreen's

life is only hinted at, and those hints only occur at points in the text where those particular subjects in her life would either come to mind or be mentioned. I have tried to do this with all my stories.

Hemingway is also a practitioner of the anticlimax. Many of his stories just leave off, much in the style of Sherwood Anderson. Again, I think this is vital to the style of mixed realism-determinism I have tried to develop. Resolution of conflict is not quite clearcut in many of life's complex situations. I have always liked the ending of Hemingway's "The Killers":

"It's an awful thing," Nick said.
They did not say anything. George reached down for a towel and wiped the counter.
"I wonder what he did?" Nick said.
"Double-crossed somebody. That's what they kill them for."
"I'm going to get out of this town," Nick said.
"Yes," said George. "That's a good thing to do."
"I can't stand to think about him waiting in the room and knowing he's going to get it. It's too damned awful."
"Well," said George, "you better not think about it."

And that's the end. I can fill in the rest. Hemingway doesn't belabor the point. Anticlimactic? Yes. Effective? Most definitely. In my story "Starlet," the central character is killed by an out-of-town drifter. I take the story right up to the point where Johnny reveals himself to be a murderer, although I don't show the actual murder

itself. The story is concerned with recounting how Doreen let herself be picked up by this man. The reader can imagine what will happen next, which in most cases will be more horrific than anything the writer can conjure up. Hemingway is quite instructional in the nuances of this technique.

My story "Fishing" is a tribute to one of William Faulkner's stories, "Hand Upon the Waters." Faulkner's story concerns an investigation into a rural murder and leads to a conclusion wherein justice is not served by the letter of the law. The story occurs in Yoknapatawpha County in July and takes the reader through a series of meetings with the rustic characters Faulkner is renowned for creating. In spirit, "Fishing" parallels this outline.

Faulkner has also given me a model which I can draw from in writing about Lincoln, Illinois. He has used his fictional Yoknapatawpha County (inspired by Lafayette County in Mississippi) as a setting for many stories and novels. He chronicles the various experiences that befall selected characters living in the region. Being one of the finest regional authors, he gives an authentic feel to the speech and actions of his southern characters. I am especially intrigued by his descriptions of the more degraded southern clans. As I Lay Dying, one of his most acclaimed works, typifies his treatment of the "white trash" theme. Violence, both physical and psychological, also plays a prominent role in Faulkner's fictional world. I have

consciously tailored the town of Lincoln and outlying areas to echo these Faulknerian tones.

Another regional author, John Steinbeck, has extensively described life in Monterey, California. His collection of stories entitled Tortilla Flat is an amusing example. Here is another work that blurs the distinction between the short story collection and the novel. The stories relate separate events; however, they are also connected by the continuing presence of colorful characters such as Danny and Pilon. These characters are presented in decidedly sympathetic terms, even though they are in fact "bums" and "drunks." Sometimes I think Steinbeck goes a little far in his romanticization of slum life, but I do try to follow his example and treat my own disreputable characters with sympathy. After all, bums are caring human beings like the rest of us, as detailed in the following passage from Tortilla Flat:

These were his friends, <the Pirate> told himself in the night, when the house was dark, when the dogs snuggled close to him so that all might be warm. These men loved him so much that it worried them to have him live alone. The Pirate often had to repeat this to himself, for it was an astounding thing, an unbelievable thing. His wheelbarrow stood in Danny's yard now, and every day he cut his pitchwood and sold it. But so afraid was the Pirate that he might miss some word his friends said in the evening...that he had not visited his hoard for several days to put the new coins there.

This is typical of the terms in which Steinbeck presents his characters. He looks toward life's unfortunates, reprobates, and dispossessed to find what is called, for lack of a better term, the human spirit.

Of course, Steinbeck's famous The Grapes of Wrath strongly promotes this view. The Joad family's trek to California is obviously intended to be as inspirational to the reader as it is arduous to the Joads. The Joads even have a Christ figure with them--Casy the preacher, whose initials just happen to be J.C. A little of this type of thing goes a long way, but I still can't help but romanticize my characters to a certain extent. I find in them the strength of humans under pressure. For example, among the characters in this collection, there is Jeff, who is violent but loyal to his few friends. Beth, another character in the collection, endures mental and physical abuse through her imaginative link with Jeff and Scott, who both seem somehow removed from the squalor of Lincoln life. Of course, the reason Scott seems so removed from it all is that he has removed himself from everything. In order not to be noticed, he makes himself "invisible." Yet it is this protective passivity which is his greatest obstacle to receiving any satisfaction or enjoyment from life. With Jeff's help, Scott begins to experience life instead of observe it. Doreen, though a victim in the end, seeks to escape her unpleasant reality through imaginative flights of

romance. Imagination provides another character, Willie Tipton, with momentary relief from hatred for a class of people. He is able to recognize the essential human-ness of another person by realizing he can share an emotion, grief, with a person he believes he should hate.

I don't subscribe to the simplified notion that plight and poverty ennoble people, but I do find the simple act of endurance to be inspiring. Steinbeck seems to, as well. Quoted out of context, his character Tom Joad's last speech to Ma in The Grapes of Wrath sounds overdone, but I can't help liking it:

..."I'll be all aroun' in the dark. I'll be ever'where--wherever you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there.... I'll be in the way guys yell when they're hungry and they know supper's ready. An' when our folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the houses they build--why, I'll be there. See? God, I'm talkin' like Casy. Comes of thinkin' about him so much."

It is true this passage is sentimental and romantic. I have a weakness toward such things in spite of my naturalistic and deterministic leanings (or maybe because of them), so I've decided to live with it and try to do the best I can in writing it as skillfully as Steinbeck could.

Speaking of romantic and overblown, I haven't talked about Ken Kesey and One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest yet. I have always admired this novel for many reasons, but one

of the biggest reasons is its structure. I think the novel is greatly effective when told through Chief Bromden. His impressions of McMurphy are the true story here. The psychological change in the Chief forms the novel's interest. I don't think the novel would work as well if it allowed the reader free access to McMurphy's thoughts. He doesn't change much, unless you count what the Combine does to him at the novel's end. It is the change he effects in others that captivates.

For exactly this reason, none of my stories in this collection is told from Jeff's point of view. I am more interested in seeing how he affects others. This allows me to present a wide range of opinions about Jeff because everyone sees him differently. This subjective impression of another person is well illustrated by the following passage from One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest:

<McMurphy> shrugged his shoulders and with a loud sigh slapped both hands down on his knees and pushed himself standing out of the chair. He stretched and yawned and scratched the nose again and started strolling across the day-room floor to where <Nurse Ratched> sat by the Nurses' Station, heisting his pants with his thumbs as he walked. I could see it was too late to keep him from doing whatever fool thing he had in mind, and I just watched, like everybody else. He walked with long steps, too long, and he had his thumbs hooked in his pockets again. The iron in his boot heels cracked lightning out of the tile. He was the logger again, the swaggering gambler, the big redheaded brawling Irishman, the cowboy out of the TV set walking down the middle of the street to meet a dare.

McMurphy is larger than life to the Chief: doubly ironic when you consider the Chief physically towers over McMurphy. McMurphy gives the essentially passive Chief courage, and McMurphy's eventual defeat forces the Chief to be independent, even if this temporary independence can only result in what happened to McMurphy. Much the same thing happens with my characters Jeff and Scott throughout the course of the stories.

So, in conclusion, I have been painfully learning some valuable lessons from many authors. It is difficult to integrate all of these styles into some semblance of my own style, and I know the process is far from finished. This knowledge is alternately depressing and inspiring: depressing because I want to be the best I can be RIGHT NOW, and inspiring because I know stopping means stagnation. I do know a few things. One is that I want my stories to resemble "reality" as closely as possible. Another is that I want to include more description. To this end I am reading "visual" authors such as James Dickey, Tom Wolfe, and Jean Toomer. The last thing I know is I have a long way to go before I will be in any sense confident of my authorial voice, but I won't stop looking for it. I am too much in love with the creation of character and situation.

If I can convince a reader what he or she has read just might have happened the way I have related it, then I will be momentarily successful in my writing aspirations. But only momentarily. There will always be more stories.

ORIGINS

ROADKILL

It was a closed casket service, of course. It couldn't have been anything else. Not even after the best efforts of the local post-mortem plastic surgeon, an inappropriately jolly old bastard named Shafer who ran the Shafer Home of Eternal Rest. It was said that he could put the bloom of color back into the shrunken cheeks of a cadaverous cancer victim or patch up all but the worst damage done to the latest casualty of the Drinking and Driving crowd. But not this time.

It seemed like everyone knew the story. And of course everyone suddenly loved the memory of the late, lamented Brad Gunther and began to cherish the all-too-brief moments that they had spent in his saintly company. What the papers didn't print, and what no one would say, was that Brad Gunther was a mean son-of-a-bitch whom everybody in the entire school had been afraid of. His idea of an uproariously funny practical joke had been to blow up stray cats with firecrackers. His greatest joy was to break some running back's ribs during the football games. I know, I just know, that most of the freshmen breathed silent and guilty sighs of relief when they heard that the biggest, baddest senior of them all had been ripped in half by a semi. A semi that didn't really give a shit about Brad's

four years of varsity football and state championship wrestling.

I was a little more honest than most of them. I had always hated Gunther, for many reasons, and I wasn't about to let his death make me recognize what a swell guy he had actually been. Whenever I began to feel too sorry for him, I would remember how he had beaten some little freshman geek to the point of hospitalization. I can still hear the way the kid screamed when Gunther broke out his front teeth. The kid wouldn't tell anyone what had happened to him; he was that scared of Gunther. Even with all this, I had never really wanted Brad Gunther to die. But when he did, I sure didn't lose much sleep. The most his death meant to me was that we got out of school for a day. The day of the funeral.

I didn't want to go to the funeral. I was going to use the time to go cruise the mall, buy books or something, eat some pizza. Anything but pretend that I had liked Brad Gunther and that I would miss him. But Jeff wanted to go, and that puzzled me. Jeff wasn't any fan of Brad Gunther's, either. Jeff had always called him a bloodthirsty asshole with a taste for raw meat (preferably freshman).

Jeff insisted on going, though. Since I usually hung around with Jeff a lot, I sacrificed my principles and went to Brad Gunther's funeral. Probably more to make sure he was dead than anything else. And to humor Jeff.

All the way to the church, Jeff talked about what had happened to Brad Gunther. I still remember Jeff's face as he drove us there. He was staring at the road rather than seeing it, and he wasn't talking to me so much as to himself. He talked about The Accident.

The story Jeff told was common knowledge. It had been whispered back and forth, all the way from seniors to freshmen and back again. It was a story guaranteed to bring gasps of horror from wide-eyed cheerleaders and countless verbal variations on the theme of "How terrible!" What had happened, in verifiable truth, was this. Brad Gunther had been driving home from school when his parent-financed Camaro inexplicably swerved into the opposite lane. A semi rig operating out of Hyster's had been coming right toward him. The Camaro had smashed into the rig's grill and then was pushed under the rig's front tires. There were two basic accounts of what this had done to Brad (besides kill him). One was that he had been decapitated. Another was that he had been torn in half. I had heard both stories. All I knew was that if your car gets crushed flat under a semi, you are probably not going to leave a good-looking corpse. Whatever had happened to Gunther, it was enough to get old man Shafer to admit defeat and hold a closed casket service.

Jeff was fascinated by The Accident. At the time, while we were driving to the church, I supposed it was

merely because someone we knew, someone our own age and from our own high school class, had been killed. I remember being a little startled by Jeff's obsession with the gorier details of Gunther's spectacular demise. He talked about little else during that drive.

"Just think of it, man," I remember him saying. "I wonder how quick it was. Did he know what was happening to him? Did he live long enough to feel himself rip apart? I mean, Jesus, what would you think about during something like that?"

I didn't say anything. To tell the truth, I didn't much like to think about what the poor bastard had gone through in his last seconds. Just because I hated him didn't mean I wanted to see him torn in half. Or maybe I did and felt so guilty about it that I didn't want to think about it anymore. I still don't know. Either way, I didn't really get into Jeff's obsession with the subject.

On and on he went. "I wonder what it looked like? You know, before the rescue guys cleaned it up. There would be a shitload of blood, all over the glass, boiling on the engine. I wonder if he lived long enough to see that?"

I looked at Jeff. He was worrying me a little. Maybe his was a healthy reaction, but I doubted it. You weren't supposed to think about stuff like that, were you? I mean, when you're 17 years old, who wants to think about dying? But Jeff did. I had never really noticed it before. That

conversation with him on the way to the church was the start of it. Things got bad in a hurry after that. Or maybe they always had been and it took something like Gunther's accident to bring things to a head. To make me notice.

We got to the church and sat through the funeral. All our classmates were there, or at least most of them. And most of the faculty and all of the coaching staff and about three hundred relatives and assorted townspeople. It was one of the largest funerals in the history of the area. A real standing-room-only affair. Newspaper reporters were there. I had already seen the headlines during the past two days. STAR ATHLETE DIES IN HEAD-ON COLLISION. PROMISING AREA STUDENT KILLED IN ACCIDENT. You know the type. It just goes to show you that not even brutal sadism and severe personality defects can keep you from being popular if you know how to play football well enough.

I spent most of the funeral day-dreaming. But not Jeff. He was intent on the action. I know he was disappointed he couldn't somehow sneak a look into the casket. I had a vivid mental image of Jeff sweeping the floral displays from the coffin lid, smashing open the hasp or lock or whatever the hell it is, and then throwing open the lid. Whenever I tried to think of how Brad Gunther did look beneath that polished wood surface, I just couldn't do it. But I'm sure that Jeff could. I'm sure he knew exactly, and I'm just as sure it was frustrating to him that

he couldn't look beneath that lid and confirm the accuracy of his vision.

As soon as the formal service was over, I dragged Jeff through the crowd and back to his car. He didn't want to go. But I sure as hell didn't want to stick around and talk to our classmates about how great Brad Gunther was and what a goddamn tragedy this was. It would have been my luck for some reporter to try to interview me for my reaction to this terrible event. All I wanted to do was to leave the whole mess behind: to bury Brad Gunther and let things get back to normal.

Which, of course, they did. They tell me that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. This certainly held true at the high school. For all the hysterics and teeth-gnashing and PA eulogies that occurred before the funeral, things became quiet again real quick. Brad Gunther was in his grave, and he was now simply another glorious chapter in Lincoln High School history. We all had too much to do to think about dying for very long. You know, we had to drink and smoke and tell lies about how much trim we were getting. The King of Turd Mountain was dead, and there were those who missed him and more who didn't, but he was no longer a factor in anyone's calculations, except for the fact that he was missing. The football team had to figure out a way to win without him, so they did, and they dedicated the season to him as a sentimental formality and

then promptly went out and played and didn't think much about him at all. The freshmen had one less tyrant to fear, so Gunther didn't even have that left. There were plenty of other assholes ready, willing, and able to take over as Dickhead in Charge of Freshmen Intimidation. The girls Gunther had fucked soon found other guys who replaced him in their memories and in their busy beds. I heard that his circle of buddies would give him a toast of Red, White, and Blue every now and then, but there was a helluva lot more to do than sit around and drink beer to a guy they hadn't really liked so much as feared.

The only way you knew that Brad Gunther had been there at all was this one plaque they hung up in the high school's lobby with all the basketball, football, and track trophies. The plaque was wooden and uncomplicated, with only his picture on it and some idiotic poem under the picture. In the picture (which I suppose is still hanging there), Brad was wearing his football jersey and pads and holding his helmet under one muscular arm. His blonde hair hung down to his eyebrows, and whoever took the picture had managed to catch him smiling. At least the corners of his mouth were turned up. It was a mean little smirk, and I'm sure he had probably been thinking about how he had fucked the principal's daughter the night before, or how he had made some little bastard sing the Greenie song and then beaten the crap out of him anyway.

One day, about a week and a half after the funeral, I was walking through the lobby on the way to the gym, and there was Jeff looking at the plaque. I said hi and then stopped beside him. Jeff kept looking at the plaque while we were talking about what to do that weekend, and it was distracting as hell. Finally, I said, "What the hell do you want to look at him for? Didn't you see enough of him while he was here?"

Jeff smiled and gave up pretending to talk about the weekend. It just wasn't important to him right then. He had been looking at the plaque, and I was only interrupting him. He said, "I've got to get to class, man. I'll call ya tonight. We'll set something up." And he walked off, leaving me there to look at the plaque and wonder what it was Jeff saw there.

That night, Jeff did call me. I was glad, because I was actually trying to do some algebra homework, and any reason to put it off was good enough for me. I thanked Jeff for bailing me out of my homework and thus keeping me sane. He laughed, and I remember feeling one of those moments of affection you'll sometimes get for no reason in particular except that your friend is good people and you've really got something cool here. His laugh was like that. He never faked it.

"Wach you wanna do Friday?" he asked.

"Preferably get laid, but I guess if I can't I'll run around with you."

"Then I'll definitely see you Friday."

"No way. Guess you struck out there, too. You've gotta get some help somewhere."

"Hey, no shit. The callouses on my right hand ain't from workin', pal."

"Well, why don't we see if we can get you laid. Let's go cruise Main."

Now there's one thing you have to know about Main if you're not from around Lincoln. Main Street, as you can probably figure out from the name, cuts right through town. Past all the fast food joints and the Coca Cola plant and the gas stations and the car washes, all the way out past the VA hospital and the community college. Main Street eventually leads out into the country and the corn fields, where it becomes just plain ol' Route 150 again. Its moment of glory, though, is that stretch of a couple of miles where it runs through town. All the kids load up in their cars and turn their music up loud and roll down the windows. And then they drive up and down Main. That's all. A good night of cruising, that lasts a few hours and involves at least one car chase, will take you up and down that road at least a hundred times. You start right when you come into town at the first stoplight, you turn around at the Burger Chef two miles ahead, and then you go back to where you started. And

you do it again. And again. It sounds like a shitty time, and believe me, it can be, but still there's something to recommend it. Mainly the faint but not impossible hope that you're going to meet somebody who's worth meeting.

"Cruising Main sounds fine to me," I told him. "I'm hurtin'."

"There are other things in life besides getting laid."

"Yeah right. Don't give me that shit. When's the last time you got laid?"

"This morning."

"You lying sack of shit! With who? I want a name!"

"Doreen."

That was bullshit too. Doreen was one of the hottest girls at the school, but she was a virgin if I had ever seen one. You know, honors student, in by ten o'clock, the whole works. Of course, Jeff knew that I knew he was bullshitting me, so it wasn't like he was trying to pull one over on me. I told him to fuck off, he replied in kind, and we hung up. I returned to my beloved algebra, but I still couldn't concentrate on it. I was thinking about Jeff. Not just about what we were going to do Friday, but about who he was.

You see, Jeff and I were best friends from an early age. The whole American childhood tradition: Cub Scouts at nine, Boy Scouts at twelve. Staying overnight at each other's house, forcing the parents to take us to movies. We even stayed friends through the social turmoils and general

upheavals of high school. We always managed to keep from stealing each other's girls or getting in with different groups that would have split us apart. The first time I got drunk was with Jeff. We got high together the first time. Jeff got a car first and became my tireless chauffeur until I was able to get my own car. In general, we were prime examples of classical childhood and adolescent male-bonding. I had so many memories of him it was hard to settle on any one in particular. We had never really had to work at our friendship; it just happened. That night I was trying to concentrate on algebra, but I kept thinking about him. For the first time I could remember, it hit me I had known Jeff for years. For a long time. More than half my life. I was seventeen, and I had known Jeff for so long that I felt old.

I also thought I knew him, which turned out not to be the case.

I looked forward to Friday all that week. I suffered through a schoolday on Friday that took forever. I pretended to listen to the idiotic bullshit our teachers spoonfed us. And think about what might happen that night. Of course, the ultimate goal was getting laid, but there were about a thousand different ways that could happen. It was great to think about them, and I didn't fuck up my daydreaming too much with thinking about everything that could go wrong with these plans (which, truth be told, was usually what happened to most of our grand plans).

The sixth hour bell rang at three. Since seniors could leave early, I said goodbye to everyone, ran out to the parking lot, hopped in my Ford Fiesta, and raced home as fast as you can race in a Fiesta, which on a good day when it's feeling healthy is about 50 mph. I don't know why I was so goddamn excited and running around like that because we weren't going out until about eight. It just seemed important to get ready as fast as I could. Which was a mistake, because I was showered and dressed by five and had to kill another three hours. It was impossible to concentrate on a book or the tube, so I spent most of the time pacing around my room, staring at the posters on the wall and checking myself out in the mirror.

I only spent about an hour in my room before I got sick of that, too. I decided to unbarricade myself and wander out into the kitchen and dining room area to see what Mom and Dad were up to. They were okay, Mom and Dad were, when we all could back off long enough from our assigned roles. I hadn't been in too much shit with them lately, so I felt comfortable going out there just to bullshit around. Maybe helping Mom fix supper and rapping with Dad would help kill the time until Jeff got there. I sure wasn't doing real well on my own.

So I left my den and walked down the hallway toward the kitchen. Halfway down the hallway, I overheard Mom mention

my name. She was obviously talking to Dad, and they evidently hadn't heard me come out of my room.

So I did the natural thing. I didn't make a sound, and I listened to them talk about me. What would anyone else have done? That's right--the same thing.

"....Scott doesn't talk about it much" was the first clear string of words I could hear, and this was from Dad. The bend in the hallway really messed up the sounds from the kitchen, and I had to really strain to hear. I even had to hold my breath because my breathing was too loud for me to hear them half the time.

"I know, but it's got to bother him. Don't you think?" This from Mom. I could hear her moving plates around and clinking silverware together.

"I imagine it does, but I wouldn't worry too much. Kids don't. He'll be OK."

"How could it not worry him? The Gunther boy was the same age."

Jesus Christ. When I realized what they, or more specifically, Mom, sounded so damned worried sick about, I almost laughed right then and blew the whole act. If they could only know just how much I didn't give a shit about Brad Gunther, alive or dead. Were they actually worried that this was some deep psychic scar I would always carry around? Give me a break here.

For some reason, I could tell that Dad had put his hand on Mom's shoulder when he next answered her. "I don't think he knew him that well. I don't think they ran around that much."

I grimaced to myself in the hallway. Not for the first time, it hit me how little parents can see where their kids fit into the local pecking orders and how long it's been since said parents have been in high school pecking orders themselves. The thought of me and my buddy Brad hanging out in the school parking lot, drinking beers and telling pussy jokes, was hysterical in a black humor kind of way. And yet Dad wasn't sure if I ran around with him or not.

"Yes, Chris, but they were almost the same age, and it's got to be a shock to Scott." I could tell Mom had found her track on this particular issue and wasn't going to let it go that easily.

"Maybe so. It's hard to tell with him. He's a quiet one. But he hasn't been staying in worrying about it. He's been going out, running around with Jeff, and just too busy being a kid to worry about it. I really think he'll be OK. If he wants to talk about it bad enough, he will."

"That's not good enough. He'll talk to his friends, but he won't talk about something like that to us. It's too personal. God, Chris, when we talked about sex with him that one time, he was too embarrassed to really talk to us again for a month. You know that."

"Hon," he said in that pleading tone you always swear you will never use with your own girl and you always do. "What do you want to do? Sit down and press him about it? There's no faster way to shut him up."

This had gotten all a little too personal for me. They hadn't said anything major yet, but I could tell things were drifting that way. I didn't want them to end up getting me appointments with any of the Lincoln shrinks (and believe me, that town needed and still needs them). So I backed up several steps and began loudly walking toward the kitchen again. I made sure to bounce off a bookcase along the way. Nothing too dramatic, just a rattle of trinkets on the top shelf to let them know the Teenage Basket Case was dragging himself and his shattered psyche into their loving and sympathetic presence. By the time I turned the bend and walked into the kitchen, the two of them looked for all the world like they were too busy getting supper ready to be talking to each other.

Mom was stirring her sauce with too-serious concentration, like it was some job that took all of her combined physical and mental strength. She let me stand there for a few seconds, and then she looked up with big, wide, bright eyes, just like she didn't know I had been standing there for a few seconds waiting for her to look up.

"Hello, dear," she said. She smiled, and I've got to admit she had a really nice smile. My mom was pretty, in a

forty-year-old kind of way, and Dad had every right to show her off to his golfing buddies. Pretty or not, though, she had never been quite able to handle a teenage son. I was an alien creature to her, and I was always surprised to find out how wrong she always was about me. Like with my deep depression over the death of my dear friend Brad Gunther.

Dad was pulling glasses out of the cabinet over the sink. He glanced idly my way, said "Hi, son", and then put the three glasses down on the formica counter. He didn't dare look at me longer. I could always tell when Dad was lying. He was shitty at it. I guess that's a compliment. I don't think he had the heart for it, just like he always hated having to be a dad instead of a regular guy. I know there were times when he wanted to buy me a beer.

"Hi guys." My standard greeting. Might as well play the game. "When's grub?"

"Patience," Mom said. "You're always eating. You ate when you got home from school. Right before you shut yourself up in your room all afternoon."

Something in her tone made me paranoid; she probably thought I was in there beating off, and even thinking that my mother could think that (which, of course, I had no way of knowing that she did) made me start to blush and look real guilty. Trying to fight away a blush only makes it worse.

Fortunately, Dad came to the rescue. I think all dads have some sort of primitive trace memories of how it was to be seventeen, even if they can't remember it very clearly, and they just sort of instinctively bail you out of shit like that. Dad said, "Come on, Helen. He's a kid and he's gotta eat. He's too damn skinny as it stands. Too much time in the shower is why. Going out tonight?"

"Yep."

Dad stopped shoving glasses around long enough to ask me directly, "Got a date, or you going stag?"

I shrugged. I didn't really want to admit I didn't have a date, but Jeff was coming over to pick me up, so I couldn't really lie about it. "Me and Jeff are gonna go meet some girls up on Main."

Dad smiled. I thought sure he was gonna say "No date, huh?" but he didn't. I had a minute of wonder when I realized he knew that I was going to go out and try to get laid. No dates, no fancy dinners, no cute little boy going out to pick up Susie for the prom. The kid was going to try to get fucked, and I knew Dad knew. Jesus, that was a weird feeling. Not unpleasant, exactly, but I felt I had been seen too clearly.

So, to get away from that feeling, I helped set the table, and Dad brought out the spaghetti noodles and sauce. We sat down to eat and didn't talk much, which was cool. I was beginning to think I might get out of there when I saw,

from the corner of my eye, that Mom kept looking at me and then at Dad. She was working up to saying something.

Shit, I thought, and tried to get done in a hurry so I could excuse myself and get back to my room. But Mom had a diabolical sense of timing this round. She let me sweat the last few bites of supper and even let me put my fork down on my empty plate before she said, "Scott, how do you feel about this Brad Gunther thing?"

Goddamnit, the guy was haunting me at my own dinner table. Somehow, he had gotten himself into my life in a way he never would have if he hadn't been killed. I could take him when he was charging around the hallways playing deathcamp guard. It was too much when my best friend kept talking about him and when my own mother and father began discussing me in terms of him. I thought of all this right when Mom mentioned his name, and I suppose it was this that made me say too strongly, "Okay."

Mom never looked away from me, and I couldn't take that stare. Dad reacted to my overreaction by staring at me, right along with Mom. Great. This was going to turn into an issue now.

"How well did you know him?" Mom asked, never looking away. It was her earnest I'm-your-mother-and-I'm-going-to-help-you look. It pissed me off and at the same time made me feel guilty.

"Not very." I looked all around the table, back at Mom, back down at the table. I couldn't help it. How long can you look at a look like that? "Just saw him around the hallways."

"Does it bother you?"

"Naw, not really. Like I say, I didn't know him real well."

"Death is part of life, Scott," my mother assured me solemnly. It was cliché time. "I know that's hard to accept at your age, when everything's still ahead of you, and it's probably a shock to know that someone your age can die, someone who still had his life ahead of him...."

"Mom, I'm tellin' ya, I didn't know him that well. It wasn't like a friend dyin' or something."

I had to stop her. She was being as serious as she had been when she had sat me down with Dad and they had both taken the tag-team approach to telling me about sex. First sex, now death. The two great constants, and parents sometimes act like they think you don't know shit about either. I wished Mom would've recognized I'd been hearing this stuff for years and spared us both.

She was on a roll, though. It was time to enlighten her son about some Basic Truths. She said, "But you can't dwell on it. You can't let it get you down. You have to realize death is the natural end of life and accept it."

Accidents happen, and we can't prevent them. But we can go on and not let things like this get to us. Right?"

"Sure." Better to agree sometimes.

"It's terrible, what happened to that boy, and I won't lie to you and say something like this won't ever happen to people you do know. But you can't think about it. It's not natural to think about it too much. That's hard to remember when something like this happens, but you have to remember it. Okay?"

I smiled, like a good little son. "Okay, Mom."

Dad said, "I remember something like this happened at my high school, Scott. One of the girls in my class was shot by her boyfriend. Horrible tragedy. We were all shook up by it for awhile. Jesus, you'd have thought a tornado wiped out half the town, the way people carried on about it. But just a few days later there were other things to do. Homework, dances, so on. It sounds corny, kid, but life goes on."

"I know that, Dad."

Mom reached her hand over to my arm. I tried not to flinch. Her hand was warm. "Just be careful. You're at a dangerous age. We worry about you all the time. We know that you have to go out and run around, and get into trouble, and do all sorts of other things. That's fine. But don't get into something you can't handle. Be careful

when you drive, or when you and Jeff go driving around. We don't want you to get into a wreck. Okay?"

I nodded and tried to look sincere. I didn't want to get into a wreck either, but there's something about those goddamned parental lectures that really makes you all defensive inside and you can't listen to the fucking things. I said, "Okay, Mom."

"Promise?"

"Yeah, promise."

"Okay."

Sensing the end-of-lecture time, I said, "Well, I've gotta get ready for Jeff to pick me up." And I made my escape.

Locked in my room with the stereo jamming, though, I was able to back off from the whole thing and relax a little bit. Yeah, I knew they loved me and were just trying to watch out for me in their own clumsy way. Forty some odd years is a long way from seventeen, and in many ways we would never look at the same incident and see the same thing, but they seemed to be trying a little harder than I was. I even got to feeling a little bad for running away from them like that. I made a vow for about the millionth time to loosen up and be more of a friendly son. The next day. That night, there was Main Street.

A few minutes before Jeff was supposed to get there, I decided to go outside to wait for him. This would do two

things. First of all, I could just get in the car when Jeff got there and he wouldn't have to screw around with getting out of the car and talking to Mom and Dad like a polite little teenager. Second, and most important, I could swipe some of Dad's beer out of the small fridge in the garage while I was waiting for Jeff to get there. I usually brought along the beer whenever Jeff drove--my way of kicking in for gas money.

So I put on my jacket and went out into the front room. Dad was reading some kind of history book--he was a big WW II buff--and Mom was watching one of those idiotic World Premiere Friday Night movies. As I came out there, Mom looked away from the TV and said, "Doesn't he look good tonight?"

Shit. I remembered this scene from when I was five years old and Mom would get me up in some little blue suit and coo over "What a little gentleman!" I was. Right before she would go for a camera. I had the horrible feeling she was going to do just that when I came out in the front room. I managed a weak smile for her benefit.

Dad looked up from his book. For some reason I noticed in the overhead lighting that his hair was getting pretty thin. He said, "Need any money?"

I did, but I had about run through my twenty-buck-a-week allowance in a matter of a few days, and I was too embarrassed to admit it. So I told him that no, I was doin'

okay. He nodded, said to "have a good time and be careful," and then went back to his book. Mom said to "call if you're going to be in past midnight." I nodded and went out the door before she could hug me goodbye. Once outside, I realized that I had been holding my breath. The screen door banged shut behind me. The bang echoed off the siding.

I made sure Mom and Dad weren't looking outside and then went into the garage at the end of the driveway. Dad kept the garage real neat because he was always messing around with his car for some reason or another. There was never really anything wrong with the damn thing, but he was always tuning it and cleaning the plugs and generally being a perfectionist. I think he got off on it. And since there was nothing like a cold one after a hard day's work (he said that a lot), he always kept at least a twelve-pack of Bud in the fridge on top of the workbench. He would usually look the other way if I took some for a party or something. That night, I grabbed a six-pack.

Then I went outside and waited in the driveway for Jeff. As usual, he was right on time. His car rolled up to the house at exactly eight o'clock. Jeff had a '79 Cutlass, and the bastard could really move. Jeff had bought it from some old couple down the block and really fixed it up. He had had it repainted dark blue and installed a way-too-loud stereo system. You could hear that stereo long before you heard the engine (an engine which, by the way, a friend of

Jeff's had revamped for free dope). Jeff was proud of his cruising vessel. I do believe he loved that car more than his mom and dad. As I watched him pull the Cutlass over to me, I knew I loved the Cutlass myself. It was streamlined and it was loud and it held good memories for me.

I trotted over to the passenger door, the beer wedged under my right arm. Jeff leaned across the seat and cracked the door open for me. I got an arm inside the door, pushed it open, and slid inside.

"There he is," Jeff said. "And prepared, too."

"Don't leave home without it," I said, holding the beer up momentarily by its plastic connective rings.

"Jesus, hold that down. If your mom sees that, she'll come out here and have my ass busted for contributing to the delinquency of her innocent little boy."

"Don't worry. Whenever I go out for the night, I know Dad jumps her bones the second I leave the door. They wouldn't know it if we had a fucking party out here."

"Man, that's disgusting. I can't even imagine my mom and dad together. Jesus! I don't think they do it anymore."

"I can't blame 'em. Look what happened," I said, indicating Jeff. Jeff aimed a lazy punch at my arm, which I easily escaped. The formalities of greeting were over, so we could go cruise.

Jeff backed the Cutlass out of my driveway onto the residential street. He didn't even look to see if any cars were coming or if he was about to back over the neighbor's kids. He just rammed that car out into the street, threw the shifter into drive, and took off with a fish-tailing protesting of rubber. I was thrown first one way and then another, and it was all I could do to hold on to the beer. I was surprised, because Jeff didn't usually drive like that, and I was also a little pissed. I was sure Mom and Dad loved that little exhibition of driving skill and sensibility. If they were in there screwing, I'm sure Jeff scared them right out of it. This on top of that damned lecture earlier!

I said, "Take it easy, would ya? It'd be real smart to get arrested with all this goddamn beer in the car."

Jeff replied, "You worry too much, man. Relax."

We raced down that narrow residential street. I didn't dare look at Jeff's speedometer. Parked cars were lined up along both sides of the street, and they flashed past in multi-colored blurs of steel and chrome and plastic. If somebody had been getting out of one of those cars, Jeff would have taken his door off. I looked over at Jeff, about ready to ask him what the hell his problem was, and then I didn't say anything.

Jeff was biting down on the inside of his cheeks. They were all pinched in. His eyes were narrow with

concentration. I stared at him for a few seconds, and then I remembered the stop sign at the end of the street. I nervously looked forward and saw it less than a block away. Jeff was still accelerating.

"Jeff--Jeff, godDAMN IT--"

I looked at his foot to see if it was on the brake yet just as his foot lashed out toward the pedal. The brake pedal sank to the floor. I braced my hands against the dashboard as the Cutlass's tires locked up. I jerked toward the windshield, but then the Cutlass shuddered and shimmied to a stop right at the sign and pitched me back in the seat before I could eat any glass. The car didn't drift, though, which was fortunate, because if it had, we would have sideswiped one of the parked cars. As I fell back in the seat, Jeff let out a low, trembling sigh. Not a scared sigh--a sigh more like the one you let out after a helluva cum. He looked at me.

"Did you see that, man? We were going sixty. What did ya think?"

Well, I didn't really think a lot of it, to be honest. In the past, neither one of us had been too impressed with that peculiar American adolescent urge to scream around corners and lay rubber on the streets with hideously overpowered cars whose rusting bodies would have, by all rights, otherwise landed those same cars in the junkyard fifteen years ago. I was pissed at Jeff and more than a

little scared. I said, "Yeah, you must've just read the new scientific study that conclusively proves penis length is directly proportional to how fast you drive on a goddamn side street."

Jeff rolled his eyes, a habit of his he had refined to a fine art over the years I had known him. "Take it easy," he said. "Just blowin' the cobwebs out. You've gotta do this every once in a while just to make sure the engine runs right. Makes it puke all the impurities right out."

"Yeah, bullshit."

"No, no bullshit. It blows it all right out the exhaust."

"Is that any reason to kill us?"

Jeff laughed and playfully punched me on the arm. For one of the few times that I can remember, I consciously had to keep from really popping him one back. Not on the arm, either. He said, "Would I do that? I don't want to even dent this bastard, let alone kill us. Come on. I just got 'er fixed and paid off. I can handle this. It's nothing. Are you going to drink that beer or not?"

So we drove on, at a sane pace, drinking our beers. After the first few sips, I managed to forget about the incident. Then we talked about people we knew and about how this one cute girl at school was asking people about me. Jeff mentioned just enough about her to get me really going, and then he shut up just to be a prick. I tried to be cool,

so it wouldn't look like I was too desperate to get info out of him, but we both knew I was dying for him to tell me more about this girl who was asking about me. About all he would tell me was that her name was Doreen. The same girl he said he had fucked. Which, of course, I pointed out to him.

"So I lied," he said. "I was trying to see how much you knew about her and what she's been saying. I figured that was one way to find out. If you liked her, I knew that would get you."

I pressed him for more details, and he shut right up.

"You bastard," I finally said. "Why'd you even bring it up if you weren't going to tell me anything about her? I don't believe for a fucking minute that all you know is that she was asking around about me. Did she put you up to this?"

Jeff shook his head. He smiled. It pissed me off.

"Look," he said. "All I'm going to tell you is that she's interested. If you want to know anything more about this, go talk to her. I'm not going to do all the work for you this time. Like I did with Kathie and Robin. I'm not going to go tell her that you like her, and I'm not going to fill you in on all the details. I heard this bitch likes you. I'm letting you know about it. The rest is up to you this time, pal."

"Jesus, why'd you say anything at all? To torture me?"

"No," he said, quite seriously. "You always need a push. Okay, shithead, you've been pushed."

I was mad about this, too, but I also had to give him some credit. Like most things, he was right about this. I had to get off my ass and do something around here. It was too easy to put things off and make excuses and pretend this made you cool. I realized that I did like this Doreen girl. I was thinking about her as we drove down the highway toward Lincoln. I stared at the thick stands of trees and the sagging houses they sheltered. As the Cutlass rolled on, I thought of long red hair grasped in my sweaty hands and of a fuzzy, white sweater rolled back over breasts that glistened wetly in the faint green light from a car stereo. Doreen's red hair and large breasts, of course. Would she? I had no way of knowing. All I could think of was her gasping in my ear. Her pushing my head lower.

"This is where it happened," Jeff said.

His voice startled me from my daydream. I had no idea what he meant. I only saw the road unwinding beneath us, the tall trees vanishing behind us on either side.

"What?"

"Where Gunther bit it."

"Right here?"

"Well, right behind us, now."

In spite of myself, I turned in my seat to look. I saw behind us the stretch of road where Brad Gunther had died.

The road was purple with the last of the daylight and the approaching night. I couldn't see much of the road at all. Just purple-shaded concrete and the black picket-fence of trees on each side of that road. It looked cold. I thought of the autumn and winter that would be here all too soon.

I faced back around. "How do you know that? This is the general area, but how can you be sure."

Jeff said in a low voice: "Because I cruised the roadside until I found--well, look in the glove compartment."

I had no idea what in the hell he could be talking about. Until I opened the glove compartment, and it was all too clear. He had taken out all the normal shit you find in a glove compartment--you know, the owner's manual; the receipts from ten different stores; the pens and pencils; the unidentifiable scraps of paper on which you've jotted directions, phone numbers, etc.; the toothpicks, the combs--and replaced it with the mementos he had found of Brad Gunther's headlong collision with his own mortality. I took the largest items out and then reached in the glove compartment one more time because I could see some sparkly reflections at the bottom of it. Like shiny dust.

"Don't touch that. You might cut yourself. It's auto glass," Jeff said.

"Jeff. Why in the hell...."

"There's blood on some of the glass I picked up. All of this shit was layin' in the grass by the side of the road. They picked up most of it. But not all of it. They couldn't get all of it."

"What is this shit? Sunglasses?"

"That's right. They're his. Recognize 'em? I do. He wore the goddamn things in school all the time. In the hallways. Where the sun never shines. But hey, they look cool, so he had to wear 'em. Even inside."

Jeff flicked on the dome light so I could get a better look at the glasses. I knew the ones he meant, even before I could really see them, but the light confirmed it. If you're an American in the declining years of the twentieth century, you've seen these glasses. Tom Cruise wore them in the movie Risky Business. And most of the rest of us have worn them ever since. You know, the black wrap-around jobs with the black lenses. These were a little different, of course. Tom Cruise's sunglasses had not been subjected to the raw power of physics as these had. One of the black lenses was gone, probably because that side of the frames had been buckled and twisted. The other black lense had been fractured but was not completely gone. It hung bravely in its cracked black circle.

"He was probably wearing them at the time," Jeff said. "There's some dried shit on that broken lense that looks to

me like blood. You're probably holding all that's left of his eye."

I hurriedly placed the battered glasses back into the open glove compartment. Then I looked at the other two objects in my right palm.

I said, still staring at my palm: "How do you know this crap is his?"

"Because of that little piece of chrome you're holding. Look at it."

I did, holding it up with my left hand so that the dome light would hit it better. It was chrome from Gunther's deceased car. How in the hell, it might be asked, did I know it was from Gunther's car? I mean, one strip of chrome looks pretty much like another. Well, in addition to our late varsity letterman's other charming eccentricities, he had liked to file notches into the chrome stripping that lined the top of his driver's side door. This hadn't just been Gunther's mindless urge to mutilate and deface, however. There had been a method. One notch equalled one girl he had successfully bagged. In a school not known for the subtleties and sensitivities of its inmates, this brazen tallying had been enough to distinguish Brad Gunther just that little bit more from his peers. And, like I said, he had used a file to abrade those notches into the chrome. I was staring at those very same notches on the piece of chrome I held. I recognized the roughly burred edges of the

notches. The notches were spaced the way I remembered Gunther had spaced them. This strip of chrome had to be from Gunther's car.

I fingered the notches. Six of them. All that were left of the twenty or so I remembered being on Gunther's car. The rest of the chrome strip this lonely segment came from must have still been with the car's corpse. I tossed the chrome back into the glove compartment. I didn't want to touch it anymore.

That left one object in my right hand. I couldn't really tell what the hell it was. It didn't look like anything. It was small (about half an inch long), roughly rectangular, hard. I held it up in the light.

"What is this?"

Jeff said softly, "It's one of his teeth."

And it was. About half a molar. Cracked in half, cracked right out of Gunther's skull at the moment of impact. I couldn't tell what it was before Jeff said anything, but as soon as he did, I saw the gestalt of the thing. It became a tooth as I stared at it. It was yellow with old cigarette smoke and exposure to the air. It was fissured on top, the edges of the fissures dulled by years of eating pizzas and potato chips. And it had come from Brad Gunther's screaming mouth.

"Holy fuck," I said. Eloquent enough for the occasion. I put it back in the glove compartment and closed it. Then I wiped my right hand on my jeans.

"Why do you want that shit?" I asked. I found it hard to believe that Jeff was carrying around these morbid trophies.

"I'm not sure, exactly. Just that I do. It's a lot of things, I guess. It gives me some idea of what happened back there. It must have been fucking spectacular. I'll bet there were pieces of that son of a bitch all over the goddamn road! Look what I found just lookin' through the grass at the side of the road. Imagine before they cleaned it up."

I shook my head. "Jeff. Why are you into this so much? Why are you carrying him around in your fucking car?" I pointed at his glove compartment.

Jeff seemed to give the matter some thought. He was quiet for a few moments, moments during which I kept sneaking looks at his face. He was staring ahead at the road with not a glance toward me. Finally, he said, "I guess I thought ol' Brad G. was immortal. I was scared of him because you could tell he just didn't give a shit. Most people hold back a little, 'cause they've got things to lose. He didn't stop to think. He just did it. Y'know what I think? I think he was driving along, and saw that truck, and just drove into it before he realized what he was

doing. I think he wanted to take a piece out of it. I think the stupid fucker actually believed his own press."

We drove along in silence after that. I drank my beer as quick as I could, waiting for the welcome buzz to settle in. I didn't want to think about Brad Gunther, and at every turn I was being forced to. By my parents. By my best friend. My best friend who had combed the roadside, looking for whatever spoils the cops and ambulance attendants and wreckers had left. After a few minutes, I managed to forget how bizarre that was. Seemed I was having to do a lot of suppressing lately.

And at last we came up on Lincoln. The trees gave way to clusters of houses, which gave way to whole neighborhoods, which in turn gave way to downtown. We rode down the nerve connecting it all. Main Street. A street lined with gas stations and junk-food stands and parking lots full of kids sitting on the hoods of their cars. It was the kind of street where half the downtown businesses have going-out-of-business signs in the windows. The downtown stores were all graffiti-smearred brick and whitewashed windows, and the tallest building was ten stories. A veritable skyscraper amid the three- and two-story storefronts.

More out of form than any real enthusiasm, we cranked down the Cutlass's windows so we could yell at any people we happened to know. It was a somewhat chilly night, and the

breeze whipped through the car. My hair whipped back and forth across my brow. I shut my eyes for a second to let the wind run over me, and then I looked back out at the street.

We were in the right-hand lane, the cruising lane. Ahead of us was a long stream of cars filling both lanes. Taillights glowed, and turn signals blinked. At every angle of vision, there were cars filled with kids. All cruising.

I looked at Jeff. His sharp features were white in the harsh glare of headlights and neon. The breeze blew his long hair back from his forehead and temples. He looked from the surrounding cars to the road in a regular rhythm, and he was smiling. His eyes were shiny with reflected light. He had also switched into what we called Cruising Mode. He was leaning far back in his seat with his left arm hanging out the open window and his right arm sticking straight out toward the wheel. His right hand was draped casually over the rim of the wheel so he could steer with his wrist. It was so Jeff, so familiar, so comfortable, that I smiled at him. This was more like it. I knew this was it, and the weirdness was gone for a while. I felt good out here on Main, and it's always surprising to look back at moments like that and realize just how goddamned few there really are.

"Okay, Navigator," Jeff said in his Captain Kirk voice. "Set stereo on tunes."

I reached over to the in-dash cassette player and twisted the volume knob all the way to the right. Bob Seger's booster-amplified voice crashed out of the twin speakers mounted in Jeff's rear window. I winced a little, but it didn't take long to get used to the volume. I never really enjoyed music when it was that loud, but it was somehow necessary to the scene.

Since any human form of communication with Jeff was now impossible, since the music was so loud, I looked at each car that passed by. More accurately, I tried to see who was in each car that passed by. The first few cars I saw that night were jacked-up street machines with exclusively male occupants and stereos even louder than Jeff's. The guys in the cars glared at us, and we were honor-bound to stare right back. To tell you the truth, shit like that always made me a little nervous, and I usually looked away as soon as I could and still preserve dignity. That's all I needed, to get my ass kicked, out on Main where everyone could see. Some guys went out on Main to pick fights, and Jeff and I weren't the biggest guys in the world.

That night, though, Jeff wasn't giving any ground. Usually he would kind of laugh at the cruising badasses and more or less ignore them. This time he glared right back. One carload I remember in particular. A Nova pulled up next to us on the left side, and the passenger stared balefully at Jeff. The passenger was a few years older than us and

had runny zits all over his cheeks. His stringy blond hair hung down in his sleepy, stupid-looking eyes. Jeff frowned right back at the guy and wouldn't look away. I didn't know quite what to do, so I settled for looking back and forth from the road to Jeff. I couldn't help but notice that the driver of the Nova was now in the act. He hunched forward in his seat and looked past his buddy right at us. The driver was a class act too; he had mean, snaky eyes and a bush of dirty-brown hair topped with a Harley baseball cap. It was a classic even-odds situation: two in the Nova and two in the Cutlass.

"Jesus," I muttered. Jeff didn't look away from the guys, and the Nova matched our speed for about a block. The Nova's passenger gave Jeff a last sneer and then looked at his driver. The driver waved a hand at us and then floored it. They pulled away from us and up into the flow of traffic.

"Pussies!" Jeff yelled after them. That wasn't like Jeff, either. For a second, I was scared he was going to chase after them. Then I saw him visibly relax, so I relaxed too. The two guys in the Nova had looked like nothing but trouble, and I was glad they had given up first. I didn't (and still don't) think Jeff would have. Not in the mood he was in.

Another car pulled up beside us right after that; this time it was a Ford Tempo. Jeff sat upright, abandoning his

characteristic cruising slouch. Leaning forward to see around him, I saw why. I saw a carload of blonde-maned girls. Four of 'em. All four were looking us over and half-smiling. I wasn't sure if that was good or bad. I smiled back, but I was nervous as hell. I couldn't figure out what those half-smiles meant. Did they think we were geeks? Yet they didn't look away.

Then the Tempo reduced speed to match ours. Shit, I thought. I moved around in my seat and wondered what to say if we ended up talking to them. What exactly did you say to a girl from a moving car? I was relieved that I wasn't driving or that we weren't in the passing lane so they would be on my side of the car. It was all up to Jeff.

Jeff responded admirably to this grave responsibility--at first. "How ya doin'?" he yelled so that he could be heard above Bob Seger. I reached for the volume knob, but Jeff swatted my hand without once looking away from the Tempo. The car swerved slightly to the left until he was able to get his right hand back to the wheel.

"We're doin' okay," the girl in the front passenger seat yelled back. A less than brilliant conversation, it may seem, but what the hell else could you say?

"Where ya goin'?" Jeff shouted.

"Just around." The girl shrugged in demure counterpoint to her shouted words. She had evidently been appointed the car's ambassador. She chewed her gum with

exaggerated relish. Her hair swept around her heavily made-up face as she leaned out the window.

"Pull over there," Jeff yelled, and he pointed to the parking lot of the Burger Chef that was coming up on our left.

The ambassador smiled and looked at her driver. The Tempo pulled forward and away and went right past the Burger Chef parking lot. This was the signal for the chase to start. The chase that would continue for about four stoplights before the bitches figured we had panted after them long enough. Only then would they pull over somewhere so we could finally talk to them. At least, that was how these things would normally go. Jeff let them go this time. He didn't even try to follow.

I turned the music down so I could be heard. "Aren't you goin' after them?"

Jeff shook his head. "Fuck 'em. We don't need it that bad. They want us to follow and we won't get shit out of it if we do. We've seen it a million times. It's just a game. To hell with it."

Secretly, I was relieved. However, I wasn't about to show it. "They looked pretty good, dude."

"Yeah, and they knew it, too. I'm serious, man. To hell with 'em. You really want something to do with these chicks? Concentrate your energy on Doreen."

"Why in the hell are we out here, then?"

Jeff smiled. His smile was all white, perfectly shaped teeth. He had a good smile, the kind that charmed the shit out of adults when he was in trouble with them. It was the smile he used when we were about to lay into a bottle of Bacardi or smoke some really good weed or go to a party with two eager young women. His smile told you that he drank beer and smoked dope (the preferred vice depended on his mood) but that he was a good kid at heart, the kind who mowed your grass for free during the summer and would grow up to be a responsible citizen once he "got it out of his system."

"We're out here, my friend," he said, "to rock 'n' roll. This is just like goin' to the zoo. Sit back and enjoy. Unwind, for Chrissake. You're about the most uptight one son of a bitch I know. Forget these girls. Have fun with 'em. You don't want syphillis anyway, do you?"

Then he turned the music back up and looked at the cars around us. When he smiled at me like that, I was able to forget most of the off-key things I had seen about him lately. This was my friend again. The guy who I went camping with in his backyard at the age of twelve and who I got smashed with at the age of sixteen. I didn't think about the odd trophies in Jeff's glove compartment. Didn't think about 'em at all.

We smiled at two more carloads of girls that night. It always went the same way. They showed just enough interest to get us going, and then they zoomed away so that we'd have to chase them. That was the theory. That night, Jeff let them go every time. This wasn't at all like the last time Jeff and I had been out here. Last time, we had chased a carload eight blocks before the car finally pulled over. Jeff and I and this other guy had talked to the girls for a while, promising them beer (which they drank) and more (which they didn't follow up on, although they did drink the beer before they left). That had been it. For some reason or another, Jeff had finally had it with the Main Street scene.

After he let the last carload go that night, he turned down the music and said, "Watch this."

I looked at him and saw he was staring fiercely at his rearview mirror. I looked behind us, and, sure enough, here came another carload of girls. A rust-streaked Pinto pulled up beside us, and these two Harley-rider chicks started checking us out. The driver was a milk blonde wearing a headband and a black T-shirt. The passenger was dark-haired and had narrow black eyes. Those eyes were smoky and circled with heavy bands of eyeliner, and they made you weak in the groin just to look at them. It was hard to tell, since the dark-haired one was slumped back in her seat, but you could see she probably had huge breasts.

The dark-haired one looked slowly up and down at us. Jeff looked right back at her and not at the road. These chicks looked like serious business. They weren't giggling back and forth like girls who had borrowed Daddy's car for the night and gone out to tease the horny locals. These two looked straight back at Jeff with expressionless faces. No smiles, no nothing. They looked about nineteen years old, and the Pinto was beat up enough to look like the driver had bought it secondhand somewhere with her own money.

What Jeff did next scared the hell out of me. He leaned out the window and said calmly (the cars were no more than a few feet apart): "Do you want to fuck or not? If you don't, get the hell out of here. I'm sick of the bullshit."

"Oh shit," I said.

It didn't even bother the dark-haired one. If it did, she didn't show it. She just kept looking at Jeff with those dangerous black eyes. Appraising him. The driver threw her head back and laughed, but it was a strange laugh, like she didn't really mean it. Then the driver looked back at Jeff, with her blonde bangs swinging over her mascara-rimmed eyes. In fact, the only one Jeff seemed to bother was me.

The blonde spoke first. "Well, whadd'ya know. A puppy with balls."

She was talking to her friend, but her voice was loud enough for us to hear her over the wind and engines.

The dark-haired one was looking at Jeff when she said, "Sure you can handle it?" Her voice was almost as deep as a man's. She still hadn't leaned forward in her seat.

Jeff nodded to her. "You know I can."

Then the blonde looked past her friend and past Jeff. Right at me. I tried to be cool and look right back at her with the same lack of expression. She said loudly, "Sure that he can?" Meaning me.

Jeff said, "Yeah."

I had no idea what to say, so I nodded in agreement. It felt stupid, and the blonde must have thought so, too. She smiled sourly and eased back into her seat.

The dark-haired one said, "How old are you guys, anyway?"

Jeff replied, "Old enough so that everything works."

"Sixteen, right? Just got the license? Borrowed Dad's car?"

Jeff looked at me. He frowned, but he also winked at me. Then he turned his frowning face back to the Pinto, shook his head, and said, "Fuck you. See ya later."

He tromped on the accelerator, and we left the Pinto behind. I started to look back at it, but Jeff put a hand on my shoulder.

"Don't look," he said. "I want to see if this works."

"God, what a couple of babes," I said. My pulse was loud in my ears, and I realized for the first time how tight my muscles were. I tried to relax and found that my hands were clenched into fists.

Jeff whipped into the left lane to pass a Maverick. He said, "Don't ever let 'em know that, though. Sure, they're hot, but you can't let it get to you. Come on, they shit too. Remember that."

"Are they catching up to us?"

He glanced into the rearview mirror. I saw him smile.

"When you think of this night," he said, "remember me fondly. Here they come. Right up on us. No, damn it, don't look. I'm going to pull over next chance I get."

My heart got loud again. I said, "Aren't you going to make them chase us for a while?"

Jeff said loudly, "Haven't you been listening to this? Watching this? That would ruin the whole thing. We're different now. They're goddamned intrigued. If we make 'em chase us, we're just doing what we've been bitching about all night. If you turn the tables, man, you can't turn 'em right back around again."

"I can't believe you asked if they wanted to fuck."

"Well, goddamn it, it's better than chasing dippy little girls around all night and never getting anywhere, isn't it? This way, you know if there's some interest going. It's not like you're going to carry on any

meaningful conversation with some chick you meet out here, anyway. Now listen up. We're going to pull into that parking lot up there. I don't know how this is going to turn out, but a lot could be happening here. Relax. Go with whatever the situation turns out to be. Follow their lead. And whatever you do, be honest with them. You can't act like you don't need pussy, because otherwise why would you be doing this? On the other hand, don't be like a dog sniffing at their crotch."

"Where does that leave us?"

"With the way it is, man. You'd like it, but if it doesn't happen it won't kill you either. Don't put on an act or we're dead."

"Fuck you, Jeff. You worry about your own here."

"Okay, okay, sorry. I didn't mean to lecture. Here they are, right up on our ass. Damn it, don't look! Okay, here we go. Mission accepted. We're going in."

Jeff signalled his left turn and put on the brakes. He waited for the oncoming lanes to clear and then turned into the empty parking lot by the Coca-cola plant. By the entrance, there was a big sign that warned us in hysterical red letters that this was a 24-hour private parking lot and that violatores (yes, that was how it was spelled) would be towed at their owners' expense. In other words, cruisers stay out. Jeff's strong headlights blazed across the cracked cement, the faded white lines that marked the

parking spaces, the broken beer bottles and discarded brown paper bags from cruisers that were there before us, the weeds struggling gamely up from the cracks in the cement. A choice romantic locale.

The interior of the Cutlass flared white as the Pinto pulled in behind us. This was it. I had to reach out to the dashboard to steady myself. Jeff drove to the back corner of the parking lot. The Pinto stayed right behind us. Jeff killed the engine and coasted into the corner. His headlights lit up the alley behind the parking lot. I saw trashcans lined up along the brick wall that was the rear of the pawn shop across the way. Then Jeff killed his lights. The Pinto nosed up beside us on Jeff's side and killed its lights. And there we were.

I glanced nervously past Jeff. The girls were staring at us; they were still damnably expressionless. We were quiet. Our car stereos were dead. I listened to the traffic sounds of the cruisers driving Main behind us. We had left the river for this dark cove, and to be honest I had no idea what the hell we were doing here. I kept looking at the girls and then looking away before I could really see them. I hated myself for that. I had never been this way the other times we had talked to girls in the parking lots off Main. Maybe it was different this time because the game was altogether different from what I was used to. That goddamn Jeff had changed the rules on me.

As was only appropriate, Jeff talked first. "Why are you following us?"

The dark-haired one leaned forward for the first time. I saw that I had been right. Her large breasts filled out her T-shirt as she said, "Just curious, I guess."

"About what?"

"I've heard a lot of lines out here, but never 'Let's fuck.'"

The blonde driver spoke up. "Hey, does your friend talk?"

"Sure he does."

"Yeah," I said. "It's true."

"What do you talk about?"

That was important. I could sense it. Don't fuck this up, I told myself. Having no idea what I was going to say, I said, "Depends on if there's something worth talking about."

I gave a half-smile I hoped was okay and forced myself to keep looking over at the blonde. I felt rather than saw Jeff give me the thumbs-up, with his hand down low where the chicks couldn't see it.

The blonde didn't smile, exactly. She suddenly didn't look quite so expressionless. Maybe she let her face muscles relax from the tension of holding that blank look. Then she said, "Well, it's certainly worth talking about. Maybe you'll even find out."

I was starting to sweat. I hoped it wouldn't be obvious. These were older girls. It was a well-known fact that older girls fuck. Then I realized I was starting to think about it too much. Maintain, I told myself.

"Names," Jeff said. "We want names."

The two girls looked at each other and kept looking, as if they couldn't decide. Then they shrugged. The dark-haired one turned back to us and said, "I'm Kelli."

The blonde said, "Candy."

Jeff laughed. "Kelli and Candy. Your real names, I'm sure."

"Who are you?"

"Jeff."

"Scott," I said.

Kelli pushed her dark hair back from her face and then arched her back. I couldn't help but stare at the way her breasts strained against her T-shirt. She said, "You got beer?"

Jeff said, "Not much. You got any?"

"You mean beer?"

"Of course I mean beer. What else?"

"We might have some. Wanna help drink some of it?"

"Sure."

And that was how it started. Jeff invited them into the car with their beer. He moved me into the back seat with the blonde, Candy. Kelli sat up front with Jeff. We

drank a few beers in the parking lot, all the while hoping a cop wouldn't pull in and bust us. We talked about some of the people we knew on Main. I drank a beer real quick so I would be able to talk to Candy. It helped a little bit.

"So who else do you know on Main?" Candy asked me.

"Well, I think we've about covered it."

"Ever seen a red-headed guy out here, drives a pick-up truck that says 'Fat Pat' on the front of it?"

"No, what about him?"

"He's my husband."

I was in mid-swallow on a beer when she said that. I nearly spit it out. "What?"

"Don't worry. He doesn't give a shit what I do. Right, Kelli?"

I looked at her left hand, the one holding her beer. I said, "No ring."

"No problem. He doesn't wear his either when he's out here."

I stared out the side window for a moment. Then I said slowly, "Okay...."

Candy tossed down the last of her beer and threw it on the floor. Then she said loudly, "Well, Kelli, why don't you show Jeff there how neat my car is."

Kelli said, "Good idea. Come on, Jeff."

She opened the passenger door and climbed out. Jeff got out on his side. Just before he closed the door, he

leaned down and looked in the back seat. He smiled at me and winked. I don't know if Candy caught it. She was too busy putting on lipstick. I didn't know where she got it, because she didn't have a purse. Then Jeff slammed the door. Moments later, I heard Jeff and Kelli get into Candy's car.

Candy put her lipstick tube down on the vinyl seat. Then she looked at me. Her eyes were very wide, and they gleamed in the faint spillover of light from Main Street. She ran her right hand across her sharp, white cheek and back into her mane of hair. I noticed her nails were painted some dark color I couldn't identify, and they were very long. The sight gave me instant hard-on, which didn't take much, because I had almost been there the last half-hour. I tried to swallow past some blockage in my throat and couldn't.

"Scott, you're really cute. Quiet, but cute. I'll bet you talk more when he's not around."

"Jeff?"

"Who else?"

"It's hard to get a word in around him sometimes."

"How old are you? Really?"

Honesty, I told myself. "Seventeen."

"Well, only two years. Not bad. You seem a lot younger."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You got a nice house, right?"

"I guess."

"You want to know where I live?"

"Sure," I said, although I really didn't want to.

"Jackson Street. With all the niggers. We can't afford anywhere else. Still live with your parents, right?"

"Where else would I live right now?"

"I was alone when I was fifteen."

Suddenly, just like that, I knew for the first time that night what I should say. So I said it, with confidence and purpose.

I said, "Look, I don't know what all this shit is about where I live and if I live with my folks and how young I seem. I can't help it if your life sucks. Yeah, I still go to school, too. As a matter of fact, I'm going to college next year. My parents are paying for it. Want me to feel guilty about it? I guess I do, but I shouldn't."

And, just like I knew she would, she smiled. "Goddamn, I got you talkin'."

"Yeah. Well, now what happens?"

Candy put her hand on my leg. She said, "Well, I don't fuck on the first date."

"Damn," I said. My face felt hot with blood, and I could barely sit still. Her hand was heavy on my leg. Her nails dug in.

She gave me the best head I had ever had in my young life. Right there in that parking lot, with the sound of passing cars drifting in and out of my awareness. I clutched and pulled at her mane as she bobbed up and down. Once or twice, I looked over at the Pinto. I couldn't really see Kelli, but I could see Jeff sitting in there with his head thrown back. I guess these girls had the same interests. Then I forgot all about the Pinto as Candy moved faster and faster. When I came, she didn't seem to mind.

Afterward, when I could only lie back against the seat and try to slow my breathing, I remembered what was in Jeff's glove compartment. And that was all I could think of as Candy stroked and petted and rubbed. When she demanded I then take care of her, I did so with a great deal more roughness than actual skill. When I nibbled, I couldn't help but think of the shattered molar sitting in the darkness only a few feet away. Even as novel as this situation was, I couldn't wait to get it over with. I seriously wondered if I might get sick. I don't think that would have gone over real well.

And, finally, it was over.

Candy was pulling her jeans up when she said, "Meet you out here again?"

"Sure," I said. I doubted if I would have any choice. Jeff would drag me along. For my own good, of course.

"You can't call me at home. My husband might be there.
How about same parking lot next Friday?"

"Okay. Can you get beer?"

"Yeah. My husband's twenty-two."

"Your husband really knows you do this?"

"You told me to fuck off earlier. Now I'm telling
you."

"Okay, okay."

Jeff knocked on the driver's-side window. I said,
"Yeah, we're ready."

When he opened his door, Candy got out on that side.
She said over her shoulder: "Next week?"

"I said yes."

"See ya."

"Later."

I got up front with Jeff. When I looked at him, he
gave me the old smile. His hair was messed up, and he
hadn't bothered to tuck his shirt back in. We waved goodbye
to the girls in their Pinto, and then we were back out on
Main. Heading east, out of town.

"Well, Scott, what'd I tell ya? This is guaranteed
next Friday. Great, huh? Lot better than some little
teases. I won't ask for details, my man, but you better
tell me what happened. What happened?"

So I told him, and then he told me. I felt the usual
macho bullshit pride about it, but the victory had been

spoiled for me by Jeff's proud display of Gunther trophies earlier that evening. I felt drained and not so uptight but somehow weak. I wasn't mad at Jeff or at Candy (if that was her name): let down, somehow. Jeff was wide awake and full of energy, however.

He said, "I think we covered Main tonight. Let's boony drive the way home."

"Sure. Whatever."

So we drove out of Lincoln, back down the old highway. Back toward where Brad Gunther had died. I worried what Jeff would say or do when we went by the spot this time, but he had other plans. Eventually, he turned off onto a country road we knew well from earlier drinking expeditions. The road was gravel. It was getting pretty late, and it was as dark as hell. Rows of corn streaked by on either side of Jeff's highbeams. Occasionally, red animal eyes would gleam in the tall grass by the road as the headlights caught them just right. Jeff cranked on some Bruce Springsteen tunes, and we drank what was left of the beer in good-natured silence. I was finally able to remember how good Candy had felt. I even started to look forward to next weekend. My window was rolled down, and there was more than a hint of fall in the chill night breeze. I began to wonder where my windbreakers were. At the bottom of my closet?

I was pretty much hypnotized by the passing rows of corn when I was suddenly jarred to full alertness. A small

but handsome farm collie was poised by the side of the road visible in Jeff's headlights. When the lights hit the dog, it froze for an instant. Then it freaked out and dashed in a panic across the road. There was time to avoid it, though--or there would have been if Jeff hadn't floored the accelerator.

I couldn't move. I glanced at Jeff and saw his face had that pinched look I remembered from earlier that night. His blonde hair whipped frenziedly across his brow in the wind from the open window. Gravel sprayed across the sides of the car as he bore down on the fleeing collie. The dog dove for the opposite side of the road. Jeff swung the wheel to go after it. The rear tires lost their purchase in the shifting gravel, and the back end of the Cutlass swung around--but not before the right bumper caught the collie in the ribs. The dog was flung to the side, and then the Cutlass's back end slid to the right and the nose snapped toward the ditch. I was flung against the door, and I distinctly felt the metal bow in toward me as the dog's body hit the outside. There was no time to be scared--only stunned.

It was over so quickly I wasn't sure it had happened. The Cutlass completely spun around once. The whole time, Jeff heaved the wheel in the direction of the skid. He never touched the brake, which saved our asses. My instinct would have been to ride that brake, but he never did. He

was able to regain control. We straightened out just shy of the ditch on the left side of the road. Only then, when Jeff was certain he had the Cutlass back, did he put on the brake. We shuddered to a stop. And then there was only Bruce Springsteen playing on the stereo.

"Shit," I finally muttered. My voice was shaky, and I didn't trust it above a whisper. I began to tremble as reaction set in. Then I looked at Jeff. I didn't know what to feel. I simply could not believe that he, my best friend since childhood, the one I thought I knew so well, had deliberately wiped out a dog and nearly got us in the bargain. He peered up into the rearview mirror. His face was expressionless, but something about it warned me against saying anything. Yet.

He turned the stereo off. Then he reached down and moved the shifter into reverse. We backed up in silence. My only thought was a bitter "Going back to finish the job on the dog?" I still had no idea what to say. I was scared, pissed off, and worried about him all at the same time.

He moved the Cutlass back about fifty feet. Clouds of dust swirled through his headlights as we slowly backed up through the section of road where the Cutlass had lost it. I could see where the gravel had been scattered every which way. Deep ruts were dug clear through the gravel right into the dirt. And then he stopped the car. Without a word, he

opened the door and slowly, deliberately, climbed out. Then he walked behind the car.

Of course, I still didn't know what to do. This was so far beyond my experience that I had no idea what a proper reaction would be. Should I scream, shout, punch him, or never speak to him again? One thing I knew for sure: it would be a helluva long time before I rode in a car with Jeff again.

"Scott," he called. His voice was level, but lower than I'd ever heard it before. Involuntarily, I turned around. Past the back seat where I had gotten head earlier, past the back window, I could see Jeff in dark silhouette, just barely outlined by the sick glow of the tail lights. I could see he was looking down at the road. Probably down at the dog.

I debated ignoring him. But he showed no signs of getting back into the car. He was so still that I thought there was a good chance we would stay here all night until I got out of the car and saw whatever the hell it was he wanted me to see. If I humored him, it would get me home quicker. Then I could decide what to do about him.

So I opened my door and climbed out. I remembered hearing and feeling the dog hit the side of the door. Unable to help myself, I looked down at the door as I closed it. Sure enough, there was a wide buckle in the dark blue skin of the Cutlass. Matted hair and blood slimed the

entire length of the door, as if the car itself was bleeding. My stomach hollowed.

"Scott," he said again. I looked away from the smear of blood. Jeff still stood behind the car. I heard its engine smoothly idling.

"What the hell are you doing?" I finally made myself say. It sounded completely inadequate, but I had to start somewhere.

"Scott, come here. Look at it."

"Man, screw that. You're crazy."

"No, man," he said quietly. "Not crazy. Check this out."

Again, I had the thought that we weren't going to leave until I looked at the wiped-out dog. The longer we sat here on this road, the more likely it was that some farmer would drive by and see us. With my luck, it would be the dog's owner. That would be an unbelievable hassle even if Jeff could lie convincingly and say it had been an accident. So I took a deep breath and walked over to him. Then I slowly looked down at his feet.

The dog's body was bathed in the red glow of the Cutlass's tail lights. The blood looked black, and there was a lot of it. It had sprayed across the road, and it was still leaking from the dog's stomach and mouth. The dog I had seen running across the road had very little connection with this broken bundle of twisted limbs. Its eyes were

wide and unseeing. Its tongue curled out one side of its muzzle. I couldn't look any more. Even in that brief glimpse I could see that the car's tires had nearly ripped the dog in half.

And that reminded me of something else. Of course....Brad Gunther. I looked at the dog again. And suddenly it was a lot clearer.

"Jeff--what's wrong with you?"

He looked away from the dog. He looked right at me. I could see only parts of his face in the dim light. The rest of him was black. His eyes caught the light in pale imitation of the way the dog's had.

He said, "Do you ever think about death?"

I tried to be cool, but I know I backed up a step. I'm not sure why. I wasn't afraid of him. It was more like I didn't want any part of whatever the hell he was up to. I said, "Well, sometimes, I guess."

"Ever think about dying?"

"Not as much as you seem to."

"Ever killed anything?"

"No. Jesus Christ, let's get out of here before someone sees us."

"Ever think about killing anything?"

"No, damn it!"

"Bullshit. How could you not think about it?"

"All right....sometimes I do." Then I pointed at the smashed dog. "That's a lot different from this."

Jeff looked at the dog, then I saw his eyes move back up to meet mine. He said, "If we are friends, that means I don't have to hide as much from you. What I'm saying is, I'm curious. If you're honest, you'll admit it too."

I didn't have to admit anything. All I wanted to do was get the hell out of there. I said, "C'mon, let's go. You bashed in the side of your car, it's got blood all over it, now let's go take care of it before someone sees it. Come on!"

Jeff nodded. "Okay, let's go. But tell me one thing. It was a high, wasn't it?"

I stared at him, then suddenly turned away. I was getting paranoid as hell. I heard cars coming, people walking through the fields, shotgun bolts being drawn back. I said, "Man, you're bizarre. Let's get gone. Your car's a mess."

"Scott," he said, grabbing my shoulder. Second time that night. I jumped a little bit. No, a lot.

"Admit it," he said. "We're always bitching about how bored we are. How nothing ever happens around here. Well, tonight, my man, we made things happen."

"You made things happen. I was just along for the ride."

"Well, that's okay. You'll learn."

He made me stay there and face him. I couldn't help but look at him. His face was more in the darkness as he moved us away from the car. That helped a bit. He said, "We made things happen. It beats the old times, huh? It beats cruising Main looking for teases. It beats drinking and telling the same stupid jokes. It was a night of opportunities, and we took 'em, man. This whole night has been fucking intense! And it's only the beginning. I'll tell ya something, something you won't hear from your goddamn parents. You don't know you're alive until you know you can die. Right?"

I said, "Jeff, can we go home?"

"It was a high, wasn't it? To be able to do that to something?"

I pulled away from him, half-falling against the Cutlass as I did so. Then I saw again the blood on the open passenger door. I said, "Jeff, let's go. I have to get home."

"Okay," he said behind me. "But just think about one thing."

I didn't answer.

"Okay? Think about Brad Gunther. Think that maybe he was going for the ultimate high. Got it? Okay, man, school's over for tonight."

Jeff drove me home. I didn't say a word. I didn't offer to help him clean the car up. He didn't say anything

either during the drive home; he finally seemed tired for the first time that night. Why shouldn't he have been? It had been an eventful night: getting head on Main Street, killing a dog on the way home. Even though he finally looked beat, however, I kept expecting him to do some other stupid and dangerous move. But he drove a steady 55 and, when we got to my house, pulled up to it slowly. No screaming tires, no revving engine. I got out of the car without looking back. I saw the light in the front room of my house was on. Parents still up. Great.

As I walked up the driveway, Jeff called after me. "See you soon. We'll go out again. We've got dates next Friday, remember? And you better call Doreen, too. Might as well get all you can."

I waved a hand at him without looking back. I heard his tires crunch gravel as he pulled out of the driveway. His headlights lit up my path for me until he turned the Cutlass and drove down the street. I stopped and listened to his engine fade into the night.

Then I took in several deep breaths of chilly air. I was half drunk. My nuts ached from what Candy had done. I kept thinking about Brad Gunther's glove compartment. I kept seeing that dog lying in a mud puddle of blood and dirt and gravel. Was that how Brad Gunther had ended up? The hell of it was, now that I had a quiet moment there by myself to think, I didn't feel that bad. Kind of good,

actually. After all, I had gotten head from an older woman that night. When you're seventeen, that's roughly comparable to a conquest of Mt. Everest. I knew I couldn't pass that up. And that meant Jeff and I were still friends. He had set me up for this whole thing. I was in his trip, for better or for worse.

What was Jeff's trip, I wondered then, and I wonder now, several years down the metaphorical road from that night. I haven't seen Jeff in a while, but for the rest of that school year, we were out almost every night. We did meet up with Kelli and Candy again, and more besides. Jeff didn't kill any more dogs that I know of, but I was never sure when he would do some ridiculous stunt nearly as disturbing. Ultimately, I think, Jeff's trip was that he wanted to try everything, and he didn't seem to worry too much about who or what interfered with that. But he didn't want to be on the edge by himself, either. He wanted me there. For all my bitching, I was more than willing to let him take me there.

But I didn't know this at the time. I was too close to it. The night he dropped me off in my driveway after he killed the dog, I only knew my head ached from cheap beer and I wanted to go in and go to sleep. So I went into my house. Mom was sitting on the couch, reading a magazine. She said, "What'd you do tonight?"

And I said, "Nothing much."

DESTINIES

STARLET

Doreen didn't know what the story was with the guy sitting at the west end of the stage. What she did know was that he had been staring at her all night. It didn't matter whether she was dancing or mixing with the customers; the guy was definitely a starrer. Normally, she dismissed such guys as real jokes: guys who thought their unblinking bug eyes made them look simply goddamn irresistible and instead only made them look ridiculous. Still, there was something about this guy that made her uneasy. He wasn't laughable. She couldn't help herself from continually glancing at him.

Well, she couldn't worry about that now. Susan, stage name of Desiree, was almost finished with her set. Doreen, stage name of Dahlia, was the next starlet in line. Doreen had her songs picked out, and she had bummed some quarters for the jukebox off some poor easy mark who had been buying her drinks all night in the impossible hope this might convince Doreen to overlook his sour breath, dirty beard, beer gut, and zitty face long enough to go to bed with him. Pardon the pun, Doreen thought, but fat chance.

She picked the mark's quarters off the table, took a last sip of the Bacardi and Coke he had bought her, and then leaned over to him. His name was Jerry or something like that, maybe Gary. She decided on Jerry. She kissed his sweaty cheek and said, "Jerry, hon, it's time for me to go

do it." She made her voice go low and breathy with the words "do it," and poor old cock-teased Jerry was suddenly having to move his big ass back and forth as his greasy jeans became too tight. Doreen took a small, mean satisfaction in making the fat bastard squirm with the impossibility of having her.

"I want you to wait here for me, Jerry," she said, leaning over the table even farther so that her black teddy fell open to expose the top halves of her breasts. 'Ol' Jerry didn't even try to pretend he was looking at anything other than her tits. She shook them at him, and good ol' boy Jerry let out a coyote howl that was audible even over the last few seconds of the Bon Jovi song Susan "Desiree" Richards was dancing to. Jerry's thick lips glistened in between his growth of beard as he howled. He then leered at his buddies sitting at the table. Doreen knew they were staring at her with red eyes pinched in concentration. She leaned over to kiss his hairy cheek and smelled his beery, stale breath again.

"I'll be right here, babe," Jerry said. "You be sure to come right back. Don't be lettin' these other assholes buy you drinks. I've got all you need right here."

"I know you do, hon," Doreen said, and she reached underneath the table to squeeze his fat upper thigh. "I can feel that."

Jerry leered at her. That was all she could take. Even in the dim light of the bar, she could see the crud stuck between his crooked teeth. She felt faintly nauseated and suddenly ashamed of herself for leading on this fat, drunk son of a bitch. She decided to escape, knowing that Jerry's buddies would be congratulating him on his fine catch the moment she left.

"See ya later," she said, attempting to smile, and then walked away. She tried not to shake her ass, but she knew she was doing it anyway, and she could feel his hungry eyes on her. Part of her loved the attention, even from that loser, but she was just as much pissed at herself for feeling like that and even more for working at this place. Once, long ago, she had enjoyed them all, even the Jerrys. She wondered how she could have.

Jesus, the guy's name was Gary, not Jerry. She wondered how she could've forgot it so fast. Not that it really mattered. Gary the Jerry was getting his show for the night, and Doreen the Dahlia was getting his tips. She smiled a little. Seemed fair enough to her. Gary-Jerry only had to live with himself; he didn't have to put up with a long string of guys just like himself pawing him night after night.

Damn near as if on cue, somebody grabbed her ass as she made her way through the tables toward the jukebox. Her first impulse was to swing at whoever it was. She stopped

herself and looked behind her. Two rednecks were sitting at the table closest to her. She recognized both of them. They were regulars. The one who had apparently grabbed her said, "Hey, Dahlia, babe. How are ya this evenin'?"

She made herself say, "Jus' fine, Ray. How 'bout yourself?"

Ray nudged his buddy and then said, "Well, babe, I had a hard day. You know, a hard day. Real stiff time of it. Feel like helpin' me out with that?"

"Oh, now, Ray. You know I'm workin' tonight."

"I know, darlin'. That's why I asked."

Ray fell back in his seat with a sharp bark of laughter. He again nudged his buddy, who in return slapped Ray on the back in appreciation of Ray's wit. Doreen laughed without meaning it. Her stomach clenched tightly.

"Go up there and shake it good," Ray yelled. "Maybe I'll give you my tip!"

Doreen smiled sweetly and said, "That's all you've got, you son of a bitch. Fuck you."

"Jesus Christ, Dahlia, I'm jus' teasin' ya."

"No, hon, I'm teasing you. And that's all you're ever going to get."

As she walked away, she heard Ray say, "What a bitch. Women, huh? There ain't nothin' worse than a whore with pride."

"Fucker," she whispered. She was damned if these guys were going to get to her. She looked up at the stage. Susan was wrapped around the pole at the west end of the stage, her long legs squeezing and unsqueezing around it, her hands stroking it, her tongue rolling wildly across her lips. The Bon Jovi song ended with a distorted wail as the decibel level peaked out the bar's huge but cheap speakers. Susan arched her back at a near-impossible angle, thrusting her bare breasts toward the multi-colored stage lights and letting her long, blonde hair almost sweep the stage floor. She held that pose as the echoes of the music died away and as the audience began to clap, howl, whistle, and stamp boots on the wooden floor. Susan's nipples became erect as she heard the lust of her audience. Doreen envied her. Susan enjoyed the crowds and worked them well.

Doreen suddenly noticed the starrer at the west end of the stage. He was still staring. Not at Susan, whose gorgeous body was leaning backward from the pole in front of him, her crotch pointing directly at his face. No, he was still looking at Doreen. He didn't even try to hide the fact he was staring. He obviously didn't care if she caught him.

Doreen had gotten a good look at him during her earlier sets. She had noticed him staring at her when she came in for work earlier that evening. He had been sitting at the bar then, ignoring the crowd and the dancers. He had looked

at her while she talked to the bartenders and the dancers who weren't on stage. She knew he had watched her go into the dressing room, back of the stage. And when she came out for her first set, he had moved from the bar to sit at the west end of the stage, where he still sat and from where he hadn't, as far as Doreen could tell, moved all night. Not even to go piss. Now that was dedication. He had just sat there and watched her dance all night. He had never tipped her or tried to talk to her. Should she be grateful or nervous or disappointed? He wasn't a bad-looking guy. Especially in comparison to some of the winners that made it a habit to hang out in the El Dorado Bar and Show Club.

Susan unbent herself from the pole; the movement distracted Doreen. She looked away from the starrer. She had to get ready to get on stage. She hadn't picked her songs yet, and Susan was almost ready to leave the stage. Management got real edgy if that stage was empty for more than a few seconds. Doreen walked over to the jukebox as quickly as she could in her stiletto heels. The men yelling and clapping for Susan (or, more accurately, for Desiree) began to quiet down as Susan shut them out and began to walk around the stage collecting her dollar tips from the stage floor where they had been thrown. There were a few half-hearted wolf whistles whenever Susan bent over to pick up the money, but not many. The audience knew showtime for Desiree was over, and she was now all business. Some of the

men noticed Doreen over by the jukebox and began telling each other to look at the "set of tits on the broad by the jukebox." "Look at the box by the box." "Nice ass." "How'd you like to fuck that?" Doreen tried not to hear as she scanned the list of song titles under the jukebox's glass front.

She settled on her first song, the song in which she would still be more or less dressed. The song was Robert Palmer's "Addicted to Love." She was still debating on the second song, the song where she would peel off her teddy to reveal bare breasts and G-string, when Susan came jiggling down the steps and walked over to join Doreen at the juke.

"Hey, it's a good tip night," Susan said in her cigarette-roughened voice. She was still topless. Doreen was uncomfortably aware that Susan kept brushing her nipples against Doreen's left arm. Accidentally? Doubtful, knowing Susan and the way she carried on. She was fond of saying she would fuck anything or anyone, and Doreen believed her.

"Great," Doreen said. "At least tonight won't be a complete fucking loss."

"What the hell's wrong with you tonight, babe? You've been pissy ever since you came in."

"I'm sorry. Just not in that great a mood, ya know?"

Susan bent close to her ear. "Can I help?"

Her breasts pushed against Doreen's arm. No accident this time. Jesus, what a night this was turning out to be.

"No, I'll be okay. Thanks. I've got to get up there."

"Babe, I like you," Susan whispered. Her erect nipple pressed into the flesh of Doreen's arm. Doreen had no idea what she should do.

"Go dance your stuff," Susan said. "Think about it."

Then, thank God, she was gone, disappearing into the dressing room entrance a few feet away. Doreen took in a deep breath. Then she realized she had better pick her second song and get her shapely ass up on that stage.

For no reason at all, she thought of the starrer at the far end of the stage from where she was standing. She looked up from the juke and over at him. He was still looking at her. His face was hard to see in the swirling cigarette smoke and the dim lighting, but she remembered how it looked. Pretty good. In fact, pretty damn good. Maybe he was a starrer, but he was a good-looking starrer, and he was a quiet starrer. What the hell. Doreen decided to put on a show for the man. She would do that sometimes, when the men started to get on her nerves like they were tonight. She would pick one who seemed different than the others and dance for him, even though the one she picked did not always realize it. Doreen plugged her last quarter into the juke and picked Clapton's "Wonderful Tonight."

Her first song kicked in over the hissing speakers. It was showtime. Dahlia was here.

Now just Doreen again, Doreen sat in the dressing room in front of the communal mirror. She smoothed out folded dollar bills against the dresser holding up the mirror. She ran a long nail through the bills. She had made twenty-two dollars. Not bad. She must have danced every bit as well as she thought she had. She picked up her purse, opened it, and tucked the bills gently inside it.

For the moment, she was alone. The other dancers were out working the crowd, cashing in on the "buy-me-a-drink" racket, trying to make enough so they could eat next week. Joan "Jonay" Reynolds was up on stage. Susan was out in the crowd, just where Doreen wanted her. She didn't want to put up with her right now. Doreen also remembered that Jerry-Gary or Gary-Jerry was still out there, waiting as promised.

She looked at herself in the mirror. Her dark hair looked damp and lifeless with sweat. She had really put on a show for the starer, though she was too much of a professional to ignore the rest of the audience. To ignore the audience meant no tips, and it also meant pissing off her boss. Her boss was Gene Patterson, and he was a mean ol' cowboy, made even meaner by the fact that he wanted to fuck his dancers and not a one of them would. Doreen would've loved to tell him to go fuck himself to get rid of his constant, unrelieved hard-on, but she needed to work for him. His money spent the same as anyone else's.

The door to the dressing room swung open, startling Doreen. She looked away from her reflection and saw Susan. Before Doreen had time to wonder what she wanted this time, Susan said, "Hey, I gotta message for ya. Loverboy wants to see you."

Doreen's pulse quickened. "Guy by the stage?"

"No, he's up at the bar. He gave me this note for ya."

Susan handed her a folded-up sheet of paper. Doreen took it. Then Susan said, "You look good up there tonight, hon. They'll be askin' for ya all night."

"Thanks, Sue."

"Well, I'm gonna dive back in. I've got some poor son of a bitch buyin' me house champagne. Six bucks a drink! Another hour of this and I can take a vacation in the Bahamas."

Susan patted Doreen on the shoulder. Her fingernails rested there a moment longer than they should have. Susan said, "See ya on deck."

"Yeah."

After Susan had left and shut the door behind her, Doreen opened the note. She hoped it wasn't from Gary-Jerry. And it wasn't. She recognized the handwriting as soon as she saw it, before she even read the note. It was Jeff's handwriting.

"Aw, shit," she said to the dressing room. The note itself was very simple. It read, "Please talk to me at the

bar. I will leave right after. Come on, we need to talk. I promise no fireworks. Love, Jeff."

Doreen looked at herself in the mirror again. Why now? She didn't want this right now. Not here.

And, just like that, she thought of a way around Jeff.

He saw her coming. He straightened himself in recognition. He looked at her face, not her body. Quite a feat, considering the white lace teddy she wore. He placed his long, thin hands in front of him, on the shelf lining the stage. Doreen took a deep breath. She had no idea what she was going to say to him until she said it. He never looked away as she approached.

"Hi there," she said. "Looking for company?"

"Always looking. Never finding," the man said. His voice was deep. It was not loud, but it carried.

"Well, don't move. I'll be right back." She smiled, hoping he took it as sincere. She felt her lips quiver.

"I'll be here," he said, and raised his drink to his lips. Again, she noticed how long his hands were. They looked knowledgeable. Doreen made herself brush his shoulder with her thigh as she walked by him. Her skin was hot where it touched him.

She looked at Jeff, who was sitting at the bar. Sure enough, he had noticed her talking to the guy. Jeff shook his head slightly and turned back to talk to the bartender.

Fuck you, she thought. She hadn't touched the guy just to piss Jeff off. Although that was a nice fringe benefit. She walked toward the bar, trying to ignore the guys turning to stare at her. She walked past Ray, who had the good sense not to say anything to her this time. And she had forgotten about Gary-Jerry. Until he let out a coyote howl practically under her nose. She jumped. She also noticed Jeff turn back around to watch.

"Hey, sweet thing. Sit your ass right down here," Gary-Jerry said, simultaneously scooting his chair back and clapping his meaty thighs with his thick hands. His friends hooted approval.

"Hey, dickhead, sit on this," Doreen snarled, jabbing her upraised middle finger toward his nose. She didn't wait to see if Gary-Jerry's piggy eyes would go wide with hurt or narrow with anger. She walked on, making sure her stiletto heels drove down viciously against the floor. She didn't hear tubby following, so she guessed it was over with him.

She went up to Jeff. He said, "Want a drink?" He held his drink up in encouragement. It was dark: Jack Daniels and Coke, most likely.

"Sure. Are you out of your mind, being in here? You know you're not supposed to."

"How the hell are they going to know? They can't watch me twenty-four hours a day."

"No, but they can run random blood tests. Remember? Any time, day or night."

"I didn't come here to talk about that. I just wanted to see you. Hey, Bill. Get the lady here whatever she's drinking."

"Bacardi and Coke, thanks, Bill."

Jeff sipped his drink and said, "So."

"Yeah. So what?"

"Well, I can see this is off to a good start."

"What do you want me to say, Jeff? I told you where things stood."

"I didn't say I agreed with you."

"When did you ever?"

Jeff grinned. Damn him, he always looked good when he smiled. He looked like the teenager he once was when he grinned. He said, "Good point."

"I've got work to do, Jeff. What do you want to say?"

"Yeah, I can see what kind of work," Jeff said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder, in the general direction of Gary-Jerry. And also the man at the stage. Doreen tried not to look toward the stage, but she did, briefly. Jeff saw it. He said, "Isn't half a year long enough to work around guys like this?"

"Shove it. Their money spends like anyone else's. Besides that, me and the kids can't stay with Mom forever. I need the money to move out. Mom's not in good shape."

"I hear. I'm sorry."

"The way she smokes, it's a wonder it didn't happen before now."

Bill placed a drink in front of them. He said, "That's four-fifty."

"Jesus Christ," Jeff said, taking out his wallet from his back pocket. "You girls make a killing off this racket."

He gave Bill a fiver, said "Keep it," and turned back to Doreen. "I came here to tell you that I want you. That's all."

Doreen took a big gulp of her drink. It was cold on her tongue. "Jeff, I don't have time for this, and I'm tired of justifying myself to you. We've been through this."

"I know we have. I just want to watch out for you, that's all."

"Well, gee, thanks. I appreciate it."

"I mean it. Anything you need, anything you want, I'll help. You know, with the kids."

"They're not even yours. I don't expect you to help with them."

"I just want to make it easier for you. And them."

"Jesus, you sound just like Al when he took off for Rio or wherever the hell it is and left me alone with his two kids and no husband."

"I'm not Al. I'm not gonna run away from here. Come on, I can help you. No strings attached."

"Thank you. I'll let you know. Is that it?"

"That's it. Just be careful out here, okay? Kinda rough, you know."

"I need you to tell me that?"

For the first time that night, Jeff appeared frustrated. He snapped, "I'm trying to protect you. You think I like coming out here?"

Doreen snapped back, "I don't need you to protect me. Who the hell do you think you are? Superman? It's been almost a year since we broke up and you still think you have property rights on me? We only lived together six months, damn it."

"Doreen, you should have seen yourself when we first went out. Your husband just up and left, you trying to raise two kids by yourself. I don't want to see you go back to the way you were then. I'm trying to help."

"Well, that's big of you. When I need it, I'll beg and plead on my knees. Until then, I wish you would give me some breathing room here. You make my customers nervous when you hang out here. That costs me money, you know."

Jeff sipped his drink, then said, "Look, I'm sorry I bothered you. I'll leave as soon as I finish this. I just wanted to tell you I'll be around."

"Not at the rate you're going, asshole. You'll be going right back. Do not pass go, do not collect two-hundred dollars. Stay off the sauce, goddamn it, and you better stop sellin'. They'll crucify you."

Jeff sighed and leaned his head back. He rubbed the bridge of his nose. He said, "We've had this argument before. In case it slipped your mind, 'though that would be hard to believe since you brought it up first."

Suddenly, Gary-Jerry was between them. He was all fat and hair. His beery breath washed over Doreen as he said, "There you are, honey. I wuz wonderin' where the hell you got to. I got your damn drink back at the table."

Gary-Jerry then accidentally (of course) drew his porky elbow back. Right into Jeff's hand. Jack Daniels and Coke spilled over Jeff's wrist down onto the bar. Jeff jumped back from the bar to avoid the splatter.

"Well, now, goddamn. Would you look at that," Gary-Jerry drawled. "I swear you must be a clumsy son of a bitch. Makin' a mess like that. You mighta messed up my sweetie's outfit here."

"I'm not your sweetie," Doreen growled. She tried not to show that she was suddenly scared. If Jeff got in a fight here, that would mean cops, and that would mean serious shit. She didn't want to see him back in trouble.

Jeff looked at his half-emptied glass and then down at the spreading pool on the bar. He then looked at Gary-Jerry

(Gary, his name was Gary, Doreen told herself). Jeff's eyes were narrow and expressionless. Doreen saw the muscles in his left cheek tighten, saw tiny veins suddenly stand out in his temple. She hoped he would hold back long enough to think about what he had to lose. She also saw he wasn't going to wait that long.

Jeff said softly, "Damn, I guess I am clumsy. Whoops."

And with that, he threw what was left of his drink right in Gary's face. Drops of alcohol and Coke splattered from Gary's face onto Doreen's skimpy top. Her pulse soared.

Gary fell back against Doreen with a grunt. Doreen's own drink spilled across the bar, adding to the pool. Gary pawed at his blinded eyes and said, "You fucking son of a bitch."

Jeff gave him the grin. "It was an accident."

Doreen grabbed Gary from behind, putting her arms around his fat chest, pinning his arms as he lowered them. Jesus, she thought, his tits were almost as big as a woman's. Then she said, "Gary, goddamn it, stay put. You started it. They're gonna throw your ass outta here if you push it."

He tried to move toward Jeff. Doreen shoved her right forearm up into Gary's throat. He let out an explosion of rancid air. He began to cough. Doreen fell back onto the nearest bar stool, dragging the off-balance Gary with her.

His weight on her lap made her stomach clench with nausea. Instead, she looked up over Gary's sweaty shoulder and said, "Jeff, you better get outta here. This fucker wants to cause trouble."

Jeff set his now-empty glass on the bar. He said, "I'll leave. First, I want to make it up to this man. I want to buy him a beer. You're a beer drinker, right? You sure as shit look like one. A Bud man, if I'm not mistaken."

"You cocksucker--"

"Let the man buy you a Bud," Doreen said. She dropped her left hand to his crotch and dug her sharp fingernails into Gary's nuts. With one hand on his balls and the other arm pressing against his throat, Gary stopped moving around. He sat there, his beer belly quivering, in Doreen's lap. She looked around for any other signs of trouble. Bill the bartender was making a big show out of hanging back, although she noticed he was within easy reach of the baseball bat he kept by the beer cooler. She looked at the floor. The guys closer to the stage hadn't noticed anything, what with the loud music. Those guys closer to the bar had noticed, including Gary's buddies; they were turned in their seats to watch the fight, but no one had made a move toward the main actors. That was good. If no one had made a move yet, no one would.

She turned her head back so she could talk into Gary's ear. She said, "Surprise. It feels like you've got a dick here. You wanna keep it?"

Gary nodded, his bluster gone.

"Thought so. Then you let my friend here buy you a beer, and we'll all forget the whole thing."

Jeff still grinned. He looked away from Doreen and Gary and saw Bill standing a few feet away, watching. Jeff said, "Bill, sorry about the mess here. Could I have a bar rag, and a bottle of Bud for my friend here, and another Bacardi and Coke for the lady?"

Bill glanced nervously at Gary, still sitting on Doreen's lap. Jeff said, "Oh, don't worry. I think Doreen's got things well in hand here."

Bill nodded, smiled at Doreen, and went to get the drinks.

Doreen said to Gary, "Gonna behave now? I'll have your fat ass thrown outta here if you don't. Give up on me, pal. You wouldn't like me anyway. I'd just lay there."

She released her various holds on Gary, put her hands on his flabby back, and pushed. Gary stumbled forward. He looked back at her, his face red and dripping with sweat and liquor. She smiled sweetly.

Gary said, "Aw, shit. You bitch, you're nothin' but a whore anyway."

"Yeah, that's right, and I won't fuck you. Rejected by a whore. Pretty bad, Jerry."

"It's Gary, bitch."

Jeff said, "Hey, friend, here comes your Bud. You might want to pick it up yourself, though. Wouldn't want anymore accidents around here. And don't worry about the mess here. I'll clean it up."

Gary glared at Jeff, then reached past him and grabbed the bottle of Bud Bill left for him. Gary got up in Jeff's face and said, "I ever see you in here again you're dead."

He then stomped back to his table. Jeff smiled after him until Gary had sat down. Then Jeff let out a huge whoosh of air and slumped back against the bar. Doreen could see sweat suddenly appear on his forehead.

"Scared?" she said.

"Yeah," he said, staring down at his reflection in the puddle of liquor on the bar. "Yeah, I was."

"So was I."

Jeff looked up at Bill. "How much?"

Bill smiled. "On the house. It's worth it just to see that. I hate that fucker anyway."

"I won't argue. Gimme that bar rag and I'll clean this up."

Bill handed him the rag and then said to Doreen:

"Gotta lotta balls, Dor."

She held up her left hand and hooked her fingers. "He sure didn't."

Jeff mopped up the mess while Doreen sipped at her new drink. She kept looking at Gary to see if he was going to come back. However, he only stared at the stage. He wouldn't talk to his buddies.

Jeff said, "Well, I'm gonna take that as my signal to get the hell outta here. Can I call you?"

Doreen said, "Maybe. Okay? Let me call you first."

"We make a good team, babe. Just ask Gary over there."

"Jeff, I don't know. Let me think about it. I just don't think it's gonna work for us, you know?"

Jeff nodded and looked away from her. Then he said softly, "I know."

"I'm gonna have to get goin' here. Take care of yourself."

"You, too. What I said earlier, that still stands."

"Okay. See ya."

"Yeah."

He wadded up the bar rag, stood up, and walked toward the door. Doreen watched him go. She watched the door close behind him. Then she looked over at Gary's table to make sure he didn't follow. Gary didn't seem to notice that Jeff had left. Good.

Bill came over to her. He said, "You okay?"

"Yeah. Just kinda sad. We had some good times together."

"Wanna tell me about it?"

"Not right now. I told that guy by the stage I was gonna go talk to him." She pointed toward the man she had never seen before tonight. "I just hope fatass over there doesn't decide to hassle him, too."

Bill said, "He won't. I think you cooled him right down. You up again soon?"

"Yeah. A few sets from now."

"Go get 'em."

"I'm gonna try," Doreen said as she got up and walked back toward the stage. She decided to take the long way around, following the walls, so she wouldn't have to walk by Gary. And she hoped the mysterious stranger sitting by the stage would turn out to be a nice guy.

He saw her coming. He put down his drink, waited until she got close to him, and said, "That was quite a show up there."

Doreen said, "Oh, you saw all that."

"Yeah." The stranger brushed back his hair with his right hand. "Who were those guys, anyway?"

"Nobody. Just a coupla drunks, thought they could put the moves on."

"Oh. I thought one might be a boyfriend. Husband. Something."

"No," Doreen said, recognizing the implied question. "Nothing like that. See?" She held out her ring-free left hand.

"Interesting. Definitely interesting," the stranger said. "Sit down."

She did. The two of them momentarily looked at the onstage dancer. Doreen didn't know this one very well. Her stage name was Tahnee, and that was about all Doreen knew about her. Tahnee was very tall, very blonde, and very bored. She was obviously just going through the motions up there.

"So," said the stranger. "What's your name."

"Dahlia," said Doreen instinctively.

"As in the Black Dahlia?"

"What?" Doreen said sharply, offended.

The stranger smiled momentarily, looked down into his drink. He said softly, "Nothing. Private joke."

"You need glasses, hon? I ain't black."

"Never mind. It's a long story. My name's Johnny."

"Haven't seen you in here before, Johnny. Can I have a drink?"

"Sure. Well, I'm from out of town. Just passing through, you might say. Might stay a while if things pick up."

"What are you, a salesman?"

Johnny laughed. Doreen could see his teeth were white and straight. A rarity in this area.

He said, "No, I'm a photographer on assignment."

"Who do you work for?"

He laughed again. "Myself. Free lance. I sell to the highest bidder."

"What do you take pictures of?"

Johnny looked at her. His face was expressionless as he said softly, "Life. In all its infinite permutations."

"I went to college a few semesters, you know. That was the last time I heard someone use a word with over two syllables."

"Poor Dahlia. You must feel very alienated here."

"You could say that."

"Done any modelling, Dahlia?"

"Is that a come-on, Mr. Free Lance Photographer?"

"Okay, I'm sorry." He laughed. "You must hear that a hundred times a night. Let's talk first. Tell me how you got to be here. We can share our secrets."

Doreen looked carefully at him. He was good-looking but straight. His hair was short, and his clothes were very carefully casual: faded but clean jeans, white Oxford shirt, gold necklace looped around the neck. He reminded her of those guys she had gone to college with those years ago. In fact, he reminded her of long-ago high school boyfriend Scott, who went to school and never came back.

She could handle this guy. She decided to stay and talk. This guy didn't seem to be a wild card like Jeff.

"Now what kind of secrets could a guy who looks like you have?" Doreen asked.

"You'd be surprised," Johnny said.

"I would, huh? How?"

"Later," Johnny promised.

"What makes you think there'll be a later?"

"Because you've been looking at me all night."

"Only because I noticed you looking at me."

Johnny laughed. "Won't give in any, will you? Except that you came to me first. Okay, we both noticed each other at the same time. How's that?"

Doreen laughed too. "Better."

Just before closing that night, Doreen ducked back into the dancers' dressing room. She had already put on her street clothes, but she had to tell someone about this. She hoped Katie hadn't left yet; Katie had come in an hour before to look through the wardrobe closet in preparation for her shift tomorrow. Katie was holding a red silk nightie up to her breast, modelling it in front of the mirror, as Doreen came in. Doreen felt relief.

"Katie."

Katie turned her head, blonde hair swinging across her full-fleshed face. "Hey, Doreen. Just getting ready for tomorrow."

"Katie, I think I've got a man here."

Katie smiled. "Jeff showed up again, huh?"

Doreen tried not to show her irritation. "No. A new guy. He's not from around here. He talks just like someone from a movie. Not like these local boys."

"You better marry him."

"I think I'm gonna let him take me home tonight. Is that good enough?"

"It'll have to do. Does he seem nice?"

"God, I hope not," Doreen smiled.

"You tramp. Is he cute?"

"Look out the door, and try not to be obvious. He's sitting by the stage. He's about the only guy left."

Katie eased open the dressing-room door, peered out for a few seconds, and then closed the door. "He is cute. How many drinks did he buy you?"

Doreen patted her jeans pocket. "About sixty bucks worth, babe. He must really like me."

"I don't think anybody around here gets sixty bucks a week. He must be from outta town."

"He is. Stayin' over at the Lincoln Motel."

Katie rolled her blue eyes. "Oh, now that's romantic."

"Hey, he's not here long. I've got to move in quick, or he's gonna be gone."

Gently, Katie said, "He's gonna be gone anyway, hon."

Doreen nodded and looked at the dirty floor. "I know. But just for a while, you know? I could pretend he's staying, couldn't I?"

"Yeah," Katie said softly. Then she smiled and said too loudly, "Well, kid, don't waste time talkin' to me. Go get 'im."

"I will," Doreen said. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Have fun. Be careful."

"Always am. I can handle them."

She hoped he wouldn't be rough, like so many of the local guys were, and he wasn't. They made love in his motel room, a room with shiny patches worn into the rug and dust thick on the discolored walls. The curtains were pulled shut and the room's one lamp was off, but red neon light from the Lincoln Motel's highway sign spilled into the room through the thin vertical gap where the curtains didn't quite meet in the center of the window. She could dimly see his silhouette as he moved above her, his shoulders hunched with effort and his tangled hair spiked and red-tinted with what little light shined through it. They took turns pushing each other into the creaking bed. The bed bowed in the center where the springs underneath had broken from the

weight of countless couples before them. As they tangled limbs in the ancient sheets from which the motel laundering service had not quite removed the crustiness, the springs repeatedly scraped the rug. The headboard dug divots into the wall. At one point, plaster fell from the ceiling onto Doreen's bare ass. It was so good with him Doreen didn't mind the room. He lasted a long time, and when he was finished, he stayed in bed with her. That was rare too. When he was ready again, so was Doreen.

He surprised her this time. Right in the middle, he pulled away from her and growled, "Pictures."

"What?" Doreen gasped. The shock of his leaving disoriented her.

"Pictures," he said again, and staggered up out of bed. His skin gleamed wetly in the red light filtering into the room. Doreen thrust her hips into the air in an urgent plea for his return. She was so close, and he had pulled out for no reason.... She moaned softly as he turned his back on her and limped toward the room's one battered writing desk. She watched the muscles knot in his back and buttocks as he lurched across the room.

"Johnny, come back," she pleaded. She was frantic, on the brink, and he had left. She watched him pull open the desk drawer and pull out a dark, hand-sized, rectangular object. She didn't know what it was until he turned back

around. He was holding a 35-millimeter camera. Red neon momentarily glinted off the surface of the camera's lens.

"No pictures," she said, sitting up and pulling the sheet up to her breasts. The moist heat of near-orgasm faded instantly. "Who in the hell do you think I am?"

Johnny said, "My model. My raw material."

He held the camera in his left hand and dug in the drawer behind him with his right hand. Doreen had no idea what he was looking for. She heard his fingers sliding around over wood. She stared at her lover, unable to move. His eyes were dark slits. His chest heaved with the force of his breathing. She suddenly felt very alone, very vulnerable. She wanted more than a sheet to protect her body. Her pulse became very loud in her ears when she heard Johnny's scrabbling fingers pull what sounded like a metal file across the wooden drawer bottom.

Then she saw it. Steel gleamed briefly in Johnny's fist as he pulled his hand out of the drawer. His teeth showed as he smiled.

"My whittling block," Johnny said.

FISHING

Danny Williams makes it a point to drive by Lake Lincoln at least once a week. He takes State Highway 150 until he gets to the turnoff into Lake Lincoln State Park. There, he turns left onto the road leading into the forested center of the park. All during the drive, Lake Lincoln is bluely visible through the passing tree trunks. Eventually, Danny reaches a gravel path branching off to the right from the park's main road. He follows this gravel path through many twists and turns until he reaches the end of the gravel path. There he stops and gets out of his car, stands by the end of the path, and looks out over the lake. It nearly laps at his shoes. He can see a wide expanse of Lake Lincoln from here.

Depending on his mood and the weather's mood, the lake can be many reflections. It can be shiny silver when he is conscientiously mindless. The lake can be the purple of his intensity or the gunmetal blue of his bitterness. He likes to watch the blood of a setting sun spread across the wavelets. It is a blood he doesn't mind. He also likes to watch the fish heave themselves above the calm surface to snap at the low-flying dragonflies. It reminds him of the way things are. In nature, he believes, the predators are rare, but they are effective beyond proportion to their numbers. Too effective if there are too many of them.

Predators are dramatic but limited. Danny takes a cold comfort in this.

For every dragonfly he sees eaten, he can see several more pass by him unharmed. This, too, is as it should be. It is at this point that he usually feels better. Then he can leave to wherever it is he has to go. The places he has to go to are places he would usually rather not be.

For example, yesterday. In the course of an investigation, he had found out one of his suspects had a hobby that provided both sport and profit. The suspect bred pit bulls as fighting dogs. What the suspect lost in dogflesh he made up for in sidebets. Williams had found out where the guy and his cronies fought their dogs. Yesterday, he had driven there to check the place out.

He would never forget the place. It was an abandoned barn located on the back forty of a property no one seemed to own, as far as Williams could discover from courthouse records. In the center of the barn, the floorboards had been pried up and a huge pit, approximately twenty feet in diameter, had been dug into the earth to a depth of about ten feet. Williams couldn't imagine the amount of effort that took. All that effort to give pit bulls a place to tear each other apart. A rope ladder hung down to the bottom of the pit.

Williams could smell and see the violence that took

place there every other Saturday night (according to his sources). He smelled dogshit and sweat from both animals and humans. He could see the imprint of dozens of pairs of boots around the perimeter of the pit. In the pit itself, he could see darker patches of earth that he knew were bloodspills. Clumps of fur stuck to the veins of rock that stuck out from the sides of the pit. He could almost hear the snarls, the cheers from the winners up above, the moans of the losers both inside the pit and up above it. He could hear bets being placed and changed as the battles went first one way and then another.

He imagined the losing pit bulls carried up out of the pit in pieces. Their blood smearing the bulky forearms of the men who carried them. He could hear the fake expressions of graceful-winner sympathy from the men who had made money from the blood of slaughtered dogs.

He had left the barn, wondering what he had done that he had to see things like this. He took it out that afternoon on some punk he had to question down in lockup.

And then there is today. He wants to stop by the lake after work, since there is no need to rush home now that Velma has left, but he is not sure what time he will be able to go home. If it is too dark, he can't see the water. That's no good. He needs the water. He is thinking of it while he kneels beside the corpse in the hotel room.

"Coroner's on the way," the patrolman behind Williams says.

Williams says, "Good. I.D. on this guy?"

"Yeah. Illinois driver's license. His name's John Edward. I've got Fred runnin' him through the computer right now."

Williams looks around the hotel room. He sees only the low grade sleaze of a run-down Lincoln motel room. The wallpaper is of a color he honest to God can't identify. Kind of gray more than anything. He sees a writing desk that leans drunkenly to the left. The chair that goes with it has been overturned. On the writing desk is an open briefcase. Something glossy shines from the inside of the briefcase. Looks like paper, but it isn't. Photographs.

"He musta been sittin' there when it happened," the patrolman says. Williams looks at him. The policeman is probably nineteen. He still looks uncomfortable with his cop's short haircut. He has the good beginnings of a beer belly. The policeman is looking at the desk.

"Good. You'll make lieutenant yet," Williams says. He looks away from the cop, toward the body. Williams sees blood smeared across the man's forehead, blood on the wallpaper, blood splattered on the bedspread of the room's one swaybacked bed. The murder weapon (Williams is sure it is murder, not suicide) is a gun that rests on the floor

near the body's feet. The gun is small caliber. Its handle has been taped. Williams takes it all in at once.

Blood doesn't bother him. He has seen enough of it. What does bother him is the stillness. There is no mistaking a corpse. The blood is only the most obvious sign.

The corpse is a young man. A kid, really. The hair that wasn't blown from his head back onto the wall is blonde. The hair stuck to the wallpaper is black with blood.

The kid's eyes are blue and open wide. The blue in the middle of all that red is startling. Williams hates the ones with the open eyes. He wants to close them but doesn't dare for fear of disturbing any evidence. Williams notices the kid's expression. His mouth is half-open, as if he was just about to tell his murderer something. What? Had the kid been begging? Pissed off and yelling?

Something catches Williams's eye. He looks toward the kid's outstretched right hand. Inches away, half shoved under the shadow of the room's air conditioner that sags from the window, is a camera. Pictures of the murderer, perhaps? Too good to be true. If the kid had got a few shutter snaps in, surely the killer would have taken the camera with him. Then again, maybe not. You never knew what the crazies would do. It has to be checked out.

Williams looks back to the kid's eyes again. They stare mindlessly at him. Nobody home.

"Sir?" says the patrolman. His voice is uncertain.

Williams stands up, his knees cracking loudly in the room's silence. He gladly turns his back on the body sprawled by the bed. He sees the patrolman has moved over to the writing desk. He is looking into the kid's briefcase. The patrolman's mouth hangs open.

When Williams sees what the patrolman is looking at, Williams lets his own mouth hang open. And suddenly, Williams is no longer mad about what happened here.

Williams shows a reproduction of one of the pictures he found in the kid's briefcase to Lt. Fisk. Williams says, "Can you look and see if any of our missing persons fits this woman?"

Fisk visibly starts as he looks at the picture Williams is holding in his face. Williams is starting to get used to the pictures, but he remembers the first shock of seeing them. He knows what Fisk is seeing: the careful arrangement of nerveless limbs; the wide, unseeing eyes; the glint of a flash on knife blades; the blood that looks black. Williams waits patiently until Fisk is able to talk.

"Yeah, but Jesus Christ, what in the hell is this?"

Fisk manages to ask.

"Some sicko got himself wasted out at the Roach Motel. This was one of the pictures he had with him. I think this one's a local girl. I think I've seen her somewhere before."

"You're actually trying to find out who killed the bastard that did this to her?"

Williams shrugs. "Just so we know who to give the public service medal to. Call my desk when you find out who she is, will you?"

Fisk calls twenty minutes later. Williams is looking at reproductions of the worst of the pictures. He is trying to make some sense of what he sees there. He can't. He only sees shadows and twisted limbs. Edward took the pictures in dark places: closets, cellars. He used purposefully dim lighting so that the blood looks even darker in the finished product. Williams suspects he can't place a pattern on what he sees in the pictures because he is not able to look at them for any length of time. He also can't shake the feeling that he has seen this particular woman somewhere before, although she is by no means the only star in the psycho's private showings. Fisk's call is a welcome interruption.

"Found her," Fisk said. "She is a local, a dancer out at the El Dorado. Name's Doreen Madison, and she's been missing since last weekend. At least I think this girl's

Doreen Madison. I've got descriptions and photos of her, and I'm about one hundred percent she's the girl in the photo you gave me."

El Dorado. That's where he's seen her. During the times he went out there to forget about Velma leaving. Now he can stop nagging himself about having seen the girl before. A minor mystery solved.

"No body." It's a statement, not a question.

"No. I imagine this prick was pretty good at keeping 'em hidden."

"Who reported her missing?"

"Evidently her boyfriend, or an ex-boyfriend, or I'm not sure what. I was the one who interviewed the guy. He seemed pretty upset. He got in my face about why we weren't doing more to find her. Jesus, I just thought she was out having a fling somewhere and didn't want this guy to know about it."

Williams has to shove the pictures away from him, back under the clutter of papers piled randomly across his desk. Somewhere in that clutter are the final divorce papers from Velma. He tries to forget them as he says, "What's his name? The guy who reported it."

"Jeff something. I can't find my interview report. If I had a brain, I'd be dangerous. Let's see....Jeff...."

"Call me when you find out. I've got a hunch about what happened here, and I'll bet I'm right."

"You think this Jeff guy wasted the psycho."

"You're damn right. Keep quiet, huh?"

"You bet. I hope you can't nail him."

Williams asks the El Dorado's owner: "So Jeff's been in here quite a bit. Always to see Doreen."

The owner is a balding man whose broad forehead shines with sweat. He also has a nervous habit of hitching his polyester pants up to the gut that protrudes over his beltline like a sack. He eyes Williams with dark, narrow eyes. The owner is suspicious, not sure how much trouble he's in for all this. Williams isn't about to reassure him. So it is with obvious reluctance the owner says, "Yeah, that's right. If Doreen isn't here, he isn't here."

"She ever talk about him?"

"Not to me, she didn't. I know they had some kind of thing going, off and on, and I kinda got the feeling he came in here 'cause he was tryin' to watch out for her."

"Now why would you say that?"

"'Cause he would get in fights and shit--stuff like that if somebody got too rough with her. You know, defending her honor. Crap like that. As if she had any honor left to defend."

Williams has to restrain himself from telling the owner that his missing dancer doesn't have anything at all left to

her. He would like to show him the pictures he found in the motel room. Instead, Williams says, "This happen a lot?"

"Every now and then. Fact, he got kinda in a tussle with some creep not long before Doreen hit the high road. You find that bitch, tell her she owes me money."

"What creep? You know him?"

"Yeah, local guy. He hates Jeff. Then again, so do a lot of folks."

"If I show you this picture, do you recognize who this is?" Williams holds up a fax copy of the kid's driver's license photo. The owner takes the fax with red, sausage-like fingers. He studies it briefly, then nods.

"Yeah. I do. Don't know him, didn't see a lot of 'im, but I remember this guy. A week or so back. He was puttin' the moves on Doreen."

"Why do you remember him?"

"'Cause he spent a lot that night. Tipped pretty big. Think he left with her. Hell, he's a good-lookin' bastard, ain't he? I'll bet Doreen's shacked up with this guy."

"Jeff here that night?"

"Matter a fact, he was. That's the night he got into it with one a my regulars. Little bastard."

"Did Jeff see Doreen with this guy?"

"Shit, he hadda ta. Everyone did."

Williams next interviews one of the dancers, a large-breasted blonde named Katie. Who, according to the owner, is one of Doreen's closest friends at the bar. Williams has seen Katie dance before. He hopes she doesn't remember him. She doesn't seem to as he talks to her at her house. She is more worried about the fact that Williams has got her up out of bed when she has to be back at work early that evening.

"Jeff? Yeah, sure, they had a thing going. For quite awhile. Then they kinda called it off."

"Do you know why?"

Katie purses her lips and says, "No, not exactly. Just that he got real possessive, tried to make her quit the bar. She got tired of fighting him and left him. Say, you don't think Jeff had anything to do with her being missing, do ya?"

"Just checking out every possibility. She ever say anything about a new man in her life? Just recently?"

"Yeah. She sounded kinda excited about him. Said he seemed exotic. Different than the usual assholes around here."

He hands her the fax photo. "Recognize him?"

She smiles. "That's the guy. I saw him that night he picked her up. Cute. Big tipper, too."

Okay, Williams, he tells himself. Let's see just how clever you really are. Without giving any hint that he is

mentally holding his breath, Williams asks, "She say where she was going to meet this guy? Where he was staying?"

"Uh, yeah. Lincoln Motel. She said he wasn't in town long, so she had to move in on 'im fast."

So far, so good. Now the big one. He says, "Anytime in the past week, did Jeff come up and ask you where Doreen's new boyfriend was staying?"

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

Driving back to the public safety building, Williams reviews what he knows about Jeff. He knows about his prison record for assault. He also has motive. And he has a witness who can connect Jeff, at least tentatively, with the knowledge that John Edward was staying at Lincoln Motel. Still pretty slim, but it's enough to convince Williams to stay with Jeff. There's only one thing.

"It's too damn easy," he says in the relative silence of his car. "You're not making me work. Why? Do you want to get caught? Or do you just not give a shit?"

Williams visits Lake Lincoln the next day. However, this time, the visit is duty related. He gets a call that a fisherman has discovered a body floating in the shallows of the north end of the lake. From the fisherman's report, the body is pretty badly damaged, but Williams knows it has to

be Doreen. He thinks about her as he drives out to the lake. He also knows he has to look at what she has become.

He drives his car out to the north end of the lake and parks by the squad cars that have been sent out on this call. He gets out of his car, takes a deep breath, and then walks down the slight hill that separates him from the lake and Doreen. He can see down onto the uniformed cops clustered around the shoreline. Off to one side, a cop is interviewing the fisherman. The fisherman is the only civilian present. It is still early morning, and word hasn't travelled yet. The reporters and the gawkers would be here soon enough.

Williams reaches the bottom of the hill and says to the first cop he reaches, "Hey, Jake."

"Danny. Listen, you haven't eaten yet, have you?"

"As a matter of fact, I haven't."

"Good. You're not going to after you see this."

"Wonderful."

Williams makes his way through the clustered policemen, dreading what he will see and knowing that he has to see it. A woman thrown in the lake like a garbage bag full of crumpled fast food wrappers. He shoves past another cop and the shoreline is in front of him. He starts off slow by examining the ground nearest him.

The fisherman's pole lies where it was dropped. Loops of test line curl around it. The pole lies near a log,

where evidently the fisherman had been sitting. A closed tacklebox sits on top of the log. Just in front of the log, three empty Budweiser cans rest next to three full ones. By the cans, a thin metal stake sticks into the mud. A nylon cord runs from the stake into the wavelets lapping at the shore: the fisherman's stringer. Even as Williams sees it, the cord whipsaws back and forth. There are fish on the stringer. Williams visually follows the cord out into the placid water of Lake Lincoln's north shallows. He sees her floating about ten feet away.

He can never think of Doreen again without seeing what floats pitifully in the lake. In that moment, the lake is ruined for him.

She has been in the water a week. In that time, she has become shiny and stretched and bloated: a thing. Decomposition and water erosion have been busily at work. Although Williams doesn't look for long, and the body is not too close, he can see that the fish have been at her, stripping and peeling.

What makes him lose his previous night's dinner all over the mud by the fisherman's gear is this. The fisherman has caught four ugly, yellow catfish this morning and put them all on his stringer. The catfish aren't dead. In fact, they are very much alive and hungry. They have swum out to Doreen. They are twisting and pulling at her side. They are bound together by the cord that runs through their

mouths and gills, and their struggle tangles them in the line worse and worse. They whip the water into froth, and their slimy bodies beat one another with meaty whacks. Doreen rocks in the water with the force of their feeding.

Predators, victims, and scavengers, Williams thinks dimly as he retches into the mud. The eternal cycle. This time, he thinks he knows a way out of it.

Two days later, Williams turns in a progress report to the chief. He reports that Edward's victim has been found and her family notified. Beyond that, nothing has developed. Privately, he says to the chief that he suspects one of Edward's sick buddies wiped him.

"Guy's probably long gone," Danny Williams says.

The chief seems to accept this. Before Danny can leave, the chief says, "By the way, heard from Velma?"

"Yes."

"Any change?"

"No. She's happy where she's at."

"Indianapolis, right?"

"Yeah. It's funny. She wants to get away from us cops, right? Those cops in Indy are even worse than we are."

He knocks at the apartment door. There is a short silence, and then the voice he has been waiting to hear says, "Who is it?"

"Police, Jeff. Open up, please," Williams says.

"Just a minute." The voice is calm. Williams hopes the guy doesn't try to run.

The door opens inward. Williams gazes with frank curiosity at the man he has been tracking for the past few days. Jeff looks younger than he is, although his eyes are puffy and dark from lack of sleep. His hair is mussed, as if he had been asleep. Williams holds his badge up and says, "I'm Detective Williams. I'd like to talk to you."

Jeff surprises him by still appearing calm. Jeff surprises him even more by saying, "Would this have anything to do with the murder of John Edward?"

"As a matter of fact, it would. I don't suppose you'd care to tell me how Mr. Edward came to be dead?"

Jeff says quietly, "Am I under arrest?"

"I can read you your rights, if that's what you mean. You've heard them read before though, haven't you?"

"You tell me."

"You served two years of a five-year sentence for assault with a deadly weapon. You served these two years at the Danville Correctional Center." Jeff does not change his bored lack of expression, but Williams' sharp eye notices Jeff's Adam's apple jerk once, convulsively, as he swallows.

"You are currently on probation because you were a good boy in prison. I don't think I read that off your mailbox."

Jeff sighs. "It was Katie, right."

"Among others. You sure you want to be telling me this?"

"Does it matter? Why don't you come on in, Detective?"

"Surely."

Jeff stands aside to let Williams come in. Williams professionally notes the surroundings. The apartment is barely more than an efficiency, but Jeff has made some effort to make it pleasant. Well-cared-for houseplants stand in the corners and hang from hooks in the ceiling. The furniture is not new but not beat up either. The dinette area is clean, the dishes neatly stacked for drying in a dishholder. Williams glances over at the far east corner of the apartment and notices a waterbed with silk sheets.

Williams looks at Jeff and says, "You have the right to remain silent. I'd hate to throw any of your off-the-record remarks back at you later."

"Can't trace the gun though, can you?"

"No, pretty good job. I've spent the last day trying to find out. Want to tell me where? I'm thinking of bumping off my ex-wife. What are your thoughts on attorneys, by the way? Charge a lot, don't they?"

"Bring that up for a reason?"

"Just making conversation, really. Isn't this great, that we live in a country where the cops and the citizens can be friends like this? Be glad you don't live in a police state. On a professional level, that keeps me from having to be a prick all the time. I'm really not a prick, you know. Socially, I'm a helluva guy."

Jeff grins a crooked grin. "I'm sure you are."

"I hate scenes, Jeff. They make me grumpy and make my stomach hurt. It's a bitch of a job sometimes."

Jeff points at his dinette. "As long as we're being friends and all, I'd offer you a drink except that I know you must be on duty and that--"

"And that you're diagnosed as a borderline alcoholic and one of your parole conditions is that you not drink. At least not where your parole officer can hear about it, although why you hang out at the El Dorado is beyond me. Stupid risk, Jeff. Everyone in the whole goddamned town knows you go there."

"I reported her missing. That made you check me out, right?"

"I checked you out plenty. You seem like an interesting guy. Bit of a temper, perhaps, but a nice guy overall. Any honest man would admit you've got your reasons for what you've done. Upon your assault conviction, for example, you said that the man you hospitalized had raped your ex-girlfriend. And now this."

Jeff shakes his head. "Why are you dragging this out?"

"Sorry. In my own way, I'm trying to get to the point. Something that really gnaws my ass, Jeff, is a dilemma. I hate dilemmas almost as much as I hate having to be a prick for a living. Trouble is, I face dilemmas every day. Probably why I'm such a prick. For example, I've got a helluva dilemma here. Want to guess what it is?"

Jeff keeps that poker face. Williams admires him for it. Jeff says, "I have no idea."

"What do I do about you?"

"Me?"

"Yeah. The easy answer is to arrest you and be done with it. I don't have much, but enough to get you behind bars again. A little more digging would keep you there. As far as I can tell, you left a trail a mile wide. I know you killed him. Maybe self defense when you confronted him about where your girlfriend was, but more likely revenge. I mean, think about it. You're sleeping with some dancer from the El Dorado and everyone knows it. Except it doesn't seem to be your average shag-one-off-in-the-parking-lot kind of thing like you usually see out there. You take her kids out, you're seen all over town with someone everybody thinks is a ten-dollar-a-blowjob whore and you don't care. Your defense attorney could probably make a good case that you have some sort of 'emotional attachment' or

'significant-other bond' or whatever it is they're calling it these days."

Jeff looks away from Williams. But Williams keeps going. He says, "But things don't go right, you kinda break apart, but you still keep going there. Trying to watch out for her, you tell her. You see her with one guy in particular one night. And after that, she disappears. Nobody cares except her kids and her dying mother. The cops don't. The guy who took your report didn't. He told me. She's only a whore out at the El Dorado. They pull up stakes and head to Indianapolis all the time. Left her kids alone with her sick mother? Hell yeah, that's just how these bitches are. Not a loyalty in the world. Goddamn, we got real crimes to solve here, not try to find some cheap slut who ran off to peddle her ass at the real titty bars in the big city."

Jeff goes over to a padded chair and sits heavily. Williams walks over to him and keeps going. "So you know after you report it that the cops don't care. You decide to do some digging of your own. You know that the girls she works with would know if she left with some guy. Katie tells you where the guy is staying. You go out to the motel, stake out the parking lot. You've already seen this guy, so you've just got to be patient and he'll show. When he does, you see what room he goes into. You bust in behind him with your gun, and I suspect you just threaten him at

first. 'Where the hell is she, you asshole.' Things like that. I don't know for sure how the rest of it went, but sometime in there you saw the photos. The guy was a dead man then. You left your gun and put the guy's camera out where we could find it and left the photos where we would find them. So we couldn't help but see what kind of a shithead got himself killed."

Jeff suddenly loses his temper. He says loudly, "All right, Sherlock. Do I have to listen to this? Why are you telling me this? Think I'm proud of any of this? Arrest me and get it over with, the suspense is killing me. I'm real impressed at your detective work, okay?"

Williams decides to deliver it right now. "I'm not here to arrest you, Jeff."

Jeff blinks comically. He leans back in the chair, making a great effort to control his adrenalin rush. Then he says, "What?"

"Jeff, you made no attempt to cover your tracks. In just a few days, I found out the whole story. I've spent more time tracing John Edward than I have you. I know why you killed him because I saw those pictures. Doreen isn't the only one; you know that. There were little girls in those pictures, for Chrissake. Edward's from Indianapolis, and he sells these fucking pictures. The ones that he's not in, I mean. He sells them around here, and you know? People buy the fucking things. He's not a stranger in town,

Jeff. He's got some friends here, and Katie knows why I came by to talk to her. You watch your ass, ya hear me?"

Jeff shakes his head. "I don't understand."

"Look, we both know you killed this guy. The law says you have to pay for murder. I take the law seriously because it's the only thing I have left in this goddamn town. Which is why it's harder to let you go than it should be."

Jeff's face pinches in puzzlement. "Let me go?"

"That's right. I know why you went to jail, for something a little like this. You're not a bad guy, Jeff, just a damned unlucky one. I'm sorry about that, but I see a way to give you a break here. I can help you, and I'm going to do it. If for no other reason than I don't want to see that scumbag Edward drag anyone else down with him. I don't think you're a murderer. You can kill, but then again, most of us can."

Jeff says, "What about your investigation?"

"Well, hard as it may seem to believe, they don't seem to care too much about John Edward down at headquarters. Everyone knows who he was and what he did. On paper, there's an investigation which I am in charge of. I haven't found out anything officially, and that's how it's gonna read in the final report. I'm about one week away from marking this case 'Suspended'. Eventually, we'll file it away as 'Unsolved'."

Jeff closes his eyes and knuckles them wearily. Williams decides to leave him alone. He heads toward the door. He says over his shoulder, "I'll let myself out. Just one more piece of advice. Keep your mouth shut about this. This conversation never occurred. Don't make me come back and arrest you for real. I would think real hard about getting out of town, too. And as I said, John Edward had friends around here, hard as that may be to believe. Of course, you probably won't leave, so watch your ass. I mean that."

Williams does not wait to hear or see Jeff's reaction. He only wants to go home, even if Velma is no longer there. Oddly enough, he is thinking about the pit where the dogs tear at each other. He is not sure why, but somehow he thinks he has made the eternal cycle break down. Just for a moment. That'll have to do.

NEW SEMESTER

As Scott turned into the parking lot of O'Leary's Pub, he glanced at his watch--a few minutes after seven. Good, that meant Jeff hadn't been waiting too long. If he was even there yet. Scott drove down the first aisle in the lot, looking for a space where he could fit his Nissan. The lot was full of cars--the cars belonging to Lincoln's elite. He didn't see any rusted front panels or bashed bumpers. Only Fierros and Trans Ams and Cadillacs. These signs of modest affluence seemed strange to him even though he had been to O'Leary's before and knew the crowd the bar attracted. One didn't see many scenes of yuppie-dom in the town of Lincoln. O'Leary's was about it.

He found a spot in the first row of cars, and he pulled into it. He didn't want to bother with driving around the lot to see if Jeff's car was there yet. Congratulating himself on being lucky enough to find a parking space near the front door, he shut off his engine, yanked the keys from the ignition, and practically leaped from the car, simultaneously being careful not to bash the Taurus beside him with his car door. He was eager to get inside and have a beer. His day was over, and he wanted to bury it properly. He slammed the car door, locked it, and then hurried across the parking lot toward the bar. A cool, near-autumn breeze ruffled his hair, and he noticed the sun

was low in the sky. It was the time of day when the streetlights flicker hesitantly, uncertain whether it could properly be called evening yet. His muscles tingled pleasantly with anticipation of the night ahead. The breeze hissing softly through the parking lot triggered many unspecific but pleasant trace-memories within him: walking to keggers at twilight, scuffing through fallen leaves in the campus quadrangle with a certain brown-haired female, sitting at his study desk in his dorm room watching the people through his open window. He tried to forget the disquieting knowledge that those days were over now. Forever, as the songs said. When he was around Jeff, it was easy to forget.

He reached the the bar's heavy, wooden front doors, ornately carved with all manner of intricate scrollwork. He had always thought these doors to be rather pretentious in a town like Lincoln. He grabbed the brass handle on the right-hand door and pulled, having to let his weight do most of the pulling. "Damn doors," he muttered. How were the drunks able to open them?

He walked in. The bar's interior was fashionably dark. A pretty good crowd was there because it was Friday evening and there wasn't a hell of a lot to do in Lincoln except drink. That was the one thing that held true for both rich and poor people in the area. He was thinking about that when he saw Jeff, one of the lucky ones who had managed to

grab a seat at the bar. Scott noticed that he'd even managed to keep another bar stool open. Jeff had done it by placing a full mug of beer in front of the empty stool, as if someone were already sitting there.

Scott elbowed his way through the throng of drinkers clustered around the end of the bar. He heard fragments of conversation as he went by gesticulating, boozily emphatic men with red faces and rumpled suit jackets. He held in his breath, trying to make himself as skinny as possible so he didn't touch too many of the drinkers. He saw a disembodied hand, clutching a brimming beer mug, jerk toward him and then move away at the last second. Beer sloshed out of the mug in a curl of foam, but he managed to avoid most of it.

"Sorry, partner," a voice shouted to his side. He didn't look around. "Asshole," he muttered.

He tried to see through the crowd. Jeff sat serene amidst the shouted conversations and waving arms and jabbing fingers. Jeff smiled in response to his slow progress toward the bar and raised a hand in greeting. As Scott shoved closer, he saw Jeff's face was flushed, his eyes bright. He'd evidently been here a while. He wore a white Oxford shirt, opened three buttons to reveal his skinny chest, and faded jeans. That was dressed up for Jeff.

Jeff yelled, "Hey, Scott! Pull up a rock! Got a cold one waitin' here for you."

Scott pushed past the last huddle of men and let out a deep sigh. He was grateful for the open seat, but he also wondered how Jeff had managed to keep it saved from such a rabid crowd. He didn't wonder too long, though, because he sat down and took a long swallow from the waiting beer mug.

"How goes it?" Jeff said loudly, in order to be heard.

Scott drained some more of the beer and then said, "Shitty, bud. You won't believe that place I work at. I've had it."

Jeff laughed. "Hell, you've been saying that ever since you came back here."

"Yeah, but this time I mean it."

Jeff slapped Scott's shoulder and said, "Could be worse. At least you've got a job. More than most can say around here. Except of course these assholes." He swung an arm behind him to indicate the O'Leary's crowd in general.

Scott looked behind him in response to Jeff's movement. All around them, men in off-the-rack business suits were yelling at one another how the economy had really been looking up lately. Things were going good, a bearded man right behind them was saying to his overweight friend, and by God wasn't this town making a turnaround. God bless that Ronald Reagan.

Jeff leaned over to Scott and said, "Yeah, let's hear what he says when GM closes down like it's going to."

They'll be at the head of the line to string Ronnie from the nearest tree branch."

Scott took another drink of beer in order to avoid answering Jeff. He knew Jeff worked at GM. Jeff's apparent disregard of his own job vulnerability made Scott uncomfortable.

"Don't worry," Jeff said. "You got a secure job around here. That damn newspaper will never close down. They gotta print the DUI arrests somewhere, right?"

"Yeah. Don't remind me. I had to write an exciting story today. The Moose Lodge is having a picnic out at Lincoln Park. Guess who got to write it up?"

Jeff laughed. "It pays, don't it? It's what you went to college for, huh? Be a writer, all that artsy shit?"

"Somehow, I didn't think I'd end up writing about the Moose annual picnic."

"Hell, whoever ends up doing what they thought they'd do? Stop whinin' and drink your drink."

"Thanks, Jeff. I can always count on you to put things in perspective."

They sat in companionable silence for a few minutes, periodically gulping from the beer mugs. Scott noticed, with some satisfaction, he was matching Jeff in drink rate. Among various other skills, Scott had learned to put away a lot of alcohol at school. He had never been able to keep up with Jeff before he left town.

They finished their first beers, ordered another round from the pudgy man behind the bar, and drank the second round more quickly than the first. Scott felt his fingertips go numb, the first sign he was getting drunk. Shortly after that, his stomach hollowed with the thrill of being half-lit. He took another huge gulp of beer.

Jeff said, "Goddamn, Scott. I can't get over this. You drink like a local boy anymore."

"I am a local boy," Scott said. "Remember? Grew up here, right?"

"Sure would never know it by the way you never came back to visit," Jeff said. He tried to make it sound like he was kidding, but Scott knew he wasn't. Scott was surprised he brought it up here, in the middle of all the noise, but then he figured that's probably why he'd brought it up at all. If Scott really couldn't answer, it wouldn't be that big a deal. No uncomfortable scene.

"Come on," Scott said. "I moved back here, didn't I?"

Jeff looked up from his beer so he could see Scott. Then Jeff said, quite seriously, "Why?"

Scott had been asking himself that for several months now. He knew when he went away to school Jeff had never expected to see him again. Scott frowned momentarily, then said, "I don't know. I guess maybe I wanted to. Thought I could learn more here than I was learning in school."

"You crazy fucker. You had a choice, and you came back here. Where was that other job? St. Louis? And you came here. That would be touching if it wasn't so stupid. I think college put you through a real mindfuck, boy. Thank Christ I only went to jail."

Scott drained his mug with little effort. Then he slammed the mug down and said, "Why don't you get us another round. I got the last one."

"Jesus, look at this. You're the one makes all the money. I'm just a part-time factory worker. You work for the Lincoln Gazette, college boy. You know, I tell my friends at work you write those articles, and they don't believe me. They say I couldn't possibly know anyone intelligent."

"Money, money. I'd make more money digging ditches. I'd make more working with you." Scott didn't mean to sound sarcastic, but he knew immediately he had given a slight, condescending inflection to the word "you."

Jeff chose to ignore it. Thankfully. He said, "Stick around. You might be digging ditches. Not because the Gazette will fold. Because you will. Get a job someplace else, you crazy bastard. Anywhere else. Hell, I don't want you around here."

"Thanks, Jeff. I'll remember that."

"You think I'm kidding you. I'm not, man. This place isn't good for you. You got options."

"Name one."

"Good point."

"Let's drink, then."

So they did. A lot more. They became progressively drunker. They told each other dirty jokes and bitched about how there was nothing to do in Lincoln. As it got later and the guys with families went home, the ranks in the bar thinned down to the hardcore drinkers. Without comment, Jeff and Scott matched each other drink for drink. Scott felt it necessary to keep up with Jeff. Whether it was true or not, Scott felt that in Lincoln a man's worth was measured by his ability to hold liquor.

A movement behind the bar suddenly caught his attention. He looked up from his beer. He saw a new bartender helping the first bartender wash beer mugs in the stainless steel sinks beneath the bar. The new bartender was a tall, blonde woman with slightly slanted eyes, giving her a feline appearance. She wore her O'Leary's T-shirt well, and she had on a denim miniskirt that showed her long legs to best advantage. The skirt curved snugly over her hips. Scott stared in appreciation for a few seconds. He felt warm, alcohol-fueled lust. He nudged Jeff with his elbow.

"Hey, man. Who's that?"

Jeff looked around. "Who?"

Impatiently, Scott pointed at the woman bartender.

"Her, idiot. Who'd you think I meant?"

"Oh, her. Name's Beth."

"Damn it. You know her? I forgot you were a goddamned regular in here. Isn't that against your parole or something?"

"Hey, take it easy. I don't know her, if that's what you mean. I've seen her in here before. Why? You got the hots for her?"

Scott pointed at her again. The woman was leaning forward to plunge two beer mugs into the soapy sink water. He said, "Look at that and tell me I'm crazy."

"Well, I'll get her over here then."

"No, wait--" He pushed his arm in front of Jeff's face to shut him up. Of course, it didn't work.

"Hey, Beth. How goes it?"

Beth looked up from her task at the sink. She didn't turn around, perhaps wondering if she was hearing things. Jeff called again, "Yeah, you. Turn around here."

"Jesus, Jeff," Scott whispered.

She turned around. Scott quickly looked away, hoping she wouldn't think he was the obnoxious one calling her name. He didn't have to worry. Jeff waved his arms and said, "Beth, I swear, you've got the best damn legs I've seen in here for a long time."

Scott ventured to look up from his beer. Beth was smiling in their direction as she slowly wiped her soapy hands on a bar rag. Scott couldn't help but notice her breasts pushing out against the thin cotton of her T-shirt. Then he looked back at her face because he knew women hated it when men stared at their chests. Beth's feline eyes crinkled slightly at the corners as she smiled.

"Jeff," she called back. "I'd be flattered, except you say that to every girl you see in here."

"That's not true. I really mean it." Jeff clasped his hands in front of his left breast to indicate his sincerity. In response, Beth threw her bar towel at him. He caught it with an instinctive speed and lack of fluster that Scott envied.

"Sure you mean it," she said, placing her hands on her hips and cocking one shapely leg slightly in front of the other. The movement was spontaneously and unconsciously sexy enough to make Scott momentarily tremble with an upsurge of longing.

"You boys want another drink?" she said. "I know you do, Jeff, you lush."

Jeff looked at Scott with upraised eyebrows. Scott shrugged, nodded in a self-conscious attempt at casualness. Jeff turned back to Beth and said, "Why not. I want to change this time, though. I would like a Jack and Coke, please."

Beth looked directly at Scott for the first time, and Scott tried desperately not to look away. His face went red with heat. She said, "Please, he says. He's only nice when he wants something. How do you know this loser?"

"We grew up together," Scott said. He forced himself not to look away from her long-lashed eyes. They were half-closed, sleepy looking, and all the more erotic for it. "We went through grade school and high school."

"Hey," Jeff said. "He finally admits it."

"I wouldn't," Beth said. "What's your name?"

"Scott."

"Don't see you in here. Stop by more often. I'll take care of you. You still stickin' with beer?"

Scott was frantically reviewing her words for hidden, intimate invitation, and the question took him by surprise. "Huh? Oh, yeah, beer's fine. What's your name?" Then he closed his mouth in frustration. He already knew her name, and she knew he knew her name. Cool move, he told himself.

She didn't seem to notice his mistake. She said, "Beth. Hang on, guys. I'll be right back with your drinks."

Scott watched her walk away. Jeff elbowed him and said, "She's a babe, right?"

"You might say that."

"I think she likes you."

"Don't start this shit again. Sounds like we're back in high school."

"You're right, buddy. You always did need a fire lit under your ass to get you moving. You haven't changed that much. We had some good times back then, huh?"

Scott smiled at half-formed memories. "Yeah. We did."

"Remember that time I was in the wrestling tournament and you started cheering for me? I got my ass kicked, and I sure thought you were going to get yours kicked. That's when I knew you had potential, that you had finally grown some balls. Remember that?"

"Yeah," Scott said. He hadn't thought of that particular incident in years, but Jeff's prodding brought the memory back to him. When they were both sixteen, maybe sophomores or juniors, Jeff had entered the wrestling tournament the high school held each year. Only Lincoln High School students were eligible--it was an in-school competition so that all the school studs could show off how tough they were in front of the student body. The preliminary rounds were held in the boys' gym classes. The semi-finals and final matches were held during special school assemblies in the afternoon. Invariably, the finalists in the competition were Coach Mac's football players. It was all very fraternal and cozy, with the winner being annointed king for a day in front of a cheering assembly of every student and teacher in the school. For

some reason, Jeff decided to enter that year. Scott spent the better part of a week trying to talk him out of it.

"I'm sick of this circle-jerk popularity contest," Jeff would always say in response to Scott's most reasoned arguments about why he shouldn't commit suicide in such a spectacular and public way. "Somebody needs to show them what things like this are really all about."

Jeff nearly had, as Scott remembered. Jeff had always been strong, even though deceptively skinny. He was practically impossible to get a grip on during a wrestling match; he squirmed over the mat like an oil-coated eel. He had survived the prelims in Coach Mac's gym class, much to the angered consternation of Coach Mac and his goon squad. Scott was in the class, though of course not entered in the competition, and he now remembered the puzzled fury in the onlookers' eyes as Jeff kept winning his matches. Looking back on it, Scott wondered if fate would have been kinder by having Jeff meet his defeat in those early matches.

Scott said, "You sure kicked ass there, all the way up 'til the finals."

Jeff smiled. "Yeah. Brent Abbott really cleaned up the floor with me. Right in front of the whole goddamned school."

"How long did that match last? Probably a minute."

"Well, hell, I knew I was done the minute he got a hold of me. The only prayer I had was to run away from him, make

him work so hard to catch me that he'd have a heart attack or something. It didn't quite work. He caught me."

"Whatever happened to him?"

"Went into the Marines, I think. You know that crazy bastard used to rape his little sister?"

"I heard."

"God, I wanted to beat him. In front of that entire school assembly. I knew I couldn't, but I wanted to. I knew what a grinning shit he was. And he was going to beat me like a mule in front of everyone. I let him do it. I could've not shown up for that damn match, and no one would've blamed me."

"Ah, hell. It was heroic."

"It was stupid. But no shit, Scott, when I walked out on the floor in front of all those people, and they started booing, I just got so damned mad I wanted to cry. Then I heard you cheering and clapping, the only one out of all those people. I remember I looked up, and there you were, standing up while everyone else was sitting down, and you were hollerin' and screaming and clapping and yelling my name over and over.... The only damn one. All those other people looking at you and telling you to sit down and shut up, and you wouldn't do it. No lie, buddy, when I saw that, I got a chill up and down my spine, just like when I was a kid and they'd play 'The Star-Spangled Banner' on TV. One of your finest moments, you know."

Scott laughed. "You looked so pathetic. I mean, out comes Abbott, with his short hair and his tank top and his weightlifter body and his shorts barely covering his ass. Crowd goes nuts cheerin' him. And then you come walking out a minute later. Hair down to your ass, dirty T-shirt, baggy old shorts, skinny legs, socks down around your ankles. Hell, I had to cheer someone who had the nerve to walk out in front a school assembly looking like that next to Abbott."

Jeff looked away. "Where the hell's that Beth with our beers?" While he was looking toward the other end of the bar, he said, "I always appreciated what you did that day."

Scott was grateful Jeff wasn't looking at him. It made it easier to say, "Hell, you were always defendin' my ass. Figured I owed you one."

"Yeah, some good times," Jeff said, looking back and grinning. It was the signal to move on to something else.

"Let's not start talkin' about the old days or we'll depress the shit out of each other," Scott said.

"Yeah."

Jeff didn't say anything, but Scott wondered if he was thinking about Doreen. Both of them had gone out with her. Scott was first, during high school. After he left town to go to college, Jeff took up with her and stayed with her for a few years. And now she was dead. Murdered. Scott didn't know many details. She had been killed while he was at

school, and as far as he knew, the cops had never arrested anyone for it. Jeff didn't volunteer many details about the whole thing, and Scott was never sure how to ask for them, so he generally just left the subject alone.

Beth came back with the drinks. She placed them in front of the men. Then she leaned over to Jeff and said, "Meet me out back later." She looked at Scott, winked, and then turned back to Jeff. "Bring your friend," she said.

After they had both watched her walk away to serve another customer, Scott said, "What the hell was that all about?"

"Business."

"What kind of business?" Scott felt slightly uneasy.

"Scott, I've only got a part-time job that pays maybe a dollar and a half above minimum wage. No one besides GM will touch me. That's what a felony conviction in this town does for you, though I'd say fully half the population has felony records. I've gotta run a little business on the side just to pay the bills."

Scott knew what he meant. Jeff had done it before. Scott said, "You dealing?"

"Hey, pretty quick. I guess you didn't go to college because you was a dummy."

Scott sighed. "I don't want to lecture you, buddy, but you gotta be careful. I can't believe you're even in a bar, let alone doing something like that."

"O'Leary's is low key, man. I won't get in trouble here, like I might at one of the Main Street bars. I know I've got to be careful. Think I don't know that?"

Scott raised his hands in a warding-off gesture. "Peace. I'm just telling you. I'll be quiet now."

Jeff nodded and smiled. "I know. Sorry. I'll be careful. But it's the only way I can keep afloat here. If the tax guys get nosy about where I get my money from, I'll just say I'm sponging off my old man. He'll back me up."

"Okay, let's drink." Scott raised his mug in salute. Jeff raised his Jack and Coke in return. Scott wished he could forget about Jeff's line of work, but he couldn't. He didn't want to see Jeff get in trouble again, and there was entirely too much trouble in dealing. He had always had faith in Jeff's ability to watch himself, but there was such a thing as bad luck. And Jeff always seemed to place himself in situations where bad luck would be catastrophic. He wished he could guide him somehow, to return some of the favors Jeff had done for him. To have some balls, as Jeff might say, like on the day of that long-ago wrestling meet in front of the student body.

Scott managed to forget his unease in the following hour. He grew progressively drunker. He bitched about his job to Jeff, even though he knew his job probably sounded pretty easy and high-paying to his old friend.

"My editor," Scott said. "A prize prick. He tells me today that I don't write for the New York Times, that he doesn't need any of my smartass remarks about the stories he gives me. He calls me 'college boy' and gives me the worst assignments he can think of. Probably wants me to get fed up with it and quit."

"Quit, then. What the hell? Life's too short for that. You can still try St. Louis. Chicago. Anywhere."

"I can't do that. This is where I'm from. I'd like to make it here."

Jeff shook his head vigorously. "First rule of Lincoln: No one makes it here. You get by here. You may even end up with a business suit and a nice car, like the idiots in here, but you're still just gettin' by."

"Nothin' wrong with that. Why should I be any better than anyone else around here?"

"You are seriously confused. I think your goddamn problem is you feel guilty because you went to college. You could make it and you're too damn stubborn to try."

Scott began to shred his drink napkin. Concentrating on this action intently, he said, "College taught me it's uncool to be sentimental. It taught me how to write paragraphs with topic sentences. It taught me shit about anything important."

"You gotta be spoiled rotten to talk like that. You know how that sounds to me? Jesus. Would you rather have gone to jail?"

Before Scott could reply, Beth came back to them and said to Jeff, "I've got a ten-minute break. Why don't you and Scott meet me out back in a minute?"

She walked down the length of the bar and through the door that led into the back kitchen. Jeff swatted Scott on the shoulder and said, "Drink up." He drained what was left of his third Jack and Coke. Scott chugged his beer and stifled an acidic belch.

Jeff motioned to the male bartender and said, "Hey, Vic. We've got to run outside for a few minutes. Can you keep our tabs open? We'll be right back."

"Sure," Vic said. He winked.

Scott stood up, too quickly. The dim lighting in the bar became even dimmer as his consciousness swirled and blurred. He thrust his hands against the bar to steady himself. Don't fall down, he told himself. Then he could see again, and the worst of it was over. He hoped Jeff hadn't noticed. He was drunker than he had thought. It had sneaked up on him. He walked away from the bar slowly and cautiously. His legs worked. He was thankful most of the crowd had left by now. He didn't think he would be able to walk through a crowd without stumbling over somebody's feet.

Suddenly he was aware of Jeff by his side. He let Jeff pass him on the way to the front door. Jeff was weaving a bit himself, which reassured Scott. At least I'm not the only one hammered here, he told himself. Jeff half-fell and half-pushed the door open, and Scott followed. His shoulder clipped the door frame, knocking him off his carefully plotted course, but he didn't really feel it. Then they were outside, in the yellow neon-glow of the parking lot. The breeze was welcome. Scott could almost feel the odor of cigarette smoke and stale beer being stripped away from his clothes.

He tapped Jeff on the shoulder. "Hey, guy. Does that Vic know about this?"

"Sure he does. I sell to him all the time."

"Is this what you mean by being careful?"

"Hey, I'm not gonna make any money at this if no one knows I got shit to sell. No lectures, remember?"

Scott couldn't help envying him his cool. He hadn't really changed at all. Scott wondered if he himself could be so heedless of consequences if the roles were reversed. Probably not, he had to admit. He knew he had always been the cautious one, the one who over-analyzed every situation for each possible variable until the time for action had safely passed. He remembered how strongly he had always tried to be impulsive like Jeff, and how miserably he failed

whenever he tried. He knew he wasn't equipped to be impulsive.

They walked around the back of the building. Scott saw Beth standing by the dumpster. She was hidden in the shadows thrown by the building, but they couldn't quite cover her completely. Her blonde hair was a shimmer of white, and her eyes were twin points of light.

"Hey, boys," she said. Her voice was soft so she couldn't be heard from the side of the building where the customers parked.

"Okay, Beth," Jeff said. "Let's see the color of your money."

"Greedy son of a bitch," she said, pulling a wad of bills from a side pocket in her skirt. She held the money out to him, and he took it and pocketed it.

"Ain't you gonna count it?" she asked.

"No, I trust you. Here."

He reached into his front jeans pocket, pulled out a plastic baggie full of what, in the darkness, looked like dirt, and placed it in her hand. He said, "Check it out inside. It's good, had some of it myself. Quality control, don't you know. And before you say it, no, I didn't short you on the goddamn weight."

"Of course you didn't," Beth purred. "I trust you."

"You should. I'm not like those scumbags you're used to dealing with. Anything else you need, you be sure to let me know."

Beth looked at Scott for the first time during the conversation. She said, "You guys want to help me smoke this tomorrow?"

"Oh, I don't know," Jeff said, looking over at Scott with a carefully neutral expression on his face. "I'm kinda busy--"

"Sure," Scott said, without thinking about it. He didn't care if Jeff came along or not. In fact, he had a quick, guilty hope Jeff wouldn't.

"Well, I guess so," Jeff said, smiling.

Beth said, "That's what I thought. You remember where I live, right, Jeff?"

"Sure."

"About nine o'clock?"

"No problem," Scott said before Jeff could open his mouth. Somehow, he felt he wasn't contributing enough to this meeting.

"Well," Beth said. "I'm gonna go back in and try some of this out in the lady's room. If I don't see you guys before you go, I'll see you tomorrow."

"Sure thing," Scott said.

She walked back inside, her shapely form briefly silhouetted by the kitchen lights until the door swung shut.

Scott breathed deeply and then turned to Jeff. "Jesus. Is this how you run things here?"

Jeff stared at him. "Yeah," he said. "What about it?"

Scott scratched the back of his neck and said, "Mind if I give you some advice."

Jeff shrugged. "Do I have a choice?"

"Not really. You've got to follow through on this crap. Someone asks you to come over to test your stuff, you've got to do it. You say you're makin' a living at this?"

"I'm doin' okay. Can always do better. Obviously, you think I can do better."

"Damn straight you can. She could be one of your best customers. Yet you said yourself she goes to other guys. She ought to be going to you alone. You've got to build up loyalty here."

Jeff grinned slightly. "So, college boy, am I right in thinkin' you want to help out a little here? Is that the direction you're trying to point me in? Trying to help me keep my ass out of jail?"

Scott trembled slightly from a combination of cold night air, alcohol, and mounting excitement. "It's easy," he said in a rush. "There's nothing to getting people to stick with you. That's something else I was able to learn at school."

Jeff's grin became positively expansive. "That easy, huh? Think you could show me?"

"Hell yeah. Man, this could be good. Starting tomorrow night, with her. You have to bind this girl to you. To us. The rest will follow. You've got to do that with everyone you sell to."

Jeff laughed. He slapped Scott's back and said, "Scott, I think you've changed a little bit. I still don't think you know what the fuck you're talkin' about most of the time, but at least you're gettin' a pair of balls to back it up. And I knew it was there the whole time. All it takes to get you going is a little shove. Maybe someday you won't even need me to do the shovin'. Well, I guess as long as you're back here, you might as well go the whole route. I'll show you what I know about this, and you can help me with the people end of it. Let's go back in and drink to it."

"Good idea."

So they went back in and toasted themselves several times. Scott watched Jeff make a sale to Vic with a promise of delivery by the thirtieth of the month. He introduced Scott to Vic and said, "You'll be seeing a lot of this guy, Vic. New partner."

"That so," Vic said, eyeing Scott dubiously.

"How's it going?" Scott asked, trying desperately not to slur.

"Fair," Vic said. He left to take a customer's bar order.

Jeff leaned over to Scott and said, "He'll get used to you. New faces make people nervous in this business." Scott stared down at the far end of the bar, where Beth was wiping down the top of the bar and laughing with a red-faced, white-haired old man. She threw her head back as she laughed and glanced sideways. She saw Scott staring down at her, smiled and winked in his direction, and then went back to talking to the old man. Scott shook his head and looked beseechingly at his longtime friend.

"How do I get her, Jeff? I've been away from people like her too long. What the hell am I doing back here? I've never been a part of this."

Jeff twisted up one corner of his mouth in a crooked grin. He said, "Don't worry, okay? School starts tomorrow."

CONNECTION

"I wanna kill that son of a bitch," Mark said. He took a big swig of Black Label beer. Then he slammed the half-empty can down on the kitchen table. Beth jumped. She had the good beginnings of a headache, and the noise irritated her. She was not in a good mood anyway. Her guest had been here for hours, slurping beer and raving about anything that bothered him.

"Jesus, you scared the hell outta me," she said.

"I oughtta take that gun and blow a hole right through him," Mark said. He got up, grabbed the beer can, and drained it. He crumpled the can and pitched it at a paper sack sitting by the refrigerator. The can hit the side of the fridge and then landed in the sack. Beth, still sitting at the kitchen table, clapped once, waited a few seconds, and clapped again. She had no energy left to handle Mark. She wanted to be alone before Scott and Jeff got there.

She said, "Lighten up, wouldya? Don't fuck this up for me. They're gonna be here any minute."

Mark ran his right hand through his hair. Beth saw the upraised scar that looped around his knuckles and down toward his thumb. He had told her he received the scar in a knife fight in a bar. She had never had any reason to doubt him. Then he limped over to the kitchen counter where what was left of the six-pack sat. The limp was, of course, from

his motorcycle accident. She always wondered if he exaggerated his limp because it was a status symbol in Lincoln: a badge of honor for having survived a wreck. He ripped a can loose from the plastic ring and popped the can's tab.

"I could, you know," he said. "I've done it before."

"Sure you have."

"I have, goddamn it! On a run down to Georgia. Nigger got uppity with me, so I blew him away. Another time, I ran some guy off the road by shootin' at 'im. You don't want to mess with me, Beth. Not at all. It's not good to piss me off."

"Jeff hasn't done shit to you."

"No, but he wasted a friend a mine. Few months ago. Killed him just like that."

Beth sighed. Mark would say anything to justify his bitter perspective. He couldn't admit he was jealous of Jeff's local success in a business Mark had tried many times with no results. She said, "Jeff did? Bullshit."

"No, it ain't bullshit. You don't believe me, bitch?"

Beth shrugged. "Of course I believe you, Mark."

"Damn straight you do. You better."

"Listen, Mark. They're gonna get here any minute. I want you outta here."

"What the fuck for?"

Beth slapped the tabletop with her right hand.
"Because you're trashed, and you're acting like a shithead, and I don't want you pissing them off!"

He slurped at his beer and then said, "I'll do more than piss 'em off. I gotta gun, you know."

"Yeah, everybody in this whole goddamn town knows you gotta gun. You tell everyone you can all about it when you're fucked up."

"You gettin' mouthy with me, damn it!"

"No, I just want you out of here before they come. Jeff's gotta watch his ass. If you get him mad or nervous, there goes my connection."

Beth saw his eyes roll back in his head as he took more beer down. For a moment, she thought he was going to keep rolling his eyes back, let his head fall backward, and fall to the floor. Then, at the last second, he got his balance back. He blinked his reddened eyes and yelled, "That's somethin' else. What the hell's th' matter with the stuff I get ya?"

"Nothin', when you actually get it to me."

"What's that mean?"

"It means, Mark, that you never come through on your fucking promises."

"I miss once or twice and you say I never come through."

"Once or twice? That's a joke. Mark, I want you to leave. Now. They're gonna take one look at you and head for the hills."

He swayed from one foot to the other. "That's right. Because I'm dangerous. I know this Jeff bastard. He knows he's gotta watch out for me. I gotta gun."

Beth stood up. She felt her vision go gray for a second, and she had to put her hands on the tabletop to steady herself. She was drunker than she'd thought. She had to be careful here. Arguing with Mark was dangerous, and if she said anything wrong, he would let her have it.

"Come on, Mark. Leave. I'll call you later, when they're gone. We can share, okay?"

Mark staggered backward a step, and again Beth thought he was on his way down. He threw his right foot back as a brace to catch himself, and it seemed to work. He didn't fall. Beth briefly, viciously wished he would and knock himself cold. At least that way he would be quiet. He took another drink and said, "Better call. I don't 'preciate gettin' asked to leave like this, ya know. Not at all."

"I'll call, okay? Now come on. I'll walk ya to the door. You okay to drive?" It was beside the point. Beth had no intention of letting him stay, even if he couldn't manage the short walk to his bike.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Fine. I been drinkin' and drivin' since I was sixteen."

Which might explain his two DUIs, Beth thought, but she didn't dare say it. She carefully walked over to him. He half-fell against her, grabbing onto her shoulders with both meaty hands. His forgotten beer can dropped to the tile floor with a clatter of aluminum and a splash of foam. Beth kicked the gurgling can aside. Beer sprayed across her bare ankles and the lower legs of her jeans. As she moved her body to kick, Mark's left hand slipped down onto her right breast. He squeezed it painfully.

"Ya sure got nice tits," he slurred. He squeezed again. Her face went hot with shame. He always made her feel degraded because he didn't care enough about her feelings or dignity to ask for what he assumed was his. His pinching fingers showed no regard for the tender flesh they pulled at.

Beth pulled back from him. He followed at a stagger. Great, now this, she thought. He has to get horny now. If he was even able to get it up right now, she'd be surprised. The thought of him being close to her, in her, was revolting.

"Come on, Romeo," she said. "Time to go. Maybe later, huh?"

"You always say later. How 'bout now?"

"I told you. I got company comin' over."

"Yeah, I'll kick that Jeff's ass. Goin' aroun' thinkin' he's so goddamned tough. Killed my frien' an' got

away with it. He ain't such hot shit though. He got laid off same as me."

"Jeff did? Yesterday?"

"Sure as hell did. He ain't no better than the rest of us."

Beth said, almost to herself: "He didn't mention it on the phone."

"I always hated that sumbitch. Acted like he owned that factory. Not any more." Mark laughed, and the force of his laugh nearly knocked him to the floor. Beth placed herself beside Mark and slipped her left arm around his fat lower back. He smelled of beer and stale sweat. She wondered how she had ever let him close enough to go to bed with her.

He slurred, "Anybody else with him?"

If you only knew, Beth thought. Yeah, somebody else is with him. Somebody who had spent the night and part of that morning in her apartment. Somebody who didn't rape her in the front room whenever he felt like it. She tried to keep her voice calm as she said, "Some guy named Scott." She pushed at his back again. They lurched through the kitchen.

"Is he a pussy?"

Mark's inevitable first question. Men fell into two categories for him. Those who could kick his ass he left strictly alone. Men whose asses he could kick were his

victims. Beth said, truthfully, "He's not as big as you are, no."

"How the hell do you know about this guy, anyway?"

Easy here, girl, Beth told herself. She didn't want to get him any more curious about him than he already was. Her mind went blank for a suitable response. To stall, she said, "Scott?"

"Who else, damn it!"

"He runs around with Jeff all the time."

"I've never seen him." He swiped at his beard, knocking a fine spray of beer droplets onto Beth's cheek. She fought the urge to gag.

He just got back from--" Then she stopped. Serious mistake.

"From where?"

She almost said the military, but if Mark actually saw Scott, he wouldn't buy that. She was trapped, and she was too drunk to think of a convincing lie. Then, angrily, she thought, why lie to this drunken ape anyway? So she said, "College."

"College boy. Figures. You lettin' college boys come 'round here?" His voice was suddenly not so loud. Bad sign. He was also more right than he knew.

"He runs around with Jeff, okay? He's part of the connection. Look out for the chair!"

They had managed to get from the kitchen to the living room. Beth steered Mark around the chair and aimed him toward the apartment's front (and only) door. She had let go of his waist and now tugged him along by the front of his shirt. His flannel shirt was rough in her left hand, but she used the material to correct his course. She tugged in whichever direction she wanted him to go. He followed his shirt mindlessly. Grabbing his clothes was much more preferable than touching him right now.

Finally, the front door. She unlocked it and turned the knob. The door did not fit well in its frame, and she always had to tug to open it. She pulled at the knob, and the door suddenly flew inward. It caught her by surprise, and she stumbled backward, her balance destroyed by the beers she had drunk. She fell into Mark's arms. He grabbed her around the breasts and started slobbering kisses onto her neck and ears. His beard scratched at her skin.

"Later, okay?" She wanted to scream it, but she tried to sound as inviting as possible. Anything to get him out the door. Why wouldn't he just go?

"I want it now." He licked her ear, running spit into it. His spit was cold and made her shudder.

"I told you, I don't have time." She tried to twist away, and his arms tightened around her. She couldn't breathe.

"They can watch. I'm not gonna leave until I want to."

"This is my house, goddamn you, and you'll leave when I say you do!"

She stomped hard on his left foot. He gasped in surprise, and his grip loosened. She spun away from him, trying not to fall. She was scared because he was probably sixty pounds heavier than she was. But she was pissed, too. Her face burned, and her fists curled. She wanted to hit him because he was scaring her.

Mark looked at her, his dark eyes narrow and his eyebrows scrunched down. He licked his thin lips and then growled, "Go ahead, fight. It's better that way."

"Goddamn it, Mark. Get outta here. They'll be here any minute."

"When I finish with you, I'll kick their asses down the street."

"Do you want any pot or not?"

Mark turned and aimed a clumsy punch at, as far as Beth could tell, nothing. Then he faced her again. His narrow eyes were blinking, and she could almost see the slow thoughts grinding behind them. Then, defused, he said, "Awright, awright, I'm goin'. You better call later."

She let herself relax. She was used to his rages. If she could get him to think, he would usually be okay. He wasn't a stupid guy; it was just the alcohol that made him that way. Hopefully, he would be out the door before he made himself stupid again. She said, "Got your keys?"

"Yeah, right here." He dug in his pocket for several seconds before he was able to get a good grip on his bike key. He fished the key out into the air and twirled it on its chain.

"Jeff better watch his ass, man. I know what he did, and so do a lot of other people. We could fuck him up. Him and his college fag buddy. Tell him to watch his ass."

"Yeah, I'll tell him. Now get outta here, wouldya?" She pointed at the open door. Mark walked through it. He made it a point of pride never to kiss a woman goodnight. For that, Beth was grateful. She could tell he was concentrating on every step; his eyes never looked up from where his feet were going. Yeah, he was in great shape to ride a motorcycle. Beth moved over to stand in the doorway so she could watch him to make sure he left.

He nearly tripped twice as he walked out to the apartment complex's parking lot. Beth saw his Harley Davidson leaning on its stand. He had left it under the one overhead light in the parking lot. The bulb threw sick yellow light down onto the black Harley. She watched him try to reach his bike, his strength. He seemed to be walking as hard as he could so that his boots would clump and echo against the apartment buildings surrounding the parking lot. Just a few feet from his bike, he stumbled and caught himself on the Harley's gas tank. He hung there for a second, breathing hard. Then he pulled himself upright

again, dropping his key in the process. He had to bend over to get it. If a cop was watching, it was all over for Mark.

Then he threw himself over the bike seat and gripped the handlebars. Beth couldn't tell if he knew she was watching or not. All he had to do was look back and he would see her standing in the doorframe. He wasn't looking back, though. He was stubborn. And by the way he threw back his shoulders and puffed out his chest and sucked in his gut as he sat on his bike, Beth knew he was posing. For her. It was ridiculously touching, and also pathetic. He tossed his head so that his long hair swung down and brushed the tops of his shoulders. He reached up and smoothed down his beard. Then he took his sunglasses from his pocket and slipped them on. No helmet for Mark. It was strictly sunglasses, even at night, which reminded her of that dipshit song so popular a few months ago.

She couldn't watch anymore. She stepped back into her apartment and closed the door. It wasn't until she heard his Harley roar and then peel away that she was able to look outside again. She wanted Jeff and particularly Scott to get there. Scott, with the tall, thin body and the blue eyes and the sharp, hairless face. Scott, who talked in words she couldn't quite understand even though she could tell he was making an effort to talk to her. For some reason, his talking that way didn't make her feel like an idiot.

She looked at her four-room apartment: living room, kitchen, bathroom, and tiny bedroom. Her rug was worn through to the floorboards in some areas. Her wallpaper was dull, cracked blue. None of her furniture matched, and it looked like exactly what it was, a random collection scavenged from pawn shops and discount stores. She didn't care enough about the place to keep it picked up. Newspapers and plates were piled on her scratched coffee table and by her one recliner chair. She thought about shoving all the crap into a closet to hide it from Jeff and Scott, even if they already knew what a mess her place was. After Mark, though, she didn't have the energy. She wanted a beer more than she wanted to clean up the front room. So she went to the kitchen, itself littered with dirty plates and bowls.

She saw the beer can she had kicked. It had splashed beer puddles over the floor tiles. She didn't want to bother cleaning that up either. Fuck it. She grabbed a beer from the counter and popped the tab. She looked at the paper towel rack that hung from magnets attached to her fridge door. Out of paper towels. Shit, she couldn't clean up the mess if she wanted to. She would have to buy some with her tip money from O'Leary's.

She knew she felt sorry for Mark and wanted to help him. She realized that as she stood there wondering where the best place in town was to buy paper towels. She wanted

to stop his drunk rages, his lousy attitudes. She wanted to help him get a good job record somewhere, anywhere. She also knew she couldn't. He would never change. There wasn't a thing she could do about it except try to help the man who threw beer all over her house and fucked her when she didn't want to and sometimes hit her.

Scott, she told herself. Scott was the only one who could make her think about something else. He was different. He had been away somewhere else. She could have that too, if only secondhand. Stupid, she thought. Should know better than to hope like that, to rely on somebody else for that.

She drank her beer until a loud knock at her door startled her. She went tense, and then a voice called, "Hey, babe, it's Jeff and company. Yooooo-hooooo!"

She smiled. Jeff with his magic weed and Scott with the serious expression. For a moment, she felt like she was almost in a good mood.

THE TOAST

Willie Tipton ran out of money at Harold's Good Times Bar at three o'clock in the morning. He was smashed. Earlier that month, Harold had told him no more drinks on credit, but Willie figured it was worth a try.

"Hey, Harold," he called out, still fingering his unfolded and quite empty wallet.

From the other end of the bar, Harold said, "Yeah, Willie. What do you want?"

"I know my credit ratin' ain't the best, but could you see your way clear to makin' an exception to that this evening? I seem to have run a little short on funds here."

Harold shook his head firmly. "No dice, Willie. No more credit 'til you pay your goddamn tab. You've had balance due on this tab for three months now." Harold started to wipe down the bar. "Besides that, you missed last call."

"I didn't hear it," accused Willie.

"You're too drunk to hear it. You better not get any cops 'round here again, Willie. I've about had it with you. You know them goddamn cops are tryin' to clean up this part of town, and you go outta here drunker'n hell and 'tract 'tention to yourself. I don't want any more trouble in my bar, understand?"

Willie said sullenly, "It was a misunderstandin'."

"Misunderstandin' my ass." Harold swiped viciously at the bar top. "You get in too many fights, you steal too much goddamned money. Them cops got pictures of you, you know that? They showed me. You are a no-TOR-ious troublemaker. You're on their list of known muggers."

Willie pocketed his wallet. "So I guess credit's outta the question."

"You got it. Get on home. We're closed anyway."

Willie pointed at the other two drinkers sitting at the bar. "What about them? I don't see ya kickin' them out."

Harold didn't answer. He kept wiping the bar. One of the drinkers turned to Willie and said, "Why don'cha go rob some more white folks, Willie? 'Cept go over on their side o' town, keep the cops over there. I'm sick of those cops bein' over here."

"Fuck you, George," Willie snarled. "I didn't hear ya bitchin' when I was buyin' those rounds earlier. You drank from my money then."

"Hell yeah, I did. I didn't say I liked white people, that I didn't want ya rippin' 'em off. Jus' said I wanted ya to take the trouble over to their side."

The other drinker leaned back from the bar so he could see around his buddy and look at Willie. The second drinker said, "Yeah, Willie. We don't want no more blood bein' gunned down by the cops 'round here. How the hell they miss you?"

"Darrell came outta the buildin' first," Willie said softly. "They was waitin' for him. When they got him, I ran out the back by a window they didn't know about."

The first drinker said, "Why the hell you break into that warehouse anyway? Sure, The Man owns it, but you can bet cops come when an alarm goes off in white folks' buildins. Even on this part of town."

The second drinker said, "Why they got a buildin' over here anyway? That's crazy. They know white people get killed over here all of the time."

The first drinker said, "Cheap mothers. Low property rates over here, man. They know easy dollars when they see 'em."

The two drinkers began a drunken debate on the intricacies of white economic theory. Willie was forgotten. He had no interest in horning in on the conversation. The drinkers had reminded him of what he had come in here to forget. Willie had robbed a gas station two nights ago so he would have money for tonight's binge. Now the binge was over, and he would have to try to sleep. Being drunk made it easier.

Well, the bar had been pretty dead tonight anyway. Things were too tense lately for people to be out risking a meeting with the cops. At the best of times, no one had much money to go out drinking on. Especially across from the warehouse where Darrell and Willie had made their

abortive break-in two weeks ago. Where Darrell had caught a magnum load in the face for "resisting arrest," as the goddamned paper put it.

Crap. Willie remembered seeing Darrell crawl out the first-floor window, drop to the outside sidewalk, and then suddenly straighten. Willie saw his buddy hold his hands up in surrender, right before the muzzle flash. Willie didn't remember much after that except the important thing: he had got past the cops undetected.

The two drinkers had brought it all back to him. He shook his head to clear it. The sudden motion nearly threw him off his barstool. The binge was over. It was time to go home. Not that he had any booze there. He didn't have much of anything there because his shitty part-time factory job didn't pay too well. He had four walls and a bed. The place was empty because women avoided him recently. "You're trouble," one of them had told him.

He stood up, a trifle unsteadily, and remained still so he could test his balance. He wobbled a bit, but not too bad. He stuck a foot forward and then let his weight fall on it. He stayed upright. Thus reassured, he walked carefully past the two drinkers. He said, "See ya later, Harold."

Harold looked at him with small, squinting eyes. "You go right home, Willie. Don't start no fights or cause any

shit out there. I mean that. You had three fights in here this month, then you go get almost shot up."

"Don't worry, goddamn it. I'm on my way home. I'll be asleep before you get these two bums outta here."

He flipped Harold off and pushed his way through the screen door leading to the street. He noticed the screen was slashed and barely hanging in its frame. The screen's mesh tatters flapped in the early morning breeze. It was getting cold, Willie noticed, and he wished he'd brought his windbreaker. He let the screen door bang shut behind him and then looked across the street at the warehouse he had tried to rob. The Lauhoff warehouse was an ugly grey building with few windows. The windows were covered with wire mesh, all but the one he and Darrell had removed the mesh from and then shattered. The window they had crawled in: the one Darrell had climbed down from and then been shot in front of. That window was now covered up with a thick board. Somebody had spray-painted FUCK YOU PIGS on the board in red.

Willie had been right behind Darrell but was still in the building when the cops killed him. Willie hadn't seen much of it because he hadn't been in the window frame yet. He had mostly heard it. Darrel gasping in surprise, the cops yelling "Freeze, nigger," and only a second or so later, the shot. Willie had heard Darrell slam against the side of the building. That was all Willie needed to get him

running like hell for the small back window they had discovered when going through the warehouse. The shot had echoed as he ran, chasing him through the darkness. He swore he could still hear it as he stared at the warehouse.

"Shit, Darrell," he whispered as he looked at the sidewalk in front of the warehouse. That was where Darrell had been blown away. He didn't know the exact spot, however, because he hadn't exactly stuck around to see how everything turned out. He had had to read the paper to see what had happened to him.

To break his mood, he looked down the street and wondered if anybody was out and around. He noticed two things at about the same time.

The first thing was that Jackson Street was deserted. He couldn't see any cars, either parked or moving. Jackson Street went down and intersected Main, and he didn't see any cars driving past on Main. Wasn't even the usual cop car sitting across from Harold's, making sure the uppity niggers didn't get too rowdy.

The second thing he noticed was that Jackson Street wasn't quite deserted. Of all things, there was what looked like a white boy sitting on the curb, not twenty feet on down the way from Willie toward Main. The kid sat on the curb and stared across the empty street at the front of the warehouse. Willie noticed that the kid wore jeans, boat

shoes, and some kind of dress shirt. Not quite the uniform Willie was used to seeing around here.

Now there were three things Willie was pretty sure of. One was death, another was taxes, especially for the guys who could least afford them, and the third was that any white boy out on Jackson Street on a Friday night would not be there long before he was dragged into an alley and beaten like a mule. All Willie could figure was that it was so late no one had been by to hassle the son of a bitch.

That was sure about to change.

The kid didn't look around as Willie stared at him. Willie wondered if he had heard him come out of Harold's and decided he probably hadn't. The stupid bastard just sat there, staring at a warehouse that was probably the last place in Lincoln a white person would want to be right now. Willie, no stranger to the subject, wondered if the kid was strung out on something. Booze, pot, maybe harder stuff. The kid sure wasn't paying any attention to his environment. If he was, he would be hightailing it that very moment for Main.

Willie wasn't quite sure what to do to the kid, but if the kid was stupid enough to come over to Jackson Street and commit suicide, Willie was happy to oblige. The kid looked like he had money. Willie's mind unfogged somewhat. He could beat the kid up, take his money, and spend it back in Harold's. That was it. God had put this particular honkie

at this particular spot at this particular time so Willie could catch what was left of last call at Harold's.

"Thank you, Lord," he whispered. But a more sober part of his mind was every bit as curious as the predatory part. He briefly wondered about the story behind that guy sitting here in the middle of what white people called "nigger heaven." He even wondered if the kid might be dangerous somehow, although he looked kinda scrawny to be very much of a threat.

Willie was drunk enough to want to make this a confrontation. Normally he would have crept up behind the guy, knocked him in the head, and looted his pockets. This time, however, he wanted The Man to see it coming and worry about what exactly was going to happen to him. The Man had been quick with Darrell. That wouldn't happen here.

So Willie said loudly, "Hey."

The kid acted like he didn't hear. Maybe he didn't.

"Hey, what's the deal?" Willie raised his voice.

Again, no response. This kid was wiped, Willie thought, and he yelled, "Hey there!"

The guy moved. He leaned his head back, his eyes shut tight. The guy had blonde hair, fairly long in back, and when he leaned his head back his hair went down to his shoulders. Then the guy lowered his head back down, and his bangs swept down into his eyes. Only then did the guy look over at Willie. Slowly.

"Watcha doin' here, man?" Willie said, louder this time.

The kid said, "Nothing." Then he reached down into his shirt, and Willie could see his hand moving under the shirt down toward his jeans waistband. Shit, Willie thought. The crazy shit's got a gun! Willie tensed, ready to dive back into Harold's. It occurred to him that maybe the kid was some kind of crazy redneck inspired by the cops' heroic example to clean up Niggertown. Willie wished he hadn't had to pawn his own piece a few months back.

The kid's hand connected to something, and then he pulled out something that gleamed in the dim light from the few working Jackson Street streetlights. Willie felt his heart start to work faster, and then he realized what the kid had. He relaxed. It was a bottle. A little hip flask of something or other, but definitely the hard stuff.

The kid held it out toward him. Then he said, in a voice Willie had to strain to hear: "Wanna snort? On the house."

That was too good to be true. And just damned irresistible. Here it was closing time at Harold's, he was broke, and some white kid out of nowhere comes by to offer some free booze and, involuntarily, free money. It was just strange enough to appeal to what was left of Willie's sense of humor. Why not? It was against his better judgement, but it would be a way to extend the hunt. He could set this

guy up good. Drink his booze, act friendly at first, then get louder and more abusive and get the guy all worried. Then bash him. It would be a hell of a game.

"Don't mind if I do," said Willie. He walked down toward the kid.

As he got closer, he realized his benefactor wasn't quite a kid. His face looked older. He was still young, probably early twenties, but he wasn't a kid. Willie also noticed that the guy was holding out a hip flask of, yes, it was true, Jack Daniel's. The Good Lord will provide, Willie thought. A little shot or maybe two of JD would go down smooth.

The guy sitting on the curb said, "Take a healthy belt, but leave me some. I got some more drinking to do here."

Willie could smell the alcohol on the guy's breath as he spoke up. Willie squinted his eyes to see better and noticed that the kid's eyes were pretty violent red. Like he'd been knuckling them. Yeah, that's all this guy needed was more booze. Willie was fairly drunk himself, but he wasn't as gone as this guy seemed to be. Oh well, it wasn't any of his business. And any Jack Daniel's he could drink, it would be that much more this guy wouldn't end up puking all over the street.

So he reached out and took the hipflask. With a professional eye, he noted the seal on the flask had been broken but the flask was still fairly full. Wherever the

guy had been drinking, it wasn't much from this flask. Willie uncapped the flask and tilted the bottle skyward in salute. The whiskey washed stale beer aftertaste right out of his mouth.

He capped the flask and handed it back down to the guy. Willie said, "Thanks. Pretty smooth sippin' whiskey ya got there, boy." He put a slight emphasis on the word "boy," just enough to set the kid to worrying about it but not enough to scare him off.

"Sippin', hell," the guy said. He uncapped the flask and put it to his mouth. Willie noticed the guy didn't wipe off the bottle rim first, which surprised him. He watched the guy's Adam's apple rise up and down as he chugged a fairly healthy blast of whiskey.

In spite of himself, Willie was fairly impressed. "Shit, man," he said. "That's pretty harsh."

The guy lowered the flask from his lips, threw his head back, closed his eyes, and sighed. Again, Willie could smell the booze on the guy's breath. Then the guy said, "Harsh my ass. The nectar of the gods, here. Sit down and have some more. It's not gonna last long."

Willie considered it. This guy was trashed, no doubt about it. Willie had no idea who he was or where he came from, and he wasn't sure he wanted to know. On the other hand, the guy had booze and he was something different. He didn't act scared, and he didn't act like he was looking for

a fight. Willie realized he wanted to know why the guy was here.

So Willie plopped himself down on the curb next to his new white acquaintance.

"My name's Darrell," Willie said, taking the offered flask from the extended white hand. He wanted to see if the kid showed any recognition of the name. The kid didn't react to the name.

"Sorry, I didn't introduce myself, did I? Name's Scott Richards." The guy had definite trouble with his "s" sounds. He slurred them pretty bad. Willie glanced again at the guy's red eyes. Shit, that looked painful. Of course, he realized his own eyes probably didn't look a whole helluva lot better.

He tilted the flask at Scott and said, "Glad to meet ya. Here's to ya." He was going to push ol' Scott by taking down as much of his booze as he could stomach. He hoped Scott would try to stop him.

"No, not to me," Scott said with drunken good fellowship. "To friends. New friends and old friends." He waved a hand at Willie, evidently indicating that he should consider himself a new friend. Willie himself wasn't going to go that far, but he guessed it didn't hurt to drink to it. So he did, without wiping the rim. He figured if the guy had any strange diseases or germs, the Jack would kill them. He guzzled until he choked. Scott didn't say shit,

didn't even seem to notice. Saved yourself for another round, Willie thought. He was enjoying himself. He handed the flask back to Scott.

"Yep. Friends. A rare commodity in today's world. Goddamned rare, Darrell. A sad thing." Scott took a belt to emphasize the point.

"Sure enough," Willie agreed. He wondered if this white mother was playing some kind of game after all. Did he know about Darrell and hide it? Then he relaxed. How could he know Darrell was Willie's friend? All this dude would know was some nigger got himself shot out on Jackson Street.

Scott pulled the flask down from his face and waved it in the air as he said, "Take, for 'zample, what happens when you have to bury one of 'em. Speaking hypothetically, of course. Here, have another drink, Darrell."

"Sure," Willie said, taking the flask. He was going to have another drink and hit the white fucker. He knew something about Darrell and Willie. How the hell he knew, Willie had no idea. But he was playing games.

"I mean, just like that, you bury one of 'em and that's that. Well, I mean, you don't bury him yourself. Other people do that for you, which is real goddamned nice. No, they just make you carry him to the hole where other people bury him for you. Kinda takes the unpleasantness out of it, you know?"

Willie took another huge swallow of Jack. He didn't know how this son of a bitch knew, but he did. It was time to take the game to a new level so the guy would know he was getting in deep.

He moved his face real close to Scott's. Just to let the kid see his blackness. Then he said in as deep a voice as he could: "Well now, Scott. This is real good booze, and I'm sure grateful, but I have to ask myself why someone like you is sitting out here on Jackson Street in the middle of the night. Sounds to me like a good way for a gentleman of your persuasion to wind up in the hospital, you know?"

"Absolutely," Scott said. "Kind of what I thought. I was drinking at O'Leary's earlier, you know, nice and quiet and safe. But it's not the kind of night where you want to be nice and quiet and safe. You know the feeling?"

"Yeah," Willie said quietly. And he did know it. Those were the kinds of nights when he would go into the Main Street bars and see what kind of fights he could pick. Or the nights when he would get as fucked up as he could and then go driving his car just as fast as he could down those winding country roads outside Lincoln. Or maybe even rob a gas station. Perhaps even break into a warehouse he was pretty sure was wired to the station house so he could get the cops stirred up again. Yeah, Willie knew those nights intimately.

"So I left O'Leary's, where a helluva good-looking girl was working. And she was waiting for me too. And I just up and left. She still might be there waiting, for all I know. I doubt it, but she might be. And I left her to walk over here and sit on a curb in Jackson Street."

Which reminded Willie of his initial curiosity about why the kid was here. He still wanted to know before he ended this conversation. So he decided to draw the kid out a little longer. "Damn, boy, whatter you doin' here, then?"

"Because it's not a woman night either. Maybe later today, but not right now. She's nice girl, Darrell, but we're just, you know, different. She's trying to understand, but she just doesn't quite know how it is."

Willie decided to get it over with. He wanted to get the story so he could be satisfied and let the kid have it. He said, "How what is?"

"Read the papers lately, Darrell?"

"Not for a day or two, no. Why you ask, boy," Willie growled. He felt his fist tighten on the flask.

Scott didn't seem to notice Willie's growl. "Well, scrounge up a back issue somewhere. I believe it's the day before yesterday. You may notice that I have a story on the front page of the local section. Goddamn, I guess I didn't tell ya, did I? I write for the Lincoln paper. I get to write about all the exciting Moose picnics at the park, and I cover birthday parties at McDonald's. Sometimes, when my

boss is really feeling generous, I get to handle a bigger story. Like this one two days ago. I got to write about how my best friend died in a motorcycle wreck. Yep. Police reports, eyewitness accounts, hospital records, the whole nine yards."

Willie took another drink. He didn't quite know what to say, so he let the guy talk. This was so unexpected he felt disoriented. The stupid white boy wasn't talking about Darrell. He lost the keen edge of his anger. The booze felt heavy in his stomach. He blinked his eyes because his vision was blurring in and out.

"I'll tell you the kicker, though. My boss knows this guy's my friend, right? And he still gives me the story. Says I would do a good job with it, that he's sure I wouldn't want anyone else to do it. So I wrote the story, and then I quit. Without my two-week fucking notice. So much for the resume, huh?"

Willie handed Scott the flask. "Here, man. Take a drink and relax."

"Oh, I'm relaxed. I've been relaxing all night. Funeral was this afternoon. I was a pallbearer, right? Ever been a pallbearer, Darrell?"

Willie nodded without saying anything. He had helped carry a coffin himself not too long ago.

"Coffin ain't as heavy as you'd think it'd be, is it?"

"No, it ain't. Wonder why."

Scott threw back another generous dose of Jack Daniels. Then he said, "So, I guess I gotta decide what to do next. I heard that some guys were gunning for my friend. I think, maybe, Darrell, that this wasn't an accident. You know?"

"All right, man, what happened?"

"Dark road. S-curves out on the highway there. Lot of people got themselves killed out there over the years, right? It's funny. In high school, this guy the two of us knew got killed out there. Now it's Jeff's turn. Far as I can tell, he was riding his bike into town and just went off the road. Right into the trees."

"Shit, man. Tough dues." Willie didn't trust his voice to go on. He thought he could hear the echo of a gunshot again. He remembered Darrell's silhouette crumpling out of sight underneath the window frame.

"You better believe it. The cops were good enough to tell me what was left." Scott took a drink, quick. Then he went on. "Anyway, there were some tire tracks on the highway right where he went off. Like someone came up on him. Aw, shit, I don't know. Maybe I'm just reaching here. He was fucked up on booze, pot. So of course the cops didn't care. Served him right, huh?"

"Why would someone kill your buddy?" Willie kept his voice low. He hoped he would hear an answer that made sense to him.

Scott shook his head. "I don't know. He was in some weird shit in his time. Maybe it caught up to him, who knows. Beth, the girl I know at O'Leary's, says she heard some shit a few days ago that someone was after him."

"No way to find out, huh?"

"Hell no. I tell you, though, if I find out who ran my friend off the road into those trees, I'm going to kill 'em. Drink, Darrell?"

"Sure, man." Willie took the flask and belted down. Then the two of them, the young white man and the black man, sat in the cool silence of Jackson Street. From far down Main Street, tires squalled as a late-night racer took off for the country highways. Willie was still angry, but it no longer had anything to do with his unusual drinking partner. He thought about cops who didn't give a shit and about wanting to kill. Mostly, though, he thought about Darrell and how he had never seen him again after he fell beneath the window frame that night. The white kid had said something about coffins being lighter than you would expect. Willie thought about how light Darrell had been in his coffin.

Finally, Willie said, "Sorry to hear about your day, man. What's your buddy's name?"

Scott said quietly, "It was Jeff."

"Tell you what. Don't know him, don't know nothin' about him, and I don't know nothin' about you. But here's to the two of you. I mean that."

Willie took a long drink and gave the flask to Scott. Scott nodded, stared at the flask.

"Good toasting drink here," Scott said. "Jeff's goddamned favorite." He raised the flask to his lips and took a pull. "You know, I hate this shit. Never could stomach it."

Willie said suddenly, "Why here, man. Of all places for a white boy to be lately."

"Well, I do read my own paper. Seemed like there's been trouble here lately. A shooting right out here not too long ago."

Willie nodded, breathing in deeply. "I know."

"I guess I was looking for trouble and hoping someone would give it to me. Jackson Street's the surest bet I could think of for that."

They sat in silence for a few moments.

Willie said, "Somethin' I should tell ya, man."

"What's that?"

"I jus' told ya one of my names. My first name's Willie."

"Willie Darrell. Okay. I'll remember it."

"No, man. It's Willie Darrell Tipton."

"Got it, Willie Darrell Tipton."

They drank for a little longer. No one bothered them. They shook hands goodbye, and the last Willie saw of Scott, he was walking unsteadily down toward Main. Willie sat on the curb for quite some time after that, and he saw nobody else come down Jackson Street. Rising, he decided he would go home and stay out of trouble tonight.