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This thesis **EXPERIMENTATION WITH VOICES** by
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is a thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School at the
University of North Carolina.

by

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A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
1973

Dept. of Examination

Approved by

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8

APPROVAL PAGE

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August 28 1973
Date of Examination

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WINTERPLAY

A FABLE

Just now, it was deeply dark still, and there would be no visible ball of sun for a few weeks yet. But it was after eight, and in a half hour or so there would be enough light to suit him, to let him go safely into the wooded area that lay under eight or nine feet of snow, glazed and crusty old snow. The trees knew the weather so well that the lowest branches which appeared in summer were nearly fifteen feet off the ground, and the animals would forage a toll of any even that close when they had more snow to stand on.

He regretted for a second the oil he had wasted reading last night, although he seemed to have enough to last until late May. Then, the light would be better, and he would snowshoe the thirty miles into Whitehorse. But to him enough to last meant a good reserve, a trump card against this spiel of Nature that let him get along just fine, but only on Her terms, with no room for slips. He had known this place to be thumped and slammed by blizzards as late as May.

The trip back to Whitehorse was still far off, and only an intense urge to be by himself, to be on the land and of it, kept him where he was with such chores as not freezing, pursuing food and staying alive. Going back was a small necessity. He was able to pick up work each summer and to

save a little of his earnings to resupply the cabin here, but of course he blew most of his cash, made at bulldozering for the burgeoning city's developers or at almost anything he could stand for three months to pay him something. He wasn't always sure he'd remain in the city even that long, and he had trudged some of his annual returns to Lake Laberge a bit earlier than planned, when too many beers or frosted fonts of Gilbey's had brought into focus the uneasiness he always felt down there. There were too many people and sounds. He needed the money, so he stuck with it until some morning when he just wouldn't leave his boardinghouse for the job, decided not to leave it at all that day, then decided to quaff some antifreeze for the walk back home, did so, and gained the aid of angry fists and boots out the door of whatever rummy corner he had gone into for the imbibing and there been unable to keep his peace. He would spend his last hour in Whitehorse for that year paying up at the boarding house and paying up at the general store where his order had been placed some weeks before.

The order was the same each time, of rock bottom staples and necessities, except for his little indulgence of western novels and northern adventure stories that he could stuff into the corners of his pack. He knew well the noble stories of Robert Scott, of Will Rogers and Wiley Post, in each of whom he saw something of himself and something he

demanding of himself. In the several years of living the way he did at the lake, he had nearly memorized all of Robert Service and all the Jack London and the mounted police tales he could find.

As in the other years, he would start back at an early hour, spend the bright summer night bagged up under a fallen tree or such shelter and get to the cabin about midday next, with ample energy left to haul in the supplies that had been shoved out of the mail plane to Dawson, parachuted to a clearing a few hundred feet from his cabin. The big bundle was pineboarded and steel banded, but he still couldn't leave it out too long because hungry grizzlies could get into things packed better than that.

He had no clock. The clatter reminded him of Whitehorse, where his little lessons in sociology seemed to gang up with daylight nights to keep him unaware of time and tiredness, to keep noise in his head long after real noises had stopped until tomorrow.

And too, the desire for the strong wet stuff was something he always felt and gave in to in Whitehorse. But that urge stopped immediately with the paying of his bills down there. There was never any argument within himself, not the first small tinge of regret that the airlifted order was all stone dry, since his purpose was to live in this white arena, not to guarantee his death here.

He shortly had the fireplace snapping and rumbling. After a pound of panbread and fried spam, he took several blocks of chocolate for energy. He pulled his furskin leggings on over his thermal longhandles, put on a shirt and his thin leather jacket and covered the whole outfit with a bleached white parka suit, a sort of floppy jumpsuit he had made, and he strapped white leather coverings over his boots. He broke up the remaining fire and wet it well, and with a rag to keep from burning his hand, pulled the grimy lever on the chimney side that closed the flue and simultaneously closed off the whole chimney from a foot below its peaked cover, to insure that the length of it would not be filled with windblown snow when he returned. Before leaving the cabin, he went to the mantle and removed the well oiled .30-.30 from its elkhorn rack and hid it behind some rough pine poles leaning against the fireplace where it met the wall. Not by man or Nature or accident did he want his death certificate signed, to come back and find that thing missing. He expected nothing like that to happen, and he knew of no men within miles, but neither would he tempt this place too much.

He slammed the door closed, kicked snow up against the sill to keep interesting scents inside and pushed the latch string back into its hole, not beyond his reach, unless his hands were frozen stiff, but away from the random

graspings of any bear that might come nosing around.

The different thing about this winter's stay, a real surprise in fact, was that in walking about he had noticed one snowtrack after another that had puzzled him, since he felt he had become enough a part of this place to know it. After weeks of speculation about the makers of these strange tracks, found this year and not before, he, in the middle of the mile and a half walk back from his seine in the ice hole at the lake, had suddenly remembered a track like what he'd been finding, one he'd not seen since childhood. It came to him that some quirk of Nature had led into the area a group of whitetail deer, judging from the signs, about a dozen. Normally, they would never range farther north than Edmonton or Prince George, and he hoped they'd not had too bad a time foraging in this strange and harsher place. He kept finding fresh trails and droppings, so he guessed they were getting by.

There was no immediate threat of bad weather. The moderate wind, around ten miles an hour, was from the west, and he knew to feel for any shift that would send it from a more northerly source, jolting the temperature, and in a matter of minutes collecting the North Pacific moisture into snowfall. His thermometer at the cabin read twenty-seven below, and the barometer needle was holding in the middle of its dial. He plodded westward toward the ten

or twelve square mile patch of fir trees where he had seen the deer tracks and where he expected to find a relatively fresh trail in the snow of two days before. The clump of forest was elliptically draped around a small knoll about a hundred feet high. On its far side, the knoll rose through its dark green collar of growth and appeared to be a step-stone at the base of a stark sheer cliff, with massive granite chunks sticking out, glittering under their snowcaps with bits of feldspar and mica, maybe a little gold. He'd never wanted to go cliffhanging for any of that, though. He simply felt at home where he was, walking into these trees, his boots making hole after hole in the snow.

As the scattered firs that were preludes to the thicket itself got closer together, he felt for the quiver thongs with his free hand and snugged them up to insure no noisy flapping against his thigh. The eight long fiberglass arrows, each set into its own clip against the quiver's insides, sported gleaming stainless steel bleeder heads, their razor edges and openings designed to get the job done quickly. Though not in any immediate danger of starving, he was after food. He would never feel any compunction about using his gun for this job, and he would do just that if the pangs in his middle ever urged him to. But the rifle was a stopgap, a security that extracted more than he wanted his food to cost. He felt better about using his bow.

In his family's lodge years before, in the part of Michigan that will always be more kin to the Yukon than to something like Detroit, he had felt strongly the propriety of that slender six foot extension of his father's arm, that elegant orangewood power that lay in its rack over the door, and he remembered now, as he made highkneeing strides toward the place where he would wait, the perfect statement his father implied the many times the boy had seen him ease up from the ground, taking many seconds just to stand straight, with eyes locked on something the boy could not budge a muscle to see for fear of ruining the effort. His father's three calloused fingertips would take the gut strand back and back, stressing the orangewood before the rigid child's gaze until it was ready, and the cedar arrow would disappear, chop off some of its fletching as it went and drag up the boy to streak after his father, the both of them intent on being close at hand when the animal bled enough to fall dead.

From within the patch of forest, in a kicked out squatting hole he'd made about thirty yards from the freshly tramped deer path, he hastily slipped the white covers down each end of the 90 lb. fiberglass bow, tying them at center and coiling the ends of the tie strands to keep the shaft rest clear. Placing an arrow on the rest, nocking it and holding it and bow in his left hand, he

slumped on his icy floor and appreciated the foot and a half of fresh snow that had not yet rigidified to the nine foot underlayer, snow that gave him cover yet revealed the most recent wanderings of the misplaced whitetails. There were two more hours of the half light left.

The subdued sunshine was of help to him in that he hadn't needed his polarized glasses to keep from being dazzled by whiteness. He was glad not to need them, because somehow he didn't really feel comfortable with them. He could see far less well with the old slit carved wooden goggles he kept in the cabin, but he, if asked, would have thought of his father and therefore expressed a nonsensical preference for them over the newer type, just as he claimed to like cedar arrows over any others, although he was aware that his fiberglass shafts, or even aluminum ones with their habit of bending easily at the swipe of any half inch limb, were actually better.

Waiting now, and thinking of the summer, he wondered just how and when deer slept in those endless days, how they survived the airplane safaris that droned around during July and August, alternately belching high velocity slugs and beer cans.

Then nothing he could hear in the tree rippling breeze, nothing his chilled nose perceived, but a peripheral hint to his eyes caused him to tighten his crouch even more

and to ease his stare to the left, where the deer trench came out of the thicker woods and towards his hole. Only one deer, but it had a good hundred fifty pounds to it, stockier than he had expected, exiled as its herd was. The graceful animal ambled at a slow jog, seemingly with no goal, no destination, but still not stopping to feed on any of the evergreen sprouts, and he imagined that to be because it was alone and probably not used to being so. It passed for a second behind the one tree that he had purposefully left between himself and the run, a tall and straight fir, this burly fir now lending itself to him as a blind, to insure that the deer never saw him rise. He stood upright with the bowstring behind his ear, with the calculation made to align eye and arrow. The whitetail turned away from him with the trail, and he corrected. The bow propelled his arrow into the fading light.

He sprang up without needing to see the shaft home, leaving the bow for later, and he plumped and hopped in the stricken animal's wake as fast as the drifts allowed. The string of crimson splotches testified, and the pursuit was short.

When he came to stand over the doe, his breath blending with the vapor trail from the pooling blood beside her, he thought he felt eyes on him and the doe, eyes that caused him an unfamiliar shame, shoved blood

up inside his face and tingled the scratches he bore from the run through the trees. He quickly looked about him, in all directions, peering through the settling night. Then he set about tending to the doe.

The weight of the carcass would have been nothing to him, but he would not carry the doe home until he had eviscerated and trimmed her, and hacked her into halves. With the two nondescript chunks of meat over his shoulders, he turned toward the cabin.

1970

RECENT GRIEF

Pete and I have gone through a lot together. We grew up here in Weldon, and I surmise that here we'll grow down, too. He's a good ole fellow. Always given to being rather quiet, but doing rather loud. I'm a little more conservative. I suspect that, without me, he would have gone through a good bit more than he has.

On the whole, though, we are complementary. I don't care much for his wife, but neither does he. He likes my ex-wife, and so do I. I imagine we are pretty good friends, on the whole. I presume it was a gesture of friendship when he woke me up the other night. He knows how I love sleep and hate the cold of January.

I am just not a winter person. It strikes me as congenital idiocy on a massive scale that humans would try to live north of Atlanta. In a few years, when the fuels all run out and we turn back to our father the sun, I shall be vindicated. Pete and I own two hundred acres of land in New Mexico near a little town with plenty of water. That's fifty each for us and fifty each to sell off to folks, little by little. Social Security.

Thus, it hurt to set my alarm that cold night he called. Damn the railroad for forcing a daily local out of Richmond so early that it coasted into Weldon before

7 AM, which from November to March does not even resemble daytime. And I had to be ready and waiting to unload the freight from the express car. By 7 AM, not only ready, but snappy as well. Because the agent, old Austin, liked to wave the train out before I could get it all off and onto the trucks. Most mornings, it was a race.

I must have dozed off. I was having a terrible dream. I stood naked between the rails at the station, shivering in the raw frigid night. I was somehow locked to the platform and forced to stare north. Suddenly, down that cold steel track, there loomed in the blackness a great ass, its lobes inscribed Atlantic Coast Line Railroad and directed at me. At cheek breadth, it was half a county wide. Suddenly it started firing boxes and crates at me. Its terminal sphincter grew red hot at the effort, as package after carton slammed my cold hands or whistled by me in the night. Everything crashed into a heap somewhere behind me, each impact reminding me that I would be summarily discarded by the company for all this breakage. The dream plunged on. Quickly, concern for my job was replaced by concern for my life, as I heard a clanging of bells that strongly suggested I was about to be run down from behind by another goddam train.

A few moments of fuzzy puzzlement about the clanging led me to discard the impending death theory, to try the

clock and finally to pick up the phone. I managed to say hello, but asked for a short recess.

"C. P. ? C. P. ? Are you all right? Wake up, man. You got to help me."

The tense voice was muted, secretive. I looked at the clock, and it grinned back 3:30. I was already shaking from the cold. Outside my window was as black as the plague.

"C. P., this is Pete. I've got to be quiet. You awake?"

"At 3:30? Of course. I was just lying here reading bra ads. Where are you, and what the hell's the matter?"

"Listen. I can't let Ellen hear me. Can't tell anybody but you. Meet me over in the phone company lot in ten minutes. It'll take me 'til then to get ready, but I'll be there waiting in the car."

He hung up. Pete was usually quiet, especially around his wife. He wasn't henpecked, he'd just rather not talk to her. But I don't know if I'd ever seen him so bothered by anything, not in all the time I'd known him. Things just didn't often get to him. In most of our schemes, he was the adventurer and I just the tagalong. As I've pointed out, I'm two years younger and a little more conservative. And right now I admit that the relationship was not as firm, as I put on my overcoat and walked out into the black frigidity.

I thought, well, we've gone through a lot together, but at this juncture, I just don't know. The shivering was making my teeth hurt. At least the Great Packard would be warm when I got there.

That finely kept relic. Pete's Packard was a local legend. The first car in Weldon to have an am/fm radio and a cigar lighter, an inside trunk latch and such modernities. It was over twenty-six years old on this evening, but he had kept it like a showroom exhibit. It was perfect. If you had been in it, you told people so afterward. Once when it was new, Pete and Ellen took Mildred and me to Richmond to spend a fine summer Sunday afternoon. You recall it was a big thing then too, to watch airplanes take off and land. Well, we spent three hours riding around and looking for the Richmond airport. It was a warm day, and we had all been in the liquids, yet Pete claimed he knew where we were every minute. But after all that time and not a vestige of an aircraft, the load of rubes headed back down to Weldon. Pete remained undaunted. He whipped out the last of his rum crooks — the real was already all gone — pushed in the lighter, said well we had christened the automobile well enough, fired up the cigar and threw the cheroot lighter right out of the window. He yelled and locked up the brakes, and we got down on our hands and knees in the middle of Broad Street, trying

to find it. Never did. While I was complimenting the city on the quality of its pavement and storm drains, Pete was moaning did we think his insurance would cover it. He promised to keep his window up all the next summer as penance. We didn't hold him to that.

There was the pristine Packard in the parking lot before me, its emerald green body like auroral ice in the moonlight. The big iron flathead eight idling made a smooth warm sound. I slipped into the right front seat and silently blessed the heater. Even before I could get the door closed, he had pulled off into the street. To treat his car that way!

"I'd say you were beside yourself tonight, but we'd be a bit crowded up here then. Might I ask what is up at four in the AM?"

"No time for jokes. Can you sign off for tomorrow? I need your company awhile."

"My friend, that is \$22. And don't expect my best behavior at this opaque hour."

"Want to tally the past to see who owes who a favor?"

Oh, the pain. We pulled into the freight station and woke up the night clerk. As he was marking me off for a day, I went to his coffee pot.

"Pete, you want some of this?"

"No. I may never sleep again. Not in this world."

"Then in the next, perhaps. Do you care to tell me about it?"

The night man intruded with the fact that the agent wouldn't like being stuck with a tyro replacement, but I kept telling him how sick I was. Oh, the pain.

We stopped at the truckers' allnighter for gas and zipped off across the countryside. Twice I asked him what was going on, and, peering down the headlights, he only allowed as how we had to go to Raleigh. That was all he'd said.

"Goddammit now, I think you ought to explain what in the pluperfect devil we're doing. You owe me that much. Think what time it is. And you know how I love cold mornings. And I can't sit in this old jug and amuse myself. How about it?"

He winced at the slander to his Packard. He broke.

"C. P. C. P., let up a little. I'm a hurt man, C. P. I was scared to death. Just look at my back seat. I'll kill myself. Look at it. Just God, what a mess."

There on the fine leather upholstery I saw a mattock, a shovel and a large flashlight. And red dirt clods all over. Dirt and clay, all over that seat. Jesus.

"It's ruined, C. P. It'll never come out. Oh God, C. P., I was crouched in Rowan's back yard for half an hour,

expecting every second to get my can shot off. They must be sleeping hard from the fatigue of their recent grief, ha ha. God, my nerves. I never shoulda moved in next to that fool. Ellen's mother just gave me too good a deal on that house, and we'd just got married and all. That neighborhood was no first choice, I can tell you. And her mama's only two blocks away. Ugh, no. I never shoulda bought it, even if Jake Wayland did double the coverage on the house. My nerves are gone. Just look at that back seat."

The Rowan house, next door to Pete's, was an armed castle. Whoever built that three-story redoubt used every gothic kitsch element there was, from an odd number of gables to a stain glass oval window looking down onto the crapper. And whoever built it, Jojo Rowan was right at home making it seem like a fort. Jojo lived next to Pete with his 87-year-old mother, a mobile snuff disposal. His father had never been seen. During World War II, Jojo had been a food inspector in the army, come out a captain, telling everybody what a hell it had been at Juneau and Pearl, and a guy had to live every minute, since the Japs could have delivered him up day or night.

And now the strabismic grit was a great sportsman, specializing in turkey hunting. Season out or in, he was intrepid on the trail. He snuck so many gobblers that we

expected Ben Franklin's ghost to come up and throttle Jojo some night, leaving feathers strewn all about the room. Rowan was president-for-life of the Weldon chapter, the National Rifle Association. There were two standards for membership in his club, outside of buying all your ammo from him. You had to have "appropriated" one of every type gun there was in the army, as Jojo did. And you had to be on a disability pension from the Veterans Administration, like Jojo. That way, employment never interfered with the hunting. He had gotten a grease ulcer before he had been in the service a year, and now the mailman cried at the weight of that check the first of every month.

And he was still getting guns. Every few weeks or so, the express car on the train would have him a box of something, either long and narrow, or square and marked DANGER— Live Ammunition. There was a certain conversational value to living next door to Jojo. I've seen Pete fairly shine with excitement as he described how that fortress would go off some day, all the way to Iapetus, with the ensuing flames fed by Jojo's prized collection of every back issue of Guns and Ammo.

Looking into the night ahead, Pete went on.

"You know Jojo's mother? How she just shuffles

around that place, talking to her cats and that old dog, Brownie? Well, one of those damn cats dropped a litter in my garage day before yesterday. I told Chipper he had to stay clear of the mama and all until they could get settled and her slack off her guard. He vowed to Jesus he wouldn't go near those kittens. That evening, when I got home from work, Chipper kept hanging round in the back yard 'til I caught on and called him into the house. The boy's cheek had four red streaks, in a row between his ear and his mouth. Just broke the skin, dammit. Broke the skin. Before I could get my belt out, he said he had not messed with the mama cat. Said he was teasing old Brownie over a bone, and she raked him across the face. Well, I didn't have any evidence to the contrary. And I can imagine being a fifteen-year-old dog and watching a kid prance around my food. So, I bought his story and headed next door. I knocked on the back door, and the old prune came to it. I said,

'Miz Rowan, Chippie said he was playing with Brownie this morning, and she scratched him accidentally. Not to suggest anything or nothing, but I'd appreciate sorta keeping an eye on her for the next few days just to make sure.'

"And she said,

'Umgh.'

"That's all,

'Umgh.'

"I went on back home.

"C. P., that bitch fell over and died yesterday. I went over there again about the scratches on Chipper. She liked to called the police. No autopsy, no examination, nothing. Not for her dear old Brownie. Picture that coming from her. She never liked it that much, anyway. She named it just for spite. Brownie's the name of her half sister she hates, Jojo told me. So, half an hour later, with her eyes on me — I was sitting on the edge of the front porch eyeing her — she stood over Jojo while he dug a grave back behind their old house. Jojo put that damn dog in it and covered it up with a nice, smooth mound of clay dirt, and the old woman started crying and chunking pine needles and plastic nasturtiums down on the red dirt, and in between, wiping tears and watching me."

We entered the capital city. I don't know how Pete knew the way, but there was little traffic at that hour, and we soon pulled up and parked in front of the state public health laboratory. He seemed at ease now, since we had arrived. More like himself. And by now both of us were a bit groggy over the lack of sleep. Pete went to the trunk of the Packard and got out two

blankets, leaving aside the large plastic sack there. We wrapped selves in the blankets and settled into the doorway of the lab building. No one would be inside for another couple of hours yet. I hoped aloud that no cops would get inquisitive enough to do business with us, and we dropped off to sleep.

Some months along later, I was having a fine day. It was deliciously hot and steamy. I had taken in the last load of express for the afternoon from the 4:15 and stacked it into Earl's truck for the first delivery the next day. My shirt was sopping wet and sticking to my body, July style. I could foresee with relish the cold shower when I got home, and two big homemade muenster cheeseburgers, rare. After that, I intended to traipse out for an evening of heterosexual delectation. Jojo's mother died yesterday. I locked up the office and headed up towards Pete's for a cool can of beer on the porch. He had phoned me to come by on the way home, and I had gladly accepted.

Naturally, there were the NRA boys' cars parked in front of the old house, and a plastic wreath was hanging on the front door. I walked past the scene without staring and took a seat beside my friend. The

cooler was equidistant between us. His front porch had a nice way of turning down both sides of the house for a yard or so, affording a fine view of the neighborhood. A lovely breeze wafted.

Our attentions shortly were drawn to the delicate sounds of female prattle. The first shift of telephone operators was spilling out of the office building across the street and heading off for the day. Our upraised cans drew not a one across to us, but several smiled and waved, and a few winked.

"What shall we do with the weekend, Peter?"

"Want to go get some bream down on the Cashie?"

"That sounds good. And remember that any trip to Windsor affords a visit to my cousins there."

"You mean the ones that made that stuff you gave me last Christmas?"

"Those, and it, the same."

"Lordy yes."

We sipped. I leaned back in my cane-bottom and looked into the Rowan back yard at the dog grave, with its little headstone and smooth grass covering. There was a wreath on that, too, with a black ribbon for propriety.

"I can't believe the taste he has. Look at that, Peter."

"I wish I had the guts," Pete said.

"Reach into that thermos box, and maybe something will happen."

"No. I mean, I've been thinking — I'd only get beat to death, because he's got a half a division in there — but you know what I want to do? All day long, I've wanted to go over there, call Jojo out the back door. And then jump up and down on that pint sized hump of dirt, and stomp those fake posies. And yell at him,

'Fake! Pseudo! Fake! It's gone, it's empty. They kept the old bitch's head in Raleigh, and I threw the ass end in the Roanoke River!'

"And then let him wonder who or what I was talking about."

"Yes, my comrade. But you are too young to cross the bar. We would see you in the sweet bye and bye."

"Oh, I know it, C. P. But Jesus, I want to so bad. By the way. . . Chipper told me awhile back it was really the mama cat that scratched him."

"Well hell."

"Yeah."

We sat and rocked in the waning sunlight. The beer felt very good going down and quite good after it got there. I noticed one of those cats walking around the garage and eyeing the Packard. Another one loped by, and the two of them ran off around toward Rowan's.

Pete opened another can and quaffed a gentle swig.

"I whipped him anyway, for telling me a lie."

1972

THE SABBATH

The quality of the headset was stated in terms of cps, or recently, Hz. But far more importantly, the thing provided me incapsulation. Seemingly nothing could be going on outside it.

The sunlight had gone from the winter Friday evening. Lying on the sofa in the dark, I had verdant strings oozing through my ears toward each other, to join at deep places. Even great brasses came as private pleasures. The cord ran from me through the double french doors, past the quietly breathing coals in the grate and down to the component array at the end of the long living room. Surely worth some cut classes to get that weekend at home.

You know, it seems to me that my mother often had trouble guessing what would become of me. My father just figured that, unless God took a shine to me, I'd end up crying under some drill sergeant. In the great ignorance of one who had no idea then where I'd be after getting my college degree but who somehow felt unconcerned, I didn't want to think about it. Not to mention idea then what I'd be.

They said go to school so you can have a real life, be somebody. My parents never could really be called

zealots, but I think they were, maybe a little. Now, though, that is a moot point.

I could lie there for awhile. It was cold outside the house, but I didn't have to feel it. Even until now, I have kept it so. In this last decade I've found that a government sinecure is far better insulated even than a university campus, all things considered. Except for an occasional interruption, the longer you listen to the music the better it gets. And it bestows a comfortable rambling quality to your train of thought.

I did not know my mother had come into the room.

"Matt."

I opened my eyes to the evening dimness and looked at the ceiling, then realized that she was there.

"Sorry. I didn't hear you."

I removed the headset.

"Your Uncle Bill wants you on the phone. Supper's almost ready anyway."

"What does he want? I just got home."

"He didn't say."

She turned and walked back toward the kitchen. I followed her out of the room and went down the hall to the telephone table.

"How're you doing, Bill?"

"Hello, Matt. You set the world on fire yet?"

"Can't you wait like everybody else? I don't finish school until next year. Now what can I do for you? You realize that this is the first time you've ever called me that it wasn't seven A. M.?"

"Sorry, university gentleman of leisure. But it's right good for you. And if your daddy was home every day, I wouldn't have to do it. Just be grateful. I got advance notice this time. Marse called a minute ago and said he was sick and wouldn't be in again tomorrow. Didn't say what was wrong. Bet it's hemorrhoids. He's down more than up around here, I know that. He ain't been much good lately, here or there. But I just can't have it on a Saturday. Sandusky'll be here for deliveries and such, or whatever might come up, but we got to make the collections. How about coming in in the morning? You can rest up and still get started about 8:30, if you're worried about getting lots of sleep in the morning."

"It's too cold that early. Besides, I don't know the route, do I?"

"No, you never have done this one, but it's just all the locals, and almost every one has a street address. Everybody owes me. If you hit a hard one, call me and I'll tell you how to find it. Your daddy knows these, but he doesn't come in off his run until tomorrow night, I think

your mother told me, right?"

"Yes. He's on 75 this time. Local trains are always late on the weekends. All right. I need the money. But you've got mighty little respect for a young man's health to get me up so early. I'll see you in the morning. Oh, and what does this fine task pay now? Still five dollars?"

"Right. Why would you want more? You'll be back home by four o'clock. You folks all right? Doing good up there at school?"

"Everything's fine, I guess. Yours?"

"'Bout the same. I have to laugh a lot. Anyway, I'll see you then. Harvey's over here having a cup of coffee, and he says hello."

"Tell him hello, and I'll see him later."

"Right."

A flat bed pickup truck is like the big ones in at least one way. It doesn't ride very well without a load on it. What a rutted driveway that little house had. Bounce and lurch and bounce again. Just another mud yellow stucco house in South Weldon. I was glad that I had only three more stops to go. Rebuttoning my heavy jacket, I got out of the truck with the account cards and the receipt book and walked up to the door. There was no bell.

A few seconds after my knock, there came to the door a stocky woman whose bushy eyebrows ran unbroken from one side of her bland face to the other. Her dress and the apron over it matched her deep, tired brown eyes. She looked like the weather that day. Winter overcast. But I would be back home soon.

"Yes?"

"I'm from Carpenter Furniture, mam. I'd like to collect your weekly payment."

"Oh, yes. Come on in, please, and get out of the cold. I'll get it for you. Are you new with Mr. Carpenter?"

"I'm his nephew, Mrs. Bennett, is it?"

"That's right. Where's the regular fellow?"

"He's ill today, mam. Nothing serious, and I'm just giving them a hand."

"Well, you looked sorta familiar. Have a seat, and I'll go get it."

"Thank you."

I had sat too much in the truck. Standing to relieve the discomfort, I noticed how banally everything seemed to be in place in the small living room. There was the plastic rose in a vase. A big Bible, a calendar from a grocery store, a fairly nice chair I think came from the store. Life among the rednecks. It was all there. Then I started to sit, because although my feet were chilly,

the upper air in the room was too warm from the big oil heater that stood in the corner and glowed and hissed. Halfway into the chair, however, I noticed the photograph on the wall and forgot wanting to sit down. I walked across to it.

"I'm sorry, sir. I'll be there in a minute."

"No problem, mam. Take your time."

The picture was a cheap high school five by seven, in a frame of cardboard. It had no glass over it, and the picture and its frame had by this time assumed a pronounced convexity.

I knew the girl. Yes. Bennett, Bennett. But her name is Ralene Perkins, or was. Is that her mother? She has the same brown eyes, the facial bones. I think so. Yes, and the tight little smile to cover a large group of very bad teeth, I recall. She had too much candy and too little cabbage, as Harvey would say. Well, damn. I wonder if she's here, or where she lives. It was five years ago, no, six. I haven't had so much since then that I'd forget how long it was. That story about older girls and how valuable it's supposed to be later if it's done right the first time.

But it works, I guess. What good was just reading about it. Because then I had no driver's license, and Tommy got the car to ride around with some of the guys on

a May Sunday afternoon, Momma said he had to take me. He loved that. She still doesn't know why we never did "act like brothers should." Anyway, we pulled into Tony's to get some hot dogs and stuff, and they were parked next to us in the lot. Tommy said let's go down to the river and walk around. So the two cars, four of us and four girls, drove down past the football field at the north end of town. To look at the Roanoke River, I guess I thought. They were all seniors, classmates. In another month, they were all gone, all over. I felt out of place with them, although I knew them from school and seeing them around.

The cars stopped in the playing field parking lot, and everybody got out. Some started walking down toward the bank of the river, past the hatchery and the cottonwoods. A couple went up toward the hulk remains of the old power company building.

"Tommy yelled one hour, guys. Let's nobody be late, now, and watch out for snakes," one boy said.

They all laughed.

Ralene said, "Can I stay here with you? I don't feel like hiking around."

"Sure. I thought they were just going down to the river there. Do you know anything about all this? Where are they going?"

"You know."

"No, I don't. I've never been down here with you people, being such a child and all."

"Well, piece it together, then, Child."

She was so sullen all this time. Maybe she didn't like to grin and show those teeth.

"OK, Old Lady."

At that, she couldn't help a little smile, behind her hand. I said do we just wait for them, and she said yes. I said all this was news to me, and she said she didn't think it was right, and she sort of believed in going steady. I took a step toward her and put one arm around her neck and a hand on her breast.

"Hey!"

She moved both ways at once, her body snatching itself away from me and her hand swinging at my face. I don't know how she missed. She drew back for another try, but dropped her arm and just glowered.

"For that, we could just as well have gone with them. Boy, you don't waste any time."

"I'm new at these little Sunday games."

"Oh, what a line, you. How come you think I'm so good at it?"

"What line? Dammit, I didn't insult you. What I did was a pretty honest move."

I was red faced, almost yelling.

She looked puzzled and for several moments said nothing. I turned and walked off and looked out over the river. The anger I had felt receded and was replaced by surprise at myself and amazement at what an afternoon this was.

"I don't know about you. Didn't you know what they do down here?"

"No. So I'm stupid, then, by your reckoning."

"You've never done this?"

"Don't rub it in."

She was quiet again. She took my hand and led me over to the girls' car, and we got into the back seat. She said nothing more. It seemed that her dress, one of those starched stand-out things they all had then, filled the seat between us. She lifted it, and all those crinolines underneath, and she made love over me twice. It's funny, the second time she muffled a tight squeal beside my face near the end of it, and I didn't even know what it was.

This must be her senior picture. That's how the girl looked then. Six years. It seems longer.

"I'm sorry. Here it is."

"Thank you, mam."

She gave me the wadded up bills, and I began to flatten them out. There were seven ones. I began to fill out the receipt book blanks.

"I saw you looking at my daughter's picture. Maybe did you know her?"

"Yes, mam. She was in my brother's grade in school, but I remember her."

"She's dead."

"Oh no. I'm really sorry."

"Yes. She's been dead for over a year now. She was such a good girl."

"Yes, mam. I didn't really know her. I only talked to her once, one Sunday afternoon."

"I know."

She must have turned up the stove, it seemed. The woman stood there without moving, her arms down at her sides. Then her eyes flushed and overfilled, and tears began to run quickly, profusely, down her face, and she was trembling. I had wanted to ask her what had happened to the girl, but all I could think of was wanting her to take the receipt from me so I could go. Between sniffing, then, she began speaking to me, so softly that I could barely hear her words.

"I know. I know who you are. She told me. . . about down at the river that day, that Sunday. She told me. I knew it was you when you said who you were. Oh, Jesus Lord,

she was so good. . . so good. I understand, I do, understand. You were so young then. . . she had to show you what was right. I understand. Oh, you know, don't you. . . she didn't want to hurt you, she said. You know, now, why she . . . why she had to stop you, don't you? You couldn't of expected her to be like those others, could you? Oh, Lord Jesus. . . I know, I do. I understand. You know she was right, don't you now? I've been so thankful for her. . . Oh, Lord. Yes, I knew you were the one. I know. Oh she was so good,. . . Now, she's gone. Oh, stop it, stop me, Lord."

She put her hands over her face and stood there, trembling. I tried to wipe the moisture off my lips with my hand. The place had turned into a furnace, I thought. Nearly all I could feel in the heat was the urge to run out of the house. I don't know what manners kept me from doing that.

A car pulled to a stop in front of the house, and she looked up.

"I'm sorry. Here comes my husband home."

"Yes, mam. Well, I have to go now."

Pensive, she stood before me. A man was coming across the yard toward the house. I went to the door and opened it and started out.

"Will the regular man be back next Saturday, or can you come instead?"