

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Joshua D. Weber for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
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Tracy D. Daugherty

The Gospel: According to Matt is a novel, told in the first person, simple past tense, depicting the struggle of a young man attempting to make sense of his relationship with his estranged father as he wrestles with a growing crisis of faith. Matt is deeply sincere in his desire to do right, but he is, at heart, skeptical of the teachings of his mother's fundamentalist church. In the beginning of the novel Matt attempts to avoid confronting his own feelings about faith. The novel consists of four major movements, two of which are explored in the present document.

The first of these details Matt's trip across the county with his father, a rowdy truck driver. Matt's conservative Christian values are challenged at every turn by his father's behavior and outlook, which are foreign to him. Matt finds himself compromising his principles in small things, and he must face his growing fear that, inside, he is just like his father.

In the second movement, Matt is dropped off by his father at a summer Bible camp, where he expects to find companionship and guidance that will reestablish his faith. In the camp, though, he is disappointed to find that his peers do not take their faith as seriously as he tries to take his, and some are even engaged in sexual activity while in camp. Further, Matt is thrown off balance by the secular and liberal viewpoints of some of the faculty.

In the creation of this document I have paid special attention to the voice of the narrator in an attempt to capture the nuance of late adolescence, while balancing the perspective of a retrospective narrator who is aware of the irony of the situations and experiences he is recounting.

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The Gospel: According to Matt

by
Joshua D. Weber

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Joshua D. Weber, Author

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The Gospel: According to Matt

1

My first sin, committed before my father and I had even rolled out of the rest stop on the I-40 where he met my mom and me, south of Hooker, was what they call a sin of omission.

“So, have you thought about what you’re going to do when you grow up?” my father asked as he whipped the wheel around.

“Yeah, I guess,” I said. “A little.” I bounced in my seat, holding the handle above my door. The passenger seat in my dad’s truck was springy and new, the vinyl still fresh and bright.

“Hell boy, you’re ahead of me then.” He leaned forward to look into his mirror before he gunned the diesel and we lurched forward into the road. It was the same conversation we always started with. He hadn’t been sure of what he was going to do until the day he graduated high school.

“Got my CDL the day after graduation,” he said, spinning that big old wheel back around the other way.

I could feel the tug of the long trailer straightening out behind us, neatly between the narrow white lines. I leaned forward and peeked out my mirror. In the distance, though perhaps closer than she appeared, I could see my mother standing against the side of her Escort station wagon. The wind blew her flower print skirt around her ankles, furling it against the car door. She pulled her hair back – it looked long and dark, and I couldn’t see the grey that I knew streaked it, clustered around her temples, at that distance – and opened her car door. I missed her instantly, as though I were a kid again left at a babysitter’s watching her walk away through a screen door. It was the same way she pulled her hair back when we stood to sing in church, hooking her finger behind her ear and sweeping it over her shoulder. She did that at night, too, when she peeked into my room on her way

to bed. She'd find me studying or writing at my desk and she'd bend over behind me to give me a kiss on my jaw, just below my ear. Her hair would fall when she did and she'd tell me not to stay up too late, and she'd sweep her hair back as she backed out into the hallway and closed my door. The cab straightened out on the road and she vanished in an instant.

"I was a fuck-up when I was your age," my father said. I looked across the cab. The driver's seat was beaten down. It had been molded to the contours of my dad's butt for four or five hundred thousand miles. He'd thrown a sheepskin pad down on the cracked vinyl for comfort, and the wool squirted out along the edge of his thigh. "You got direction," he said, shifting.

The big motor roared under the hood. Now I could see the entire rest stop in the mirror, the restrooms and cars, somewhere my mother, sliding away.

"So what's it going to be?" he asked. We changed lanes and he shifted again. "You gettin' yourself a college education, or you gonna go straight to makin' some dough?"

Oklahoma lay out before us, flat and wide. A cluster of buildings rose out of the prairie far from the highway, on the right, and I could see a bridge that crossed the freeway without an entrance a couple of miles ahead. My chest tightened, and I felt my hand grip the armrest on the door. I was embarrassed to tell him about Jesus. This was my chance: Seminary, Father, I could say. I am going to spread the word. That's going to be my life's work, the way moving dry goods around North America is yours. We'll both carry things. You'll carry dog biscuits over mountains and across plains, and I'll carry souls up that ladder to eternity. I love Jesus, Dad. Let me spread the news about him to you. Jesus is the father who is always there for you.

I said, "College," through my tight, dry mouth. Would he laugh at me if I told him? Or would he spend the next four days trying to talk me out of it? I didn't want to be talked out of it, and I wasn't sure which I dreaded more, the talking or the laughing.

“Hell, Matt,” he said, “You know the Willie Nelson song, ‘*Don’t let your babies grow up to be cowboys.*’” He hummed a bar or two and sang, “*Don’t let them play guitar and drive them big trucks.*” He laughed. “I bet I got that tape in here somewhere.”

I laughed too. My arms relaxed.

“Doctor or lawyer?” he asked.

“Don’t know yet,” I said. “Either would do.”

“That’s right. Buy your old man a Mercedes-Benz when he retires from truckin’.” He barked out another laugh and shifted. “Either way, I’ll be proud as hell, Goddamit.”

I flinched at the word, but he didn’t notice. He held the steering wheel with one hand and hauled a black case out from behind his seat. He started pulling cassette tapes out of it. I looked back out my window. It was a great feeling, climbing up into a big rig, and dropping into a seat, and I surrendered to it. When I was a kid I loved everything about my dad’s truck: the high bouncy seat with a view, the slow bass throb of the diesel, even the hard plastic dome that housed the transmission right there between the seats. I remember asking my mother why we couldn’t all just go in the truck. I was little then. Maybe three years old. There was plenty of room for all of us in the sleeper, I told her, and besides, Dad would always be driving so she and I could share it. She was swollen with my sister, but I didn’t see that as an issue. She brought it up: What about the baby, Matt? And I told her no problem, I’d hold the baby.

The overpass was getting closer, and I could see a pickup on it pulling a trailer stacked high with hay bales. It would be off down the road by the time we passed. Gone off to a farm, maybe the cluster of buildings out there, barely higher than the green earth. And whoever was driving that pickup thought that his load of hay mattered. But it didn’t. I knew it didn’t, because in a moment it would be nothing more than a speck in the mirror, and then just a distant memory or forgotten altogether.

That was the one thing that I had to admit I still loved, was the way it felt sitting so high on the road, watching the landscape pass. I felt invincible, and the earth crawled by in slow motion. Seventy in a truck didn't feel like seventy in a car. It felt eternal. I hadn't thought about it before, but when I did I realized that was why my dad loved it. I hadn't ever thought that he must love sitting in his truck – it was just what he did. As though seeing his kids no more than once a year was just part of the job description for an irresponsible, neglectful father, and it was better for everyone involved anyway, because when he was around things were worse. One of my first memories, back when Nicole was so little she sat in a car seat, was sitting in front of the Meetin' Place tavern late at night, looking through the back window of the Escort at the neon signs and dark cedar shake siding, waiting for Mom to drag Dad out so he would be sober enough to drive by dawn and not lose his job. I remember leaning on the hard plastic edge of Nicole's seat and her screaming her head off right in my ear when they finally stumbled out. I used to imagine that he would hit her back then, but I really don't remember. If I saw that I've shut it out.

The fact was, I saw now, he loved the trucking life. He loved that feeling. I looked over at him, across the wide cab and smiled as he popped one of his tapes into the deck above the transmission casing, and immediately Willie Nelson started plucking his guitar in the cab.

"I know it's on one of these," he said, hitting the fast-forward. "*Make them be doctors and lawyers and such.*"

"Mom always says it's good to have work that helps other people," I said. That was as close to talking about the ministry as I was going to go. The truth was that summer camp, the final destination of my trip in my father's truck, was supposed to be a direct and important step on the stairway to seminary.

It was a camp that the pastor of our church, Reverend Randolph William (Willy) Allen guided my mother toward. The preacher who ran it, Reverend Smith, had been a friend of his back at seminary, and Pastor Willy thought he could help me out.

It wasn't that I was sinful or anything. In fact, I was the pride and joy of Reverend Willy's Wednesday night youth groups. We'd start by sitting in a circle in the finished basement of the church on these folding metal chairs and he'd pass out Bible character cards. The name of the character was down at the bottom of the card, and there were ten clues, each one easier than the next. Everyone would read their card slowly, starting from the top, and when you could name the character you'd shout it out, and if you were right you got the card, and whoever collected the most cards led the class in prayer.

"Third son of Zeruiah."

Silence.

"Known for being fleet of foot."

Silence.

"Cousin of David."

"Elkannah!" someone shouted. There were always kids who were desperate to get a card or two and would shout almost any name they knew.

"Slain by Abner at the pool of Gibeon."

"Abishai!"

"Joab!"

I sat up in my seat where I had been waiting. "It's Asahel," I said, reaching for the card. "Elkannah was Samson's father, and Joab and Abishai were the first sons of Zeruiah."

Pastor Willy winked at me. I had known the answer since the second clue, but we had an agreement that I couldn't answer until at least the third, so that the other kids would get a chance to learn.

I liked to vary our prayer as much as I could, so I started to think about what I would pray for after I won the game. Lead us not into temptation. That was a good one. That year, sixteen years old, I found it increasingly difficult not to think about breasts, and at the time, a girl in my class named Andrea Apelwood, good looking, but no homecoming queen, had been trying to get me to look at hers. "Hi Matt," "How's it going Matt?" every time I ran into her in the hall at

school. I didn't talk to her too much, because I tried to associate only with Christian kids I knew from church. Bad associations spoil useful habits. But lately she was behind every locker door, around every corner. Lead us not into temptation.

But I worried a little that the other kids might get the idea I was being tempted if I did that prayer, so I decided to switch it up and pray that week for daily bread, and the next Wednesday I would do temptation.

"He's got a great future in the church," The pastor told my mother, later that evening. She had come to pick me up, but he invited us into his office, so we threaded our way through the shady wooden pews that looked so forlorn and empty in the darkened hall, into the back room of the church that the pastor used as his office. We sat around a brightly lit card table underneath the fluorescent overheads. "Camp with Reverend Smith could really give him a jump start," he said.

"What do you think, Matt?" my mother asked me. "Would you like to go to Bible camp?"

I shifted on my chair. My mother and I sat on the same folders they had downstairs in the classroom. Pastor Willy had a padded office chair with arms and a hydraulic lever for altitude control. The congregation bought it for him one weekend after a fiery sermon he had given about riding high with the Lord. The pastor was not a tall man.

"Sure," I said.

As far as I knew, everyone in Hooker wanted to get out of Hooker. For me, the option would be to stay home, hang around the house while my mother was at work all day and suffer through the heat, listening to the splash of coins and the woogle of bonus points on my sister's Nintendo when she railed or ollied or landed a 360, playing *Skate or Die*. While I wasn't going to say no to anything that meant leaving town, the fact was that Bible camp sounded pretty good to me. At Bible camp, Pastor Willy explained, you slept all summer in a tent and they had a lake with a diving board and a rope swing. They did bonfires at night, and every

morning they served breakfast on a covered outdoor veranda while Reverend Smith, graduate of the Oklahoma Christian Academy, as well as the Northpoint Evangelical Seminary in Minnesota, a virtual legend on the preaching circuit in Oklahoma, Texas, and Nebraska, gave Morning Prayer. He also led the campers in Bible study in the afternoons.

But getting to Bible camp meant first a swing around the country with my father. He had two weeks of visitation coming to him that summer, but he was always on the move in that truck. The week after our meeting with the pastor, my mother finally got a hold of him on the phone and bargained to reduce those two weeks to six days, the six days that it would take him to pick me up in Hooker on his way through to L.A., change his load of synthetic doggy bones out for a shipment of Casio watches, and then drop me off at a church in New Mexico on his way to Dallas. My mother got off the phone with him and said she was sorry if I didn't want to spend all that time in the truck, but it was for the best, and it would save over forty dollars on the bus ticket. "Remember, Matt," she said. "Endurance works out its fruits with righteousness."

I suspected she was misapplying scripture, but I didn't question her. Just that morning she had taken a second job for the summer, and our kitchen table was stacked high with copies of the *Nickel's Worth*. I picked one up and thumbed through it, pretending to review the classifieds. My father was a guy who could build a lunar lander out of the contents of the average family's garbage can, and who, when I was a kid, I embarrassed in front of some of his trucker friends when I forgot which way to spin a bolt to take it out of his truck's engine block. I jammed that sucker on so tight that he had to borrow a ratchet from one of his buddies to get it off. He had laughed at me with his friends, but I think I shamed him because he never made me help him work on his truck after that. We never talked much once he hit the road for good, and the idea of sitting in cab with him for almost a week with nothing to talk about, just waiting for him to ridicule me about going to Bible camp filled my intestines with dread.

“Did Dad say he wanted me to ride with him?” I looked down at the *Nickel's Worth* in my hand. It was crushed like an accordion. I relaxed my grip and slid it under a tall stack on the edge of the table.

“He said it would work out fine.”

“Did he ask if I wanted to go with him?”

Of course he hadn't. I knew that. When he first left, if I asked about him, she used to say things like, “Of course he loves you, honey. He's just not good at showing that. Maybe that's why he's not a family man. He's not cut out for responsibility.” But she didn't say things like that any more, and I guess I didn't really want to hear them. It was easier for both of us if no one tried to make excuses for him.

But so far, sitting up in that old truck with him hadn't been as bad as I had feared. Maybe he was avoiding talking about church camp, too.

“Well, shit,” my father said, squinting out into the afternoon sun that hovered out there on the other side of our visors. “Your mother does good with you. You'll choose fine what you want to be.”

He didn't look over at me when he said that, just kept messing with the fast forward buttons. I wasn't sure what he meant. Was he saying he was sorry he wasn't doing good with us? Or was he complaining that Mom had my sister and me all to herself? I couldn't tell.

His face lit back up with a smile. “Hell, Matt, I think I found her.” We both sat back, watching the wide earth as Willie sang.

That night I lay in the sleeper in a rest stop in Colorado and contemplated my sin: “He who denies me before men, this one I will deny before my father on Judgment Day.” But he wouldn't understand anyway. He lived in a world of engines truck stops and the sweet smell of rubber radials mounted on shiny wheels. What good would it do to tell him about camp? Could he even understand what it meant to a Christian to study with the reverend? What could I liken it to? Driving with Henry Ford?

I pulled the coarse wool blanket up. It still got pretty cold at night, but Dad didn't like to run the diesel if he could avoid it. He lay in the passenger seat, reclined as far as it would go. I had told him I'd be fine in my seat, but he said I should use the sleeper.

"Old truckers don't hardly sleep anyway, boy," he said. "That's what we do when we're home for a week."

So I curled up in the back, smelling my dad's odor in the blanket, something I hadn't smelled in a long time. Beef jerky and lambskin, and cotton T-shirts changed every other day. I crinkled up my nose, held my breath at first, but when I let the scent in it didn't burn or turn my stomach. It was gentle, somehow. Familiar.

My parents divorced in 1985, when I was seven and my sister was four, which was about two years after Mom became a Christian. For quite a few years Dad kept a house in Hooker with his new girlfriend, Linda. Nicole and I went over there on weekends when he was home, and we ate hotdogs off his charcoal grill. Then he and Linda decided to get married on a trip up to Vegas, and that really messed them up. Linda left him a few months later, and he pretty much hit the road in the rig. Back then he drove a Mack truck. That was the first rig he bought when he went into business himself. The kind with the long hood, not the flat-nosed cab-over style. I used to think that it was an important distinction, because I thought the cab-overs were ugly as hell. Another kid in my class, Stevie, had a father who drove a Kenworth cab-over for Atlas Moving. His dad was in town a lot more than mine, but his truck was ugly. I always mentioned that to him when I had a chance.

But now my dad was driving a cab-over, and the year before he'd bought a little land up in Idaho, where his mail went, and I was lying in his sleeper. I felt grown up, thinking about how life changes. My head was resting on my backpack, stuffed full of summer clothes, and I could feel the hard outline of my Bible deep in the front pocket. Dad never really had actually made fun of me for being a

Christian, in fact, he'd never talked to me about anything like that all those years, but somehow that made me even more nervous about it around him.

In the end, the problem was that I hadn't been as strong as I should have been that day, but the thing with Jesus, I knew, was that He was all about second chances. Prostitutes, tax collectors, folks like me. I'd spread the word to my Dad when the time was right.

The next day I compounded the problem by taking the name of the Lord in vain. I had been hearing it so much from Dad that it just seemed natural. We were driving down a grade in the mountains of Nevada. That's all there was in Nevada, mountains that stuck up like islands in the desert. He was telling me about this hunting trip last fall with a driver friend of his. The guy's name was Ray, and he was from Priest River, a town up in the mountains of North Idaho. He and my dad had planned it all over the CB one week while they were both going east on the 70. They were within a few miles of each other all the way across the country, and Ray told my father about his annual deer hunt in the mountains behind his home. My father always kept a gun in his truck, but he had never used it that I heard of. He took it on the hunting trip, though, and they had pack mules and all, just like mountain men.

"It was like I was back in the Old West," he told me, as we barreled down the empty road. "Mountains and horses and mules, and I even called my gun 'Betsy,'" he said.

"Did you shoot anything?"

"Lots of stumps," he said. "I was a lousy shot, but I got better."

"And you rode the horses and climbed up the mountains and all that?"

"Sure did. And wore a buckskin coat."

I imagined my father in buckskins with a raccoon cap, spending my child support pretending to be a mountain man. Somehow, it didn't make me mad like it should have. I kind of liked the idea. It was an image of my father I could admire.

"Best part," he told me, "was making camp. Tie the horses and the mules to trees, and you gotta have someone brushing them and giving them grain. Someone else puts up the tents and makes the fire, and you hang your food up in a tree to keep the bears out."

"You saw bears?"

"Bear shit. Bear shit everywhere."

“Jeeze,” I said. That was a slip, but it still didn’t quite count as abusing the Lord’s name. At least not when my mother couldn’t hear it.

“Then you grill a great big steak, or some fish if we caught any, pass around a pint of Jack.” He brushed the back of his hand across his mouth, as if remembering the fish and the steak and the burn of the Jack.

I had tasted Jack once, behind the equipment shed near the track at school. That was eighth grade, when I made the football team. After our last practice one of the guys pulled out a flat pint and passed it around. I didn’t want to drink it, but I had no choice standing there in a ring of kids, all laughing and swearing about practice. I don’t remember anything about the taste. Only that it burned the back of my throat and brought tears to my eyes as I ran home afterwards. I never told anyone, but I quit the team as proof to the Lord that I hadn’t enjoyed that taste, and I didn’t want temptation. My mother had been against me playing anyway, because it was expensive and interfered with Wednesday prayer meetings, so I told her that I wanted to give it up to concentrate on the Lord, and she was glad. I missed it, though, I missed it a lot, but I felt good about sacrificing for the Lord.

“Yup,” my dad said, “Stoke up the fire and talk about the ladies and tell truckin’ stories.”

“Wow,” I said. I wondered which ladies.

He stretched his arms over the top of the wheel and downshifted as we approached the summit of a long grade. The ground was bare and grey beside the road, except for patchy sagebrush.

“Guess that’s not much like the camp you’re going to.”

I didn’t know how to answer. And somehow his story made me embarrassed about Bible Camp. Even if he didn’t say it, he had to be comparing shooting guns and chasing bears with Bible study and hymns. I was.

“Your camp sounds fun, though,” I said. Focusing on Idaho felt safer. “Except for the bears.”

“Ever shoot a gun?” he asked me.

That's when this little Nissan sedan came whipping out of nowhere and cut into our lane and we had to slam on the brakes and swerve into the shoulder to keep from plowing it under. I shouted "Goddamit!" and my father laughed. "Happens all the time," he said. "That's the job."

The little car motored off into the flat desert at the bottom of the grade, unaware, it seemed, of its narrow escape. I had never used the Lord's name before, not quite like that. My mouth tasted bad, as though the space below my tongue was packed full of dirt. My father kept right on talking as though nothing had happened. "There's a crossroad up ahead there. I'll introduce you to Betsy. Could use a break anyway."

We pulled off onto a deserted road that hardly seemed to have deserved its own exit. Two lanes, paved east of the highway but to the west, only a gravel track headed into the hills that we had just come out of on the freeway.

"Where does this go?" I asked my father when I climbed out of the cab. The wind blew cold on my face, and so loud in the sagebrush that only a hundred yards from the highway I couldn't hear the cars, if any passed.

"Nowhere," he said. "There's lots of old roads like this out here. Maybe used to be something."

He pulled his gun case out from behind his seat and put it on the gravel. I looked in as he unfastened the cover. Betsy was a rifle. Rich brown wood polished like a Cadillac dashboard. The long, steel muzzle shined, blue as the distant hills. I looked around to confirm that the truck was blocking the view from the highway. I felt nervous, because I was sure there must have been some kind of law against pulling out a gun near the highway.

"Safety is the first thing," he said, popping the bolt to open the chamber. He shoved a copper shell in and tilted the rifle toward me. "This here lever is the safety. On. Off." He threw the rifle up to his shoulder. "Keep it firm against your shoulder," he said, "unless you want to get hurt."

I looked around again. Nothing in sight but the idling rig and the concrete supports of the freeway overpass behind it.

“So it doesn’t have one of those lever things that you put your hand in while you fire? You know, you pump it to reload?”

He looked crosswise at me. “No. This is a bolt action. Lever action’s no good for anything but cowboy movies. No compression.”

The gun roared and I jumped, and so did a big sagebrush a ways out from the road. I thought he was going to be put out, like when I stripped that bolt working on his truck, but instead he just held the gun out where I could see it and popped the action. The spent shell shot out toward me and he dropped another in the chamber. “When you shoot,” he said, pulling the gun back up to his shoulder, “look down the barrel, don’t squint. Leave both eyes open. Look slowly. Understand?”

I didn’t. “Look slowly?” I said.

“Look slowly. And don’t pull the trigger. That jerks the gun and you’ll never hit what you’re aiming for. Massage the trigger like a woman’s titty.”

The gun blasted again and the same sagebrush jumped, and this time a few branches sprayed up into the air.

I looked over where his finger slid off the smooth round trigger and thought of Andrea Apelwood’s tight blue sweater. She wore it a lot, and it was the only thing I really remembered of the times that she cornered me in the hall to say hello. It was unlike me to allow that sort of thing to linger in my mind. I pushed it out and reached for the gun as he held it to me.

But before I got my hands on it I heard a motor and looked around. My father heard it too, and he pulled the gun back and put it on the case. He stepped around the front of his truck to look.

“Cops,” he spat.

A chill rose up my spine at the word. I looked wildly around, but my father acted fast. He snapped the case shut and tossed the gun in the passenger door before the car pulled up.

It was a Nevada State trooper, and he nosed up to the front of the truck with the windows rolled down. "Everything okay here?" he asked across the passenger seat.

"Just stretching, officer," my father said, leaning against the fender of his truck. He put his hands behind his head and clipped off a yawn to make the point.

The cop looked over at me, standing there on the gravel with my hands jammed into my pockets. At first I tried not to look at him. Then I tried not to look away. Then I kicked some rocks.

"How 'bout you, son?" the cop said.

"I'm stretching too." Could cops search trucks? I had no idea. And what if the gun was stolen? It would be just like my father to have stolen a gun. Would they haul us in? I could just imagine my mother getting the call. My poor mother who had volunteered to deliver the *Nickel's Worth* at four a.m. every morning to help pay for my Bible camp. She'd be devastated to find out I was in jail in Nevada. All because my father wanted to shoot some bushes with his stupid gun.

"Travel center at the next exit. About thirty miles up the road," the cop said. "Be a better place for it."

"Sure," my father said, pulling off the bumper. "Load up, Matt." He leaned down to look in the cop's window. "And they got coffee, I bet."

"Sure do, sir," the cop said.

The cop drove behind us until we pulled off at the exit. My father growled off a string of swear words the whole way, all of them about meddling cops and I sat in my seat with the butt of the rifle case jammed against my ribs. I tried not to hear his language. His words were worse than the one I had said, of course, but swearing was swearing, and each curse made me cringe, remembering how my mouth felt saying that word, and I got madder every mile. He never thought things through, and it was no wonder my mom divorced him. What if we had gotten caught, and it was illegal to be shooting by the road? He had no idea that it mattered to me, or he didn't care. This trip was not just some fun ramble. I

couldn't imagine my mother facing the congregation when they found out I'd gotten in trouble shooting guns in Nevada. On Sunday, two weeks before I'd left, the Reverend had passed two plates through the congregation instead of the usual one. He said a prayer, like he always did, asking the Lord to act through the hands of his faithful, and fill the church's bowl with paper dollars; a miracle like the ones he himself had performed, changing that water into grape juice. One of the deacons passed the plate, but before it left the first row, before, in fact, Dan Miller (father of Skye Miller, a popular cheerleader) started the donations off with a twenty and passed the plate to his wife, the Reverend stopped its motion with a gesture.

"We have amongst us today, a young man, about whom I wish to speak to the Lord," he said. He bowed his head and the congregation meekly followed him. I folded my hands again like Christ in the picture of the last supper that hung behind Pastor Willy's pulpit.

Lord, bless Matt, who is known to you and well loved. He needs our help, Lord, and yours, so that he can raise a shout of praise through his life's work that will be heard by your faithful in every place. Bless his mother, who like yours, works for his betterment. She took a second job this summer, Lord, delivering the Nickel's Worth in the early mornings, so that her son can go to camp with the great Reverend Smith, down there in New Mexico.

I could feel the eyes of other worshipers behind us, peeking up from their devotions to look our way. And I saw Nicole looking around the church, staring down anyone who dared raise their eyes. She never liked to bow her head in church, and she didn't like to be looked at. She and my mother fought about those things.

Bless each of us, Lord, as we contribute to help young Matt and his good mother. And when he speaks your name to generations yet unborn, may our voices sound in his, to your glory honor and praise, Amen.

The deacon passed a second bowl, a regular white cereal bowl, after the collection plate. Mr. Miller took it from the deacon and turned around in his seat

to give me a hard, businessman's nod. He owned the Chrysler dealership on Main and was on the school board. He pulled a long green ten out of his wallet and dropped it in the cereal bowl. His wife, who worked in Renee's Beauty Salon just up the street from the dealership, turned too and gave me a cheery grin before flourishing a fiver over my bowl. The whole congregation was invested in my trip, and now my father was messing with it.

At the plaza we both climbed out and walked into the mini mart to use the bathroom. I grabbed a pack of Hostess cupcakes, the kind with filling and the little white twirlies on the fudgy frosting, and dad growled about that.

"Get something with some substance, boy," he said. The girl behind the counter was red. Red hair, red freckles. Even a red nametag that said 'Jaime'. "Slim Jims," my father growled at her, tossing a twenty onto the counter. "The big pack."

She was reading a thick novel, the kind with a big-breasted, mostly naked woman on the cover leaning back into the arms of some dude with a lot of gel in his hair, and she rolled her eyes and popped her gum as she put it down. She stuffed the bill in her cash register and slammed his change down on the counter.

"Thanks," he grumbled.

She ignored him and shoved the pack of Slim Jims across the counter.

"Uptight as hell," he said as we stepped outside, even before the door closed. He said it just a little too loud, and I dared not look back at the flaming bob. "Uptight as hell," he repeated. "Needs to get laid."

I jammed my hands into my pockets and walked away from there fast, with my head down. I didn't want the girl to be able to see my face through the window. How could she know that it was only my dad, not me, who would say that to her?

I kicked the parking lot dust off my sneakers as I climbed back into the truck. Dad pulled out and we kept rolling through those long, dry Nevada flats. I sat silently, looking out the window, and after half an hour or so my dad turned up the volume on the CB and listened to stray chatter. The road ran through the land,

barren for miles, then a sign would rise up out of the sagebrush announcing the mileage to the next oasis of slots and food.

“That’s a good one,” my father grunted, as a big billboard loomed beside the road. Prime Rib 4.95, it said, Richest Slots North of Vegas. Trucker Equipped. 198 Miles.

I watched the ten-foot steak glide by. The country was different out here than it was back in Oklahoma. There it made you feel fast and grand, watching everything slide by; out there I felt, tiny dwarfed by the indifference of the hard grey rocks and the low jagged hills that looked like broken molars. Back at home it would already be dark, and the warm lights would be on and my mother would sit on the loveseat in the living room, catching up on her magazines or doing a little knitting if her hands felt up to it after a day of cleaning houses. I kind of missed Nicole, too. Loud and obnoxious, playing her games too loud and fighting with Mom about her curfew. But she always reassured me by her contrariness that I was doing all right. Anything Nicole hated, or laughed at, was probably the wise choice. She was a weathervane for me.

I tried to imagine a train of mules, and mountain men all got-up like my dad and Ray on their pack trip, fighting across that wasteland outside my window back in the settler’s days, but I could hardly believe men would have tried to cross those windy sagebrush flats without the straight and narrow ribbon of the interstate.

The crackling on the CB caught my dad’s attention and he whipped it off the catch. It spat a string of indecipherables: eight-four-ninety five-Blackhawk-thirty seven-over-twenty four.

He chuckled like it was a good joke and retaliated, “Ten-four-Blackhawk-compass lines-ninety two-hundred miles out.”

I looked in the mirror on my side of the truck. Nothing but a line of darkening blue hills, just like the ones that fringed the sky out in front.

The CB disgorged more static and a few more cryptic lines and my dad laughed again, “No sirree, I got my boy with me on this run. Gotta get him a steak dinner to chew on.”

More fuzz and noise, and the word “Oklahoma.” “Sure enough,” Dad answered, “Kid’s takin’ a look around at the country.”

Static, buzz, pop. “Yup, something he can sink his teeth into.”

My father had a flair that way. Something to sink his teeth into. That’s how he liked to talk, and he loved to pull a wad of twenties out of his pocket and peel them off. I remember this one night, only a year or two after the divorce, when he was still around town a fair amount and Nicole was six and she went on a spree with her baby teeth. Lost one on Monday, another on Tuesday, and a third first thing Wednesday morning. Each night the tooth fairy visited, leaving what money she could. Paper money on Monday, one bill and a few quarters on Tuesday, but only a small handful of nickels and dimes by Wednesday night. Nicole said nothing until Thursday, which was a bad day all around. I had gotten tackled by this kid at school, and I slid across the lawn on my back, making a mess of a new shirt my mother made for me. And when I wrestled back I elbowed the kid in the jaw and he started punching. My mother got a call from the principal and picked me up after school, livid that I had been fighting. She grounded me for a month and sent me into the living room desk to do homework and put ice on my bruises. But barely was she through with me when Nicole confronted her.

“Does the tooth fairy think I’m bad?” she asked.

“No, no, of course not,” my mother said.

Nicole worked her tongue over her remaining teeth and dumped the little pile of nickels on the table. “What’s her problem?”

“Honey, sometimes the tooth fairy gets low on cash, and payday’s not until Friday.”

Nicole, who had already quit believing anything adults said, slammed herself in the bathroom and started yanking on another wobbly incisor. It wasn’t

ready, but Nicole liked to push things, and by her bedtime there was blood all over the house and a new tooth under her pillow.

From the living room, where my exile continued, I heard my mother haranguing my dad on the phone. She was down to her last thread by then, and her voice was low like it only got with him and sometimes Nicole. "You better get over here," she said, "the tooth fairy is out of cash."

I heard my father's pickup pull in a while later, and they spoke out on the front porch before she let him in.

He stopped in the living room, where our one desk sat in the corner behind the sofa. I remember his shape in the doorway, framed by the brighter light of the kitchen. That was the last time he ever came into our house.

"Hear you been fighting at school, boy," he said.

"Not really," I said, "more wrestling."

"Wraslin's fighting too, if you mean it."

"Okay," I said. "I'm sorry." I was sitting in a mess of papers trying to understand square roots. I knew he was only scolding me because Mom told him to. He didn't care what I did, and I knew it and disliked him for it.

"How bad did you get?"

"My shirt's messed up. And this is a little sore." I passed my hand over my cheek. It wouldn't bruise badly. Just a little cherry.

"You're mother's got enough to worry about," he said. "Hell, Matt, you go fightin' you're going to lose as many teeth as your sister."

"I won't do it any more."

He lowered his voice, "How's the other kid?"

"He had a bloody nose," I felt a little surge of pride, telling him. "And he tore his jeans."

My father nodded. "Don't let me hear you been fighting," he said. Then he went down the hall toward my sister's room.

When I went to bed half an hour later, Nicole was sitting up in the lower bunk.

“Daddy said he’s not a cheap-ass tooth fairy,” she said. She held up a bill with both hands. Twenty bucks. She was in the first grade, saying things like that.

“Don’t use that language,” I told her. “I’ll go tell right now.”

“Shut up, Matt,” she said.

My mother, out in the hall, heard us talking and cracked the door. “Quiet down,” she said, leaving the door open. “You should be asleep, Nikki.”

I climbed up the ladder to my bunk and lay down, pulling the covers up.

I stretched out on the mattress, burrowing under my blankets and plumping my pillow. My hand brushed something between the pillow and the sheet. I fished around and pulled out a new, fresh bill. Twenty.

“You know what I’m going to buy with this?” Nicole whispered after a moment.

“Shush,” I told her. “Go to sleep.”

That was years ago, but I thought about it as we raced along that freeway toward the sunset in the hills ahead of us. We passed another sign. Slots, Steak, and Cocktails, it said, 75 Miles, Truck Parking.

I remembered the feel of that bill between my fingers. I hadn’t held many bills that size. It felt stiff and crinkly, not smooth like regular paper, but fibrous, sinewy material that could do things. Blood money. A reward for swinging back instead of turning the other cheek. All week I struggled with the dilemma of my father’s money. I carried it around in my front pants pocket, and there was hardly a moment that I didn’t think about it. It made my leg itch, and I frayed the bill’s edges, playing with it. I wanted a lot of things, none of them necessary, of course. Things my mother would call frivolous. A twenty could more than double my candy consumption for the remainder of the school year if I rationed it out. During class one day I figured it to three penny Tootsie Rolls, two Atomic Fireballs, and one Laffy Taffy each school day through the end of the year. A feast that I could almost taste, sitting at my desk in fifth hour.

I wanted toys, too. A model, maybe a Corvette, would be nice, but I’d have to tell my mom about the money to bring one of those home. And she’d be

pretty ashamed of me for taking money from my dad for fighting. She didn't like him to give us money. "What's a kid need cash for?" she used to say, "Not for paying bills or buying groceries or anything else decent. They've got what they need."

I looked across the cab at my father. His radio conversation was over and the sun had slipped behind the tall hills. He didn't look tired at all. He looked pretty happy, actually.

"I'm looking forward to some steak," he said. He started doing some finger stretches with his CB hand, as though he wanted the fingers in good shape for his dinner. "Nice having you along. Good excuse to stop off and get some beef instead of driving all night."

I wondered how he would feel if I told him that, driven by indecision and temptation, I had spent his money in a compromise, breaking the bill and donating most of it – eleven dollars – to the church and then pumping the rest into the *Galactazoids* video game down at the bowling alley when I was supposed to be working on a science project at a classmate's house. I couldn't get that money out of my pocket fast enough, and my hands shook with adrenaline as I slammed the joystick back and forth, smashing the fire button with my thumb, and then when it ached too much to shoot, the bottom of my fist. Besides bills and groceries, I could see that money was pretty much a bad influence. The love of money, the scripture said, was the root of all evil. Mom quoted that one any time Nicole or I started complaining about stuff we didn't have.

"It'll be nice to stretch," I said to my dad as a green mile marker ticked by. Another big bright sign was just coming into sight in the beam of the truck's headlamps.

"Taking my boy to eat at Sharkey's," he said. "Ain't that great." He laughed and started fumbling around for a tape.

It's possible, I thought, that he had just wanted to give his son some money, and fighting at school had nothing to do with it. Slipping it under my

pillow, he didn't have to fight with Mom over the moral dangers facing a kid with cash.

"What do you get there?" I asked. The new sign loomed on the highway. Sharkey's Prime Rib and Refreshments, 61 Miles.

"Always the prime rib special," he said. "Always. No food like casino food."

I shivered at the thought. Casinos. Dancing girls, piles of cash. I really only knew them from the James Bond movies I had watched at my Dad's house a couple of summers back, during visitation. They were dangerous. Lion's dens, dens of iniquity.

We pulled into the long empty rows behind the establishment marked for tractor-trailer rigs. Out back, Sharkey's stretched across the parking lot, long, low and windowless, illuminated only by the lights of the gas pumps and the convenience store on the far corner of the truck area. We walked around to the side door, and as I turned the corner of the building I shoved my hands deep in my pockets and shivered in the biting wind. My father saw.

"It's always cold out in this desert when the sun goes down," he said. "Doesn't matter what time a year."

He pulled open the door, and a flood of light and sound and the smell of roast beef tumbled out. Blinking lights of the slots and flashing neon beer signs. We stepped into the warm, red carpeted room, my third sin. Gaming stations lined the walls, but the consoles flashed to empty seats, except for an old couple on the far end, who sat on stools and gazed listlessly at the rolling images. Their hands seemed to move independently of their bodies. Pick up the token, drop it in, pull the handle. Pick up the token, drop it in, pull the handle.

"Empty one tonight," my dad said, as he led me down the aisle. A sign at the end of the row pointed to blackjack and restrooms on the right and dining on the left. He fished through his pockets as we walked. "Thought I had a few coins left," he said. "Oh well. We'll add a roll of quarters to our tab and hit 'em on the way out."

I ignored him and stared around at everything as we walked. I had never seen anything like it. Cherries and lemons, pulsing red lights and spinning bars, and everywhere images of a wide-faced Indian, big smiling cheeks, long black hair and a brown striped western shirt. He even had a couple of feathers in his hair.

My father saw me looking. "That's Sharkey," he said. He led me into the dining area, past the sign that said, "Seat Yourself."

Like the slots, the dining hall was nearly empty. A few travelers sat in red vinyl booths in front of a bank of tall windows that ran along the front,

overlooking the highway. Our waitress appeared, a brunette wearing a white miniskirt and a halter top, and Dad ordered two prime rib dinners, medium rare. I asked for fries instead of a potato.

“So,” I said, casting about for something my father and I could talk about, “What’s your place like, up there in Idaho?”

“Hell, boy. It’s great up there. Whenever I retire from truckin’ all I’m going to do is sit out on my porch and watch that river roll on by.”

“So you live right on the river?”

“Not right on,” he said, “across the highway and up the hill. But I pulled the trailer to the highest spot on the land and after I move in I’m going to build me a porch with a view.” He unrolled his napkin and tested the edge of his steak knife with his thumb. “Might even bag me a couple of mulies from that porch. Sit right there in my rocking chair, and BANG.”

“Mulies?”

“That’s a deer. Mule deer. Bigger and smarter than them whitetails you see creamed out beside the road everywhere you go.” He looked up and smiled over my shoulder. “Sharkey!”

I turned around and saw the Indian standing behind me. He looked just like all the pictures, less the feathers. “Hey, Ken,” he said to my dad, “Haven’t seen you through here in a while.”

“Hell, Sharkey, there’s a lot of roads out there.”

“Good to see you. Who the hell is this?”

“This is my boy, Matt. Matt, stand up and shake Sharkey’s hand. He owns the place.”

I stood and extended my hand. Sharkey stood a foot taller than me, a good three-fifty, four hundred pounds. He smiled, teeth flashing like the mother-of-pearl snaps on his cowboy shirt.

“Naw, I don’t own the place. It’s a joint venture between the mafia and the Paiute nation. I just run it.” He kept my hand trapped in his vise grip. “How old are you, Matt?”

I was afraid for a moment that I wasn't supposed to be there. Did you have to be eighteen to be in places like this?

"I'm seventeen," I said. "Almost."

"That's the age we start them," he said. He turned to my dad, who was still playing with his knife. "You think your boy would like to try an Indian? We got a real live Indian girl now, replaced the blonde."

I jerked my hand away. I felt dizzy. He couldn't mean what it sounded like.

"No, Sharkey," my dad said. "Matt's here is a Christian. He's probably not interested."

I felt sweet relief wash over me – I didn't have to answer the man. But my father was stepping in to defend me from immorality?

"Oh. No shit? My sister-in-law is a Christian too. She has meetings at her house every Thursday night where they study the Bible. My brother goes into Winnemucca and gets all shit-faced because she won't let him watch the T.V. while they're prayin' in there."

He nodded at me, like he expected confirmation of this description of the Christian life.

I nodded back. "That's real good," I said. An Indian girl? I imagined a sexy little Pocahontas in a leather skin suit. Buffalo robes and teepees.

"So do you do them prayer meetings, too?"

I didn't want to talk about being a Christian. I was used to being ridiculed. Jesus said His followers would be persecuted. I lived with Nicole, who loved nothing better than to inform her friends, when they stayed the night, that I had never kissed a girl because I was a virgin for Christ. I knew about persecution. But somehow Sharkey's questions, as sincere as they could be, made me more embarrassed than all the teasing junior high and high school could dish out.

I nodded. "Sometimes, yeah."

"Matt's mother is real good about that," my father cut in. "Does real good with them."

Rescued again. By my father.

“Oh,” Sharkey said. “That’s good. You’ve got a good healthy boy from all that clean living he does, Ken.”

“I’m proud as hell of him,” my father said.

Sharkey stepped aside as our waitress returned with two plates piled with hot food. The steaks were striped black from the grill and still smoking. My father smiled in anticipation and swept aside our Cokes so she could put down the food.

He was proud of me? Since when? His words warmed me right up. My mother was careful not to say things to Nicole or me that might puff us up with pride, and my father, well, he just usually didn’t talk to me.

“Matt,” my father said, “She asked you if you want ketchup.”

I nodded at the girl.

“Hey listen, Matt,” Sharkey said, putting a stack of gold chips on the table in front of me, “These are for you, since your dad’s an old friend.”

I looked at the stack dumbly. Gambling chips. Indian girls. My father’s proud of me.

“Don’t worry,” Sharkey said, “here in Nevada the Christians play slots all the time. You should see my sister-in-law. The first machine in the second row out there, she thinks it belongs to her. She comes in here after prayer meeting and someone’s on it, she comes right to me and says Sharkey, you get that man off my slots.” He laughed, bobbing his head at his story. “I think she about wore off the handle.”

He patted me hard on the back and shook my father’s hand. “Hell Ken, good to see you. You come back through and we’ll get another blonde.”

My father went red in the face as Sharkey walked off. He tried to laugh but it didn’t come out right. He stuffed a big piece of beef into his mouth.

“Old, Sharkey, he, you know.”

“Yeah,” I said, “Right.”

“I mean, he’s a joker.” He chewed through the words.

“Yeah.” I picked up a long thin fry and dipped it in ketchup.

“I wouldn’t want you to get the idea that I, you know.”

“No. Of course not.” I stuffed in the fry and he swallowed the meat in a big, uncomfortable gulp.

“Of course I wouldn’t go, uh, consorting around with that kind of women.”

“I know,” I said, “I didn’t even think it.” How could I make him see that I knew he did, I didn’t need Sharkey to tell me, but I was so grateful for help with the Christian talk that I didn’t care?

“Well,” he said, sawing off another hunk of steak, “We can play them tokens of Sharkey’s or not. Just whatever you feel like.”

“Yeah,” I said. I picked up my steak knife and poked it into a knob of shiny fat on the edge of my meat. Blood and fat were pooling around the meat. They meant it when they said medium. Did he just suddenly figure out that sinning made me uncomfortable? Did he never know that before? I wanted to hug him, or maybe have him punch me on the shoulder and slap the back of my head, like fathers do. Of course we didn’t have that kind of relationship. I stabbed the knife in, holding with my fork, and watched it sink through the pink muscle.

“Let’s play ’em,” I said.

Jesus might not like it much, but He also said to honor your father. I stuffed a big forkful into my mouth, imagining a teepee, a loincloth, and Pocahontas, with her long black braids, her face like the Disney cartoon, serving up roasted buffalo.

When our plates were clear we slid out of the booth and my dad left a couple of dollars in change on the corner of the table for the waitress. The roll of tokens felt heavy in my pocket, heavier than Dad’s twenty dollar bill had, years before, and my arms felt prickly, like they had that day at the video game, as we walked back out into the casino. Right away I could tell the Christian slot machine from the others. The stool in front of it was worn down, like it was used more

often than the others, and the handle no longer shone quite as brightly as the rest did. I stopped in front of that one.

“You never done this?” my father said.

Like he had to ask. The pit of my stomach was roiling around, and warm too. Hot, like it started to get when I saw a girl and kept on looking at her, as Jesus says, so as to get a passion for her. Same tingle of thrill and badness. I looked around, but nobody was paying any attention to us. While we ate, the old people had moved across the aisle to video poker, which faced away from the slots.

I handed my father the roll of tokens. He pulled it open and dropped one in and yanked on the handle. The fruit and the cards spun around and around. Two cherries and a banana. I had no idea what we were trying to get, and I wasn't even sure if Dad knew, but I loved watching those things spin.

“Give her a shot,” he said.

I peeled off a coin and dropped it in and pulled on the handle. Not very hard, and the wheels spun and stopped and my token was gone.

“Rip on her like you mean it,” he advised me.

I dropped in another coin and yanked hard on that arm. The wheels spun, and suddenly, before I could register what had happened, change spilled out into the tray by my belt.

“Damn,” my dad hollered, “You done it.” He sifted through the change. “Ten bucks.”

I dropped in another and ripped on that handle and the cherries spun and more coins tumbled out.

He hooted again and scooped up some coins. “Hell boy, we can go all night the way you play.”

I grinned at him and reached for another token.

Just before I hit a hundred bucks my father said he better change out. If I won too much Sharkey would take it away, because I was underage and not supposed to be playing anyway.

“Really?” I said, “Sharkey would take it?”

“You don’t think his mamma gave him that name, do you?”

“Oh,” I said. I wanted to think better of Sharkey, Indian prostitutes and all.

We climbed back into the truck, still idling and warm, and my dad handed me the money I’d won from the Christian slot machine. Ninety-two dollars, even. I reached around to stuff it into my backpack, but it didn’t feel right, putting gambling money in there with my Bible and my church clothes. I hadn’t felt a bit bad the whole time in the casino, once I had started pulling that shiny knob, and that scared me. I stuffed the money into my jeans pocket instead, and sat down in my seat as Dad started the rig rolling.

“Isn’t that going to be a hell of a story,” he said, as we lurched forward. “Tell the boys this fall around the campfire about my boy cleaning out Sharkey his first time at the games.” He laughed as we pulled out.

I hoped - just a little - that he would tell the story. I had given him one more reason to be proud of me. But I hoped a whole lot more that his hunting buddies were the only ones he’d tell the story to.

We got up to speed on the highway and he put his music on low, and I leaned against the window and watched the dark, jagged mountains roll past, shining up against the sky. The moon was bright and it made me want to talk to Jesus. Like I had to explain some things to him. I started to mouth the words of a prayer into the glass. I could see my lips moving in the reflection. *Dear God, they were saying, Dear God, I know it doesn’t look good right now, but I can explain. I’m not sorry enough, I know, but I will be, I’m sure of it.* I could feel the weight of the money against my leg as I watched my lips move, and it made me suddenly certain Jesus wasn’t listening just then.

I leaned back in my seat and watched the yellow lines firing toward the truck. My father was humming to Willie Nelson, and I concentrated on being sorry as we sped toward the mountains and California.

We dropped out of the hills, down into L.A., with the sun beaming, exploding off the glass walls of the little clusters of skyscrapers scattered around the valley. Cars everywhere. High in the truck I couldn't see the highway, just a scaly serpent of metal and brake lights that writhed across the valley between strip malls and liquor stores and endless advertisements. My father pointed at a big yellow arrow that towered above a green Starbucks advertisement.

"In-N-Out Burger," he said. "That's the best. We'll get us a few of those."

My feet were jammed hard against the floorboard and I clutched the door handle, measuring the distance to the cars in front of us, and the radio blared that it was a good day in Los Angeles: warm, pollution was low. The Dodgers would play the Texans that afternoon.

"Damn," my father said, jamming the brakes. "The Rangers are in town."

I lurched forward in my seat and a little Ford sedan like my mother's escaped our bumper, pulling away from us.

I asked if he still watched the Rangers, even up there in Idaho, and he said he didn't because they never came on T.V., but he heard a game in the truck now and then.

The Ford stopped suddenly, right on the bumper of the van in front of it, and we bore down on it. Dad braked and I braced for impact as the car's trunk disappeared below my line of sight. It couldn't have been a yard from my tingling feet, through the truck's front wall.

My father yawned and played with the radio dial.

"It's something," I said, "driving in this traffic."

"You get used to it."

We took an exit onto another highway, and burrowed into the city. They had stripped the smooth pavement off the road, doing some kind of construction, so when we did speed up I could feel the rattling all the way to the roots of my teeth. Grey office buildings and tall palms rose from the concrete walls that

channeled us along, graffitied overpasses swung over our heads, their multi-layered green signs threatening to clip the cab just above my head. It felt as though it took as long to cross the city as it had taken to cross California, but finally Dad wheeled us off the freeway, and we found ourselves on a smooth, sparsely traveled four-lane road that wound past a couple of industrial buildings with tall smudgy, smokestacks, and through a strip of shops and warehouses painted garish green, yellow, and blue, with Spanish signs I couldn't read. After the last of these, a great square building with a sign hanging next to a giant mint ice cream cone painted onto the façade, Dad pulled into the depot, a warehouse complex lined with long docks and square doors that opened into the dark maw of the building. He whipped the truck around and backed the trailer up to a doorway to drop it off.

I waited in the cab while he jumped up on the loading dock to find a foreman. As soon as the paperwork was done and the trailer unhitched, Dad and I pulled back out to the road. He said he usually just stayed in the truck when he had to wait overnight for a load, but since there were two of us, and we had an extra afternoon to beat around town, we might as well stay in something bigger. The guy at the terminal who signed off on the load paperwork had told him there was an okay place up the road that offered tractor parking.

Driving back along the city street, past the ice cream and the smokestacks and back under the freeway we had gone under, the truck felt different, naked even. High up in the cab, with nothing but four sets of dualies and an empty hitch behind the sleeper, I felt the truck leap forward when we took off from the dock. It hadn't become any kind of a racecar, but the difference was enough that I nearly fell back into my seat when we pulled out into the road and Dad really accelerated. I held onto the armrest as we turned tightly into the first lane.

"Feels different, doesn't she?" he said.

I nodded. "It's pretty cool," I said. Before, even a week ago, I would have expected him to laugh at me for grabbing the handle. But we were different now, it seemed as though even the air between us was clearer.

He flicked on the radio and started switching between a couple of sports talk stations as we changed into the right lane and sped up.

I felt the difference in the way he talked, as though he were explaining something to one of the guys, not telling me I was a stupid kid. His eyes stayed round when he looked at me; he nodded his head instead of pointing his chin and squinting. That was how I remember him talking to me, squinting, even the night when he told me not to fight or wrestle and he slipped the twenty under my pillow. That night he stood in the dark hallway, and I sat at the desk with a lamp, so I couldn't make him out so well, but he could see me, no problem. Still he squinted at me while he talked, squinting like he couldn't make out who he was talking to, or if I were not quite smart enough to understand English.

For my part, I had always hated to spend time with him. He didn't think I was smart. And I knew he'd slept with his girlfriend while he was still married to Mom. Mom always said she wanted to keep me and Nicole out of their marriage problems, so if his cheating came up she'd say we shouldn't think badly of him or worry about it, but then she'd run off to her room bawling into her hands. This happened a couple of times even after he was gone, and I couldn't be around him long without thinking of how he made Mom cry.

But that day, thinking about how our relationship had changed there in the cab of that truck, how we'd started acting like a father and son who had things in common, or maybe not even as close as fathers and sons, maybe just like a couple of friends, I started to feel bad. Maybe all those years I had never given him a chance. That's what you do with sinners. You give them a chance. Look at Mary Magdalene and Zaccheus and Matthew the tax collector.

It wasn't even that I wanted to convert him. Not any more. Before, that had always been the idea. I remember Nicole asking Mom, just after Dad and his girlfriend split up, if Dad was moving back in now that he'd gotten rid of his other woman. My mother said no. But she'd take him back if the day ever came that he decided to accept Jesus and settle down. I wanted Mom to be able to quit crying,

but already I didn't really care for the idea of his being back in the house, even two weekends a month between loads.

But it dawned on me for the first time, as we drove up that two-lane street from the terminal toward the motel, that maybe giving him a chance was good for something else besides conversion. If nothing else, I could hang out with my dad for a couple of days.

The traffic was light on that road - just a couple of other rigs heading the other direction, toward the freeway. It seemed as though cars had decided to stay as far from the trucks as they could. I held onto my door handle and watched from my high side window as we passed a few warehouses and a tall building with metal siding and a sign that said Re-Machining, and an empty lot behind a chain link fence that seemed to be propped up by piles of empty fountain cups from Circle K. I tried to think of a biblical precedent for this situation with my dad, but Mary, Zaccheus, and Matthew, they were all conversions, too.

Then I thought of the Prodigal Son and the lesson of mercy, the kid who comes home from living in sin and his father just rolls out a feast without even asking if he's repented. That was good, but somehow it started me thinking again about the twenty my father had left me that night long ago. I'd never said thanks. No note, no call. Nothing. And the whole time I'd pumped my remaining eighty-five into the *Galactazoids* game, all I could think about was how good it felt to get his money out of my hands. I was blasting at those descending rows of alien ships like I never had before, dodging in and out of the cover of my shield barriers, and every attacker I shot felt like a blow for righteousness. It took me hours to get rid of that money, I earned so many free lives. Between every game I'd looked around, sure I would be caught blowing money at Hooker Lanes by someone my mom knew from church. By the time I'd spent all the money I had captured two slots on the high scores list, numbers 37 and 39. It was a bloodbath, but I felt clean at the end of it. I rode home from the bowling alley satisfied, even though my right palm and my left thumb could barely function on the handlebars of my bike. But I wasn't grateful.

We passed a wide lot full of rental equipment: heavy-duty pickup trucks, small yellow graders, concrete mixers and Bobcat front end loaders, all waiting patiently behind another chain link fence, this one topped with coils of razor wire.

The truck slowed as my dad pointed out the hotel, up ahead on the right, and the chugging motor dropped to a whining hum.

The motel stood in the next lot, across the street from a squad of backhoes, all lined against the fence with their arms folded high and buckets tucked in. Beyond the long brown motel sat a squat windowless building next to a sign shaped like a martini glass, probably twenty feet high, outlined in pink neon. The neon dipped into the bowl of the glass, like a toothpick, impaling three glowing green Xs.

I had never even told my father thanks. I couldn't remember saying that to him once, in my whole life. That made me feel dirtier than the slots had, by a long shot.

He pulled the truck into the lot, between the tall cocktail and the backhoes, and I peered down out of my high window at the litter that filled the seams and beveled the edges of the parking lot like grout: cigarette filters and broken glass, shiny aluminum can tabs and brown scaly palm bark, torn Trojan packets and a crumpled religious pamphlet. It wasn't the kind of parking lot you see in a small town in the Midwest where they have street sweepers and trash cans. Any other day I would have been worried, but my father pulled up and set the brake and said, "This will work out all right, don't you think?"

He said it round-eyed, asked it like a real question, one I couldn't get wrong.

"Sure," I said. "Why not?"

"What do you think about a baseball game?" he said, "Dodgers and Rangers in a couple of hours."

"Sure. Why not?"

We got to the stadium late, and the wide sidewalk out in front of felt eerily empty. The sound of the national anthem floated hollowly out of the concrete concourses, scratching like a phonograph. Synthesized ball game music followed, and the roar of a crowd through a tube. We bought our tickets from a scalper in front of the stadium. He wore dark blue jeans with gaping tears in the knees and butt, and either he had patched them with older denim or he had on another pair of more faded jeans inside. He cruised the block opposite the ticket booth whispering to himself, and anyone near, that he had tickets. My dad stopped and the man whipped a pair out of his blue jean jacket. Dad peeled a few bills off his wad and I looked around to see if Denim Man had any friends around looking at my dad's roll.

Dad had bought good seats, about halfway down the first base line, and I had never sat so close to the field, even when, occasionally, he would take Nicole and me to see the double-A Red Hawks in Oklahoma City on visitation weekends before he hit the road for good. I slid down the row as the Dodgers took the field for the top of the second inning. Dad stayed out in the aisle because he'd almost finished the beer he'd picked up as soon as we got in, one of the really big ones in the plastic cups. He said he would get another before he sat.

"Be right back," he told me. "Want anything else?"

I shook my head. I had a Sprite and a big long hot dog.

I sat back in my seat and unwrapped the hot dog as the Dodgers' pitcher started throwing. I suppose I should have been rooting for the Rangers, but I didn't care that much about baseball so it didn't concern me when the pitcher struck out the first two hitters. I looked around for Dad. I didn't have a watch on, so I didn't know how long he'd been gone, but it seemed like a while. I nibbled my way down that big dog, and looked around the tall stands above me. The place was awash in suntan lotion. Skin everywhere, and it all smelled like coconut and bananas, and aloe vera. The odor didn't go well with the hot dog. I ate it fast as a couple of goateed guys in front of me pulled out a tube of Banana Boat and started wiping themselves down.

The last Ranger of the inning hit four pop-flies into the stadium before he struck out. I watched the last one arc high over my head into the cheap seats. I turned the other way, back toward the gate, but still I saw no sight of my father.

In the third, Texas got a man on, and the two guys in front of me stood to boo the Dodger's pitcher. They had beers like the one my dad had polished off, and even though it was only the third inning they spilled it on their armrests and on a middle-aged couple in khaki sitting next to them.

I wiped my hands on my pants, feeling the lump of my casino money in my jeans pocket. It felt reassuring to have it. I couldn't imagine my father deserting me at a baseball game. But it was L.A., after all, and who knew what could happen. The problem was not knowing my dad. I started on the Sprite, and as the Ranger's second batter came to the plate, I heard him in the aisle.

"Whew," he said, "Just in time to see some Texas ass-kickin'!"

One of the goateed guys turned around and flipped Dad off. My dad had his hands full with two beers, but he managed to roll them around to give him two fingers back, or perhaps one for each guy. He plopped back in his seat and the guys turned around. He set a beer on the concrete between our chairs.

"Don't want to go dry, boy," he said. "Always prepared, like the Marines."

He finished off the beers in two innings, and pulled a square, silver flask out of his pocket.

"Re-lax juice," he said, pointing his chin at me. "Every moment a trucker's not on the road, he needs to be shaking it out of his system."

I nodded and drank some Sprite. Back home, our church was considered moderate, or even liberal concerning alcohol. People knew that the pastor made grape and rhubarb wine in his cellar, and everyone in town knew that Mr. and Mrs. Miller drank Scotch that cost more per bottle than most people's monthly food bill. In church, of course, we used grape juice with the unleavened bread, like we were supposed to, and the pastor preached often against drunkenness, but a little sip on the side was never condemned from the pulpit. That, I think, was my mother's one beef with the church. She'd lived with my dad and knew how bad drinking could

be. I didn't remember it, but she used to cluck her tongue and shake her head at my father's drinking. And she made it clear to me that the moment I started tipping, I was in the express lane to my father's kind of failure, and I might as well just pack my stuff and move my self and my bottle into a cardboard box, because she wouldn't stand for it.

All things considered, I decided that if my dad needed a little sip to shake the road out of his system, I could let it go, this time.

During the sixth inning our section of the stadium got sprayed with flyballs. Kids and men leapt over seats all around us as batter after batter stayed alive on the inside of the plate. My dad was pretty loose by then, most of the way through his Re-Lax Juice.

"Damn, Boy," he said. "Remember that time down at the Red Hawks game when I got that ball for your sister?"

I nodded and watched the batter square up his stance and wriggle the end of his bat over the plate. That day in Oklahoma City we perched in the high seats, but one towering ball came our way, and my dad stretched out across two rows and caught the fly with his fingertips. The camera people caught it on tape, and they played him two or three times on the big screen, snagging that ball like he was a fielder. He turned around to my sister and me, but I was watching the replay on the screen. On the screen he was holding it out to his kids, and it took a moment to register that it was to *us* that the guy on the screen was holding the ball. We had been fighting that day, my dad and I, over what I don't even remember, but I remember complaining about being dragged all the way to Oklahoma City for the game. I turned to take the ball from him, but he held it away from me and flipped it to Nicole. I sat down, burning with shame. I didn't know if the cameras caught that part. I couldn't look up.

Now I looked over at my father and there were tears in the corner of his eyes. "I'm sorry, Boy," he said. "I'm sorry I never caught a ball for you."

I turned away to the ballgame, where a batter was slapping the bat against his cleats. I couldn't take looking at him like that, even if he was drunk. It made

my insides turn all around. "I'm sorry too," I said. I felt heat behind my eyes, like tears were going to start. I wanted to tell him I was sorry for never giving him a chance, but I knew I would cry if I did. The batter saved me.

The Ranger swung and the ball ripped toward us, but over our heads. The two guys ahead of us, who had been drinking at least as much as my dad, both leapt out of their seats even though the ball was a good twenty feet above them.

The batter stepped back and the pitcher threw a new ball before the guys could sit back down.

Crack!

The ball sailed high into the air, and slowly, slowly, drifted down into the stands in center field.

My dad jumped up hooting, inches from the two goatees, who stood at his level on their hard plastic seats.

"Yeah, Texas!" he shouted, right in their faces. I could see from how he was leaning that he was good and drunk.

"Shut it, Asshole!" the guy in front of me yelled. He was a big guy, but with a little pointy face and small rodent teeth. I smelled beer and bananas. He reached out like he was going to thump my dad on the chest. His friend smelled drunk too, but he grabbed the guy by the shoulders.

"Let it go, Scotty," he said.

Scotty and my dad glared at each other, then Scotty and his friend unsteadily climbed off of their seats. "Go Dodgers!" Scotty yelled at us.

My dad sat down next to me. The other people in our row, a mother and father with three kids, were all looking at us, and I knew everyone behind must have been, too. I avoided their eyes and watched the last Ranger strike out before the seventh inning stretch.

"Go Dodgers!" the guys in front of us yelled in unison.

The music for the stretch, a peppy, bouncy YMCA, floated over the field and people started to stand.

“Dude’s lucky his friend had brains,” my dad said. “Starting a fight standing on a chair like that.” He didn’t seem to notice that everyone near us was leaning away from us.

“I need a beer,” he told me, “to cool off. That prick made me mad. Want anything else?”

I shook my head. I wanted to get out of that park and away from all the glares and away from the prick.

“Another Sprite? No? I tell you what we’re going to get you is one of them fly balls. It’s about goddamn time I caught my son a fly ball.”

I smiled, sort of a tight smile, but it was as much as I could do. “Only three innings to go,” I said.

“We’ll get’er done.”

The park was growing dark and the lights came on all around the field. The smell of sun and skin and lotion dissipated. Now it was greasy food wrappers and empty beer cups.

The seventh inning only produced one fly ball, down the third base line. We had another beer between our seats and my dad nursed the one in his hand. The eighth inning unfolded tragically for Texas. All three batters flied out to left field. Then in the bottom, the Dodgers scored four runs. The guys in front of us turned and snickered with each run, but my dad - and I was proud of him - just ignored them.

It was the first pitch of the ninth, and it happened so fast I hardly knew what was up. No bloop. The ball didn’t tower into the sky and float sweetly down. It was just a straight fast fly rocketing toward us. My dad and the rodent, Scotty, reacted like fielders, moving to the ball before I even knew it was coming. They collided in front of me, and they both fell into Scotty’s seat.

I couldn’t tell who had the ball. My father was on top. Scotty punched at his ribs with his free hand. My dad wrestled for the ball, which must have been

somewhere in the middle of their embrace. I could hear Scotty squealing, "Let go, fucker, let go!" and my father, hoarsely, "Ball for my boy!"

"Stop it," I yelled, "Just stop it. I don't care."

Scotty's friend was more useful than I was. He was tugging at my dad by his pants, which started to slip down the long gaping crack of his butt.

Then the cops appeared and they shoved Scotty's friend aside and pulled my dad up. He stumbled and wobbled, and pulled at his pants. Scotty stood holding the ball to his chest. A couple people around were saying things to the cops and pointing back and forth at my father and Scotty. My father's face was bruised under the eye, and his public humiliation flashed on the big screen: his drooping drawers captured by a camera across the park. The camera hadn't caught me, next to him. Only a close-up of my dad's hands pulling up his jeans by his belt, in between a couple of pairs of pressed blue slacks. "The Texans fans aren't just losing their shirts!" the announcer boomed. The audience erupted with laughter. "Don't mess with Texas!" the announcer said. They cut away to an ad from a car dealership and I slumped back into my seat.

"Either of you going to press charges?" the cops asked.

"Should," Scotty said. He was still clutching that ball, but he didn't look like he had been injured. "But I won't if you throw him out."

My dad looked back to me, "Come on, boy. Screw this."

The cops hauled my dad out to the aisle. "Game's over for you, buddy," one said.

I didn't want to get up and follow him. Now I understood the humiliation my mother must have felt. He didn't act like it was the first time he'd been thrown out of somewhere. He didn't look worried at all. Just mad, like he still wanted that ball. I knew my mother had picked him up, drunk, from the bar more often than the one time I remembered.

I stood and shuffled out to the aisle. The family on the end made way for us. The kids looked up, awed, the mother frowned at me with pity behind her long blonde bangs, and the father watched my dad trip up the stairs between the cops.

The police let go of him at the exit. "We could book you for disorderly."

My father shrugged them off. "Let's get a taxi, Boy," he said. He plunged into the dark city, and I followed, mumbling "Excuse me" to the cops. As we sat in the taxi on the long ride back to the motel, I watched the dark palm trees along the streets and wondered about my mother. All that time she never divorced him. Even after she found out he was meeting Linda in motels instead of coming home when he passed through Oklahoma, she still wasn't the one to demand a divorce. Now I wanted a divorce. I didn't want to talk to him. I didn't want to be in the motel room with him, a big, drunk, obnoxious jerk. I didn't want to sit in that truck with him all the way to New Mexico. He had played me pretty good, making me like him and think he was okay, just a normal guy. Even making me think it was my fault we never had a relationship, and he was proud of me anyway. I had felt guilty, and an afternoon later I had to watch his big wide butt shining on the big screen in front of a ballpark full of people.

Twilight made LA prettier, less dirty and grey. I sat in the cab with my arms folded tightly and my jaw clenched, watching the brown air turned pink and the color that reflected off the square buildings that crowded the streets into gutters. It was darkening when we turned down the street I recognized, and I saw the outline of my dad's rig, trailerless and forlorn, in front of the motel. The pink neon of the cocktail sign next door was the brightest light on the block, and the green Xs shimmered like kryptonite. The cab stopped in front of the cocktail, and we piled out. I stared up at the sign while my dad struggled to find the right bill and the taxi driver thumped the outside of his dingy yellow door with his palm. My dad kept dropping his wallet. Finally he gave the driver a twenty. The guy thought the change was a tip and drove off. Dad started yelling, and I was pulling him away from the curb. He gave it up and turned, almost running into the base of the giant cocktail.

Then this girl, leaning against the dark building whistled at us. She was in the shadows and it took me a minute to pick her out.

“How much?” my dad yelled. He grabbed his crotch, “How much for my boy’s first time?”

“And one for you too, Daddy?” she said.

She was ugly, this girl. Greasy black hair and thick legs in fishnets and a belly roll squeezing out in the space between her vest and the top of her shiny black miniskirt. But her breasts pushed up out of her vest like they were filled with helium. They were bigger than Andrea Appelwood’s. Bigger than I’d ever seen.

“Maybe we’ll buy you a drink and talk it over,” Dad said.

I stepped away from him, turning my back to the girl. “I hate you,” I told him.

He looked at me with his forehead all crinkled in confusion.

“I hate you.” I turned and almost ran into that cocktail myself.

“What’s wrong with him?” the girl asked.

I ran for our room, pounding across the cracked asphalt toward the hotel, its windows shining pink. I could hear Dad stumbling along behind me, still shouting negotiations at this girl. I yanked on the locked door. He had the key.

I stood aside and waited as he banged the key around in the door. Finally he pushed the door open and marched into the bathroom and started peeing without shutting the door. He was still talking in there and I tried not to hear him. “Goddamn whore,” he was saying. I turned on the TV.

Infomercials. A guy and a girl in Spandex took turns sweating on a shiny black machine that made them bulge in their clothes. I watched the girl’s breasts move, sliding up and down over her pectorals as she did presses. The guy’s navel was an outie, but lost in the deep creases of his abs.

My father stumbled out of the bathroom and flopped down on one of the beds. I walked past him, careful not to look his way, and locked myself in the bathroom.

I sat on the edge of the tub. In Oklahoma we knew all kinds of things about LA. People called it Sin City for a reason. Most of the immorality in

America was a direct result of watching the movies and T.V. programs made in L.A. Up and down her breasts slid, the Spandex stretched, the Spandex shrunk. Californication. Homosexuals. Whores. All there. And here I was, Lot in Sodom, surrounded by sex and vice. In fact, sex-and-vice leaned against the building not twenty feet from where I sat. Its breasts swelling up out of a leather vest, just waiting right outside the door. Had she seen my kind before? Did she expect the door to crack open any moment, a little sliver of light and a hand waving a couple of twenties? Was she re-arranging her clothes, stretching out that material, fishing around in her purse for a condom? Did she make guys use them? I had the money, right there in my pants pocket. Or my father would happily lend me the cash to make up for his stupid baseball. I could even lift from his wallet – peel them off that big wad he liked to carry - since he was probably already passed out.

I stood and unbuttoned my pants, pretending I was going to urinate. Instead I slid my hand in the fly. My body shuddered involuntarily. In two days I was to be sitting in the dining hall with all the other Christian kids eating breakfast and hearing Morning Prayer. I would give my letter to Reverend Smith, and with that same hand I was doing this?

I stepped away from the toilet and knelt on the tiles and put my elbows on the tub. Black grime caked the base, and the caulk that sealed it to the wall was mildewed. I had been with my father too long, and I hadn't been strong enough. If I had told him in the beginning that I was a servant of the Lord, none of this would have happened. But I had been having fun. My father's kind of fun.

I heard him snore, out in the other room, and the sound turned my stomach. I remembered a time, back when I was in middle school, when my mother got a bug, some kind of intestinal thing, and she couldn't work for a week. I had never seen her in bed that long. The sisters in the congregation brought us hot meals that week. Each day a different casserole, and they would spend some time in my mother's room praying with her, just like Paul says to do. Thursday, Mrs. Miller came, Rosalind, her name was. I saw her car in the parking lot and my heart

skipped, thinking Skye might have come with her, both because I would maybe have a few minutes with Skye, the most beautiful girl in the class, when she would have no choice but to pay attention to me, but also with shame, because she'd see my house, the narrow apartment with cheap wicker furniture from the second-hand store on 4th. But there was no Skye, just a tuna green bean casserole on the counter wrapped in cellophane. I shut the door carefully because the house was dreadfully quiet. I tiptoed down the hall and heard them talking, my mother and Mrs. Miller. I had never heard them talk before, not even at church.

"We've always admired how you do with your children," Mrs. Miller told my mother. I peeked through the cracked door. Mrs. Miller was in my mother's old wooden rocker, facing away from me. My mother, looking up at her from the bed, didn't see me.

"Thank you, Rosalind," my mother said.

I didn't know she could call her Rosalind. Everyone called her Mrs. Miller, and walked respectfully when they passed the sprawling two story ranch that she and her husband had built after tearing down Mr. Miller's family's old Victorian. They had a four-car garage and an in-ground swimming pool that the Cougar cheerleaders were known to sunbathe around.

"Especially Matt," Mrs. Miller said. "He's the most spiritual boy in the congregation, and people can see what a bright kid he is."

A brief silence. I couldn't see my mother's reaction, but then I heard her say, almost in a whisper, "I pray every day that the Lord pulls out what he's got of his father in him."

"Let's pray together," Mrs. Miller said.

I crept back down the hall to the kitchen, so I didn't hear if that's what Mrs. Miller prayed for, but I believed that the Lord had done the job. I had believed that. I had believed it every day. I was insulted that my mother felt the need to keep praying for my salvation every day, and I convinced myself that she had probably realized her job was done and didn't feel the need to keep bothering the Lord about it. In fact, I liked to think that she had moved on to thanking the

Lord that I was not like my father. I had believed it when I got in the truck, I believed it all the way across Colorado, I even believed it after Sharkey's and in California. I could make mistakes, but the real sinner, that was my father, not me.

I teared up, and lay my forehead on the edge of the tub while I reached down to button my pants back up. The smell of the mildew, earth and infection, filled my nose as I secured the copper buttons, all four, closing the fabric barrier that separated me from what I had of my father in me. What comes from inside a man defiles him, Jesus said.

I felt too defiled to pray, but I listed the sins that burdened me without presuming to ask the Lord for forgiveness. Sin of omission, taking the Lord's name, breaking gun laws, gambling, lust, associating with my father, more lust, and attempted self-abuse. I knew I would make things right the moment I got into camp. I would head to the chapel to work things out with God, even before I took the letter from Pastor Willy in to the Reverend Smith. Extra sins to be ashamed of were not things I wanted to be carrying with me when I met that great man. He would see right through me. I'd tighten my stomach muscles like the guy on the exercise machine, but it wouldn't be enough. He'd see my father lurking in there behind my white oxford and my blue and red tie. So I would have to start on my new path immediately. When my father awoke, I would tell him about Jesus, make my first sin right, and that would be that.

When he awoke, close to noon, he was hung over and I didn't even try to speak to him. Neither of us spoke, actually, except about logistics. Ready? Yes. Truck's loaded. Okay. Get the coffee. Right.

As soon as we slammed the doors behind us and my father yanked on the mirror outside his window, it was as though a glass partition, like in a limousine, slid up between the seats. I could see him over there on the driver's side, but just barely. Down at the terminal we hitched up to a new trailer full of imported Taiwanese watches and crept along the narrow city highways back to the interstate.

I watched the mirror on my side of the cab as we wound our way out of Los Angeles. My father growled at the mirrors and threw the gears, darting us in and out of traffic like a motorcycle. I smiled with relief as Sin City receded into the thick brown smog, and we rolled on toward Riverside and Palm Springs and then took the highway up to the I-40. My dad called around on the CB and started talking to other truckers in their broken, electronic language, and he ignored me after that. I watched the rocky, silvery grey hills and the scrubby cactus of California roll dryly by the passenger side window, willing the broken ground to move faster underneath us. I'd found an extra atlas in the back, outdated, but I used it to calculate distances, and I ticked off miles on the green posts that lined the road.

As we crossed into Arizona and crossed the tail end of the Grand Canyon, I looked down from the high bridge at the striated earth that dropped wildly to the distant banks of the Colorado River. I wanted to see the Grand Canyon. All of it, not just the end. I wanted to see where it stretched out like an empty ocean, miles across, and the bluffs and pinnacles rose up in the middle like islands in the air. I'd read *Bright Angel of the Grand Canyon*, the kid's book about the prospector and the burro who live in the canyon back in the Teddy Roosevelt days, about six or seven times when I was younger. It was a book about becoming civilized.

Some engineers came, in the book, and made a bridge across the canyon, or at least across the river at the bottom. The bridge was a big accomplishment because before you either had to risk your life to cross the river or travel for days around to get to the other side. But the end of the book, when the bridge is finished, always made me sad. As though they had managed to chain up the biggest, wildest place in God's creation.

I looked back in the mirror at the long bridge that now zipped us right across the Colorado. The Canyon was probably the biggest single piece of evidence for Noah's Flood, which was probably the strongest proof that the Bible was true. I couldn't imagine the canyon, even the tail end part that we'd crossed over, full of raging water. It was intoxicating to think of it. Torrents wrenching away great chunks of earth. Trees and animals, big saber-toothed cats, and maybe dinosaurs, struggling to keep their heads out of the waters of the Lord's wrath, rushing past the very spot we had roared so easily across on the four-lane highway. A delicious cataclysm. The kind of terror that means something. Tells you that everything is okay in this world because God's in control.

After my *Bright Angel* days I got into archeology and paleontology. I liked nothing better than finding facts of science that proved the Bible true. Sometimes they weren't actually proof. More often I found facts that just matched up to Bible stories, if you understood that the dates the scientists put on things couldn't be trusted too far.

The first time I didn't get an 'A' was in my middle school science class. I had done research about Neanderthal Men, and I wrote a good paper on it, better than anyone else in class ever wrote. At the end, though, I pointed out that they could have come from the descendents of Noah's son, Ham, who was cursed by God. My teacher, Mr. Jones, an atheist who taught science both at the middle school and the high school, gave me a 'C-' on the paper. He wrote a note at the bottom: Radio-carbon dating. None of your dates match up. I took the paper home to my mother, just about in tears, and she went down to meet with Mr. Jones. The pastor and the principal both got involved, and in the end he

grudgingly raised my grade to a 'B,' based on the quality of my research, but he refused to budge an inch more, even if he were to be fired, because, he said, he taught science not theology. That was good enough, my mother and I felt. The pastor said to keep in mind that Christians will be persecuted, and I worked hard and my grades stayed high. The issue of the radio-carbon, though, always lurked in the back of my mind. What if the scientists were right? An earth billions of years old? Humans in Africa millions of years ago? Then what happened to faith?

The truck started climbing uphill. We were headed for a long drag up to Kingman and then to Flagstaff beyond. The countryside was desert, probably chock full of fossils and carbon isotopes. Why couldn't I have the kind of father who would talk about things like that? Maybe the kind of father who knew a little something about faith and belief and science. Things that interested me. He sat on the other side of the truck with his CB receiver in hand, chattering about things that made no difference as we climbed higher and higher toward the top of Arizona.

In Flagstaff we pulled over because there was no point in getting into Albuquerque late at night. I would meet the camp bus the next afternoon, and it wasn't a very long haul into New Mexico, my father said. Mostly downhill.

I slept again in the sleeper, but this time the smell of the woolen blankets made me sick, and my father drifted off to sleep the moment after he settled on a late night broadcast of *Dr. Demento* on a.m. radio. He snored and the evil doctor cackled, and I lay there trying to keep my nose away from the blanket.

After an hour or two I got up and let myself out of the truck. I took my backpack into the all night diner and found a seat near the door. The waitress asked if she could get me anything and I said no right away, but I changed my mind. Why shouldn't I, with money in my pocket and a menu full of greasy items we never ate at home? My mother rarely took us out to eat because it cost so much. I ordered a hamburger and fries, and the largest size milkshake they made, vanilla, and it felt decadent, extravagant. I liked the feeling, but it scared me, too. Getting used to excess could be dangerous.

I pulled out my notebook and tried to write something while I waited, but nothing came to me. Not even a journal entry. So after the waitress slid my food onto the plastic red table, I replaced the journal and dug my Bible out of the bottom of my backpack. I started in the beginning, getting down to basics. Adam and Eve, the apple and the snake, Noah and Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. I read about Joseph in Egypt and all the way into Exodus before I drank a second milkshake and asked for my bill. The sky had lightened when I took out one of the twenties I'd gotten from the casino and left it with the on the table for my food and a tip.

I stumbled back to the truck, tired, but fortified. I had been under trial for a long time, all the way since Oklahoma, and I felt proud that I had avoided sins. Avoided the worst ones, my father's sins, mostly. Perhaps the Lord, sitting up there watching me, pulling for me as I underwent this trial, was proud too. And by noon or so I would be delivered into the company of Christians.

In the cab, the radio still crackled and my dad hadn't moved. I crept back into the sleeper and fell asleep, good and hard. I heard my dad, later, get the truck going, and I lay still, pretending not to be awake, until I did drift back off to the hum of the road.

At a rest stop in New Mexico I finally awoke and crawled out of the cab. In the bathroom I pulled the dark slacks and white shirt out of the bottom of my backpack, but I agonized over the tie. I still didn't want to put it on in front of my father, but I dreaded being the only Christian boy to show up not looking the part. In the mirror, my hair stuck out from my head, a wild mess, and the white button-down was wrinkled from the backpack. I wet my hair under the coldwater faucet and pressed it down as much as I could, trying to make a decent part like I did on church days, and I smoothed the shirt with my damp hands. I rolled the tie up into a ball and stuffed it into my shirt pocket where I could pull it out and whip it on in a restroom, or even on the church bus - frayed edges, as my father would have said, be damned.

None of the other bible campers would arrive in semi trucks, a fact that I agonized over as we crested a hill and saw Albuquerque stretched out before us, carpeting the desert floor. I couldn't think of how to get to the meet up point without the truck being seen by my camp mates, but how could I tell my father that I didn't want anyone to see him? Driving through a town he didn't know had him more focused and intense than I had ever seen him, as he executed tight turns down the narrow streets.

The church we were to meet was on a street called Larchview. I found Larchview on a map and pointed it out as the motels and fast food joints on the outskirts of the city flew by.

"Looks pretty small," I said. "Maybe you could just drop me off nearby and I can walk, if it's easier."

He looked over my shoulder, snorted at the map. "If it's on a road I can get you there," he said.

Off the highway, we pulled into a maze of side streets and mini malls, and moments after we had entered town, he managed to cruise that big rig right up to the curb in front of the tall, white steepled church. A knot of kids my age sprawled on the church lawn, sitting on and around a concrete picnic table. I lowered myself out of the cab. I was the only camper not wearing shorts and a tank top. I used the big handle to drop onto the running board and then to the ground. I tried not to look at the other kids. My dad's truck roared – I swear it was louder than it had ever been – and belched greasy black diesel fumes that floated across the sun and the suburban blue sky.

"See you around, Boy," my dad said, from inside his snarling behemoth.

Next year, did that mean? He was glad to be free of me. The big motor shuddered, impatient to charge out of the narrow streets and respectable houses that surrounded the church, back to the long wide roads where it belonged.

“Yeah,” I said, the muscles of my back tightening and aware of the gaze of the Bible campers behind me. I wanted to feel the grass of the lawn against my legs, like they did. I wanted to see the truck distant and strange, like they did.

My dad shifted his hand to the top of the big wheel, his fingers wrapped tightly around the impatient reins. “One of these days you get on up to Idaho, we’ll do some hunting, huh?”

I nodded. “Thanks,” I said, “for the lift.” I gave the door a good push and it swung shut.

I stepped away from the truck, which responded with an industrial bellow that echoed down the clapboard street, and a fresh cloud of black soot spewed into the air from the twin exhaust pipes that rose above the roofs of the cracker box ranch homes.

I turned and stepped up onto the church sidewalk. A silver Volvo station wagon had pulled up on the street that ran along the front of the lawn, and this girl, maybe the most beautiful girl I had ever seen, stood at the hatchback, pulling her duffel out of the cargo compartment. She wore short white shorts and a t-shirt that said AGGIES in college lettering. Her legs, smooth and tanned, didn’t walk, they glided, but at that moment only I looked at them, because the rest of the group, twenty or thirty kids sitting on backpacks or reclined on the short, fresh church grass, all watched me. Their eyes followed me with cruel amusement, and I could feel, without looking, the mass behind me lurch forward from the curb like a tanker leaving the dock.

I stood still, small as I could, cringing in the wake of the trailer. One of the wheels hit a manhole cover and the iron disk rang in the street like a rusty bell, echoing up and down the row houses. Then the next set of wheels hit it. And the next. And the next, until it felt like all eighteen had taken their turns and the engine roared again, coughing, chugging all the way down the block. The Aggies girl pulled her stuff out of the Volvo, and she and her mother stood behind the shiny car and watched the truck disappear.

No choice. If I waited even a moment it was all over for me. I hoisted my backpack and walked forward.

If the kids hadn't been sitting on a church lawn, I wouldn't have known them for Bible campers. They looked like any sophomore class in the country. There were a few grunge kids wearing big black Doc Martens with baggy cargo shorts. A couple of cheerleader types: lots of makeup, little shorts and thick-soled flip-flops. And right in the center, blond and crew-cut, surrounded by an offensive lineman, a couple of outfielders and a small forward, sat the brawniest Bible camper of them all. He was a quarterback, no doubt. Maybe a linebacker. But everyone waited for him to make the call.

I was no idiot. I had a month to spend with these kids, and I knew that it would take only an instant to find my place in the social order, and I was not on a good trajectory. It took everything I had, because I desperately wanted to disappear into the restroom - maybe permanently - at least long enough to change into some cargo shorts and wait for the excitement of my entry to die down. But I didn't. I walked directly up to this big guy sitting in state, and pulled the tie out of my pocket.

"Just about have to wear a suit to hitchhike these days," I said, looking him in the eyes. My voice nearly quavered; the entire camp was listening to me. "Even a trucker will hardly pick you up unless you're wearing a tie."

He who denies the father before men...I batted the thought away.

He looked at me from under his thick square brow, and I worried he might just rise from his bench and beat me senseless. He could have. His biceps rippled out of the armholes of his t-shirt, and he could have bench-pressed the entire Hooker offensive line. But instead he laughed. "This guy's funny," he said. "This guy's a joker."

The rest of the jocks laughed too, and so did the cheerleaders. The thrashers nodded.

"You know where you can change around here?" I asked.

"Jimmy'll show you," he said, "His dad's a deacon at this church."

A tall, skinny kid stood. "Sure thing, Norm," he said.

And I was safe. I was the jester. Outside the caste system. I could move in the upper circles as long as I was funny and I could move in the lower circles, as long as I was funny.

"This way," Jimmy told me. Jimmy didn't walk, he loped. Probably a reserve wide receiver at best, and surely he had planned on locking down the joker spot. Now I was in it, he was a flunkey again. "It's inside," he said, throwing me a dark look, "I'll show you the door that's unlocked."

I stepped out of the church to find a yellow bus pulled up to the curb. Half of the group had already climbed aboard, so I slung my backpack over my shoulder and got into line. I threw my pack down in the first empty seat as the driver released the brake and we lurched forward.

The bus rolled past subdivisions at the edge of town toward the sanctuary of the lake in the mountains. Brushy fields gave way to thin, dry woodlands punctuated by shiny silver mailboxes marking the ends of dirt driveways. I had changed into my shorts and a baggy grey t-shirt, but I still felt like I carried a cloud of blue diesel exhaust above my head so I was thankful for the bus - a little time to adjust to get used to this raucous crowd that was so much more secular than I had expected. Still, I couldn't help but smile out the window. I felt like one of the Israelites marching into Canaan. Finally home. Finally safe.

From the first moment, Reverend Smith loomed in my consciousness. His face, in line art, graced the front of the Christian Soldier Regulations pamphlet that we were given as we boarded the bus. I held mine on my lap. It was printed on sturdy yellow paper folded accordion style. There were ten rules, of course, but each rule had extensive subsections. Smith's face looked like I remembered it from the trip to hear him in Oklahoma City. He'd preached in one of those super-churches and I couldn't see him very well from where we sat, but the church had a Jumbotron mounted above the pulpit and that we had a good view of. On the

brochure he had a moustache, which he hadn't when I saw him, and he wore a bolo tie. His glasses made him look like Teddy Roosevelt. I could imagine this guy with one leg planted on the carcass of a slain African elephant. The same personality had radiated from the Jumbotron back in Oklahoma City, too.

Jimmy and Norm sat in the seat ahead of me and I heard Jimmy saying that he knew all the places in Albuquerque, and when we had our Saturday trips, he would show Norm around. I leaned forward. I hadn't realized that we got to spend Saturdays in town. I don't think my mother had, either, or she would have had some advice for me about that.

"There's a great bowling alley where all the St. Eustace Prep girls hang out," Jimmy whispered to Norm. "They're Catholics, so they're snobs when you try and talk to them. But they're easy. There's a guy in my class who got sucked off by two of them last year after we played them."

I sat back in my seat and looked around to see if anyone had caught me hearing that sort of filth. I couldn't believe it. I felt my ears going red. These were Christians!

"No shit," Norm said.

I pulled my Christian Soldier Regulations open. Rule one: *Thou shalt obey the regulations posted throughout camp pertaining to off-limits areas and times.*

"They'll try stuff that our girls won't do."

Just what did Jimmy think our girls did?

Swimming in the lake is allowed during most times after 6:00 AM until dusk. Never swim alone. "Two are better than one, for should he fall his brother can raise him up," (Ecclesiastes 4:10).

"What do you mean two of them sucked him off?"

"He says they took turns."

I kept my head down and flipped through my brochure. *Christian Soldiers of the opposite sex should not be alone together in any of the camp buildings. The exception is camp counselors or activities leaders. In this case the door should be left wide open. This includes tents.*

“Christian girls aren’t that tough, either,” Norm said. “What do you think about that one that came late?”

“Which?”

“She’s behind us. Three back.”

Jimmy swung around to look and almost caught me listening, but I had the brochure back up. *Tight or revealing clothing is both inappropriate for a Christian Soldier, and displays a lack of Christlike love for our brothers.*

The engine in the front of the bus started to wind up as the grade steepened. It was a tinny whine, so different from my father’s throbbing engine. Panic built in my chest, sloshing against my breastbone in cresting waves. Was this the relief, the sanctuary that I had earned when I got out of my father’s truck and away from his influence? They were his sins, not mine that had chased me in the passenger seat of his truck. The devil had been after me while I was with him, but surely, surely the devil would not follow into the camp of God and Reverend Smith?

“Yeah,” Jimmy said, turning back around. “That’s Jolene. She’s nice. Wait till you see these Catholic girls, though.”

I looked back, too. Two seats back and on the other side of the bus sat the Volvo girl. Jolene. Her eyes were brown, large and round. Her hair was blonde, pulled back in a ponytail, and her legs crossed so that her little white shorts exposed rather than concealed the swell of her hips, and her flip-flop sandal hung off a shiny red toenail. She saw me look, and held my gaze for a moment with those eyes. They glowed like Christ in the transfiguration. Then the most peculiar thing happened.

This girl smiled at me.

She smiled at me, right there, over the backs of two green vinyl bus seats. It was a wide smile full of perfect teeth, soft, it seemed, like her eyes. I stayed in the glow of that look as long as I could, just one eternal second, and I turned back around. The brochure still lay open on my warm lap. I flipped it over to rule four. Jimmy was telling Norm about beating St. Eustace and a guy in the seat in front of them turned around to join the conversation. The bus was going slow, climbing the

steep road past the hilly pastures on the edge of town and the tall, forested mountains stood in toward the bus like great gateposts.

The bus pulled into the camp before dark and we shuffled off to dinner and a short welcome speech by a counselor named Spalding. I had hoped for a look at the reverend. Just to meet his eyes and see his reaction when he looked in mine. Would he flinch at the darkness inside me? Or would he smile like Jesus did when he talked to the Samaritan woman at the well, when he called her Daughter, and told her that even though she didn't worship the right way, he'd help her out. Make her better. I needed to see that reaction. I wanted just one sign that promised the Lord's mercy. But the reverend didn't appear.

We dropped our backpacks and duffel bags in cubbyholes that lined the walls of the lobby, and then we went into the dining hall, a long room banded by wooden beams that seemed to hold both the walls and the ceiling in place. We took seats at narrow rectangular tables and dished pork-and-beans and coleslaw out of brown casserole dishes. The counselor sat at the head of the front table, and he had to turn his chair sideways to face all of us in our long ranks. He gave a short speech, welcoming us and exhorting us to read our rules pamphlets. If we lost our copy, there were more in the camp offices.

He called for questions right before he handed out tent assignments, and I nearly raised my hand to ask which way to the chapel, but I thought better of it. The Lord had been waiting this long for me to set things straight with him, and he hadn't smitten me yet. He wouldn't mind a one-night continuance. And I was as afraid to come off too religious in front of this group, at least the ones I had sat by on the bus, as I was in front of my dad or even Sharkey.

When a few questions about bathrooms and schedules had been answered (most of Spalding's replies were reminders to read the rules pamphlet), Spalding invited us to come down to the fire pit on the main lawn for a welcome bonfire once we'd gotten settled in our tents. He excused us, and we picked up our bags and headed toward the campsite, a neat cluster of white tents set up in orderly rows in a stand of big pine trees, on the other side of the main lawn.

The sun was setting as we tromped along the dirt trail from the compound to the camp, and it reflected orangely off the water of Round Lake, which formed the third border of the central lawn. Deacon James, a tall, wiry guy with hair clipped so short I thought he was bald, led us to the first tent and then began calling out names, handing people tent assignments. He called "Erickson" and I stepped forward. He had a blue tattoo on one of his forearms. Three crosses at Golgotha with the word "Sacrifice" printed around his wrist in square letters. I took the paper from him, trying to duck away before he'd noticed me. He chilled me, inside out, the hard way he looked at me, top to bottom, and he wouldn't let go of the paper until I looked up and we locked eyes. But he did the same thing with the people behind me, too, and I watched for a minute, from a few paces away, wondering if he would ever blink.

I walked down the path between the tents in the boys' section, looking for number five, my assigned dwelling. I found it underneath a tall bull pine, a few rows down from the bathrooms, which separated us from the girls' side.

The linebacker Norman Franks, blonde and crew cut, stood in front of my door.

I stepped up to meet officially.

"Norm," he told me. "From West Texas. My father's a pastor and he farms corn and raises hogs. He's on the board of directors for the camp."

"Matt," I told him. How could I describe my father? He's a whoremonger and truck driver. I said: "My mother and I went to see Reverend Smith in Oklahoma City last year."

Norm grunted and nodded. "Yeah, he's okay. He went deer hunting with us last year on my birthday." The basics covered, he tossed his kit in through the tent flap. "I'll take this side," he told me.

I peeked in past his grapefruit shoulder. It looked to me like his stuff was dead center. I didn't want to guess wrong. "Okay," I said. "I'll leave my stuff here and use the bathroom while you get arranged."

“Good idea,” he said, thrusting an arm and a leg through the flap. He moved decisively, as though he were keenly aware of which muscle groups he could flex with every action. “It’s going to be tight in there.” Life, apparently, was an endless string of bodybuilding poses. I imagined the reverend and Norm, both wearing Teddy Roosevelt outfits, standing atop a deer carcass, flexing. How could it be that someone who swore and talked about girls the way Norm did hung out with the reverend? I knew about living a double life; Pastor Allen preached about it occasionally when he gave sermons for the youth. But the son of a pastor, hunting partner of the Reverend? Probably, I thought, Norm lived a double life around his peers, pretending to be worldly so he’d be popular. That was a lesser kind of sin than mine – pretending to be a good Christian when at heart I was like my father.

Later, down at the campfire, we sat on the grass, and Spalding and some other staff members handed out pointy sticks and marshmallows. A few kids who knew each other clustered in tight groups, but for the most part we sat and watched the flames, the boys and girls roughly segregating themselves. I looked over at the girls sitting in the dark, talking as little as the boys did. The girls looked so clean. So good, after the women I had seen while with my father. They weren’t actually prettier than other girls I knew, but right then they seemed to be the most beautiful girls I had ever looked at. I always got nervous around girls, and I still was – I wasn’t about to try to cross the line and talk to them – but that night it was a good and comfortable nervous. A calm, familiar nervousness, next to the way the waitresses and the prostitute had made me feel. And Jolene, the Aggies girl, she really was the most lovely of all. Andrea, back in Hooker, even Skye - they paled. A knot of girls had started to form around Jolene.

Spalding called for attention, and an older lady, the oldest person I had seen in camp, came forward to lead us in song. She balanced a guitar on her knee, thin and fragile looking under a polyester pant leg, and she started strumming *Amazing Grace*. At first nobody joined in, but then Jolene and her girls started singing, and we all sang a few songs. I felt good, happy among worshippers. The

sky had clouded up a little, so we couldn't see many stars, but the lights of the bathrooms in the camp and of the Worship Center reflected off the still lake as we launched into *Jesus, My Savior*.

When the songs ended, I lay in my dark tent, and my stony thoughts returned, roiled in my mind. I lay quietly listening to the great grunts and exhalations of my muscular tent mate, the bodybuilder for Jesus who seemed to be flexing in his sleep. What had I gotten into? The fact was, no matter how I tried to excuse him because he knew the reverend personally, Norm hadn't flinched one bit when Jimmy told him about the St. Eustace girls. Just turned around and checked out Jolene and her white shorts. Somehow it made my sins seem less grievous, committed as they were in the presence of a worldly truck driver, not on God's bus. But maybe I had more at stake. Norm's mother wasn't getting up at three a.m. to deliver papers so that he could come to camp. That I was sure of. Neither was Jimmy's. They had fathers to be proud of.

I settled into sleep. I was thinking wrong. Sin is sin. Who would be stopping to compare notes on the end of a pitchfork? No one laughs when their toes are touching the flames.

The next morning at bugle call I stumbled out of my tent and stretched under the trees. The bugle called reveille from the loudspeaker on top of the central hall, where services were to be held. It was a recording, and the bugler slid cleanly from Reveille into "*Onward Christian Soldier*." It was a long ordeal, and sleeping through it could only be a conscious choice. In that camp, getting up on time was just a matter of a little self-discipline.

Down the little bank the lake was dark and grey, not yet touched by the sun, still caught in the tall pine covered mountain to the east. The tents bounced and shook around me, and one by one zippers started to open. I hurried to the bathrooms, just a few tents away, to get in before the rush. According to the rules pamphlet, missing Morning Prayer once meant extra KP duty; missing twice

forfeited Saturday leave in Albuquerque. When I returned to the tent Norm had vacated, so I rolled my sleeping bag and folded my pad into three sections and stowed it behind my backpack.

I took the letter from Pastor Willy, as well as all my sins, to Prayer that morning, ready to be relieved of both as quickly as possible. I found my seat assignment, between a skinny blonde girl and the big guy who had been talking with Jimmy and Norm about football on the bus. Before I sat, I went back to the door, hoping to catch the reverend before it all started. I lingered as long as felt safe, but at two minutes to seven I gave up and slid into my seat.

The reverend entered as the clock hit seven, and he nodded to Norm and the other campers assigned up front at his table, the one Spalding had welcomed us from. I tried to smile up in his direction as he passed, but I didn't manage eye contact.

Before breakfast, the Reverend read from a small book called *Daily Manna*. It was the same book of scripture and commentary that my mother read out of to Nicole and me in the mornings on school days while we ate cereal. But at camp, the Reverend read from an edition specifically for youth. That first day, the Bible text was about Josiah, boy king of Israel, who cleans the temple of idols and reinstitutes the rule of religious law in the land. Then he has his men smash up everyone else's religious paraphernalia. And God blesses him for it, the Reverend pointed out, right up until he goes into battle and gets slaughtered. Take a lesson from that, the Reverend said, fight the Lord's battles, not your own. Disown the flesh.

That really touched me, deep inside. Here was the key. Instead of fighting the Lord's battles, say, writing letters to my congressman to get evolution out of science class, I was spending all my effort trying to get my hand out of my pants. I felt a giddy warmth deep between my shoulders and in the back of my neck, the kind that came when things snapped into focus and made sense. My doubts about camp started to melt, and I looked around to see how the other kids were taking it, if they were getting it too, but most everyone slumped over their clean cereal

bowls, waiting for the sermon to end. It was early, though. The spirit was willing but the flesh was weak. No longer. Not for me! Not here with the Reverend.

When the Reverend finished he said a long prayer and stood, shaking hands with Norm and a couple other campers at the front table as he left. Meanwhile the camp cook and his assistant brought hot cereal and toast and big casseroles heaped with scrambled eggs into the dining hall.

I left the table early and followed the Reverend out. The main compound consisted of three buildings, and outside the dining hall I stood in the central courtyard under one branch of a three-armed covered walkway that connected them. I walked to the center, where they all joined, and looked at the directory. They had mounted it like a plaque on a heavy stand. The building I came from, where the support services were housed, was called the Holy Ghost. The other choices were the Father and the Son.

Clever. The classrooms would be in the Son. The Logos. Offices would be in the Father.

I ran down that path, pulling the folded envelope out of the back pocket of the stiff Levis that had been rolled up in my backpack for nearly a week. The reception desk sat empty, so I passed it and walked down the carpeted hallway behind. The walls were white and the trim was all light oak, and each door that I passed bore a little Formica plaque with a name. At the end of the hall were two doors, one that said "Detention," and one that said "Reverend Smith." I banged on the reverend's door, but there was no answer.

Another door opened, on the right, and a woman stepped into the hall. I didn't recognize her from the bonfire the night before. She could have been one of the campers, except that she dressed like a counselor and she wore no makeup.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

She was as tall as I was, straight brown hair still damp from the shower. On second thought, she did look older, mid-twenties, maybe. Through the open door I saw a glimpse of a bed and a desk, and a bright window.

"The Reverend?" I said. "I have a letter."

“Smith’s gone for the day,” she said.”

“Gone?”

“His house and his offices are in Albuquerque.” A tall, plumed feather pen, white and brown like an eagle feather sat on her desk in front of the window beside a squat, dark inkpot.

“Can I put that in his box for you?” She shut her door behind herself. The plaque read “Wright.”

“Sure,” I said. “I was hoping to give it to him.”

“No worry. I’ll see that he gets it.” She took the letter from me and slid it into the breast pocket of her denim staff shirt. “You’d better get back. The faculty wing is off-limits. And anyway, you don’t want to miss signing up for classes.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I didn’t know.”

“Don’t worry,” she said, following me to the front desk at the end of the hallway. She took the letter back out of her pocket as we walked past the desk. She looked a little nervous herself, the way she kept passing my letter back and forth between her left hand and her right.

We spent the morning signing up for classes. They would go on our transcripts, and most high school districts recognized them. We had four options. There was an art class taught by the grandmotherly lady who had been playing guitar the night before. She wore thick glasses and she proudly told us, while we sat in the main auditorium of the Worship Hall, also in the Father complex, that she had painted the mural on the back wall. It was based on the prophecies of Isaiah and it portrayed a kid hanging out with a lion, and a baby in diapers patting a gigantic hooded cobra while the parents looked on with big smiles on their faces. There were majestic mountains, a splashing river with a stone bridge, and a sidewalk that meandered past the lion, through golf course grass. I thought about taking the art class, but somehow that mural turned me off. Who mows the grass in heaven, and why the concrete sidewalk, I wanted to know? If this was paradise, did we need concrete?

The Good Samaritan first aid class was taught by a former firefighter turned preacher. All the jocks signed up for that one. We could also choose a nature class (designed to reveal the hand of God in creation, according to the brochure, and provide a basic understanding of Southwestern flora and fauna), led by Spalding, who had welcomed us to camp. He was in his early forties, balding on top, wearing dark, horn-rimmed frames. The firefighter introduced him as Professor Spalding, and I heard someone behind me whisper that he once was a teacher at a college somewhere. I turned around. It was Jimmy. I briefly considered that class, but instead I signed up for the last option, Psalms and Poetics. That class, it turned out, was taught by the woman I had met in the faculty quarters.

Classes started every day at 8 a.m., just after breakfast and Morning Prayer. Each morning I stumbled in as the second bugle call finished and plopped down in my breakfast chair. Norm stayed in the sack a bit longer than I did, but he made up the time by not rolling his bag. He always arrived just after me, and sat across from Jolene, up at table one. Her father was a camp contributor of some kind. I desperately wanted to make eye contact with her again. I tried every morning, when I arrived at breakfast, to feel that smile again, but I had only a moment before Norm slid into his seat, blocking my line of sight. And he would talk to her until the Reverend came.

The Reverend appeared every day at seven on the dot. His version of *Daily Manna* continued to parse more action verses than my mother's, mainly the Old Testament and the Gospels. Sensational miracles and epic godly battles. My mother's copy, for adults, focused on St. Paul and sins of the flesh. In only a few days on the road with my father I'd gotten out of the habit of morning text, and that affected my attitude. I began noticing that the lessons for kids were all very similar: David slew two hundred men – you can be cool and serve the Lord; Peter cuts off the ear of the slave of the high priest – you can be cool and serve the Lord. By the end of the first week, I almost preferred the endless warnings against sins of the flesh, and sometimes I nearly dozed off.

The classrooms were in The Son. From the Holy Ghost, we'd walk directly to class, where we'd spend the morning. During that first week it quickly became apparent that I was the best writer at Round Lake. After a lecture, we scooted our desks into a circle and read each other's work. Miss Wright led a discussion of how to make the poems more artistic and more praiseworthy. By Friday, as I sat in my plastic seat near the window reading these other kids' poems, I marveled at how many words in English rhyme with the word Lord: moored stored board ford hoard Ford bored roared sword gored. Through the glass

windowpane I could see a long line of Christian naturalists working their way around the far side of the lake with their butterfly nets and specimen jars. The surface of the lake shined, crystal and blue until the water rippled under a light gust of morning breeze, turning it dark and silvery. The naturalists gathered around a tree like druids. Spalding - I could tell him apart from the others all the way across the lake by the slouching, distracted way that he moved - touched the tree. All of the kids looked up, some of them shading their eyes from the sun. Then they looked down. Not all at the same spot, but around. They could be pagan druids out in the forest, worshipping pagan trees. I wondered if someone could get away writing about that kind of thing in Miss Wright's class. Maybe you could write about St. Patrick converting the people and burning the druids.

I knew Jolene was in Spalding's class, and I leaned forward to see if I could pick her out. Even across the lake she was worth a look.

"Trouble concentrating, Matt?"

Miss Wright stood over my desk. She looked like a high school English teacher, thin and spare, eyes that squinted from lots of time with books. She couldn't have been out of college for too long by then. She still had a lot of pimples, and I imagined she would have had difficulty keeping her students in line at her school. She wore her hair straight and plain, as though she'd just gotten out of the shower, and she never wore makeup. I was probably the only one who realized she might have been pretty somehow, if something hadn't gone wrong. Sometime in the past, I figured, someone had told her she was ugly, and she'd believed it. Now it was just one of the facts about her, one that we all knew.

"No, Miss Wright," I said. The girls called her Miss Wrong, even when she could hear them, and a few of the boys had started to do it.

"You can call me Melanie," she said. Her full name was Melanie Wright. I knew I was probably the only boy who treated her like a teacher. When the girls talked about her down at the lake in the afternoons, the boys just nodded, unwilling to admit they had even looked at her. She's a dog, one of them might say.

She looked out the window too. The campers had left the tree and were working their way along the far shore. One pair of bright white shorts stood out from the rest. Jolene.

“Good day for a nature hike,” Miss Wright said. She looked around the room. Most of the kids were talking, doodling in the margins of their papers. And it was hot in there. She walked to the center of the room.

“Class,” she said. “Much of the world’s greatest poetry, including the Psalms, was created in nature. Anyone who wants to go outside to work, feel free to do so.” There was a scramble of chair legs squeaking across the shiny tiles, so that I could hardly hear her finish. “I want a fresh poem on Monday, reflecting a free morning in the outdoors.”

I picked up my notebook and let the other kids pass. Miss Wright packed her papers into her backpack, and I walked out with her. At the entrance of the Camp Education Center we looked grandly down the slope at the stagnant little lake. Passing clouds had greyed it, but the sun hit the far edge, and the glare began to spread toward the center. The lawn had just been mowed and it smelled green and fresh, a little like the algae of the lake. On a little hill to the right, and partially obscured by the buildings of the Worship Center, the tents stood in their cool shaded rows beneath the tall pines. Our class filtered into them and disappeared.

Miss Wright dropped her bag and slumped down on one of the two wooden benches that flanked the covered corridor that connected the Education Center to the Father and the Son. Like so much of the camp, benches seemed too new and clean to be standing there in the middle of a forest.

“It’s gorgeous,” she said. She leaned against the back of the bench, her eyes on the distant shore of the lake where a wide swath of lily pads, just beginning to sprout up through the surface beneath the overhanging brush, textured the bright shallows.

“Praise the Lord,” I said idly. She was unguarded, outside the classroom. Her whole face relaxed, and I saw I was right. She did become prettier away from

the other kids, and the natural light helped her bad skin. "Those were seven busy days," I said.

"Has it been a week already?" she said, still lost in the lake.

"I meant Creation," I said. "Sorry." I was surprised she didn't get the scriptural allusion. I didn't want to feel superior to Miss Wright. I admired something in her. Her calm. Her mildness in the face of the scorn of the other campers, which she couldn't have missed, especially after the 'Miss Wrong' business started. It was a kind of Christianity I had rarely seen. Happy are ye when persecuted.

And I didn't want her to think I was a showoff. Like the Reverend said that first day, keep your mind on the Lord, not on yourself.

And I couldn't stand for her to know that I felt sorry for her. I thought of the way my father had treated that cop back in Nevada, cursing him all the way to the truck stop. I knew about respect.

Miss Wright laughed. "Right. Creative days. I always thought those were symbolic. What with fossils and everything."

"No," I told her. "They are supposed to be real days. My church went to see Reverend Smith speak once, and he gave this great sermon about that." She looked at me instead of the lake, but I couldn't read her eyes. Surely she understood how authoritative Wilson was on the subject? It shocked me that she didn't know far more about this than I did. A counselor!

"With Noah's flood, everything changed," I said, suddenly aware that I didn't want to be telling her all this. It sounded hollow and unconvincing spoken out loud. "You can't really trust radiocarbon dating before that."

"So your position is that the Flood killed the dinosaurs?"

"Well," I said. "I guess so. That's more or less what Reverend Smith said."

"Okay," she said. "Fair enough."

I felt isolated, alone with just Miss Wright at that moment. The naturalists had followed the Lake Trail deeper into the woods, and the artists and the

Samaritans still hadn't come out of their classrooms. A couple of kids from our class lay on the grass down by the lake, sitting on bright beach towels with blue and red and yellow patterns in shades too bright for the colors of the camp, but most of them had disappeared into the tents or the forest.

"You can sit, Matt," she said. I had both hands wrapped around my sweaty notebook. "Unless you wanted to go work on those poems."

"Thanks." I sat on the far end of the bench and looked out at the lake, like she did. No wonder I hadn't spoken a word about Jesus to my father, if I felt so foolish saying it out loud to a counselor. Maybe I didn't know the right words to talk about things like that. But Miss Wright should have known the basics, even if she wasn't teaching Bible history.

She still wore the loose khakis and a denim button-down. Standard issue for counselors, but when she was relaxed, looking at the lake, it wasn't as frumpy on her, and her plain face looked softer, almost pretty. She had a slim build underneath all that cotton, and I wondered what she'd look like in a bathing suit. I could tell that her breasts were firm and nice by the way that stiff denim draped across her chest.

At fifteen, and wearing tight briefs, it didn't take much. I held my notebook in my lap.

"You have a real talent," she said. She slid her elbow up onto the back of the bench, turning her shoulders slightly my direction. "You just have a good feeling for putting words together. Do you like English?"

"I like reading," I said, "But English classes are pretty boring."

"I'd love to have you in my class. I think you'd like my reading list. Have you read Hemingway? *The Sun Also Rises*?"

I shook my head. "I read part of *The Old Man and the Sea*."

"Bo-ring." She smiled. "No wonder you don't like English." How could a smile make her so pretty? "How about Kerouac," she said, "*On the Road*? Or *Catcher in the Rye*, by Salinger?"

I shook my head.

“Those guys would be right up your alley. They’d be good for you.”

I felt a little embarrassed, not knowing all those books. “Do you teach at a Christian school?” I asked.

“Public. Thus the doctrinal ignorance. I know the poets of the Psalms, though.”

“I go to public.”

“Really,” she said, “I thought you might have been a home-schooler.”

“My mom talks about it, but it’s too much for her to do.”

She nodded. “Well, remember Kerouac and Salinger.”

I realized she was dismissing me, but I didn’t know if I could get up without revealing myself. She kept smiling at me. Her eye level would be at my waist if I stood.

I did a spin stand, as though I heard a noise back at the worship center that I had to look at. And I jammed my left hand in my pocket.

“Thanks,” I told her. I scanned her face for any sign that she saw, but she was unreadable. My face felt bright red and hot. “I’ll look for those books.”

“It was nice talking to you, Matt.”

I stepped past her, shielded on the left by my fist, balled in my pocket pulling my shorts away from my body, and covered on the right by my notebook. She looked away, back towards the Worship Center, and I couldn’t help it. I looked down her shirt.

Nice ones. I guiltily reviewed them in my mind that night while I lay in my sleeping bag watching the mosquitoes bounce off the netting. I had been wrong to look, but since I had seen them, I figured it wasn’t changing anything to remember them. Most of the girls at camp had relatively small breasts. Jolene was about the biggest of the girls who were not fat. I imagined hers would be huge in a few years, when she’d really filled out. When did girls quit getting bigger? I hadn’t noticed much about her mother, back at the church with the

Volvo. Usually I did. There were two new things that I was noticing that year, mothers and wedding bands.

Jolene's breasts looked about the same as Miss Wright's. But Miss Wright's had freckles, at least down to the top of her white cotton bra. I decided that the freckles were sexy.

"Hey Norm."

We didn't talk much, Norm and I. He grunted and turned his head.

"What size do you think, say, Jolene's are?"

"Her knockers?"

"Yeah."

"34-C."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Really."

"How do you know for sure? Did you see her bra?" The idea of Norm seeing Jolene's bra caused an upwelling of rage and longing in my stomach. And I didn't like his calling them knockers.

"No. But I will." He ducked into his sleeping bag.

I waited a second, unsure what was happening. It was disturbing, this certainty regarding Jolene's size, and his confidence that he would see her bra. He popped back out holding a glossy copy of *Maxim*, dog-eared and worn. He flipped through the pages. On the cover a woman in a little white bikini crouched like a tiger on the leather seat of a motorcycle. He turned the open pages toward me, and I could just make out the image in the dim light. "That's a 'C,'" he says. "Jolene's probably just slightly bigger." He flipped a page. "That's a 'D.' She's not quite that big." He tossed the magazine onto my sleeping bag. "You can use that one," he said, "I don't need it right now. Keep it clean, though."

I pushed the magazine back toward him. "We can't read that stuff."

I couldn't see his face well in the dark, but his eyes were hard. "I might have been wrong about you, Erickson," he said. "Don't be a pussy."

My social life at the camp depended on Norm's approval. I hadn't tried to make backup friends outside his group. I just had to stay funny. I had started doing an impression of Spalding that Norm liked, and whenever the professor came up while we were standing around talking he'd give me my cue: "Spalding, Erikson."

I'd scrunch up my nose and squint my eyes and make piglike snorting sounds, while pretending to push a pair of horn-rims up my nose. "Hmph. Snuff. Running a little late to Worship this morning, snumph, Franks?"

Norm would laugh. The boys would laugh. The girls would laugh, too, but not as hard. I couldn't afford to be a pussy in Norm's book.

I rolled over, unsure what to think. Norm rolled over too, stuffing the magazine back down into his sleeping bag. He knew I would not challenge him or tell. He knew he was in control. And he could see through to my insides, even if no one else at camp seemed to be able to. He must have known that at night in my sleeping bag I brooded endlessly on breasts and those dark little triangles, or he wouldn't have showed me he had that magazine. We all thought about those things, except perhaps Norm. Apparently he saw enough of the real thing that he could spend his nights flexing his great, smooth pectorals.

I had not prayed for a long time. Except for the group worship at Morning Prayer and Lunch Study, I might not have said one good prayer since I got into camp, despite my intentions to come clean with the Lord right off. And now how many sins did I bear? All of my own, too many to count anymore. And on top of that, I was carrying Norm's sins too, and Jimmy's. The language they used, all the things they talked about. When you hear but don't tell, you become a sharer in a sin. An accomplice.

Still He was testing me. Testing me here in camp where I was supposed to have found relief. I folded my hands down in my sleeping bag where my manhood, predictably, had responded to the pictures. As I started to pray it subsided. I prayed then for courage, I prayed then that I be delivered from temptation, and I prayed for scientific discoveries that would definitively disprove

the accuracy of radiocarbon dating. Before my prayer was over I felt myself drifting on the edge of sleep, halfway conscious that I hadn't finished properly, and I'd have to do my "in Jesus' name Amen" in the morning, like a postage stamp to make the prayer count.

I drifted into this image, and it grew and filled my mind: Jolene sitting in a dark green bus seat with those smooth legs folded up, that white flip-flop dangling from her polished toe. Miss Wright, with her freckled chest, was barely a shadow next to it, and I couldn't think for the life of me why Miss Wright lingered in my mind.

One day, Marci Poppini, the long and lean girl who sat to my left during Morning Prayer and who played soccer, basketball, and gymnastics for a medium-sized high school up in Colorado, asked to play football with the boys. The first time she tried, early in the week, Brent, the big offensive lineman from a Christian school in Louisiana, who sat to my right during breakfast, told her to get lost. She chewed him out right in front of everyone and she and Brent pretty well hated each other from that moment on. But because he was one of Norm's top lieutenants, she didn't get to play.

They glared at each other across steaming bowls of oatmeal every morning. She called him the fat slob, as in, "Can you ask the fat slob to pass the sausage, Matt?" He called her The Bitch, though at breakfast he'd only whisper it to me. In the freedom of the outdoors he'd just say it loud: "Hey Erickson, can you do the bitch?" I didn't impersonate her because she was kind of pretty, and, after all, it was kind of true that Brent was a fat slob. Plus, Norm never seemed to want to see an impression of her.

Eventually, though, Marci got into a game. Friday afternoon, and I was playing when it happened. I took it as a matter of pride that I was never the last one picked. Not for football. I was a fast runner and pretty strong for my size, I just had no skill. The year I had gone out, I made JV, though in practice I was pretty much limited to playing on kickoffs, and of course, after the whiskey incident I decided I should drop the sport so I could concentrate on the more important things.

So we were out there lining up across the grassy beach on a field that we had negotiated from the girls, who wanted to throw down towels and lie in the sun. On one side of the field near the lake, the soggy grass splashed mud up our calves when we ran, and my sneakers were soaked through, but it didn't feel too bad in the bright afternoon sun. Brent had been the captain of the second team, which meant he picked first and had first possession of the ball. His side scored once,

and then we traded possessions a few times before we scored on this quarterback sneak. I threw the big block on that play, sprang Norm free for the touchdown. So it was tied, and we were driving, and Jimmy ran his route and slipped in the wet grass down near the shore. He slid into the water and came up limping, holding his groin, his khaki shorts dark like he had wet himself.

“Can’t run,” he muttered in Norm’s huddle.

Norm didn’t look at him. “Go sit with the girls,” he said. On the field Norm had no time for the fallen, whoever they were. But we were short a man. It was the first time Norm’s team had been remotely threatened with a loss. Jimmy limped off and Norm started drawing up a shorthanded play. Before he finished Marci’s head appeared in the huddle.

“I’m lining up wide right, deep post,” she said.

Norm looked up at her and laughed. “Suit yourself.” He turned to me. “That means you stay in and block, Erickson.”

I nodded. “Sure.” I played tight end, which meant that I mostly blocked anyway, though Norm would dump a short pass off to me now and then, because he knew that if I didn’t drop it - as I usually did - I was fast enough to go all the way.

Anyway, I was blocking on the play, keeping this guy off Norm, and watching downfield. And who but Brent should be stuck defending Marci? It turned out she also ran track up there in Colorado. She made her cut and turned Brent around and walked away from him like I couldn’t believe. Brent pretended to trip on the grass and took a tumble. Norm reared back and chucked one as far as he could. Marci ran right under it and cradled that thing like a newborn. She even turned around and moonwalked past the two backpacks that marked the end zone. Norm ran down field and gave her high-fives and she yelled toward Brent that it was easy because the faggy one was guarding her. That was where things started to go bad for Brent. By taps that evening everyone in camp had heard the rumor that Brent was gay.

The next day was Saturday, and on the way down out of the mountains for our afternoon in Albuquerque I shared a seat with Brent, in front of Norm and Jimmy, who were in the back seat. I squeezed up against the green corrugated metal of the wall, watching the ranks of pines file by my window as we bounced down out of the hills. Brent sat on most of the seat, knees spread wide and arms folded, defying anyone to look at him. There was none of the usual joking and rowdiness on the trip down the hill. No football talk. Brent stared straight ahead while I watched the trees and Norm and Jimmy muttered behind us.

I squirmed in the vinyl seat, and kept my body shoved up against the wall. I tried to avoid incidental contact with Brent's widespread legs. I didn't have the kind of reputation that could survive much innuendo. I felt sure everyone who glanced my way was trying to ask me, "What's wrong with you? Didn't you hear Brent's a faggot?"

I had never met a faggot before, though there were stories about the piano teacher back in Hooker, a grey-haired old maid who wore long flower print hippie style skirts and men's button-down oxfords. She was rumored to be gay. And I remembered there was a guy who worked in Snead's department store, on Main Street, who was supposed to be gay. That was back when I was little, and I remember my father, working on his truck, joking with his buddies about who was going into Snead's to get fitted for a jacket. Not that my father or any of his friends ever wore a sportcoat, but later, when I fit in small men's sizes, my mother took me into Snead's to get a jacket for church and I remember how strange I felt as long as we were in the men's department. The guy was gone – he had moved away to Tulsa or some other big city long before I ever set foot in Snead's - but I never forgot that story, and when the girl ran her hands under my arms and tugged on the coattails near my butt I shivered, happy he had left town. I imagined Brent in neat pressed pants and a bow tie, patting down men's jackets. It was a ridiculous proposition. The bus dropped us off in town, in front of a bowling alley.

“Hey, Matt,” Jimmy said, jumping down behind me. “Where’re you going?”

The campers were all heading down the sidewalk in the direction of the long pink front of the bowling alley and arcade. The building was featureless except for the double entrance doors and a couple of wooden bowling pin cutouts mounted on the roof.

Deacon James stood on the last stair of the bus door shouting directions: “Five p.m., that’s three hours. In front of the bowling alley.”

“I’m going to use a phonebook,” I told Jimmy, stepping out of line so the stragglers climbing out of the bus could get by. “I want to go to a bookstore. Get something to read.”

“Forget it then.” he said. “See you at the alley.”

I checked in a phone booth on the corner, and found a place that, if I read the blocky map in the yellow pages was correctly, looked to be nearby. I craned my head to see down the empty street where a stop sign stood alone on the corner between a tall crumbling apartment building with an arched plaster sign built into the doorway that said, in blocky art deco letters, “Baird,” and a gas station converted into a dry cleaners. I was pretty sure that was the cross street I was looking for. I found the page again and recited the number, and then started down the road, cutting through the abandoned gas pump island.

I smiled at an older Mexican woman who stood inside the front door of the old station, hanging a pair of bright blue women’s slacks on a plastic clothes hanger. She ignored me and clicked the garment onto a rack.

The used bookstore occupied another old stucco building a couple of blocks down. I pushed the door open. A couple of men stood behind a long glass case. One, thin and middle aged with a horseshoe of brown hair and square plastic glasses, rested an arm on a cash register and watched the other, young, paunchy, wearing a form-fitting black t-shirt, flip through a stack of Marvel comics. Woody Guthrie posters covered the wall behind them, and the glass case was lined with an

army of pewter figurines: orcs, trolls, warriors and wizards, lined rank and file between displays of Dungeons and Dragons guidebooks.

The young guy barely looked up.

“Hi,” I said, intimidated by the place. There were racks of books opposite the counter, metal frames bowed with a shambles of volumes. I could barely breathe for the dusty thickness of the air. “I was just looking for a book.”

“Good choice,” the man at the cash register said.

“Shit,” the young guy said. I nearly jumped.

“That last dude thought *Iron Dame* 64 was worth ten dollars. I got four of them here.”

“Was there a certain book,” the other asked me, “or did you just want paper?”

“*On the Road*,” I said. I wanted to get all the questions right and get my stuff and split as quickly as I could.

“Classics are in the back row,” he said. He was obviously not interested in helping me out, so I slid past and hid myself in the farthest row.

The covers of the books were tattered, spines cracked and broken, and no one had spent much time organizing. It took a while, but eventually I found them: yellowing copies of Miss Wright’s books for half the price on the cover. *On the Road* for ninety cents and *Catcher in the Rye* for seventy-five, plus tax. The clerk at the register gave me a look when I pulled out my wad of gambling money, but he took a twenty and gave me my change, a ten, eight ones and the change. I rolled it up with the other cash and dug the wad deep into my pocket. After my meal at the truck stop and two books I was down to sixty-three dollars and fifty-eight cents

I slipped past the big young guy, who had pulled an even taller stack of comics out of a bag behind the counter and was thumbing through them. His thick arms and round fingers unnerved me. Not the kind of guy I wanted to show my roll of cash.

I walked along the old grey sidewalk toward a patch of green that looked like a park. There were a lot of older buildings, sort of Mexican looking. Everything was plastered or stucco, and the corners of the older shops that lined the street were rounded off, and a few had peeled logs sticking straight out through the stucco, like pictures of the Alamo that my class brought back from a junior high trip that I hadn't been able to go on. Mostly the pictures the kids brought back were of each other – my classmates wearing shorts and Hawaiian shirts and tube tops on boats that bumped along the Riverwalk in the hot sun. For weeks the class passed around a photo in which Andrea Apelwood's halter had slipped off her shoulder, and a lucky classmate had snapped the moment, capturing her almost down to the nipple. I saw it two or three times before Mr. Jones, during a seventh hour lab confiscated it from another kid. But the street I was on, as I wandered through town, not directly back to the bowling alley, looked like if the folks who built the Alamo had designed it.

I sweated in the dry air, my hands uncomfortably moist on the smooth paper covers of the books. Miss Wright, Melanie, I thought it would be nice to call her Melanie, troubled me. Not just her breasts – why did I like them so much? But I couldn't understand her attitude, either. How could she be so blasé about something as important as Bible history? There were two sides to the issue, as I saw it, either you were with God or with the atheists. She just said sure, okay, to my lame argument, as though she didn't have an opinion or really care. But at the same time, the way she talked and the way she comported herself was more Christian than anyone else in camp. My mother would have loved her, and my father would have made crude jokes about her. How could I question her Christianity? After all, I had looked down her shirt.

It seemed hotter in Albuquerque than at the lake. I saw a little green down one of the side streets, so I followed it down a block and found a little park. There was a bench in the shade of a fragrant, sagey tree, so I sat and put the books on my lap. It felt strange, sitting there in the middle of a big city like that, especially after a week of isolation in the woods. And I wasn't exactly used to cities anyway. The

only one I'd ever spent much time in, besides the trip with my dad, was Oklahoma City. I watched a couple of people walk by, on the otherwise quiet sidewalk, talking about something or the other. The shops across the street didn't have their own buildings, like shops did in Hooker. Instead they were just storefronts in big, dry brick buildings hunkered down under four stories of dusty windows. I wondered what happened up in those rooms, behind the shades that were pulled halfway down the windows directly above the bookstore. On the right, above a florist, the windows on the second floor were open, and there was an idle fan sitting on the empty frame. Were they apartments? Desperate tenements where starving immigrants struggled to feed their kids? Or did that fan blow on faces of drug addicts who came out at night to wallow in their depravity?

I felt cosmopolitan and worldly. Not worldly like they say at church, meaning sinful and ungodly, but worldly like traveled and knowing, a man on his own in a new city with a couple of books and sixty-three dollars and fifty-eight cents in his pocket. It was a great feeling. The same kind of feeling as sitting high up in an eighteen-wheeler watching the earth roll by.

I tucked Kerouac into my backpack, and flipped *Catcher* open. I read the first few pages, but I didn't really understand it. After a while I gave up and stowed the book. It was hot anyway, and perspiration began to blot out any grand feelings I had. I stood and pulled my damp t-shirt away from my chest and looked back up at the fan, still hanging listlessly, turning slowly when the breeze caught it. It looked symbolic, worth writing down. Maybe a good image for one of the poems I would write for Miss Wright, but I wasn't sure what it was symbolic of. Maybe of the feeling the city gave me.

I started back to the bowling alley. I didn't know the way exactly, but I hadn't gone far and the streets were pretty easy to navigate. I passed St. Eustace Prep, and from there I could see the familiar shape of the corner we had been dropped off on, just a block down. St. Eustace was a tall, pagan building with a lot of idolatrous sculptures around the front, and a broad park-like field. I couldn't help but admire it as I skirted it, careful not to step on Catholic property.

A block over, I pulled open the heavy glass door of the bowling alley and joined Brent, Jimmy, and Norm who were throwing in lane three. Jolene was bowling with some girls down in five. Jolene didn't play much. Mostly she sat at the scorer's table and watched the hems of Norm's short sleeves stretch to the bursting point every time he threw.

They had just started a new game, so they let me throw twice to catch up, but before we made it to the sixth frame the St. Eustace girls appeared down on the end near the video games, just like Jimmy had predicted a week earlier on our bus ride into the camp on Round Lake. Brent and Jimmy dropped out so that Jimmy could take Brent over to introduce him. I pretended to weigh a couple of balls in my hands, stretching my fingers to fill the holes while Norm threw, but I watched sidelong as Brent and Jimmy talked to them. The Catholics wore sexier clothes than our girls: little miniskirts that would get a girl sent to detention back at camp. It made me nervous, having that around, and I kept looking over at Brent and Jimmy. They were asking for trouble. Probably, I thought, it was my moral obligation to remind them about associating with unbelievers, but I didn't. I couldn't.

So I kept my eyes focused on the lane and Norm and I finished out Jimmy's and Brent's cards. I actually beat Norm on Brent's card, which had started with a strike and a spare. When the game was over Jimmy and Brent had disappeared. I racked up again, lugging my ball, a dark purple nine-pounder, to the track, where it sat silent and pitiful next to Norm's black fifteen. The pins dropped, Norm whipped up his ball and winked at Jolene as she ran her tongue along the tips of her front teeth.

It might have been desperation that drove Brent that evening in Albuquerque, or perhaps he was trying to avenge himself on womankind in general. Maybe he was just horny. In any case, on the way back to camp, I sat alone because Brent, having been caught having sex with a Catholic behind the bowling alley, beneath the pines on the grounds of St. Eustace, shared the front

seat with the square, buzzed figure of Deacon James. We all knew he would to be ejected from camp and shipped straight home to New Orleans, even though the regulations didn't specify a punishment for fornication. They hadn't been written with that magnitude of sinfulness in mind. The details were unclear, but I heard Jimmy whispering to Norm as we boarded the bus that he happened to be walking through the park with Deacon James, when they heard noises from the bushes. Jimmy was our only source of information because the counselors weren't talking. He always found a way to get the information we wanted, and, I thought, sitting in the dark bus, Jimmy would now move one spot closer to Norm.

Giggling circled the bus as the information went around. I was fortunate enough to be sitting alone on the return trip, so I slid my back up against my window, feeling the ridges of the green metal paneling against my vertebrae, and stretched my legs out on the seat. I reread the opening of *Catcher*. Sitting alone on the dark green vinyl I imagined asking Miss Wright about the book. She might bring me into her room there in the faculty quarters. Perhaps I'd sit on that daybed I had seen behind her. We'd sit on it together, while she talked about this Holden guy and unbuttoned her denim shirt.

Jolene sat up ahead, about six places. She turned a few times and looked back, and the first time I thought she was looking at me, and for a moment I imagined sitting with her in my tent. I would tell *her* about Holden while she pulled her top off over her head. But I realized quickly, almost instantly, that it was Norm, right behind me, that she had smiled at. I wanted to sink down into my seat and batter my head with my new books. They were paperbacks, but if I smashed them into my frontal lobe hard enough and fast, perhaps I could rearrange things in there so that I would be able to think about a girl, even for just a moment, without imagining her disrobing. Instead I flipped through *Catcher in the Rye* in the dark.

The metal wall of the bus wasn't very comfortable, so I slid *On the Road* behind my head. Not the best pillow, but something. The bus jostled and bounced, and the seats creaked on their bolted metal legs, and I closed my eyes,

but I heard Jimmy get up from the seat behind me. I sat up a little to peek over the edge of the seat, and there he was, ahead of me now, whispering to Jolene. Information was not the only thing Jimmy could broker. She nodded, and I ducked back down and closed my eyes. Footsteps back down the aisle, but these were new. They scuffed the plastic traction ridges that run between the seats in a different way than Jimmy's had.

"Hi," I heard Norm say.

"Hi."

"Can you believe about Brent?"

"He wasn't really gay, was he? He was one of your friends," Jolene said.

"No," Norm said, "I doubt it, but it sure makes you think about what's important, doesn't it?"

"I guess so."

"It just shows that Christians need to be with other Christians."

I leaned back into my book, sick in my stomach. How could you miss the point that badly? I heard the sound of a little smooching in the dark.

"Do you think we should be doing this?" Jolene whispered.

"We're both Christians. It's okay."

More liplock. More serious. That was Norm's genius, spinning events. Like a publicist or a radio talk show host. On we rattled, into the night, through the dark invisible gateposts, back into the camp of God.

I didn't feel like talking to anyone that night. We sat in our rows on the padded folding chairs as the cooks brought out our dinner. Oven-baked pork chops lined up in brown casserole dishes, mashed potatoes in big white bowls, and soggy carrots with parsley. Everyone dug into the food, chattering as though it was just another evening meal, while I slopped a pile of thick white potatoes onto my plate beside my chop. No one seemed to notice that Brent was gone, eating alone in the detention room at the end of the hall in the faculty building. Did they

bring him his own pork chops? Did he get to choose his last meal, like a condemned man?

Up at the front table, Norm didn't act troubled the sudden loss of his former buddy. He and Jolene, up at the front table and in my line of sight, were furiously jabbing at each other with their knees while they dished up mounds of those little green-flecked orange discs. I could smell carrots everywhere. Sickeningly sweet, and sagey. Marci passed me the carrots and I tried to hand them off so I wouldn't have to set them down where I could smell them, but the guy on the other side of Brent's empty seat declined and pointed at Brent's shiny white plate.

Brent was now an empty space, no good for anything but parking soggy boiled frozen carrots. And had the Lord cut him loose? Would Brent wake up tomorrow feeling alone? Cut off? Floating in darkness? No invisible hand watching out for him anymore, because he had given in to the desires of the flesh?

I dug my fork into my mashed potatoes. Mashed potatoes were one thing that the camp kitchen did pretty well. The cook used more milk than my mother did, and whipped the potatoes until they were good and fluffy. I had been eating a lot of mashed potatoes, getting them in before I went back to my mother's dense, flaky version. I stuffed my mouth full and chewed away, while Norma and Jolene flipped a carrot back and forth from one plate to another. How could everyone be so trivial at a time like this?

I'd had God's invisible hand my whole life, and I couldn't imagine living without it, the way Brent would be, now and forever more. If I were him, I thought, I'd go to the highest building in New Orleans and leap straight into eternity. In Hooker there were no buildings tall enough to jump off of, so if it were me, I'd have to take pills or cut my wrists. Either that or go home to my mother, who'd be tired from the delivering Nickel's Worth anyway, and face everyone I'd failed. And do it without the Lord.

My pork chop was getting cold and the grease thickened around the edges. I didn't feel hungry. I still had *Catcher* in my back pocket, and I wished I were

back at the comfortable desk in the corner of our living room with my reading lamp, where it was always quiet and where I had sat to read or do homework for most of my life.

Norm and Jolene quit with the carrots and went back to knee-knocking. I swirled my potatoes and dumped some onto my chop. Kids around me were having seconds and finally someone asked for the carrots and the earthy smell moved on. Then there were those Catholic girls. Brent had been standing close to a short one. She had long dark hair. Looked like she might have been part Asian. Kind of small chest, but her skirt only barely covered her underwear, if she was wearing any. The skirt was a houndstooth check, and she wore a tank top and a jacket. How far did he get? I shouldn't be thinking about it, I knew, that was a sin in itself. Unlike Brent, I didn't have the guts for fornication or suicide. I'd be too busy imagining Mom delivering the papers.

That night the counselors lit another bonfire down on the lawn and we all gathered around it in the dark. Deacon James was the supervisor that night. Norm and Jolene didn't group up like they usually did, with the boys and the girls. Instead they stood around bumping into each other with their elbows and giggling. When the Deacon wasn't looking she gave him an accidental elbow in the ribs. Fake retaliatory punch, even a little wrestling. Plenty of giggling. This, while the rest of us looked on. It was sickening, but no one else seemed to care. Either everyone hid it or I was the only guy in love with Jolene. I liked to think that was the case. I was the only guy *really* in love with Jolene, and that included Norm. Of course I knew I was fooling myself. My love wasn't true love, but I knew Norm wasn't really in love with her either. He had said he was going to see her bra, and now he probably would. I knew what he was in it for, and if Jimmy or Brent had a chance, that's what they'd be after, and my father, that's how he was too. I wished I could be different. I wanted to be in love with Jolene for something else. Something pure, righteous. Smart, even. But in the end, I wanted to be the one who saw her boobs.

I couldn't take it anymore, so I slipped away from the fire and headed back up to the complex. The lobby of the 'Holy Ghost' doubled as a lounge for campers who wanted to get away from the outdoors. The decorators had smothered the walls with pale crème wallpaper and thick wooden trim, and they lined the lounge with paisley couches and coffee tables that matched the oaken reception desk. Along the wall, down from the empty desk stood a tall, dark cherry wood piano and a rack full of hymnal sheet music. On top stood a notice printed on stiff paper, folded to stand A-frame: Songs of Praise Only, Please. I went through the main doors and settled into one of the empty couches.

I read for a while before the doors opened again. I slid the book between my leg and the cushion and slid one of the magazines off the end table and onto my lap. In just the first few pages I had read enough cursing that I didn't want to get caught with it.

It was Miss Wright herself, but I didn't want her to see the book either. I was embarrassed to tell her that I had run right out and bought the books she suggested. I didn't know why. Maybe I didn't want her to know how much I identified with her, or maybe she'd think I was trying to butter her up for grades.

"Hi, Matt," she said. "How are those poems coming?"

"Good." I nodded.

"No fire for you tonight?"

"I didn't feel like it," I said. She wore jeans and a striped tank top that showed off her thin waist. I had never seen her out of uniform before. I carefully looked only at her face.

"Do you mind if I play a little while you read?" She looked over at the magazine on my lap. "How is *Soldier of the Republic*?"

I hadn't even looked at the magazine I'd thrown there. The picture on the cover showed two missionaries walking up to a thatched hut, carrying bibles and a brown bag of vegetables. My mother subscribed to *Soldier*, but I hadn't seen that issue.

"Uh, okay," I said. "It's about missionaries."

“I see,” she said. “Are you sure you don’t mind?”

I shook my head, and she sat, facing away. I put the magazine back down and watched her play a few scales. She played a couple of bars of a hymn that I didn’t recognize, whichever one was on top of the stack, then she turned to me and put a finger to her lips and winked.

She flipped the sign on the piano top down onto its face and started hammering the keys. She played *Happy Days*, stamping out the rhythm with her foot, and the quick notes bounced madly off the stolid walls. I wanted to sing, almost. I’d seen the show a million times with my mom – for a couple of years it was the only program she allowed Nicole and me to watch – so I knew all the words. But, socially, could I survive getting caught having a sing-a-long with the ugly Miss Wright? And what if the Reverend walked in and heard the lounge exploding with rock-n-roll?

I watched instead, envious of the freedom that seemed to seize Miss Wright as she played. She lost her nervous fidgeting, the self-conscious duck of her head, or flip of the straight brown hair that always hung thickly around her ears. She just played her goofy old song in defiance of camp rules. Maybe she did understand something about Christianity that I didn’t. She finished her song with a jazzy flourish, and reached up to tip the Hymnal sign back upright.

Wasn’t it supposed to be about freedom?

She closed the piano and stood. “Goodnight, Matt,” she said. “I’ll see you at services tomorrow.”

I waved. The room felt empty and bare when the door swung shut behind her. I wished for a moment that my father had been sitting beside me in that lounge, but mute and invisible. If he could see what I saw, if he could only know that there was something out there as free and joyful, yet still as virtuous and Christlike as Miss Wright banging away on that piano, maybe he would understand. But he had lived all that time with my mother, and she must have shown it to him at some point. He had his chances to see. Freedom and joy were not exactly the first words I would use to describe my mother, but sometimes,

sometimes I knew it was there with her too. And she certainly had the virtuous and Christlike all sewn up.

But I didn't want him to be there beside me, once Miss Wright was gone. The room, without music, lost its joy. Stiff wallpaper and overstuffed couches, like some Victorian parlor that didn't smile on foolishness. The little sign on the piano, it might as well have said Christian Books Only, Please. *Catcher* burned against my thigh and I slid it out and put it between my legs with both hands covering the spine. My father would laugh at the room. Needs some neon beer signs in the windows, he'd say. And he'd walk to the glass doors and shield his eyes and put his nose right up to the glass so that he could see out, see Miss Wright's retreating figure, and he'd say "Uptight as hell...needs to get laid."

He didn't have to be there. I knew what he would say, what he'd think, because I was thinking it.

I heard the bugle from the top of the Father, blowing first taps. That was our warning to pack it all in. The second call, twenty minutes later was curfew. I opened *Catcher* on my lap again. I still didn't want to see anyone, so I decided to ignore the bugle and sneak back into my tent after the second call.

With the light at the bathroom burning all night, we bivouacked on the edge of the darkness. I walked toward the tent, blind from having been in the light, and unzipped the flap. I thought at first I had made a mistake, because instead of Norm, Jimmy sprawled on the left hand sleeping bag. But he held up Norm's *Maxim*, illuminating a glossy circle of flesh, the same page Norm had shown me.

He nodded in the direction of his tent, which stood second from the bathroom. "They're borrowing my place," he said. Brent had been Jimmy's tent mate. Now Jimmy had the tent to himself.

I flopped down on my bag. My eyes were adjusting, and Jimmy's tent was between mine and the lights of the bathroom. Through the fabric I could make out

Norm's shape, just a little bit, and Jolene underneath him. Their tent was trembling. I ripped open the zipper of my bag and squirmed in, clothes and all.

"You ever look at this shit?" Jimmy asked. "This is crazy shit." He tried to show me what he was reading but I just burrowed deeper into my sleeping bag. "He's got a whole freakin' library in here."

I stuffed my face into my pillow and the tears made the fabric hot and wet against my cheekbones. My head filled with Norm's glistening muscles and Jolene's tight skin. In my mind her breasts looked exactly like the flashes I'd seen in Norm's magazines. That's what her whole body looked like in my pillow. A porn star.

Then the noises started. Jolene, Jimmy, Norm, all making noises. There were noises coming out of me, too, whimpering noises, and I knew Jimmy could hear them, but I didn't know if he would recognize them, if he could differentiate broken love from his masturbatory bliss.