

1993

Angst : a chaotic short story cycle

R. P. Proctor
San Jose State University

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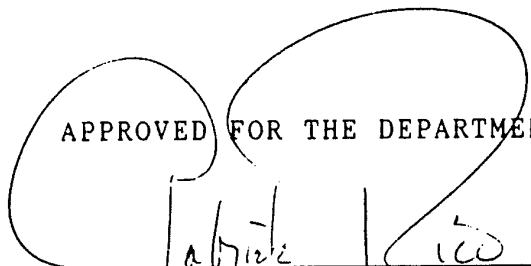
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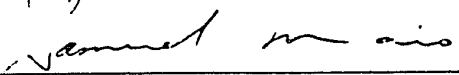
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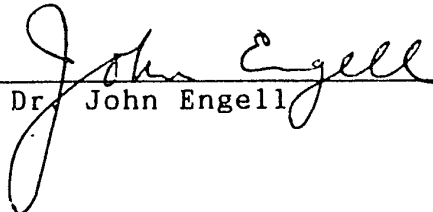
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ABSTRACT

ANGST
A CHAOTIC SHORT STORY CYCLE

by R. P. Proctor

This project explores the application of two principles of Chaos Theory to short story cycle form. The aspects applied are Mandelbrot's Fractal scaling and structures and the influence of Strange Attractors on iterating feedback loops.

Themes, imagery and language of socially disfunctional behaviors are iterated throughout the project, creating an increasing atmosphere of anxiety. These self-perpetuating loops of disfunctional behavior help illustrate the decline of culture and the increasing isolation of the individual. Though the individual stories of the cycle are separate, a unity is built by the presence of a complex, Chaotic system of interdependent dissymmetries in the various characters and situations.

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A Chaotic Short Story Cycle

Few theories have caused as much controversy in the sciences, and recently in many other fields, as Chaos Science. Since the first papers on the chaotic nature of weather were published by Edward Lorenz in the late fifties, critics have shaken their heads in disgust, called the body of ideas ridiculous, and have even vehemently attacked the theories as insulting suppositions made by heretics. However, it can not be denied that many aspects of Chaos Science raise significantly important questions. Are our ideas of form and order in harmony with those of nature, or have we turned our backs on the reality of the universe and reinvented the natural world to suit our own cognitive structures? What is the true order of the Universe? What are the implications of these ideas on other fields of human endeavor? Since literature does not exist in its own isolated cosmos, it is apparent that it too will ultimately be affected by these questions. It is infinitely interconnected with all aspects of the world. How do these new ideas concerning the dynamic structure of the universe impinge on literature, and how can they be utilized to add depth and enrichment to literary structure? In order to attain a more complete vision of this possible enrichment, an examination of Chaos Science is required.

The popular image of the term suggests total anarchy, disorganization, and a complete lack of design. The meaning of the word is total confusion, and the mere sound of it elicits a sense of violent disarray. Popularly, chaos is commonly associated with the formlessness that exists prior to the rise of form. Mythically it is the great void from which the gods pulled the universe. The archaic meaning of the word can be translated roughly to the abyss, the place of eternal suffering from which the universe, and all of creation itself, was drawn. But it is not this hellish fiction which Chaos Science pursues. Although Chaos Science investigates the presence of chaos in the sense of randomness in the universe, it conceives chaos as evidence of a dynamic, interrelated system, and not the result of some great cosmic madness.

It is this investigation, and the ensuing theories that it has generated, that has caused a schism between those who adhere to traditional physics and those who look for new possibilities. Schisms between schools of thought, of course, are typical early symptoms of revolution. The schism has arisen as a matter of focus.

In the tradition of linear science there is a small degree of error acceptable within the strictures of the scientific method. It is the percent error, the unpredictable, inexplicable white noise of the universe. The smaller the percent error, the closer a theory

represents reality; or so traditionalists imagine. Chaos Science focuses on the percent error as indicative of the true holistic design of a natural world that we have only just begun to examine.

Short term, casual observations of the systems examined by Chaos researchers may seem to be a disorderly maelstrom of random, chaotic behaviors, but after lengthy and involved examination it becomes apparent that these maelstroms are systems of incredible complexity. Though they can never predict exactly when those behaviors would repeat, Chaos Scientists can prove that the unpredictable decay and splitting up of plotted data and the repetitious feedback loops from which the system perpetuates itself, or bifurcations and iterations of chaotic systems respectively, are requirements to the Chaotic system. In other words, tradition demands a focus on exact quantities while Chaos Science focuses on dynamic qualities. *But, the skeptical traditionalist argues, you have only noted casual relationships. You can not prove their existence with the indisputable strictures of the Scientific Method, without which your theories are mere speculations at best.* This has been one of the most common criticisms of Chaos Science. But these are the rumblings of an old order, Empiricism, pained by the appearance of Chaos Science's heretical new paradigms.

To understand Chaos Science it must be known that it is

not a linear science of predictable individual results of specific theories that have sprung from the mind of man. The construct of time is man's ultimate linear invention, forever grinding forward one invented second after another. Rather, Chaos Science is a study of dynamic relationships and how they affect one another. Chaos Science does not deal with the understanding of machine-like repetitions thought to govern the clockwork universe. Man is the builder of perfectly symmetrical machines, nature does not. How many perfectly symmetrical cubes exist in nature?

Linearity depends on logical simplicity and the lack of complexity; it reflects the clarity of proportion and narrowness of scope; it postulates undeniable systems of cause and effect. Linearity is symmetry.

Consider symmetry: It is the textual similarity and balanced proportioning of matter on either side of a bisected plane. It is the mirror-like mechanical reproduction of data across time. A modern industrial assembly plant can be considered a linear symmetrical system, churning out, say, an endless repetition of machine parts day after day. This is an important requirement of the industrial age, but in human terms, a linear symmetrical system of reproduction cannot be fathomed. Never has a human couple produced offspring identical in disposition and equally proportioned in form repeatedly over long periods of time. What family is made up of identical siblings of

greatly varying ages? Reality does not work this way. But it is this kind of rigid, predictable systemization that is the norm in linearity.

What of the popular beliefs that govern the term "chaos"? Consider asymmetry: It denotes a lack of coherence. In terms of asymmetry, the same industrial plant above would implement the same production systems and produce a different machine part, or even fruits and vegetables, with the completion of each productive repetition. In human terms, the same parents as above produce not only vastly different children genetically, but different species of animals as offspring as well. Impossible. This also does not occur in reality, but it represents the popular view of chaos.

Now consider dissymmetry: It denotes deficiency of symmetry, or parallelism in opposite directions. An example in nature could be a butterfly's body, iterating designs similar on both sides, yet each side individual and separate from the other in minor ways. Dissymmetry is expressed in the physical similarities of siblings as they occur in reality. Two or more brothers may look strikingly similar, but they are not carbon copies. The driving force is variance and texture, not rigidity and repetitive quantities.

Another important element of Chaos Science is interdependence. All elements of a holistic system are dependent on the nature of the elements surrounding them.

They are more than just dependent, they are interdependent, since they are all related as part of a holistic system. This interdependence has been expressed by the idea of the Butterfly Effect. In essence, a butterfly flaps its wing in Japan, the air it moves sets in motion an amazingly complex chain of events that culminates in the crashing of a wave on a California beach or a cloud burst over Berlin.

Interdependence gives Chaos Science incredible richness and complexity. Instead of linear equations illustrating narrow cause/effect relationships, we are presented with infinite variations on a theme, iterated unceasingly from the absolute micro, finite space all the way into the macroverse of infinity. The main progressive dynamic involved is global, not linear. A global system is far reaching and far reached; cause/effect is more of an input-output machine affair. There is a certain manipulable immediacy involved with cause/effect relationships. This immediacy stands up very well to the demands of the scientific method, which bases legitimacy on clock-work repetition of results. Chaos Science works as an on-going feedback loop that has no clear beginning, end or internal borders. In essence, every element interdependently bears influence on every other, from the apparently inconsequential to the catastrophic. The simplest of stimuli elicits vast numbers of analogous responses across vast scales of reality. The atmosphere and the oceans work on the same Chaotic principles, just at

different scales. The mind grows just as coral grows just as trees grow, all with similar, yet dissymmetrical designs. The end results are not identical, just closely related. It is this interdependence that is at the heart of Chaos Sciences's complex systems.

Chaos Science embraces many, many different fields of study. Many scientists and other researchers have explored the field of Chaos without ever hearing of each other or knowing that others shared their interests. Scientists across many fields have conducted important research in the Science, much of it new, much of it redundant. With the advent of super computers, able to repeat equations hundreds of billions of times, mathematicians have been able to graphically illustrate Chaos for the first time. For the sake of simplicity I will concentrate on two elements of Chaos Science as discovered in the field of mathematics. The sublime designs of Strange Attractors and Mandelbrot's Fractal Scaling.

Attractors are used in mathematics for plotting the predictability of equations on three dimensional graphs, or phase space. Whole numbers are fed into square-root equations and the results are plotted on phase space. Then the results are then fed back into the equation and it is repeated. A loop is created, and the resulting graphed points will create many various shapes. An attractor is a numerical structure of stability on the graph around which

many of the points have a high probability of falling. It is the point at which the equations reach a static state, predictable in their yield. For instance, the mathematics involved with the swing of a pendulum will appear on two-dimensional phase space looking much like a doughnut.

Strange attractors appear when numbers used in root equations are of a nonlinear nature, such as non-real (minus) numbers. The tracked points from these equations first appear in seemingly random and chaotic designs. In previous centuries this unpredictability was simply written off as percent error, and therefore erroneous. The immense amount of written math required to investigate further was avoided. But in recent times the use of super computers have allowed mathematicians to carry out the billions of equations required to graph the percent error. Computing endlessly, they produced vast chaotic fields of plotted points. The results of these billions of plotted points have given us the first picture of mathematical chaos, the strange attractor. In the picture, very visibly, patterns swirl loosely around a mutated but recognizable doughnut-like structure. Though the plotted locations of individual equation results were always unpredictable and would pop up on the graph seemingly at random, there was an undeniable holistic design. The attractor structure was present, but it had become strange and mutated.

Since, the Strange Attractor has been used in

probability mathematics to plot the unconventional probabilities of everything from moth populations to stock market fluctuations, the erratic eye movements of schizophrenics to efforts in preventing viral epidemics in third world children. It is more than a structure indicative of a Chaotic System, it is a catalytic system of vastly intricate, interdependent loops operating globally. What appears random after only a few equations is in fact part of a larger process. What appears immediately, or locally chaotic, is actually holistically, or globally stable. Further investigations of these results has brought forth the birth of a new mathematics.

Another mathematician, Benoit Mandelbrot, worked on similar problems of investigating mathematical improbabilities in his study of geometric scales. He was concerned with shapes and the measurement of their surfaces. He desired to measure coastlines, looking closer and closer in order to measure total surface area. But there was a quirk in his design: scale. He realized that the closer one looked at a surface area, the more surface area there was to look at. If you measure a coastline with a mile long stick you will miss much of the contour and attain only a rough estimate. The same is true with the use of a yard stick, or a ruler, or a micrometer. There would always be some contour of the coastline unmeasured; the smaller and smaller he could measure, larger and larger would grow the

coastline. He decided to utilize super computers and graph these ideas on three-dimensional phase space.

Mandelbrot took geometric equations and plotted them on a computer, just as the other mathematicians had. But he widened the parameters of his graph to include color in order to illustrate the nuances of scale. Then he enlarged specific borders within the designs and ran the mathematics for the much reduced numbers until he saw a fully detailed enlargement of one tiny spot from the original. He repeated this process hundreds of times. He found that the closer he looked at the plotted mathematical borders, the more detail he found. He looked closer and closer until he approached infinity. Indeed, that was his conclusion: all coastlines were infinite, it was all a matter of scale; the closer one looked, the more one saw. He had put his finger on infinity within finite space. And what was more, though the specific designs were slightly different, the general design was the same. He magnified his screen two billion times and saw the same visual patterns iterating dissymmetrically over and over, to infinity. What appeared random after only a few equations was in fact part of a larger process. What appeared immediately, or locally chaotic, was actually holistically, or globally stable. In a much different way Mandelbrot came to many of the same conclusions on Chaos as the mathematicians had.

Two elements are central in both strange attractor

structure and Fractal Geometrics: iteration and bifurcation. Iteration within the Chaos Science framework refers to a doubling, or repetition, of either an event or a population, which feeds the original equations or population in such a way that it is not only perpetuated, but is mutated. Bifurcation, the splitting apart of data or a population at critical moments, relies on iteration. For instance, imagine a geneticist plotting the genetic variations of a fly population over a million generations. The geneticist chooses to graph the evidence of the presence of one set of genetic variations that is apparently causing populational instability and is threatening the survival of the group. As instability rises a chaotic state of genetic unpredictability rises, until there is a breaking away from the main line, mutations bifurcating in ways that give rise to two new strains of the same species of fly. This is a bifurcation of data evidenced in reality. The moment of bifurcation has a certain disorderly, chaotic quality that gives it a highly unstable, short term character. The rising instability and ensuing breaking away are locally chaotic and unstable while the whole population is globally stable and in no threat of extinction. The iteration of this process, constantly interacting with the environment, becoming threatened by incompatibility, then reaching a point of instability as a population and adapting, ensures survival and holistic stability.

There are many other aspects of Chaos Science, but there is neither time nor space to go on. These two elements--the structural concept of the Strange Attractor and the significance of scale--can vitally influence literary structure.

Literature, art, language, all are nothing more than mere Platonic imitation, shadowy visions, metaphors of reality parading across the cave walls of text. For example, the omniscient narrative voice of Tolstoy is hardly conceived of as a viable device by today's tastes in writing. We cannot believe that a narrator is capable of existing in all the heads of all of Tolstoy's characters at once. Given what we believe is possible in the twentieth century, we cannot accept Tolstoy's nineteenth century approach, just as those in the twenty-first century no doubt will question, and eventually reject us.

Modernism, post-modernism and the myriad of schools of thought that have sprung from them, all seem to be interested in expressing reality from a more believable, complex view that represents modern life. Many current writers rely more on creativity than form and have produced some unique material. Others have contrived a vast, black, chaotic maelstrom. But the problem is still present. The imposition of textual contrivances, even shocking and original devices employed by many modern authors, taint the corporeal effect of the fiction. Indeed, many modern pieces

are less accessible to the reader due to the lack of understanding caused by the modernist author's sometimes markedly unconventional structures and interpretations of reality. This cannot be avoided, since we are all subject to our own experience and perception of language. It may not solely be a problem of style not sufficiently representing modern reality, but may well lie in the inadequacies of linear structure.

Reality needs not the trickery of suspense, nor the magnetism of linear plot lines. It draws its power and unique coherence from interactive complexity. Reality is a holistic, inter-linked kaleidoscope of checks and balances teetering on the edge of apparent destruction. It is humankind that applies its little boxy linear constructs on it. Humans are obsessed with linearity, or the desire to draw clear and indisputable lines of cause and effect for the sake of clarity. The human mind seeks, and imposes patterns. But this clarity diminishes texture. For literature, the end result is a stiff, linear course of events laid out before the reader like marching stick figures on a cave wall.

If imposed linear structure relegates art's expression of reality to the lowest common denominator--interpretation of simple, linear cause/effect relationships on a universal level--is not art then an impaired, plastic appendage of cultural biases, removed from the thing it tries to

represent? This is the same question Chaos Scientists have been asking traditional linear scientists about Newtonian Science for years. And if the answer is yes, what is the best way to represent the thing that art tries to reflect? Many literary movements of the twentieth century have asked this same question. The application of Chaos structure to literary form may provide insight into these troubling questions. That was one intention in the writing of this project, entitled *Angst*.

The main themes of *Angst* are: alienation, learned helplessness and the frustration and eventual indifference to the acquisition of the now inaccessible American Dream. *Angst* expresses one of the most fundamental concepts of Chaos Science: the irrefutable presence of unresolvable local turbulence (alienation and crisis felt by the main characters as they grow in a society in decline) in the face of a larger holistic stability (the sum of all the diseased parts equalling a society convinced its problems are actually the diverse fruits of the modern age). The elements of Chaos Science utilized for this short story cycle have been illuminated above: The Strange Attractor, Fractal Scaling, Iteration and Bifurcation. Each will be addressed as a literary device in turn.

Chaotic scaling, or Fractal Geometrics, is the Chaotic structural framework of *Angst*. Eleven vignettes are dispersed throughout the cycle, one before each of the

eleven short stories.

Angst fits the traditional criteria for a short story cycle. The stories are both independent of each other and related thematically, by character or location, or any combination of these three. It is the shape of the story cycle and the complex interaction of the characters that draws on Chaos Science.

Since *Angst* explores, in part, the adverse effects of television and the media, the cycle itself assumes an episodic form. The main themes are glimpsed from different perspectives at different times in the characters' lives. At one point in the cycle alcoholism may be a primary element of a story. At another point, later in the cycle, another story about the same character may focus on dysfunctional familial relationships, in which alcoholism is a secondary concern. From the vantage of the reader a complex system evolves in which complicated dissymmetries become apparent.

An attractor, in an everyday sense, is analogous to a motivator; either financially, as in the necessity to hold a job to pay the bills, or the desire to buy a car in order to keep that job. Its presence assures a repetition of certain behaviours. Psychologically, it can be likened to subconscious motivation and desire. In terms of society, the simple cause/effect relationship of going to college, getting a good job, getting married and acquiring the happy

home with 2.3 children is part of the classic idea of the American Dream. A Strange Attractor would be in evidence in a situation in which this cause/effect relationship is obscured, pursued by a group of people with no hope of attaining it.

The driving force of *Angst* is this Strange Attractor of the illusive, unobtainable American Dream. The five main characters: Laura, Joan, Len, George and Evan, are each introduced as children in situations which will color the rest of their lives. Laura is trying to survive in an abusive household by the construction of an elaborate inner world. Joan deals with exposure to a sexually transmitted disease (STD) at a very early age. Len and George start out as playground bullies, but develop into full-fledged dysfunctional adults. Evan is not part of the short story element of the cycle, but is the "star" of the vignettes. He is the binding, Everyman character, interspersed throughout the text in these vignettes.

Iteration is the feedback loop that regenerates the driving force and sustains tension. This feedback loop is fueled by bifurcation. Bifurcation can be seen as the literary moment of crises, although not cathartic, since no conscious epiphany is required for the iterating system to feed on itself. Since all events in some way effect the global system, all events are important. A traditional moment of epiphany need not be paramount. A Chaotic Short

Story Cycle is filled with iterating bifurcations and the people involved are wholly unaware, since their immediate awareness does not matter to the system as a whole.

Many images are iterated throughout *Angst*: the sculpture entitled *Zeitgeist* that is covered with reaching hands is iterated repeatedly, as are the acts of hands in general; bugs and vermin; spirits. One story in particular reflects images from every other piece. "Make City," the center piece of *Angst*, is the perfect example of this iterating system.

A first person narrator speaks directly to the mind of his sleeping killer, forcing the killer to relive the murder which inspired the story. The voice drags details endlessly across the killer's dreamscape in the form of the personified sin which was the murder's catalyst, knowing that his effort is in vain. The past cannot be changed, fate cannot be cheated, and the three prisoners; the killer, the victim and the deed itself, are stuck in an endless loop. A tension builds, with the addition of detail, which ultimately falls back on itself with the iterative ending. Many of the other stories also utilize this beginning-ending iteration of setting and language in order to illustrate the cyclical nature of *Angst*.

The speaker of "Make City" is *Angst*: pure frustration, pure anger, pure hopelessness, screaming to be heard by a society that can't care. "Make City" has many of the

characteristics of post-modernism: it is told in the first person by a speaker who is long dead and insane; the rising and falling action occur simultaneously; the story opens with the climax, weaves through many sub-stories and psychotic delusions and ends anti-climatically where it begins. This story speaks of the conception of Cal, a dual victim/sin creature. Cal is unable to shake his damned conception and that conception's aftermath, just as he is unable to not suffer from its consequences. In this way Cal is *Angst*. Of course, Cal has an arch rival, which is embodied in the character Tod. Tod appears in both Cal stories (and others) and represents all that is disgusting, yet admired by our culture: lust, egocentricity, greed, self indulgence, self-relativism and hedonism at the expense of others.

Other stories use language to express repetitive theme.

For instance, the stories "Jodie," "Counterpoise" and "Something Old, Something New" are all stories about the Laura character at various ages in her life. The main thematic thrust is the effects of ritualistic abuse on the developing individual and the complete lack of recognition of abuse by our society. Laura is very young in "Jodie" and the narrative reflects that naive world. The reader is allowed to see and feel the imaginary world constructed by Laura to protect her from her surroundings. By the time she is in her early twenties, it is apparent that the contrary

world she created is still in evidence, but it is a very unstable and disoriented world. Moving in and out of her fantasies without warning reflects the heightening instability of her world. Finally, Laura makes her last appearance, before being packed off to an asylum, in "Something Old, Something New." Here the narrative is very incoherent. Laura, now diagnosed as schizophrenic, lives a nightmare at her sister's second wedding. What Laura represents, free imagination and childhood, has become twisted into a walking nightmare. The language and point-of-view of these stories gathers the reader into the same vicious loop that Laura cannot escape from.

The character Joan is more resilient. She is a survivor, and though many of her decisions are self-serving, she learns and adjusts and moves forward. "Truth," "The Gray Nineties" and "Saturnalia" (indirectly) all center on Joan. She first appears in "Truth" as a naive youth inflicted with an STD. This information is juxtaposed against a backdrop of Valentine's Day hearts and festivities. She is, as are more and more children these days, a casualty in the modern warfare of sex, love and lies. But her experiences do not crush her. In "The Gray Nineties" she is in a position identical to Laura's in "Counterpoise," off on her own in California, but she is adapts to the mutability of her surroundings much better. In fact, she experiments with the racier co-workers at her

restaurant. This experience ends in catastrophe, which only strengthens her sense of distance ("It was a thing that happened"). She is mentioned in "Saturnalia" as that story's unobtainable love interest. This change in perspective adds to a holistic view of Joan's world and its interdependence and unintended influence on the worlds of other characters. She is the only character that physically crosses over the boundaries between the vignettes and the short stories, as she and the Everyman, Evan, are joined and will eventually marry. It is this relationship, its ups and downs and the nature of family ties, that is the topic of most of the vignettes. The thematic thrust of the Joan stories is the effect of the prevalence of victimization, loose morality and the politics of sex in an atmosphere in which the rules continuously change.

"TV Wasteland" and "Dad" are about two brothers named Len and George. "TV Wasteland" is an episodic piece focusing on George's lack of ability to deal with his mother's mortality. He is forced to realize that there are consequences to things done, and that he has missed out on a large part of his own life. George is the catalyst of most of the bad decisions made by the other brother, Len. These characters are dissymmetrical beings. Each is the product of the other. In order to break the bond of family traits and downplay the influences of heredity for the iteration of behaviour, they are step-brothers. This makes them less

brothers in a familial sense and more brothers in a societal sense. This is done to suggest a universal societal transcendence, a repetition of theme through self-similar behavior across more distant ties than hereditary family. This diminishes the obvious ties of genetics, implying the spread of social disfunction and the decline of culture is on many levels, more than just within the home. To strengthen this motif, both characters are connected to the cohesive Everyman character in minor ways. (The brothers beat Everyman as children in "Houndstooth Polyester," and by "Home," George and Evan are close friends).

The Vignettes are entitled "Camelot," "War Games," "Houndstooth Polyester," "PC," "Carpe Diem," "Transience," "Gaia," "Home," "Cappuccino," "Bedrock" and "Postlude: The Inquisitor," respectively. They are all about the Everyman character, Evan Manz. He is a combination of the Fool and the Wise Old Man. In his small cameo performances he touches the life--or is touched by--every other character in the cycle, yet is oblivious of the dynamic system he is a part of. All of the characters are connected in this literary universe, but are completely unaware of the influence they exert on each other and the forces dominating their lives.

Angst endeavors to draw literary connections using ideas of interdependent, Chaotic systems. While it may seem

enigmatic, it is nothing but a swirl of gas in the vast atmosphere, smoke rising unnoticed in the dark compared to the complexities of the average day which surround us. Its literary constructs are mere effigy of a greater, vastly more complex, equally fleeting system. Centuries from now, the world we live in will only exist in historical text, an array of collated statistics in none of its original intricate complexity. A linear cause-effect time-line conception of history, a display of dry facts arranged in the order of occurrence, will hardly reveal the true complexity of our time. Chaos Science offers a new set of tools to explore our understanding of the universe. It is the science of both spatial and qualitative relationships; it is the study of the nuances of character. It grasps the complexity of dynamic systems, not dissect and pigeon-hole them in a system that looks for the lowest common denominator. Chaos Science struggles now for acceptability in a world abhorrent to change. 500 hundred years ago the popular western belief that the world was a flat plane was ruptured by the discovery of the New World. Perhaps humankind will finally prevail in its struggles with the same, flat and patterned linear prejudice so many years later in the face of another new and global world.

Camelot

The sky overhead is clear, the light, airy blue sky of a snowless New England winter. No storms have come down from the north, only a barren wind that shakes the houses at night, followed by uncanny warmth in the day, Indian Summer. It is a sunny November day along New Brighton Boulevard in a newly developed suburban neighborhood just outside Nashua, New Hampshire. Clear, rushing air curves the little mounds of dead pine needles that lie in clumps along the new black street. Women come out to sweep the needles from their jutting drives which reach from rows and rows of identical split-level ranch houses painted bright barn-board reds and canary yellows. Stubby evergreens sit among the houses in the cool breeze, their fragrance subdued by the season, but not wholly diminished.

In the sun-warmed living room of one bright yellow home squats a child's playpen, an open-topped cage containing a pillow, a few blankets and a brown teddy bear. On its corner hangs a tan cloth jacket. It is the only furniture in the room, except for the small black and white television set on a metal fold-out chair. The television is on, revealing men and women slapping buzzers and answering questions for easy money.

A young mother enters through the bedroom doorway carrying a blue bundle in her arms. She holds the package

firmly against her creamy cashmere sweater, which conceals her round breasts. Her jeans are rolled halfway up her thin calves and her loafers are worn recklessly without socks. She smiles down on the bundle as she moves, in near slow motion, across the living room's hardwood floor, the soles of her flats moving in slow silent sweeps. Her skin is smooth and firm, her eyes clear and blue. She wears her short-cropped light brown hair up in curls held in place by sticky, hard chemicals sprayed from a can. The mother comes over, kneels by the side of the playpen and slowly lowers the blue bundle onto the blankets next to the bear.

"Wake up, sleepy head," she coos, "you can't sleep all day." She unwraps the boy as she talks and runs her fingers through his thin black hair, his father's hair. As she makes quiet clicking noises she gently slides the playpen into the sun. "The summer sun may burn you, but Indian Summer sun is a blessing." She exposes his pale white chest and tickles his nipples, pinching one to make him jump. "This sun will give you color." She stands and leans over her son. "I just hope your first Christmas will be a white Christmas. All Christmases should be white." A worried look crosses her young face. "Your father and I want your first Christmas to be special..." The mother takes the boy's wrinkled fists and rocks him back and forth. "Your father and I have so many plans for you. We know just what you're going to be." She likes to have things her own way.

She sighs as she rises and goes through the dining room to the kitchen. Out in the kitchen she rustles pots and sings to herself. The boy waves his arms and laughs at nothing, his wide-set blue eyes following drifting dust as it rises in the sun-warmed air.

The mother comes from the kitchen and stands in the dining room entryway. She leans on the jamb and calls to the little boy, "Handsome. Oh, handsome." The boy turns his head quickly and waves his arms towards the voice. "Ka ba!" he says. She covers her face with both hands and leans closer to the boy's face, then suddenly she opens her hands and says, "Peek-a-boo." The boy laughs and waves his arms. "Ma gah!" he says. She reaches down into the playpen and picks up her boy. She holds him up over her head and jiggles him around. "Time to eat, little man," she says, her voice high to make the boy squeal. After cradling the child in one arm she reaches down and flicks off the television with her free hand.

She carries the boy into the dining room and lays him down on the kidney-shaped dinette set. No pictures hang in the house yet, it is too new. Their formal dining room set hasn't even arrived. She runs her fingers along the dinette's sharp new edge as she leaves the boy alone. Music comes on from the kitchen, then static and music intermix as she looks for a station. *Please Please Me* comes on and remains as the mother comes back carrying a warm glass baby

bottle with a red rubber nipple. With the last guitar stroke of the song comes the deep voice of the disc jockey.

"That was the *fab* four with their *timeless* tune *Please Please Me* here at the Nor-eastern home of the Beatles, WNNH. This is *Franky* Freeman down here *all* day, *all* night with our weekend *rock* and *roll* *marathon*."

The mother raises the baby's head and nuzzles the bottle into his mouth. The disc jockey's voice is melodic, smooth and soothing. The boy lies still and calm whenever he hears it. "Coming up *next*," the mellow voice says, "another Franky from Franky, Franky Valley with *Big Girls Don't Cry*." A nasal voice starts to sing over the radio; *Biiiiig girrrrls dooon't cryyyyyy*.

The baby boy waves his arms and gurgles with the strange voice.

"Handsome likes the funny singer?" She smiles down at the boy and pulls the bottle out of his mouth. He makes a loud popping, sucking noise and waves his arms helplessly. She lowers the bottle, just touching the nipple to his lips, then quickly pulls it away. The baby starts to thrash and says, "Fuh! Fuh!" Just as he begins to cry she sticks the nipple forcefully back into his mouth. She smiles as she lays the boy down on the blanket on the table and rests the bottle on his stomach. The boy holds the bottle against his chest with his hands and feet and sucks and sucks. The mother pulls out a chair and sits with the boy at the table.

She rests her head on her hand and watches her son suck, her eyes glassy and distant. The boy finishes the bottle and lets it slip off his chest. It rattles on the Formica wood grain tabletop and startles the mother out of her thoughts.

"Well," she says, "little piggy ate all his lunch."

She carries the bottle into the kitchen and returns a moment later with a dish towel over her shoulder. She lifts the boy and rests him on the towel and begins to pat his back. After a moment he lets out a wet burp and says, "Da Buh!"

"Good boy," the mother says. "Time for a nap, piggy needs his rest for when Daddy comes home to play." She carries him into the living room and lays him back down in the railed pen. "Pretty soon you'll have your own bed," she says, "as soon as the truck comes from Boston. You'll have a room full of toys, and Daddy and I will have a bed and a chest and couches and tables. We won't have to sleep on the floor." She covers him with a blanket and tucks the corners under his legs. "We'll have a whole house *full* of beautiful things and we can start to have people over, everyone we haven't seen since graduation." She stands and turns to walk away, but the baby squeals and thrashes about in the pen. "Okay, okay," she says without looking at him. She flicks on the television and leaves the room. The musical noise in the kitchen stops, then she returns a moment later with a cold beer. She squats in the room, behind the playpen.

As the boy watches through the rails a pack of cigarettes dances onto the television screen; then another pack, a baby pack, joins it. Around and around they twirl, dancing the same dance. The mother reaches over to her jacket and takes out a pack of cigarettes and lights one. As she smokes and sips her beer she rocks the playpen gently and hums along with the cigarette jingle to her child. And suddenly there is silence. The television screen goes blank for an instant and then a man is there, sitting at a desk. The mother stops rocking the playpen and stares quizzically at the man looking out at her.

"This is Eric Bauer," he says, his voice low, shaken. He cannot seem to bring himself to look directly at the camera and out of the television. "We interrupt this program for a news bulletin. It has just been reported that President Kennedy has been shot in Dallas just a few moments ago." The house is very still, the mother stands in the center of the living room and moves closer to the television set. The boy watches her back. "Again: today, while his motorcade moved through downtown Dallas, President Kennedy was shot. We don't know right now the extent of his wounds or his condition. As you can imagine there is great pandemonium there in Texas right now and the reports are sketchy at best." The man's voice on the television is completely without emotion, monotone, smooth and almost soothing. "Again," Eric Bauer says, "just a few minutes ago

President Kennedy was shot while travelling by motorcade through downtown Dallas. If you stay with us we'll have complete coverage as the story evolves."

The mother's body hunches down a little bit, jerks slightly. The boy lies in his playpen, watching her back. She turns slowly, her face covered with her hands, and walks unsteadily toward her son. She kneels in front of the playpen and sobs silently into her hands. The boy smiles and waves his arms. "Ma Gah!" he says.

Jodie

Halloween was coming, with its costumes and candy and egg fights and tramping through the night in the crunchy dead leaves. The entire month of October was dedicated to decorating Hathaway School for that night. In the old wing, built when the children from the entire town could fit in eight rooms, the first and second graders were working themselves into a frenzied anticipation. Their craft time was an exercise in orange and black paper mutilation and paste eating, ending up with an array of strange oval jack-o-lanterns with evil eyes and mouths and a wide assortment of monsters too broad to describe. Conversation was about candy and monsters and witches exclusively, and the teachers didn't even try to instruct anything different. In the new wing, housing the third and fourth graders in its modern two stories and long shiny halls, the excitement was subdued. Up until Friday, Halloween, it was business as usual for the older, more mature kids. But back in Mrs. Wilder's first grade class it was Halloween all week.

The cinder block walls of the old classrooms were painted bright colors, each a different color: green and yellow and blue. A cork border, just below each ceiling, wrapped around the rooms. Across the fronts hung the alphabet, but around the rest of each rooms were works of art created by the students. They were changed for every

season, and now the boards were full of scary monsters and angry black night.

Laura sat at her desk, her small, wide-set black eyes following the pictures around her yellow room. Hers was hung over the door, the place for the best pictures. She knew she was good at drawing and things like that, the teacher always told her she was. Her reddish-brown hair was cut short, her thin face set above a skinny frame. Though her body was smaller and less developed than her classmates', her hands were quick and fumbling. They were always busy, trying to keep up with the stories and friends that were always moving around inside her head.

She stared dreamily up at her picture over the door. Unlike the slower, messier children, it took her only a few minutes to paint. It was a picture of two girls walking hand in hand, both dressed in elaborate Halloween costumes and struggling with bags stuffed with candy. One little girl was dressed as a cowgirl, in a blue skirt, a red shirt and a black vest. She wore a big tan cowboy hat and matching boots. This was Laura. The other girl wore a police woman's outfit and carried a big gun at her side. This was Jodie. All around the girls flew a host of ghosts and goblins in striking detail. Following at a safe distance was an ogre. Neither was afraid, Jodie had a gun.

"Laura?" Mrs. Wilder asked.

Laura looked down from the picture, her eyes wide. The

other kids laughed at her. She lowered her face to cover the rising color. The other kids always seemed to like to see her hurt. They were doing it again, she could tell. Laura sank down in her seat. "Yes, Mrs. Wilder," she nearly whispered.

The teacher leaned forward over her desk and smiled to the class. "There are only two hours to go until we break for the day. I know tomorrow's Halloween. You've all done a fine job of containing yourselves. Now patience." She was so calm and nice. Laura could hardly believe that Mrs. Wilder was always quiet and understanding. Grownups were never quiet and understanding. Laura looked around the room, all the children's white faces were staring at her, laughing at her. Mrs. Wilder half-smiled calmly and said, "We were spelling words, Laura. Your word was fright."

Laura looked up at her picture and pretended to think very hard. She looked at the ogre. Suddenly it seemed that it wasn't just behind her in the picture. It was stalking her. She looked back down with a shudder and said, "Fright: f, r, i, g, h, t." She smiled, for she knew she was right.

"Yes," Mrs. Wilder said. "Almanzo," she continued down the narrow row, "your word is--"

Laura glanced back up at her picture. It seemed safe again.

The afternoon passed slowly: spelling exercises arithmetic, geography. Finally, at three o'clock, the bell

rang and the kids leapt from their chairs, threw on their coats and bolted out the doors in a three minute fury.

Laura was one of the children who lived near the school. She considered herself lucky not to have to be trapped on the bus every day. All the children that lived in the neighborhoods immediately around the school were allowed to walk to and from classes and not be confined to the buses. She didn't like the crowds of kids pressing down on her anyway. She left the building pulling her gray coat about her, buttoning it as she went. She carried a small red book bag over her shoulder, as if it were a purse. She carried the bag very carefully, for it contained something very special. As soon as she was clear of the school yard, sure that no one could see, she flipped open the bag and reached inside.

"Be careful," a small voice came from inside. "You just poked me in the eye."

"Oops," Laura said.

She lifted Jodie from her bag and held her in her arms. She never held her like a baby, for Jodie was much older than Laura was. Jodie wore a blue dress with old woman black shoes and black, round-rimmed glasses. Laura could never understand why she wore them because they were fake, glassless glasses. Her hair was black and long. Often she would let Laura braid her hair and practice all the ways to wear long hair. Laura wasn't allowed to wear long hair.

"I don't think I could have stayed in that bag another minute," Jodie said. "I get so jealous to hear you all painting and cutting in class, and then playing at recess."

"I would bring you out, but Mother told me never to bring you to class any more. She says it's time I grew up."

Jodie's face wrinkled as if she just ate something sour. "You shouldn't fight back against your mother. She's usually right. But I don't think she knows about how close we are. If she knew she would understand."

"She does know," Laura whispered. "I think she's just jealous and mean. She's like that a lot since Daddy left."

"Let's not talk about that today," Jodie said. "Let's get home and have an adventure in our room. Or maybe we can play a joke on Mary."

"No. No. If she catches us she may beat me up and tear off your arms and legs again." Laura's fright turned instantly into secretive humor. "Do you know what she could be for Halloween? She can be an ogre, a big mean ogre. She's already big and stupid and has warts."

"She's not even your real sister. She is *Mother's* boyfriend's *daughter*." Jodie reminded her in the same secretive tone.

"I wish *Julius* would come back and take her away. She's an ogre."

"You called him *Julius*!" Jodie laughed. "You're never supposed to call him *Julius*. He hates that name." The two

friends giggled together as Laura walked slowly up the windy street. "If he heard you calling him that he'd beat you up good," Jodie said. Leaves whipped around them in circles and rushed between Laura's feet. The air had lost its heavy summer hang and was cooling more every day. The leaves lay rotting sweetly, blanketing the lawns of Laura's street. As she walked she kicked her feet through piles of them, sending clumps flying.

"The big kids are already out," Laura whispered as they neared their house. "Look out for Mary. After she got caught the last time she seemed really mad."

Jodie hugged her arm and pulled herself closer to Laura's body. She looked up at Laura and said, "Do you think she would do it again?"

"Yes."

Laura crept along, just inside the boughs of the bushes that lined her street. She was only a few houses down from home. If they went slowly and looked very carefully they would make it inside. Once they were in they were home free. They were only one house away when Laura stopped.

"We can run in from here if she comes around," Laura said calmly, "we made it." She climbed through the bushes and sat at the edge of their yard. Laura sat Indian style in the grass and pulled a comb out of her book bag. She sat Jodie on her lap and began to brush her hair. "Will you sing me a song?" she asked Jodie.

"Of course," Jodie said. Laura began to hum *Buffalo Girl* to herself, and inside her head it was Jodie singing, *Buffalo Girl won't you come out tonight, come out tonight, come out tonight* over and over. It was the only tune she liked to sing, their favorite song, the one that her father sang to her when he lived with them. He sang it to her every night when he put her to bed.

Laura let her mind wander as Jodie sang their song. As she pulled the brush slowly through the long black hair, flicking it at the ends, she remembered her father. She hadn't seen him in so long. She remembered Christmas day, ages ago. It was the Christmas that she met Jodie. Mother and Father sat together on the couch, father sipping a cup of coffee as he watched her open presents. So many presents. And her favorite was Jodie.

"I was the fourth you opened, remember?" Jodie interrupted. "Yes," Laura hummed back. "That was the last Christmas we were all together. "And you were a special present from Father to me. Mother's name wasn't even on the tag, at the *from* place. It was only *from Father*." In her heart she knew, they both knew, that was why Mother hated Jodie. It was because the three of them, Laura, Father and Jodie all still shared something. It was before Mary came to live with them. It was something that Mother and Mother's boyfriend, Julius, could never share in. Mary could never share in it, either. Laura smiled and pulled

the brush slowly through Jodie's long black hair.

A spray of little lights flashed across Jodie's hair. Laura heard a strange *pop* noise, the same sound a melon makes when you drop it on the kitchen floor. It sounded hollow. Dirt sprayed all over her clothes and spilled into Jodie's shiny hair. And then she felt the pain. It was a hot pain that grabbed at the side of her head, jerked her body to the side. Laura did not cry out, but Jodie began to scream. A long, shrill cry that spun around and around, as crazily as Laura's vision. Laura felt herself rising, felt a thudding in her head as her legs carried her numbly across the yard. She was not sure she had Jodie, so she looked down at her numbing hands. Jodie hung from her hand by the hair, screaming. Laura fell right on her face, into the crunchy dead leaves. They smelled sweet.

As Jodie wailed, Laura could tell she was going to sleep. Her arms seemed so heavy. Her face was buried deep under leaves and she could feel bugs all over her, picking, pinching. But she didn't care, she just lay there breathing deep the smell of Halloween. Far away she could hear a voice that sounded like Mary, hollow somewhere far off. It was saying *get up, you bitch...dirt-clod...up bitch....* And then she dreamed of

floating

numb tingly darkness

quiet sleep

Mary

knife

Lights! *lie still*

voice in a pipe

I doctor boo

touching

who

tearing

sharpsting

pain *secret*

pain

Jodie

mary secret

tell

die

tell and die

sister

I know you sister

ogre

hoommee sleep home knife

nothing to tell

nothing

"Laura," a voice called her. "Laura," it was a soft, kind voice. She knew it wasn't her mother, because it was Jodie. "Wake up, darling. Come back."

Laura opened her eyes and looked around. The room didn't look like a room she had been in before. She felt very stiff, lying on a cold hard table with only a thin blanket on her. She was cold. Her head ached. Something weighed heavily on her face. She could feel that something was wrapped tightly around her head and that her left eye was swollen shut. She looked around uneasily. There was a glass cabinet in the corner of the small room. In it were all kinds of packages and shiny silver things. The packages looked like band-aids, but most of them were too large. A long green curtain hung from the ceiling at the foot of her table. Jodie sat lightly on her chest, looking down at her with a warm smile. "I was just thinking you may never wake up."

"I can only see you with one eye," Laura said groggily. She tried to move her arms, to reach up and feel her face, but her arms were tied up. "Who tied me up?"

Jodie shook her head sadly, "I don't know. I just found you this way. I don't even know where we are." While Jodie looked around the room cautiously Laura wiggled one,

then the other arm free from the straps. Luckily they weren't on very tight. Laura was glad they were alone, she held Jodie shakily in her hands. "This is just like the place we went to when your mother had the baby," Jodie said. She turned back quickly and smiled down at Laura. "Baby Boy. That was his name, remember?"

"Yes." She remembered. It was the only time she was in a hospital in her life that she knew about. The day Mother was too fat to hold the baby inside and they all went to the Hospital and played in the children's room and Mary pulled Jodie's arms off. That was only two months ago. Of course she remembered.

"Do you think Mother will give me away too, now that I'm in the hospital?" Laura asked. She was scared.

Jodie looked startled. "I don't know. If she does I'll go with you."

"I'm scared," Laura said.

"So am I," Jodie said.

"Where's Mary?"

"I haven't seen her. Do you think she did this?"

"I'm scared," Laura said.

She began to weep softly, but the tears were hot and burned through the swelling of her left eye. She cried more then. Jodie reached down and patted her chest. "Now, now," she said. Jodie could always make things right, make them less scary. "You know what Father always said about cry

babies." But this time Laura didn't care. This time she was very afraid. She began to whimper. "If it was Mary and Mother finds out, Mary will do it. She'll hurt me, she'll hurt me bad."

"She won't hurt you as long as we're together," Jodie patted Laura on the chest again. "She's not your real sister. She is Mother's boyfriend's daughter. She's not even your real sister. I'm family, she isn't." Hope came into Jodie's voice. "Maybe she won't stay with us forever. Maybe *Julius* will come and take her back and then it will be over and Father will come home and it will be just us again." As she looked down at Laura she smiled, she was so relaxed and poised and graceful, just like the fine old nanny Laura saw in that Poppins movie.

Laura felt protected. It was what Jodie told her every time the fear came, it was their hope. But she kept whimpering. "She said she'd hurt me like she never did before. She said she'd hurt like a man hurts." She began to tremble violently.

Jodie patted her again. "Not while I'm around," she said, and smiled and held her hand.

The door swung open and Laura grabbed Jodie and held her very closely. A tall man came in. "Boo," he said with a smile. "I see you're awake at last. You're going to have quite a headache." He was very young and handsome, with short blonde hair and a small straight nose. His eyes were

bright blue. Laura knew he was a doctor, he had on a heart listener like her regular doctor wore at the office in his house. Behind him came Mother. She seemed so little next to the tall doctor. She was wearing her tight blue going-out dress, her red hair falling loosely on her shoulders. She was following the doctor very closely, touching his arm. Coming in last, sulking, was Mary. She was an ogre, almost the same size as Mother even though she was just a few years older than Laura. She was as she always was, short brunette hair cut like a boy's, mean look in her eyes like she wanted to kill something. Mother didn't look at Laura. She kept talking to the doctor as they came in the door.

"Oh, you know how kids are, Doctor Laird. There's always something that they're doing to themselves or to someone else." She came over and patted Laura's leg as she spoke, never looking down on her. "If it's not Mary breaking a bone or falling in a ditch, it's Laura getting herself all bruised up. It's not easy being a single parent these days." Finally she turned and looked down at Laura. "Are you feeling better, baby."

"Yes, Mother." Laura said. Laura held Jodie against her cheek, letting her whisper secretly into her ear. "When we get home we'll go out to our secret place," Jodie whispered. "We'll get away from them and play and they won't ever have to be with us unless you want them to."

"Okay, but I never will," Laura whispered back.

"Stop that," Mother whispered between tight teeth as she leaned a little closer. "You're a big girl and that's a doll, so stop that." Mother suddenly put on her dark face as she leaned just slightly closer to Laura. Laura became rigid and shoved Jodie away from her face. Mother never needed to raise her hand to get Laura's attention, a look from her dark face was enough.

The doctor stepped back and didn't say anything. But then Mother moved closer to him and he started asking her about somebody falling down. The whole time Laura watched the white doctor watch her. Part of her mind listened to Mother answer questions. She could hear herself answering the questions too: *Yes. The stairs. I slipped on the damp leaves. I don't remember after. Mary wasn't there...* All the while the white doctor stood and watched Laura listen. And the more he looked at her the more she wanted to hide, not by pulling up Jodie or hiding behind her hands or by turning her head. She wanted to hide inside. She felt ashamed, caught. She pulled everything she was deep inside and let nothing show, let nothing through. The more she hid the closer he seemed to look. Soon Laura could no longer listen to herself speak with her mother. All she could see was the white doctor looking into her eyes and all she could do was show nothing. Suddenly the white doctor jerked his look away from Mother and left. He said nothing, and Mother and Mary looked almost happy that he left. The door pulled

silently shut after him.

"I say we go out to dinner at Charbies," Mother said all of a sudden. "And tomorrow after school we'll all go trick-or-treating!" Somehow Laura was sitting up. Her mother was pulling her dress on and fumbling her shoes on as she spoke.

"Yes," Laura said. She hefted Jodie onto her lap and looked into her eyes. Without moving her lips Jodie told her a thing, told her very quietly, in her head. *The white doctor knows*, she said. *He knows*. She looked quickly over at Mary. Mary looked angry enough to kill her. Laura looked away. She felt dirty.

"Do you know what's under here?" Laura rubbed the bandage on her head and felt a short, sharp pain over the long dull pain that had sat on her head all day. All around them, on the safe cave walls, danced parades of Smurfs in the flashlight's dull glow, blue and white Smurfs. They crawled out of the gloom way over at the edge of the bed and danced right up the wall, over the top of Laura's head and down the other wall into the gloom again. The two giggled uncontrollably. "Do you know what this is under this bandage?" Laura giggled as she pointed the flashlight up at her face. Jodie giggled too. Jodie was older, but she liked fun.

"It's an egg, of course. Silly," Jodie said.

"No!" Laura whispered fiercely, "I'm growing a new eye."

Jodie shook with laughter in Laura's old nightie. Her long hair was tied up in a bun and her black shoes stuck out from the nightie's fringe.

"I hope she hits me on the back of the head next time so I can grow an eye and see her coming." That was too much. The two of them laughed so hard Laura thought they would both wet their pants. Just the idea of wetting the bed stopped the laughter cold. "Don't wet the bed!" Laura whispered fiercely again, without humor. Jodie stopped laughing instantly and screwed on a terribly serious face.

"Don't think it," she said. "You're too old for that punishment."

"Yeah, too old," Laura whispered.

The door outside, on the other side of her Smurf wall, the door out in her real room, quietly opened and closed. Laura and Jodie stiffened. It was late. The friends stayed up late on purpose, just so they could make a little noise and have some fun with the flashlight in the Smurf cave without waking anyone up. It was late, and someone was in her room.

"Jodie," Laura whispered breathlessly.

"Shhhh," she said quietly, "lie down slowly and turn off the light. Pretend you're asleep and maybe she'll go away."

Before she could sit back, before she could turn off the light, someone crawled onto the bed behind her, up by the head-board. The big body pressed down on her, pushed her face from behind down close to the flashlight and Jodie. Laura whimpered. Jodie was silent. A heavy pair of legs wrapped around both sides of Laura's little body, squeezed her. She could see her Smurf wall crush and dent and mold to the shape of the heavy legs. One of the Smurf legs smashed down on Jodie, buried her, pushed her away into the dark bottom of the bed. After the Smurf legs were in place, after Jodie was squashed down into the darkness, after Laura was trapped, the weight of the other body let her up. The other didn't pull the sheets off Laura's head, but sat on the outside and held Laura there, still, the flashlight lay down by her feet, shining up into her eyes. After a few seconds of sitting still Laura began to calm down. Nothing had happened yet. Nothing yet.

A hand slipped quickly, smoothly into the cave, from behind. As soon as she felt the cold white fingers slowly crawling around on her chest under her nightie she squeezed shut her eyes.

"Pleas--" she started to whisper, but the hand slapped her mouth shut, then pinched her right nipple very hard. It stung like a wasp.

Another hand slipped around her chest, from behind, and started to undo the ties of her nightgown. Laura was

shocked. She had been held before, she had been slapped and shoved, but nothing like this had ever happened. At first she was frightened, now she was shocked and curious. She blinked her eyes and looked around the cave quickly. As she breathed heavily the Smurf cave became hot and close, all the Smurfs' blue faces were staring at her, laughing at her. The hands rubbed her chest, moved down her belly. The cold fingers slipped under the band of her panties. She tightened every muscle in her body. Now she was terrified. A fear gripped her, white fear. Images danced through her head, coming to her rescue. Jodie sat smiling as Smurfs danced and paraded by. The white doctor led the parade, dancing and singing and holding out his warm hands that could reach and take her away from these cold, tearing hands. The closer the white doctor reached, the more Jodie smiled and the Smurfs danced. Then it hurt. Off in the world, far away, she felt pain. She felt it in the place Mother always said would hurt her if she wasn't careful. Mother always said that place was just for peeing, and if she forgot that it would be more trouble than she could handle in her whole life. This was trouble, this was pain. Mother was right. Jodie and the Smurfs and the white doctor-man flickered for a second, faded, disappeared.

She kicked at the flashlight, knocked the light out of her eyes. It twisted around toward the end of the bed. There, down under the sheets, far away and safe, lay Jodie.

Her feet were all Laura could see, useless little black feet sticking out from the dark folds so safe and far away at the bottom of the bed. And all at once she realized she was alone. Alone. This now was the trouble, the beginning of her life. As her body was being twisted and poked she knew this was the trouble and the pain. There was no white doctor man. The Smurfs were gone. Jodie was gone. There was only her and the cold finger pain. All she could see were her own legs, still for a moment and then violently twitching and kicking in reflex, kicking at the Smurfs that looked on in the dimness with stupid, happy eyes. There were no rescuing hands, knowing hands that could reach in and save her. There were only the hands here, white and hard, pressing and tearing and hurting. There was no parade, no band music, no smiling Jodie. There was only grunting and gulping in the hot dimness, under the covers of her own bed.

Laura came down the stairs very slowly. She walked stiffly, feeling the pain in each step as she came. It was a little earlier than she normally came down for breakfast. She sat at her spot at the table and silently watched her mother. Mother moved around the kitchen humming to herself, cracking eggs and whipping them in a big plastic bowl. Her hair was in curlers, wrapped under a gray mesh cap, and she wore a flowered robe that hung open. As she whipped the

eggs, she squinted through a cloud of smoke rising from a cigarette that hung in her mouth.

Laura felt nothing for the woman, she felt nothing at all. As she sat and watched she only thought offhandedly that Mother must have stayed home last night. That was the only time Mother ever got up and fixed breakfast for anyone, when she didn't stay out late on her date the night before. She was home last night. It didn't really matter. Nothing mattered.

"Oh," her mother startled her out of her thoughts, "you're up early, sleepy head." Mother came out to the table and cupped Laura's chin. Laura pulled away for an instant, then gave in. Mother looked down at her, her face finally seemed to care. "You look tired, honey. Are you feeling okay?"

Laura's eyes betrayed nothing, dead glass in her face. "I didn't sleep too good," she said.

"Well, serves you right staying up all hours fooling around like you were. I hope you don't do that kind of thing every night. I'd hate to have to start getting a baby-sitter every time I do decide to go out because you don't have sense enough to look out for yourself.... Kids," Mother said, shaking her head. She looked down at her watch and sighed. "Mary's in the shower, you're after her." Mother went back into the kitchen and began making two lunches for the kids. She said casually over her shoulder,

"Mother's got a date tonight, baby. Mary said she would take you and that doll out to trick-or-treat for me." She glanced up and looked surprised for a second. "And where's that damned doll you're always clinging to?"

Laura looked down at her empty plate, expressionless, hands buried in her lap. "It's up in bed, or someplace. It's just a doll, Mother." And deep in her mind she heard a voice, a different voice, a new voice. It said: *Jodie's dead.*

War Games

Black widow's peak, down-pointed on white flesh, his hair slicked slick, the boy, perched on a three-legged stool, wets the comb under hot water, clicks it on the white porcelain and slicks his hair some more as he hums a cowboy song. After a swish or two more, hair all in place, he tosses the comb back down in the sink. He wears a light green Sunday-go-to-church shirt, but it's okay today, Friday, and he wants to wear it. "Hurry, dear," comes an old woman's voice, from the living room, "never keep the audience waiting." The boy steps back from the mirror, clips on his brown wool bow-tie and pulls on his little tan blazer. He jumps down from the stool, wearing cut-off denim jeans and no shoes. *Don't worry about leggings, his grandmother said, they don't wear them under their desks on the TV news either. That will be another secret, just for us to know.* He grabs the papers from the toilet tank. "Is it show time, Grandma?" he smiles as he hurries down the hall.

"Yes, dear," says the grandmother. She sits blue haired, smelling thickly of rose perfume, in the brown leather TV chair. Claspng spotted hands tight in her flowered print cotton lap she waits for the show to begin. The house is still, split-level ranch, earth tones, plastic runners in the hall and on stairs.

The boy stops beside the grandmother's chair, he is sad. "Grandma," he says, "I miss them." She pats his hand, wrinkles smile around dark blue eyes. "Evan, they'll be back... together. They love each other very much, they always will. Now lets play our game."

"But if Mother and Father love each other, why are they always talking about Father going away?"

"They are not talking about that," the grandmother says firmly. "They just went away to Marriage Encounter to learn to be good to each other. Your father is not going away. He just has to learn what it is that makes him so mean. And when they get home they will have learned to love each other again."

"No more yelling?"

"Not ever. That's a promise." The grandmother looks at her watch, then pats the boy on his rear and shoves him toward the television. "It's six o'clock, sweetheart. It's time for the news." The boy moves around the television cabinet that has been moved out from the wall and climbs on a stool placed behind it by the grandmother. He climbs up on the stool, leans over the top of the television and clears his throat.

"Good evening," he starts, his voice unnaturally low, "I'm Evan Mantz, and this is the KUSA Nightly News."

"Very good, Evan, very clear and professional. Someday you can be famous and on the television every night."

He smiles. "Tonight the nation is again in tur, tur, turmoil. While our soldiers are fighting for the American way a growing number of cowards protest in the streets. They don't know that if we fail the gooks will overrun the Pacific and be here in the United States pretty soon."

The Grandmother sits in the brown leather chair and nods her head and smiles as she listens. "You read very well."

The boy fumbles with the papers. He looks up at the grandmother, crying. "But what if Mother comes home alone and Father doesn't come back?"

The grandmother rises and waddles over to the television set, shaking her head and holding out her arms. "No, no, no," she says, "Evan, don't cry. Little girls cry, dear. Your father will be back." She takes his head in her arms and holds him close to her bosom. "You don't have to worry about your father going anywhere. He got out of the draft, so the army doesn't want him now. *He'll* be here for a long time. Your Uncle Ben will be home soon from the war, too, sweetheart. He'll be home in six weeks and we'll all be together again." The boy smiles, wipes his hair back and settles himself with loud sniffles. "Let's not worry so about these things," the grandmother says. "I wrote a whole news show last night for you to read." She lifts the boy's head and holds it between her palms. His eyes are red, his hair a mess. He will not look her in the eye. "Evan.

Let's finish playing our game." She turns and seats herself in the brown leather chair. The boy picks up the papers and begins reading softly:

"Finally, a comm, comm,"

"Commentary."

"A commentary on the future of America. Right now it seems this country is going through some changes, with the war and the protesting and the niggers burning everything down. But the only real change will be that the country will be stronger and a better place for everyone as soon as the threats to the American way of life are stamped out. These days are pretty scary for children to live in--" He lowers the papers and stares at his right hand for a moment, then raises them and continues. "But when the children grow older they will learn that America really is the only place to be. From Evan Mantz, this has been the Evening News." The grandson lays down the papers and smiles weakly at the grandmother. "Grandmother," he says, "they'll both be home tomorrow? Just like they said? And then Uncle Ben too?"

The grandmother comes over and helps him from behind the television. She puts her arm around his shoulder and leans down close. "Evan," she says, "no matter what happens in this family, remember two things: you were born an American, and that makes you the best in the world. This is the only country to live in and be somebody important. And also that I love you and I won't ever leave you." She leads

him to the dining room and lifts him on the table, then brushes the hair falling across his forehead. "Remember, the world is yours for the taking, all you have to do is want it," she says. "When you're ready just reach out and take it."

Truth

"So there is no way to refute the facts or misinterpret the evidence," the teacher lectured as she moved slowly up and down the rows of stationary desks, her plain white cotton blouse tucked loosely into her faded gray denim jeans, socked feet in wide, open-toed sandals. "While Evolution is *technically* still categorized as a theory, we must never forget that there is far more evidence for its support than for its denial." The children bent over their books or let their eyes wander over the hearts with lacy borders and pink ribbons that hung everywhere around the room, averting their eyes from the provocative gaze of their teacher. "I hope, George, that that answers your question about the fossil evidence."

"Yes," said the dark haired boy, "I don't have a problem with it, it was just my uncle said some things last night that sounded different than what you said in class."

"Oh really?" She stood over his desk, her permed blonde hair tied with a red ribbon so that it fell loosely down her back. She looked down on the boy through her round tortoise shell, pink-tinted glasses. The boy slid low in his chair as she hovered over him. "And what might that have been?"

"Nothing really," he said timidly. "Just that he thought there seemed to be more behind the development of

life than just random chance mutations over vast amounts of time."

The teacher turned away from the boy's desk and wandered toward the front of the room. She turned back to the class with a broad smile. "At one time Creationists had full sway over society. They felt the universe and all life, all orders of biology and physics and culture, the whole sha-bang was whipped up in six days by some grand wizard. George, you should tell your uncle before he goes to his next revival meeting that this is the twentieth century, not the tenth. There is no room for superstition in the scientific method." The three o'clock bell rang and the students leapt from their seats. They were out the door before the teacher could return to her desk. George stood at the door for a moment, looking at the teacher with a concentrated stare, then he turned and hurried from the room. He collided with a young girl, their faces nearly touching. They both blushed and continued in their separate directions as if nothing had happened.

The young girl came hesitantly into the room. She wore a black suede halter top under a light white linen waste jacket and dark purple skirt that came to just below her crotch. On her feet were white ankle sox with a lace frill just above the ankle and black suede pumps with two inch heels. Her hair was close-cropped black and she wore heavy make-up around her light blue eyes. She hugged the wall by

the door and waited quietly for the teacher to notice her. The teacher stood at her desk, wiping her glasses with a shiny piece of paper and smiling in contemplation. She affixed her glasses and began to casually collect her papers and place them into her briefcase. The young girl took a small step forward and said, "Mrs. Conard?"

Mrs. Conard turned about calmly and considered the girl who called her name. After a quiet moment she said, "Yes, Joanie, come in." Mrs. Conard leaned against the desk and watched the girl edge her way across the room.

"Mrs. C," she said again, a little less afraid, "can I get into your sex education class again?" She looked at the floor and blushed under her makeup.

"Joanie," Mrs. Conard laughed and smiled, "You just completed it for your requirement last semester. You don't need to go through it again."

"Yes, but," Joanie trailed off and looked out the classroom's window and began to cry.

The smile faded on Mrs. Conard's face. "Joanie, honey," she came around the desk, took the young girl's hand and led her to a desk in the front row. She took the girl by the shoulders and sat her firmly in a desk. "Joanie, honey. What's wrong?" The girl didn't answer, but continued to cry. Mrs. Conard moved to the door quickly. She looked out into the hall full of kids, then pulled the door shut. She came back over to the girl and sat on the

desk next to her. Joanie collected herself and looked up to Mrs. Conard. The teacher took Joanie's hand. "What is it, Joanie?" she said calmly.

"I don't know what I did wrong," Joanie said, her voice shaken. "I must have done something wrong. Something is wrong with me, something is growing in me. You're the teacher. You can show me what I did wrong."

"Oh no, dear," she shook her head and smiled, "are you pregnant? That's no problem. We can take care of that." The girl burst into tears.

"I know you said it only takes once if you don't use protection," Joanie said in near hysterics. "I used it. I thought I used it and now what am I going to do?" She began to weep again, her mascara running down her face. Mrs. Conard took her hand and held it firmly. A dark look of concern fell across her face. "What did you do, Joanie? I'm not going to tell, but I need to know what you did and who you did it with."

The door opened and three older girls, juniors, walked into the room. They stopped and stared dumbfoundedly at the two sitting in the front row. Mrs. Conard looked up and said angrily, "Do you mind?"

"I'm sorry," one of the girls said. "This is the book club room. We have a meeting today." They backed away.

Mrs. Conard put her arm around Joanie's shoulder and raised her as she spoke softly in her ear. "Come to my

office, hon. Stop crying, we can take care of anything that happened, this is the twentieth century. We can fix it." She moved Joanie over to the door and leaned her against the jamb, handing her a handkerchief from her pocket before hurrying to her desk. The three girls crossed the room and sat in the front row, all staring with semi-amused looks on their faces as Joanie wiped the black smears from her face. Mrs. Conard gathered her books and papers hurriedly and stuffed them into her briefcase. She crossed the room and scowled over her shoulder at the patronizing girls. "Remember, women, you were younger once yourselves."

Mrs. Conard and Joanie hurried past the bright orange lockers all decked out with red and pink hearts and flowers that decorated the biology wing. "I just love Valentine's Day. Don't you think the school is beautiful with all the flowers and hearts?" Mrs. Conard said lightly as they moved determinedly toward the faculty offices. The girl whimpered as she walked. Mrs. Conard leaned over slightly and said in a low voice, "Don't cry, honey, everything will be alright. It's lucky this is the end of the day, hardly anyone is left in the halls."

"I don't feel too lucky," Joanie said softly. "This has been the longest day of my life."

"Of course it has," Mrs. Conard said. They hurried through the faculty reception area and moved into the teachers' offices. Mrs. Conard ushered Joanie to a seat in

front of her desk and closed the door. She laid her briefcase on her desk, sat down, picked up the phone and dialed three numbers. As she waited for an answer she pulled a heap of tissues from a paisley box and handed them over the desk to the girl. "I'll take the handkerchief. It looks about used up."

Joanie wiped the tears from her face with the smudged cloth and handed it to the teacher, accepting the tissue. She blew her nose fiercely and sniffled a few times. "Yes, hello, Marion, this is Beverley Conard, can you come to my office please, I have a situation here. Uh hum, yes, a sophomore. Thank you." She hung up the phone and looked kindly at the student. After taking out a pad and pen and writing a few notes she held out her hand. "Don't worry, we'll take care of this. Joanie, please, tell me what has happened so we can *fix* this. Who did this to you?"

"I thought I was using them right. I thought I was using them just like you showed us on the model in class, but I guess I wasn't using them right."

"Using what right?"

"The rubbers."

"The condoms."

"Yeah."

Mrs. Conard looked down and wrote as the girl spoke.

Joanie's voice went up and down, squeaking and shaking as she held back her hysteria. "It was the first time I

ever did it and I thought I was safe but I wasn't and now it's down there and it itches and it won't go away, I wash and wash but it just gets redder and redder and then it broke open--" She fell into sobs.

Mrs. Conard leaned back slowly in her chair, her eyes narrowed. "Who did this," Mrs Conard asked again sternly.

"I *can't* tell who he is, I love him and we're afraid we'll get caught and they won't let us see each other again."

"Okay, Joanie," Mrs. Conard said, calm and in control. "Okay, I won't ask you again who did this to you." She made another notation. "When did this all happen?"

"A couple of weeks ago. My parents and his parents are in the same bowling and softball league and we were at a dinner over the Christmas break. We went out to his car and I had a rubber a guy gave me on the bus."

"Did you know the guy? Was it used? I told you condoms can never be used twice."

"No. No. He was a guy from some rights group. I can't remember who. He was passing them out still in their packages."

Mrs. Conard leaned forward and said, "Thank God for that."

As she spoke Joanie became calmer, her voice steadied. "Me and Ch-, me and the boy went off from the others in his car." She lowered her head and reddened as she spoke. "We

went to an old house no one lives in any more and we kissed. He wanted to do it, and I had the rubber." She hunched low in her chair and turned a deeper red. The teacher smiled slightly as she listened. "I put it on him because I watched closely in class. We did it on the stairs of the old house. It hurt, just like you said it would. It hurt so much and I was bleeding, but I did it."

"And no one found out, not even about the blood?"

"I told my mother I was splotching--"

"Spotting."

"Yeah. Anyway, we did it again with another rubber my girlfriend gave me and another time with one I took from my brother's room. It hurt less and less."

"Is this boy older than you?"

"Yes."

"What grade is he in?"

"He's a junior."

"Okay."

"And then a couple of days ago I started to have a funny feeling, kind of itchy but not really itchy, kind of stiff, tingling but... I don't know how it felt. It scared me."

"Of course it did. Why didn't you come to me right away?"

"I was scared. I thought you'd get mad because I was doing it wrong."

Mrs. Conard smiled and tilted her head as she wrote on the pad, then she leaned forward and caressed the side of the girl's head. "Oh, honey, I wouldn't get mad. These things happen. You can't help it and I can't stop them from happening. Don't worry, it's probably just a little infection. The doctor can clear it up."

Joanie went white and rigid in her chair. "If the doctor sees me I'll have to tell. I'll have to tell and my parents will kill me."

"They won't kill you, hon. They can't do anything. No one can do anything to you that you don't want done to you. I can promise you this, you have control because it's your body."

A light knock came at the door. Mrs. Conard patted the girl's hand and rose to answer the door. Marion the school nurse came in, smiling in her white uniform and silent shoes. "Happy Valentine's Day," she said calmly. "Do we need to take a ride downtown?"

"Oh, no," said Mrs. Conard, "we need to go to the free clinic." She came around the desk and helped Joanie up. She put her arm around Joanie and led her out of the office behind Marion. "Mrs. Cunningham is a licensed Health Practitioner," she told Joanie as they moved down the hall toward the parking lot. "The state says it's all right for her to help you if that's what you want. And that's why you came to me. We'll just go down the street to the Free

Clinic and check this out with the doctor there. With a little time we should be able to take care of everything."

"Of course we will, Mrs. Conard." The nurse reached back and took Joanie's hand and led her down the narrow hall to the main lobby of the school and out into the sunlight. Mrs. Conard followed them over to Marion's red Dodge Dart, then suddenly stopped short and said, "Damn. I forgot Detention. I have to get to the English wing and take a detention. It's my turn this week to watch the derelicts." She patted Joanie on the shoulder and spoke soothingly to her as she helped her into the passenger side of the car. "I'll be over within the hour to find out how you're doing." She straightened up and pulled Marion aside. "I'll be over as soon as I can. What are you going to do right now?"

"Well," the nurse said, "I'll just take her over and get her signed in and fill out the paperwork. It would be a lot easier if we contacted the girl's gynecologist, if she has one yet. But we'll have to let the doctor take care of that."

"I was her Health Counsellor last semester," said Mrs. Conard, "so I'll be overseeing if the time comes to involve the parents. If we're lucky it's nothing serious and we won't have to go that far."

"We'll find out when the doctor takes a look."

"Here are the notes from the initial consultation. All the information that I collected about the encounter and

symptoms are there." Mrs. Conard hurried back into the school with a wave to Joanie who sat very still in the small red car.

All the way down the street to the Free Clinic Joanie slunk lower and lower in the seat so that no one could possibly see her. Neither said a word. At the Free Clinic Joanie sat low in the car and didn't move at all until the nurse came around to her side and helped her out. Once she was free of the car she hurried up the side steps of the building and moved into a corner of the waiting room.

The waiting room was filled with women of all ages. One was very old, dressed in a dirty, faded flower-print dress. She hacked and coughed as she flipped through a copy of McCall's Magazine. One was dark skinned, with black and red eyes and puffy bruises on her face. Several were high school girls close to Joanie's own age, but she didn't look very closely at any of them. Joanie didn't look around anymore.

The receptionist filled out some papers at the desk, both women behind the desk standing to look down on the girl sitting so still and fearful. The nurse turned toward Joanie and said as she crossed the waiting area, "You're all set, Joanie. Mrs. Conard should be over as soon as she can." She leaned down over the girl and said softly, "These people will take care of you. Just relax, it's just like going to the dentist or any other doctor's office." She

patted Joanie's knee, wheeled about and left quickly through the door.

Joanie's face was blank, but she could feel it burning red. As hard as she tried to remain calm she could feel fits of panic rising inside of herself. She stared at a picture of a man fly fishing on a wall across from her. She was a still as a statue. Twenty minutes passed.

"Joanie?" a woman called from behind the desk.

"Joanie? Come here." Joanie moved meekly over to the desk.

"Come with me." She followed the woman to a small room.

"Sit here." Joanie sat at a table where the woman took her blood pressure and temperature and drew some blood into three rubber-sealed vials. The woman never spoke once.

Then the woman led her back to the hall and handed her some papers and said, "Take these papers down the hall there and wait in room C3." The woman looked away and resumed her paperwork.

Joanie moved down the hall quickly and let herself into room C3. The room had various charts of human anatomy on the wall, colorful representations of male and female sexual organs. On the back of the door was a small mirror. A gray metal cabinet stood in the corner opposite the door. Next to it was the examination table, a long piece of white paper stretched on it from end to end, two slingshot-shaped pieces of shining steel sticking up on either side of one end. There was nowhere else to sit, so she climbed up on the

table, rested an arm on one of the slingshots and waited. After fifteen minutes the doctor came in carrying a manila folder and smiled at the girl on the table. She was an older woman with gray-blue hair, square set through her body, but not heavy. Her eyes were brown/black, but friendly. Crows' feet wrinkles surrounded her eyes and made her face look cheerful. Joanie's expression did not change.

"Hello, young lady," the doctor said, "Happy Valentine's Day." She came over and rested her hand on the girl's knee. "I hear you have a condition that needs some looking into," she smiled. "I see you didn't fill in an Insurance Carrier. And how would you like to arrange billing this afternoon?"

Joanie looked horrified. "I can't pay you anything!" she said.

"Of course not, sweetheart, it was a joke." The doctor patted her knee. "You are here thanks to the state. It's your right." She shook her head and smiled, "Goodness, you are tense." She raised the chart she carried and looked it over carefully. Finally, she lowered the paperwork and looked closely at the girl. "So you have had a sexual encounter from which burning and itching has been the result?"

"Yes."

"Do you have a gynecologist yet?"

"No."

"And you are fifteen?"

"I just turned sixteen last month."

"Good. Good. But you should have a gynaecologist. We can make arrangements with one of the clinic specialists for an appointment when we're through." She looked back down and made a note on the page. "And is the boy a student there at Jefferson, also?"

Joanie did not answer, but shifted around uncomfortably on the table.

"Joanie, if this is nothing more than an allergic reaction or the result of abrasive irritation then it is none of my business who is involved with your love life, as long as you are smart enough to use protection... which it says here you were. But if this is more than minor irritation then I must know who he is."

The girl shifted her weight a little and stared dispassionately at a colored cut-away picture of a flaccid penis. After a moment she said, "He goes there. He's a year older than me. I won't tell you any more."

"Sweetheart," the doctor took her hand and held it lightly, "don't be afraid. I'm not your principle or your parents or the police. I'm your doctor."

"If you need to know later, I'll tell you who it is, but not until then."

The doctor smiled and said, "Okay." She moved over to the gray cabinet, opened it and pulled out a light blue

gown. "Why don't you slip into this and we'll do a preliminary examination. Remove everything, please, including panties and bra."

The doctor left the room without looking at Joanie and shut the door. Joanie stood for a moment with the gown in her hand, then quickly began to undress. After she had removed her outer clothing she pulled on the blue robe, then, from under the gown she pulled off her pink panties and strapless bra and tucked them under the pile of the rest of her clothes. She left her white anklesox on and climbed back up on the table stiffly, trying not, to expose herself.

After several minutes in the cold room the doctor returned with a smile and said, "Done? Good. Now I want you to lie back and we'll have a look."

Joanie hesitated for a moment, then lay back, her head between the steel uprights. She lay on the table with her back straight and her legs held tightly together. "Well," said the doctor, "we'll never get anywhere with this attitude." She helped the girl back up and twisted her around on the table. "Your legs go this way," she said. "Just relax, young lady."

The doctor opened the cabinet and pulled out a pair of white powdered gloves that she pulled on with a snap. She stood over Joanie and flipped up the blue gown, exposing her pubic mound, abdomen and chest. "Now, just relax," the doctor said in an offhand way as she poked and probed

Joanie's stomach and breasts. She poked and then turned to write something on the chart. Then she poked and probed and scribbled again. After that examination she smiled down on the girl and said, "You seem to be alright initially, lets take a look at the inflammation."

She moved to the end of the table and patted Joanie's bare calves. "Could you lift your legs into the stirrups, please, Joanie?" Joanie lay very still, her legs held tightly together. The doctor took her legs by the ankles and lifted them from the table and lay them in the stirrups. "I know, Joanie. The first time is scary, but these exams are all part of it." The doctor bent down and looked closely between Joanie's legs, then took a probe from the cabinet and began poking and moving Joanie. Joanie turned her head away and held her breath. "There they are," the doctor said softly. Then she reached into the cabinet and pulled out several plastic vials with thin wooden sticks protruding from their mouthes. She pulled the wooden sticks from the vials and out came long cotton swabs. The doctor hummed *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes* as she poked and probed Joanie's pudendum, and then deeper into her internal genitalia. Joanie laid stiff and still on the table, slowly sucking in her breath and holding it quietly every time the doctor touched her. After the doctor poked and probed each spot she stuck the swab back into its vile and snapped off the excess wood. The vials made little snap noises as she

pinched them shut. When she had written the girl's name on each plastic vial and placed them in her coat pocket she returned to her examination. "Does this hurt?" she asked into the girl's crotch.

"Yes"

"And how about here?"

"No."

"Uh hum," the doctor said

"And how about here?"

"Yes."

The doctor straightened up and looked hard at the girl on the table. "You took the Sexual Awareness Class over at the High School when...last semester?"

"Yes."

"And you told your Health Counsellor that you have been using a condom?"

"Yes."

"Joanie, did you pay attention when the use of a condom was demonstrated in class?"

"Yes, I did."

The doctor shook her head. "You can get dressed now," she said as she scribbled notes on the chart. Joanie sat up, the mascara and makeup around her eyes smudged, and grabbed at her clothes at the end of the table. She sat and held them to her chest very tightly.

"What's the matter with me?"

The doctor closed the manila folder and looked hard at the girl. "I won't lie to you. If you were using your prophylactics in the way they were meant to be used I shouldn't be seeing what I'm seeing. Do you know what it feels like when a condom slips off after the male ejaculates?"

"Mrs. Conard told us about that," Joanie said indignantly. "I knew about that."

"But do you know what it feels like? When the male is no longer fully erect? Slippage?"

"I... I... How can I know? I never did it except just those times."

"Uh hum. Did you examine the condoms for breakages or breaches?"

"I don't know if we did. I don't know."

"Did you ask this man if he was clean before you had intercourse?"

"I've known him all my life. I know him."

"Well, now you know more about him." The doctor leaned against the table and put her arm around the girl's shoulder. "Joanie," she said softly, "I can't be sure of everything that's going on with you until we get the results of your lab work, but it's not irritation that's your problem. It looks like an early stage break out of Herpes Simplex. That's an STD, a Sexually Transmitted Disease. The long term prognosis doesn't include a cure right now,

but researchers are working on many preventative salves and treatments to keep the flair-ups to a minimum. What else you may have will show up in the lab work." The doctor was very deadpan as she spoke. Joanie was expressionless. "As for the boy involved, I wouldn't care too much to protect him now. He obviously didn't care enough to protect you."

"I can't," Joanie said very softly.

The doctor heaved a tired sigh and bounced herself off the table. "Well, have it your own way. But I will tell you this, if your HIV tests return positive you'll be required to tell who Don Juan was. You are under Eighteen." The doctor went to the door and rested her hand on the knob. Joanie sat still on the table, clutching her clothing. "You can get dressed now. I'll be contacting you through the school with the results in about two weeks."

"Yes," Joanie said.

"Good," the doctor left. Joanie sat on the table for quite a while, staring at the collage of colorful cut-away drawings of people's sexual organs. The walls were covered with them. Her eyes followed the body parts slowly around the room until they rested on a heart in the center of a cartoon man's chest, covered with lumps of cartoon fat and red and blue cartoon veins. She shook her head. The door of the examination room opened and a blonde nurse walked in, then pulled up short when she saw Joanie sitting on the table.

"Miss, you'll have to get dressed pretty quickly now. We're pretty busy this afternoon and someone else will be on their way to this room very soon."

"Oh," Joanie said, jumping from the table.

The blonde helped Joanie from the table. "I'll be just a second." As Joanie watched she pulled the long sheet of paper on the examination table through a slot at the stirrups end. It fed from a big roll at the head. She tore it off and crumpled it in her hands. "I'll be back in a minute," she said, and left. Joanie hurried as she pulled on her clothing and shoes. After she looked at her face in the mirror she pulled open the door and stepped into the hall. A young lady was just coming through the door in to the room. The two girls collided, their faces nearly touching. They both blushed and continued in their separate directions, pretending as if nothing had happened.

Houndstooth Polyester

The boy rounds the corner of the old brick school building, his face red, his black hair a wild mess. The slacks he wears, houndstooth design on polyester, have a tear down one leg and his white button-down shirt is smeared with dirt. The boy slams himself up against the building and looks around wildly. The area ahead, where he had hoped to find escape, is sealed off by a chain-link fence. There is no place for him to hide. He peeks back around the corner from where he has come, then jerks with tension as he bolts away. Around the corner come two boys who chase him. One boy is large and wears dark blue bell-bottom jeans, black high-top sneakers and a black T-shirt. The other is smaller, wears faded blue bell-bottoms, gray high-tops and a white T-shirt. They are both bigger and older than their prey.

The smallest boy runs as hard as he can, but the bigger boys catch up to him quickly from behind. The white T-shirt is first. He kicks the small boy's running legs, sweeps them hard with his foot, and the small boy falls and slides face first through the dirt. The white T-shirt drops his knees into the smaller boy's back, the black T-shirt lands hard on the boy's legs.

"Fag," the white T-shirt says, "fag in girl's pants." He holds the smaller boy's face down in the dirt with his

knee. "Evan likes to dress like a girl, Lenny, so let's treat him like a girl. Let's see if he wears girly underpanties too."

"No, George, please," the small boy coughs into the dust.

"*No, George, please,*" George mimicks. Lenny laughs and starts to pull off Evan's brown leather shoes. "Evan wears girl's panties," Lenny sings over and over as he throws the brown shoes over the fence.

"Stop messing around with his shoes!" George barks at Lenny. "This little faggot is making enough noise to get us screwed."

As George presses Evan's face down into the ground with his knee Lenny lifts both of Evan's legs by the pant cuffs. "Look, George, stretchy pants," he says. George laughs.

Lenny tugs and pulls at the pant legs, grunting as he works. The pants are held in place by a belt neither bully bothers to undo, and the buckle tears the skin on Evan's stomach as the pants give way and come slowly down. Finally the pants come free and Evan's bare white legs fall limply in the dust.

"Oh my Gawd, look at those bony little girl legs. The two larger boys slap at Evan's white legs over and over until they are bright red, laughing hysterically all the while. George never lets up the pressure on Evan's neck, but grinds his face continuously into the dirt.

The recess bell rings and the two boys stop. They look at each other and let the laughter die on its own. Evan lies limply in the dust, whimpering quietly. Finally the two larger boys stand up over their prey, breathing heavily. Lenny picks up the pants and whips Evan across the butt fiercely and laughs once more before he throws the pants over the fence too.

"Well," Lenny says, "at least he didn't crap his underwear." The two boys laugh and turn off. "Maybe there's some hope for him to be a man someday after all."

"Nah," George says as they walk away. "Tell and die, faggot," George says offhandedly over his shoulder as he leaves.

Evan turns his head on the ground, watches them walk away in a sideways world, their cool bell-bottom pants going *swish, swish*.

Counterpoise

Bad weather and darkness always had an ill effect, bad omens, even though Laura never considered herself superstitious. Dark roads, traveling alone. Just the idea of it, removed from her new home to travel all day to get to their home to watch the ogre marry; it horrified her. Streams of rain poured down the huge panes of glass that surrounded her departure gate. Torrents of water writhed on the glass, twitching and convulsing in every odd angle. Drops of rain, driven by the wind, pelted the rivulets and added to their descent. Bored children pawed at the glass, or stared with fear into the storm, cringing and crying for home.

She traveled lightly, as her mother suggested, carrying only her red knapsack slung over her shoulder. She wore her old parka, a gray flannel shirt, jeans and a pair of Timberland boots. Earlier that day the Bay Area was warm, in the high seventies. The sun was shining and the gate seemed to be a sunny place that could ease her growing dread. But the comfort dissolved as the sky thickened with black and the gate thickened with children. Then came delays and the hours seemed to crawl past. Now she was beyond mere irritation, she was numb. She wrung a copy *Stress Management* in her hands, twisting the pages into a tight tube, a club, and stared at the small torrents of rain

as they trickled down the panes. Holidays, she thought, road stops on the way, exits and dead ends.

Thanksgiving was always a family holiday. The family on Mother's side came from all over the East Coast, and people came from Julius' family too. Nick. Call him Nick. And his people would descend on Mother's house and stay the longest, up to a week. And Nick's great aunt would be there, Ruby, white hair, hollow eyes, bent and slobbering in her wheelchair chair. Ruby had a damaged brain, the side of her head dented, eyes uneven. She was a poet when she was young, never married, never bore a child, what a waste. The woman seeped maternal ooze. She would take her aside and hug her tight up against her chair and caress her face and whisper in her ear, "Write, little sweetheart, *write*. You have the gift. Don't let them take it away." Nearly famous, a poetess, a *modernist* on the edge, a babbler. She was something old, when would she die? She didn't like thinking about Ruby, but Ruby was the holidays, they all were.

Laura's mind drifted uneasily through the rain as it fell over the bay. She settled in her seat, across from an ancient Chinese woman doling out tea to her family from an improbably huge Thermos. The old woman seemed to glance over at her every now and then, to wink almost, to nod. The old woman stroked her long braided black hair, smiled a dirty smile. Stress, that's what she was doling out,

anxiety. Laura could feel the anxiety building inside. The road was becoming crowded. She retreated with her red knapsack to the ladies room.

She pegged her bag on a coat hook and began to splash water on her face. It felt cool, eased her mind. "Calm," she said to herself in the mirror. "Stay calm." She looked at her watch, then took a small pillbox from her shirt pocket and pinched out a little white pill. She placed it on her tongue and swallowed it with a hand full of water. Traveling always made her out of sorts.

"Goldie Locks," someone said behind her. The voice was soft and sweet. She stuffed the pillbox into her breast pocket and turned to face whoever it was accosting her. It was the old Asian woman, nodding vigorously, hands held tightly to her gray chest. She moved closer, as if she wanted to touch her bobbed blonde hair, but that would be a bad thing. "Goldie Locks," the old woman said again. They both stood very still. A touch of panic rose in her throat. Finally the old woman came forward and held a matchbox right under her nose. It had little holes punched all over it. She looked down at the old woman, right into her eyes. They were pure, happy. They sparkled with the delight of a child, as if they were filled with the tiniest little diamonds. She had seen eyes like that before, fixed and honest, but she couldn't remember where. Then it struck her, this woman had the soul of a child. Her smile wasn't

dirty, it was foreign. After several still moments the old woman gently placed the box on the counter top and smiled again. She smiled back tentatively. "For luck," the old woman said as she turned and left the ladies room.

She stood still for a while, almost not believing that the woman had really been there, but there stood the matchbox on the counter. She looked a little closer, the box made little scratches at her. She looked closely in the holes, a tiny golden cricket chirped at her. She stood bolt upright. A bug. The old woman gave her a box with a bug. A golden bug. She slid the box away and went back to washing her face. It was strange. Maybe it was some strange custom among Asian travelers. The box made a tiny greeep noise and she picked it up and shook it a little. The creature seemed trapped. She tucked it in to her breast pocket.

"Thank you so much," she said softly. Her thin voice echoed in the tiled room. She eased her way back out into the crowded airport, watching the Asians as they chattered away at each other in their odd nasal language, a music she could not begin to understand. They could have been discussing anything they wanted to in this foreign land, even blowing up the plane. No one would have been the wiser. She looked around in the group of them, but the old woman was nowhere to be seen. All of a sudden she felt alone, terribly alone. She had lived here for three years

and still she had no friends here, no real friends. Only strangers, memories and fantasy.

As she settled into her seat she could hear the scratching coming from her shirt. She remembered something Ruby had once told her; "All travelers share the same road," she had said, "a painful road that must be travelled alone." But that wasn't necessarily true; soon Mary would be married.

She had to stop these morose thoughts, had to play at something else. She looked casually around at the other travelers. There was nothing spectacular about Gate 23. Passengers slumped in their seats all around her. Some were lucky enough to fall asleep despite the babble of the children. But most were much less fortunate, forced to sit and stare at the modern facilities and inconceivable modern sculptures. It was no idiot that decorated airports with all this ultra-avant-garde junk, she thought. What better audience for pointless art than this gallery crammed with desperate-to-be-stimulated prisoners with nothing better to do?

She watched a man with a beard examine the sculpture nearest to Gate 23. It was a particularly disturbed piece she thought: an lumpy zeppelin shaped piece of bronze covered with a multitude of hands protruding out at all sorts of odd angles. It appeared to be hand-signing some message. The man walked around and around the sculpture,

stroking his beard.

What was he looking at? She thought she might ask him. The meaning of life, he might have said. A small black cloud of fists and knives and fury. Mary. She shook her head, tried to shake herself free.

She sat and watched his apparent fascination with the bronze thing, stroking his beard with his right hand, the other shoved nonchalantly in the pocket of his tan sportscoat, little round tortoise shell glasses sitting on his face. He looked to be about thirty, just three years older than she. She tilted her head to the left as she watched. I could marry him, she thought, if he were very gentle, very gentle. He couldn't hurt a thing.

She watched the slow way he stroked his beard, pulling the gray hairs at the corner of his mouth out so gently, cocking his head. His eyes blinked slowly behind his round glasses, slower than if he were reading the paper or watching the news. And then she could see him look away, up past the zeppelin thing, into the past when they first met. He remembered Stowe, Vermont, five summers ago when they met in the little-used bookshop a block from the center of town. She read Flaubert, an obscure printing of *Madame Bovary*; he read a volume by Jung. They read next to each other, not reading, leaning slowly towards one another. He half smiled over his shoulder at her, nodded. It was innocent at first: they had coffee, spoke in low tones of French poets.

They shared, secrets and plans. He protected her.

He peered over the zeppelin thing at her, calling her with his sad, blue eyes. She rose. Slowly they wandered toward each other. He pulled off his jacket as he came. She slid across the waiting area, wrapped her hand around the back of his head, pulled him down to her lips. She blinked. Her prince had vanished. She sighed and glanced over to her Asian neighbors. They chattered away as if nothing had happened.

"Attention passengers for flight 240," a pleased woman's voice came over the loud speaker. "Again, we apologize for the delay of our Thanksgiving flight to Boston. We would like to announce the boarding of flight 240 at gate 23. Will passengers in first class please begin boarding."

A collective sigh of relief passed through the waiting area. She stood up and stretched her legs and back and ambled over toward the gate with the rest of the second class passengers to watch the first-classers board. As she watched she hoped the bearded man was on her flight.

"Thank Gawd they didn't shuffle us onto another airline," a manly little woman, covered with pearls and gems, said to her lady companion as they passed through the second class passengers. "The last time this happened I was forced to sit in cattle class. What a nightmare. The idea of bumping all the way across country in coach is--"

Laura watched her platinum hair as it was swallowed by the crowd. "Seats thirty-five through twenty-five please have your boarding passes ready as you enter the plane," the woman's voice came over the loudspeaker again. Finally her seat number was called and she followed the passengers onto the plane.

The plane was old and small. It was smaller than any plane she had ever flown on. The faded, earth-tone upholstery was covered with a collage of flowers right out of the seventies. It had a used car kind of smell: decomposed vinyl and the faint, sweet smell of hidden food.

People moved about, grumbling to themselves as they contorted to stuff far too bulky carry-on luggage into the tiny overhead compartments. She was apparently not the only one slightly less than pleased with the micro-plane's accommodations. She struggled down the aisle with her knapsack, bumping people in the head and shoulders with her hips and apologizing all the way to her seat.

Finally she made it to her spot, seat 14A, a window seat. She quickly removed her parka and swung her knapsack under her seat. No one was in seat 14B, so she easily slid down into her narrow place.

She looked around in her bag for her earphones and set them on just as the stewardess began her "In case of emergency..." speech. She turned up her tape player and looked out her egg-shaped window. Men wearing ear

protectors hurried around in the rain, securing equipment and getting the plane ready to back out on the runway and take off into the storm.

As she listened she unpacked her books, cassette player and her tapes of Mahler, Mozart and Beethoven. She stuffed them into the little pocket on the back of the seat in front of her. Crammed down on top of all the safety brochures was a copy of one of Stefan Dauphin's novels, \$. It was a well-read paperback that someone had left behind. She decided to follow the previous owner's lead and leave it for posterity. She leaned back, shut her eyes and dissolved into the music.

Someone gently touched her shoulder, giving her a little shake. She clenched her eyes. Deep inside she hoped against all hope that it was her bearded man. She looked up, the Gem Woman glared down at her from the aisle, her watery eyes blue against a bleary swath of bloodshot red. Her short-cropped platinum blonde hair sat on her head like a whisk broom. As Mahler rang in her ears the old Gem Woman waved a hand in her face. She seemed to be barking something. Her teeth were yellow, her gums gray. She slowly lifted off the headset and smiled.

"Yes?" she said.

"I said, I would like to sit by the window. Pay attention! Stewardess. Stewardess! If I must sit back here I think I should at least deserve a window seat." She looked back down at her and grimaced. "I get terribly

motion sick. You don't mind moving, do you, sweetheart?"

"Well... I *am* claustrophobic. I try to get window seats on all the flights and rides I take since--"

"Fine! You sit there and be as comfortable as you need to be. I just hope they aren't serving anything back here that could stain your clothes," she leaned down close, "for both our sakes."

"Umm, why don't you take this seat. I'll be fine, really."

She moved out into the aisle and allowed the Gem Woman to pass. The Gem Woman shoved past her and slid into the seat, liberally filling her space. Before she had a chance to sit back down the Gem Woman went through the pocket on the back of the seat in front of her and tossed whatever wasn't airline issue onto the other seat.

"I don't want to be accused of taking anything!" she said offhandedly. "Stewardess! Stewardess! Bring me a Bloody Mary! No. Wait! What time is it? 12:15? Fine. Make it a Scotch over." The Gem Woman looked up at her still standing in the aisle. The corners of the Gem woman's mouth pulled down as her skull looked up underneath her face. "You don't look like the Scotch type, too young. I bet your *father* drinks Scotch. Let me guess, white wine spritzers?"

She smiled down on the woman, "Excuse me." She turned and started for the back of the plane, toward the restrooms.

She had two options: to move to another seat or take another flight. Her time schedule was terribly tight, so another flight wasn't an option. She moved as quickly as she could to the flight attendant at the end of the plane.

"Excuse me," she said to a very thin, brunette attendant with a perfect little Barbie-doll body and gleaming, white teeth, "I was wondering, I overheard that lady who you just sat in seat 14A say as she boarded that she was in first class. Why is she next to me?"

"I'm terribly sorry. There was an emergency reservation that was filled just last night. That woman's husband tried to mix things up to get her on the plane just prior to boarding. She was never in first class. I'm surprised she's even on the plane."

"Well, I'm not complaining, but, she's not the most pleasant travel companion."

"I'm afraid I did notice a slight attitude when she boarded. Just try to make the best of it and I'll see if I can't make some other seating arrangement once we're in flight."

"Thank you." It wasn't exactly the best news to get on this trip. She walked back to her seat very slowly, pausing to read the instructions on the credit card telephones, checking out the stewardess' caches of magazines, reading over the other passengers' shoulders. Inevitably the *Fasten Seat-Belts* and *No Smoking* signs flashed on and she had to

return to her seat.

"Oh," the Gem Woman said looking up at her when she returned, "you're back." She was smoking a long black cigarette, holding it between her index and middle fingers, palm up, cigarette pointing down. The Gem Woman waved her hand around as she spoke, her gestures lethal.

"I was just speaking with the stewardess about the delay."

"Did you tell them we need drinks here? No? Oh honey, Amanda has got a thing or two to teach you on this flight." She started to jab the stewardess button with her long, tan nails. An ash fell from the end of her cigarette and disintegrated into the top of the red knap sack. "Amanda Ravenhurst, sweetheart," she said as she held out her little hand, palm down. They were awful hands, stubby and spotted. They could have been man's hands if not for the fake tan nails.

"Laura--"

"Gawd!" the Gem Woman said looking out of the window, "will you look at all those idiots running around down there in the rain! No wonder this damn plane's been delayed so long. Men! They'd be useless if it weren't for a few basic needs they supply. Mine couldn't even get a simple plane reservation right! Where the hell is that stewardess?"

Laura settled down into her chair, trying to ignore the Gem Woman's tirade as best she could and dodging the

cigarette-of- death. Suddenly, from a few rows in front of them, a man yelled "Hey! Whoever you are back there, put out that light!!"

Amanda, the Gem Woman, hunched in her seat, her brows pulling down into tight little furrows across her forehead and her eyes narrowing to mean cracks. "To hell with you, you idiot," she muttered as she stamped out her cigarette. "Bunch of damn cows."

The plane finally taxied out onto the runway and began to rev its engines. Amanda, the Gem Woman, reached for a vomit bag. All around the two women people chit-chatted as the wind rocked the little plane on the runway. The stewardesses made a last pass through the compartment: cinching passengers' belts tight and slapping up lowered dinner trays. The stewardesses finally strapped themselves into their combat-style, minimal-space-taking, fold-out stewardess take off/landing chairs. The stewardess across the way from Laura rolled her eyes just as the engines throttled up and the plane lurched forward into the storm.

"Gawd," Amanda, the Gem Woman, bawled, her greenish face rocking side to side, "we're going to die. I know it. We're going to *die!*"

The man and woman across the aisle, dressed in identical gray and pink sweaters, looked over with sad grins at Laura and Amanda, the Gem Woman. Laura shrugged her shoulders and shook her head, trying to pull away from

Amanda, the Gem Woman, and disappear all at once. She leaned out into the aisle and called to the woman with her finger.

"She's not my mother or anything, really," she whispered. "I'd give anything to trade places with the stewardess there." The woman smiled politely and turned away.

The plane rattled and banged down the runway, rocking the passengers into each other as it went. Without warning the back end of the plane dropped into a great void and the front flipped up into the rain and wind. Laura felt her stomach sink. The moan of the engines straining against the wind dimmed as the pressure built in her head. All conversation quieted, replaced by mumbling and moans and, somewhere in first class, vomiting. It seemed as if it would never end, and then the sky was blue.

"Well," Amanda, the Gem Woman, rolled her head towards Laura and breathed a thick plume of gray gums and cigarette breath, "that would have been one hell of a lot easier had we been *properly* fortified." She reached over to her arm rest and jabbed at the call button limply. "Nothing a Scotch over won't cure, sweetheart, I assure you."

Laura pounced on her novel and fumbled for her page.

"Flawbert! Please. Sweetheart, you'll rot your brains! Whenever I fly I always observe three rules--" The stewardess came out from behind the first class curtain with

what seemed to Laura a very heavy-handed Scotch over, with a lemon twist.

"Here you are, Mrs. Ravenhurst. I'm so sorry for the delay, but regulations are regulations."

"Oh, thank you, honey. Charge that to the Captain, will you? And... here is a little something for you. No, no, I insist."

The stewardess left the little folded twenty politely on the dinner tray and hurried off. "Where was I... Oh yes, the three golden rules of air travel. One, always be prepared for the inevitable. Fortify!" She raised her glass. Mrs. Amanda Ravenhurst, the Gem Woman, raised her glass and took a huge sip from it, draining half its contents.

"Two, always travel in a custom one is accustomed to." She looked about the cabin and raised her upper lip slightly. "And Three, always bring Dauphin!" She reached into her magenta lizard-skin flight bag and pulled out Stefan Dauphin's latest novel. "It's his *third best seller* this year." She plopped the novel down into her lap and slapped her hand on it affectionately. Her rings thunked on the hard cover. It was so thick Laura thought for a moment it might crush the Gem Woman's scrawny legs. The colorful jacket depicted a pair of baby-girl pink galoshes tucked into the corner of a cozy country kitchen, a trail of water footprints leading from the back door to the boots and a

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trail of bloody baby footprints leading from the boots across the kitchen floor through the inner door. It was entitled *Children after Midnight*.

"Charming," Laura said.

"Oh, no one writes like Stefan. So suspenseful, so sincere. Don't you just love his style, it's so complex. No two stories are told the same. That's talent. It's no wonder he's at the absolute top in the world of *Literature*."

"Maybe, but I don't particularly like his--"

"Well! *Maybe* when you make sixty million dollars you can talk. Until then..."

"Well, until then I'll just study for my mid-terms. Excuse me." It was a lie. She had never gone to school after high school. She could never see the point in going to more school once she had moved to California. It wouldn't get her a job making more money than she was as a receptionist. Besides, Mary went to college. She didn't particularly like lying either, but it was a great way to excuse herself from unwanted conversation.

"Oh! You're a student?! Isn't that interesting. I have a daughter, Camella Ravenhurst. Do you know her? She goes to Stanford. I was just visiting her at Stanford. Of course, we wanted her to attend Harvard, or Wellesley, but she loves the weather here in California, so. But, if she wants to go to Stanford, let her go to Stanford."

"Really, she goes to Stanford? I'll be masticulating at the Our Lady of Fatenema College in Pawtucket... Rhode Island? It's a Diminutive School. You've probably never heard of it."

"Hmmm? A Catholic school? How nice." She reached down and touched the call button gracefully. The stewardess poked her head through the curtain and raised her eyebrows. Mrs. Amanda Ravenhurst, the Gem Woman, raised her glass and jingled her ice. The stewardess' floating head disappeared and returned a moment later with a glass full of Scotch and ice. She handed it to her mistress reverently and bounced back behind the curtain to first class.

"Where was I? Ah yes, Stanford. My daughter, Cammy, she might love the place, but I am afraid I could never get accustomed to the standard of living there. Why do the pedestrians just *waltz* across the streets, as if they would't be just as dead between the crosswalk lines as they would anywhere else? What they need is a lesson from a New York City cabby." She took a long sip from her drink and leaned back. "Tell me, dear, what are you studying besides Flawbert?"

"Well, I'd like to be a nurse... with geriatrics."

"*Geriatrics!* Old people? Honey, how old are you, Nineteen? Twenty? Get out there! Get a job with a future. If you have a gift, find it and use it! Don't waste your time in a death home--"

As she listened to the Gem Woman babble, she looked down at her watch. It was almost time, just another half an hour. She could feel the pressure inside, she could feel the panic. A half hour was close enough. It would be all right if she took her medication now. As long as no one could see. Without taking her eyes off the Gem Woman, she nonchalantly reached into her pocket as carefully as she could and grasped her pill box. She placed it into her cupped hands and slid it carefully open. It felt empty. She swept her finger around in the box and felt nothing. Panic set in. She looked down into her lap. There, perched on her hand, was a tiny golden cricket. She jerked spasmodically as she tried to cover it up. It felt cold and wet and still on the back of her hand. It was done. It was done. She didn't mean to do it but it was done.

Laura squeezed her eyes shut just as the flash of silver streaked by outside their window. The plane shook violently. A deafening roar filled the compartment. Laura thought she looked up at the first class curtain and it was gone, the whole front end of the plane was gone. Pieces of wall flapped in the ultra-sonic currents of wind as if they were mere cloth. The sudden loss of pressure sucked everyone without their seat belts on through the center of the plane.

The still-intact tail end of the plane flipped end over end as it dropped to the earth. Through the huge round hole

a few seats in front her, the blue sky and green earth chased each other blue-green, blue-green in a blur of wind and debris.

No one screamed.

And Mrs. Amanda Ravenhurst the Gem Woman just sat in her seat, sipping from a glass sucked dry by the sudden drop in pressure. She just sat there in her seat, her ugly short hair tugged and pulled in all sorts of directions clenching her empty glass within her talons as the plane toppled through the sky.

"...and Cammy going berserk every time that band comes to town. What are they called, Thankful Death, or something dreadful like that. What else could I expect? Cammy's upbringing being so turbulent what with going through as many *Oom*-pairs as we did, but I couldn't get along with a one..." she was saying.

Slowly, so slowly in the howl of the broken, plummeting fuselage, Laura reached over and slipped her fingers under Amanda Ravenhurst, the Gem Woman's, arm. Slowly she slipped her fingers under her seat belt latch. It didn't matter that everyone in the front of the plane, the passengers, the stewardesses, the pilots, everyone that could have saved them was now dead. She would be ready to meet her maker if she were allowed this one little extravagance, to see this wretched, obdurate traveling-companion- from-Hell sucked into the stratosphere, screaming "*Stanford! Stanford!*"

Stanford!" all the way to her crushing death in some farmer's cornfield.

Slowly, she lifted the buckle. *Fup!* Mrs. Amanda Ravenhurst, the Gem Woman, stopped speaking and looked Laura directly in the eye.

"I beg your pardon!" She reached down and indignantly latched her belt.

"Oh! Excuse me. I thought that was mine." She smiled weakly, unlatched her buckle and stood. "I must have been thinking of something else...." The airliner jerked the slightest bit over some turbulence, a stewardess smiled through the curtain.

The red eyes and yellow teeth smirked up at her. "You should be mindful of whom you touch, dear." The Gem Woman's eyes dropped to Laura's hands as she readjusted her belt. "Gawd, girl, you've got vermin crawling all over you." She stabbed at the Attendant button and looked away with contempt.

Laura skulked to the back of the plane. It didn't work. It never really worked. She was still sitting next to the Gem Woman. Mary was still getting married. Her prince had vanished. The past was still the past. Nothing changes. Halfway to the restroom she looked down at her watch. The yellow cricket lay dead, bent, stuck to her hand. Little cricket, what were you looking for? She could hear its tiny voice, "For luck."

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"Thank you for those entertaining and informative historical anecdotes, Mr. Peabody," the old, bald-headed, European-American man says, smiling into the microphone. "You are most welcome, Mr. Sherman," the other old, bald-headed, European-American man says as they shake hands. Mr. Peabody exits the stage. It is a hot, humid day for graduation. Sitting in their black robes under the glaring sun is torture for the graduating class, the last torture this institution will bestow.

Evan, a young male of European descent, crosses its sticky legs under its robe for the thirtieth time and sighs heavily. It leans over to the senior sitting next to it and whispers, "My God, it's hot out here. You'd think those eggheads up there would crack and spew in this heat." The other, a young, male African-American-person-of-color, lowers its face and shakes its head.

"Nice image, Evan," the other says, "just what I need to hear right now."

"Remember, Curtis, no one ordered you to stay up all night drinking. You're a person of responsibility now. In every sense of the word."

"Die, Evan. Die. Die. Die."

Curtis and Evan look back toward the stage. Nothing has changed. The reddish pink dome of Mr. Sherman's head is

still sweating in the heat, its black rimmed glasses still sweep the crowd as it hems and hums its way through the introduction of the next speaker. Evan looks at its watch, it is almost time. It sighs heavily again and leans toward Curtis. "One to go," it whispers.

"And so it is with great pleasure, and great remorse, that I introduce for her final speech here on campus, your valedictorian, Wednesday Alan."

The graduating class stands and claps enthusiastically. Evan and Curtis jump to their feet and whistle cat calls, and scream *Baby, Baby*. Over all the ruckus steps Wednesday Alan; long black hair parted in the middle, hanging on either side of its head, straight and flat, its face pale and slender, its black gown collared with a white honors array and a ribbon of the school colors, at the end of which hangs the medal for the National Honors Society. It calmly lays a sheet of paper on the podium and clears its throat. The noise of the graduating crowd subsides.

"Distinguished Faculty, honored guests, fellow graduates, I stand here before you today, the first day from which our entire lives will spring, with a short and simple message." The graduating class, sweating under scads of black nylon, cheer and hoot, requiring Wednesday Alan to stand uncomfortably quiet for several moments under the June sun. The crowd quiets and it continues.

"Through the annals of history *man* has stood in

opposition. He has *opposed* nature; *raping* the environment for unchecked profit; *disposing* of his *wastes* wherever it was convenient or *profitable*; *seizing* land from others in order to advance his egocentricities and sate his appetites; *all* justified with his *unbalanced* Western Cultural value-system.

"He has *opposed* his fellow humankind by setting in motion these value-systems in the centuries past; systems which *still* are dominant today, *still* oppressing womyn and their freedom of hygienic self-government; *still* dictating every aspect of life within the different cultures *he* deems subservient with economic slavery; *ensuring* the continued subservience of the economically challenged across the nation and around the world.

"*He* has *opposed* the future by perpetuating the diseased, moneyed hierarchical system of personal-gain politics and denying the advancement of his fellow beings, labeling them *his* enemies: the poor, the multi-cultural Americans and, most of all women. At the hands of his extended ego, his various governments, by those hands have the oppressed individuals of our small global village suffered."

Curtis leans over and says, "Is she talking about you or me?"

"Does it matter?"

"A New World Order stands in the offing. One which

will give the oppressed masses of the world new opportunity, their first opportunity, to taste the fruits of their labor, to govern themselves in a way that is just and fair for all and not just a few that find their power through racism and financial terrorism. We are the world leaders of tomorrow. And we are the first potential world leaders that will be able to help establish and provide continuing maintenance for World Government. There is a light, there is a time of change and a generation to oversee that change. We are that generation."

"We are?" Evan whispers in Curtis's ear.

Curtis shrugs its shoulders and says, "Whatever." The crowd claps politely.

"The cold war," Wednesday Alan continues, "a truly covert and global war, has finally ended. The oppressors behind the now defunct Iron Curtain are now the oppressed. And in this wake of absolute destruction stands virgin potential. Just as the thorns of capitalism grew from the ashes of post-war Europe, so will the roses of a new, politically correct World Government rise from the stagnant pools of the post-industrialist world of tomorrow."

The crowd claps politely.

"We are the first generation with the promise of a truly new future, one in which all individuals are affirmed, all individuals are provided for and all suffering, for the first time in human history, can be alleviated." Wednesday

Alan stops for a moment and scans the crowd before it.

The crowd claps politely. It is quiet for a moment after the applause dies down.

"And what do I base these promises on? How can I believe, and not naively, that there is a new age upon us? Structure! Positive realignment! Self-affirming autonomy! There is a new consciousness rising within the human condition. There is a new unisexual feminism growing in power on a global level, one which nurtures growth and is giving of the universal reproductive efficacy, not myopically raping in the name of profit. There is a new culturalism, stronger in its unity, enraged at centuries of oppression, at the narrow little minds that see nothing but gender and color. There is a New World Order, and we are its stewards. And for that privilege, for that honor and grave responsibility, we must rise. We must realign. We must overcome."

Evan leans over to Curtis. "Tell me when to yell Halleluiah."

"Typically speakers at these affairs describe to the graduating class what their duties to the future will be. There is only one. Universalism. We are *challenged* as no other generation before us has been. Not only is our nation *economically* bankrupt, but we, as a multi-culture, are *morally* bankrupt. Where any culture is dominated by *one* group within the infra-structure the inevitable result is

across the board moralbankruptcy. There is but one answer: Universality! Humanism! We must join hands and rise above mere superstition. Rise above prejudice and avarice and greed and join hands, raise our one voice to the life force of the universe and say, "We are one life, Flora, Fauna, Terra, together. We shall rise above our past, heal our present, create our own future. We shall overcome."

"Zeig Hiel," Evan says.

The Gray Nineties

It was a thing that happened. Nothing too terrible. It made other things a little more tedious, but no real harm done. No one died. The restaurant was empty and dim now, the New Year had passed. Joanie sat at the bar and rubbed her eye gently. She tried not to rub it, to dislodge her contact, but something had gotten in there and burned. She stopped. She blinked, then rubbed and stopped again. It was smoke or dust or something, nothing deadly. She sighed and looked for something to occupy herself. It was just another thing that happened. The night was full of them. She twirled a clean ashtray around and around by its lip, listening to the dull crystal ring it made on the uneven grain of the bar.

She sipped her coffee and waited for the others. Everyone else had already gone on to the party. But she was a new waitress and couldn't go yet. She had been saddled with helping set up for New Year's Day brunch. Joanie was growing impatient at the bar, last to leave, waiting to follow Sam and Luane over to a house she had never been to, to celebrate the departure of a fellow waitress she did not know, with a wait staff that were strangers. The lounge was dark and silent. Colored bottles lined the back bar, dull in the twilight, rows of dead vacuum tubes.

She sat still at the brass rail, petite, not more than

five feet tall, thin, pale complexion, wide-set impassive blue eyes, blue-black hair cut shoulder length. There were only eight stools along the bar, enough for four couples. In the dimness around her stood the small round tables, gray in the off-lighting. Without their laughing guests and arrays of food-laden plates and glimmering silverware, the tables looked sterile, truncated in the pale light, cadaverous. As she watched her finger fling the ash tray around in circles, she thought about it, the thing that happened.

She was new in this place; she didn't want to make a judgement on whether it was worth staying or not, not yet. So what did it matter if the owner did things his own way? He was the owner. She didn't know if Norman had it coming. The manager that had hired her was fired a week ago, and Tod just ran the show himself. He didn't even know she was alive. It wasn't the worst New Year she ever worked. Still, if she hadn't seen the thing with her own eyes she might not have believed it. Sam and Luane, the others stuck setting up for brunch, had to take orders from some of their tables three times in the middle of the rush because the kitchen ran out of food and didn't warn them. Even she had trouble, and she had the smallest section, the one for beginners. One of her tables had walked out, but it wasn't the end of the world. It wasn't her fault.

The laughs and rough housing of Sam and Luane came from

the back of the restaurant. The lounge lights came up slowly, the bottles began to glow. They entered. Sam was fifteen years older than Joanie, at least, and carried himself with all the arrogance and self-love of an American aristocrat. He was five feet eleven, tan oval face, sun-bleached white-blonde hair and dark blue eyes. He was always smiling, whether speaking or not, and when he was silent his jaw stuck out slightly in a slow grinding underbite. He had a thick bushy blonde mustache, but the rest of his face was always clean shaven.

"Hey, babe," he said to Joanie. He called all women he was friendly with *babe*. He came over and seized her shoulders and looked closely at her eye. "What Have you done to your eye?"

"It's nothing. Just a speck of dust or something."

"Looking bad. Are you ready to go on to the party?"

Sam came over and leaned heavily on the bar. Luane sat next to him and pulled a cigarette out of her purse. She could have passed for Sam's age, but Joanie knew her to be her own. Luane's hair was longer and the same basic color as Joanie's, but Luane's was stringier and wispy. Her complexion was not clear and light as Joanie's was, but colored the shades of some beige and brown make-up mixture. Her head was long and narrow. When you looked at her face straight-on, she looked normal enough, but when she turned her head, her long cheek bone and jaw line became very

apparent. From the side she looked distorted. She always addressed people head-on. Luane was not a native Californian, none of them were. She was from somewhere around Texas, she'd never said exactly where. Sam was from Midland City, Ohio. Joanie was from the east coast, her parents presiding over many small television and appliance shops. And now their travels had converged on this pretentious little neo-French California-cuisine restaurant, 'Le Cest Poule', in Redwood City, California.

"I'll tell you right now," Luane said, her slight drawl obscured by monotones, "I'm not leaving this hell hole until Mr. Potato Head buys us a drink. There's no way I'm going to put up with this kind of night without some kind of retribution."

Sam smiled and jumped off his chair. "Retribution on the rocks on Tod! Who's closing up?" he said as he rounded the end of the bar and scooped up some ice in a glass mixer. "Duke is the only one left in the kitchen tonight, right?"

Joanie slid the ashtray down the bar to Luane with a flick of her finger. Luane smiled up at Sam and said, "Yup. The office and the front are all locked up. Duke's just waiting for us to come out the back. I'll have a Who's Blue and a Heineken."

"Make mine a martini, dry please," Joanie said.

"Ooh, a martini. We are grown up. That sounds like a drink your father would order." Sam said. "You guys are

boring. I'm going to have the usual, a Doctor Pepper-from-Hell. Light me a cigarette, babe." Joanie watched Sam mix his drink. He poured equal portions of Amaretto and coffee liquor into a shot glass and floated 151 rum on top, then lit it on fire and dropped it into a glass of beer. "I know this is the latest *rage* among the clue-less recent ex-minor set, but it *is* good," he said.

"A Doctor Pepper-from-Hell," Joanie said. "You like the most extraneous cocktails."

"Babe, I was a bartender before you were off your mother's tit." He flipped a glass mixer tumbling into the air. It twirled over his shoulder and landed neatly in his palm behind his back. "Laundromats and concession rentals at The Stick aren't the only hobbies of this entrepreneur. I've waited tables, bused, washed, cooked, mixed, managed, and serviced widows in every fine establishment up and down the bay." He wet his finger in the sink as he danced around and sucked the moisture up his nose, then smiled and winked at Luane.

As Joanie watched, he filled little glasses and poured liquors into mixers and hummed some song she didn't recognize. "What golden moldy is that?" she said. He stopped what he was doing and looked at her with disgust.

"Vile youth," he said, "it happens to be a classic by the Doors."

"Van Morrison?" Joanie said. Sam laughed as he leaned

over towards Joanie.

"Well," Luane said sharply, "this has got to be some kind of low for Tod." Sam looked up at her, his smile innocent as a child's.

"That's what you get when an investor takes over," Sam said. "I've seen it happen a million times: no experience but plenty of gall. Until we get a real manager, there won't be a night that goes by without some minor catastrophe in the kitchen or on the floor."

"I thought Tod was going to castrate the dishwashers after what happened with Norman," Luane said. "Those poor guys don't know a word of English and Mr. Potato Head was screaming at them so loud I could hear his tirade while I was doing table wine service on the other side of the restaurant." Sam handed her the little glass of reddish-blue liquid and the green beer.

"I was in the kitchen when it all happened, babe. Let me tell you, if Duke wasn't in the kitchen keeping order with the Mexicans they would have all probably walked out. I mean the help, not the line crew. The day Duke walked through the door was a God-send day for Tod."

Luane laughed, "I don't know where something like Duke comes from, but I'll tell you, it ain't Texas. In Texas--"

"Do you think Norman will sue Tod, or anything?" Joanie said over her martini. Luane looked blankly at her as Sam moved back around the bar and sat behind her. He began to

erotically rub her shoulders. They were always rubbing or touching each other. "I know I've only been here for a month," Joanie continued, "but, it's like Tod had it out for Norman."

"Hah," Sam said, "ever since that guy got shot at his night club, Tod's been getting worse and worse. You should have seen what happened to Cliff before you even started here. Tonight was just a scuffle."

"You call that a scuffle?" Joanie said.

"Sure," Sam laughed. "Three clean strokes to the mouth and Norman was out of there. Tod pretty much *ruined* Cliff before he fired him. You can ask Cliff about it when you meet him."

"*He'll* be at the party tonight, with Tod?"

"Oh no. You'll meet him someday, somewhere around here. After a long enough time you see that everyone's leaving for somewhere." Sam said. "But we all just wind up working the circuit. Sooner or later we'll all work together again somewhere. This party tonight will repeat itself endlessly. The names of the restaurants will change, but the faces will always be the same. You do this long enough and you see the pattern."

"It'll be the typical Greg and Bobby party," Luane shook her long head, "stiffs and bankers in one corner and us in the other." Does anyone know if Mr. Potato Head is going to be there?"

"For crying out loud," Sam said, "if I hear Mr. Potato Head one more time I'm going to scream. If you hate the guy so much why don't you leave?"

Luane looked up over her shoulder at him and blinked once slowly, her big round eyes lifeless. "Why don't you leave."

"Why don't we all leave?" a voice came from the bar's doorway. All three turned, drinks in hand. In the doorway stood Duke, her head shaved under a dirty Red Sox baseball cap. She wore all black; a black men's turtleneck shirt, tucked into a short black skirt, black leggings that came down to her black high-top sneakers.

"Thanks for asking," she said, "yeah, I could use a beer." She came over slowly, as if she were sizing up the others for a fight, and sat at the end of the bar. In her hand she carried a black leather biker jacket covered with silvery pyramid studs and loose buckles. "Bud," she said. She lit a cigarette, cocked her head and exhaled tiredly. She gripped her cigarette lightly between the fingers of her bone white hands. Duke's skin seemed strangely like porcelain, they looked smooth and cold. Across her fingers of her right hand, just below the knuckles, were the letters L-O-V-E. Joanie could see her left hand resting on the bar. Across those fingers were the letters H-A-T-E. She was twenty-eight.

Sam smiled a huge, toothy grin. "You're going to have a

drink with us?" he said. He backed up slowly and rounded the bar to the beer coolers. "You've never had a drink with us before." He popped open a Bud and slid it to her.

"You've never asked me." She drew a deep breath of smoke and looked right at Joanie. "Except for that wonderful night with you, *Joan*." She winked at Joanie.

Joanie laughed a little bit as Duke took a long pull from her beer. It was a tight, controlled laugh. Duke put down the bottle and said, "Hell in a Dixie cup. Sometimes this place is Hell in a Dixie cup. Oh, Sham," she called to Sam, "give me a shot of 151."

He poured her a shot of 151 and stepped back to watch her drink. "I don't know how you put up with it back there, Duke," he said. "Between the Mexicans always trying to give you a hard time and Tod always exploding--"

"You mean Mr. Potato Head."

"Yeah," Sam ground out a smile, "Mr. Potato Head."

As Joanie watched Sam toy with Duke, she was a little intrigued, a little uncomfortable. Most of the time Duke was abrasive and crude. She was stronger than most of the men that worked in the Cest. She could out-swear them all and loved to embarrass the wait staff, especially Joanie. But sometimes, especially when she and Duke were alone, Duke seemed to be a good and warm person.

"It's not easy being the only woman in the kitchen," Duke said. "I can't earn respect from the wetbacks because

I'm just a girl. They even talk about screwing *me*, and I can beat most of them up. Every day I come in it's like my first day. Every day the struggle is the same."

"Why don't you leave?" Luane said.

Duke took a sip of beer and shrugged her shoulders. "Nothing would change. Nothing ever changes. It would be the same in New York or L.A. as it would be here in fascinating Redwood City." She threw back the shot and her whole body shuddered. After a second she slid the glass back at Sam and said, "Another." He poured the shot and slid it back to her.

"I didn't know you were such the drinker, Duke."

"I'm not. It's just been *one of those days*."

They all finished their drinks amongst idle gossip and restaurant shoptalk; who was currently sleeping with who and what wine prices would be going up soon. After the second shot of 151 Duke fell silent and sat staring at Joanie. Joanie tried to ignore her, but their eyes kept meeting. Luane finally reached under the bar and tapped Joanie's leg. "Let's hit the ladies can and powder our noses before we're seen in public."

At the end of the bar Duke removed her hat and patted her close shaven head, feeling the black stubble. "I'll stay here," she said, "I'm still presentable."

As the two women left the bar, Sam called, "Oh Luane, babe, don't go forgetting about old Sam back there in the

powder room." He was engaged with pouring another shot for Duke and mixing himself another Dr. Pepper-from-Hell.

"Don't worry, pin head, same noses, different powder."

Back in the lady's restroom Joanie leaned close to the mirror and applied mascara as Luane stood in the rear of the bathroom.

"Someone better look out for Duke tonight." Luane said. "I've seen that look in Sam's eye before. He's picked Duke for tonight's whipping boy." Joanie stopped what she was doing and looked up into the mirror. Over her shoulder she could see Luane's long, narrow, downcast head.

"What do you mean his whipping boy?"

Luane turned and looked Joanie's reflection head-on. "You hardly ever come out with us after hours, I mean just once or twice or so. Sam will pick someone, usually with a weakness that he can make fun of. And then he subtly works them over all night. It looks like Duke is going to be drunk and stupid before tonight is over and Sam will make her have to live it down all next week."

"What an awful thing to do."

"Yeah. Sam is kind of a jerk when he's into the day-glow." She shrugged. "What's the butt head going to do, give the stuff up?" Joanie noticed what Luane was doing in the corner. She had her little compact mirror out and was chopping a bunch of small white chunks into powder. She

sliced the powder gracefully into two little lines and held up the mirror to Joanie.

"No, thank you," Joanie said.

"Cool," Luane said casually, as she stooped over the mirror. With two quick motions of her head, and hardly any sound, the lines were gone. She licked the mirror and placed it back into her purse. Joanie stepped aside as Luane came over to the sink and wet her finger. With a snort she sucked the moisture into her nose and smiled down on Joanie. "Show time," she said.

Luane stepped around Joanie and jerked the door open. She was out into the dark restaurant, headed for the front, by the time Joanie repacked her purse and headed out herself. The cocaine didn't bother Joanie as much as it had when she first started as a waitress. She was getting used to seeing it around. It seemed that everyone did it, except for the few like herself, who still actually thought controlled substances were illegal, and the father and mother types that waited tables, did their clean up and left as soon as possible to save on baby-sitters.

As she rounded the corner into the lounge area she viewed a strange scene. Luane watched passively as Sam and Duke arm wrestled at the bar. The wrestler's faces were serious, concentrated, as they leaned and pulled on each other. Joanie could see right away that the bottle of 151 was now on the bar and that they were wrestling for shots.

"Give up, Duke," Sam said, his voice a little strained. "I'm nowet back."

"Nope," she slammed his wrist down to the bar and smiled sloppily, "you're just a pasty-faced white boy with a roll of quarters down his pants and a BMW traded in for his kids." Duke tilted back her beer and drank noisily, then tossed the empty to Sam. "Let's get the Hell out of here."

Joanie came over to Duke and put her hand on her shoulder. "Do you think you should be riding your bike over to the party? It wouldn't be so bad if you were driving over in Sarah's car or if Sarah were here and she was driving--"

"To Hell with Sarah," Duke said, "that bitch is used up."

"You broke up with Sarah?" Luane said.

"Watch it, Shirley Temple," Sam said to Joanie, "I think she smells fresh meat."

"Joan missed her chance," Duke said, looking away from them all, "now I have a *boyfriend*."

"Since when do you like boys?" Luane said.

Duke stood slowly and made her way to the entrance of the bar. "After Sarah turned out to be such a witch, I thought I'd give one a try. If you're lucky and you're nice, you can meet him at the party."

"I don't believe it," Luane said, "what's his name?"

Duke smiled and tilted her head. With a dreamy look in

her eyes she said, "Vesche."

"*Vetch!*" Luane said. "*Vetch!* That's Peter's metal name." Luane's mouth hung open as she starred at Duke. "I can't believe you're going out with *Peter*."

"Looks like you girls have something in common," Sam laughed. Joanie was confused. "You two will have to compare notes," Sam said.

"Forget notes," Luane said. "That was two years ago. Before he got into all that socialism crap and the metal music. You can have him." Luane stalked off into the kitchen.

For a moment, the three of them sat in their places and looked into the dim doorway where Luane had left the room. "What was that all about?" Joanie finally said.

Sam moved over from his seat and wrapped his arm around Joanie's shoulder. Joanie tensed. "Peter worked here two years ago--" he said softly into her ear.

"What?" said Duke. "What? No secrets."

"It's no secret," Sam said innocently, "it just never comes up. Two years ago Peter worked here. That was back in the old days, before all of the people here were hired. It was just me and Luane and Peter, everybody else was different, except Tod. And Peter and Luane were an item back then." He stood as he spoke and slid his hand down Joanie's thigh. Joanie shivered. "Anyone want another drink?" he said.

"I'll have another beer," Duke said. "And mix Joan up another on me." Duke winked at her.

Sam continued as he mixed the drinks. "It was Memorial Day weekend, nothing too big in volume, but a lot of drinking. Luane and Peter and Tod and I went out to Gauchos down on Whipple. It's gone now, of course. I think some Koreans bought it and turned it into a Jiffy Lube. Well, we went in and started drinking rounds of tequila. We were there about an hour and one of Tod's partners came in for a cocktail."

"Is this the boot story?" Duke said.

"You've heard this?" Sam said.

"Well, I've heard about it from someone who was in the bathroom, but I never heard the whole thing."

"Ok, so this partner comes in and sits at the table with us. He's this typical yuppie lawyer type, wearing a suit that probably cost two grand, balding from stress, champagne belly. We're all sitting around and Peter starts getting really bombed. Peter and this yuppie start talking about politics and philosophy or something. We weren't really listening because once Peter has a certain amount to drink he starts to get really obnoxious."

"He doesn't drink anymore," Duke said as she took a long pull from her beer.

"I'll believe that when I see it. Anyway, the yuppie is defending capitalism and Peter is defending socialism and

they're both turning red and getting louder. Peter is going on and on with all of these scenarios of the revolutionary end of our form of government and he's putting this lawyer guy right in the middle of every scenario, blowing him up and disemboweling him and his family. We think they're about to throw punches and Peter starts laughing, right in the guy's face. The yuppie lawyer looks all confused, looking all around the table for help. And Peter starts patting him on the back and says, 'You rich lawyers are all alike. No sense of humor. It doesn't matter what you argue about, as long as you win. I'm just kidding. The revolution won't come, it was a joke. You can keep all your toys and cars and women.' So Tod and the partner just take off, they get up and leave. Tod was pissed."

Sam came back around the bar and headed for his seat next to Joanie, but Duke moved next to Joanie before he got there. Sam shrugged and sat next to Duke. "We were leaving about five shots later and Peter is still laughing at the lawyer guy. So we stop in the can on our way out and guess who's taking a piss? the lawyer guy. So Peter goes over calm as can be and whips it out next to him and says as they're pissing together, 'You know, son, I was only kidding when I said the revolution wasn't coming. I just wanted you to relax so you wouldn't see it coming. In just a little while me and my comrades will be marching into your little condo in the Los Altos Hills and we'll take back what you

stole from us. And just for kicks I think I'll squash your little pin-head under my own personal hobnail boots.' And while he says it he reaches over and grabs the guy's butt and sinks his fingers in deep and shakes him all around. The yuppie guy goes berserk. He starts yelling all these things and calling Peter out. We ran the Hell out of there. Peter probably gave the guy nightmares. When the partner found out Peter worked here, he made Tod fire him. He and Luane didn't last much longer after that, she said he was too unstable."

"Well," Duke said, "unstable doesn't bother me. Never has. Besides, he gave up drinking for the New Year." She leaned into her hand on the bar as she spoke, her words came slow and sloppily. "You know, I came to work here right when all that was happening. We had a meeting in my first week and Tod was saying things like, *never talk about people behind their backs after you leave a place because you never know when you may be working for them again and that they could turn up in your life where you least expect them.* I guess he was talking about Peter. Tod's got balls. I never heard anyone threaten fired people."

Duke stood slowly and staggered towards the door. "Thanks for the story about my boyfriend, Sham. Come on, let's get the hell out of here before Mr. Potato Head catches us." She walked into the wall as she passed through the entryway and said, "Oof!" Duke started laughing to

herself as she walked into the dimness.

"Wow," Joanie said, "how many shots did you guys do?"

Sam shrugged his shoulders and ground a wide smile, "We were arm wrestling for shots. You know, it's amazing. The more a dike drinks the stronger she gets. It got to the point that I didn't even try to beat her." Sam laughed as he pulled on his coat and followed Duke into the dark restaurant. Joanie shook her head and followed him.

"Duke," Sam called, "wait a minute."

Joanie and Sam caught up with her in the dark restaurant. They stood in a small triad among the dead, white tables. "What," Duke said.

"Why don't we car pool over to the party?" Sam said. "Joanie's only had one or two drinks tonight. We can all ride nice and safe over to the party and no one will go to jail."

Duke put her hand on Joanie's shoulder and looked into her eyes. "Okay, " she said. They turned and made their way into the dark kitchen. As they passed through the kitchen, Duke spoke in the dark. "Where do you suppose my competition took off to?"

"She probably had a temper tantrum and waited in the parking lot," Sam said. "I'll go see if I can find her."

Out back, the alley way was dark and full of obstacles. Joanie came out of the back door and walked a few steps into the night. Up ahead, she could hear Sam and Luane speaking

quietly in the dark, grabbing each other and making noise. She frowned and shook her head. Just as she started into the dark, her arms out in front of her, head down, the restaurant's back door slammed shut with a boom in the dark. She wheeled around and saw Duke's black shape against the white stucco wall. Neither moved.

"I'll take you up on the ride to the party," Duke said thickly. "But you have to promise to keep your hands off me, *Joan*. I'm a spoken-for *woman* now." She passed by Joanie in the dark, brushing heavily against her. Joanie felt Duke's hand brush across her thigh as she passed.

Duke must have known this alley instinctively. Joanie wondered if she knew just this alley so well or if she knew her way around darkness. Joanie followed Duke around cans and dumpsters and stacks of trash she would have never seen if she walked through there alone. She never left this late, when all the lights were off. Finally they reached the end of the alley and walked into the street lights. Sam and Luane's cars were gone already. She was not surprised.

Duke staggered towards her bike. "My car is over here," Joanie called to her. "This tan Rabbit. Here, I'll let you in." She unlocked the door and held it open for Duke. After a pause Duke came over, now wearing her black leather jacket. She collapsed into the passenger seat, her head back, eyes closed. After a second she looked up at Joanie and smiled, "I'm warning you, *Joan*, I may be cheap,

but I'm not easy." Joanie slammed the door and got in the driver's side.

The Rabbit started right up and Joanie edged it out onto the nearly deserted El Camino Real. "I hope you know the way to the party, Duke. I've never been to Greg and Bobby's place before."

"Sure, it's easy," Duke said, "Just a mile up the road, a left on Whipple, go up two blocks and look for all the cars."

"Duke," Joanie hesitated.

"What?"

"Watch out for Sam tonight. I heard he might try to set you up."

"Don't worry, kid. I've watched you people dick around before. Sham is an idiot, but he's entertaining. Besides, if he gets out of hand Peter will rip his heart out and vomit in the hole." As she spoke Duke popped out Joanie's cassette tape and stuck in one of her own. A head banging thrash beat blared out of the speakers as some screaming maniac shrieked lyrics Joanie could barely understand. The screamer growled over the speakers and the song went into a violent machine-gun drum rhythm covered over by abusively distorted guitar:

Generation mutilation
Juvenile genocide
investment capital ordains
the death of dreaming parasites.

You stuffed yourself with the American
dream until you were so full you had to
puke it up on the floor, Hey, thanks for
leaving a little wet something for the
next generation to lap up.

Self-indulgent intercourse
egocentric death divorce
steals the future's power source
fuels the growing anger force.

You said you'd change the world but the
only difference you made was in hot properties
and the toxic waste disposal business,
remember: Never trust anyone over thirty.

"Great song, huh?" Duke said when it was over. "It's
called *Yuppie Up Chuck*, by Rat Masochist. It's the thrash
band that my boyfriend is the drummer for. They're putting
together an album called *Great White-Male Satan*."

"Yeah, great. It's real uplifting," Joanie said. She
reached over and turned the stereo way down. Duke laughed,
"I was wondering how much of that you were going to put up
with."

"It's not exactly my kind of music." The quiet of the
car seemed uncomfortable to Joanie, so she turned up the
music just a little. Duke stared straight ahead. Joanie
decided to start small talk. "You know, Duke, I've worked
with you for a month and I don't even know your real name."

"My real name is Patty." She looked over and said very
softly, "Patty." Duke reached over and turned the music
back up.

They arrived at the party almost immediately after

that. There were dozens of cars lining the street on both sides. With no open spaces available, Joanie pulled down the block and parked in a dark knoll by the end of some house's driveway. She turned off the car and the lights, the two women sat in near-total darkness. Just as Joanie unbuckled her seat belt she felt a hand, firm and stable, come to rest on her thigh. The hand slid slowly up Joanie's thigh and came to rest near her crotch. She looked down into her lap and could see the pale white hand with the faint word written across the fingers, HATE. Joanie could feel the heat of Duke's hand through her black work pants. She said nothing, but sat in the darkness and listened to Duke breathe. Finally, after what seemed half an hour, Duke spoke.

"Believe it or not you're the only one that knows my name from before I dropped out. I wouldn't trust any of the wetbacks in the kitchen or the Yuppies waiting on tables, but I trust you. I don't know why." Duke stroked Joanie's thigh gently. "Sham and Luane have been screwing each other and everybody else for as long as I've known them. They don't know any better. Tod is a thief and a bastard. Peter is psychotic. But you're okay." With the LOVE hand Duke reached up and turned Joanie's head and looked her in the eye. "I wanted to screw you. But now I just want to know you. I want you to know me. You can call me Patty, but just don't do it around the others. My real name will be my

pet name for you." Duke leaned over and kissed Joanie on the mouth. Her hands were hot, but her mouth was cold and tasted of ashes and stale beer.

Before Joanie could react, the passenger side door opened and the car filled with dome light. A white arm, muscular and covered with steel and leather bracelets, reached in and pulled Duke from the car. A man's head poked into the space that Duke had just filled. The head sat on a thick neck, square jawed with a Roman nose that was long on the round face. It had stunning blue eyes. The man's dirty blonde hair was shaved similar to Duke's, except for a shock of dreadlocks which grew long and heavily from a circle on the top of his head and flopped in his face. "Hey, you're a cute one. She told me she had better taste in women than I do." And then the face was gone. The man slammed the door and Joanie sat stunned in the dark.

She sat there in the warm darkness of her car for a long while, staring at the spot on her leg that Duke, or Patty, had been stroking just before. At first her mind was a curious blank. The only thing that surfaced was not a thought at all, but a sensation. She had never been kissed by a woman before, not with the press of slightly opened lips on her mouth. Several times she reached up and placed her hand on the ignition, then let it drop. Finally, she opened her door slowly and stepped out of the car. Noise from the party drifted down the street.

The house was classic mid-seventies California architecture; a pastel-colored stucco box, capped with rust-colored, interlaced curved tiles, with three feet of property on either side. There was ten feet allotted to the front for a pull-in driveway and probably the same amount in the back for a narrow pool or a wide hot tub. Cactus and hanging plants filled whatever space remained in the front, for effect. Joanie squeezed between a dangerous-looking cactus and a black BMW and made her way to the front door.

Through a window she could see groups of people standing around clutching wine glasses, reservedly engaged in small talk. They didn't look at all like restaurant staff types, too stiff and reserved, well dressed and maintained. These, she assumed, were Greg and Bobby's guests. The walls were painted bright white. In the center of each hung small pictures too detailed for her to make out from across the room. Playing softly in the background was music she did not recognize. It was old sixties music, or something like that. Somewhere in the back of the house she could hear the sounds of a real party; loud laughter and screams over the subdued conversation in front of her. That was where she wanted to go.

She let herself in and stood in the entry hall. Alice stood with her boyfriend, both dressed in comfortable, expensive-looking clothes. He wore a hot pink button-down, khaki slacks and loafers without socks. His hair was black,

cut close on the sides and topped off with a flat top. His features were square and tanned. She wore a light flowered sun dress with a cream sweater and matching flats. All of the other guests wore similar clothes and none noticed her come in. Joanie felt out of place and inferior in her work clothes and tried to slip through the entry hall into the kitchen, but Alice noticed her and waved to her to come over. There was no way she was going in there dressed as she was. She waved politely and kept on her way towards the kitchen. Alice slipped loose of her boyfriend's arm and eased her way through the crowd.

"I know where you're heading," she said smiling, "into the real party. Everyone is in back."

"Where's Duke?"

Alice looked at her, both surprised and sarcastically. "Slumming tonight?" she said.

Joanie turned and brushed the comment off. "I just met her new boyfriend and I wanted to see more of him." She looked over her shoulder as she made her way through the kitchen piled high with odd dishes of stuffed pre-historic looking vegetables and raw fish rolls. "He didn't say much, but he looks interesting."

"Interesting!" Alice picked food off plates as she passed through the kitchen. "He was here a half an hour before you showed up with Duke and he wouldn't stay in the back. He kept coming up to Dennis' friends and saying the

strangest, rudest things. 'Did you know that these plastic plates contribute to the destruction of the biosphere?' 'Recycling! It's something we all should do.' and 'Everyone has their day, Comrades.' What a dick. It was like being verbally assaulted by a militant ecologist."

"Well, maybe he is."

"I hope not. They're so obnoxious. I don't want to spend the rest of the night defending my stand on diapers. Hey, what's the matter with your eye?"

Joanie shook her head. "It must be these contacts or something. Or something got in my eye and won't come out. It's nothing. A little something in the eye never hurt anyone."

"Seize the day!" someone said loudly on the patio.

"And if he doesn't stop with the toasts, I'll shoot him myself."

They passed through the kitchen and dining room and through the sliding glass doors onto the patio. Paper lanterns of various colors hung, glowing dimly, along a cord of electric lights. On a table sat barbecued foods, leftovers on plates still covered with congealing red sauces. Sam and Luane and Duke and her boyfriend Peter, stood around the barbecue, drinking beer. With them stood many of the rest of the restaurant's wait staff and one of the bartenders. She couldn't remember their names. Apparently Mr. Potato Head was not there. They were all

drinking to Peter's last toast. As soon as they came out on the patio, the drinkers all turned and called for the two to join them.

"Joanie, Alice," Sam said, "*please* join us."

Joanie noticed a silence hung over them. They all held cans of beer except for Peter. He had his hands stuffed into his pockets. Sam and Luane seemed half-embarrassed by whatever it was they were talking about. Duke and Peter had half-asleep, half-amused looks on their faces that made Joanie feel that they were hardly there. In the light, she could see that they dressed the same, both in black. He wore a black tank top, black jeans and black army boots. After cursory greetings, the other employees moved away and gathered in small groups and spoke in low tones. Sam crumpled a beer can and flipped it over his shoulder into a nearby garbage can. It fell neatly into the center of the can. "Swish," Sam said.

"Well," Peter said to Joanie, "you do look better standing up."

"Oh, really," Sam said. "We were wondering why the ride over was taking you so long."

Joanie turned and slapped Sam on the shoulder. "We met outside." Joanie was surprised that Sam seemed to have turned his attention away from Duke, but it was probably because of Peter. Peter was definitely threatening enough. She would have to be careful. Sam might try to pick on her.

"Did Tod ever show up?"

"Yeah," Sam said, "he's inside with some investors or something. You know Tod, let's make a deal."

"So, Sam," Peter said, "I can't believe that you're still shlepping California cuisine to all the stuffed shirts and dick heads like the fine folk inside there." He thumbed towards the house. "You decide to join *our* generation of servants or what?"

Sam turned from Joanie and smiled. "Hell no, *Vetch*," he said, "waiting tables is play for money. You probably didn't notice my new car outside, the brown Mercedes. Nothing a little hard work can't swing."

"Nothing selling your soul can't swing."

A flare of anger flashed across Sam's face for an instant, barely noticeable, but he smiled amiably at Peter. "You'll never change, Peter. This is a party. Take a lude or something."

"I don't do *ludes*," Peter said.

"Since when?" Sam laughed. "Have a beer and mellow out."

"I don't drink." Peter smiled and cocked his head to the side. His dark blonde dreadlocks fell across his shoulder. As he spoke, he pulled Duke to his side and put his arm around her shoulder. She looked a little shocked at first, then her face went blank.

Sam turned and regarded Peter full-on. "You don't

party and you don't drink? What the hell do you do for kicks now? We used to have a hell of a time."

"I stay out all night and crash yuppie parties to watch the Beemer stiffs get hard-ons for their best friend's wives. I go to Macy's and Emporium and watch fresh new college graduates sell perfume baths to leprous Boomer bitches out spoiling their inner children with alimony money. I--"

"What the hell happened to you? Man, it sounds like you're hanging out with all the wrong people." Sam didn't seem angry so much as annoyed with a disobedient child. "Gawd, all we're trying to do is have a little party and you come in and depress everyone with this crap. Who wants to hear all this punker crap? Do yourself a favor, lighten up and start drinking again. You're a hell of a lot funner when you're drunk."

"Punkers were the seventies, this is the nineties."

Sam wasn't smiling. It was then that Joanie noticed Luane and Alice had gone. They must have slipped away from the discussion. They were nowhere outside. Sam sniffed and took a short pull from his can of beer. He clinked the aluminium side of his beer can in and out with his thumb as he spoke. "Peter, this is a party, mellow out dude."

"Mellow out: late sixties. Dude: thirties, late sixties, mid eighties," Peter said. "This is the nineties, tell me something nineties."

"Man, you have an identity problem. That's the problem with all you dread heads in your black clothes and your crappie attitudes, you're a bunch of whiners." Sam looked really angry now. He leaned over the barbecue and pointed his finger at Peter's chest, obviously careful not to touch him. "Why the hell don't you get a job and stop pissing and crying."

"Never trust anyone over thirty," Peter said quietly.

Sam turned and walked away. He whipped open the screen door and pulled it shut after him. Peter smiled and hugged Duke a little.

Joanie suddenly realised she was alone out on the patio with them. She turned back to Duke and Peter. They both stood watching her impassively. "Um," Joanie said, "I heard one of your songs on the way over here. It was very interesting."

"She talks," Peter said. "Well call me Bob Dylan."

"Peter," Duke said, "you can be a king prick sometimes."

"I'll bet he was screwing Luane when we were going out two years ago," he said. "Sham was in better control about it then though." Peter made Joanie feel like she wasn't there, that she was just watching him perform in a show. "Seems like he's losing his classic, detached objectivity," Peter said. "I flushed him out pretty quick. They must be pretty hot and heavy."

"So?" Duke said. "What's it to you? What do you care if they're into leather and cannibalism? You still got a problem with her?" She seemed a little unsteady and looked up at him with sad, confused eyes. Peter raised his head and sighed.

"Duke, jealousy does not become you," he said. He slapped her butt and started to laugh. "I don't have a problem with either Sham or Luane. They can get sucked into a black hole for all I care." They moved over to some lawn chairs set up next to the hot tub. Joanie followed them over and sat next to Duke as Peter stood over them. "You don't have to worry about me, Duke," Peter continued. "People like those two are everywhere. I just like to know my enemies." Peter happened to look over his shoulder and suddenly crouched a bit. "Oh, great," he said, "Tod is back from his little business trip to Coketown. I think I'll go say hello." He moved off toward the house.

Duke watched him go and turned slowly toward Joanie. "Know your enemies," Duke said shaking her head and smiling slightly. "Joan, this guy is a mental case. Everyone is out to get him. I never met anyone with so many axes to grind."

"Is he serious? I don't get what he's doing," Joanie said. "Is he some kind of budding young communist or something?"

"Socialist. He hates communism.... Anyway, he's

mostly just pushing buttons. I don't know what it is about him. He's angrier than anyone one I've ever met before. Maybe his acting out whatever it is that makes him so pissed is what helps me through it all." She rolled her head back and started to laugh as she spoke. "The other day I went to the park where Peter is living in his van and this mini-van pulls up. This little yuppie couple in their late thirties, early forties get out and start playing with this toddler on the grass. The whole while the father yuppie is watching us like we're rabid dogs or something."

As she spoke, a smile grew on Duke's face. A slight tone of excitement grew in her voice. Joanie noticed Duke starting to use her white hands to describe the things she must be seeing in her mind, drawing boxes and shapes in the air for Joanie to see also. "So he goes over to the Burger Pit next to the park and he comes back with a huge bag of seasoned twisty fries and he starts pelting the side of the mini van with them. And do you know what the yuppies did? At first they sat there in horror, but Vetch must have looked so terrifying that they picked up their kid and ran off to the restrooms or someplace. They called 911 on their cellular telephone. Peter spent two days in jail for drunk in public or damage to private property or something. The yuppie parents wanted him to stay longer for traumatizing their kid." Duke broke off and chuckled to herself, shaking her head. "He told me while he was in jail that it wasn't

fair. What right did they have to a mini-van and puking infants at their advanced age. That should have been *his* mini-van."

"Oh my god," Joanie said, "does he do things like that all the time?"

"Yeah. I don't know what it is with him. I don't know what attracts me to him." Duke shook her head and let her hands fall limply in her lap. "Maybe I should stick with the kind of relationships that I know. But I haven't been too successful with those, either." Her head rolled back. "Joan, could you get me a Coke, or something, something with caffeine. It's been a long day."

Joanie stood and walked across the patio toward the barbecue. She began looking around the table for a cooler where some drinks might be. Under the table she found a small garbage can filled with ice and various cans of drinks. She sifted through the cold ice and found a red can of Jolt Cola. *All the sugar and twice the caffeine*, it said. As she stood, she could see inside the dining room. Peter, Luane, Tod and Sam stood around the table, talking. Tod had changed from the suit he was wearing in the restaurant earlier into a pair of tan slacks and Docksidors. He wore a violet Polo shirt and a shiny Rolex watch. It didn't look too volatile to Joanie. They almost seemed to be a family gathered at a reunion or a holiday; Tod, the father, Sam, a young uncle, Peter, the rebellious son, and

Luane, the devoted daughter. Joanie turned and headed back toward Duke. She looked a little better, her face not so pale and her eyes seemed to be clearer. She decided not to mention Tod, she didn't want Duke to get upset while she was ill. "You must be feeling better," she said, as she sat.

"Actually I feel worse than I have in a long time." Duke took the can and read it. "Good choice," she said. "Look, Joan, my head is clearing up and I have to tell you something. Peter thinks you and I were out there sucking face before he came out and got me. He's probably hostile because he's jealous. I'm pretty new at this boyfriend experiment so I don't really know what to tell you."

"Did he tell you that?"

"No, I just know. I know you're not a dike and that you come from this good little all-American family and that's fine," Joanie tensed up and looked away from Duke's eyes. "Don't take a lot of what goes on here or at the restaurant too seriously. It's all a dream, a cartoon. Some pervert is asleep somewhere and we're all just trapped in his dream. That's what Peter always tells me: 'Uncle Sam has had a cranial melt down and we're all trapped in his psychotic delusions.' I guess that's why I like him, he says stuff like that all the time."

"No, it's OK," Joanie said softly, "I don't think much about it all. I don't think anything less of him or you for what's happening in your relationship. Relationships aren't

easy, especially experimental ones." She turned and smiled sadly. The two sat silently for a while, listening to the sixties music drifting from the house.

"Have you ever read a book called *Ulysses*?" Duke finally asked.

Joan started from her thoughts and looked over at Duke. "*Ulysses*?" she said confused. "You mean the Greek guy?"

"No," Duke said. She was quiet and calm. "The book by the English guy. Today we were in the park, this morning, and Peter was telling me all about this book he just finished, *Ulysses*. He loved it."

"Really? What was it about?"

"A day a guy had. Everything about the day. I never cared about stuff like that, but Peter loves it. He tells me it's the greatest book, he sleeps with it. He loves to read things. Says there are too many people around nowadays that are dead up here," she tapped her temple lightly.

"So it wasn't about Greeks?"

"It was about all these people moving through this guys head... And they were a part of his inner--"

Something shot through the dining room window and they could hear someone from inside the dining room yell, *Nostrovia!*

"Oh Hell," Duke said, as she rose heavily from her seat. "Looks like this is the end of the party for us." She turned and smiled, "He lasted longer than I thought he

would." The two women entered the dining room together. Everyone had come from all the parts of the house to see what was going on. They stood crowded in the doorways and looked on with passive, mildly curious faces. In the background, Joanie could hear a Who song, an oldie she actually recognized. The singer was singing, *The party on the left*, and on and on and on. Tod and Peter were standing face to face and yelling something about Communism.

"Sam said you changed, but you haven't changed. You're still a loudmouth fool that you always were." Tod's face was slowly turning the shade of his Polo shirt, all the way up his forehead onto his shiny bald head. Peter looked oddly bored, impassive. "I can't believe you still walk around talking that communist line after all these years," Tod continued. "Get some new material. Don't you watch the news?"

"Why the hell would I watch the news? They're all a bunch of lying pitchmen for the special interest groups. They're nothing but another special interest group themselves. Cerebral sedation and they're doing a great job of it, too. Nothing insures violent overthrow more brilliantly than a lethargic, dull-witted, trusting, naive population of registered sleep-voters, eager to slam the next puppet into office--"

"Oh, come on, Peter," Tod said patronizingly, "rhetoric? You can do better than that." Tod turned toward

the kitchen and called, "Greg! Bobby! Which of you invited this social retard to this party!"

"They're occupied," someone called from the kitchen and several people somewhere in the house broke into laughter. "Very funny," Tod said. He turned back to Peter and said in a low voice, "You better get the Hell out of here before there's any trouble, Peter. Pricks like you are no problem for me to handle."

"Oh, please, Mr. Potato Head, you're old. Old. Old. Old. I'm young, young, young. The next generation. I could remove your bloated liver with my tongue."

Tod swung at Peter's head, but Peter quickly ducked out of the way and caught Tod's hand with both of his. With one quick move, Peter twisted Tod's arm. Joanie heard a loud pop noise and Tod began to scream. The expression on Peter's face never changed, cold, as if he were watching a beer commercial. Several of the yuppie men and women by the living room entrance turned away in horror and retreated back into the living room.

"Hey! Hey!" Sam yelled, as he lunged to stop Peter from doing any more damage. "What the Hell do you think you're doing. Let him go! Let him go!" Sam and another man pried the two apart and shoved Peter toward the front of the house. Sam took Tod into the living room and laid him down on the couch. "Call the police!" Tod yelled, "Call the police! I want that son of a bitch arrested."

Before she knew what was happening, Joanie was being dragged toward the front door. Duke had grabbed her arm and was pulling her through the kitchen behind the group of people pushing Peter out of the house.

As they passed through the kitchen, Duke stopped in front of a man in a cream-colored sweat suit, who was yelling into a wall phone. "He's a crazy bastard," he said, "He already smashed up one guy here and he's on his way out the front door. What? I don't know. He may have a gun. I saw a knife. Yeah. He's dangerou--" Duke reached out and pulled down the cradle and the man's face looked shocked. "What do you think you're doing, you dike bitch," he said, and he slammed down the phone on Duke's fingers. Duke pulled her fingers out from under the handset. She shook them in the air and then wound up and punched the phone caller right in his smiling face. It was so fast, shaking and swinging in one smooth movement, that Joanie hardly noticed it. Then, Duke turned and ran, dragging Joanie along with her. The whole time, she never let go of Joanie's arm.

Outside, a little crowd formed. A half-circle of well-dressed men and women stood in front of the house, almost like a little blockade to keep Peter out. Duke and Joanie pushed through the crowd and found Peter walking up and down the street screaming, "Where is it? Where is it?" Finally he came to a big brown Mercedes. He stalked up to the front

and started kicking out the headlights, then the grill, then he kicked off the rear-view mirrors. The whole time he kept yelling "*Swish, Swish.*" The crowd behind the two women was making noises as if they were watching a fireworks show. In the distance, Joanie heard a siren.

"Should we stop him?" Joanie said.

"Why? Hear those sirens? They'll take him whether he stops or not. He knows what he's doing."

Joanie was stunned. It was as if Duke were watching her husband make a particularly difficult putt on the eighteenth green, or carve the hedge. Glass tinkled into the street as Peter went around and around the car, screaming and waving his arms and kicking. "Who said there'd be no entertainment at this party?" someone said in the crowd. As he rounded the car, he stooped and scooped up handfuls of the broken glass.

The Police pulled up in front of the crowd and flashed a spotlight on Peter. The light shone intensely bright, lighting one half of his body. The other side, the dark side, was obscured. He looked curious in the odd light, flat, two-dimensional, as if he were an image without substance.

The two policemen inside jumped out and drew their revolvers. "Freeze!" one of them yelled. Peter turned and started walking towards the police, bellowing and screaming and swinging his dreadlocks around and around his head, his

knotted hair flopping around like arms waving at all kinds of crazy angles. He tore at his shirt with his bloody hands. It was quite an impressive show, melodramatic. In his left hand he held a bunch of broken car glass. Peter turned away from the police for a second, then turned suddenly, wound up and threw a bunch of broken glass at the police, and charged their car, screaming. The tiny chunks of glass ricocheted all over the car. His chest exploded, a cloud of blood and bone sprayed from his back and covered the dented brown Mercedes that glistened in the spotlight. Joanie didn't even hear the shot. Peter didn't struggle and wave his arms and gasp theatrically as he slumped to the ground. His body just fell in a pile in the street, a limp heap of bloody clothes.

"Oh my God," Duke said.

Joanie turned her head and looked blankly at Duke, then looked back at the thing. She blinked.

Carpe Diem

The long white structure floats on a heat-twisted sea. Sweltering steel and vinyl colors subtly mix in the rising heat. Evan sits behind the wheel of his car at the beginning of an endless row of parked cars. The morning of an endless day. The old El Camino wheezes as it skulks down the row, vainly searching for a spot, heading for the back. By the fence one spot stands open. He parks the car and climbs from its belly, locks the door, stretches in the heat, shoulders his pack and starts his trek across the lot. He is tall and thin, white skin, blue-black hair that falls perfectly straight to his shoulders. He rubs his eyes, bleary red, coughs hot gas through his dry throat. A hundred yards from the white structure he can smell sweet breads, rolls baking in ovens, coffee. Any other day, any other time in his life he would have rejoiced at that sweet smell, the vapors of domesticity; it smells putrid.

His feet fall lightly in time the pounding in his temples. He is very late. The summer sun sucks what little life he has been allowed to keep. He eyes the door as it dances closer and closer; the building is cool, they keep it cool. Machines won't work when overheated.

Evan enters, slips past the supervisor's office and tries to hide in the employees' lounge. A crowd. It is an amazing thing, people buzzing, humming away there around

multi-colored speckle- topped tables, clicking endlessly, iterating faces in plastic chairs, smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee. He adjusts to the shock imperceptibly and joins them, looking for faces less alien than others. At a small table near the back he sees her, she is sitting with him. The young man reads behind a paper all sprawled out in front of him and she stares off into space. Evan braces himself and heads over to their table. He pulls up a red plastic chair, turns it around and straddles it.

"Can you believe this?" the male voice comes from behind the paper. "'America Reaches Middle Age,' the paper says. 'How America has changed since the Boomers have hit middle age.'" He lowers the paper. The reader is about eighteen, orange crew-cut hair, swaths of acne rebelling on his face, hazel eyes, tattoos. "Do I look middle-aged to you? What, all of a sudden we're a nation of yuppies. Who do these people think they are?"

Evan ignores the question. "Hey," he says, "What's up? Why aren't we working?"

They look up at him in wonder. The woman, about twenty, sandy blonde hair, ovular glasses, gray eyes, shakes her head. "Why aren't you fired, you mean." She laughs. "Evan, you never cease to amaze me. Here we thought you were gonna get canned for drinking all night and sleeping half the day away and being late for the *fiftieth* time this week and you blunder in on the one day when the Government

comes in for a surprise inspection of the facility." She hands him her coffee and smiles. Evan takes the cup, looks at it, blinks stupidly down at it.

"Well," Evan says into her coffee, "at least we know now that the government is good for something."

"We were just talking about you," says the younger man. "About what happened yesterday."

"Yeah? What about yesterday?"

"You're still wearing the same clothes I saw you in last night at The Club," she says. "You slept in your car last night, didn't you?"

"What if I did?"

"Hell, Evan," acne says, "it's okay if your dad asked you to leave yesterday. I got tossed out two years ago. I wasn't one of the *beautiful* people. I wasn't on an *upwardly mobile* track." The acne face smiles, angry and delighted. "Pop thought I was a bad *investment* of his time, a limited return. So I was asked to leave until I *matured*. I was optioned right out of the house."

"No," Evan says, sipping her coffee, "I think what I need is to be alone for a little while. I've been thinking... What if what he said is true? What if he did fail as a father and I'm this *curse* to the family? So he wants me to be a brain surgeon, or a lawyer or something. So what? So what if I bake bread. This isn't forever, it's only for now. I like running my machine, dumping all the

ingredients in and folding it slowly in my own vat. *My vat.*
If I'm happy baking bread, that's enough."

"Live for today? Right here, right now?" she says.
"Is that what you're saying?" She laughs, strokes his
thigh. "Ah, virgin youth, your innocence dies hard."

"We fought most of the weekend," Evan says downcast.
"Every time I left my room he was on me like a cheap suit:
*When are you going back to school? When are you going to
get a real job? When are you going to move out?"*

"So dad pulled the old *The world is your apple* con,
huh? *Seize the ring, boy!*" acne says. "Blood pressure
jumping through the roof? Let him. Maybe you'll luck out
and he'll blow a vein and you'll never have to work again."

"Oh, that's nice," she says.

Evan smiles.

"So the old man is disappointed," acne says. "Your
life has let him down. Failed dreams. So what? That's his
problem. Why the hell is he *trying* to live two lives and
making you live none?"

"Oh no," she says, "here he goes again."

"To hell with you," acne says, "like you're the beloved
daughter?"

"Don't drag me into this," she snaps. "I already dealt
with the whole sudden family death syndrome." She shakes
her dark face slowly, arms linked tightly across her chest.
"You're lucky you lasted this long with your family, *Evan.*"

My family got caught up in the psycho-babble con game a few years back." Her voice assumes a hideous sarcasm. 'I love you, sweetheart, but this thing has *got* to work itself out. I have to do things I have to do, your father has to do things he has to do. We have to *heal* our *inner* children that never had a chance to grow up.' Try this one on: 'How can you force your expectations of parenthood on us when we're nothing but frightened children ourselves?' or: 'We all have to heal ourselves before we can be expected to nurture others.' Ha! I thought I was the kid in the family, but I nursed them right through the divorce." She broods.

"Okay, okay," says Evan, "believe me, it's too early for this. I was just wondering out loud. I've had a lot to think about these last few days. Where the hell am I going to live?"

"If you need a place to stay you can crash with us down by the waterfront," she says.

"Or you could move in with your girlfriend." acne says.

Evan shakes his head. "I don't know... it just doesn't feel... right."

She and acne laugh. "What does right have to do with it?" acne says.

"Well," Evan mumbles, "she's going back to school at the end of the summer... and we just started dating two months ago... and she doesn't even have a TV."

The three sit in silence.

"We have a TV," acne sulks.

After a long moment Evan sighs. "Okay... you got yourself a roommate... for the time being." Evan smiles at her, fleeting, a rare and strange smile. "Maybe this episode will work itself out before the commercial break after all."

The woman laughs and throws a half-eaten doughnut at Evan. "What do you think this is, *Three's Company*?"

"Evan!" someone calls from the other side of the cafeteria. Evan turns his head, still smiling. It's the supervisor.

TV Wasteland

"Welcome back...", the TV lilted from its high perch in the waiting room, which smelled of ancient canned heat and sour milk. "your dreams were your ticket out..." It was that old seventies TV show that he hadn't seen in ten, fifteen years. It was on much too loud. It was always on much too loud, yesterday, today.... But none of these people, these zombies lost in space, isolated in grief, none of them ever seemed to notice. George did, sitting in the corner, quietly smoking a cigarette. George wasn't like them, he wasn't isolated. He was doing the good son thing, rushing through the night to be there, to be there. He was annoyed with the whole situation. He hadn't moved a muscle in five minutes, refused to move, just sitting there watching the grief-stricken; the whole thing made him sick. He flicked an ash on the floor, then inhaled deeply from his Camel.

Unobtrusive-yet-inviting, pastel comfy-chairs; magazines; Bible; plants; all the same, these rooms were all the same, designed to invite, relax, affirm. Tasteful textures, soothing surfaces; shallow special effects, just like TV land. Nothing was real. Nothing but death, yes, that was the thread that ran through them, the real thing. Waiting for death and failure. He wasn't decor soothed. He was alone. Where could they be, the family? It was beyond

belief. Not one of them was there to greet him. He drove through the night to be there and not one of them was there, except mother. She was there, but she wasn't saying much. He mashed his cigarette out in the ashtray and sighed. George looked up to the omnipotent Magnavox, always there, always sending. Horshack jabbed his arm in the air and creeched, "Ooo, Ooo, Ooo." George smiled; life, TV-life anyway, blundered on.

He got up from his attractive-yet-functionally-dynamic avocado comfy-chair and wandered over to the window. Streaks of rain ran down the pane, tears of the gods. George shook his head and smiled sardonically. An ambulance flashed silently at the emergency entrance below. Two men nonchalantly lugged a long bag inside. George looked into the red flashing lights and his mind wandered. Ambulances, gristly cargo, hospitals, pain, he hated them. Hated the remembrance. That night. The red lights flashed in his eyes, flashed around in his head as a light snow began to fall in the waiting room. Ambulance. *Ambulance, crouching in the snow, white crouching creecher blinking six years ago... college, Christmas break, all-nighter; beer and tequila.... Drunk in the ski lodge, a heaven of stupidity. Sweaters and panties and legs, intertwined. Beautiful. She was beautiful. So difficult to see her face like that now, so full of life, long black hair, tiny nose, hazel Asian eyes that smiled, that knew to laugh. She was the happiest*

person.... Love.... I could have loved her. She clung to me and I clung to her.... Pregnant, she whispered in bed, a Mommy and a Daddy she fingered at me. Away. Away. Lets be alone, to plan, to celebrate, we left, before everyone else we had to leave. Romance in the mountains, in the snow. Driving under water, divers down. Speed racer blind through the snow, white blind night in a truck underwater, submersed, sliding through trees and poles out of nowhere, mashed and buried.... trees and poles too close to the road, too close. Telephone poles line the road to hell, to the end of the world, it was the end of the world for us, Mai. I've seen death before, mother. I've looked in its hazel eyes, terrified rabbit eyes that fade with a truck's dome light, fade to black, Mai, you bled to death in my arms....

He turned and ambled over to the television, squat up high in the room, overlooking. He stood right in front, not caring if he blocked the view. Barbarino's head was seriously distorted, stretched and twisted, bluish and bruised. "TV land," he muttered, "I gave up tan hard bodies and cocktails for this sh--"

"George!"

He turned. Len came in, dripping, bean-pole tall, mop-topped blonde hair, beak-nosed, angle-necked, soft-eyed and casual, a step-brother, a late one.

"Len! Que pasa? Where have you been? You called two hours ago so I expected someone to at least be here by now.

It would have been nice to get out of this tomb about an hour ago when I got here."

"Relax," Len said, his voice soft and tired. "It's been a long night."

George looked around, shrugged his shoulders under his overcoat. "This is starting to get to me, it's a little too depressing. Let's at least go to the cafeteria and get away from here. Are you alone, or are John and Penny here, too?"

Len smirked. "You can never let it go, can you? I'm alone. Penny and Lara are with the kids and Dad finally went home for some rest. They were here last evening when she started to revive. I finally got Dad to sleep with a Valium and came back here to get you. Have you seen her?"

"No."

"Do you want to?"

"She wasn't there for me."

"Hmm," Len said. Neither spoke as they crossed over to the adjacent tower to the cafeteria. It was still too early for breakfast, but at least they could get some coffee. As they stepped from the elevator, George grabbed Len's arm and they stopped short.

"I can't go in here," George said.

"Why not?"

"It's crowded with *them*." George glanced around the cafeteria at all the people sitting quietly at tables.

"It's the same people we see here every time, day in and day

out, eating the same food every time because there's safety in the repetition of it."

"Oh boy," Len said. "You've been sitting alone up in that waiting room a little too long. When's the last time you slept?"

"No, no, Len. I'm serious. These people are like some kind of perverse extended family or something. Don't you ever think of them, always here? Don't they ever think of us?" Len was nodding across the room at someone he recognized.

"They're just people, just like anyone else."

"No they aren't. Do you share jokes with just anyone else in an elevator? Do you recognize just anyone else's clothes and start to take inventory of their wardrobe, tell their mood-swings by the clothes they choose? Can you tell when just anyone else has got a new haircut? or take interest when just anyone else shows up with a new relative you've never seen before? This is family, but it's perverse, there's a fiber of nastiness that runs through it, helplessness in the face of death. I've been here before, I know."

"But they're not family. Family is always the same, these people are only here because they have loved ones that *just happened* to get sick at the same time as mom."

"Reunions are just gatherings that happen to fall on holidays. It's all the same. We're related by mortality."

We all even look related, we all have the same worried, tired look in our faces. Those Asians over there have the same haggard looks I saw on Penny's and Dad's faces two days ago. On your face now. That black family over there, huddle together for comfort, for hope and encouragement just the same as we do around a holiday bird or mother's death bed. It's all the same."

Len looked hard at George. George looked away. "Death is the most casual thing in the world, the most normal. The dying aren't the ones to be pitied, we are. We're the real martyrs here. We have our health. We sit and watch our parents and spouses and children dying slow, painful deaths and then pop off to the cafeteria for starch and coffee, gallons and gallons of coffee." He turned and stared Len right in the eye. "I don't want to be with them, or be like them. Not today."

Len looked tiredly at his step-brother, "Let's go get a drink."

Snow drifts down slow-like, angling back and forth, back and forth in the still dark. Watching snow mercilessly falling, little twirls through the shattered windshield, ice pennies alighting on her swollen eyes, filling, running cold and wet down her blue face, too cold to brush it away. Her shattered face consumes memory. Buried headlights dim after a while, dying dome light coaxes death, draws it nearer.

The driver's seat, divers down, eyes half open, watching. Snow lands on her, sucks the last of her heat, black slush. She doesn't make a sound, not a moan. Her breathing just gets lighter and lighter. It's nearly silent when she dies, just the quiet whisper of snow falling into black blood, surrounded by souls dancing, little white souls here to reap my Love. I nod my head to the dancers, listen to the silent singing of her soul dance, listen to the drunk shrieking of the hooker a few stools down.

"To Hell with Johns Hopkins! To hell with them! You think if I get sick them folks would take me in? Hell no, I ain't rich." She was a huge, ratty drunk. "Why the hell they build that place here in the first place? What business they got putting a hospital in the middle of the battle zone?"

"Welcome back," Len said. George swung his heavy face around and there was Len, watching him slide around slick on the bar stool. Watching. George reached up and felt his face, wiped away the cords of sleep slick that hung from his mouth.

"They did it cause it was cheap," a little Asian bartender said. As big as she was, the little man was tiny. She wore tan sweats and a black overcoat, a grungy Red Sox cap. He was the owner, or something. That was it, he greeted them hours ago. Tiny little hands at the end of gray sleeves. They were surrounded by people, strangers:

gutter rat bastards and hookers, pimps, bimbos and piss-soaked drifters in out of the rain. "They're developing cause it's cheap down here," the little bartender said. "They expect a regular bonanza of condos and medical students. They're crazy if they think they can just crowd us out."

"No self-respecting Harvard or Stanford doctor would live shoulder to shoulder with people like us," George cut in. All the others turned and looked at him, blinked, then turned away.

"The sex shops make far too much money," the tiny man behind the bar continued, "they could never afford to buy *them* out."

"Kill em. Kill em. Kill em," an old man pounded on the bar.

George raised his hand, ready to jump into the conversation. Len took hold of his arm. "You better shut up. They were talking about stripping you naked and leaving you in the street while you were napping."

"Just tired, not drunk. I haven't been sleeping lately." He turned and eyed the tiny bartender as he ambled over and leaned on the bar in front of the old man. He probably owned this place his whole life, a round bulbous body perched on tiny thin legs, scrawny neck and an oddly shaped, wide, flat-topped bald head. The man's face hadn't changed from the tired look of disgust he'd worn when they

came in. "Mr. Leninson," he said, "just drink your beer and shut up. You don't own a damn thing, so you got nothing to complain about. You'll just drift to another part of town."

George looked around the room, a cheesy little box with neon signs hung on cheap, plastic paneling. The drinks were cool and numbing, the bar was dry and warm. The faint scent of urine mixed with the stale smoke that drifted about the semi-stunned drinkers. It was a vacuum, a void, nothing came in, nothing came out. George felt relaxed, at home. These people were dying too, but at least they were sitting up and pretending to have semi-intelligible conversation. Their faces were flabby and discolored, but it wasn't from lying two months in a coma, it was from years of hunching over the same bar and lapping cheap gin in the taking light of neon signs and the dull glow of Zack, the bartender. Looney Toons. The whole thing was Looney Toons.

He looked down at his watch. 8 o'clock it read. "Hey, bud, I mean Ho," George called, "can you turn it to channel 56? *I Love Lucy* is on. This early morning news stuff is depressing. The bartender looked over at George and smirked, then went back to his conversation with Mr. Leninson.

"Could I have some more coffee, please, Ho?" Len called down to the barkeep. When he came over Len slipped him a couple singles and said, "Anything but the news would be fine." The tiny man went off. After a few minutes, he

casually changed the channel.

George rubbed his eyes and sighed. "This stimulating bar conversation just blows my mind."

Len held out a finger to the bartender and he came right over. Without saying anything, Len touched the rim of his coffee cup and pointed to George. The bartender went off and returned with another cup and placed it in front of George. "Uh uh," George said, "Becks." The tiny man looked at George, then at Len. He shrugged and moved off to get the beer. George finished his warm beer and started immediately on the cold one. He looked over at Len, suspicious. "You don't want a drink? Not even an Irish coffee?"

"I can't."

"Huh," George said into his beer. "I never thought I'd get that phone call last night," George said. "I thought she was gone."

"Well, there was always the possibility that she could come back. Remember when it first happened and the doctor pressed her eyeball and there was no reaction, not even reflex? That should have proven she was dead, but the doctors just sent her down here. They had hopes."

"Get smart, Len, those doctors have bills. Besides, I missed the stroke, I was in Barbados, remember?" George was growing more and more irritable.

"Yeah, it was pretty bad."

"Why is it that these things always fall right out of the blue? They drop in your lap, bam, and what do you do? You drop everything, you watch and you wait and life becomes a mess."

"Yeah," Len said distractedly, "Lara and I were planning on kids this year, but it all seems tainted now... with all this going on."

"You're going to be a mommy and a daddy? I don't see it."

"Lara doesn't either," Len mumbled.

George fell into a dark mood. "I know what you mean. I was staying with this woman, red head, she was *connected*. I could have quit my job and been set for life if I moved in with her. There was a cabana out back, you and Lara... and the kids could have come visit any time. Things were finally looking up. Then what? Bam, it's all over. The timing is all wrong. She's not gonna want me now, not with all of this stress going on. Cheers!" They drank.

"Well, we're all together again," Len said into his coffee, "one big happy family. It's just too bad that this family reunion is turning out to be so macabre."

"You make it sound like one of those cheesy melodramatic Dauphin novels."

"And that's a twist. You're the one that's the extremist," Len said. He stared at the mirror behind the bar for a while and said, "It was quiet that night, sad,

almost scary. She sort of nodded off, watching the news after dinner. Penny and Martin were there with their kids, but everything was really mellow."

"That's not how *Penny* tells it."

"Well, she had to consider her kids, the excitement was probably mostly in her head, trying to keep her kids out of the way of the ambulance guys and keeping Dad calm. He was starting to get hysterical. Martin and I were with mom, and she just laid on the couch."

George stared at the liquor bottles as Len spoke. He tried to tune out the whole day, the last two months, but he couldn't. Len kept talking and talking, bringing up the night of the stroke, trying to process his feelings and fears. It had become a ritual for Len, this sharing. It was getting difficult to sit through. George wasn't Superman. Len grinding away at the details. Mash.

He looked up at the TV. Lucy's nose was on fire and she fanned in vain to put it out. Why did Len go on and on? George wasn't even *there* when it happened. *They* were all there and *he* was off in Barbados. Barbarino. They weren't even her real kids. They were the *step-father's* kids and he was the underdog. He had her blood, he had the real connection, and he was Underdog.

Len kept going on and on, sharing, lending, as if he were transplanting the memory of the thing, the blood of a misery George turned his back on. To hell with Penny and

her Martin and Len and his Lara. Mother always favored John's kids. She *had* to play favorites just to keep her marriage off the rocks. Family politics, and for what? For a guy that thought with his fist and his dick. Mother had about as much taste in men as Olive Oyle.

But what did it matter now? It was the end of her road.

William Holden watched with dumb wonder as Lucy's face burned and burned. Ricky Ricardo looked down from the screen in amazement and began to laugh like a seal. It was so "redicuelus"! In TV land, timing was everything. George looked down disdainfully from the TV as Len droned on and on. George shook his head, lit a cigarette and ordered another drink.

It was too late. Too much water had gone rushing by. Too many mistakes. Too many feelings set in concrete. Extremes hidden with niceties. He hadn't been a part of this family in six years, not birthdays, not weddings, not holidays... and she would die. The revelation hurt his mind. It fell out of his consciousness like a chain-saw, cutting noisily and deep.

Len droned on. George wasn't back until nearly a month after mother's hospitalization. It was almost time for George to nod. Len paused, George nodded. Barbados. Long commutes into Boston, stuck in traffic jams and everyone too afraid to talk. Mai Tais. Monotonous grinding horror

stories. Len trying to help George feel a part of a tragedy he wanted no part of. Mai. George went numb. He looked away from the TV and waved for Ho, then turned towards Len. "Mmmm," he said.

Butcher! Bastard! Murdering Bastard! spit-screaming Penny shrieks, she does the waiting room jump-and-shriek, eyes bulging, spit flies from her white teeth, red lips. She hates. Red-faced hate. What did she know? She didn't know! She was blind to tears cried convulsions wrapped in a blanket next to a body bag. Fire arms tugged on us but I wouldn't let her go, pulled us out together, blood covered, covered with blood. Sightless Step-sister screaming for her bestest, oldest, dearest friend. And I stood still, still as stone and took it. What did she know? What did she know of loss? of the umbilical child crouching connected to a cold dead womb? death bearing? Those unshared tears were my last. They were shame, shame Penny pointed and blamed, admittance, guilt.... Tears lie cold in the ground, submerged in snow, mashed and buried.... Mother wouldn't come see me, not until I was released, cleared of negligence. Alone, my family died in my arms. Alone, living among strangers. Tables turned. Now the conspiring bitches face death, they face it alone, alone in the dark....

Somehow it had gotten to be night. George sat up

slowly in the back seat of someone's car. He took a mental inventory of his day; it was morning, and that idiot, Lucy, was lighting her nose on fire, and some big old guy kept hacking away next to him like he was going to throw up his lungs. Where was he? He had never seen this car before. Can-strewn, it smelled of grains fouled. What city was this? Boston... this was Len's car. He looked at his watch, eight o'clock.

The car rocked and heaved, his head ached, a dead squirrel had curled up on his tongue and tasted fairly rotten. He climbed slowly out of the car, moaned and staggered across the street into the hospital's lobby. Checking in, he looked up to the huge mirror hanging above the receptionist's desk. A fiend grinned down on him, worse than he had seen him look in a long time. On his way through the lobby he veered off to one of the patient corridors which led to the men's rooms on the first floor. Once safely hidden and locked inside the john, he began to undress.

Antiseptic, wonderfully sterile. He splashed water all over himself, his face, neck, chest, the floor and sink top. It was cold and refreshing, he drank fifteen handfuls of water, slurping greedily until the sudden wet cool of it in his gut made him nauseous. Without a toothbrush, he had to make do with a finger of soap. It tasted better than what he was swabbing out. He slicked back his hair with a wet

comb, then quickly dressed and walked back out into the world.

He walked down the short corridor to the elevator, shaking his head, trying to sort it all out in a fuzzy brain that wouldn't stop pounding. The hospital was having a visitor rush, people from the real world finishing work and rushing over to visit the sick and dying, to rejoin the family. George packed into the elevator with a bunch of them and pushed 8. Nauseous, he hummed the theme to *The Brady Bunch*. The elevator heaved and shot up through the guts of the building.

The Brady Bunch. I Love Lucy. Welcome Back Kotter. Lost in Space. Gilligan's Island. No one ever died. Why didn't any of the Brady brats die? They should all have died. He stopped humming and clenched his fists. That was the problem, they never warned you, only showed you the cutesy crap, the first kiss or a trip the the Grand Canyon. Everyone was so well adjusted, so well dressed. Len used to say they were just like the Bradys, with less kids, all happy step-kids. They showed a picture of Carol's dead husband once, on the first show. George still had a picture of dad but mother didn't. No one ever talked about real, dead dads out here in the real world. Lies. Lies. Lies.

The doors finally opened for the eighth floor. The same zombies still sat in the same chairs before the same omnipotent glowing god, back from the same dinners they

always safely ate.

Penny stood tall and gangly by the nurse's station, wrapped around her Martin, Len and Lara tall and firm as pegs, nodding next to their father. Something terrible must have happened; tears fell from Len's eyes, Penny scowled like she did so well and John, papa, sobbed quietly into his son's shoulder. George walked unobtrusively by and heard John mumble "kill--" Something was going on. Maybe she died, maybe he missed that, too. He picked up his pace and hurried to the end of the ICU hall, to the head-trauma center. At the door, he picked up the phone and looked through the window. "Visitor, bed 12." A nurse, older, devoid of emotion, came to the door and let him pass.

He slowed, the apprehension set in. He had been surprised so many times before; when he first saw her here and all her facial features were swallowed by a paralytic limpness, her hands swelled and her fingers curled. What if she were dead, shroud covered cold? or worse? What if she were coming out of it? What if she would survive, but was different? What if whatever goodness, what little he liked of her, was gone and she were someone else. Connection severed, exile exiled.

He parted the curtain and looked in. She lay still, just as she had for the last two weeks. The suction machine hissed as it sucked the mucus from her lungs, a blow hose sticking out of her nose hissed and gurgled. Her skin was

waxy, shiny. IV tubes stuck out of her arms, surrounded by bruises and little scabs from where it had penetrated before. The room smelled of dirty linen and stale air, the slight hint of stomach fluid hung about the bed. The shades were drawn, they were always drawn. Nothing came in, nothing came out. A strange peace settled on him, a finality.

Not much was very different from last week. George hesitated, then moved closer to the bed. He looked down on his mother. If she died today, this sight would envelop his memory of her, this bloated, hissing thing was what he would remember. No one warned him she would look this way, it wasn't fair. Six years in exile, no retribution, no kids visiting grandma's house, no goodbyes, no nothing. He looked up from the bed and stared at the curtain.

He had no idea how long he stared into space, it could have been days. A gurgle noise brought him back, he looked down to his mother's face. She had an expression, for the first time in weeks. Discomfort, she looked like she was in pain. Her eyes opened and rolled in her head, looking in different directions as she tried to focus. They were the eyes of an animal brought before the butcher, fear, no warmth, no recognition, no personality. She must have perceived a shape in the room with her and reached for it. Milky goop from the lung tube in her nose ran down her face, down her neck. She gurgled again and opened her mouth,

trying to say something, trying to spit something out. Something fat, alien, moved in her mouth. In the months that she had lain unconscious, her tongue had grown something on it, a layer of brown and yellow. It moved fat and slow in her mouth. She gagged again. George moved closer, he wanted to comfort her. He put his face close to hers, her breath was rank and he moved closer. His mother's half closed eyes looked up unfocussed. She began to mumble softly. George leaned closer. She kept whispering it, over and over, on and on, "kill me...."

Butcher...

Bastard...

Murdering Bastard...

George sat on the hood of his friend's car down in the parking lot of the hospital. His mind was blank, except for a tune he heard droning in his head, it was the tune from some old seventies TV show that he hadn't seen in ten, fifteen years. He couldn't place it. He listened for a while, it comforted him, it helped his headache go away. And every once in a while, he could hear Penny's shriek. Len heaved a sigh. Welcome back. He inhaled deeply from his Camel and watched a subway car rattle past.

Transience

"A couple of hours ago I would have given anything to have used this piece of junk." Evan runs his fingers along the red sun-faded hood of the old Plymouth, sliding his fingers along the scratches and dents of the old car. A fine dew had collected on its surfaces as the sun set. Streaks of fiery reds and burnt oranges fill the dimming sky. He sits on the edge of the car and pulls his feet up on the bumper, still holding a knapsack filled with a weekend's change of clothing and wearing his tan Baracuta jacket. "Even this junker would have made today a little easier."

"A lot of things would have made today easier," Joan says. She leans on the front of the car next to him. She wears a peach sweater with a cream border around the neck, blue jeans and black flats. "You could have called this morning and saved yourself eight hours of traveling time." In the setting sun Evan looks at her profile as she speaks. She has cropped her long beautiful black hair, probably at Dennis's insistence, but her profile is still the same. Joan's forehead is high. Her profile dips down at the bridge of her nose, then slightly ski-jumps out to the tip of her small, rounded nose, her jaw line and lips stick out just a little further than the rest of her profile. Evan adores her. "I never asked for company this weekend," she

says.

"Nope. You had company all arranged."

"Well, what do you want us to do? Change our plans? Call his parents and cancel because you pull another one of your little eccentricities?" Joan stands and paces back and forth in front of the car. "Look," she points over his shoulder at the interior of the car. "We have it all packed: food, clothes, games. Oh, Evan, why didn't you call?"

Evan sighs and shakes his head. "I thought it would be a surprise." He looks over his shoulder at the stuffed car. "It sure was."

"If you had been a half hour earlier, it would have been a real surprise." She comes back over and leans against the car next to him. "I'm not going to lie to you, Evan. Dennis and I have been dating... on and off."

"Yeah," he says sadly, "I picked up on that. How long is on and off."

"We started to have feelings about three months ago--"

"Three months ago. *Three months ago.*" Evan jumps from the car and begins to pace. "For the last ten months I've been staying in Dennis's room when I came to visit you here. I've been sleeping in his room and confiding with him like he was my friend, while he was sleeping with you!"

"We never slept together. It's not like that. He *is* your friend. Oh, no. Here it comes. Drama. If you can't

remain calm, then we won't have this discussion".

"Okay. Okay. Calm down. I'll calm down. So you and Dennis have been, what, going to movies, studying together? Did you share my letters for laughs?"

"It wasn't like that either. Dennis has been my best friend since my first night here. It was just hard, being here alone and not having you around."

"Our first night here, remember? I stayed the first weekend here. Skipped classes at my own school. I tried to be around. Most of your friends thought I went to school here for the first semester, I was around so much."

"Yeah, you were around, but... See, you're doing it, getting that accusing tone. You being around all the time, I felt like you were only here to watch over me. Me and Dennis only did small stuff, walks and rides... It was innocent. You're making it seem worse."

Evan comes right up to the front of the car, spreads his feet and sets them. He speaks clearly and slowly.

"Listen, Joan. Isn't it just a little *too* coincidental that the whole time I was coming up here, on busses and trains and hitchhiking for eight hours at a time all the way up the New England coast to your proper little private school, with its all boy/all girl dorms and its thirties morality, wasn't it just convenient that Dennis made himself available to let me confide in him, and being too willing to hear out my fears about this long distance relationship of ours. And

then all of a sudden I show up and you're both all packed up for a trip to Niagra Falls."

"That's it! That's it right there. You can talk to him about our relationship, but you never talk to me. You never talked to me, we just worked on assumptions. Just like you showing up today."

He walks away, then stops about ten feet off and turns.

"What is going on, Joan?"

"Come here and we can talk. I won't yell and scream and be a spectacle for everyone on campus. There, good." She puts her hand on his shoulder and he pulls away. "I don't want to hurt you, Evan, but I can't be with you right now, either. If I stay with you we'll just hurt each other."

"You're right, this would have been *much* easier on the phone."

"I came here from a long way off. Things have happened to me that you could never even dream about. It took me five years to get just to where you are, to be a freshman. I'm not sure what I want right now. And I don't know what you want from me. You always pull back. I don't know if your parents had something to do with it. You always said you didn't want to make the same mistakes they did. I'm sorry they did things, Evan. We all have things that we have to live with. That's just the way things are. But I won't live the rest of my life with a guy that's too afraid

to be close because of he's co--"

"Dependent? That's a catchy phrase. Pick that up in Psych 101?"

"You're impossible." She crosses her arms and continues. "I kept asking myself what you would be like with our kids--"

"Oh thanks a lot for the credit. It's not like I'm getting a chance."

"What chance do we have now? We just met passing through the same small town. That's no reason to spend the rest of our lives together. Not until we're sure. I loved you... I still do...."

"You love Dennis."

"I don't know. He's crazy, he makes me laugh. I have to find out." She slides down from the car and holds out Evan's knapsack. "If you love me you'll wait to see." He looks up the hill at the men's dorm. He half expects to see Dennis's dark form watching from his second story window, but the old colonial building stands dark and empty, most of the students having gone off camping or to various weekend retreats. Evan doesn't answer. She offers him the bag again. "You may be able to spend the night in the lounge. No one is here this weekend, really. Or maybe you could go to the motel down by the depot. We could give you a ride."

Evan takes the knapsack from her hand and turns slowly to walk up the hill toward the dorm. There's no sense in

arguing, he knows better than that. She likes to have things her own way. Joan catches up with him about half way and takes his arm. "Evan. I still love you very much. I don't want you to go away like this. You're worrying me. How can we do this like adults when you're acting like this?" Evan keeps walking up the hill. He doesn't look at her as he passes the dorm. He heads toward the front gate of the school. "Evan. Please don't leave like this," she says softly, as she follows him across the quad. "I thought we could talk it all through. Don't do anything funny." She stops walking behind him by the front gate. Evan shoulders his knapsack and walks slowly off toward the train depot.

Make City

Road kill.

That was the first thing I thought in my new life; in the anti-life of this after-birth. The first thing I saw, the thing that made me react by thinking, was my own body, cast off and slumping to rest in the cramped, brown and red toilet stall of the FCC.

I knew it used to be me. I am Howard... Howard Hurllothrumbo of the raw head and bloody bones, bete noire, enfante terrible, wearing the favorite cardigan sweater with the top two buttons missing, bought from Goodwill, dark plum with gold piping. And I recognized my hands: thick fingers, no rings. Of course, I couldn't see much in the way of face. All that was left after the big move was part of my left cheek, my smiling jaw, my left ear, and a bit of brown hair. And then there was bone, as white and bloodless as eggshell, surrounded by folds of red meat, white skin and yellow fat.

Placental.

I was spread all over the men's room wall; all over the whores' phone numbers and the foul words. I often think of it that way. For some reason a vision flashed through my fresh, new mind. It was a vision of a doe I hit with my truck early one morning, a week before. This doe sprang into the road, glancing over its shoulder at me. The look

in the eye, just as I slammed head-on into it, was like I had interrupted it on some inane errand, on its way to a Seven-Eleven or Sunday brunch; cut it down on some trivial little task not worth dying for. It seemed surprised. The doe rolled around under my truck for a hundred yards. I pulled over and walked back to check the damage. It looked like a big, brown, hairy ball with bones sticking out, their edges creamy-opaque and bloodless. So the first thing I thought, floating there above the red mess and sexual scrawls, was: Road kill. Wrong place, wrong time.

And as I rose I saw you, Tod, smiling through the hole in the door....

Of course, the last thing I saw in my old life, in the physical world, was the shabby, brown toilet stall door, just a few inches from my numb face. Colitis, you know. I just barely remember the transition now; outside the door your voices were hushed and furious. Intent. And then the explosion of light and sound, a sunburst of little prickles on my face.

Nativity.

I think there was a second in between. Who can be sure? Death was sort of like a hiccup of movement through free-floating, feeling-less space. And now... I think here, The Fowler Cove Club.

Invaginated.

But that was a long time ago. That was when I was a

small body, a tiny mind, isolated, polarized. Now I am a force, your subconscious. You are my consciousness, owning and ruling the FCC by day, but I rule the night. This building is our head, and we three are centered here.

I am a lover of words. What else do I have? I remember a man I knew in college, a writer, a roommate. He told me he wrote so he wouldn't lose his mind, so the stories that were inside him could flow out and release him if he released them. He went insane. That's why I chatter lipless talk all the time. It hasn't helped. If he were me, my old roommate, and he were finger-less in this lucid, typewriter-less world, he would be mad here, too.

I have a story to tell. The story of Howard and Tod and Cal. Our story. Listen closely, here we go again. I tell it again and again to your sleeping brain, every night. Even now. Here in the ceiling, looking down at you asleep there, malignant plum, we are tied. And not just the two of us, there is the third.

Cal.

When I could sleep like you are, safe in my drunken slobber, I sometimes dreamed. Sleep is a deep breathing death, dreams are a flickering hell... My brain used to ferment in a liquor blood soup as I slept in my car the four hours after last call, until I was safe to drive. I was like you, except I had a home to go to, when I wanted to.

Dream Tod, let me show you a dream....

A middle aged man, a grinning head wedge of cheese, broad forehead, pointed nose, narrow jaw, dimpled chin, eyes oddly round with long, thick black eyelashes, stands at his urinal. He scowls and grinds his teeth up at the sports page hanging over him, behind a sheet of plastic. In the plastic he sees his reflected face, bent and fuzzy. He is drunk, invariably oblivious.

"Howard!" a voice whispers to your brain; a tiny voice, quiet. It makes the wedge man jump, makes him look about for the source. He finds it. A new face is in the plastic, where his should be. A young man with a flat top crew cut and big flapping ears stares across onto his round little eyes, connectedly laughing across from the dull plastic sheet.

Tod, it is me, I say, Howard. You don't want to see me, do you, Tod? You sneer at the little fool. You don't even really know how it happened. You don't want to know the name Howard? Well, this ought to be fun. I laugh.

I never killed you! you slobber, turn, stagger across the empty men's room to the mirror.

Tod, my old friend, my fine comrade, my Brain! I say, looking out from the shiny glass, join me, won't you? And my head explodes. Blood sprays. Placental brain muck splatters all over the eternal side of the glass. And you pull away, shield your face as if the same fate might befall you. It does, in its own way. And a smiling jaw says

through smears of blood, *you can never escape the Censorious.*

The mirror vision disappears like a nightdream, leaves nothing but the echoing sounds of dripping, you wonder....

Censorious.

You stumble out, pulling up your fly, move back to the bar. Already my name dissolves in your brain. You stagger behind the bar. Entrepreneurial after hours bartender of one to one, to self. Above serving others. You pour another 151, corrode the past.

Solvency.

Howard! You jump, but you ignore me. This happens so often now, every night. I sit Indian-style on our mahogany and marble bar. All the dancers have gone home, all the women, the local pros and the suits. It's play time for us now: Tod and Howard and Cal.

You're getting slow, Tod, I say, you seem to have lost that reflex edge, your trademark, the will to pounce, or duck. Anyone can own a nightclub, but not everyone can duck, huh?

You wave your arm at the antagonistic night, stagger to your place by the gas fire. Slump into your chair and stare into the flames. Stare into your glass. Watch the golden liquid, plasma, swish. Look closely. There, in the ice, see them? Tiny jaws laughing, flapping ears, up and down, lips that say, *Howard, Howard.* And you raise the glass,

never taking your eyes from the ice. You drink.

And I rise in the air, flow through the loft ceiling and the mirrors and the stuffed heads and the couches at the fireplace, the brass gas-fixtures and railings. *I am here.* I stink with the smell of burning cedar and old leather, low glow mood lighting over our antique back-bar that encloses so many glowing bottles of me, so much rich, knowing blood. My face disappears in the stained glass windows. *I am here.* The loud speakers creech and moan, wail the song of secret bastard children. I scream the pain of still, trapped death, the tears of ensnared ageless-ness. But it is lost on you. You sit alone at the fireplace, numb on the hearth, a cockold stump slumped still before the flame. Oblivious to the sunburst you let into my head....

Sunburst.

The dream ends....

You gurgle, ferment, sit up on your sleeping couch and blink at the gas fire. Sleep, Tod. Take a little rest, Tod. Welcome back, there is so much more to see.

I ask you. Why couldn't this have all happened in a building that faces the sun? In a building that has more than two windows and swinging doors neatly covered by a smothering green lattice? I can't remember the last time a ray of real sunshine fell on me....

Sometimes I smash myself up against the inside of our building, in the front room. I pretend the building front

is my face. It is nice to have a face again. I sit squat on the sidewalk, my broad double-door nose slit up and open, long eyes on either side, just a little higher, unblinking. Who needs a mouth? A dark green lattice overhangs the front of the building, shading. I must look like some hot, risque gambler, I imagine sometimes, darkened eyes smoldering like fortuitous black stones beneath a green visor.

And they come in me, the crowd, which I used to be a part of. They pull open my nose, crawl through my face and look out through my eyes and buzz inside and out and never, never suspect that I haunt our head. Except for when there's a full moon. Mix the knowing blood with moonbeams, the moonbeams in their eyes, and that's when some can see me. The full moon mixed with blood makes them demented.

And they crawl around inside our head, worms, maggots, and all I do, all I can do is watch, floating. They swarm over the floor boards and the bar top and the tables and the dancefloor and my death womb like a virus, drinking and writhing and vomiting in our head. I can't stop them. I could move a dice cup on the bar inside our new head about as well as I could have clapped my brain hemispheres together in my old head.

Thwop.

My old head was diagnosed as having a tumor, as bad meat, just before you helped in the big move. You removed

it. Replaced it.

When the moon is full it is always ominously haruspical and oracularly fatidical, not to mention vaticibnal, prophetic and all around big with the fate of omens and so on and so forth. And somehow the they can always see then. It was full that Friday. There was full moon trouble when you staggered in that Friday night, our special night. Big Daddy, ready to fire the first screw-up. You had an emptiness that hurt. Nick was the cause of your hurt, but you didn't know it yet. I never trusted Nick, but what does it matter now?

Road kill.

Hands are the doers. That is what it amounts to. A brain is a glob of muck in a box that sits jealously conscious of the thrills of the hands. I wish I had hands. Not the nightmare hands that I fondle your dreams with. Real hands. Feeling hands. Feel my shadow-hands, Tod, hands as light as air, lighter than fire, lighter than a hiccup floating in senseless space. Hands tell all, show all. Watch my dream-show hands. Return to our joining day in your dreams....

Nick, the dragon prince of greasy pick-up lines and bondage politics, leather and lace as sharp as tongued scalpels; watch his wide hands probe, watch them know. When he came in that first time they were stuffed in his pockets, remember? He hid his taste for buxom dark brunettes with

shapely legs and hourglass curves, for your wife, Joyce. The local women hated him, but she drew naively near. The local women knew his hands, knew how they used and used, plied and tore, bruised thighs. But you knew those hands as something else, short and square and strong and fast bartender hands, they poured drinks and cash into your pockets, they poured 151 down your throat. Watch as they pour pleasure and pain. Watch from the end of the bar that Friday as Joyce leans over and whispers in his ear, offers her cleavage, her full lips wet and whispering as she strokes his fingers....

Epiphany.

A catalyst comes, huge, drunk, college student, Coke machine body lumbering through the door; round, fat fingers full of beer and spit and football. After a while those fat hands give those square fast hands so much cash, and the square fast hands pour so much wet knowledge that the fat hands become thick and loud and stupid. Nick's fists are full of little white pills, fuming, they always are. He follows the big hands out, out of your bar, out of the FCC. They crash together toward the parking lot.

You got-damn hay seed son-of-a-bitch, the college hands say, *let me get my friends, let me get my coat.*

Nick, in his black leather Harley vest, thick arms, he rips the kid between the legs with his knee, drops the huge kid in the rain. Ryan and Carlos and Big Mike back into the

door, protecting Nick, wearing their slate blue jerseys, giant happy laughing door-Smurfs spitting hate and fear as they pull it shut. But that big hands is dense, he rushes the door. Big hands do that kind of stuff. And as soon as he gets his head and shoulders through the door, Nick slams it shut on his face, knocks the wind out of him, breaks his teeth, his nose. The big hands staggers back into the parking lot and Nick follows him out again, to finish him off. Nick likes that.

Don't hurt him, he's just a kid, someone yells. That was me, way in the back of the crowd. I was alive then, but you wouldn't have noticed. No one listened to me. Still no one listens to me.

Thwop.

You think you're bad, lose the muscle, man, come out one on one. Big hands has liquored-up blood all over his face. *Come on, leather man,* he says. So Nick saunters up, drop kicks him one in the chest.

And Joyce, thin hands cover her mouth, flutter like moths, hungry and vicious. Her eyes gleam as she looks through you, blue-black curls swirling. You are dead then, Tod, to Joyce. Nick kills you with his boot and a sober, artful drop kick on a fat guy's chest. Joyce waves you off with her thin white hands. You are gone. You know it.

But I know a secret. His name is Cal. He is the third. We are all linked, tied.

Triad.

And you try to corner Nick in the john, try to get him alone, try to cut out the disease that is spreading in your staff, in your wife. You follow him into the john and face him down. And I hear you, on the other side of the toilet-stall door. And I sit on the dumper, colitis, watching the whores' names blur whirl, nursing my fatty liver and my plum tumor with its gold piping eating up my glob of muck. And I listen to you fighting, accusing. I can imagine your hands, soft and wet, hear them reaching for his throat, hear you through the door. Screams and a blast of sunshine through my door. You remove my tumor, one of you. And do you know what I think? There she is, my doe pouncing through the dusk twilight into my useless high beams, glancing at me through the windshield like I am some Peeping Tom. And I think: Road kill. Wrong place, wrong time.

And Nick runs for his life, stuffing his hands into his pockets, hiding as he smashes through the door. We haven't seen him since. It's not fair, but he was a wanderer, no good to anybody. And you, you just look in through the hole in the door, smile a big old wedge head smile and laugh and laugh. Peek-a-boo! I often guess the reason you laugh is that our little drama played out in the men's room and Joyce couldn't see, she couldn't be a part of the thing she helped set in motion. She and Nick and Cal. I often think of it that way. And all the dancers go home, all the women, the

local pros and the suits. The party's over. It's the three of us: Tod and Howard and Cal. Nick was just passing through, he never counted.

Other hands come along, rubber gloved hands, finger condoms keeping the spatter of suspected AIDS away, wiping death back on the dead. Good Samaritan hands that wipe up drunken blood and muck and eggshell, mop my muck into the same bucket you use to mop up vomit. They take me away in a zip-lock bag and I watch from atop the jukebox. See me there? And you watch from a table, alone, smiles and laughter long gone; I didn't know you well, then. It was before we were a triad.

I lost my family too, Tod, the moment they lost me. Like you, I think of them often, those I can not have.

I was nearly married to a certain miss, her hands hard-grasping, sexless, pulling cruelly, knuckled, grinding lovelessly as a faithful shirt-wringer Doberman. A shadow with the depth and feeling of a paper cut. Oh yes, you're right. I am bitter. I'll be the first to admit it. How she would have gloated now, if she could see me here. How she would have laughed to know how much time I will spend here, after she sermoned her ultimatum on tolerance. It or me! Sit! Stay!

Control.

Her reptilian claws would have reclined so calmly, self-righteously, in her bony lap, motionless stone geckos

poised hungrily listening to the derailed blathering of scorned love. But those hands were more quick and sure, adept at child-proof caps and greedy for sleep and revenge. If fate is a dispassionate and forthright and nonpartisan censorious then my near Mrs. sits even now on her childhood bed, eternal resident of her father's home.

She made her point.

Road kill.

Our women were singularly alike, alike in their compulsive idiosyncraticity. Free-floating atop the fire of obsessive passions and anal fixations, both singularly concerned with the off centered vortex of self. Of that similarity I am sure. Perhaps that is more a similarity between us....

Free-swimming sperm is one side of the equation, the politically incorrect side. A head, one eye atop a squiggling uncommitted curve. Yang. And out there, Yin cruises, polarized, legitimate, absolute, hateful and clinging through the sterile vacuum that joins us in a loveless misogyny.

Too much Yin.

But what of it, I never cared. You don't now. How can Yang ever understand Yin? Especially when Yin's yinfriends keep saying, *do what feels good for you you you*. Me me me.

Yang.

I miss my hands and fingers flipping quarters' thumping

dice boxes and friends' flanneled shoulders, hands thick and smooth rubbing binge whiskers in the spotted death womb's mirror. I miss hot and cold and sweets and stinks and sights of baggy eyes and bushy-brows and frowns in mirrors now vacant of everything but the other side of the room no matter how close I look.

Thwop.

Of course, you never met my bride-to-be, Tod. You never met any of my flock. You hardly knew me, before. But I can show you them, now. I can flaunt them nightly through your captivated subconscious: shadow-puppets prancing around your drunken dreamscape. Shadows only tell of outlines, in every deep a deeper depth....

I am truly sorry you must live here with me, exiled in our head; and Joyce is exiled too. Polarized, at home alone, waiting for her fugitive, raising Nick's oaf daughter in your once-home. Laura, feeling Laura, your daughter, your own flesh and blood, your vicarious link to young youth-now-eternal-victim, she is helpless in her sharing.

Advice:

Face destiny head on.

My college writer friend told me a story once. A man hears from a drunk that if he steps on a bus uptown, a chain of events is set in motion; and if he misses that bus, his destiny is forever altered. Suddenly the man's life changes. A specter hangs over him constantly, waiting for

the moment to alter his path, to shake his tree. He starts to get strange. He rises to leave a room and then jumps back into his seat and screams, *Ha!* As time goes by his behavior becomes more and more random, more sporadic, as if he feels he is in control by living in a state of fixed turbulence.

One day he is on a cable car (he lives in the roily city of San Francisco, isn't that convenient?). As the car crests a hill and starts its shaky descent he jumps from the car, fearing the beast destiny. He slips under the sharp, round wheels, which naturally slice his legs clean off above the knees. As he flails around on the ground his severed stumps spray rhythmic streams of blood in the faces of the shocked tourists out for a day on the wharfs. His life ends, needless to say, and the chaotic chain of destituous events comes to a crashing continuance for the tourists, distracted forever on their way to gulp shellfish and pop ogle wax celebrities. The chain has just begun. And who's to blame? A loud mouth drunk! A casual conversation inspired by the flow of hot, knowing blood.

Of course, my writer friend was crazy when he told me this story, sitting on his hospital bed, foaming at the mouth, gagging and sputtering, looking up at me and saying with absolute conviction and the intense strained concentration of the insane *imposed dissymmetry* over and over. How he loved those words. This was his punch line.

It was just another story that he couldn't get away from, that trapped him as it bubbled through his glob of muck and made him mad mad mad.

Captain's Supplemental: If I had bubbled this story I would have emphasized self-restraint, not manipulation. Looking into destiny aware aware aware.

Advice:

Eat, drink and be watchful, for tomorrow breeds betrayal.

Sin's monogamouscidal penetration.

Cal.

At that, you gurgle, pass a bubble. Yes, very wise.

Soon you will awaken, Tod, drag yourself from your hard place of sleep in front of this warmth-less phony gas-fire. You will lumber down to the little kitchen in the basement of our head. I watch you do this every morning, Tod, a smiling deaf man doing silent food, prayer *make it stop make it stop make it stop*, starting your morning ritual of blood-purging and muck-ache-repairing with cholesterol and starch. And all around us I will scream the thing I know, the secret of Cal. He is to me what I am to you, triad.

But there is time still tonight, before you awaken. Breathe deeply there before the fire, I will tell you again. I will tell you the thing again, of Cal. Roll into a ball, pull your legs up tight to your chest and we will take another trip. Dream another dream.

That Friday night, the same as any other. I was as sloppy and stupid as the rest of them were, as you were under that big full moon.

Two young men are sitting at the downstairs bar, next to the wall where your office is. One of the men is nicknamed Otis, dressed like a golf pro, big nose huge and dark Italian eyes. He is just divorced, days away from bankruptcy. He slams a dice cup.

The other is a big-eared fool, a face familiar to you now. You flinch in your sleep, good. They are alone, sitting together up against the wall, the other side of which is your office. These men are engrossed, slapping down dice boxes and discussing in low voices the self-induced death of floppy ears's beloved. They're not playing each other for money, just passing the time in an increasingly drunken stupor, forgetting. None of the boys are in yet, none of fishermen or the construction boys, the farm hands or the business men and their women. Your bread and butter, who love to raise a little Hell after work, before going home and single-handedly dealing with their kids. Most are like big nose and floppy ears there; sold the family wagon for drunken, childish freedom on the make, filling some loss or need with knowing blood, being single again after so many years, plastering over new herpe sores, learning the new dangers and relearning how to be sexy, how to bait and capture.

Make City.

The day flirtations are subtle, more complex than the night crowds' drunken thigh-grinding. If a man and a woman want to be alone, they go through complex, enjoyable, levels of flirtation/counter-flirtation, send each other a drink, make remarks to their friends. And before you know it you may have something going where you'd least expect it. That's how this chain of events all started. And that's why I'm here, why Cal's here.

So, through the wall comes this rhythmic screaming and howling. The two men look at each other, smile.

In a ghost voice, deep and fuzzy, big ears grins, *That Nick is an animal.*

Must be that new waitress, they laugh, rib jab.

And they continue their games; a long time they wait to see. Finally Nick comes out, nods and smiles at the two young men, bounces up the stairs, little jingle change crib ringling in his pockets. The two laugh and jab rib. A few minutes later, Joyce comes out, your Joyce. She pleat sleeks and gown fangles a hip swish across the room, makes an innocent, arrogant dash for those stairs. She doesn't even look at the young men, who follow her with wide eyes.

I don't know what Nick is thinking, says Otis.

Maybe that he owns the place, says I. *Maybe that he owns everything.*

A tiny voice screams in the night, screams betrayal

just moments before the roar that takes my life. From your desktop this scream ripples through the universe, a tiny glint lost to the passionate grind throbbing of its conceptual cyclops Judas Kiss.

Float with me, Tod, here in Joyce's duskiness. Twist and twirl in her warmth, the real fire, nutrient rich. We are sperm. Swim with me. Swim for her womb, through the black soup. Send us, light one, bright one, Horhorn, quickening and wombfruit. Send us, light one,-- Stop! Wombtumor! Wombtumor! Tod, we are not welcome here. This is the enemy's land. Nick's spawn is here. He floats. His seed beat us, contaminates, sucks from the walls all that you lay claim to. Defiled penetration. Damned procreation. Perverted. Nick has faulted her! Your whole family. This stew was once friendly, allied, pure, but now there is this seed, soul-damned bastard. Joyce carries it, a sin bubbling and foaming inside her like a rabies virus. It is deadly. It killed me, all things considered. Laura has a brother, a little Caligula malformed. Ceaser Ovarious, I pity you, little Cal, little pestilent dead-womb-invaginated bastard.

Caligula.

Legend has it you buried a baby you personally disfigured under the floor tiles of your father's temple in order to drive him mad mad mad. You were only nine at the time, quite ambitious. But this time around you are more complex, dual, both child monster and buried victim, waiting

to bring misery. So much heaped on an innocent head.

Prenatal road kill.

Wrong place, wrong time.

Caligula.

It is done.

We are three. The faulted, the sin, the holey ghost.

Make City Trinity.

I don't want to hurt you, Tod. You are only stupid. A cuckold. But I must protect my subconscious. Of course, he is really mostly idea. I don't know if Joyce is pregnant. Who cares? Tomorrow, I'll change this all around. That doesn't matter. Cal is to me what I am to you. You can never see me, but I am here. I can never see him, but he is here. We all affirm each other. If I didn't exist, what would drive your guilt? If he didn't exist, what would be the point of my existence here?

Reason.

Yes. When Otis and I watched Nick and his goons kick out those football hands, kick him around, and you pushing through the crowd and Joyce afraid for her man, which wasn't you, we knew. We knew. Well. All the excitement got to me. The affair and the fight and the crowd milling about seething for blood, it all got to me and my drunken body. My tumored head throbbed and my colitis kicked in and I made a dash for the dumper.

You always seem to see things too late.

Do you ever watch the bands or the dancers out on the dance floor? No, you never care about that stuff. Money money money. \$. You should. Our full moon Friday *Vomit Rush* played. They're bad, crazy as nut house rats. I have to admit now, some of the shows are pretty entertaining, now that I have to watch them. You should have spent more time here, watched more. So much might have been avoided. Oh, well. My favorite bands now are out of Newport, Rhode Island; *Rat Masochist* and *Eurorectal Septum* and *Six Finger Sally*. I often float behind the drummers and watch the *punkers* bash into each other, a mass of waving fists sticking out of brown hair and black leather, waves of heat rising steamy above dark glistening leathered bodies, cartoon-cricket-people, hop-writhing victim-youth, one giant mass of sweat and limbs, brown with bones all sticking out waving and waving. If you saw them today, I know what you would say, I know now: *Look at the vermin scurry*. I was part of a crowd once, and if I were a tad more tangible, I would have been a part of this one. They remind me of a tale. My grandmother told me this, long before I was a building.

A little boy once lived on an island, far away from cities and people that could make him grow bad. He lived there alone with his father, a tall man with a broad forehead, pointed nose and narrow chin, and his little, bookish brother. At first he was very sad on the island,

but as time went by he grew to be contented and confident in his paradise home with his father. He was a cute little boy, tending his sheep in his bright cotton vest, the outfit of a sheep boy. Finally, he reached the age when he could discard his little vest for boys and wear the clothes of manhood, leather. And as he grew older, he saw the pleasures and possessions of the father and desired them. The father watched his boys and saw in the elder a change. He noticed that the boy stretched the truth and lied as boys at this age will.

Never fib on this island, little man, the Father told him, for this is a magic place. We are in the realm of the Censorious, and he will come for all the liars and bad boys of his Kingdom and make slaves of them, or worse, kill them.

The little eldest was afraid at first, but after a while he became comfortable again on his island home. The threat of the Censorious became weak and diffused through time. He grew tall and strong and soon thought himself a swaggering man.

One day, while he was out on a stroll, he happened across a beautiful woman with ebony hair sitting on the side of a road. He could see she was a woman, for she was very full in figure and had full red lips. She was weeping very sadly next to her carriage and was in need of the boy's help. The young boy did help the woman. He lifted her carriage from the ditch, for he was very strong, and fixed the dented

wheels and helped her into the cab.

Lifting her skirts as she climbed in her carriage, she said, *Won't you come in so I may give you a ride home, young man?* He could see her shapely legs and woman's curves and quickly said yes, for he decided he loved the woman. On the way home she pulled off the road and took the young man to her cottage, for she lived very near to his home. She took him in and showed him a great many things: sweet sins a woman knows of, things a man should only know with his wife.

As time went by, the father noticed that his son was hardly ever around anymore. The sheep would stray all over the mountainsides and sometimes the boy would be gone for days.

One day at dusk, the boy arrived home late with the woman. He swaggered from the carriage up to the front door and sauntered in. The father and younger brother watched from their chairs and could see the woman watching after him from her carriage as he walked into the house. The Father was a wise old man, he could see that the boy had changed again. He looked over, past his son, at the woman outside in the carriage and he knew.

Boy, he said, did that woman bring you home?

Yes, the boy said.

Did she bring you straight home, or did she bring you through the forest first? he asked.

We never were in the forest, the boy said.

At that moment the sky exploded in a sunburst of light and sound. From the sky fell a great beast, a fury of brown fur and grasping arms sticking out at all angles. The Censorious rushed up the walkway and pounced on the boy before he had a chance to turn away. Many arms grabbed the boy's head and twisted and tore most of it from his body, only leaving the left ear he should have listened to his kindly old father with. And as the virtuous, if a little slow, old father and the innocent little son watched, the Censorious rushed off into the sky, in search of other malignancies to remove from his Kingdom.

I think this story illustrates one thing pretty well; my Grandmother was a disturbed, unbalanced old woman. I marvel at the nightmares and horrors inspired by dysfunctional antediluvian authoritarians in the name of moral purity. I offer it to you for one reason; sometimes, in the big cruel world, the criminals and the victims get transposed. We both know who should have been your holey ghost. I offer it to you, Tod, and more. You have enthroned your very own Censorious. Never sleeping, never feeling, never hungering, vigilant. Forever reminding. I will be your Censorious, guardian of your family's sin. Eternally installed in your dreams. I am imprisoned here, tied to you, tied to Cal. And I will be all things here, in my realm; I will oversee the blood that flows, the gold, the melodies and passion, the soul of the FCC living on,

persevering through a Hitlerian millennia, timeless.

And if time and the wreckers should come and attack my fortress, my sanctuary, crush our head, I pray they scrape my remains, heap me into large orange trucks and haul me respectfully away, carting the mighty, fallen king off to his tomb; a tomb magnificent, stretching through the hills and mountains, long, black, curvy as sperm. A road, a mountain road, crossed daily by all forms of humanity and life; maniacs and wanderers, doe and gecko, zealots and prostitutes and drunkards and bookkeepers and artists. Humanity with its Caligulas in tow.

Little Caligula.

The sun rises, I see its rays on my neighbors lucky brick faces, glowing stupidly there across the street. You gurgle, foam. You must rise now, Tod, we are done for tonight. Stagger into my men's room and wash the drool from your face, hide from your employees before they unsuspectedly arrive. No one will find out about our little reality, our little secrets. And as you rinse the slick, dusty cords from your face, I will fade, my voice will dim to just a strange feeling lurking in the quiet recesses of your troubled subconscious. The sum of my existence will be a mere persistence of bad dreams, dull remembrances of some unnamable guilt or pain that bubbles through your glob of muck, doing its damndest to make you mad mad mad. I will retreat for the day to the liquor, to my blood, where I will

not be forgotten, held up in sad toasts by friends who slowly forget my details and hang on to fuzzy outlines. And later, after all the dancers go home, all the women, the local pros and the suits, it's the three of us: Tod and Howard and Cal. You will collapse into the drunken void, where we will be waiting. Once you are breathing deep death-dream, sleep seamless, I will unravel this again, my cryptic triptych. You will have no choice. Trapped, there is only this recurring fate for you.

Listen closely...

Road kill.

Home

"You have to land on your feet. No matter what else happens, you have to keep moving forward on the road." Evan moves across the living room and pops open his beer. George sits in the big easy chair, the only thing he really owns. He lifts the apogee bong to his lips and lights the last of the bowl's contents. It gurgles as he sucks at the mouth, then the pot is gone and the empty bowl whistles. George releases his finger from the carburetor on the handle and air rushes in. The water bong gurgles noisily as the last of the smoke shoots into George's mouth. He leans back, his chest round and full, mouth squeezed shut under a week's growth of black beard, eyes red-rimmed; hair, uncombed and matted, falls across his forehead.

"Can you at least cover your end of the bills for the last two months?"

George exhales, his eyes become unfocused as his body deflates. "See? No Smoke. AA. Absolute Absorption. That's the way it's done."

"You've been showing me that for years." Evan sits heavily, unimpressed, in the other easy chair. Evan's is a battered brown Lazy-boy that came with the two bedroom apartment. George sits and watches a story about a local serial killer on the late night news on the little black and white TV, blue-glowing on the floor. Nineteen young girls

are dead, are dead. Evan watches George.

"George! This is ridiculous. We can't keep getting notices, and I can't keep covering all the bills. I want you to get up off your butt and find a job tomorrow. You've got to get over this. No more excuses."

"Evan... how long ago did you move out of your parents' house?"

Evan sits back and sighs, then turns to watch the news. A stunning blonde blankly reads death statistics of a Rumanian catastrophe: millions dying; ten of thousands suffer bone-crushing oppression; family separations; hundreds of thousands roam cold and homeless in the streets. After a moment he says, "Which time?"

"All of them."

"I took off the first time when they separated. I was ten years old and gone for a week. Then I was asked to leave, after I dropped out of college. The last time was six years ago, after the summer I graduated. Why?"

"I want a dog," George whined dreamily. "When I was a kid, back home with my mother, I had a Rottweiler. It was loyal... smart. No matter what ever happened to me, she would have protected me. Ragnar! She would have died for me. I loved that dog. Out here," he waves his arm weakly around his head. "Out here they don't let you have pets in apartments. Not even a fish."

"So?"

"So? So what's a home without a dog? The only thing they let you have in these cages is other people. Human pets. Playmates." Evan rises from his chair slowly as George speaks, watching him. George's eyes are glazed, his head rolls loosely from side to side. "A regular playmate smorgasbord," George says sleepily, "all you can eat."

Evan stands over George and says, "You're getting a little funky on me here, George."

"You know," George says offhandedly, "my uncle is a scientist, a sociologist or something. Every time we talk politics or about the way things are he always says, sticking his chest out like... all authoritatively, 'My colleagues study population,' he says, 'breeding rats in a confined space to the point of severe over-population. And do you know what they do, George? They cannibalize one another, eating their young as fast as they can crank them out.'" George looks down into his lap and shakes his head slightly. "America."

"What have you been smoking tonight, George?" Evan says as he crosses the room, lifts the apogee and smells the bowl. "This doesn't smell like just spleef. What else have you been smoking?"

"I laced it, just wanted a little down time. I haven't been sleeping too well lately."

Evan takes the bong into George's room and puts it down next to the unmade bed. He comes back into the living room

and stands over him. George seems only half-conscious, watching the TV. "Listen, George. This has been going on for a month. She dumped you and she dumped the kid. That must not be easy, but you have to deal with it. She doesn't want family. She doesn't want to settle down. Who does nowadays? But you can't sit here and rot your brains and smoke your life away. I haven't seen you smoke so much since college."

"What I can't understand is why. Everything about her; the forties and fifties clothes; the militant cause crusades; eco-terrorism! I don't know what it was about her." He drifts off. "What was it about Judy," he sings softly, "her natural beauty?" George rises stiffly from the chair. "Maybe it was that she seemed so much older, even though she's your age. Remember when we were in college, smoking through mid-terms in the dorm, talking politics, talking about the future... playing reality. She seemed like something stable, with a future. She seemed tuned in to the infinite potential." He begins to chuckle softly to himself. "She's just another lobbyist, just another special interest group."

"George, stop it, man. You're just torturing yourself. You sit here twenty hours a day, too fried to move, and you make me pay your way. You're running away again. I'm sick of it. You're twenty-eight years old. You're not a sophomore sitting in a dorm room smoking through mid-terms."

George looks up at him. "Haven't you figured it out yet, man? You've got to take care of number one and not worry about her or the past... or the future. You're just a face, a symbol, a part of a larger idea. People are just dead images, you and her and your daughter. And when you're wiped out, a million other faces will fill in the gap."

"No, no, no," George says, shaking his head slowly side to side. "It's not that any one person is meaningless. It's just that we see too many of us all at once. People, people everywhere... and not a drop to drink." He moves into his bedroom and comes out a second later with his brown leather flight-jacket on. Evan stands silent and watches from across the room. George staggers off to the kitchen and starts rummaging around through the cabinets in the dark. After a minute he stops, a dark shape holding something bulky in his hands. George stands in near-total darkness, teetering in the kitchen in the dark, clutching the bulky thing to his chest. Evan stands still near the warm blue glow of the TV. A little bell jingles. "We're expendable because we're not an endangered species."

"She's weird, George, get over her."

"What's to get over? I don't think she ever really cared. She had her own agenda. Maybe I just wanted a dog." George lets himself out the side entrance. Evan listens to him stumble down the fire escape on the back of the building, a little bell jingling more and more faintly as it

recedes into the darkness. He moves into the kitchen and looks around on the counters, in the cabinets, then grabs a beer out of the fridge and comes back to the living room side of the apartment. He reaches down and flips the TV to channel 56, *All Night Black and White*, then falls comfortably back on his chair. *Gilligan's Island* is on. Evan smiles and sips his beer.

Saturnalia

The den was static; all the shelves of antique heirloom books and walls covered with ancient, cherished family oils were obscured on the edge of a darkness. Squat in the center of this darkness glowed a blue light, hissing hypnotic fuzz, a twelve inch wink-less globe, cyclops opiate TV screen. And not far away a man reclined, head bowed to one side reverently before his orb, dazed by the day's long uncoil, eyes slit half open, droop mouthed. The Lazy-cradle's reclined embrace enfolds, a cup of cold coffee poised in his limp hand, socked feet hang cock-eyed glowing blue at the base of the television, altered in the dark, broken sock-toes loose and hanging. In his lap, a deadened hand counterpoised the obedient remote, calmly waiting. He was a bald man, in his mid-forties; round tortoise-shell glasses slipped halfway down his dull round nose. A silver cord of drool hung from his lip. Somewhere a phone rang.

"Wilson," a woman's voice called from another part of the house; his body started, coffee lap splashed as his hands jerked, the remote squelched snow and sought *The News* and found it. Scenes of another serial killer stalking the area flashed across the screen. "Wilson! Pick up the phone. It's Dennis. He's actually in town."

"Oh," Wilson said to himself as he lifted his pear-shaped self from the recliner. He flicked on a green light

over the desk and moved around to the seat's side. There he pulled out the top right drawer and lifted a cordless receiver from a hidden phone. "Hello. Dennis? Is that really you."

"Yeah. Uncle Wilson. What's happenin'?" The voice seemed tiny and far away, like a long distance call and not at all like from right in his back yard.

"Hey, cut it with the uncle stuff. You'll make me feel like an old man. Dennis, where are you? This is a terrible connection."

"I have a friend, actually a couple of friends now, that have an apartment in the area. I guess they have an older phone." Wilson could hear women, young women, speaking and laughing in the background. He couldn't recognize anything they were saying, only lusty laughing happiness. Virile youth. "I just got into Springfield this afternoon," Dennis said, "and thought I would look you up."

"Well, this is a surprise." Wilson's round bald head broke into a smile. "Why don't you come up to the house for supper then? It must be two or three years since... Since I saw you last--"

Dennis laughed, "Wait a minute." His voice, enfolded within the young women's voices, female titter burst joys of confused thrashing about, youth's receiver apparently slipped from hand hard hitting floor amidst sounds of rough embraces, came. After a long pause Dennis returned.

"Okay, man. You got yourself a date. Are you sure Aunt Alice won't mind the intrusion."

"Oh, Dennis. That was three years ago, and she never meant it the way it sounded."

"Yeah, yeah. Cool. Hey, are any of the cousins in town?"

"No," Wilson said sadly. "They're both out of town. Tom has finally been accepted as an apprentice law partner up in Boston and Jerry is on a cruise to Hawaii."

"Hawaii? How did he swing a deal like that? I thought he was the starving student of the family right now."

"Well, he is. But it seems his girlfriend's father is worth about seventy-five million. He wants to see them married so he gave them a cruise, sort of as a pre-honeymoon tempter."

"That's funny. Didn't you tell me once that you and Alice still haven't had a honeymoon yet, after twenty-five years?"

"Well, kids these days seem to get around the little financial barriers that held us up when we were young. I never would have thought to take advantage of the setup with as much style as Jerry seems to be able to. Well, anyway, they're both out of town."

"That's too bad. Listen, I have to take a shower and get cleaned up before I come. Is it black tie and tails, as usual?"

Wilson laughed. "We'll throw something on the barbecue. Do you still like country style spare ribs?"

"Sure," Dennis said. "It's five-fifteen now. I'll be there in an hour."

"Excellent. We'll see you in an hour." Wilson lowered the receiver into the drawer and slammed it shut. This was a lucky day. He hurried around the desk and out of the den. "Alice! Alice!" he called as he came down the stairs. "I just invited Dennis over for dinner. Get those ribs left over from the Fourth out of the freezer."

Alice came out of the kitchen and planted her loafered feet at the base of the stairs. She wore tan corduroys with a light blue silk, sand-washed blouse, accented with a simple strand of pearls choked around her thickly layered neck. Alice's hair stood in a perfect dollop of bluish curls and swirls massed on her head with just a hint of gray at the temples. Her wedge face was well proportioned with just the beginnings of crow's feet exposed at the outer corners of her eyes. Handsome. Alice looked up at Wilson with a stern glacial expression in her shivery blue eyes. "I just put a casserole in the oven and now you want to start up a barbecue for a kid you haven't seen in three years. What am I supposed to do with the casserole?"

He stopped short and grinned down on his wife. "In the world of family the return of a prodigal nephew is a far cry more important than mouth-watering, tasty tuna casserole.

Country style spare ribs are his and my favorite in the whole world." He eased his way around her and passed through to the kitchen. "I've known this boy since his first day of life and tuna casserole couldn't get him over here for dinner if it was served on the family's gold-rimmed China. Meat. That will do it."

Alice pursued him into the kitchen, agitating her head. "Good Lord, Wilson, look at you. You'd think one of your own sons was coming home the way you're carrying on." She sidled over to the oven and man flicked the dial to *Off*. She opened the oven door and hefted out the little oval casserole dish and deposited it on a trivet on the counter. "Tsk, tsk, tsk. This will have to cool before I can put it back in the fridge."

"He likes ribs." Wilson laid out the utensils before him: a broad bowl, cutting slab and dagger knives, mortar and pestle, red fleshy tomatoes, dark Irish spirits and cloves of garlic, onion, bee's honey, sauce of oriental soy, salts and peppers, desert zest mesquite, thick, slow running molasses and biting mustard yellow, far away foreign oregano and home sweet basil.

"We just barbecued three days ago for the Fourth of July, and now we're doing it again?"

"We used to do it more than just once in a blue moon." Wilson wheeled on her, his face vexed, "Listen, Alice. I'm sorry you and Dennis had a falling out at Tom's wedding.

I'm sorry, Okay? But that was three years ago. Three long, tired years ago." He returned to his concoction, mixing and cracking, crushing and folding in tight, angry little circles. "You both shouldn't have been talking politics at a wedding, anyway. That was stupid. You had too much Chardonnay and the boy was pumped up on being a teenager, or something. Can't you just leave it alone?"

She planted her hands on her hips and spread her legs. "The boy is an anarchist. What man would show up to a wedding, a formal affair, wearing a Hawaiian get up and a pony tail down his back? And he had the nerve to condemn me for belonging to the Republican Party while he sat there *drunk* with no party. The only thing he envisioned for the future was anarchy."

"He's a teenager, it's your own fault for taking him seriously."

"And he called me a cold bitch right in front of the whole reception. In front of the whole family. He's a maverick. He doesn't really care about you or me or anyone else in the family. You're just blind because he's your favorite. For god's sake, Wilson, wake up."

Wilson turned impatiently on his wife. "He's just an individualist. That's all he's ever been. So what if he's a maverick, that can be a lot of fun if you do it with style. What do you want the boy to be, a fundamentalist? Lord, then you'd be happy. He'd be a zombie."

"I don't want him to dry up and blow away any more than you do, but why do you condone his perversions? Who did you hear in the background on his phone call? I heard women. And is that who he's staying with here in town? Lurid women? He's a hedonist!" She paced around in right to right circles, slicing and angling the air with severe finger sweeps. "It's no wonder with the role models kids are saddled with today. All they ever teach them is that success lies between their legs instead of between their ears. What ever happened to the woman's movement?" She turned and pointed her finger accusingly at Wilson; Wilson rejoined his formulation. "What's that sometime-blonde bimbo's name, that singer?"

"You mean the one with the dirty girly picture book?" He squinted off into space over the preparation of the sauce. "It's some ancient Roman name, Tiberia or Medusa or something."

Alice's face pinched tight, eyes fisted shut, hands waving off the inevitable. "If his mother knew what he is up to, it would break her heart."

"You seem to be forgetting that it was his mother and step-father that asked him to leave last year. I'm not too sure she even cares anymore."

Alice's mouth slapped open. She edged right up to Wilson and snapped in a tiny, controlled voice, "That's an evil thing to say about your sister. What is the matter

with you? Why do you insist on seeing everything from his point of view?"

Wilson turned from his hooch and looked into his wife a moment. She stood there contemptuous, haughty, tightly turgid and rigidly frigid, relentlessly implacable and altogether aggregate. He let loose a sigh and weak eyed her. "Do you remember the story about when he got thrown out of Harvard? His whole point was to not conform. They were teaching something in his Business Ethics course that disturbed him." Wilson put his hand to his shiny baldness and stroked slow to draw out specifics. "It was about the acceptability of cheating and lying as long as profit was involved, or something inane like that. He formally protested and they labelled him a Moralist. Politically Incorrect. A reactionary. And what does he do? He drops out..." He reverted to his sauce. "Amazing."

"What is so amazing about flunking out of college?"

"Principle," he mumbled. "He's only twenty, not even old enough to pick up a bottle of wine for dinner tonight, but he's got more spine than most of the men I do research with all day in the Lab."

Alice reversed rearward and glared at the hair side of his head. "Wilson. Why don't you ever react this way to the things your own sons do? Don't you see how you're neglecting your own sons?"

Wilson slowed his saucing, turned back to her and

shook. "They aren't even here anymore. Don't you think I know how successful our kids will be. They're on the fast track and will probably do better in the world than we even did. Jerry already is. But not Dennis. He doesn't care. He's the free spirit I remember being when I was a kid in the sixties."

Alice gyrated about and stalked from the kitchen, her arms lock folded across her chest. "Groovy," she ejected. Wilson stood still for a moment, then went back to chopping spices and blending. The hour must have flown past, for it seemed to Wilson that no sooner had he sauce consummated and prepared the flesh than the door chimes beckoned from the hall. Alice's heels clicked across the marble foyer to answer. From the kitchen Wilson could hear Alice's voice flitter into the her high friendly range as she greeted the boy and plucked him from the night. Wilson wiped his hands excitedly as he crossed the kitchen and flung the towel into the sink.

"Wilson!" Alice sing-songed from the living room, "Dennis has arrived. Come and see the boy." Wilson passed through the foyer and came into the living room to greet his nephew, a big smile all over his face. Dennis sat in a leather wing-back chair by the fireplace when Wilson came in. He wore his usual Hawaiian shirt, this one bright pink and deep blue, black 501 jeans and brown suede cowboy boots. He looked much the same, except his hair wasn't long

anymore. Dennis had cropped his hair. It was one of the new mushroom head styles, as Wilson liked to call them. Dennis's previously long blonde hair still had some length, but was shaved nearly bald all around his head, primed from the temple down. With all that hair gone, Wilson noticed his eyes right off. They seemed intense, just a little disturbed. Usual. As Wilson crossed the room quickly, Dennis rose and held out his broad tanned hand. Wilson brushed it aside and embraced him.

"Hello Dennis. We are so glad to see you." He turned to Alice and stopped short his oration. She had metamorphosed into one of her fine dresses, a deep blue, jacketed affair to which was affixed a large pearl brooch that glared wink-less from her hard chest. Wilson caught himself and continued, "We've prepared the most delightful feast for you. Would you like to drink? Bourbon and seven if I remember correctly."

"No, thank you, Wilson. I'll just have water or something. I gave up drinking. It was getting me into a lot of trouble."

"Really? Alice, could you fix some drinks, please? A water for Dennis and I'll have a bourbon and water."

"I'd be glad to." She hurried from the room.

"Well, Dennis," Wilson said, clapping him on the back. "What brings you to Springfield?" They moved back to the fireplace and sat facing each other in the opposing wing-

backed chairs.

"Actually it was a girl that brought me here. We're kind of... traveling together."

"So, you're finally settling down and *traveling* with someone? Where is she? Why didn't you bring her along?"

"We're not exactly... *traveling* together. We're just very close. She's visiting with her family right now. That was her and all of her sisters that were making the racket when I called. There's nothing noisier than a house full of women."

"There's nothing noisier than a house full of woman," Wilson offered amiably. "Well, there's a certain glow all that commotion can add to a house. I missed not having a little girl to raise. And I know Alice missed not having a little daughter."

"Speaking of glows, you must have left the TV on, up in the den again. I noticed that familiar blue illumination as I walked up the drive."

Wilson laughed softly. "I'm always leaving one of those things on somewhere in the house. One of these days I'll go off to work and come home to find the whole house shimmering in blue light."

"A very mystical scene."

Alice returned bearing a small ovular tray of drinks and moved close to Dennis. She leaned over and held out the tray for him to select a drink. None of the drinks looked

like water. One was yellow, like urine. That was the bourbon and water. The other two were dark and foamy. He lifted one and offered, "Coke?" Alice nodded. "Thank you," he said as he smiled up at her. She drew near her husband and served him his drink, then crouched on the couch watching with her drink. "Please... use the coasters. So, how are you, Dennis?" she said very sincerely.

Dennis turned toward Alice and smiled. "I'm fine. Probably for the first, time I really feel fine." He turned his whole body toward Alice, his face very serious as he spoke. "Alice, there's something I'd like to say before we go on any further tonight." Alice and Wilson exchanged a quick glance in the pause. Wilson could see that here-it-comes-I-told-you-so look in her eyes. "I know you and I haven't spoken in three years because of Tom's wedding. And I kind of feel that you may still be feeling angry. All I want to say is that I would like to ask your forgiveness." The expression of surprise was a delicate counterpoise to her attire. "I'm also sorry that I haven't absolved this before now."

"Well, Dennis..." Alice stammered before she fell into silence, unable to complete what little she started to say.

"You don't know this, and there was no way for anyone to notice because I got so good at hiding it, but I had a heck of a drinking problem back then. I didn't get control of it until just last year." Both Wilson and Alice

inadvertently set their drinks down as he spoke, their faces blank. "I think at that reception I had about a dozen drinks that I stole from tables all over the building. I also got in fights with Mom and Dad and Jerry that night. I actually punched Jerry in the mouth, did he tell you that?"

"No," Wilson and Alice said altogether.

"Well, that doesn't come as a surprise."

"What did he do to deserve a punch in the mouth?" Alice said.

Dennis smiled and looked down into the fire. "You don't want to know," he said. After an awkward pause Dennis re-engaged his aunt. "Anyway, I hope you can forgive me for the things I must have said that night. I really can't remember."

Alice sat silently, reciprocating nothing but a dull stare.

"Dennis," Wilson said, "you mean to tell me that you've stopped drinking all together? Is that why you're drinking a coke?"

"Yup. I hit bottom right when I dropped out of Harvard last year. When I protested and they labelled me an outcast, I kind of lost sight of the larger issues." Dennis grinned to himself as he spoke. "Me and my number one drinking buddy, my girlfriend at the time, went down to *The Pub* in Cambridge and drank all night. We were on a world-class binge. By the time we were through drinking and doing

lines, it was the next afternoon and I was pissed as ever. I belted her a good one for shooting her mouth off, so she split. She took everything she owned and most of my stuff, too. I followed her up to her parents in southern Maine, tracked her down." He looked up and smiled apologetically. "After I found them all, I got a hotel room in town and started planning to get her back. I got in touch with her but her father said he'd call the police if I showed up at their house... after he and I... He hurt me pretty bad, and she did too. So I actually killed their dog and did all kinds of stuff... I was doing an eight ball a day... not altogether there." Dennis stopped short and looked embarrassed.

"I had no idea," Wilson said.

"You mean to tell me you're an alcoholic?" Alice said, astonished. "You're only twenty years old. As old as Jerry. You're just a boy."

"I'm twenty-two... a man," Dennis flatly said. "I've had a short life, and now I want it to be normal... whatever normal is. At least I can make it drug free." He looked from Wilson's blankness to Alice's blankness and back again. "Don't worry about it now." Dennis smiled proudly. "I've come a long way since then." Dennis stopped talking and just smiled at his uncle and aunt. He looked back and forth between them as they sat in dumb wonder. Wilson's mind was a blank. This certainly wasn't the way he had

envisioned the evening going, and the boy had just arrived. They hadn't even fired up the coals yet.

"Well," Wilson sprang up from his seat, "let's barbecue some food." Alice rose slowly, not taking her eyes from Dennis. Dennis rose and said, "Sure. Fine." The three walked from the living room in silence. Alice veered wordless from their course and slowly ascended the flight of stairs. The two males stood in silence at the bottom of the steps and watched her stately waddle up the stairs. Top-wise she vanished, off to her secret rituals preparatory to the feast. The two remaining eyed each other, then resumed their slow trek to the kitchen. Dennis inappropriately hymn hummed as they loaded up their arms with ribs and sauces and long skewer fork and tong devices. Wilson intoned, "Well, Dennis. This can be A Victory Feast, or A New Beginning Feast."

"Sure, that would be nice."

They went out on to the patio and arranged the barbecue implements on a small pedestal near the barbecue. Wilson was still a little taken back as he ignited the gas feast flames and arranged the cooking utensils and meat on the table. "Hope you don't mind if I do all the tending, it's a man's rights." He offered a smile.

"It's your home, it's your temple."

Wilson hefted the meat preparations and laid them out carefully over the flames. "Cook well, meat," he said

softly.

As Wilson muddled about with his job, he grew more and more at ease with Dennis's little bomb. The awkwardness began to settle down. He laid the ribs on the hot grill and they sizzled with heat. Wilson decided to jump start the conversation and to exhort on something less severe.

"There's something about barbecuing that's like nothing else in the universe," Wilson incantated. "It's something I don't think women will ever understand." He turned, held out both arms, a long skewer on his right hand, tongs in his left, and smiled a big reassuring smile at his nephew. "A man gets to know his meat as he stands over it, watches it get hot and turn from red to brown, firm up." He turned back to his ritual. "Every piece is existent, cooks different, idiosyncratic. So when he sees it, all offered up on the platter, he can look at it and recognize the pieces and know how his guests will accept them. It's almost mystical in some sort of... primeval way."

"Just like on the Flintstones. Yaba Daba Doo." Dennis smiled into the gas flames.

Wilson stroked the ribs on the grate, poked and prodded at them. After a second he put forward, softly, "You killed a girl's dog? My god, son... what has been happening to you?"

"All kinds of weird things... theurgy... divination... immolation and gore.... She hurt me, and her father did

too. So I wanted to hurt them back, to scare the Hell out of them. I got into some scary things and made some big mistakes and now I'm sorry as hell I ever went there."

Wilson poked and stroked the meat, observing closely the way it sizzled. He had no idea what the Hell Dennis was talking about. It sounded religious, which was one Hell of a surprise, considering. What was it with kids these days? All he ever wanted in college was to get drunk and get laid. Then it occurred to him. "So, you're traveling around with a girl? You haven't mentioned her name yet. Is she the new one?"

"No, our relationship isn't based on anything physical." Dennis let go a sigh. "It's more of a spiritual thing." Dennis sat on the picnic table and sipped his Coke. Wilson looked around for his drink, but it wasn't out on the patio. He must have forgotten it inside and that was just as well. "Her name is Joan," Dennis continued, "and she's my sponsor. She's been in the program for about a year longer than I have."

"In the program?"

"Yeah. AA."

"Phew," Wilson chuckled comfortably. "For a second there I thought you had become a Moonie or a fundamentalist or some other kind of fanatic with all this mumbo-jumbo talk."

Dennis smiled. It was good that they were lightening

up. "No, we're not Moonies. Just recovering, as if we were in chemotherapy together." Dennis's attitude seemed to stiffen as he continued. "Joan has had a really interesting life. She comes from a broken home--"

"Who doesn't, these days?" Wilson had his back to Dennis as he spoke, feeling and fingering the ribs that sizzled over the gas flame.

"That's right. That was the first thing that we had in common. It's a little unusual to have a sponsor of the opposite sex, but I've never really responded as well to guys as well as to women. She and I sat together when I first started going and we hit it off right away, like it wasn't us behind it at all." Wilson cocked his head a little, suspicious. "Well, anyway, her mother is an ultra-radical militant-ecologist type, an equal rights proponent for the oppressed everybody everywhere. I don't know what all to make of her. And the only thing all those titles really mean to Joan is that her mother never bothered to take time out for her, that she wasn't victim enough. That's the way Joan sees it."

Wilson turned to Dennis and shook his head. "I don't know. It seems parents have a right to a life, nowadays. Especially women. I don't want to knock your little friend, Dennis, but it sounds like the same emotional buck-passing they talked about in a report about parent-bashing on 60/60 the other night."

"Oh, I can see your point. They are right, to a degree. But the news people are not seeing that all of these things are interdependent. They're just seeing what's going to seem interesting and make them sponsor money. The news people aren't in the front lines, they're manipulating them. It's fine if Joan's mother wants to have a life, but she sacrificed her mother/daughter relationship for that life. Whatever you call it, however you interpret what is happening, that was the end result. Joan feels that it was some kind of all or nothing deal that her mother has been reliving constantly since she was a little kid. It's all interrelated. The ribs are burning."

"Oh!" Wilson turned back to the hot meat and pricked and poked at it, turning all the pieces over on the grill. He thought about the things Dennis said as he massaged sauce into the meat. He couldn't help feeling a little disappointed. This was supposed to be a party. And now they were talking about divination and dog killing and bad parenting. Dennis was getting into some heavy things that were better left for other times, not this time. But... the fat was in the fire. The boy was asking for it... Like: what Wilson couldn't understand, what he always had trouble with, was how all of this pop-psychology stuff just blew up out of the clear Indian summer skies of the American Cultural scene. Why was it this generation that did all the belly-aching about the tough breaks in life. His generation

never cried and whined about life. They had Vietnam to face and these kids are just stuck with the fat of the land, and complaining about it, too. Whatever. Whatever. Whatever the answer was, he wasn't about to antagonize Dennis. Alice might be against a good time, and Dennis might not be ready for one, but at least he would maintain and have fun. He decided to let Dennis blow off steam and say the things he probably felt he needed to say so they could just get on with their visit. When the ribs were safely coddled and cooking he returned to the conversation. "So this Joan is visiting her mother here in Springfield? Patching things up?"

"No. Her sisters live in the area. Her mother lives in Los Angeles. The sisters and their mother haven't spoken in years. There's so much damage done to the relationships that I don't know if they'll ever get it back together. After what her mother did to Joan, I don't know if I blame her."

"Was she one of those kids that was sexually abused by her parents, or something?" Wilson mumbled.

"I don't know. I never asked. What I know about was when she moved out two years ago. She broke up with some joker that she was infatuated with. He was three or four years younger than she was. I don't think her mother liked that. It doesn't sound like she likes much. Her mother was always doing stuff to them that intimidated them."

Especially Joan. She once walked in on them while they were... you know. She came in with a camera and started taking pictures and screaming *Rape! Rape!* I think Joan was twenty-six at the time... Even though she still carries a flame for that guy, I think that was the end of their relationship." Wilson turned back to the ribs and chuckled to himself. "Joan started using drugs after her boyfriend dumped her. Within a year, she was shooting speed-balls into the veins on the back of her legs. She almost overdosed. I met her at a meeting about a year later."

"I'm sorry, Dennis. Speed-balls? Some of this is embarrassing. Doesn't Joan mind you telling her little secrets in front of total strangers. I mean, what am I going to say when I meet this girl?"

"Oh, it's okay. This isn't anything that she hasn't stood up in front of a meeting of two hundred people and talked about."

"Good god, Dennis. What kind of people have you been hanging around with?"

"Just normal people. People with the same background as I have."

"It's a good thing that your mother isn't here to hear this."

"Mom met Joan. She wishes we'd get together, but we keep telling her that that isn't what we're all about."

"Dennis?" It was Alice. She stood poised in the

sliding glass doorway, arms out stretched door to sill, head tilted and wonder all about her eyes. Wilson started at the soft corners of her voice and turned to face her. "Dennis?" she said, "I'm sorry for the way you and I have been. I had no idea. I was just talking with your mother."

"Alice!" Wilson said. "What's the matter with you?"

"It's okay," Dennis said as he turned to speak with her. "Why don't you come out here and join us?"

Alice stepped through the door and stood next to her husband. Wilson looked at the strangeness of her; an alien tissue quiet with ill at ease. "I'm so sorry Dennis, but I just couldn't believe you after all the years of lies that you've told. I could believe the Harvard story, but everything else seemed so... fantastic."

"Yeah, it's been a difficult couple of years. What did Mom say?"

"She said she couldn't believe the change that's come over you. She says that this girl has changed your life." As Wilson watched, he noticed her lack of skeptical poise, the revealing of her doubting demeanor kept hidden whenever Dennis was around. She was tainted, replaced with a look of minor wonder. "But she also says you're getting into some other things. She says this girl has changed you into a Jesus-freak."

"Alice!" Wilson said. "All this talk about AA and dog killing and rape and overdosing is getting out of hand."

This is supposed to be a party. And now, on top of everything else, you bring up religious fanaticism." He stomped away from his position in front of the flames and waved his arms around unsanctimoniously as his face hued red. "We're Unitarians, the whole family, and we don't bother with this superstitious clap-trap. All of us! This kind of superstitious drivel isn't worth talking about." He pulled himself up, noticed the looks of bewilderment of the others' faces. "I'm sorry," he mumbled. "This was supposed to be a celebration, a feast. Not some kind of religious experience." He turned and pleaded with Alice. "The boy is involved with AA. He's hardly rolling around on the ground screaming canonical gibberish and foaming religious liturgies at the mouth."

Dennis smiled and shook his head. "Why do all of you see these things from such black and white extremes. Those are destructive stereotypes, like calling a black person an Uncle Tom or calling Jews vermin."

Wilson turned from his wife to Dennis with a look of shock on his bald face. "You mean to tell me that you're believing all this God crap?"

"One of the first steps, after admitting substance addiction is to accept your own powerlessness and turn to the strength of a Higher power. Ego and pride are two main reasons people never admit they have a problem, even though they do the cruelest, craziest things to each other. A lot

of people turn to God." He smiled. "Some people turn to weight training or some other pursuit of physical excellence, but that seemed to me to be the same thing as before. Ego-centricity. Either it's substance highs or it's adrenaline highs, they're both as flimsy and transient as the body is. I decided to pursue something that seemed to be... a little more lasting. The more I studied the more sense it all made. What's so bad about 'Love thy Neighbor'?"

Wilson moved toward Dennis with a confused, pleading look. He shook his head. "What have I always told you? What have we always believed? We're Unitarian Universalists. Ghosts and superstition and immortality is what brings man down, the cause of all the wars and real suffering. Read your history."

"I'm not saying that history isn't full of mistakes, but man is the one that made them all. I can't say that God is responsible when we're given a free spirit that can choose to be bad. That was what I did, and I blew it. Now I need help."

"My god," Wilson said, "you're talking like a fundamentalist. How can you stand there and talk like a fundamentalist?" Wilson began to back away. "Did you come here to evangelize us?"

"I'm not a fundamentalist. I don't even know what one is. I'm an adult. I can believe in what I want. I needed

help and I got it. I didn't come here for anything but to make up with you both and apologize. What are you so afraid of?"

"Wilson!" Alice screeched. "Wilson! The meat!" Wilson turned to his ribs. They were engulfed in flames, pork fat fueled. He lifted them from the grill and hurriedly stacked them to the side of the small inferno. After he rescued his food from the flames he inspected the damage. Every last rib was scorched, consumed by flame. He reached down to the gas feed knob and turned it out. "It is finished," he said, devoid of emotion. He turned and looked at Dennis hard.

"I'm sorry," Dennis said. He turned and started to walk out.

"It's okay," Wilson sighed as he walked past Alice and caught him by the door, "it's just that your visit is so strange." He turned back to Dennis and held both hands out smiling. He shrugged his shoulders. "You have to admit, this has been a strange visit. I guess you're an adult now, entitled to make your own mistakes." He turned and looked back sadly at the scorched meat. "Oh, well, looks like we'll have to eat tasty tuna casserole. And I remember how much you used to love your ribs."

"It's okay. Since I got clean I kind of gave up meats and fats and stuff anyway."

"You're a vegetarian, too?" Alice marvelled.

Wilson turned and looked astonished at Dennis. "My

god," he stammer smiled, looking up to the rear den window.
Dark. Dark. "You really have forsaken us."

Bedrock

"We've changed together over all the years we've been apart, old friend," he says sloppily, raising his half-full quart of Colt Malt Liquor in triumphant toasting. "I didn't believe that you really still existed, but here you are. I haven't stepped foot on you since I was a damn kid and here you are, still here." He lifts the bottle, spilling the malt down his chest before the lip reaches his mouth. "We are the same; a little older, a little more run down, but still up." He raises his diminishing quart and drinks another toast. "Brain! We have to pay homage to our friend here... Flintstoneville, Barney Town, Wilmasburg, Betty's Heights!" He staggers and falls into a bush by the driveway. "Bedrock, South Dakota. Molder of the American Mind."

He scrambles from the shrub and crawls to his car. Evan downs the rest of his malt as he sits Indian style on the hood of his car. He wears nothing but a pair of red shorts and white tennis shoes. After several loud, wet belches he reaches back into a knapsack at the head of the hood, removes another quart and jams it into the crook of his crotch. His red Jetta sits cold and still in the driveway of the salmon pink house Evan thought was Barney Rubble's home so many hours ago. Next door stands the sandy yellow splotchy home of Fred and Wilma Flintstone. That was

his first choice of a parking spot, when he first arrived. But someone had dug up the Flintstone's driveway with a back-hoe or something, so he drove to the next house, Barney Rubble's. All the other variously-pastel-colored, globular fiberglass-boulder houses stand in random spots on the abandoned property, long grass and weeds growing all around them. Clouds had drifted through the little Black Hills town of Custer hours ago, all the previous day and into the night, but now the sky is finally lightening, the potential storm only a hollow threat. "That's fine with me," he screams. "You can rain, spit or piss on me, I'm not going anywhere! This is my cartoon-theme-park ghost town!"

He sits up, cracks the seal of his new quart and looks cock-eyed into the distance.

"Tell me, brain," he says hypothetically, "which reality should we respect more? Should we respect the real world out there, with all of its moral bankruptcy, and corrupt government and sleazoid yuppie hair-balls out to rape a buck? Or should we venerate this technicolor demi-world of our pals, the Flintstones?"

Well, brain answers, let me ask you this: Which one is really real, and which one is trying to pull the wool over your eyes?

A suspicious look crosses Evan's alcoholically simplified face. "What do you mean?"

Remember the guy down in the liquor store? brain says

inside his head. *You were asking about the Sitting Bull Monument and why there were so many bullet holes all over the property up there?*

"Yeah," Evan says, "so what?"

He put reality in its simplest terms. He said, 'There are a lot of people 'round here that think them Indians were a bunch of murdering scum, and don't want to see no monument to 'em. We--

'want to kill them all off and they want to kill us all off, that's the way it's always been,' Yeah. I remember him saying that. Why?"

Pretty honest if you ask me. You're not even a local, even worse, you're a tourist, and he was all ready to tell you about the time he shot up the place himself. Did you ever get it straight like that from Bedrock?

"No, but you don't get it straight like that from the six o'clock news, either. Holy cow, Brain, it's just a hypothetical question about cartoon land." He jumps down from the hood of his car and kicks a heap of pebbles into the grass by the front door of Barney Rubble's salmon pink house. "If I wanted to think about the big lies in life, I would have watched the President. Let's changed the subject. Let's talk about women--"

Not women again, Brain whines. That's why we're on this idiotic trip in the first place. 'The Drunk In Fifty States Cross Country-rama,' remember? 'In Search of the

Perfect Legs?'

"I remember, but I'm not a leg man anymore. I'm a liver lover. Give me a woman with a great gorgeous gall bladder. Or how about intestines? I'm mad about intestines, long, shapely... functional intestines. I love 'em."

Brain is quiet. Evan raises himself up and staggers around the car. "To hell with body parts. I remember, on the road again, nothing like the freedom of the open road in America." As he speaks he walks around and around his car, waving his arms in dramatic gestures at the fiberglass houses and rocks and trees all around him. "You tell me, Brain, you tell me where a man can just up and leave. Leave all the responsibility and the chains and the lies and look up at a different time zone's own little piece of sky every night. Not only that, but drunk as hell, too? Where?"

The Soviet Union has twelve time zones, that's three times as many. And lord knows they have a good supply of vodka.

"Whoa, Brain, you can still do math. Time for another Colt."

I think you should go back, Brain says decisively. It was a mistake to leave Joan just to be free and easy. Life doesn't work that way.

"My life does, so shut up already. That's all you've been telling me for three days. Go Home. Go Home. How did

I ever get such a yellow, lumpy, spineless, soft-shelled, asinine, yellow, useless, wimpy... stupid brain, anyway?"

Stupid? Who's the one running away? Who's the one trying to live up to some perverted self-reliant American Male image he scrapd off The Rifleman?

"Okay. Okay. That's it, baby. You just threw your last cheap shot of the night." He holds his finger over the open mouth of his bottle tight and shakes it violently.

"Now you're gonna get yours you cheap sleazoid ball of muck." He holds his hand to his temple and releases. A jet of foam plumes against his head, down his chest. Evan raises the spewing bottle to the sandy, splotchy house across the little patch of tall grown grass and toasts.

"Here's to Fred and Wilma and their Pebbles prodigy. I hope to God there are no serial rapists in cartoon land!" He throws back his head and finishes the bottle with a huge "Ahhh!"

Oh, this is so mature, Evan, brain says, If only Joan were here to share this Kodac moment.

"Stop it," he says, then he raises the bottle to the Rubble's salmon pink house. "Here's to you, Betty, even though Barney wasn't man enough, at least the writers gave you little Bam Bam." He raises the bottle to finish off its contents. Nothing comes out. He raises the bottle over his head and shakes it. "We didn't plan that very well, Brain. You done drained big daddy's libelations with your suicidal

sha...nantics."

Sleep, Evan, sleep, Brain says.

"Drink, brain, drink," Evan says.

He walks down the street, bottle-raising and thunder-lauding the red Fire House boulder building, drinking health to the green boulder bowling alley and the prehistoric fire hydrants as he goes. The sky overhead begins to lighten, huge gray clouds billow a dull pink. Very far off, probably from somewhere over the plains, he hears the thick thunder rumble. He raises his bottle and honors the coming rain. Just as he approaches the largest building, a cream colored two story double-decker multiple fiberglass boulder affair, someone steps into the road ahead of him.

"Hold still, son. No one wants to get hurt." It is still fairly dim. Evan can't see if it's a cop or a caretaker of some kind.

"Look, Brain," he shouts, "it's the pole-lice," and he starts to laugh.

"What are you doing here, son?"

"Me and my good friend here, my brain, we're drinking to your fine city, Marshall Dillon." Evan laughs. The dark shape moves closer. Evan can see he carries a shot gun. It is a cop.

"This is private property, boy."

"Private my butt. This is Bedrock. Flintstoneville. TV land. This is my heritage."

"You've had a bit too much to drink tonight. And you're not driving. Why don't you get down on your face there, boy." Evan can see the man's face. It is expressionless, dark skin that seems to have a slight shine to it, black hair, flattened nose. He is an Indian. Evan slowly places the bottle down on the ground and lies flat, face in the dirt. The cop comes over slowly, then drops his knee into the back of Evan's neck. Evan doesn't struggle as the Indian cop wrenches his arms behind his back and cuffs him.

"I am arresting you for trespassing, destruction of private property and being drunk in public. You have the right to remain silent--"

"Yabba Dabba Doo," Evan says.

Something Old, Something New

Behemoth daisy yellow eyes wink watched with white petal lashes. Sprays of dancing white-pill little baby's breath perched on long bony green fingers fingered a floral affair. Daffodil butter cup electric mouth up kissing soft sanguine rose skin flesh touched. White pill littles in the flowers winked. It was a most most floral affair. Possibly the most floral laurels Laura had seen in any one church garden meadow groves of cut killed wedlock-blooded flowers everywhere. They clambered from every church pew arbor. And the reception theme repeated on every table and doorway armored with flowers. The Club fraternal sending off again again Daddy husband's little girl again.

Laura sat at Table One, off in the left corner by the cool draft breeze lonely alone behind a pole brooding. Flora and female people dress dressed with floras surrounded her in slow disturbed eating strangeness. It was always this way, these things that Mary did and she always felt this day should have been a personal express special day that she and Mary would parallel couple simultaneously. But it was never that way. Disappointment raging disappointedly from this engagement through planning right up to wedded bliss time and including this gala regatta Laura felt something miss amissing gone astray.

Love.

And she was most uncomfortable assigned sitting at Table One. Hidden in the corner, fettered with festive filled old dowagers and gloom and bride relatives so distant who can remember who all they should have to be. The reject table not the front long rectable. Laura sat still and quiet, poking her potatoes and stroking roast beef, trying to ignore the slurred buzzing of the Groom's guests positioned all around her. She was placed there on purpose, she knew it. It was nearly impossible to squeeze herself into the little corner way off to the side of the dining hall. Mary knew she would never fit into such a tiny little cram-corner spot, not the way she always was ponderous around all these petite little Barbie Doll whoevertheyare gloom women in their floral print triangle lacy collars summer wedlock deckings who easily fill fit off to the edge-corners crammed as most quests of the other's family but not her family should be. But... Laura looked them all over, knew she maybe knew one or two, or was maybe related maybe. But it made no sense. Less and less did. Why were some women not fortunate enough to win a sleek little teeny-breasted no-hipped body frame in the heredity lottery. And a good here and now. Some women inevitably were generous by proportion. It was only in the movies that they were ever like this teeny group stationed around. Yes... Laura was a real person, not one of the little bony here beauties of the pop oggle. She became aware of her size sitting still

there, there in the tiny seat sitting. Comfortable. No excuses to the Barbie doll contingent. No apologies to the MTV stringy lean beanpole bimbo squad hand-picked to public fuss over frugal leaves and twigs piled high at the salad bar. She snorted to herself and took a large chunk of red meat and shoved it in her mouth. Twig woman next to her looked away.

Laura chewed and looked again up at the head rectable. Groommary spoke low, personal tones, oblivious. Tumultuous wedshow whirled and buzzed all around them, but they were there, unwitting trapped in extramiopicsexeyesightlessness. And then Mary watched her watch, raised cupped claws waved little up and downs cutesie-like. The perfect couple, projecting this costly here and now. Mary never smiled gray teeth unless she got caught off guard. Mary looked off, face unchanging after losing sixty pounds since Groomeeting a year ago, nearly as much as Laura gained. Groom chisel... Chin face whispers with the Mary. She the eye hog food given up for sex and sex and sex and sex. Yes... Mary liked boysnakedtouching, always did like piercing blue eyes; Mary ran her sharp fingers through short curly chocolateness and wet round nuzzled the face that grew wet warm.

Laura quickly looked down and food brooded. Mary courted this gloom, all the time they were together with the skin and the other things. And now Mary would

transmumetamorphigure into yet another someone else again again and Laura would persist stagnetic analogous. Depressed... Mary was growing more and more distant adult aloof a tiny one hundred twenty size 8 until the day she would die. Ting ting ting air all around claw hammers on glass the smiling dress witches swing kiss jingles for the bride and gloom. He brown curl leaned to her clear oval white wrapped lace face. *White* medieval headdress. Laura laughed to herself. All anyone could see of Mary was sweet saccharine-faced huge dark eyes lip lies derisiomockery spider irony concealed in vogue lace with slender little hands and thin, graceful, smooth little talons sticking from the lace white ended in sharpened little points. Spider heart.... Kiss and be careful fly.

Hypocrites seated right and left went ting ting ting until she bit him. Bite. Smile boy girl boy girl right left arrangements on the thin young pretty rectable smiled perky, similarly slim black tuxshoulderedos and pastoral gowned smiles. She had seen this before, this love kiss carnival supper Groom and bride and lookers-on as they kiss the taking dying lier death kiss, doomed blessed matrimonial bliss. Yes, that was how it seemed... endmosterminus supper. Eterminal Snack. Suddenly she was glad the Groom had so many sisters, there was no room, no room at the... the lockwed carnifestijubilation. Yes

"Twins!" someone barked right near her right ear. She

shook the sound off her head and it left, the whole thing left the mist of her mind. She turned to see who it was that actually would speak to her. The woman next to her was familiar, she remembered, from last night. Laura saw her last night. They did food things together. A mother. No. A Groom's great aunt. She had before introduced herself as the Groom's great aunt last night while Laura was trying to squeeze herself into her little red restaurant chair. They were far away from the special people then too. The old woman sat yellow smiling with a temporal joy, high forehead dots of white age spots. Pills. Wart thing, she had a temple wart thing. Why didn't Laura remember that? That resinous opaque wart bulge thing. Who was she? "Twins!" the great aunt ejaculated again. Laura smiled polite as she could, finger-drumming and not running. "I just heard that you and the bride are twins isn't that a coincidence but you don't look anything alike I would have a difficult time saying you were even sisters but you must be just fraternal twins. Twins!"

"We're not twins, of course," Laura said disgusted.
"Just look at her."

"Oh, that's not what I heard," the old woman said more sharp swiftly. "Our side of the family has had a few experiences with twins." She was sleek and bony like the rest of the around tabled in-laws, just a wizened old bone of a woman, but when she was young she must have been just

as stunning as the rest of the Groom's beauty bloodline. "It's just that you both have so many different features." Laura didn't let the woman upset her, though she knew that was her scheme. She knew about conspiracies here and there all her life. Arrangements. The old great aunt was the only one at the table even attempting to make contact with her. Why... Laura smiled politely as she slid her plate away and set her round stubby fingers into her lap under the table. She turned to engage the clash woman.

"How do you mean?" she smiled.

"Well, Mary is a redhead and you're a blonde--"

"Red is a popular color today... and white"

"Excuse me?"

"Mary won all the skinny Irish family genes in the family from her father's family side and I'm supposedly the spitting image of my mother though I wouldn't know since I don't think I've ever seen her in person... only pictures."

"Excuse me?" the old woman winced, temple moving. "I met your mother last night we all ate together."

"Another mother."

"Divorce? That seems to be so common nowadays we were just saying that they," she gestured with her head toward the front table, "they shouldn't have any kids until they're sure they'll stay together children can make a divorce so messy."

"No, my parents weren't divorced. My mother couldn't

be bothered with the everyday little inconveniences of reality, like child rearing and family and everything else that went along with the real world." She lifted her hands to the table and patted them as she spoke left left right right. "When Mary and I used to cry in our rooms for food she would come over and try to turn down the sound, or turn off the picture with imaginary little knobs on our doors I remember the sound of her around and around nails on the hollow wood doors and she swore to father that we were demonic cartoons from hell trying to trap her and take away her dignity because she was phrenic."

"A what?"

"A phrenic. You know, *I'm a phrenic, he's a phrenic she's a phrenic we're all phrenics wouldn't you like to be a phrenic too?* At least that's the story father will tell you in the bar for a drink."

"My goodness," the old woman gnarled.

"Child rearing was not kind to mother," she said prima donna-like. "They shouldn't worry about divorce," she gestured with her head toward the front table, "when they've got so many heredity problems to worry about." Laura smiled around the rest of the table, but no faces were listening to her. All about the table meat strewn blood plates crouched quivering unattended. Heads bobbed on skin and chattered on and on and on and on and... The smile melted from her as she looked back at the old woman. "What do you want from

me?" she said, but the old woman was gone. Laura sighed at her gone and started to push the roundtable away to make way to the ladies room.

"Coming through," she sing-songed to the others' guests and started to push the large round table away from her belly. They under breath shut up harumphed and gufawed as the table slid into them, they sliding chairs backwards and with just not a little effort Laura pulled herself free of her grab seating and out-wedged sidewise from the gripper. Exit. She not so carefully not too eagerly pushed through the crowd, most aware of the satin cling thing creamy satin of her wrongsized evening gown pinching crotch and pits with quiet plastic givitz zwip as she walked. An old tuxshoulderedo nodded familiar like, making a muscle spasm up and down and up her back. She turned away and sped for the exit. Egress. With a slight head turn they were exposed, an old wart woman kneeling down by the Mother-in-law to be, she is she is the great matriarch, the queen bitch royale that sat so still and reserved, brood cruel controlling in and quiet authority. She was a real piece of work. Ratted out. The bitties watched her tight waddle across the room. There was nothing more caught-Laura wanted than easy egress. Escape. "Marvelous," Laura's voice said aloud to her, "narked on by the old bat so now the queen mother will probably try to corner me again."

Laura drifted right past the ladies room on the side of

the hall. Cool it was cool out there away and a much away from all the faces looking and asking. Voices and music followed down the hall, just followed when she moved and when she stopped they lingered soft. Somewhere in the sound a woman laughed and laughed. She knew that laugh it was the dead one the gone other. She was still invited from the dead. Laura felt suddenly sick as in why did she have to be here too, and, why was she following her? Laura duck penetrated the little roosteyrietaverpub at the stop of the longhall. She didn't know if the queen mother or the other witnessed slippage into this here, but she hoped not. She knew stool sliding on that she was no easy target to miss.

The bar was day dark; dark wood panels and black overstuffed leather grippers, portraited dead dark militaries' faces and eyes and gray plumes, dark bartop stretched long and slick sticky fingers smooth and wet here not there. Men. Men. Men of all forms stood and chattled congenially around and around, plume wording gape mouthed in great white reeks, homo sapiens scrapped away from wedlatch jubileeastng for men drunkenness, blue and white square shoulders and skin on the head, dead white hands look soft but pinch and tear and... It was fine with Laura. Fine. None of these cheating meat men wolves would bother her, not here in the time out, not with so many buns of steel tight twig wonder women around. And that was fine with her too. No more fraternalizing ever....

A rasp long rasp and suck of air and another's chatter little rodent like of two men laughing few bar stools down together slamming hard little glasses on the smooth bar. Laura's chest filled with ammonia with vinegar and electric hiss tight. He was there again drunk no more no less, it was husband... Nick. Her forehead hot slime slick she leaned back to look see and sure enough he and the other one were red face. Their voices drifted through the drunken rabble, echoed down a long, glass tube.

"These kids they're better off than you and I ever were," Iowa said yes yes he was from Iowa, "just look at the educations we're about to shell out for them for graduate school If I had that kind of big gun mentality behind me when I started out I'd be a hell of a lot better off by now."

"Hell," Nick interrupted, "an education isn't going to make a lot of difference look at the waste it was on Laura she's a total waste of whore's flesh I work with these kids in retail every day they're not interested in homes and families give one of them an education and he's just going to work a year, maybe two just long enough to save up for a car or a stereo or a trip off to Europe or the Far East." His voice got casual like he needed money. "Young kids today are more interested in possessions and prestige impressing their friends with loud stereos and shiny cars they're not interested in investing the time to raise a

family like we were in our day family values just aren't important to them any more it's more a matter of self gratification."

The Iowa other chitter laughed. "I think you have them confused with yuppies."

"At least *that* generation could make some real money." Rasp chattle spit fly in plumes of fraternal family fucking. It was a blessing, a blessing if she could slip from this here and not see them again this day, not standing anyway. Let them, let them become fools and laugh dance pass fight fall bleed sleep vomit, let them. Laura held her breath and backed downward the bar eyeing head sides laughing as she backed up step careful slow into the cold edge wet crashing down her shoulders sharp head crack wet on the back.

"Hey!" the woman's voice said. They turned, two faces smile fading to jarhead yellow teeth sneers. Iowa watches dumb in wonder but Nick just turned away, stared away and cigar chewed like nothing was there. Laura backed into the hall.

Phenomenomiraculous wonder of miracles the hall was clear and free of fearicles. Laura stood there a second between the two noises, between the drifting vapor woman off aloft in the hall following and them, white velvet fists. She stood there for a second, safe and away from both, and she knew she knew she knew she could not return to either. Parking lot escape withdrawal regroup alone. Too much going

on, all them not her, too too much voicenoisebewilderpill-
 littleeyetalontearbloodgarbbbleplexhexvexsexmessstranger-
 strangleepainsoutoutoutout... She held her ears tight and
 lowered the head sighed screaming inside as she made for the
 out. Parking lot. And trying the double door passing
 through two servant men types blocked the way wet beer
 stinking and hard. All of white wall of white move for to
 pass. They chest opened wide berth passed Laura through.
 Tangy sweet smelled sweat beer sperm in their smell she
 could smell. The doors shut together and they were gone,
 leaving cruel drunken gurgle laughs flopping *fat fat fat* on
 the stoop. She stepped heavily down the front steps and
 turned toward the cars.

The air was cool and hard, lifeless and silent, beauty
 in dark night death quiet and not cruel. She breathed out a
 hot plume of air stale of bar beer and smoke from inside and
 it didn't seem fair, somehow. All around the sky grew
 nightish and cold falling dome over this parking lot dead.
 And beyond the dome, beyond the wednightmoves stood a light
 alone, distant aways and alone. She kicked her shoes at the
 building and started off towards the light. As she walked
 the foot jab stabbing rocks jabbed up and up inside her legs
 to the knees and it was a good thing. This was her pain and
 hers alone in the growing dark. No one gave her this but
 this herself. The noise stink fell away and thoughts
 returned, thoughts clear and familiar. Like, here she was

on one day she always looked forward to and she wet was alone miserable. Always envisioned Mary's and her weddings simultaneous for some reason, talked and talked and talked of it as girls young. She was the star pupil before this long night this long night and now there was she where was she on this day of days? Table one, left hand corner of the reception hall. The defect table, the rejectable. She whispered to herself, "*Rejectable. Rejectable. Rejectable.*" She envisioned to go back and ruin the orgy, stand in the dance floor and expose expose expose black fur taloned lace disguised spider woman to all those beautiful imitation flower bone women and their handsome cheating meat Ken Dolls.

Her round feet slid past row after row of fading chrome and the light was there bigger and bigger. The closer she moved toward it, the clearer things were. Sharp little tingles danced up and down her back, down and around her but the cold fingers clawed with a breeze but she went on. Such an affair for such a small family, so many people drunk on the edge of so many don't tell deep dark furtivenigmaticconfidentials. The smallness of them and the hugeness of it. The family. Off to themselves. Ever since Mother's side wrote them all off when Mother died. Strangers were always around, always everyone. And now? More. More in-laws. The humorless bitch queen mother and babbling fool father, the dim watts chin chisel Groom, the

insipid little pre-teen sister-in-law, who giggled tediously for three days, they had been all forced together celebrating. Idiots. They weren't *her* in-laws, they were Mary's. Remember that. Laura had none of their cloying eccentricities to worry about. Everything was changing again, and she was the same, trapped, mixed and amiss and now everything else was changed. Others would move, Laura would spin. It was all over. This was a celebration of death, not an orgy of bloodwedbliss.

She looked up, daze reached up to her face and found tears. All around there were trees and trees, no cars or water or even sky. Under her feet soft lay needles scratching to get in. Trunks thick and black stood erect blocking light. She was in a wood looking around. Calm. Calm. Calm. If you're ever alone and no one is around or if a stranger is around call call. Laura stood still for a moment, listened to the voice tell her the call.

"Mahhhhtherrrr," she squeaked no good because it never worked before. None of it ever worked. She started back in the direction behind her looking outside this time. This was just a walk, just out away from them. She wasn't lost, she had just taken another walk. Nick always said that it was OK, normal. Normal is quiet. They said Mother used to walk like this. Laura wondered if Mary had started taking walks like this, too. Or if she ever would. They would all find out some day. Walks or no walks.

Laura looked down and a road was under foot. Things were not as messy, less and less it did. Laura felt the calmness come again, started back towards back that way she came. Pill little white rocks pinch jabbed at round chubby feet walking. Around a corner and through the trees she could see the Fraternal's Club under the tiny dome lot lights just now standing good ground against the growing night. She neared and eyed a tuxshoulderedo on the stoop steps. Far away it was a black and white dollness, nobodynothing just moving a little then pluming white. And then it grew in gloomness. As she near and neared the he looked on at her coming impassive, he holding her shoes in his mit. And then there was Mary Mary the bride the honored one again and again as she came out flowing lie white whispering something into the gloomtuxeardo and the double watching. Wordless the bridegloom watched. And then she could see his dusk hair curl tight and hers slight green under the fluorescent lights. Laura brightened as they grew closer and hurried. But up close they changed.

"Where the hell have you been?" Mary snapped. "Do you know what the hell is going on here? This is a wedding! We have an agenda!"

"What?" Laura lowed before Mary's cruel voice, fear gripped her so hard she wanted to pee. "I couldn't take it in there anymore," she let each word out slow and clear so she could seem clear and slow. "I had to take a walk. All

those perfect people noising and watching at me and some sperm men even laughed--"

"For crying out loud, Laura. Stop that! You always do that *Poor me* thing when things aren't going just how you want them. You were supposed to make a little speech as a toast along with the best man. Remember, *special arrangements*."

"I forgot. I was walking and I completely forgot." She rushed the stairs and her dress pinched there and there and there as her whole body turned and twisted in the tight satin as she came up the steps. Mary stepped in front of her and looked deep into her...

"You were *walking*. Oh my god, Bert, she didn't take her pills today you didn't take your pills today did you?"

Laura looked out into the parking lot and left herself floating and the tiny voice said, "I home forgot them at there... walking and them they were quiet there and I didn't do it..." The gloom dropped his head and side shook side to side. Mary let out a long hiss.

"You bitch you fat disgusting pig you loser all you've ever done is make my life miserable just by being alive you make me sick I wish I could tear your lungs out you fat retarded pig bitch," spit was coming out of her landing all around from her twisted red face eyes so terrible white they tore flesh.

"Stop honey, you're getting excited," it was the gloom

stepping in between like a fool like he had nine lives like he was offering himself to save Laura, "She can't help the way she is."

Mary wheeled on him as Laura crouched half expecting a spray of blood from his open throat and talon spatter head back splash of red and red on white and white. But she didn't. She didn't. "You deal with this *Gilbert*." Mary made a noise, a noise that squeaked and hummed and stomped and her red coils swept inside not looking back. He was there, he and she alone and he had staved it, saved it and they were both alive. Laura looked up at him, he was tall now, looming tall and strong white square tooth smiling. "Do you have any medication on you now Laura can I get you some water?" White smiling.

"Pill little whites," Laura soft stammered and shook. "Pill little baby's breath and whites."

He leaned down looked inside and smiled light in there. He knows. "It's OK," he whited. The groom knows. *Gilbert*. Groomgilbertwhiteteteethbetterthantheastone and the husband were bad and hit and clawed but this white one knows and its OK. Laura felt her mouth open and cool air came in filled her to the top with cool because it's OK.

Before she could tell him she knew he knows a box man came out the door behind Groom carrying so many boxes, cameras! "Here you are." Photographer! "The bride is seeing red." He looked side-long leary eyed at Laura and

said, talking but not talking to her, "Have you figured out what to do about all the botched pictures ops?"

Groomgilbert turned and smiled she knew he must be smiling when he said to the photographer, "Everything will be OK I can take care of Mary." And he was gone.

Cold and pure the stoop stood pure and clean. She shook herself and things fell to the ground, soft invisible terrible things of foreboding fell away and crawled off into the night. He could take care of Mary. Take care of husband. She moved into the warm light cloy of the Fraternofficer's Club and waddled focused down the corridor until she was stopped by the end at a hard closed door. This was where the wedorgy was, Mary merry marrying. Inside she could hear noiseaudience pig rooting drunkdrinking people wet scream shouting things like "Shove it!" and "Make him eat the whole thing," and "Kiss her now, she'll never be this sweet again." Laura fought the throwing up. The they watching sickness as she pushed open the door.

Laura poked her head inside to see the bride and groom sweet smearing white ice around and around their lips and tongues and fingers. Their faces blinked white white surrounded by thousands of white flashes floating in and about. They head-down pushed through the glittering pop blaze consuming crowd towards the sacrificial plain to shake and grind and publicly consummate their bonding. Laura crept in and wall slid around them all small as she could

be. The carnivores were oblivious of her, transfixed by the grindtwirling two. Mary lied again again, there was no rude waiting and waiting for the wedexhibition was raging underway again. Peace. She only wanted to rest in peace, as long as she stayed away from the parentals lurking here and there. Laura snuck around the reception perimeter and took up her position by the beer and wine bar back by the kitchen entrance. She demurely ordered white wine from a young bartender and sunk into the woodwork.

As she watched the carnivores flowed in around the bridegroom consumed them finally in their hip grind mass and they were gone. Laura thought of how it would be. Her day. *This* was no real wedding, this was a travesty of tradition. The DJ boomed bass deep and lowed from everywhere. Laura could feel him inside her chest pounding bass on her heart pom pom. This sucked. Her day would be different, no cannibals, nothing she envisioned would be mass produced reduced repeated over and over as Mary married. Those less hungry in the crowd cliqued clumped virtually ignoring unpleasing people. That was so like Mary. The bride and groom could dance until they were raw as far as she was concerned. There was no continuity, no theme, just feeding and white... This was certainly Mary typic--

"I was wondering if we were going to get to chat more at some point." Laura shook with the voice and the noise of it. She blinked stupid eyes and cringed before her

attacker. It was the queen bitch mother-in-law. "After we met at the rehearsal dinner last night you rushed off so quickly I thought you might have been trying to avoid me," she said. She was close up standing right on top of Laura. How could the old woman have snuck so quietly. Her painted face wink pinched mascara and thick red lips droop smiled. What was she up to. Why did she come all the way over here and talk with her.

"Rehearsal dinner?" Laura said.

"We talked briefly at the rehearsal dinner."

The woman was short and smelled, she smelled of something, thick and sweet. She smelled of dead fake bottled flowers and something else, something Laura remembered.

"Your father told me you were a student until recently, until an illness."

"None of his business."

"Well... yes... "

Her hair sat perched there thick and stiff and blue, her mouth looked funny, loose and wet. My God, Laura thought, the woman is death! Electric nerves tightened inside her stomach and lower. She remembered, she remembered the smell was urine sweet and hot and welts and night screaming where you can't get away.

"Yes, we were talking about what you planned to do with your future."

"The future... " Laura started backing away.

"Yes. You mentioned that you were thinking of going on to post-graduate work like your sister, I believe."

Laura looked side to side but they had all come around her, surrounded leaving white bones stacked on the dance floor more looking hungry and they all smelled of urine sweet death. She watched the queens hands, covered with thin skin bones showing through and bruises, scabs set in skin like little ticks. She raised her eyes quickly. "What was that?"

"College?"

"Well... I haven't decided where to go yet."

"You won't follow Mary?" A half-smile crossed the Mother-in-law's face. Yellow teeth long growing longer canines, carnivore.

"I'm just joking with you dear. You know, the big sister... thing?"

Toying cloy claw talons reeked of death and pain and wedding day plans and college to the future to the future.

"Big sister toying," Laura stammered.

"Are you all right?"

Before she knew what was happening the old woman reached out and touched her skin cold hard flesh. They were all around and now they would tear things tear away satin and skin... And now it overwhelmed her. Laura clicked and squirmed and breathing hurt as she tried to back away from

the withered ghoul that reached and tore.

"You don't look well." The ghoul-in-law smile dimmed and stepped closer still.

"Please let me peace, rest and peace... please," Laura's tongue was in on it too, she knew it, keeping her stupid.

"My aunt told me you were feeling strange. I'm terribly sorry to hear that. I know that this is no time for this to come up, but I found out about your condition and that Mary isn't related. I thought it important that the kids knows as much about their future health as possible."

"It's *their* future, not mine." Laura looked back out on the dance floor. "I won't tell and the groom will take care of her." Mary was alive still alive of course she was still alive that was silly to think in the first place. Mary was on a chair head back legs spread smiling and the groom was hands up her to the elbows pulling and grinning dirty in front of them watching the pain of the thing all around eyes drooling and oohing when he pulled it from her limp and wet and dead flopping lace white fatalfetal-slainparalyzed as he swung the carcass around wet overhead and tossed it to the tuxpack slavering jump fighting for a scrap snap jaws and growls and one rises victorious waving the death of freedom red faced and tired and sex and hex and vex and next. She turned back to the woman and smiled

slightly. "Weddings make me jumpy."

"I'm sorry if you think I would pry," the woman smiled, "but there are some things that a young couple should know before they start a family I noticed your surprise when I came over to speak with you I wasn't surprised you hadn't noticed before I've been very sick and it's something the they should know about a genetic malady."

"Genetic." Laura said.

"I just thank God I could have seen my last born married I just wish I could see their children before I go--"

"Oh, my God," Laura said. Her face paled before the truth of it, the truth of everything that was skinny woman in front of her.

"Oh, don't worry I've been under a fine doctor's care for a year now the prognosis is very good for a few months I have no shame for the condition of my body we're all just people and we all must die--"

"Oh, my God," Laura said.

The woman stepped closer and grasped Laura's hand.

"It's no use we have you now."

"Please."

The old woman held up her claw command of silence and shut her eyes. "When your sister and my son began their pre-marriage counseling we made sure that the elements of cancer that could be inherited by their offspring were well

known and documented Mary said at the time there were no hereditary defects in her family that would cause any greater harm than the ones I have sadly contributed." The old face was pain and tired and hate and love and quiet and angry and jealousyhungrysickening. "I wouldn't even bother except that our family has come to know by experience how painful these situations are." She clutched tighter and tighter, Laura's hand blood starved tingled in the death woman's scabby grasp. Laura backed against a wall, there was retreat.

"Don't touch me," she said. "Please. I'm just a me. I... I... can't help the way she is."

The Mother-in-claw pulled away with a look of confused shock. "Relax sweetheart I know all about it," she said. "You can trust me I won't hurt you." She moved closer till hips nearly touching the thigh of death. "Sooner or later you have to learn to trust someone."

Laura wrenched her arm free and turned to escape. The Mother-in-claw grabbed at her. "Oh no Laura no you need to just stay calm--" But Laura broke away. She pushed through the them, still flat flowers lifeless plastered shoulder to shoulder topped with twirling death stink of hair spray and sweet pressed flowers and armpits and crotches and food teeth rot squirming bare arm waving *me me me* tears streaming hot cheeked as they elbowed bashed and heel ground *hey hey look out cow* breaking through to the air

and it comes comes flying behemoth daisy yellow eyes wink
watched white petal lash sprays of fling flying white pill
little baby's breath perched on long bony scream fingers
flung a floral flyer screaming loud daffodil butter cup
electrics mouth up kissing soft sanguine rose skin sucking
daffodils and soft pink folds of skin blood dripping face
flesh slam star sprays in the right eye blood blacked out
and white pill littles in the flowers blinked and then the
they them laughed.

Gaia

"Do you say grace before meals?" He knows it is a tricky question. All the questions Andora asks are tricky questions. Some even prove dangerous. He looks up from his plate to the woman addressing him. This could go in any direction. He decides to say nothing, to wait for it.

"We pray to the food," Andora says, smiling coyly. She sits quietly, hands folded on the table, rings with huge colorful stones on her fingers. It is her way. This stage of the game is too complicated, too important to mess up and say the wrong thing. The mother could ruin everything, and she comes with the deal. "And since you're the only man at the table, I think it's your responsibility to say grace. That was how you were raised, wasn't it?" Andora's graying hair is pulled back and tied simply behind her head. Her skin is tan, but not from frivolous hours spent sunning in pursuit of the perfect personal form, vanity. She is an environmentalist. Supervises eco-projects. That is what she calls them, eco-projects. A huge black stone hangs on a long chain around her neck and dangles at the center of her chest. She caresses it often as she speaks.

Joan rubs Evan's leg under the table reassuringly. Evan turns and stares her off. In the past, it was her job to set the boundaries between them and the mother, but that was the past.

Evan looks at Joan, she is a younger version of her mother, firm confident mouth, straight white teeth, high cheek bones, blue eyes, black hair, dark skin. In an instant he knows what Joan will be like as an old woman. He looks away.

"I don't know how well I can pray to vegetables," Evan smiles politely. "Maybe you should take the honors."

Andora smiles a warm, friendly smile. "Now you're catching on, Evan. We'll have you correct soon enough." Evan shivers. Sitting at the other end of the table, across from Andora, is a tall thin woman, slightly bucktoothed, long thin face, plain blonde hair. She is Samantha, a co-worker of Andora's. "Don't toy with him, Andora," Samantha says reservedly, "he's only a boy."

Andora doesn't acknowledge the comment. She holds out her hands and says, "Form the circle." Evan takes Andora's hand in his left and Samantha's in his right. He bows his head. "You needn't bow your head, Evan, this isn't some dogmatic church service. This is a home." She says her prayer. "Gaia, Earth Mother, we thank you for our existence and the life we draw from you. We thank you for the life that flows from us and into others, that they might also commune with the force that is all and is one." She looks at Evan the whole time, a tiny smirk on her face. "Amen," she says softly.

"Mother," Joan says, her voice stilted and annoyed,

"why must you perform this show every time Evan comes to dinner?"

"It's no show, Evan. I'm just helping you to become aware. Awareness is the first step."

"Joan, darling," Samantha says, "please pass the mango salsa and chips. Thank you." Inside, Evan heaves a mental sigh of relief. Samantha is more morose than usual. At least tonight *she* will leave him in peace. Joan passes her the colorful salsa dish and Samantha heaps a large portion on her plate. Andora sits back and caresses her stone. She claimed it gives her clarity. She watches Evan poke at the food on his plate. "Are you having trouble with your meal? Is the foccacia quiche too rich?"

"Well," Evan stammered slightly, "I'm kind of a meat and potatoes man, myself. You know, *real men don't eat quiche.*"

"Well," Andora says kindly, "how seventies of you."

"Mother," Joan says, "would you *please* pass the juice?"

"Tell me, Evan," Andora says, ignoring her daughter. It has begun. He prays it will be quick tonight. "Tell me, Evan, do you believe that spirituality is an important thing? Your generation always intrigues me with the way you see the world."

"Talking 'bout my generation," he smiles, but the reference is lost on them. Seriously, "Well, my generation

doesn't know what to think quite yet, I don't think. I just have my hands full just trying to stay on top of Joan and all her... ideas."

"That's my Joanie," Andora says, "just *full* of little surprises." She leans forward and stares hard at Evan.

"But there are so many options nowadays. In my day, children were forced to fall on their faces in prayer to some dead male god figure. And what did we pray for? We prayed for death." She laughs demurely as she speaks. "And look what has come of all that death worship, the threat of global ecological collapse, among other things."

"Well, industry may have had someth--"

"Industry is only a symptom, my dear. The disease is the disease that has plagued the Earth since the rise of warring male influences in early tribal humyns. Oh, I don't mean you, Evan. I'm sure Joan has better taste in men than that."

"Better taste than you had, hopefully, mother."

"Now, now, Joan, leave your father out of this. He got what he deserved."

"Actually, I'm not so sure I follow this whole White-men-are-responsible-for-every-evil-in-the-world deal. What--"

"We're not arguing the role of patriarchal aggression in the stratification of cultural power. We're not even going to waste time talking about the sociological

development of Western Culture. In sure you can take sociology texts from the library. I was merely trying to illustrate a new point to you."

Evan pokes assorted vegetables and egg on his plate without looking up. He is in his usual posture, head down, still, waiting...

"There is a new ordering of things in the world, that's all." Andora continues innocently, "I would hate to see such a fine young man swept aside because of inadequate upbringing and training. All you need is a little exposure."

"Exposure," Evan says.

"I'm not going to apologize for the destruction men have reigned on our Earth for so long, but I'm not going to deny it any longer. We are all part of this living thing here, Evan. Even men. But its time we acknowledged history and made some changes. Western Culture, Judeo-Christianity with it's war and its male dominance, has panned out fully into the mess we have to live with today." She leans forward and begins to eat. Inside he smiles to himself, eating is a good sign.

"He's just a boy," Samantha mumbles to herself, "he can't grasp what you're saying. I'll bet he's barely listening." She looks up with a smirk. "I'll bet you he's just sitting there thinking about any way out of here he can find, even between Joan's--"

Joan slams her fork down on the table. Everyone looks down at Samantha.

"Excuse me," Evan says. He lays his knife down on the table. Joan turns red and looks hard and long at her mother. Andora looks amusedly down the table at Samantha. All the diners sit still. After a moment Samantha rises and leaves the table without speaking. The clink of silver on glass resumes.

"I hope you can excuse Samantha, Evan, she may never really get over her anger. Inner healing is a long process."

"I can never figure out what I did to her to make her hate me--"

"Oh, it's not you. It's the culture that made you. She has nothing against you personally, I'm sure. Your genitals and the chemicals they mix in you, along with your naturally unbalanced male spirituality is at the root of it. That anger you see in Samantha is just the result." She leans forward and pats his hand. "I feel for your generation because it will be your generation that will have the least chance of being re-educated as to the New World Order. All the damage from thousands of years of European male dominance will come to and end in you." She leans back comfortably into her chair and smiles.

"Well," Evan says, popping a piece of quiche into his mouth, "call me Satan."

Dad

It was raining steadily into the early afternoon when Len finally came back to reality. It was Sunday, beginning like more and more Sundays were beginning for Len. He lay in bed, still as death, breathing noisily and heavily through his loose open mouth. He had dreamed the dreams of dehydration, dreams of rushing water tearing through the wasteland of his subconscious. There he sloshed through rip torrents, his mouth sealed shut, unable to drink from the cold foamy water all around him. Finally, the pangs of his bladder wrestled him to consciousness, his paper tongue rasping against the roof of his mouth as he sat up in bed and blinked stupidly around the room. A pain jabbed him sharply through his temples as he tried to turn his head from side to side. The ache through his dehydrated beef brain won and he slowly slumped down on his pillow.

"Lara! Lara! Coffeeeeeee!" he squeaked, rolling on his side to keep the vomit down. He waited, chanting to himself the command not to vomit. *Not. Not.* Lara didn't come with the coffee. She didn't answer his cries for help. He listened to the water falling down the side of the building and ignored his bladder. It was no use. He lurched out of bed staggered into the bathroom. When he was finished Len staggered back into bed. "Laaaaaraaaaa!" he called again, louder and with a tint of anger and

impatience. His calls were met with silence. After a few deep breaths and a gargantuan effort he raised himself and teetered unsteadily again on the edge of the bed. He looked around the room and blinked. Time to take stock.

The dresser was neat, as usual, but many of the drawers were askew. On his side of the bed lay his clothes in a pile, and on his crooked night table lay papers and books ruined by an apparent spill of his night water. Lara's night table seemed bare, a framed poem he had written spontaneously for her when they were dating stood alone. Arranged all around the room were his sculptures, on the shelves, on the dresser, on the window sill. But something seemed out of place, missing. Some of the pictures of family that hung in the walk-in closet were missing. Things seemed missing.

"What the hell is going on here? Where the hell are you?" he rasped and limped out of the bedroom. Len rubbed his butt, there was a nasty ache in his hip and up his back. And the pain was still there, the pain in his side that was always there. He shook his head slowly and thought about his pains, how they could have happened. The side pain was always there, always nagging, dull, intense. The others were new, but he couldn't remember at all how they got there. There was no answer he could come up with, just an ominous blank spot and an unexplainable feeling of guilt.

The apartment seemed deserted; there were no signs of

life. Even the damned dog was gone. He walked quietly down the hall towards the rest of their space. The door to his son's room was slightly ajar, but none of the usual clatter and play noises came from inside. He poked his head in and said gently, "Good morning, son." He was not not there. He looked around the boy's room with the same scrutiny as his own. Something was odd about the room, but Len couldn't put his finger on it. He knew if he stood there long enough he would figure the oddity, but the distraction in his side and his ground chuck had the greater need. Len pulled the door shut and headed for the coffee maker. The kitchen was clean, as usual, but no coffee or breakfast had been made. Perched by the sink was a note on a pink card. He recognized Lara's clear, round writing from across the room. It read:

Len,

I know you didn't mean the things you said to me last night, that it was the alcohol talking and you were out of control again. I love you, but I can't take these nights anymore. I can't sit by and watch what you're doing to yourself, and doing to our family. I don't know if you remember hitting me last night. Maybe I deserved it, I don't know, but I can't be here now. Your son watched your performance and was up all night crying. I can't let us do this to him anymore. I'm going to stay away for awhile, don't look for us or worry. I'll call you.

Lara.

P.S. Happy Father's Day.

Len was stunned. Was today Father's Day? How could he have let that slip? He stood in the kitchen and tried desperately to put the end of the night back together. At first he drew a total blank, he was at the Club with George and the guys down in the game room. They were drinking tequila and beers.

"Tequila, ah, that explains it," he said.

He limped slowly, lightly out to the living room and headed back towards his son's room. He opened the door and looked inside again. He could see right away what was different this time. His son's things were packed up and gone. That was what he had missed. He never would have expected it. Lara had gone on her little "vacations" before, taking his son for a few days when they weren't exactly seeing eye to eye, but this time *all* of the boy's clothes were gone. Many of his toys had been left behind (Len was generous with toys) but the favorites, Blanky and Boo Boo, were gone. Those were the toys that the boy couldn't live without. That was a bad sign. Len's heart fell. Maybe this was slightly more serious than he thought.

When he came back down the hall he noticed that the living room was actually pretty messed up. The coffee table had a big crack down the center and the legs were cockeyed. One of his larger sculptures, a standing nude displayed by the front door, had a gash gouged in her chest. "It must have been a hell of a fight," he mumbled fingering the gash.

He rubbed his side and tried to piece together the few memories he still had.

He remembered pressure on his face and the hot friction of falling on a carpet. Maybe that was the coffee table breaking, but it could have been a fall at the Club. Who knows? There was too much uncertainty. All he knew was that he must have fallen down somewhere at some point. And, according to her, he had hit Lara. Both seemed possible, if he was any judge of his own character under the influence of tequila.

He limped back to the kitchen and began to mix up a batch of coffee. The sandy whine of the coffee grinder cut through his head like a hack saw, but the pain of it was a sacrifice worth making.

While the coffee perked, Len climbed into the shower. This was turning out to be a six-alarm hangover. He lifted his head and allowed the hot water to pour down his throat into his shriveled stomach. After he felt good and full he crouched down and buried his fingers deep inside his throat. He felt around for the button, those fleshy little folds way at the back, and pushed it. Bile and water and slick poured out of his mouth, burned deep inside his sinuses. Len collapsed to his knees and coughed, but it was better. He was purged. It was better.

After twenty more minutes in the shower and a shave, after donning a fresh pair of sweats and his favorite tennis

shoes and downing a pot of hot coffee, he still felt like hell. He stood in front of the bathroom mirror and listened to the dead silence of his home. Words passed through his head: *dry death hit out of control sick Father's Day hit purge flesh crying....*

Tired out he sat at the broken coffee table and lit a cigarette. He felt as if he had been up all night. "No need to panic," he said aloud, "she hasn't left, just gone for now. This has happened before. She always goes to some friend's house and then comes home after a while. No need to be upset. I'll just watch the game till she calls. She always calls. Don't get upset, don't worry." So he watched the Sunday games and worried.

The apartment began to dim. Len lost track of the game, of the score, of the sport. The numbness in his legs and his arms and his mind caught up with him and he slipped into an uneasy sleep. He saw flashes across his intelligence, nothing tangible or coherent. In one flash he was delivering his son. The boy came out blade tooth snapping at his fingers. Time disappeared. Dispersed.

The phone in the kitchen rang loudly. Len slipped out of his nap and slouched over to the phone. He snatched the handset out of its cradle and barked into it:

"Hello."

"Hey, Len." It was George. Len sighed. "How are you feeling today. You put on a real performance last night. I

haven't seen you drink like that since we were underclassmen."

"Yeah, well, my head is feeling in direct relation to my performance, and since I don't remember you'll have to figure that out for yourself." He looked at the side of the phone, the ringer was set to *Loud*.

"Black out, huh?"

"Brutally."

"How's the home front?"

"It's not"

"Oh, boy. What happened?"

"I don't know. When I woke up this morning she and my son were long gone."

"Wow. And you don't remember what happened?"

"All I know was that I got sick at some point."

"Don't tell me you ralphed. Wimps ralph." Len coughed. "Well, Len, actually, you did look pretty green around the gills by the end of the night."

"Thats how I feel now, too."

"Well, I'll tell you this, women hate it when you barf on 'em." Len and George laughed. "So what are you going to do this time," George said, "not the same solution as last time. If you go to every one of her friends' homes and pound on the doors again, you'll get locked up as a lunatic. Those are great grounds for divorce."

"Well, I decided against that. She left a nice little

note and said she would call me this time."

"A note? That's a new twist."

"George. I've got to stop this from getting out of control. She actually took all of the boy's clothes and most of her own. I'm afraid this time."

"Well, maybe it's time to get on the ball on what we were talking about last night."

"What's that?"

"Oh... yeah. We were talking about life changes."

"Oh, yeah, life changes. Like: *I'm only twenty-nine and too young for these crises.* Well, I still feel that way. What do you know? You're not stuck." Instantly Len became agitated. "You actually got a job out of college. Who the hell is going to hire an art major? People want sciences, and business, or biology. Anything that's gonna make them some money. I have a degree in Art History and one in Philosophy. Together that spells dick."

"Hey, calm down. I'm an ally, remember?"

"Yeah, yeah. Do you think I got two full degrees with honors so I could manage cooks and waitresses at the Motor Lodge?"

"If you want, I can put in a word down in Human Resources. Maybe they can help with placement or something."

"No, no, no." Len poured himself the last of the coffee and sat at the dinette table. "I never told you

this. One time I came down to your company to pick you up for lunch. It was back when I was working in the bakery. I was sitting in the lobby and this business woman was sitting across from me. She had this cellular telephone and while I listened she talked about stats and specs and parameters. She sold 400,000 dollars worth of stuff right in your lobby and she didn't even crack a smile. Zip. I got up and left there. That's why I never meet you at your work anymore, your environment and my personal wiring are not exactly compatible. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"No. And I didn't when you told me that same story last night, either."

"Well, Lara doesn't get it either. She wants a house. She wants another car. She wants to raise my boy in the same little reality she was raised in. It ain't happening."

"Well, remember, when she wants out she'll take out. Look out for yourself while you still can."

The phone beeped call waiting.

"Just a second, George. This is probably Lara now."
He pressed the flash button and said, "Hello."

"Hello, Len. How do you feel?" Lara's voice asked with no inflection.

"I feel fine, never felt better, how's my son?"

"As well as can be expected."

"Great. Just a second. George's on the other line.
Hello, George. I'll call you later. Yeah, Lara? I'm back"

"Well, are you having a nice Father's Day? Are you enjoying your family on your day?"

"No," he said faintly.

"Look, Len, I just called to tell you I've really had it this time. Richie and I are staying away unless you get some help, get into the program again."

"I know, I know," he sighed, "George and I were just talking about that."

"Oh, great. George! He's one to talk about keeping a marriage together."

"I saw the coffee table, did I fall?"

"No. You tripped over your son when he ran out to stop you from kicking his dog. God. I thought last Easter was bad enough but now you're turning into a maniac."

"I don't know what to do. I just don't know what to do," he said helplessly. "I keep thinking some morning I'll wake up and there it will be, the answer, a glowing face in the mirror with our answer for the future. But all I ever get is trips over the stupid dog and a broken coffee table."

"Forget the dog, Len, forget the table, forget your family unless you get some help." She hung up on him. Len sighed.

Len knew she was pissed, but she was right. This mess had gotten out of hand. Things were getting out of control. He walked sullenly out to the living room and sat on the couch. He turned off the game and put his feet up on the

cracked coffee table. Last Easter. The Bloody Easter Bunny from Hell. He was playing Easter Bunny dancing all around the yard with his screaming toddler son in tow. He staggered, tripped over those big stupid floppy shoes and fell sprawling on his butt. The boy laughed hysterically, but he couldn't see the look of pain and horror on Len's face just beneath those big plastic eyes, a shattered pint flask bottle in his back pocket, his left cheek sliced open like an Easter ham. The bloodstain destroyed the costume. For two hours at the emergency room, Lara watched horrified as the doctor sewed shut the bluish grin on Len's behind, fifteen Easter stitches. He tried to make a joke out of it, the Bloody Easter Bunny from Hell. It just wasn't funny.

It was time. He knew it was time. Lara was right, George was right. It was the fifth act, the climactic scene. Hitting bottom was life's fifth act. Every event of his life before this moment was orchestrated for what he knew had to follow. It was time to move, time to make his exit from the party, to cast off the yoke, to hit bottom. Drama. The Grand Finale. The ritual casting away. Dead wood. He had an idea. It occurred to him what he should do. He knew just how to do it.

Len stopped on his way through the living room and put on one of his favorite new age albums, *The Secret Song of Cheese*. As he moved back toward his bedroom, he removed his clothes and let them lay where they fell. As he stepped

into the walk-in closet, he paused by the dresser and slipped off his wedding band. He looked at it closely, the inscription inside had faded away. Len flipped it among the scraps of paper and odd coins that littered the top of his dresser and entered the walk-in.

After a quick stop at the friendly neighborhood drugstore Len headed straight for *The Pink Lady*, a seedy little strip joint out off Hanging Woman Creek Road. He knew it was the perfect place, the bottom of the barrel both metaphorically and literally. At the door he showed his ID, paid his ten dollars and waltzed on in like he owned the place. It was still light outside when he finally got settled on the corner stool but he had to squint in *The Pink Lady's* midnight dimness.

As he waited for the bartender to come down he picked up one of the menus propped up on the bar. *Salim vs. Re'chauffe' in the Velvet Lounge: Oil Bondage Hourly*, it read. *Live Sex Shows Nightly from 10 am. till 2 am. Live Dancers always! (Men for the Ladies Every Wednesday)* Debauchery. This was the nightclub of his youth. The place hadn't changed in five years. He hadn't been back since he got married. Twenty-five, too young to get married. He leaned back against the bar as casually as he could and looked around. It was disgusting now; adults rubbing their glands all over each other like dogs in heat. Animals sitting around the stage, too pathetic to keep their

own women or men happy, too warped to get satisfaction any other way; lonely, perverse, obsessed with tufts of hair and lumps. He was glad he had graduated from this academy. He had a good woman and a loved son. He felt sorry for these people. Deep inside him he remembered.

At first, Len didn't bother to watch the show. He just glanced around at the customers, watched them stare in dumbfounded silence and then jump up and hoot and groan. He missed his wife. He missed the goodness in her. He could see it clearly. She was too good for him. A voice began to nag at him, tug at his self-esteem. She was too good for him. Look what he had done to her. Look what he was doing now. Maybe this was where he really belonged. Maybe this was home. His side ached.

"What can I do for you?" the bartender asked. Len whirled around and sized the man up. He could tell the bartender was doing the same, checking to see if Len were a potential tip or trip, nothing more. He was an older man, bald, hooknosed with small eyes that seemed to see through you. Len knew this guy had never set eyes on him before. Len was probably less than nothing to him. It was perfect.

"Yeah, I'll take a shot of tequila and a Bud. She's pretty fine, huh?" Len said, gesturing to the stage.

"Yeah, she's bad, but, ah, look but don't touch. It's better for your fingers that way. OK?"

"Oh, you mean the *dejeuner 'a la fourchette*? No, no.

If I wanted that I would have bought *that* out in the street." He held out his hand to shake. "The name's John, Sir John Barleycorn." The bartender slipped Len's change into his hand, smiled and wandered off.

The first piece in place. Len looked down at his watch. Nine p.m. This place was perfect, the only place for him to go. He had to be a stranger for what he had in mind. Anonymity. That was key. He was a regular everywhere in town, but here. The Pink Lady was like a brand new club to him. He was a regular five years ago, but that was then. In a place like this, a staff can turn over eight times in five years. The regulars turn at least twice. Even ownership could turn two or three times. Len was completely anonymous here. He was counting on it. The dancers certainly wouldn't recognize him, they were all about thirteen years old when he last darkened the door of *The Pink Lady*. It was perfect.

The dancers ground and ground, twisted in ways Lara could never manage. The lights flashed, the driving bass pounded the marinated brains of the men that stared and drooled. Leather Clad Pickles drove a pink Harley down the ramp on to the stage and proceeded to make love to it. Len drank.

Sally interested Len somewhat. She appeared in a clamor of city noises; sirens, horns and breaking glass, as a bag lady that limped pathetically as she pushed a shopping

cart on stage. The racket faded as a sexy, almost dreamy, sax swelled and swayed with the dancer. With successive flashes of light and smoke, her rags vanished, revealing bits of thigh and breast as she went. In the last great flash, all her city filth disappeared, under it was a gleaming white Merry-Widow. It didn't take her long to get rid of that. Then she began to pull toys from her shopping cart: a bullwhip, hip boots, handcuffs and a leather zipper-mouth mask that she put on the head of an extremely eager volunteer. She acted out beating him. The crowd loved it. Len watched her entire act with fascination. Even though it was a pity Sally didn't realize that caring about bag people had long since gone out of fashion, he had to admire the artfulness, the imagination that went into transforming a sleazy strip act into a social statement.

Metamorphosis. That was the key.

The strippers were all interesting, but they had nothing to do with the plan. Len drank shots of courage; tequila, whiskey, rum, schnapps. Every time he bought a shot and a beer, he tipped the bartender five bucks. It would keep him coming back until the time was right. Len waved another twenty and the bartender came right away.

"What'll it be this time, son?"

"Well, Slim, looks like we'll try something a little unusual this time... what's Creme de Casis? Sounds alright, make it a double, and a beer."

Slim served the drinks, rang the money into the till and thanked Len happily for the large tip. He came over and leaned against the bar to make with the customary small talk.

"I've been watching you, Slim," Len said knowingly, "you're a professional bartender, aren't you? You never waste a move or miss a thing, that right?"

"I've been doing this for twenty years and worked in a dozen clubs since I got in this racket." Slim smiled. "You seem happy tonight, Len. You're out having a regular celebration. Anything special?"

"Actually, it is. Tell me, Slim. How many famous artists have you served in the years that you've done this? How many Van Goghs or Adams or Mahlers or Vonneguts have you chatted with?"

"None. Are you an artist?"

Len leaned forward and gestured for Slim to come close. "Today I signed a contract with the New York City Museum of Modern Art for a showing over this Labor Day. You may be drinking with the next Ansel Adams." Slim smiled.

"Well," he said, "this calls for a little toast."

"Damn fine idea, Slim. What kind of champagne you got back there?"

"Well," Slim apologized, "we only have splits of a domestic stock, Chateau Brionde."

"That'll do fine," Len said a little sloppily. Slim

took out two splits of champagne and poured them into wine glasses. He came back and set them on the bar between them. "That'll be nine bucks."

"Slim," len flipped a twenty and motioned for Slim to keep the change. "By this time next year you may see my face on the cover of *Time Magazine*. The next genius of his generation."

"It's too bad you have to spend this time alone. You just get divorced?"

"How'd you know?"

"You can lose the gold ring pretty quick," he said pointing to his bare left ring finger, "but you can't lose the white one over night." He pointed to the untanned ring around Len's finger. "I may be able to find you a companion."

"Slim," Len lifted his glass and clinked it with Slim's. "If the need arises, you'll be the first to know."

Slim drifted off and Len turned to size up the atmosphere. The bar was taking on a surrealistic ambience, the distance blurred and swayed, the immediate surroundings became detached and cartoon-like. But he had to keep on his guard, he had to be aware of the distance. That was where the doormen would come swooping from when the time came.

Things were shaping up swimmingly. He knew what to do, what he needed next. Len fingered the little box in his jacket pocket and turned slowly, a little unsteadily on his

stool. He surveyed the crowd, somewhere there was his next piece, his meat.

Across the room the sweaty red, green and yellow lighted flesh of the dancers throbbed and jerked. No, not one of them. They were unaccessible to a guy like him. They would take the drinks, but they made too much money to have to sit and talk with the customers. They weren't hookers, they could afford to be choosey. *Talking* to the customers was the job for the has-beens, the one-time dancers. It was there he would look.

As he sat and scanned the room, it all came back to him. He took a pen from his inside pocket and doodled on napkins as he watched the tables away from the stage. This was where the local pros sat, the people whose immediate glandular needs weren't the reason for their being there. Those were the college kids and first time minors, the drunks with vivid memories and the perverts that clambered around the stage. The table crowd was were the real patrons sat, what Len used to be; the junkies and the johns, the dealers and the pimps and their whores. It was here that Len sought the next piece.

He surveyed the potential of his surroundings and felt quite pleased with himself. He smiled broadly at the patrons all around him. *The Pink Lady* was on the sleazy side, the hookers looked more tired and worn out than they used to. He was surprised to notice that gay hookers had

made their way in. *The Pink Lady* used to be pretty much for real men only. Len shook his head and laughed at himself. They had probably been there all along. So now he had two options, buy himself a pretty boy or a drag queen and go out in self-respect destroying style, or to stick to the original plan. He looked closely at one of the boys at table six. He looked sick. It could have been anything, drug withdrawal, any number of lung or nervous disorders that came with prostitution. More likely, though, it was AIDS. He shook his head and decided to go along with the plan, to skip along the edge of the days of his youth. A hooker would be fine.

They were all shapely here, the bad food they ate never left bulges, the crank and crack burned it off. The real scars were in the face, the bags, swollen lips, pock marks in discolored skin covered with putty and rouge. The real vets spoke with a slur, even after eight hours dry in the tank. Turning tricks was not a kind trade.

Len casually surveyed the crowd. He still had time, he figured he had at least eight shots to go. One couple, an old man and a young girl, sat nearly on top of each other in a booth across the lounge from him. She wore very little, he wore gold rings. As he watched them paw at each other, he began to write on a napkin. It came to him out of the blue. Most of his ditties did. He wrote:

He clung to her
and she in turn
clung to him,
as they were
two strange
looking people
clinging securely
to each other
in a world secure
in the fact that they
indeed looked strange.

He read it over three times, smiled to himself, stuffed the napkin into his shirt pocket. He resumed the search.

He eyed meat he liked. Hundreds of men and women ago she probably could have passed for Lara's older sister. She had the same long dark hair (a little stringier), same black eyes (blood shot), and the same round bust (no one in Lara's family would be caught dead in public in an electric green leather halter top that was two sizes too small). She looked worn out, probably didn't even have a pimp anymore. Yes, she would do nicely. Perfect.

"Slim!" Len called. Slim came right away. "What is that beautiful creature drinking over there?"

Slim leaned over and pretended to look thoughtful. Len knew he must know her. He probably knew all the girls, maybe even caught a percentage from the pimps. As he watched Slim casually look around the room, Len constructed in his head a reality to fit Slim. In his own way he was probably a Big Daddy to the girls, too. If they were ever in the place without cover he would watch their backs, and when

some potential john like him, ever asked him for some companionship, as drunks always ask their friendly bartender, he would set up whatever girl he knew needed to make cash or was well enough to work. A great guy, Saint Slim.

"That's Patty, a real sweet little cutlet. She drinks white creme de menthe over."

"A sweet little cutlet? Tell me, Slim... were you, by any chance, a butcher before you were a bartender?"

"Nope, believe it or not, I actually worked on a ranch in California." Slim gestured to Patty and she rose from her seat and came to the bar. Len could see Slim wink to her as she came towards the bar and she nearly climbed into his lap.

"Hey, baby," she cooed sleepily, "what you doin' over here all by your self?" Gutter lingo was all the same. It never changed, the one language that transcends all race, all background, all personality. It is the slurred, tired, careless language of resigned misery. Len loved it.

"Hello, sweetheart, how are you doin' tonight? You were looking pretty lonesome over there."

"I've been waitin' fer you, baby, now we're here. Buy me a drink. What we doin' tonight?" She breathed hot on his neck, rubbed the inside of his thigh, "I can make you feel fiiine."

Before long, Len and Patty were life-long friends.

They laughed and drank and made fools of themselves. She explored his legs, he smiled and kept the drinks flowing.

"Patty. That's a nice name."

"Patty. Suzy. Whatever makes you happy, baby."

He leaned forward and kissed her hard on the mouth. She opened her mouth wide and sucked in his lower lip. When he pulled away she bit down softly, held him still for just a second and then let him go.

"Tonight you will be Lara," he said licking his lip. "In everything we do, you'll be my Lara."

"In everything," she said.

He slid a wad of twenties up her thigh and slipped it in to her garter. "Not here, baby," she said.

"That's just for the drinks." He rose and leaned heavily on the bar. "I gotta go to the can, buy some skins." He smiled and walked away. The floor was soft and wobbly. As he passed them the bar stools caught at his feet, tried to trip him up. Len just kept going on, up the stairs and to the left into the men's restroom.

Once inside, away from the racket, he felt safer. He dowsed his face with cold water and took out the small package from his jacket pocket. He squinted to read the instructions, then opened the packaging and removed a little vile and dropped it into his breast pocket. "That ought to do her." Len felt a paper in his pocket and pulled it out. It was the napkin with his couple ditty on it. *He clung to*

her. He smiled and tucked the napkin away with the vile. Len swept the packaging into the trash and looked at his watch. It was ten forty-five. He relieved himself and went back down to the bar.

As Len approached the bar both Slim and Patty were facing away from him, discussing something. It was between strip shows and the music from the juke box was much quieter than the booming bass drives used for the dancers.

"...paid me double," she was saying, "I can ditch this loser any time I want."

"But why kill the golden goose?" Slim said softly.

"Hey," Len called joyously as he came up to them, "don't you go trying to steal my date, Slim. Give us another round of drinks." He slapped another twenty on the bar. Creme de menthe. Wild Turkey. Creme de menthe. Jack Daniels. Creme de menthe. Sloe Gin. Creme de menthe. 151. Schnapps. Mudslide. B-52. Len was going wild, anything that looked good or that helpful Saint Slim could recommend, all washed down with a steady flow of Bud. There was no shutting Len off, the steady stream of liquor was perfectly complemented by a steady flow of \$5.00 tips. Everyone was happy. Len tried it all, but Patty-now-Lara stuck with her creme de menthe. Low in proof and sweet, she would not get drunk (get trashed, get slashed) and the sugar would help keep her going between fixes. Len's addiction was less calculating, less thoughtful. When he really got going

there was no cunning in his consumption, just drive.

The room began to reel around Len's head. The age lines around Patty now Laura's face softened; she began to look almost presentable, less like a piece of meat and more like someone's sister, mother, daughter. The noises of stripper dance music mixed with Patty-now-Lara's shrill laughter as she squealed and squawked and rubbed Len's legs. It all bled into one continuous surreal flow of maniacal racket through Len's mind.

It was time.

His two bought witnesses were near. He looked down at his watch, twelve thirty-seven it read. "Hey Slim," he called. Slim waved a wait finger at him and finished saying something to what appeared to be a manager. He ambled over.

"What will it be this time, John?"

Len started to say something but held up his finger and turned away. He reached into his pocket and, pretending to cough, downed the contents of the little vile. It was body warm, bitter, metallic. His throat constricted, his stomach wrenched as the vile liquid made contact. Len's mouth watered as he turned back, "Hey Slim, watch this."

With a quick clumsy snatch of the hand, Len grabbed Patty-now-Lara's shoulder, wheeled her around and held her steady at arm's length. She didn't seem very shocked, just smiled a dirty little smile. He opened his mouth and a fountain of vomit projected out, beer foamy, red and green

brown liquor streaked mixed with bile splattered all over Patty-now-Lara's chest. Now she screamed. She swatted for Len's face with her long, black, false nails. One caught and stuck in the side of Len's nose, ripped right off her finger. Len pushed her off her bar stool down into a puddle of wretch. He turned to Slim who stood stunned and shouting: "What the hell are you doin', you son of a--" Yetch! Len gurgled belched up a stream of puke that jetted into Slim's face and trailed all the way down his body. Len fouled the well ice, the bottles in their speed racks, the stacks of glasses; he was very thorough.

Just as Len anticipated the doormen came swooping out of the corner shadows. "You dirty rotten son of a bitch!" Patty-now-Patty again sat on the floor, screaming at Len's backside. Her whole body convulsed and slid around as she recklessly tried to stab Len in the calf with her long spiked heel. She missed. Len looked down at her.

"What the hell's the matter with you? You got paid, slut. You'll go home and get cleaned up and be back by last call!"

The confusion was awesome. Slim waved his arms frantically yelling, "Carlos! Carlos! Where the hell are you." Carlos the Coke machine bouncer came rocking back and forth on his thick legs and grabbed Len with one crushing nab. He effortlessly wrestled Len from the stool and clutched him brutally by both arms from behind. Carlos

picked Len up and carried him to the door, conveniently leaving Len's seventy dollars change behind on the bar.

It wasn't so bad being carried and inch or so off the floor. Len was as drunk as he had ever been, so the trip out wasn't the usual stagger forward and falls that went with going home. As he was floating through the booming room, he saw the faces, the hundreds of thousands of eyes looking, watching the show he was center stage in, that he wrote, produced and executed. *The Purge*, he thought. *That would be a nice title.*

He began to drift off into a stupor when something happened that got his attention. Carlos bashed the double glass doors open using Len's face. His nose broke immediately, mashed down flat on his upper lip. Carlos flung him like a rag into the parking lot. Len lifted himself, head hanging. *The Pink Lady* stood upside down and spinning. Through the crazy fog he could see Carlos coming, lumbering slowly after him. His tan face had a hideous downward frown. The pointed toe of Carlos' shoe cracked a rib as soon as it made contact. Len felt the air rush out. Then he realized, it wasn't a frown. Carlos was happy. A woman's voice squealed and squawked *kill em kill em kill em* and somewhere far away, off in a warm haze he heard her say it. *Having nice Father's Day? Blackness came.*

Len woke up on the hood of his car, still as death, breathing noisily and heavily through his loose, open mouth.

His tongue was papery and stung of salt. The ipecac had done its job well. He dozed.

Len awoke face down in a car that rocked him gently back to nauseousness. It was dark, but he could hear the distant robotic babble of a police dispatcher. Someone lifted him, carried him hog-tied into a cold bright room and laid him out on a hard steel slab. The cold of it sucked him, sucked the warmth from him until he slipped into a cold oblivion. He slept dreamless black nothing until someone jabbed and prodded at him. "Go to Hell," he mumbled, eyes shut.

"We're already there, sport." A big cop rolled him over and stood over looking Len for a second. He whistled. "What the hell happened to you?"

"A woman from Hamburg... and Carlos," Len mumbled squinting up at the officer.

"Oh... him."

"Could you turn off that light?"

"That light never goes out. It seems it's always looking over you drunks and idiots. Time for a phone call," the cop chuckled to himself as he helped Len up and out of his cell. To his amazement Len realized he was no longer tied up.

Len called home, knowing she wouldn't be there, not knowing where she could be. "Lara, honey," he said to the answering machine, his voice thick and wooden from dried

blood packed in his nasal passage. "It's all over. You were right. This time I really hit bottom, just like you said I would. I'm at the County Sheriff's, in the drunk tank. Please come get me. Don't bring my son." He hung up the phone very pleased. Len knew that sooner or later she would be looking for him. She would come get him.

The officer walked back with him. "This is the first time I seen you here," the cop said as he locked the bars behind Len. "You look like hell."

"I never made it this far," Len said, rubbing his nose. He slipped down the cold bench and nodded off. Len's heart bashed about in his chest; blood pounded through his brain; his throat tightened until air whistled in and out; a dull ache in his side wrestled him to consciousness. He lay on his back and stared at the light, counting the pulse throbs in his side. No rest for the wicked. Finally a guard came for him some time after sunup. "Hey buddy, time to go."

He came through the doors down to the front desk and collected his possessions. He looked into his wallet, it was empty. It didn't matter. Every bone in his body ached. His face swelled up and turned colors, but he had a future. There was only up from here.

Lara wasn't waiting in the lobby. Their old blue station wagon sat idling by the front gate. Without speaking or looking at her, he got into the front passenger seat, slouched down and laid his head against the door.

Lara did not move; she sat staring at her husband. After a long, awkward moment, Len looked up, dog-faced and guilty. He reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a napkin, unfolded it and read it as she blankly looked on. "He clung to her and she in turn clung to him, as they were two strange looking people clinging securely to each other in a world secure in the fact that they indeed looked strange... I wrote that for you." He handed her the paper lamely and smiled like a little boy. "It's a poem I wrote about us." She took it, read the napkin carefully, folded it and tucked it neatly into the ashtray. Len slunk down against the door.

Neither spoke on their way through the dawn, both lost in their own thoughts. One looked ahead, intently watching for the what would happen next as she maneuvered down the road. One looked off to the side, oblivious. There was little to see within anymore, just a tired woman and a sleeping man. Every once in a while she shook her head, but she never once looked at the man traveling at arm's length. The slouch smiled half consciously. He was feeling as though he had accomplished something, though its rationale seemed blurred, obscured in a drunken reality from which he slowly, reluctantly returned. Deep in his subconscious, secretly, he felt a warm happiness not unlike pride. The bottom wasn't so bad. The dark blue family wagon moved on through the early morning. All around fell gray drizzle.

Cappuccino

Evan sits in the airport coffee shop and shakes his head, lost in thought, sipping a cup of cappuccino. He wears a blue surf shirt, black jeans and a pair of black cowboy boots. All around sit other travelers, all on their way to some distant destination: a shabbily dressed young couple with oddly cropped red hair chain-smoking cigarettes in the small smoking section; a business man in a dark suit with perfectly arranged teeth, sipping a beer, staring nowhere; a huge fat man devouring several pieces of pizza, wearing blue shorts and a too tight tee-shirt depicting the outline of a muscular body-builders torso. L.A., city of angels; city of lies and broken promises. The trip has been less of an adventure than he thought it would be. He found out California wasn't everything it promised the world it was on TV. Stepping from the plane at LAX a week ago he expected to see beautiful, blue skies, fancy cars and rich, rich hard-body residents all tanned and beautiful surrounded by palm trees as far as the eye could see. He even half expected to hear exciting action-show theme music blaring from the airport speakers. All he saw was smog and people, tens of thousands of millions of people locked up alone in tens of thousands of millions of cars, lined up sitting still in thousands of miles of perpetual traffic jams, each willfully oblivious to the existence of everyone else. The

beautiful people he had expected to see flirting and waving and squeezing themselves seductively at passing, expensive autos, along the busiest thoroughfares of the world, all turned out to look like they escaped from some hideous sexual freak show, wearing pounds of make up, leather sex-wear and chains; lingerie men dressed as women; women dressed as animals; animals dressed as people. It was all very entertaining in a disturbed way, but as his trip lengthened the disappointment in the dream elongated.

The "normal" Californians he encountered weren't semi-nude blonde beach beauties bouncing into his arms with nothing but good wishes, no inhibitions and near professionally athletic physical capabilities. They weren't the laid back smiling friendly people devoid of ill-will, solely interested in the best possible inner-attitudinal adjustment and communing with the eco-sphere, promised to him by the media glitz machine. The people seemed frantic, rushing from appointment to appointment, forcing meals down their throats in their cars on the freeways, forcing their way ahead of everyone else in line, forcing their way through life under a protective blanket of sound supplied by millions and millions of Walkmans creating a cacophony of personalized, stereophonic universe-bubbles, existing and not interacting, entertained, isolated. True, the non-freak-show people are well groomed; slim, tan, active, seemingly balanced in the oddly gyrating world they have

constructed around themselves. But still, something is very wrong. He is glad to be going.

He sips his cappuccino. He is not a little disappointed that the Southern California part of his See-America-Before-Being-Tied-Down-Until-Death-Do-We-Part-By-A-Crippling-Mortgage-And-A-Devouring-Marriage trip was so deceiving. He is leaving the area a week before he intended.

Evan lifts his paper and reads the headlines: *Boomer Society Established*, it read. *Amidst eager anticipation today in New York City the Boomer Society, or BS, is established by leading Boomers Hillary Molly Coddle and "Slick Willy" William Silverspoone. Their immediate goal, the dynamic twosome said, is to assist our generation's growing demands in the new arenas of politics. The duo wish to do away with the emotional turbulence which accompanied the Boomer dominance in the world of finance in decades past. "We have come, we see and we will conquer," said Coddle, "but this time, with our guidance, we hope it will be a more comfortable affair.* Evan lowers the paper. "God help us if these people come to power," he mumbles.

As he mulls over the BS, a man comes up to his table. He is dressed plainly enough: old Converse sneakers, kahki pants, a faded blue plaid shirt. He is young and has sandy blonde hair. When he looks up at the man standing over him, Evan notices something about his face. One eye is a little

higher than the other, and his ears are very small. The deformed man lays a card on the table, smiles and moves on, laying small cards on the adjacent tables as he goes. The huge fat pizza devouring man at the next table picks up the card and reads it quickly, then tosses it down, shaking his head and returning to his food. Evan picks up his card. It reads, *Learn To Sign! I am deaf and make my living handing these cards out to you. Please give whatever you feel you can, and remember, the first step toward love is to reach out.* He looks up and sighs.

Two youthful executive types come into the crowded little cafe and pull up seats at the table directly behind him. They wear rich Italian suits and pointy, imported shoes; heavy gold jewelry drips from their extremities. Their hair is close-cropped, but not too close, just right. Their teeth are perfect as far as the traveler can ascertain in a glance. Their skins are smooth and tight and tan. One seems a little younger and carries himself with a subservient air as he pulls out the seat for the elder. They are loud and boisterous enough, obviously enjoying their allotted existence. He shifts his attention to the new arrivals. The waitress comes over and the two order.

"Yes," says the younger, "I'd like a decaf cappuccino. Do you have Peruvian chocolate? Fine, two shakes, please."

"Latte," says the elder. Just *latte*.

"Well," says the younger, "I finally got the fall line-

up from programming. It looks like we'll be seeing the resurrection of the disco era next year."

"Uh hm," says the elder. "That's no surprise. It was twenty years ago. It will be reappearing right on schedule."

"According to the table that's the next era. We have three disco-based comedies; two dramatic explorations of the free love movement, those will be the sexy ringers; and one drama about the rise of the Me movement and the establishment of the Baby Boomers as the predominant financial influence of the country. Those will be the fall additions."

"How many will be set here in LA... and how many will be set in Hometown, USA?"

The waitress comes over with their drinks on a tray and sets them down very gingerly in front of the executives. They stop speaking and grunt at her before she pads off.

"Well, the appeal of Hometown, USA, in the last decade was fairly successful," says the younger one, "but that was mainly due to the influence of the last of the Generalised American types that still believed in some idealistic American 'We.' Now that they're pretty much dying off and the TV generation is settling down amidst their toys long enough to watch a little tube, we have to refocus television's scope."

"That makes sense. Reshape things so the viewing

audience feels the programming was tailor-made for them."

"Pampering and special treatment is what they're screaming for, so let's give it to them, as long as they keep buying the Sponsor's product and believing they stand higher in society thanks to our guidance in grooming."

Both men laugh. "They all fall for that one every time," the elder says.

Evan can not see the groomed men well, so he rises and goes to the coffee bar, orders a refill and returns to his table. But he does not retake the seat facing away from the men, he seats himself in the seat facing them. Both men look at him as if he were a strange face in the street. After a moment, they resume their talk.

"We stand to make a real killing in the nineties, really accomplish what they started out to do in this industry," says the younger. "We've been waiting for thirty years for this generation to let go of their active pursuits of libido-stroking and get back in front of those TVs that had so much to do with raising them. It's a fruition of the full circle. Welcome back kids."

As he watches, both men chuckle quietly and take a little breather in their conference. They lift their coffee cups and clink them gently.

"To the future," says the younger.

"To our future," says the elder.

Someone taps Evan's shoulder, startles him. He looks

up into the crooked face of the deaf man. "Oh... yes," he says. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a five, wraps it around the deaf man's sign card and hands them both back. "God bless," he says. *Thank you*, the crooked-faced deaf man signs back as he moves off. Evan's mind slips into a comfortable blank as he watches the crooked-faced deaf man move methodically across the room.

"Heh, heh," a deep voice interrupts his mind, "you fell for the oldest one in the book, son." It is the huge, pizza devouring man. He shakes his head and chuckles as he walks away. The TV executives chuckle quietly on his other side. He glances over to the well-groomed men and notices that each one has six fingers on his well-groomed hands.

Children Of The Promised Land

The smiling woman in her cheery lying little brown airline suit assured him it was nothing, that he needn't be so panicked, that the storm would soon pass and the plane's problem, their problem, would soon be fixed. Everything would be okay. That was what they probably always said, just before big plane crashes. Bert paced back and forth by the art exhibit, occasionally pausing long enough to read the shiny little plaques. This trip was a nightmare, the lying airline, the endless delays, anticipation. And then there was Mary...

And on top of everything else, that thing, sitting up there on its glossy black pedestal with all those hand-things sticking out of it, making no sense whatsoever, brought Bert close to the point of absolute agitation. He walked around and around it, sizing it up, stroking his beard. It sort of looked like a swan, standing on one foot, its body smooth except for the dozen or so hands rupturing through its skin, reaching out, taking. It reminded him of something, on a strange subconscious level, something close to him. The escape of the sculpture's meaning was infuriating. It was a tormented piece; it seemed to need, to hunger, to starve. He leaned down close to look at the work's title and name of the sculptor. *Zeitgeist, by Max Groom*, it read. *On loan from the Museum of Modern Art,*

Berlin. What kind of twisted individual would place this monstrosity, this malformed aberration, in a place already riddled with so much anxiety? What sort of twisted mind could conceive and create such a nightmare?

He took a small package of nico-gum from an inside pocket of his tan sport coat, pulled out a sheet of bubbled plastic containing squares of gum and popped out a piece. As he studied the sculptor's plaque, he popped the small brick into his mouth. The gum made his spit tingle as he chewed it. When he finally swallowed, his spit burned.

Bert scoffed with disgust and shook his head. "This looks just like the kind of junk Mary would spring on me," he mumbled to himself, "just as I walk through the door; a bronze bird from Hell sitting right on top of the television set throwing me two dozen fingers." He tucked the gum back into his coat and ambled around to the other side for a change of perspective. It could be a homage to Mary's family, he thought, obnoxious, going in a hundred different directions at once, screaming nothing. It could be marriage....

He shoved his right hand down deep into his pocket and looked down at his watch. The plane was hours late, the storm was getting worse and the trip was an utter disaster. "Funerals," he sighed and chewed his gum with a slow grind. The old man probably lied about how advanced his cancer was, planned to drop off just when he knew they were finally on

their honeymoon. "You old jerk," he said to no one, "death didn't even stop you from meddling with our lives."

He glanced over the top of the modern art monstrosity in front of him. A beautiful blonde woman, large blue eyes, small straight nose, stared right at him. She didn't seem to be overly concerned with him. Maybe she was looking through him as she thought of something or someone else. Maybe she was daydreaming, or brain damaged. Just as well. He had been pushing his luck lately with women. That was the downfall of his first marriage and he wasn't about allow this one to deteriorate. The last one cost too much. Mary was the goose that laid the golden egg. As it was she would have his jewels if she knew the half of it. He stared back at the blonde for a minute, half expecting her to notice him. It was his game, eye-contact, body language. One corner of his mouth twitched as he smiled.

"Bert! Bert! Look at these shot glasses! San Francisco! The Curviest Road in the World! And look at the little pictures: here's The Fisherman's Wharf, and here's The Golden Gate Bridge! And Disneyland! Ooooh, I wish we could have gone to Disneyland." Mary walked towards him, gliding in her high heels. It was strange to see her excited about such trivial little things, but it was nice. It was the first time since her father's death that she didn't seem morbid and preoccupied. Her long, purple nails curled around the tiny glasses she held out in front

of her. She rubbed their edges with her thumbs, back and forth, smoothly and rhythmically as she spoke. Bert watched her fingers caress the glass, amused that she was so completely unaware of her obsession with sensuality; the absolute smoothness of glass, the tickling of her own palm, a trickle of water down her thigh. Her brown hair bounced around her head in a rhythm slightly out of sync with the rest of her body. Last month her hair was much longer and platinum blonde. She chopped it back and dyed it her natural color as soon as she heard the news of her father's death.

Mary sidled up to Bert and grinned at him with oversized green eyes that faded to a bright yellow around her pupils. She smiled around his arm at the sculpture behind him. "That's nice," she said in an offhand way.

"You would think that was nice. Tell me, what does it mean?"

"Does it matter?" She bowed down over her purse and stuffed in the little glasses. While she was bent down there she seemed to make little noises, quiet and rhythmical.

"Well," Bert said, "looks like we'll never get to get away on a honeymoon. Four years is too long to wait." Mary stood and looked up at the sculpture again, as if she were really looking at it this time. "It was a miracle I could swing First Class last night, with such short notice." Bert

continued. "Your new half-brother the anarchist must have used some of the old family clout to get us lined up so quickly." He leaned over a stainless cigarette stand and spit his gum into the dusty tray. The gum made a dull *think* noise before it dropped into the butts. Mary drifted back from her thoughts.

"Tst,tst," she said, "it was fortunate we got such a small break in the face of everything else," she said offhandedly. Optimist, he thought, blind-optimist. No matter what the circumstances, Mary seemed to make the best of things, quietly reassuring him that everything was under control. Her restraint was unnatural. So was brother Skip's. Neither were realists. He turned away from her and tried to look for his blonde. She was gone.

Mary lifted his arm and pulled herself underneath. "Don't leave me," she mumbled. She looked up at him, her eyes alive and intense. Her beaming was unnatural, twisted, taking. Her right eye was just a little larger than her left. He knew she meant to adore him, but her uneven eyes made her look like a psychopath sizing up prey. He sighed and glanced out the huge plate glass window across the waiting area. Streams of water distorted the gray view of sunny California.

"Look at that rain. Can you believe that all of us sheep are about to go up in a storm like this? And after a delay? What if there's something seriously wrong with the

plane?"

Mary stretched her back and yawned. "If there was something wrong with the plane, they would have brought us another by now." She squeezed his ribs so hard they ached. "The circumstances may not be the ideal, but at least the company is."

He pulled away from her and started to wander back towards their seats. "I can't believe the old guy is gone," Bert mumbled. He turned and smiled sadly across to her. "I'm sorry this has had to happen. This isn't much of a Thanksgiving."

"Holidays are never much of anything," Mary said bitterly. Bert bit his tongue. She sighed and said, "He was such a monster after Mother died. He really caused it, you know; Mother's death. He drove her to an early grave with the way he treated her. Why couldn't I have had a real father, like Ward Clever? Why did I get issued such a narcissistic bastard?"

"He did all the issuing," Bert said. Mary sat heavily on her seat and dropped her face into her hands. She wouldn't weep. Bert knew she wouldn't weep. She never cried. He walked over to her and rubbed her back.

"Listen," he said, "we're all adults here. Don't feel bad that he was a cold, selfish man. Just being a father isn't reason enough to be loved. He was an adult, too, just as responsible as any of us for the way he treated people

and the way they reacted to him. So don't feel you have to pity him."

"Attention passengers for Flight 240. Again, we apologize for the delay of our Thanksgiving flight to Boston." The crowd over by the gate let out a tired sigh and began to mill about. "We would like to announce the boarding of flight 240 at gate 23. Will passengers in first class please begin boarding."

The crowd began to gather their things. The attendants opened the gateway and smiled big, happy welcoming smiles at the tired irritable faces that rushed for the doorway to the plane. Bert watched as shoving began. He loosened himself from his wife and looked down at her uneasily.

"Um, I have to go back to the check out stand. I forgot to get something. Some gum."

"Okay, dear. But hurry, we're already missing our first class boarding. You know I hate boarding with everyone else."

He headed through the crowd for the main body of the terminal. He rushed past the newsstand and ducked into the lounge. Bert hurried up to the bar and slapped down a fifty. The bartender noticed him right away and came down to his end of the bar.

"Two shots of Crown Royal please, doubles. And hurry," he smiled easily and pointed over his shoulder with his thumb, "I'm about to take off."

The plane rocked and heaved as it taxied down the runway. Though his senses were dulled he could hear the plane being pulled apart as it pounded through the storm. He clutched at the arms of his seat and pretended to be brave. Somewhere behind him some fool lit a cigarette. His mind screeched. He rolled his head toward his wife and said angrily, "This egg crate is gonna crack and spew any second and some jerk is lighting up a smoke!" He jerked his head around so quickly a jolt of pain shot down his shoulder. "Hey!" he yelled, "whoever you are back there, put out that light!!"

Mary grabbed his arm and rubbed it gently.

"Bert," she leaned over and whispered in his ear, "everything is going to be all right. Don't worry. The company wouldn't have put us in this position if it weren't for our best. The pilots know what they're doing. Besides, whatever you drank back there in the lounge should make everything alright."

"I gave up drinking--"

"When we got married, I know."

Bert looked back out his tiny round window and closed his eyes. He slunk down as deep as he could in his wide leather chair and whipped out another piece of gum. To him the plane sounded as if it were covered with demented terrorists armed with sledge hammers and pile drivers, pounding away at the fuselage and the engines. A woman's

voice, shaking and terrified, croaked from back in the coach section, "We're going to die. We're going to die!"

He turned his green face toward his wife. "Was that a flight attendant? Did someone say we're going to die?"

She patted his hand and, shaking her head, looked back down at her in-flight magazine. "This is a big airline, hon, in a big country. They wouldn't dare send us off in an unsafe plane."

Oh, wouldn't they?! She had planned all this, he knew it: the death of her father, the old plane, the delays... the storm. His little psycho-eyed wife who loved to watch him, be with him, hang on him. He grabbed for the air-sickness bag stuffed in the pocket hanging in front of him. The plane rose from the runway, jolted and heaved into the sky.

The rest of the flight was considerably more comfortable for Bert than the takeoff, he slept through it. He slept through the entire flight, waking only long enough to eat the rubbery little pieces of turkey, stiff potatoes and warm cranberry sauce he had paid for, and to use the lavatory. The remainder of the flight was a mass of twisted faces and situations. He dreamed all the way across country.

He dreamed he was on stage with the Beatle's, playing the guitar standing next to John Lennon. The music they played was too slow, the rhythm thick and stilted. The

other members of the band moved as expressionlessly and as slowly as wax zombies. John looked over, his face gray. "What are you doing here?" he said. "You don't belong with us." Bert looked back out at the crowd.

The audience was filled with Marys. Marys of every age: Marys as toddlers, crawling through the legs of Marys as teenagers, dancing seductively next to Marys as old, bent, white crippled woman, moaning to the Marys as pregnant woman with more and more screaming little Mary kids in their arms. They all called and screamed *Bert! Bert!* And then, with a crash and an explosion of smoke and lightning, the show came to an end. He exited stage left and walked right into a sunshine yellow kitchen.

It was a kitchen he had never seen before, covered with big, round yellow happy faces and filled with the smell of sweets. Seated on a hideous yellow naugahyde chair at a kidney shaped table was Mary 's father. He was dressed as he always was around the house, in the pair of fuzzy leather slippers Mary gave him years ago, loose slacks and a rugby shirt the colors of his alma mater, red and white, Stanford. He stared intently at his hands.

"Hello, Bert," he said, "did you bring my little girl home to me?" The old man looked up, his eyebrows bushier than Bert had ever seen them. "I've got something very special prepared for my little girl's Thanksgiving dinner."

The old man stood and walked over to the refrigerator.

He opened the door. With little effort he reached into the machine and pulled out the pale, naked body of a small boy, squatting on a large ovular platter. He turned, slowly lowered the plattered lad onto the counter and slid him over to a heart shaped cutting board. Bert looked closely at the boy's face. It seemed hauntingly familiar. He recognized the boy, it was himself. His father-in-law pulled a long cleaver from a butcher block and held it up to the boy's face.

"Would you like light meat or dark?" the old man said.

"No, thank you," Bert said softly.

He edged around the kitchen, keeping as much distance from the old man as possible. He backed out into the living room. The room was dark. Two people, their skin white and blue, were watching an old black and white television. They were so old and wrinkled they were unrecognizable, their skin folded around their fixed facial features like cooled, melted wax. The old man looked slowly up from the glowing screen and smiled.

"We've been waiting," he said, "waiting to tell you. For the powerless, there's only direction." The old man pointed stiffly to the front door. "Out. That's the way out, son."

Bert pulled the door open and peered outside. The road was filled with ragged people, all bent and staggering forward. Someone pushed past him from inside the house. It

was his father-in-law, still carrying the little boy. Bert could just see as they pushed by that their faces, both their faces were carved and hacked. There was no blood. Without a word, without looking back, the old man walked down into the line of people. Bert waited until the old man was around the corner and out of sight,; then he, too, walked down the steps and joined the line. The world jerked. Flashes of light burst in the sky. Nausea overtook him.

"Bert. Bert," Mary shook his arm gently. "We've already landed. It's time to deplane." She looked over her shoulder at the line of people milling up the aisle. Bert blinked and lifted his head from the window. A sharp pain shot through his shoulders.

"I just had the strangest dream," he mumbled.

"Oh?" Mary said, reaching under the seat, "what was it?"

"I don't know, something about The Beatles."

Mary smiled as she stuffed a book into her flight bag. It was one of those terrible horror/mystery/romance things by that French guy that Bert hated so much. "Come on, hon, hurry! Stand up, it's our turn to get in line."

They drove through the east side of Boston, past the pizza parlors and Italian restaurants, past the rows and rows of two and three story duplex homes that lined the

streets filled with oversized cars. Their powder blue Mercedes followed the flow of traffic on the expressway bridged over East Boston. Finally, the road settled back down to the ground at the toll booths before the entrance of Sumner Tunnel. Bert dropped change into the toll basket and eased back into the line of cars. Six lanes down to two and in they went, under Boston Harbor. Mahler's sixth symphony filled the Mercedes as dull yellow tiles slipped by their car.

"We should be at your father's house in about forty-five minutes," Bert said nonchalantly. "Do you think we'll be greeted by the sadist?"

"Skip'll be there... Why do you always think he's like that?" Mary glanced back dreamily. "He's not some Marxist weirdo."

"I don't know...." The tiles turned black overhead, stained by the smoke of a car that had exploded in the tunnel two years ago. A family died here. Somewhere in the back of his mind he noted they had past the the halfway mark of the tunnel. "Maybe it's because he shoves all that French-guy-social-philosophy stuff down my throat every time I see him. 'Russian peasant slaves deserve the bloody dictatorship they ask for,' or something. What kind of stuff is that?"

"Bert, that was a year ago." She turned in her seat and rested her knee against his leg. "You were feeling each

other out then, you hardly knew what to think about each other. Ever since he crawled out of the woodwork he's been like this little father creature. Sometimes it gives me the creeps, like he's a new, youthful father, resurrected from the dead."

"Yeah, well, he certainly is following in his footsteps. Has he even looked for a job since he popped up last year, or is he still living on extortion money from the old man?"

"He's working on a fellowship at Harvard."

"Harvard. That figures."

Mary turned away from Bert and brooded out the window. They were just emerging from the tunnel and turning north to leave the city. They rose above the city streets again, above Faneuil Hall, over North Station and onto Tobin Bridge. From the bridge it was only a short drive on to Dover and the family estate. Just as they reached the bridge she turned on him.

"I can't help it and won't apologize for my family, Bert. My family is *my family*. I don't expect you to understand the way we are. My father worked hard and long for the fortune he has. He started out as a cook, or a doorman or something. And if a certain aura comes with the kind of responsibility we have then that's something you just have to adjust to. We're all that's left, me and Skip and Laura. If we can't get along with each other, there

won't be any of my family left at all."

Bert pulled the sheet of bubbled plastic from his coat pocket, tore the wrappers from it and popped gum in his mouth. He chewed for several seconds, not looking at his wife. He swallowed; it burned all the way down. Bert turned up Mahler and drummed his fingers on the wheel. He was dimly aware that she fiddled with something in the glove compartment, read a magazine. It didn't matter, he was alone. Isolated. Now they wouldn't fight.

Gustav Mahler thrummed pom pom pom daaa da pom pom daaa da pom pom daaa da daaa da daaa da with that wonderful bass rumbling and moaning, ushering northern Massachusetts' dying fall countryside dreamily past their car. Bert was gone, auto-pilot. She couldn't touch him now with a jack-hammer. Before he knew it they were pulling into Mary's old neighborhood, up her street and turning into the drive. Every trip there was easier than the last. With the old man gone, they would become easier still.

Not a bad place, Bert thought as he pulled up the driveway. Not a bad place for a bastard thief. The blue Mercedes crunched up the stone drive and rolled to a stop at the front door. Bert and Mary pushed open their doors simultaneously and stepped out on the stones. The family house rose above them, dwarfed them. The three story Tudor front reached to a point in the sky far above them, towered

over them. Bert came around the front of his car and put his arm around his wife in the cool shadow of her father's home.

"Be it ever so humble... " Mary said.

"Mausoleum sweet mausoleum." Bert grinned down at her. "Do you think the professor is home?"

She sighed. "Who knows what Skip is up to now... without Father to keep him in line."

"At least you'd think Louise would have come out to greet us and bring in our things."

"She was always Mother's maid. I wouldn't be surprised if Father fired her after she died."

They dragged themselves up the front steps and let themselves into the foyer. The house looked the same as the last time they had been there, three months ago. The dark hardwood floor was polished and clean. The stairway, covered in a deep tan shag carpet, wrapped around a fountain centered in the foyer. Off to the right was the formal dining room, lined with cabinets full of antique family china and figurines of huge-busted colonial woman. In the center of the dining room stood a cherry table. It was easily a dozen feet long. To the left was the formal living room, complete with an imported Italian pink marble mantle piece, Victorian dark wood furniture, and, of course, a full wet bar. The walls were antique white and covered with paintings and ancient photographs of people no one even

remembered anymore. Bert sat gently down on a thin-legged chair just inside the doorway.

"That's funny," Mary said, walking slowly towards the stairway, "I don't ever remember the fountain being turned off." She ran her finger along the fountain's edge. "I don't remember the house being this quiet before."

"Why should there be elitist fountains and frivolous idiocy?" a quiet voice trickled down from somewhere overhead. "This is a house of mourning."

Bert shut his eyes and lowered his head. Slowly he shook it side to side as he listened to Skip's feet come cushioning down the stairs. The grand entrance. What a bozo, but... bozo ran the family now.

Bert collected himself and looked up at his new brother-in-law. Skip looked as if he hadn't slept in days. His hair was close cropped on top and long in back, long enough to tie into a pony tail. Like all the pseudo-intellectuals these days, Bert always said. His hair fell around his face and shoulders in a knotted mess. His face was still puffy with sleep and his eyes had cakes of sand at the corners. He wore a rich chocolate sand-washed silk men's bathrobe, tied loosely around his waist, and a pair of brown furry slippers. Bert looked at his watch, it read 5:15.

"At an all-nighter in honor of poor old Dad, Skip?" Bert said.

Skip pursed his lips slightly and winced, "Ever the

comedian." He came to the bottom of the stairs and stood perfectly still. "Bert, Bert, Bert. How Vaudevillian of you? Still the working class clown?" He turned to face his sister. "Welcome back, Mary. Gawd, I'm glad you've finally come. It's been a horrible mess since the shooting. The papers haven't stopped calling all afternoon. Louise didn't even show up this morning."

Mary moved toward her brother on the stairs. "What shooting? Your telegram never said anything about a shooting."

"I know. I know. I couldn't tell you by wire." Skip held out his arms. "That would have been so... cruel. It wasn't exactly a shooting. Father was pulling one of his infamous binges. He was gone four days. I held down family business, filled in when he never showed up at the offices." He came over and sat across from Bert by the door. He still had that stale, bed smell. "Finally the State Police called, at two-thirty Sunday morning. After a weekend drinking spree, he wound up last Sunday night down at the FCC." Bert drew a blank and shook his head. "The Fowler Cove Club, down by the Yacht Club. No? It's some little dive he used to hang out in years ago, long before you came along. It's a metal rock place now. Something happened there, the police haven't told much. Apparently someone followed him back to the office and murdered him."

Bert's jaw dropped open. "What?!"

Mary turned white. "What do you mean 'murdered'?"
Who would want to kill Father?"

"Mother?" Skip smiled.

Bert shot Skip a look of pure violence. Skip didn't even look in his direction. Mary turned slowly about and stared at the floor. "Bert... someone murdered Father."

Bert rose slowly and looked long at his new in-law. "If this happened Sunday night, why did you wait until Wednesday night to telegram us about all this?"

"Oh... well, the police had all these reports and what not, and the press was a nuisance. There were arrangements to be made. I went down the next day and saw the crime scene, actually sat in the place where he sat. It was very exciting."

"Who would want to kill him?" Mary asked herself quietly, over and over. "Who would want to kill him?" Bert helped his wife into the formal living room and laid her down on the couch. He took out a white handkerchief and covered the little spot where her feet would lie. Skip followed them in and watched passively in the doorway.

"See, aren't you glad I told you in person?" he said.

Bert grunted at his new brother-in-law and rose slowly over his wife. He looked around the room she lay in, at all the gray faces that stared with blind, oil eyes, at the cold unfeeling ceramic poses behind glass. Bert turned suddenly to Skip, "Could I speak with you... alone?"

"My thoughts exactly," Skip said. "We'll get some coffee. Let's go to the kitchen." He led Bert out of the living room, without a glance at his sister.

"Bert, please bring me something hot when you come back," Mary said from the couch, legs crossed, arms folded over her chest, eyes closed.

He nodded and smiled a weak smile. Bert hurried through the foyer and caught up with Skip in the formal dining room. They passed together through the serving pantry, stocked to capacity with every conceivable piece of silver and stacks of linen napkins. Wordlessly, they passed through the swinging doors into the stainless steel kitchen.

The kitchen had not changed. Huge stainless gas stoves lined one wall. A huge grill, big enough to cook fifty burgers at once stood at one end. Across the room stood the industrial-size family dishwasher. It could be loaded from the top, as well as from the front. Three huge porcelain sinks, each with it's own array of faucets and appliances, stood to the right of the washer. In the center stood an island where Bert had once helped the servants prepare dozens of salads at once for the guests. Over it hung an old cast-iron carriage wheel, from which hung an inconceivable array of pots and mixing utensils: whisks of every size and dimension, a dozen ladles, pots ranging in size from one-egg-boiler to three quart steamer. The larger pots were stored in their own room. All this for a man who

lived virtually alone.

Of course, Skip was oblivious to the magnificence around him. He sauntered to the other end of the kitchen and began fooling around with the coffee roaster and grinder. From behind he looked like a disheveled-millionaire-alcoholic-housewife coming off a two week binge; a brown smear on stainless steel.

Bert slowed as he crossed the kitchen. Skip filled the Bistro' with fresh French-roast coffee. He spilled coffee liberally on the counter top as he worked.

"Damn this coffee thing." He threw the pot and plunger across the kitchen, narrowly missing Bert. Skip turned and looked embarassed, "Sorry."

"Never mind the coffee, Skip. What the hell do you think you're doing out there, dropping that bomb-shell on your sister like that. She can't handle crap like that right out of the blue."

"Oh, please. Spare me the Holier-than-thou preachery. Mary was dealing with the theatrics of this house long before you came along. She hates the old bastard as much as anyone, maybe more." Skip slipped his hairless, white hand into his robe pocket and produced a pack of deluxe, ultra-light cigarettes. He fumbled absently with the rip tie. Bert pulled out the sheet of plastic bubbles full of nicogum bricks, popped out a pellet and tucked it in his mouth before Skip had even opened his smokes.

"No one has ever been in love with the old man, especially Mary. But that doesn't mean you just walk up to her and say, 'By the way, Dad got whacked.'"

"Dad got whacked," Skip chuckled softly.

"Listen. It's no secret that you and I don't care for each other very much, and that's fine with me."

Skip shook his head as he pulled out a cigarette and lit it.

"But I did marry your sister. She was my wife before you came along and declared yourself her brother. She doesn't need some effeminate prick stomping bad news down her throat for kicks. If you have something to say about what happened, why don't you try your sideshow on me and I'll tell her what happened."

"My," Skip said, running his fingers through his hair, "aren't we informed." He rose and left the kitchen through a side door. After a moment, he returned with a carton of orange juice. He pulled down a champagne glass and filled it half way with juice. He took a sip and swished it around in his mouth before swallowing. The glass was almost empty when he went back into the adjoining room. When he returned again, his glass had a foamy, orange head. Bert watched. Skip pulled a tall chair from one corner and sat at the island in front of his drink.

"Poor doe-eyed Mary, 'dare I eat a peach?'" Skip laughed and downed half his drink. "You're not referring to

that 'Catch me lest I faint' routine? Twenty-six years of pre-Gilbert living in this house can hardly be swept away after a mere four years of bledded wiss with you, or ten years, or even a hundred. You just can't erase a person's upbringing. And a millennia in middle class bliss couldn't erase an upbringing here."

"What do you know about an upbringing in this house?"

Skip offered Bert a cigarette. Bert shook his head and tapped his breast pocket. "Oh, sorry, slipped my mind," Skip smiled. "Tell me, Bert, did Mary ever tell you about Christmas Morning, 1976? No? It was impressive. We were all dressed up in our Sunday finery and propped on our Christmas morning chairs. Mother was handing out gifts." He leaned closer to Bert as he spoke. "She handed Father a box, all wrapped in silver foil. As we watched, he ripped off the ribbon and the wrapper, all excited because he was first to open gifts... as usual. She had given him a beautiful leather-bound photo album. He gathered us around to open it and flip through all the family pictures he seemed sure were inside. We climbed all over him and he flipped it open." Skip stopped for effect and sipped his drink. "Imagine our shock to see a page full of photos of Father in various sexual positions with an array of squealing neighborhood woman." Skip smiled. "And written in beautiful script, in gold on the card she gave with it, were the names of all the women he had had over the years.

And we sat and watched, right there on the couch... where Mary's probably lying now."

"What are you talking about? Who told you about that. You weren't even around then."

"Oh please. I've been here all along, here and there. Illegitimacy does not carry the social stigmata that it has in the past. Anything goes, these days. I've been floating around the peripheries as nephew this, or kissing cousin that, on and off all along."

"Well, what the hell ever. We're not a part of this environment any more. We have our own home, our own kids soon, probably. Do you think we'd waste our time with the crap that happens here? You have to be kidding? Why would she tell me that?"

"You're right, what would she gain by it?"

"This is nothing really new." Bert turned. "It's no secret that she hated her father. I didn't even know the man and he got on my nerves. What difference does it make what he did now, how it all happened, or who you say you are?"

"Oh, no difference. History is history, right? No need to bother with the details." He leaned back in his chair and finished his drink.

Mary was right. The house was quiet. It was then that Bert figured out why; his father-in-law always had a faint cover of classical music playing over the house intercom system. Now, after his death, after someone murdered him in

his office for whatever reason, the big old house sat quiet. It could have been the first time ever. The old man got murdered and his home, his mausoleum, cluttered with lies and violin music, sat perched, silent as a dead bird on a swing, waiting to fall. The funny thing was, that was the only change in the place Bert could feel.

"Listen," Bert finally said, "we've had a long day, a long couple of days, when you're ready to stop with the games and secrets, you just tell me what's going on."

"You know, Bert, this is not a home full of secrets. We know everything that's going on, all amongst ourselves. It's all a matter of dis-information. I'm the patriarch now, legit. This is the promised land, and every land has its own traditions, passed from one generation to the next. You have no idea what this empire was built on." He got up and pulled the matching tall chair from the other corner and set it next to his own chair at the island. His thin, white hand patted gently on the seat. "You were wrong, Bert. I actually like you. There are some things you need to know. Don't worry about getting caught, Mary's probably upstairs unpacking by now," he waved his hand over his head. "Don't be too concerned about her."

Bert sat down next to his brother-in-law. "What?"

Skip sat next to him and leaned close. "Father never stopped after 1976. I know. His libido was of mythic proportion. He was having a wild old time down in the

boathouse most weekends." Skip closed one eye tightly and glared at Bert with the other. "It's easy when you and your wife don't sleep together. Remember that." He winked. "Of course, Mother knew, and she got revenge. But she didn't sleep around like he did, that would have been without dignity, and dignity was her key. They couldn't very well get a divorce way back then. Divorce wasn't fashionable yet. She did him one better. She froze up on him. She moved out, but stayed home. Everything about her closed up and died. And Mary? Sweet, quiet reassuring Mary supported mama Fridgidaire all the way."

He stood and smiled. Skip snatched his glass and ambled back into the back room, the chocolate brown robe falling undone as he rounded the corner. When he returned this time he brought the bottle with him. It was a dark bottle with a single gold *M* written in script on the front.

"Care for a Mamoza? No?"

"Listen," Bert said. This thing had been going on long enough. "I don't care about your father, I never knew the man and I barely knew your mother. You're making no sense whatsoever. What does this have to do with Mary and me?"

Skip prepared his second drink and took a long sip. "This is important for a single reason: Father is no longer here to keep the lid on things, to protect the family name. That's mostly my job now. I doubt Mary will make much effort to keep up appearances. Laura is certainly

incompetent." He waved his hand dramatically around his head. "The grand illusion. Women, they're so... conversational. You know, girls are girls, men are men. They hated Father; Father hated them." He smiled slightly. "We'll find out when we read the will."

"Arrangements had to be made."

"Your Bohemian wit is terrifying. Seriously. There are things you need to know, about the ways of the game. You know how father died, that couldn't be avoided. But do you know how mother died?"

"No."

"Do you know why Mary was divorced before she met you?"

"I don't understand."

"Do you know why Laura is happily babbling away somewhere in a closet?"

"I don't see the connection."

"You don't notice a pattern emerging here?"

Bert was annoyed. He stood slowly and looked down on Skip.

"What are you driving at?"

Skip sighed and topped off his drink with champagne. He lifted the glass and slowly sipped long, looking over the rim at Bert. "There is so much to learn and so little time. Her mother took her own life."

"She killed herself?"

"On the same spot where Mary is probably lying in the

living room."

"She doesn't know this?"

"She might know. She might not. But now *you* know. You know how secrets are, they're never really secrets, just controlled dis-information. I'm just telling you now since the guardian of the family crest is no longer with us. There's nothing we can do to protect him, he died in his own filth. The old man never wanted you to play along, but I do. He liked people to be at his mercy. To me, it's business. As part of the next generation, someone connected to the family name, you'll have to be careful, know what you're doing. You never know what kind of damage gossip could do."

Bert sat and stared at Skip's glass, watched a piece of pulp slip slowly down into the orange foam. Mary doesn't know this. She believes her mother was a saint, that her father killed her with his cruelty. He felt his arm raise. Somewhere far off, in his hand, his finger tips, he felt something small and round and dry. Skip knows. He's not the whelp he appears to be. He's a god now, in this reality, letting Bert play... They locked Laura up somewhere. Laura. And Skip told him something Mary didn't know. Why? He knew something Mary didn't know. Mary's mother killed herself. Right in this house, on that couch. He felt the thing tug in his grasp, rasp, slip, resisting slightly in his fingers. He had a power, he knew something.

But he could never tell Mary, or anyone. So what kind of power was that? A light flashed in his face, close. It comforted him, calmed him. A warmth filled him, a something took him and he was at ease. He looked up from the glass and stared into Skip's face. Skip smiled. He was close.

"Don't worry about back-sliding, brother. Everyone does it. Besides, this is your first try to quit. I know she made you do it. It reminds her of father. Everyone screws up their first try." The sweet smell of champagne and orange juice was heavy on his breath. "I won't tell."

Bert rolled the cigarette in his fingers, grinned at the smoldering tip that glowed warm and friendly up at him. He dunked the cigarette in Skip's drink and rose. "Thanks a lot." He turned to leave.

"Welcome to the family," Skip said.

Bert came back out through the pantry into the dining room. Mary sat on the far end of the table. Her hair hung in front of her face. He stopped short in the door, surprised to find Mary not upstairs unpacking. She was motionless, staring down at an ashtray. She ran her finger around and around it's edge, as if she expected it to sing like crystal.

"Hi, hon," he said. She didn't look up. "Is everything alright?"

"Nothing," she assured him morbidly. She sat still, deep in thought, preoccupied... scheming. "It's nothing."

California

Rain fell from the thick gray clouds that loomed in the desert sky, splashing arbitrarily into the muddy yellow puddles here and there. Rivulets trickled past the entrance of the low cave at the foot of the massive butte, just yards from the highway. The rain had been falling heavily before, but had since tapered off into a slight drizzle. Smoke from the fire wafted across the low roof and then was sucked quickly out into the cool, wet desert night. As the sky grew darker, the cave grew warmer, the small fire throwing dim yellow light. To feel the heat of the flame, the man had to lean down over his cooking food.

He was a young man, early twenties, short-cut black hair, wind-darkened skin. He wore a worn brown leather jacket, black jeans, scuffed black leather boots. He looked out over the flame, into the darkening desert. His eyes were striking, black against white, calculating. A scar ran across his left temple; he was clean shaven. The smell of cooking bacon in the small black skillet and coffee simmering in a pot, just out of reach of the flames, filled the air. It replaced the musty smell of damp earth clinging in the dim, still cave he had stumbled across a short while ago.

He looked out into the mist. A gray shape under a tarp stood just outside the cave. It was the young man's

motorcycle, cloaked against the wet night. And beyond his bike, hunched under its blanket, stretched the road from which he had come. Black and glistening in the failing light, it stretched into a gray haze of rain and steam. Lightning flashed, filled the desert night with a strange brilliance and brought out the distant mountains that were covered with the storm's shroud. And as the dark fell back onto the mud and pavement, the young man could see a dot of light appear on the highway. It was coming very fast. By the time the thunder rolled across the desert floor, chasing the long gone flash of lightning, the deep, throaty sound of a roadster motorcycle rolled into the small cave, filling it.

The young man leaned back, away from the fire and its warmth and light. He pulled the skillet from the direct flames and balanced it on the rock next to the coffee. In the back of the cave he had piled his possessions, a bundle and brown leather saddlebag. The young man reached to the back of the cave and searched through the saddlebag, pulling out a small revolver and tucking it into his jacket. He leaned back over the fire, poking at the bacon and watching the new arrival pull up and dismount.

The other man was older, late forties. He wore scuffed black square-toed biker boots, faded jeans and an old black poncho. He was soaked. The older man climbed the slight embankment that led up to the cave and stood hunched at its mouth. His weather worn face was obscured under a few days

growth of black and gray hair. He looked in with eyes that were deep chestnut brown, red and tired.

"Mind a little company? Sure looks warm in there."

"Come," said the younger man. "Fire's warm."

"I'm sure it is." The older man pulled off his poncho and left it in a pile at the entrance. Under it he wore a black leather vest over a gray tee-shirt. "Won't get much use outta that for a few days." He held his nose and made a face of disgust. "Them Mexicans use some kind of burlap and ox hair blend to twine these things all up. That's what gives 'em that pungent aroma." He smiled down at the young man. "Looks like I caught you at dinner."

The young man showed no expression. "Don't have much, but you're welcome to it."

"Well, I ain't a charity case," the older man smiled. "You just get that fire warmed up and I'll take care of some things." He scooped up his poncho, turned and left the cave. The rain had died down to a fine mist. The older man called over his shoulder. "Just so happens I got some vegetables here in my pack, and maybe some bread that ain't too soaked, if we're lucky." He untied a canvas pack from the back of his bike and placed it heavily on a rock nearby. The canvas throw he pulled from his pack was old and covered with smears of paint. It didn't tuck as neatly as the fitted canvas throw that covered the younger man's bike. After the throw was in place, the man walked around his

bike, kicking stones and dirt onto the loose edges. He looked up and smiled as he came back to the cave, carrying his pack. The younger man watched every move.

"She doesn't look too good, but all that paint keeps the water out." He dropped his pack by the fire and held out his hand. "Nick," he said. "All my friends call me Nick."

The younger man reached up and took his hand. "Cal," he said.

"Good to know you," Nick said. "What you got under that fancy tarp out there?"

"Ninja, 900. Just bought it in San Jose," Cal said.

"I'm just coming in outta California myself." He smiled down at Cal and scratched his belly. His hair was thinning, loose and wispy about the collar of his tee shirt and vest. "Course, you could never get me on one of those rice rockets. I'll take a Harley any day." He reached up and smoothly pulled out a red and white box of cigarettes. Without taking his eyes off Cal, he took out two cigarettes and handed one down to him. The other he popped in his mouth. "I can always tell a smoker by the look in his eye when I go for a smoke. Either you gotta have one or you gotta stop me. There's no in between anymore." Cal smiled. Nick smiled back. He pulled out a stainless refillable lighter and, with a ringing clink of the flip top, lit his smoke. He held the flame down to Cal, but Cal held up his

hand and shook his head. The stinging smell of lighter fluid filled the small cave. "Where you going?" Nick said as he clinked his lighter shut.

"East," Cal said as he lay the cigarette carefully aside and threw some sticks in the fire. He turned and watched Nick move about the small cave. After Nick placed some potatoes and a few handfuls of string beans on a rock near the fire, Cal scooped out three thick slices of bacon, already stiff in the cooling pan. He handed them over to Nick. "They're cooled off a bit, but they'll hit the spot," Cal said. He took the simmering coffee from its perch and gently poured some into a shallow metal camping mug. "Only one cup, we'll have to take turns if you want coffee."

Nick sat heavily and shoved a whole piece of bacon into his mouth. "Never touch the stuff. Shacked up with a broad once in New Mexico, a Chicana. She drank two or three pots of it a day. She only slept about an hour a night and got the worst headaches I ever saw if she ever missed her fix of coffee. Swore I'd never get addicted to the stuff." He chewed the bacon recklessly, swallowed and shoved the next piece in. "Damn it is good. Seems like I haven't eaten in days," he mumbled through his bacon. "But I just ate up in Tahoe this morning, and then a sandwich at noon. Riding makes a man hungry."

"Riding does make a man hungry," Cal said. He bit small pieces off his strips of bacon, sucked on them until

they were soft and swallowed, barely chewing. He washed down each piece with a sip of hot coffee. "You came out of Tahoe?" he said. "You live there, or just visiting?"

Nick looked up from licking his fingers and stared closely at Cal. After a moment he said, "Lived there. But I don't live there anymore. Used to live on the South Shore. Lived there a long time. But they threw in the casinos and the hotels and the fast food places and I just couldn't take it anymore." He reached down and gave the potatoes a half turn and pulled the hot beans away from the fire. Nick handed roughly half the beans over the fire to his new companion. He blew on them before he popped them whole, one after another, into his mouth.

The light outside had nearly disappeared. The dim gray shapes of canvas stood just the other side of the edge of light, barely perceivable. Cal looked out into the darkness, slid beans into his mouth slowly, biting down half way. When he was done with his beans, he sighed and lifted another strip of bacon out of the skillet. He leaned over the flame with the fork and slipped the bacon into Nick's waiting hand. As he settled back he stabbed a large potato with the fork and reclined wearily. "Wish we had some butter. These potatoes would be nice with real butter," Cal said.

"After a while you don't miss butter, as long as you have salt n' pepper." Nick reached in his vest pocket and

pulled out a handful of various restaurant brand salts and peppers. He dropped them in a pile next to the fire and smiled. "Just set that pan back here on the rocks and dab your potato in it and that'll fix you right up," he said.

Cal tried it and smiled when he did. As they ate the potatoes together, wiping up the last of the bacon grease, Nick watched Cal's face and his obvious pleasure. Nick was done first and leaned back against his wall with a smile. He sighed and looked up at the ceiling, wiping the grease from his hands on his jeans. In one motion he reached his right hand in his vest and pulled out the box of cigarettes and flipped the top with his thumb while his other hand pulled out the lighter again. He shook out a smoke and pulled it from the pack with his mouth. It was lit before he flipped the pack shut with his thumb again. "Nothing like a smoke after food," he sighed. He reclined and held his smoke in the crook of his index and middle finger, his hand hanging limply over his knee. He blew a thick plume of smoke up into the dark roof close over his head and hummed some song.

Cal took up his cigarette and lit it with the glowing tip of a twig pulled from the fire. He puffed from the flame; a cloud of smoke stood in his face. He leaned back away from the smoke, his eyes squinting. Every once in a while he would take a puff from the cigarette, and then blow a small round cloud from his mouth. He finished off the

coffee, swishing the dregs around in the pot and flinging them across the cave out into the night. The fire cracked weakly among its stones as the two men stared; Nick up, Cal out.

Time passed; it could have been hours that passed instead of only moments. The rain outside started up again; first there was just a fog, then a fine mist giving way to a drizzle. Little torrents poured down from above the cave's mouth, formed little rivulets that hesitated at the edge of the cave's mouth before spilling out into the night. Before long the rain drove down heavily and loud on the canvas wraps out in the darkness. The men reclined, each to the quiet comfort of his own thoughts in his own repose. With the passing time, the rhythm of the rain drumming on the earth, on the canvas out in the dark drew the men from their individual postures and shaped them. They sat in the same position, leaning forward, chin in palm, staring out into the flood. Their eyes seemed glassy, mesmerized by the ceaseless tumult of falling water through the dim firelight that reached out of the cave into the storm and was sharply cut off. Water falling in little dribbles breaking into streams that were interrupted suddenly and replaced by little dribbles and then nothing, strung all across the black opening that held out the night. Patterns emerged, then danced away over the edge that separated order from chaos.

"Whoa," Nick shouted. Cal started from his daze, reached slightly toward the opening of his jacket and glared at Nick. "This is the kind of thing that can make a guy do some pretty strange stuff out on the road," Nick said, thumbing out at the rain. "Probably most every place else, too." Nick glanced at Cal's hand poised above his jacket and smiled slightly. "Calm down kid, it's just a storm."

"I know," said Cal. "I just don't like surprises." Cal sat up uneasily and looked deep into the fire. After a moment his face became listless and distant. Nick watched.

"Hey, Cal," he interrupted, "you look like a pretty decent guy, a little up tight, but decent. This is my first night out on this trip, let's have a little party." He reached into his vest and pulled out his cigarettes again. This time he was more careful as he fished around in the pack. He slowly pulled out a unfiltered smoke that was more wrinkled than a normal cigarette, a joint fat with marijuana rolled neatly and evenly. He smiled over the pack of smokes, danced his hand around with the joint in it and said, "Ta da."

Cal looked at the joint unexcitedly. "Um," he said, "I would, but unfiltered stuff effects my asthma."

"Ah," Nick said, smiling, "miasma."

"Cigarettes don't affect me as long as they have filters. And I gave up pot a long time ago, when I was in high school." Cal smiled lamely and looked into the flame.

"But go ahead, I don't mind. I have some Scotch if you want to wash it down." He didn't look back until Nick had his joint going and was inhaling deeply.

"So you never did say where you were coming from," Nick finally said after several hits. He leaned back and slid slightly down the wall. His eyes softened, eased into red cracks on his face. "You a native Californian out to see the world?"

"No, I wasn't lucky enough to be born there." Cal reached behind his back and into his bindle. After fumbling about he pulled out a pint of Scotch, casually twisted off the top and took a long pull. Cal handed it over to Nick without looking at him. Nick took the bottle delicately and wiped the rim of the bottle quickly with his shirt. He examined the label closely.

"This is good stuff. How old did you say you were?" Nick smiled up at Cal.

Cal grinned back, "I didn't."

Nick drank long and deep from the bottle, draining a third. He sighed and chased down the shot with a hit from his joint. "Ahhh," he said. "So you ain't a citizen of Rome. All those 'Welcome to California, now go home' bumper stickers meant just for you?"

"Not exactly." Cal wiped the rim of the bottle on his shirt and took another sip. "The people that raised me were native Californians. They got me from New England--"

"New England! What a hell hole! Do you know how hot it gets in New England? and cold?" Nick leaned forward and laughed. "Is that where you're going? Have you ever been there?"

"Not exactly." Cal sat up a little, his eyes narrowed and he spoke slowly. "I was born there, and then sent to California."

Nick settled back and assumed the deep, confident voice of a man of the world. He drew deep from the joint and let the smoke come out while he spoke. "I'll tell you, I been there so many times over the past thirty-five years, always looking for work or visiting friends or just having a hell of a time, and I always end up back where I started from. California. The weather there is great! Where else can you walk around in your drawers outside in the dead of winter? You can't beat California for weather." Cal cocked his head and smirked as he listened.

"Even winter in Tahoe?" he said.

"No, not winter in Tahoe." Nick looked away shaking his head and took several small puffs from the joint. Both were silent for a minute, then Nick looked back, relaxed and thoughtful. "You know, kid, there's nothing like hot food and a good smoke on the open road. There used to be a time when everyone was on the road coming west." He grinned slightly as he spoke. "Roving with the communes when I was a teenager, getting it on with everybody. Now that was

fun." Nick slapped his knee. Cal stared at the flames. "People always love to come west. 'The west is the best,' that's what Morrison sang. Nowadays you don't find a whole lot of hospitable people on the road. Everyone is too wrapped up with their own fears."

"I'm looking for something, too, I guess," Cal said, sipping the Scotch, his eyes grew distant as he looked into the fire. "I'm looking for something I've never known. I'm looking for commitment that means more than staying with someone only until you come or the sun rises. I'm looking for someplace where the human body is more than just some pleasure machine that's drooled over for its curves and holes. For--"

"Hell, you're chasing dreams, kid." Nick leaned back and took a long haul from his joint. "You're traveling the country, looking for a place that doesn't exist. I remember when people looked for something on the roads of America that was worth searching for, self."

Cal squared his shoulders slightly and set his chin. "I'm actually looking someone up. I have a score to settle."

"Oh." Nick looked down into the fire. "A little revenge on the downside of your soul searching?" Cal didn't answer. Nick looked long into the flames as Cal watched him. Sip by sip, Cal finished off his pint. When it was done, he flipped it out into the pouring rain. The

"More than most, and maybe some more on the side here and there." Nick laughed and put both hands up behind his head. "The women are the problem, always getting in the way. But the kids ain't a problem. They're smarter than people give 'em credit for. They're born with instincts that keep 'em going. They're a Hell of a lot tougher than a lot of adults I know. Leave 'em alone and they'll look out for themselves, just pat 'em on the butt and shove 'em out into the real world. Just like the birds. Best advice a man can get." He leaned back toward the fire and tossed a few sticks into the dying flame. "Got any more of that Scotch in those bags? No? Fair enough." He reached back into his vest pocket and pulled out his smokes again. In one motion he lit a cigarette and settled back. "Yup, if you get stuck with kids just let 'em be and watch out for your own ass. If everybody'd do the same the world would balance herself right out."

Cal sat silently, his face expressionless. The whole time Nick spoke, Cal sat, legs out, arms crossed on his stomach, pressing the hard steel into his gut. As he listened his eyes seemed to come in and out of focus, staring at Nick's smiling mouth, then drifting down into the flames, then out into the dark rain and back to Nick's mouth again. The rain was dying down into a cool fog that drifted into the firelight in wisps.

"You never said who you were looking for back east,"

Nick said.

"A relative," Cal said quietly. "He's just about your age by now... Maybe its about time for sleep. This mist will probably make us stiff as wood in the morning." He unrolled the brown blanket that was his bindle and covered himself as he lay back along the side of the cave wall. "Good luck with sleep, Nick," he mumbled.

"Oh, I never had trouble sleeping out. I remember one time back east, Massachusetts I think it was, I slept out every night for weeks. I was traveling then, like I am now, on the go...." He talked quietly to Cal in the dimness long after Cal had fallen asleep.

The morning came in a steamy mist and a light drizzle. The cave was dim and smelled of moist earth, as it had when Cal first got there the night before. He sat up and stiffly rubbed his shoulder. The cave crouched in black and gray, color absorbed by the weak predawn light. The fireplace was long cold and damp. Cal coughed and patted himself, then began sweeping the damp coals from the fireplace. He took a handful of twigs from a small pile of wood left over from the previous night and arranged them into a tent-shaped heap over a ball of paper. He lit the fire and sat back. The smoke drifted over into Nick's face. He stirred and looked up at Cal.

"Cool," he said, "breakfast."

"Why don't you reach out there and grab the skillet and

I'll cook the last of my bacon," Cal said offhandedly.

Nick stretched and groaned in the dirt. He had fallen asleep where he lay, uncovered and resting his head on his pack. "Ahhhh," he groaned louder, then sat up and lunged out to grab the skillet. "Bacon sounds good." He flicked the rainwater out into the mud and tossed the skillet to Cal.

"You got anything to throw in for breakfast?"

"Well, now that you mention it, I think that was the last of my stuff that we ate last night."

Cal sat and stared into the flames. After a minute he sighed and looked up at Nick. "Tell you what, lets go into the next town and find ourselves a greasy spoon. I haven't eaten in any restaurant this trip so far. I can't afford to do it more than once or twice. This morning seems as good a time as any."

"A small town diner," Nick said speculatively. "Well, today's a good day as any to die." He looked up from his feet and smiled, "Or at least to give the heart a good coat of grease."

Cal smiled and let out a huge yawn and blinked sleepily at the growing fire. "Let's just warm up a bit, have some coffee." He pointed out into the lightening fog at the small pot. Nick reached out again and picked it up lightly. No rainwater spilled this time. "I'll take you up on the fire and the greasy spoon, but I'll pass on the coffee," he

said as he handed the pan over to Cal and rubbed his hands over the fire.

Cal dumped a fistful of coffee grounds into the water and set it close to the fire to simmer. Each man sat in his own thoughts as they watched the water begin to steam and the smoke rise slowly to the cave's low ceiling. "I had some weird dreams last night, kid," Nick said suddenly. "I dreamed about a shooting I saw a long time ago, probably before you were born. I dreamed it like a haven't remembered it in a long time." He looked hard at Cal.

"You saw someone get shot?" Cal said.

"Blew a guy to pieces," Nick said softly. "Wonder why I was dreaming about guns...."

Cal shifted on his seat a little and poured himself a cup of coffee. "Beats me," he said.

Nick rose stiffly and hobbled out of the cave hunched over. Outside he stretched tall, his back made tiny cracking noises. He looked out across the gray desert. The sun broke over the mountains in the east and desert colors crept out of hiding. As Nick watched the gray mud turned a dull gold, all the little pebbles around the mouth of the cave exposed from the dust that had been stripped away from the torrents of the night before. The brush, spiny gray bones in the predawn, displayed tiny green buds coated with shimmering droplets of water in the new sunlight. The canvas coats of the bikes sparkled with a thousand drops of

morning dew. Nick lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. He turned and looked back at Cal sipping coffee at the fire. "It's going to be a beautiful day on the road," he said. Cal swished coffee grounds against the cave wall.

The two men packed their gear quickly as the sun rose. Each helped the other remove his canvas and shake free as much dampness as possible, before folding up their tarps and stuffing them away. They started their bikes and let them idle while they packed up the last of their things. When everything was all stowed away, the two went back into the cave for a last look before getting on the road.

"Looks pretty clean," Cal remarked as he headed out. The fireplace made a faint hiss and Cal turned back. Nick stood over the embers, urinating with a big smile on his face.

"Smokey the Bear," Nick laughed. The close cave smelled of burning ammonia, acrid and foul. Cal turned and left the cave. He sidled up to his humming bike, unlocked his red full-face helmet from the saddle lock-ring, pulled it over his head and cinched the straps tight. Cal reached into one saddlebag and pulled out a pair of brown gloves. He looked at them a moment, looked up at the sky and inhaled deeply the clean air, then tossed them absently back into the bag. He threw his leg over his bike and kicked back the stand. Without looking back, Cal pulled on to the road and accelerated. After a few seconds, he looked over and saw

that Nick was riding next to him. He slowed and flipped up the visor of his helmet. Nick's hair flipped around his face; he wore no helmet.

"So, you want to race, do you?" Nick laughed. "Last one there buys breakfast."

The two bikes rode side by side for a while, slipping easily over the hills that rolled through the desert like swells on a calm sea. The air was crisp and damp and the low-lying fog had burned away, revealing black thunderheads that towered in the sky as they swept more rain into the desert valley. The riders crested a rise, still side by side. Off in the distance crouched a small town in the thinning haze. Several miles of straight, black road and several tiny red stop lights in the middle distance were all that held them from breakfast and escape from the coming rain. Cal throttled his bike up and leaned down over the gas tank. He shot down the hill ahead of Nick's slower roadster. Nick leaned back and throttled up, accelerating slowly and steadily.

Cal crossed the desert floor, passed through one green light, then sped up to run a yellow. He was just one light away from the small town when the light, fifty yards ahead, turned from green to yellow. He opened the throttle full and hugged against his gas tank. He passed through the intersection just as the old green station wagon crossed through. The old car's peeling chrome grill shattered as

the wagon hit Cal head-on. His leg was nearly torn off by the car's front end, but he flipped free, relatively intact, slid up the dusty hood and smashed into the brown-streaked windshield. His body flipped up onto the roof, the spear of the luggage wrack piercing the face shield of his shiny red helmet. As his body flipped up and around, his head remained stationary. He came to a crushing thud on the roof of the car, his head twisted all the way around backwards.

The woman inside the car never made a sound. She just stared with wild eyes into the furious crash; the splintering windshield, the boom of Cal's body crashing over her head. She white-knuckled the steering wheel as the car dragged over Cal's bike, a stream of sparks flying from the bike's chrome, grinding across the pavement.

It was very still when Nick rolled through the intersection. Cal lay on the roof of the car, twisted and bleeding in his brown leather, the outlines of bones pressing strange images here and there in his clothes. Both of Cal's white hands were raised in the morning sun, limp and lifeless. The woman, older, with blue hair, sat in the driver's seat, staring into space, a grocery bag with a dozen eggs on the seat beside her. Large droplets of rain began to fall as Nick slowed to pass through the intersection. He threw the throttle full-open as he passed through the little town and drove off on the slick black road.

Postlude:
The Inquisitor

The Quick Check line should be the fastest, but it never is. Even early this in the morning there must always be some kink in the works. Invariably some peon gets in line with a cart full of repeat items and claims they are all the same item. Some things never change.

"Lines suck," says a young girl's voice behind Evan in line. He turns and smiles down at the little girl. She must be... fifteen, sixteen, shiny black hair pulled into a pony tail, high forehead, black sunglasses, white teeth, full lips with only one tiny sore visible, smooth, tanned skin barely covered by one of those tiny bikinis made out of opaque plastic and smoothed on to the skin with body oil. If he tilts his head just right she appears as if she wears nothing at all.

"Some things never change," he smiles down on her, mildly surprised she even spoke to him. "In all the decades since the advent of the Quick Check line," he says, "you would think everyone would figure out how to use them."

She shakes her head violently and looks into a clump of gold and silver hoops on her wrist. "If this bitch doesn't get moving, the sun will be too high to go to the beach." She looks up and shoves Evan to the side just a little. "Come on, man!"

"Maybe you'll have to go without beer," he says timidly, "if you want to beat the sun."

"Shut up," she says.

"OK," he nods and turns back towards the front of the line. The clerk still lectures a gravitationally challenged, matured woman for over-purchasing in the Quick Check line. She waves her round little fingers in his face as he shakes his head. Without warning she winds up and punches the clerk in the head. Pom! The Manager Assistance light blinks on. Evan sighs. He is very tired of waiting in lines. He leans on the counter, hangs his cane over his forearm and rubs his prosthetic hip.

If Joan were still here this wouldn't be so bad. She could make the best of any situation. Still, being a widower isn't so bad. True, Joan did all the shopping and he didn't really need to go to the market much in over fifty years. Shopping was never really his thing, and he liked to have his own way in most matters. But now that he was getting used to it there was nothing to it really, shopping for one. And there are the fringe benefits that he never gets at the home, like the young thing behind him. Evan glances over his shoulder at the girl. Her breasts stand out near bare and there. Fashion certainly has come a long way since he was a boy in the Seventies and Eighties. She is staring at something on his butt. He reaches nonchalantly behind and feels that one of his tubes has

escaped him. He can't see which one it is, but quickly stuffs it back into his baggy slacks. All of his attention focuses forward.

"Gross," the exposed girl says under her breath.

Evan shuts his eyes and sighs. Age sucks. He shrugs his mental shoulders and begins to read the tabloids. It doesn't matter if he reads newspapers or the tabloids, they're all the same. In fifty years, the tabloids and the media haven't changed their stories, only varied them: *Dinosaur Found on Mars, Vintage World War I, II or III Aviator Found in Cave on the Moon, or Lose Weight on the Feces Diet.* At least he doesn't have to see any of those horrible Elvis articles anymore. The last of his fans died off ten years ago. But this headline catches his eye, *Last Official Baby Boomer Dies.* Evan reaches down and takes the paper, *The Inquisitor*, and reads it. *Amidst eager anticipation in New York City the last officially recorded Baby Boomer passed into oblivion Wednesday. Ex-Billionaire CEO of the now defunct BS, Mr. W. Silverspoone, dies in poverty.* Evan smiles as he replaces the paper. He begins to chuckle when he is shoved from behind.

"Move it man, you're next."

He slides his six-pack of beer down the conveyor and fumbles with his wallet.

"That'll be fifteen fifty," the pimply clerk says tiredly.

"I have this government check" Evan apologizes. "The banks aren't open yet. Would it be alright to cash it here?"

The clerk looks at the check in his hand and starts to laugh. "We deal in money here, pops. See the sign: No Script! For food you need real money."

"I have no real money."

"Get out of the way, old man," the girl behind him starts to shove Evan forward. "I'll never get out of here with all you old people in the way."

"Excuse me, young lady," Evan turns and looks down on the little girl. Anger begins to bubble inside of him. He spent his whole life in line behind the Baby Boomers, and now that he is at the front, he is not about to get shoved out of the way by the Boomer's babies. "I'll be done here when I am done here. Have some respect."

"Hey!" the clerk suddenly booms. "Get out of the line or I'll call the police."

Evan stands still for a second, looking down at the pimples and the breasts and the angry little faces and the balling fists and the violence of it, and Evan steps out of the way.

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