

1989

Beach Cove

Neal Lerner
San Jose State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_theses

Recommended Citation

Lerner, Neal, "Beach Cove" (1989). *Master's Theses*. 3155.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31979/etd.3ssb-z6p9>
https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_theses/3155

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Master's Theses and Graduate Research at SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@sjsu.edu.

INFORMATION TO USERS

The most advanced technology has been used to photograph and reproduce this manuscript from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book. These are also available as one exposure on a standard 35mm slide or as a 17" x 23" black and white photographic print for an additional charge.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

U·M·I

University Microfilms International
A Bell & Howell Information Company
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
313/761-4700 800/521-0600

Order Number 1338708

Beach Cove. [Original novel]

Lerner, Neal Dennis, M.A.

San Jose State University, 1989

U·M·I
300 N. Zeeb Rd.
Ann Arbor, MI 48106

BEACH COVE

**A Thesis Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
San Jose State University**

**In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts**

**By
Neal Lerner
August, 1989**

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH



Professor E. Rob Swigart



Professor Virginia De Araujo



Professor David Mesher

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY



ABSTRACT

BEACH COVE

by Neal Lerner

Beach Cove is the story of Richie Lewis, former junior high school English teacher. Now that his teaching job has burned up in flames after five years of hand-to-hand combat with an obstinate administration, Richie doesn't know what to do with his life. He's turning thirty. He's lost interest in a career as a teacher. He has lost track of what is important. To get a perspective on the matter, Richie brings to the house in which he grew up on the New Jersey shore three friends from high school for a weekend of reckoning, reminiscing, and recovery. Complicating matters are his friends' own agendas for the weekend, and the acquaintances and surprises they bring. The weekend takes him back to his parents' lives, to his own life, and finally to his father's basement where he realizes that one's plans don't always work out like one's expectations.

Acknowledgements

This novel originally came about from my work with Professor Rob Swigart at San Jose State University. I'm deeply indebted to Rob and his fiction writing workshops and the many other students who provided criticism, support, and guidance. I am also obliged for the suggestions and support of Greg Runyon who pushed me to make Richie Lewis come alive. Finally, this work would not have been possible without the encouragement and love of Tania Baker, to whom I am forever grateful

Introduction

Narrative is a subjective art. Many people can tell a story from an event they have witnessed, but each version might be very different depending on a person's point of view, his mental state at the time, even the events of subsequent years. In this sense narrative creates confusion. For someone wishing to reflect on and scrutinize his life, assembling his own stories of the past as well as the stories of his friends would not provide clarity though it would provide the rich texture that is at the heart of narrative. Someone who wishes to examine his life in order to make decisions about the future would need to understand that the process of story telling (and of living for that matter) is more important than any ultimate lesson contained in the story. It is all in the process, not in the product.

This idea works on many levels in *Beach Cove*. Richie Lewis is about to turn thirty, has recently lost his job as a teacher of high school English, and has found himself at a crisis point in his life from which he can continue to live or can succumb to the pressures that confront him. To help him with the decision of what he should do with his life, Richie gathers together major elements from his past at the house on the New Jersey shore in which he grew up: Elliot Kreger, Walt Oslofsky, and Jerry Mazio, high school friends, the four of them the entire membership of their high school Club Concerned. Richie assumes he can construct a future for himself by looking back on his past with the clarity that he hopes his friends will provide. Richie has lost that clarity, that focus that he needs. However, his friends' present lives, along with their own particular memories of past events, do not provide

much clarity for Richie, and instead throw him into a fit of confusion. His use of narrative is contradictory to his intended goal.

In addition to making the mistake of using the narrative of his past to create a future, Richie uses third person narrative to relate part of his story. The first chapter, the story of Richie losing his high school teaching job, he tells in third person, maximizing the distance between narrator and subject. This narrative distance is Richie's attempt to bring a focus to his life by viewing it as a story about him, as if he were removed from the actual events. The subsequent chapters, however, are told in first person as Richie nears coming to grips with the forces that have shaped his life.

Complicating the narrative and accompanying Richie and his friends are the elements of their present lives: Rebecca, Richie's long time companion; Ismeralda, Walt's artist friend, and Benjamin, Jerry's weekend companion, brought along to display Jerry's new sexual orientation. The arrival of Richie's friends does little to clarify his situation. Instead things are confused by the present dramas of his friends' lives. Richie's attempts at recreating his past are further thwarted.

Framing the narrative of the novel over the course of the three day weekend are Richie's midnight strolls, a habit he has had since childhood to deal with his frequent insomnia. During these moments, Richie puts into some perspective the events of the weekend, and begins to seriously consider what the reader will later find out to be Richie's attempted suicide. During the first stroll, we learn of Richie's depression, of his desire to assemble his friends and scrutinize his life. During the second stroll, Richie begins to wonder about what this weekend is really doing, if it is just confusing

matters, and during his third stroll, he gives up and decides to shoot himself with his father's gun kept in the basement of the house. He then relates the story of how his parents' relationship was ruined when his father shot and wounded his mother's brother Morris after Morris harassed Richie's father for not being good enough for Richie's mother. Richie's father led an extremely solitary life after that, spending his time either working at his shoe store in New York City or in his basement carving little wooden figures that he'd polish and detail and then throw out in batches. Richie interpreted this discarding as a statement on the futility of his father's life.

During his third midnight stroll, Richie realizes that achieving this understanding of his father was also a motivation for this weekend. In his father's basement with his father's gun pointed at his forehead, Richie finally thinks he understands what his parents' relationship was all about. But as Richie is about to shoot himself, he considers another possibility. His father's wooden figures had a wry smile, as if they shared a private joke. And at the moment Richie has pulled the trigger on his father's gun, he considers that the joke was what his father's mask of solitude was all about. Perhaps he threw out his wooden figures because the pleasure was in their creation? Such was the lesson of life, to enjoy the experience, the day to day pleasures, and not to focus on indeterminate goals, goals that Richie cannot define much less reach. Having come to this conclusion, another of Richie's plans goes awry as his father's gun ends up not to be loaded. Richie is still alive. Once again Richie is betrayed by a false narrative, by his interpretation of his father's story.

Throughout the novel Richie Lewis reveals himself as a story teller. By

relating stories of his and his friends' lives, he hopes to get a sense of what he was, a starting point for what he might become. This is the substance of the novel itself. But at the same time, Richie wonders if he is merely reinventing the past to fit his present needs, if he has reduced his own friends to convenient wooden figures similar to the ones that inhabited his father's basement. Richie questions his own subjectivity, his own narrative. He is faced with the contradiction of being dependent on narrative but also mistrustful of his stories.

The process of narrative, and of life, is what Richie learns to cherish by the end of the novel. Yet, it is also that process which makes up the novel itself: the assemblage of stories about Richie's and his friend's past and current lives. Richie's search for truth and identity is a rocky, confusing one which leads to his attempted suicide but also leads to his final understanding of how he should live his life. That dual use of narrative is the contradiction and tension that fuels *Beach Cove* and will fuel Richie's future.

1. QUITTING MY JOB

"Let's say, hypothetically, you have a situation," Mr. Steele, vice-principal of the Pompeii school, started after staring silently at the resume of Richie Lewis, potential teacher of high school English. "You're in front of a class of twenty five students. Suddenly, a boy jumps up, shouting, 'Destroy the school, destroy the school,' and throws an incendiary device at your feet. What do you do?" Mr. Steele sucked on his cupped hand cigarette, staring at Richie with close set grey eyes. He had a chiseled Marine's haircut.

"Incendiary device, huh?" They were in a small white cubicle. No windows. "Well, I suppose I could dive on it and sacrifice myself for the good of the class. Or," Richie met Mr. Steele's eyes, "In a lightning flash of movement, I grab the grenade and toss it out of the window into the stone courtyard below where it explodes without much damage. Maybe a broken window or two. Then I apprehend the perpetrator, march him down to your office, and assign the class a research paper on terrorism."

"Mr. Lewis," Mr. Steele snarled. "There were several students in that courtyard."

"There were?" Richie pursed his lips.

"Fortunately they were being delinquent, cutting class. Your action will

be seen as a deterrent." He grimaced a smile. "Good thinking."

Richie left Mr. Steele's office taking deep breaths. This was a big moment for him. Richie Lewis was a bright-eyed young man fresh out of college, driven to put his undergraduate degree to use. Well, actually, Richie Lewis wasn't particularly bright-eyed, having acquired a cynical attitude as a means of surviving an undergraduate career besieged by legions of bright-eyed peers. And actually, he wasn't particularly fresh out of school, installing car stereos part-time for a year while he lived under the watchful eyes of his parents and commuting to City College in Manhattan for two semesters to get his teaching credential, and then, finally, working in Boston for an export office for two years while his spouse equivalent, Rebecca, was pursuing her post-doctoral research at Harvard in her chosen field of Behavioral Psychology. So, finally, when Rebecca got an assistant professorship at NYU, Richie Lewis found himself living in the middle east side of Manhattan, a not particularly young twenty five with a bad attitude, ready to put his post-graduate degree to use.

Coincidentally, at the same time there arose in suburban New Jersey a school of no particular note. This was not some high powered college-prep school. This was not some experimental, psycho-social haven of educational theory. This was hardly even a decent place to hang out for four years. Instead this was a fearful, ever shrinking, hotbed of beleaguered kids sent off to private school by their beleaguered parents.

The Pompeii school was created as a reaction to bussing; it was designed to be a haven for the stoic parents who'd be damned if a few dark-skinned youths would be packed into the hallways where their offspring received a public education. And they'd be double-damned if their broods with carefully

nurtured senses of right and wrong would be forced to wait out in the cold like lawn ornaments for a dirty yellow bus to transport them across town to the "other" public high school, the one rumored to pass out condoms in health class and be a junkie shooting gallery during gym. These hardworking middle-class parents had a need. To fill this need the Pompeii School promptly swept in and offered a viable alternative. Yes, you white middle-class parents. Caught in the middle of the bussing dilemma? Do you fear for your kids' safety? Hygiene? Send them to Pompeii, an inexpensive, private alternative in your own neighborhood.

The Pompeii school had not always been so high profile. For years it was a small Catholic school with a dwindling population of nuns. But during the disconsolate seventies a major multi-national corporation, its middle management bored with triumphs in the convenience store market, latched on to the idea of private schooling for the disgruntled middle-class. The idea was presented at a board meeting where the chairman sniffled an assent, and the search began for suitable candidates. Pompeii, in the heartland of west central New Jersey, would be the trial run. It would go non-denominational, nearly secular, and court those parents concerned with the safety of their children, those tired of being pushed around by the non-judicious state. Yes, the Pompeii school would be a fight back, a blow for the middle class. Let the public schools bus their kids around like rearranging silverware. We'll send our Johnnys and Joanies to Pompeii where the education is priority one and never is heard a discouraging word. This is a triumph for the people.

So first a school was found, then a principal, then a vice-principal, and then some students. Oh right, a missing ingredient. A few teachers would be

needed. They were of course a salary drain, a flush of liquid assets, and instead a major push was presented at a board meeting to run the classrooms via a videotape package available from Expert Learning Systems, Inc. for fifteen grand. Fortunately cooler heads prevailed. The marketing people recognized the need for a familiar structure. After all, they argued, we are trying to appeal to a market sector whose notions of education are very basic, the three r's and keep my kids out of trouble. This potential customer base could identify with the image of a slump shouldered, bespectacled human being waving his hands as if to fan the knowledge toward the students. So, teachers, it was agreed, were necessary.

Thus, at last, Richie Lewis enters, a potential teacher of high school English, soon to find his next five years inexorably tied to the fate of the Pompeii school. Responding to an ad in the New York Times, seeing his chance to mold fleshy minds into hardened chunks of learning, within weeks of mailing his resume, he was interviewed by a Mr. O'Farrell, an outside contractor specializing in personnel searches. It went pleasantly enough though Richie was somewhat puzzled by the need to bring a notarized copy of his college diploma. Next was the vice-principal, Mr. Steele, whose interrogation left Richie somewhat unsure that Pompeii was the place for him.

The final interview was with the principal himself, the executive manager of the Pompeii project, the second in command to the chairman of the board. He was Mr. Schwartz, a twenty year man in the company who had been pushed up the corporate hierarchy through no intentions of his own. Mr. Schwartz had a magic touch with special projects. In Denver he took a struggling convenience store and put up a sign, "Bikers Welcome." The

volume tripled. In Ontario he put a microphone in a laundromat and held talent nights. Business boomed. In Poughkeepsie he introduced do-it-yourself chicken frying in a small take-out place. They expanded to six stores and were heading for seven until someone was caught frying an ex-boyfriend's hand. Now at Pompeii the company was counting on Mr. Schwartz's flair for innovation and fresh ideas.

"So, Mr. Lewis," he started in their interview. Mr. Schwartz was a very short man, wearing a tailored three piece suit. He looked like a miniaturized executive. "Tell me about teaching. What have you done in the past?"

"Well, as you can see on my resume, I've student taught for two semesters. That included making my own lesson plans and carrying them out, basically being in charge of the class."

"Yes, I see." He held up the resume at arms length, squinting at what Richie had carefully typed, trying to sum up his life on an eight and a half by eleven piece of paper. "I do have to find my glasses. They're around here someplace." They were in Mr. Schwartz's new office at the school. The old Catholic headmaster had been mercifully retired and the photos of religious figures had been replaced by the company's award winning advertising slogans. "Winnemuka Travel for Your Wildest Dreams," caught Richie's eye.

"You know I barely made it through high school myself," Mr. Schwartz said.

"Oh yeah?"

"Graduated by the skin of my teeth. Took that puppy and center punched it right into the working world."

"Uh huh." Richie could vaguely understand what Mr. Schwartz was talking about. He kept nodding.

"But I made it, you can see that. I have the whole ball of cheese now." He put down Richie's resume and looked out of his office window. "This is quite a location."

"Yeah, this part of New Jersey is quite pretty."

"Oh, I meant it is terrible, Mr. Lewis. We have to attract students here. We need an aura of learning. This looks like a country club."

Richie gave Mr. Schwartz a half-smile. "A chain link fence topped by barbed wire, perhaps?"

"I'm not sure." He stared silently out of the window. "So, you want to teach English, huh? I've nearly filled the sciences and the industrial arts. It's mainly physical education and the humanities that I have left. Can you teach social studies?"

"Uh, no, English."

"You don't free lance?"

"No, I'm kind of limited."

"I'm building a fine crew here, Mr. Lewis. A regular cast-iron kettle of a teaching crew."

Richie shifted his position in the straight-backed chair. Were things going well here?

"Tell me, Mr. Lewis, how do you teach English?"

"Well," Richie cleared his throat. "I think you have to make it exciting. You have to impress upon your students what reading and writing can do for them. How it can open up new worlds of thought and communication. How it can empower them." He paused. Mr. Schwartz was still staring out of his

window. He had hardly looked directly at Richie so far. "If they can write, they can persuade, motivate and think. You have to make this clear." Richie found himself slowly sliding to the edge of his chair. He sat back.

"We can't pay much here," Mr. Schwartz finally said. "But I can insure small classes, no more than fifteen students. And only three or four sections."

"I see."

"Perhaps a senior elective, if you wish."

"Have you hired any other English faculty?"

"I'm interviewing several people in the next few days. Yes, I think we'll have quite a team, a regular Miller Huggins wrecking crew. What do you think, Mr. Lewis?" He finally looked over at Richie, his eyes blurry behind thick-lensed glasses.

"I think I'm interested. Are you offering me a job then?"

"Of course, of course. You'll be our scrappy shortstop, knocking down hard one hitters bare-handed. Yes, I like that quality in you, Mr. Lewis."

So Richie Lewis was offered a job at the Pompeii school, one of many who would pack the faculty lounge during all available breaks. The English faculty totaled four including Richie. There was Ms. Weiss, fresh out of a New England liberal arts college, passionate with the idea of teaching "literature." There were the two veterans of the staff, Mr. Hill and Mr. Valdeccio, both retired teachers coaxed out of their life of ease by the corporation. Together they had fifty years of linoleum-floored classrooms and squinty-eyed teens. Thus they had an English department at Pompeii, and soon Richie Lewis found himself propped up in front of a classroom of restless freshmen.

"Now, take your pronoun for instance. Quite the handy little device." He looked up over his notes at fifteen blank stares. "You have your personal pronoun, your indefinite pronoun and, of course, your interrogative pronoun, just to name a few."

"Mr. Lewis," someone asked.

"Yes, Charlene."

"What does this have to do with making me write good?"

What indeed.

The classroom scenes never actually went like that. In fact those were the best times. The first couple of years were a boom at Pompeii. Court-ordered bussing was pushing up the student population and shrinking the public school roles. Richie found himself often staying late, conferencing with students, watching Red Thorpe, phys. ed. teacher, coaching girls' basketball. He'd sit at the scrimmages in the faded yellow stands and grade student papers. When Richie got home to Manhattan, he was exhausted but satisfied. He and Rebecca spent their evenings grading papers, designing class assignments or lying together on the couch, making out like high schoolers. Richie felt like he was really doing something.

The next two years grew progressively worse. Bussing was on the wane. Pompeii wasn't replacing graduating students and was therefore losing revenue. By Richie's fourth year, everyone was acquiring an edge, including the students.

"Mr. Lewis, their hot lunches really suck," Mindy Cohen told Richie between classes. "I swear they use the same food over and over. First day it's boiled, second day creamed, third day curried."

"So, bring a sandwich," he told her.

"This place is so cheap." She pressed her notebook against her chest, swinging her shoulders in gentle arcs. "Did you like the essay I showed you?"

"I did. But you should have changed the names. You don't want to insult Ms. Weiss. She has feelings too, you know."

"Oh, she's such a drag." Mindy rolled her eyes. "She's making us memorize and recite Beowulf. Can you believe that? You never made us do anything like that last year as freshmen."

"Yeah, well, we all have our own styles of teaching." Richie Lewis felt himself blush over the flirting he was receiving from Mindy Cohen. It was something he had never gotten used to, and his face was attacked by a wave of crimson.

"Well, I gotta get to gym. See you."

"Take it easy, Mindy."

Cutting back on school lunches had only been a small part of Pompeii's cost-cutting measures. There was never enough toilet paper in the faculty men's room, and the stall doors had been removed and sold for scrap metal. Sick days had to be accompanied by a doctor's note. Textbooks were arriving used, workbooks already filled in. For four years the classrooms had been where the small triumphs of a strongly worded image and the larger triumphs of a dynamic essay overpowered any grumbling in the teachers' lounge. But now the teachers' lounge was pushing ahead.

"Lewis, they want us to start coming in on weekends to wax the floors." Richie's forearm was being grabbed by Lou O'Connor, teacher of science.

"Lewis, they want us to work nights filling the sanitary napkin dispensers in the girls' rooms."

"Get a grip, Lou." Richie stubbed out the Benson and Hedges Kingsize cigarette that he had been enjoying, a habit Richie had acquired during his first semester Pompeii and one he hadn't been able to shake since then. All of those things they told their students not to do: smoke, sex without contraceptives, heavy drinking, were pursued with zeal by the faculty. There was adolescent joy in the fact that they could get away with it. "Lou," Richie said. "We can always strike."

An immediate silence choked the usual din of the faculty lounge.

"Did someone say the s-word?" asked Lucita Fernandez, teacher of Spanish. "You know there's to be no mention of the s-word in here." She pointed at the blue neon "Pompeii" logo that filled an entire wall and put a finger to her mouth. "Loose lips, pink slips."

"Sorry," Richie said. They were all feeling insubordinate lately, having been handed a directive that morning: vacation and sick leave temporarily revoked due to management cutback. This was the latest in a series of cost cutting moves by the corporation, moves that most of the faculty had tried to ignore like a siren on a distant street. But now the siren was approaching. They were faced with pulling over to the side and holding their fingers in their ears. No one could find Mr. Schwartz since too many harried faculty members had sought out his mercy. Mr. Steele seemed to be running the show now.

"They have our balls in their vice grip, Lewis," Lou O'Connor said, wiping the perspiration off of his forehead with a stained cuff. "And it's the fucking students who are losing out. I couldn't give a shit about the molecular weight of potassium at this point." He shook two cigarettes from a

damp pack and offered Richie a slightly crooked one.

"Listen, Lou, it'll all blow over."

"How can you be so sure? The economy is screwed, our student pop is dwindling, the public schools are packed, bussing or no bussing." He jabbed at Richie with a nicotine-stained thumb.

"Lou, we've been here four years now, right? We've seen the ups, and we've seen the downs. The corporation will find a way out of this."

They of course did. Twenty five percent of the faculty was laid off including Mr. Hill and Mr. Valdeccio, who were forced back into retirement. Richie's class size increased to thirty five. It was time to seek out Mr. Steele.

"I had an agreement with Mr. Schwartz," he told Mr. Steele, gripping the underside of his chair with both hands. "He said no more than fifteen students per class. I'm up to thirty five. I can't teach in that environment." Steele's over air-conditioned office was quite a contrast to the sweaty atmosphere of the rest of the school. This fourth spring had been the warmest so far. The school's air conditioning system had been working less and less efficiently. Mr. Steele seemed to be beating the heat. He slowly opened a file on his desk.

"Can I at least talk with Mr. Schwartz? The faculty hasn't seen him in weeks."

"You can't do that."

"Why not?"

"There's been a reorganization. Mr. Schwartz is not on this project any longer." He leaned back in his chair with hands folded behind his head. There were no sweat stains under his arms like most of the faculty had. "He's been transferred to a corn fuel project in Des Moines. I'm in charge now."

"I see." Richie could make out his last name on the file on Mr. Steele's desk. "What about the size of my classes?"

"Listen, Lewis, you're no dope so I'll tell it to you straight." He stood up and came around to sit on the front edge of his desk. "This project is a mess. There's been a major push for cut and burn." He shook a cigarette loose from the pack he removed from his breast pocket.

"What are you talking about?"

"Absorb our losses and get out of here."

"Close the school?"

"Perhaps. There's also been a drive to turn this project into a trade school."

"Where does that leave the faculty?"

He grinned and pulled a cigarette from his pack. "Can you fix cars?" The cigarette he offered was dry and crisp as opposed to the moldy pack that Richie had been carrying around. "My primary job is security, Lewis, and from that standpoint this project has run smoothly. Student detentions are down seven percent this month. Pulled fire alarms down to five. Unfortunately, suspensions have increased twenty percent, but I see that as ultimately constructive."

"You suspended three of my students for abuse of school property. Something about lab equipment."

"That was Mrs. DeAngelo in Biology. Those students were dissecting frogs. I find that disgusting."

"It was Biology. That was the assignment."

"Not on their own time. Mrs. DeAngelo complained about a lack of discipline. I took action."

"Mrs. DeAngelo has about as much sense as a tulip."

"Nevertheless, action was needed."

"A lot of people are upset, Mr. Steele."

He stared straight into Richie's eyes. "My problem isn't with the students, Mr. Lewis. It's with the faculty. I have a proposal for you."

"A proposal? And what could that be?"

"I'll reduce your class size. In return you keep your eyes and ears open in the staff lounge. Keep me abreast of insubordination."

"Your stooge?"

"Call it what you wish. This project is in the red and heading for worse. It wouldn't be hurt by the loss of some more payroll drain."

"Why don't you just fire them outright, Steele. Why do you need me?" Richie felt his ears burning.

"We're a humanistic company, Lewis. People are our priority. We've already laid off more than our public relations people advised us was feasible. It would set a bad precedent. Our stock profile could be damaged." He walked back to his chair and sat down. "So that's my proposal. For some information you'll have smaller class sizes. If you refuse," he smiled, "I'll find someone else."

"How about if I quit?"

"You won't. You're too good a teacher." He picked up some papers that Richie recognized as student evaluations. "Besides," he grinned, "your students love you."

So Richie Lewis, teacher of English, was faced with a moral dilemma. Small classes would benefit the students in those classes and his own mental

condition. But spying for Steele was physically revolting. He'd just have to plug at it a bit longer, do more, reach more students. He could look for another job, but industry rumors had the whole high school humanities up shit's creek, public and private. Teachers with twenty years experience were being laid off. And maybe this teaching thing wasn't what Richie Lewis should be doing. Sure, the students were great, but the rest of the hassles were too much. Why wouldn't other administrations be as screwed up as the ones at Pompeii? Public or private, the bottom line was the buck not the students. Perhaps Richie needed a break. He could write that play he'd been threatening. He could roam the East River collecting aluminum cans. He could sit at home and watch game shows in his bathrobe. All possibilities looked brighter than Pompeii at this point.

"Lewis, how did it go?" Lou O'Connor accosted Richie outside of his 6th period class. "Did Steele squeeze you dry?"

"He wanted me to spy on the other teachers for him." Richie shook his head. "Can you believe that bastard?"

"Spy for what?"

"He's afraid of a strike. I don't care if this project is losing money. If we strike, the parents will pull their kids out as fast as spitting a watermelon seed. Then maybe the NLRB will step in and get us a settlement."

"Not a bad idea." Lou pushed a few strands of damp brown hair over the top of his bald head. "Hey, I've got to get to class. Christ, these class sizes stink. Next thing you know we'll be combining grades like fucking Tom Sawyer." He waved and hurried down the hall.

Richie's mind wandered as he taught 6th period. They were on their fifth day of Slaughterhouse Five.

"OK, let's say you've been plopped down on Tralfamador, and you're to be studied. What aspects of your life are interesting, huh? Let it loose here, this is in class writing. Let those aliens have a taste of the real you. I don't want to read about any used chewing gum collections or boring crap like that. Let it loose, piss me off. I'll give you fifteen minutes." Richie wiped his hands on his thighs and headed for the classroom door.

"Have a good smoke," Heidi Schmidt said, a smirk on her face.

"Piss me off," Richie told her. He made his way out to the hall and patted his pockets. Shit, his Benson and Hedges pack was flat. He decided to head for the teachers' lounge where there'd bound to be a spare cig around. On the way Richie passed Lou O'Connor's Chemistry class, the glass door smudged with handprints. He stopped abruptly and made a quick sidestep before Lou could see him peering in. Richie couldn't hear much but could see Lou giving his lecture to his sleepy-eyed class. Nothing was unusual about this. Lou's talent as a lecturer was known for its ability to drowse any coffee addict. What was unusual was that only fifteen students lounged about the desks of Lou's classroom; fifteen lucky ones, their education unencumbered by classroom overcrowding, and their lucky teacher, his palm still warm from a handshake with Mr. Steele's iron claw, having sealed their little partnership.

Richie hurried back to his class, forgetting about the cigarette break and barely listening to his students' essays about heavy metal, black t-shirt collections and owning the complete works of Jerry West's Happy Hollister series.

Remarkably, Richie Lewis lasted out a fifth year at Pompeii. It was a year

of slump-shouldered walks down hallways, unimaginative assignments given to English classes, and quiet mistrust in the teachers' lounge. Richie Lewis went through the motions, filed the proper documents and didn't ask questions. By the end of the year he felt it was time to do something.

"I'm going to quit," he told Rebecca. They were in the kitchen of their apartment. He held his coffee cup with both hands, staring at the cream in a newly poured swirl.

"You've been saying that for awhile," she said, bustling around as Richie sat in his bathrobe. "Is this something you want to talk about because if it is, I'm late for a class." She filled a pot with water.

"Talk? Me, talk? I'm all talked out." He took a gulp of coffee.

"So Richie, quit then. March into Mr. Steele's office and resign. What's the big deal?"

"Unemployment. We can't afford to have me not work."

"Sure, we'll get by." She grabbed a folder of papers and brushed her lips over the top of Richie's head. "If you call in sick, you can make something out of the garbanzos I have soaking. If you quit, give me a call. We'll go out and celebrate." She gave him a flash of a smile.

"Wait." Richie jumped up off of his chair and wrapped his arms around Rebecca. "What about my kids? Do I do them any good if I quit?"

"Richie, they're all pulling out of the Pompeii school anyway. You're an excellent teacher. But it's not keeping kids in the school. It's abandon ship time at Pompeii."

"You're right." He gave her a big kiss on the mouth. "Have fun today."

"Sure will."

We've come to a recurring problem in the life of Richie Lewis. He was

one to make plans. He saw himself as the teacher, passing on what he knew, making a difference in his students' lives. He wasn't overly egotistical; he didn't expect his charges to bow down whenever he passed along a glass egg of wisdom. Richie Lewis only wanted to make a minor difference. He wasn't setting lofty goals.

But now his plans were being ransacked by the corporation. The students were leaving Pompeii. The administration had become fearful and reactionary. The faculty couldn't give a flying fuck. Richie Lewis' master plan had been seriously screwed with. He felt like slipping into a cool hole in the ground and hibernating. He felt like urinating on Mr. Steele's desk. He felt like sitting at this kitchen table in his bathrobe until spiders had turned him into a web the shape of Richie Lewis. He felt powerless.

"Oh screw it," Richie said, gathering his robe around him like a cloak. He decided to resign that day, after his classes were over. He wouldn't even make an appointment with Mr. Steele.

"Can I see Mr. Steele, please?" Richie asked Mr. Steele's secretary, Roberta Longaker. She was furiously typing with one hand while signing documents with the other. Richie was impressed.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No." He stared at his feet. "But it's important that I speak with him."

She kept on with her dextrous tasks. Richie noticed the signature that she was signing was Mr. Steele's. "He's not in."

"I hate to disagree, Roberta, but Lucita Fernandez had an appointment with Mr. Steele fifteen minutes ago. I watched her go in to his office. She has yet to come out."

Roberta looked up at Richie over her glasses. "I'm lying then?"

"Well, huh, doing your job. Listen, I just need a minute of his time; it's real important."

"What is so important?"

"I can't tell you?"

"Why not?"

"Roberta, I'm having a major crisis over my job, and I need to discuss it with Mr. Steele. He's my boss. That's the usual chain of command. I don't want to sit out here gossiping with you."

Roberta returned to her tasks. "You know, you teachers aren't very smart for educated people. To see Mr. Steele, you have to see me. I'd expect you to be especially nice to me. That would be a good way to see Mr. Steele."

"Nice?" Richie heard his voice go up an octave. "OK, I'll give you nice. Do you want flowers? How about a box of candy, do you like candy? A condo in Fort Lauderdale perhaps? Stop me when I get grandiose."

"Have a seat, Mr. Lewis. When Mr. Steele comes back, perhaps he'll squeeze you in."

"Thank you, Roberta." Richie sat down on a folding chair, among the ones his students called "Death Row." The only magazines were three year old copies of "Highlights," the same magazine as at his dentist's.

In a short while Lucita Fernandez emerged from Mr. Steele's office. She was slowly shaking her head, a fixed grin on her face.

"Hi, Lucita," Richie said as she passed. She didn't even look in his direction. He looked back at Mr. Steele's door. It was closed.

"Can I go in now, Roberta?"

"What makes you think Mr. Steele has returned?"

"Are you kidding? Do we have to keep playing this game?" Richie bolted upright and headed for Mr. Steele's door. Just as he was about to grab the doorknob, it opened from the inside. He cautiously made my way in.

"Hello," Richie called. He saw the usual slogans on the wall. "Smart Shoppers Reject Great Gimmicks" stared him in the face. There was no sign of Mr. Steele as the door closed behind him. "Hello," he repeated.

Richie moved around the office. Everything seemed extremely clean and orderly. The desk was completely empty except for a computer terminal. When he moved closer, he noticed the terminal contained a message.

"Enter name of faculty member:"

Richie typed his name and hit return.

"Faculty member Lewis," he read. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am AdminIt 2000, the operating system for the Pompeii project. Please press the return key when ready for next screen."

Richie took a seat on Mr. Steele's chair and hit return.

"I'm sure you have a lot of questions. Unfortunately, Mr. Steele will be unable to answer them. He has been transferred to a security project in Ho-ho-kus. The management of this project is now being run by AdminIt 2000, a state of the art secondary school management program. This program is to be used in tandem with TeachIt 2000, secondary school multi-subject instructional program."

"A computer is running the school," Richie said out loud. "My boss is a piece of software. My kids' futures were being decided by integrated circuits." He read on.

"In this transitional phase to AdminIt 2000 control, the following menu sub-topics are offered:"

The screen changed to show a choice of four entries:

- 1) Student discipline problems.
- 2) Faculty complaints.
- 3) Physical plant details.
- 4) Letters of resignation.

Richie entered a (2).

"For registering faculty complaints, please briefly list your complaint and AdminIt 2000 will file your request. For action on your complaint, consult manual."

The school was being run by a computer for which Richie didn't have a manual. He couldn't even complain to someone who could fire him. He entered, "Faculty strike imminent. Wages must be tripled or Pompeii project will fold."

The computer considered Richie's complaint. First it considered filing it in its database, then it used its powers of artificial intelligence, searching through its categorized possibilities of responses, and issued an answer to his complaint.

"Please identify instigator of strike."

Richie grinned. "Richard Lewis, teacher of English," he typed.

The computer buzzed a bit. "Lewis, Richard: Employment terminated. Confirmation will be sent by mail."

He returned to the main menu and entered choice four: Letter of resignation.

"To whom it may concern:

Take this computer and stick it up your ass. I resign my job here at

Pompeii, not because I didn't like being a teacher. On the contrary, teaching was the most fulfilling thing I've ever done. But we are in a humanistic occupation. The way we treat our students should be the way we, the faculty, are treated. This did not happen at Pompeii. The project is a failure; the corporation should return to selling porn at convenience stores. Teaching people and changing lives is beyond the capacity of an obsession with cost effectiveness. Pompeii is ruined."

Richie again returned to the original menu and called up (3). Using Roberta's name, he ordered 200,000 roles of toilet paper for this office. He reached behind the terminal and shut off AdminIt 2000.

"It's an improvement, Roberta," Richie said, emerging from Mr. Steele's office. "Never did like dealing with people anyway."

"You think so?" He noticed Roberta was stuffing envelopes with pre-printed letters. "I wasn't sure what it would be like working for a computer, but it's not too bad. Do you think the faculty will be able to handle it?"

"Sure, they'll love it." Richie gave her a big smile and leaned over her desk. "And once you mail out all of those letters, they won't care, they'll all be fired."

She looked down at the form she was folding. "Oh, yeah."

"It'll just be you, AdminIt old pal in there, and a terminal in every classroom. It'll be goddamn heaven."

Richie Lewis walked away from Roberta's desk and back to the teachers' lounge. He had just quit his job. He was unemployed. He felt a mixture of relief and remorse, a combination headache and stomach ache. He'd gather his things from the lounge and head back to Manhattan. His classes would be taught by a monitor come Monday morning. His students would give great

sighs and shrug at the ways and means of the modern world.

Richie Lewis avoided the few faces he saw in the teachers' lounge. He gathered up a coffee cup, a sweater and a folding umbrella and put them in a brown paper bag. He wasn't even sure they were his.

2. CROSSING THE BRIDGE

"Rebecca, wake up," I said, not too loudly. "We're crossing the bridge." I glanced over at Rebecca, who was letting out sleeping sounds with her face leaning against the car window. She was using a magazine as a pillow. She never liked to miss crossing the bridge on the way to the house in which I did most of my growing up. Even when my parents were still here and my father still alive, Rebecca always liked to come down to the New Jersey shore and to cross the bridge onto Beach Cove Island.

"Wake up," I repeated more loudly. "It's the best part."

We glided over the Manahawken bridge. Weekend sailors wrestled with unruly sails. Misguided seagulls swooped down at glittering beer cans. Red-skinned fisherman gazed vacantly off into the horizon. Then we saw it, Rebecca's favorite part.

"There it is," I pointed.

She rubbed her fist into her eyes. "The bait shop?" she slurred. "Here already, Richie?"

"Yeah, I made good time. The only State Trooper I saw was hassling some guy in a black Camaro. You'd think they'd have more respect for the state car of New Jersey."

"There it is," she said.

'Lou's Bait' came into view on an island-side access road that ran parallel to the bridge up to the edge of the water. The outside of the shop was littered with crab cages and ice machines.

"You think Lou's still here?" I asked. "It's been a couple of years since we were last here."

"I have no idea," Rebecca answered.

This place had always been a regular part of our routine when we came down to my parents' house. When we'd drive by Lou's Bait shop, on our way onto and off of the island, there would always be Lou, his bulk spilling over the sides of a canvas director's chair, waving a small hand at anyone who waved back. Rebecca liked his attitude.

"Do you see Lou?" she asked. "I don't see him yet."

"Perhaps he cashed in all of those car tires and grocery carts he's been collecting out back and bought a condo in Miami. Couldn't you just see Lou under a palm tree? He's finally away from this dive."

"You're such a cynic, Richie." Rebecca shook her head. "Lou's a sweet guy. I bet he enjoys it here." She squinted in the direction of the bait shop. "And when we first met, it was Lou who told us we should be patient with one another."

That was true. Actually, all Lou said, when we stopped by the bait shop in search of ice for our cooler, was "patience." This was in reply to "How much for ice?" It was all Lou would say no matter what we asked him. Rebecca was orthodox in her interpretation of this. Since then, we stopped by Lou's on our way onto the island for his word of the day. Sometimes it was "desire," sometimes "wait", sometimes gibberish that we would nod our

heads to in mock understanding. It became part of our routine; Lou, our private prophet.

"I don't see his chair," Rebecca said. "We'd better pull off and find out where he is."

"Maybe he's on a break," I said. "Or maybe in Hollywood selling aluminum siding to the stars."

"Richie, don't joke about this. I'm worried." She took a strand of brown hair between her fingers. "I've grown attached to the routine of seeing Lou." She gave me a quick glance.

"OK," I said. "I'll pull off." I felt a small ache in the bottom of my stomach. I had a master plan for this important weekend: I was doing a serious investigation into being recently unemployed and soon to turn thirty, and my three closest friends from high school were coming out here for celebration, nostalgia, and basketball. Lou was not in the blueprint and neither was his absence. "Think flexibility," I told myself.

"I hope nothing's happened to Lou," Rebecca said. "He's such a nice guy."

We pulled onto the side road. Maybe Lou would have a good word for my turning thirty? "Submit." I could consult him on that matter and on my career. What was I now? An unemployed teacher of English with a bad attitude. Lou, give me the word.

His chair was in front of the bait shop, folded up and leaning against a rusted crab trap.

"I'll go inside and check," Rebecca said, darting out from the car, leaving the car door open.

I reached over and closed the door, then sat back, my window rolled down, inhaling the salt air and listening to the bay water lapping up against the bridge. It was a quiet life here on Beach Cove, far removed from the urban survivalism of Newark or Camden and the pretentious nouveau riche of Short Hills and Montclair. There had been a constant feeling of transience growing up on a vacation island. The summers, especially weekends, were teeming with sun-burned mainlanders, clawing over each other for that two week patch of beach that they had earned by working their butts off during the year. Every two weeks would bring a fresh crew, showing off bikinis and beer bellies on the beach and at the boardwalk arcades. We could always spot those families, their ankles pale from wearing socks, from the way they crowded around the realtors' offices in the spring with the anticipated frenzy of finding an available, affordable rental. The rest of the year the island was filled with its permanent stock, us long timers. Most of the families operated fudge shops or small grocery stores during the season and collected unemployment during the fall and winter. A few, like my father, commuted to New York City or Philadelphia, opting for the solitary home life on the island with a long commute on a grimy New Jersey Transit train.

For the children of these residents grammar school and junior high was spent on the island, but for high school my peers and I were bussed to a school in Manahawken. In school we were the "Islanders," not expected to produce much unless a tourist was present from whom we could fleece a buck or two.

I had lived on the island from age six, when my parents moved here from New York City, until age eighteen. My friends coming to meet me this weekend, Jerry, Walt, and Elliot, were mainlanders, though their families had

all moved away in the twelve years since high school. Rebecca had worked here during the summer seasons. My occasional returns, increasingly rare since my father's heart stopped and my mother moved permanently to her condo in Ft. Lauderdale, always felt like the island was in a layer of haze. Time had created a warmth and comfort that I had never felt when I lived here. The times I visited in the last few years, mainly during the off-season, when I inhaled the salt air and drove past the surf shops boarded up for the winter, a smile found its way across my face. This was my past: sweaty NJ teens looking for quick trysts under the anonymity of a brief visit; overweight vacationers packed into rental apartments on the south end of the island, spread out on their wooden decks with Yankee games blaring over transistor radios; rich, go-getters cruising their Mercedes up to the north end and Harvest Cedars, spending a couple of weeks in their architecturally extravagant beach houses, ingesting lobster flown directly from Maine.

Rebecca pulled the car door open and quickly sat inside. "Let's go," she said.

"Where's Lou? Is he all right?"

"Oh Richie." She turned toward me, concern pushing the corners of her mouth together. "Lou died."

"Really?" I reached out and held Rebecca's arm. "How?"

"They said in the bait shop that he got drunk and fell off of the dock. He drowned." She moved closer and put her hand on the back of my neck.

"They flew the body back to Italy for the funeral. That's where he was from." Rebecca draped a hand around the back of my neck. "When I told them I'd be sorry I couldn't talk with him anymore, they asked if I spoke Italian. I said, 'Not a word.' Well, Lou never learned English. He never knew what we

were saying to him."

I squinted at Rebecca. "Lou's given us random advice over the years in a foreign language?"

"That's what it looks like."

I started the car and headed back toward the bridge. I wondered what Lou had really been saying. When I looked at Rebecca, she gave me a sad little smile and a shake of her head. It seemed like we needed a new private prophet.

My parents' house was on the middle of the island, between the extravagant summer homes on the north end and the densely packed rental properties on the south. In the middle were small cottages, single family homes, front yards filled with small white stones or sand and no basements. That's the way most of the houses looked. My parents' was no exception. It was narrow, two stories. The wood siding was grey and smooth and always had a fine layer of moisture from the humidity. We did have a basement, though it was below the water line. I think that was a selling point for my father. He wanted a private room where it was cool and silent. He could dabble at his hobbies there, operate power tools while wearing plastic safety goggles. The basement was my father's domain though it had to be pumped free of water several times a year. My father would slide into his yellow, rubber hip boots and stand with one hand resting on the gasoline powered pump as it sent salt water in a steady stream from our basement into our backyard.

The house was on the corner of a block of five houses, the last of which was on the dunes overlooking the beach. They were progressively larger, the final one a summer rental and the other four houses full-timers when I had lived here. This was my neighborhood, from six to eighteen. It was under the porch of the beach house where Amy West captured my virginity with a deft squeeze of her thighs. This was where I came after long high school days, to shoot baskets on a backboard mounted on a pole in the street. Many games of two-on-two were played here, holes knocked in the hedges by errant passes, layers of skin scraped into the asphalt after sweaty collisions.

We pulled onto the cul-de-sac. The backboard and rim were still there. I had wondered if some over-sized renter would have pulled the whole thing down with a zealous slam dunk.

Rebecca and I walked toward the front door. I fingered the key we had picked up at the realtor's office. The house was often rented out most of the summer, but this week I had arranged months ago. There were to be no strangers here now.

I opened the door with a push of my shoulder. The ocean air always swelled the wood of the house. It was significantly larger during the humid summer.

"It smells like the beach in here," Rebecca said, wrinkling her nose.

"I'll bet some renters left behind another shell collection." I looked around the room. We'd have to find those mummified clams and muscles before everyone else arrived tomorrow, open some windows, freshen this place up. I wanted things to be nice.

"I'll start bringing in our stuff," Rebecca said. "Are you OK, Richie?" She came closer, putting her hands on my shoulders.

"Yeah, I'm all right." I wrapped my arms around her. "I'm trying to decide if I really lived the memories I have of this place or if I imagined them or saw them in a movie or something." I laughed. "I guess I'm feeling a bit disconnected from my life."

"You wait until your friends get here. I'm sure you'll bore the crap out of the rest of us with incessant reminiscing."

"Is that right?" I raised my eyebrows. "You mean you won't find it interesting to learn about obscure people who none of us can remember very clearly?" I smiled. "To each her own."

"Come give me a hand with our stuff."

I took another quick look around the living room. Most of the furniture and shelf trinkets that I had grown up with had been replaced with durable, generic fair, noteworthy for their ability to stand up to screaming ten year olds playing "Fort Armageddon" and overweight New Jersey adults tilting back on their chairs while watching the nine-inch color TV in the corner. The interior design was nautical motif, a ship's clock, two driftwood lamps, hazy photos of yellow-slickered fisherman hauling in a catch. None of this was here when I grew up in this house. It all arrived courtesy of an ambitious realtor named Marge, knowing just what the renters were looking for in a "cozy summer cottage."

I trooped out to the car to help Rebecca. "I'm glad we came down a day early. It'll be nice to have some time to ourselves before my past arrives."

"And then it's look out, Richie Lewis, reborn adolescent."

"Who me?" I smiled. "I'm a certified adult now. Hey, I'm turning thirty. Doesn't that make it official?"

"Well, sort of." She grabbed a suitcase from the hatch. "But I've spent a

lot of time with you and your friends. You know, they're my friends too. But you have a look in your eye this weekend. You're planning on some sort of recapture of lost glory or something like that." She handed me a suitcase.

"Seriously, Richie, you're not too bummed out with quitting your job and all that are you?"

"Bummed? Nah, everyone quits jobs. I've quit thousands, hundreds. Working as a nuclear physicist in Los Alamos. Sorry, not enough challenges. How about the time I was shark fishing off the Keys? Sorry, too boring. Yeah, I'm a veteran of job loss."

"Come on, kidding aside. This weekend will be a good time to think about what you want to do, don't you think? But don't feel like you have to decide now. We can live on my salary for quite a while."

"Rebecca, I love you." I dropped the suitcase next to the car and squeezed her around the waist. "Don't worry about me. This is a time for celebration. My friends, our friends, are coming for the weekend. We'll eat, drink, reminisce, play basketball. It will be like the proverbial old times."

"We should really recreate the situation," she said with a smile, her face close to mine. "How about your parents. What would they be doing while their son spent his afternoons toiling in the gutters shooting hoop?"

"Well, we didn't play every day. It wasn't until senior year that the four of us became friends, and then we played once or twice a week. Sometimes we spent weekends down here, but since I was the only one who lived on the island, it was too much of a hassle for those mainlanders in there to come out every day. I usually would take the yellow bus along with the rest of us islanders, exploring our isolated lives while we ate what was left of our

lunches out of brown paper bags."

"Oh, poor Richie. How come you didn't have any other friends out here?"

"Hey, I had a few. There was Steven Farber in grammar school but his father got transferred to Pittsburgh. In high school I dated a couple of girls who lived on the island but most of the people here were very transient. Everyone was either just renting or was on their way to a place not surrounded by water. This island had a way of breaking you down. I saw that in my father."

"I don't understand why. It's a vacation spot."

"Well, one thing about a constant flow of vacationers is that you're bombarded with everything you're not. Good and bad but mostly good. You know, the people up on the end of the island, Harvest Cedars, are rich as hell, go around in Mercedes and support the over-priced restaurants around here. And everyone else can leave when they want to. They're only here for awhile. The rest of us are trapped here. We can't leave."

"You left."

"Yeah, I know, I did." I dropped my arms from around Rebecca and walked over to the basketball hoop mounted on a pole at the end of the driveway. "In some ways I didn't. It's very confusing. It's just that I always saw my father looking around at everyone who had it better than he did. And he was trapped. They were leaving. He was staying."

"Was your father that unhappy?"

"I think so though I never discussed it with him. We didn't talk much. He commuted into New York and wouldn't get back until eight o'clock. My mother and I ate dinner before he got home. I'd be watching TV when he

came in, and he'd rub his hand over the top of my head before going off into the kitchen to eat the dinner my mother would re-heat. By the time he was finished and would take his seat in front of the television, I was up in my room, reading stories about space mutants."

"I know we've talked about this before, but it's still hard for me to understand why his life bums you out so much. It's as if you hardly knew him."

"I know. I can't explain it very well." I jumped for the net and managed to touch the bottom half. "Ooh, it's been a long time." I took a deep breath. "But for this weekend you're looking at the definition of carefree. Jobs? Who needs them. I told you. I'm going to write that play I'm always talking about."

"I'm glad to hear it." Rebecca took a long look at me. "When's everyone supposed to start arriving tomorrow?"

"Well, Elliot I know because I'm picking him up at the airport. Walt's driving down from the city and Jerry and Elaine from Bloomfield. I expect they'll be here fairly early. They'll set new land speed records in their anticipation of the fun in store. It's been at least a year since we all got together."

"Not since brunch at our apartment," Rebecca said. "That was fun. It was too bad Elliot had only a half a day between meetings."

"Hard working slob. Not like me, right? The non-working slob."

Brunch at our tiny apartment in Manhattan was highlighted by Jerry's kids re-enacting scenes from "Death Wish II" while the rest of us crowded around the kitchen table, sipping coffee and throwing smiles at each other.

Jerry and Elaine would occasionally shout out, "You kids knock it off," or "I've had enough of you kids." I considered what I had missed growing up as an only child, forced to spend the time during my parent's social events hurling the family cat across the kitchen floor.

While I unpacked our clothes into a big swollen dresser in my old bedroom, Rebecca sat out in the backyard. This room, like the rest of the house, had been stripped of its identifying marks. It had a double bed instead of my old single, and the walls were painted a bright blue. When I lived here, they were covered with wallpaper that I had picked out and hung myself when I was twelve. It was a series of predatory birds: hawks, falcons, vultures. They were drawn in various states of attack, talons leading, beaks raised in a cry. I would lay here surrounded by this flock, imagining them as my charge, ready to pounce on unsuspecting neighbors and teachers, to carry away infants to the mountain stronghold that I had planned on constructing once I left home. My parents never went for actual birds of prey, but instead I did get a finch. He lasted awhile, singing away in his cage, until the day our cat Myron discovered how to balance with one paw on my dresser and open the bird's cage. I came into my room in time to see Myron swinging from the bird cage while Bruce the finch made a quick getaway through the open window. I had sat staring at my wall paper, trying to decide which bird would be the one to nail Bruce out in the wild.

I sorted out our clothes, separating Rebecca's from mine. We had been living together for eight years now, and I never felt less intensity than we had now. I liked the way our clothes fit together in a suitcase. I pressed my face to one of her blouses. I could smell Rebecca's back, strong and broad, quite capable of hiking ten miles with a thirty five pound pack or bending over a

stack of scientific papers. When she read, she pushed her eyebrows together with one hand. She'd suddenly murmur, "Bullshit," or, "That's interesting." When I'd creep up behind her and slowly slide my hand down the back of her pants, she'd jab me with a sharp elbow. "Richie, grade some papers or something; I'm working here."

Rebecca's work was somewhat alien to me. She was an assistant professor at NYU, trying to find out why rats freak out when you starve them, shock them and then shoot drugs into them. She called this Behavioral Psychology.

I finished with the unpacking and went downstairs. Rebecca sat in a chaise lounge in the small, pebbled backyard, her face turned up to the sun, eyes closed. Since it was the end of the summer, she was already deeply tanned, the edges of her brown hair faded blond. I came over and gave her a kiss on the forehead.

"What's happening?" I asked.

"Oh, not much. I'm winding down." She gave me a bright smile. "You know it really is relaxing here. I can hear the ocean. I've always liked coming down here."

"Even when you were working at the arcades during the summer?" I pulled up another chaise lounge.

"Even then. There was always time for laying out on the beach, doing a lot of reading. Did you feel that way growing up here?"

"Not during the summer season. It was four times as busy as the rest of the year. In the winter it was really great. No hyperactive youths drag racing down Lighthouse Blvd.; no old blue-haired people in Cadillacs signaling left and then turning right; no crowds." I closed my eyes to the hot sun.

"I don't mind the crowds too much. They're interesting."

"That's because you're a psychologist. You make a living studying behavior."

"How about you, Richie? Teachers study behavior." She looked over at me with a slight smirk.

"I suppose, though I'm not sure if that's what I am." I looked away. "In some ways I want this weekend to help me decide what I should do with my career. In other ways I'd like to use the time to forget about it."

"I can understand that." Rebecca got off of her chair, swung her leg over mine and stood straddling me. "I know it's tough making choices, but don't sweat it. It'll work out." She slowly lowered her weight onto my lap.

"I hope so. I've got an active imagination, you know. I can imagine the worst."

"A good tool for a writer." She leaned forward, giving me a clear view of her small, firm breasts resting inside of her blouse. They pointed toward my lap.

"This will be fun. Hey, I get to play basketball. I haven't done that in a while." I turned my head to the side. "And who knows whom our friends will bring, huh? We could meet some new interesting people."

"Great." She grabbed my face with her hands and planted another kiss on it.

"Want to get some taffy?" I mumbled.

Rebecca laughed and resumed the capture of my mouth. I savored the taste of her and kept one eye out for the neighbors.

3. MRS. EDELMAN

That night, before the house would be filled with friends and conversation, Rebecca and I went out to celebrate our mini-vacation. We elbowed our way to the counter of the M&M clam bar and polished off a dozen steamers each. Then it was Ray's House of Crab for some softshell. Soon we found ourselves holding our stomachs, perched on a wooden bench along the boardwalk, watching the late summer crowd go through its nightly mating ritual. Since it was after Labor Day, there were fewer initiates than usual.

"Richie, what are you thinking about?" Rebecca asked me after we had sat in silence for awhile.

"I was thinking about how when I was thirteen I'd come here after dinner and watch groups of girls in halter tops and fantasize about them asking me to join their parties."

"Did it ever happen?"

"Nah. I'd see three or four young girls and then three or four guys. They'd each be lingering around each other like amoeba. Pretty soon they'd gravitate closer and closer, the guys flexing muscles under their tank tops, the girls pushing out their newly found cleavage. I'd sit right here and watch all

of that and pretty soon, boom, they were off in a Camaro, off to perform acts I could only fantasize about. Dogs were involved. And Maybelene. And Kenmore washing machines."

Rebecca laughed. "You know I don't see very many people like that here now. There's a lot of older couples here. And real young kids."

"Maybe I made it all up." I stretched my arms straight over my head. "Actually I've lied to you all of these years. I'm not from this place. I'm from another planet which doesn't exist in this dimension. I'm making a study."

"Oh yeah? Of what?"

"I'm studying the effect of impending adulthood on the psyche of post-adolescents. You see it all fits in, my turning thirty, teaching high school, this weekend. I will soon know if one's role in life is understood at a young age and if not, what socio/psychological effect that we'll have on that person."

"Uh huh, very interesting." Rebecca nudged my calf with her toe. "One's role in life, huh? You think that's important?"

"Sure. It's like that roller coaster over there. If you go on it, not knowing the dips and turns and twists of the track, you'll be scared shitless. Who needs that? On the other hand, if you know what's in store, it's a breeze, right? No fears, no problem. Just sheer speed."

"And if you do it with your eyes closed, you never see what happens. You barely feel the drops."

"Oh, you feel them, you do. I've done that. Physically you still drop."

"Mentally too."

I smiled at Rebecca. "What the hell are we talking about? Oh, right. I'm an impostor. I'm here to study attractive psychologists who in turn are studying rodents who in turn are studying their captors. It's all very twisted."

I put an arm around Rebecca. "But keep it quiet. We don't want the neighbors to know."

"Richie," I suddenly heard. "Little Richie Lewis."

I looked over to see an old woman lurching toward us, arms outstretched.

"I think I know that woman."

"Richie, you've grown up, but I still recognize you." She stood eye level with us though we were still seated. She was clutching what looked like a stuffed dinosaur under her arm, a brontosaurus. "Do you know who I am?" She waved an index finger under my nose.

I gave a quick glance to Rebecca. "Mrs. Edelman."

"Oh, how sweet, you remembered." Mrs. Edelman gave a satisfied grin to Rebecca and stood hugging the dinosaur to her chest.

"This is my friend, Rebecca." I gestured toward Rebecca. "And this is Mrs. Edelman, one of my mother's friends."

"Yes, Dolores and I have known each other for years." She moved closer to Rebecca. "Things just haven't been the same since she moved to Florida. Everything is always changing around here." She hopped up on the bench between me and Rebecca, dangling her stubby legs in the air. She grabbed Rebecca's arm. "Let me tell you dear, I watched Richie here grow up from a toddler who liked pulling his pants down to the fine young man he is today."

"Is that right?" Rebecca smiled. "He's still quite fond of pulling his pants down." She patted my arm. "Why he might pull them down at any moment."

Mrs. Edelman let out a loud choking laugh, turning into a cough. When

she had regained her composure, I asked, "How's Mr. Edelman?"

"Oy, Richie." She dropped her jaw and her eyes welled up with tears. "Mr. Edelman moved on."

"I'm sorry." I looked down. "How long ago did he die?"

"Oh, he didn't die, that rat." She gripped the dinosaur with two fists. "He went down to Atlantic City for an excursion. It was one of those events the community center puts on. I couldn't go myself, having come down with my usual bronchitis, but Mr. Edelman went on that trip. Now? Ech!" She waved her hand in front of her face.

"Did he lose all of your money?" I asked.

"Worse. He met some floozy, some girl from out West somewhere looking to get lucky in Atlantic City and fleece a senior. And there's Mr. Edelman feeding his nickels into the slot machine, nursing gin fizzes for an hour and a half." She shook her head. "The next thing you know I get a note slipped under the door saying Mr. Edelman is not in love with me, saying he's going to Montana or Idaho with this, this. . . girl." She threw her hands up and leaned back on the bench.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Edelman," I said, trying to catch Rebecca's eye. I was thinking of making a run for it, escaping this relic of my past whom my mother called, "The tongue that knew no mercy." Rebecca, however, looked genuinely interested. Another study of human behavior, I figured, imagining Rebecca's brain analyzing and categorizing the reams of data she was receiving from Mrs. Edelman's melodramatic performance.

"Well, things are better now," Mrs. Edelman said. "I met a wonderful man."

"That's nice."

"Yes. A real doll. He's a widower, poor soul. Lost his wife two years ago."

"Where did she run off to?" I asked, imagining him misplacing his wife at a Bamberger's basement sale.

Mrs. Edelman widened her eyes at me. "She died. It was terminal." She folded her hands in her lap. "Any one of us could go at any moment. You have to live one day at a time. That's what you learn when you're my age." She smiled at Rebecca and patted our hands. "Well, I won't keep you two any longer. I'm sure you have a wonderful evening planned." She struggled off of the bench and stood up. "Come and visit if you have time. I'm still in the same house. One of the few who hasn't moved away and turned their house into a rental." She thrust out her chin and looked toward the people strolling down the boardwalk. "There's Mr. Kupfurberg now." She waved her small hand in the direction of a grey-haired man emerging from the public rest room. He waved back.

"Nice meeting you, dear," she said to Rebecca and trooped off to her friend. They walked arm in arm, their grey heads bobbing among the loiterers on the boardwalk until I couldn't spot them anymore.

"Little Richie Lewis," Rebecca said after awhile.

"Yup, that's me. Fond of pulling my pants down." I put my arm around Rebecca and squeezed her shoulders. "Live one day at a time, she said. Well, what's today?"

"Friday."

"OK. Then I won't think about Saturday or Sunday or Monday until midnight, right?"

"Sure, Richie."

"No thinking about my career, my friends, my parents, my fears, dreams, anxieties, hopes or the fate of the free world, right?"

Rebecca narrowed her eyes at me, trying to gauge whether I was kidding. "You can think about those things, just don't expect to resolve them today."

"Oh, resolution. Yeah, that's it." I put a hand to my chest. "I resolve not to resolve."

"Right, sport." She shook her head.

"I think there's a basic contradiction here."

"Let's go ride the ferris wheel. We haven't done that in years." She smiled a white, melting smile.

I could feel my resolve slipping away. No matter how miserable I could resolve to make myself, Rebecca had a way of shooting that down. "OK, sport," I said. "It's on me."

I grabbed Rebecca's hand, and we set off for the spinning multi-colored lights that marked the ferris wheel.

4. INSOMNIA – PART I

On Friday night I woke up covered with sweat. The clock read 1:30, about an hour since Rebecca and I had gone to sleep. I looked over at her on my left, the blankets pulled up almost to the top of her dark head. She was a heavy sleeper. We had often joked that I could get up, pack my things and leave without ever waking her up. It would be morning before she realized I was gone.

I had been an insomniac since I was a kid. It wasn't that I had trouble falling asleep, I didn't. It was that I woke up after a short while, staring wide-eyed at the ceiling, a light layer of sweat between me and the sheets. I couldn't will myself back to sleep then. I could only get out of bed, walk around and think. I did some of my best thinking then.

I quietly kicked the blankets off and threw my legs over the side of my bed. We were in my parents' old room, in their old queen-sized bed. That was kind of strange. But it was the nicest bed in the house, and this was a special weekend. I had insisted that we sleep here, trying not to sniff the ancient smells of my parents. Instead I concentrated on the sweet scent of Rebecca's tanned skin.

I slipped on the clothes I had worn that day, a pair of blue shorts, and a

yellow t-shirt that said, "Bunky's Auto Parts." There was a chill in the air, a drop in temperature that was typical for the New Jersey shore in early September, so I threw on a flannel-lined overcoat that hung on a peg on the closet door. It had been my father's, and I had noticed it when putting away our things. It was something the realtor had left behind.

I had the feeling I would still be cold, but I didn't move for any more clothing. Instead I quietly left my parents' old room, taking one last look at Rebecca lying in a lump under the faint light of the streetlight through the window. I moved down the stairs, the silence of the house ringing in my ears. I slipped on my still-laced sneakers, lying where I had left them a few hours before. I went out into the night.

When I stood in front of the house, I could hear the sound of the ocean tumbling in against the sand. It was a sound I had gotten very used to, growing up here. It was like living next to the train tracks. After awhile you didn't even notice the three o'clock express.

As I had expected, the night air was cool. I hugged my coat a bit tighter and tasted the salt that had formed on my lips. I headed toward the ocean.

When I was around thirteen, I had a tremendous crush on Amy West, a girl in gym class; her pale thighs were covered with skin so translucent the pale blue outline of her veins marked a route into the darkness under her yellow gym shorts. My attempts to manifest this crush were feeble. Once in a while I'd walk by her in the hallway of the junior high and lower my eyes, my ears burning hot. Once in a while I'd sit a couple of tables away during lunch, listening to her talk with her friends about boys and classes and boys. I never heard my name.

What I mainly did was come out here after my parents were asleep and

stare out into the ocean. Sometimes I'd imagine a tiny speck of light, far off in the horizon. I'd picture it flickering over the dark ocean. Soon that speck would grow as it came closer, and I'd eventually make out the outline of a boat. Its sails were billowing in the stiff wind, and I'd sit cross-legged on the sand, waiting. When the boat was close enough to the shore that it was in danger of running aground, someone would get out and begin to wade to shore, someone in yellow gym shorts and near translucent skin. I'd sit against the dunes and imagine Amy West and I groping at each other in adolescent frenzy.

Tonight there were no specks of light on the horizon. The ocean was black. The foam of the breakers was dark grey. There was no moon. I sat on the bench at the entrance to the beach and thrust my hands deep into the pockets of my overcoat.

This was to be a weekend of reckoning. I had called together my closest friends, large pieces of my past that would, by Monday, fill my parents' house and tell me something I wanted to know. There was only a slight problem at this point. I wasn't sure what it was that I wanted to know. I only knew the following:

1. I was out of a job, a recently acquitted teacher of high school English.
2. I was turning thirty, a significant milestone in a life at least one third lived.
3. When I closed my eyes and imagined Richie Lewis another thirty years down the road, I was met with a bald old guy sitting in a rocking chair with a blanket tossed over his lap. He had a blank expression on his face. He was beside a fireplace that was cold. I didn't even know who the hell he was.

4. I was on the New Jersey shore, in the house where I grew up, on the island my parents moved to after growing tired of the hand to hand combat of living in New York City.

5. I was sitting on a bench, staring at the ocean, trying to figure out why I had felt on the verge of tears for the last two months and why every breath I took was filled with sharp pain.

I thought of Rebecca. We had been living together for eight years now. Those were eight good years, there was no doubting that. But during the last two our relationship had ground to a halt. We maintained our routines, our meals, our vacations, our love-making, but we had stopped talking to each other. At least I had stopped trying to make Rebecca understand the problem I was having. How could I? I couldn't understand it.

"I think you should see someone," she had told me, a couple of months ago.

"See someone?" I asked. "Can I just hold up their picture? Would that accomplish what I need?"

"Come on, Richie, you know what I mean." She folded her hands around her coffee cup and made her lips into a straight line. We were in the kitchen of our Manhattan apartment. "Mathilda and I had a long talk about it this morning."

"Mathilda?" I wrinkled my face. Mathilda was a street person who we let sleep in our apartment when she felt like it, usually when the New York streets froze over like an urban arctic. Most of the time Mathilda preferred to live in the doorway to the basement of our building. "Mathilda is telling me what to do? This woman considers broken legs off of baby dolls among her most prized possessions. And she's telling me what to do?" I repeated.

"Don't be so cold-hearted," Rebecca said. "Mathilda has been going to drop-in counseling at Bellview, and she's been sleeping in a shelter. She's getting her act together."

Even mentally unstable homeless people were more organized than myself.

"I know several people I can refer you to," Rebecca said. "Colleagues who still maintain private practice."

"Just what I need. I'll be the hot topic among the NYU faculty. See the geek who can't handle turning thirty. See the unfortunate soul who loves the woman he lives with but can't get her to understand his problem."

"Richie, give me a break."

"Sorry." I took a sip of coffee. One month had slithered by since I had been out of work. The first two weeks I had lain in bed all day watching daytime television. The next two weeks I was watching in the living room. "I know I'm being irrational. I'm entitled, I feel. I'm sorry if it's making your life miserable."

Rebecca shook her head. "You know this is hard for me. I'm sorry you're depressed."

"Depressed? Me? Nah, I'm as happy as a loon." I forced a big smile on my face that hurt my cheeks.

"But you're not alone. Plenty of people have been through this. Go see someone who can help."

"You're right, I should." I stared into my coffee cup. "But not one of your colleagues. That's too suffocating. I couldn't breath there."

"I'll ask around. I'll find someone on the outside."

"Fine." I affixed a smile to my face. "Guess you have to go to work now,"

I said.

She looked at her watch. "Shit, I'm late for my office hours."

I hunched over my coffee cup. "I'll let you know about Greg Brady's college application. I'm concerned he'll get rejected from State. Then, who knows? He might land up working for Sam the butcher. What a horrible fate. He'll be trapped. I feel for the guy."

Rebecca came over and rubbed her hand over the top of my head.

"You're a nut." She bent down and kissed my ear.

I grabbed her right wrist. "I'm sorry," I said, feeling my eyes become unfocused and overheated.

Rebecca shook her head again. "I'll see you later."

"Bye."

On Wednesday the week following our conversation, I paid a visit to Dr. Bob. I had doubts as to whether I could take anyone seriously with a name like Dr. Bob, but I promised Rebecca to give it a try. Dr. Bob's office was in suburban Westchester County, on a street lined with tall oaks and hundred year old houses. The office was the back entrance to Dr. Bob's house. It was marked, "Dr. Lorraine Bob; Family, Individual Counseling."

I pushed open the screen door and stepped into a cool, white office. Fluorescent lights were hidden over the tops of the walls. Soothing music oozed from an invisible sound system.

"Hello," I called, seeing nothing but white Danish modern furniture and a short stack of Psychology Todays.

"Hi," I heard from another room. "Have a seat. I'll be with you in a sec."

I sat lightly on the edge of a rocking chair. The magazine in front of me announced, "Help with Hair Loss Trauma." I rubbed the top of my head with my palm.

"Hello." A tall woman with jeans and a white sweat shirt came toward me with a hand outstretched. She wore an intricate necklace of bone and lapis that looked African. "You must be Mr. Lewis."

"Are you Dr. Bob?" I asked.

"Call me Lorraine." She gave me a warm smile, crinkling the skin around her eyes.

"Well, I suppose you should call me Richie then." I put my hands in my pockets and pressed a smile to my face.

"Why don't we get started?" she asked. "Come into my office." She led the way into another white room with a couple of dark wooden overstuffed chairs, angled to face each other. "Have a seat."

I wondered which seat to take. Which was Dr. Bob's? Which was the patient's? I looked for clues, boxes of tissues, notebooks, psychological toys; there were none. I randomly selected.

"I just want you to know, Richie," she put a long-fingered hand on my arm, "I'm sure you're a little nervous. Most people are their first time. But you have nothing to worry about. We'll just talk awhile, throw some ideas around, anything you want to do. There's nothing to worry about."

"Good." I forced another smile.

"Have you ever seen a psychiatrist before?"

"Me? Oh, no. Never. Never had a reason."

"Uh huh. Why are you here now?"

"Well, I lost my job, recently, and I've been a bit depressed since then."

"Uh huh, depressed."

"I've watched a lot of TV."

"Uh huh, TV." She was staring at me with one hand on her chin.

"You don't take notes or anything?" I asked. "You know, maintain a file."

"Oh, well, not usually. I can if you'd like. I usually just dictate into a recorder after our session. Just a couple of key things to refresh my memory before our next meeting. But I can take notes if you'd like."

"No, no, that's all right." I crossed and uncrossed my legs.

"I don't believe in anything too threatening. I want you to consider me just someone to talk to." She smiled. "I don't want to be any sort of threatening authority figure."

"That's good." I cleared my throat.

"So, tell me about your job."

"I taught high school English for five years."

"Uh huh. And you quit?"

"Yes. It wasn't such a good place to work."

"And now?"

"Now I need a new job."

"Uh, huh. Will you still teach?"

"I'm not sure." I looked at my watch. Fifteen minutes had passed. We sat in silence, smiling at each other.

"So, what seems to be your problem?" she finally asked.

"I'm not sure. That's why I'm here. I'm sort of afraid of my future."

"Uh huh, your future."

"I can't imagine what's in store for me."

"Uh huh, no vision."

"It's quite frightening."

"Uh huh, fear."

"I'm not sure I want to live."

"Uh huh, suicidal."

We stopped our dialogue. I felt my heart pounding and my lungs squeezing in and out large quantities of air. I felt like I had gone too far.

Dr. Bob maintained her pleasant smile. "How do you feel about what you've revealed?"

"Well, it is a plan I suppose."

"Your suicide?"

"Sure, it's a plan." I smiled. "But not a very good one."

The rest of that session was marked by Dr. Bob's unfailing pleasantness and my nervous chatter. We shook hands, promised to see each other regularly, and I headed back toward Manhattan more distraught than ever.

I sat on the train, engaged in a staring contest with a little kid with a runny nose who draped himself over the back of the seat in front of me. This was all wrong. I didn't want to see a psychiatrist. I didn't want to pour out my feelings to a stranger like dirty bathwater spiraling down a drain. I wanted my friends to talk to. There seemed to be a problem though. I couldn't get Rebecca to understand. It was as if we were too close. I needed someone more objective but who still knew me, knew Richie Lewis, perhaps had an idea as to how he should proceed with his life.

When I was in high school, somewhere between the comfortability of junior year and the anxiety of upcoming college decisions during senior year,

I would spend Friday nights with my friends, Jerry, Walt and Elliot. We'd hang out in the basement of Jerry's parents' house, with its framed pictures of John Kennedy and Cardinal Spellman nailed to the cinderblock walls. We mainly played cards, seven card draw poker, betting with a stack of pennies that we kept in a mason jar. We didn't keep track of any real debts. No one had enough money to lose any playing cards.

"OK, one eyed jacked, the third deuce dealt up, and low card in the hole wild," Elliot would announce, cutting the deck with one hand.

We talked about a lot during those games, the girls at school, the Watergate scandal, our prospects for the future. We speculated, bullshitted, fantasized. There was nothing left unsaid.

"You know, I'm particularly fascinated by Nixon's penis," Elliot said.

"What?" Walt shook his head.

"No, really. You think he has a constant erection or what?"

"Elliot, are you insane?" I reached for a handful of potato chips from the several bags that surrounded us. Once in awhile we had beer, if we could persuade Jerry's older brother to buy it for us. It was rare, though. He usually just took our money and never came back. "Why would Nixon have a hard on?"

"All that power, man. Imagine. He's a power freak. I can relate to that."

"He's also a scum sucking, lying son of a bitch," Walt said. "Do you have a constant hard on?" he asked Elliot.

"Hey, getting up in front of people and having them believe the bullshit that your spraying over them, hey, it's a rush. I get off on that, I admit it."

"You're a bizarre human, Elliot," Jerry said, his mouth full of potato chips.

"You think he's well hung?" Elliot asked.

"Who cares?" I shouted. "Ask Pat. Let's play cards. Whose deal is it?"

When we weren't playing cards, we were playing basketball out at the basket that hung on a pole in front of my parents' house. Since I was the only one who lived on the island, my friends would accompany me home from school in the faded yellow school bus driven by Moses, an ancient black guy with blue-grey skin and six fingers on his right hand.

"We're here," Elliot would shout, leading us off of the bus onto Lighthouse Blvd., a half block up from my house. "It's the goddamn beach life now, right dudes? Hang ten and all that shit. Let's play basketball. You have anything to eat in your house, Richie?"

We'd shoot baskets, play two on two or taps, polishing off a couple of jumbo bags of barbecued potato chips. Since we had all met at the high school, when Elliot and I had formed a political club, our meetings had been conducted on the basketball court. We were the only members.

"I vote that Elliot should never be allowed to wear that shirt again," Walt said, dribbling the ball on the free throw line.

"What's wrong with this shirt?" Elliot pulled on opposite sides of the t-shirt he was wearing. It said "Penn St." in faded brown letters. Elliot's skin showed through the network of holes that made the shirt look like a colander. One brown sleeve hung by some ragged strands. "This is my favorite shirt," he said.

"It stinks. I vote you throw it out or at least wash it." Walt sent up a shot. It swished through the net.

"It's too fragile." Elliot tossed the basketball back to Walt. "I hand wash it

every now and then. Give me a break."

"All in favor," Walt called, raising his hand. Jerry and I raised our arms, and Elliot ran down the street, clutching his arms around his chest.

"Leave me alone," he shouted.

Now, as I sat on the train on the way home from the psychiatrist, I slowly shook my head. It had been a long time since I had thought of those days. I had kept in touch with my friends, but with Elliot in California and Walt and Jerry busy with their own lives, we didn't see each other much. I had to change that.

Somewhere between Bronxville and Harlem I made a decision. I would act on Socrates adage, "A life unscrutinized is unworthy of man." And what better way to scrutinize one's life than to get the major influences together under one roof for a weekend of revelry, nostalgia, and basketball. I'd orchestrate a reunion of my closest friends from my past, those who could give me the clues to my life like no psychiatrist ever could. By the time the weekend was over I'd either have everything straightened out, or I'd be a basket case. It seemed like a reasonable choice.

The next month before the reunion was filled with planning, phone calls and persuasion. For the first time in a year I was happy. This included the final stages before I quit my job, when I walked around with my eyes glued to the dirty linoleum floor of the school and had my students fill in the blanks in monotonous grammar textbooks while I sat at my desk, dreading that someone would ask me a question. Now I was revived, waking up early, writing down lists on little pieces of yellow paper, talking on the phone with Elliot out in California, Walt in New York and Jerry in New Jersey. Rebecca left me every morning parked at the kitchen table, the phone on my right and

a yellow legal pad on my left.

"Are you going to be there?" I had asked Elliot a couple of weeks ago.

"Sure, a reunion of the old group in your parents' house in New Jersey. How can I not fly three thousand miles for that? Unless of course I have an appointment with the proctologist or something."

"Very funny. When are you flying in?"

"I'll be in on Saturday morning. Hey, maybe I'll see some clients, make it a business trip. It'll be deductible."

Elliot always had a scheme. Perhaps he could talk me out of having to deal with the rest of my life.

"How about everyone else," he asked. "Will they be there?"

"Jerry's driving down with Elaine and probably their kids. I think Walt's coming too, but he hasn't said for sure."

"Hey, Walt has to make it. He's not that big of an asshole to miss this."

"He'll be there, Elliot. I'm real sure." I cleared my throat. "Are you bringing anyone?" I asked.

"Anyone? You mean like my accountant or something? I know he'll miss me, but you're asking too much."

I laughed. "You know what I mean. What happened to that Gloria woman, the one you were seeing the last time I called? Things work out with her?"

"Nah, she was too bossy. If I wanted another mother, I'd have left on my umbilical cord so she could lead me around."

"Too bad, Elliot. Well, I'll talk to you again soon."

"Hey, Richie, you know we're all turning thirty this year."

"Don't remind me. I'm having some trouble with that."

"Just play basketball guy. Work on that jump shot."

"Yeah, sure."

"When you sink that sweet jumper, there isn't anything else as important right that second."

"Good philosophy, Elliot. Take it easy."

To get the weekend in order there were realtors to call, menus to imagine, flights to arrange, activities to plan, decisions to make. I filled my life with a weekend that would be a culmination of a gigantic effort, a life's experience. I had huge expectations and a fully developed plan.

Now I was sitting under the moonless New Jersey sky, staring out at the ocean, and hoping the weekend would work out. Tomorrow was Saturday. Walt was due in the morning, Elliot's flight was arriving in the afternoon and Jerry and Elaine were to come around then as well. I had invited them to bring friends or current flings. I had figured more people into my plan. It was something I was ready for.

I took off my sneakers and pressed my feet into the cool sand. I scanned the horizon for any sign of ships and suddenly felt tired. It was time to go back home, to lie beside Rebecca and sleep dreamless sleep until morning. There was lots to do tomorrow.

5. THE RABBIT WOMAN

The first time I saw Rebecca she was dressed in a tattered grey rabbit suit standing alongside a meek little kid's arcade ride: the barbecue-go-round. Little hot dogs in faded yellow rolls, sesame seed buns that had become flaked with peeling paint, a condiment or two. Fresh-faced New Jersey kids sat astride the wiener and twirled in a circle, waving at their glassy-eyed Moms and Dads. This was Rebecca's job, sweating profusely in an ancient rabbit suit, collecting tickets, throwing an occasional lever to get the whole thing rolling.

In my post college funk I found solace at the arcade. Here, at the New Jersey shore, hiding out in my parents' beach house, I was twenty two, scared stiff, very alone. My parents were there, good old Mom and Dad. They had been spending only winters in Ft. Lauderdale at this point, but they were beautifully restrained about inquiring as to my future. It was driving me crazy.

"You know, Richie," my mother would say. "This is a beautiful place to live."

"Right, Mom." I was stretched out on the beach, alternately staring into the hot sun then clamping my eyes shut.

"I bet it's quite interesting here in the winter. And our house does sit

empty. I'd like someone to look after it."

Damn it, I thought. Tell me to get my ass out of here and get a goddamn job.

"Your father and I wouldn't mind at all if that's what you wanted to do."

They wouldn't mind. And Richie Lewis would spend the rest of his life shuffling along the beach, looking longingly at the teenage girls outgrowing their pre-teen bathing suits, picking through trash cans in search of recyclables.

"Old Lewis," they'll all call me and keep back a ways.

After four years of college, I no longer felt to be the size of a pea swirling in a vast green soup. Now I felt like a microscopic bacteria clamped on to that pea in dread of falling into that vast green soup. I didn't know whether to grip harder or to let go. College had not helped with those decisions.

I often blamed it on my father. In fact, it was a conversation we had when I was eighteen, shortly before my departure for Rutgers that dictated my next four years and perhaps the eight since then which would lead me back to the scene of the conversation: our house on the New Jersey shore.

"Richie," my father called. "Come down here a moment."

He was calling from the basement, his workshop. I was in the kitchen, making lists of things I should bring to college: my basketball, my brain, my collection of squirrel pelts which were a gift from Pete "The Pistol" Peterman, a childhood friend.

"What is it?" I called back.

"Come down. I need to talk with you."

I made my way down into the basement. This was my father's den, his tools carefully lined up on a pegboard, their outlines penciled in. I wasn't

comfortable down here. I wasn't comfortable anywhere at this stage of my life. I considered it a delayed surge of puberty. I wasn't even seeing my closest friends from high school. Elliot was in Israel, Walt was hanging around Soho learning about art, and Jerry was putting in long hours at his father's hardware store. I was isolated, stuck with my parents.

"Are you getting ready for school?" my father asked, looking over his half-glasses at a wooden figure that he sanded with a small square of paper.

"Yeah."

"Yeah, you're getting ready?" I could see that the figure was a little woman. He was sanding each breast to a fine point.

"Yeah."

"Well, we need to talk about something."

"What?"

"Girls."

"Why?"

My father stopped his sanding and glanced over at me. "What do you know about girls?"

"Some."

"What?"

"Some. What is this, an inquisition?" I felt my ears grow red. I had serious spite for my parents this year. They seemed as intelligent as meat loaf and equally kind. I prayed that I had been adopted.

"You ever, uh, you know." My father removed his glasses. "You ever fool around with a girl?"

"Oh, you mean make faces at her, that sort of thing?" I blew out my

cheeks and crossed my eyes.

"Richie, you're eighteen, you know what I'm talking about. I should have had this talk with you five years ago. Can you make it any easier for me?"

"Christ, Dad." I shook my head. "I know about sex, OK? I'm not a virgin. I'm brave and smart enough to buy and use condoms. All right, satisfied?"

My father pressed his lips together. This was a marathon conversation compared to our usual nods and grunts.

"Who was it?" he asked.

"Amy West."

"Amy West?" He raised his eyebrows. "Her father is always trying to sell me insurance."

We stood there for a few long silent moments. I shifted my weight from one foot to the other. My father gently knocked his glasses against his palm.

"Well, college should be good."

My father had never gone. He probably knew about it from the same sources as I did: magazines, television, books. Smiling blond women clutching books to their chests, kindly old professors stimulating exciting discussions about "theories." My father leaned closer, his mouth slightly pushed into a smile. "Screw a lot of women," he said.

I recoiled like he had spit in my face. "Uh, sure." I made for the stairs, taking two at a time. Fathers weren't supposed to talk like that, especially mine. He had overstepped a barrier in our relationship created by his long hours at his shoe store and my tendencies toward hermitage. I could imagine my mother had coaxed him into the sex preparation speech but not that last

part. I shivered and headed for the bathroom to wash my hands and face a few times.

My father's advice did me little good while I was in college. Perhaps if I had acted on it, growing into an adult would have been more palatable. As it was I was locked in delayed puberty, my face blotchy with acne, my joints sore from growing four inches that summer. For the first two years of college I was an impostor of Richie Lewis and for two more I forgot what Richie Lewis had been like.

By the time I took shelter at my parents' house that summer after graduation, trying to emerge as a whole, I fell into a somewhat comfortable routine. What I did during the day was lie on the beach. I'd read, nap, take an occasional dip into the ocean. I was kept fed with seafood, had lots of cassette tapes of music that I liked: atonal jazz by Ornette Coleman and Eric Dolphy that I played at loud volume to the horrified stares of fellow beach goers. I wandered the beach at dusk, picking up shells, sighing greatly, dreading.

One of my other routines was to go down to the arcade area of Long Beach Island and play ski ball for an hour or two. Rolling the heavy wooden balls up the ramp and into plastic rings to win tickets was so simple and gratifying that I had become addicted to it. This was certain measure of my success. I had little green tickets to prove it. I had the option of trading them in for a stuffed Snoopy or a little plastic statuette of the Empire State building or a serving tray that said, "I Heart New Jersey."

Adjacent to the ski-ball arcade was an assortment of rides: a roller coaster, a ferris wheel and the obligatory merry-go-round. During any day of the summer, the best and the brightest of New Jersey's youth could be found in

their black tee shirts that said "AC-DC" and "Molly Hatchet." They'd sneak smokes under the ferris wheel and plan some serious adolescent humping while on the roller coaster.

There were also little kid rides, slow moving affairs where a kid would mount a boat, truck or hot dog and putter around in a circle. The people who ran these were dressed up in animal suits despite the heat and humidity. Rebecca, the rabbit woman was there. I sat on a nearby bench, sipping a chocolate shake in between ski ball games.

"Hey kid, no trying to get off while the ride's moving," she yelled. "Sorry, too short," she told a diminutive curly-headed kid who gave her the finger as he walked away. This rabbit was a pro, no doubt about it. I could tell it was a woman from the voice, but what did she look like?

I watched as Rebecca leaned on a railing and scanned over a collection of New Jersey youth. God, she was tall. Maybe it was just the contrast with the kids, but she towered over the adults as well. It was those ears, one of which stood straight up like an antenna.

In normal times I wouldn't have been as daring as to try to meet this rabbit woman. But these were not normal times. I was filled with dread over my future and would do anything at this point. I'd meet the rabbit woman, have lots of grey tattered babies and live under the boardwalk. We'd find treasure in the sand, a cave along the shore, have everything we needed. Right now I had nothing except fear. God, I was scared of going out there in the world. I was stripped down, bare. I needed a rabbit suit. I approached the rabbit woman.

"Hi." I grinned at Rebecca.

"Hello." She tilted her rabbit head at an angle. "You want to go on the ride?"

"Sure." I held out my strip of tickets, enough for at least ten trips.

"You have your kid with you?" She had a great voice, kind of deep, and she was indeed tall. I could see her eyes in the costume lining up higher than mine.

"No kid." I grinned. She must think I'm a madman. "Actually I just wanted to meet you. I admire the way you stand around all day in that rabbit costume."

"Oh yeah?" Little kids rustled behind me, clutching tickets in their greasy fists. They'd have to wait. "Well, there's no rule that says you can't ride. Pick a car, sport."

I grinned again, delirious over my conversation with the rabbit woman. It was a start. I chose to ride the mustard jar, watching Rebecca as I rotated around the barbecue grill that served as the centerpiece of the ride. I couldn't tell if she was smiling. She must think I'm a loony.

When the ride ended, I sat in my mustard jar and smiled resolutely at the rabbit woman.

"Ride's over," she yelled as kids clamored past her to go fill their bodies with sugar-based products.

I tried to increase the intensity of my smile. Perhaps it would melt any reserve she might feel. How couldn't she love an intensely smiling maniac in a mustard jar?

"You riding again, sport?" she called.

I nodded, holding out my strip of tickets.

"Great," the rabbit woman mumbled, opening the gate to allow another

horde of youths to pour over the ride.

Once all of my tickets had been deposited in the rabbit woman's paw, I pulled myself out of my mustard jar and unsteadily walked over to her. I was still spinning a bit from ten times around the grill.

"Just wanted to thank you for your hospitality." I held out my hand.
"Those were great rides."

She flapped her ears at my outstretched palm. "I'm going to call the cops, you creep."

"No wait." I dropped my eyes. "Listen, I meant no harm. I'm just kind of bent out of shape, having finished college, here at my parents for the summer, don't know what I'll do now. I just wanted to meet you." It came out in a rush, followed by hot tears rolling down my cheeks. I held my hands to my face.

"Hey, OK. I won't call the cops, don't cry." She cocked her head at me. I could see that the stitching on one ear was coming loose, making it flop off her head in an exaggerated motion. I nodded.

"You can meet me, all right? I get a break at five." She put her hand on my shoulder. "We can have coffee."

I sniffed a smile. "Thanks. You must think I'm a real jerk. A real asshole, I can't believe..."

"Sh!" She put her hands up. "Don't worry about it. See you at five."

"Sure. Thanks." I smiled again.

"Rebecca," she said, extending a pink padded hand.

"Oh, yeah, uh, Richie." I grabbed her soft hand and squeezed. "Five o'clock, right."

"See you." She turned back to her horde of angry customers, waiting for

the rabbit woman to finish with this geek and start another ride.

I made my way back to my parents' house, walking along the beach. I had made a fool of myself, but it had been worth it. I had met the rabbit woman.

I returned to the children's arcade at five o'clock, somewhat apprehensive. This was a big move for me. My social-sexual life had been nearly imaginary for the last four years. In college I had either pursued abstinence or embittered alienation. Now, I was putting my hopes in the paws of a rabbit-eared amazon, in front of whom I had made a total fool of myself.

I lurked near the barbecue-go-round, taking deep breaths, watching Rebecca go through the motions of her job. The air had a salty coolness that I could taste on my lips. The humidity was finally ebbing, and the knot of New Jersey youth was being replaced by an older crowd. Soon, mating rites would commence, romance high atop the ferris wheel. The little ones have gone to bed, time to concern ourselves with the in-and-out. The New Jersey shore at night was a huge vat of hormonal activity.

At precisely five I shuffled up to Rebecca who was whisking off the last of her customers.

"Ride's closed. Let's go. Get off that pickle."

"Hi." I waved.

She looked up, flopping ears in my direction. "Hi. Just give me one 'sec. I'll shut this thing down and get out of this suit."

I moved back to a bench and sat inhaling the early evening smells. Cotton candy and buttered popcorn mingled with Chanel Number 5 and anti-

perspirant. Everyone was a kid here, doing kid things, going on rides and seeking love. I felt oddly calm, the frenzy swirling around me.

"Hi." A tall dark-haired woman greeted me with blue eyes and long white teeth. Her long arms and legs flowed smoothly from her shorts and t-shirt.

"Hello." I cocked my head. Of course it was the rabbit woman but this transformation was a shock. She was so human, very pretty, large full lips and lightly-tanned skin. She wore a blue pastel top and white shorts. I could see little blue veins coursing through her body. Words clogged in my throat.

"There's a coffee shop a couple of blocks off the beach. Let's go there. I work inside starting at six thirty."

"What do you do in there?" We began to walk toward the street, past the cool teenagers balancing on skateboards with cigarettes dangling over their lips.

"I make change." She swung her long arms in great arcs as she walked.

"You work a hell of a long day."

"Yeah. It's a drag sometimes, but I need the money."

"And in that rabbit suit. It must be an oven."

"It is. I've nearly passed out several times this summer. But it's the best paying job on the boardwalk." She spoke with that same deep, quiet voice I had heard from the rabbit woman. "And it keeps me thin." She laughed.

She was very thin. Lots of angles. I wondered if I would be bruised after spending a night with her.

"This is it." We came to a little cinderblock restaurant on the corner of the main drag. Neon buzzed in the window advertising "Coffee." That was good. I liked coffee.

We sat in an orange plastic booth with its own music box. I flipped through the song choices, wondering what I had gotten myself into. But I had to talk, I was at the point of no return.

"So," I started. "You must think I'm a lunatic."

"No." She smiled. "You must have been pretty upset to make such a scene."

"Thanks."

"Just kidding. No, really. What's going on? Why are you sitting on benches staring at little kids on the barbecue-go-round? Are you in some kind of trouble?"

"No, no, it wasn't the kids. It was you." I looked hard into her clear blue eyes. "You're the rabbit woman. I admire that. Sometimes I'd like to put on a costume and be something else, perhaps a porcupine."

"Yeah, right." A white-haired waitress came over and took our order for two coffees. I also ordered toast. "Why are you on Beach Cove?" Rebecca asked.

"My parents have a house here; I'm taking refuge."

"Refuge from what?"

"Reality."

"Is that right?" Our coffee arrived, steaming in its porcelain cups. "I actually don't have much sympathy for you." She took a short sip of her coffee. "The only people I have ever found to be constantly despondent about their lives are rich bastards, those who too easily overcome the everyday mundane shit that the rest of us have to plow through." Her ears turned red, poking out of her brown hair. "Are you one of those?"

"Me?" I held my hands over my cup, feeling the condensation collect on my palm. "My parents do all right, sure. But that's not my fault. I spend as little of their money as possible. I'm out of college, on my own, independent."

"Doesn't sound like that to me."

"Yeah, well, I suppose what I'm trying to figure out is what that all means." Despite the heat of this woman's attack, I didn't feel particularly upset. After all, she was right. It was time to come out behind my Mama's apron. I knew that, but yet I couldn't do much about it.

"How about you?" I asked. "What side are you on?"

"I'm doing this solo, sport. That's why I'm working here. Earning money now so I don't have to work while graduate school's going on."

"Oh yeah? What do you study?"

"Psychology. I have a grant to go to Columbia for my Ph.D. It includes a small stipend, but it's very small. To live in New York City, I need a lot more money."

"No parents?"

"Nah. They divorced a long time ago. My father died shortly thereafter, and my mother moved out to California with some fitness nut that she met and married. I was fifteen and decided to stay back here in Neptune."

"You lived by yourself when you were in high school?"

"I did. I worked part-time, got free room and board in exchange for taking care of a woman's kid. It was a good experience. I learned a lot."

I felt like a mumbling babe with this rabbit woman. But yet, she had compassion, she had consented to have coffee with me.

"Do you have a boyfriend?" I asked.

"No." She laughed. "I haven't had much time or use for men." She smiled at my raised eyebrows. "But maybe that's changing."

"Yeah, maybe." I smiled back at her, feeling content. On the edge of another of life's precipices, Richie Lewis is dragged back by the rabbit woman.

"So, what do you do?" she asked, sipping her coffee.

"Me? Nothing." I pulled a cigarette pack out of my jacket. "Do you mind if I smoke?"

"No, go ahead. What's it like doing nothing?"

"Well, it's not particularly time consuming. I just graduated from Rutgers."

"What's your field?"

"English."

"Oh." She smiled. "So what are you going to do with that?"

"Question of the year." I shook my head. "I think I need a job, just anything. I'm spending too much time worrying about the rest of my life."

"That's a mistake," she said. "Get a job, make some money. Buy yourself a Grand Torino and cruise the beach awhile."

"Good plan," I said, taking a drag of my cigarette. This rabbit woman was the real thing. "What time do you get off work tonight?"

"Ten. We toss out the video addicts and cruising youth gangs about then. Why?"

"I'll come by. We could, uh, maybe, find a place. I'll read you some stories I've written. I did some of that back in college."

Rebecca smiled. "Stories, huh? That would be interesting." She looked at her watch. "I'd better get back. People will demand their change."

We walked back to the arcade without talking, occasionally brushing

shoulders. She stood taller than I, and I imagined kissing uphill.

"Well, see you later," she said, once we were outside of her workplace.

"OK." I took a step back. "Thanks for coffee."

"Sure." She smiled, holding my stare. "Do you always meet women this way?"

"You're the first." I smiled. "See you later."

I walked back home quickly, whistling loudly, my mind ablaze with scenarios. Rebecca and Richie, cuddled in the sand, covered by the rabbit suit. Or wandering the deserted beach, not talking, making mental pictures of each other naked. I went down to the ocean, stared out into the dark grey water and conjured up fantasies of me and the rabbit woman.

Rebecca and I met that night and several nights more in the next two weeks. I felt at ease with her, telling her about my funk that was constipating my life now and the funk that I had been in during college. I told her about my high school friends who I was avoiding this summer. I wasn't the Richie Lewis from Manahawken High any longer, I told her. I wanted a clean break. She told me I was a jerk.

After a couple of weeks we slept together for the first time. I had taken her to dinner at a lobster place and surprised her with the announcement that I had gotten a job washing cars at the nearby "Wash 'N Go". We had wine with dinner, more wine after dinner as we sat below the boardwalk, watching the ocean and soon found ourselves in Rebecca's tiny room, sprawled on her single bed. We giggled a lot. I came too quickly. She said she didn't care and coaxed me into another try. We lay wrapped around each other, and I

drowsily heard sounds of a radio talk show in another apartment, something about a man who divorced his fourteen year old wife because she had gotten bad grades in high school, but I might have dreamt that.

6. ARTISTS AND AEROBICS

"I want you to meet Ismeralda," Walt said, standing in the doorway of the beach house, his arm around the wide shoulders of this woman he had brought along. "She is an artist."

It was eight o'clock Saturday morning. I had called Walt on Thursday night and told him to come early on Saturday, that Elliot's plane was due at eleven. Jerry got the same message. I had been anxious to get the weekend in gear.

I smiled at Walt's friend. She was quite short. In fact, her body looked compressed, perhaps the result of some birthing complication. I imagined the doctor squeezing baby Ismeralda between his palms. "Slight problem here. Baby too big, not to worry."

"Hi, Ismeralda."

She smiled short white teeth.

"And this is Rebecca, Richie's friend."

Rebecca came forward. "We've heard so much about you. We're so looking forward to this weekend."

Ismeralda took Rebecca's hand and gave a soft, "Thank you."

I raised an eyebrow. I had never heard of this woman. Was I missing

something? It was strange for Walt to bring a woman around. He had always kept his relationships to short but intense flings with women who had tattoos on their inner thighs and were missing several teeth. One I had met by accident, bumping into Walt on 7th Avenue in Manhattan. We had coffee at a Greek diner, and Walt's friend spent the time telling me about how literature was dead. "The whole medium is just fossilized." I nodded back, a frozen smile barely concealing my disinterest. Walt had averted my eyes.

As a matter of fact for a few years he had sworn off relationships all together, declaring they screwed with his creative flow.

"As an artist I have to be singularly dedicated," he had said one morning. We were having breakfast near his apartment in the village. It was when I was working on my teaching credential at City College. "Relationships get in the way of this."

"Maybe." I chewed my toast. "Will this build up of sexual energy fuel your work?"

"Come on, Richie. We don't all need to be constantly getting our rocks off."

"Yeah, sure. In no time you'll be sculpting enormous cement columns ringed by metallic tunnels."

Walt smiled over his coffee cup. "You're so shallow, Lewis."

Perhaps that had always been true. But I had never really understood Walt's art anyway. In high school he had been a varsity starter as a sophomore on both the baseball and basketball teams. He was a natural. But by junior year he had quit organized sports and spent his time in the metal shop welding together car parts into what he called, "Suburban Art." The shop teachers thought he was building a tank and heartily approved.

When he was going to City College, his sculpture was all urban: old tires and chains and grease and litter. When he transferred to a small school out in the sticks of New York state, his art was vines and leaves and branches from fir trees.

"What do you think?" he had asked when I visited him one weekend.

I stared at the array of ivy, wound around a truck tire, half-plunged knife blades protruding from the inside. The whole thing was painted bright green.

"This is art, huh?"

"Yeah, man. Hey, loosen up. Experience it. Don't be so literal, Richie."

"Yeah, literal. That's my problem."

Either shallow or literal, I could still see that something was different about Walt this weekend. My high school friend, former jock, current artist, man of few words and odd expressions was becoming a normal person. He was pursuing a normal relationship with erections and everything.

"Well, well, well," I started, coming into the kitchen to see Rebecca, while Walt and Ismeralda situated themselves upstairs. "Comes a time."

Rebecca gave me a look as she began opening cupboard doors. "What is it you're not saying?"

"Who would have expected it?" I sat down at the table. "And what was all that 'having heard so much about you'? I never heard of her."

"I was just trying to make her feel welcome." Rebecca stared at the near empty cabinet, holding a pad and pencil. "Walt's as human as the rest of us, Richie."

"Possibly. But the Walt I know has always been different. Different needs. In high school he was sleeping with this thirty five year old divorced

woman who had recently moved into his neighborhood. Now, that's unusual enough, right? But he didn't even brag to us about it. The neighbors saw them making it in the back yard, made a big deal."

Rebecca moved some cans and wrote on her pad. "Do you want to make food every night or should we go out?"

"We'll do both. This island offers a full range of choices."

"Hi, you guys." Walt poked his head into the kitchen.

"Everything OK up there?" Rebecca asked.

"Sure, swell." Walt was the only guy since 1955 who was still using that expression. He edged into the kitchen, not fully committing himself to coming inside. "So, uh, well..." He gingerly set himself down on a chair. "Some weekend, huh?"

Walt had never been much of a conversationalist. It was always his lack of talk that made for his reputation. I smiled at Rebecca. "We're sure gonna have a blast. So, how long have you and Ismeralda known each other?"

"Way to beat around the bush, Richie," Rebecca said.

"No, that's all right." Walt cleared his throat. "A few months. We met at an opening in Soho. A mutual friend."

"What sort of art does she do?" I asked.

"She paints. She's good."

I had a strong feeling that Walt was trying to get us to approve of his friend. This was weird. Walt never had to prove anything to anyone. I was worried.

"She has a kid," Walt said, his light blue eyes looking off into the wall behind me.

"Really?" Rebecca said, turning away from the cabinets. "How old?"

"Three. Ricardo. He's a good kid." Walt smiled.

I looked hard at my friend. He was a changed man. I was approaching thirty and my friends were acting like fathers to their girl friends' kids who probably despised them for putting it to their Mom's. Whatever happened to the simple date? A movie about some outer space war where good wears white and bad wears black. Perhaps a few awkward attempts at hand holding, painfully aware of the puddle formed in your palm. Then maybe, pushing it, a long arm around the shoulder attempt at breast touching. Perhaps, yes, I feel it. Is it her bicep? I'm not sure, I feel it, I do.

Things were simple then. Now we were grown up. We dated women with kids. We arrived at our dates, pockets stuffed with little plastic dinosaurs and four kinds of candy. Pacifiers.

"Are you guys making a living as artists?" I asked.

"Barely," Walt smiled. "I'm also working part-time as an auto mechanic. Ismeralda drives a school bus."

"What about her son?" Rebecca asked.

"He goes with her. They're wonderful together. Real close. You guys should meet him sometime."

"Sure," I said. I imagined little Ricardo, the compressed dark-skinned three year old, standing on the first seat of the yellow school bus, staring back at the pimply faced teenagers who clamored over the seats. Sit him down, Ismeralda. If the bus stops short he'll be thrown to the floor, sharp objects will appear from nowhere and hurtle toward him. My God, what was this protective instinct? This thirty business was evil.

This was some serious adult shit that Walt had gotten himself into. I had nothing against women with kids, nor kids themselves, yet I wasn't sure if I

could deal with this. But then Walt and I had always been very different.

In high school he was mysterious. Sophomore year we were in the same English class, Mr. Krakow. Our first writing assignment was to describe an incident from our childhood. When Mr. Krakow asked me to read my essay to the class, I felt my throat tighten. Once I was up in front of the room, my eyes riveted to the paper in front of me, sounds started to come out of my mouth. After awhile they were intelligible. My essay was titled, "The Time I Ran Away."

When I was small, every Saturday night my parents went out with their friends. I'd have to stay home and watch "Mannix" or "Creature Feature" or play monopoly by myself, buying up all of the hotels. One weekend I could not take this any longer.

"Mom, do you really have to go out?"

"Yes, Richie," she said. She was putting on makeup, sitting in front of her mirror with thirty little light bulbs.

"I don't want you to."

She looked over at me. "It'll be OK. You have things to do, don't you?"

I scowled. "Saturday night television really sucks and every other person on this island is a creep."

"Oh Richie," she said, sliding a long dangly earring through the hole in her earlobe. "Just make the best of it."

"If you and Dad go out, I'll run away."

My mother smiled. "Just make the best of it," she repeated.

In my eight year old anger I vowed, "I'll show her," and changed out of my pajamas and back into my playclothes. Then I grabbed a brown paper bag from the kitchen. I packed the essentials - pajamas, socks, underwear, toothbrush - all of the things I'd usually take when playing "nuclear survival". While my parents had their backs turned, I bolted out of the front door and ran down the dark street. I felt like I was going incredibly fast, the sidewalk rushing by. When I reached the end of the block, I burst into tears and ran back home. My parents changed me back into pajamas, gave me a hug and went out on their date.

The next day it rained, and out of the window I saw a pair of socks I must have dropped in the driveway. They lay there getting wet, not

going anywhere.

After I read my essay, I looked up at my classmates. A few fingers strayed toward a few nostrils. A few mouths gaped in mid-yawn. Angelo Buentempo in the back had a wide grin on his face, but he was crazy and thought everything was a riot.

And then it was Walt's turn.

"Mr. Olofsky," Mr. Krakow accosted Walt. "I want you to read your story."

Walt looked up from his spot on back of the room. His eyes were always half-closed. I'd assumed he was just a dumb jock, clothed in sweat pants and a sweat shirt and dirty, high top sneakers. When called upon, his answers were short grunts. I knew he wasn't on any of the high school teams any longer. I assumed he had some sort of sports injury.

Mr. Krakow held out the essay on the end of his skinny arm. Walt sauntered up to the front and stood behind the podium. He began to read in a low, clear voice. His articulation was clearer than I had ever heard anyone speak before.

"This is called, 'Riding Down a Closed Road.'" Walt cleared his throat.

There we were, suddenly, without noticing, the car gliding in all of its Motor City given beauty. It was Jersey City, the land at the end of the long road.

"Deano," I whispered. "Wake up, look."

Deano, the adventurer, the holy goof, the heavy drinker. What I had learned from Deano was to hot wire cars, to hot wire waffle irons and to turn women inside out until their innermost thoughts were shouted out at the top of their lungs. Deano was an ace at a party.

"What's happening, Sam?"

"Jersey City, man. That crazy, hot wired, all night town. The one at the end of the road."

"Yeah, man. A groove. I tell you about the time I met this chic at a Denny's in Kearny? We had grand slam breakfasts, left a big tip and cozied off to her shack by the railroad tracks. Made it with the sound of the big engines wheezing in the background. The best way."

"Yeah, man. I heard that one." I had heard them all. Three months of hard driving with Deano had conjured up all of the stories. This man had done it all, taken it all back. Deano was living in a 33 1/3 world on 78. "Jersey City, man. Just like I pictured it."

We parked our Buick at the curb, in front of the best ham sandwich shop in the entire East coast. This was America, Jersey City. The America of fast talking winos and television salesmen, and housewives lining up their grocery carts outside of the supermarket like the start of the Indianapolis 500. We were young and on the road, searching for America, finding it in Jersey City. I was tired.

"Rest, Deano. I need a rest."

"No cash, Sam," Deano said. "No cash, no rest, no drink, no bed, no burly Puerto Rican girls who'll dance the Mambo on your back all night long. But it feels all right."

"That's cool, Deano."

"Yeah, Sam, cool."

So Deano and I, mad about life, rushed out of our car, soared through Jersey City like falcons after prey. And when it was over the Buick was still there, parked next to the curb in front of the ham sandwich place. We got in. Deano drove. The search was still on.

The class was silent once Walt had stopped reading. Even Angelo Buentempo had stopped smiling. Walt hardly looked up under his long hair, instead took a deep breath and sauntered back to his seat.

"OK," Mr. Krakow started. "Who knows what piece of literature Mr. Olofsky was satirizing?"

Literature? Satirizing? What did that have to do with the assignment? I was confused. The silence gripped the class a bit tighter. I didn't know if Walt's writing was terrible or great or what. But I felt inferior. I had missed something. He definitely knew more than I did.

"Anybody ever hear of Jack Kerouac?" Mr. Krakow asked. The class made

no response. "Dean Moriarty? The Beat Generation?" Silence. Mr. Krakow shook his head. "Why do you know this stuff Mr. Olofsky if everyone else does not?"

I looked back at Walt. A smile slowly spread on his face. "Beats me," he said. "Swell book, though." A man of a few, select words.

I declined to go food shopping with Rebecca, suggesting I'd better stay home in case Jerry and Elaine arrived. I sat in the kitchen, nursing a cup of coffee, staring out of the window shaped like a large porthole at the sand filled-yard in back.

I could hear Walt and his friend milling about upstairs, and those sounds were somehow sad. I wanted this weekend to be filled with stories of my past, an accumulation of data that I could use to construct some sort of future. So far my friends were changed. I took a deep breath and warned myself to calm down.

"Hello." Ismeralda interrupted my solemn feeling sorry for myself, standing in the doorway to the kitchen. I sensed the need for an invitation.

"Hi." I smiled. "Come in. Have a seat. Would you like some coffee? I just made a fresh pot."

"Sure. I would like that." Ismeralda sat herself on a stool along the kitchen counter.

I set a cup of coffee in front of her. "You'll notice we drink a lot of coffee around here. Beverage of the Gods."

"Are you Catholic?" she asked.

"Me? Oh no." I laughed. "Jewish. My mother's pretty serious about it, too. She loves Rebecca, or so she says, but she wishes she were Jewish.

Rebecca does get by with having a Jewish sounding name. That saves face at parties when she's mentioned. God forbid my mother's other Jewish friends found out her son was going with a 'shiksa.'" I stopped, suddenly self-conscious of the non-stop talk I tended to generate when with strangers.

"How long have you known Walt?"

"Three months." She had a slight accent, slightly Hispanic. "I love him, you know."

"Yeah? Good, that's great."

"He has talked very much about you, Richie."

"Really? Good or bad?"

She smiled. "You are his best friend. He has no other."

"That's good to know. Thank you for telling me that." I wasn't sure I was ready for the heavy tone that this conversation was generating. Oh well, be nice to strangers.

We sat in silence for awhile. I thought of Walt, and I'm sure Ismeralda did as well. We could hear him upstairs doing what sounded like jogging. I looked over at her.

"Aerobics," she said. "Walter believes it very important to maintain a physical regimen."

"He was a hell of an athlete in high school. I'm sure he still is."

"He is teaching my Ricardo to play baseball. He would be a good father, very kind and understanding."

"What happened to Ricardo's father, if you don't mind my asking."

She gave a small sigh. "We married too young, seventeen I was. He was eighteen. What did we know of love? It was passion that we had, and that

died down once our lives became more complex. He was in the Marines, so I did not see him very much, sometimes on leave." She cleared her throat. "I did not love him, and it took me four years to decide that."

"You divorced?"

"Yes. It was very hard for me as a Catholic. But I had my own life to live. Ricardo was just one when it happened. He does not remember his father at all. He wishes Walter was his father."

I was surprised that Ismeralda was only twenty three. She looked much older. Perhaps this is what marriage and children did to you. The aging process was accelerated. You age three years for each year of your kid. Something to look forward to.

"How did you become an artist?" I asked.

"Always I would draw. In Guatemala my family lived in the mountains in the North. My playpen was acres of forest and meadow. I always had to capture this beauty on paper. To share."

While Ismeralda spoke she kept her gaze down toward the floor but every once in a while she would look up, catching me with brown eyes shining with intensity. She and Walt made quite a couple, about a fourteen on the ten scale intensity meter. Could I tell her I had arranged this weekend to generate some intensity of my own? "Oh, and I'm doing this because I don't want a job. Prolonged childhood. Next year I'll be looking for a womb." But I wasn't uncomfortable with Ismeralda. Like Walt, her intensity was infectious, not intimidating. Quite a couple.

"How's it going down here?" Walt stepped into the kitchen, a towel draped around his neck. He was shirtless, and his body was as taught and sinewy it was in high school. All traces of adolescent body fat were gone. I

slipped my hand to my own stomach, feeling the emergence of a thirty year old's pot belly. The last five years as a teacher had made me put on a layer of fat, a meagre protection against the mental hostility of my students and the administration. It was a shield I no longer needed.

"We're fine," I said. "Just discussing the wonders of coffee and existential philosophy."

Walt smiled. "I warned Ismeralda to not believe anything you said. I told her you were rarely serious."

"Me? Joke around." I shook my head. "You've got the wrong guy. We've been away from each other much too long. I've become incredibly serious. I ooze seriousness. My blood has been replaced by a cynical serious solution." I tried to keep myself from grinning but it was hard. I had always been a good liar.

"So what's the schedule?" Walt asked.

"I have to leave and pick Elliot up soon." I looked at the nautical type clock that hung over the sink. A large scallop shell with crab arms for hands. Another touch by Marge the realtor. "As a matter of fact I have to leave now. His plane is due at eleven and it'll take me two hours to get there." I downed the rest of my coffee in one gulp and set my cup in the sink. "Rebecca will be back soon. You guys just make yourselves comfortable. Feel free to ransack any cupboard or anything."

"I would like to see the ocean," Ismeralda said, looking over at Walt.

"Neat idea," he said. "Let's go swimming. The things you see on the floor of the ocean are more dynamite than half the stuff hanging in the galleries in Soho. You have to see it."

"Is that what we should do as artists, Walter, recreate nature? We can't

compete with that. We can capture aspects of that but merely the emotion, perhaps the form. But we always fall short. That is not a realistic goal."

"Maybe that's true, but some of these people are slapping their environments in the face. They act as if they are Gods, apart from the world around them. They ignore the fact that not only do they create a world but they are, in turn, created by one."

"Uh, guys," I interrupted. "I hate to intrude, but I have to go. I'll see you later."

"Sure, Richie." Walt grinned and moved his long blond hair out of his eyes. "Ismeralda and I like talking about art. Sorry."

"Hey, no problem. I'll add my humble opinion later. Right now I'd better pick up Elliot. I don't want to leave him in the airport by himself. He might be rounding up the Krishnas and reorganizing them for increased efficiency. In no time he'll be the king of airport panhandling."

"It's sometimes hard for me to imagine Elliot in the business world," Walt said. "For a long time that was everything he hated. And now he's a part of it."

"Yeah, well, Elliot was always on a power trip," I said. "He's just traded it in for a new one. When he first went out to California, I thought it would only be a temporary thing, working in the electronics industry. And a salesman." I shook my head. "But you have to admit, Elliot could always sell. Even in high school."

"That's true." Walt smiled and looked down to the floor. "Better pick that big guy up. It'll be good to see him."

"Yeah, I'll see you soon."

7. ELLIOT

I sat at Newark Airport, in a hard plastic seat, waiting for Elliot's plane to arrive from California. New Jerseyites milled around me, hugging an occasional deplaning passenger, talking excitedly in foreign languages. I was sweating a bit, rubbing my hands on my shorts to keep them dry. I hadn't actually seen Elliot for a year and a half though we had talked on the phone fairly regularly. He was the high school friend who had gone west to seek his fortune, off to mythic California. I imagined him soaking in a hot tub, with a portable phone in one hand and a tekka maki in the other. Not to mention the beautiful women who accompanied him. Elliot, from California. But I also knew this could never be true. Elliot had always been a gruff, wise cracking, sloppy guy from New Jersey. California wouldn't alter that.

"Richie. Richie Lewis," he called, coming out of the skyway door. He was as huge as ever, at least six four, a wide upper body and a generous gut perched on skinny legs. His grey slacks were sliding down his non-existent butt. "Richie, you look like shit." He still had a way with words.

"Thanks, same to you." I embraced Elliot and gave him a squeeze.
"How's it going? You have a good flight?"

"Eh, it was airline hell. I had a screaming baby on one side and a sumo

wrestler on the other. Six hours of torture." He shook his head. His hair was short now that he was in the working world. A classic John Kennedy style haircut. "And the flight attendants. Talk about fat and ugly. Even the men looked like a plastic surgeon's malpractice case."

"You're not looking exactly svelte yourself, buddy." I patted his thick stomach. "Are you ready for the weekend?"

"Hell, yes. This is the first vacation I've had in months. No work!" He clapped his big hands together. "Lee-zur."

"How's the job?"

"It's a race. Hey, but I sold a half-million in chips last quarter."

"Is that good?"

"Good? What are you, a Franciscan monk? That's great. That's twenty five grand in commissions. That's bucks."

"Shit." I whistled. "In three months?"

"Yeah. Hey, it's not like that all of the time. And I have to beat on people's backs constantly to get the orders. But, sometimes. . ." He shook his head. "No more goddamn business talk. Hey, who's here? Is Walt here yet? Does he know I'm gonna kick his butt all over the basketball court?"

"Yeah, he's here." I smiled. "And he brought someone."

"Who? His mother?"

"Ismeralda. He's hooked. Serious stuff."

"Bullshit. He's too weird. And I thought he gave up sex for art."

"He's found time, I suppose." I grabbed his arm. "Hey, it's great to see you."

"You too." He gave me a toothy grin as we walked off to the garage.

Early in high school I wouldn't have thought that Elliot and I would end

up to be this close. Back then I knew of him. Everybody did. From the kids working on cars all day in autoshop, to the math heads staring away at the computer punch card readers, Elliot was known. He was the school rebel.

"Now class, we are discussing the Magna Carta. Anyone care to elaborate on the purpose of this historical document?" asked Mr. Rambler in junior year Western Civilization class. He had been rumored to have had a metal plate put into his head during the Korean War. He squinted and scanned the room for upraised hands until he settled on Elliot's. "Yes, Mr. Kreger."

"The Magna Carta," Elliot announced in his usual loud baritone, "is useless information."

"What?"

"How can we sit here and discuss old crap when everyday hundreds of our boys are dying over in 'Nam? That's what's relevant, Mr. Rambler. Not some treaty from 1215 to give civil liberties to the English."

"Don't tell me what's relevant, Kreger." Mr. Rambler shouted. "We'll be studying Southeast Asian colonialism in our fourth semester unit."

"Dying! And for what?" Elliot stood up and waved his big hands. "To stop Communism, they tell us."

"Mr. Kreger, take your seat."

"We are intruding on a civil war in an imperialist fashion no better than those countries that we criticize."

"Mr. Kreger. I've had enough."

"It's time to protest, you people. Time to stand up and get involved. Time to get things straight before we are all sacrificed for the sake of the war machine that is ruining our country."

"That's enough, Mr. Kreger. You are treading on detention."

"I'm standing here until our boys are coming home, Mr. Rambler." He looked around. "And anyone who cares about what is right will stand with me."

"Another detention!"

"Stand up, one and all. Stand up and be counted."

"Suspension, Kreger."

"No sacrifice is too great for our boys, Mr. Rambler."

We watched this drama, glued to our seats. Hell, I was fifteen. Vietnam was something on TV. What was this guy's problem?

When the class bell rang, we left Elliot standing there with his arms folded, glaring at Mr. Rambler who gathered up his notes and scurried out of the room.

In the rigidly segmented society of high school, Elliot stood alone. The jocks and cheerleader crowd ignored him, the greaser crowd kept a distance, the druggy crowd paid him respect, and the intellectual crowd feared him. It helped him to be six foot four and over two hundred pounds. Elliot was a mountain, his quick, snarling mouth and aggressive argumentative style keeping all students and often the faculty at bay. He was what we all secretly wanted to be. Even young Richie Lewis, a normal sort of New Jersey kid, pursuing the path of least resistance through high school, admired and feared Elliot. But it was when I finally got to know Elliot that I decided to work on my self-image.

"Hey, you." I heard from across the room. I was in the school library, preparing a report on Zaire for Social Studies, copying verbatim from the World Book Encyclopedia. Only one person would break the self-imposed

hush tones of the library. Heads snapped up over open books.

Elliot was glaring at me from across the room, his long brown hair pulled back and tied with a rubber band. "Come over here."

I looked to each side and pointed to myself. "Me?" I whispered.

"Yeah. It's important," he shouted.

I gathered up my books and slipped across the library, conscious of the eyes around me drilling small holes into the back of my head.

"What do you want?" I whispered, looking up at Elliot's ruddy face, a thick unshaven stubble spread over his protruding chin.

"You're Lewis, right?" he bellowed.

"Me? Yeah, Lewis, right." I looked around at the faces now averted in angry scowls. "Let's talk in the hall."

"Why? I like this place." He grinned. "It's nice and quiet."

I pointed to the door and led the way. Out in the hall I looked up at Elliot towering over me, a huge grin on his face.

"I need you for an important mission."

"Me?" I asked.

"Yeah. Listen, Lewis, my strength is in agitating, oratory and occasionally intimidation. But I need the meat of it."

"I don't get what you're talking about."

"We were in seventh grade English together. Remember? Ms. Schwartz?"

"Yeah, I remember." That was my first exposure to Elliot. He was smaller then but just as loud and intimidating. His essays were a call to arms against the current administration. The whole class thought he was wacko, but Ms. Schwartz oogled and ahhed and fawned over him. He must have missed half

of the classes, but I know he passed because he was in ninth grade English in the fall.

"Well, I remember your stuff from that class, Lewis."

"You do?"

"Good stuff, good writing. You did an oral report on a book, A Clockwork Orange. That got a rise out of the class.

"Yeah, I remember." I had read that book under the covers by flashlight, out of my parents' sight. I knew it was a risk, but it seemed exciting. The forbidden. And anyway the year before I had done The Hardy Boys Go Hawaiian. It had been time for something more mature.

"That was good stuff. And you wrote a couple of essays and a satire on Fall of the House of Usher.

I felt my mouth widen into a smile. No one had noticed my writing before. "So, what's this all about?" I asked.

"I'm not a pen man. I'm a mover, a doer. I need a writer."

"For what?"

"Campaigns, slogans, speeches. This is not the time to be passive. Where do you stand, huh? Where do you fall?"

"Stand? About what?"

"The war, the country, our whole goddamn society. You can't avoid the polarization. My grandfather lived through this in the 30's, you know, Sacco and Vanzetti, Emma Goldman, the Wobblies. It's back again. The surface is cracking and the black interior is forcing its way through." He paused. "That was pretty good. Maybe we can use that." He stared hard. "So, are you with me or not?"

I laughed nervously. "Most of the school thinks you're crazy."

Elliot smiled. "Good. What do you think?"

"I think that I'm not sure. You'd make a good linebacker, though. Are you fast?"

"Sports are a ritualistic diversion from the real problems we have. And I have bad knees. Grew too fast."

"Oh." I looked back inside the library, everything back to normal, once again hushed tones were ruling, perfect order. "Things might be pretty screwed up. But I haven't given it much thought."

"Aren't you afraid of getting drafted?"

"Nah, I'll be in college. Won't you?"

"College is not for me, my friend. No little boxes for Elliot Kreger. I'm going to travel, see the world, touch Tahitian beauties and hobnob with French poets. College? No way, Buddy."

I smiled at this blasphemy. College was assumed for me and my peers. College, a good job, a wife, a couple of kids. These were reasonable, stable goals. This Kreger wasn't an overpowering loud mouth, he was a dreaming fool. But interesting. He did say he liked my writing, and we had done a unit on propaganda in English class the previous year. "OK, I'll help you."

Elliot stuck out his large palm. "Good. Welcome to the club." He jerked my arm up and down a couple of times.

One of the first things that Elliot and I collaborated on was to form a school organization, one to take its place among the Glee Club, the Chess Club, the Young Republicans Club, the Hotpoint Club and all the other after school organizations that kept us high school kids off the street and out of the

house for a couple more hours.

First we needed a name. After rejecting the Anarchist Club, the Fifteen Ounce Club, and the Realist Club, we settled on Club Concerned. Then we needed a faculty advisor. Elliot talked Ms. Schwartz into doing it, who by now was teaching an English elective at the high school: "Romantic Vision: The Works of Freud and Marx." Elliot had a way with that woman which I later learned included personal, at-home tutoring. The guy, indeed, was years ahead of the rest of us.

Finally, we needed an introductory meeting. I made up the poster.

**Dissatisfied? Angry? Horrified? Frustrated?
Get Up.
Do Something About It.
Meet Others of Like Minds. Earn 3 Hours of Afterschool Credit.
Join Club Concerned
We Care About Society Enough to Change It.
We Will Do What We Have To Do.**

The last line was Elliot's. The two of us and Ms. Schwartz met on the Thursday designated as Club Initiation Day. We arrived at Ms. Schwartz's homeroom immediately after last period. Over the blackboard Elliot draped a large picture of Karl Marx and next to it one of James Dean.

"This is going to be great," Elliot said, flashing his wide smile at me and Ms. Schwartz.

"You think anyone will show up?" I asked.

"Of course, Lewis. Don't be so negative. I personally recruited several people."

"How many arms did you break?"

"Very funny. If people care about their own lives, they'll show up. Trust me."

The door opened. Jerry poked his head in. "Hi, Richie." He glanced fearfully at Elliot.

"Hi Jerry. Come in, come in." I jumped up to grab his arm and pull him in.

"This the meeting you told me about?" he asked as I guided his plump body over to a desk.

"This is it. We're just waiting for everyone to show up. Elliot, this is my friend, Jerry."

Elliot scowled and nodded. He had a thing about intimidating people when first meeting them, claiming it earned respect.

"I went to the Americana Club down the hall but it was too crowded," Jerry said. "I hate crowds."

"This will be great, Jerry," I said. "Just you wait."

"I was wondering what you've been doing lately. We hardly ever get together to shoot baskets anymore."

"Yeah, I've been busy." I looked over at Elliot, who was cracking his knuckles one at a time. "This club has taken a lot of my time."

This was something I hadn't minded. Jerry had been my only real friend in the entire school. We had spend a lot of time together. Now, instead of hanging out with Jerry watching "Get Smart" reruns, I was scheming with Elliot. Elliot was teaching me to question what I was told, to be more aggressive, and to stop wearing my jeans with the cuffs rolled up.

"You know we need at least four members to keep our charter," Ms. Schwartz said with a glance at Elliot. "Is anyone else coming?"

"Sure, sure, Ms. S.," Elliot said. "Be patient."

We all looked up at the clock. It was already 3:15 and by now the student body had either chosen their respective clubs or gone on home. I felt Elliot's disappointment fill the room. I could barely look over at him.

"We'll give it to 3:20," Ms. Schwartz said. "I have a dentist appointment at 3:45, so that's the latest I can stay."

We watched the clock in silence. Every now and then a laugh or a shout would come from outside the door but no one entered. At 3:19 Elliot slowly walked up to the front of the room and stepped in front of the Karl Marx poster. With two arms he reached out and ripped it off the wall. As he moved for James Dean, the classroom door opened. Elliot stopped in mid-rip as Walt took a half-step in.

"Hey," he nodded at Elliot. "I'm looking for Club Concerned." He held up one of my posters.

"Yeah, yeah, come in," Elliot said, rushing back to his seat, holding the balled up poster.

Walt took another step in and looked around. "Quite a crowd."

"Yeah, well, this school is filled with a bunch of apathetic assholes," Elliot said. "Except for us." He grinned. "Elliot Kreger," he said, pushing his hand out to Walt.

Walt nodded. "I know." He looked at me. "What's happening, Richie?"

"Not much." This was the year that Walt and I had Mr. Krakow for English, but I didn't know if he realized I existed. "This is my friend, Jerry," I said.

"We better get things going," Ms. Schwartz said. "I have to leave in ten minutes." She looked at her watch.

"Yeah, OK." I jumped up, sensing a crucial moment in the life of Club Concerned. Ten minutes to solidify this disparate foursome. Elliot was the orator, I just wrote. But Elliot sat brooding over the lack of a turnout. It was time to do something.

"Well," I started. "I know why I'm here. And I think I know why the rest of you are here too." I paused, looking carefully at each person. "We care about our lives, our school, our world. We're concerned." I nodded at Elliot, who grimaced. "So, uh, what are we going to do about it?"

Silence.

"Anything." I said. "Anything at all. Someone make a suggestion."

Walt raised his hand, two fingers poking out of his denim jacket.

"Yes," I nearly shouted.

"Shoot hoop."

"What?"

Walt slowly looked at the rest of us. "My mind works better when I'm shooting hoop. I'm going over to Gumpert's Park. Anyone wants to join me that would be cool."

I looked at Elliot, who sat staring at his hands. I had shot a lot of basketballs over the last year, part of my infatuation with the New York Knicks. "Elliot, you want to shoot some baskets?"

Elliot looked up and then at Walt. "Sports are primordial exercises in domination. Just another form of repression."

Walt grunted.

"We're just going to shoot some baskets, Elliot," I said. "What harm is there in that?" I turned to Jerry. "You want to shoot baskets?"

"Sure, Richie." Jerry nervously eyed Elliot. "Is that what this club is all about? Are we just going to play basketball?"

I sighed. "Sure. We'll play some hoop. Throw around some ideas to make changes around here. How about that, Elliot? We'll start there."

Walt stood up. "I'm headed for Gumpert's." He moved swiftly to the door. "Later."

I watched the door slowly close. So, this was radical politics. I wanted to go with Walt, but I was afraid Elliot would never speak to me again. I owed Elliot, he had given me confidence in what I could produce; he had set me apart from the rest of the student body, clamoring and struggling to act with self-conscious conformity. Difference was not lightly tolerated at my high school.

"Well, it looks like things are over here." Ms. Schwartz stood up and brushed off her corduroy skirt. "You boys let me know when the next meeting will be. I'd join you at the basketball court, but there is that dentist appointment. I do like that idea though. Both sports and politics can be extremely romantic." She scurried out the door.

Jerry cleared his throat. "Well, you going, Rich?"

"Uh, yeah, Jerry. I think I will." I stood up. "You go ahead. I'll meet you there."

"Sure." He quickly glanced at Elliot. "Good meeting." He pushed his way out, leaving us alone.

Elliot sat at a desk, his large body crammed into the small space, nudging a balled up piece of paper with his shoe. He looked up at me. "This place sucks."

"Yeah, I know." I stood up. "Let's go shoot hoop. We'll talk things over,

plan our attack. Let's do that."

"I don't like that Olofsky guy. Isn't he just some jock?"

"Hey, he showed up here, didn't he? He must care about how screwed up things are."

"Yeah, I suppose. '

I had never seen Elliot so subdued. "Let's go," I repeated.

"I can't play basketball," he said.

"What?"

"I can't."

"Elliot, come on. There's no ideological harm in throwing a round ball through a round hoop."

"No, not that I won't, I can't. I'm no good at it." He cleared his throat. "I have crappy vision and wearing my glasses makes me look like a soft-palmed accountant. And I hate doing things that I'm not good at."

"You do?" I thought about seventh grade gym class, when puberty had stretched me out and rendered my coordination nil. I had despised the daily ritual of being picked for teams, inevitably coming in last. I knew what Elliot was going through, but I had gotten over it. "So, wear your glasses and practice. You could get pretty good. It's not that hard. And we won't care how good you are anyway. Elliot, we're just going to shoot some baskets."

"Yeah, well, I'll see you later. I'm going to go home and catch up on some reading. I got a new Kerouac book."

I looked down at my feet, not at all comfortable with the vulnerability of our fearless leader. Oh well, sometimes a person's just gotta look out for himself. "I'll see you later," I said. "I'm headed for Gumpert's."

Now, as I headed south on the Garden State Parkway on the long drive from Newark Airport to Beach Cove, I made an effort to match up the Elliot sprawled on the seat next to me with the large obnoxious kid that I could remember. There was so much I wanted to talk about with Elliot that I didn't know where to start. After sitting in silence for awhile, I tried for chitchat.

"How are you enjoying California?" I asked.

"It's all right," he said, twisting the radio tuning knob and running quickly past stations. "Christ, it's been a long time since I've listened to these stations. Is N.E.W. still good?"

"I don't know. I don't seem to listen to the radio much these days."

"You don't? What the hell are you doing now, Richie? On the phone you said you were out of work. You looking for another job?"

This was a good question. "Not at the moment."

"Are you going to teach?"

"I'm not sure."

"Will you write?"

"Maybe."

"Sounds like you're firmly committed to your future, Richard Lewis." Elliot gave me a tight-lipped stare and then smiled. "You should write, you know. You always were a hell of a story teller."

"Yeah? Do you think so?"

"Oh, no doubt. But if you write about me and you don't make me look good, I'll come after you."

"Thanks." I let out a small laugh. "Maybe I'll write a play. It'll be about an over-sized New Jersey kid who takes a bus ride to California to live the life

he has only dreamed about. At a truck stop along the way he meets a woman on a Harley Davidson with a bougainvillea tattooed on her inner left thigh. She's missing two teeth. He falls in love, cancels his trip, and they move into a trailer home and sell hand-embroidered crotchless underwear to the tourists."

"Hey, I like that. Are you basing the biker woman on me?"

"Sure, Elliot. That's you all the way." We cruised down the Parkway, following the signs that said, "Shore Points," through the densely packed suburban neighborhoods of central New Jersey. As a kid I had always liked driving on the Parkway, mainly for the toll booths that were placed every ten miles or so. I'd shout for my father to take the toll as fast as possible, flipping the quarter into the white plastic basket as he raced our Ford through the narrow toll booth slot. In an uncharacteristic move for someone normally very reserved and conservative, when my mother wasn't with us, my father would allow me throw the quarter from the right side passenger seat, letting me lean out of the window and over the roof of the car. I'd often miss, and he'd give a toot of his horn to alert the toll authorities that we had earnestly tried to pay them a quarter, but that they'd have to pick up the coin themselves. He'd race off, and I'd sit on my hands, waiting for the next toll.

"So, what's it like to be out of work?" Elliot asked.

"Well, it's all right." I felt my face grow flushed with this lie. "I'm spending some time figuring out what I want to do."

"What do you want to do?"

"I haven't figured it out yet?"

"You know what I want to do?"

"What?"

"I want to go to the Stu's Root Beer stand in Manahawken and eat two hot dogs with the works while we sit in the car. I miss drive-in restaurants. I haven't found any of those in California."

"We'll go there right away." I gave Elliot a smile. I was glad he wanted to explore his past some as well. I needed his corroboration to help me know whether I had made up most of the stories I remembered. I needed a benchmark. I was creating a person here, one Richard Lewis, and I needed as many experts as possible.

For the rest of the drive Elliot told me about his life out in California, about the house he rented near the University in Santa Clara, and how it not only had no basement but you could feel the wind whip from the front door to the back, despite his attempts at weather stripping. I also heard about Silicon Valley, about the people driving around with car telephones in their BMWs, and Elliot told me a few success stories of people who made millions with a stock offering. He also told a few stories of people who went broke because of a design problem with their computer or a change in what consumers wanted. I tried to pay as close attention to what Elliot was saying, but I found myself slipping away, preferring to dwell on past stories of our lives. Elliot sounded like he had a nice life, but it wasn't one I was at all remotely connected to. I couldn't help drift back to when we were in high school. When we finally exited the parkway in Manahawken, I drove toward Stu's Root Beer, on the main drag where Elliot had driven us in his Chevelle Malibu with its 307 engine. When we were seventeen, we spent many Saturdays cruising up and down the Ocean Boulevard, staring at girls in brightly colored bathing suits, stopping at Stu's for a black cow and a hot dog

with the works. Now, on our way to Stu's, I held off telling Elliot that I had been a vegetarian for the last five years. Maybe I'd eat a hot dog for old time's sake. When we passed Gumpert's park, near our old high school, with its five full basketball courts lined up waiting for someone to pound a ball on their surfaces, I got lost in a memory. I thought of the first basketball game with my friends who would make up this weekend. It was the first official meeting of Club Concerned, and I was trying to balance my loyalty to Elliot with my desire to hang out with Walt and Jerry and shoot baskets. After we had left Elliot behind at the high school, brooding over the lack of desire his fellow students had to change their dismal surroundings, we went to Gumpert's to work on our shots.

I held the leather covered basketball with both hands. Walt had pulled it out of his locker as we were leaving the high school. It was labeled in thick black marker, "Property of Manahawken H. S. Athletic Department."

"Are you borrowing this?" I asked.

"They have no respect for these old leather balls here. It would just get trashed." Walt ran his fingertips lightly over the ball. "They make them in vinyl now. It's just not the same. This is a classic. I felt personally responsible to insure it's proper treatment."

I stood on the free throw line and spun the ball until I could clearly read "Wilson" in black block lettering. I took a deep breath, slowly exhaled and hoisted the basketball toward the hoop. It ricocheted off of the backboard with a thump, altogether missing the rim or the net. "Christ," I muttered. "I'm cold."

Walt rebounded the ball and proceeded to make ten shots in a row,

walking along a perimeter eighteen feet from the basket.

"How come you're not on the team?" I asked.

Walt shrugged, holding the ball out in front of him. "It wasn't for me. I had a problem with the coach." He shot the ball and finally missed. Jerry grabbed the ball and sent up a shot from the baseline that sailed over the rim, right into my hands. I let it sail from the opposite side and it went straight over the rim, back to Jerry.

"We're doing real well, Jer," I said, looking over at Walt. He was smiling, slowly nodding his head.

"So, you quit the team," I said.

"Yeah, the coach had us all pissed at each other. We were madder at each other than we were at the other team. I just wanted to play basketball not mentally and physically humiliate everyone else on the court. Call it philosophical differences."

"Let's play HORSE," I called. "That's a good three man game." HORSE was one of my favorites since I could use a wide selection of bizarre shots that I had perfected during hours of practice. When everyone else would have to make them in identical fashion, I would usually win. "You go first, Jerry."

Jerry took the ball and set up on top of the circle, about twenty feet away. His shot snapped through the net.

"Nice shot," Walt said.

"Thanks." Jerry smiled. "Your turn."

Walt took the ball and calmly made the same shot. I lined up on Jerry's spot and sent the ball clanging off of the rim. "I've got H," I called, raising my hand.

The game went on for awhile, and it wasn't until the ball had changed

hands a few times that I was able to start trying shots of my own.

"Watch out for him," Jerry said to Walt. "He has some really strange shots. He always beats me in this game."

I smiled. "OK, left-handed layup standing only on your left foot, with your eyes closed." I made that one and both Walt and Jerry missed.

"Behind the back, underhanded from the left corner." When I made that shot, I heard, "Nice shot, ace," from behind me.

"Elliot." I spun around. "What are you doing here? I thought you decided not to show up."

Elliot stood near the court, his hands jammed into his jeans, a flannel shirt partly tucked in but mostly untucked from his pants. He motioned for me to toss him the ball. He took it and held it up with one hand, a cigarette in the other. "So, this is what Club Concerned is about, huh? A round ball flung at a hoop." He threw the ball underhanded at the basket. It dropped through the net with a swish.

"Nice shot," Jerry said.

"Do you want to play?" I asked. "We're playing HORSE."

"You know, there's a lot of issues out there that need our time. We're wasting it here." He shook his head. "What's HORSE?"

Jerry explained, "If the person who goes before you makes a shot, you have to make it in the same way. If you miss, you get a letter. First person to get all letters in HORSE loses. If you make it, the next person has to try. If the person shooting before you misses, you get to create your own shot."

"Uh huh, sounds like a blast." Elliot crossed his arms. "What the hell does it have to do with the issues out there?"

I looked at the asphalt. Elliot was right. I was betraying the cause. There was no way I could justify it. But I was also not sorry. I wanted to be friends with Walt. I also would like to spend more time with Jerry. Elliot and I had been obsessed with creating Club Concerned. I just couldn't be as single-minded as he was. "We can do both, Elliot."

"I had great plans for this organization," Elliot said. "Great plans. Hell, it starts off with a few meetings, a rally cry, maybe some rock throwing. Next thing you know, there's demonstrations, sit-ins. I had my sights on Mr. Poindexter's desk chair. All those times he's called me in to give me a hard time for talking back to teachers, I've been eyeing that chair. It would have been nice to boot that bastard out of there. But now?" Elliot shook his head and sighed. "I really hate this fucking place," he said, seemingly more to himself than to us. I found myself holding the basketball, looking up at the grey clouds that signaled a cold fall.

"Let's get the hell out of here someday," I said, looking over to Jerry and Walt. "It's not worth changing."

Walt laughed. "Maybe we're not worth changing."

"Speak for yourself," Elliot said. "Yeah, you guys can spend the rest of eternity throwing that ball through that hoop but not Elliot Kreger. Oh no, big things are in store for me." He jabbed at his chest with his index finger. "You all can come along for the ride if you please, but get a firm grip. It's going to be fast and reckless, I can guarantee that."

I grinned. "That's good to hear. Are you going to play HORSE with us?" I held out the ball. "We'll make some changes, but not right now."

Elliot slowly shook his big head, his long hair swinging over his shoulders. "Real goddamn radicals," he said, placing his cigarette in the

corner of his mouth. "Throw me the ball, I'll show you guys a thing or two about this game."

We spent the rest of the afternoon playing an extended version of HORSE called HORSESHIT. Despite his lack of experience, Elliot held his own. Both Jerry and Walt were eliminated, and I polished off Elliot with a between the legs, double pump scoop, left-handed layup.

"That's T for you," I called.

"Horseshit," Elliot said, pulling a cigarette pack out of the pocket of his flannel shirt. "Real horseshit."

Over thirteen years had passed since that first game. In the interim the four of us had played a lot of basketball. As Elliot and I cruised down Ocean Boulevard on a late summer Saturday afternoon, I wondered when I could work basketball into this weekend. I was anxious for a game. There were some things that time could not change.

"Oh my God," Elliot called. "Stu's is a Chinese restaurant."

I looked up ahead on the right. There, in between Victor's Surf Shop and Trusty Toilet Fixtures was Stu's Chinese Restaurant. The old drive in was a new looking building of glass and cement. I shook my head.

"Shit." Elliot slouched down in his seat. "What's the world coming to when you can't get a Stu Dog with the works and a root beer in a frosted glass?"

"Hell if I know," I said, pulling a U-turn past Stu's and heading for my parents' house. "This indicates a real lack of respect for tradition."

"Tradition? Shit. That's a foreign word now." Elliot laughed. "Christ, here we are turning thirty and we sound like a couple of old farts. Screw

Stu's. We just won't eat there. We'll find someplace else."

We settled on an Arby's and Elliot had a jumbo beef. I had a BLT that I picked the bacon off of and a watered down Coke. We both shook our heads, lamenting the loss of Stu's.

8. SURPRISE, SURPRISE

"Hi, cutie." I grabbed Rebecca around the waist as she stood watering the marigolds that lined the pebbled driveway of my parents' house. Elliot had made his way inside after a big hug for Rebecca. "Is Jerry here yet?"

She gave me a closed-mouth smile. "He's here."

"He is? Great." I gave her a hug. "Is he upstairs or something? Where are Elaine and the kids?"

"He didn't bring Elaine."

"No?" I raised my eyebrows. "Is there a problem?"

"He brought Ben."

"Who?"

"I don't know. Ben. The doorbell rang, there was Jerry and next to him was this guy. 'Hi Rebecca. This is my friend, Ben.' What could I say? 'Hi, Jerry. Hi, Ben. Come on in.'"

"You're confusing me."

"Richie, don't you think it's a little strange that Jerry didn't bring his wife? I was expecting Elaine."

"Sure. It's a little strange. But, maybe he needed a little time away." I shrugged. "I'm sure Jerry can't keep up being the family man every minute

of his life."

"Richie, how's it going?"

I spun around, hearing Jerry's voice from the side of the house. "Jerry, you animal," I called. "It's about time you made it down here."

Jerry came into view. He looked absolutely sprightly in tennis shorts and a green LaCoste shirt, a little alligator menacing his left breast. Here was Jerry but no Elaine. Instead he was with a young guy in a black leather jacket with silver-studded cuffs. I stopped abruptly. "Well, I did get here before you and Elliot could make it back," Jerry said, smiling.

"The traffic on the parkway was hell," I said, resuming my pace, arms outstretched. "You would have thought everyone was coming to the New Jersey shore for this weekend. Maybe even this part. Before we know it Beach Cove will be crawling with every sort of New Jersey type. We'll have to walk around armed." I grabbed Jerry's arms and smiled at his wide face. The leather guy scowled into the sand filled yard, nudging a pebble with a leather booted toe.

"So, what's the story?" I asked. "Who's your friend?"

Jerry turned to his companion. "This is my friend Benjamin."

"Oh." I scratched my head and offered a right hand. "How's it going, Benjamin?"

He looked down at my palm and unfolded a hand from deep inside his armpit. "It's going OK." He touched my hand quickly, scraping me with the back of a grinning skull ring.

"So, where's Elaine?" I asked. "Did you leave her at home? How about the kids?"

"Yeah, well." Jerry stared down at his feet. "She's home."

"Yeah?"

"The kids are with her." Jerry looked over at Ben and smiled. "There's a lot I have to tell you guys about."

Uh oh, I thought. I didn't want to hear this. This was Jerry, steady, married, low-key Jerry. He was my rock of Gibraltar. I didn't want any true confessions from this guy, at least not this weekend.

"I've been waiting for this opportunity," he said, looking again at Ben.

I shook my head, letting out a little laugh. I hadn't planned for this moment. How could I? I had imagined the Jerry I had known in high school to show up here, the Jerry who was my first real friend at Manahawken High. He was the guy who I had stood next to at his wedding, trying to remember where I had put the ring, and hoping I hadn't lost it when I had shot baskets with Walt and a couple of neighborhood kids at the hoop in the rector's parking lot. If I had had time to consider, I would have remembered that Jerry was always full of surprises.

"I'm getting married and I want you to be best man," Jerry had announced one Saturday morning. It was 1977, the heart and soul of the seventies. Carter was in office; I was disillusioned with just about everything. We were having coffee at the Peppermint Lounge, a breakfast hot spot in Manahawken, owned by Jerry's Uncle Nunzio. This had become a Saturday routine for Jerry and me since we started going to Rutgers.

"You're kidding," I said, stretching my legs out on the orange vinyl booth. "You're not getting married."

"No, really. Elaine and I are really going to do it."

"Marriage is out. Our society's whole notion of bonding is akin to

ownership, Jerry." My rhetoric was polished through months of anti-social behavior. College was a drag. I spent the weekends on the island, escaping the mind-numbing drinking scene of New Brunswick. Jerry was home on weekends to spend more time with Elaine who was working as a secretary. "With marriage there's no avoiding the fact that you become slaves to each other."

"Richie, don't give me that bullshit." Jerry's wide face and full cheeks suddenly twisted in pain. Tears welled up in his eyes.

"Hey, whoa, I'm sorry. I was just spewing. Don't take it so seriously."

Jerry grabbed a napkin from the stainless steel dispenser and loudly blew his nose. "Elaine's pregnant. We're getting married and I'm dropping out of school to support us." He sniffled loudly.

I stared at Jerry's red rimmed eyes. "You're kidding?"

"I kid you not."

"Hey, I'm sorry, I didn't know it was that serious." I fumbled for a Camel from the pocket of my denim jacket. My hands shook. "Is this what you both want?"

"Of course. I love Elaine." Jerry blew his nose. "Hey, this is no funeral. We should be celebrating." His lips parted in a smile. "I'm going to be a father."

"You know, there is abortion. You could do that, go back to how it was, stay in school."

"Abortion? Are you kidding? Two good Catholics like us?"

"Has the Pope authorized pre-marital sex?"

"Fuck you." He placed his pudgy hands on the table. "So, I'm a hypocrite. Wake up, Richie. It's a way of life."

I smiled. "Sex isn't all it's cracked up to be, anyway." I tried to remember the last time I went out on a date. "I'm abstaining."

"You just can't get any women to buy your radical brand of bullshit." Jerry let out a long breath and sat back in his seat. "Elaine and I are happy."

"That's good. Real good." Elaine was a couple of years younger than we were. They had met at some church function, anointed each other with holiness, and started screwing like church mice. Perhaps I was bitter? "What about work? What're you going to do?"

"Elaine's father has offered me a job. It's not much, clerking in his hardware store. But it's steady."

"Yeah, steady. We all need that." I took a deep drag on my cigarette and stared at my best friend. I was losing him. I was jealous. "You sure this is what you want?"

"This is what we both want." Jerry gave a big smile, all traces of crying erased from his full face. "It'll be a blast of a wedding."

"Yeah." I smiled. "And I'd be honored to be your best man."

So, Jerry and Elaine were married, and he went to work for Elaine's old man. Seven months later they were parents. In the eleven years since they had two more kids and Jerry took over the hardware business when Elaine's father died. He expanded to five stores, throughout New Jersey. They bought a huge house in Bloomfield, among other rich Italians, most of whom made their money in ways much less honest than Jerry's. It was a life they had both seemed comfortable in as Jerry and I were turning thirty.

Elaine had become a large part of our lives together. I depended on seeing her when we got together, her long hair braided into a large bun. She was extremely short, and when Elliot would put his arm around her she looked

like his young daughter. But now there was something out of kilter.

"Uh, OK." I tried for a distraction, to give me time to deal with this new Jerry. I looked over at Rebecca, who was still hosing down the flowers, creating a major body of water by now. "Well, yeah. Have you seen Walt and his friend? I just dropped Elliot around here somewhere? Rebecca, have you seen them? Yeah, quite a weekend, it is quite hot out here." I took a few steps back as I jabbered, moving my head around like an owl.

"I'm going inside now," Rebecca announced, moving over to shut off the water. She flashed a quick smile. "Dinner will take some planning, and I'd better get started. Nice to meet you, Ben." With another flash of white teeth she was up the wooden steps and had escaped. Coward.

I paused for breath. "Well, why don't we all go inside? Have you seen Walt yet?"

"We saw Walt and his friend when we arrived. She seems like a nice person." Jerry motioned in the direction of the ocean. "Ben and I were going to take a walk down to the beach. I really wanted to show him the ocean. He's never seen it. Can you believe that? Never. When we crossed the bridge onto the island he nearly jumped out of the speeding car." Jerry let out a loud laugh and looked over at his friend. Ben seemed to be making some sort of demonic pulpit of rearranged rocks with his toe.

"Uh, OK, why don't you do that. I'll go inside and see how everyone's doing. OK? Yeah, that's what I'll do."

"OK, Richie." Jerry looked at me with his eyebrows arched up onto his wide pale forehead. "Ben and I will be back soon." Jerry threw me an unsteady smile and turned and grabbed his friend's arm. Together they

sauntered down to the beach. I watched Benjamin shuffle his steps in oversized black leather boots.

I stared up at a seagull crying overhead. I was leaning against the telephone pole that the basketball hoop was tacked to. I was turning thirty and my high school friends were showing up with strangers. I hurried inside to seek Rebecca's interpretation. She was always more objective than I.

I found her in the kitchen, being entertained by Elliot.

"It's a race, let me tell you." Elliot was sitting on the counter, still in his airplane clothes, white dress shirt and grey slacks. His large body filled the space like a major appliance. "Hey, Richie, I was just telling your squeeze here about life in the real world. You know, the business world that you two have been trying so hard to avoid. Yeah, it's tough out there, but assholes like me have to make the best of it."

I looked at Rebecca who was carefully chewing over her bottom lip.

"What's going on?" I asked.

She shrugged.

"What?" Elliot asked.

"Jerry's here," I said, taking a seat. "But not with Elaine and the kids."

"No kids?" Elliot cried out. "What a goddamn shame. Guess that means I don't have to censor my language. Too fucking bad."

Rebecca smiled. "I don't want to even imagine Elliot Kreger restrained. Mount Vesuvius revisited." She looked over at me. "I was expecting Elaine to be here. What did Jerry say when you talked with him on the phone?"

"Nothing unexpected: he was looking forward to coming down here, it had been a few years since he visited our old haunts since his parents moved away. There was no mention of Ben."

"Did you ask about Elaine?" she asked.

"Sure. I said, 'How's Elaine and the kids?' Jerry said, 'Fine.' That's all I know." I took a seat at the kitchen table. "Jerry's going to explain all of this eventually. I'm sure we can all think of many reasons why Jerry's here with some leatherette fresh out of high school."

"I don't think he's that young," Rebecca said.

"But what's he doing here?"

"Hold on a minute, kids." Elliot slipped off of the counter and firmly planted his feet. "You're telling me that our beloved Jerry has forsaken our equally beloved Elaine for some punky kid. Impossible. Jerry has always been a straight arrow. He's our rock of Gibraltar." Elliot held his hands up, palms forward. "While I was screwing around, traveling around the world, Richie here was frisking youths for explosives and Walt was, well, being Walt, Jerry was raising kids, running a business. No, too weird. Our Jerry is not a..."

"Don't even say it." I interrupted. "Elliot, you remember at their wedding, how Jerry's father and Elaine's father got real drunk and had it out in the church after the ceremony. Both families didn't want them to get married."

"What I remember is a young Richie Lewis, before he had the good fortune to start hanging out with you, Rebecca, pining for a certain maid in the wedding party. She was dressed in pink, with lips that looked like they could suck the starch right out of your tuxedo shirt."

I shook my head at Elliot. "That's the Jerry I remember. Why's everybody changing?" I yelled.

"Maybe there's a rational explanation," Rebecca said, always the empirical one. "Let's not be so hasty with our conclusions."

"I've never seen a couple more in love than Jerry and Elaine," Elliot said. "Except you two of course. But I mean a legally married couple."

"You haven't seen them for a few years," I said. "At least one kid ago."

"Well, the last time was when I was in for a trade show in Atlantic City. You remember?"

"Yeah, we all met you down there. Was Walt there?" I asked.

"Was I where?" Walt poked his head into the kitchen.

"Hey, Walter," Elliot bellowed, flinging himself off of the counter and at Walt. When they embraced, the lean Walt was swallowed up by Elliot and his billowing clothes.

"What's all the conversation about?" Walt asked, pushing himself from Elliot.

"Atlantic City, 1985," Elliot said. "You were there, right? And Rebecca and Richie and Jerry and Elaine. If I remember correctly, we were thrown out of several casinos because of Rebecca's anti-social behavior."

"What?" She stared wide-eyed.

"Oh yeah. Guzzling free drinks, gambling all of our money. All we could do was stare in horror. We were powerless to stop you."

"The way I remember it," Rebecca started, "Walt, Elaine, and I sat at the quarter slot machines throwing money away for an hour and then watched an overweight, cheaply dressed male dancer do a routine of Charo impressions. This was not exactly a hot time." She looked to Walt for corroboration.

"And the whole time Jerry and Richie were following you around trying to count cards at blackjack. Something about a foolproof method." Walt

said.

"It was foolproof," Elliot said. "Those places are all fixed. Everyone knows the Mafia doesn't let poor Jewish slobs like myself win large sums playing blackjack. A clear case of anti-semitism."

"We did get to play basketball," I said. I had found an old basket nailed up on a streetpole a few blocks from the casinos.

"The local kids let us borrow a ball and sat laughing at these jerky white guys playing inept two on two," Walt laughed.

"I think Richie and I won that game," Elliot said. "It was a last second turn around, top of the key." Elliot spun around to practice a jump shot. He landed off balance and crashed into the refrigerator. "Ahh! Ref, foul. I'll sue. Foul." He sat down heavily on the floor. "You guys get any beer yet?"

"But what about Jerry and Elaine being in love?" Rebecca asked. "The way I remember time the two of them didn't talk much. They weren't hostile with each other, but I don't remember them being very close. At the time it I didn't think about it much."

"So maybe I have a bad memory," Elliot said. "Who the hell knows?"

"Hi, everyone," Jerry said, coming into the kitchen. I could see Ben a few feet behind him. We were all suddenly quiet.

"Hi, Jerry. Hi, Ben," Rebecca finally said. "How was the beach?"

"Beautiful as always." Jerry smiled, pushing out his pudgy cheeks. "You know I love the seashore; I always have. I used to come down here to hang out with Richie as often as I could in high school."

"When your father let you have a break from his sweatshop," I said.

"Yeah, every couple of years or so." Jerry laughed. "Ben, come in here and join this crowd. These are my best friends in the world. Come on and get

to know everyone."

Ben shuffled his way in and stood against the wall, thumbs hooked in his jeans' pockets, head thrown back, exposing a knobby adam's apple.

"So, what line of work you in, Ben?" Elliot asked, sitting on the floor against the refrigerator.

"Ben's a student at Hunter," Jerry chimed in. "Undeclared."

"Oh." Elliot chewed his lower lip.

"Where are you from originally?" Rebecca asked.

"Ben's from upstate," Jerry said. "Near Oneonta."

"Hey Jerry, is Ben a professional mime or something?" Elliot asked, a smile on his face.

"He's shy," Jerry said. "But he's extremely eloquent."

"So, Jerry," I started. "Where's Elaine and the kids?"

"Well," Jerry stared down at his topsiders. "Elaine and I are separated."

We all looked at each other and then at Jerry. "Oh." I finally said.

"Why?"

Jerry cleared his throat and then looked up, catching all of us in his clear hazel eyes. "It seems I'm gay."

I wondered if I had heard correctly. Perhaps because that was what I was expecting Jerry to say I had actually imagined that he had. In reality he had said, "I'm ready to play," or, "I'm having a great day." Yes, that was what he had said.

"You're gay." Rebecca repeated.

"Yes." Jerry turned his eyes back down to his shoes. I looked over at Elliot who was squinting up at the bright lights of the ceiling.

"If you'all excuse me I have to see a man about a horse." Elliot raised his large body and made his way out of the kitchen.

"How do you know?" Walt asked, taking a seat at the kitchen table. Three of us were sitting now, with Jerry and Ben still standing.

"It's hard to explain." Jerry also took a seat at the table. He ran his hand through his thinning hair. I'd just now noticed that it was thinning. Jerry was getting older like the rest of us. "I can tell you about specific instances if you'd like, trace the whole sordid history," he said with a smile. "Believe me, I've done that in my head countless times."

"I don't think I want to hear that," I said.

"Elaine and I have been unhappy for quite some time now, several years. Or should I say I've been unhappy. You know, Richie, how in college you always lamented how you never quite felt satisfied, how every assumed big event in your life never worked out like you had planned?"

"Right. My bar-mitzvah, getting my driver's license, turning eighteen, my father dying." I paused. "Shall I go on?"

"Well, that's sort of how I was feeling. I love Elaine very much, but there was an emptiness in my life with her."

"What about your kids?" Rebecca asked.

"The kids I love. They'll be fine with Elaine. I'll give her enough money to be comfortable." Jerry sighed. "Believe me I've agonized over whether this would mortally wound them. I could just see Tony and his peers in third grade: 'My father's a fireman.'; 'my father's a pediatrician.'; 'my father's a fag hardware salesman.'"

We all laughed. It was good to hear old self-deprecating Jerry, my old chubby friend who was shtupping a young leather guy.

"But I had to do this for myself," Jerry continued. "I was going insane."

We all settled down in our chairs a bit more. I heard a slight humming. It was Ben, still up against the wall, his eyes half-closed. It sounded strangely enough like a Bach prelude.

Rebecca put her hand on Jerry's arm. "How's Elaine doing?"

"Oh, she's all right. I love her, I really do. She nearly shat when I told her. 'You like boys,' she screamed." Jerry wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. "But we talked about it for days. I love her, but I just wasn't complete. I had to do this for my own sake."

Ben's humming was becoming louder now. It was Bach Prelude Number Four I recalled from my adolescent piano lesson days.

"Benjamin," Jerry said loudly.

Ben's eyes snapped fully open. "Huh?"

"You were off in your dream land," Jerry said. "I'm spilling my guts here to my best friends, and you were dreaming of exotic beaches lined with speedo-garbed studs."

Ben scowled and blushed at the same time. I felt my own ears turn red.

"Do you play basketball, Ben?" I asked.

"Nah," he said.

"You planning the game?" Walt asked.

"Yeah, tomorrow I figure. Is that all right?"

"That's cool," Walt said. "If everyone else is into it."

"Sure they'll be. Isn't that what we're here for? Basketball, friends, incessant reminiscing. Have I missed anything?"

"Surprises?" Jerry said.

I smiled. "I suppose some of that too. Nothing ever does go quite like I

plan it." I stretched my arms over my head. "Well, I guess I'd better get some blankets and beddings for you, Jerry. You mind the living room?"

"No," Jerry said. "Ben and I don't mind."

I cleared my throat. "Well, I'll get some things from the basement." I got up and gave Rebecca's neck a quick rub. She reached out and squeezed Jerry's arm. "I'm glad you're happy now, Jerry," she said. "But I will miss Elaine."

"Me too." Jerry said.

I used my key to unlock the basement door and made my way downstairs.

9. THE JERRY I REMEMBER

The cedar-lined closet in the basement of my parents' house always reminded me of my father. I must have been seven or eight when he built it, and I could remember him down here, working on the weekends when he could get away from his shoe store. My father's home life was filled with such projects: closets to be built, shelves to hang, gaskets to be replaced in sink faucets. He'd go about his business with a paint-splattered canvas cap perched on his thinning hair and his "work" pants, canvas trousers that stopped about mid-ankle, held up with a wide black leather belt. We didn't throw a ball around much or go to Yankee games or Cub Scouts. Instead my father would nod approval at my report cards or grumble a quick "no" when I asked to do something that stretched the bounds of permissible behavior.

We did once try an activity called "Indian Guides" where my fellow kids and their fathers got together at a member's house and planned "activities." My father and I lasted only a couple of meetings, feeling out of place among the fathers keen on survival trips in the Pine Barrens and ready to challenge other communities to tests of sporting ability. In two meetings we never did anything particularly Native American except for wearing headbands with a single blue jay feather sticking out. I thought I'd die of embarrassment for my

father who sat quietly in the corner like a large plucked bird.

Even now, five years after his death, my parents' basement still held my father's tools, carefully picked out from Sears and Goodfellow's, the local hardware store. My mother never did get rid of his things and didn't take them down to her condo in Florida.

It was strange that Jerry's announcement had made me think of my father. There I was getting lost in an unrelated incident in my life to deflect serious thought of the moment. But, perhaps, the two were related. It was because of my father that Jerry and I had first become friends.

In ninth grade when I had started going to Manahawken High on the mainland, my few island friends were scattered out in the huge student population of the regional school. That year, though, I didn't mind not having friends. At least not during the fall and winter. It was then that I would take the bus home from school every weekday, shoot baskets at the hoop in front of my house and spend evenings listening to Knick games on a transistor radio that was shaped like an iguana, a souvenir from Florida. On non-game days I would pore over the statistics, the sports section spread across my bed, my well-thumbed Knick yearbook at arm's length. A couple of years before, the New York Knicks had won the NBA championship, anchored by their sore-kneed captain, Willis Reed. They were known as the thinking man's team, defeating taller and faster opponents with precision teamwork, pin-point passing, and cool temperaments. They were my heroes, but my parents wouldn't let me go to any of their games.

"Your father goes into the city every day during the week," my mother told me. "You can't expect him to make a special trip to that slum on weekends."

"I'll meet him there after work then. How about that? We'll catch a seven o'clock game."

"You're not going in there by yourself. It's too dangerous. New York is a very dangerous place for young boys."

I tried to imagine what could happen to me. There were the usual muggers who'd take my money. Perhaps a dripping-faced mutant might spring out of a manhole and drag me down to his underworld. I could even imagine getting lost in a huge city, far from the New Jersey shore, but that didn't faze me much. I could ask for directions.

I tried my case on my father a few times.

"Just one game, Dad. It'll be great."

He looked at me over his half-glasses, the Star Ledger in his hands. "Isn't it about your bedtime?"

"Sure, it is. But what about the Knicks?"

He leaned back and let out a great sigh. "I really don't want to make a special trip into the city. Especially this time of year. Those trains are so damn over-heated and over-crowded. They're always breaking down."

"I won't mind," I shouted, trying to drive a wedge into a glimmer of an opening.

"I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks, Dad." I ran up to my room to thumb through my Knicks yearbook again, practicing the motivational shouts that my players would need. I closed my eyes and saw Willis Reed point up to the stands at me and wave. The public address announcer calls, "And Captain Willis Reed would like to take special time to thank Richard Lewis of Beach Cove, New Jersey,

for his longstanding support and admiration."

The vendors give me free hot dogs. My fellow spectators reach out to slap my hands. My father smiles proudly.

On Wednesday that week my father interrupted his after-dinner ritual of reading every page of The New York Times to call me over from in front of the television.

"Richie, I need to talk with you," he called.

"What is it?" I asked quickly, making sure my anger at being denied a Knick game was clearly evident.

My father reached into the hip pocket of his trousers and brought out his fat, cracked leather wallet. He slowly opened it and pulled out two tickets from the bill section. "I thought we might take in a basketball game," he said, handing me the tickets.

I studied them carefully. They looked authentic. Madison Square Garden. The New York Knicks versus the Baltimore Bullets. A Saturday 7:30 starting time. I looked up at my father, feeling my face spread into a grin.

"Excellent," I said.

My father took a long look at me over his half-glasses and then turned back to his paper.

Three Saturdays later my father and I set off for Madison Square Garden. We took a bus from Beach Cove to Manahawken. The traffic was heavy due to an accident on the bridge, and we missed our train. After an hour of sitting in the Manahawken train station, we boarded a NJ Transit train headed for Penn. Station. The first half-hour we clipped along fine, and I stared at the passing meadowland, figuring out what we would have missed by the time we arrived. Probably just warmups. We'd be there in time for the opening

tap. The train then slowly squeaked to a stop. After twenty minutes I could see two conductors standing outside pointing at something under the train. After another twenty minutes there was a scratchy announcement over the P.A. system.

"Folks, we have an equipment problem. It looks like we'll be here awhile, so you can make yourselves comfortable. We'll be going again as soon as possible."

I looked over at my father who shook his head and rustled his newspaper. I stared at the marshes outside, tall reeds slowly waving in the ice incrustated muck. If the train were fixed in fifteen minutes, we'd still make the second half. Perhaps time for another furious Knick comeback. I sat back in my seat imagining rushing outside to help fix the train. "OK, you guys, move aside and let someone who knows what he's doing fix this. See? You just need to turn that screw a couple of times. Easy. Now, let's get a move on."

An hour later the train lurched a few times and slowly crawled forward. At this speed we made the next station at four o'clock. The Knicks and their opponents had given locker room interviews, showered, dressed and were making plans for dinner. My father and I got off at Red Bank and caught the next train back south for home.

I didn't ask to go to another game, and my father didn't offer though my disappointment was clear. I cried for two days. The Knicks had lost. I had let them down.

It was about a month later, as I sat in my desk in homeroom with the boxscore from the previous night's Knick game taped to the front of my notebook, that I met Jerry. He was three rows over among the M's, between Markowitz and Myers. He was Mazio.

"Hey, is that the Knick game?"

I looked up. This was unusual. People three rows apart didn't usually talk during homeroom. Only those directly adjacent. "Yeah."

"How many did Barnett score?" Jerry asked, his flannel shirt strained from his soon to be greatly enlarged belly. I would soon find that Jerry loved to eat, and his mother was no help, filling his pockets with Italian pastries and his daily lunch bag with enough food to feed a small family.

"He had eighteen."

"You ever been to a game?" he asked.

"Uh, no."

"You want to go sometime?"

I smiled. "Sure."

"How about next Saturday? My Uncle Lucky left a pair of tickets at my house that he couldn't use. He has jury duty. I always see you studying the scores, so I thought you might want to go."

I smiled even wider. "Sure." Then I thought about what I had agreed to. "How do we get there?"

"We'll take the train."

"But I live out on the island."

"There's busses to Manahawken, aren't there?"

"Yeah." I bit my lip.

"You telling me your parents won't let you? You're fourteen. I go into the city all of the time. I have relatives on the East Side."

"Yeah, my parents can be uncool. But I'll work it out. I'll meet you at the Manahawken train station at nine."

"Nine? That's four hours before tip-off. You think we need that much time?"

"We can hang around Rockefeller center and watch people skate. It'll be fun."

"Sure." Jerry turned to go back to his seat. "I'm Jerry Mazio by the way."

"Richie Lewis." I took his outstretched hand.

"Yeah, I know from the roll calling." He smiled, his pudgy cheeks like a chipmunk's. "We'll have a good time."

"Yeah," I said, immediately devising defensive schemes to spring on my parents.

On the Saturday morning of the game I announced in the kitchen, "I'm going to go over to the mainland today. I'll be spending the day there."

My mother looked up over the egg she was boiling for my father. She'd judge two minutes not by looking at the clock but by the sound the egg made when she tapped it with a fork as it bobbed in the boiling water. She knew when it sounded ready.

"What will you be doing over there?" she asked.

"Uh, well, I met this guy at school, Jerry. We're going to study some algebra, talk and stuff like that. He says he has a nice house."

"Does he have a phone number?"

"Uh, well," I looked down. "I'll call you when I get there. I'll call every fifteen minutes."

"You don't have to do that." She waved her fork at me, the other hand on her hip. "Just call when you get there and give me the phone number in case of an emergency."

"What could be so important that you'd need to call me? If the house

burns down, I'll find out when I get home."

"Richard." She narrowed her eyes at me. "Just call. And say goodbye to your father before you go."

I opened the door to the basement and shouted, "See you, Dad. I'll be gone all day. I'll call when I get there. I'll come home in case the house is on fire." I heard the sound of a power saw come to a halt.

"What's that?" he called.

"See you," I yelled and closed the door.

On the bus ride to Manahawken I worried over what to tell my mother about Jerry's phone number. I could give her his number though we wouldn't be there. She might call it to check up on me, and Mrs. Mazio would tell her all about the escapades of her delinquent son. I'd then be buried up to my neck in the sand at low tide.

I could give her a random phone number, which she might call and get "Alfredo's One-Minute Massage." My fate would be the same.

By the time I arrived in Manahawken, I had no real answers. Maybe Jerry would have a good idea.

"I don't know," he said. "Why do your parents care?"

"They worry about me. They also hate New York City. They even lived there a long time. I was born there. It's just their personality. Especially my mother. Very cautious."

"Tell you what," Jerry said. "My brother Angelo has an apartment in town. Right over the five and ten. We'll give her his number."

"Are you sure he's there today?"

"Oh yeah. Saturday is his day to practice hair styling on wigs. He's training to be a barber or a beautician. I'm not sure which."

"You sure this will work?"

"Oh yeah. I'll set it up, and Angelo will cover for us. He owes me a favor anyway. When we were kids, he broke a lamp, one of my mother's favorites. She gave me a beating, trying to get me to tell her who did it. But I didn't tell. Angelo owes me for that for the rest of his life."

So that was our plan. Jerry called his brother, and I called my mother and gave her Angelo's phone number in Manahawken.

We then caught the train for Manhattan. The whole ride up Jerry and I talked about high school, about our classes, about how we felt to be freshmen. Jerry still had some friends from junior high, but mainly he was in the same boat that I was. It was time for new friends.

When we arrived in New York, we had an hour to kill before they'd let us into Madison Square Garden, so we bought pretzels and went to watch the ice skaters at Rockefeller Center. Jerry wanted us to skate, but I counted the money I had brought, and I wouldn't have enough left over for the program, the food and the official Knick wristband that I had planned on buying. Instead we just watched, munching on the pretzels that tasted like the smoke from the vendor's cart. Whenever someone did a particularly fancy move or just fell down, we would point and laugh.

The rest of the afternoon was complete immersion into the Knicks. I watched slack-jawed as they went through warmups and shooting drills. Our seats were four rows up behind the clear plastic blackboard, so we could hear every squeak of the sneakers, every grunt and shout, every slap of the ball on the court. I was in Knick heaven.

The game went fast. Faster than when I listened on radio. The Knicks

won 130 to 95 and Willis Reed had twenty five points, twelve rebounds and three blocked shots. The game was never close.

Jerry and I didn't talk much during the game nor much afterwards. We filed out of the Garden, down to the trains and boarded the train heading south for Manahawken. I wore my Knick wristband, wondering if my parents would notice it.

"Thanks, Jerry," I said when he saw me off at my bus. "That was great. I'm glad we did it."

"Yeah, me too. See, New York isn't so bad."

"You tell my mother that." I grinned and waved. "See you in school on Monday."

I got home around five o'clock and my parents were preparing to go out with friends.

"Did you have a good time?" my mother called.

"Yeah, it was all right," I said, heading for my room.

"There's a TV dinner in the oven. All you have to do is turn it on."

I closed the door to my room and pulled out the game program that I had tucked inside my flannel shirt. I reread each story and savored the obscure statistics: "High School points per game average"; "Most rebounds in a five minute period." When I heard the front door close, I came out and headed downstairs. I turned on the oven and wondered how I would spend the time until the eleven o'clock news would show highlights from the Knick game.

10. CORN HUSKS AND CLAM SHELLS

Back in my father's basement I stared into the cedar closet and realized that there were no blankets and pillows here for my friends who had come to visit. Everything was in an upstairs linen closet, easily accessed by the inhabiting renters. I had no reason to come down here.

Before snapping off the light, I took a quick look around the basement. It was about the same as my father had left it when he and my mother moved to Florida: the cinderblock walls were stained with broad white water lines, tools hung on pegboard, in size order, a large vacuum cleaner ready to suck up sawdust next to a pump for draining the frequent floodwater. A few of the wooden figurines my father was fond of making the last few years of his life were propped on his workbench. They stared stoically, knowing more about my father than I ever would. The closet still held several of my father's old pin-striped suits, his work uniform while clothing the multi-footed monster of thirty years of squirmy kids. The basement was kept locked when renters swarmed over the house. It was one less room to line with generic, durable seashore items, and the frequent summer flooding was kept out of the consciousness of the vacationing renter. The realtor hadn't removed my father's things, and my mother had left them intact when she'd left. I'd have

to clear out this place at some point.

I made my way upstairs. The kitchen was empty, a circle of abandoned coffee cups on the counter. I moved into the living room and plopped down onto the couch. It was a few moments before I realized that Ismeralda was sitting in the rocking chair, a hardback book propped up in her hands.

"Hi," I said.

"Hello Richie." She smiled her brilliant white smile and caught my eyes for a moment.

"Where did everyone go?" I asked.

"They are outside peeling corn and shucking clams. Dinner is being prepared."

"Oh." I put my chin in my hand and let out a breath. "Ben and Jerry, too?"

"Yes." She raised the book in front of her eyes and then quickly lowered it. "Walter told me that your friend is a homosexual."

I nodded. "Yeah."

"In my family it is very rare for a man to admit he is a homosexual. Sexual prowess is very important to the men. It would be humiliating for them to admit that they longed for other men. It is very brave of Jerry to make this admission."

"Yeah, I suppose."

"You were surprised?"

"Of course." I sat up. "I'm uncomfortable with this. It makes me look through our lives searching for signs, for indications. But he's still Jerry. He's still my friend."

"Walter thinks we are all bisexual. He has told me he sometimes longs

for other men."

I lowered my eyes. "I don't think I want to hear about that."

"I agree with him. I have slept with other women. The physical closeness that you need from other people can be received regardless of gender. It's the contact that is important, the skin touching skin. When viewed through a microscope, what difference does it make what an organ is shaped like or what emptiness is being filled?"

I stood up. "Uh, I'm going to go outside and see if I can help out there. Give me a yell if you need anything."

"I am fine right here." Ismeralda gave me another brilliant smile and raised her book back in front of her eyes.

Outside Jerry and Ben were sitting on the ground, pulling husks off of corn ears while Rebecca and Walt pried open large black clam shells.

"Hi y'all," I said. "Where's Elliot?"

"Haven't seen him," Rebecca said.

"He's missing out on important feast production," Jerry said. "But I'm sure he'll be around when we get to some serious eating." Ben was carefully peeling an ear of corn, as if unwrapping a present he really didn't want.

"Well, do you need me out here?" I asked.

"I think we've got it covered if you want to do something else," Rebecca said. "Don't forget you're grilling the fish."

"What kind?" Jerry asked.

"Fluke. I picked up some beautiful fish this morning at M and M."

"Wonderful." Jerry piled an ear of corn onto the top of the pyramid he had formed.

"Well, I'm going to wander down to the beach then, you know, do some private reminiscing. Maybe Elliot will be there."

"OK," Rebecca called, her attention fixed on the wet clam shell in her palm.

"Hey Richie, it's terrific to be here," Jerry said. "This was a truly fantastic idea."

"You think so?" I smiled. "I'm glad you guys are here." I started walking backwards. "I'll be back soon."

I slipped out around the side of the house, past the row of three garbage cans, past the smooth raised dirt bed where my mother had grown fat tomatoes and perpetually shriveled eggplants. Everyone was now here at the house on the New Jersey shore where I had spent a significant portion of my life. I couldn't say it was turning out like I had expected, but that didn't surprise me. Jerry was gay. I could accept that.

I made my way down to the beach at the end of the block. I didn't see very many people on the street, probably because the summer season had ended a couple of weeks earlier on Labor Day. Mid-September was much more serene, more civilized. The nights were cool with a smell in the air that threatened the biting cold of winter. The days were still hot, though by the late afternoon it was wise to wear a sweat shirt or a jacket.

I stood facing the ocean and wrapped my arms around each other as I felt the pestering wind off of the water and wished I had stopped inside for more clothing. When I lived here, I could wear summer clothes well into November. I had tough skin from being outside all the time, the blowing sand and salt forming a layer of insulation that I washed off every night in the shower. The occasional fall tourists, bundled in bulky sweaters and hats

with ear flaps, would stare open-mouthed as I jogged by in gym shorts and a t-shirt. But now I was cold.

This was also a good time of the year for surfing. The waves grew in confidence. That was something I had never tried. "Hey Buddy," I heard from my right as I looked over rough surf.

I glanced over and saw Elliot sitting on his hands on a bench tucked along the dunes. "What's the word, guy?"

"Nothing much." His white shirt was unbuttoned and billowing like a sail. Elliot looked like a hairy buddha.

I sat down on the bench, kicking off my sandals and squirming my toes in the still warm sand. A layer underneath was cold.

"What do you make of it?" Elliot asked.

"What?"

"You know what I'm talking about. Jerry. And that creep he's leading around on a leash. Fucking beats the hell out of me."

"So, Jerry's gay. It's not such a big deal? I never thought you were so macho that you couldn't handle that."

"Maybe you were wrong." Elliot reached into his shirt pocket for a crumpled cigarette pack and shook out a couple. He offered me one.

"Does it make you wonder if maybe, perhaps you yourself are gay?" I said this with a smile, lighting my cigarette on Elliot's match.

"Nah, I'm as straight as they come. A regular Brigham Young. Except minus the wives."

I pulled a few drags on my cigarette, feeling the conversation slip onto extremely sensitive footing. "Would it be different if Elaine were here?"

Elliot didn't answer right away. "Maybe. Jerry and Elaine were

comfortable with each other. There wasn't that disgusting enthusiasm you get with new relationships. Now I have to deal with Walt and his squeeze, you and Rebecca, and Jerry and his guy. That shit turns my stomach."

"You could have brought someone, you know. I told you that you could."

"There wasn't anyone to bring." Elliot brought his arms over his head and stretched until his shoulders popped. "I was almost married in Israel, I've told you all about that."

"Yeah, you told me some."

"Now I'm in fucking Silicon Valley selling micro-chips to people with as much social skills as toast."

I laughed. "No one has stolen your heart, huh?"

"I work too hard." Elliot ground out his cigarette on the cement arm rest. "But I'll find the time. Don't you worry about me."

"I'd like to hear about that woman in Israel again. I like that story."

"Yeah, me too." Elliot moved to the edge of the bench. "Shit, it's getting cold out here. Let's head back and concentrate on serious eating."

"Sure." I followed Elliot back up the dune to where the street ended and took another look at the ocean. I had seen this view nearly every day for ten years. On a quick glance it had hardly changed. But when I looked carefully, I could tell the beach had eroded, the sand washed away. There was a sharp drop at the high tide line that had never been there when I was a kid.

"Let's go, Rich," Elliot yelled, his voice carried away by the swirling wind.

"Right," I said softly, picking up my sandals and heading away from the shore.

11. ELLIOT'S STORY

Elliot graduated from high school along with the rest of us on a hot June night in Manahawken, the air thick with humidity. We were in the school's football stadium, sweating under our robes, and Elliot chose to go out with his usual flair.

Mr. Poindexter, the school's vice-principle of discipline, stood behind the podium, shuffling his notes, half-glasses perched on the end of his nose. "Thank you, Reverend Swaine for your invocation. Now, I'd like to introduce the salutatorian of the class of 1975, who, uh, whose name I can't find right now." He rattled his papers against the microphone. "At any rate, I'm sure this young person will do a fine job of introducing himself. Ladies and gentlemen, our graduating class' salutatorian."

There was light applause, and Elliot rose up from his spot among his fellow students and stepped to the microphone. "Thank you, Mr. Poindexter," Elliot said, leaning his forearms on the podium. His long brown hair, parted in the middle to reveal his big bony face, was kept in place by a torn off Hanes underwear band. In his billowing graduation gown, Elliot engulfed the podium like a python squeezing a small animal. "I know you've all heard a great couple of speeches so far," Elliot said. "But I'd just

like to add something."

I looked over at Jerry a few places down the row from me. He shrugged. Elliot wasn't second in the class. He was more like second hundred. But no one was trying to stop him from making his speech.

"My name is Elliot Kreger and I too would like to thank our teachers and administrators for bringing us all here for this night. I would thank my parents as well, but they're not here tonight. My Dad lives somewhere outside of Austin, Texas, and my mother is a nurse. She couldn't get off of her shift because she's been late to work four times this month."

The audience began to murmur, sensing something not right here. Still Mr. Poindexter made no move to stop Elliot.

"But let me throw some perspective on all of this," his loud voice boomed out over the P.A. system. "It's 1975. Our high school years have been highlighted by perfect cupcakes in home ec, perfect somersaults in gym, and perfect tin ashtrays in metal shop. Amid this quest for perfection we've finally pulled out of Vietnam, Mr. Nixon has been exposed by Watergate and resigned, and Mr. Ford is our president, a man whose blandness is the perfection of our high school years. Dare to be bland, Mr. Ford says to us all. And we try. Yes, we try so very hard." Elliot looked over his audience with a wide grin.

"Parents, friends, teachers and administrators, what you have before you is an entire high school class that dares to be bland.

"Well, now we've graduated. We're all clutching the proof in our fists, ready to spread blandness from Trenton to Tallahassee. That, my audience, is our fate. That is our credo. It's been four years of bland, and we've only just begun."

Elliot paused. Amid the struck silence of the audience a smattering of applause broke out from the elementary school kids who liked to clap. But Elliot wasn't finished.

"The Greeks said that only in sorrow do we find truth. Well, our sorrow is long over. The truth was too much to handle. Let me finish with this thought. If only in sorrow do we find the truth, then only in blandness do we find our true selves. I have seen that reality in all of us. I thank you for letting me share it."

Elliot thrust his right fist into the air, his diploma clutched in his beefy hand.

I looked over at Jerry who was slowly shaking his head. I wasn't totally sure what Elliot was talking about, but I was smart enough to know it wasn't good. The audience murmur was becoming a low-pitched groan. I could see my parents opening and closing their mouths like fish. Mr. Poindexter, after waiting too long and in danger of losing control, stepped to the microphone.

"Well, that was the salutatorian speech by, uh," he shuffled his notes. "Ms. Jenine Franks?" His face quickly grew crimson. "Now, we'll have the valedictorian's address. Mr. John Lee?" He looked over his shoulder until a slim dark haired boy stepped out of the rows of students and toward the podium. Mr. Poindexter checked the student's ID card before allowing him to go on.

After the ceremony, as we mingled on the wet grass of the football field, Jerry and I found Elliot, his arm around his girlfriend, Sheila, a can of beer in his hand.

"Elliot, you anarchist," I shouted. "How the hell did you pull that off?"

Elliot laughed. "Jenine Franks owed me a favor. Hell, when we were paired in civil law class, I did all of the work. She owed me."

"Is she here?" Jerry asked.

"No, she has the flu. Goddamn shame." Elliot grinned, taking a long swallow of beer.

"Mr. Kreger," we heard in a voice that was wavering with hysteria. "Mr. Kreger," it repeated, coming closer.

"Oh shit," Elliot said, taking his arm off of his girlfriend. "Hey Sheila, why don't you find your parents. I'm sure they want to congratulate you. And hit them up for ten bucks so we can go out after this."

"Sure, Elliot." Sheila gave him a quick peck on the cheek and stepped into the mass of students.

"Kreger," we heard again. The crowd parted to allow Mr. Poindexter to make his way through. "Kreger, that was the last straw," he shouted, his gray suit shining like metal. He was pointing a long thin finger that was shaking rapidly.

"Good to see you, Mr. Poindexter," Elliot said, "And thank you for your good wishes on my future."

"What's this?" Poindexter said, pointing at Elliot's beer. "Drinking on school grounds? That's a violation, Kreger. I can withhold your diploma."

Elliot took another swallow of beer. "Excuse any unintentioned disrespect, Mr. Poindexter, but who gives a flying fuck?" Elliot pulled his diploma from the folds of his robe. "Here it is. I'm gone. You're too late."

"Oh yeah?" The veins on Mr. Poindexter's neck stood out like highway dividers. "That diploma is a mere formality. I still have your transcripts. Just try applying to college without an official graduation seal because you've

been expelled. Just try." He moved to within a few inches of Elliot's face, his lips pulled back to show yellow teeth. Mr. Poindexter was a tall man, at least Elliot's height, though Elliot had a good thirty pounds on him.

Elliot narrowed his eyes. "Fuck college, Poindexter. All that will do is expose me to four more years of assholes like yourself."

Without stepping back, Mr. Poindexter cocked his elbow and brought his fist straight into Elliot's stomach. Elliot folded over at the waist, dropping his beer can.

"That's what assholes like me think of punks like you, Kreger." Mr. Poindexter straightened his tie. "Get up and get off of these grounds before I call the police. You've been threatening me, and I don't like that."

I grabbed Elliot by the arm and pulled him to his feet. His breath came in loud rasps, and his hands were clenched in club-like fists. "Let's split, Elliot," I said, staring at Mr. Poindexter. "It's not worth it. Let's go."

"Smart choice, young man." Mr. Poindexter rubbed his palms together. "Take your friend out of here."

"Come on," I shouted to Jerry who stared at Mr. Poindexter with wide eyes. "Let's go."

Jerry grabbed Elliot's other arm and the three of us walked slowly out of the stadium. The crowd of laughing and smiling parents and students paid us no attention. We led Elliot to his Chevelle Malibu parked in the spot in the parking lot labeled "Reserved for Coach."

"Are you OK?" I asked.

Elliot swallowed hard. "Yeah, sure."

"I can't believe he did that," Jerry said. "And no one else took any notice. It was like it wasn't really happening."

"It happened." Elliot lifted his graduation gown over his head and threw it in a ball onto the street. "Fucking Nazi." He lifted himself to the hood of his car. His t-shirt was soaked dark blue with sweat.

"Can we do anything?" I asked. "Isn't there someone we can complain to? He can't get away with punching kids."

"Forget it, Richie." Elliot patted the pockets of his jeans and pulled out a cigarette pack and shook one out for me. "I made him look bad. I deserved it."

"You got your say in," Jerry said. "Great speech."

"Yeah." Elliot lit a cigarette and took several deep drags. "I'm leaving for Israel next week anyway."

"You're what?" I took a cigarette from Elliot's pack.

"I've arranged to work and live on a Kibbutz in the Negev desert. I've had it with this goddamn society. Goddamn Jerry Ford."

"Good first name," Jerry smiled.

Elliot glared. "Right."

"Don't you think that's quitting?" I asked, pointing at Elliot with my cigarette. "I thought you wanted to work to change this society."

"I have, I've worked. And look what we have now. Gerald Ford. To tell you the truth I preferred Nixon. At least he had some personality. Evil, perhaps, but there nevertheless."

"I don't think you really believe that." I shook my head. "You're not going to Rutgers with me and Jerry then?"

Elliot shook his big head, his long hair dangling in front of his eyes.

"That's not for me. I need a change."

"We'll miss you, Elliot," Jerry said, arms wrapped around his graduation robe. "Good luck."

"Thanks." Elliot exhaled a long stream of smoke. "You can come too, you guys. How about it, Rich? An honest day's labor, working for the collective, folk songs at night under the bright stars of the Negev. A couple of dark-skinned Israeli woman to massage our tired muscles."

I managed a weak smile. "Sounds real nice. But I'm all registered at Rutgers. I can't leave the country."

"Yeah. I didn't think so."

As the three of us sat there we could here the noise of the crowd on the field.

"You tell Walt yet?" I asked.

"No, not yet. I was going to tell all of you together, but Walt didn't feel like showing up to graduation, and I just couldn't find the right time. I heard he was going to some art school in the city."

"Yeah, Parson's," Jerry said. "I suppose he'll live there."

"I suppose." I flicked the ash of my cigarette onto my robe.

"Well, I have to go, guys." Elliot threw his cigarette to the ground. "I promised Sheila that I'd take her to Wildwood to go on the Ferris Wheel."

"You're not going to any of the parties?" Jerry asked.

"Nah, just a quiet evening alone with Sheila amid the screaming jerks on the Wildwood Boardwalk." Elliot grinned. "I'm leaving soon, so we want to spend as much time together as possible."

"Sure," Jerry said. "I understand."

Elliot pulled himself off of the hood and opened the door to his car. "You guys need a ride anywhere?"

I looked at Jerry. "No, we'll stay here," I said. "I haven't even seen my parents yet. They're probably wandering around the field looking very confused."

"OK." Elliot's car started with a loud rumble of its engine. "I'll see you before I go. You might want some of my stuff." Elliot waved and put his car in gear. With a screech of tires he pulled a u-turn, ran over his graduation gown, and honked his horn as he sped down the street.

I tried not to look at Jerry as I fought the tears that were pushing themselves into my eyes.

"Let's find our parents," Jerry said, as the sky flashed with sheet lightning.

I nodded and followed Jerry back into the stadium.

Elliot went to Israel. In his disgust with his native country and with a penchant for adventure Elliot settled on a Kibbutz in the Negev desert. There he worked with his fellow Kibbutznicks to carve out a living in the oppressive, barren world of the Negev. This was a place that had never seen long rows of cotton, irrigated by an intricate canal system, or a thriving, close-knit community, working side by side in the fields and in the low buildings they had built from cement mixed with desert sand.

In this world Elliot thought he would find the politics and idealism that he had struggled for in high school. There were other Americans there, as well as a few Europeans and a majority of native Israelis. Everyone was young, the eldest around forty, and they lived in Kibbutz Ramon near the tiny Negev town of Mitzpe Ramon, previously a stopping point for Bediouns on their treks to the Red Sea.

In Kibbutz Ramon Elliot was still the same big, brash loud-mouthed guy that I knew in New Jersey except now he was called Eli. The Kibbutz was a place where people spoke what was on their minds. Elliot fit right in.

"The distribution system we are using really sucks," Elliot said at a weekly Kibbutz meeting. "I work alongside some extremely hard working people. They deserve at least everything that is given to them. On the other hand there are those who do very little, preferring to spend most of their time reading Arabic comic books while locked in the johns. I don't think this is fair. Why should they get everything that they desire when they don't do equal work?"

The elected Kibbutz secretary, Ehud Feinstein, shook his head. "Who is to decide which job is worth more than another? Is there a book we can consult? Should we give more to the person who maintains armed guard against our Arab neighbors than the person who empties our garbage? Both of these persons perform valuable services, Eli. How can we rate one as more valuable than the other? And we are not giving out much here. We have weekly allowances but not much other than that. Eli, you have only been here three months. You are only a candidate for membership of Kibbutz Ramon. Give it some more time to understand how different people work at different jobs here."

"I'm not talking about different jobs, Ehud. I'm talking about people not doing their job."

"This is a community, Eli. Two hundred of us live together, eat together, work together, sleep together, and make rules together. Are you going to submit a list of all those you think are not performing their required tasks?"

Do you think its our job to enforce such lapses? Believe me, it will catch up to the person who is slacking off. We have our own internal ways, many of them subtle, of dealing with such problems. You have only been here a short while. You haven't seen all of our ways yet."

"I've been here long enough to identify some problems of the community, Ehud," Elliot said. "I left my country to find a better way. Now I'm trying to help shape that."

"We appreciate your help, Eli." Ehud ran his fingers through his beard. "Now we will move on to the next issue. A disease is overcoming our goats. Do we try to cure this disease, or should we slaughter all of the goats and start fresh? Any suggestions?"

Elliot left the meeting room, throwing his Kibbutz issue, green Israeli army fatigue jacket over his wide shoulders. He walked outside, waving to a gun carrying compatriot who sat facing Jordan to the east. Elliot reached into his pocket and pulled out a cigarette pack. He leaned against a wooden support pole and inhaled the crisp cool night air of the desert. It had been only three months, and Elliot knew he shouldn't push so hard, but he had rarely ever tried another way. Still, life on the Kibbutz beat the hell out of life in New Jersey. People were motivated by a common good. No one merely talked about complete democracy, they carried it out. There was no hanging out in shopping malls, discussing how to beat the latest pinball game. Instead there was talk of cotton production, maximizing the labor force, deciding whether children should stay with their parents for one year or for seven.

Elliot felt a hand on his shoulder. "Spare a cigarette?"

He turned to see a fellow member, in Hebrew a *haver*. It was Chaya, a woman he had been watching that morning four rows over in the cotton

fields. He had marveled over the efficiency of her fast moving hands, separating the cotton from the prickly stalks. Elliot's inexperienced fingers had yet to become anything but cramped and bleeding. Now one of those hands was on his shoulder.

He shook a cigarette out of his pack.

"Where are you from in America?" she asked, lighting the cigarette on the match Elliot lit after fumbling with swollen fingers. Chaya's skin glowed over the yellow light of the match. She had very dark hair that usually fell in ringlets around her thin, deeply tanned face. Tonight her hair was tied in back with a leather strap, fully exposing her eyes lined from squinting in the hot desert.

"I'm from New Jersey. Have you ever been there?"

Chaya laughed loudly, a deep sound that seemed to come from far inside of her body. "I was born here on Ramon. I was once in Tel Aviv."

They stood back to back against the thick support pole and Elliot tried to see Chaya out of the corner of his eye. She was also wearing a faded green fatigue jacket, and she was much shorter than he was. He could only see the top of her head, shining in the near dark. "I think it's very beautiful here."

"Yes, I can see that." She blew out a stream of smoke that curled around Elliot. "How old do you think I am?" she asked.

Elliot shrugged. "I'm not sure."

"Go ahead, you guess."

"Well, I know that the original Kibbutzim came here in the early fifties. So, uh, I don't know, twenty seven or so if you were among the first generation born here." Elliot imagined a small Chaya, clearing desert scrub

with hands that would never have been used to set up pretend tea parties.

"I'm seventeen," Chaya said, coming around to face Elliot. "Look at my face. This is the face of a *haver* child, one who knows no childhood. I was born here on the Kibbutz but not of the first generation." She inhaled a deep drag on her cigarette. "There are some here of my generation who already look like old men and women." She laughed lightly. "You probably think I'm being so incredibly vain. So anti-kibbutz."

"No, I don't think that." Elliot reached down and rubbed his forefinger along Chaya's taut neck. "You're very beautiful."

Chaya lowered her eyes briefly and then up again at Elliot. "You're very tall." She laughed loudly. "I'm not."

"I like this place," Elliot said. "Do you think I'll be selected as a *haver*?"

Chaya shrugged. "You have six months as a candidate. Who knows what will happen. Perhaps you'll be rejected. It happens a lot here. This is a small community, and it is very careful about who it can support." She took a long drag on her cigarette. "If you don't become a *haver*, will you return to New Jersey?"

"I can't imagine that." Elliot threw his cigarette to the ground and pressed it with his heel. "I can't see myself going back."

"I often can't see myself staying here." Chaya came closer to Elliot and pressed her body against his. "*Sabra* women are very direct, you know. We don't try to act coy or kittenish."

"So I've heard."

"What do you say we explore the *Maktesh Ramon*."

"Sure." Elliot grinned, grabbing Chaya's outstretched hand. As she led him to the *Maktesh*, he winced as his sore fingers were squeezed in her strong

grip, but he didn't cry out.

They stopped at the rim of the Maktesh, staring into the crater. Elliot had already been told many times by the Kibbutznicks that this was the largest single natural pit in the world. It was a geological triumph here in the barren Negev. The members of Kibbutz Ramon considered it their own.

"I know a ledge we can hike down to. Come on." Chaya took off on a narrow rocky trail down into the crater. "Come on," she called again.

Elliot took out another cigarette and followed Chaya. He could hardly see her green jacket in the darkness much less see the trail. He slowed down, kicking rocks that he couldn't hear drop as they fell into the crater. After several minutes of slow hiking, he stopped. The crater was silent except for the wind that whipped over his head, occasionally driving sand into his face. He could not hear the footsteps of Chaya. He walked on farther, taking a deep breath, and clamping the cigarette between his teeth.

After another hundred feet of precarious descent, he stopped again. "Chaya," he called, not loud enough for her to hear him unless she was inches away. "Chaya," he called again. "Oh shit." Elliot puffed on his cigarette, leaning against an overhang and staring down into the blackness of the canyon. Before he could exhale his smoke, he suddenly felt strong arms clamp around his waist and pull him into the wall of the canyon. A hand around his mouth muffled his yell. He lost his balance and fell heavily to the hard ground, raising a cloud of dust that he could taste in the darkness. "What the fuck is going on?" he bellowed.

Chaya lit a candle that was perched on a flat on the wall. "Hi there."

"Where the hell did you learn that move?"

"Army defense training. We learn very young here to defend ourselves."

"I can imagine." Elliot rubbed his forehead with his palm.

"Are you OK?" she asked, sitting on her haunches, her face tightly trying to conceal a wide smile.

"Yeah, I'm all right. Just a little surprised." Elliot looked around the small cove glowing in the yellow light. "What is this place?"

"My hideout. I used to come here when my parents wanted me to do chores I didn't like. Like feeding the goats. I hate feeding the goats." She was still on her haunches, looking deeply at Elliot with large brown eyes.

"Does anyone else know about it?"

"A few of the children, but don't worry. We are safe." She came closer to Elliot, straddling his outstretched legs. "I have brought you here for a reason," she said, sitting on Elliot's thighs and putting her arms around his neck. "I have wanted you here since the first day I saw you in the dining hall." She slowly began to unbutton her faded blue shirt.

"Oh yeah?" Elliot grinned, touching Chaya's protruding ribs with his fingertips. "Why?"

She slowly moved her lips to Elliot's, barely touching. "I've never been with an American. There was just something so un-Israeli about you. I liked that." She kissed Elliot more deeply, letting her lips slightly part.

Elliot leaned his head back. "But I'm here to be an Israeli," he said. "I've had it with America."

Chaya sat back and began to unbutton Elliot's shirt. "Once you are here awhile, you'll see. Or maybe you won't." She shrugged. "Let's not worry about that now."

"Sure," Elliot said, meeting Chaya's mouth again, and drawing her up

against his chest.

Elliot wasn't even distracted by the fact that his legs were falling asleep as I would have been. Instead he let things progress as they would, offering little protest.

Elliot and Chaya became the subject of rumors on the Kibbutz Ramon. Rumor had it that they were spending several nights a week sleeping somewhere in the vicinity of Maktesh Ramon. Rumor had it that they were making eyes at each other over the long rows of cotton plants, both of them stooped low and wearing wide-brimmed hats for protection from the sun. Rumor had it they were spending weekends in Beersheba, taking the hot and dusty number fifteen bus, sitting alongside stout Arab women and wide-eyed children heading for the marketplace. Rumor had it that the Kibbutz elders would ask Elliot to make his intentions known to the community and not to develop ties that he would have to break if he wasn't accepted as a *haver*.

"What if you don't get in, Eli, what then?" Chaya asked, sitting cross-legged on the foot of Elliot's bed. This was Elliot's dorm room in a building that housed volunteers and short-timers, those not yet permanently a part of the Kibbutz.

"Let's not think about it." Elliot was mending a pair of shorts that had torn in the seat from all of the constant bending of cotton picking. These shorts were quite loose now. He'd have to request more clothes from the Kibbutz canteen. He had lost at least ten pounds of New Jersey fat in the nine months he'd been at Kibbutz Ramon. "I have three more months before the Secretariat makes a decision. I plan on living that time to the fullest. How about you?" He leaned over and kissed Chaya.

"Sure, I'm all for that." She twisted her long dark hair in her fingers. "If you go back, would you want me to come with you?" She looked down at her lap.

Elliot put aside his sewing, taking Chaya's hands in his own. "We've discussed this before. Of course I want you to come back. But we're not going back. We're staying here."

"Right. Here in the land of the dull."

Elliot smiled, squeezing her hands. "It's not so bad. Am I dull?"

"You didn't grow up here. Give it time. You will see."

As Elliot leaned closer to kiss Chaya again, the hallway door opened and Elliot's roommate, Moshe Braun, fellow candidate for membership and a whining, complaining guy from Pittsburgh, came in the room. He looked over Elliot and Chaya with his long bearded face and slowly shook his head. "It is nearly curfew, my friends. I have a headache, and I'm in no mood to be a reluctant voyeur to your lovemaking."

"Don't get your hopes up, Moshe." Elliot glared. "Chaya was just saying good night."

"Yes. Good night." She gave Elliot a quick kiss on the lips and pushed herself off of the bed. "Good night to you to, Moshe. Don't let Eli keep you up with wild stories of his life in New Jersey."

Moshe let out a short blast of air. "Wild life, huh? I'm on a Kibbutz thrusting my hands into sharp plants, breaking my back stooping over fields all day, nearly dying from dehydration in this horrid climate. Wild life, yes. That is what I need." He flopped down on his bed, raising a cloud of dust.

"Good night," Chaya repeated, quietly letting herself out into the hall of the dormitory.

At this point Elliot was sure he would become a member of the Kibbutz. Since achieving candidacy, he had worked hard and long, distinguishing himself in the fields with his perseverance and relentless energy. His hands had become as hard as Chaya's. The cotton plants now seemed as soft as the cotton itself.

There were the occasional disagreements with the Secretariat at the weekly meetings, but Elliot knew that those were forums for complaint and conflicting ideology. It wasn't important if he felt that weekly cash disbursements should be withheld to those who didn't work that week or that the Kibbutz didn't rotate the unpleasant jobs: garbage, latrine duties, guard duties, often enough. These were Elliot's opinions, and he felt entitled to them.

The next three months moved rapidly. He and Chaya made few plans, except for a weekend in Beersheba to celebrate Elliot's acceptance as a member when the time came. There they would catch a movie, sitting in the air-conditioned theatre for at least two showings. Then they'd eat dinner, in a restaurant, where you could choose anything on the menu rather than be served whatever was in abundance that week. That was their plan. Otherwise they went on with their lives, working long hot days in the field and spending occasional nights in Chaya's cave in the Maktesh, lying naked on the ledge, staring up at the stars. Elliot tried to be a good *haver* and enjoy the time he could spend with Chaya. When it came time to decide his membership, Ehud invited him into his house for tea and cake after meeting with the rest of the secretariat.

"Sit, sit, Eli." Ehud motioned to a chair around a small white formica

table. "I will have the tea ready in a moment."

Elliot sat down, rubbing his hands together. He wanted to just ask Ehud outright what had happened. He thought this would be the Kibbutz way to approach the situation. But defense mechanisms took over. He sat back, looking around the small square, very white kitchen in Ehud's small square, very white house, and waited for Ehud to bring it up.

"You know, it's really peaceful here when my wife is out at her committee meeting. When she is here, there are always people dropping by, asking for her time, bringing up the smallest problems."

"Which committee is she on?" Elliot asked.

"Landscaping. She is in charge of how many trees will we plant and who will get them. There is unfortunately a limited supply of healthy trees. We can't afford very many. You'd be shocked over the infighting that goes on regarding these trees. People see having them as a sign of prestige. In a Kibbutz, mind you, where we have tried for a long time to get rid of such notions. But human nature, ach." Ehud waved his hand. The teapot began to shrill, and he poured the water into tall cups with a sprinkle of tea leaves.

Elliot nodded thanks as Ehud handed him his tea. He sipped the warm beverage, feeling the perspiration run down the hollows under his arms.

"Well, you've been a here a year now," Ehud started. "It has gone by quite fast I think. How about you?"

"Speedy," Elliot said. "But I feel like I'm really a part of Kibbutz Ramon. I can't imagine not having lived here."

"Yes." Ehud smiled, sipping his tea. "Well, that brings me to the committee's decision." He cleared his throat. "We all like you very much, Eli. You are a hard worker. That is a very important quality for *haverim*."

"I certainly didn't know hard work back in America," Elliot said. "That was a real shock."

"Yes, that is the usual reaction. But you adapted quite well. However, the committee has rejected your application for membership." He took another sip of his tea. "In no way is this a personal rejection." He looked Elliot directly in the eyes. "We have to balance many factors: the applicants special skills, the needs of the Kibbutz, the lack of funds in any given year."

Elliot put down his tea cup on the white formica table. He slowly folded his calloused hands on one another. "Is it my ideology? Does the secretariat have a problem with that?"

"No, of course not. We need a dialogue here. This is no autocracy. This is a democracy in as pure a form as you'll find. We all have a say. No, that was not the problem."

"Then what was?" Elliot heard his voice become slightly too loud.

"We have enough money to accept only a few members this year. We can't support any more. Those we accepted all have skill in a specific trade. Yosef Klebel was a tailor. Marte Alef has studied to be a nurse. Moshe Braun has an engineering degree."

"Moshe Braun? You took Moshe Braun over me? That guy's a weasel."

"He's an intelligent young man. True, I wouldn't want to be trapped on a lifeboat with him, but he will be good for the Kibbutz. That is what we had to consider, Eli. We had the best interests of Kibbutz Ramon at heart. I'm sure you can understand that."

"Yeah, I can." Elliot shook his head. "I wasn't expecting this."

"Listen, this doesn't mean you won't become a part of a Kibbutz. Try

another one. There are many in Israel. There must be one who needs a hardworking person like yourself."

"Maybe I will." Elliot stood up, trying to find a place for his hands. He settled on his pockets.

"Take your time getting your things together, Eli. Take as much time as you'd like. I know you have some people to say goodbye to." Ehud squeezed Elliot's shoulder before walking with him to the front door. "I'm sorry this did not work out."

"Yeah," Elliot said, leaving Ehud's small white house, heading back to his dorm where he knew Chaya was waiting for word.

"What happened?" she asked, as Elliot stormed into his room. When she saw Elliot's face, she took a deep breath. "You didn't get in."

"No fucking kidding." Elliot pulled out his backpack from underneath his bed and began throwing his clothes into it.

"Eli, don't be angry with me." She came closer and wrapped her arms around him from behind. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah, me too." Elliot held out a t-shirt that said "New Jersey is for Lovers." It was my gift before he had left. "I'm real sorry." He turned around to face Chaya. "I'm going back to the United States. This just isn't working out for me."

"Don't." She pressed herself against Elliot. "You can try another Kibbutz. We both can. I don't want to stay here any longer."

"Come back home with me," Elliot said. "I want to take you with me."

Chaya took a step back, letting go of Elliot's arms. "I can't leave Israel, Eli. Don't ask me to do that."

"Why not? I thought you wanted to. You love me, don't you?"

"Of course I do." She smiled. "But I would be like tortoise out of its shell. In any other place I'd be very vulnerable."

"Not you. You're as tough as hell."

"Not that tough." She looked down. "This is where I grew up. I don't even know if I could leave Kibbutz Ramon."

"But all along you said you wanted to. I thought you hated it here."

"I know, I did, but...I don't know now. I didn't think you would be rejected." She shook her head. "It's hard for you to understand Kibbutznicks. We are a strange people. We both love and hate where we are. But our souls are chained here. It is so hard for them to leave."

Elliot sat down on his bed. "Moshe got in. Can you believe that? That schmuck."

Chaya ran her fingers through Elliot's hair. "Stay a little longer."

"I can't. I'm leaving tomorrow. I just can't stay." He looked away from her.

"OK." She folded her arms and took a few steps back. "I will miss you, Eli."

Elliot resumed packing his backpack. After a moment he looked up. Chaya was staring at him with glassy eyes. "What are you thinking about?"

"That first night in the Maktesh." She smiled. "That is a good memory."

Elliot moved around his bed and came over to her, taking her hands. "My memories of the largest single natural pit in the entire world." He laughed.

Chaya firmly grabbed Elliot's hand and led him out to the Maktesh, for one last night in her cave.

The next morning Elliot strolled out of Kibbutz Ramon with few

goodbyes. He caught a dust covered bus for Beersheba and there another bus for Tel Aviv. After waiting eight hours in the Tel Aviv Airport he used the last of the money he had brought over from the United States to purchase a ticket to New York, and was on a 6:15 PM flight to Kennedy. He arrived that same night, caught a bus to Port Authority terminal in Manhattan and from there a bus to Manahawken. By 11:00 he was back in New Jersey, knocking on his mother's door, and wondering what the hell he was going to do with his life.

12. INSOMNIA AGAIN

That night, Saturday, after we had put away a major meal and struggled around the living room like beached whales, and after my friends had retreated to their rooms, Walt and Ismeralda in my old bedroom, Elliot in the third bedroom upstairs, and Jerry and Benjamin on the fold-out couch in the living room, and after everyone had fallen into a sleep filled with the turmoil I had created by bringing them all here, I took my nightly stroll.

I left Rebecca making small sleeping sounds, her face turned toward me. Her cool breath had been drying the sweat that was running down my neck and forming a pool under my adam's apple. I slipped on my shorts and my t-shirt, quietly made my way out of my parents' bedroom, and stood at the top of the stairs. The absolute quiet of the house buzzed in my ears. Faint sounds of the surf floated through an open window. I took a deep breath and softly made my way outside.

It had been twenty four hours since my last excursion to the beach. It felt more like one thousand and twenty four. The arrival of my friends, the stories and surprises that they had brought, made time seem like one of those dreams where you're running in slow motion, frustratingly unable to hit full speed.

I felt I had two missions tonight. There were a couple of developments that could shed light on my weekend, perhaps give me a clue as to where I would go from here. One involved the ocean, the other, the basement. I'd start with the ocean.

As I made my way to the beach, past the dark houses that held neighbors I had never met, I thought of my parents. When my father died about two years ago, I had gone to Florida for the funeral. There, in a cemetery my mother had picked out of the yellow pages, I stood beside his grave, my head lowered, my hands folded in front of me. The names on the surrounding tombstones were all strangers, and there were no family plots. This was a graveyard for those far from home. I was feeling somewhat guilty. My father's death didn't sadden me. His life in Florida had been a preparation for death anyway, sitting all day in a folding chair outside of his condo in Ft. Lauderdale. He'd sit among other old people, listening to their shouts of what their lives had been. My father was a quiet man, and I'm sure he just sat there nodding, occasionally dozing. My mother had always been more active. My father's declining years, when his over-worked heart didn't allow him the freedom of mobility, were a prison sentence for my mother. After he died, she went on two cruises, sold their condo, and moved into a younger neighborhood in Boca Raton. Now she drives her big white Oldsmobile among the palm-lined streets, her grey head barely poking over the steering wheel. She visits her many friends for card games and volunteers at an art museum in Miami, leading docent tours of their collection of West African art.

They had become parents I hardly knew. My memories of them were becoming cloudy, obscured by time. I was having trouble separating what I

could remember from what I could invent.

I stared at the dark ocean and slowly pulled my shirt over my head. The night air whipped across my skin, instantly raising goose bumps. I carried my shirt in one hand, my shoes in the other and approached the surf, its roar becoming louder as the cold water lapped at my toes. I walked out a few feet, my ankles turning numb from the cold, and I felt for the dropoff I had seen last this afternoon when I was out here with Elliot. Turning to the side, I poked out with my left foot, feeling for the edge. I took another couple of steps, and when I lifted up one foot, the incoming surf knocked me off balance. I went down on one knee, dipping my shirt in the salt water and getting a face full of spray.

"Shit," I muttered.

The tide must be too far in, I thought. The edge I had seen was further out. The only way I could go to it would be to swim. Unfortunately, despite growing up on an ocean island, I hated to swim. It always took a huge effort to stop my skinny body from sinking like a waterlogged corpse. With a few strokes I'd be gasping for air, my skin red, my eyes sore. I had always avoided swimming.

I walked away from the water and sat down in the sand, laying my wet shirt out at my side. I had to find that edge, that dropoff that I had never seen as a child. If it had always been here, then I needed to verify its existence. If I was imagining it, like I was probably making up most of the stories of my friends, then, well, then I had to be sure. This weekend was blurring what was real, what had really happened with what I could imagine. My oral history was flawed. How could I paint a decent picture of myself from stories

of my friends if my friends were showing up like people I had never known?

Elliot was miserable. He was a loud, obnoxious, wisecracking shell of a person. The young radical chooses to get back at the mean ugly world by making a lot of money, selling people products he didn't care about, exerting power in small, ugly ways.

Jerry was gay. This was a large deviation from the Jerry I knew, the solid family man, but what was more disturbing was his treatment of Benjamin. Jerry's friend was some sort of appendage, brought here for shock value. He was as different from us as Jerry could find and through Benjamin, Jerry was screaming out his own difference.

Walt had Ismeralda now. But Walt had grown way past me. He was a creative being, thoughtful, sensitive.

I leaned back until I was supine on the cool sand, folding my hands behind my head. The wind whipped over my eyes, bringing tears that clouded my vision of the bright three-quarter moon. It was so easy for me to put people in little boxes. Even my closest friends became wooden, dependable little figures. I was robbing them of any humanity. I was the inhumane one.

Perhaps Richie Lewis was the one who was the problem. Sure, he had a traumatic experience, he had finally decided to do something with his life, teach high school English, when the school and his life fell apart. What now? he asked. So he gets his best friends together, the ones with knowledge of his past to tell him what he was and what he might turn out to be. But Richie had all these stories ready. It was a fixed game. The questions were preplanned, the answers as well. Richie was trying to get a handle on himself with a succession of lies.

The salty wind whipped above me, and I considered digging in, building sand walls that would keep me warm and protected.

The weekend wasn't working out as I had planned, but that didn't surprise me much. Maybe this was some cruel joke played by my parents. They had trained their son to see the trash-littered streets underneath the billboards with smiling beauties advertising cola. He'd see it all, no tunnel vision here. When he finally found the nerve to go out and get a job, he had to see something flawed with that as well, a crater in the center of the school system that threatened to suck Richie Lewis right in. My parents did it, I decided, and then skipped out to Florida before my father skipped out of life altogether. This training was subtle. All of those years I had spent avoiding my parents had resulted in this weekend.

I couldn't say I had lost all hope, at least not yet. I loved Rebecca. If I could just chant that, like some sort of mantra, I'd make it. I had Rebecca. Now I just needed myself.

I sat up, reached out for my water-soaked shirt, and took another breath of cool ocean air. When I was a kid, I always associated the ocean's smell with a shoe box that I used to keep in my room underneath the bed. In that box I'd put shells shaped like old women, sandcrabs I'd dug up when the surf rushed out, seaweed like coarse hair, and a handful of sand. Every now and then I'd take it out, and push the sandcrabs around with my finger. I'd take a breath of the salty, fishy contents. It had originally been a science project for Mrs. Brautenheimer in fifth grade, but after that I just liked the idea of my own private beach under my bed. If I could capture the whole expanse of sand, water, and sea life in a four by nine box, I could make some sense out of it. Before that the creation of the whole shoreline was very intimidating.

That box lasted under my bed for several months until my mother did her spring cleaning. I lost my shoe box, several "Archie" and "Mysterious Death" comics, a folded and yellowing Playboy center fold I had discovered on the beach one morning, and a pair of well-broken in sneakers that I would wear when wading in the bay fishing for crabs.

As I lay on the beach, I thought of this evening, after dinner, when we had sat around the living room, recounting names from high school lost long ago in a torrent of additional names and faces.

"Bruce Greenwood, remember him?" Elliot asked. "He was probably the ugliest man on earth. I wonder what ever happened to him."

"I heard he's a lawyer now," Jerry said. "I think I read that in the Manahawken paper a couple of years ago."

"Just what we need, another ugly lawyer." Elliot took a long swallow from the beer bottle he clutched in his large hand. Two empty bottles sat staring from on top of the stereo cabinet.

"I used to think about being a lawyer," I said, taking a swig of my own beer.

"You'd make a good lawyer, Richie," Rebecca said. "I've told you that before. It's not too late." She reached out and touched her fingertips to my shoulder.

"Richie Lewis, Barrister," I said. "I don't know. Think of all the people like Bruce Greenwood I'd have to deal with."

"What was he like other than ugly?" Rebecca asked.

"Oh, he was a miserable person," Elliot said. "He had a real chip on his shoulder. He used to lock himself in a bathroom stall and masturbate a

couple of times a day. If you knocked and said you needed to use the toilet, he would tell you to fuck off."

"Not a popular guy," I said.

"What is it you're going to do now, Richie?" Walt asked.

I took my time answering. I took a long time. My friends began to form uncomfortable smiles on their faces. "Good question," I finally said. "I've considered becoming a cliff diver, but I'm not sure how I'd look in those little swim trunks."

"You should write a play," Jerry said, sitting on the floor and leaning against Benjamin's bony legs as Ben sat stiffly on the couch. He still had said little more than a word or two since they had arrived. "You were always great with stories. A play would be perfect." He gave me a wide smile.

"Why would that be perfect?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't know. We need more plays that capture life. Maybe it's just me. I love going to the theatre. Elaine never wanted to go enough." He looked over his shoulder at Benjamin who grunted. "It's crystallized life on the stage. It's two hours of intensity that rings so true when it works. You should write a play."

"Oh yeah?" I smiled. "How about one about this guy who has no sense of what he should do with his life. He's really confused. What he does is get three friends from his past together to help him remind himself of what he was. Nothing too complicated, just some facts about whether he could shoot a jump shot, whether he could hold a conversation without lapsing into a catatonic state, whether his small, inconsequential life on the New Jersey shore was real or imagined."

"Richie," Rebecca said, "What are you talking about?"

"Wait a second, I'm getting there. So our hero gets these people together to assemble stories of himself, but when he does, he's in for a surprise. Closing act: His friends don't remember him. He never even existed. His own stories are all made-up, products of his over-active imagination."

"So who is he?" Walt asked.

"Good question." I stared down at my bare feet, the skin slowly turning a light shade of blue as the evening temperature dropped. "I guess he's been someone else all along. Or maybe he never existed. If a man claps in a forest with no one else around, does he make a sound?" I looked up. "But here's the end. If he's never existed, there's no reason to go on. Final curtain – he shoots himself, blows his brains all over the first row."

"Richie, what is this pseudo-philosophical bullshit?" Elliot pointed at me with a stubby index finger. "Since when did you get so morose? I thought we were all here to have a good time."

"Oh, right." I forced the corners of my mouth into a smile. "I forgot."

We spent the rest of the evening engaging in uncomfortable small talk, my friends casting me quick troubled glances when they thought I wasn't looking. When we retreated to our rooms, Rebecca took her turn.

"Richie, are you all right?"

I shook my head. "I hope so. I'm getting bent out of shape."

She threw a long arm around my shoulders and pressed her lips to my ear. "Relax. Your friends are here."

My shoulders started to rise as I involuntarily cringed. "I'm trying. I'm turning thirty, my friends are here, I have no job, and I'm trying to relax. I really am."

Rebecca took a step back. "What can I do?"

"I don't know."

"This is frustrating for me. I love you, Richie. What can I do?" she repeated.

"I really don't know," I said more loudly than I had wished. I lowered my voice to a whisper. "I'm not even sure what the problem is. But this weekend is turning out to be strange."

"Why? Just because Jerry is gay and he brought Benjamin? Why can't you handle that?"

"I have no problem handling that. It's everyone else's reactions that I'm having trouble with. Especially Elliot. And it pisses me off that Jerry picked this weekend to break the news. I had big plans for this weekend."

"I agree that Elliot is dealing with it like a real shit. And Jerry doesn't exactly treat his friend Benjamin like a prince. But let's just deal with it. I'm having a good time. Ismeralda is a wonderful person, and Walt and Jerry are great, you know that. Elliot drives me crazy, but we've all been through a lot together. They're your friends, Richie."

"I know that." I turned away and sat on the edge of my parents' bed. "I know that real well. I'll try to mellow out."

"Think of the rest of us, Richie. Don't ruin this weekend for us. That would be a selfish thing to do."

I put my fingertips against my forehead, trying to hold back the headache that was accumulating with every syllable out of Rebecca's mouth. We rarely argued. And when we did, it was because I was acting selfish. When my egocentrism threatened the party, the long arm of Rebecca would usually put a stop to it. How could I argue? I was acting like a child.

We went to bed with a cool, short kiss and few words. I thought about the day as I listened to Rebecca's breathing grow deep and regular. I was asleep only a short time before I had woken up to take this stroll.

Now, before making my way back to the beach entrance at the end of the street where I had grown up, I stared at the dark ocean some more, the moon casting a long reflection, the grey-blue foam rolling up the sand. Once I was back on the asphalt, the wind was less severe, and my goose bumps subsided. I walked back to the house thinking about my father's basement.

My father took refuge in his basement. Whether it was a long day of selling shoes to squirmy kids and indecisive teenagers or an evening of listening to my mother's plans for trips abroad, my father would go to his basement. There he'd run his power tools or pump out the accumulated water after a fierce summer storm or sit thumbing through catalogs for everything from Burpee seeds to English woodworking tools. I needed a place like my father's basement, a refuge where I could revel in the simplicity of a tongue and groove joint or the power of a circular saw. I had thought that reminiscing about high school would be it. Things seemed simpler then; our lives were framed by basketball and friends. But maybe I had that all wrong too.

I quietly re-entered the house, moved through the front hallway and unlocked the door in the kitchen that led into the basement. At the bottom of the stairs I snapped on the light and squinted around the room. While my father was still alive in New Jersey, especially during the summer I lived here after college, he would cut from wood delicate little figures of people and animals. He would carefully paint them, every detail precise and line them up on his workbench, arranged by height. Every few years he'd gather them

all up in a box and put it out by the garbage cans. Then he'd start again, creating a new generation of wooden figures.

I hung my wet shirt on the workbench vise and reached back into the small space between the bench and the wall. I could feel a wooden box in the gap behind the bench. I knew I could bring that box out by tipping it onto its side and sliding it through the small space. Instead I leaned back against the edge of the bench. This place was still my father's domain, despite his death and the succession of renters who swarmed over the house. The realtor kept the basement locked to lessen her liability and would check it for flooding after a heavy rainfall. That was fine with me. When I lived at home, I rarely came down here, and even now I was uncomfortable. I wasn't ready to uncover any of my father's secrets that still might be lingering around.

I snapped off the light and headed back up the stairs into the kitchen. The house was lit by dim moonlight from the windows, and I took a seat at the round formica table where I had spent the afternoon probing my friends' lives. It was several moments before I realized that someone was standing in the doorway that led into the living room.

"Hi, Benjamin," I said.

Benjamin nodded, a slightly perceptible move in the darkness.

"You having trouble sleeping? Why don't you take a seat? Maybe if I talk to you enough, it'll put you right out into dreamland."

Benjamin slowly moved into the kitchen and perched himself on a chair across the table from me.

"Everything all right?" I asked.

Benjamin let out a lot of air through his nose. "Yeah."

"That's good." I listened for the sound of the ocean and wondered if I should get up to open the window so I could hear it more clearly.

"You've known Jerry for a long time," Benjamin said.

"Since high school."

"A long time," he repeated. "I haven't known him very long."

"Where did you two meet?"

"In a bar in the city." He folded his hands behind his head, thrusting out his chin. "I had started to hang out in gay bars."

"Oh yeah?"

"I wanted to find out if I was gay. I guess I was."

"I can't help but ask. Aren't you afraid of AIDS? You can't help but be aware of it."

"I take precautions. At least I try. But those first couple of months hanging out in that bar, I was like a kid with a new toy. I took precautions many times." He let out a grunt like laugh.

"That's where you met Jerry?"

"Yeah. It was a Friday. I had a mid-term that day. I was celebrating. Jerry bought me a beer. I had never seen him in there before."

"You know he's married, he has two kids."

"Hey, I know. He wasn't the only one in that bar in that situation. Jerry's a big boy now."

"I know. I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to make it sound like I was blaming you. It's just still somewhat of a shock."

"Think of what it is for him." Ben put his hands palms down on the table. His long fingers glowed in the moonlight. "It was that night that Jerry asked me to come down here. It was only a month or so ago."

"Why did you agree?"

"I don't know. I like Jerry. My life has been very different than his, from all of yours. I grew up in Newark, just me and my Mom. I never made it through a regular high school. All I did was get stoned and get into fights. I wanted to come down here and see what Jerry's life was like. Maybe to see what I missed."

"What do you think?"

"It's all right. We all unzip our pants when we take a piss." He stretched his lips into a smile. "I mean, I know Jerry wanted someone freaky looking guy like me to spring on you all. I really don't care. It isn't the first or the last time I've been whored." He reached into an inside pocket of his leather jacket and pulled out a cigarette pack. "What do you want out of this weekend?"

"I don't know. Answers, I suppose." I took the cigarette that Benjamin offered. "I've lost a sense of direction in my life if I ever had one. I remember high school as being a good time, simple. I wanted some of that."

"You getting it?"

"Not really." I lit my cigarette on Benjamin's lighter and took a deep drag. I didn't smoke much anymore and that occasional cigarette always made my head swoon. "As a matter of fact I'm fairly despondent."

"As far as I'm concerned there's only one direction in life - forward. Clocks don't run backwards." He blew a cloud of smoke that was blue in the dark kitchen.

"How come you haven't talked all day?"

"I guess I didn't have much to say. And I don't like talking in groups, makes me uptight."

"I can understand that."

"I'm leaving tomorrow afternoon. There's some people I have to see on Sunday night."

"Oh. Does Jerry know? We were all going to go out for dinner tomorrow."

"He'll know in the morning." Benjamin stood up and moved over to the sink. He quickly ran tap water over his cigarette, extinguishing it with a sizzle. "I'm turning in."

"OK. I think I'll do the same." I got up to wet down my cigarette, passing close to Ben as he moved away from the sink. He smelled like leather and burnt tobacco and ocean salt. I ran the tap, and when I turned back around, Benjamin was gone from the room.

I looked out of the kitchen window at the night sky. It was still clear. If it held, we could play some basketball tomorrow. That would be good. That was something in high school that I was sure really happened. We really did spend a lot of our lives shooting baskets outside of my house. Tomorrow I could do some of that again.

I moved toward the stairs, feeling a lot calmer than when I set out. The beach, the basement, and talking with Benjamin had pushed me out of my suffocating internal world for a moment. I could sleep now.

13. PLAYING BALL

"Let's play some ball," I shouted out from the top of the stairs. Everyone was sprawled around the living room, the *Sunday Star Ledger* scattered among my house guests.

"It's raining," Elliot said, not looking up from his financial section.

"It stopped." I pointed at the street outside. "Look out of the window."

Dark bottomed clouds rumbled past; the sand yard was pitted with indentations from the heavy rain.

"That was one of the fiercest storms I've ever seen," Elliot said. "This is the goddamn tropics. You want to play basketball in that? It'll come back."

"Come on." I darted down the stairs and went for the front closet.

"There's a basketball in here just dying to be thrown through a rusted metal hoop." Basketball had always been a major character in the play of my life. It seemed the right time for it to make an appearance. The times demanded basketball.

"That was too big a breakfast," Jerry said. "And I haven't played in ages."

"Come on you lazy bastards." I found the ball in a cardboard box marked "Sports." It was the realtor's contribution to the renters who inhabited this place most of the summer. "Basketball is our relic of the past. We did some

serious bonding on that basketball court in the street."

Walt lifted his head up off of Ismeralda's lap. "Two on two?" he asked. "Or everyone else as well?"

"We can do both. There's plenty of time." I moved toward the window. "The street is nearly dry. We'll just get out the old push broom and spread the puddles out a little." Rays of sunlight were steaming the wet asphalt. "What about it, guys?" I turned to Jerry. "What about Ben, do you think he'll play?"

Jerry looked up. "He's off at the beach again despite the rain. Being reflective, I suppose."

"What's the deal with that guy, Jer?" Elliot asked. "He doesn't communicate very well. It's like an afternoon with my relatives. Is he just pretending to be an asshole or is that his real personality?"

Jerry thinned his lips. "Go easy, Elliot. I care a lot about Ben."

"Is this some fling or what? What about Elaine?" Elliot stared at Jerry over his newspaper. I felt my ears turn red. I could tell about my conversation with Ben last night, but I wanted to keep it to myself. It was Ben's choice to tell his motivations to everyone else, not mine.

Jerry shook his head. "I went into this already, all right? I've changed. I'm not the Jerry Mazio of high school. Can't you accept that?"

"Hey, sure. I can accept anything. But you've brought some young jerk here to our big reunion, and now he's turning the mood into a goddamn funeral. What do you need that selfish son-of-a-bitch for, anyway? Isn't he kind of young for you?"

"Hey, Elliot, take it easy," I said. "Let's not turn this thing into something we'll all regret. Come on, let's play some basketball."

Rebecca put down her magazine section, her eyes shining. "Well, I'm game. We can play 5-3-1, Richie, until everyone else gets in the mood. I won, what was it, four dinners the last time?"

"That's not fair. You were on the team in high school. You didn't tell me that when we met. You're a ringer."

"OK, I'll spot you ten points." She rose from her chair and passed me on the way upstairs, brushing her lips on my cheek. "I'll just slip on something more athletic. Why don't you warm up?"

"There's one brave soul," I said to the rest of the group. "You guys save your energy for basketball instead of idle talk. I'll see you out on the street."

Elliot yawned and stretched his hands over his head. "I'll play only if Walt does. I owe him a few face shots."

Walt raised his eyebrows. "I'm no match for you, Elliot. You've probably been playing all year round out there in California. You probably belong to one of those health clubs."

"With this gut?" Elliot patted his stomach with both hands. "My idea of health is to watch an aerobics class. Keeps my heart rate up. Maybe Ben will play. Maybe he'll show us what that magic is that has Jerry fucking up his marriage."

Jerry stared at Elliot, his face turning red. He slowly raised himself off of the floor and headed into the kitchen.

"Elliot, you should try a physical regimen," Ismeralda said. "Walter does it. It is good for the soul. One works off much psychic energy that might otherwise be channeled into less beneficial endeavors."

"My soul is fortified by neglect and waste, Izzy." Elliot gave her a big grin.

"This whole Renaissance man crap is very old. It's the age of specialization. My specialty is slovenly behavior."

"You guys can sit here and intellectualize over a game of two on two. As for me, I'm going to pray to the gods that my shooting touch has improved with the four cups of coffee I've had this morning." I walked out the front door, dribbling the basketball down the three steps onto the front walk. On the last step the ball caught the front edge of the stone and flew off into the street. I looked over my shoulder and saw Elliot waving with one hand and holding up a cinnamon roll with the other.

Basketball had been a large part of our lives when we were in high school. From the early meetings of Club Concerned, to the after school time we spent watching the girls' basketball team win the state championship, to the weekends spent playing two on two in the street in front of my house, our lives were shaped by basketball. It was how Jerry, Elliot, Walt and I hung out. We discussed girl's breasts and shot baskets. We discussed futures selling motorized monkeys on the boardwalk and practiced layups. We screamed at each other for flagrant violations and threw elbows. Basketball became a background rhythm to our high school lives. Once we went our divergent ways, the reunion games were few and far between. Thanksgiving and Christmas were too cold, and summers saw us exploring different required classes, irate hardware customers, and all-consuming sculpture projects. We played once in awhile, sharing stories of our present lives. I first told them about Rebecca during one of our games.

"I met a woman," I had said, dribbling the ball at the crack in the asphalt that we used to mark a free throw line.

"What?" Jerry asked. He was married at this point with one kid. Elaine

was in my parents' house being interrogated by my mother about her life with Jerry. Their kid was outside trying to cover my mother's Scottie with wet sand. "Did you say you met a woman?" He was standing under the basket, his pale round arms up in the air anticipating a rebound. "Is that what you said?"

"That's what I said." I shot the ball and it ricocheted off of the rim with a dull thud into Jerry's hands.

"Richie met a woman," Jerry said to Walt who was standing under the other side of the basket.

"I heard him. Don't be so shocked. Richie's known several women in his life."

"Yeah, but it's been a couple of years. Isn't that right, Richie."

"Uh, well, sort of." I moved toward the hoop as Jerry dribbled out to take a shot. "Where the hell is Elliot?" I asked. "I thought he was on his way out here."

"Don't change the subject," Jerry said. "Tell us about this woman."

"Well, we met on the boardwalk. She was working the kiddie arcade. We had coffee."

Before I could elaborate, Elliot came rumbling out of the house, screaming, "Last seconds of the game, desperation pass, Kreger is open." He held his arms out to Jerry who bounce-passed the ball. Elliot grabbed it with two hands, reached out to the basket with a long arm and laid the ball over the front rim. "It's good, the shot is good, the Knicks win the pennant."

"Championship," I said. "Not pennant. You should have dunked it."

"Me? I couldn't jump high enough in high school, and I certainly can't jump high enough now." His black t-shirt was lifted up by his growing belly.

He was home on one of his infrequent visits since he had moved to California to sell computer parts. "But jumping is over-rated anyway. It's bad for the digestion."

"Richie met a woman," Jerry said.

"What are you, my personal bard?"

"Hey, you told us, you must want us to know. I'm just relaying the message."

"Richie, Richie, Richie." Elliot came over and draped a thick arm around my shoulders. "We need to talk. Women are trouble."

"Not this one."

"Hey, in Israel I was almost married, did I tell you that story?" Elliot glanced down at me.

"Yes." Walt said.

"And it's true. This real Sabra. As tough as they come. She was the Kibbutz's Marxist theologian. We'd make love under the olive trees, rolling on pits from half-eaten olives. Painful." He shook his head.

"It didn't last?" Jerry asked.

"Philosophical differences. She developed this fascination with foreskin. She decided that circumcised men all had castration complexes and were therefore mother lovers. She took up with a Filipino who was working on a student visa."

"Breaks my heart every time I hear that story," I said. "But this woman is the real thing. She's a psychology student. She's very cool."

"Your own personal Freud," Elliot said. "Fucking wonderful."

"No, she doesn't do that. She likes to study people, but she never forces

her conclusions on you. She's not going to tell you your personality fuckups after shaking your hand."

"Like my mother," Jerry said. "'He's a good-for-nothing,' she'll say about someone she's just met. 'It was the way his gums showed when he smiled.'"

"Sounds great, Richie," Walt said. "But tell us later. Let's play some ball."

That had been eight long years ago. Now we were turning thirty, haunting our fathers' basements and paralyzed by the thought of new careers. But basketball was still here. I could still miss layups and overshoot jump shots. No one could take that away from me. Now it was just a matter of getting everyone else as involved in the nostalgia of playing basketball. The anger between Jerry and Elliot was dominating this weekend. It wasn't like them to argue though we all got pissed at Elliot from time to time. He prided himself on being obnoxious.

I grabbed the ball lying on the street and looked up at the backboard and rim nailed up years ago on a telephone pole by a now anonymous neighbor. It had survived lightning storms and torrential rain, buckshot aimed by a neighborhood youth with a birthday gun, and summer renters who were tall enough to jump up and hang on the rim. Fortunately we permanent stock weren't tall enough. The backboard and rim still stood. Only the net had been replaced every couple of years, usually by me perched on a step ladder. The current net was a faded red, white and blue. It was an A.B.A. net.

I dribbled the ball to the familiar asphalt crack foul line and took a deep breath. Basketball was a game of repetition. When I was in eighth grade, I had practiced this foul shot so many times I could close my eyes and still make it. Now it had been awhile. I shot the ball, trying to remember the

form I had carefully developed every afternoon after school. The red, white, and blue basketball, also A.B.A. regulation, fell through the hoop with a snap of the net.

"Nice shot," Rebecca called, trotting out to the court. She was wearing old black high tops, probably the same ones that had taken her high school team to the state championship. Her long legs were made even longer with her short gym shorts, displaying "Wampasett Junior High - Schottstein" which were a present from me from a thrift store in Philadelphia. "Hey, do you think Elliot and Jerry are going to kill each other or what?" she asked. "I've never seen them confront each other like that."

"That situation is turning into a major drag. This was to be a weekend of nostalgia, basketball, some personal reckoning. It was all supposed to balance. Maybe overlap just a little. I didn't count on any new hostilities."

"What's Elliot's problem? You'd think he'd be a little understanding. It's not like he's never changed. He was Mr. Radical, 1973 and now, he's Mr. Corporate, 1987."

"Yeah, but Elliot hasn't really changed. He was a radical because it made him different. It gave him a certain power. Now he has plenty of power. He's gone corporate. He has the power to make money. At least that's my oversimplification of the situation."

"Jerry's change seems much more palatable to me. You're saying that Elliot has been shallow all along, and now he's found the perfect manifestation of that in selling computer parts."

"Yeah, maybe. When we were seventeen, Elliot was my hero. I think I grew out of that."

"Maybe not totally. You have to say something to him about the way he

talked to Jerry in there. If you don't, everyone is going to leave here in sad shape. It's like some sort of twisted social aggression study."

"I'm sure you're right. But right now let's just think about basketball, OK? I want at least one of my plans for the weekend to work out." I turned the ball over in my hands. I hated being handed ultimatums. "Is anyone else ever going to get the hell out here?"

"Walt is game. He was trying to convince the rest of them. We'll see." She reached down with both arms crossed to stretch out the back of her legs.

"With the view of your backside that Elliot is getting right now, he'll be out here pronto."

She straightened up and flattened her lips at me. "Pass the ball, sport."

We played 5-3-1, a shooting game where the goal is to be the first to score twenty one points. First shot was from the foul line and was worth five points. Second was from where the ball rebounded and was worth three, and third was from anywhere and was worth one point. If you sank all three, you kept going until you missed or reached twenty one. You couldn't go over twenty one, you had to hit it on the nose. If you got 25, your score became four. Rebecca reached seventeen on her first round until she missed a shot.

"Hey, finally my turn. Thanks." I grabbed the basketball and took my place at the foul line. I lined up the ball with the front of the rim and took a deep breath. As I shot the ball, letting it spin off of my hands, I heard from the house, "Richie, I've got fifty bucks on this shot." It clanged off of the rim and took off down the street. My next shot would be from about fifty feet away.

"Thanks, Elliot," I called. "Are you going to stay in there being an asshole

or are you going to come out here and be one?"

Elliot pushed open the screen door, looking up at the sky. "It's going to pour, Lewis."

"That never stopped us before. I can remember playing in torrential downpours. It became some sort of water sport."

"You're hallucinating," Elliot said. He turned back to the house and said something I couldn't hear.

"Remember senior year, Elliot? Remember how we took our prom dates to Gumpert's for two on two? Tuxedos and all."

Elliot grinned. "It would have been fairer if it wasn't you and I against them. We should have split up if we wanted to win."

"Hey, we promised them a special night, didn't we?" I looked over at Rebecca who was practicing her left-handed layup.

"I'll be out in a sec," Elliot said.

"Hey, you hear that," I said to Rebecca. "We're going to get a game going here. This is Club Concerned revisited."

Rebecca smiled. "This is what it takes to make you happy, huh?"

"Hey, I've been planning this. This is just how it should be."

"Hey," Elliot shouted, pushing aside the screen door. "Let's play some hoop."

He jogged to the court, carrying a cinnamon roll in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

"Is anyone else coming out?" I asked.

"They're coming." He put the cigarette in the corner of his mouth. "Pass the ball; I need to practice my shot."

"Are you going to continue to be so hard on Jerry for the entire

weekend?" Rebecca asked.

Elliot planted his feet and tossed the ball at the rim. "I don't feel like talking about that now."

"Oh yeah?" she said. "You're not going to brood, are you?"

"Go easy, all right?" Elliot rebounded the ball and tried a layup. "You guys know I care for Jerry, I really do. I don't want to see him fuck up his life."

"You sure you're not just being homophobic?"

He glared at Rebecca, pointing at her with his cigarette. "Fuck that. I don't care if Jerry's screwing roadside animals. We're all a little bizarre."

"Be nicer to Ben," I said. "It'll make things smoother."

"Well, when's he going to lighten up? I flew three thousand miles for these couple of days. It's just as important to me as it is to you, Richie. I'm feeling cheated."

"Give him a chance," Rebecca said. "Jerry's our friend. We trust his judgement. We trust yours. If he likes Ben, then I'm sure Ben is all right."

"You trust my judgement?" Elliot said, a smile spreading across his face. "Richie ever tell you about the time we totaled his car in Elk Township?"

"No." She looked over at me. "What happened?"

"Oh yeah." I laughed. "We were driving into Philadelphia for the day the summer after my freshman year in college. We were both home. That was right when you came back from Israel."

"Yup. Two boys looking for a good time."

"I had this blue Dodge Dart that I bought off of my father's cousin Max who lived on Staten Island. As I remember it, you were driving, Elliot. It was

one of those heavy summer downpours, like this morning. The tires had no tread, very bald, and we were taking the back roads route, going about sixty five on those country roads."

"The problem wasn't the speed," Elliot said. "The problem was that I let you steer sitting in the passenger seat."

"Why? What were you doing?" Rebecca nodded at Elliot.

Elliot and I laughed. "It was getting late, and we wanted to get to Philly. We didn't want to stop."

"So?"

"Elliot was attempting to pee into a Coke can. Unfortunately we started hydro-planing going around this turn."

"Very uncomfortable. There I am with my manhood in close proximity to the sharp edges of a Coke can, and we're doing a three-sixty into a telephone pole."

"Hey, I almost steered out of it. If you hadn't grabbed the wheel in a panic."

"Panic? My guy was in danger. That wasn't panic, that was gut reaction."

"OK, I admit it," Rebecca said. "That's pretty reckless. I'll never trust you guys again."

"Yes, we were young and reckless," Elliot said. "And look at us now." He gestured with his cigarette, sweeping his arm down his body.

"Anyway, have some tolerance for Jerry. He's still our friend." She skipped the basketball over to me. "Isn't that right, Richie?"

I gripped the ball between my palms. "Hey, I'm not crazy about Ben so far either. But I can be easygoing about this." I shot a ten footer that swished through the hoop. "It isn't my ideal weekend, but I'm being a realist."

"That guy bothers me," Elliot said, tossing the ball back to me. "What's the deal with the skulls and the death motif? Kind of morbid."

"Why don't you ask him?" Rebecca said.

"Maybe I will, Becky, if he ever comes out of the cave he's probably dug in the sand. Hey, we ever going to get this game going or what? Those guys better get out here before it starts to pour again."

The screen door opened, and Jerry and Walt emerged, big grins on their faces. They were dressed in gym shorts and old canvas sneakers. My friends had come prepared to play basketball.

"Where's Ismeralda?" Rebecca asked.

"She's going to pass on this activity," Walt said. "She's right in the middle of a chapter. She sends her psychic regards."

"Good deal," Elliot said.

"Well, that leaves five of us. It's three on two then."

"How about letting us warm up a bit?" Walt asked. "It's been a long time since I've held a basketball."

I passed the ball over to Walt and he stood there a moment, holding the ball lightly in his hands. He rubbed his fingertips over the rubber surface, his eyes barely open.

"You going to shoot or pray?" Elliot asked.

"Don't rush me. You have to establish a bond with the ball." Walt dribbled to about fifteen feet away and sent up a shot. It fell through the net with a snap.

"He always did have a hell of a touch," I said out loud. We stood there as Walt slowly established a perimeter, sinking all of his shots as he moved around the basket.

"Don't want to get tired out there, guy," Elliot said. "Give someone else a try."

"Sure. Here Jer." He passed the ball to Jerry who bounced the ball quickly with his right hand, his head down, moving toward the basket. He sent up a right hand hook shot that cleared the hoop and fell into Rebecca's hands on the other side.

"Nice shot," Elliot said.

"Thanks for the encouragement." Jerry glared at Elliot, took the ball back from Rebecca and tried another hook shot. This time the ball hit the backboard and bounced through the hoop. "OK, I'm ready. What are teams?"

"Well, how about me and Walt?" I said.

"That's cool." Rebecca brushed her hair out of her eyes. "Let's play before it rains."

Walt and I took the ball out first and faced the basket. With one less player we would have to keep on the outside and make sure to hit our long shots. We couldn't rely on a lot of rebounds or drives to the basket. In the past it had always been Walt and Jerry against Elliot and me. Walt was a natural, the ball an extension of his hand, and Jerry performed yeoman's work under the basket. My shooting touch was sporadic, but I could jump high, occasionally blocking one of Walt's smooth drives to the basket. Elliot was brute force and no touch. He approached the game like he approached everything else. His ball handling skills were terrible, but I could count on him to muscle in for rebounds of my shots and hit short jumpers. Now, with Walt and I teamed, we had to bear the brunt of Elliot's physical game and Rebecca's marvelous shooting touch. Despite Walt hitting his first five shots,

we were down seven to five thanks to Rebecca's shooting and passing. When I went up to block her shot, she would calmly fake and then pass to Jerry under the basket who would sink the ball every time.

"What's the game to?" I asked. "Eleven or fifteen."

"Twenty one, Lewis," Elliot said. "Just like always. This punishment will not stop." Elliot took the ball at the foul line and dribbled toward the basket. As I reached around him to knock the ball away he brought his elbow up into my chest.

"Hey," I called. "Offensive foul."

"Don't be offensive," Elliot said, stopping his dribble. "I have a right to protect the ball."

"Are you ever going to pass the ball, Elliot," Jerry asked, his hands on his wide hips. "No one likes a ball hog."

"Pass?" Elliot said, a slight smile on his face. "OK, Jerry, I'll pass."

"What about the foul?" I asked.

"I didn't hear a whistle," Elliot said.

"Fine. Your ball. Just start back at the foul line again." I took my spot about five feet from Walt, protecting any passes Elliot might make toward the basket. Rebecca slowly jogged from one side of the court to the other. Elliot glanced at her and then fired the ball overhand at Jerry who was watching Rebecca. The ball bounced off of Jerry's chest, knocking him to the ground.

"You asshole," he yelled. "You are an asshole."

"You asked for a pass, Jer," Elliot glared. "I was just obliging your request."

"Elliot, what the hell are you doing?" I asked.

"Me?" Elliot pointed at himself wide-eyed. "I'm just playing this

goddamn game with my goddamn friends. Ask Jerry what he's doing."

"This is ridiculous." I looked over at Walt who was staring down at his sneakers, shaking his head. "You guys are acting like we're in junior high again. We're not. We're responsible adults now. We're turning thirty."

"I don't need this." Jerry sat on the ground, his hands around his ankles.

"Are you going to apologize?" I faced Elliot.

He slowly shook his head. "OK. Sorry Jerry. I didn't mean to fake you out. Now let's play this goddamn game." He moved over to Jerry and offered his hand. Jerry grabbed it and lifted himself off of the ground. "Now where did the ball go?" Jerry asked.

"There." Rebecca pointed.

I turned to see Ben walking toward us, holding the ball out like an offering. After it had hit Jerry, it must have rolled almost all the way to the beach.

"Hi Ben," Jerry said. "You want to play?"

Ben came closer, still holding the ball.

"We could use another," I said. "This two on three stuff is tough going. They're killing us. How about evening up the sides."

Ben scowled at the ball, and then rolled it toward the basket. "I don't play."

"You don't have to be a superstar," I said. "We're just having a friendly game." I took a glance at Rebecca who was narrowing her eyes at me. "We could really use you."

Ben stared at Jerry who managed a weak smile. "Only if you want to, Ben."

He looked at each of us, his hands thrust in his pockets. I gave him my

pleading smile. Slowly he pulled out his hands and peeled off his leather jacket, exposing a body under a tight white t-shirt that was all angles and planes, as sharp as the edge of a piece of paper. He slid his skull ring off of his left hand and dropped it into an inside pocket of his jacket. Then he carefully folded his jacket into a bundle and placed it on the gravel lawn of my parents' house.

"Great," I said. "You're with me and Walt. You can cover Jerry. Let's kick some butt here."

Walt took the ball out behind the foul line and made a quick pass to me. I held the ball over my head as Rebecca waved her long arms in my face. Walt took Elliot to the basket, and Ben stood with his back to me under the hoop. "Ben, turn around," I called. He glanced over his shoulder and I bounced the ball toward his hands. He caught it, stared at it for a few moments and then pushed the ball at the basket with one hand. It clanged off of the backboard and in.

"Nice shot," I called.

Ben grimaced and wiped his nose.

For the next three points Walt took quick passes back from me and sank three consecutive jump shots over Elliot's thick arms. I could see the back of Elliot's neck grow increasingly red. The next time out Walt faked a shot and drove cleanly through to the hoop.

"Help out," Elliot called to Jerry after Walt sank the layup.

"I'm trying," Jerry said, leaning over to put his hands on his thighs.

When I missed the next shot, Rebecca rebounded the ball and quickly passed to Elliot behind the foul line. She waved her arms in the air, taking

up a spot in front of me. "I'm open," she yelled to Elliot.

Elliot glanced at her and drove headlong for the basket. Walt tried to poke the ball out from behind, and I tried to step in front of Elliot, but he drove around me. The last line of defense was Ben who stood next to Jerry, staring at Elliot as if he were watching a movie. When he didn't move, Elliot held the ball out with one hand and drove the other hand into Ben's neck, knocking the both of them to the ground. Elliot landed with all of his considerable weight on Ben's chest. I winced.

"You asshole," Jerry screamed, grabbing Elliot by the head.

"Hey," Elliot shouted, coming to his knees and reaching a hand behind him to swat away Jerry. Walt and Rebecca and I rushed in to separate the two. Ben lay on the ground, his grimace replaced by a smile.

"I can't fucking believe you," Jerry shouted with clenched teeth. "What is your problem?" He shook himself away from my grip and went over to Ben. "Are you OK?"

Ben lifted up his head, took a long look at all of us and let out a high-pitched laugh.

"Oh, it's funny?" Jerry asked, a slight smile on his face. "You have a strange sense of humor, Benjamin."

Walt stood behind Elliot, pinning his arms to his sides with a bear hug. "Are you going to relax?" he asked.

"Yeah, let me go." Elliot shook his head, his cheeks red and his mouth set in a line. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Oh yeah?" Jerry thrust out his chin and stood inches from Elliot. "You care to explain yourself. You've given me nothing but grief since I've arrived here. If you can't handle the fact that I'm gay, that's your problem, not mine.

Don't take it out on Benjamin." He turned to help Ben up who was sitting with a big smile on his face.

"Well," I started. "So much for the game." Rebecca and Walt stood with feet planted, glaring at Elliot.

"I'm sorry," Elliot said again. "I was being an asshole. Forgive me." He pulled a bandana out of his pocket and wiped the sweat off of his forehead.

"Hey, this isn't going to be a funeral, is it? I apologized."

"I am pissed, Elliot." Rebecca said. "Really pissed."

"Oh, Becky, Jesus Christ. What do I have to do?"

"Ben is our guest as are you. What is your problem?"

"Look," I said. "What do you say we go inside and get a cold drink or something. Maybe we should play cards. Something less physical."

"Maybe Ben and I should leave," Jerry said, brushing the dirt off of Ben's t-shirt.

"Don't do that," I said. "We were just getting started here."

"This isn't working out, Richie. Not at all."

I took a deep breath and looked at my friends. They all stood with lowered chins, staring at the ground.

"Don't leave," Elliot said. "Jerry, please. I'm sorry. I got out of control. You know me, Jerry, you know I can get that way. Don't let it ruin this weekend. This means a lot to Richie. It means a lot to all of us. Me too. I came out from California for this."

Jerry shook his head, looking over at Ben. "What do you want to do, Ben?"

Ben grinned, looking happier than I had seen him since he had arrived.

He moved over to the basketball that was lying underneath the basket and scooped it up in his long thin hands. "I believe it's our ball," he said softly. "Let's play."

"Yeah," I laughed. "Let's play. We're in the middle of kicking butt here."

Jerry smiled. "Are you sure, Benjamin?"

Ben nodded, taking his place under the basket and passing the ball over to me. I held it against my hip and waited for my friends to take their places on the court. When Rebecca resumed waving her hands in front of my face, grinning at me with white teeth and sparkling green eyes, I let a shot go. It clanged off of the rim and into Elliot's hands. He took two dribbles and threw the ball to Jerry. Just as Jerry took aim to shoot, it started raining fat cold drops. We kept playing anyway, getting soaked in the New Jersey summer rain, throwing a red, white and blue ball through a rusty orange hoop.

14. OUT TO DINNER

"We are going to eat until Gagliano's is forced to close due to lack of food," I announced, waving the telephone in my right hand.

Rebecca poked her head into the kitchen. "Did you make reservations?"

"Reservations? I didn't merely make reservations. I made a commitment. I told them that six of us would descend on their restaurant tonight, consume dozens of their largest, worst-behaved lobsters, and then pay with an over-worked credit card that was foolishly issued to me when I had a job."

"Hey, this one's on me." Elliot came in from the living room. "I'm the only one here with a decent job."

"What about me?" Rebecca called.

"You don't count," Elliot said. "You like what you do. I bet you go in weekends."

"Sure, if I'm in the middle of a project," she said.

"See? I learned that it's not work unless you hate it. Unless you can't wait to leave at the end of the day, get home and do something productive with your life."

"I thought you liked your job," I said.

"Eh, it's all right. I like the pay. It's not what I would do given the choice of any job in the world."

"What would you do then?" Rebecca asked.

"I'd like to be the guy who cleans the pay toilets on the boardwalk."

"Are you kidding?" I laughed.

"No, that's a great job. You remember that guy, he always had a big grin on his face. He always said hello."

"That guy was weird," Rebecca said. "When I worked here, he'd let himself into the woman's bathroom not bothering to find out if anyone was there. He was just trying to catch a peek."

"See, what did I say? The perfect job."

Rebecca shook her head. "Elliot, you're a jerk sometimes."

"Just think of all those thirteen year old couples locked in those pay stalls for a few moments of groping. I'd give them a real hard time."

I shook my head. "You are strange, guy."

"Hey, when I was thirteen, I'd take my dates into those pay stalls. We'd be locked in combat, and that old fart would whip the door open with his pass key, mumble, 'Excuse me' after taking a long look, and then shuffle his way out. I've been there. I know the ropes."

"You worked at Gagliano's, didn't you?" Rebecca asked. "I think Richie told me you did."

"For a summer," Elliot said. "It was a crappy job, sticking my fingers in picked over food. You know you can't even tell what people ordered after it's massacred on their plates. Being a busboy was a drag. I'd rather clean the bathrooms on the boardwalk."

"Hey, this will be like homecoming for you then, Elliot," I said. "Mrs.

Gagliano will come running out from the kitchen when she hears your voice."

"She doesn't own that place any more," Elliot said. "Some big chain bought it the summer we graduated high school. Somebody like Marriot or something."

"It's still one of the hottest places on the island," Rebecca said. "At least that's what their billboards spread all over the place say."

"Well, we're going over there to stuff our faces," I said. "We'll just have to eat some onion rings in memory of Mrs. Gagliano."

"Oh, I love those onion rings," Elliot stretched his arms over his head. "Do you guys think I talk about food too much?" He put one hand on his thick stomach cresting over his gym shorts.

"What's that about food?" Jerry opened the screen door to the kitchen.

"Hey, Jerry." I stood up and extended my hand. "Did you get Ben off all right?"

"Sure, fine." Jerry squeezed my hand and rubbed his eye with a fist.

"Thanks for the use of your car."

"No problem."

"I made reservations for tonight at Gagliano's," I said. "Six-thirty. That gives us a couple of hours to hang out."

"Sure." Jerry headed for the doorway to the living room. "I didn't get much sleep last night and that basketball game wore me down. I think I'll lie down for awhile. Is it all right if I use your room, Richie?"

"That's fine," I said. "You feel OK?"

"Oh yeah, just a bit exhausted." He turned and raised the corners of his

mouth. "This is a packed weekend. I'm out of shape, not used to the pace. I'll see you guys soon." Jerry headed for the stairs to the second floor.

"So, do you have anything planned for us for the next two hours?" Elliot asked.

"I'm afraid our itinerary isn't that detailed. Basketball this morning. Tonight out to dinner. I thought maybe hanging out at the boardwalk after that if the weather holds. For the next two hours you're on your own, Elliot."

"Super. I'm watching the Yankee game on the TV. It's been years since I've seen those boys in pinstripes." He lifted himself out of his chair and sauntered off to the living room, leaving Rebecca and me in the kitchen.

"How are you doing, Richie?" she asked.

"Oh, I'm OK." I smiled. "I feel a bit like I should be accounting for everyone's whereabouts every moment of this weekend. The complete host. But I'll assume my friends are adults now and can plan their time themselves."

"Walt and Ismeralda are down at the beach," she said. "I think I'm going to join them. Do you want to come?"

"I think I'll watch the game with Elliot. Have fun." I kissed Rebecca on the forehead and moved toward the living room. As I left the kitchen I turned back to see Rebecca staring at me, her green eyes intense with concentration. I smiled and continued on my way.

The Yankees lost that game six to five in the bottom of the ninth. The boys in pinstripes gave up too many home runs to boys in white socks from Chicago. By six o'clock the house was alive with showering and preparation to go out. By six fifteen I was pacing around trying to hurry everyone up so we could be on time for our reservations. I could be compulsive about those

sorts of things.

"Let's go guys." I motioned to Walt and Ismeralda who were huddled together in the living room, bent over a cracked leather backpack. "Do you take that wherever you go?"

"I keep many essential things in here," Ismeralda said. "I like to be prepared. There's food, an apple, some raisins and cashews, a paperback, a sewing kit, a snakebite kit, a bicycle patch kit for when I am riding my bicycle, a Swiss army knife, a spoon, a set of chopsticks." She was counting off her fingers until she ran out. She looked to Walt.

"Addresses, phone numbers, foreign currency, tampons, bandaids, a bandana, a set of clothes, your swim suit." He raised his eyebrows at her.

"Isn't that kind of heavy?" I asked.

"No, I don't mind carrying it." Ismeralda gave me a quick smile.

"OK, if you have everything then, let's get a move on."

The six of us piled into Ismeralda's pick-up truck to head for the wharf area. Rebecca, Jerry, and I sat in the bed, the three of us with our backs against the cab, watching the main island road recede as we passed.

"How are you doing, Jerry?" I asked, raising my voice over the wind.

"I'm OK. A little melancholy." He raised the corners of his mouth into a smile.

"I thought Ben was pretty cool," I said, glancing over at Rebecca.

"Yeah, a nice guy," she added.

"I wonder if I'm ever going to see him again." Jerry pulled his jacket tightly around his round body. "I wonder if I should have brought him here in the first place. It was not a move close to Elliot's heart."

"Don't worry about him," I said. I could hear muted laughter from the

cab of the truck. "I think he's regressing. Back to the junior high bully we all were afraid of."

"I don't think Elliot's very happy," Rebecca said. "All of that joking around. He's just kidding. I think he's in a lot of pain."

"I'm not sure," Jerry said. "Anyway, Ben was just a prop anyway. I'm a shit for doing it, but I needed a way to show you guys I had changed."

"You don't have to prove anything to us, Jerry. We've all changed. There's nothing wrong with that." I gave a smile to Rebecca who glanced suspiciously.

"I'm just not sure what I'm going to do come tomorrow." He glanced up. "I suppose I'll just deal with it, huh?"

"That's all you can do," Rebecca said.

"Right," I added. "As for myself, come tomorrow, Monday, I'll have made a major career move, perhaps pursuing one of those vocational training centers advertised on match books. Within weeks I'll be the proud owner-operator of a commercial trucking vehicle."

"What about me?" Rebecca said.

"Oh, I'll be home on weekends, darling. Then we can pursue home industry, maybe industrial glove cleaning in the kitchen sink. Yes, these are the eighties; we have to think big."

"What are you really going to do, Richie?" Jerry asked. "Go back to teaching?"

"I'm not sure." I rubbed the top of my head. "I was going to make up my mind this weekend."

"What if you don't?"

"Don't teach?" I asked.

"Don't make up your mind."

"I don't think I have a choice. I've spent all of my focus on getting this weekend together. I don't want to deal with blurry."

"Well, there's always room for you in one of my stores," Jerry said. "I know you think hardware isn't the most glamorous thing there is, but it's a living. You can still be creative."

"Thanks, Jerry. But I'm not cut out to hock ballpeen hammers and extension ladders. Do you remember when I worked for Sand's Drug Store the summer of junior year in high school?"

"Sure. We did a lot of fishing that summer. You got us great equipment."

"And we never paid for any of it. Do you want someone like me in one of your stores?"

"You're an adult now, Richie. I trust you. Consider it an open invitation."

"Thanks, Jerry."

We drove on to Gagliano's, the three of us sitting in silence. I reached for Rebecca's hand, and she held it against her hip. This time of year there wasn't a lot of night time activity on the island. The restaurants were partially filled with late-season renters and permanent stock. At the height of the season, a table at Gagliano's had to be reserved several days in advance. Now, past Labor Day, my reservation was probably not even necessary. I had made it though because I always liked making reservations. Something about calling someone up, arranging an evening and then having them expect you to show up. And when you do, it's like, "Oh, yes, Mr. Lewis. We were

expecting your party." They are generally relieved that the plan worked out. Reservations were very satisfying.

Ismeralda turned into the gravel parking lot next to the restaurant and pulled into the first open space, alongside a station wagon with Wisconsin license plates. To come all of that way for a vacation. I couldn't blame them for wanting to stay until the bitter end.

"Lewis, party of six," I told the maitre-de as we walked in. He glanced at a clipboard though we could see quite a few empty tables.

"Lewis, party of six," he repeated with a deep Italian accent. "Please follow me." He was a large man, this maitre-de, with a white shirt and red vest that were too small for his expansive upper body. I tried to remember the last time I had been to Gagliano's and whether this man had been here then. It had been after my father had died. I had come down to the island from Manhattan to help my mother pack up her life's possessions upon moving permanently to Florida. We had spent the day packing my twenty five years and her fifty years plus worth of possessions into cardboard boxes marked "top" and "bottom." It wasn't really a sad moment, my mother seemed anxious to get things together and get started with her Boca Raton life. She was quickly piling things into boxes, seemingly at random. A set of everyday dishware for four stuffed together with a set of single size sheets with Snoopys all over them. Then a couple of old clock radios to fill things out. I had sat slowly pawing over my old collection of Archie comics, Sordid Tales, and Beach Nymph magazines. My mother hummed Beatle's songs and finished long before I had.

My mother and I had gone to Gagliano's that night and sat in silence, smiling occasionally at each other, dipping lobster in clarified butter. I had

felt like we should have a serious discussion of my father, perhaps exorcise him from our thoughts, but I wasn't game to get it started. My mother had seemed content, probably already fitting herself behind the wheel of her Oldsmobile in Boca. She had never been one to dwell in the past.

The maitre-de led the six of us to a round booth in the left hand corner of the restaurant. We had a window on one wall, and I slid next to Rebecca, facing the view of the small harbor behind the pier. I had never been much for boating, but there had been a time in my life when I'd come out here and fish. There used to be a lot of blowfish that puffed up grotesquely when you dragged them onto the blacktop of the dock, but they had disappeared a few years back.

"I dream about this place sometimes out in California," Elliot said, brandishing a menu.

"Dreams about working here?" Jerry asked.

"No, eating here." Elliot moved his head quickly to take in the whole restaurant. "I only worked here for one summer clearing tables. It was miserable. Except for the food. I was always sneaking plates of onion rings during breaks."

"The model employee," Jerry said.

"I always did want to come here, but I could never afford it," Walt said, running his fingers over the menu.

"It must be miserable being poor," Elliot grinned. "I've almost forgotten what it's like."

"Give me a break." Walt smirked. "You're so happy now that you have coin in your pocket?"

"Yeah, I'm doing all right." Elliot looked down at his menu. "I can eat in places like this all of the time."

"Big deal," Walt said.

"I've always felt very uncomfortable in restaurants," Ismeralda said. "Like a stranger in someone else's house. An uninvited stranger."

"Will you all just relax and enjoy yourselves," Jerry said. "This is our last night together. We should be making toasts, whooping it up. Let's get happy." He waved his menu at the rest of us.

"Right, Jerry," Rebecca said.

"Yeah, right," I added. "Listen, I have to go to the bathroom. Order me the fried lobster."

"You always do that, Richie," Rebecca said. "I hate ordering for you. You always leave before the waiter comes over."

"What's the big deal? He'll come over, ask if we're ready to order, you reply, yes, then say the member of your party who was afraid he'd urinate all over the imitation velvet seat cover of the booth had to go use the head. He wisely chose the fried lobster. You know what I like as far as salad dressing and all that other crap goes. Oh, and let's get a bottle of house wine. Red."

"Thanks a lot, Richie." Rebecca slouched down in the booth.

I shook my head and slid off of the seat. I didn't need shit from Rebecca. This was the last night of this weekend, and I wanted things to go well. Instead there was a tension among my friends that had been slowly building since Saturday morning. It had only been partially relieved by Ben's exit. Things were coming to a head, and I wasn't sure what that would be. I wasn't even sure what my role was. Center stage? Off in a wing? Was this my weekend to straighten out my life or my friends chance to prove to

themselves that they were leading satisfactory lives? Satisfactory sounded so mediocre. So unexciting.

I made my way to the men's room. I could remember that it was one of those solo operations: a single toilet and a single sink, one of those electric dryers that nobody ever used but instead would ball up a huge wad of toilet paper that shredded into little bits and left you feeling like your hands were dirtier than when you started. I seemed to have a habit of remembering bathrooms. In third grade I threw up in the women teachers' bathroom of the Benjamin Franklin Elementary school. I was too sick to make it another couple of feet to the boys' student bathroom after eating a tunafish sandwich for lunch much too quickly, and I could remember turning to look at the sanitary napkin dispenser between heavens into the toilet. I wondered what it was. Fortunately, I was alone.

The men's room door at Gagliano's had a drawing of a skinny little man tipping his top hat to me as I grabbed for the door knob. What at first seemed like a casual need to relieve myself now felt like damming the Mississippi with balsa wood. The door was locked. That's the thing about solo johns, one poor shnook in there trying to avoid coming back to the table and answering questions about the dwindling children's trust fun money and the line pretty soon snakes out of the alcove where the rest rooms sit around to the secluded booths in the back. You'd think the board of health or somebody would have made the Gagliano's or the Marriott's or whomever put in another couple of fixtures. But this was New Jersey. Inspectors earned more than governors. Gagliano's remained under-equipped.

I stood, shifting my weight from one foot to another, trying to fend off the

impending emergency. Maybe this was a sign of age, loss of bladder control. You hit 30, and next thing you're discreetly buying disposable undergarments from bored drug store clerks with half-glasses tired of giving teenagers a hard time about buying condoms. I knocked on the men's room door and a muffled voice came back "Occupied." Great. That could mean all night. I considered using the women's room which was probably also a solo operation, but before I could lurch in that direction, a little girl in a yellow halter top slid past, went into the rest room, slammed the door followed by a loud click of the dead bolt. I did a little to dance to hold back the floodwaters and took full notice of a third door with a transom at the top. An outside door. Emergencies called for rash action. I jerked that door open and found myself in a narrow alley littered with garbage bags. I could hear water lapping at the nearby dock and seagulls still fighting over remnants of abandoned bait. Taking a quick look for dignity's sake, I leaned against the wall, my back to the street, and relieved myself onto a patch of concrete that had probably received similar treatment before judging from the curious stains and smells that filled the alley. I felt much better and grabbed for the handle of the door from which I had exited. It was locked. I banged on it a few times, but it was a heavy door. I could barely hear the casual chatter of the lobster-starved patrons. Shit. I started to walk down the alley, stepping over garbage bags that were torn open and reeking odors that made me question the food that could become that way. This was a side to Gagliano's that I had never seen. For that matter it was better off unseen. I tried to ignore any suspicious motion among the garbage, made a mental note to ask the maitre-de if they had paid their garbage bill that decade, and picked my way out of the alley.

I gulped salty air and tried to re-orient myself. The restaurant was on my

left, the front entrance around the corner facing the harbor. As I walked along the gravel path around an old rusty anchor that decorated the front of the restaurant, I suddenly could see my friends around the table to which we had been assigned. I stopped, put my hands in the pockets of my jeans. They were talking, Rebecca, then Elliot. Jerry added something, moving his hands while he spoke. Walt leaned back against the booth, expending little energy while his mouth moved. Ismeralda had both elbows on the table, holding her round face in her hands. I wondered what they were talking about. Me, perhaps? Maybe that was just ego-intense speculation. Maybe they were discussing the Yankees, whether Billy Martin would last the year. Maybe it was a political discussion, the rise of political action committees and the resultant benefits/dangers. Maybe they were discussing why Richie Lewis had brought them all together this weekend and whether he was losing his mind. Ego wins out again. I didn't feel like I was losing my mind. I might be getting stuck in an endless loop of childhood memories, generously edited to serve my current crisis. I could be so detached sometimes. Most of the time the crap was so far up past my eyes I could hardly see. I watched my friends for a few moments, imagining that I was seeing them for the first time. They seemed like nice people. They were munching dinner rolls, barely talking with their mouths full. When my father had talked, which wasn't often, he'd usually have his mouth full of sardine sandwich or my mother's meatloaf. He'd spray bits of food around, not seeming to notice. I hated going out to dinner with him. My friends look well-rested, no dark smudges under their eyes, reasonably happy, small smiles decorating all of their faces. Maybe Elliot had told a joke. He was a funny guy. I had always envied his sense of humor, sometimes with intense jealousy. Why couldn't I be that funny?

Maybe I had gathered my friends together so I could compare their lives to mine. But that was so unfair. We were all very different. I could learn from them all but never be like them. I had to remember that. Rebecca looked attractive and intelligent, her dark eyes full of an intensity that I always hoped to feed off of. Maybe we should break up, cut the cord. I needed a sharp jolt, high voltage, a push I couldn't seem to supply in a direction I couldn't seem to figure out. I was rotting like Gagliano's back alley garbage. I had to do something.

I walked around the corner and in through the front door of the restaurant. The big maitre-de was nowhere in sight as I glided over to our table.

"Hey, you fall in or something?" Elliot shouted.

"I stepped out into the alley because the john was reserved for the night. I got locked out." I held up my hands and shrugged. A gull glass of red wine sat in front of my plate. "I miss anything?"

"Oh, we were chatting," Rebecca said, sliding away from me on the bench seat as I sat down.

"We were discussing Elliot's transformation from radical to Republican," Walt said, smiling at Elliot.

"Hey, it's not that severe," Elliot said.

"Oh right, you probably don't even vote anymore. 'Who did it?' to 'Who cares?'"

"Give me a break, Walter. You artistic types think everyone has the talent to hole up in some loft and churn out a classic or two. It doesn't work like that. Some of us have to scramble to survive."

"You are confusing survival with integrity, Eliot," Ismeralda carefully folded one hand on top of the other. "You need not lose one in order to gain the other."

"OK, OK. I sold out. I admit it. I lost the fight. That's no secret. It doesn't even upset me. I'm crystal clear in what I'm doing now. I want to make a lot of money, surround myself with fabulous material wealth and drink myself to death." He took a slug of wine.

"Why?" Rebecca asked.

"Why not? You can't accuse me of not being true to myself. This is myself. I don't think radical was it."

"You don't miss any of that?" Jerry asked. "I mean, you were great back in high school, giving everyone a hard time. That was tremendous."

"Yeah," Elliot smiled. "It was a power trip, but it's not high school anymore. And I do the same thing now. You should hear me call up accounts with outstanding payables. Talk about hard time, I mainly do sales, but my boss let's me collect money as an added frill."

Walt shook his head. "This is going to sound crass, but if I met you now, I'd never get within ten yards of you. You're not my type at all. But still," he smiled, "I feel close as hell to you, Elliot. Why the hell is that?"

"Because I'm the only person to consistently block your shot?"

"Oh, don't give me that sports, male-bonding crap," Rebecca said. "Why is it that men can hate each other in street clothes, but put them in sweats, and they're bonded for life?"

"Nah, we still hate each other," Elliot said. "We might just have something to respect if we've bashed into each other a few times on a court."

"We've all shared a ton," Jerry said. "That's what keeps us close. That's

what brought us all here this weekend. Right, Richie?" He smiled at me.

"That's true," I said. "A memory a day keeps the future away." I shrugged at my friends. "At least that's the way it seems to me."

15. THE HELL WHOLE

"Come on, guys, the roller coaster awaits." Elliot draped a black sweatshirt over his shoulders as he spoke. After dinner we came back to the house for warmer clothes before returning to the boardwalk area. It was getting much colder as the summer died away. "I'm dying to ride the bumper cars. How about you, Walt?"

"Sure, Elliot." Walt smiled. "How about those little racing cars. Can we do those?"

"Sure, anything. It's Sunday. Tonight's the night to let loose. This is the culmination of the weekend. Right, Richie?"

"Hell, we might never see each other again," I said. "We have to live for the moment here."

Walt cocked his head, the smile still fixed on his face. He was trying to figure out if I was serious or not, if Richie Lewis had had a change of heart and wasn't interested in his long range plan anymore. Maybe his old friend Richie Lewis had finally come to his senses.

I moved to the kitchen and leaned against the doorway. I pressed my index fingers to my forehead, pinching my skin. I was getting a massive headache, one that had been building for a couple of days now. Each bite of

lobster at Gagliano's had thumped relentlessly at my skull. I headed for the cabinet over the sink in search of aspirin.

"I'm ready to go, sport." Rebecca came up behind me and planted a kiss on the back of my neck.

"Do you have any aspirin?"

"You getting a headache?"

"It's too late. I have a headache." I squinted at Rebecca. She was still wearing khaki shorts and a long sleeve t-shirt but now she had a long cotton scarf around her neck. "Are you dressing in contrasts tonight?"

She smiled. "It's chilly outside but I don't feel like putting on any heavier clothes. It's a pleasure to walk around in shorts like this." She held out her arms. "Being a University professor carries this ugly responsibility to dress as an adult. I really hate it."

"I wouldn't know."

"Ooh, you're in a good mood." She raised her eyebrows.

"I just need some aspirin. Will you find me some?"

"Sure, sure, if I can escape here alive." She moved out of the kitchen, leaving me leaning against the cabinet, my forehead against the sticky wood veneer. I didn't want to be mad at Rebecca, but I was losing control of the swollen red rage that was pushing itself out with my headache. I knew this pattern. Soon everything she did would annoy me, the way she moved her hands when she talked, her reaction to everything I said. I was becoming irrational, and there was little I could do to stop it.

"Lewis, you animal." Elliot came up from behind and clamped his big arms around my chest. "Let's go to the boardwalk and convince sixteen year old New Jersey girls that we're important Hollywood executives out on a

talent search. We'll dump everybody else and bring them back here with a sixpack of RC Cola, a couple of German Shepherds, fifteen tubs of Cool Whip."

I pushed Elliot's arms off of me. "Do you have any aspirin?"

"Headache? I never use aspirin. The pain is good for you. Cleansing."

"I find it merely painful. I have to find some aspirin."

"Get your ass in gear. We have to get to the boardwalk during its peak activity."

"It's the end of the season. There won't be very many people there," Walt said, stepping into the kitchen. "Ismeralda and I are ready. Where's Jerry?"

"He's been in the bathroom for a year now," Elliot said. "He's writing his memoirs or redesigning the plumbing or something. Let's get this show on the road."

"I'll be right down." I quickly moved upstairs, towards the medicine cabinet in the bathroom Jerry wasn't occupying. Rebecca was there, holding small bottles up to the light.

"What is this stuff? Most of the labels have faded. These could be dangerous. Did the realtor leave unmarked bottles in here?"

I peered into the medicine cabinet. "Maybe the last renter left them. Do any of them look like aspirin?"

"These are little white tablets with a 'B' marked on them. Maybe they are." She looked up at me. "Are you doing OK?"

"I've been better. My head is really killing me."

"The weekend working out OK? I'm having lots of fun."

"Sure, sure, it's great." I started pulling tops off of bottles and spilling the contents onto the top of the toilet lid. "Does this look like a Tylenol to you?"

"You really have nice friends. And they have nice friends." She took the capsule I was holding up. "Might be a Contact. Don't take it."

"This is ridiculous." I jerked up the toilet lid, sending the pills cascading to the tile floor. I put my hands to my ears.

"Richie, what's wrong?" Rebecca moved closer. "Why aren't you having fun."

"I am, I am," I whispered, my head jarring with each consonant.

"What can I do?"

"I don't know."

"Do you still want to go to the boardwalk?"

"Oh, I think." I pulled the toilet lid back down and sat on it. I tried to force my mouth into a smile but my jaw was locked in place. "I don't know."

Rebecca sighed. "We can stay here." She ran her long fingers through my hair. "I'm sure that'll be all right."

"I can't decide. I'm feeling pretty bent out of shape." I let out a long breath.

"Are you disappointed?"

"About what?"

"I know this weekend was supposed to make you feel better."

"I do feel better." I rubbed my eyes with my fists. "At least I did. I don't know. I think that I think too much."

Rebecca kissed me on top of the head. "I'm going to go downstairs. If you feel like going, we'll go. If not, well, we do something else."

"OK. I'll be down in a second." She kissed me again on top of the head

and I managed a weak smile. "Close the door on your way out, will you?"

I sat on the toilet, surrounded by broken pills, the harsh light of the overhead fixture making me squint. When I was a kid, I'd sit here reading science fiction books and listen to my parents yell at each other in their bedroom. I'd be engrossed in a post-apocalypse scenario while my parents carried on their fairly regular Saturday arguments in shouts muffled by the walls. It was often a silly argument, my father wanted to work in the basement on that night while my mother wanted to go out, or my father wanted to paint the living room blue while my mother wanted to wall paper it. They'd shout at each other, I'd hear a few doors slam and then later, when I finally came out of the bathroom, I'd see my father hurrying red-faced into the basement. Soon I'd hear his power tools running, the faint smell of sawdust drifting up through the rest of the house. My mother would lie on her bed, one arm draped over her forehead, until it was time to make dinner. There were no clear cut winners to their arguments. Eventually they'd be amiable to each other again and sometimes they'd go out that night, sometimes they'd stay home. There was no gloating by either side.

Now, as I sat in the bathroom, I could only hear the far away voices of my friends in other parts of the house. They were probably wondering what was wrong with Richie Lewis. Why was he so bent out of shape? He had his friends together for the weekend. What more did he want?

I'd go to the boardwalk. I'd play a few arcade games, go on a couple of rides. I'd try to have a good time. I'd try not to be such a drag.

I swept a couple of white round pills off of the floor that were marked with a "B" and shoved them into my mouth, flushing them down with a swallow of cold water from the bathroom tap. I wiped my mouth with hand

towel that hung on the guest rack and moved downstairs.

"All right," I shouted. "Let's get this show on the road."

The six of us stuffed ourselves into my Honda wagon, and we made our way over to the Boardwalk.

"Hey, Rich, remember when we used to hang out at that surfing shop," Elliot asked, pointing to a boarded up store on the main boulevard.

"I don't." I looked in the rear view mirror. "That one?"

"Oh yeah. We'd hang out there, talk surfing with the local studs." Elliot was jammed into rear compartment of the car, behind the back seat. "They'd let us wax their boards once in a while."

"I think you're making this up," I said.

"Oh no. We did that. I'm sure of it."

I shook my head. My friends were imagining a life more colorful than the one we lived. This was confusing the issue.

I pulled into the sand covered parking lot next to the boardwalk. It hadn't changed very much since I had lived here. There was a new water slide, a landscaped mountain of plastic ramps. A velodrome for skateboarders had been built in the rear of the parking lot, and when I parked next to it, I could see the tips of skateboards as they teetered on the edge of the smooth track before heading back toward the bottom. Otherwise the arcade area was the same.

"Does this bring back memories or what, Richie?" Rebecca asked.

"Rebecca used to work at this place," I said out loud.

"We know," Jerry said. "That's where you met. You told us that story a long time ago."

"Maybe I'm just reminding myself." We popped out of the car and headed for the arcade. "We need a plan," I said. "Should we all hang together or meet back here in an hour or two?"

"Hey, just like when we were goddamn kids." Elliot said. "I'd come here with my Mom and her date when I was twelve. Barry or Larry or Gary or who the hell ever would slip me a couple of bucks and tell me when to meet them at the car. Hell, I'd spend most of the time sitting outside that fun house exit where the big blast of air billows up girls' skirts. Didn't cost much at all. By the end of the summer, I was a rich man."

"Let's stay together," I said. "There's strength in numbers."

Jerry took a long look at me. "Sure, Richie."

I took Rebecca's arm and we headed for the center of the arcade. The boardwalk itself covered about six blocks of beach front with the rides in the center. The usual seaside shops lined the boardwalk: saltwater taffy, pizza by the slice, coffee cups with "New Jersey Warms Me Up" printed on their sides as well as pinball arcades and all of the games of skill that make any boardwalk a place to toss away quarters: softball toss, horseshoe toss, basketball toss, dart toss, bowling ball toss, and shooting games that ranged from water guns to facsimiles of 44 magnums.

The part of the boardwalk that contained the rides ran from the street onto a pier that was raised over the ocean by huge round piles. Once when I was small, a fierce winter storm had sent waves crashing over the pier and had carried away the ferris wheel. When they dredged the wheel, its metal seats covered with seaweed and sand, we all watched from the boardwalk, gasping as they laid the huge metal wheel on the beach. It took two seasons for a replacement ferris wheel to arrive.

Tonight the boardwalk area wasn't very crowded. The summer renters and weekend vacationers had all gone back to their overcrowded neighborhoods in northern New Jersey. What was left was the permanent residents of the island and those mainlanders out for a last thrill before the realities of school and work would prevent rides on the merry go round and the pleasures of spinning upside down, suspended in air, in a small car shaped like a ketchup dispenser. The entire boardwalk shut down at the end of September. The booths would be boarded up, the rides would be still, some covered with stiff grey tarpaulins. As a kid I always spent a lot of time on the boardwalk after the season was over. I would rummage under the boardwalk itself, picking up loose change, trying to avoid stepping on cigar butts and spent condoms. I'd be wrapped in my winter parka, with its fleecy hood, my pockets bulging with real finds: broken pieces of dinosaur that must have been won and smashed in quick succession, a few driver's licenses, lots of keys. I'd go home and spread everything out on my bed, organizing items into categories and storing them in several shoe boxes. When I had returned home one summer during college, those boxes were gone, victims of another of my mother's spring cleanings.

"Richie, we have to ride the Hell Whole," Elliot grabbed my arm.

"The Hell Whole?"

"Yes, we have to. The reunion wouldn't be the same without it."

The Hell Whole was one of those rides where everyone stands at the edge of a cylinder that slowly begins to spin. Soon enough centrifugal force is built up so that the floor drops away, and you remain pinned to the wall. We rode the Hell Whole the spring of our senior year in high school, managing to maneuver our bodies so that our heads were pointed toward the floor or we

were pinned to the wall sideways with hands locked. When the ride slowed down, we would fall to the floor and get in line to do it again.

"Hey, do you want to ride the Hell Whole?" Elliot called out to the rest of the group.

Jerry shrugged. "I just ate dinner. That ride never agreed with my stomach."

"Come on." Elliot turned to me. "What do you say, Richie? Let's ride that thing."

"Sure." I smiled, looking at Rebecca. "Are you coming?"

"I always hated that ride. It makes me nauseous." She put her hand to her stomach.

"Walt," Elliot shouted. "You have to, guy. We're counting on you."

Walt looked over at the entrance to the Hell Whole and then at Ismeralda. "Sure, I'm game. Would you like to try?"

"What is this hell hole?" Ismeralda asked.

"Oh, don't ask, Izzy," Elliot came over and put a hand on her shoulder. "It's something you just have to experience. We could never prepare you for it."

"It's kind of like going for a car trip with Elliot driving," Rebecca said.

"Only much, much worse."

Ismeralda squinted at Elliot. "I have never experienced Elliot's driving, but I will try this hell hole. It sounds exciting."

"Tremendous. Let's go then. The Hell Whole awaits."

Elliot, Walt, Ismeralda and I headed for ride. Rebecca and Jerry took a seat on a bench to wait for our emergence from the Hell Whole.

There were only a couple of other people on the ride, two young kids with long hair covering their faces and black t-shirts that advertised a heavy metal group. The pimply-faced teenager who ran the ride positioned us against the wall and strapped a belt around our waists.

"No unbuckling during the ride," he mumbled. "No chewing gum. No spitting. Do not remove your shoes." He pointed to a sign where these rules were printed in faded black letters. He then slouched out of the cylinder shutting the door with a click. I looked over at Elliot on the opposite side of the chamber. He had already unbuckled his seat belt and gave me a wild grin. As the ride slowly began to spin, Walt and Ismeralda gave me quick smiles, and I swallowed hard. We gradually picked up speed, the cylinder's low whir increasing to a high pitched whine. I could feel the skin on my face being pulled back, my mouth forced into an involuntary grin. To increase the effect, a strobe light had been added since I had last been on this ride. This gave the sensation of seeing separate slides, and I kept my gaze trained on Elliot who was slowly moving himself sideways. I could hear his loud laugh over the din of the machine. When we were in high school, we would stay on this ride several times in succession. The attendant had been a friend of Jerry's, and he'd let us ride as many times as we wanted for the cost of one ride. When we'd get off, we'd stumble around for awhile, feeling like everything was still spinning. We'd laugh and stumble over to a food stand, where Elliot's girlfriend Sheila worked and would slip us free hotdogs. Now, I just felt pinned and slightly queasy. It felt like the ride had gone on far too long, as if there was some malfunction, or the attendant had abandoned us. He was off with his greasy friends, arguing over who the best rock group in the world was. We were trapped in the Hell Whole, destined to spin until

our internal organs were pureed like cream soup or until the entire cylinder would spin off of its base and take out half of the arcade booths in its path of destruction. I forced myself to swallow, unable to take my eyes off of Elliot who was now completely upside down. I felt a scream being pulled out of my lungs, mingling with the squeal of the cylinder and echoing around the chamber, being pressed against everyone's ears. I closed my eyes for a moment and detected a change in the tone of the machine's sound. It was slowing down. I watched Elliot slowly slide off of the wall into a heap on the floor and the Hell Whole came to a stop.

"Christ," Elliot yelled. "I'd forgotten what a blast that is. I want to buy one of these for myself, put it in my yard. What a great way to let loose." He was sitting against the wall of the cylinder and looked over at me. "Was that great or what, Richie?"

I realized I was clutching the restraining belt, my hands sore from the grip. "Ugh," was all I could manage.

"Hey, you didn't get upside down." Elliot stood up and came over. "Do you want to try it again? You missed the best part." He bent down and looked into my eyes. "Are you OK?"

"It's been a long time," I mumbled, finally able to unbuckle myself. I took a step and felt my stomach spin around several times. "A long time."

Elliot turned to Ismeralda. "How about the Hell Whole, Izzy. Was that the time of your life or what?"

She smiled, rubbing her palms on the thighs of her jeans. "This is a strange experience. I'm not sure of the reference to Hell, though. Do you think it's a variation of Dante's circles of Hades? I have never thought of

hell as a centrifuge. I suppose it's an interesting idea."

"Are you OK, Richie?" Walt asked, coming closer.

I stumbled forward a few steps. "Uh, sure." I felt my stomach pitch upward. "Somewhat. I have to find the bathroom." I moved as quickly as I could out of the Hell Whole, gave a quick wave to Rebecca and Jerry on the bench, and lurched towards the men's room. I barely made it in time to empty my stomach into the porcelain toilet. I crouched over the bowl, my eyes closed, my insides still spinning in the Hell Whole. Reaching to grab some toilet paper to wipe my mouth, I noticed some graffiti. "Anarchy Rules."

I stood up, splashed some cold water on my face, and went out to rejoin my friends.

16. LAST TIME FOR INSOMNIA

I closed the door silently, leaving Rebecca asleep in bed. Maybe she was dreaming of me, Richie, her confused lover, dangling his life in his hands like a marionette? Or maybe they were dreams of fantasy: other places, other men, altogether different lives?

I quietly placed one foot after the other, moving through the upstairs. I passed Walt and Ismeralda in my old bedroom, feeling the passion flow through the crack beneath the door. Rebecca and I once had that passion. But sex wasn't all adolescent boys made it out to be. At least it wasn't enough now.

I passed Elliot's door, the low rumble of snoring penetrating the wood. Elliot had his job, his money, his success. He knew where he was going and where he had come from.

I moved down the stairs, passing Jerry in the living room, tangled in his blankets, set in his chosen lifestyle. I went through the kitchen, out onto the back porch screened in to ward off New Jersey pests. I sat in the cool New Jersey night, pressing my hands against my thighs, feeling the sweat run down both sides of my backbone.

Life was full of choices, and it was time to make one. I could go back in the house, back upstairs to Rebecca, back into bed and fit myself into the space

around her back and legs as she slept on her side.

Or I could slowly walk out to the driveway, get in the Honda, let the brake out and roll start the car at the end of the driveway. From there it was thirty minutes to Philadelphia, eleven hours to Michigan, sixteen to Chicago.

Or better yet I could go back in the house, use my key to unlock the basement door, and make my way to my father's workbench. There, among the glass mustard jars of three penny nails and assorted wood screws, I would find a locked, felt-lined cedar box. It would be slipped into the the open back of the bench that rested against the cinderblock wall. Inside the box I would find a twenty two caliber handgun, fired only once. I could take that handgun, hold its hard, cold barrel against my chest and blow bits of Richie Lewis all over my father's well-organized basement.

I considered these choices as I listened to the crickets rubbing their legs together. Richie Lewis, failed teacher, failed speculator, and generally bummed out guy, was on the edge. This is what it all came to. All the years of gathering experience like kindling, burning it up over the routine of everyday life, waiting for that moment, that revelation. I wanted that one instant when it all cleared, when I'd say, "Yeah, that's what it's all about." But what was it all about? We're born; we live; we die. That's all.

To put off the final choice, I rose from the swinging seat on the porch and pushed my way outside. The humid air parted as I forced my way through.

I moved down the street, past the two story beach houses lining the block. Vacationers dreamt thoughts of work, workers of vacation.

As I drew closer to the ocean, I could hear its sound rise. The sand spread out from the end of the block, marking the entrance to the beach.

Warning: No dogs
No Disrobing
No Public Bathing
No Picnicking
No Walking on the Dunes
Violators will be prosecuted. City Statute 765.37

I slipped off my shorts and underwear and pulled my shirt over my head. The cool ocean air rushed by my inner thighs slick with sweat.

I moved closer to the water and sat on the sand, stretching my legs out in front of me, my hands back for support. I could feel the ocean spray lay a fine coat of salt mist over my skin.

Life was full of choices, yet each choice led to another. They are never done. They pop up like the skeletons in "Jason and the Argonauts."

I was turning thirty; I lived with a wonderful supportive woman; I had close friends with whom I could talk and share weekends. Everything was fine. Nothing could be better.

Perhaps I should chant these like a mantra, I told myself. Everything was fine. Nothing could be better. Everything was fine. Nothing could be better. Everythingwasfinenothingcouldbebettereverythingwasfinenothingcouldbebetter.

Then why the hell did I have a feeling in my chest like someone had poured slow drying cement in there? It was hardening, freezing up my vital organs, pressing against my soul with threatening force. The shrill scream of my insides had become so loud that I was afraid others could hear it.

I got up and moved down to the water's edge. It was numbingly cold against my bare feet and ankles as I waded part way in. It felt good, the aching

cold, distracting the pain away from my chest.

When I was a kid and used to come to this beach with my parents, I'd immediately dig a huge hole. I'd spend hours scooping out the sand with a scalloped shell, piling it high beside my hole. I'd dig as far as I could reach, getting in the hole and digging further until I could barely climb out. Then I'd rest up against the cool sand wall and listen to the muffled sounds from above, as if from a different world. Finally, my father would reach his arms into my hole, dangling them in front of me like ropes, calling me to get out before I became trapped.

Then I thought of my father's gun, waiting in his workshop bench. The one time it had been used was in 1959. I was three years old and this was perhaps my earliest memory. My father brought the gun back with him after he spent the war fighting the Germans.

"You'll need to defend yourself if anything like those Krauts ever hit these shores," he told my mother.

"If it comes to that point, they'll have me as a loyal follower. I won't die for some men's game."

"Just use the gun, Esther. If you have to."

With that advice the pistol rested in its felt-lined case for ten years. A twenty two wasn't powerful enough to do much damage at any distance. I suppose my father thought that caliber would be safest in case of accident. My father would periodically clean and reload it, keeping it ready in case of enemy attack. In 1959 it happened. My Uncle Morris came to visit.

"Esther, my sister. I'm finally come for a visit." Uncle Morris was a huge man, who engulfed my mother in round flabby arms, pressing her thin body against his well padded frame. I was next for his embrace. "And this must be

little Richie."

My father shifted his feet in the background, clearing his throat, as my uncle rubbed the top of my head.

"Oh, uh, of course." My mother squeezed herself out of her brother's grip. "Morris, this is Leonard, my husband."

The two men eyed each other for a long second. My parents had eloped after falling in love at a USO dance in New York City. My mother's family was from Chicago, and they had ostracized her from the time they were married until this visit. Uncle Morris broke the silence. "So, this is the husband you've been hiding from us all." He reached out a thick hand. "Leonard, you're taking care of my sister, I assume."

My father grunted, giving my uncle's hand a quick shake.

"You see my sister is used to good things, fine things. I would hate to see her not have those." Uncle Morris glanced around at the bare walls of our apartment. My mother had worked especially hard scrubbing the faded yellow couch and chairs and putting a new coat of wax on the hardwood floor. She had even dusted her entire collection of mollusk shells that sat on top of the metal bookcase.

"Enough talk, you two." My mother broke in and grabbed both men's arms. "Morris, you must be exhausted. Come, I will show you to a hot shower and a soft bed."

"It's good you have those things, Esther," Morris said, as she led him away from my father. "I was not sure you would be able to afford them."

Our tiny New York apartment was crowded that night with my Uncle's great bulk and the growing animosity between him and my father. Dinner

was take-in Chinese food. Uncle Morris ate two entire cartons of Egg Fu Yung.

"At least you have Chinese in this neighborhood, Esther," Morris bellowed, bits of fried egg hanging on his beard. "But tell me. Why don't you move to a nice suburb? Long Island or New Jersey, maybe?"

"When we have the money." My mother glanced quickly at my father. "We're working as hard as we can."

My father grunted.

"What is it you do, Len?"

My father hated being called Len. "Shoes."

"What was that? I'm half-deaf in my left ear. What do you do?"

"I sell shoes," my father said in a monotone, holding his cup of tea with both hands.

"Oh, I see. A shoe salesman." My uncle resumed chewing on a sparerib. "Esther, do you remember Edgar Katz, the one with the birthmark on his cheek?"

"Oh, of course. Edgar, with the birthmark shaped like Italy. We went together in high school."

"Well, Edgar Katz is a big man now. A very big man."

"He's not the only one," my father mumbled.

Uncle Morris pushed out his large cheeks and waved the sparerib at my father. "Edgar Katz is a lawyer now. Reputation, money, respect. Everything except a wife." He turned to look at my mother.

"He was a nice boy." My mother laughed. "A nice boy."

For awhile everyone watched me strapped into my booster seat, eating fried rice by the fistful.

"Let's play cards," my mother finally said.

Uncle Morris looked up. "Three hand? What can we play three hand?"

"Oh, I don't know. How about gin rummy? We could play for points."

She turned to my father. "How about that, Len?"

He scowled and wiped the corners of his mouth with his paper napkin.

"Whatever you want, Esther."

"Yes, let's do that. Let's play gin."

They moved me to the couch, and planted me in front of the black and white television while Lucy and Ricky prepared for a dinner party for Ricky's boss. While my father packed his pipe for a smoke, my mother cleared the kitchen table of Chinese food and pulled out the deck of Eastern Airlines complimentary playing cards.

Things went OK for awhile. Lucy tried baking bread but put too much yeast in the dough and ended up with the bread taking over her oven. Fortunately, Ricky's boss loved bread and thought Lucy's loaf was the most inventive he had ever seen.

My mother won the first few hands. She had a great memory and was an ace at hoarding the cards that my father and my uncle needed. It was on the fourth shuffle, my father's, that trouble began.

"So, Len," Morris started. "What plans for the future do you have for my baby sister?" He smiled broadly at my father, clutching his third glass of wine in his swollen hand.

"Plans?" My father ruffled the cards expertly, cutting the deck with one hand, a trick he had learned from the card sharks in the Catskill Mountains where he had worked summers as a waiter, earning money for college. "I plan to work hard, save some money, take a vacation to Florida perhaps."

"Oh, Leonard, that would be wonderful."

"Florida is too humid for me," Uncle said. "And too many spics. Lazy bastards."

"Leonard works for a Cuban man, Mr. Cardoza."

"A spic? You kowtow to a spic?"

My father's face slowly turned red. "He's a good man. He treats me fair. We've discussed my buying into the business."

"Yeah, sure. Just give the spic your money. He'll spend it on his girlfriends and fancy clothes. Just give it away, Len." He took a huge swallow of wine.

My father slowly dealt the cards, his ears crimson like wine.

"And another thing," my uncle started. "Edgar Katz doesn't work for any spics."

"Morris, please. You're angering Leonard."

"Edgar Katz doesn't live in a dump on the East side."

"Morris."

"No," my father nearly shouted. "That's all right, Esther. Let your brother talk. He's never wanted to like me, and he never will. No one is good enough for his baby sister."

"Leonard, that's not true," my mother said.

"It is," my father yelled, slowly standing up. "Ever since we've been married your family has been nothing but insults and pain. They think I've turned you into some sort of whore."

Uncle Morris choked on his wine. "Watch your mouth," he sputtered.

"Leonard, Richie's listening." She rushed over to me on the couch,

holding my head against her flowered dress. "Time for bed, Richie. Say good night to your uncle and your father."

They stood opposite each other across the kitchen table. My father's thin arms stuck out of his rolled up white shirt sleeves. He was dwarfed by my uncle's great bulk.

My mother hustled me into my room as I heard broken glass from the kitchen. Shouts and grunts flew in muffled succession as my mother hurriedly undressed me and kissed me good night, tucking the blankets up around my chin.

Once my mother left my room, I quickly climbed out of bed and made my way back to the kitchen. There I sat, in my pajamas covered with tiny Howdy Doodys with empty grins, watching my parents and my Uncle Morris.

"How could you marry this, this," Uncle Morris gestured at my father with his glass, splashing wine onto the linoleum floor, "this footwear peddler."

"How dare you?" my father shouted. "You are in my home. Don't you have any respect?"

"Why should I?" My uncle and my father faced each other across the kitchen table. "You're a disgrace to my sister and our family. We are very important people in Chicago."

"Bullshit. You've made your money slaughtering cows as they pass by an old drunken Hasidic rabbi."

"We own the largest Kosher slaughterhouse East of the Mississippi. Your wife had respect, a family name. Now what is she? A Lewis? What is that?"

My mother moved to the table waving a dishrag. "Why can't you two stop this? This is no way to settle this."

"Sure," Uncle Morris said, turning toward my mother. "The only way is for you to leave this dump and come back with me to Chicago and Edgar Katz."

"I can't do that, Morris." She swept her hair off of her forehead with the back of her hand. "I have a life here."

"You call this a life?" He pointed at my father who glared, fists clenched. "With this bum?"

"That's it," my father shouted. "There is another way to settle this." He scrambled out of the kitchen and into the living room.

"Morris, you should be ashamed of yourself. How dare you come into my home and start this nonsense?"

"I'm only looking after your best interest, Esther," my uncle said. "Leave this bum. Now. Tonight."

"I can't."

"Why not? Do you love your Leonard and this miserable life you have?"

"Of course I do. Why the hell do you have the right to be so judgmental about my life?"

"I'm your brother, your family. I know what is best."

My father hurried back into the room. In his right hand he held his twenty two caliber pistol.

"Leonard, my God," my mother shouted. "What are you doing?"

"I've had enough from this pile of shit brother of yours. Get out of my house." He waved the gun like a flag.

"Put that away, you fool. You're just proving to your wife what a lunatic you are. Put it away."

"Get out now."

Uncle Morris slowly put his glass on the kitchen table. He had a twisted smile on his fleshy face, like he was about to tell a joke. "OK, you schmuck. I'll leave. If my sister is as smart as I know she is, she'll come with me." He took a few steps toward my father who was standing in the doorway. "Put that stupid gun away."

"Put it away, Leonard," my mother repeated.

My father pointed the gun at my uncle. "Get out first."

"Are you coming, Esther? Are you coming to Chicago with me?"

"I can't go, Morris. I have a life here."

"You could call it that." My uncle took a long slow look from my mother to my father and then rushed at my father, pinning him to the door frame with his great bulk and grabbing for the gun with both hands.

"Stop it," my mother screamed.

The two men grunted and struggled, their faces red with exertion.

"Stop," my mother screamed again, her hands over her ears.

My father suddenly pried my uncle off by bringing his knee into my uncle's stomach. Uncle Morris stepped back and gasped for a moment, then took another charge at my father. When the two men hit the door frame, the gun fell out of my father's hand, hit the floor, and exploded with a loud "pop".

"Esther, I'm shot," my uncle shouted, his mouth small and twisted. He released my father and reached a hand back to touch the jabbed tear in his trouser seat that was quickly becoming stained with his own blood. He examined his hand, sniffed at it a moment and then fell to the floor in a large heap.

It was at this point that I scampered back to bed, pulling the covers up to my chin and shivering in the darkness. Before I finally dropped off to sleep, I could smell my father's pipe smoke coming from outside my door, and I could feel his eyes staring at me through the darkness.

I never saw Uncle Morris again. It wasn't until five days later that I saw my mother. Evidently, she had dressed my uncle's superficial wound that night and escorted him the next day back to Chicago. While she was gone, my father spend the evenings smoking his pipe, staring out of the open front door of our apartment. When my mother came back five days later, my life returned to normal. My father resumed working long days at Mr. Cardoza's shoe store. My mother took me to the local park during the day to chase the white ducks that made the small pond their home.

My parents moved out of the tiny New York apartment a couple of years later. They settled in a spacious ranch style in a suburban neighborhood on an island off the coast of New Jersey. My father eventually bought the shoe store from Mr. Cardoza who retired and moved back to Cuba. My father was successful at running the store and opened three more in the expanding Hispanic neighborhoods of New York City. The old Hasidic men, clinging to their apartments in the old neighborhoods, would wave to him as he came to work everyday at his first store. My father retired a wealthy man and moved my mother to Florida. They lived a life of casual activity in a condo in Ft. Lauderdale until my father's heart got tired and stopped. At that point my mother went at it solo.

For thirty years my parents' relationship was mortally wounded by a bullet in Uncle Morris' butt. My mother never forgave my father and they forever lived in uneasy wariness of each other. For all of my father's business

success he grew increasingly bitter, spending most of his time in his basement workshop in the house in New Jersey, cutting from wood delicate little figures of people and animals. They were his community, his peer group. He had total control over their lives.

This was where my father's gun remained, waiting in his workbench in the house on the New Jersey shore. I gathered up my clothes in a ball and stepped barefooted across the sand, back toward the house. The silent neighborhood took no notice of this naked man, strolling down the block.

I slipped back through the screened-in porch and into the house. The door to the basement was on my left. I pulled the key out of my shorts pocket and unlocked the door.

At the bottom of the stairs I clicked on the light switch, flooding the cinder-blocked room with harsh white light. I snapped it back off. No need for that. I could feel where things were.

I reached behind the workbench and touched the small cedar box. As I tipped it onto its side, I could feel cobwebs breaking free from the box and its resting place.

Life was full of choices. You're born; you live; you die. You push and strive and struggle all your life and you land up suffering for thirty years over a bullet you planted in the ass of a man who surely deserved it. You strive to learn, to teach, to write of your experience but it all comes down to words on paper. There's no action except the impotence of understanding. Sure, I understood it. Sure, my life will be different. Then why the hell was I sitting naked in the dark basement holding a gun box in my hand while my closest friends slept peacefully unaware above me? Thanks for the legacy, Pop.

When I was thirteen, while rummaging around the basement, trying to find where my father hid his old *Playboy* magazines, I had discovered this gun.

"Richie, what are you doing down there?" my mother had shouted from the top of the stairs.

I had whipped my hand out from behind the workbench. "Nothing."

She hurried down the stairs. "I want to show you something. You should know this is here if ever anything happens to me or your father."

Then, with a lesson on self-defense and a threat if I ever touched the gun without reason, my mother showed me the blue-barreled twenty two. When I asked if it had ever been used, she had told me the complete story of Uncle Morris, embellishing my own memories as a three year old.

"I'll never forgive your father. Not for as long as I'll live."

I nodded in mock understanding, wondering what it would feel like to shoot the gun. My adolescent curiosity would never be satisfied. My mother never showed me where the key to the locked box was kept until they moved to Florida, five years ago.

It was that key that I removed from the top of a beam running the length of the basement's ceiling. I opened the cedar box and watched the metal gun gleam in the moon lit basement. The gun felt ice cold as I grabbed its barrel. I transferred the gun to my left hand, holding it by the handle, now. I rubbed my index finger along the trigger, feeling its smooth curve come to a rounded end. As I raised the barrel to my forehead, I felt a cold shiver quake through my body, starting at my toes and returning there.

This weekend was to be a review of what was best in my life. It was to be everything I loved as I turned thirty. Among this love I was supposed to

discover the reasons for going on. I would realize how silly this little defeatist game was that I played. Screw it, Richie. You have everything. Why are you so unhappy? Why are you such a pain in the ass?

Why, indeed. Why was everything so insignificant as to be trivial? My friends didn't mean anything, Rebecca didn't mean anything, my hostile parents' history didn't mean anything.

I stared through the window high up the basement wall and slowly squeezed the trigger. This could be painful, I considered. But I would take brief pain over everlasting pain. The everlasting pain that my father felt.

I winced as I squeezed the tight trigger. I saw my father's face, his skin sagging from age, hunched over his workbench. He held a tiny wooden figure in his clumsy looking, oversized hands. With delicate strokes of a sable brush, he applied a face, an expression. They all had the same expression, my father's figurines. They had smiles but not simple, happy grins. They were wry smiles, like the wooden men and women knew something that you didn't know. As if they all shared some big private joke.

As I felt the trigger spring squeeze past the point of return, I realized that joke. They were little wooden figures. That was it. They weren't people, they just looked real. They had arms and legs and faces and expressions but the joke was that they weren't real. They were laughing at themselves and laughing at the people who'd create a miniature environment with those wooden people as citizens. Get off it, Richie. We're not real.

Perhaps that was my father's joke as well. His mask of pain wasn't real. Inside he was living life one day at a time, enjoying what he could, creating the little pleasures that push us from day to day. Yes, perhaps that was it. For all of those years I saw his periodic clearing out of his figures as the

pointlessness of it all. But it wasn't that. He had no lasting attraction to them. The pleasure was in the creation. After that, there was no fun left. Yes, perhaps that was it. All of this crap doesn't mean anything grand. It's just the accumulated shit of a life. We're born; we live; we make friends; we have triumphs and joys, defeats and sorrow; we die. It is worth whatever you make of it.

I had called my friends together for a final examination of my life's worth, and I had predetermined its worthlessness. But the stories of Elliot, Walt and Jerry and the experiences with Rebecca and the rest were all part of the living. We're born; we live; we die. We have little sardonic smiles on our faces knowing it's no better or worse than what we want it to be. We laugh at it, enjoy it while we can.

What I was doing was ludicrous. I was shooting myself, snuffing out my life, creating pain for my loved ones. I had to stop the trigger. I wanted to live. I wanted to enjoy the small defeats and big victories. I wanted the pleasure of a cup of Rebecca's strong coffee while I sat in my bathrobe in our Manhattan apartment, reading the Sunday *New York Times* Arts and Leisure section. But it was too late, the trigger was past the moment of recall.

I winced in anticipated pain as the gun let out a loud metallic crack.

Nothing happened. No shots, no smoke, no brains on the floor. The gun hadn't fired. I dropped it from my forehead and snapped open the barrel. It wasn't loaded. I had never thought to check. My father had given my mother an unloaded gun for self-protection. He didn't want her to hurt herself. Uncle Morris' bullet was the last one this gun had ever been intimate with.

I placed the gun back in its cedar case, locked it, and returned the box to its home behind the workbench. I silently mounted the stairs, emerging into the kitchen. Jerry still slept in a tangled lump in the living room. As I crept upstairs, Walt's and Elliot's rooms were quiet. I slipped back into my parents' old bedroom, crawling into the space around Rebecca. She murmured in her sleep, and I felt my cool skin being warmed by her sleeping body. I let out a deep breath and hoped my shivering didn't wake her.

17. DEPARTURES

It was Monday morning. I had made it this far. My friends were gathering their things, readying themselves to return to the routine of their lives. Rebecca and I, too, had to return, back to our apartment in the middle east side of Manhattan. There Rebecca would continue as an assistant professor of psychology at NYU, carefully studying the increasing confusion of rats stuck in mazes. I would return to perhaps another chapter in my life, a new one. I would be thirty years old. I was leaning towards returning to teaching, maybe getting a job at one of those inner-city high schools in Bedford-Stuyvesant or Spanish Harlem, where drug dealing fifteen year olds earn more than principals, carry beepers on their belts, and keep Uzis in their lockers. That would be a good experience for awhile. A challenge. I needed that.

I could also go back to school, get some sort of advanced degree, a Master's or a Ph.D. I could study folklore or modern story telling. It amazed me how stories were told, passed down, how truths were assembled or disassembled.

I thought about all of these things as I sat in the back porch, drinking coffee, listening to the murmur of my friends preparing to leave.

"It's a goddamn shame," Elliot yelled, coming into the kitchen. I could

see him through the screen door. "I have to fly three thousand miles in order to get up early tomorrow and get stuck in the morning traffic on the way to work. It's a goddamn shame." He opened the screen door and leaned his large body into the porch. "Do you feel sorry for me?" he asked.

"My heart bleeds, Elliot." I took a sip of coffee. "You could stay here, you know. Resume your life among the rest of humanity in New Jersey."

"Me? No way. I love California: the weather, San Francisco, the occasional earthquake. I couldn't give that up now for the Paramus Mall and Great Adventure theme park. And who are you to talk? You've escaped to New York City."

I smiled. "True. I'm merely a visitor now." I took a deep breath. "So, did you have fun this weekend?"

"Are you kidding? Unparalleled. Good food, the Hell Whole, some hoop. It's been a long time since we've all been together."

"It has."

"Everybody's doing real well. It was good to see that."

"Even Jerry?"

"Sure, even Jerry, sexual preferences and all. It's his life. I'm sure he's doing the best thing."

"I think so."

"How about you, Richie? What's in store for the number one scribe of Club Concerned?"

"I'm thinking about teaching again. It's really very rewarding despite the frustrations. You see people learning, becoming aware of themselves, of their lives. You create that awareness together. That really makes me happy."

"I gave a hard time to every teacher I've ever had. But they never

seemed to care about awareness, just putting me in my place. I know you wouldn't do that."

"Nah, it's no big power trip for me. Yeah, I'm leaning towards teaching again."

"Sounds good." Elliot rested his back against the door jam. "I think I'd better get on Walt and Izzy's asses a bit. We have to get moving soon to make my plane."

"I like Ismeralda," I said. "Walt seems very at ease with her."

"He does. That Walter will be the first of us to become famous, I predict. Izzy will give him the stability he needs to catapult himself to the top of the weird art heap."

"You'll be coming back for his big art opening then, right?"

"It's an open date on my calendar. Right next to your wedding."

"Oh yeah?"

"Sure. I know you and Rebecca will make it legal someday."

"I suppose. Though I'm perfectly comfortable the way things are now. Marriage wouldn't change anything."

"Maybe, maybe not. I haven't had the experience to know. Nevertheless, the date is open."

"I'll have to think about that one." I put my coffee cup on the glass-topped end table and stood and stretched. "I have to make sure the house is ready to be locked up for the winter."

"You know we should rent this place for a week next summer. Wouldn't that be great? You, Becky, Walt and Izzy, Jerry and whoever, me in all my glory. We'd descend on the New Jersey shore, live like royalty for a week."

Let's do that."

"God, it would be weird to rent the house I grew up in. You'd think they'd let me stay for free."

"That's between you and your mom. Anyway, let's plan that week of Beach Cove lunacy, seafood, sunburn and basketball. Who knows? Maybe I'll meet a woman between then and now and cart her along."

"Maybe."

"Stranger things have happened." He grinned. "Let's check on how things are going."

I nodded and followed Elliot through the kitchen and into the living room. On the way I glanced at the door that led into the basement. This morning I realized that I had left the key on my father's workbench before coming up to go to sleep. I had locked that door with no way of getting it open again. I wasn't sure if the realtor had a spare key or if my mother had one on her key ring in Boca Raton. The basement was perhaps permanently locked.

"Richie," Rebecca called. She stood at the upstairs landing with one long-fingered hand on her hip. Elliot made his way outside. "I can't seem to find my 'Beach Cove' sweat shirt, the blue one I wore when I arrived. Didn't I lend that to you the other day?"

"Did you? I don't remember."

"Sure, on Saturday. I can picture you wearing it around your shoulders when you got back from the airport with Elliot. When Ben and Jerry were first here."

"I still don't remember."

"What did you do then? Did you leave it down at the beach or

something? That's one of my favorite sweat shirts."

I shrugged. "I did go down to the beach later on to get Elliot. I don't think I left it there." I rubbed my head. "Wait, I did go down to the basement to get blankets. Do you think I left it in the cedar closet down there?"

"Don't ask me." Rebecca put her other hand on her hip. "Why don't you go down there and look."

"Oh." I looked at the basement door. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"It's locked."

"So use the key."

"I don't have it."

"Where is it?"

I looked back at the basement door. "I realized just a second ago that I left the key down there. It was last night. I went down to the basement to get my father's gun and shoot myself." I shrugged at Rebecca.

"You what?"

"I was going to shoot myself. End it all, hang it up, cash it in. Life didn't seem worth living anymore." I shrugged again. "But I changed my mind."

"I see." She cocked her head slightly. Talk softly, humor him.

"Yeah, I decided that life is what you make of it. If my expectations are high, then I have to squeeze more out of it. At any rate, I have to learn to enjoy day to day things, little pleasures. Like this weekend."

"Richie, are you OK?"

"After all, that's what life is, an amalgamation of the little moments. What the future is, good or bad, I have to stop focusing on what I don't have and instead concentrate on what I do have. Like this weekend," I repeated.

"Richie, I asked you if you were OK."

"Now? Sure, I'm great. I'll look back on this as a major turning point in my life. When we're old, planted in rocking chairs, watching neighborhood kids on BMX bicycles, I'll talk about the weekend I nearly killed myself." I shook my head. "What do you think?"

"I don't know." Rebecca wrapped her arms around herself, her hands clamped to her sides. "You sound so blasé about this whole thing. You're scaring me."

"Don't worry about it. I feel better than I have in a year." I patted my stomach. "Telling you this is important to me, Rebecca. I tend to keep too much stuff inside, internalizing my world. I was suffocating. I need to let it all out now. You should know I tried to kill myself last night. Who else can I tell? You're my closest friend."

Rebecca relaxed, letting her hands drop to her sides. She stood at the top of the stairs, looking down at me with bright green eyes. "Richie," she said, "you scare the shit out of me sometimes."

I moved quickly up the stairs and wrapped my arms around her, squeezing until her backbone let out a loud crack. "Chiropractor to the stars," I said. "Perhaps my next profession."

We stood there for awhile, holding tightly, my chin over Rebecca's right shoulder, until she took a step back.

"No chance of getting down to the basement, huh?"

"Not unless we break the door down. Is it worth it?"

"No, I guess not. But that was my favorite sweat shirt."

"Well, we can stop at Santu's and get another. On our way off of the

island."

"It just won't be the same. You know me and clothes, I get very attached to my things. I can't bare to throw things out after they get a few holes in them. Think of all the experiences you and your clothes have been through together."

"What about the experiences you go through when you're naked?" Elliot said, coming through the screen door leading out to the driveway. "I'm glad my clothes weren't on to tell those sordid tales."

"I don't want to hear about it," Rebecca said. "Oh well, that's that. I guess I'll finish packing." She turned and walked back into my parents' room, stopping once to look back at me.

"What was that all about?" Elliot asked.

"Nothing much," I said. "Sweat shirts, keys, old clothes. It's hard to explain. How are Walt and Ismeralda doing out there?"

"They're discussing American foreign policy in Central America. Real light topic. I dumped my stuff in their truck and got out of there."

"Boy, you really are apolitical now, aren't you?"

"Sure, I am. I admit to taking a peak at an occasional issue of *The Progressive* when I'm at an airport news stand, but it's only because someone else is hogging the *Oralrama*. It passes the time." Elliot tucked the back flap of his white shirt into his trousers. It was the same shirt he had arrived in on Saturday. He'd only brought the clothes he wore plus his gym shorts and a t-shirt. The only bag he had was a very weathered soft leather briefcase and a paper bag full of notes that he said he made while at his job. He was working on a novel and hoped to make some sense out of all of the scribblings in his brown paper bag. I didn't think he got around to that this

weekend.

"I think I'll go outside and see how things are coming along." I pushed the screen door open and stepped into the warm sun. The weather had stayed fairly warm this weekend. The only rain was yesterday morning. It was an Indian summer in New Jersey.

Walt and Ismeralda were sitting on the hood of her truck, holding hands, looking off in opposite directions.

"Hey," I said. "How's it going?"

"We're ready to go," Walt said. "Just enjoying a little quiet reflection. I don't come down here much anymore since my parents moved to Hunterdon County. This place has a real serene quality when it isn't teeming with summer temporaries."

"Yeah, I always liked this time of year best. Where's Jerry hiding?"

"He's gone to the beach," Ismeralda said. "He told us he would be back soon. He wanted one more look before we all departed."

"Yeah, I'd like that too. Don't any of you leave before I come back." I headed for the end of the street, where the sand fanned out onto the pavement. The houses were as quiet as they had been last night. No one lived permanently on this block anymore. It was all rentals.

I stood at the opening to the beach, watching the ocean spill onto the sand, recede and then spill again. I turned around and could see Walt and Ismeralda still on the hood of her truck. Elliot had joined them now, his white shirt billowing like a sail.

"Richie," I heard and turned back to the ocean. It was Jerry, walking up the sand toward me in long slow strides. I went down the dune to meet him.

"Hi, Jerry."

"What's up?"

"I wanted a last look before we all head out of here." I looked in both directions down the beach. It was a Monday morning. The weekend types were gone. The permanent island residents were at work or school or in front of the television watching "Hollywood Squares". I skipped school once when I was about nine, fourth grade, Mrs. Livingstone. On a Friday she had told me to clean out my desk or not come to school on Monday. I never got around to throwing out or bringing home the balled up pieces of paper with geography quizzes and drawings of Mrs. Livingstone with fire coming out of her mouth. In fact I forgot all about it until Sunday night when it came back to me while I watched "Ed Sullivan". Some guy had these six trained parrots dressed up in little tuxedos singing Yugoslavian folk songs, and I suddenly broke into a sweat. I had to face Mrs. Livingstone the next day with my desk still a mess. Instead I rode my bike around the block four times and then sat on the beach all day reading comic books. No one disturbed me. I enjoyed that experience.

"Good weekend, Richie," Jerry said, breaking me out of my trance. "Are you thinking about it?"

"I was thinking about my life as a kid." I smiled at Jerry. "I have some strange stories."

"I think we all do." Jerry held his wrist up and looked at his watch. "Looks like its time to head back North. Back to the hardware grind."

"Where are you staying now that you left Elaine?"

"I'm renting an apartment in Verona. It's over one of my stores. It's not bad." He shrugged. "You coming?"

"Sure." I followed Jerry up over the dune and back onto the street. We walked in silence back to the house. Walt and Elliot were there; I could see the both of them laughing about something.

"Hey, you two New Jersey-type characters, Walt and I just had a brilliant thought."

"It was your idea, not mine," Walt said, holding his hands out in front of him.

"OK, I had a brilliant thought. That's what I get for trying to share the wealth." Elliot reached into the open window of Ismeralda's truck and pulled out a basketball. "One last game. Two on two. Until death."

I took the ball from Elliot's hands. "Is this yours, Walt?"

"I wasn't sure if you had one. I wanted to contribute something to this weekend."

"You were here. That's enough. We all were." I bounced the ball on the driveway, being careful not to ricochet it off of the gravel. "Let's play."

"It's me and Richie," Elliot called out. "Time to meet your maker."

"Shoot for out," Jerry called, standing at the foul line. I passed him the ball and he calmly flicked it off of his right hand and through the hoop.

"Match that," he said.

"You're the boy, Richie," Elliot said, pointing me to the foul line.

I took the ball and stood facing the rim and backboard. Taking a deep breath, I slowly exhaled, letting the basketball roll off of my fingertips and toward the orange rim. It bounced around a few times, nearly falling through and then flipped up and over the side.

"Tough shot," Elliot said. "Let's play some D."

Walt took the ball out behind the foul line. I stood in front of him,

waving my hands, a smile spreading across my face. I jumped up and down a few times in my best imitation of an NBA player. When Walt let off a shot, I didn't even turn to see if the ball had gone in.