

SOMETHING LOST

By

DANIEL ROGER ALEXANDER

Bachelor of Arts in Arts and Sciences

Oklahoma State University

Stillwater, Oklahoma

1985

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate College of the
Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
July, 1988

Thesis
1988
A375
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Thesis Approved:

Gordon Walker

Thesis Adviser

Edward P. Walling

Sammy Lutz

Norman N. Durham

Dean of the Graduate College

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Finding historical antecedents for the short fiction of Something Lost is certainly simple enough. The characters in these five fictions share the frustration Arthur Voss senses in Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio creations: they are unable "to satisfy certain powerfully felt but vaguely understood needs in their natures" (185). This factor, more than the similarity of Midwestern setting or an easy bit of labeling with such concepts as the grotesque, is most useful in understanding the guiding principle in this, as well as much other contemporary fiction including, for example, William Gass' In the Heart of the Heart of the Country. The pervasiveness of this focus on individual limitations has prompted at least one critic to warn against the emptiness of this as an end in itself (Hendin 10). At the other extreme, some worry about fiction that fails to recognize realistic boundaries. A counter-movement toward solipsism in fiction moves Arlen Hansen to applaud Gass for seeking to find a mid-point between the individual's subjective constructs and adjustment to the limitations of "actual fact" (11). With some arguing that fiction is wallowing in imaginative delusions while others fear that it is stifled by reality, it seems necessary to understand the origins of this duality before attempting to place Something Lost in context.

The American Dream, as abstract and pluralistic as it may actually be, is at least vividly exemplified in the archetype of the Horatio Alger story: the rags to riches confirmation that a virtuous, hard-working, individual can make good in this society. The idea, then, is that, in

America, the pursuit of happiness is not merely a right but a duty, and each individual's opportunity to find happiness is relatively equal. This stems directly from the prime importance of individual freedoms that lies at the heart of what it means to be an American. Defining the paradox that then emerges in American fiction, Theodore L. Gross writes that, by keeping a political faith in the common man (democracy) but insisting on the hero (historically an elite character), our society finds heroism in the "tension between idealism and authority" (vii). Though most blatantly apparent in the heroes of popular culture, not only the Mr. Smiths who go to Washington but, also, the Lone Rangers and Dirty Harrys who must become outlaws in order to preserve order, Gross asserts this same conflict defines the Hemingway code hero (203) and drives Salinger's Seymour Glass into an early grave (264); Americans simply must have heroes despite the leveling forces of reality.

If all of this is truly central to American fiction, then how does it jibe with Frank O'Connor's assertion, in the oft-quoted "The Lonely Voice," that short fiction (of which Americans are masters) really isn't about heroes at all (86)? This would certainly seem to be true of the central characters in Something Lost. Though they are haunted by personal constructs of truth that have seemingly been declared forever untrue, their actions would hardly qualify them for even an elastic definition of tragic heroism. Focusing on the environments, characters, situations, and uses of voice in this collection should help show the way these stories are uniquely born from the friction of American culture.

Beyond the dominant small town environment, the settings shift within each story. "Big Friday" follows Peacock from the isolation of his room to failure and alienation in the bar and, finally, his

release in escaping to the solitude of the dance bar's parking lot. Similarly, "Coronado Heights" moves from the enclosed world of the car traveling by night to the near-vacant motel and, finally, to the release attained up on Coronado Heights, under the dawn sky. The brother and sister, in "Survived By His Children," move back and forth between "that great white mausoleum Clayton called a home" (29) and Terry' modest apartment, ironically experiencing what is perhaps their most healthily intimate moment in the singular restaurant scene. The title story follows a young boy from his claustrophobic encounter with a teacher to the dreary world of his friend's home and their frequent escapist flights which culminate in the climb of the extremely oppressive (in the context of the story, they represent a future the friend does not want) smelters. Finally, "Shelving Goods," the most constrained in terms of setting, still manages to move from the isolation of the teenager's bedroom to the close-quarters of the stockroom and back to the isolation of his car, where he exercises some freedom in driving the section roads until late in the evening. The characters in these stories share an overwhelming sense of the oppressiveness and isolation imposed by their immediate environments--a force against which they struggle and achieve only momentary victories.

Beyond the actual setting, the environment of each story is shaped by a conception of dual worlds. Whether it is the opposition of freedom and imprisonment, authenticity and play-acting, success and failure, hope and despair, or youth and experience, each story revolves around the inability of a character to come to terms with the clash of these abstractions in a more complex reality. "Survived By His Children" perhaps makes this most concrete in its use of the Penniman home as a symbol

of the cold emptiness of abstract success that Terry, nevertheless, uses to gauge his own short-comings. If the collection is focused on the conflict between the idealized truth (or dream) and reality, the settings serve to reveal the illusions that repeatedly alter the subjective perceptions of that reality. Only in "Shelving Goods" is this abstract sense of worlds made fundamentally clear on the level of characterization.

Kenny is as thoroughly absolutist in his world view as any boy after his first heartbreak. Nothing matters more to him than the dream of a relationship that is never likely to develop. Though his coworker draws extensively from his experience in order to ease the young man's pain, Kenny ultimately rejects the messiness of Larry's world view: an action that is aided by the emergence of a taboo (Larry's drug use) that Kenny can use to deny the validity of all that has gone before.

Kenny's naivete makes it easy for him to do this just as Pickcock's mystical self-centeredness allows him to walk back into the dark contract he seems to have with Angelo. Though as divergent a character as there could be from Kenny (really just a typically innocent kid), Pickcock idealizes the flamingo in a way similar to the way Kenny does Pam. They each allow a subjective interpretation of a woman's actions to define their own self-worth. Though one likely connects his failure with the relative benefits of freedom and legality and the other probably has only lost one small battle in the struggle for maturity, both choose to embrace the pain and withdraw from whatever antidote contact with others or self-examination may offer. This is similar to what happens in "Coronado Heights" when the protagonist mechanically settles for his predetermined destination without fully coming to terms with what he has experienced.

Both "Something Lost" and "Survived" also deal with characters who have a hard time coming to terms with their experiences. While Doug is at least partially justified in attributing his relative success (and the simultaneous failure of his and Jimmy's dream) to the pressures of society, he incorrectly denies the role of his own personal effort in bringing him to where he is. The flip side of this is Terry's resentment of his dead step-father whom he sees as feeding Darcy's success at his own expense. Here, too, the protagonist unfairly denies the x-factor in Darcy's make-up which has turned her opportunities into achievements. While one cannot enjoy his success the other cannot overcome his failure because both central characters favor the neatness of the imaginary construct over the rough-edged nature of reality.

That passion for the seductiveness of the dream actually creates the situations that ultimately destroy the illusion. If Pickcock did not place so much emphasis on his pick-up capability, the paranoid delusions that send him back to Angelo would never have erupted. If the central character in "Coronado Heights" were not such a hopeless dreamer, he probably would not have run away from his home in the first place, much less try to reinvent his future with a make-shift damsel in distress. If Terry could let the ghost of his dead step-father simply fade away, he perhaps could deal with Darcy, if not as a brother, at least on a mature level of friendship. It is possible that, without artificial preoccupations with success and failure, Doug and Jimmy, the separated friends, could still communicate, or, at least, live and let live more easily, these many years later.

This inability to communicate, and likewise continue with his life unexamined, has forced the persona of "Something Lost" to return to the

incidents of his adolescence and try to make sense of them. What has happened to the ideal resolve he had in eighth grade about the relative importance of friends and school? What has happened to a friendship that, for a brief period, broke down the barriers which had previously defined his existence? The persona in this fiction is, like that of "Coronado Heights" and "Survived," distanced by time, more than emotion, from the events in the story. Though each of these stories differs in time lapsed between the event and the telling, with "Something Lost" being the longest and "Survived" the shortest, all three personae are left with a painful questioning of just how to come to terms with the realities their stories reveal. The true effects of the stories are not manifest in the narrative but, instead, in the rediscovery of the central illusions that haunt and inhibit.

By complete contrast, the immediacy of Pickcock's voice never sees beyond the simplest conclusion in the story--that the evening is not working. The extreme nature of Pickcock's character, the fanciful solitude he embraces, gives the reader enough distance to see around his flat delivery of the details. This is a persona who tells his story, not to grow from it but, to justify his apparent decision to give up on society. The story as a whole serves to show the extremely self-destructive nature of the delusion.

As removed as possible from the immediacy of the persona in "Big Friday," is the ironically distanced narrator of "Shelving Goods." Repeatedly choosing to show Kenny's myopia while giving all indications of Larry's genuine concern, as is shown in Kenny's repeated cringing response to the notion of shooting pool with his coworker, the persona is not terribly concerned with the status of Kenny and Sally at all.

Instead, the choice of detail and focus here show an over-riding concern for Kenny's reaction to the helping hand he gets offered repeatedly. The ironic touch is complete when, after the out-stretched hand has been shown to offer the key to accepting life's realities, Kenny feels threatened and chooses not to accept.

In Larry's extended hand lies the key to the turmoil that pervades these five fictions. Just as Larry has accepted the reality of his father, a tragic mix of nobility, bravery, cowardice, and insensitivity, the protagonists in these stories must either consciously struggle to see reality for what it is or allow their delusions to lead them from one shattering disappointment to the next. These fictions speak to the promise of the American dream by showing the ease with which such individual ambition can be squandered, misdirected, or lost altogether. In conjunction, not conflict, with this insight is the truth of those limitations imposed by the individual as well as outside forces. Like a siren seducing these characters toward the rocks that might destroy them, the lure of the American dream of happiness (and its brotherhood with individual heroism) endangers even as it attracts and, potentially, liberates. If we have faith that those waters near shore are navigable at all, the only way to proceed is to look hard and close at the contours of stone and the churning of water that shifts and shapes our potential path.

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BIG FRIDAY

These water spots fascinate me. One looks just like a clown, a snickering clown. He's laughing at the way he can hold my attention without even trying. I just lie here on this bed, mouth hanging open, and watch him. I'm not going to let him humble me.

A horse springs from the point where the clown's hair becomes a tangle of cracks. This horse is running free in some wild field's breeze. That is, he looks cool. I'm hot.

A squeal. A girl, a college girl, is fighting off some young punks outside my window. I can't see them; maybe they're around the corner. Girls, young girls. It's been a long time.

But I'm plunging into it all tonight. Me and Ed are going out. Three weeks on this damned delivery job and we finally got paid; I'm ready for a few rewards, like I haven't had in too many Fridays.

It's been five years since the word Friday meant anything more than a choice of fish to me. Five years in cell after cell with the only excitement being coming close to getting out or having some joy-boy try to do a little back door work on you--Friday don't mean much on the inside.

But it's there; it's a memory, a picture in your head of everything that was good about the outside. That time of the week when freedom means more than just not being behind bars; it means a chance to release all the shit that's weighed you down since you punched in on Monday. It means the week has been for something.

My Baby Ben says it's nearly six-thirty, but I don't trust it because

it always runs a little fast. I'm supposed to meet Ed at the Silverpool Lounge at a quarter of seven; I'll be there whether he is or not. If not, I know I can always find Angelo down at Blayney's shooting pool or picking up on women at Little Queenie's next door.

I pull on my jeans. I was trying to sleep, but today, for the first time since I started running bread at the crack of dawn, I wasn't able to relax at all. The naps never really make up for anything anyway, just leave me groggy and confused. I slip on my new red shirt, pick up my Camels, and I'm out the door.

It's about four blocks to the Silverpool. Kids are playing in a yard up ahead. They chase each other around, using up all their strength as fast as they can before mothers call them inside. I remember doing the same thing; me and Angelo blocks away on Crestview Hill, where all the new houses were coming up, hearing my mother call, always having to go home before him. I could've had kids by now. I could've had kids as big as some of those if I hadn't fucked things up so bad with Tina.

No one can say I didn't try with her. I got a pretty decent job working down at the boat plant. I settled down, quit staying out all hours with Wayne and Jim and, when we were lucky, whoever we picked up along the way. At least whoever I picked up. I was always luckier than the other two. I don't know why (I was probably the worst looking of the bunch, with my big mouth and ears and cheeks that make me look a little slow or something) but I always had a knack for finding the one that would go for me at Steiger's, or wherever, on any given evening.

But I quit all that for Tina. Sometimes I'd still go spend a while with the guys--just long enough to spot her sitting underneath a red and white Bud lamp or shooting eight ball in the back of the room--but that

was it, find her, maybe talk to her, was all. I always went home to my wife. We'd sit on the couch and watch tv, sometimes eating popcorn or chips and drinking beer, and Tina went to sleep there leaning against my side. I sat up watching movie after movie (especially good adventures or old westerns, but sometimes I'd even watch one of those late-night sermon shows) until the screen turned to color bars and the tv hummed and everything turned to static and snow. Sometimes I'd get another beer and just watch that fuzz.

And then Angelo'd come by. He'd come in the back way at the apartment about the same time I'd be getting Tina to bed. Sometimes he'd just sit and watch and drink beer with me, but usually we'd talk. He's about the only guy I've ever been able to talk to the way I can to him. We'd get a few beers down us and we'd get going on everything, even the end of the world. We could talk for hours about how screwed up everything is and how plain it is by just watching all those smiling-lying faces on tv and how someday, with the movement of the wrong looney's finger on the wrong looney button, there'll be a flash of color, a hum, and we'll all be just so much snow-white-fuzz blasting through space. That's all she wrote, so why not have a good time way before you're sorry you didn't and you got your head ducked between your knees? That was what Angelo always said and it made a certain kind of sense to me.

Sometimes we'd get a little loud and excited when we talked, and I'd make sure Angelo was out of there before Tina woke. She only met him a couple of times and she didn't care for him one bit. Not that there was anything not to like about him, it was just the way he dressed, the way he still dresses, with his bandannas and gold and silver chains and that long black coat he always wore. Some people thought he looked creepy or

even fruity, but I never did, not at all. Angelo looked like Angelo.

I push open the dark glass door of the Silverpool. My eyes adjust to the dim light. All the booths are full. I head for the bar and order a whiskey and water. It tastes good, cool.

I look at the others. Several pool players are ordering over each other, screaming over the country music, at the end of the bar. A zombie, next to me, stares at the tv. A couple of girls, pretty ones, are sitting at the table right next to me. Neither one's the one though, so I don't make my move.

I look around the room carefully, but no Ed. After delivery this morning, he said he'd get here before me. I drink my second whiskey.

At least, if Ed doesn't show up, I can fall back on Angelo. He's one of those sure things in life. I've known him as long as I can remember. I used to sneak out the window of my room (after my parent's accident, when I lived with my aunt and uncle) and take off into the night with Angelo. He's always been around when I needed somebody.

They called me Pea Cock in the pen; my name's Pickcock, so I'd heard that one since about third grade, but I had a hard time in there at first and I spent a lot of time to myself. Anyway, Angelo used to come visit me a lot. (Of course he wasn't caught though he was as guilty as me-- Angelo wasn't the type to get caught at anything.) So, he came in one night as a surprise (he had some pull, knew a guard or something) and drew this beautiful peacock on my wall, really impressive. When all the joy-boys saw that they treated me different; Angelo turned the name around and I suddenly became important, someone to know. I owe him that one. On the other hand, if Angelo hadn't helped me rip off that car, I wouldn't

have been in there in the first place. Tina never understood why I did it; I already said she didn't really know Angelo.

A girl comes up next to me and orders a margarita. The right voice. I look. It's her! The one for tonight just like before--only better. Most of the time they were kind of average-pretty, but this one (I know she's the right one) is gorgeous--something tears through my gut and climbs my spine. She's Indian, or at least dark like that with black black hair and dark deep eyes. she's wearing a pink sweater and faded jeans. She gets her drink. She's what the outside is all about.

"That looks awful good," I say looking at her drink.

She looks at me. "Yeah, it does, doesn't it?" She takes off. Nothing. No connection.

I watch her cross the room to a booth. She sits facing my way. She's alone. She's so right.

I take another drink and glance back at her. This little pale yellow-haired guy walks up to her, smiles, and sits down. She smiles back at him. He's a runt, but it's obvious they're together. He starts talking to her and she seems to hang on every word he says. If she'd just yawn or something.

I feel two hands reach around my waist, a kiss on the cheek. I spin around, almost falling off my stool. A pretty blond is laughing in my face.

"Look at you," she laughs, "Eddie sent me over, said you'd shit your pants. Did you?"

I look around and see Ed sitting with another blond. He waves. "Do you do everything he tells you to?" I ask.

"Eddie? Shit no, he's crazy. Speaking of crazy, he told me you had curly red hair but he didn't tell me this curly and this red!" She stares, slack-jawed, at my head. We go over and sit with Ed and his date, Cindy.

The girl that attacked me is Robbie.

"How'd you two get mixed up with this guy?" I ask them, smiling. This might be all right.

"Hell, we've known Eddie forever," Robbie answers. Cindy smiles at Ed.

"You all drinkin'?" I pull out my billfold and start to flag down the barmaid.

"Oh, we've got drinks comin'," Cindy says.

Ed points behind him at an empty pool table. "See there, I got us all fixed up."

"I wanna play, if anybody's goin' to." Robbie smiles.

"All right, how 'bout a game of partners--you and Pic can get whipped by me and Cindy?"

Before I know it, we're all up and holding cues. Cindy and Ed start beating us bad right from the start. Robbie has a talent for scratching. I sink two in a row and look across the room for my one. I see her just as she gets up and heads for the bar. I miss the next shot and drain my drink.

"Anyone else need somethin' from the bar?" No one does and I head off alone.

She's coming back. So sure of herself, so graceful; it's all in her walk--like a flamingo. I remember that old song--On our block, all of the guys call her flamingo. I smile at her. "Was that drink as good as it looked?"

She looks at me like she doesn't know what I'm talking about. She almost looks angry, then half-laughs and says, "Pretty good." She walks past fast. I turn and watch her go back to the booth; the runt sees me

looking, gives me the evil eye. I smile at him and head for the john, setting my drink on the bar.

There's a guy hunched over the toilet getting sick. I use the metal trough and think about my situation. I could just walk right up to her and say, "Hey Honey, why don't you lose this little jerk?" But no, I'll wait; it's Friday and things will work out in a while. She's the one.

I buy another drink at the bar and look over to see her sitting alone. The song keeps running through my head, . . . and every guy will envy me, 'cause paradise is where I'll be. I start heading for the booth, Every guy would make her his, if he just could . . .

She's glancing down at first and then she lifts her margarita and looks right past me. She looks fantastic holding that drink to her lips. If she just would . . . I smile at her as I reach her table.

She sees me, starts, and stares straight ahead at the empty booth. She is afraid; she really doesn't want me anywhere near her. I walk away.

I go back to Ed, Robbie, and Cindy. They all look up and smile. They have some kind of secret. I light a cigarette and sit down.

Robbie pulls close to me. "Ed was telling us stories 'bout you two cruisin' in the truck."

"I bet those were exciting," I say.

Cruising, that word reminds me of that night almost six years ago. Angelo said, "Let's go for a cruise. What harm can it do?" The cop said something like, "Out for a joy-ride, son?" as he slammed me against the hood of the car. But it wasn't a joy-ride; there was no joy in it. After I got laid off at the boat plant, my marriage went down the drain. Tina was working; I couldn't find a job. It got to where I couldn't stand

it.

And one night Angelo said, "Let's take this car and just cruise."

It sounded good.

The barmaid comes with drinks. Ed picks up the tab for his and Cindy's. Robbie digs out her money and pays. I guess I should have.

I watch Robbie take a drink. I feel sorry for her. I've been ignoring her. She's been trying. She has big green eyes and her mouth sort of puckers when she drinks. "How old are you?" I ask.

She looks a little surprised. "I'm nineteen, Cindy's twenty."

"How 'bout that Pic," Ed winks from across the table, "neither one of these girls should even be in this place. Should we turn 'em in?"

"Maybe," I say and lean back. I'm tired. A red flashing light, from a bar across the street, keeps going on and off in my eyes; they feel sore. Ed, on the other hand, looks more energetic than ever. His face is red and smiling. "After we suck these down," he holds up his drink, "why don't we all go dancin'?"

Cindy looks thrilled, but Robbie is still. It's time to meet her half-way. "Yeah, that sounds good. I suddenly feel the urge to dance the socks off ol' Robbie here." Her eyes show surprise, but I can tell it's already too late to save the evening with her.

Ed finishes, jumps out of his chair, pulls Cindy up with him, and announces, "Let's go!" We finish in a hurry and follow the other two. I look back at the flamingo's booth--she's gone.

We pile in Ed's '71 Olds. Robbie and I sit in back, with most of the seat in between us. Cindy practically sits on Ed's lap as he drives. He gasses it like we're being chased. We turn down every side road and Ed has to accelerate as much as possible between any two stop signs or red

lights, even if it's only a block's distance.

I think of six years ago; that cop wouldn't have ever stopped me if I hadn't driven the same way--he wouldn't have had a reason. Ed's bored and looking for trouble.

We swerve around another corner and there it is--Little Queenie's Dance Emporium. The flames on the neon sign blaze orange and yellow and red. Ed puts the car in park too quickly, throwing everybody forward. He and Cindy laugh. I'm relieved we made it at all. I look at Robbie; she feels the same way. We smile at each other.

Inside, we charge straight onto the dance floor. Dozens of bodies reel and rock in the red and orange lights. Ed and Cindy fade into the mass of bodies. Robbie begins to move with the music. I shift feet but feel stiff. The drum blasts seem to slap everybody else into motion. They trip me up. I watch Robbie's face, her closed eyes. She moves her mouth with the lyrics, words I can't understand. She opens her eyes and looks at me, smiles. Is it because I look funny, awkward? I look around at the others.

And then I see her, moving with all the rest but smoother, more graceful. The flamingo is only ten feet away, dancing with her runt. He looks like a natural born dancer. I start to look away, but those dark eyes glance my way and recognize me. She flinches and looks back at the runt. I close my eyes and feel everyone stop dancing, stare at me, and laugh.

I open them and see Robbie. She's unhappy, looking off over my shoulder, away from the dance floor. I know she saw. The song ends. "Let's go sit down," she says.

Cindy and Ed have already started a game of pool in the back of the

room. We go back by the table. Ed sees us, stops, and says, "Pic, Robbie, I want you to meet Harry Dunn, an old buddy of mine."

We nod; we say, "Hi." Harry goes back to the game to shoot. He sinks three balls. Robbie watches him closely. "I'm gonna go get a drink, want one?" I ask her.

She shakes her head without looking away from the game. I go to the bar and buy a beer. I lean on the railing and watch the flamingo dancing slow with her head on the runt's shoulder. They hold each other very tight.

I look back at the pool table. Ed is shooting; Cindy sits nearby and watches. Harry and Robbie are talking and laughing. I look back at the flamingo; she's in another world.

I throw open the wooden doors and step out into the parking lot. The night air is cool and clean. The parking lot is packed with cars and trucks. I walk out onto the highway because I think I see him, but it's just some blue-haired punk in another long black coat.

A car roars by me. I feel the air in its wake. Someone yells, "Hey, Bozo, you wanna get hit?"

I see the kid half-hanging out a car window. I look around at all the other cars, all the people pulling into Little Queenie's and Blayney's smiling and laughing for no reason.

I start for the green light of Blayney's door. I know Angelo will be in there, somewhere. He's got to be there.

CORONADO HEIGHTS

Francisco Vasquez Coronado and I contemplated our situations at the same spot and came to opposite conclusions. He decided to go home; I chose to run away. He stood on the highest point in the region, looked out over those vast dark plains, saw no gold glow on the horizon, and realized he was only in Kansas, nowhere near Oz, and it was time to give up on the Seven Cities. Over four-hundred years later however, I saw plenty of white and gold glows dotting the landscape, but I knew what they were--streetlights, factories, refineries--and I knew I had to get away. I had to run so far that I wouldn't even see a gold aurora in my rear-view mirror.

I used to lie on my back with Betty Johnson next to me and stare up at the stars. She was a sweet person and a good companion for those long evenings up on Coronado Heights. I'm not sure why she put up with those cheap dates, but I always thought she liked me because I worked hard, saved my money, and drove the sharpest blue Camaro that ever cruised Main. She worked at Utley's Shoes and gave me discounts on sneakers that wore out every month. Working at Ed's Chicken Palace and mopping and buffing floors every day, I definitely needed a strong shoe connection--the chemicals ate the rubber off my heels. I blew my connection though, one night, when she realized all I really wanted. We saw a shooting star flare across the sky and I said:

"If wishing works, I won't be around here much longer." I wanted a reaction.

"What?" she whispered, her head against my shoulder.

"I'm leaving town the week after graduation."

"You are?" I could barely hear her.

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Because I'm not going to work in a fucking refinery for the rest of my life, that's why!" I pulled away and sat up.

"What're you gonna do?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know?" Her tone told me she thought I was being silly.

"I mean I don't know but I'm not going to let that stop me! I want out of this nowhere nothing place--I hate it all!"

She teared up. I took her home. We never went out again. I suppose I should have offered to take her with me. It crossed my mind, but that was about it. She wasn't a risk taker; I knew that. She wanted to be comfortable and do all the right things and have kids and grandkids and grow old and die right there where she always lived and where she could be near all her family and friends.

I wanted to live. I wanted to go someplace where I could see things and do things I never imagined. I would write about those things. People would buy my books and, in essence, pay me to do what I wanted to do.

I wound up in Oklahoma City working in a bookstore. I wrote evenings and weekends, but started a lot more than I ever finished. It was to my advantage to work in a bookstore--I was close to what I loved and able to get discounts on anything I wanted. I also met Pam there.

Pam Wilson started working at Davis Books about two months after I did. She had mousy brown hair and an almost-too-full figure but, even so, immediately struck me as very attractive. It was something about the way she held herself; she seemed very self-confident and a little detached from everything surrounding her. She was friendly and quiet in a way some people might assume to be the result of shyness, but something very disquieting stayed just under her surface. She seemed to carry with her a hidden wisdom and a knowingness about things that ultimately made her seem kind of sad all the time. We worked together a lot and, as a result, we started going to lunch and, whenever possible, taking breaks together.

That's when she started telling me about Ricky, her husband, and I found myself struggling with a decision I wasn't ever asked to make.

She and Ricky married when she was sixteen and he was eighteen. She was pregnant. Their parents were very supportive about making wedding arrangements and getting them set up in a little apartment with an extra bedroom for the baby. Ricky graduated from high school when he was seventeen and went to vo-tech school, working a maintenance job at the hospital at the same time. She dropped out and planned to wait to work until after the baby was born. Jeremy, their little boy, died of apnea when he was two months old. That was when Ricky started to drink more than he had before--he found the boy, checked the crib as he was getting ready for work, and saw the still blue hands--and blamed Pam for what happened. She should have taken better care of their boy. That was her job. He brought home the money by working five to two every day and she hadn't held up her end. He drank and he beat her, and the saddest part of it all was she took it because she felt he was right.

"What could you have done?" I said again and again, "You can't predict that kind of thing."

"I should have known." She stopped eating and put her forehead in her hands. "If anybody could have, I should have known something was wrong with my boy."

She came to work bruised, with circles under her eyes, and I said she was crazy to let it go on. I said I would talk to Ricky. She said I didn't understand him like she did. She said she loved him. She was right--I didn't understand.

I let it happen though; I watched her change. When I was offered a job as assistant manager with prospects for promotion in Kansas City, I didn't hesitate, and left her along with all my other friends. After six months at my new job, though, I made a trip back to visit. I hadn't felt comfortable about things. I wanted her to come away with me.

Eddie, an old friend who once worked at Davis', took me in for a couple of nights at his trailer. I went to see Pam at work and asked her to lunch. We just went to the cafeteria next door.

"So, how have you been?" I asked her after placing our trays at a nearby table.

"Fine." It wasn't convincing. She smiled at me, but there were new creases in her face. Her eyes were red, set deep in the darkness of her heavier-than-ever shadow and mascara. I told her about my job, that I should be taking over the store in just a few months. I wanted to say more. I asked her about Ricky.

"He's fine." Her eyes glanced down at the formica table-top.

"No problems?"

"None."

"Do you know that if you ever need me you just got to let me know--anytime?" I put my hand on hers. I wanted to say more, to make it feel sincere to her.

She looked into my eyes. "Yes, I do know that. Thank you." She smiled.

We ate and talked about everyday things, and it all felt difficult and very strained. We hadn't seen each other in months and probably wouldn't see each other again for several more months. Back at the bookstore, on the back of a bookmark, I wrote my number and address in Kansas City and the number at Eddie's trailer. I told her I was leaving the next morning, but she should feel free to call. I was surprised when she did.

Eddie and I were watching some sitcom and working on a six pack when the phone rang. Eddie said it was for me. He looked puzzled. She sounded strange, quiet, and yet, panicked. She was at an In-An-Out near her home. She asked if I could come get her.

When I reached the convenience store, Pam was sitting at one of the tables by the windows, a small airline bag at her feet, absentmindedly stirring ice around in her Coke. She looked bad--her left eye was blackening and the cheek and lips were swelling on that side of her face. Her eyes were bloodshot and puffy; tears tracked through what make-up she had on. She started when she saw me and we walked out to the car.

On the way back to Eddie's she told me very little. Ricky was drunk--passed out in the doorway to their bathroom. "Take me with you. There's some reason you came back to me today. I know now." She choked.

"What do you know?"

"That it's not going to end--it'll never change."

She didn't want to go to Eddie's trailer. I said if she really wanted to go on, we could leave right then. She lain down in the seat while I packed. I came out, tossed the suitcase I had, along with her bag, into the trunk. I looked up and saw Orion; I used to follow that constellation night after night up on Coronado Heights. It made me feel lucky when I found it.

Pam slept soundly, as she had for an hour. I kept the car stereo down low so it wouldn't wake her and I grew sleepy watching the narrow concrete highway rushing at me out of the black night.

I couldn't believe she finally decided to leave him. Sometimes, in the past, I felt like I was jeopardizing our friendship when I suggested she consider getting away. Sometimes she grew very cool toward me. On the other hand, there were moments when her eyes shined at me and made me confident she appreciated my concern. I saw that look in the cafeteria earlier that day. It always gave me hope.

The Kansas countryside was only visible where the horizon was cut off by a navy blue, starlit sky. I had seen Orion in the southern part of the sky, but now, heading north, I could no longer watch it. It was about one o'clock when we passed the McPherson County Line sign.

I remembered the old city limits billboard that said something like Welcome to the Brightest Little City in America. There were huge (today they seem wasteful) fluorescent lights on every downtown street--three to a pole. They are so powerful, even today, with only one of each lit, you can stand on any downtown street, anywhere, and read the paper at night. There wasn't much crime in McPherson, at least not much that was apparent. If anyone got in trouble, it was out on the section roads

just outside of town. The times people got out of hand, the occasional drunken fights, stabbings, and shootings, took place in those little, hard to find bars on the outskirts of town, where none of those big bright lights could possibly penetrate. From the time my oldest friends could drive, until I left, we spent most of our nights on the outskirts; the adventure in driving Main got old really quick.

We nearly tore my little blue machine up racing down those gravelly country roads. One time I got stuck in about two-and-a-half feet of mud and had to walk back to town with Betty and Ray and Ellen (or was he with Cindy then?).

Coronado Heights became someplace to go. Before, while we were growing up in Mac, it always seemed like nothing more than an old roadside turn-off that no one, not even our parents entertaining company, ever went to visit. But when you turn sixteen, you realize these often neglected spots are sometimes perfect for Friday and Saturday night retreats. We'd take kegs of beer up there and have unforgettable parties. The last year I was there, Ray and I made it our home away from home.

Some days we'd stock up on picnic food and sit on the very top of the monument and eat and drink wine. No one could see us when we were sitting up there because we found some footholds and a route through a skylight that, as far as we knew, no one else ever used. Visitors can drive up and climb to the terrace below, but they rarely tried to climb the extra level to the spot where we crouched, quietly sipping T.J. Swan. This monument was a miniature replica of a Spanish-style fort with a graffitied room inside and a set of stairs up to a deck and a look-out tower. On top of this tower, where we hid, there were even loose rocks behind which we stashed bottles and magazines.

Being high and looking at Playboy up on Coronado Heights always beat the hell out of getting chased around town by bored cops or trying to impress girls who never seemed to care anyway.

I could see the orange highway lights that led into McPherson. We were only a few miles out. I shifted my knees a little and put my hand on Pam's shoulder. She came awake suddenly and sat up quickly, rubbing her eyes. She wiped the side of her mouth with her palm and asked, "Where are we?"

The faint lighting from the dash revealed her face in a shadowy, obscure way; it was enough to throw me for just a moment. Her face looked even more swollen and aged in this light. I remembered the fresh face of the girl who started working in the shoe store two years before and compared it to the one staring at me in the darkness. I had let this happen.

"We're almost to McPherson." I reached to pull her closer to me. "I would like to stay here for the night."

She stiffened a little but took my hand. "Why, how much farther do we have to go?"

"Oh," I paused, not certain why she seemed so hesitant, "Kansas City is another three-and-a-half to four hours away. I'm tired. We can stop here at a motel, leave early in the morning, and still get to the city by early afternoon."

She was staring out ahead and I could tell by the distracted look on her face that she was busy thinking, hard. "I could drive, I mean, if you're tired."

"No, why don't we just stop." I glanced at her to see how she reacted. "We could both use a little sleep." Her face showed nothing.

"Yeah," she said softly.

"Besides," I opened up a little, "this is where I grew up. There are some places I'd like to show you, not now, but in the morning."

"Oh . . ." she whispered, "okay," and she lain her head back against the seat. I turned up the radio. A call-in show was on with a pop-psychologist offering advice:

"Doctor, I just gotta talk to somebody."

"Well, that's what I'm here for."

"Doctor, I just don't know."

"What is it you don't know?"

"I guess I just don't know anything. click"

"Hello . . . hello?"

I turned off the radio.

As we came into town, on the exit ramp, Pam scooted over close to me and put her head on my shoulder. I reached my arm around and held her. We kissed lightly. I felt so protective of her, just as I had for so long.

We checked into a little motel I remembered as fairly inexpensive but clean. An old man worked the graveyard shift. He smelled like he had been nipping to kill those deadly lonesome hours. He fumbled around, looking for a key, and mumbled about some damn Arabs in one of his rooms. We prepaid, bought a six-pack of Budweiser from him, and went to our room on the first floor.

Though tired, we were both tense. I opened a beer for each of us and left to get ice to keep a couple more cold. The motel seemed deserted; it was so quiet it was eerie. I went back to the room, and we sat on the bed and sipped our beers. A musty odor in the room made me wonder if it

hadn't been flooded at some point in the past.

Pam switched channels on the ancient tv. A sign-off on one channel, a test pattern on another, a preacher summing up his thoughts on Our Lesson for Today on yet another, we left him on though we didn't really listen to what he had to say. The beer tasted great. We were hot and cotton-mouthed--my car's air-conditioning hadn't been working.

I finished off a couple of cans and stripped off my jeans, quickly climbing into bed. I felt I could sleep now. Pam hadn't been saying much, and I decided not to bother her, to just let her think. The room had twin beds, and it was up to her which she wanted to sleep in.

I was drifting into that half-sleep of voices and mini-dreams when Pam slid under the covers behind me. I opened my eyes only to see the room was dark. Her breath caressed my shoulders and she put her left arm over me; she pulled her body close behind my back.

Ricky Wilson stormed through my thoughts. She had been married to him from the time she was just a kid. I had watched that kid grow rapidly into a beaten and tired woman. I owed it to both of us to try to change things for the better.

When I woke, it was still dark outside. I knew, however, I wouldn't be able to sleep any longer. I turned over several times, but suddenly was very uncomfortable with staying in bed. Pam was now huddled on her edge, as if to stay out of my way. I got up and went to the bathroom.

Coming back, I saw Pam sitting up in the darkness.

"Having trouble sleeping?" I asked as I crawled back under the covers.

"Uh huh," she said, "I just can't stop thinking about things--my mind keeps racing."

"What about?"

"Oh, you know, Ricky, I just--"

"Don't think about him." I knew I was fighting a lot of history.

"But he--"

"Think about Kansas City. Everything's ahead of us. I've got a really nice apartment--two bedrooms. There's a pool there. But wherever you want to live, whatever you want to do . . . you just don't have to worry. I've got a decent job--a promotion on the way--it will be fine." Somehow, everything I said sounded empty.

Pam propped up on one elbow. "Let's go on. I can't stand being here, in between like this." She put her hand on my shoulder and pleaded with me.

I sat up. "I know what I can do." I got out of bed and started pulling on my jeans. "Those places, the ones I wanted to show you, we can go see them now."

"And then can we go?" she said very softly.

"Sure." I smiled at her as she turned on the bedside light. I knew she was only willing to delay because I wanted it so much. I decided to only make one stop; it would be easier not to see my folks' home anyway. One time, when I first moved to Kansas City, I pulled up in their driveway at night and just sat there--I couldn't bring myself to go in. They were so much easier to take on the phone, although Dad wouldn't say much more than two words to me:

"How's it going boy?"

"Great, Dad, I got a new job!"

"More money?"

"Well, not at first, but I'm in line--"

"Is it worth it to make the move for the same money?"

"Well--"

"Oh, don't listen to him. It sounds wonderful!" That was Mom; she always thought everything I did was great--at least she seemed to.

It was probably my fault--the distance between us. Dad always wanted me to either follow him into the refinery or go to school and study something sensible; so I never went to school at all. In high school, I was more like a boarder, who was never there, than a teenage son. When I came home, Mom was always sitting up watching tv and acted glad to see me. I knew Dad had cursed me and gone to bed. I never wanted things to be the way they were, but I never wanted to be like them either.

We gathered our things and loaded up the car. I took our key back to the old man, who moved slower than ever from his chair in the back of the room to the front counter. I bought us a couple of Pepsis. Pam smiled and thanked me when I reached the car.

I turned the car onto Main and headed out toward Coronado Heights. We drove a full ten miles in silence. The road seemed longer than I remembered, but I slowed and turned onto the right gravel road without hesitating. I drove a quarter of a mile and pulled off the dirt drive. Pam looked out into the black morning at the gates left open (a sign said they closed at eleven) and the dirt road beyond.

"This is Coronado Heights--where we had all those parties I told you about. It's like the farthest point north Coronado came when he was exploring the continent--where he must have given up on the Seven Cities of Gold."

We drove slowly up the steeply spiralling hill--for a moment it felt

like Ray was next to me, or Betty. There was a blue glow in the eastern sky, very faint, but obviously the beginnings of dawn. Each point in the road--the curves and rocks and trees--jogged my memory and awakened my senses.

We reached the top of the hill and I stopped the car right in front of the monument. I looked at Pam as I cut off the engine. "This is it."

I got out of the car and went to sit on the hood. Pam came around her side of the car and joined me. I pointed to the top of the fort. "C'mon, let's go up there."

We stubbed our toes against the hard rock stairs inside but eventually made it to the second level and the terrace. I stopped under the tower in the small darkened enclosure--a gray beam of light poured in through a small hole-in-the-rock window. I said, "C'mon," again and led Pam up through a hole in the roof of the old hide-out. It was windy and my breath was taken away a little by the spectacle of the flat countryside stretching out to the (now pink and blue) glow in the east. The stars were still visible, and their twinkling seemed to fight the sunlight that would soon overwhelm them.

Pam put her arm around me and said, "This is really pretty; this is nice." She felt the same as I did up there.

"Sometimes I used to come up here by myself just to think. I've lain here and seen hundreds of shooting stars."

The lights of Lindsborg and the glow of McPherson mirrored the stars as they all grew fainter. The pinks and blues of dawn grew brighter. Pam was looking out toward Lindsborg. She said, "Just think, there are all those people, still in bed, asleep and comfortable in all those homes. Every twinkling light we see, from every corner, is surrounded by a half

a dozen houses and people, sleeping people."

I knew the feeling she was having. The loneliness I had felt so many times was creeping into her. It was a fear--a fear of losing all you've known, of losing every comfort you've ever enjoyed. There had been nights when I felt so cut off like that--like all I wanted to do was go home, like even that wouldn't do any good.

A golden glow seethed through the pink; the blue of night drew back even further from the horizon. I looked at Pam and saw she was as entranced by the beauty of the dawn as I was. The desperation I had seen in her face, the loneliness that had only just been there, was smoothed over by a new expression. She looked calm; the lines of hurt and worry dropped from her features. We watched the red ball of the sun turn gold and then white. We didn't speak much.

When the daylight completely washed the color out of the sky, I saw a different woman next to me. She appeared decided, resolved, more like her old self, yet different. The last hint of morning breeze (it was going to be another hot day) caused me to shiver slightly. She looked comfortable.

"Are you ready to go?" I asked. I already knew the answer.

She insisted I not drive her all the way back; so I took her to the bus station in Wichita. She said it was a mistake; I'd been an easy out. Despite all her last minute promises to keep in touch, and what I was sure were good intentions, when she disappeared behind those black glass doors to the depot, I knew that was the end.

I could see my reflection, leaning against the passenger door of my little blue car, and I thought how funny it was for me to see myself

as anybody's savior. I had no idea what to do now just because she changed her mind. That told me something; maybe I'd wanted her to save me. Anyway, I was left with all the freedom in the world at that moment, and all I could do was stare at myself in that reflection.

I eventually drove on to Kansas City without really knowing why; that was just my destination. Still covering miles to make up for my little detour, it would be a while before I really felt like I was on course again.

SURVIVED BY HIS CHILDREN

Darcy Penniman and I spent three years of our lives, from the age of twelve to fifteen, as sister and brother. The occasional weekends, sometimes weeks, when I had someone to talk to in that great white mausoleum Clayton called a home, stand out clearly in my memory from the grayness of those years. It was never a good marriage. Mom and Clayton fought constantly. Sometimes it seemed the only love under that roof came from those quiet conversations and quick glances I shared with my sister. We knew how selfish our parents were and were both embarrassed by things they did and said. We admired each other for not being like them.

Though Mom and Clayton didn't speak between the time they divorced and he died, Mom dragged me along to the wake, the rosary, and the funeral. Every day that week, Mom called as soon as I walked in the door with some new excuse to go to the Penniman's. I was tired from working the presses all day at the Oilton Sun Times and never felt like going immediately over to a dead man's house to visit a bunch of half-forgotten acquaintances. But I took her--I owed her at least that much.

After the funeral, when I entered that colonial monstrosity, I had to face Jean and Ryan, two older siblings from Clayton's very first marriage. We had once been fairly close--I had nothing to say to them now. After three marriages, to Elaine, Darcy's mother, and mine, Clayton Penniman left quite a collection of children behind--not to mention wives. A large group of people with very little in common.

Darcy grabbed my arm and led me into the kitchen. I could hear my mother, in her element, chattering and forcing laughter, as we passed through the dark hall that separated the two rooms.

Darcy picked up a loaf of freshly-baked rye bread from a table covered with lunchmeats, cakes, potato and macaroni salads, and bags of chips. "Do you like this?" She glanced up and I nodded; she began slicing the bread. We made sandwiches on paper plates.

"Would you like a coke?" she asked while reaching in the refrigerator and wrenching a can from its plastic ring. She pulled glasses out from the cabinet and filled them with ice from the machine in the refrigerator door. The same one--I vividly remember filling the water goblets for dinner, and the one time I couldn't get it to work.

Clayton was shouting at Mom and came into the kitchen and saw me with my hand in the ice-tray and jerked the glass out of my other hand. I stepped back as the big man shut the freezer door and began banging the glass against the lever, watching air pour out of the machine. He sighed, "What in hell did you do to it?"

The thing worked fine for Darcy now, just as things always had. Clayton didn't get irritated with his little princess; if she made mistakes it was only comforting evidence of her eternal dependence. He would laugh and say, "Here, let me show you."

And only I could see, during their many lessons, the way her eyes rolled up (just for a second) when he turned from her to show her how to operate his camera, how to handle the prints and negatives, how to cover things and put them back in the refrigerator, how to walk from point A to point B. Clayton knew the right way to do everything and enjoyed imparting this knowledge to his daughter. The fact that he had to show

me the same things never failed to annoy him.

"Do you want to take these back in there?" She pointed with her shoulder at a white-arched portal beyond which a piano stood against a far wall--where they were all gathered, where my mother's voice droned on and on. I wondered what she could possibly have to say--why would she think her ex-husband's mourning family would want to hear it?

"I guess," I said, not wanting to sit in the whiteness of the empty dining room at the oak table where we spent endless dinners in silence, drinking ice water.

In the living room, Darcy sat by her mother on a loveseat and I sat in an antique chair, trying to juggle a paper plate full of picnic food and a glass of coke with a napkin around it.

A portable tv had been moved from upstairs and sat conspicuously (Clayton would never allow a tv in the living room) on a wooden table in the center of things. Andy Hardy struggled with a flat tire, but no one watched. Clayton's mother sat straight across from it, on the sofa, staring ahead, but her ancient red eyes showed no sign they focused on anything. Mom patted her hand and went on about the unfairness of things, and how young Clayton was, and how good Mrs. Penniman looked. All lies.

Jean and Ryan ignored everyone else in the room as they leafed through the laminated pages of Clayton's coin collection. They had two padded chairs pulled together and conspired about the prices and where they could make the best trades.

Darcy's mother, Marilyn, sipped coffee and watched Mom and Mrs. Penniman on the couch. This room full of mothers was all the while fixed in the gaze of his first wife as she stared down from her portrait on the mantle. Having died of cancer twenty-five years ago, she was present

in the only way she could manage. These women, who would never normally spend time with each other, felt compelled to come together to mourn this man's death. I wondered if any of them really loved him.

"Are we going to Mass, Mother Penniman?" Mom asked.

"Oh, yes, I suppose so," she answered quietly.

"How are we going to ride? Jean and Ryan have a car." She went on, "Terry, are you going to drive yourself or ride with Darcy and Marilyn?" I looked at Darcy. "Or Darcy could ride with you, I guess, or maybe you all could ride with Jean and Ryan."

"You can ride with me, Anne," Marilyn said to my mother in a dismissive way.

"Oh . . . well, that would be fine," Mom said.

"Darcy," Marilyn said, "why don't you show Terry those pictures of you two?"

"Oh yeah," she looked at me, "they'll really take you back."

We walked down the stairs to the den and Clayton's darkroom. The musty basement air was pleasant after the suffocating living room. She opened the darkroom door and yanked the chain, turning on the bare bulb in the ceiling. A nude with a flip hairdo stared at us from the opposite wall. Pictures Clayton took over the last thirty years lined all four walls of the tiny room. One, of Darcy and me on a rollercoaster, was blown up and on prominent display to the right. She pulled one of the big books of proofs out of the shelves and I followed her out into the basement den. That was about as much as I had ever seen of the darkroom. Clayton never invited me in, though Darcy was thoroughly trained to work with film at every stage from shooting to fixing. She didn't even have much interest. I was the one who took pictures all the time with my little Brownie 110.

We sat on the old blue sofa. A pool table now took up much of the space in the middle of the darkly-paneled room. Other than that, everything looked the same. I was comfortable there.

She scooted next to me and laid the album across our laps. The proofs stood out in shades of black, silver, and gray in contrast to the white background on which they were rigidly arranged. Darcy and I at the park, at the wedding, opening Christmas gifts and playing Monopoly. The picture of that game, with us sitting Indian-style on the basement floor looking solemn and pale behind the smiles fixed for the camera, that picture provoked the most concrete sense of it all. The pictures at the park and on holidays failed to show the everyday reality of the three years. We ran away to those games--from the strained conversations between Clayton and my mother that told us this was already another mistake.

We ran away from Clayton and his close scrutiny of everything we did, every move I made. "Don't leave these things on the cabinet; put everything back where you found it! If you leave the lid off the shampoo, the whole bottle will spill and be wasted! Don't talk back to your mother! Be careful with that food in there! Why don't you take that game downstairs?"

And Darcy looked at me (these things were usually directed at me) and grinned a bit, rolled her eyes, and we gladly picked up and headed downstairs. I could tell by the look in Clayton's eye just how nervous I made him. Darcy was his daughter, and therefore part of his collection. Mom, his young wife, was also part of his collection. His classical albums, his paintings, his coins, his cameras, and his photos--his thousands and thousands of photos--were all part of his collection. I was the exception under that roof--an intruder. I had to be constantly watched or chased

away to make sure I didn't stumble into the glass cabinet where Clayton kept his cameras or poke my face in the frame of an otherwise perfect picture.

So I got out of his sight, along with Darcy, and played games. Sometimes we made up new rules; sometimes we spent more time feeling each other out on how we each viewed things than we actually did playing games. We were alike in many ways. We both wanted to be successful at our own pursuits. We didn't want to be anything like our parents. Darcy wanted to create, not collect. I wanted to be my own person, independent, free from family ties and everyday concerns. I wanted to be a reporter. At least one of us made it.

As she turned a page of the album, her head brushed against my face and I smelled her shampooed hair. It had been a long time since we played these roles. We hardly wrote each other, maybe five or six letters in the last decade. But whatever had been there when we were younger was back again.

We came upon a loose picture out of place in this collection. It showed Darcy, at the age of three or four, petting an Irish setter twice her size--eyes wide with fascination. She picked up the picture and said, "You know, that's the first thing I can remember about Daddy--that black box always clicking, capturing everything that happened. He used to always take pictures of me. Always." She looked off across the room at nothing.

"Yeah?"

"You know, he and I had a lot of problems, me studying art and going away; we got to where we almost wouldn't speak. But more than anything else . . . "

"What?"

"Pictures," she smiled a little, "he quit taking pictures when I was here at home."

I looked around at the den. What felt cozy a moment before now seemed oppressive. The darkness in the corners seemed to be creeping toward us--closing us in. I looked at her eyes; they glanced up from the page into mine.

"Do you wanna go somewhere? Maybe have a drink?" I sounded like I was pleading. "I mean, if you want to . . ."

She looked at her watch. "Sure, we have over an hour before six o'clock Mass." She smiled warmly.

"All right." My heart pounded as I stood up. I put out my hand and helped her to her feet.

We went to Keeler's, a comfortable bar downtown. We sat in a corner in the back. I ordered a beer; Darcy ordered a Scotch and soda. She was the first to speak:

"You know the kinds of things that were in the paper. 'A pillar of the community, Clayton Penniman served Johnstone oil loyally for forty-two years while maintaining his family's ranching interests. His passion, however, was the camera. Constantly recording the visual splendors of our locale, Clayton Penninman gained national recognition for his photographs and periodically contributed a column to Maker's Eye magazine.' You know," she dropped the elevated tone she was mocking and spoke normally, "I never thought of him like that. It's like . . . oh, is that who he was?"

I laughed, "In my paper."

"Oh yes, you work for them." Her eyes lit up as she leaned forward. "Do you like it? Is it what you always wanted?"

"No," I hesitated, "I always wanted to be a reporter. I run the presses here--that's pretty temporary though." I lied--I knew my position wasn't going to change. I went on, "Anyway, you were talking about Clayton."

"Yes," she sipped and stared off beyond me, "I just don't know. They made him sound like such an important man. 'Citizen Penniman' or something. I don't see Daddy that way. He was no pillar of the community. He had nothing to do with the community."

"You don't think so?" I was surprised.

"Terry, you know that." She ran her fingers through her hair, leaned back for a moment and leaned forward again. "Daddy was a selfish old fart who lived alone after three broken marriages--alone with all his hobbies. He drove away anyone who could have cared about him, except maybe Elaine--they supposedly had a wonderful marriage."

"He drove you away?"

"Of course, and you too." She drained her drink and signaled the waitress. "He took it personally that I went to art school when he always thought I'd come to work at Johnstone. He said he'd get me on. I never wanted to work there. Oh, you know, I always said things like 'sure, talk to personnel' when I was a kid, but shit. I never wanted that and made no secret of it."

"All you ever talked about was your painting and ceramics," I agreed.

"Me--art, you--reporting, exactly. He knew that. He didn't care. He saw that as my hobby, like knitting or something. All he wanted was for me to live here with him."

"He did love you very much."

"Too much," she lit a cigarette, "Too much and in all the wrong

ways."

"Wrong ways?" I was confused.

"Yes, for a father . . ." she pinched her brow as if trying to squeeze out the right words, "for anyone. He loved me like you love something that has no feelings. I didn't cry today, you know? I'm sad he's gone and everything but I don't feel like crying. It's really bad the way I do feel . . . almost relieved. God, I should go to hell!" She paused. "Speaking of going to hell," she checked her watch, "we have ten minutes to make it to Mass." She grinned.

"There's always tomorrow morning." I grinned back.

"Who am I kidding; I never go anyway."

"Me neither. Another drink?"

"Why not?" She placed her hands flat on the table in front of me.

"So, Terry, what about your job?"

"What about it? There's really nothing to say. You went off to school. You're the budding artist--the talk of Colorado. I'm stuck in a nothing town with a nothing job." I ordered a drink and went on, "Seeing you again makes me realize what a screw up I am."

"Bullshit." She placed a hand on mine. "Terry, listen to me. I got a lot of breaks you didn't get. My parents have money, and they supported me whether Daddy agreed with what I was doing or not."

"Uh huh," I said, taking a deep swig of beer. I really didn't want to talk about it.

"You need to remember," she went on, "what you always told me. You said that I could do anything. Do you remember?" She looked at me as though she really expected an answer.

It sounded like something I might have said, "One time in particular?"

"No," she sort of laughed to herself, "Well, right, I mean, you said that kind of thing all the time. I knew what you thought of my ability and you'll never know how much that pushed me."

I felt like I was being patronized. I didn't know if I should get mad or be embarrassed. I just drank more beer.

"Terry," she waited for me to look up from my bottle, for our eyes to connect. "I have faith in you, always have." I had drained the beer. Something moved in my throat. My new drink came just in time.

We drank a good deal over the next couple of hours. We went to my place. I was self-conscious about the way it looked, junky with rock and roll posters all over the walls and an album collection that acted as a centerpiece to the room.

"This is great! This looks like you," she said, and it sounded real, a little affectionate. I put Al Green's Let's Stay Together on the turntable and played it low so we could talk. We had to sit together on my sagging sofa.

"Do you want a beer?" I asked, feeling like a pretty lame host.

"Sure," she said and I went to the ice box. As I was pulling two Busch from out of the twelve pack that made up most of the contents of my biggest appliance: a twelve pack, a package of American cheese, a bottle of cola and two plastic containers of God-knows-what, she said, "That's that Tina Turner song, isn't it?"

"Yeah," I said and handed her the beer, "but it's his song." I nodded toward Al's smiling cover picture.

"You really have a lot of albums," she said and that started me thinking. That would be a whole part of my personality she wouldn't know anything about. We had collected Top 40 singles together as

kids; we used to listen to the AM radio for hours and make requests, but she couldn't know how important it had become for me as time passed. Music really became a lifeline for me; no matter how down I might be, I could put a record on and instantly feel connected to something that literally kept me glad to be alive.

"Yeah, around five hundred or so."

"That's great. You probably know a lot about it; I wish I did."

"Well, I wish I knew something about art, other kinds of art."

She looked at me and grinned before taking another sip off her beer. "It sounds like we have things to teach each other." She was so beautiful. She had grown into the perfection that had always suited her.

It was in keeping with what I loved (and, yes, resented) about her. Her ability never failed to give credence to the preferential way Clayton treated her. I told her I had faith in her because I had no doubt she could do exactly what she wanted; I never questioned her talent, like I did my own. Clayton and I had that in common--we both loved his daughter.

I told her about why I loved music that night. She told me about her paintings: Darcpressionisms, she called them. She said that was a label one of her professor's gave them because they differed little from the kinds of character portraits Manet did (no, I didn't know who he was but, then, she didn't understand the significance of Booker T. and the MGs) and the only thing new about her work was the modern settings and characters she chose: two punks in a yuppie bar, a bag lady on Park Avenue. This was meant as a criticism of her imagination and style, but she took it as a badge of honor. She loved Manet and Impressionism, and

she didn't see the point of formal variation just for the sake of formal variation. I followed all this by relating it to music, but I couldn't picture the work.

"I'd like to see your stuff," I said, wondering if that sounded disrespectful.

"Well, you'll have to come to Colorado for that. I'm having a gallery showing next month. You should, what a wonderful idea!" she said with her eyes brightly smiling at me, as though I had come up with it.

Later in our conversation, while I was going on about the importance of rap by wrenching together some vague connection to streetcorner soul, she suddenly said, grabbing my knee and swallowing her beer rapidly, "I've got an even better idea!" She looked at me as if pleading for me to ask what it was, "Why don't you sit for me?"

"Sit for you?"

"Yeah, it would be great! I can do a portrait of you and then you'll know how I work, the way I approach it, everything." She was very excited and I felt honored, though more than a little embarrassed at the idea of having my face painted to be put up on the wall or something.

"Sure," I said, wondering how I could get out of it.

"Then we'll do it. I can get the things I need tomorrow and, if you'll be free, we'll start in the afternoon."

"Okay," I said, feeling uncomfortable but a little excited at the same time. It was an excuse to be with her.

I called the next morning to see if I needed to wear anything in particular. At that point, I hoped she would be busy, that she had

forgotten part of her plans and there would be no way she would have time to do this painting.

"No, wear what you have on--and bring that jean jacket you've always got on," she said in a cheery voice. I hung up and decided to face it like a man. How bad could it be? I might even enjoy it.

She had me sit on a stool (in my jacket) with the afternoon sunlight pouring in Clayton's basement window, lighting one side of my face and the top of my head.

I actually enjoyed those hours sitting because I had the chance to watch Darcy work. She was more beautiful than ever as she feverishly sketched and mixed paints and dabbed and stepped back to take long careful looks. I wondered what she was looking for--she sketched my face in the first few minutes of the first session, but, in the painting, she was looking for something more. I nervously tried to keep a mask on, a serious blank expression, so she wouldn't see too much. I felt exposed at times. Other times, I was just caught up in seeing my sister do what she did best.

On Thursday, she finished. By that time, I felt I knew her better than I ever had. I knew the discipline and determination that made her good at what she did. I saw the painting and understood what she had been looking at all week. I looked like a bum. She turned the basement window into the only clue to the setting--a broken light, as if blocked by bars, fell across the gray room, a cell. She'd made me a convict, and I looked the part.

"Thanks!" I said.

"What?" She looked alarmed and hurt. "You don't like it?"

I laughed. "Well, no, I like it . . . I think. How am I supposed

to feel about being typecast as a criminal by my own sister?"

"Criminal?" She frowned.

"Prisoner!" I pointed at the lighting.

"But not just any prisoner." She looked at me in the painting, "Look at his eyes. What do you see in his eyes?"

I looked at myself the convict and felt really silly, "I don't know . . . I look sad."

"Yeah, but that's not all, at least not all I was going for." She looked at me and back at the painting, worried.

"Well," sad hadn't been quite the right word, "I guess I look kind of nice or something."

"Right," her eyes lit up, "right, kind, compassionate, someone who shouldn't be behind bars but is--someone who was locked away because he was too good for the world and someone else resented it."

"Shit." I blushed and laughed. "Why in hell would you use my face for something like that?"

"Because your face is perfect for that." She smiled with her eyes as she looked deep into mine. She kissed me on the cheek. "Thanks for being my inspiration."

Embarrassed again, I didn't say anything but helped her put away her things.

Over the week, we spent a lot of time together. She made me feel different, special. We went out to eat several times, to the movies, to the park. She took my hand in hers and led me places. I would feel awkward doing the same, but I loved that she did. On Thursday night, things changed. We had take-out Chinese at my apartment, watched an old movie on tv, and ended up in bed.

Darcy sat up against the pillows and reached for a cigarette. I turned away and put my feet on the cold wooden floor. I listened to her, my sister, smoking--the crinkle of the inhale, the cool blowing out. She was somewhere else now; I was alone.

I remembered dark nights, Clayton's snore from across the hall, Darcy sleeping in the adjoining bedroom. I went in there once, in the middle of the night, and just listened to her breathing. I wanted to wake her but I couldn't. Some nights it seemed to take forever to fall asleep.

"Did you ever . . . "

"Hmm?" She took a long drag.

I leaned back next to her, "Did you ever think we would?"

"No." She looked straight ahead.

It was dead quiet. She looked at me, grinned and kissed my cheek. "Well, we have now, and I have no regrets."

"No," I said, lying.

She finished smoking and put her arms around me and her head against my chest. I settled to where I was lying down again. "Anything wrong?" she asked, her chin pressing into my ribs.

"No," I said again and tried to go to sleep. We did doze off that way for awhile, but I woke and she rolled over in her sleep to hug her pillow.

I knew I wouldn't be able to go right to sleep so I pulled my pants on and went in the livingroom and turned on the tv. I stared at a late night talk show and tried to get sleepy. Then Darcy came in wearing a t-shirt. "Are you okay?" she said.

I looked at her; something stuck in my throat. She came and sat

beside me on the sofa.

After a long quiet, I said, "I'm sorry."

"Why?" she whispered.

"Because I'm scared we did the wrong thing."

She pulled back and looked at me. "Don't be."

"Why not?"

"Because I feel the same way. You're afraid we're going to lose something more important because of this."

"Yeah." I wondered if she really did feel the same things. "I'm afraid we had more going before than we'll ever have this way."

"And you're afraid we might not be able to go back."

"How do you know what I'm thinking?" She was being extremely presumptuous and, even worse, getting it all right.

"Because I went through this too. I'm feeling the same things. I wanted to get as close to you as I could because you have something I've always wanted." She looked down.

"What?"

"You have a kindness, a warmth, that I've never felt I had. All that ever matters with me is that I'm the best in whatever I do. I can be so cold sometimes it scares me."

"I don't believe that." Though, in a way, I did. "You're so, so . . . perfect."

"No." Her eyes teared. "I'm not . . . and I know it's stupid and silly and queer, but I don't know how to deal with that. Daddy always wanted me to be; you thought I was. Now Daddy's dead, and I'm not sure what I'm about. Half the reason I've done the things I've done is because he wanted me to, and the funny thing is I hated him for it."

We held each other in the glow of the television. She slept, and I thought about what she'd said. I did think she was perfect. I suppose that's part of the reason I wound up in bed with her. I wanted to be part of that perfection. There was something horribly selfish in what I had done.

We slept on the couch until dawn. Then we went to breakfast and talked about her paintings and my music. I took her home. It was like nothing had happened. She would be leaving town the next day. Before she got out of the car, I said, "There's a wall up, isn't there?"

"Yeah," she said, laughing more to herself than to me. "There sure is."

"I guess we aren't as tough as we thought." I looked up at the white house at the end of the drive.

"Uh huh." She looked at the house too.

"Probably just need more time," I added.

"Probably," she returned and opened her door.

"Am I," I hesitated, "am I taking you to the airport tomorrow?"

"If you want to, I would love for you to," she said, smiling.

I looked at her and saw that same affection in her eyes I saw when she painted my portrait. I knew then that things would be okay. It might be awhile before our conversations would be any less stilted, but we cared and wanted to hang on to each other.

At the airport, I kissed her cheek and said, "Take care, Sis."

She laughed and said, "Sure thing, you too. You will come to see me?"

I nodded.

I never have gone to see her. The Penniman house was up for sale

about a month ago, and I drove by, thinking about going in. But, as I sat in the long gravel drive and looked up at the old ugly thing, I had no desire to even get out of my car. I wondered if Darcy was involved in the sale, but I doubted it. Besides, it would have been awkward to go to see her that way; we couldn't really talk. No, it was probably just Jean and Ryan doing their best to get everything they could out of the estate.

Three years later and I don't even know if she is still in Colorado. My mother would know, but then she'd start urging me to go see her if I showed any interest.

I thought things were going to be different for a while. I almost left town at one point. But Monday morning rolled around, and I fell back into my old routine. In two months, I'll be getting my annual raise, and I think I'll start setting a little aside each check. I'm not staying here forever. One of the editors is thinking about letting me try my hand at a couple of stories. If that takes off, then I'll give Darcy a call. Maybe I can show her she was right about me.

SOMETHING LOST

I was in eighth grade when I realized friends were more important than school. I had been fine without many of them before that, and, probably for that reason, had also been a straight A student. Of course my parents raised me to do well--I was a disappointment when I didn't perform. My teachers loved me: Mr. Cox, math; Mrs. Buchanan, English; and Mr. McGraw, history--I was their pet. In class, they held my work up as exemplary, kidded with me, and asked me if I had any questions after explaining various points. They gave my parents rave reports on Open House nights and assured them I had been raised just right.

But they turned on me when I started hanging around with Jimmy Teenor. They didn't like the way he looked with his shoulder-length brown hair, holey jeans and jean jacket, and the faint scar that ran down his left cheek--a memento of a fight he had when he was twelve, out on the railroad tracks: a kid three years older than him grabbed a piece of broken beer bottle, while Jimmy was holding him down, and split his face open with it. We met right after my parent's divorce.

During that period, both Mrs. Buchanan and Mr. McGraw called me up to the front after class to talk to me about my grades. Mrs. Buchanan always made me uncomfortable in these one-on-one sessions. Well, into her sixties, she had a habit of grimacing and clicking her false teeth that never failed to give me the chills. MEanwhile, she played with her large pink, green, and yellow junk beads with her left hand while she scribbled on my paper with the red pen in her right. She leaned close

to me, so my eyes burned from her too-sweet perfume, and clicked and fiddled and slashed. I remember one day in particular after the class filed out.

"Now, Douglas click you know you have always been one of my favorite students. You are alert click, intelligent click, and always able to get your work done on time click. But lately, I've noticed a significant click trend in your performance that deeply disturbs me. Now," she pulled one of my papers from a manila folder on the side of her desk, laying it in the cleared space right under my nose, "look at this essay click; what do you see?"

I glanced at the paper; it was a narrative about my parent's divorce. I didn't know what she was asking me. "A story?"

Her eyes flashed white heat, "Don't be smart with me click young man."

"I wasn't meaning to be; I just wasn't sure--"

"Douglas click, how many times did I mark your paper?"

I went through and counted the red checks. "Seven?"

"Seven." She took her half glasses off and rubbed the bridge of her nose. "What does that tell you?"

I looked through again; they were all punctuation mistakes. "That I don't know how to use a comma?"

"Is that what it tells you click?" She put them back on. "Or is it that you don't care? Perhaps you don't care about your punctuation because you don't care click about what kind of grades you make? Perhaps click you don't care about school click!"

She rolled her necklace between her fingers and clicked again, staring at me, waiting for a response.

"I care about school," I said softly.

"Do you? I don't know, Douglas. I do know that I'm disappointed in you." She paused (click and roll). I'm disappointed but hopeful. I know that you have what it takes to be the best that ever came out of Hoover Junior High if you can just keep your priorities straight (click and roll)."

"Yes, ma'am, I'm sorry." My eyes teared from the perfume, and I didn't want her to think I was crying. I just wanted to get out of there. "I'll try to do better."

"I'm sure you will!" And, leaning back and dropping her pen forcefully, she sent me off.

I was free, but I felt like a wimp--all choked up and shaking. I felt dirty too. I had to find Jimmy.

Jimmy and I met at AJ's Grocery every day after school. In fact, that was where we first met. I always played the Gunfight at the OK Corral pinball machine at the back of the store. Sometimes, I started playing at about 3:30 and kept on until 5:30 or 6:00--when the sun had gone down and my dad would be at home watching the news, with an open bottle of scotch.

We moved to an apartment after the break, and my mother went back to school, fifty miles away. I got bored sitting at home waiting for dad every day, so I just took my time coming home. That was really why I started playing pinball and why I got good at it. By the time I met Jimmy, I was at the point where I could stretch a dollar's worth of quarters (I sold paper so I always had change) to fill up the two-hour gap.

One day he just came up to me and laid two quarters on the machine by my right hand. "Take you on the next game," he said and I looked at

him and, I have to admit, my stomach twisted and I shook a little. Though he wasn't very big, he looked menacing with that hair and scar. I didn't know if he'd be any good, but I felt sure he'd be a sore loser and take care of me if I made him look bad.

I didn't have to worry about it; he never looked bad. I learned a lot about pinball from him, like only using the paddles when absolutely necessary. My technique had always been to punch the buttons in a rapid-fire fashion that sometimes shot the balls back in the hole rather than forward. He hit one at a time, using only the hand the ball approached. When he lost the ball, it was because it cleared the paddles altogether--and that happened only rarely.

I found him that day after my talk with Mrs. Buchanan. He was playing the gunfight at AJ's but quit and let his ball go when he saw me come in. "We've gotta go to my house, c'mon," he said, smiling as I followed him out the door.

I'd only been to his house a couple of times before. He lived across the business district, over the railroad tracks, and five blocks beyond that, from my apartment in Rolling Meadows. But it wasn't a bad walk, not when there was someone to be with. I told him about Mrs. Buchanan, playing up how much she looked over her glasses, and he laughed. He said, "You know, she's an all right lady most of the time, but I never know what she's talking about. I mean she's real nice to me even though I'm flunking her class." She warned me about him before; it was kind of funny that he took up for her.

We got to his house and no one was home: that is, except for his half-blind grandfather, who was always sitting in front of the tv in his wheelchair, even though he had cataracts and probably couldn't see more

than the lights and shadows of the Gunsmoke he always had on. His mother worked the 10:30 am to 7:30 pm shift at a steak house and his father went to work at the zinc smelter sometime in the afternoon, most of the time, and didn't get home until late at night. Jimmy's Uncle Leo, his mother's youngest brother, lived there too and had worked at the smelter for years. Jimmy figured he'd end up there someday too if he couldn't make it as a welder.

Sometimes, Jimmy had a bottle of Wild Turkey or Jack Daniels stashed under his bed, and we'd sit in his room and drink. Not that day, though; after I sat down, he left the room and came back with a long brown box. He opened it and I saw cigarette papers tucked in the side and a plastic bag full of marijuana.

"Have you ever done this?" He smiled at me.

"No," I said as my stomach flipped over.

"Wanna?" He glanced down and back at me.

"Sure," I said, though I wasn't.

He rolled three sloppy joints and put the box back in his uncle's room. We walked down to the railroad tracks and sat behind a warehouse, smoking them in no time at all.

I didn't feel anything at first, but we kept it up, going down to the same spot several times a week until one day when I suddenly started laughing and didn't know if I could stand up anymore. I thought he might have to leave me there. But he didn't, and I could still walk. I fell in love with the intense euphoria, and Jimmy and I turned the warehouse trip into a daily ritual.

Everything went fine until one drizzly afternoon when we decided not to stay down by the tracks too long and went to Jimmy's right after

we got high. His Uncle Leo, who I'd only seen a couple times before-- and each of those times he made a big impression on me with his bushy black beard and the black lizards, birds and dragons that decorated his arms--was sitting in Jimmy's room when we got there. He was frightening to look at but with clear lighter-than-normal blue eyes which made him look intelligent or at least a little more sensitive than his trappings would lead you to believe. He looked at us and didn't say a word.

"Hey Leo," Jimmy said.

"Hey." He had a deep voice--like a growl.

"Whatcha doin'?"

"Wonderin'," Leo almost barked.

"Wonderin' what?" Jimmy looked confused, maybe startled.

"Wonderin' where you've been getting your dope." Leo's eyes fixed on mine. "And hopin' it wasn't from me."

"What . . . we don't," Jimmy started.

"Don't give me that shit." He pulled Jimmy to him and looked in his eyes. "You've been stoned every night this week!" We were quiet. "And what's worse, I've been missing some lately, some of my stash you shouldn't know nothin' about!" He got louder as he spoke.

"I'm sorry, Leo," Jimmy said, not able to look up.

"You're sorry!" He was still yelling.

"Me too," I said, my voice cracking.

It was quiet for what seemed like forever. "Okay," Leo spoke quietly again. "Okay, I know how it is. You probably didn't know what I'd do . . . but this isn't the way to handle it. If you want some weed, I want to know about it. I don't want you sneakin' around here like a little thief. Ain't nothin' worse than a thief. You hear me?"

Jimmy nodded.

The next day, Leo walked in as we were listening to records and said, out of the blue, "Now listen, if you wanna buy some from me, that's another story altogether. Is that what you wanna do, buy some?"

Jimmy nodded again.

"How much do you all have?"

We both dug in our pockets. I had about six dollars, mainly in quarters, and Jimmy had around five. "Bout ten bucks," Jimmy said.

"Okay, there's a guy comin' by here in about fifteen minutes. His name's Munchkin. I can get a dime then if you'll leave my shit alone." Leo half-smiled.

We agreed to the deal. Over the weeks, we started buying from Munchkin, directly. He was a strange guy--big, about six foot four, and heavy, probably weighing over three hundred pounds. He had wavy red hair and a big thick beard. He always wore a sleeveless Tweety_bird shirt and a wallet with a chain on it. His eyes got kind of big when he talked, and he never said anything much louder than a gruff whisper. Leo said he talked that way to cover his squeaky little voice.

We started hanging around with Leo a lot--as long as he wasn't with a lady friend. He was a big blues fan, and we listened to his old records in his room and got high with him. We fell in love with that music. The first time I heard Elmore James play "Dust My Broom," I thought my chest was catching on fire every guitar solo. I'd heard nothing like it before. He had a big poster of Muddy Waters on the wall that said The Original Hoochie--Koochie Man in big red letters. I stared at that poster for long periods of time. That round face and high cheekbones looked regal, belonged on a Haitian king rather than an old Chicago bluesman.

Leo had a guitar case leaning up against an amplifier by the side of his bed. One afternoon, Jimmy asked him if he'd play something for me. He pulled out the shiny-but-beat-up electric--I now know it was a Stratocaster--and plugged it into the amp. I was amazed to hear Elmore James' fiery licks burning from Leo's fingers. He switched tunes and started playing "I Got My Brand On You," and sang it with a voice that sounded like it could feel a hot iron against skin.

When he finished, I just said, "Can you show me how to do that?"

Within a week, I bought a red Japanese imitation Strat at Shrakey's Pawnshop downtown and started taking lessons from Leo. Jimmy sat in with an old acoustic of Leo's and got really professional at playing rhythm while I learned as many leads as fast as I could. My hands would cramp from the stretches, and my fingers would blister, but I got a little better each day. At some point, we quit playing with Leo all the time and started practicing on our own. We traded off on vocals; Jimmy took the nitty-gritty ones while I took the more melodic (wimpy) ones. We generally stuck to the blues and played all the time because we loved it. It filled our afternoons and evenings and gave us a break from school and parents that made us feel important and special just for what we were able to do on our own. I guess that's why, by the time we turned sixteen, we were good enough that Leo said he'd been out-classed.

I learned a lot about Jimmy over that year and a half. Leo had pretty much raised him because his father worked split-shifts for as long as he could remember and his mother worked evenings. Leo was only six years older than Jimmy and had been taken away from his parents when he was a baby. He'd almost died of pneumonia because he was left lying next to an open window, and the courts decided his alcoholic parents weren't fit to

keep him. They lived somewhere in Arkansas, and Leo had only seen them once or twice he could remember. But alcoholism must have been in their genes. Leo could finish off a bottle of Wild Turkey quicker than just about anyone, and it seemed like he was always just finishing one off.

Jimmy's grandfather was in an accident at the smelters when a section of scaffolding gave away and he fell fifty feet. He never walked again. Jimmy was always telling me horror stories about the smelter and how he didn't want to work there. He had another uncle who was a welder and made pretty good money. When he went into high school, he started taking classes at the county vo-tech.

I probably learned more about Jimmy and his background than he ever had a chance to learn about me. I enjoyed the freedom of being at the Teenor's house. When Jimmy occasionally came to our apartment, my dad never took his eyes off us and made me real nervous and a little embarrassed.

At the same time, if I stayed gone all evening, he didn't seem too concerned about where I'd been. Of course, by the time I got home, he was usually on the couch with a half-empty bottle of scotch next to him.

He was stuck in a job he hated at Johnstone Oil while others, working around him, kept getting promoted into better ones. He was always saying he'd been labeled an engineer because of the degree he earned twenty years before and that kept him from moving up into management jobs he knew he was capable of handling. He always said he should have stayed in school and gotten his master's; he warned me not to make the same mistake.

My mother got a reasonably high paying job as an executive secretary in Tulsa where she went to school. Occasionally, she made sounds she wanted me to come live with her, which just made Dad drink more. I didn't

really want to go. I felt needed where I was, even if it was just to be around the place occasionally. I worried about him. Besides, I didn't want to leave Jimmy and Leo and Elmore James.

At that time, I wanted more than anything to sing like Elmore James. His range suited mine, but I couldn't quite hold on to the notes and stretch them out the way he could. I worked on it every day as Jimmy and I got our set down. He would sit on his bed and twelfth bar the rhythm while I practiced bottleneck leads. We'd start with Jimmy singing on something like Hooker's "Big Legs, Tight Skirt." Then I'd take over for "Dust My Broom" and Johnson's "When You Got A Good Friend," and he'd follow that with the Wolf's "Tell Me." We had that first part down and kept switching around the last few songs. Leo kept telling us we were getting good enough he'd try to book us at his favorite hang-out, Zeke's. We didn't really believe him but wanted to be ready just in case.

My schoolwork continued to be neglected in favor of playing music and, increasingly, getting high. However, I now had a new batch of high school teachers who hadn't known me long enough to be disappointed. They wrote me off as least likely to achieve from the very start of their courses. That was fine; I wrote them off as least likely to understand the blues.

Jimmy was the first to get a car. He bought, and partially rebuilt, a 1973 blue Capri. He had a nice tape deck in there with a lot of wattage, but couldn't afford strong enough speakers; so he had two wooden stereo speakers sitting on his backseat that, honestly, sounded great. We bought a lot of tapes and filled up five shoeboxes in the backseat with blues and descendents like Jimi Hendrix, The Yardbirds, and even Led Zeppelin.

Jimmy worked at an all-night diner until one or two in the morning, five nights a week. I worked delivery at the hospital on weekends. Since Jimmy had Friday and Saturday off, we went out on those nights and pushed ourselves to our limits even though at least one of us always had to be at work in the morning.

We drove around, getting stoned, most of the time. We found less and less time to play our music. We'd drive out to Birch Lake, take a swim, drink some beers, and then head back into town. We drove by the crowds at Pizza Hut, Red Apple (we called it Red Asshole) Sports Center, and the Youth Canteen, only to make jokes about our classmates. Seeing those girls with all those guys always made us ache, though we must have liked it; we never quit coming back for more. When we got tired of that, we'd light up and head out onto the country roads and eventually, end up at Zeke's.

Zeke's was an almost all-Black bar on the extreme west edge of town. The fact that we knew Leo, who practically lived in that smokey hole-in-the-wall on weekends, put us in good standing with nearly everyone there. We'd come late in the evening, and play pool and maybe hang out by the bar and talk to Zeke's women, Donita, Krista, and Sam. They worked for him and did most of their business in the trailers behind the bar. I always had a strong feeling for Donita; she carried herself really well, held her head high, like she didn't know she was a whore, or, if she did, she was doing exactly what she wanted to. Looking back, I suppose that was just a front. Both Krista and Sam looked older than they were--tired, tough, and unhappy. I liked them all, though, and they seemed to be especially fond of me and Jimmy, probably because we were just kids, not customers, and they could just hang out with us and talk.

We still played some, but our practice grew less and less consistent in favor of scoring drugs and cruising. We were making pretty good money that way. We could buy an ounce of coke, sell off three quarters almost instantly, and have the quarter we saved paid for. We bought bags of pot and sheets of blotter acid and did them the same way--always breaking even. And then, of course, there was the speed.

Leo did a ton of speed. He did business several times a week with Munchkin, Wilkins, and Horseman, all at Zeke's. We bought some every now and then, but Jimmy and I agreed there was more misery coming down off that drug than it was worth.

One night, Jimmy and I were going to score some Orange Sunshine through a guy named Buzz who was going to come and see Leo about some speed. We went in and sat in Leo's room and waited for this guy to come by--Sonny Boy Williamson was on the turntable.

"What do you two want?" Leo barked about the time we got seated.

"We were gonna wait for Buzz," Jimmy said defensively.

"Oh," Leo said softly and stared straight ahead. He looked bad. He was waxy white and visibly shaking. "Do you all want a dime?"

"We don't have enough money," I said, "if we're gonna get the blotter."

"Oh well, hell that's all right. I'll spot it to you." He started dumping lines on the mirror.

As we snorted two apiece, Leo prepped his syringe. He worked his left hand open and closed, trying to get some veins to stand out on the candle-like surface of his arm. He tied off at the muscle and slapped the underside of his arm repeatedly. He found a vein he seemed satisfied with and stuck the needle in, "Ah, shit!" he said and pulled it out.

"You all right?" Jimmy and I both asked.

"Yeah, I'm just kinda shakin'. Missed--gonna bruise a little." He tried again and missed again. "Shit! Listen Jimmy, do you think you could hit it for me, bud?"

"Leo, I don't know." Jimmy looked scared.

"Ah, go to hell, I can do it!" He tried again and hit his mark. He untied, worked his hand, leaned back, and in a couple of minutes he was back to his old self.

"Why don't you two play somethin'?" he asked, smiling.

"Ah, no, you, Leo," Jimmy said.

"Yeah, you," I pitched in.

"Nah, I haven't practiced in so long, and you guys, you just play about every day." He pulled the Strat out of its case and handed it to Jimmy.

"Okay," Jimmy said. The speed was probably hitting him, like me, and I felt like doing something, anything. I went to Jimmy's room and got the other guitar.

We played "Red House," and it sounded pretty good--a little sloppy, but Jimmy's voice just seemed to get better and better. When we finished, Leo clapped and whistled through his teeth.

He lit a Camel and sat silent for a moment until the smoke came pouring out his nose and mouth. "You know, you all really have something working for you there. You shouldn't let that get away from you; that could be your ticket out of this hell-hole of a town."

Buzz came by with the sunshine, and we each did a couple and went riding out on the section roads until we felt it coming on. The night lit up with red and green phosphorescence and the sides of the road shifted,

and things, seemingly small animals, darted back and forth on both sides of us. I looked at Jimmy to see if it was hitting him and saw the biggest shit-eating grin coming back at me. We both giggled like madmen.

That was when we hit the bridge. I guess the acid had taken him by surprise, and he quit looking while he was driving. We both looked back at the turn we were missing and the bridge up ahead, and he hit the brakes and turned the wheel. We slid on the gravel for several tense seconds, then slammed hard against the side of the bridge.

Dust rose all around us. I looked at Jimmy; he looked wild-eyed back at me. We jumped out of the car and stared at the big dent in the right front fender. After a few seconds, we looked at each other again. "At least we're all right, huh?" Jimmy smiled and I smiled; we laughed.

We got back in the car and drove up to 39 Hill. It was deadly still up there. We gazed at all the blinking lights of town, standing on the red clay that looked deep black in the darkness. I thought of my dad at home and tried to place our apartment by the lights. I thought of Leo and tried to find their house. I thought of my mother fifty miles away.

"Jimmy?" I said, and it startled me like speaking out in the middle of a dream.

"Yeah?" His voice was like a whisper.

"Do you ever get scared?" I said, not really knowing why I was saying it.

He was quiet; all I could hear was a whisper of wind, and then he said, "Yeah."

* * * *

I caught some kind of awful cold that next week and didn't go out with Jimmy through the next weekend. We talked some on the phone, and he told me about this girl he'd met named Jessie he was going mad over. He came by to see me a few times, but it was the second Friday before we went out, and even then, I wasn't feeling real well. My head was congested and my throat was on fire.

"You've just gotta burn those germs outta your system," Jimmy said as he handed me his brand new fifth of Wild Turkey.

"Sounds good," I said and took long swigs hoping to go numb.

Leo poked his skeletal face in the door. "Hey, Doug, didn't know you were here. You two comin' down to Zeke's tonight?"

Jimmy looked at me and nodded. "Yeah, probably."

"Good, I'll see you all there. But remember, there's liable to be some trouble early on, so you might want to come a little later after things have cooled down, all right?" he said.

"Sure," Jimmy said, and he shut the door.

"What's he talkin' 'bout?" I asked.

Jimmy took another swig. "It's Munchkin. He's givin' Leo some king of shit 'bout some speed he thinks he ripped offa him. He said he'd find him tonight. I think it has more to do with Leo dating Patti, Munchkin's old girlfriend."

"Well, Leo can take care of Munchkin any day," I said.

"Yeah," Jimmy agreed.

We ended up staying there and listening to records for a while. The alcohol was relly hitting me (I'd been dry for nearly two weeks), but I didn't feel any better. In fact, my head started feeling like ice-tongs were tearing into the sides of it. When Jimmy asked if I

wanted to go to Zeke's, I said I was sorry I was such a wimp, but I thought I'd go on home. He said that was fine and gave me a ride. Then, I guess he went to Zeke's alone. I really did feel like hell that night, but I don't suppose I'll ever quit feeling like I wasn't there when he most needed me.

When Jimmy called me the next day a little after noon, it wasn't so much a shock that something had happened to Leo (I got used to that possibility, as self-destructive as he was, a long time before) but it was the way it happened. Leo was basically a well-liked, gentle guy.

His voice was shaky on the phone, and I said I would be over as soon as possible. He said no, he'd come pick me up. I told my dad where I was going, pulled on my jean jacket and stood by the kitchen door, waiting for the sound of the Capri's engine. I was out the door the second I saw a flash of its blue paint through the thick bushes that blocked our walkway from the alley.

Jimmy looked bad. His eyes were red, his face white. A harmonica started sputtering and a piano kicked in on his tape deck. It was "I Got My Brand On You."

We sat quietly as Jimmy drove and Muddy played. We couldn't help but hear the way Leo played that song superimposed over the original.

"So," I broke the silence after a few minutes, "how'd it happen?"

Jimmy looked frail and vulnerable--like a dangerous breeze could easily blow him out of the car seat. "We'll need this," he said as he reached under the seat and pulled out a half-empty bottle of Wild Turkey.

We each took a couple of long swigs, and then Jimmy started talking real quietly. "You know, I could've kept it from happening--I knew he was having problems with that Munchkin shit. Leo was with Patti, and

Munchkin came in raisin' hell and calling Patti a slut and Leo a thief. They got in a fight and of course, it didn't take Leo long to put Munchkin down on the floor . . .

"Munchkin was hurtin' after that and picked himself off the floor, and Zeke grabbed him and pushed him out the door. I knew Munchkin was crazy, and I left the pool table and let old Louis finish my game. I told Leo I didn't feel good about things and he better watch out. Leo just said, 'Ah, don't worry 'bout him, Jim; he's all blow,' and I left him alone though I knew I shouldn't."

Jimmy stopped and took a long pull on the whiskey bottle. "And, anyway, I was talkin' to Krista, and she had some blow, and maybe just to get my mind off things I decided to go back to trailer 3 with her and do a few lines."

He drank again, as if he had to pour something down his throat just to get the words to come out. "That's where I was when I heard the shots and you know . . .," he took a sip and gasped, ". . . the second I heard that sound I knew it was Leo. I ran out, found him lying out by his pickup in the parking lot.

"Man, Doug, he looked like some kinda rag doll, all twisted in the dirt, and the blood was all around and spreadin' farther as I watched. I got down on my knees and looked in his eyes. He saw me and kinda laughed, but when he laughed somethin' caught in his throat, and he coughed and that was it. Someone, Zeke, pulled me away from him, and then I saw Horseman and Wilkins holding Munchkin down and his shotgun lyin' on the gravel, and I started kicking him and kicking him hard-- I wish I'd killed him--and then they grabbed me, and Buzz took me back inside and got me a drink, but I went back out and stayed with him and

rode with him and didn't go home until Mom and Dad came down to the hospital, and it was late . . . and it was for sure.

"So, then I hear Munchkin got away before the police got there, and no one can find him."

I didn't know what to say and took another drink. "I'm sorry."

"You know . . . it doesn't seem like it really happened." His voice was a whisper.

We drank all day. He had at least two partial fifths in the car, and then we went to a grocery store where we never got IDs checked and bought a case of beer. We went up to 39 Hill to drink and talked at the cliff's edge.

"You know, I never even told him I'd be followin' him out to the smelters." He took a big swig of beer and threw the can into the empty grocery sack we had next to us on the rocks. He pulled out another one.

"What do you mean?" I asked, confused.

"I quit goin' to the vo-tech."

"What?"

"Okay, I got kicked out for comin' in shit-faced last week." He stared ahead and drank.

"For good?" I couldn't believe it.

"I don't know. I haven't gone back."

"You're not going back?"

"I don't know."

We sat in silence for a few more minutes. He finally said, "You know, lots of guys weld and are outta work most of the time."

"Oh."

"Yeah, I think Leo wanted me to do somethin' different, but I don't

think weldin's it." He sounded like he was trying to convince someone. "Maybe we should get serious about our music," he went on.

"Maybe," I said.

We drank a few more beers and, when the sun got low in the sky, and a chilly breeze made us shiver, he suggested we drive a little. He knew right where he was going. We stopped by the gate of the smelters. He said, "C'mon," and got out of the car and walked up to the fence.

I got out and stood beside him. "What?"

He looked up at the eerie-green-lighted structure. "Let's go see where I'm gonna work." He started climbing the fence. I followed. We had to jump and tumble a little on the other side. When I got up from the ground, Jimmy was already moving for the tallest tower.

"Wait up!" I yelled.

He reached the stairs that ran all the way up the height of the tower and started climbing. I ran after him, not sure what he might do. He was so fast I knew I couldn't catch him unless he let me. We ran up for a long time; I'd hit one landing, swing around holding the railing, and run up the next flight, swing around, until I felt my head spin. We were near the top when I tripped over Jimmy where he sat on the steps. He was lighting up a joint.

I sat down next to him--groggy and clumsy from all the alcohol; it was more like I collapsed. I took a hit.

"You know," he said, exhaling, "I am really alone."

I didn't know what to say. "I'm here, man," I whispered.

"I know, but you'll be gone soon. We're gonna graduate, and you'll go to college, and I'll stay here in this shit-town and go to work in this shit-place," he said.

"What makes you think I'm going to college?" I said, startled.

"C'mon, your daddy's gonna take care of you and make sure you go. He wouldn't take no for an answer, would he?" He looked at me.

"I don't know. He's never been real happy, and he went to college." I looked off at the lights in the distance.

"Bullshit. He wants better for you than him, and that starts with going to college." I knew he was right.

"Now me," he went on, "my parents don't know what the word better means." He paused. "I am just supposed to be the same."

"But you're not," I said.

"You know, . . . Leo probably didn't seem like all that much to you. I mean, I know you liked him, but you knew how fucked up he was too . . . but he was always there. He has always been there."

I wanted to say 'I know,' but I couldn't.

Then he stood up and yelled in a voice that shook the tower and echoed off the hills in the distance, "Munchkin? Can you hear me, Munchkin? If I ever find you . . . !"

His screams echoed, and I suddenly felt sick. I grabbed for the middle of the metal structure because it felt like it was swaying. I dug my fingers into the metal, hard. I threw up. I felt Jimmy's arm go around my shoulders as I heaved down through the grating to the ground, over fifty feet below.

* * * *

Not many people came to the funeral the following Monday. They barely filled up the first three rows in the arena-size First Baptist

Church. The minister kept talking about the mark of Cain, and I knew he meant to use that with reference to what Munchkin did. No matter what we believed we could be or wanted to be, we were marked to be who we were and to be separated.

Less than a dozen made it out to the cemetery. Jimmy stayed while they buried him and the Caterpillar shoved the bulk of the soil in, and then the workers topped it off with their shovels. I stayed there with him, not sure what to do.

We didn't go out much after that. Jimmy didn't want to go back to Zeke's, and I lost my taste for drinking for a long while. The next thing I knew, he and this Jessie had become pretty serious; they went out all the time. I started studying the most I had since seventh grade.

I did go to college; my ACT scores were high enough, and I ended up majoring in computer science. Jimmy wound up working at the smelter. I went back to see him a few times, and I was the best man in his wedding.

But we lost touch with each other. I never really knew Jessie. When we were together, we'd just talk about old times, and that always shut her out. But we couldn't help it--that's all we had to talk about.

He still did a few drugs. He was scoring some coke the last time I was at his place. I passed it up because I'm kind of a health nut--prone to watch what goes in my body. I tried to explain why I was refusing, but it felt like I was snubbing him. We went on a run to the liquor store for some beer, one of our few moments alone together, and he said, "You know, it's like we don't really know what to say to each other anymore."

I said, "I know," and that was really the end of something.

I haven't been back, but the other night I heard an old Muddy Waters song done by one of those new-purist groups that are out now. I really felt I had something to say to him then. Though we failed, accepted our brands and stayed with our kind and did what we were supposed to do, we had options. I'm not sure what they were, but there was a time when we were like brothers and, when we played music, the differences between us seemed to slip away--or, at least, mesh into a harmony.

We had something going for us, and we lost it. Maybe I'm romanticizing it, but, right now, I don't see we had any excuse to squander our talent and our friendship. There's no excuse good enough for that one.

SHELVING GOODS

Kenny Gaines didn't know what to do with himself. He saw his daily routine flash before his eyes like some dull After School Special he'd resorted to watching half-a-dozen times because there was nothing else on tv. As he punched in on the time clock at 15:52, he realized this was the last place he wanted to be, working in the stockroom at the hospital cafeteria for the next three to four hours, and wished he had the courage to come up with a plan to take the rest of the afternoon off. He was suffering more than simple heartache; he couldn't think straight and nothing, nothing at all, made any sense to him now.

Only yesterday, Sally Park rode home from school with him and they bought lime-aids at Braums. They sat at one of the orange-plastic booths, and she grinned at him when he flirted with her. She sucked the juice from her lime as she listened closely to everything he had to say; he didn't even remember what he said--he just talked to keep those beautiful blue eyes on him. She wore a fuzzy baby blue sweater, and her silky blond hair curled over her shoulders. Things were really going great for him, yesterday.

Last night, all that changed. He was working on his math with "Baba O'Riley" blasting through his headphones when she called. The line was crackling; about half the time, it sounded like the phone was picking up a radio signal. She said she'd been thinking; he knew what that meant. He wished he could talk to her face to face, without all the hiss and buzz, so he could see her eyes. She was giving her old boyfriend a

second chance.

The receiver slipped; he gripped it tighter. The room actually seemed to spin. Things hadn't quit spinning. He slept three hours, woke at five, and went driving until school started. He took notes with his mind disengaged through algebra, music theory, American History, English, and chemistry (where he spent the majority of the period doing the same part of the assignment as his lab partner). His grades had already been slipping all through the romance, but now he really couldn't handle school, even if he did have a research paper due in English at the end of the week.

Now, he was in the last phase of the day and nothing felt any better. She gave Donald Jensen another chance by robbing Kenny of his first and last one.

Second chance? Jensen didn't even deserve a second thought. Perhaps the most vain senior at Sooner High, he treated Sally like a mindless puppy dog. Now, after confiding with Kenny about how miserable the macho-jerk made her, she wanted more.

That hurt the worst. If he was so awful, why would she go back? What did that say about Kenny?

He went back to the stockroom where his inventory list hung from a nail in the wall, waiting for him. He hoped Larry had finished moving all the flats in from the dock so he could go seal himself in the downstairs stockroom and stack boxes, without any outside disturbance, for the rest of the evening. He needed time to think without having to deal with people.

When he reached the dry storeroom, the nail was bare. He looked around for the inventory, but it wasn't in the room. He sighed, taking

this for a sign of how the rest of the afternoon was going to proceed. He went back to the office and asked his supervisor if he knew where the list might be. Ernie Gibbons, a tall bony man in his mid-thirties, glanced sharply up from the papers on his desk.

"You don't know?" he asked.

"No, it's not back there." Kenny cringed, feeling a problem coming on. Ernie tended to overreact if he ever lost the illusion that things were running perfectly.

He rose from his desk, looking like a ghost in his long white lab coat, and nervously looked through the windows into the outer offices and the kitchen for someone who might know something. "Well, we had better find out; you won't be able to do anything if you don't have that list."

"I know, that's why I--" Kenny started.

"Nancy, Kenny can't find the storeroom list. What are we going to do about that?"

Nancy Kelsey, a young dietician with an unusually easy-going personality, held her hand up as if to say 'hold it'; "Larry has it. We had a large order, and he offered to make up for the hours he lost earlier this week by staying until he and Kenny made some headway."

"He won't go over forty?" Ernie said sharply.

"No." Nancy sighed, and took her seat behind one of the desks.

"Well, we'll still have to review his schedule and see if we can't rework it so that these things don't happen." He looked down at Kenny and then returned to his office, saying, "You better get down there; it seems he needs your help, and I don't want him raking in any overtime when you can work a little longer in the evening anyway." Then he shouted,

"Nancy, why would the order be so much larger today?"

Kenny walked out into the cafeteria past Ms. Kelsey saying, "These things just happen before the holidays, Ernie." He walked down the olive green stairs to the first floor hallway where the main storeroom was. This was not a happy turn of events. Larry Divers was a thirty-year-old tough guy who really intimidated Kenny. He wanted to work alone, but now he would have to listen to the old greaser tell his biking and getting-stoned stories.

He tried the knob on the big brown door that was only two doors down from the identical one marked Morgue. It was locked, so he pounded on the dense surface, making only a thudding noise. He waited and pounded again.

The door opened with a blast of the Rolling Stones from a portable radio and the rank smell of Lucky Strikes. The big man smiled at Kenny, wrinkling his face heavily on one side. He scratched his dirty blond curls and said, "Hey, Kenny boy, c'mon in and join the party," as he shoved the door back far enough that Kenny could walk through. Kenny stepped under his arm, passing closely by the cigarettes that were now hidden in the buttoned chest pocket of Larry's work shirt. He wasn't supposed to smoke in there but never took great pains to conceal that he did.

"So, Bud," his voice boomed against the walls of the storeroom, "we've got about a week and a half's worth of everything that came in today 'cause the warehouses won't be deliverin' on Monday. So, two flats here, one in the walk in upstairs, and a big one in the freeze-your-ass-off box. Lucky I stayed on, huh?" He smiled at Kenny.

Kenny blankly looked at him, the flats that were stacked six and a half feet tall, and at the mostly-stocked shelves. They would have to

hustle and rearrange as they went; there'd be no way he could meditate on his problems the way he wanted to. "I guess, if lucky's the word for it."

"Shit, I heard that! Well, let's start with this'n." Larry straddled some of the lower boxes on the biggest cart and began handing the top ones to Kenny.

They were cereal boxes, no big deal. The real pain would come with the sixty pound detergent boxes a little further down that Kenny would have to heave up to an eye-level shelf on the other side of the room. Then there would be the hundred pound bags of sugar and flour and the equally heavy boxes of meat upstairs in the freezer. He would be frost-bitten and aching for Deep Heat by the time he got home from work tonight. Hadn't he been hurt enough for one day?

Now that he saw how much work there was to do, he was a little bit more appreciative Larry decided to stay, but the sheer amount of work was in keeping with the day's trend: nothing would go right; he could only expect the worst from everyone and everything.

Larry handed the boxes to Kenny, and Kenny walked them across the room to the various shelves. The pains crept up on him from a number of fronts. There was the immediate strain on the biceps, followed by the rising tension in his neck and the lower back pains he knew would give him the most problems in the long run. He had problems with his back ever since his first job as a bus boy, when he worked eight hour shifts from 10:00 to 6:00 in the morning on weekends at an all-night pancake house. Those bus tubs got heavier and heavier, but there was no time to stop (beyond two fifteen minute breaks that were more of a tease than anything) and he called on adrenalin reserves to keep the tables clear

as midnight customers continually poured in the door in increasingly drunken and obnoxious states of mind.

"Hurry up, boy," one particularly sloppy drunk said in the middle of one blurry morning. "Get all this shit off my table before I throw up on ya." Fortunately, he no longer had to deal with customers and managers who constantly watched over his shoulders and nagged, but the tension he experienced in that first job did enough damage to his back to remind him of that sweat shop every time he exerted himself to any extent. He knew he would have those back pains for the rest of his life, just because he wanted to earn 2.65 an hour when he was fifteen.

"Shit you're quiet." Larry grinned as he tossed another sixty pound box down into Kenny's arms.

"Yeah, I'm just thinking," Kenny said, hoping that would do it; he carried the box to the wall twelve feet behind him and pushed it up on another box a foot above his head.

"I'd say you're stewin' about somethin'--you look like you didn't do no sleepin' last night."

Feeling exposed, Kenny jerked around and looked at the man; Larry was already reaching for another box. He turned around, handing the small box to Kenny with one hand and gesturing toward the empty shelves on the extreme other end of the room. He bent over the flour and sugar bags and said, "Down to these mothers. Get between me and the wall and we'll go halfway."

Kenny put the little box behind him and crossed to the other side. Larry embraced a large sack of flour within his massive arms and turned and handed it to Kenny, who gave a little in the knees under the weight and, stooped over, slung the sack into the far corner of the bottom

shelf. They worked silently for a few minutes, and then he had to ask.

"Do I really look that bad?" He glanced up from one of the sacks as the big man's face broke into a huge smile.

He boomed a short laugh and then bent over to get a sack of sugar, "Let's start a new pile."

"Okay," Kenny grunted with the increased weight of the sugar, not to mention the blow to his self-esteem that came with being funny when he hadn't meant to be. He laid down his burden and turned, saying, "What was so funny?"

"Here," the man pounded another sack into Kenny's arms and then went on, "Well, I guess that you do. Your eyes are all dark and kinda puffy. You're so quiet you might be dead, and every line on your face says somethin's hurtin' pretty damn bad. Probably a girl. Perfectly good men get that way over ladies all the time, and they just ain't worth it." He drew out those last four words as if to emblazon them in Kenny's brain. "If you get dumped on, and we all do, you get dumped on--end of story. All the bellyachin' and cryin' and moanin' in the world ain't gonna make no girl go 'Oh, man, I'm sorry. Take me back, baby!'" He laughed and it was like a slap to Kenny's face.

Kenny felt his cheeks go hot. How dare this big hood presume to know what he felt? Even worse, how could he tell him whether what he was feeling was right or not? Worst of all, why did he have to be right?

"Well, it's not a girl, so don't worry about it." Kenny grabbed the next sack out of the man's hands before he could turn loose of it, throwing Larry a little off balance.

"Sorry, man. I didn't realize. What's his name?" Larry laughed again and picked up another sack.

"Funny," Kenny said, thinking 'that's probably just what I seem like to him, a little faggot. Well he can take a . . .'

"You know, you don't always pick the right thing," he went on, without hearing Kenny, without pausing in his work, "Sometimes I'll know just what I ought to do, and then I'll go right ahead and do the other. That's how women get you comin' and goin'. When you've got a woman, you spend more money than you got on her; you waste time when you should be sleepin' or workin'. You lose your senses, go flat-out looney, that's all."

Kenny thought of how bad he'd been neglecting school. He ran through the list of grades he could have made and things he could have done if he hadn't been sitting around thinking about Sally Park. He got a mental image of himself staring out the window of Mrs. Hart's chemistry class, soaking in the giddy feeling he got just picturing Sally. He felt like a wimp.

"But then she dumps on you and you're left all alone with all that time and you get so crazy you can't do nothin' then either . . . except get drunk maybe." He stopped to smile at Kenny.

He was too close to the mark. "Forget it," Kenny lashed out. "You got it all wrong."

Larry started working again. "Oh, I know, kid. I'm just tellin' you this so's you know what it's like to waste a lot of time worryin' about somethin' you can't do nothin' about. That's all. I've done it too many times."

"Catch a clue, let's drop it!" Kenny shot back and then immediately felt bad about it. The man was just trying to help, but it wasn't making him feel better at all. "I mean, don't worry about it."

Larry looked seriously down at the last sack on the cart. "Okay."

He relayed it to Kenny and wheeled the cart out the door.

Kenny stood alone in the storeroom and felt an ache in his gut. Why was he acting the way he was? Why be so embarrassed by the truth that he had to lie and fight with this man? Larry did seem to have good intentions. When he came back in, Kenny blurted out, "Okay, you're right. It's a girl. It's a girl. I'm being stupid."

Larry laughed in another sharp staccato. "Lighten up, kid. I'm just making conversation. Here, let's get this other cart." He dragged another leaning tower over to where they were standing, by the shelves.

Kenny felt worse than ever. He wasn't acting normal, and he could see it for himself now. "Listen," he said, taking the first box and walking to his relay position, "I know I'm being touchy. Just ignore me."

"I understand, man: you're just young. You don't realize everybody goes through this kind of thing and makes jerks out of themselves. Hell, one time I got about as drunk as a man can be and decided I was going to patch it up with my woman right then and there. I went over to her house, which was something in and of itself because that must of been a couple miles from the bar I was in. I went to her house and knocked on the door at three in the morning. Well, no one answered the door; I suppose she was out somewhere, but I ended up gettin' sick all over her porch and fallin' asleep in her driveway. I woke up at about six in the morning and got out of there. I still don't know if anyone saw me lyin' there." He laughed. "I guess I never will."

Kenny laughed. "Man, that's pretty bad." It reminded him of the time he went and stood in Christy Early's yard in the middle of the night. Sometimes, when he was up late watching tv on a Friday or Saturday, he'd slip out the sliding glass door of the tv room and just go walking.

Christy lived about eight blocks away, but one night he felt ambitious enough to go that far. He just stood by a tree and tried to see any motion behind the darkened drapes; he finally noticed what looked like the blue light of a tv and imagined Christy in there, alone, curled up in a blanket on the couch. He wondered what she would think if she knew he was outside. That was when he got embarrassed and decided to go home.

He'd never done too well with girls. He thought about them all the time but couldn't bring himself to speak to the ones he liked: especially the ones he really liked--Christy Early last year, Donna Locken for the last three years, and Sally. That's why it had been so fantastic when this relationship just suddenly started growing with Sally. He met her at a ball game: he could still see the satin jacket she'd been wearing and the way her eyes kept glancing away just as he looked at her. Then, Ronnie Davis told him that she'd told his girlfriend, Tracy Ungers, that she liked him. And then, after staring at the phone until he felt dizzy and sick on at least three different nights, he decided to call her.

She'd said yes to the movies and pizza; in some ways he felt like he was born at that second. Now, he knew it was all a lie; he felt like he'd just died.

"It was stupid," Larry said, blasting into Kenny's daydream. "That's exactly what I mean about wasting your time with stuff you can't do nothin' about. You can't throw a fit and expect to get your way like a little baby. No." He stopped and poked Kenny in the chest with his smoke-stained index finger. "Times like that, you know what you need to do? Somethin' you're good at; give yourself a little personal satis-

faction--that'll make you feel like kickin' some ass again."

"Yeah?" Kenny said and looked at him.

The big man jammed another box in Kenny's hands and went right on picking up another. "Sometimes you can feel that way about work, but I wouldn't count on that'n. Me, it's pool. You play pool?"

Kenny turned and took another box. "I have . . . but I'm not very good."

"That don't matter, anything you're good at works. What do you know you're good at?"

That question hit Kenny squarely in the middle of his back as he knelt to shove the box to the back of the bottom shelf. What was he good at? What did he do? He shot baskets by himself down at the Y, but he wouldn't say he ever attained any great skill at that. He watched a lot of tv and listened to music all the time; he could relate nearly every adventure Captain Kirk ever encountered, and he could name every song and artist on pop radio, usually linking it with how old he was when the song came out, but did he do anything? He went to school. He went to work. He drove around with his buddy David until he had to be in for the evening almost every night. He got drunk sometimes. He slept quite a bit.

Turning around, he said, "I do lots of things, but I'm not great at anything."

"Oh, well, you don't have to be great. I'm not great at pool, but every time I play I get a little better. We oughta go play together some time."

"Sure," Kenny said, working harder than before.

They worked on in silence until they finished that cart. Now they had to go upstairs and work on the refrigerator and freezer goods. It would

be cold and miserable.

"Let's take a break." Larry sat down on one of the carts and pulled his Lucky Strikes out of his shirt pocket.

"Okay." Kenny lay down on the other cart, keeping it from rolling by bracing one foot on the floor.

Larry got his cigarette burning with one sure drag and leaned back, looking over at Kenny. "You know, you need somethin' that works for you. Like I said, for me, it's pool. I guess I've been playin' about ten years. As a little kid, I didn't have nothin' to fall back on neither--nothin' I could do and just think things through a bit with. When I was a boy, I didn't know what to do with myself."

Closing his eyes, Kenny tried to picture Larry as a boy. It was hard; so much of his look derived from the impression that he had been around forever and seen the underside of things far more often than he'd seen the topside. With his furrowed brow that jumped and deepened when he spoke and his pock-marked cheeks, Larry immediately struck him as being older than he was, possibly in his mid-forties. As a teen, he had the acne that caused those scars and the beginnings of those trenches in his forehead. If you were his age, he would probably have impressed you as being out of place, like someone who might have been held back more than once in school and, big as he was, he probably always looked like trouble waiting to happen.

"My pop drank almost all the time, and I used to stay away from home as much as I could. But I didn't have anything to latch onto, so I got in trouble. That's what happens to you if you don't have something. I should know. But don't get me wrong about my pop. He was a good man, and he treated me fine--just wasn't happy. Drank like it was a painkiller

he needed just to get through the day. He worked down at the Failing Plant there on the far side of the railroad tracks. Sometimes, I used to go the six blocks to meet him at five and then walk home with him.

I musta been pretty young then 'cause he didn't come straight home after awhile. He started going to the Stardust Lounge and stayin' until eight or nine at night, sometimes longer. He'd spike his thermos just to stay a little loose at work, but it was after work he'd really tie one on.

"Then he'd come home and hit like a small tornado or somethin'. He'd slam open the back door and throw his shit against the wall and grab me and sit me down in the kitchen. And then he'd tell me how it was." Larry let out a sharp laugh that turned into a wheeze and a cough. He cleared his throat, leaned over rapping Kenny on the chest and grinned. "He'd stand there with this crazy fuzzy look in his eyes and poke me in the ribs and tell me what for, and good. He'd say, 'They're gonna screw you, boy. Every chance they get, they're gonna try to screw you so you just better get used to it!'"

"Where was your mother?" Kenny couldn't imagine his mom putting up with that kind of behavior from his dad. He remembered once when his father stayed too late at an office party they had such a big fight he thought for sure they'd divorce. He'd never have stupid fights like that with his wife; he'd never do anything to make Sally Park mad at him. On the other hand, he wondered if maybe that wasn't what she liked. After all, Jensen treated her like she was nothing and apparently that did something for her--maybe treating her like she was special made her think he was a sap.

"Mom?" Larry paused and sighed. "She was around though you didn't hardly notice. She was always fixin' us meals and workin' around the

house. She was so quiet--almost like a ghost, next to my father."

Then, switching gears with a rise in his voice, "Pop kept me there for hours sometimes. At first he'd bitch about the people who were screwin' him over but, before too long, he'd start talkin' about the war. He'd tell me about Davao, in the Phillipines, where he saved a buddy everybody else took for dead 'cause a mortar went off in his hole. Pop almost got killed savin' that guy, and the funny thing is that guy just ended up gettin' run over back here in the States." Larry laughed again. "Pop was more proud of saving his buddy's life, Ray Dowd was the guy's name, than anything he'd ever done. After tellin' that, he'd change his whole tune. He'd say, 'Boy, you know you can do anything you want to do if you just set your mind to it? They'll try to screw you for sure but, if you set your mind to it, you can do just about anything.' Then he'd get real quiet and go back to drinkin' until he fell asleep, sometimes right there in that kitchen chair."

"That doesn't make sense," Kenny said, thinking the old man must have been a little crazy. How could he say one thing one second and then say just the opposite in the next breath?

The big man laughed and sat up on his cart. "I know, I know. Imagine what it was like for a little kid? I never did know if I was supposed to grow up to be the President or steal cars or somethin'." Then his face grew serious. "But, you know, I think he was doin' just what he was talkin' about: settin' his mind to it. He just never figured things out and ended up drinkin' hisself to death." Larry stomped out the butt of his Lucky Strike. "Ready to go upstaris and freeze our assholes off?"

"Sure," Kenny said, feeling confused and hoping they'd be too busy

and cold for Larry to talk and he could go back to thinking about Sally.

It worked out that way for a while. They each had time to take a break in the bathroom and then went to the locker room to put their coats and gloves on. Kenny put on an old pair of spare gloves someone left there for freezer work. They were small, and the seam cut across the fleshy bottom of his palm. He had to remember to bring his own gloves next time, he always thought to himself at this point. They went back to the freezer and began stacking bacon, hamburger patties, and pork chops. Though Larry always turned off the blower when they first went in, it was still bitter cold in the huge ice box.

Kenny's thoughts went from the cold to Sally again and again. He'd have to show her, somehow, that he was the best man. He'd act like it didn't bother him. He'd act like he hardly noticed her at school, treat her no different than anybody else. Maybe he'd start talking to Christy Early between classes. But, of course, he'd never been able to do that before; why would it be any easier now? Anyway, he'd be aloof, and she'd feel left out. But what if she didn't? What if she never talked to him again? His stomach flipped as his fingers went numb.

When they finished the meats, they went on break. "Cup a coffee before the fries?" Larry said and Kenny nodded. He felt claustrophobic in the cold room alone with all the thoughts of Braums and Don Jensen and Sally and the school halls and yesterday at Braums again. It made him tired on top of being depressed. He was ready for more conversation.

They sat at a small table in the cafeteria next to the big windows overlooking the front entrance to the hospital. The tray line was shutting down, and only a few nurses and technicians still sat around talking

and eating. Out the window, the leaves were just really starting to turn and fall and, in the orange sunset, everything looked golden.

It reminded Kenny of football season and the night he met Sally last year. She was standing with three girlfriends and talking to him and two other guys, and they kept catching each other's eyes and smiling. She was so beautiful that night, in that short satin jacket with her hands in her side pockets pulling the coat forward in a lump at her belly. He wanted to hold her then, just as he wanted to hold her yesterday, the only difference being yesterday it seemed a lot more likely.

"What're you gonna do after work?" Larry asked, snapping Kenny out of his funk.

"Oh, I don't know, probably just go home," he said, very uncomfortable with the question.

"Well, we oughta go down to the bowlin' alley and shoot some pool," the big man said almost like a father offering his son a trip to the ice cream shop.

"I told you I wasn't that great," Kenny put up as an excuse. Sure, Larry was being all right to work with, but it would be too strange to hang around with him. He wondered if the old hoodlum was as desperate for friends as he seemed. He felt a little sorry for him.

"And I told you it didn't matter." Larry smiled and took a sip of his coffee.

They sat in silence for a moment, and then Larry went on, "You've gotta do somethin'. You just can't mope forever. I should know."

"Why should you know?" Kenny was tired of his knowingness.

"Trust me." His face looked unusually somber. "I've been down

so far I thought I'd die . . . and when I was a helluva lot younger than you with half as good a head on my shoulders."

"When you were younger--"

"Oh, it wasn't just a girl that time . . . it was worse than that."

"Sally isn't just a girl--" Now he was pushing Kenny too far because he obviously didn't have any idea how serious this was.

"My pop," he put his finger in Kenny's face and cut him off, "My pop didn't show up one night. Mom and I were watchin' Johnny Carson, and I told her I didn't want to go to bed. I felt somethin', somethin' real cold. I was really scared, more than ever before, and I didn't even know why. The funny thing is I was thinkin' about Pop, but I wasn't scared for him; I was afraid of what he was goin' to do when he came in, what he might do to Momma." He stared out at the fiery sunset through the leaves; Kenny followed his eyes and stared at what he imagined to be the same red leaf.

"A cop came to the door at 3:30 in the a.m.; Pop had driven off the side of the Okemah dam, killed hisself." He paused until Kenny looked in his eyes.

"But Pop was a dead man a long time 'fore he hit that water. . . I couldn't remember him comin' home sober . . ." Kenny could see the tough little kid in the big man's features as he stared back into time twenty years. "And he steered right off the road just to finish the job."

Kenny fixed on the carport outside, trying to think of what to say. 'I'm sorry' seemed too simple and insincere.

Larry drank his coffee down with one last long sip, checked his watch and scooted back his chair, saying, "Time to go back to work."

They shelved vegetables in silence for quite a while until Kenny felt like he was going to go crazy in the stinging cold with the heavy quiet weighing him down. He felt guilty for pushing these feelings to the surface in this man who was only trying to be helpful--to be a friend.

"You know," Larry suddenly said, "You know what I ended up doin' to keep from goin' crazy? I mean, I would've gone crazy 'cause, even though it probably don't make sense to you, I did love my pop. Hell, he was a war hero! Everything to a kid!" He half-laughed and went on, "I didn't know what to do, and I didn't do anything for days. Momma let me take off from school, and I just stared at my ceiling mostly." He dropped into silence again.

Kenny wanted his mind off the icy feeling in his legs and chest. "What did you do?"

"Well, see, there was this bridge." Larry laughed, wheezed and coughed.

Kenny wondered what was so funny. "Yeah?"

"Yeah, a big 'ol bridge out on the highway by where I grew up. I always remember seein' it one time when I was real little and ridin' in the car with my pop. All I can see is this big bolt of lightnin' tearin' across the sky and showin' that big thing like a castle from some ol' monster movie . . . scared the shit out of me." He stared at the wall of the freezer like he could see it there in the frost formations. Kenny couldn't fit it all together.

"Anyway," he went on, "I never forgot that, and so I always felt like that bridge was kinda special. When I was 'bout thirteen, I guess, I used to go down under it with some other guys and smoke cigs. It was a good hide-out 'cause you could get in the supports underneath, and

no one could find you unless they crawled all down the bank an' around the side too."

Kenny used to hide out in a place like that. He had built a fox-hole in the woods behind his house. He and his friends dug the hole in between two bushes a few yards from a well-traveled path. They got down in the hole and pulled a tarp over it and made up secret codes, and sometimes, when his buddy Tim could get into his older brother's magazine stash, they'd read Playboys.

"But the one thing," Larry pulled him back into his story, "The one thing I always wanted to do was to climb that mother."

"Climb it?" Kenny echoed.

"Yeah, I mean, we climbed under it and all, but what I wanted to do was go all the way over to the other side. Climb all along the supports until I made it down on the other bank. There were eight of 'em; I'll never forget that: four up and four down. And the middle was the most dangerous part 'cause there was no nook 'tween the fourth and fifth support so you'd have to hang onto the ledge along the side and inch on the tips of your toes all the way from four to six." Larry used his whole body to illustrate this, holding onto the frost-covered shelves and inching to his left.

Kenny tried to picture this. "I can't follow," he said, and Larry immediately proceeded to use his pocket knife to draw in the ice on the top of a dilapidated box of popsicles. He drew an arch with a smaller one under it and linked the two with eight Vs, making it look a little like the bridge had teeth. "That was all cement," Larry said as he stood back and admired his artwork.

"I see," Kenny said, not sure he did.

"Anyway, so my buddies, Steve and Chris, they thought I was crazy for wantin' to climb the damned thing. And one day I called 'em sissies and said my pop said you could do anythin' at all if you set your mind to it. They said my pop was nothin' but an old drunk who never got over the war, and I told them go fuck themselves and that was that." He punctuated that by passing Kenny another box and said, "When Pop died, I knew he messed up and all, but . . . you got sort of a . . . a connection with your pop that has a lot to do, you know, who you are and all. And what was I supposed to do now my pop killed hisself?"

"Climb the bridge?" Kenny guessed, blowing into his gloved palms.

"Yeah, I mean, not just like that." He stopped working again.

Kenny was torn between wondering if they were ever going to get done and out of the freezer and, at the same time, curiosity about where the story was going. "I mean, I started thinkin' back to what my buddies said about Pop and wonderin', you know, was it true? Was he really just an ol' waste case? And then I thought back to the bridge and how it all started in the first place. He said you could do anything, you know?"

"Uh huh." Kenny picked up a box, trying to hurry the man a little without interrupting what he had to say.

"So I figured I had to find out if that was true. If anything the ol' bastard ever said was true. I mean, Kenny, I wasn't just sad; I was lost, man."

And his sunken bloodshot eyes looked deep into Kenny's as if to show him what a lost man looks like. His brow was furrowed deeper than ever. His cheeks were sunken. Kenny thought of this painting he had in his psychology book: was it called The Scream? It was black and white and showed a frightened person running down a darkened road, holding his

(or her) face in his hands. For some reason, this man was holding his heart out to him and it made him nervous.

"And so I left my house one mornin' and said I was goin' back to school, but I didn't. I went straight down to that bridge. It was icy and snowin', and I suppose I could have waited for better weather, but, somehow, that wouldn't 've been right. If I wanted to prove somethin' to myself, it was perfect for that.

"So I went down to our old hide-out. I hadn't been down there since I read the other guys the riot act the summer before. If any signs we ever hung out there were left behind, they were covered by the snow two inches deep.

"I climbed down the first two supports before, so really no big deal, though I had to be extra careful 'cause the snow made it pretty slick. But the third, that was another story. I was way out over the water and made the mistake of lookin' down, seein' the snow kicked loose go fallin' down. Made me dizzy. I even took my coat off to keep my balance."

Kenny felt weakened by the thought of the intense cold.

"I almost turned back because I knew I was gonna die. But then I knew I really couldn't do that; so I didn't even hesitate long enough anyone watchin' would've been able to tell I was havin' second thoughts. I just went on, slowly and surely.

"The ledge was about half a foot wide. I dug my toe deep into the snow so I was gettin' the full benefit of that half foot, and I held on tight to another ledge eye level. I inched both feet out onto the ledge and scooted my way toward the fifth and sixth ones."

He was looking at the icy wall again. He was surely seeing it all. "I was on that ledge for a million years. I will never forget, 'til the

day I die, feelin' gradually shiftin' my weight, inchin' over, makin' sure I still had my balance, then shiftin' my weight again. Sometimes when I lie in bed at night, lots of times, I still feel like I'm there, thinkin' about my next move, just before I go to sleep . . . " He paused for longer than usual and went back to relaying the last few boxes.

"So, what happened?" A little irritated by the dramatics, especially in the deadly cold, Kenny still had to know the rest.

"I fell." He grinned at Kenny, gave him a couple of boxes, and explained, "Yep, right off the sixth support. One minute, I was thinkin' I was goin' to whip it, and the next, I'm layin' on the ground thinkin' maybe I'm dead, can't breathe, can't do nothin'."

"What was the matter?" Kenny looked him up and down.

"Nothin', wind knocked out of me. I got up in a little and walked home feelin' pretty good: not happy, just strong and sure of myself. I walked real sure-footed, like I climbed the bridge, all the way home." He smiled like he knew what Kenny was going to say next.

"But," Kenny didn't get it, "how could you be happy? Your father was wrong and you fell?"

"Nah," Larry clapped a hand on Kenny's shoulder, "he wasn't wrong. I made it to the other side and that's just what I wanted to do. Wasn't perfect, but there wasn't no way in hell it could've been. No, he was right all right."

They were both quiet for awhile. They finished the boxes and got out of the freezer. Larry clocked out and went in the locker room to wash up. Kenny followed him in to take off his coat and gloves. He would have to help the rest of the crew clean up and wouldn't be getting off work for at least another hour.

As Kenny hung up his coat he said, "So, did that make you feel good about your father or were you still kind of confused: I mean, right away?"

Larry was scrubbing his face with a soap towel. He rinsed it and looked in the mirror, thoughtfully. "Oh, yeah, well, the main thing was I made it over the water, to the other side . . . ," he grinned and went on, "and I don't know when I knew it exactly, but I knew there was some good, some truth, to the old bastard. After a time I knew that."

"Yeah." Kenny tried to imagine having a father like that. His own father was just a typical dad--worked, came home, sometimes disciplined him, always seemed in control. But was he? Kenny never thought about that before.

He turned to leave. "See you tomorrow."

Larry called out from behind, "So, you don't want to shoot pool; wanna smoke some weed? You could knock off early; ol' Nancy'd understand."

This struck Kenny in the gut; he'd never understood why people took drugs. and the idea of going to Ms. Kelsey to squirm out of work (especially for that reason) made him feel guilty. At heart, it scared him a little to think what might happen if he got high, or got caught. "Nah, I've got homework to do."

"Okay." Larry put his coat on and followed him through the door. "Well, then, maybe some other time."

"Maybe." Kenny went into the dishroom and got back to work. The girls wanted him to go around to the far end of the dish machine and pull the dishes off. He stood there alone and thought about Sally Park. He'd forgotten for a little while, but now the pain came back full force. He welcomed it. It would be good to sulk alone for awhile.

Then he thought about Larry. So, if he knew he could do whatever he wanted to do, why was he working in a cafeteria as a stock man? It didn't add up.

When he was driving home after work, he stared at the broken white line in the road, and something Larry said popped into his head: That's what he was doin', settin' his mind to it. He just never figured things out. That part of the conversation kept repeating in his head. Sometimes he felt like he was crazy when thoughts just rolled around and around in his head without ever going anywhere.

He turned the car radio up loud enough that it bordered on being distorted. He thought about Sally and it hurt. Then he thought of Larry and felt confused. He pictured Sally at Braums again. He drove out on the section roads and listened to the music for a long while. Then he went home.

VITA ¹

Daniel Roger Alexander

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Thesis: SOMETHING LOST

Major Field: English

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, October 21, 1963,
the son of Roger E. and Mary Alexander.

Education: Graduated from Sooner High School, Bartlesville, Oklahoma,
in May 1981; received Bachelor of Arts in Arts and Sciences
Degree in English from Oklahoma State University in May, 1985;
completed requirements for the Master of Arts Degree at
Oklahoma State University in July, 1988.

Professional Experience: Adjunct Instructor, Department of Communi-
cations, Johnson County Community College, Overland Park,
Kansas, Spring and Summer 1988. Teaching Assistant, Depart-
ment of English, Oklahoma State University, August, 1985,
to May, 1987.