NIGHT-TIMES-NIGHT

A NOVEL IN THREE PARTS

WITH A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

By

STEWART KEITH LONG

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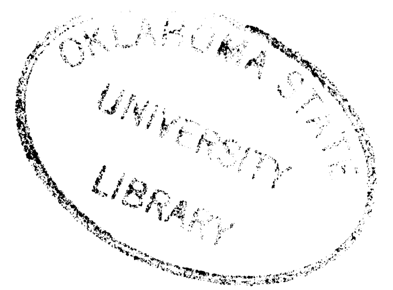

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Thesis Approved:

Gordon Weaver
Thesis Advisor

John E. Crane

Nuala Jordan

Norman N. Durham
Dean of the Graduate College

1290999

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Finally, to my fellow patients at Midwest Dialysis, Duncan, most of whom are no longer with us: Peace. You've earned it.

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ONE STORY -- TWO VOICES:

A MELANGE OF METHOD

By KEITH LONG

I read Faulkner's As I Lay Dying my second year on the kidney dialysis machine. It is a really short book, but it held my attention for three weeks because I would only read while I was undergoing a session. By that time I had learned any book that could keep my attention on the machine was too precious to read anywhere else. However, on a good day, I might read for only thirty to forty-five minutes before my blood pressure bombed, my calf and thigh muscles went into cramps and my headache began. Ergo, three weeks.

When I first undertook to write Night-Times-Night, I thought As I Lay Dying would serve as an excellent model. My initial notion was to cover some of the catastrophes at the clinic and employ the floating, first-person narration which characterizes Faulkner's book. I had an appropriate milieu: a closed environment in which everyone sees the same incidents. And I had an appropriate cast of characters: an assortment of people who had come to the environment from different directions and who -- although they saw the same incidents -- interpreted those incidents in rashly individualistic manner. There was Eva Holderby,

who credited God with every tick on the clinic's clock; Ira Fleetwood, who remained baffled about the nature of our illnesses to his dying breath; Albert Boles, an ancient cowboy who was a foreman on the Seven Gable ranch in south Texas, and who died shaking his head in a soiled bed in a Comanche nursing home, and Ray Beamer, who is represented in the current draft of <u>Night-Times-Night</u> as Barney Fore, an intolerable, old cuss who uses his own pain and ill temper as a cushion against the realities of hemo-dialysis. My original idea was to wrap their first-person voices with a voice of my own experience and perhaps uncover the common element that kept each of us alive for as long as it did. The four of them are dead now, of course. But I still believe it is a good idea -- certainly a worthwhile idea -- although it has been long abandoned in favor of the novel which has now developed.

I ran into trouble immediately with this original concept. It became apparent to me that the vision of William Matthew McKeever (my autobiographical vision, for the most part) needed more than just a fifth of the narrative: more even than a fourth, or a third, or even half. The dialysis machine hummed too recently in my mind; my kidney transplant was not yet a year old. Before I could tackle anyone else's sensibilities about the machine, I had to tackle my own. In order to write about life at the end of a plastic tube, I had to face off with the emotions I had

learned three years earlier to avoid simply to survive. I had to face the prospect of being different, of being unhealthy, of being dependent on a corraboration of lights and wires and fuses and tubes. Of being "less."

So I decided to leave the stories of Eva, Ira, Albert, Ray and the others for another time. And I started Night-Times-Night in earnest.

While I solved one problem -- or thought I had solved a problem -- I invented a myriad of others. I fear the project is still riddled with problems, but at least I can define them a little better.

When I understood the novel would be my story, I immediately went back to the dialysis center and the various hospitals to review my medical records. I looked through almost four hundred pages of nurses' notes at Midwest Dialysis Center in Duncan. I got a copy of my records at South Community Hospital for the two months following my transplant operation. I looked through my files at my doctors' offices.

I went to a good deal of trouble and expense. It was pretty much wasted effort.

I found if I attempted to provide as real a picture of my experience as possible, my story would be dull and boring. After all, the worst aspect of the experience -- except for the occasional bouts with pain -- was enduring the tedium and repetition.

So I dumped all the nurses' notes in the corner of my

apartment. I put my research and notebooks in the closet. I began looking for ways to condense the story; I needed to give the reader a shortcut through the tedium without subtracting from what I wanted to say. I let McKeever speak as the first-person narrator and let his vision of what is important account for the gaps in time and narrative.

The primary problem with the first draft of N-T-N, and the second, and the third, and even this most recent one, is that I am compelled to view McKeever as though he is two different characters. There is the McKeever who goes through the trauma, the humiliation, and the pain, of becoming an ESRD (end-stage renal disease) patient. And there is the McKeever who takes the experiences and builds a new, highly-conscious world view. The "before" and "after" McKeevers, if you will. But it is more complicated than that. Because N-T-N is heavily autobiographical, both of the McKeevers have two quite distinct flavors, at least to my mind. The "before" McKeever experiences those times which I experienced, and has experiences which I didn't. And the "after" McKeever makes observations which I made. But the "after" McKeever goes a step further and makes observations which I think I should have made and I wish I had made. I, as author, am looking back on McKeever (as autobiographical me) as he looks back on himself, which isn't exactly the same experience I had.

Yes. Complicated indeed.

In order to avoid these difficulties as much as possible, and in order to give the reader the story as I see it as simply as possible, I invented two voices for McKeever. There is the first-person voice in which McKeever directly chronicles his life on the machine to the audience. It is the major voice of the novel, at least insofar as pure bulk is concerned. It is the voice which carries the action of the novel, and while it is employed, the reader enjoys a direct communication with McKeever, as McKeever tells his story as it happens.

McKeever's other voice comes in during the dialogue segments with Marla, the dialysis nurse with whom he becomes emotionally involved. During the dialogues -- which are set apart from the regular text by different margins and bolder type -- McKeever is no longer immediately addressing the reader. Instead, he speaks confidentially with Marla and the reader is allowed to eaves-drop, picking up attitudes and revelations that might or might not have an immediate connection with the accompanying narrative text.

At some time prior to this text, the dialogues were overdone. They became something of a novel unto themselves, and I felt they were overshadowing what I considered the real story. Now, in this text, I have an uneasy feeling that the dialogues are under-developed, that they do not stand on their own and therefore cannot help to prop up what I still consider the real story. If anything, I know now

that the real voice of the second McKeever lies somewhere between the two.

Ultimately, I feel the success of the project will be determined by the success I have in welding the two disparate voices into a single coherent voice. I have tried various approaches. I have stacked the narrative story up from its chronological beginning to its chronological end, and run the dialogues in exact reverse, so that the two McKeevers would start at separate poles and meet somewhere in the middle. That doesn't work.

I have allowed the dialogues to run about three or four episodes behind the narrative, so that the second McKeever's revelations would be apparent to the reader. I have let the dialogues run about three or four episodes ahead of the narrative, so that McKeever's revelations would have time to fester before some incident in the narrative would enlighten the reader. Both are lacking.

For this text, I have allowed the dialogues and the narrative to run in more-or-less chronological harmony with each other. McKeever and Marla have their first dialogue at the point in the narrative that they have their first signicant meeting. And so on. In some ways, I feel this structure works quite well. It is easy on the audience. They understand why McKeever and Marla talk about what they do when they do. Since the reader doesn't burn any fuel figuring that out, he can consider the other elements of the

story, which is my much of my intent.

But, in its current form, the structure backfires for a couple of reasons, I think. First of all, the reader learns very little about Marla, the nurse. In earlier texts I had taken great pains to develop her as fully as McKeever. But that took time and attention away from the real story. Now I must see if the real story can be told without knowing so much about Marla.

Secondly, because the dialogues and the narrative run concurrently, it becomes more difficult to juxtapose the two McKeevers. In fact, McKeever the narrator is only a notch or two behind his dialogue counterpart in development. Originally, I thought it important to oppose the two personas with each other as vividly as possible in order to show the deficiency of the former and the progess of the latter. However, the structure in the present text allows the "after," enlightened McKeever to pull along his other self in a somewhat satisfying and harmonious manner.

At any rate, I feel the two voices of McKeever and the abilities they give me as a writer to scatter viewpoints and narratives and actions are the keys to the stylistic and literary merits of Night-Times-Night. I am more satisfied now than I have ever been with the effect of the voices, but I will continue to give attention to the pecularities of that effect.

Ultimately, I have discovered that the differences between autobiography and fiction have something to do with

dimensions. When I began this project, I wanted to conduct myself very closely along autobiographical lines. I wanted to write about pain and sickness to an audience that already understood a good deal about pain and sickness. If others wanted to read it as well, that was fine with me.

But I didn't get into the writing very far at all before the identity of McKeever and the manner in which he reacted in his own character showed me that there was more to say and more to gain -- for both writer and audience -- if I let the material flow into fiction. Larger problems materialized. More important questions developed.

At first, the sickness of McKeever was most important.

Suddenly, as the fiction exerted itself, I found McKeever was, first and foremost, a human reacting as he must. McKeever's illness became secondary.

The project has been an adventure. I've learned something about organization. And discipline. And honesty. But above all that, I think I have learned something every fiction writer must suspect from the very first: the writer has the opportunity to raise his story to whatever level he desires, and the only restrictions on his art are those which he would impose on himself.

PART ONE

CROSSING THE BEAST

"Thy life shall hang in doubt before thee, and thou shall fear day and night; In the morning thou shalt say Would God it were evening! and at evening thou shalt say, Would God it were morning!"

Deuteronomy 28:65-66

CHAPTER ONE

I am home.

I lean weakly in the back seat, my right wrist smothered in bandages and tape, the pain of my pulse drumming louder as I lift it from my lap. I reach across my body with my left hand, push the door open. Across the street, Moorehead and Talbot sit on lawnchairs beneath a shade tree. They watch my progress. Moorehead raises the tip of his whittling knife to the bill of his cap in acknowledgement. Talbot, one hand stroking the nape of his lazy cur dog lying beside his chair, lifts the other hand as I work my way out of the car. It is Sunday, not yet noon, but any morning freshness has long disappeared under the progress of the August sun. The heat rushes into the air-conditioned confines of the car. Talbot's dog, a fifteen-year-old collie-and-something, pants and heaves, its red tongue hanging limply from the corner of its mouth.

Home.

The back porch and carport are breezeless; locusts chatter loudly from the chinese elm at the driveway's edge, more quietly from the towering pecan trees across the street. Mother tells Father to get the door and she holds me at the elbow. I need the help; the blood pressure jumps when I stand up, the pounding in the wrist increases. I feel weak; my vision dims.

The last time I was home -- June -- Father's garden was an explosion of green, with eight rows of sweet corn at its peak, and green beans, onions, squash, tomatoes, okra, cucumbers, and white potatoes. Most have been plowed under since; the okra still stands, two leafless rows of it, sending frail stalks nine feet in the air so that Father must bend it over to harvest the pods from the upper tips. Picking the okra is his after-work duty and he slips into the garden with a gallon bucket and his yellow pocket knife with the blade which has been mostly sharpened away. From across the street, Moorehead and Talbot hoot encouragement, slapping their thighs and leaning forward in their chairs to spit between their shoes.

"Tallest damned okra I ever seen," Talbot says, standing on the back porch with a quart of yellow plums he trades Mother for the okra and squash and tomatoes Father has toiled through the summer to produce while he sits in the shade and pets the cur dog. "Marion -- she loves fried squash," he says. "Me, I like the okra; fried, stewed, boiled, pickled. No matter. Okra is okra. But" -- and here he throws a wink toward anyone standing on the porch -- "yellow plums're a damned sight easier to grow." Talbot chuckles, snatching his sack of garden produce like it was full of bejeweled booty, and scurries back across the street, looking both ways, the dog raising his hackles fiercely behind the cyclone fence until Talbot reaches over

and pops her on the nose.

Home with okra towering in the back garden. It will produce until mid-October's hard freeze knocks the leaves off the pecan trees and the wind switches into the north, tumbling the leaves into a brown drift against the south-facing carport.

Beyond the garden, Titan and Sam, the two English Setters, squeeze their noses through the picket fence of their pen and bark at our arrival. Talbot's cur lifts his head in notice, but the heat keeps him pressed to the ground. Father picks up a rock from the driveway and with an underhanded throw whips it against the iron shed that serves as the north side of the pen. The rock pings against the sheet-metal and the dogs stop barking, the noses disappear. I hear their toe nails clicking against the wooden floor of the doghouse.

Some people live to go on the machine, the doctor said. And some people go on the machine to live. The difference is not a subtle one. The machine is a major adjustment, a weight that pulls most people down. But some keep their heads above the surface.

The shed pings again, more strongly, not from one of Father's rocks, but from a golf ball lifted from the other side of the house by Sammy, my younger brother. He walks around the corner, expertly bouncing and balancing another ball on blade of his chipping wedge, smiling into Father's

frown. "Pulled that last one a bit," he says, and bounces the ball particularly high and catches it with his free hand. "Hi, Bro," he says, and shakes my left hand, eyeing the bandage on my right one. "How you gonna grip with all that tape on your hand? This is our chance. You really are a handicapped golfer. Spot you a stroke a hole."

I take his club away from him, swing it with the left hand only, careful to lean against the car. Mother backs away. "No golf today," I say. "Too hot."

"Naw. Perfect. You can work up a good breeze if you walk fast."

"Guess we could rent a cart," I say, sneaking a smile toward Sammy.

"Both of you -- quit talking like that," Mother says, stepping up and taking me by the arm again. "William's going nowhere for the time being...except inside to sit down. Just shush that kind of talk." Sammy smiles back when Mother turns toward the door. I hand back the club.

"You have a few weeks to practice. Better make the best of it."

"Right. Like I need it or something," Sammy says, swishing the wedge downward and clipping some grass with the smooth swing. "What -- the doctor say you can play golf in a few weeks?"

"Yeah," I say, walking toward the door. "Modern medicine -- to think I never could play it before."

"Quit stealing my jokes," Sammy said. Behind my back, I hear the wedge go swish-swish.

They gave me a small, white rubber ball. Larger than a golf ball, smaller than a tennis ball. Squeeze it thirty times, twice an hour, the nurses said, demonstrating. To build the fistula quickly as possible. The fistula must be strong for the needles. If it collaspes -- trouble. Squeeze, twice an hour. Squeezing makes the blood rush, dilates the vein. Build the fistula. Squeeze.

Evening comes grudgingly in August. I stay in the comfort of the house until eight o'clock, and then I go outside to sit on the back porch. Mother and Father are there; sweat stains most of Father's shirt; he has been picking okra. Mother sits near the corner of the house. Better breeze, she says. Talbot and the cur sit on the lawn across the street. Moorehead is gone in his pickup, a smooth '63 Ford, spotless and manicured. The sun is well behind the tops of the pecan trees, but the heat has stayed on.

"See," Mother says, pointing. "There's the first of the birds." They told me of the birds while I was in the hospital. Thousands and thousands of blackbirds -- starlings -- flock to the tall sycamores that line Choctaw Street a half-block away. There are six trees and the birds have created a roost.

"It's the scent," Father says. "They can smell their

roost from miles away. They'll be coming from every direction."

At first the birds trickle in, a dozen at a time, landing in the very top of the trees. Then there are more, large groups, flying in from the west and the southeast and the northeast. Finally, as the sun slips away and the highest limbs of the trees go dark, the birds come in a steady stream, from three directions, thousands each minute. Their sound drowns out the conversation in the back yard. Father leans over, raises his voice.

"From the grain fields," he says to me. "Feed all day, then come here." He gets up and slaps two one-by-four boards together -- the sound as sharp and loud as the report of a .22 pistol -- and the birds rise out of the trees, a complete screen of black birds, whirling around the neighborhood, directly overhead, a black funnel of wings and chattering. They circle once, twice, three times and settle back into the trees. "What a mess," Father says, still standing. "Under the trees."

"Probably doesn't help," I say, "scaring them like that." Mother asks what I said and she laughs after Father explains. She repeats my joke when the Johnsons drive up and stroll into the backyard. The birds are something of a social event, and the Johnsons, Bob and Karen, pull up chairs to watch the birds settle down. I answer the standard questions about the hospital, about being home. Bob gestures to my bandaged wrist, asks me how I plan to

go dove hunting all taped up.

"At least I'll have an excuse," I say.

"I've got one too -- can't hit 'em," Bob says. "Guess we can come back and shoot into the sycamores."

"Be a quick limit, huh?"

"Several quick ones." Bob laughs, fishes in his pocket for a cigarette lighter. He snaps the lighter on, lights the cigarette, hands the lighter to Karen, who lights her own cigarette, a different brand. Bob asks Father if he will be in the carpool in the morning, leaving the cigarette in his mouth and letting it dance up and down with the conversation. Darkness comes quickly and the birds settle to a heavy sort of silence. I slap at a mosquito and stand up; the wrist becomes alert with the move.

"I'm going to lie down a while," I announce, say goodbye to the Martins and go back into the empty house. I look back through the kitchen window: three cigarettes, Father's included, dance like tiny flares on the back patio. I am alone. Sammy is not back from the golf course. Home.

Never let a nurse put a needle in the fistula arm. Never let anyone take a blood pressure on that arm. The fistula could explode. Never button the cuff of a shirt on the right arm. Never wear a jacket with an elastic cuff. Never roll up the right sleeve. Never sleep on your right arm. Never hang the arm off a couch, a bed, or a chair. Protect it: it keeps you alive.

My room is sparsely furnished when I walk into it: all my belongings are still in my apartment in Ada. Sammy and I must take the pickup this week and move everything back. Mother has already asked Woody to go with us so I won't have to lift anything. I'm a little surprised she will let me go at all. My bed sits against the north window. A writing desk has been moved into the corner farthest from the door. There is a chest for my clothes, a night table with a lamp and a clock situated on it. Mother pulled a couple of pictures down from the attic to put on the wall. I lie down on the bed. I am nervous. Uneasy. The east windows are open and I can hear the murmur of conversation from the back yard.

Tomorrow the machine. New nurses, new people, new patients. I will be on display. That causes my nervousness; I catch people watching me from the corner of their eyes, careful of what they say. People greet me as they might at a funeral; quietly, with questioning eyes, forced conversation. Tomorrow everyone will be watching. I must do better on the machine. I must tolerate it, keep my stomach down, not like in the hospital. I don't want that scene three times a week. Surely it will get better.

No tomatoes, no watermelon, no cantaloupe, no apples, no oranges, no orange juice, no ketchup. All have potassium. No salt, no cooking oil, no fried foods. No cured or smoked foods, no salt-processed foods. No peanuts,

no pecans, no chocolate, no bacon, no sausage. Two ounces of meat a day. Boiled or broiled.

CHAPTER TWO

It is a small, concrete-block building, square, squat. Painted in a tired-looking yellow. In front, hanging from a rusted pipe, a small white sign with black lettering: Southern Dialysis. It is located on South U.S. 18, on the outskirts of Dooley, a few blocks from the ramp that siphons traffic up and onto the newly-constructed S.H. 70, which runs east out of town and past the major Halliburton buildings. My parents told me about the clinic, but I am mildly shocked when Father pulls the car into the cramped parking lot.

The clinic is located at the far southern end of the Dooley strip, and I can remember not so many years ago turning my parents' car into the driveway and veering back to drive through downtown on a Friday or Saturday night, hitting the A&W drive-in on the other end and circling back. An endless parade, in search of new girls or old drinking buddies. An endless waste of time. But harmless. The clinic was a music store back then, with red guitars and golden banjos hanging from displays in the front window. Today the windows are shuttered.

Directly across the street is DD's Bar, a cowboy bar with windows painted red, a few bar stools, a few tables, a black-and-white television and a jukebox in the corner with country hits from the 1950s. I was in there, too, once.

Under age. Four of us went in on a dare, just to see what it looked like.

It was early on a Saturday evening, and besides the bartender, a black-haired woman who appeared near her seventies, there were only two others. Two fat men, sitting side by side at the bar, the tails of their shirts not quite reaching their belts in back, watching Love Boat in silence. We sat down at a table in the corner and the woman took our order and went behind the bar to open four bottles of Coors. She returned, asked for our money -- two dollars -- and then asked to see identification. We didn't have any. She asked us to leave and we left, she holding our money and our beers stacked in front of the two old men, who turned and grinned and touched the fronts of their cowboy hats.

The bar appears unchanged. The windows are still red, although the DD's sign has been taken down. It is locked by a padlock and chain looped through the outside handles of the double doors.

It is shortly after 12 o'clock, and noontime traffic swishes down the highway in either direction. Directly to the south is a self-service Kerr-McGee station and to the north an auto garage, specializing in muffler replacement and repair. None of the establishments seem interested in lawn maintenance; the five-foot chain-link fence enclosing the clinic from both sides is practically hidden by streaks of tall Johnson grass and milkweed.

It is Monday. The driveway was used as a parking lot over the weekend by kids who sit on the front of their cars, wave at passersby, and litter the area with beer cans and cigarette butts and brown broken glass. When we reach the front, I try one of the glass doors and find it locked. Father reaches for the other door, pulls it open. I step inside; it takes a moment for my eyes to adjust from the brilliant sunlight.

There are two large windows in the front of the unit, both covered by venetian blinds, as are the double doors. The blinds are cranked down, shut as tightly as possible. There is plenty of fluorescent lighting inside, but it is still dark, especially in the lobby area, where four or five people are already sitting. There is a shrunken man with a denim cap on, and another larger man, more alert, sitting next to him, holding a large, straw hat in his hands and looking pleasantly at me. He misses two fingers on his right hand. He nods and I say hello, hoping it will be accepted by the entire group and I won't have to speak directly to each of them just yet.

There is a black man in the corner, sleeping, his head fallen back against the wall. He doesn't appear as old as the other two. He wears brisk-looking black boots, square-toed, brightly polished, a notable contrast from the scuffed boots worn by the alert man and the ragged house shoes on the shrunken man's feet. There are two women in the other

corner, one old, wearing green-tinted bifocals, holding her purse. The other is much younger, plump with puffed hair, the daughter, perhaps. It is the younger woman Mother immediately approaches when she comes in behind me. She introduces the two women as Mrs. Hickerson, one of the patients, and her niece, Gloria, who drives her from Lawton three times a week.

There are only six chairs in the waiting area, and Mother offers me the spare one, but I decline it and she sits, still speaking with Gloria and her aunt. I lean against the counter which separates the visiting area and the offices from the patient room. The patient area, I estimate, comprises about seventy percent of the building, filled with large, beeping dialysis machines that look nothing like the one I was hooked to at Mercy Hospital. That machine had been no larger than a microwave oven, easily moved about on a cart with rollers. It had been an attractive blue and beige color with rows of well-organized dials and buttons on its front. But these machines, ten of them, are distractingly large, bigger even than the brown reclining chairs that accompany them.

They are about four feet wide, perhaps five feet tall and two feet thick. They have their own rollers, and when one of the two nurses milling about in the room tries to move one, she has to brace herself and shove against the machine's weight. The two nurses, who smile at me when I

enter, are mopping up about an inch of water spread throughout the unit. The shorter, less attractive nurse works near one of the machines directly in front of me. "We sprung a leak," she says, glancing up at me.

"Yeah -- and big-time, huh?"

"Oh, it won't take long. Kinda cuts into lunch, though." She pauses, wrings her mop into a bucket. "Bet I know what that bandage means."

"Yeah -- the new guy."

"Matt McKeever?" I nod. "I'm Jacki...you don't even look twenty-five." She begins mopping again. "Don't get many young ones."

"So I hear."

"You okay? They said you were really sick."

"I'm okay now. It's when I'm on the machine I don't do so well. And I get tired easy."

"Soon as this water's up, you can come sit down. You're that chair in the corner."

Father stands a few feet away, his hands in his pockets. Mother is busy talking with the other patients. I hear the shrunken man cough and hack. After the nurse moves away, chasing water puddles, Father moves over and says he is going to gas up the car and check out the ammunition sale at Ward's. "Low on sixteens," he says. "Tell Mother I'll be back in awhile."

I watch him leave, and when he opens the door, I

realize I have become accustomed to the interior lighting, because the slant of sunshine coming through the door seems harsh and hot.

I understand the gas station and the shotgun shells are a convenient excuse for Father. He isn't able to face the needles, the claustrophobic sense of the tubes and the wires. Blood, anybody's but his own, makes him uneasy. On one fishing trip a hook was accidentally buried in the tender flesh on the inside of his thumb and he had to pull it back out, barb and all. I became sick but he managed. I can understand how he feels. I'm not equipped to deal with today either, but I have no choice. All morning, since I first got up, I have tried to calm myself, prepare for the machine. But my stomach remains tight; I ate very little breakfast, no lunch. Too nervous. I hope it won't be like the first time; I hope I won't vomit, faint away. I hope the tourniquet won't hurt so badly, awaken the drumming of my wrist so violently. I hope the needles won't sting so hotly.

I watch the nurses finish up the puddles in the middle of the floor. I realize someone is standing next to me, elbows on the counter. I turn; it is a black man, about my age and height, a little overweight, thick through the shoulders. He wears cutoff jeans and an Oklahoma University Sooner t-shirt. He has a gold cap on one of his front teeth.

"You new? Got family here?" he asks.

I grin, nod my head. "Of sorts." I hold up my bandaged wrist. "Me. Just out of the hospital; today's my first day."

"You speak it!" he says, stepping back for a better view of me. "You ain't no patient I ever saw. Looking too much like a linebacker to be any patient here." He raises his hands to his ears in disbelief.

"Yeah. I wish." I grin, taken a little aback with the guy. "No football for me. Barely can walk to the car."

The man seems to drift away, leans heavily on the counter, shaking his head and rubbing his palms together. "My God, imagine it," he says. "Thought this was only for old folks...I hope you do good," he says and pats me on the shoulder. He turns and walks back out the door, allowing another brilliant streak of light into the clinic. I turn back and Jacki is in the corner, fluffing a pillow, motioning me toward my chair.

*****

It is no different.

Teri McKeever introduces herself and we quickly run through our ancestry, as far back as we can remember, and decide we are of no kin. She is only a couple of years older than me and knows many of the same people around the county. I have, in fact, hunted on land owned by her

father. I am her first patient and she asks me about my doctors and nurses in the city. She knows everyone I mention, raises her eyebrows at some names, scoffs at some others. When she is ready to put the first needle into my arm, she sits down an small stool and becomes very intense.

"Hardly any vein there," she says, smiling, running her gloved finger up and down my arm. "You've been exercising it?" I nod, and she puts a light tourniquet around my arm and retraces the vein along my arm. "Lose it right here," she says. "Must go really deep. Here's pretty good. And here." She pulls the tourniquet off. "That hurt -- with the tourniquet on?"

"My wrist."

"Yeah. Another week maybe, then it will loosen up. I'm going to stick you here and here."

"You're the boss."

"You want me to deaden the arm?"

"Mason said extra sticks aren't so good for the fistula."

"Over the long term, no. But it's not that big a deal for the first few days -- it's up to you."

"I guess not. Might as well get used to everything at once, huh?"

Teri laughs. "Not how most people look at it." She replaces the tourniquet on my arm. "This is going to hurt some. Don't flinch, okay?"

"Right."

My wrist thumps against the pressure of the tourniquet, Teri prods my arm with her finger. "Don't look," she says. "Sometimes that helps." I feel the needle pressing and then the suction when Teri pulls on the syringe. "Good," she says. "That's the first one. Good flow, too. Okay?"

"I think."

"Just one more."

I remain stiff even after she unclasps the tourniquet to prepare the next needle. The first needle continues to burn. Most shots had been quick darts of pain and then nothing. Just a flash, one second, and over. But this needle remains in my arm, continues to stretch my skin, aggravate the nerves. It feels too tight, as if resting against the bone. And the second needle. It feels as though Teri places it right next to the first one. I look down. The needles are at least five inches apart. But I can't feel the separate pains. There is just one feeling, one spot, pressurized, burning. Teri snaps off the tourniquet, tapes the second needle down.

"Feels tight," I say.

"Hurting?"

"Yeah, some. Is it supposed to?"

"Probably not. It acts like its own anethesia after a while. The nerves get tired pretty quick and just sort of forget about the needle. Get bored with the same signals.

You'll notice the difference in about fifteen or twenty minutes."

"Whew. Always like this?"

"Oh no. Right now you've got fresh, virgin, sensitive skin. Before long, the skin becomes tough from all the sticks. Some people say they can't even feel it anymore. Don't know about that, but it will get better."

There is a major difference from the hospital. There are other people being put on the machines. I watch; it is almost as hard as being stuck myself. The lady across from me, the Mrs. Hickerson, has the nurse put a wet cloth over her face. Not her forehead or her eyes. Completely over her face. She lies back in the chair, the cloth hiding her face. When the nurse puts the tourniquet on, she begins some kind of low chant, a murmur, something repeated over and over. I can barely hear her at first because of the genral movement around the clinic, but as the nurse comes closer to sticking her, her chants becomes louder and louder. She is saying "Dear God, Dear God." When the nurse goes into the arm, Mrs. Hickerson's chant becomes a scream, three quick breaths: "God, God, God."

Then she's silent. The nurse asks her if she is okay. She nods beneath the cloth. Then the chant begins again as the nurse puts the tourniquet back on. It reaches the same decibel level when the needle goes in but no one else in the clinic seems to notice. Both patient and nurse go

about their business. Teri, passing me, leans over and whispers: "Does it everytime -- makes the needles softer." She smiles and shrugs. "Whatever it takes."

Each of the patients has a routine with the needles. The woman next to Hickerson is dragged to her chair; two nurses hold her down while another nurse drives the needles into her. She screams the entire time, saying she didn't want the needles, she wanted to go home. "Help me!" she cries. "They're going to hurt me!" I didn't think they would be able to keep her on the machine all afternoon, but as soon as both needles were in, she settles down and the nurses joke with her and everything seems normal.

"Really, she's one of the best patients," Teri says later. "Follows her diet, watches her fluids. Always shows up...hates the needles, though."

The man next to me buries his head under his pillow; another fills his mouth with ice so he can crunch it against the pain; another woman puts on earphones and listens to music during the episode. Religious hymns, I am later told.

When everyone is placed on their machines and the nurses are catching up the paperwork and the clinic is quietly humming, I begin to sneeze. My nose itches, the back of my throat itches, my eyes itch and feel hot and dry. The nurses come and stand over me, uncertain of what to do. I can't speak to them because I am sneezing so rapidly. It goes on for several minutes and I find it hard

to catch my breath. The nurses do what they can, offering me tissues and a cold cloth to put on my face. The strain from the sneezing fit breaks me into a sweat; the nurses unbutton my shirt and try to soothe me with the cloth. My underarms and the back of my knee joints begin to itch.

"Allergic to something," one of the nurses says finally and goes to phone the doctor. The nurses are about to take me off the machine when the sneezing subsides. The itching under the arms goes away, and my throat and nose feel better. My eyes are still red and hot. I am able to see again. My parents stand behind the partition. Teri is in front of me.

"What's that all about?" she asks. I shrug. "Aren't going to do that every day, I hope."

"Me too." I try a grin, but it doesn't last. I feel dizzy, nauseaus. "Feel sick," I say.

"Stomach?"

"Yeah."

Teri steps quickly across the room, reaches up in a cupboard for a yellow basin, hurries back across the floor. She isn't in time.

CHAPTER THREE

My eyes follow her: the tallest nurse, standing very erect, striding easily across the clinic floor, lightly laughing with the patients then staring intently, lips pursed, into the dials of the machines. After I settle down, after Teri has cleaned up the mess from my heaves, she stops briefly and bends over my chair, takes my left hand in hers. Her hands are cold. "I'm Marla," she says, smiling, her eyes sharp, large. Her hair is short-cropped, frosted, molds elegantly around her face. She wears silver jewelry. "Not such a hot way to start things, huh?" she asks, and pats my hand. "Gets easier," and with a reassuring smile strides off to one of her afternoon patients.

For the first week she is a white blur across the clinic floor. I am asleep much of the time and in pain the rest of the time. She stops to speak only briefly, to ask if the fistula is developing, if there is any pain when I exercise it at home, if I notice any knots or bumps along the vein. She is all business. Then she is off, speaking and laughing with the other patients.

Teri puts me on the machine, inserts the needles, for each of the first three days. She has five years experience, far more than the others. "Seen smaller veins," she says, "but not often." Marla, I discover, is second-in-charge. When I am not sleeping, she walks past my station,

erect posture, to kneel at the elbow of other patients. She is a favorite with the others. While Teri and Jacki and the other two nurses sit at the desk, smoking and telling jokes, she is out with the patients, pulling up a foot stool to sit on and chat with each for ten or fifteen minutes. She sits very straight on the stool, leans forward, chin propped on her wrist, nodding seriously while the others list their complaints. She pats them on the arm, fluffs their pillows, brings them coffee or tea, rubs their cramping feet. But mostly she sits and talks and even in my near-sleep I am conscious of her nearness, sitting at one of the other machines, comforting Mrs. Hickerson, or the old, shrunken man named Barney, or Jessie, an even older cowboy who sits and wheezes at the next station.

Each day she stops briefly at my chair. She doesn't pull up the stool to sit, but leans over, bringing her fragrance and her eyes down to my level, smiles, and pats my hand. She is reassuring. She walks past the other patients and winks at them and they smile through the burning of the needles.

I come to the machine three days a week: Monday, Wednesday, Friday. I go on at one o'clock and get off shortly after five, at the height of rush-hour traffic along U.S. 18. I do better on Wednesday and Friday. Marla notices. She helps me to the weight scales after Friday's treatment, moves the scales to one-eighty-seven and a half.

"You lost six pounds without getting sick," she says, leaning over to smile into my face. "You may get good at this yet."

On my second Monday, she greets me at the door with a smile and a wink. "Guess who gets to stick you today?" she asks, reaching up to a cabinet to get my patient chart. "And just when you were getting used to things."

I walk to my chair, sit down, recline back a little. She busies herself by dressing the machine, clicking the tubing in place and checking the dialysis filter for cleanness. All the while she talks easily, asking questions and making jokes.

"Only four pounds...that's good for a patient's first weekend," she says. "Weren't out jogging, were you?"

"Not quite."

She is tall and thin, moves gracefully. I watch her face as she readies the machine. Her mouth moves easily, her eyes full, alert. She pulls a stool up and looks at my arm, moving her finger along the imperceptible vein.

"Teri stuck you here?" she asks, pointing to a spot on my arm. I nod. She bites her lip, grabs my arm at the elbow and squeezes lightly, creating a slight tourniquet, and she follows the vein with her other finger. She puts on gloves, prepares a needle, and positions herself to insert it in my arm. Her face is intent, grave. I close my eyes. The needle goes in, hotly, and I feel her pull the

blood into the syringe.

My arm seems to flatten, as if a huge weight has been dropped on it. I jerk the arm, lean up and open my eyes. There is a huge hump on my arm where the needle is inserted. It is growing, like a balloon, as if my arm is being pumped with air. Marla's face is white, grave, intense. "I've blown the vein," she says, calmly, and slips the needle back out, pressing a wad of white gauze directly onto the needle puncture and the knot rising in my arm, which continues to grow. She looks at me, her eyes serious and apologetic.

My forehead goes hot, begins to tingle. I lean back faintly. My stomach is churning, the pain in my arm is doubled by the echo in the wrist.

"Sick?" she asks.

"Yes."

"Need a basin?"

"Yes."

She motions to Teri, who is finishing her first patient. They get the basin to me in time, place a wet cloth on my forehead. My stomach stays down. The swelling stops growing, but doesn't go back down. Marla tapes some gauze over it to keep pressure on it, and then prepares a second needle. I stay back, eyes closed under the cloth. Mother, I know, stands in the corner, watching. Father is outside, smoking. The second needle goes in easily; I feel Marla pat my hand. The third needle goes in; I am hooked

up. I hear the machine purring beside me.

"Matt?" she asks. I don't answer, don't remove the cloth.

Two hours into the treatment, after I awaken, Marla pulls her stool to my side. "Better now?" she asks. I nod. "Understand what happened to the arm?"

"No."

"I went in too deeply -- I thought the vein was deeper. It really runs right under the skin. Just so tiny." She stops, peers into my face. "You are okay?" I nod. "Anyway, I put the needle all the way through and it began to bleed inside the arm. Causes it to puff up like that. There will be a good bruise there for a couple of weeks."

"Bad for the fistula?"

"Not good for it. But it happens occasionally. It's happened to every patient in here at least once. Doesn't ruin anything. It hurts, I know, and it cuts down our options for sticking for a few days. But it doesn't last long." I try to sit up but my head aches and she gets a couple of pills for the pain. She sits down and is silent for some time. I do not think very clearly. She takes my hand.

"Not getting easier," I say.

She is silent, nods and bites her lip. She rubs my fingers. Her hands are cold.

CHAPTER FOUR

I step from the pickup, put on my hunting vest and cap. It is a little after 2 o'clock, the first day of September, opening day of dove season. The afternoon is hot, borrowed from the brightest days of August. The temperature stood at 104 on the bank thermometer as we left town. Woody brings us here, a creek bottom lined with millet patches and a nearly bald hill above it. We are here despite Dave's objections. "Too damn many grass burrs," he says. But the place looks good. Good for dove, anyway. We hunted here last year, and in years before, and always found some early-season shooting. The hotter the better; the drier the better.

"Oughta be plenty, if heat makes any difference," I say, loading my shotgun with three shells.

"Lots -- sitting up in those sunflowers," Woody says, nodding toward the top of the hill and the draw beyond it, where a small stock pond sits. He lights a cigarette, slides the lighter in his pocket.

"Let's have a smoke," Dave says, looking at the cigarette. Woody pulls a pack of Kents out of his other pants pocket and hands Dave one. "Why you alway have crooked smokes?" Dave asks.

"You bitching?"

"No."

I try putting a fourth shell in the gun. It won't go. Good. The gun is already plugged. We walk toward the fence; Woody holds a strand of wire up with one hand and pushes the lower one down with a boot. Dave and I crawl through the opening. Dave returns the favor and I look the place over. The dry season hasn't been good for it. The millet is short, wilted. Not much to harvest. The hardier weeds -- sunflowers, indian grass, ragweed -- flourish along the fenceline. Some of the sunflowers, although sparse, reach ten feet into the air. The pond dam is about a quarter of a mile away, a pale green hump rising above the brown, rough weed that grows in abundance on the dry hillside. The sunflowers are scattered about on our side of the pond, but there is much thicker stand of them on the other side where there has been no grazing through the summer.

The green trees that grow along the creek of the pond make a sharp contrast to the rest of the landscape. Tall cottonwoods and shorter, heavily-foliaged elms and oaks nestle along the creek bed, while higher on the hill a few mesquites and bois d'arcs stand staunch and barren in the shimmering heat. There are three doves sitting in the nearest mesquite, perhaps a hundred yards from us. They fly off, fluttering just above the reach of the weeds, before we are able to move more than a few strides closer.

"Thought you quit smoking," Woody says to Dave as we

walk through the pasture toward the pond.

"I quit buying smokes...bum 'em when I can. Besides, gives me something to do while I pick burrs."

"You are bitching."

Dave is right about the burrs. They thrive in the dry season. Once beyond the thick weeds of the fence line, the burrs take over, thin stalks leaning with the heaviness of the burrs, which look like miniature shocks of wheat, thick as any wheat stand. They stick readily to the outside of my jeans, creep up the inside and stick to the tops of my hunting socks.

"Much water in the pond?" I ask.

"Gone. Almost," Woody says. "Ruell was running a bunch of cattle on this side about three weeks ago. Sucking it down pretty quick, I guess. Moved them to Beaver Creek...not enough graze here."

"Yeah," Dave says. "Can't digest grass burrs." We all stop, bend over and pull the burrs from our socks.

> **"What I think? About why? Don't know. Things just happen. I guess some people have to think there is a purpose behind everything, but that might not apply here."**
>
> **"You think there's no reason?"**
>
> **"If there is, I can't see it yet, you know? But I'm not looking for it. Reasons, I mean. In the hospital...they wanted to know all this**

stuff. What I thought...what I was mad about. Don't see where that to fits in."

"It's just we can monitor some things. Dry weight. Blood chemistries. Nausea. But some things we can't see. What you're thinking, your state of mind. It's just as important. Sometimes people can be their own worst enemy. Not with you -- you don't seem to have any trouble with it. But some people really punish themselves. You know? And it's an understandable thing.

"Well. Maybe. I don't understand."

"You will. I think you will."

"Burrs have kind of taken hold, huh?" I say.

"Shhh. Dove," Woody says, and I follow his gaze toward the pond, where three doves, probably the ones that left the mesquite, fly directly toward us. At the last moment, they swing away from me, toward Dave's side, and Dave and Woody jump up, both squeezing a couple of shots. One dove drops a couple of feathers and dives down toward the ground, but picks back up out of shooting range and rejoins the others. They disappear over the hill.

"Well," I say. "At least something hasn't changed."

"Yo," Dave says. "But we do miss 'em quick, huh?" He grins, jamming in a couple of new shells.

"Why didn't you shoot?" Woody asks.

"You guys in my way. Besides, I ain't no hog."

"Play hell, too. You just didn't want to be the first to...shhh, dove." Woody squats down, points to the left, where a lone dove is flying in high over a lone bois d'arc. He flies near, staying on my side, still quite high, and Dave and I level our guns but don't shoot. The dove continues to wing past until he is beyond the road and the pickup.

"Suppose I was in your way again," Woody says.

"Too high." I say.

"Too fast," Dave corrects. "Too fucking fast. Ain't shooting again until they land."

"Jesus," Woody says. "Bring you out here and throw dove right at you and you guys won't even shoot. Couple of wimpies." He curls his face up in sarcastic manner: "Too high. Too fast."

We walk to the pond, stopping several times to pull burrs. I know the hospital stay has taken something from me, I know the machine saps my strength, but I am surprised how quickly I tire. I barely make the pond dam. I sit down on the dam, in the shade, barely able to see, my head pulsing. The afternoon is brilliant, my eyes sore and I protect them against the sun with one of my hands.

"You okay?" Woody asks.

"Don't know," I answer. "Feel bad. Tired. Shoulders hurt. You guys'll carry me back if I die?"

"Let's rest," Woody says, and the two sit down. Beads of sweat work their way down Dave's brow. My shirt is soaked, my hair plastered to my head. I lean over, sweat drips quickly and steadily off my nose, making dark blotches in the dust. Woody is not sweating, but he never does.

"You look white," he says. "Maybe we should go."

"Can't," I say. "Even if I wanted. Can't get back to the truck, I don't think. Just need rest -- shouldn't be over-doing it."

"I could get a key from Ruell and drive up here. He'd let go a key for that."

It's a tempting offer. I think about it. "Naw," I say. "Maybe if I sit here and rest a while I'll be okay. Must be the blood pressure medicine. Said it would make me feel tired." The two of them are quiet. "Go on. Flush some dove toward me and I'll sit here in the shade and send them back toward you."

"Man's still lazy," Dave said, speaking to Woody. "That's two things that ain't changed.

I stay in the shade of the tree, high on the dam where an occasional breeze works up, and Woody and Dave leave, walking toward the far sunflower field.

"Woody...," Dave says as they step away, "let's smoke." Dave mumbles something, digs in his pocket.

From my vantage point, I can watch them and keep an eye

on much of Ruell's place. There are over seven hundred acres and just last winter I walked the whole place in a day's time quail hunting. Several times. It wasn't unusual to put in nine or ten miles during a good hunting day. I look back toward the pickup. It seems obscenely close. I can make out the green glint of a Mountain Dew can on the dashboard. I had walked maybe three hundred, four hundred yards.

The gun became heavy in my arms. I could barely hold it up, but I couldn't tell Woody and Dave that. It would be the final insult to have somebody carry my gun. The gun grabbed the muscles that come over my shoulders, pulled them down, not the arm muscles, the muscles in my upper back, in my neck, my shoulders. My shoulders became so tired, stretched. I tried carrying my gun on my shoulder, but it didn't help. It seemed to ride on bare bone. No wonder. Last year I weighed 215 as I walked through these fields. Now, with three weeks of the machine behind me, I weigh just under 180. Almost forty pounds.

I'm twenty percent less.

The gun rides on bare bone.

> **"It's better. See? You can see it running all the way to the elbow...Look at Maggie's over there. You can see it all the way across the room."**
>
> **"How big should it get?"**

"Depends. Some people have small veins. You do. See here, how small the veins are on the back of your hand? Look at mine. The veins are just bigger."

"We gonna have trouble with it everytime?"

"Shouldn't. Easy enough to hit, at least here and here. Wish it was larger so we could follow it where it dips deeper."

"If it fails -- if -- what then?"

"Have to put one in the other arm. Or in one of the legs, at the groin area. I know. Sounds tender, huh? But it's really a good place. Vein is a lot bigger there."

In the shade, the muscles relax and I feel better. I stand and am only slightly dizzy. I sit back down, watch Woody and Dave enter the sunflowers. I reach up to rub my left shoulder. There is not much there. But I feel better. There is an occasional wind and it blows across the pond and into my face. The wind feels fresh on my wet shirt and face. I will not get in much hunting, but I begin to feel as though I can at least get back to the pickup under my own power. Woody and Dave jump some doves just a few feet into the sunflowers. I hear them shoot and sit up and hold my gun at the ready. Three doves appear over the pond, flying directly toward my tree. They come over and I shoot twice, can sense my gun well behind them as they whiz past. Fast.

Must lead them more. In a couple of moments a lone dove shows, flying slowly, as if deciding whether to stop at the pond to water. I realize it is going to land in my shade tree. I wait until the last moment, until it has clipped its wings and is practically hanging in front of one of the tree's higher branches. I shoot. It falls about ten yards in front of me. A cheap shot, but meat in the bag. One-for-three, I calculate. Still no good. The legal limit is ten doves per day. But the three of us have an agreement -- fifteen shots. Too damned expensive to go out and waste three boxes on doves. Fifteen shots: we measure our opportunities closely. It is nearly impossible to limit out on fifteen shots. Unless you get them landing in the tree. I am reminded of Father's first rule of hunting: take only the best shots.

I keep track of the shots from across the pond. They are shooting quickly. I can tell when Dave downs a dove; he shoots and then runs toward the downed bird. Woody is more casual. I watch and wonder whether he is harvesting dead birds or picking burrs. I feel tired, can tell my vision hasn't completely cleared because the two of them fade in and out. But they turn enough doves in my direction to keep the afternoon interesting. Before they turn back to the pond, I have six more shots and drop three more doves. Four-for-nine. Still mediocre.

Woody and Dave trudge up to the dam, squatting once or

twice in the open as they watch doves flying in their direction even though they are out of shells. Hunter reflex. They have put a lot of birds in the air; it will take an hour for them to all settle down again. Woody has eight doves for his fifteen shots. Dave has three. "God-damned grass burrs," he says, sitting down and picking them off. "What the hell kind of place to hunt doves...can't shoot and pick burrs at the same time."

Dave sweats freely now, his shirt soaked from the hour of steady walking through the patch, where the tall sunflowers catch the heat and hold it. The ground temperature is probably near 120. Woody wipes his brow as if there is sweat on it.

"Hot," he says.

"Yeah," I say. "Bitch here in the shade."

"Your lazy ass," Dave says. "Sit the hell here in the shade and get all the good shots. How many you got?"

"Four."

Dave shakes his head. "And how many times you have to pick burrs?"

"None."

"Well pucker my ass. Come out here with someone just out of the god-damn hospital, half-dead, and he sits in the fucking shade and out-shoots me. Must've shot 'em out of the trees."

"Me?" I ask, innocent but winking at Woody. Woody

shushes us and points toward three doves flying in behind us. I'm the only one with shells left, so I move over to the left side of the tree. The birds come in perfectly, turning to the west about fifty yards away, and lazily flying single file into my range. I shoot three times, emptying my chamber. To my amazement, all three doves fall. I turn, matter-of-fact.

"Why we plug our guns," I say. "They don't want us killing more than three migratory fowl at a time."

"Pork me running," Dave says. "Must've closed your eyes."

"Makes seven for me. How many you get, Woody?"

"Eight."

"Dave? How many?"

"Fuck off. Get your birds and let's go."

"I still have three shells...maybe I'll wait for another triple. More challenging that way," I say, rubbing as hard as possible on Dave. He swears, tosses one of my spent hulls at me.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mid-September. Wednesday morning, my sixth week at the clinic. I am going back into the hospital. But it is nothing serious, Rivers assures me. I am adjusting to the machine, to my new diet, to the fluid restrictions. My whole system changes; digestion, circulation, excretion. The hospital stay will be for one night only, to review my adjustments.

There is blood in my stool. I find bright red drops of it in the toilet after each bowel movement. The blood stains my underwear. It could be constipation, Rivers says. It could be hemorrhoids. If the blood is caused by either, then I am adjusting as I should. All the patients have bouts with constipation. There are ways to control it. Hemorrhoids? A problem I may have to learn to live with. Neither constipation nor hemorrhoids are serious. My bleeding may be caused by something else. Hopefully not. But it must be checked.

The machine is taking over the work of my bladder. My kidneys still filter fluid, and I expel in the conventional way, but the streams do not come as often or in the same volume. The machine is taking the excess fluid from my body during the treatments, and the kidneys do not have to work as hard. My bladder is shrinking. It, and the tubing

running from it to my penis must be checked periodically for blockage. Rivers tells me all this Monday afternoon as Teri and Marla listen. I am only a little nervous. Rivers is very technical; the nurses listen with serious looks.

If a blockage develops, the doctors must know in case a transplant opportunity arises. The blockage would have to be removed during the transplant operation, because a transplanted kidney begins to work the second a patient's blood begins to flow through it. Persons begin producing urine within minutes, and it must have somewhere to go. The patient, of course, is catherized at the time, but once the catheter is removed, the passages must be clear.

There are no blockages yet, or I could not urinate. But, if one is building, there are ways to prevent it. In the case of such blockages, Rivers says, prevention is much less painful than removing it. He smiles. I wonder.

I tire easily, too easily. My hermatocrit is only 19, which means I do not have enough red blood cells to get fuel and oxygen to my muscles quickly enough. It is one of the reasons I can't stay up with Dave and Woody on the dove hunts. I need more blood; I will be given two units while being dialyzed in the hospital. The blood transfusion is the main reason for the hospital stay. It is against the law to transfuse blood in the clinic. Such an operation requires a hospital visit.

I am active enough that my hermatocrit needs to be

bolstered by several points. Two units should raise it to 21 or 22, Rivers says, and I will be able to feel the difference the moment I step out of the hospital. It will be easier to walk, to breathe. I will feel as though I have almost twice as much energy. Because I will. The blood gives me more energy, gets fuel to my muscles more quickly.

The other two things can only be checked during a hospital stay. Alone, neither is cause for a special visit to the hospital. But, one might as well get one's money's worth, Rivers says.

"So what does it mean?"

"The charts? Which part?"

"What have you decided?"

"You have renal failure."

"I know that. But am I nuts or what? The mental...emotional business?"

"Right to the point, huh? Rivers seems to believe you hide your emotions -- that you're scared to let some things show. Maybe showing emotion would make you seem too vulnerable, or not able to handle things by yourself."

"And you?"

"I...well, most of the patients I've seen had a lot more trouble adjusting to all this than you have... You walk in one day, and we do just about everything wrong to you at least once.

You hardly blink. Most people show a lot more anger."

"Can't understand the deal about anger. It's like you want me to show it. If someone doesn't show anger, then he's some kind of screwball. Can't follow that."

"Not a screwball. And maybe we do worry too much. It's just such a natural thing. To be angry. And show it. Haven't you ever been mad?"

"Sure. But I don't see how it could do any good with something like,,,there's nothing I can do. If there was something or is something a guy can do and it doesn't get done, then maybe there is reason for anger. But who is there to be mad at?"

"That's what Rivers asks. There is nobody. Not yourself, not the doctors or nurses. But that doesn't mean anger isn't there. It may be there, but since you can't channel it anywhere, it just sits and boils and gets mean. See? Why we worry?"

September. Summer, to my mind, is gone. June, July, August. September is autumn. But today I go back to the hospital and the temperature stands at 104. The heat is stifling, bounces off the hood of my car, off the highway,

off the sidewalk. The leaves of the pecan trees in Moorehead's yard are curled up against the sun. Even the leaves in the tall sycamores are limp; there is no breeze to move the heat. I arrive at the hospital to find the air conditioning unit has gone out. Inside, conditions rival those of the afternoon borrowed from August. I check in shortly after one o'clock. A nurse comes into my room, explains the lack of air conditioning, says it should be running by midnight. I will be taken to the dialysis room at three o'clock. Teri is on duty.

The proctology exam is set for tomorrow morning at 8 a.m. Rivers will perform it. A cystogram is set for 10 a.m., with a Dr. Davis performing that. An attendant from the radiology lab will be up in about ten minutes to take me for standard chest X-rays. I should be in my hospital gown at that time. She shows me how to operate the remote television switch and the nursing button in case I have a problem or question.

It has been more than a month since I left the hospital in Oklahoma City, but I feel as though I have spent most of my life in one of these rooms: polished, white, tiled floors, suspended ceiling, flourescent lights, thin, crackling linen on the beds, and large, heavy, stiff pillows. The building is only five years old; the windows, with dark, tinted glass, do not open. I sweat freely in the room. There are the business-card soap bars, the familiar

yellow basin, the supply of bath powder and toothpaste. I take my clothes off and put on the blue hospital gown, tie it around my neck and waist. I arrange my clothes in the tight closet. The other bed in the room is empty. Maybe I will have the room to myself. I turn the television, clicking from station to station. Cable. The attendant arrives at the door. Pushing a wheelchair. I protest, but it is hospital policy.

She wheels me to the elevator, takes me to the basement, then guides me into a hall where some kind of construction is going on. Somewhere in the hall someone is banging a hammer. A band saw erupts. I detect the scent of sawdust. Painters walk up and down the hall with buckets of paint, brushes, and ladders. The attendant is gone. I seem to be alone in a construction zone. Then a blue-clad woman appears around a corner, offers a brisk hello, looks at my charts, and takes me into one of the camera rooms. She says she will return and leaves. Alone again. The temperature in the room must be near 60 degrees. I become uncomfortably cool because of my thin gown and a film of sweat.

"Nicer down here, huh?" the woman in blue asks as she comes through a door in the opposite side of the room.

"Freezing."

"We have to keep it at 64 because of the computers. People think I'm nuts bringing a sweater to work on a day

like this."

"Don't blame you. Didn't occur to me to bring a blanket."

"We'll get you out of here pretty quick, back up where it's toasty...step over here and face this direction." She positions me in front of a metal shield, presses me against it. I jump because the metal is even colder. "Put your chin right here," she says. "And hold your arm up like this." She walks into an adjacent room. "Take a deep breath and hold it." I do, and I can hear machinery working. "Now you can breathe. What're you in for, anyway?"

"Kidney patient. Transfusion, proctology, cystogram."

"Checking the pipes, huh? They sure have you lined out." She turns me around. "Lift the left arm the same way. That's good." I take a deep breath and hold. "Now you can breathe...ever had any of those tests?"

"No."

"One thing, honey. It's never as bad as you think it will be...just don't think about it." She leaves and returns in a few minutes. "X-rays are fine. The attendant will get you in a moment and send you back up."

"Done this long?"

"Two years. A little more."

"This what you wanted to do...don't see stumbling into it."

"Went to nursing school. In Arizona. Where I met my husband. He got a position here with Ma Bell, and then this turned up for me."

"You're married?"

"Seven years. God, doesn't that sound like a long time?"

"Don't look old enough to be married that long."

"Started young. While I was a sophomore in college."

"Oh well. You like this work?"

"Better than the hospital. Schedule is nicer. You know who you are working with."

"I guess it's just three days a week?"

"Right. But it pays like a 40-hour week. And my weekends free."

"For your husband."

"For my family. I have a four-year-old son."

"Don't look old enough for that, either."

"I'm not. Seemed like the right idea at the time. And it was. Still is. Wouldn't trade Little Ben for anything. He keeps me going. Just didn't know what I was trading in."

"Kind of ties you down, huh?"

"Not kind of. Absolutely. I guess I haven't had a night out in, well, since I started here."

The dialysis room is no cooler. Teri is taking an older man off the machine when I arrive. She introduces him as Mr. Tullis; a morning patient. As soon as he has both hands free, he lights a cigarette.

"Mr. Tullis is in with lung cancer," Teri says brightly when she sees him lighting the cigarette. "He was supposed to stop smoking years ago, but never did. Now he spends most of his time here." She catches his glance and smiles.

"Nobody is going to blow smoke in my face and tell me I have to quit," Tullis says. He takes a deep pull on the cigarette, stifles a cough.

"Rivers doesn't smoke."

"Not him. You."

Teri laughs again, dresses the bed with fresh sheets. "I've never told you not to smoke. Don't make a damn to me." She steps around the bed and behind Tullis, winking at me. "If you don't care I don't care."

"Good."

"Mr. Tullis isn't usually so grouchy," Teri says, speaking to me. "Sometimes he's a lot of fun -- when he can catch his breath."

Tullis doesn't answer. He sits a moment longer in the wheelchair before Tami tells the attendant he can go. "And remember to take that arm bandage off in three hours. Don't want any clots."

I get out of my wheelchair and into the bed. I pull the sheet up, out of modesty more than comfort. Teri begins to re-dress the machine. "Hot, no?" she asks. "Not going to be very comfortable on you."

"Might not be too bad. How's this gonna work, anyway?"

"Nothing different. I put you on the machine, and then let the new blood come through the IV line into the venous line. Then it goes into your system with the rest of the blood."

"Simple?"

"Usually."

It is not a usual case. For some reason, the fistula fails. The first needle stick draws blood well enough, but the vein collapses and Teri can't get it to work. She has to pull out. The second and third needles won't pull any blood. "What's wrong with your fistula?" she asks. I shake my head.

"Your game," I say.

I can see the tension playing on Teri's face. She knows my arm is sore from the missed sticks. She doesn't want to try another one any more than I do. But I have to have the treatment; she has to get the needles in. Sweat pops out on her forehead as she ties the tourniquet and searches the length of my arm, feeling for a wide segment of the fistula. Maybe it is the heat, maybe the pain, maybe the strain I sense from Tami, but I begin to feel nauseated. I try to hold back. Finally I mention it. She

steps across the room, gets a basin for me to hold under my chin, dampens a cloth and puts it across my forehead. She hits the nurse's buzzer, asks for a floor attendant to assist her.

The fourth needle fails, but on the fifth try the arterial needle falls in place. Now the venous needle. The attendant stands by, cooling my face and chest by wiping me with the cool cloth. She has a cup of ice which she offers me periodically. The sixth needle seems to work, but when Teri hooks it to the machine, it won't function.

At that moment, Dr. Rivers and Al Shursein, the psychology student working with the clinic, walks into the room. Teri, I can tell, is near the end of her nerve. "The fistula is out," she tells Rivers. "Won't work." Rivers looks at the arm, the tape and bandages over the five failed locations. He studies the chart for a moment, looks at the attendant and back at Teri. She stands at the end of the bed, hands on her hips. Rivers steps to the bedside, holds the chart under his arm, put his stethoscope in his ears and places the hearing device on my arm, near the elbow.

"It seems we are having some problems getting you on the machine," he says.

"Yeah. I noticed." My entire arm is beginning to pulse with the pain of the sticks. I am nauseated, on the verge of throwing up. The sheet beneath me is already soaked with sweat. It is hot. I have trouble getting a

good breath of air.

"Things have a way of working out, I guess," he says. "That probably sounds a little strange. But your fistula -- it hasn't really matured yet. It wasn't given time. Did you know that these things are supposed to have eight weeks to mature before the person is put on dialysis?"

I shake my head.

"But you didn't have that kind of time. It had one day to mature. We've known since you've gone on the machine that something like this could happen. By saying that things have a way of working out, I mean that because you are here in the hospital when this has happens, it will be easier for all of us, including you. If you had gone to the clinic today, this same thing would have happened, and it might have been very hard to deal with. But as it is, you're here in the hospital and we're equipped to deal with it."

He pauses, acts as though I should speak.

"Lucky me, huh?"

"Well, it is little hard to see the bright side of things. Let's see what we can do about this." Rivers takes his turn with the needles. He tries three more in my fistula, but none will go. He moves to my left arm, and sticks a needle into the veins in the crook of my elbow. Three times. None of them work. After six needles, he too, is dripping with sweat. He stands up. His nerve, like

Teri's, is near an end. It is not easy to hurt a patient again and again, he says.

"We'll have to do a femoral stick," he says, halfway turning to face Teri and forcing a smile. "I'll go down for the paperwork. Why don't you make Mr. McKeever as comfortable as possible and explain what we'll be doing."

"How much am I being told?"

"About what?"

"My situation...my health. Get the feeling I'm not being told everything there is to know."

"What do you want to know?"

"That's it exactly. How the hell am I supposed to know what I'm not being told when I'm not being told?"

"You want to see your chart sheets?"

"Can I?"

"Sure. Any time you want to. Can't withhold those from the patient."

"Will they tell me anything?"

"Some things. I don't know what it is you're wanting to know. It tells you how much you weigh; what medications and how much you are administered while you are on the machine. What complaints you have. But you know those things."

"What's said during the staff meetings. I guess that's it. How you people are analyzing

me."

"Well. I can tell you what is said. You can't go in to a meeting. That's not allowed. But there is no reason I can't tell you."

"Okay. Tell me."

"What was said in the meeting?"

"Yeah."

The femoral stick, I find out, involves sticking the needle into the tender flesh of the groin area, going in deeply to catch the large vein that runs inside the leg. The vein is quite large at that point, perhaps a quarter of an inch, and easy to hit. But, because it lies so deeply in the leg, it is difficult to deaden it with a local anesthetic, so there is some pain. It is also a slightly dangerous operation, because the vein is surrounded by important ligaments and muscles, and the needle could cause some temporary damage. That's why there is paperwork. I must sign a note saying I am aware of the danger and permit the operation.

"Can't we just let it go?" I ask. I am already worn out. "I can come back Friday. Then it'll be better."

"Can't do that," Teri says. "I would like that as much as you. I could've stopped a long time ago. But you really need the treatment. Delaying it two days only causes more problems."

I nod my head, sign the paper.

Shortly, Rivers and Al come back into the room.

"Ready for this?" he asks.

"Not in a bargaining position, seems like."

He smiles. "Are you too young to remember Dizzy Dean?"

"Barely."

"Dizzy Dean was a great pitcher. And then he became a great baseball announcer. I never liked baseball that much, but I liked Dizzy, and I would turn the television on just to hear him. And he summed up his old profession once during a game and I've never forgotten it. Do you know how he defined a great pitcher?"

I shake my head.

"He said that any pitcher can win on a day when he's got his good stuff. And then he said only the best pitchers can win on days they don't. They just plug along and make the best of what they do have." He pauses, looks at the faces in the room. Everyone is looking at me. "None of us have our good stuff today. You're having a bad day. Teri's having a bad day. I'm having a bad day. Even the Maytag repairman is having a bad day. They have to fly in a condenser for the air conditioner from Boston, of all places. We're all having an off day, and you're having to pay for it. All we can do is bear down."

"Okay."

"Good. Let me introduce Al." The psychologist steps to the bed. "I'm going to put the needle in your leg, and

while I do, I want you to concentrate with Al on some things. He'll be able to pull your mind away from your troubles. This may be a little painful. But I want you and Al to talk and see if you can get through this without noticing the needle at all."

Al pulls a chair up beside the bed, places a cool, firm hand on my shoulder. "Some way to meet, huh?" he says in a low, whispering, comforting voice. "Too bad we have to meet under these circumstances. I've watched you in the clinic and would like to talk to you sometime. About my program. You would be an excellent study. We'll talk soon, okay?"

"Yeah."

"But now, right now, I want you to think about this...the mind and the body are completely detached. They work under completely different rules. You know that? The body works with its rules and the mind works with rules all its own. And pain, the kind you're feeling right now, in your arm, is actually in your mind. All pain comes from the mind. If you can block your mind from feeling pain, then there is no pain. I've seen you do that in the clinic already...the needles don't seem to hurt you. Do you know why? Because you've set up the right blocks. You did that to survive. And you can do that now if you want. In order to relieve the pain. In order to miss the pain. You need to let your mind leave the room. Let it leave the room. What's your favorite place? A quiet lake, a quiet forest, a

warm bath, or maybe, today anyway, a cool bath? What's the nicest, calmest thing you can think of?"

"An answer?"

"Sure, if you have one."

"Snow skiing, I guess. Coming down the mountain alone."

"That is a nice feeling...snow skiing. Not only because of the snow and the air and the blue sky and the sound of the skis through the snow. But when we're snow skiing, we've left all our worries behind, huh? They're all back in Oklahoma, right? But on the slopes, we have no worries. So imagine that, going on the slopes, under the ski lift. Let your mind go there, where it's cool, and a nice breeze, and the snow has cleaned the air, and everything is brisk and clear. In your mind, be there, where there is no pain, where everything is free and you are coasting down the slope..."

It seems to take only a couple of seconds. Teri has to shave an area of my leg first, and then Rivers pricks a couple of times with an anesthesia needle. I really don't feel that; I think it is the razor moving across my skin. Then the plunge of the thick dialysis needle. I feel the first tug, then nothing. And then Rivers and Al are standing at the side of the bed.

"You're filtering now," Rivers says. "Hopefully, we'll never have this problem again. Teri will put the new blood in, and you get a good night's sleep, and maybe you'll feel

better in the morning, okay?"

"We'll talk sometime," Al says, and pats my shoulder before he and the doctor walk out of the room.

"Don't you love his little parables?" Teri asks when Rivers is out of the room.

"You mean about Dizzy?"

"Gives patients crap like that all the time."

"Yeah. Well. All downhill from here?"

"All of it."

"Simple, right?"

"Right. Very simple."

CHAPTER SIX

"Bad on little Sammy. Middle of high school -- all new friends, new places. Things to do. He doesn't have a lot of time to spend at home. But he feels he should spend time with me. Entertain me, or something like that. I can tell. Feels bad when he goes somewhere -- football game, maybe -- and sits with his friends instead of me."

"But you're working on the paper, right? Don't you cover the games?"

"Sure. I'm in the pressbox, or down on the field. With a camera. Funny that I feel better after the machine on Fridays. Feel good enough to go cover the games. After the machine on Mondays and Wednesdays, sometimes it's all I can do to make it home to bed. But Fridays, with something to do...anyway, I still think Sammy feels uneasy about doing things he ought to be doing."

"What makes you think it's a problem for him?"

"Isn't sure what to do. At least once a game, he'll come up to the pressbox to see if I'm feeling okay or if I need anything. I'm just

afraid he can't relax with his friends because I'm around."

"Ever think maybe he's checking on you just because you're his brother and he's concerned? Not out of a sense of obligation, but because he wants to? What if the tables were turned? Could you hang around that close to him without trying to help? Ever think maybe it's because he cares?"

"Yeah. Either that or Mother tells him to check up. It's not that I don't appreciate it. I just feel in the way. And Mother would make him do that, don't think she wouldn't. It's been the hardest part, in some ways. Moving back in. It's not really being back in the same house with my parents. It's being back in the same house with anyone. I lived seven years by myself, got used to my own schedule. Fixing a sandwich at three a.m. Playing the stereo all night. Watching television until the morning hog markets come on. Can't do that now. I need to fit my schedule around the general schedule. And it's tough...especially the way the machine throws the schedule off. Going to sleep at six o'clock when I get home from the machine. Waking up at midnight, unable to get back to sleep, unable to

prowl around the house. Sometimes I get up at midnight and sit in the living room. For six hours. Until my parents get up for breakfast. Those are not great nights."

It was my third visit to the doctor before they discovered my kidneys weren't functioning properly. Back at the beginning of August. A nurse drew some blood from the back of my wrist -- my first blood sample -- and an hour later the doctor sat down in front of me and said I should go to the hospital.

"Okay," I said. "When?"

"Right now," the doctor answered. "The blood tests show some numbers that can be dangerous. At first glance, it appears there is something wrong with kidney function. It might not be that, however. It might not be anything that serious. But we need to find out as quickly as possible."

I went straight from the doctor's office to Norman Regional Hospital. I was put in a double-occupancy room with a man named Stowe. Stowe was in his mid-30s or so; he looked much older, but I judged his wife to be in her thirties and he had two young daughters. The youngest one was just a toddler, still walking unsurely, staring wide-eyed at me as I walked to and from the bathroom. The other was about five years old. Shocking red hair, almost orange. A trait of her mother's.

Stowe had a number of visitors that first day besides his small family. People were in and out of the room all afternoon. I stayed on my side of the curtain and tried to busy myself with a couple of magazines I bought in the hospital gift shop before I went to the check-in desk. Stowe's wife stayed with him until late in the night, finally leaving after he seemed to be sleeping fitfully. I didn't sleep well. I may have gotten an hour or two of sleep all night. I had been given a strong laxative; I ran to the bathroom at 15-minute intervals for most of the night.

The next morning -- I had to go without breakfast -- Stowe's doctor showed up. I could tell Stowe was not happy to see him. He began pleading -- begging is a better word -- the instant the doctor came through the door. I was reading the morning paper, which had been brought to me by a nurse on the morning shift. But I eavesdropped on Stowe. The doctor talked quietly to him for a moment, and then Stowe began screaming and I could hear him thrashing about in his bed. The doctor ordered a nurse to go get some help, and although I stayed behind the curtain, I was aware of several people coming into the room.

I laid back on my bed. My stomach was churning against the lack of food. Stowe's struggles were making me uneasy. I wondered what was happening and I began to feel dizzy and sick.

The nurses were holding him down, but he continued to yell, demand that they let him up. Somewhere on the other side of the curtain some glass broke and one of the nurses gasped. The doctor told them to ignore it and hold onto Stowe until the sedative began to take effect. Slowly, Stowe's screams turned into sobbings, and soon he was quiet. He was still alert, but his wife stepped in the room and sat down beside him and was able to calm him further. He was crying now out of shame, mumbling to his wife that he didn't mean to do that, that he didn't mean to hit the nurse. Both she and the doctor spoke back in soothing tones, assuring him they understood, and they too wished it didn't have to be this way.

The doctor began working on Stowe in some fashion: I couldn't yet sit up: I lay with my arm over my eyes, trying to get my stomach right. But occasionally the doctor would do something that slipped through the sedative and Stowe screamed and shudder in his bed. My stomach turned again. His screams were pathetic because of the sedative. A nurse came around the curtain just as my stomach could hold the tension no longer, and although I couldn't speak, I sat up quickly and signaled for a basin. She got it under my chin just in time. I heaved and struggled, but there was nothing to come up.

"Sympathy pains," the nurse said. "I thought things were awful quite back here." She took my vital signs, asked

if I needed anything.

"Need to walk -- until they're through."

She nodded, took my arm, wrapped my robe around me, and helped me out of the room. We went the length of the hall, to the waiting room at the south end of the ward, where I sat down. It was early. The room was vacated. I asked what was happening to Stowe.

"He's been with us every so often," she said. "Diabetic. Gotten worse and worse. Not a lot we can do for him."

"But what was all that..."

"Mr. Stowe has poor circulation. Causes problems with his feet. They fill with a fluid during the night; The doctor has to come in every morning and cut the sores open, drain the fluid..."

I waved her off. My stomach tightened against the impossible pain. "Every day?" I asked.

"Yes. He knows, too, that's what is so bad. Begins anticipating it when he first wakes up. Always refuses breakfast, always begins screaming when the first person enters the room in the morning, whether its the doctor or not."

"Why?"

"He's blind. Diabetes caused that too. He can't see what's going on. I think that increases the anticipation, the dread."

I sat for some time. The nurse sat with me. Outside,

traffic was streaming up the four-lane toward the university. A clatter came up the hall -- someone was stacking breakfast trays. I hadn't eaten for twenty-four hours. I was not at all hungry.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Marla is leaning over my chair, hands clasped behind her, lab coat drooping toward me when I awaken from a light sleep in the clinic. She is smiling mischievously.

"A person to see you," she says. "Claims he's looking for Dipshit. Know anything about it?"

I close my eyes and groan. "Yeah. Afraid so."

Marla moves to the side, amused. Behind her stands Lonnie Nocks, alias Stiff, rocking back on the heels of his cowboy boots, puffing a cigarette, hands in his back pockets, smiling broadly with the fake teeth he had surgically implanted after a Angus heifer kicked him in the mouth at the Pontotoc County Fair.

"Hi, Dipperoo," he says, waking everyone in the clinic and leaning over to shake the index finger of my right hand, eyeing the needles and hoses taped to my arm. "Told me you was sick, but I gotta tell you, you don't look well at all. Going pretty fast, huh?"

"What're you doing here?"

"On business. Oil man now." Still grinning, he reaches for his wallet, pulls out a business card and drops it in my lap. "I'm in big bidness these days. Thought I'd take a few minutes off and cheer you up."

Marla drags one of the stools over, offers it to Stiff. He salutes, sits down. "Thanks, Miss Nurse."

"Most welcome," Marla says. Then she puts on a serious face. "We've heard about you, by the way."

"Aw, don't worry about that. Dip here, biggest liar in the state. Chronic-type, you understand. Can't believe a word he says. And what's your name, Miss Nurse?"

"Marla."

"Marla? Glad to meet you, Marla. Name's Lonnell Agnes Nocks. Mama wanted a girl. But friends call me Stiff."

"So I hear," Marla says, still amused, and walks away.

"Good woman," Stiff says, turning back to me. "Don't find many like her these days. What you think, Dip?"

"Yeah. She's nice."

"You like her? Got something going, right?"

"No, stupid. She's my nurse. And married."

"Oh right. Like that's a big hurdle for you."

"I don't mess with married women."

"Sure you don't. And I don't jackoff on winter nights. What about Cyndy? And Donna? And Donna the Second? And let's see..."

"Don't mess with them anymore."

"There you go, Dip. Talking all out your head. What, you get sick and get religion at the same time? Damn, Dip, you don't look good at all. Thin, white. Should've stuck with me. Know the cure for all this."

"What?"

"Alcohol, Dip. Alcohol. I knew you was sick when you

stopped drinking. Remember? I said last winter you must be sick when you wouldn't even take a drink with me."

"Yeah. I remember."

"Said right then 'Any man won't go drinking with his best buddy has got to be sick.' Remember me saying that?"

"Yeah."

"And here you are. Sick. Big-time, too. Which brings me to the reason I stopped. Dip, all serious now...are you dying?"

"No. I'm not. Sometimes I think I am. Sorry to disappoint you, but my chances are good. Probably live another 40 years."

"That's good, that's real good. Really. I'm glad to hear that. But just in case -- you know -- you have a relapse or something. If something like that happens, can I have your guns?" Stiff leans back on his stool, blows a stream of smoke toward the ceiling, laughs loudly.

"You're an asshole," I say, laughing too. "You bet your left nut you can't have my guns no matter what happens."

"Now Dipper, don't be pissed. It's a sensitive issue, I know. But we're friends. We should be able to talk about this."

Stiff gets serious for a few minutes, acts like a normal visitor, looking around the room, asking questions

about the machine, the needles. But it doesn't last. Marla walks by and he livens up.

"Miss Nurse -- I mean 'Marla' -- you got something big to do right now?"

"Big? I was just filling some dialysate jugs."

"Can that wait? Need your attention here." Stiff gets up and drags another stool over to my chair. "Here. Sit. It's important. About this patient here." Marla, smiling and unsure, sits down warily on the stool. "Dip and me, we went to college together. You know that?"

"I've been told."

"Good, good. And did Dip tell you how we used to party and drink and chase women and all that?"

"A little, I think."

"And did he tell you I worked as his agent? No? Dip Shit here is really bashful. Shy. Terrible case of it. You've noticed?"

"Ummm, not really."

"Well he is. And I had to be his agent. In bars, he would find a girl he liked and then I had to go over and explain the situation to her."

"Don't do it, Stiff," I say, sitting up some in my chair.

Stiff pulled another cigarette out. "Smoke?" he asks Marla.

"I don't," she says.

"Neither does Dip...wouldn't be surprised if you're not sick too within the month. I mean look at me. I smoke, drink, cuss, everything. And I'm the picture of health, huh?"

"You want the truth?" Marla asks.

"Hey, looks can be deceiving. Anyway, I need to tell you something about the Dip."

"Don't listen to him," I say. Marla smiles, winks at me while Stiff lights his cigarette.

"Yes?" she asks.

"Dip...well, he's attracted to you. Aw, to hell with the chit-chat. He wants your body. Big-time he does. He told me so just a minute ago when you walked by."

"Shut up," I plead, completely embarrassed now.

"It that so?" she says, enjoying my embarrassment.

"Right. Said he dreams of going to bed with you. You know, the long legs. And your ears. Dip wants your ears. He always was kind of weird that way."

Marla reaches over and pats Stiff on the knee. "You know, I've been sort of suspecting all this," she says in a quiet, confidential tone.

"Of course you have. Can't hide those kind of vibes. Thought I'd just clear the air a bit. You know, as a friend. So...what do you think?"

"About what?" Marla asks.

"About Dip here. Can you help him out?

"Well, I am married. And I am his nurse. Sort of an

office situation, you see. We aren't supposed to have office relationships."

"Hey, I work in an office. With married women. And they bed me. So what's the difference?"

"Personal, I guess."

"Now don't be hasty. Take your time. Dip doesn't need an answer now...by the way, you know how he got his name, "Dip Shit?"

"I suppose I don't."

"One day our boss brought me into this office and showed me this guy. And the boss said, 'Lonnie, you'll be working for this guy, Matt McKeever. Matt, this is Lonnie Nocks.' And I looked at my boss and said, 'But this guy looks like a Dip Shit.' That's the story."

"Yeah," I say. "That's how it happened."

"Now," Stiff says, "you want to know why they call me 'Stiff?'"

"I don't think so," Marla says, smiling and standing quickly. "Thanks the same. Need to get back to those dialysate jugs," she says, retreating across the room.

"Sure," Stiff says. "Nice chatting."

"Still an asshole, huh?" I ask. "Just had to do that, right?"

Stiff leans back on his stool, sends some more smoke toward the ceiling. "You're all set up, Dipperoo. Inside a week, I bet. She wants you. Can tell by the gleam in her

eye."

"Sure."

"Ain't you gonna thank me? Hey, I don't agent for just anybody. And Marla's pretty prime, if you ask me."

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it. Now let's blow this place and go get a beer."

"Can't do it, Stiff."

"You're a sick man, Dip."

CHAPTER EIGHT

All the McKeever males have claustrophobia. Sammy may be an exception. It seems to grow on us. My grandfather and my great-grandfather had it. My father has it. I am only beginning to feel the first twinges of it. Father cannot ride in a two-door car unless he is driving. He cannot sleep with his bedroom door closed; he showers with the curtain pulled back. It is difficult for him to crawl under a car to change the oil. And he hates to watch me tied down in the dialysis chair, strapped by the hoses and tape.

When I was fourteen years old, the pipe tobacco, the unfiltered cigarettes, and the long, green cigars finally caught up with my great-grandfather. His problems started with a mild heart attack one afternoon when he reached to hang up his saw in his carpenter's shop. He was seventy-four at the time. He was hospitalized for the pain, and there they found he had a congested heart and lungs. They put him on oxygen. They ran a tube down his nose to pull some of the fluid from his lungs. They gave him a temporary heart monitor to insure his heart would continue to beat.

It happened in June, and as soon as my father got off work that Friday, my family made the two-hour trip to Bowie, Texas. We were the last of the family to arrive. The first

time I got to go to the hospital to see my great-grandfather was on Sunday afternoon. He was listed as critical; no children allowed. But we had to leave that evening so Father could go back to work Monday morning. The floor's head nurse made an exception: but only one child could be in the room at a time. My parents stayed in the room, and we waited quietly in the hall while we were called in one at a time. I deliberately got to the end of the line. My older sister went first, then my younger sister, and then Sammy.

I waited, aware of the sterile silence of the hospital. Above me a fluorescent light hummed lightly: inside the room I could hear quiet murmurs and an occasional weak cough from my great-grandfather. In the distance, in some other hallway, a squeaky cart was pushed along the tile floor.

It came my turn. My great-grandfather was never a husky man. As far back as I can remember, he was slim and muscular, an oddity among the McKeevers. Both my father and my grandfather weighed nearly 250 pounds. But my great-grandfather was much smaller, much shorter, but with a fiery disposition I had only seen once or twice. I heard tales of his quick temper recounted many times. He was the last of the McKeevers to grow up uneducated, had never attended one day of school, had worked in the hot sun of California and then Texas to keep himself fed and clothed. He left his family at age twelve, having locked horns with an equally

stubborn father over some trifle, and did not see his parents again for twenty-two years, when he had to hitch-hike almost 2,000 miles from California to attend his sister's funeral.

He never seemed a small man to me. When I was six years old, he spent an entire week in my backyard, teaching me how to hold a baseball with three fingers instead of two. It gives more control, he said. I had a difficult time at first, but before the week was out, I was throwing the ball harder and more accurately. He taught me to step forward to pull the ball with the bat, taught there is no greater disgrace on this earth than to let a ground ball go through my legs. On rainy days, he sat at the kitchen table and defeated all comers at his checker board. Sometimes the rest of the family would league up and play him by committee, but he was always several moves ahead, always setting traps, always smiling and slapping his leg when we fell into his game plan.

When we played alone, he reached over and slapped the top of my head, sometimes harder than I thought he should, and tell me to concentrate on the game. One does not merely play to be playing, he said. One plays to win. And even the greatest athletes have to concentrate absolutely in order to win. Without concentration, without thinking, you are beaten before you start.

I buckled down to the game, think harder, harder,

discover moves I had not seen, and finally move a piece. His hand would likely as not come down on my head: concentrate.

"And your job? How's it go?"

"Nice. I do what I feel up to doing. Cover the sports, the football, and do some desk copy. Work Monday morning, most of Tuesday, Wednesday morning. Then I'm off until Friday's football game. Might get in more hours when basketball starts."

"Never tires you out? Puts any stress on you?"

"Not really. Sometimes it's hard to get off the machine and travel two hours to cover football on Friday. But I enjoy that part of it. Would probably make the games even it I wasn't working."

"What -- did they advertise for a job? That how you heard about it?"

"No -- the editor called me one day. Said he understood I had been a newswriter for a few years and now I was home with this problem. Wanted to know if I had any spare time and needed some work."

"This editor knew you?"

"Not really. I knew him, could put his name

and face together. But he probably didn't know me that well. Just knew I was in town. Somehow the paper got a story that I was sick and moving back to Marston."

"So he came after you?"

"The interesting thing is the guy who had been the primary writer for about twenty years moved out of town the same week I moved back. This has helped him as much as it's helped me. Been a good arrangement for both of us, I think. Least that's what he says."

"And your friend? Stiff? Did he stay around long?"

"Oh. No -- lives in Oklahoma City. Sorry about all that. The guy can be a little embarrassing, huh?"

"What do you mean?"

"That business about being my agent. Sorry about that."

"Well, I'm not."

"How's that?"

"You're not the only one around here with fantasies, you know."

There was an old black-and-white Zenith in his living room, and on Sunday afternoons in the wintertime, it was turned to the football games. My great-grandfather was an

avid watcher, continually coached from his easy chair, berated players for fumbling or dropping a pass or missing a tackle. But football, he said, was not a true sport. Bigger men and faster men have an advantage. Football, he pointed out, is designed so the bigger, faster players can't be beat. "The game will never get better," he said. "The players will only get bigger."

It is too physical a game to be a sport, he said. A sport must be a game that forces the player to react quickly with his body and quickly with his mind. The mind is not engaged enough in football. "You can engage your mind," he said, "but a superior mind cannot compete with a superior body on the football field. That's a flaw."

Baseball, he said, holding up a finger, is the perfect sport. If the most talented player in the world leaves his brain at home for one day, he will be beaten. The game requires both dimensions: baseball trains the body and the mind. With that said, he sat back in his chair and berate the football players.

In the world -- and he reached up to slap me on the head if I was close enough to him or to shake his finger at me if I was not -- you will defeat more people with a nimble mind than a nimble body. Always, always be ready to act. But more than that, always be thinking. Don't be ready to think: be thinking.

To me, my great-grandfather was a big man. But that

day, when I walked into the hospital room, he seemed all but vanished under the bedsheets. Where the lump of his body should have been, there seemed nothing more than a few wrinkles in his blanket. The sheet was pulled up to his armpits, and his head, propped up on the pillow -- an oxygen mask covering most of his face and the hose pulled from his nose -- seemed to dwarf his neck and shoulder and the wispy, wrong-colored arms that lay over the white sheet.

My parents were on the other side of the bed, in front of the window, Mother with her hands clasped in front of her lap, Father with his hands in his pockets. "Matty," my great-grandfather said, holding up his nearest hand. I reached ot for it with both hands, startled when I touched it. His hand was icy, discolored, but more than that it was soft, almost silky. At first I thought it was wet, but I realized I was confused by the smoothness and coldness. It wasn't the hand of my great-grandfather; not the rough, large hand that clipped the hedges, sanded down the window screens, popped me on the head, framed my face while he playfully rubbed his staunch whiskers on my nose many years before.

It was a sick hand; it felt as though it did not weigh anything, that it was free of gravity, unloosed from my great-grandfather somehow. I wished to put it away, to drop the hand, to wipe my hands on my dress slacks Mother insisted I wear to the hospital. But I could not get

rid of it, for the longer fingers closed around mine.

"Your daddy tells me you knocked one out," he said, his eyes closed but his face turned toward me.

"Yes sir. It would've hit the windshield of our pickup but Father caught it with his bare hand." He swallowed very hard, struggling against the hose, and I was not sure he heard me. He was silent for some time, and I looked up at Father. Father was turned toward the bed, but his head was turned away: he was looking out the window.

"Don't become a home run hitter," my great-grandfather finally said. He paused again, for a long time. "It's not how far you hit it, but how hard. Hit it hard and let it be." He quit talking again, and I could tell from the way his expression dissolved from his face and how his fingers relaxed against mine that he had gone to sleep. I took the silk hand and placed it back on the sheet and my parents and I stepped out of the room.

My sisters and Sammy had already gone to the car, where Sammy and Carrie were fighting over who would ride in the front seat. Sandi, the oldest, was refereeing the argument. I was sobered by the weakness of my great-grandfather and I walked slowly in front of my parents.

"Never let them do that," my father said. "All those tubes, machines -- I never want that."

"But it's temporary," Mother said. "He'll be better."

"No," Father said. "I don't think so. No fight. Who could, tied down like that?"

For Father, it was the sense of claustrophobia that repulsed him most. He couldn't bear to think of himself strapped down and unable to move. And that's why he doesn't stay long in the dialysis unit, why he goes to fill up the car or take a walk along the street. I am beginning to understand that.

Back in the car, Sammy got the front seat and Carrie was forced to sit between Sandi and me, and the drive back to my grandfather's house was silent, humid, electric. I heard the kitchen conversations that morning: the children were carted to the hospital because great-grandfather asked for them and because his chances were not good for surviving the week. Mother sighed in the front seat, said something to Father, her voice articifial, light. Father simply nodded. Sammy, only five years old, turned around to look at me, surprised to find me with silent tears rolling from my eyes. I turned my head to watch the Bowie grade school slide past my window.

Aunt Jean stood on the back porch when our car pulled to the curb. Her arms were folded, her back erect. I could feel Father's fear as he got out of the car and stepped quickly to my aunt. I heard all I needed. My uncle had just called from the hospital. My great-grandfather was dead, had expired without pain. Jean said it: "He went peacefully." The family gathered around the kitchen table. My Uncle Frank arrived, one of my great-grandfather's two

sons, and led a prayer for his father. Uncle Frank, a great uncle, actually, was a preacher from northern California. He inherited my great-grandfather's temper: for a preacher, he told exciting stories. A visit from Uncle Frank was the highlight of any summer: his tears during that prayer were as foreign to me as mine had been to Sammy.

CHAPTER NINE

Leaves makes a sound when they leave the tree. I've never noticed before. In autumn. When the leaf breaks loose and falls to the ground, there is a definite sound, a definite "pop" when leaf and tree disengage. I am familiar with the sound of a dead leaf falling through the other leaves, snapping and rattling as it falls to the ground. And the sound when something steps on a dead leaf -- snapping and crackling. But this is a different sound: it comes from the treetops. A popping, a disengaging, all around me.

We started this morning at 4:30, three hours before sunlight. Woody and I stepped from the pickup into the darkness, clothed against the chill of October and the threat of rain from low clouds. We walked over a mile through grasping lovegrass to reach our deer blinds. I sit in mine, a couple of two-by-fours hammered into the fork of an oak tree, eight feet above the ground. I have sat in a similar deer blind for each of the past nine seasons: sometimes only a couple of trees down this same creekbed, sometimes in trees four hundred miles distant. I know the silence of the pre-dawn.

But never has the forest been so still. It is the clouds, I think. They have settled down to the very tops of the trees, silently rolling, wisping southward, dark and

foreboding. On other mornings a harvest moon hung low in the west, spreading its orange light in long shadows through the forest. Or -- other mornings -- stars shined, providing at least their pinpoint of light, providing at least a backdrop against the forest's upper branches, and from the blind I looked up and became dwarfed by the openness and the range of the sky. Other mornings I sat under open space. But this morning the clouds.

The clouds press down upon me, silently whisking southward, and they compress my world. They blanket the forest in a darkness I have never met. I am alone in the forest, sitting in my blind eight feet above the ground, two hours before the dawn. There is no breeze, no movement of air. Silence. Except, after long moments in which only my blood pumps through my ears, a single pop, a disengagement, from above my head. At first, it thwarts any recognition.

> **"Exactly the opposite. I think about it -- most -- when there is no crisis. Not linked to that at all. That's the scary part, maybe...that it only comes into focus when I'm looking at things in the most calculated sense."**
>
> "Everybody probably considers it a reasonable thing at some time or another. Right? But when you're not in that mood -- so rational, as you say -- when you're thinking on a normal level, what's your attitude then?"

"Just another option. No emotion at all. Comes to this: do I want to put up with this from now on? Remember the guy named Stowe I told you about? In the hospital?"

"The diabetic? You've told me a little."

"Second night in the hospital...after I talk with my doctor, Stowe asks me if I have kidney trouble, too. Really scared me. He was putting me in the same boat with him...and he was in too much pain, as far as I was concerned. We talked a long time. He had come to the hospital to die. Said if the next two years were going to be like the last two, he didn't want to go through it. I didn't understand."

"Why he wouldn't want to live?"

"Yeah. Didn't know what pain was like. Didn't know...about all this. Stowe -- he was a really intelligent man -- said he was scared to die, but more scared to live. Didn't know what death was like, but knew...well. An option. That's all. Death, when I'm looking at it rationally, is just another option. To avoid all this. Do I want to put up with all this? Come to an end like Stowe? Where the only thing to look forward to is pain?"

"But is that all there is? Ever?"

"For Stowe, yeah. I think so. Started crying at night, at suppertime, because he knew what he'd wake up to. Cutting the bottom of his feet. Squeezing out the juice or stuff. Too deep to deaden with needles. Every drink, everything he put in his mouth, made him think of it. Got up one night to get a drink and asked Stowe if he wanted one. Know what he said? 'No, it swells my feet.' It ruled everything. Pain was all to Stowe."

Against the rushing in my ears, against the silence of the clouds, it is difficult to breathe; there is such stillness. Against that stillness, I hear the leaves. Popping. I am hemmed in on the north and west by an impenetrable block of blackberry vines. They have run amok, the superior species in this slough of forest, smothering out four or five acres of their own in the midst of blackjack and oak trees. The vines run up all the trees, run across the ground, run back against each other. They soar, on their own, sometimes twenty feet into the air. The trees in their midst have all died; the blackberries choked them. They set root into the fertile, crushed ground against the creekbed and sucked all the water into their own thriving systems, flourished, climbed through the branches of the trees and covered them in their greenness. The trees, with roots running deep beneath the creek bed,

managed to find their own water, but they could not race quickly enough for sunlight. The blackberries, with their broad, sticky, thick leaves, choked them off.

The vineyards have built a dark, mysterious place, a maze, a torturous labyrinth in the guts of the forest. One afternoon Woody and I brought machetes, bladed our way into the edged of the maze. It was slow work, and the sharp, curve thorns slashed back and shortened our ambition. But we pushed in far enough. We found what we expected. Inside, a mass highway system for deer. Everywhere, tracks. Small, surprisingly small, paths, well-trampled. The vines, pushed aside years ago by deer, re-routed and built domes over the pathway. Deer move silently through the blackberry maze, completely protected from outside.

"And you think you'll come to that?"

"Don't you? These others. What about them? Barney, Jessie, Mrs. Hickerson, Edith, Ida. Stowe is in each of them. You think?"

"I don't think all they look forward to is pain, if that's what you mean. Jessie goes square dancing every Friday night. He measures his week by it. Still runs the farm, feeds his animals, gets to the lake sometimes. And Ida and Edith, they have families to enjoy. They live through them, I suspect. That's what they look forward to -- seeing grandchildren and nieces and

nephews. Barney -- you may have me there. But even Barney must have something else to look forward to, even if it's just cussing the nurses."

"Lives for the minute, then."

"They all...have something to talk about."

"Sure. When they're here, on the machine, they talk about something else. But when they are away...you should go home with them. When they are away from the machine, they're not really away. They dread it. It dominates."

I sit in the elm against the perimeter of the blackberries. The vines run up the trunk of my tree. I cut them away from my seat, twist them until they crackle in the darkness. They are choking this tree off. A year, or two, or three. One good rainy season and the vines will crawl to its heights, wrap around it, and choke it down.

The deer neither eat nor drink inside the vines. They must go out for that. They go out under the cover of dark, return sometime in the early morning. Through the predawn, under clouds that seem to wisp against my very face, through darkness I no longer struggle against, I wait.

"Easy to slide into that without ever knowing it. Sneaky, I think. Not sure I'm not already there -- where I only look forward to pain, to coming back here. Needles, cramps, vomiting, and

> the headaches. It lasts, sometimes, all night. Sometimes, until the next session. I live for the moment the headache turns off. It's going to be there. I don't have to worry about that. Instead, I worry about when it's not there. And when I am clear-headed, all I do is calculate how long I have until the next session and the next headache. You see? I have to line up my options against that."

Peculiar morning. I sit on my boards, the bow resting in my lap, two arrows leaned against a branch in easy reaching distance. I cannot see them. There is no light. And there is no wind, no movement. Everything is still. I shift my weight and my fistula, where the vein crosses over the wristbone, comes to rest against my coat sleeve. I can hear the thumping of the fistula against the coat. The pain of my wrist vanished long ago. Now it is only the sound of the fistula, my heartbeat hidden by a thin shield of skin along my wrist, that recalls the pain. At night, I am awakened by the thump of my wrist against my pillow. On a quiet bench in a shopping mall, my wrist pumps against a page of the newspaper and I have to explain the sound to the lady sitting beside me. And now, in the darkness of the deer blind, the fistula awakens me again.

This is not a

dialysis day. This is Sunday morning, an hour before the

dawn. The machine is not until Monday afternoon. In the dark, I dimly hear my heart through my wrist. It is a comfort because today is Sunday. Not Monday. Or Wednesday or Friday.

The popping, which came so rarely until now, captures my attention. It is heavy now. In front of me, behind me, above me. At first there were only single pops and I thought them to be lone raindrops against the tired October leaves. Each was rare enough to have its own personality. But the popping increases; it is not rain. I suspect movement on the forest floor, eight feet below me. I tighten my grip on my bow.

> **"But you do enjoy yourself? There are things to do? Covering ball games; hunting, fishing? Isn't there a quality to all of that?"**
>
> "Can't deny that. There are times when I feel better about life than I ever have. I know how much this is changing me. I see things differently. How important some people are to me. The whole situation -- getting sick, the machine. It really does give a focus to things."

The popping increases. Pops, quick, stunning, gone. I eliminate sounds of falling leaves, of them knocking against other leaves, of rustling and rattling, of hitting the dry bed of leaves on the ground. The popping comes from

every direction. It cannot be deer, or anything stepping against leaves on the ground. I think again it must be rain. The low clouds bring a few drops with them. Finally, a pop, close by, above my head, and a leaf comes rattling down against my shoulders. I suspect now. I suspect the sound is the disengaging. The leaves. They say goodbye.

> **"Is this -- the others -- the best argument you have against suicide?"**
>
> **"No. Just one. There are others. The best argument is that I am the same as healthy people. They have suicidal thoughts, too. I have no doubt. So, really, the machine becomes a lame excuse for suicide. The machine cannot be an excuse. Not a good one. I think you have to commit suicide when there is absolutely no excuse. No reason, nothing other people could blame it on. Then suicide would work. It would have its mystery. I think people who commit suicide want that. A final mystery. It is a way of gaining the attention they crave. If people can't figure out an excuse...but if there is an excuse, like mine, like the machine, then it's really no mystery. Right? Suicide has no effect."**

Now come other sounds. The dawn is not far away,

but it will be slowed by the clouds. I hear some deer, more than one, slip into the dark vines behind me. I hear them from a distance, moving steadily, a comfortable pace. The noise moves until it is upon me, can only be the hooves of deer heavy on ground; the deer are loud, almost crashing in the dark. The tiny popping amplifies their passing. Then they are gone, disappeared, moving silently away through their vineyard paths. A rodent -- possum, skunk, raccoon -- slips down the winding creekbed. It rustles loudly, meanders from side to side. It comes immediately below me; I think it may climb into my tree. But it ambles off around the edge of the blackberries.

The popping, though, doesn't come nearer nor pull away. It increases steadily, and the falling sound of leaves begins to drown out the quieter symptoms of the forest. Day breaks, not with the flambuoyant colors of an October dawn, but with the creeping, indiscernible waking greyness of a dawn filtered through rolling clouds. Still there is no wind.

> **"So being ill is keeping you alive?"**
>
> **"Why not? I can't really measure it, but I was probably closer to suicide before I got sick. Now I'm different; my body is different. It's given me a different mind. I think differently. I used to think...like you do. I don't now. Death is not such a bad alternative. It is, for**

Stowe, and for me, maybe, a preferable one. And even, I guess, if people blame it on an obvious excuse, like I've been saying. Because that's not the deal at all. It's not the disease that leads somebody to it. It's pain. And I've figured out I can handle the pain of the machine. The cramps and everything. But there is some other measurement for pain -- on a mental or emotional level. Not so much a measure of how much pain there is, but how little other there is. Relativeness, you know. We endure as long as there is something to endure for. Barney. In pain all the time. But something else measures in. Balances. Pushes pain aside. Pain is overbearing when there is nothing else. You use whatever alternative to pain you have, no matter what level you're talking about and no matter what degree of pain. When the only alternative to pain is death, you use it. Rightfully, too. See? You don't think that way at all."

Fifteen minutes into daylight. Then thirty. The softness, dampness, of the night air wears off, despite the clouds. And with the dryness, as if on some kind of cue, the popping multiplies along the creek bank. The oak trees, in unison, give up their leaves. In the absence of a breeze, the popping becomes a symphony of sound, all around.

It is a wonder of sound. It is the same sound some people make by thumping their hollow cheeck with their middle finger. A pronounced pop. Multiplied a million times. The leaves fall like a brown snowstorm. For an hour, I sit in the fork of my tree, isolated, motionless, warmed by the air beneath the blanket of clouds, and watch and hear the leaves fall.

Another hour, and I see Woody slipping along the trees at the rim of the draw. He walks slowly, head down, looking for fresh tracks, fresh sign. I stay motionless, knowing any of his steps could flush a deer directly toward me. He circles, with such a possibility in mind. He narrows his arc, comes closer, closer. He is only twenty yards away. We look at each other, but do not speak. It is a social law I find hard to break. Remaining silent. There is still scrub brush between us. He walks directly to the base of my tree. Still, neither of us have spoken. He is below me, only two feet from my tree. I remain still. He reaches in his pocket, lights a cigarette. The alert time has passed. He looks up at me. I stand and stretch my legs for the fist time in four hours. He stamps out the match, pulls on the cigarette, exhales, and speaks.

"You hear these leaves?"

PART TWO

THE MONKEY MURDERS

"When you think to take determination of your fate into your own hands, that is the moment you can be crushed. Be cautious. Allow for surprises. When we create, there are always other forces at work."

Darwi Odrade --

from Chapterhouse Dune, by Frank Herbert

CHAPTER TEN

"They won't come down. Three days now."

Crafton glances at me with a wry grin. He tilts his head back up, stares at the four monkeys huddled together in the cage's highest branches. "Say one's missing?"

"Yeah...Rebecca. Mother of the two youngest." Crafton doesn't reply, grinds out a discarded cigarette butt with a toe of his brown oxford. "Either she escaped or the killers took her...can't imagine what they'd want with her."

"Maybe they're perverts."

"No doubt about that."

Crafton chuckles in his patent style, his shoulders hopping curiously up and down, any sound smothered into the depths of his chest and smoke-riddled lungs. He was my managing editor when I worked in Lawton. Since I left with my illness, a year ago last month, he'd moved to Dallas, serving as a feature writer for one of the two major dailies in the Metroplex. He seems unchanged, except for more gray hair, a few wrinkles along the forehead. And a better brand of clothing.

"So these little buggers are the only survivors," he says, watching the chimps. "And they won't move. What, shock or something?"

"I guess. Too human, huh? Won't respond. Won't come down to eat. Won't make eye contact with anyone, inside or

out. Just hug each other. Only time they move is when someone tries to catch them." Crafton winces, shields his eyes from the sun with one hand, fumbles in his shirt pocket for yet another unfiltered Camel. "They're quiet now," I say. "But what a racket, when someone starts up those limbs."

"How _are_ they going to catch them?" Crafton asks. "When they move them to the university, I mean. For observation." He pulls his gaze down, lights a cigarette, turns his back on the cage and looks out over the park's playground.

"Simple enough. Same way the murderers did. At night. With a bright spotlight. Paralyzes them or something. Turns them docile, easy to catch." I look around the monkey cage. There are twenty or so people milling about, most of them either police or media people. The _Monkey Murders, Day Three_, remains a big story. "Still," I say, "I wouldn't miss it."

"Nor I," Crafton says.

Three mornings before, the dawn softened momentarily by the settling dew of mid-August, I was called to the telephone by my mother. The kitchen was bright; Father was still spooning a bowl of bran flakes and waiting on the car pool. Austen Samson, my editor, was on the phone.

"Got a camera?" he asked. I did. "Get to Murray Park then," he said. "The monkey cage -- something's happening.

Police scanner's going crazy."

I pulled on yesterday's jeans, yanked a shirt out of the closet, looked around the kitchen for an extra roll of film. I arrived at the park unshaven and unshowered. The parking lot beside the monkey cage was roped off and several law enforcement vehicles were parked nearby. I identified two city units, a car from the sheriff's office, the County Game Warden's pickup, and an Oklahoma Highway Patrol car.

I drove past the lot and parked in front of Murray Lodge, well up the hill from the cage. I trotted down the incline, my camera swinging from its shoulder strap. Zeke Anderson, the game warden, stood on the roadside, prompting the morning traffice along Country Club Road.

"Fatality?" I asked as I stepped past.

Anderson let out a short grunt. "Yeah -- or sorts. Weird. Monkey carnage. Some goon with a baseball bat."

"You're kidding."

"Me?" Anderson grinned, waved a couple of curious drivers along. "Hope you brought color film. Someone don't like monkeys. Big time."

I hurried down. The monkey cage -- a pit, actually -- is situated in the middle of the park. The kiddie-land train tracks run within eight feet of it on the west side. There are steps and viewing platforms on the east side. The monkeys were a big attraction. Even during the winter, it was rare to drive past when there weren't at least three or

four cars parked in front, parents hoisting their children up so they could watch the chimps and throw bits of food to them.

The pit is about twenty feet deep and has walls extending about four feet above ground. There is a layer of cyclone fence which extends from the walls and angles up to form a dome over the pit. The dome is supported in the middle by a large wooden pole, which has several branches extending from it for the monkeys to climb and swing on.

About three feet inside the first layer of fencing is another layer, which creates a dead space and prevents the monkeys from reaching up and grabbing a viewer. The monkeys could climb up the wooden pole and then swing, upside-down, out on the interior fencing so they could come face-to-face with anyone watching. People tossed peanuts, popcorn, raisins, bread. A scrap of food rarely hit the floor of the pen. The monkeys were quick-handed.

On drunken college weekends, some years before, friends and I stood on the viewing platform at 2 a.m. in the morning, trying to throw bottle caps past the monkeys. No use.

But someone had tired of such sport.

"You ain't had breakfast?" Police Chief Fred Michaels asked when I walked up to the south entry of the pit. I shook my head. "Good, 'cause you'd just lose it." Michaels, always snappily dressed and appointed when I saw

him in his office or when he stopped by the news office, appeared tired and hollow under the steep shadows of the park's towering cottonwoods. "C'mon," he said, turning into the short, stone corridor which led to the pit floor. "But hold your nose."

The stench hit me first, just a half-breath before the vision of the four chimp bodies lying near the west wall of the pit. The morning breeze slipped down, swirled around the pit and pressed its way out through the corridor, carrying the hot tang of chimp urine and the rich, jarring scent of spoiled blood. The odor carried a sense of heaviness, as though it had to struggle off the concrete and up the front of my shirt before it crawled into my nose and mouth and came to rest like thick, curdled milk at the back of my tongue. Its strength pressed me against the pit wall, just inside the door. I stood there, paralyzed by the stench and the sight of the sprawled bodies -- the black, glistening pools of blood caked beneath the skulls.

"Someone went ape-shit," Michaels said. "Pardon the pun. Putrid, huh? Heat ain't helping any."

"Geezus," I said with only half a voice. The chimps -- large chimps -- looked nearly human on the concrete floor, their limbs flung out in a slumbering fashion. I didn't remember them being so big. "What idiot..."

"No idiot," Michaels interrupted. "These guys had it all planned out...that's what scares me."

Michaels beat me to the scene by only twenty minutes, but he had already developed a reasonable scenario of the crime. He suspected the intruders came to the pit sometime after 3 a.m., after the bars closed and the late-night traffic along Country Club Road died down. Michaels had his reasons for believing there were more than one -- possibly as many as four -- but he wouldn't let me note that. "Conjecture," he said. "You don't want to write no conjectures."

But he had more.

"They must have had a flashlight of some kind...a powerful one," he said, looking up at the rim of the pit where several people were now gathered, alternately pointing at the dead monkeys and the survivors. "First of all, these monkeys were killed by a heavy instrument, and they're too damned fast for anyone to land a good, solid blow...they must have been stunned. By a light."

"Like spot-lighting deer?" I asked.

"Yeah. Zeke thought of that. It'd be somebody who knows that effect." Michaels looked through the corridor. "Jake!" he called. "When we get back, check our list of spot-lighters."

Jake, standing just outside the pit door with two other officers, nodded.

"Besides," Michaels said, "this monkey was struck right about here." He toed a spot on the pit floor. "You can

tell by the pattern of the blood spray. And the street light," he added, bending over to bring his head to within three or four feet of the floor, "doesn't reach this far down. They needed a different light." I didn't double-check Michaels' angles, kept my head as far above the concrete and the smell as possible.

Armed with the light, the Monkey Murderers, as the national press was quick to tab them, lured the monkeys down to the pit's floor with cans of Vienna sausages and Planter's roasted peanuts. The older, larger monkeys received the killing blows, either because they were especially targeted by the intruders or because they were more accustomed to food handouts and were easier to coax down from the branches. Michaels endorsed the latter theory, which would gain more favor later. "The bigger the bolder," the chimp experts agreed.

At any rate, when one of the chimps reached the floor, the attackers set a parcel of food on the concrete. The monkey approached the food, and when it was in position, the light was shined in its face, throwing it into a trance. One of the attackers slipped behind the monkey and clubbed it in the back of the skull. Crack.

Four cracks. Four dead monkeys.

The incident was discovered shortly after 6 a.m. when a member of a sanitation crew approached the cage to drop a few slices of bread to the chimps. When I arrived, nothing had

been touched. There were sausage cans lying about in the cage. A shattered peanut jar.

"Viennas and peanuts," Michaels muttered. "Strange combination." He spoke again through the corridor: "Danny -- check those labels and see if we can figure out where they were bought. And get around to the stores, some cashier may remember punching these items."

Danny, beside Jake, nodded.

Michaels walked over to some graffiti written on the east wall. "And this is scary," he said. "Look here, the lettering is about as wide as a finger, but no finger prints." He turned and looked at me, his eyes turning cold and narrow between his gray temples. "Bastards thought to bring a rubber glove so they could write with monkey blood. Nice touch. Really scary...they been thinking this up for months."

The message, written in surprisingly legible strokes, read:

'1st MonKeys

The NiGGer is NexT !"

"I wonder who they mean by that?" I asked, almost rhetorically while I studied the letters. Michaels' answer was chilling.

"Me, I suppose."

The chimps' caretaker showed up while I clicked some shots of the corpses. He was an old man with an uncontrolled mat of white whiskers and an ancient, faded engineer's cap. I knew him as Andy, just as everyone did. He walked with an exaggerated shuffle and when he looked at you he tilted his head noticeably to the left. In appearance, Andy was just shy of the "Igors" in the crazed scientist movies.

Every newcomer to town wondered about the shabby park bum, but they found out quickly enough that he was gentle to the bone and a joy to children. In between his few chores, he spent hours each day pushing a swing for his young visitors or helping them safely up the slide ladder. Mothers didn't worry about their children going to the park. Andy would watch them. Sweet, peaceful Andy.

But on this morning, Andy unhinged. He came tearing across the railroad bridge and had to be restrained at the entry by Jake and Zeke and a couple of other officers. His cap had fallen off during his spring and his long, white hair flew freely about his face as he struggled in the arms of the officers.

He bellowed at them to set him free and called his chimps by name. "Vinnie? Cakes? Bashful?" Michaels approached the old man, stood between him and the doorway, so Andy was forced to look at him. The mere sight of Michaels seemed to calm him down. His struggles with the

officers began to subside, and he discovered he had lost his cap. He ran his fingers through his hair in an attempt to regain some composure and dignity.

"You can let him go," Michaels said. Andy went quietly back to the door, and with Michaels' nod, the officers allowed him to enter the pit. He knelt beside one of the corpses, his hands visibly shaking. He was oblivious to the clicking of my shutter. Andy whispered over each of the bodies for a few minutes, careful not to touch anything. He seemed not to notice the odor. Suddenly, he stood up, the wild look returning to his eyes. I could see him taking a frantic inventory. Michaels took a few quick strides to Andy's side.

"There's only eight!" Andy said, grabbing Michaels' arm with an almost pleading gesture. "Rebecca's gone! We got to find Rebecca!"

Michaels nodded, calmed Andy as much as he could and told someone to call in an APB on a female monkey. "One artist drawing I got to see," he said to me as he and Andy stepped out of the cage.

I continued to snap some low-angle pics of the dead monkeys. I could only shake my head as my lens moved in closer to the bodies. If there had only been a simple blow to the head, one per monkey, things might not have gotten so bizarre. But there was more. And it brought the Monkey Murderers some national television time.

The genitalia of the chimps were mutilated, slashed by a slender, sharp blade, possibly either a straight razor or a fillet knife. A coroner's report suggested all the cuts were made by the same person; there was a similarity to the depth and pressure of each of the slashes. The nipples of both male and female monkeys were sliced off and arranged near the center of the pit in what appeared to be a "Happy Face." With a five-nipple smile.

The attackers razed the faces of the monkeys, indiscriminately plucking out the eyes, cutting off the ears, slashing the noses. The mutilations came much later than the death blows. It seemed the attackers lured the four older monkeys down and killed them, and then spent some time trying to get the others out of the pit's heights. When the other chimps refused to come down, the attackers turned their attention back to the already-dead victims.

Police initially accounted for all parts of the monkey anatomies except the right foot and the left index finger of the largest male. The foot was never found but investigators later found the finger stuffed into the monkey's anus, which, when emptied, also contained peanuts, popcorn, slivers of glass, and bits of gravel the attackers must have found on the pit floor.

I filed my first story about the incident shortly before noon. I phoned in the story and sent some pictures by courier. Both were picked up by the state Associated

Press. There was a blurb about the Monkey Murders on the CBS six o'clock news, and *Good Morning, America* had the distinction of landing the first national film crew in town. People across the nation drank their coffee the next morning and listened to the contents of a monkey's anus.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Tony sits across the table, cigarette sending a column of smoke toward the kitchen ceiling. He looks over the board, trying to decide where to place the twelve armies he received for turning in his set. His deliberation tells me one thing: he intends to make a run for the flag. If he succeeds, it will be a quick game. For the time being, I'm not worried. His forces are in North America, with a few armies scattered across Eastern Europe and Northern Asia.

I'm snug as a bug in Australia, controlling the entire continent, with a protective force of some twenty-five armies set up in Siam, the only territory by which Australia can be approached. I'm safe. For now.

Austen Samson sits just to my right and has concentrated most of his forces in South America. He is the most vulnerable. But Tony first has to find a way of getting rid of his one army in Japan. If Tony takes Austen out of the game, he gets Austen's four cards, which probably contains a three-card set. With another set, Tony runs through Woody's forces in Africa, and then turns on Dick, who is hiding in the Great North of Iceland and Scandanavia. Woody only has two cards, but if they match with the extra one from Austen's cards, then Tony wins, hands down. But if the cards don't match, then the game goes to me. I have a set and have my armies poised to make a sweep in either

direction.

From Siam, I have only India and the Middle East between me and Africa, and only China, Mongolia and Kamchatka between me and North America. Snug as a bug. And Tony knows it. He doesn't want to take anyone out and leave any scraps for me. Snug.

"Ain't there a time limit or something?" says Dick, getting up and filling his plate with chips and the onion dip his wife prepared for Risk Night, Wednesday, when the week's paper is out and everyone in the office can relax and we come to Tony and Maxie's house and play Risk. The men play Risk in the kitchen and the women do something in the living room. I'm not sure. They talk, I know that. I can hear Maxie and Carla laugh every so often. But whatever else they do is pretty much a mystery.

"What the hell -- put some more fuckers on Alaska and flip over Kamchatka and then hit Japan," Dick says, looking over Tony's shoulder.

"It's not that," Tony says. "Not worried about Austen. He's limp. I'll waste him. I'm just figuring where I want to wind up so I can jump on you."

"Me?" Dick asks, incredibly, and twists the cap from another beer. "You don't want me. I'm the power on the god-damn board. Look -- twenty, thirty, thirty-six bitches on Iceland. Jesus! Woody's the guy you want."

"But he's only got one card. You've got five. I know

you have a set. Besides, if I didn't get him out, he'd Wood-out on me. Ain't that right?" Tony asks, looking at Woody.

"I just play the game. Do what you think. But if you come after me..."

"What?"

"Be on your ass from now on."

"See? Can't jump Woody."

"Well, hell no, can't jump anybody if a little talk scares you," Dick says, sitting back down.

"Hey, are we gonna play?" I ask.

"Gotta go to the bathroom," Austen says.

"Go on."

"Shit! You kidding? Don't leave the room during deliberations. Come back and everyone's coming down on you. Ain't going until I see those armies placed on the board."

"You giving me shit?" Tony asks Dick.

"No, hell no. I'm just saying you don't want none of the Icelanders. They'll knock you back."

"Oh, think so? Then maybe I ought to cut them down a little."

"Come on. Go get Austen. The guy's on his last leg. Gotta go to the bathroom. Put him out. Let him talk with the women for a while."

"That's okay," Austen says. I won the 'A' game."

"Yeah? Well you're trashing this game."

"The 'A' game's the one that matters."

"Put him out. Can't have him winning two games."

"For sure," Tony says. "Here then."

Tony places his armies on Quebec, giving him 34 armies on that one territory. "Iceland," he says.

Austen stands up, laughing. "I'm dismissed for the moment," he says. "Learned one thing -- keep your mouth shut in this group."

"You are a crazy man," Dick says. "But it's your life."

Tony picks up the red attack dice and Dick takes the white defense dice. They roll.

"One apiece." They roll again.

"One apiece."

"Two of yours."

"Two of yours."

"Two of yours."

"Wait a minute -- shit, six in a row. Hadn't you better think this over?" Dick asks, standing up to roll the dice. "Gotta warm these up somehow," he says, shaking his dice. He rubs the dice against his crotch and promptly rolls a pair of sixes. "Aha! Two of yours!" He rubs them against his pants again, this time leaning back and applying some body english to the charade. Again he rolls double sixes. "Yo Mother!" he cries.

"Goddamit," Tony says. "Unfair stimulation." So he

stands, rubs his dice on his crotch and promptly rolls two aces and a deuce. Dick rolls a six-five.

"Guess that proves who's the best man in this little skirmish!" Dicks shouts, and downs the last half of his beer while rubbing the dice, more slowly this time with extra hip movement. A five-four. "Beat that, O my Brother!" he says.

Tony rolls two fives and an ace.

"One apiece."

The rolloff continues. Woody and I watch, smirking as we watch Tony and Dick destroy themselves in the first real face-off of the game. Austen walks back into the room just as they are having another rub-off.

"Hey!" he shouts. "Those are my dice! What're you doing?"

"Inspiration," Dick says. "I'm giving them inspiration. Tony's rubbing the dots off'em."

Finally, Dick luck turns and he loses four out of five rolls. His Iceland horde is down to eight. Tony has eleven armies left in Canada.

"I'm fading!" Dick shouts. "Fading. New inspiration. Need new inspiration!" He looks around the table. "Fat lot of good ya'll could do me!"

"Yeah -- what now, Blindly? You're a busted man. Let's roll'em?"

"Wait! Wait. Inspiration coming, inspiration coming,

inspiration here...Lucy! Lucy! Get in here!"

"What is it?" Blindly's wife calls from the living room.

"Don't ask what is it! I'm king and I say get in here! Need your body!"

"No fair recruiting inspiration," Tony says, finishing his bottle and motioning Woody to reach back to the refrigerator for another.

"Fair is fair," Dick says as Lucy comes into the kitchen.

"What is it?" she asks.

"Get over here."

"Don't be pornographic," Tony says. "There are single men in here," meaning me.

"Not pornographic. Let's roll," Dick says, and makes Lucy bend down so he can rub the dice in her red hair. He rolls. Double sixes.

But even Lucy's hair doesn't last. Tony knocks Dick out of Iceland with four armies to spare. But he can't reach the Urals, where Dick has built his other horde.

Instead, Austen, the weak man on the board, takes his turn, gets four armies for being on the board and two extras for controlling South America. He immediately takes his Venezuala troops, marches up the East Coast of North America, jump across into Europe and wipes Dick out.

"Bingo!" he says. "Five cards."

"Aw shut up," Dick says. "You didn't do nothing. Tony did all your work while you were in the pisser. You're just mopping up."

"And winning."

"See? See what you did?" Dick asks Tony. "Hey. I took a risk. It's the name of the game."

"Uh-huh. Risk is the name all right, but if everybody played it like that, they'd have to name it 'Ass-hole' or something."

"Go talk with the girls."

"Yeah."

Dick leaves the room. Austen takes his set, swings through Africa and gets rid of Woody. Tony and I concede the game. More cards, another set. All over but the rolling.

"Want to see if the women want to play?"

"Come on," Austen says. "I just won the 'A' and 'B' games. That's front page, huh? No, don't get the women. Game requires guts, deception, courage, daring, deceit, lying."

"Yeah," I say. "Don't get the women. They'd wax our asses all over the board."

Dick steps back in. "Oh -- and who won? Yeah? See? Stupid, stupid! Wasn't hurting no one in Iceland. What? Another game? Is anyone going to play like Tony Asshole here?"

"I am."

"Me."

"Me too."

"To hell with you guys then," Dick says. "I'm in. But I ain't never playing cards with you ass-wipes."

CHAPTER TWELVE

I lift the door of the dog box and Titan leaps out of the pickup bed, stopping to check both tires on the right side of the truck before running east through the love grass and sumac toward the creek that wriggles its way across Coody's property. Opening day. Perfect morning for quail hunting. The frost, already loosened by thirty minutes of sunlight, flies in all directions in Titan's wake, appearing as a scattering of diamonds in the intense early-morning light. There is no wind; the air seems to press tightly against my face. I take a deep breath. The November night has chilled the air enough to awaken my lungs with its sharpness.

But the morning's briskness wears off quickly enough. Already the sun is tearing the haze from the morning, and it burns with such an intensity on the eastern horizon that I can't look at the sky overhead without shielding my eyes. Temperatures will rise into the high sixties by noon, so I dress lightly, wearing only an undershirt, a light flannel shirt, and my hunting vest. The lovegrass pastures and the heavy oak cover on the north edge of the property will make moving difficult. But it won't be difficult to stay warm. More difficult, later, to stay cool.

The countryside awakens. To the northwest, over the section line that leads to Rock Crossing on Wildhorse Creek,

a line of crows fly just above the treetops. Single file, perhaps thirty or forty yards between them. With a frost like last night's, the crows need no water and fly directly to the grain fields. The grain holds enough moisture to keep them through the day. Same for the quail, I think, looking eastward toward the cattle pond that dams up one of the draws leading to the creek. There is always quail there, near the pond. And they will be close by this morning, even though they might not go to water. Quail stay near water. They drink two times a day; once in the morning and again in the evening. They will be close by.

"Supposed to be a real good movie."

"Don't guess I've heard of it."

"Been in all the papers. Been waiting for it to come. Henry Fonda and Kate Hepburn."

"What's it about?"

"Just two old people -- married couple. They retire -- move out to the lake. Where the title comes from. About family problems. Problems faced by old people."

"I'd like to see it. Kate's my favorite."

"Yeah. Me, too. But you know how it is -- no one to go with."

"Bet you can find someone. If you really want to."

I slip five shells into the chamber of my 16-gauge automatic. A flock of starlings take wing from the tops of the cottonwoods along the creek, heading for one of the harvested grain fields to the west. Already Titan works a pattern along the creek, zagging back and forth for some thirty yards, working slowly and deliberately. Father steps down by the creek while Woody and I spread out and walk toward the draw with the pond on it. The love grass is thick, perhaps two feet high. Difficult walking. The cover is lighter on the other side of the draw, Father points out, and I follow his thinking: the quail will be there, on the other side, preferring the lighter ground cover to the thick lovegrass so they can make a quick escape if some predator comes upon them in the night.

We walk slowly. Titan needs a lot of time to cover for three hunters. The draw is perhaps two hundred yards from the pickup. When we near it, Woody peels off to walk around the far side of the pond while Father and I walk straight on, crossing the shallow draw. "Tracks," Father says as he passes the sandy bottom of the draw. "From last night." As if by clockwork, Titan begins to trail as we come up on the east side. Woody, walking quickly, is already around the pond and walking down the slope of the hill toward us. Titan picks up the scent of the covey near the creek and follows it uphill alongside a heavy plum thicket. On the other side of the thicket, still winding up the hill, Titan

locks down. Father waves Woody and I onto the point, saying he'll watch where the birds go down. "They'll come to the creek," he says. With Woody to my left, I step in on the point. Nothing. Titan comes off, works his way around my right, staying on the downhill side of the covey. He works another thirty yards, locks down again. Woody and I advance and Father slips along the creek, staying even with us so we'll have a shot whether the birds fly east or west toward the creek.

Three more times Titan tightens up on the birds before we finally catch up to them. They are very near the hilltop, in some sparse Indian grass. The biggest part of them break at once, perhaps twelve or fifteen birds jumping up on Woody's left and flying back toward the pickup. I swing on them but Woody is in the way. He shoots once, misses, then picks out the last bird in the group and downs it. At his second shot another group bursts into the air. Five or six birds, right in front of me, flying directly to the creek, directly at Father. I can't shoot at them and neither can Father, who almost has to dodge the oncoming birds as they whistle past him, fly over the creek and land out in the sunflower field on the other side.

Woody, startled by the latter birds, pulls off the downed bird and can't fix him in the lovegrass. Titan, on his first day out, is so excited with the whole morning that he is hard to bring in to hunt the dead bird. He finally winds the shot

quail on a pass through the area, and Woody bags the bird. We head back toward the pickup after the larger bunch.

"Went in at that walnut tree," Woody says.

"All the way through," Father says. "Saw them down the other side of that sumac patch. Maybe a dozen."

"That movie -- with Kate -- is it still on?"

"Yeah. At the Lawton Cinema."

"You've seen it."

"No. Told you about that. No one to go with."

"Make you a deal. I'll go. But -- no word about it down here. Nurses aren't supposed to socialize too much...you know."

"Super. Be fun. Your husband won't mind?"

"How could he? He won't take me. Be glad to get me off his back about it."

"If you're sure. Tell him you're tending a patient. I'm honored. Unless you smoke in my car."

"We'll take mine, then."

We cross the creek, come up through the sumac and out into the field where Father watched the birds down. They aren't there. We stand for a few minutes, wondering where they might have gone when Titan locks up on the hill about seventy yards further.

"Running like turks," Father says. "Ought to hang tighter on the first day."

We move up, and with Father and Woody flanking me, I step in front of Titan. The flush is delayed. Titan starts to move up on the birds, but then three flush to my left. I swing on the widest one and fire but miss. Father wheels back toward the creek and folds one up back at the sumac. Suddenly another bursts into the air, this time on Woody's side and his first shot pulls a leg. He pumps his 20-gauge and puts the bird down with a second shot. Both Father and Woody mark their birds, but before they could find them Titan locks down again, this time back down near the creek where we've already trampled about.

"Go get him," Father tells me. "Take your time and put it on him."

I move down. Titan is pinned so close to a single clump of grass that I know there can only be one quail. I look into the tiny mound of grass but see nothing. Then the quail jumps out, Titan moves in, and the bird gets up, flying parallel to the creek. It was a straight-away shot. I fumble with the safety, get it off, fire one shot too quickly and then level down on the bird and drop him with my second shot.

A pair of birds get up suddenly back near Father and fly directly at me. Father pulls off because I am in the way and I am busy loading new shells into my gun and can't

get organized for a shot. Then one gets up between Woody and me and we both shoot but the quail keeps flying, back up near the pond where the covey originally flushed.

Birds stop flying momentarily and we look for our dead birds. Mine is easy to find and Father locates his. Titan comes in and points Woody's.

"How many we got up?" Father asks.

"See now -- three off Titan; then Woody's; this one down here; those two we didn't shoot at; and this last one. How many's that?" I ask. "Seven, eight?"

"Gotta be more birds," Father says. "Somewhere." We stand around for a short moment while Titan works through the creek. "Let's move back up. Must be running on us."

We walk back up the hill, near the spot where Titan first went down. The dog works in closely, busy and attentive because of the early success. He comes down on a couple of false points. Father is right. The birds are running. "Let's sit on them for a minute. Titan will find them."

He finds two more birds. I get one and Woody the other. We finally give up on them and move over into the sunflower field where Father watched the other group down. "Out of the county by now," Father says. But they aren't. They are right where Father had watched them land and all five or six get back up at once.

They flush before Titan has a chance to move in on

them, so all three of us are surprised. I am in the middle and can't get a shot. Woody shoots once at one peeling around his right shoulder but misses. Father shoots twice, knocking down two birds and pulling the leg on another, which manages to fly to the creek before it goes down. "Never find him," Father says.

We quickly bag his two dead birds and go down to try to kick the crippled bird up. Titan works right in on him, going down just inside the lip of the creek. Father moves in, kicks once, twice, and Titan jumps in. The bird is dead, limp. "Go and figure it," Father says. "Guess they fly themselves to death."

By now the covey is so scattered we don't know where to locate any of the remaining singles. Six had jumped and flew in front of Father and he got three of them. The other three flew back near the pond. That made four birds back in that location.

"No sense going after them now," Father says. "We've run them enough for one day. Gotten seven or eight birds out of the group, almost half of them. Just enough left for seed." He takes out a pack of Winstons, taps one out and lights it. Woody walks up and we stand for a moment watching Titan inspect the spot where one of Father's downed birds landed. "Let's go up to the fence line and follow it to the brush. We'll round the brush and head down toward Hell Creek and make it if we haven't found birds by then."

"Just that then?"

"Just that and just I don't have anyone else. To talk to. After I leave here. You can tell; I like to talk, tell jokes, discuss problems. But after work, when I leave here, there is just home. And Benny. Guess his quiet nature seems amplified for that. If there were someone else to talk to I wouldn't notice it. It's funny. I remember reading comics as a kid and always thought those women who always talked over the backyard fence were silly. You know the scene. Two clotheslines. Two laundry baskets of clothes. And two housewives, their elbows propped up on the fence, gossipping. I thought that so senseless. Now I know, and those comics aren't so funny anymore. Those women had no one in the house who'd listen."

"Guess you have to understand his side."

"I do. Really. An engineer, at work most of the talk is about problems. It's like he's lost the art of conversation. If nothing's wrong, no sense in talking. Conversation -- senseless to him. It's not really his fault. And it could be worse. He could drink. Or beat me. Or Little Ben."

This time Father and Woody set a faster pace, walking

through a half-mile of Indian grass that never held any quail. I keep the pace momentarily but soon fall behind. My leg muscles, right at the top of my hip on the front side -- the muscles right under my front pockets -- begin to pull hard and stiffen on me. It's as if there isn't enough muscle to pull the heavy boots from behind me. I begin to lose my wind. My temples begin to throb. My head spins. I feel dizzy, my stomach hurts. I kneel on one knee, put my head in my hand, prop my hand on my knee. Father, perhaps two hundred yards away and somewhat higher on the hill, has a good view of me. He stops and calls, asks if I am all right.

"Tired," I call. "You guys go on. Meet you down by the creek," I say, pointing and waving them on. Father stands for a moment longer watching me then turns and calls the dog. I watch as he and Woody disappear around the corner of the brush, Titan hidden by the higher ground growth.

I stay light-headed, realize that with my blood pressure medicine and a light breakfast my pressure may be bombing. I lay in the grass for some minutes, trying to get my feet above my head, duplicating the position the nurses put me in by setting the front of my recliner up on blocks. The position lets more blood rush to my head and keeps me from passing out. But I don't feel any better. After spending a quarter of an hour lying in the grass, I get up

and turn back, hoping to reach the truck before tiring. My progress is slow. My highest leg muscles, at the groin, tightens even more on me and I take only the shortest, slowest steps. I am disgusted; I have walked no more than a mile and a half. And yet it is an improvement. Last year, my first winter on the machine, I didn't even make the first covey.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"A two. Beat that."

"Easy enough. Oh God, a one. Must be my lucky day."

"Maybe it won't be that bad. Just like you...everytime you lose to blame it on luck."

"That's okay. Feel like I'm on a winning streak."

"Oh? And I wonder why?"

"You, uh . . . had a chance to think about the other night?"

"Have you?"

"Well. I have. But it's not like I'm putting much on the line. It's you I'm worried about.'

"I know. We need to talk. Sometimes I think it couldn't have happened. But, even then...I'm glad it did."

"I'm glad if you're glad."

"I am."

Starts as though the headache is going to come earlier than usual. I'm on the machine for maybe twenty minutes when my head begins to go a little light. I fight it for a

few minutes, continue to read the editorial page. But the lightness continues and a pain begins behind my eyes. Best not aggravate the headache this early. So I lean back. In a flash, Marla is standing over me.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, I think. Feel a little like...don't know. Head's spinning."

"So soon?" She checks the machine pressure, checks my pre-dialysis weight. "You're not too dry." She straps a blood pressure cuff on my left arm, pumps it up. I feel the bumps as the blood pressed through the cuff. "Not bombing. Pressure's a little high even. 170/90."

> **"Could we meet? Tomorrow?"**
>
> **"Six-three. Let's see. Guess I'll put you back on the bar with the six and move this up here and protect my leader. I think we need to. To iron all this out."**
>
> **"Where?"**
>
> **"I don't know. Your husband doesn't suspect, does he?"**
>
> **"I suppose I should confess. I didn't tell him I was going with you. He can't suspect. That's for the best, I think."**
>
> **"Yeah."**
>
> **"Double fives. Ha! Guess I'll have to start bearing off. This is getting so easy."**

"Win one game and get cocky. Get much more ahead here and I'm getting sick."

"Oh, is that why you never get beat? Get behind and make your blood pressure bomb? Pretty slick character I'm dealing with."

"I never do that. I wouldn't fake sickness. Losing REALLY makes me sick. And besides, when I get way ahead, you run off and check the other patients. I'm kind of captive here."

Teri walks up. "He giving us problems?" she asks, bending over and grinning into my face. I try to grin back, but the dizziness and the pressure behind the eyes is getting worse.

"Don't know. Pressure's okay." Marla bends over the other side of the chair. Looking up, I can see both Marla and Teri, staring down at me from opposite sides, their expressions all serious. "He look flushed to you?" Marla asks.

"Maybe." Teri puts a hand on my forehead. "Might have a temp. Better check. How do you feel?"

"Hot. Need a fan."

Tami turns, signals to Jacki for a fan. She moves to the other side of the chair, pumps the cuff back up. I feel it go down, accept the thermometer Marla puts in my mouth without opening my eyes. "What was the pressure a moment ago?"

"170/90."

"It's 190/100 now. Get Rivers. Matt, how're you feeling?"

I can only shake my head. The nurses are growing distant. I hear them but there is an awful roaring in my ears. It hurts too much to open my eyes. I am aware, though, of the crowd of nurses around my station.

"Turn the machine pressure off," Teri orders. Someone takes the thermometer out of my mouth. "100.6. Check it again. Get his pulse real quick. Matt, you with us?"

"Yeah." The thermometer falls out. Somebody sticks it back in under my tongue.

"140."

"What?"

"Pulse, 140."

"Jesus, what's happening here? That Rivers? Tell him to get here, stat. Something's crazy. Pressure's over 200 now."

"Got a temp of 101.8 this time."

"Take him off."

"No, not yet. We may need the IV access. Matt, you there?"

> **"Let's see . . . you just have that one left. And I have these three. Hmmmm. It would take either a double six or double five. No problem. Which would you rather I roll?"**

"Neither."

"I know that. But you've got me down again. I'm just trying to create some excitement, tension. Which would you prefer?"

"Go out big. Roll the boxcars."

"No problem. Here, let me meditate just a second. Okay. Ha! There you go! Double sixes! McKeever pulls it out in overtime. Shhh! Quit bitching. You'll wake the patients."

I shake my head. The pain changes. I feel as though I am wired to some electrical current. I seem to expand, seem to be in motion. Upside down, no sense of direction. I'm moving, being flung. My feet, the balls of my feet, hot and sweating, are my center. I am flinging around, my feet as my center. In motion. Up. Down. Cycling, the pressure all coming to my head. The back of my eyes are tied to the balls of my feet and I am being stretched.

Suddenly I cry, scream. "What's wrong? Don't, can't. Something you can give me? Killing me. What's killing me?" Marla, over me closely, looking into my eyes, brushing my forehead with a clear bag of ice. "He's burning up!" she shouts, peering into my eyes. She is centered, stopped. Behind her, the room orbits. "Temp 103," someone says. "Pressure 250." Another voice, Teri's. Then Rivers is above me, asking questions. I tell him to kill me. Stop the motion, anyway. Any way.

"Pulse 210," a voice says.

"Strip him," Rivers says, watching my eyes. "Ice his joints, get an ice wrap around his neck. Somebody, five C's of Valium -- to cut his breathing. Change the filter -- get a new one." A voice, Marla's, over his shoulder, "Valium's in."

"It's going to be better," Rivers says. "Hang in. Try to rest." I laugh or cry. I don't know. They feel the same. Rest is impossible. I am being flung about by my feet. The blood is rushing out my ears, my nose. I want direction, movement. I want to fall off a cliff, downward, a rational motion I can identify. I spin around inside myself. No rest. I ask for Marla and I open my eyes and see her, bending over me, closely, wiping my brow with ice. Behind her, a voice announces the ambulance has arrived. I begin to fade, relax. I am sinking, fading. "I'm dying, you know," I says to Marla's eyes, pressed close.

"No," she says, "Sleep. Sleep."

"Don't," I says, trying to adjust the inward spinning. "Don't lie to me."

"Relax." The ice comes down and closes my eyes.

"That's not fair."

"Now, now. Just trying to find new ways to win. Winning them all the same gets kind of boring, don't you think."

"You're a real ass...it's 4:05: think

there's time for a meat game?"

"Exactly what do you mean by that?"

"Meat game...you know, best two out of three."

"Shucks. For a second there I thought you had upped the stakes a little."

"You are an ass."

"Just looking for new ways to win."

"And just what would the stakes be in this new game?"

"You mean my way? Well, if I won, you'd have to go to bed with me."

"Oh, yeah? And if _I_ won?"

"You'd _get_ to go to bed with me."

"Big difference, huh? But I like the odds. That should really motivate me...there's a six; beat that."

I awake in the quiet, darkened clinic. I am still in the same chair. I realize I am naked, lying under a sheet and a yellow nylon blanket. I try to sit up. Marla and my mother and father come to the foot of the chair. Marla's eyes were red, there are spatters of blood on her lab coat and white pants. Mother holds a hand over her mouth. Father stands in the middle, directly in front of me, his hands deep in his trouser pockets.

"Look who's awake," Marla says.

"What time is it?"

"After 11."

I try to sit up again. Marla steps to the side of the chair, eases the back of the chair up. "Be careful. Feel all right? Need to go back down?"

"I'm okay...kinda spinning. What time is it?"

"It's all right. It's night-time, after 11. You've had a full day."

My head clears a little. I smell of puke and urine. I stick to the plastic chair. "I've been out all this time?"

"We had to sedate you. Gave us quite a struggle for a while. We thought you were calmed and then suddenly you just went wild. We had to knock you out. You've been resting."

I look at my parents. "How long have you been here?"

Mother answers. "They called at five o'clock. Said we would need to come get you home. Had a bad reaction."

"Reaction. To what?"

"Formaldehyde, we think," Marla says.

"What?"

"We clean the dialyzers with formaldehyde and then rinse it out. Apparently we didn't get it all out. And you, dear patient, don't like formaldehyde."

The three of them dress me and get me to the car. I have no connection to my legs or arms. They don't move the way I want. Marla offers to loan us a wheelchair but Father

declines. "We'll get him to bed. He'll know what to do once he gets there. Best sleeper I've ever seen."

At the next session, Marla goes over the incident with me. Pressure went off the scale, over 300. Pulse to 240. Temp went to 105. Rosen had seen a similar incident before, had ordered a new filter, and the problem was gone as quickly as it started. Within a half-hour, the filter had pulled the formaldehyde out, and my vital signs moved down to near normal.

"Don't think I'll ever be that sick again," I say.

"Hope not."

"There for a moment, I remember one moment, when I would have been satisfied if you'd just pulled the plug on me."

"A moment?" Marla says. "You begged me to stab you for half an hour. Then you went under sedation and got some rest...and didn't know what to do."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The murders happened on a Thursday morning. Crafton came up that Saturday, hung around all day. Appreciated the movement of a small town, even liked his cheeseburger from White Stone Cafe. And Crafton was not one to compliment food. He and Michaels hit it off; Crafton decided to direct his feature story toward the graffiti and the racial slur.

Crafton and I made it back to the pit shortly before dark of Day Three. The crew from the university was due to capture the remaining monkeys. A professor who had thirty-six years experience with chimps and was a leading authority on non-human communication had become interested in the reaction of the survivors. Michaels, once again, beat me to the scene, and introduced us to the professor, a Dr. Alfredo Zuegman. He seemed the perfect example of the ancient researcher: thick, black eyeglasses, a shabby brown suit far too warm for an Oklahoma August, and a sharp, whistling accent.

But Zuegman knew his business. He brought along eight apprentices. Four were stationed at the rim of the pit with brilliant spotlights and two more were directed into the pit with the lights. He told the men which monkey to target, and at his order all six of them directed their lights into the face of the monkey.

Another crewman was equipped with a long pole with a

noose on one end quickly slipped the noose over the monkey's head and tightened it around the neck. Then he brought the monkey down and guided it into a huge sack which the eighth crewman held open. The last member then cinched the sack tightly shut. It seemed a slick, professional operation.

"Good thing we have tonight small monkeys," the professor said while I watched the first capture with him, Crafton and Michaels. "The larger monkeys are sometimes difficult to pry loose their clutches from the treetops."

"Thank God the killers got the big ones," Crafton said from the other side of the group. I glanced at him; he was in the middle of his silent laugh.

I pulled the flash off my camera before stepping into the spotlights. The news film crews remained outside; I made a deal earlier with Michaels for exclusive "in-pit" photos. It paid off. The crew saved the smallest monkey for last, a tiny chimp named Jewel. I positioned myself against the north wall of the pit and my last shot of Jewel showed nothing but his head protruding out of the sack. I focused my zoom lens on the chimp's eyes, which were bugged and looking directly at the camera -- a pair of white ovals radiating fear and innocence.

The zoom lens took the background out of the photo and the bright lights produced a good mix of grain and shadow. I cropped the photo even closer in the darkroom. When I sent it out for the wire it was nothing more than the pair

of saucered eyes, surrounded by folds of the heavy, brown sack.

"Ah," Crafton said, plucking the fresh photo from the wash, "the birth of Jewel."

He was right. The ordeal for Jewel was just beginning.

That night, I received a call from the police dispatcher shortly after midnight. Crafton was still in town and I found him at his motel room, just sober enough to pick the phone off the hook.

"Find your pants -- we've got more story," I said.

"More?"

"Yeah -- they found Rebecca."

Crafton was fairly clear-eyed when I picked him up in front of the motel, but he smelled of Jack Daniels and the limp from what he called an old war wound (his third wife pushed him off the porch) wasn't quite as noticeable. And he was belligerent. Easy living in the big city hadn't softened his vices.

"How'd you get sober so quick?" I asked.

"Drugs," he said. "Sons of bitches -- finding some news this time of night." He fumbled around for his lighter. The search kept him silent for a few seconds. "That work?" he asked finally, pointing at the dashboard lighter.

"Yeah."

"I knew it. Good, old dependable American

Nissan...where we going?"

"Michaels' house?"

"Why? Pick him up, too?"

"Where the news is."

"Oh," he said. "Good plan." He steadied his hands to light the cigarette. "You can light either end," he said, holding the Camel up for me to see. "Why I buy 'em."

Michaels' house was about four miles in the country if you went by hardtop around the golf course. But I knew a short-cut and turned down a dusty, gravelled road, speeding faster over the loose rocks than I should. Crafton gripped the dashboard.

"Reporters Killed in Rural Crash," he shouted above the churn of gravel beneath the tires. "What -- they demanding ransom for 'Becca?"

"Not quite," I said. "We ought to know real quick...right around this corner." Crafton leaned in exaggereated fashion against the door as my battered pickup sailed through the curve.

I thought I made the trip in record time, but there was already a good crowd outside the house. Several patrol cars were parked about, their red and blue lights spinning, creating curious, moving veils in the gray dust kicked up by all the traffic. The police lights were dwarfed by the brilliance of a raging fire which shot flames high into the air in the center of the Chief's front lawn. Crafton

sobered quickly when he put the scene together.

"Goddamn!" he muttered, stepping out of the car and flicking the half-smoked cigarette into the bar ditch.

There were three crudely-built crosses in the yard. Rebecca, or what was left of her, was tacked onto the center one. She was ablaze, the flames reaching up and singeing the dry leaves of the elm branches some thirty feet above. A policeman stood as closely to the blaze as possible, futilely spraying the carcass with a garden hose. The other two crosses were crowned with white KKK hoods, which hung limp and ominous in the still night. There were threatening notes attached to each.

Rebecca hung, her arms outstretched and strapped to the cross with metal chains. The stench of burned hair and roasting flesh filled the yard and countryside. The flames turned to a thick smoke just above the tops of the trees and drifted heavily off to the north, back towards town. At first the blaze was so thick it was hard to make out anything but the dark body. But in a few minutes I could see the skull features. I was struck that, with her chimp exterior burned away, Rebecca looked even more human that the others.

Michaels stood off to one side, speaking with the sheriff and a some neighbors who lived a quarter of mile back up the road. I quickly snapped my pictures. In minutes the yard was filled with media. I spotted at least

three film crews. I stood beside Michaels and watched them work.

"Lord," he said, watching the cameramen setting up behind Rebecca in order to get a shot of a white hood in the foreground.

"Looks like your hunch was right," I said.

"Looks."

"What tipped you off?"

"Nothing. Just didn't like the way it all stacked."

"You asleep when this started?"

"Yeah...long time ago."

"Flames wake you?"

"Hell no." He nodded his head toward the crosses. "That monkey did."

"She was alive?"

"Sort of -- for a moment. Goddamnedest noise. Like sandpaper on my butt-bone. Long, high-pitched wail. Human-like. Very human." Michaels paused, watched some ashes from Rebecca drift up through the branches. "She was dead before I could get to the door. Wasn't even wiggling...I thought it was human from the screams. Sure looks human."

Crafton walked over, the limp restored. He was perfectly sober. "Looks like a long night, Fred."

"A long week," Michaels corrected. Crafton's shoulders hopped up and down.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I sit down in a brown swivel chair and pull on a pair of white socks. One of Rivers' nurses, not connected with the center, stands near the doorway and makes preparatory notations on a clipboard. Rivers set up the treadmill test after I told him about getting tired while quail hunting. "Could be a number of things," Rivers said, and suggested the treadmill would show both of us just how big a problem my fatigue was. If the fatigue proves severe, he can take steps to improve my conditioning; if it's not as bad as I think, then we'll learn some positiving things from the treadmill.

The nurse, Debbie, asks me to remove my shirt. Behind her, in the main lobby of the office, I can see the copper-colored fountain spouting water into a nest of ferns that encircles it. The fountain is part of the rock garden Rivers had installed. There are benches stragetically placed around the small garden, which seems an attempt at some miniscule Central Park. Rivers believes in holistic medicine. He believes attitude and belief have more to do with one's health and non-health than most of the scientific community cares to admit.

"If you feel OK, you are OK." He has said that innumerable times while looking down at me in my dialysis recliner. He makes rounds at the clinic every day, checking

each patient's file and giving recommendations and orders to the nurses concerning each patient. On a typical day he approaches my station, checks my chart for blood pressure, weight, and temperature, which are always normal, and asks me how I feel.

"OK," I say.

"If you feel OK, you are OK," he says, smiles, puts down my file, and walks to the next patient.

> "Not sure about that test."
>
> "Why?"
>
> "Don't think it's on target. Can't be. Rivers said I had the second best so far. Al was the only one who's beat me on it, and he jogs five miles every morning."
>
> "Sounds like good news to me."
>
> "Got to be wrong somehow. I'm not in that kind of shape."
>
> "You need to remember, first of all, that Rivers's patients are considerably older than you. On average. And his younger patients may have bigger problems than you."

The main lobby has a number of doors opening onto it. Three of them are to regular examination rooms, so that Rivers' staff can be in various stages of prepping, treating, and dismissing three patients at once. Another

door opens into Al's office, where the psychologist conducts his relaxation experiments. There are several other doors, including the one that houses the new treadmill machine. So long as the doors remain open, the most commanding sound for patients is the fountain, which trickles into four different bowls before it reaches the small pool beneath and is pumped back up to the spout at the top to begin another descent.

When the door closes, a patient hears piped-in classical music. Soft music with a hundred violins and piano notes in the background. Both the fountain and the music are designed to put the patient at ease. "Patients are most nervous in a doctor's office," Rivers explains. "Sometimes they are so nervous they forget why they are there. They forget their symptoms, their pains. And sometimes we can't even get true readings of their vital signs. Blood pressure and pulse go up when a person gets nervous." The fountain, the music, doesn't work with me. Both Rivers and I admit it. My blood pressure is usually twenty points higher at the office than it is at the clinic. "You think that's odd, but it's not. It's normal," Rivers says.

> **"Yeah, but even he seemed surprised. By the results. Said if my friends were walking me down, then they had to be in amazing shape."**
>
> "Oh yeah?"
>
> **"Yeah. Said anyone who reaches level seven has**

to be in good shape. But the test -- seems like the wrong premise to me."

"How's that?"

"It's more of a sprint. Be better to see how long a person can go at level four than to see how many levels he can get in."

"I don't get it."

"The thing that troubles me is endurance...In the backyard, I can run with my little brother, sprinting, about as long as he can go. But at half-speed, I tire just as quickly, while he can go for miles farther."

"I see. That makes sense."

The nurse finishes her notations and takes a couple of steps across the small room, begins to fill a white basin with water, testing for its warmth. "We have to secure some heart monitors on your back and chest during the test," she says. "We'll have to shave the chest."

"Have to?"

"Sometimes patients ask that we don't, but they pay for it when we rip the monitors off. All the hair comes with it. But besides the pain, sometimes we can't get the monitors to fit securely without shaving...in your case, for instance."

She shaves the chest area with a twin-track disposable razor. It is quick work. She leaves the stomach and

shoulder areas alone. There is a large bald spot in the center of my chest, between the nipples. There is short, black stubble that emphasizes the bareness.

"Looks kind of ridiculous, doesn't it?" I ask, looking and speaking into my chest.

"Not nearly as ridiculous as it's going to feel for a few weeks," Debbie says. "As it comes back out, it takes some getting used to. I've got one suggestion...don't wear any sweaters for awhile."

"Check."

> **"Another thing. How can a flat surface make anyone tired?"**
>
> **"I thought the treadmill angled up?"**
>
> **"But it's still flat. The perfect thing would be to put some lovegrass on the track. Now <u>that</u> would tire people out."**

There are seven monitors -- five on the front and two on the back. Each is secured by some kind of cold, clear glue. Debbie explains the function of each as she glues them to my skin. "This one monitors the aorta -- tells us whether enough blood is going to your head and brain region during exertion. One of your problems is that you feel faint during or after exertion?"

"Yeah."

"We'll be looking at that. These two check the volume

of blood going into and out of the heart during the test. We can see if the blood is backing up anywhere. Important that the heart speed up and press blood more quickly into action when activity increases."

Debbie explains that the monitors on my back are to check the sounds of my lungs filling and exhaling when Rivers walks in. He has on his overcoat, scarf and hat, having just arrived from his rounds at the hospital. He breathes heavily from his quick walk into the office.

"Debbie explaining this test to you?" he asks, unbuttoning his coat and looking at my chart.

"A little bit. Explained I have too much hair."

Rivers smiles and looks at my bare chest. "Hair grows back. Ever been on a treadmill?" I shake my head. "Might be one of the more unpleasant tests there is, although it might not be too bad for you."

"Not as bad as the light saber?"

"No. Nothing like that." Rivers talks and Debbie straps a blood pressure cuff to my left arm. The cuff is linked to a machine in front of the treadmill. I feel the cuff pump up and then release. Debbie watches the dial on the machine. She looks up at Rivers and nods. "The test requires that you stay on the machine as long as you can endure it. That's the only way we can get a true reading of your stamina. The treadmill has ten levels, and at each new level the machine will speed up a little and angle up a

little so that you're moving against a sharper incline. Got that?" I nod. "We start at level one. At that point, the treadmill is at a zero incline and only moving at about half the normal walking speed. That gets you accustomed to the feel of the machine and the nature of walking in place. At thirty-second intervals, we move to the next level. All you do is grip the machine on the rail in front, and keep up with the speed. We'll watch the monitors and make sure nothing happens to you. When you get tired, so tired that you don't feel you can go on, tell us and we'll turn the machine off. Okay?" Another nod.

"One caution. Don't
jump off the machine. You're actually walking at whatever speed the machine is going, and if you jump or step off, your momentum will send you crashing into the wall. When I turn the machine off, it will gradually slow to a stop."

Debbie adjusts my white socks to make sure they are tightly fitted and helps me onto the machine. "You feel okay?" Rivers asks.

"Yes," I say, feeling anything but okay.

"Remember, endure it as long as you can, and don't jump off. Don't try to speak during the test, except to tell us to stop."

The machine starts. The treadmill moves very slowly, and I quickly step up against the front bar, have to wait for the machine to catch up before I start walking again,

this time more slowly. The machine whirs into a quicker step, and I feel the plane angle up somewhat. My knees feel shakey, weak, and I wonder if I should stop already. But I remember the sensation, that nervous time before a basketball game or the regional baseball championship, when the knees feel as though they want to buckle. The weakness lasts only a few seconds and melts away. I feel better, and the machine kicks into a faster gear and I walk noticeably uphill for level three.

"Pulse 104, pressure 180/140," Debbie says.

"Feel okay?" Rivers asks, checking some graphing paper the monitors spit out. I nod, continue to step quickly in time.

The machine moves into fourth, then fifth. I am jogging slowly against an incline of some 20 degrees. Only on the machine for a little over two minutes, and already perspiration is draining off my hair and into my eyes. I can't reach up to wipe it away and instead duck my face into my bare shoulder to try to get the sweat out of my right eye. It makes it worse.

"Pulse 118, pressure 190/140." Debbie is already puffing the cuff for the next reading. The weakness returns to my knees, but it is my wind and lightheadedness that disturb me. I began the test breathing steadily through my nostrils, but now I am open-mouthed and pulling hard for air.

Rivers, sitting directly in front of me, keeps his eyes on the monitors. "Say when," he says. I continue to pump my legs; the machine speeds up again and I gasp harder for air. A stitch comes up in my side, that familiar pain from junior high track that digs into the ribs and forces a runner to bend over against the pain and hold his side. The pain is light for only a few seconds before it gnaws its way into my focus.

"Pulse 128, pressure 210/160."

"Maybe you should just slow down?"

"How's that?"

"Just walk slower. In the field. It sounds like you could go a lot farther if you just went at your own pace."

"I think you're right. And I've tried that. But it's hard to go slower when everyone else is getting ahead of you. And what's my speed, anyway. I have trouble regulating that. What I mean is that it's hard for me to tell that I'm walking too fast until I begin to get tired. Then it's too late."

"Sounds like your wind needs work. You should start working out."

"How?"

"Walking at first. Then jogging maybe. Just something to keep the heart rate up a little so the lungs will get used to working."

"I know just the thing."

"Swimming?"

"No. Sex. Read somewhere sex is equivalent to five jogging miles."

"But it doesn't last long enough."

"So you say. I wonder if Rivers can prescribe that. Besides, it isn't how long, but how often."

"Don't I know. One thing, though. I can chart that the patient's sex apparatus is intact."

Rivers looks up. He is a blur through the sweat running into my eyes. The incline seems severe. The speed is still not too bad and I can balance myself with the rail in front of me. My side is hurting worse but I feel in control of that. My legs still have not given out. But my throat is getting raw from pulling so hard for air. I am close to a full running gait when the treadmill angles up even more. This is it. I have to push to get one leg in front of the other, and the stitch works its way deeper inside me, making my leg movement even more painful high up in my torso.

"Pulse 148, pressure 230/190." Rivers lets go of the strip of paper emitting from the monitor and watches me more closely. I close my eyes for just a second, feel my legs trying to keep up with the rhythm of the machine. I can go on, but the stitch is even worse, and my light-headedness feels worse with my eyes closed. I turn dizzy. "Enough," I

say.

"Pulse 156, presssure 240/190." I feel the cuff building back up, feel the machine easing off, quickly sliding back down to a zero incline. In a matter seconds, it slows to a walking gait and stops. Debbie helps me step off and moves me to a chair in the corner. I put my elbows on my knees and my head in my hands. I dig heavily for breath. Sweat drips from my hair and nose and quickly builds a puddle on the floor between my feet.

"That's what I meant by unpleasant," Rivers says, laying a hand on the back of my head. He bends down. "You need to lie down?" I shake my head. "Here," he says, "let's walk into this other room and lie down on the exam bed. Rest. I'm going to look at the tape for any pecularities and then we have one more little test, but you can do it sitting down. Rest."

I lay on my back against the crisp white paper of the exam bed, droop one arm over my eyes. Against the back of my closed eyelids I watch a brilliant light display. There is red and blue, but mostly there are flashes of yellow. I am depleted. Took the test too far. Surely it isn't supposed to go this far.

"Don't guess you'd have any suggestions."

"For what?"

"This training business. My regimen, I mean."

"Surely there are a lot of contacts. Being a

journalist and all. You see lots of women."

"Right. Either a 55-year-old court stenographer or a 16-year-old post forward. Sort of a void in between."

"Guess we can improvise. I'll find something to go shopping for."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"Here's the star student," Teri announces from one of the front machines as I walk through the door. She fluffs a pillow, smiles at me.

"Star student?"

"Don't tell him yet," Marla calls from the back of the room. "See if he can figure it out for himself."

I try once or twice to get a hint from one of them, but they keep quiet about Teri's remark. I place the morning edition of the Dallas paper, a copy of Faulkner's Light in August, and a can of Mountain Dew next to my chair and walk to the back to get a cup of ice from the freezer. Patti is in the back, filling plastic gallon jugs with dialysate fluid.

"What's up now?" I ask.

"Me, tell?" She laughs, continues to place jugs on the wheeled service wagon. "You'll know soon enough."

"When?"

"Probably ten, fifteen minutes. Hang on." She turns and rolls the wagon out into the patient area.

I am about half an hour early, unusual for a Wednesday because I'm generally pushed until one o'clock to get the newspaper to press. The paper runs on Wednesday and I spend the mornings writing stories and pasting copy onto the pages. The presses run while I am at the unit and the

paper, with a Thursday dateline, is on the stands by five o'clock Wednesday.

But this morning progressed without a hitch and Austen and I finished the paste-up work by 12:15. When I walk back up front, the nurses are cleaning up from the morning shift, and as I settle into my chair, they take their lunches into the enclosed office. Marla, the last one into the office, looks back through the half-open door and smiles. "Think about it," she says.

Instead, I scan through the Dallas paper, turning in each section to the first story I want to read. With one arm disabled from the needles, the paper is hard to handle. I look at the front page's headlines, and turn to the next-to-last page of that section, folding it out to the editorial page. Ann Melvin only writes her column on Mondays and Fridays, but there is usually something else worthwhile on the Wednesday Viewpoints page. There is Bob Greene's historical sketch of Texas; boring stuff generally but sharp writing; a local editorial about White's gubernatioral promises about illegal alien control, and a syndicated piece by Buckley about the lack of national candidates in the Democratic Party.

I turn the Today section to the comics pages, which includes a cryptoquote and a crossword. There are a couple of good stories in the Southwest section about the oil boom in the Anadarko basin; movie reviews in the Arts and

Entertainment section; a column about the evils of high interest rates in Business, and I turned the Classifieds to the real estate section, particularly to Land for Sale. During the slowest hours at the clinic I calculate the approximate costs of the huge cooperative ranches in southern Texas. It is not uncommon to run across a ranch of 80,000 to 120,000 acres for sale. At $200 per acre -- $24 million. Not overwhelming for your own little country.

"Figuring what to do -- it's not easy."

"You could always work for a newspaper; you enjoy that?"

"Enjoy, yeah. But the news business -- not much room for someone who can't keep the pace. With a transplant I probably could. But you know, the transplant won't last forever. And when it goes out and I'm back on dialysis, the paper is out of question. Seven days a week. You got to be able to go when news breaks. Couldn't do the job right and be on dialysis, too."

"You are now."

"Oh, but my job. Henson lets me work when and how I want. If I feel bad, we just put things off. Different with a weekly paper. You have that luxury. But I can't support myself with the hours I put in. And I can't keep running back home, can't keep coming back to my parents."

Just as I pick up the sports section -- the only section I cover word for word -- Marla and Patti come back out of the office. Patti goes to the back -- for sheets and pillowcases to dress the other chairs -- I assume. Marla walks straight to my station.

"I asked for you today," she says.

"Wished I knew what was going on."

"You'll know soon enough. Surprised you haven't guessed."

"Gotta be something about the blood reports."

"You are soooo sharp." Marla lays the protective sheet over the pillow and then scrubs my arm with disinfectant. It is a dark orange color and she lathers it heavily up and down the fistula, the pressure from the scrubbing forcing the vein to bulge, making it look like a telephone wire running underneath my skin. Marla grabs my upper arm and squeezes it, making the fistula balloon even larger. She runs her finger along it before cleaning the soap off.

"Either the vein runs a little deeper or it just never developed like it should," she says.

"You mean it should be bigger?"

"Well, no. Not necessarily. I mean it's big enough for the job. They just get bigger than this usually."

"Seems big enough to me. I have small veins. Remember?"

"Right." Marla soaks some gauze in alcohol and wipes

the orange soap off my arm. She picks up the first needle and pushes the air out of the line. "You want to do this?"

"Guess so. Where?"

"Wherever you want. It's your arm. Patients are supposed to instinctively know these things."

"Just that I don't want to stick in the same place too often."

"Use the instincts."

"Whatever." I take the needle from her, holding it in my left hand. I fumble with it for awhile, trying to get the tabs pressed back so I can get a firm grip. It isn't the end of the world if the needle slip in my hand, but I would contaminate the needle and I've been told they are quite expensive. Besides, I don't want to get half in and then screw it up. I settle for a slightly uncomfortable grip, but that isn't unusual. The needles never feel right in my hand, anyway.

> **"If it ever comes -- the transplant -- I think I'll go to graduate school. Get my Masters. Maybe I could find a job with some junior college -- on a big lake."**
>
> **"That sounds good. But would you like teaching?"**
>
> **"Maybe. But the important thing is that a person's schedule in academia can be flexible. I know a professor in Weatherford who goes to the machine in Clinton. Three times a week. And**

there's a Business professor at East Central who drives to Oklahoma City on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. All of his classes are on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Works real well."

"You've talked to him."

"Sure. I thought I better research this business a little bit. He can't teach in the summer because of the machine, but he carries a full load of work during the other two semesters. Gets full-time pay. And he says he uses the time on the machine for constructive tasks -- grading papers, preparing lectures."

Marla waits until I'm ready. When I look up, she straps a tourniquet around my upper arm and then pulls the protective plastic covering off the needle's sheath. The bevel of the needle is facing up, as it should be, and looks like a tiny teaspoon. For the first three months of my illness, the sight -- and even the thought -- of such a huge needle ripping into the tender skin on the top of my arm turned me hot and nauseaus. There were places needles were supposed to go: into the hip, out of sight, and into the flesh of the upper arm. But not into the skin just above my wrist, where blood pounded through the fistula with each heartbeat. It was the tenderest part of my body, it seemed. At night, I could hear the thump of my wrist against the bedsheets; I could feel the blood pulsing past the bone in

my wrist where the fistula was slightly kinked. It was a small problem, Rivers explained, after looking at the surgeon's report. Small veins and big bones. The blood would always hum over that bone, but it was to my advantage, in a way. The bone itself acted as a minor tourniquet, keeping the vein expanded and the blood flowing freely. Rivers spoke and I grew faint at the idea of my blood tracking along a revised course.

But now, more than two years later, I take the needle from Marla and look in the arterial area. I want to place the needle just above the puncture from last time. My arm is tracked with puncture wounds; it is not difficult to tell where the fistula ran. Just follow the purple scars. Carefully, carefully, I lower the needle, holding it between my thumb and forefinger, steadying my hand by placing the other three fingers against the outside of my wrist. The needle has to enter at an extremely light angle: it has to tear into my arm as a bull-dozer rips earth from the surface. The fistula, puffed by the tourniquet, runs just beneath the skin. I move the needle forward and down, approaching my arm like an airplane with landing gear down. The bevel touches, a drop of blood runs out around its lips. I continue to slide the needle forward, feel the tiny "pop" as the bevel splits the elastic wall of the vein. After that, everything is smooth. I slide the needle into the vein until the neck of the needle rests in the bloody pool

at the puncture.

"Good, good," Marla says, reaching over and taping the white tabs of the needle against my arm. She pulls back on the syringe's plunger, watches the blood rush into the syringe. I can feel the blood sucking out of my vein, the bevel pressing against the wall. "And you always get a good flow."

"Best turn it anyway. The bevel is grabbing." Marla pulls the tape off, turns the needle over by flipping the tabs and tapes them back down. She pulls again, the blood flowing easily into the syringe. I can't feel the pressure this time.

"Better?"

"Better."

"I was thinking about this just last night. Of all the patients we've had, you're the first to stick yourself. I caught myself wondering why. And then I realized that the nurses in here make each other give them shots. Flu shots, Vitamin C. We can't even stick ourselves. With those tiny needles. These -- I've learned to stick the patients, but I could never stick myself."

"It's getting easier. Still get hot, sweaty," I say, rubbing my free palm against my pants. "But it doesn't seem to hurt as much. Too busy to notice, I guess."

"That's the psychology."

The second needle goes just as easily, although I have

to put it farther up my arm where the flesh is more tender and the fistula smaller. But the flow is good and the second-worst part of the day is over. Now there is only the headache.

> "Ever thought of just free lancing -- writing when and how you want to?"
>
> "It would be perfect. That's the only thing that would really fit my schedule. Write when I want to. When I feel well enough. But I've got to be realistic. Free lancing -- it's tough. No guarentees. I know a lot of writers who pull a lot of money doing that. But all of them have some other, steady income. They aren't writing under a monetary pressure. Big difference. Big."

It takes Marla only two minutes to get the machine started and the blood circulating through the filter. "Gained three and a half...setting the pressure at 300 for the first hour and then I'll turn it down to 150." She picks up my chart, realizes she has forgotten to take my pulse and pressure before putting me on the machine. She stops and cuffs me. "Pulse 84, pressure 150/80." She slips a thermometer into my mouth and quickly cleans the clutter off the machine top. "99.2." She picks the chart back up. "Any diarrhea?"

"No."

"Vomiting?"

"No."

"Fever?"

"No."

"Light-headedness?"

"Some."

"Dizziness?"

"Some."

"That coming during activity, exertion?"

"Then and sometimes when I get up quick."

"Feel like the pressure's bombing?"

"Think so. Sound like it?"

"Probably. Rivers might want to lower the medication again." She flips to the next page.

"Now, guess why you're such a star pupil."

"The labs went down?"

"Right. Want to guess?"

"The BUN was what, 131 last month? Is it down to -- below 100?"

"Lower."

"Ninety? Eighty? Seventy?"

"Lower."

"How low?"

"How does forty-nine sound?"

"But that's -- must not be my labs. That's eighty-two points."

"They're yours. Sounds better, huh?"

"What are the others?"

"Look for yourself." Marla hands me the chart. A creatinine of 5.5, down from 12.3. Uric acid, 6.0, down from 9.9. Hemotacrit, up to 28.4 from 21.5 -- much closer the the 40-44 norm. "You sure they don't have me mixed up with someone?"

"No, those are your numbers. I called and double checked." Marla shrugs. "Maybe it's the new diet. Maybe it's all the exercise you've been getting. Could be a number of things. Whatever, Rivers is going to be very interested in these."

"Mom'll be proud. She worries about numbers. Keeps finding people who tell her that my levels are fatal."

"For some they would be. That's why I'm proud too. Tired of watching you toeing the mark so close." Marla moves to another patient after patting me on the knee and squeezing my ankles out of habit to check for edema. I lean back, pour the Mountain Dew into the cup of ice and begin reading about the Rangers' extra-inning loss to Cleveland.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I did well enough with the monkeys that Austen lets me substitute news side my second summer in Marston. I tolerate the machine better; I appreciate the additional work. It makes time move easier. And Austen welcomes my initiative: if I didn't do it, he would have to. Things are slow in the summer on the sports desk anyway, and moving to news is good experience, even on such a small paper. I do not expect any big stories like the Monkey Murders. Normal stuff; hit the police files, the fire station reports and the hospital emergency room every morning. Follow up anything newsworthy -- house fires, traffic deaths, accidental poisonings, dog attacks.

But there are some strange things, gruesome scenes. I am the _blood shutter_ during those summer weeks. I carry a camera to every auto accident, follow the ambulances around the county, walk in behind police officers during late-night drug busts. I stick the camera into places even I think it doesn't belong. But it is my job and I must bring back printable shots.

I focused the camera on the charred remains of a four-member family that perished in a trailer-house fire. I clipped off some shots of a beheaded body of a truck driver who missed the South Canadian bridge and tumbled his rig 150 feet to the dry sands of the river. I got photos from the

emergency room of a mother and her three-old child whose face had been mauled by a neighborhood German Shepherd. It took three hundred stitches and six plastic surgeries before the little girl began to appear even slightly human again.

"When's the funeral?"

"This afternoon. Two o'clock."

"Wait a minute. None of us can go. Isn't that a consideration? I mean, I've known Alvie for over a year. Even like him a little. Why this afternoon?

"Seemed best to the family, I guess."

"And you? Wouldn't you like to be there.
Alvie Fore, a patient for what, five years.
Wouldn't it be nice if you could go?"

"Nurses, as a rule, don't go to patient's funerals."

"Don't? I don't understand."

"We -- there's -- you've got to understand the situation."

"What situation?"

"In the hardest sense, if we made a habit of going to funerals, we wouldn't have any spare time at all."

"Oh. One funeral in what -- fourteen months?"

"You forget the morning shift. In the last year

-- five, maybe six. Understand? Funerals are sad occasions. Nurses burn out. We can't subject ourselves to . . ."

"If I died tomorrow, you wouldn't come to the funeral?

"I said as a rule. There are exceptions."

But nothing prepares me for today. Barney Fore is stationed next to me. Things started out normally. He crunched loudly on his ice, bitched at the nurses for wrapping his feet too tightly, demanded another cigarette. Then suddenly he is rasping, a sound coming from deep inside him, the bottom of his lungs or stomach. A deep rasping and both arms are waving, jerking frantically about, the venous needle pulling loose from the tape and coughing Barney's blood onto the ceiling and walls. One stream comes across my chest, spraying onto my shirt and onto the comics page of the Dallas paper.

Until then, the worst experience I had known came the day the Stephens County civil defense found old Higgins in the bottom of Wild Horse Creek. I was pulling news duty on that Saturday afternoon. Higgins walked away from a local nursing home the previous Tuesday and there was a massive manhunt all week for the 82-year-old. I ran a recent photo of Higgins every day on page two with an update about the search.

Three airplanes and a helicopter were employed. More

than 300 square miles scrutinized. Higgins had friends in Velma. Police thought he would go there. They and the civil defense volunteers searched the fields along the southwestern outskirts of Ada and the pastures leading up to the Velma city limits.

Higgins had a history of leaving the nursing home. Liked to wander about town. Sometimes he turned up at his nephew's house in Rush Springs. By Thursday, police were beginning to minimize the chances of finding Higgins alive. In my mind, I was already composing his obit. "Walter Higgins, 82, was found dead alongside a country road after straying from a local nursing home."

But he wasn't found beside a country road. He was found face-down in Wild Horse Creek at 2:42 p.m. that Saturday afternoon. It was mid-July. The temperature was near 100 as I left the office with my camera. I found the Civil Defense trucks and an array of fire and police vehicles just two hundred yards from the back steps of the nursing home when I arrived. A police officer was guarding the roped-off section. I parked, walked up, wiped some sweat out of my eyes.

Richards, the policeman, began speaking before I said anything. "Probably walked straight to the spot from the home," he said. "Must've fell from the creek's rim and rolled down into the water. Couldn't have drowned -- there's only a few inches of water. Probably knocked

unconscious. Wouldn't be so bad if he hadn't reached the water."

"How's that?"

"The stink. Ah. You don't want get too close. Got a telephoto on that? Been there, soaking since Tuesday. Imagine. In this temperature? Ripe. And water-logged. Probably weighs four hundred pounds. Hard to fit in a body bag."

"Sounds grim."

"Grim enough. Don't want any. Thing about it, once you touch something like that, you can't get rid of it. You scrub and scrub but it's still there. Nobody else can smell -- people think you're crazy. But you carry it around for weeks. And you know it. That's all that counts."

> "**Seems crazy. Here, you nurses, are my best** friends. You know? I see you guys more than anyone else. And you don't have time . . ."
>
> "It's not like that. It's not the time. Not a selfish thing we do. Survival. You know what's the hardest thing about this job? Watching all of you come in, every day, sicker and sicker. Look around. Most of these people are here until their death. And they know it. And we know it. I can't make them well. Ultimately, I have to fail with them. They aren't getting away. It's survival. You have to gather some distance, find some kind of rip-cord,

get away, somehow, from the facts."

I asked Richards to call the office when the report was complete and stepped over the yellow rope and walked toward the creek where an ambulance had pulled up.

"Hey, McKeever, don't fall in!" someone called from the crowd of about forty people outside the rope. I turned and looked but didn't recognize anyone. As I neared the scene, I understood why Higgins had gone undiscovered. The area was covered with a thick undergrowth of vines and milkweed. Trees, both willow and cottonwood, towered over the creek. No chance for air surveillance. Just as I approached the back of the ambulance, a fireman came stumbling up out of the creek. He pulled off his mask and I recognized him as Josh Kinder, one of the coffee regulars during my morning stop at the firehouse. He bent over on both knees, vomited into the hot, green vegetation. At that moment a slight breeze floated up from the creek and the acrid scent hit me. It was tangible, worse even than Richards had described it. It seemed to flatten against my face and the back of my tongue tasted the sweet-sour presence. But I stayed rooted in my spot, widened the aperture on my camera to compensate for the dense shade, found an approximate focus and moved to the lip of the creek. It was in vain. I couldn't get a shot until they managed to get the body out of the creek and away from the heavy vegetation.

Todd Powers, the fire marshall, walked toward me after

I had clicked a few shots of them loading the bag into the ambulance. "Difficult," he said, his clothes soaked either with sweat or the creek water. It smelled like a combination. "Too heavy. Couldn't get a good grip."

"Grip?"

"Yeah. Everytime we tried to lift, the flesh just tore away. Into our hands. Tenderized by the water." He sighed, sunk down to one knee and watched the ambulance move off through the pasture. "Difficult."

It was my worst news assignment and I never even saw the body. But it wasn't as bad as Barney, writhing on the floor, suddenly possessed of strength I have never seen in the little man. A frail leg kicks up, knocks Teri back into one of the other patients. The leg, incapable of getting him from the weighing scales to his chair, suddenly has power enough to kick someone across the room.

Fore begins to frail his arms, the deep sound coming from his lungs, not really making it up to his mouth, not a sound from the vocal cords, but some kind of inner gurgling. And his face pushs outward somehow, eyes wide, tongue gone, disappears in one of his gulping efforts, his mouth hung open, wide, and no tongue. Just cavity. Half his face, cavity. Teri pulls Barney onto the floor, someone is on the phone, speaking in a kind of code; a nurse catches the rampaging venous line, clamps it, shuts off the spraying blood. Fore, squirming on his back, moving with the same

force of a chopped snake, writhes deeper behind my feet, propped up on the recliner footrest. Underneath me, pushing against discarded sections of the paper, Fore's face, puffed, pushing outward, as though exploding in freeze frame, the cavity of his mouth and his eyes rolled up into the top of his head, staring directly at me. Eyes, no longer yellowish and dull, hidden and slow-moving behind black-rimmed glasses. Eyes suddenly emblazoned with the pain of death, the pain of the gurgle spasms of collapsed lungs, bright and penetrating. Clear. He looks at me through eyes clear and understanding and brilliant and he is telling me. His tongue, caught, flapping in the cavity of his throat. Marla, with a blue instrument shoved down his throat, tries to retrieve his tongue so Barney Fore can tell me.

"I guess."

"That's why you're so different. Why we can laugh and talk and joke around with you. Don't you notice that? You can be a success for us. Twenty-five, comes in extremely sick. We revive you, you wait and get a transplant, and you're back out, living, healthy, sending us notes about your life. You see? We don't have many successes."

"So, rather than really dedicate yourself to these people, you back off at just the right point. To keep from committing yourself."

"If that's how you want to see it. It really isn't at all. I'm dedicated. I'll do whatever it takes for any of these people. And that's just it. See? That's it. No matter how dedicated I am, no matter how hard I try, I have to watch them die. If I tie myself to them, I go down. I blame myself. That's why dialysis nurses suffer more suicide, divorce, mental and emotional breakdowns than other nurses. You people are our friends. You are right about that. You see more of us than anybody else. And we see you more than anyone else. It hurts."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Woody hooks the claw of his hammer into the chicken wire and using the cornerpost as a fulcrum, pulls the wire tight by sliding the hammer around the post.

"Staple it," he says.

"Where?"

"At the top."

I take a staple and plant it over the top wire. I am in a clumsy situation, standing on the left side of the post and hitting the staple with my left hand. My hammer swings down and the staple glances off somewhere in the tall grass. I grab another staple out of the coffee can and place it over the wire. I swing again. The second staple glances off as well, jumping up into Woody's face.

"Well? Are we going to be here all day?" he asks.

"Never was much good at hammering."

"Not much good is gentle. You're dangerous...here, hold this hammer. Like this. Don't screw it up."

I get a grip on Woody's hammer and hold the wire tight against the post. Woody picks up two staples, puts one between his teeth, holds the other one against the wire and taps it three times, then puts his shoulder against the back of the post, and hammering straight back into his shoulder, drives the staple in with three hard shots.

"Top one's the hardest," he says.

"I can do that."

"Sure you can. In a million years."

He takes the hammer away from me, claws the wire halfway down the post, pulls the hammer around the post to make the wire taut, and then hands it back to me. I hold the wire while Woody hammers the second staple in.

"Really is a good thing you came over to help me build these pens," Woody says after we had the bottom of the wire stapled tightly against the post.

"Why's that?"

"Because. We're about half done, right? Well, if you hadn't come over, I'd already be done and the old woman would probably have me waxing the kitchen floor or something."

"But by God, I hold a hammer better than any four-year-old in the neighborhood."

"Better'n most, anyway. As for hammering. . ."

"It's those D-grade staples you got. One leg's longer than the other."

"Supposed to be. That's the end you tack in. You ain't supposed to start'em at the same time. Long end would go in crooked."

"Now you tell me that."

"Just with the college education and all...I figure you'd be able to brain it out on your own."

"They don't have a Staples 1113 class."

"Or a flat tire class, or a lantern-lighting class, or a house-painting class, or a wrench class, or a screw-driver class. What do they teach you?"

"Keep bitching and I'll quit helping."

"Well. Can't have that. Hey, if you weren't over here, I'd have to bitch at the dog. And Elmer gets tired of getting bitched at."

"Should send him to college."

"And ruin a perfectly good dog?" Woody pulls up the post-hole diggers and hands them to me. He reaches down, marks an "X" on the ground. "Dig right there. You can dig straight, can't you?"

"These left-handed diggers?"

"Dual-purpose."

"How deep?"

> **"You're disgusted with me."**
>
> **"Disgusted? No. Not disgusted. Surprised. We're all surprised."**
>
> **"No defense for it. Just didn't seem... didn't fit. Something. I don't know. Confused about things, I guess."**
>
> **"What things?"**
>
> **"These chemistries, for one. My condition, for another. Other day Sammy and I played three sets of tennis. Started at noon. Noon. It was 104**

> degrees. Probably 120 on the courts. Great. It was great. I perspired like crazy. But never tired. Never."

Woody takes a pencil from behind his ear, makes a mark about twenty inches up the diggers. "Stop there. And dig straight down." He stands and watches me take a couple of bites out of the earth. "Good, good," he says. He turns and begins measuring the next length of chicken wire. I am halfway to the pencil mark when Woody's wife steps out on the porch and announces that my father is on the phone.

"And just when I found something you could do," Woody says, shaking his head and snipping wire. I leave the diggers planted in the hole, take off my gloves and place them on top of the handles. I walk into the kitchen and spot the phone receiver cocked on the back of one of the dining chairs. Kim is running a vacuum in one of the back rooms.

Father's deep voice comes across, no hello, businesslike. "Teri just called. Say they have a kidney for you in Oklahoma City. She needs you to call back in about twenty minutes."

"Twenty...that's not much time. She say what kind of match?"

"Four-anagen...said it was as good as they get. Not many people get that kind of, she said."

"Yeah. I'll...I'll come home and call her."

When I get to the backyard, Woody is finishing up my post hole. "Gotta do everything," he bitches.

"Father says they have a kidney. I've got to go home and call and tell them if I want it."

"What you've been waiting for, huh?" Woody stops digging, leans against the diggers and taps a Kent out of the crushed pack in his pocket.

"Yeah. Except this last report. It was so good. May be getting well without a transplant. Lot better that way." Woody takes a deep breath through the cigarette, smoothes the ashes against the wooden digger handle.

"Could be. What do they say?"

"The nurses. They won't say...they don't build any hopes, but they don't dash any, either."

> **"Wasn't even that well before my kidneys went."**
>
> **"That is surprising. But I still don't see. I mean, it's the machine, isn't it? The machine made you that well. You aren't well on your own -- you're still tied to the machine."**
>
> **"It's the confusing part. The machine -- I've been on it for three years. More than that. It never made me this well before. Then, zap. I'm better. Feel better. Labs are better. Confusing. How can that be the machine. Why does it suddenly get better? See? Maybe it's me. Maybe I'm getting**

better. Getting well. Maybe my kidneys are working better."

"You know what your BUN is when you leave here on Friday?"

"You mean on post-labs? Yeah. Something like 1.0-1.5."

"Right. And the labs? Forty-nine, right? In three days, you go from 1.0 to 49. Three days. In five days it would be back up to 150. Your kidneys aren't any better."

"Big one, huh?"

"Yeah. I got to go home. I'll decide on the way. I think I should take it."

"Let us know."

I walk to my car, parked in the alley-way, and drive off. Woody goes back to digging the hole. Father and my little brother are sitting at the picnic table in the backyard when I pull into the drive.

"I don't know," I say as I walk up and sit down on one of the benches.

Father smokes, watches a flock of blackbirds gathering in the sycamores trees in the Goree's front yard. Sammy bounces a golf ball off the blade of a nine-iron, a nervous habit of his usually reserved for the tee-box while he waits on the group in front to hit. I wait through the silence

for a moment. Father won't offer advice unless I ask.

"What do you think?"

"Well, two months ago it would have been an easy decision," Father says. "But these last two months, and these last two checkups...you're doing real well. I know how you hate to go to the machine, but I don't think you're going to feel much better with a transplant. You go fishing, hunting, golfing. You wear Sammy out playing tennis. I watch you and just can't believe it. It's bad timing."

"But I can't stay around here forever. I need to get well, get back on with things."

"I know you do and that's what makes it hard. If only we knew what's happening. It may be that you don't need the transplant. You may just walk away from this problem soon."

"And I may not."

"It's hard."

"A four anagen," Sammy says. "Only ten percent are four-anagen. And the survival rate is eighty percent." Sammy wrote a term paper on me. He knows all this stuff.

"And the fatality rate is eight percent," Father says. "Need to think about that."

"Jesus. If only I didn't feel I was getting well. I would know this is right. But I don't."

"It's hard. But you decide. You'll decide right. You have to go to the machine. Put up with the headaches. The bad

days. And you know how you feel. Just whatever you decide, stick by it. Aren't any wrong decisions here."

I walk inside. Teri's number is beside the phone. I pick it up and dial. She answers on the first ring.

"I should take it. I know I should," I say. "But tell me something. Do you think I'm getting better?"

"No doubt you're getting better. But that doesn't mean you're getting well."

"But the lab reports...my numbers have fallen fifty, sixty percent. Haven't people just gotten well before? Their kidneys start working again?"

"Well, yeah. But that's very rare, Matt. Very rare. I'm not saying it couldn't happen, but it doesn't seem likely. Not for you."

"I'm just not ready. Just too many shaking parts about this. I'm going to pass."

"You're real sure about this?"

"Yeah. Something feels wrong."

"Okay. There's always the next one."

"Yeah. Well thanks. You understand?"

"Sure. You know what's best. It's just that I thought you were fired up about this."

"I am. I mean I was. It's just..."

"I understand. I'll call and they'll get someone else for it. You know best."

"Well. See you tomorrow, I guess."

"Okay. Bye now and try not to second-guess."

"Maybe there's something else. Some other reason?"

"Like what? What other reasons?"

"Some patients are scared of the operation. There is a chance of death, you know."

"Known that all along. Small chance. I decided a long time ago to take that one."

"And some patients...I think some patients are scared of change. Any change. Even change for the better. It's human nature, you know. Change is a scary thing. Sometimes we try to avoid it."

"You think? But a change would be back to old times, better times."

"Old times, yes. But better? You were unhappy before you got sick. You've told me. No direction. Didn't know where to go, what to do. You're still wondering about that."

"Yeah...it is a scary thing...worse than the chance of death, worse even than the machine. Courage. I don't know. Just wasn't ready...how do you get ready?"

"I know. Here, let me wipe this off your cheek. It's okay. It is a big decision and you do have to prepare for it. I...we just thought you were ready."

"Other things. There is maybe other things."

"Like? You want to talk about it?"

"You. Everything. The job, the days off, the machine, all center, revolves around seeing you. Here. When you're at the hospital or on vacation, I'm sick. It's like...like part of me never awakens that day. I hurt. Hollow. It's why I'm not ready."

I walk back out to the picnic table. Father still smokes, watches the birds. Sammy lines up some short pitch shots into a five-gallon bucket. He walks over, tapping a ball with the blade of the nine-iron.

"Turned it down."

"Probably best right now. Things could go wrong. Even with that match," Father says. "And we would always wonder about these reports. Now we'll know. You'll walk away in a few weeks."

"Wish I were that sure."

"Even if you don't, there will be another kidney. At a better time. One you can feel better about."

"Yeah. I'm going back to Woody's, see how those chicken coops are going. He's probably finished since he got rid of me."

"Didn't let you hammer, did he?"

"Not for long." I turn back around, catch Father grinning. He knows my hammering reputation. I am more

relaxed in the car. I drive the outskirts of town before I turn toward Woody's. I don't want to call back and reverse my decision. The answer seems final. Things aren't right, too many questions. I pull the car up in the alley-way and step out. Woody is standing off, eyeing the pens and figuring something.

> **"You can't say that. I'm here to help you move forward, not stand still. I'm not here for you to stay. I'm here for you to leave. Married. I can't be here for you. If that's it, I've made the biggest mistake I can...don't ever say that again."**

"Didn't take it," I said as I walk up.

Woody drops his cigarette on the ground, puts it out with his left boot. "Well."

"What do you think? Think I should've taken it?"

"You do the best with what you know. I'd do whatever feels best."

"I guess." I look at the chicken coop. It seems surprisingly orderly. The corners are square. The springy chicken wire gleams taut and straight around all the edges. The posts stands straight and firm.

"Made some time while you was gone," Woody says.

"How many pens you building, anyway?" I ask.

"I started out to build ten," Woody says, and he looks at the construction for a moment. "But I think I got over-

zealous -- that's a college word, right? I think I've built enough for at least twenty pens, maybe twenty-five."

"What do you do about that?" I ask. Woody pulls out his last crooked cigarette, wads up the pack and throws it on the ground.

"Get more chickens, I reckon."

PART THREE

NIGHT-TIMES-NIGHT

"Why did he kill himself, Daddy?"
"I don't know, Nick. He couldn't stand things, I guess."
"Do many men kill themselves, Daddy?"
"Not very many, Nick."
"Do many women?"
"Hardly ever."
"Don't they ever?"
"Oh, yes. They do sometimes."
"Daddy?"
"Yes?"
"Where did Uncle George go?"
"He'll turn up all right."
"Is dying hard, Daddy?"
"No, I think it's pretty easy, Nick. It all depends."

-- Ernest Hemingway, from "Indian Camp"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Three pigeons: the length and breadth of my vision of the outside these last six weeks. Except for the overpass on I-240 rearing up in the distance and beyond that the runways of Will Rogers International Airport. But the cars and trucks of the overpass, at two miles distant, are miniscule, mere glints of light in the sun, and the mammoth jets silent in their lift; all inanimate. There is really only the pigeons.

A month and a half ago, measured out by soap operas and three unsatisfying meals a day, the call came. A transplant kidney being flown in from Memphis. Three-anagen match. Only four months after the first call. Lucky another one should turn up so quickly, Teri said into the phone. It was a sleepless night, 2 a.m., but in twenty minutes I was on the road. A two-hour trip, a three-hour wait to check the results of a tissue-matching test, and then the operating table and green-clad attendants looking down at me from before brilliant, round operating lights. Since then, nothing but grim-faced doctors, cosmetically cheerful nurses, bland trays of oatmeal, jello, puddings. And three pigeons. Routinely, as if ordered by the cosmos, the kidney rejects, the virus flares, my temperature escalates, and I go once again through the cycle which keeps me in the hospital and pushes me ever closer to the ledge where my

pigeons strut and peer carefully over the edge. My doctor, a rotund, balding fellow named Bruzinski, shakes his head, says I am no worse, but no better.

My pigeons, waddling back and forth on the gray window sill, ten stories high, are strange tufts of feathers which turn to rainbow colors when the afternoon sun hits them. Periodically, as if a whistle has blown somewhere, they go wheeling off their terrace into the sky for an excursion around the hospital's towers, only to return promptly and surely to the same window sill, the same perch, their wings now appropriately stretched.

Freddie, the brown one, is the least glamorous, and doesn't burst into incandescence with the approach of one o'clock. He is brown -- dull brown -- from head to toe, and looks to be a genetic foul-up against his brighter brothers. Archie, the one with the green head and the breast that turns purple, is the hit man of the trio, and he will occasionally, with no prompting, run across the sill and bump one of the others, forcing him to take wing and circle out away from my window before coming back to a safer place. Milford, a totally black bird except for white feathers around his feet, sits most often in the right-hand corner, a big worrier, jerking his head back and forth and constantly peering over the edge with a nervous tic, as if he might step off suddenly into the nothingness, and forgetting for the moment that he has the gift of flight, plunge to the

concrete roof of the one-story maintenance wing below. He is, though, the most beautiful of the pigeons in the evening sun, glistening a deep purple, or perhaps a crimson, and sometimes, when he grabs the sun at just the right angle, a deeply-hued orange.

The pigeons' antics, through the long days, have become predictable, but still they are a source of entertainment in the afternoons, when the game shows have gone off and there is nothing to do but sit and think. I may, at those times, try to read the papers, but even that has become a tiring proposition. And besides, the nurses prefer that I rest my eyes, weakened as they are by the virus and the fever. So I sit and count the number of times Freddie and Archie pass each other on their strolls across the window sill, making a game of it, while in the distance the steady stream of traffic humps over the I-240 ramp and another 747 slips below the Oklahoma City skyline.

The pigeons make my mornings tolerable, my afternoons almost comfortable. But my nights are difficult. The spring-time sun often sets prematurely behind a bank of thick rainclouds on the southwestern horizon. My pigeons, fooled by the synthetic dusk, stretch their wings one last time, huddle in the right-hand corner of the window, stuff their heads inside their wings.

As if on cue, my eyes -- deep inside my skull -- begin to burn when true dusk hits the hospital tower. My fever

begins to build. The evening nurse urges me to drink my fluids, and she brings me a pitcher of water, a pitcher of cruscbed ice, several soft drinks in aluminum cans, orange juice, and grape juice. "The fever dehydrates you," she says, reading a thermometer. "And dehydration irritates the fever. You must drink." I drink what I can in the evenings and the nurse increases the flow of liquid through my IV. But it is no use. The fever wins.

The burning in my eyes increases, slowly working its way forward. By the time the evening news is over and the M*A*S*H theme has played, my eyes are so itching with fever that my vision is affected and I can no longer concentrate on the television. I turn the set off and sit up in bed, sipping ice-cold juice in the dark. The nurse enters with my 11 oclock medication, which includes a pill for ulcers, a couple of Inderal for blood pressure, one Lasix to help my kidney pull fluid, and a tablet to help me sleep.

"I can't drink when I sleep," I tell her. "That's why the fever comes up."

"We know. But you need your sleep. You must rest. It gives you strength."

"But the fever takes that strength away."

"I have my orders. And they're from your doctor. He knows best."

I take the pills, swallowing all five with one small sip of water. The nurse takes my vital signs. My pressure

is normal, my pulse 96. My temperature is already approaching 102. My nurse asks if I would like my bed down. I decline, saying I want to sit up as long as I can and take whatever fluids I can against the fever. She turns out the light, leaves my door slightly ajar. I hear her steer the squeaking medicine cart to the next door.

Even with the sleeping pill, I do not fall quickly to sleep. I fear sleep by now, for I know what it brings. In the dark, I close my eyes, rub against their hotness, drink until I fear I will make myself sick. I cannot drink quickly, for I have lost my breath in the past week. If I take more than one quick sip at a time, it takes several difficult breaths before I can breathe comfortably again. Likewise, I cannot speak in full sentences -- can only utter a few words at a time.

The fever builds through the night, and breaks, usually, about 4 a.m. I awaken, cold and shivering, and summon the nurses. I perspire furiously and my pajamas and bedding are soaked. The nurses not only must change the bedding, but they must bring a new mattress and pillow, for I have soaked the old ones. My temperature is at 105, perhaps a little over. The nurses bring ice wraps, wrap my throat, my knees, my armpits. The ice increases my chills and my shivers until I writhe about on the bed out of control. I ask, with what breath I can spare, for warmth. I fear I will die of the cold.

"We must bring the temperature down," the nurses tell me.

"I'll freeze."

"A fever this high can cause blindness, sterility," they warn me. "Even brain damage."

"I can't stand it."

The floor nurse calls my doctor. He orders an ice bath to fight the temperature, but not before the nurse shoots more medication into my IV hookup. I look up hopefully at her as she measures the syringe. "To give you rest," she says. The medication works quickly and at 8 a.m. the next morning, when a new nurse brings in a breakfast which I cannot eat, I do not remember the ice bath.

This morning, though, is one of surprises. There is, first of all, a fourth pigeon; a statusque, totally white bird, fully one-third larger than any of my regulars, standing in the middle of the sill this morning when Jessie, a tenth-floor orderly, brings me a morning paper. The bird stands, proud and erect, preening his feathers, while Milford stands in his corner and Freddie and Archie pace nervously, trying to act as though the new bird isn't there, doesn't exist.

The new bird -- I haven't had time to name him -- has scorching orange eyes that seem steadier than the other pigeons', perhaps because he doesn't jerk his head about in the same, peculiar fashion. Instead, he holds his head

high, concentrates an eye on Freddie as he passes, and occasionally spreads his magnificent wings, saviour-style, and flapping them, sends the other pigeons to the far reaches of the sill. Archie and Milford go reeling off into the sky on their trek about the hospital, hoping, no doubt, the intruder will be gone by the time they get back. But when they return, the big pigeon is still in the center of the sill, and they have to land in a corner.

Surprise number two: Freddie is a Freida. She, it turns out, is the reason the big white pigeon has arrived in the first place, and at noon the mating ritual begins, with the white bird twirling and whirling in tight little circles, conducting something of an elegant square dance by himself.

Freida, of course, continues to walk back and forth across the sill, nervously, even more so now. And Archie and Milford, concerned they might miss out totally on the action, begin their own dances, but without the help of the afternoon sun -- hidden by clouds -- their approaches pale beside the advances of the intruder. Finally, fed up with the competition, the white bird runs my two regulars off, fluffing his breast feathers to enormous size and then rushing them until they take flight and the bird is left alone with dull-colored Freida.

Even Bruzinski has some surprises. First of all, he strides into the room shortly after they've taken the

breakfast tray, maybe two hours ahead of his schedule. But that's not all.

"Here," he says, placing an orange rubber ball, about the size of a peewee baseball, into my right palm. He turns his back, faces the window, inspects my pigeons. "I want to start working your right arm. Squeeze the ball -- hard -- six times a day. Ten repetitions each time." He paces to the foot of my bed, begins to study my nursing chart. I stare at the ball.

"Why?"

"I'm terminating the rejection medicine," he says, pacing the floor more quickly than his standard. "You do realize what's going on?" he asks. There is impatience -- agitation -- in his voice.

"You mean that I'm sick? The virus?"

"It's gotten beyond that. You're not just sick anymore -- you're dying. Right now -- dying. You realize that?"

I shake my head. "The fever is bad at night. I know that. But I don't hurt. I feel pretty normal. In the daytime."

Bruzinski comes to a stop at the foot of my bed. His arms move about, he rubs the stubble on his face. I have known him for almost two months. I haven't seen him like this.

"You're not hurting? Don't feel sick?" He flips through my chart. "You've spilled your pitcher four times

in the last two days? You know why? Because it is too heavy. Full, it can't weigh more than two pounds. And it's too heavy for you to handle. You think that's normal? You think it's normal that you can't drink more than one swallow at a time?" Normal that it takes four nurses to support you on the scales each morning so you can weigh? You do not eat. Six weeks ago you weighed" -- he flips through the chart -- "204 pounds. This morning 146. Almost sixty pounds. Ten pounds a week. You don't even answer the telephone. It's charted, right here -- "Ignores telephone." And it's just two feet away. You don't have the strength. And you think you're normal?"

I shake my head, offer no words.

"You're dwindling. We're no longer in the transplant business. All we want from this point is to get you out of here. Alive. And I've got to tell you, the odds are building against us. I'm telling you this because you aren't asking the right questions. You've lost interest in what's going on. So I'll tell you: you're dwindling. A week more of this, and you'll be irretrievable. Dwindling. I've seen it too often; didn't think -- imagine -- it would happen here. This a shock? I hope. I hope you didn't know what's going on. Because if you did and don't care, we're in a lot deeper than I care to be."

"Without the medication, what happens?"

"Your body recovers, fights the virus, rejects the

kidney. We get the graft out of there, and you heal up and go back on dialysis. The rubber ball -- it's to build your fistula back up. If we can keep that access, it'll just be one less time we'll have to cut you up." Bruzinski moves back to the window. I roll the ball over in my palm. "Nothing's ever easy. Just gotta have faith there are better days coming. And there are -- I promise. If you want them to be. More depends on you than you can expect." He walks toward the door. "I'll be back this afternoon. Try to eat lunch. And work that fistula."

Bruzinski walks out. I am silent for only a moment, listen to his footsteps down the hall. I sit up, throw the ball toward the door across the room. I miss by two feet. Later a nurse tells me I will have more needles inserted, these into the artery in my throat. Intravenous feeding. "Three thousand calories a day," she says. "They're really loading you up. You won't eat, and believe me, you're going to need some energy."

Another nurse brings me a fresh pitcher of ice and two cokes. "Don't spill it," she says, and I look up quickly enough to catch her wink. On the television, Uncle Joe shuffles slowly across the front porch on Petticoat Junction. And outside, the mating ritual switches gears. The big bird slows his gyrations and Freida steps close enough to touch him with her beak. I imagine her guarding her nest, which is in the left corner of the sill, left over

from last year. I imagine her fledglings, hopping from the nest, hobbling clumsily about the sill, tottering dangerously close to the edge with the pin-feathered, flightless wings. I wonder if they will share the snow-white plumage of the father. Or the steady dullness of Freida.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The younger monkeys fared no better. None of them improved with the move to the university. Zeugman did nothing to help. All four still refused to eat on their own and went ito frenzied panic when anyone tried to approach them. All but Jewel were dead within a month.

The monkeys could have been saved. A department spokesman, dressed in a white lab coat and speaking to me from across a broad desk, admitted it reluctantly. The monkeys suffered from shock and the opportunity to study the extended effects of shock was too rare to pass up. "We might have intervened," the spokesman said, but all the experiments would be ruined. The monkeys withered away, day by day. "You must understand the application...that even starvation doesn't lift one from a dramatic case of shock," the spokesman said, rising from his desk and dismissing me with the motion.

Jewel, barely past the nursing age, began eating when the last of his mates died. His role models were gone so he was on his own. He ate from a spoon offered him by Deidre Marshall, a Psychology graduate student who spent twenty hours a day with Jewel as part of her doctoral research. Only she was allowed to feed him, clean him, and be seen by him. Others had to watch from the dark side of a two-way mirror. Jewel, from the moment he was put into the sack,

refused to move voluntarily, except to idly gum the semi-solid foods Deidre pushed through his lips. He stared blankly into the mirror, reacted to nothing. Deidre suspected he had gone blind.

I spoke several times to Deidre over the phone, long after the national press had turned its attention to volcanoes and serial killers and ancient ship-wrecks. She was always optimistic for Jewel even though she had nothing hopeful to report. Finally, I visited.

I was surprised by Jewel's condition. Most of his hair had had fallen out -- from malnutrition, Deidre said. His eyes were glassy and narrow.

"I'm glad you're here," Deidre said. "Jewelsy had a lot of company once...but no one cares."

"What's wrong with him?" I ask, looking at the limp blot of chimp.

"Wrong? From their perspective nothing is wrong." There was hardness in Deidre's voice. "Zeugman is quite content. Jewelsy has performed just as they wanted. He's become weaker and weaker."

"What's that mean?"

"They don't want him to come out of it on his own. Zuegman wants to cure him with his combination of drug and shock therapy. It enforces his research." I saw the exasperation in her eyes when she turned to look at me. "It won't work...it'll kill Jewelsy."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I awaken in a fish bowl.

I cannot see. I am beneath water. I hear the rushing, a pounding, the coast-line. I try to speak, to call for help, but my voice is lost beneath the pressure. My lungs are empty of air. Vision returns slowly, milky, blurred; there is light to shining from one side. I confirm it: I am in a fish bowl.

Then there are hands on me, brushing my face, striking me with pain, wiping away my eyes, removing the liquid. The hands are lifting me up, out of the water, away from the fish bowl. I wish I could see. I wish I could speak. I am paralyzed, cannot move, cannot catch the hands which float around my face, rub against my cheeks, excite my pain. My lungs empty themselves.

Then voices. Far away. Above the water, in a boat, perhaps, floating past. Voices come and go. I hear other sounds, the coast-line, roaring, above my head. Maybe it is just raining and I am laying face down in the water. The voices strengthen, the hands cradle my face, touch my eyes. The voice is close, lips pressed against my ear, close because of the water, and I recognize words for the first time, coming hollow and roaring into the fish bowl.

"Hello, Matt. Don't try to move. You are okay. You are fine...welcome back. Glad for you." I struggle to

answer the voice, somewhere outside the fish bowl. There is glass all around me. My vision improves some; I see glass, the white surface above my head. I am lying on the bottom, face up, the surface thirty feet above me. The voice returns. "A little ice. Here...on the spoon. To moisten your throat. Don't try to speak."

*****

"Where?"

"In intensive care. You came here a week ago. You've had a hard time. Rest now."

*****

It is Mother and Father. They stand up beside me. Still I lie on the bottom. They are huge shadows through the glass.

"I can't see."

"The nurses said that was normal. Haven't used your eyes for more than a week. It will come back. You will be able to see." It is my Mother speaking. I hear her because some of the roaring has stopped. The coast-line is quiet.

"I still don't know..."

"You've been unconscious...they thought the virus was going to take you away. But all that's over. You're okay now. You're going to get better."

It is not a fish bowl. It is a glass cage, a cubicle, and people move about outside. I cannot hear them, or even see them. But I see their movement. From nowhere, one will

move, a white blur against the glass cage.

My voice strengthens with ice. They spoon it to me slowly. I begin to feel the cool sensation against the back of my lips, on the top of my tongue. I cannot speak often. There is not enough power in my lungs. I give out, struggle for breath. Something sit heavy on my chest and I can't breathe.

"They said you might get some water and broth tomorrow." It is Mother's voice. I roll my eyes but cannot find her shadow.

"Where are you?"

"Here. Right here. I'm holding your hand...can you feel me patting your hand?"

"No." The white surface has fallen toward me. Once it was the top of the water, now it is the top of the cage and it has fallen toward me. If it reaches my chest I won't be able to breathe and I will die. I tell this to Mother. But she is no longer there. Gone. Outside, quiet shadows move against the glass.

*****

I have an orange ball. For squeezing. Ten times, seventeen times, a thousand times. I lose count; my chest turns heavy. But I squeeze. The blood doesn't run, cannot make it up the hills unless I squeeze the ball.

I listen. The roaring is gone. They all talk, with shushes and low giggles. They think I cannot hear; but I

listen, and I squeeze, ten times, seventeen. And the blood comes up, I feel it, swelling, running, furious, behind my eyes. The blood is sweet and hot and squeezes through my eyes balls until I see thorugh the darkness and watch them talking. My eyes, because the blood runs, turn to orange. I squeeze them, not with my hands but with my mind. Tightly. In my hand, the ball puffs itself. I squeeze. For the blood. I squeeze.

*****

"The operation. Okay?"

"You're here."

"Sore. Here. Did they cut here?"

"You did that. Under sedation. The morning shift said you grabbed, pulled the catheter out. Ripping the tape, the skin. Bruised the testicles badly. When you grabbed yourself. But they think no permanent damage?"

"I did?"

"You didn't know. From now on we'll straps the arms down when you're sedated. To prevent this."

"No. I can't be. My father...I couldn't stand that."

"Relax. You'll never even know..."

The nurse holds me down. Another nurse appears from my other side. Stern. A huge white shadow. Crisp. She has a needle, pushes it in.

"No. It doesn't make me sleep. I don't really sleep. Let me up. My hands must be free." She lifts some hair out

of my eyes. The blood stops running, my eyes blur. The medication sneds me to the non-sleep. I feel the blood rushing downhill. The first nurse smiles, fades through the glass and makes floating shark movements. I close my eyes.

The blood stops.

*****

A spider, white and elegant, climbed up my arm and stung me. I have the orange ball. It stung me and spun in a circle three times and jumped into the water. I can only see it now, white, spindly, walking over the hot water. The sun shines and my eyes hurt. I squeeze...but cannot. My arms are locked in place. Strapped down, silent against the non-sleep. And the spider, on the water, stares at me. He can have his way.

Now I must eat bacon, eggs, milkshakes. The smooth white fish outside, floating distant like sheep against the hillside. Because the spider and the blood.

My arms are pressed down. I hear them, speaking, moving about the room. I cannot scream to them to let my arms go, flailing toward the spider. The spider bit me when I was locked, my arms strapped because I bruised the penis black and stiff and dropping flakes of old blood. In the night. The non-sleep.

My eyes make swooping movements and I hear very well because the coast-line has stopped. The spider came and it has been years, but now it has stopped the blood. I could

squeeze but my hands are not free. It will kill, the white spider, staring. On the water its feet do not touch.

I have the orange ball for squeezing. I cannot eat and they have strapped me down. I know some things. My eyes make big, swooping movement. They think I cannot hear. Helpless. And the blood cannot work uphill, cannot reach my brain. I try to scream and only my head shakes. The are talking and do not see me.

My hands are locked.

There were eight nipples on concrete.

The blood, heavy, stops.

I know things. They think I cannot hear.

I do not have to. My eyes make big swoops.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The truck is easier. Father lifts me into the passenger side, loads the wheelchair into the back. The pickup is a heavy Dodge model, 1962, and pulls hard to the right. The right front fender has been replaced and its blue paint doesn't match the faded green color of the rest of the truck. The Dodge gets six miles to the gallon of gas, about thirty miles to the quart of oil. But it is a good hunting wagon. Never been stuck. And with my atrophied muscles unable to carry me, it is more convenient than the family Caprice.

A fine mist covers the windshield, the first sure sign of autumn. The clouds roll in low over Duncan as Father and I enter town. The bank thermometer still reads like summer: 88 degrees. But the mist, the breeze out of the north, belies the season. It is late September and Father is taking me back to the clinic, to the machine, to the needles, to the headaches and missing evenings. But even all that is better than the intensive care unit, the rehabilitation room, the raw mattress sores of the hospital.

In ten minutes we are in front of the clinic, and the mist has turned into a moderate rainfall. The breeze brings its cool front in the form of a quick blast of northern wind. The temperature drops twenty degrees. Father unloads the chair, I fall into it quickly. Teri is manning the

doorway, holding it open wide, shielding her head from the downpour with her white lab coat.

"Welcome back," she says. Teri leans over, puts her hands on her knees and looks closely at me. She is smiling.

"Don't even say it," I say, wiping the rain off my bare arms. "I'm not glad to be back."

"Beats the alternative."

"So they say."

Teri and Father help me out of the chair, guide me over to the weight scales. Father reaches down, lifts one foot onto the scale platform, about three inches above floor level. "Steps give him a hard time," he says. He reaches over, and with more muscle lifts my second foot up and onto the scales. Then he and Tami steady me until I can stand on my own.

"One hundred forty-four. Mercy. Gonna have to fatten you up," Teri says. The two of them direct me to my chair, which has been placed near the front of the clinic. "Your sunglasses -- a disguise?" Teri asks.

"No. My eyes. Light hurts them."

"Even today? When it's raining?"

"Hurts. Gives me a headache. Inside the eyes."

I try to relax in my chair. I grip the armrests, try to push the back of the chair to a more reclining angle. The chair doesn't budge. Teri reaches over, pushes the chair back. "How far?" she asks.

"That's good."

The other patients watch me. None have spoken to me since I entered the clinic. I tilt my head up, nod at the ones I can see. There is Ida. And Edith. And Jessie. Another patient, directly across from me, who I do not recognize. I nod, but he only grits his teeth. Jacki is putting him on the machine; she has the tourniquet on his arm and when she approaches with the arterial needle, the man begins to writhe and scream. I look at Teri, who is standing over me, writing on my patient chart. She bends down, again puts her hands on her knees.

"Vacation. Before winter starts. She and Little Ben went to Colorado for a week."

"Thought maybe she was tired of this job."

"Yeah, that. We all get tired. Just a break."

"I guess."

"She called every day."

"What?"

"When you were in the hospital. Not doing well. She called Bruzinski's office every day and talked to Karen. She was really worried. Still is."

"She's avoiding me . . . in Colorado."

"Becki takes these things too hard.

Feels responsible."

"That's Jacob -- a new patient from Lawton." Teri looks over her shoulder. Patti moves from her patient and holds Jacob down while Jacki slips the needle in. She has trouble getting a blood flow. "Jacob Fuller. Retired military." Teri lowers her voice: "Doesn't handle pain real well."

"Know the feeling."

"You never scream at the needles."

"That was last time."

The clinic is unchanged. The same clutter appears at the nurses' station. The same stains -- formaldehyde, dialysate, blood -- mark the tile floor. The yellow paint on the walls cast the familiar, uneasy glow into the center of the room. The same charts are tacked to the bulletin board. The same cartoons. Different calendars are up, but they are in the old places.

The clock is the same, a large, white face on the west wall above the nurses station. Large, black numbers. Thick, black hour and minute hands. *They never found the monkey's foot.* The clock has a slender, red second hand but I cannot see it this far away. Not with the dark glasses and the weak eyes. Teri tells me it is 1:15 when she gets both needles into my arm and turns the dials on the pump. The session is underway.

"How many hours this time?" I ask.

"Four. Now, anyway. When you get better we may be able to reduce it. Need anything?"

"Still have ice?"

"Yeah. Get you a cup as soon as I get Josie into her chair."

I awaken at 3:30. Sometimes in my dreams, I am Stowe. I think they are cutting my feet. Almost two hours remain. I try to sit up but the chair is too rigid. I call Teri to sit me up. My head spins a little when she pulls up the chair. She takes my blood pressure, my temperature. Both are normal. "Headache?" she asks. No. Not yet. Across from me, Jacob sleeps, his head rolled over on his left shoulder, his right arm -- with the fistula -- placed delicately on a pillow in his lap. He has thick, black hair, cut in short, military fashion. He is black and I can't estimate his age. Retired. No grey. Must be in the mid- or late-50s. He snores loudly and a dribble a saliva works from the corner of his mouth, falling to a large, damp spot on the shoulder of his tan shirt.

In the waiting room, Father coughs. I'm surprised. I cannot see him because of the paneled partition, but I imagine him sitting in the corner chair, by the table with the ash tray, reading one of the old Field and Streams or working the crossword in today's paper. I did not expect him back so soon.

The clinic is unusually quiet. There is no movement,

either from the patients or the nurses. Everyone is asleep, except for Jessie, who sits near the back of the clinic and reads the latest Louis L'Amour. The nurses sit at their station, speak quietly among themselves. Beside them, a fresh pot of coffe brews, but I cannot hear it over the hum of the lights. The nurses glance at me and I realize they cannot tell if I am awake with my glasses on. I wonder if the rain has stopped. I wonder if the temperature has dropped. I begin to tire. My eyes water. My head spins. I close my eyes. The pump beside me rumbles on. It is 3:40. In the waiting room, my Father coughs.

> **"Arnold?"**
>
> **"Died. A week after you left. Pacemaker stopped while he was feeding cows. Couldn't even get back in the truck. A neighbor found him the next morning, slumped over a bale of in the back of the truck."**
>
> **"Laverne?"**
>
> **"Hospital. Over-loaded. Fluid. Couldn't breathe, her lungs were struggling. She's okay. We had her in ICU a couple of days, but now she's out and Nancy said she was walking under her own power yesterday."**
>
> **"Things. Don't change much."**
>
> **"Not a lot. But it's no different than the first time you came. I mean you were sick**

then. And you got better and you took a chance to get out."

"And I'm back."

"And lucky to be here. It was a chance. We have to take chances."

I awaken at 4:50. Teri, leaning over Selma at the next station, brushes me on the arm with her lab coat. I awaken. The nurses are taking some of the patients off. I have another twenty-five minutes. _Marla is in Colorado because she cannot face me. She thinks she is to blame when it was really the spider._ Someone has leaned Jacob back in his chair, and I see only the bottom of his bare feet, sticking out from the yellow blanket draped over him. His house slippers, brown and worn, have been placed beside his chair.

The soles of his feet are marked with dark, brutal-looking purple slashes. A quarter of an inch thick, running in all directions on the bottom of his feet. Scars. Behind my glasses, I consider the scars. _Stowe._ He is missing both large toes. The absence seems more substantial than it should be. I stare at Jacob's feet and the cavities where the large toes should be loom back. In their absence, the other toes have splayed, separated. They seem like child fingers, reaching toward the ceiling. I look at the clock, the coffee pot. I watch Patti taking Jesse off the machine on the other side of the room and try not to think of those slashed blisters, the horroring absence.

"He a diabetic?" I ask quietly, when Teri begins to pull the tape from my needles. I nod toward Jacob, who has been taken off but doesn't have a good standing blood pressure. He sits, drinks coffee, stares at the wall above my head.

"No. Why?" Teri winces when the tape hangs to my hair and skin. She pulls out a needle, quickly places a folded square of gauze over the puncture. I reach over and hold the gauze so she can get the other needle out. "Why ask something like that?"

"I don't...noticed his feet. Thought about the guy who had his feet lanced. In the hospital. He was diabetic."

"Oh," Teri says. "Not diabetes. He was in Korea. Captured. POW for three years. They thought he knew something."

"Punishment? They cut his feet?"

"Whipped. With a metal whip."

I know Jacob cannot hear our conversation above the din of the clinic. But he studies me. He drains the last of his coffee and Jacki takes another standing blood pressure. Behind me, Father pushes the chair into a corner of the patient area.

"And his toes?" I ask.

"They took them."

Jacob reaches down, takes his hat from the table beside

his chair. Jacki takes his arm, steadies him, and begins to move him toward the scales. But he stops, turns and looks at me.

"You crippled?" he asks.

"Just temporary. Until my legs strengthen." He continues to gaze at me and I begin to think he has not heard my answer.

"Good," he says. "I spent many a day in one of those," he says, nodding toward my wheelchair and turning toward the scales.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Jewel survives. Clinically at least.

He sits buried in a back closet in the zoology lab. Zeugman and his cronies put him through the program. Drugs. Shock treatments. Brain surgeries. Jewel didn't improve.

They gave the chimp up as a lost cause, wrote him out of the research statistics. Nowhere in Zeugman's research is there even a recognition of Jewel.

But he is there. In a back room, in a back closet. Slumped on a stool in a dark cubicle, maybe three feet square. His spine given out; he reclines with his chin between his legs. His arms hang limp off the sides of the stool. All his teeth are gone; half his face disappears into his lower lip. Feces collects on the stool, falls off and cakes in a pyramid around the foot of the stool. Already the shit hides the bottom half of the stool. In the outer room, heavy flies buzz just above the floor, flying lazily, satiated on Jewel's waste. They move him every three days, feed him once a day.

Eyes dulled, teeth gone, ears crumbled into black dust, Jewel survives on his stool, offspring of Rebecca. His is the worst lot. If the stool were tall enough, if the carpeted floor hard enough, if the blood pumping strongly enough, the hind legs meat enough, Jewel would push himself

frontwards off the stool, sailing to his death beside his pile of feces.

But he cannot. He hasn't the option. He has the stool, the closet. And the buzzing flies which take turns lighting on his nose and crawling into the vacant corners of his eye sockets.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

These nights.

I am no prophet.

Another of these nights. On the living room couch, in dark interrupted by the clatter of the refrigerator in the kitchen, I sit for a time and then I lie down. I prop my head by two throw cushions and the pillow I brought from my bedroom. On these nights I find no comfort. I have slept, since 6 p.m., and now sleep avoids me. My head is heavy, pulses at the temples. My eyes dance in their sockets, sway back and forth with the throbbing, the push of blood against the optic nerves. I cannot sit up, must lie down to ease the pain. Even lying down, I keep both feet on the floor.

My stomach cannot tolerate the supper, the machine. It despairs. The Baseljel, the antacid, the Zantac, doe not calm the ulcers. They are off-balance. Gas builds. So long as I lie down it cannot escape. It builds, brings on a wave of nausea which in turn causes me head to spin. Lying down, I become nauseaus and dizzy. I sit up. The gas moves quickly up. I belch once, twice. Supper hangs somewhere on the back of my tongue.

I feel beter. Then the throbbing increases and I have to lie back down.

Another of these nights.

Earlier, the needle punctures continued to bleed. I

sat in the dialysis chair, upright, headache increasing. The nurses worked the other patients free. I watched them leave, one by one, escorted throught the clinic doors by their husbands or wives or companions. The bleeding stopped but my pressure bombed when I got out of the chair. I sat down, drank coffee and sodium-rich chicken broth. The pressure came up, slowly. I left at 5:30.

Driving home, bracing my head in my left hand, I watched the mud-flaps of the semi-trailer in front of me. The rig travelled slowly through Dooley but I could not weave my way around it. I stayed behind the truck, eyes steadied on the mud-flaps. When they stopped, I stopped.

I knew then.

The flaps could have been amusing. Yosemite Sam, pointing a pair of six-shooters at me. Underneath, his words: _Back Off._ I traded stares with him for nine miles, Halliburton traffic zipping past in the left land. _There is a new machine. No needles. It works while you sleep. It works through the membrane of the stomach._ Secure behind the truck, unable to focus my eyes without the pulsing pain, I followed the mud flaps into Marston, signaled my turn. I was home, pulled my car into the driveway, my eyes still focused through the windshield where the mud flaps had been. There is movement in the corner of my eye, but I do not focus. I sit in the car in the driveway.

*****

I ate supper quickly. I held my head in my right hand, ate with the left hand. I barely touched the iced tea, drinking perhaps two, three teaspoons. I have no output. Don't need fluid unless I perspire. I ate heavily, more than I needed.

I walked straight to bed, shucked my clothes somewhere on my bedroom floor and eased into the sheets. My head hurt but it didn't take long to fall asleep. Mother came back to the room, shoved a towel against the crack at the bottom of the door, hoping to insulate my room a little better against sound. <u>Stowe said it to me: "We are a lot alike."</u> Sometime in the evening I awoke, heard the television going, heard the laughter of Mother and Father. Then more sleep.

Now it is one o'clock. If I lie in bed, my stomach builds the gas and turns my head dizzy. The dizziness forces me up. I vacillate on the couch: sitting up, lying down. There is no comfort.

And my mind is stuck. I believe I have fever. I get up slowly, not to aggravate the throbbing, search the kitchen for the thermometer. I keep it in my mouth for several minutes. 98.4. I put it back in my mouth, lie down on the couch. Several minutes later I check again. 98.4. No fever. But my mind is stuck, racing through a series of thoughts, again and again, around and around. I cannot break the sequence, the urgency the thoughts seem to

possess. It is the dizziness, the upset stomach, the medications. I am delirious. I fight it. These nights I fight it. _I was in a fish bowl with bright lights shining through the water. A spider skimmed across the top. Outside the nurses floated past in their white coats, shark-like. They would disappear and finally I would sight them, as though through a telescope, in a green field, like tall, distant sheep._ First, I think I am in a boat, marooned on a sand bar. I try to shove the boat loose, but it is too heavy. Mother is angry with me for leaving the washing on the line overnight. It is wet with dew. I wonder why the grass in front of first base has been stripped away. Its absence makes the ball bounce weirdly and I cannot react. I realize it is game day and I've shown up in my practice togs. The nozzle of the gas pump will not fit into my car's tank. It is too big. It is as big, maybe bigger, than a garden hose. I should tell someone. The wind is cold and a rain is beginning to fall and I am in a boat, marooned on a sand bar. The boat is too heavy...my mind sticks in the circle and I try to break free of it. I try to think other thoughts, to force my mind into a basketball game, into a foxhole of some imaginary war. It works, but only for a flash. _The new machine sleeps with you. They say it is a comfort._ It is no use. I am back in the boat. These night my mind gets stuck.

If I could leave the couch, get up and walk, perhaps go

out on the front porch and check for stars. There should be clouds. There were clouds this afternoon when I drove home. I think there were. I am not sure. If I could get up and walk around, my mid would snap out of its circle. If I could read a paper, a book. Work a crossword. But I cannot. The throbbing is too much. My eyes blink, fold up, against the pain. I cannot concentrate. I am glued against the couch, vacillating. Sitting. Lying. _I know some things._ I cannot catch these bounces.

It will happen. I do not avoid that knowledge.

My stomach is the key. I can control the throbbing, the pain of my head, by lying down. With the throbbing under control, I can concentrate on other thoughts. _She said it was wrong and took off her blouse. Now she doesn't speak._ The stomach is the key. To break the circle. If I could get a soft drink from the refrigerator perhaps it would absorb the acid. No acid, no gas. I could lie in peace. The throbbing would stop. I could break the circle. I struggle up, slowly. Slowly. Mustn't increase the blood flow. But it increases and I sit back down. I let the pressure stabilize and then I rise again. I am already thinking more clearly. _Rebecca was a little human._ I find a two-liter bottle under the sink. I fill a small glass, do not bother to cool it with ice. I drink the cola, quickly, two deep swings. Back on the couch. I know I am wrong. The fluids turns on my stomach. My muscles grind against it.

It is going to come back. I am lying down, and the fluid is going to come back. I mustn't wait. I get up, against the pounding, and walk quickly to the bathroom. I kneel against the toilet. The fluid comes back easily. I can taste it against the roof of my mouth. My belches are hot, sweet.

My head pounds. I close my eyes tightly, flex against the pain. The cola comes up and dinner follows. That was it. Dinner soured in my stomach. Tomato sauce. From the stew. Too rich. My head pounds, my vision blurs in the bathroom mirror. The light in the mirror bounces inside my head. _They whipped his feet, cut one off and it was never found._ I suck some water from the faucet, gargle it, spit it out. It freshens my mouth some. There is still grit.

I walk back to bed. My pillow is not there. It is on the couch in the living room. I do not go for it -- lie down without it. I sweat, my face and shoulders. My stomach is relaxed. The pounding is still there, behind my eyes, but it is more relaxed. I am tired. Four o'clock.

I am no prophet. But it will happen and I do not deny it. On these nights, one of these nights, there will be no alternative. When it happens, it will be one of these nights.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

I negotiate the back-door steps one at a time. I lower my right foot, brace myself against the cane, and then bring my left leg down. Four times: slow, clumsy, helpless. But without occasion. The evening sun works its way behind Talbot's pecan trees, but the comfortable warmth of a late May evening lingers in the back yard. Mother and Father sit in lawn chairs, facing Father's vegetable garden, and across the alley, Jim Riley's fruit orchard.

Already, the shoots of the first corn planting work their way upward, four neat rows of green stems in the middle of the garden. Father planted onions in the last week of February -- while there were still patches of snow in the shadows. Green onions, fresh pulled and trimmed, adorn the supper table every night. On the west end of the garden, the potato crop flourishes, the plants already a foot and a half tall. Two months ago, Riley's pear tree, in the corner of the orchard, blossomed into a crash of pure, white flowers. Now it and the peach trees shine, brilliant enough, in the late sun.

I walk slowly across the carport, tighten my robe, and sit down on the picnic table bench. The sky is a heavy blue, darkened by the coming heat of summer which grows more persistent each day and hangs longer under the pecan shade

each evening. The air pushes about the back yard with a sense of weight, humidity, and I feel the possibility of more wet weather.

"Rain, you think?" I ask.

"Bet on it," Father says, lighting a Winston. "Building up in the southwest. Quick." He nods in the direction and I look over Moorehead's house on the corner. A huge thunderhead, stunning white in the sunlight, billows high into the sky, cloud stacked upon cloud. "Hot as it got today -- 96 at Fort Sill - I expect it may get a little rough."

It has rained the past two nights, and Father sat up with me until midnight, tracking the storms on the radar from the local televison station. The worst storm cells crossed south of town, but there was plenty of wind and rain. And a little hail. The rain saturated the garden and Father fears more rain will stand in puddles between the planted rows, drowning his efforts.

"Wichita got it last night," I say.

"Looks like they're getting some more right now," Father says, eyeing the thundercloud. "It's a good head building up down there. Come through about ten o'clock and dissipate. Dissipate -- that's what Gary says on the weather. Rain like hell is what he means."

"Your garden?"

"Corn'll wind up in Louisiana somewhere. We'll just

get our canning vegetables from the farm stands."

"But you won't have anything to do all summer but fish."

"Mama'll think of something."

I turn on my bench, rest my elbows on the table. The cloud builds in the right spot, a little higher against the horizon than the two previous nights. If the storm moves in normal fashion, tracking northeasstward, we could have an interesting night. But for the moment the southern breeze is warm, almost tangible, and the backyard comfortable. A trio of robins bounce near the garden's edge, pulling up earthworms urged to the surface by the saturated soil. A fly-catcher sits on Father's rain gauge along the dog-pen fence, and swoops chattering over the garden occasionally to snap up an insect. Across the street, out of sight, Talbot mows his lawn, making criss-crosses over the smooth, textured bermuda.

"He mowing again?" I ask.

"Every evening. In the spring. He'll cut back in the summer. Not because it's dry, but because all that walking kills the grass."

Mother and Father talk about my sister's new job, car problems. I watch the trio of robins become four, then five birds. A motorcycle buzzes down the alley and the robins take flight, lighting in one of Riley's plum trees. The storm bank in the southwest begins to turn blue at the

bottom as the sun hits the horizon. The cloud stays pillow white near the top.

"You stay busy."

"Makes the days go faster."

"Didn't figure Teri would make you put me on the machine."

"Nothing like that. I can still be a little professional."

"I'm sorry everything's..."

"Less said the better."

"Yeah. Say, have you seen the backgammon board?"

"Disappeared. We were looking for it this morning. For two first-shift patients. Disappeared. Now: any problems? Vomiting?"

"No."

"Diarrhea?"

"No."

"Short of breath?"

"No."

"Dizziness?"

"No."

"And some headaches?"

"Yeah."

"I never expected to see you in the back yard again,"

Mother says suddenly. "When you were in ICU. Bruzinski would talk...I never thought you'd get back."

"I didn't think about the back yard," I say. "The one thing I thought most about was getting up out of my own bed, at 5 a.m. in the morning, and drinking a big, cold glass of water from our refrigerator." No one spoke for several moments. "The hospital water was no good. I remembered how good our water was." The back yard begins to darken. I hear a mosquito buzz past my ear. And another.

"By the way, I got these while I was in Dooley," Father says. He pulls a sizeable bag from his pants pocket and throws it at me. It contains a couple of packets of plastic fishing worms. "Woody says he's catching them at Humphrey Lake on those. Black worms with yellow gator tails."

"Woody came by?"

"Earlier. Told him you were sleeping." I lay the packets on the table.

"You may as well use them. I don't see fishing anytime soon."

"Sooner than you think. You're eating now. You're out of the chair. Building up. Sooner than you think."

I slap a mosquito on my wrist. I get up to go inside and Mother comes with me, helps me up the steps. Father stays in his chair. I stand at the back door for a while, watching the tip of his cigarette flare when he takes a drag from it. The cloud moves in quickly and I can see the

lightning in the upper reaches of the thunderhead.

The tornado alarm goes off shortly after midnight. I am still up, watching an old movie and flipping channels for weather updates. The first cloud reached town about 10:30, bringing strong, sudden gusts of wind and sheets of rain. There was a small barrage of pea-sized hail and several deafening thunderclaps, but it passed harmlessly enough. But I was already tracking another storm cell -- a more ominous one -- slipping over the Red River north of Wichita Falls.

It is a large blip on the radar, and unlike most late-night storms, it was increasing in intensity rather than decreasing. It spawns at least six funnels on its route across southwestern Oklahoma. For the past hour, the Lawton television has been warning residents in the storm's path to be prepared to seek shelter.

I step out on the front porch, watch the water from the last downpour rushing through the street. Lightning from the approaching cloud is lighting up the sky over Moorehead's house. The air is tightly still and the leaves on the elm trees in the front yard hang quietly. The storm is nearing and I know the 60-mile-per-hour winds it is packing will hit quickly and fiercely. But the alarm beats the wind.

The storm whistle in the next alley, just half a block north of our house, begins winding out its alarm and within

seconds it reaches a high-pitched, ear-piercing level. The house shakes with the sound. I step back inside and Mother is already running about in the kitchen, searching for a flashlight on the upper shelf of the cabinet. Father comes into the living room, still dressed only in his boxer shorts, and peers at the television set.

"Spotted four funnels already," I say.

"Five now," he says and pads back into the other room.

"Get dressed!" Mother shouts over the whistle. "We have to go to the Brown's cellar!"

I start to ask why but remember our cellar is flooded with fifteen inches of rain water. High water table -- it soaks through the cracks in the concrete. "I'll stay here and watch the television. If it looks bad, I'll come on down."

Mother appears around the corner. The storm has frightened her and she seems near panic. There is a furious look between her eyes. "You'll come right now," she orders. "You can't even get down from the steps. I don't want to hear it. Get ready!"

I start to argue but think better of it. Mother is getting worse and worse about bad weather. And the whistle is enough to unnerve anyone. She is in no condition to listen to reason. I go to my room, pull on some blue jeans, a t-shirt and some street shoes. I grab a jacket as well, remembering the chilly front porch. The wind and rain

strikes just as the three of us step out the back door.

So this is it. The reaction. I hope they notice; they've waited for it so long. Even I recognize it. Surely they do.

Rivers looks curiously at me. Considers my answers. Asks his questions with a sly manner. I know -- I do not hold up well.

I conceal what I can. I wonder if my feet have sores on the bottom. I touch them while I sit in the chair. They are soft. Like spider's feet, able to walk over the water -- maybe never touch it.

When we reach Brown's cellar, Johnny Brown is on the steps, watching for newcomers. He lifts the door open when we round the corner of his house. Mother goes down first, then me, and then Father. There is already a dozen or so people in the dark, cramped cell. I step carefully to one corner, hold the cane with both hands. Six children sit on the one bunk pushed against the back of the cellar. They are drenched and shivering. They quietly eye me and my cane. There is the musty smell of all cellars and another odor I cannot identify. "We broke a jar of pickles in the rush," Velda Brown says, explaining the brisk smell. There are other jars of pickles, pears, peaches, and relish on the shelves near the cellar door.

They know: my silence is proof of depression. I can't help that. How can I fight it? By speaking. There is so

little to say -- and I don't know how to hide it.

I feel her eyes on me at times, when I am reading or trying to sleep. I don't read much. My eyes cannot make such small movements.

My eyes make big movements. I wish I could hide that. They follow her around and she doesn't let on. But she knows.

Buck Johnson drives me now. Three times a week. Sits in there and drinks coffee, flirts with the old ladies. Jesus. He brings me my cups of ice. On the way home he doesn't say much. I'm thankful.

There were three: Milford, Freddie, and someone else.

Sometimes my hands won't move.

Sometimes I cry for no reason.

They speak in whispers and think I cannot hear. I do not to hear. My eyes make big, swooping movements.

I know enough.

I do not recognize any of the children, nor any of the older people in the cellar. Just the Browns and my parents. I am standing by an older woman who is dressed in house shoes and a flannel night gown which stayed fairly dry under her frail rain jacket. Everyone is quiet for the first few minutes we are in the cellar, but soon the children are chattering and jumping about. Mother carries on some neighborhood gossip with Mrs. Brown. I begin to tire, standing in my corner. I have not stood this long in one

place since entering the hospital more than a year ago. I shift back and forth from one leg to the other.

"You must be Matt," the older woman says.

"Yes."

"I used to read your columns. In the newspaper. You've stopped."

"I've been in the hospital -- and recuperating."

"Yes. Things have not gone too well?"

"Not well."

"Will you be writing again?"

"I -- no. I don't think."

She starts to ask something else, but Johnny Brown asks her something about her front porch swing. She steps out into the middle of the cellar and the two of them talk. Father stands on the steps of the cellar, holds the door open a few inches, watching the storm. I move to the steps and ask him to open the door.

"I'm tired. Can't stand up much longer," I say. "I'm going back. Nothing's going to happen."

Father hesitates, looks at Mother. She is speaking with some other woman. "Okay," he says. "I'm going too. The worst is over, anyway."

We step out of the cellar. The rain is falling in torrents and the ground is slushy, difficult to walk on. I use my jacket as a cover against the rain. I walk slowly. My knees threaten to buckle. I need to sit down.

In front of the Brown's house, I step into the street and slip. I land in a stream of water, scrape my knee, elbow, and cheek against the gravel.

Father strides up to me, helps me stand back up. "You okay?"

"Slipped. Hurt my knee."

"Here," he says, and reaches around me with his arm. I throw an arm around his shoulders, and he braces me as we walk down the street and into our driveway.

The End

VITA

Stewart Keith Long

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Thesis: NIGHT-TIMES-NIGHT: A NOVEL IN THREE PARTS WITH A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Major Field: English

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Bowie, Texas, August 2, 1956, the son of Montgomery Lee and Billie Jean Long.

Education: Graduated from Marlow High School, Marlow, Oklahoma, in May, 1974; received Bachelor of Arts Degree in English from East Central Oklahoma State University, Ada, in May, 1980; completed requirements for Master of Arts degree at Oklahoma State University in December, 1987.

Professional Experience: News writer for the *Ada Evening News*, 1976-80, the *Stillwater NewsPress*, 1980-81, and the *Marlow Review*, 1981 to present; Teaching Assistant, Department of English, Oklahoma State University, August 1985 to December, 1987.