

THE UNDERTOW: FIVE STORIES

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1976

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1978

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate College of the
Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
December, 1983



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I extend my sincere thanks to Dr. Gordon Weaver, Chairman of the English Department at Oklahoma State University, for his excellent teaching, careful advising, and model writing; Dr. Terry Hummer and Dr. Edward Walkiewicz, professors of English at OSU, also for their excellent teaching and careful advising; Dr. John Gardiner, professor of Educational Administration and Higher Education at OSU, for serving on my thesis committee.

Closer to home, I thank Dr. Perry Gragg, Chairman of the English Department at Angelo State University, San Angelo, Texas, for supporting my academic and professional endeavors during the last five years; Dr. Phillip Holcomb, professor of English at ASU, for his proofreading, his moral support, and his friendship; Dr. James Sanderson, my friend from out of town, for our discussions about writing and for our long friendship.

Finally, my particularly special thanks go to Byron W. and Ellen F. Dalrymple, my very supportive parents; Lorraine Crawford Dalrymple, my very understanding and supportive wife; Joshua Ross Dalrymple and James Phillip Dalrymple, my sons.

This thesis is dedicated to Lorraine, Joshua, and Phillip.

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INTRODUCTION: THE PRINCIPLES OF FICTION

"The only way, I think," says Flannery O'Connor, "to learn to write short stories is to write them, and then try to discover what you have done."¹ Read the wrong way, her statement condones, at best, a kind of automatic writing for which the only rules are organic ones the writer must discover after the fact; or, at worst, a kind of chaotic writing for which there are no rules except those the writer arbitrarily imposes after the fact to justify what he has done. Read the right way, her statement describes the trial-and-error approach most writers must take as they learn to manipulate the principles of effective serious fiction.

Effective serious fiction, as Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren suggest, involves an idea "of some real significance for mature and thoughtful human beings."² That idea usually derives from what William Faulkner calls "a story of the human heart in conflict with itself, or with others, or with environment," and it is presented effectively if it is presented in "a moving way."³ But because the human heart is multi-faceted, its conflicts innumerable, its story moving in so many ways, the serious fiction writer faces a paradox of sorts when he sits down to write. He must proceed as if he knows what he is doing, as if the notions he

has formulated are the right notions, as if they will guide him successfully through his task; but he must also understand that each time he sits down to write he is performing a new task, that the notions he formulated yesterday may prove wrong today, that there are precious few general rules he can categorically apply to every particular task.

He may find, for example, that his commitment to "showing" rather than "telling" deprives him of the ability to convey essential information that, if "shown," would simply require too much time and space or would lead him too far astray from his intent; or he may find that his insistence on a consistent point of view leaves the motivations of one or more of his characters too vague to be effective; or that his prepossession for overt, physical action limits rather than enhances the development of a particular character or a particular meaning in a particular story. Faced with such discoveries, the writer has three choices: he may scrap the story, stick to his general rules and write a poor story, or alter the rules for the sake of telling an effective story. Nine times out of ten, the serious writer will choose to alter the rules because he knows they are, as Edith Wharton puts it, "useful chiefly as a lamp in a mine, or a hand-rail down a black stairway; they are necessary for the guidance they give, but it is a mistake, once they are formulated, to be too much in awe of them."⁴ After all, by creating light, a lamp creates shadows as well. And a hand-rail might lead to a cellar full of mildew, mold, and rot;

or it might suddenly veer from the walker's destination.

Strained as these metaphors may be, they clarify what I believe a serious fiction writer must always remember: in Wayne C. Booth's words, questions about technique in fiction "can be answered only by reference to the potentialities and necessities of particular works, not by reference to fiction in general . . . or rules about point of view."⁵ On the other hand, such relativity does not eliminate the possibility of recognizing basic principles in the art of fiction writing. Although no absolute rules of form exist, certain inherent characteristics do, characteristics to which the writer should attune himself. Creating absolute rules from these characteristics is stifling; ignoring them is just plain stupid.

The man who never walks in the rain because he knows he may get wet denies himself the pleasure of hearing fat drops rhythmically drumming his umbrella, or of revitalizing his dulled senses by drenching himself in a mild summer storm. The man who ignores rain's characteristic wetness inevitably catches pneumonia or drowns in a flash flood. Rhetoric is to fiction what wetness is to rain. As Booth points out, a fiction writer "cannot choose to avoid rhetoric; he can choose only the kind of rhetoric he will employ. He cannot choose whether or not to affect his readers' evaluations by his choice of narrative manner; he can only choose whether to do it well or poorly."⁶ By definition, rhetoric is neither organic nor chaotic, but it

is pliable. It is a carefully controlled construct that the writer can manipulate to his advantage, and it controls all of the other characteristics of effective serious fiction.

O'Connor asserts that a writer can do anything he can get away with. She concedes, however, that "nobody has ever gotten away with much."⁷ Nobody has ever gotten away with much because the inherent principles of fiction cannot be ignored: namely, the principles of character, action, setting, plot, particularity, and narrative stance.

Despite her conviction that writers have never gotten away with much, O'Connor claims that discussing fiction writing in terms of elements such as character and plot "is like trying to describe the expression on a face by saying where the eyes, nose, and mouth are."⁸ She is right insofar as she means that the quality of a story's intellectual and emotional impact ultimately determines its value. But the expression cannot exist without the face, and the face cannot exist without its parts. Any story involving the human heart demands at least one character; the illusion that the human heart is in conflict demands action; a character in action must have a setting, a place within which to act; a coherent relationship among these elements derives from plot; and, above all, to be presented in a moving way, character, action, setting, and plot must be presented with particularity from a narrative stance that creates the rhetoric of the whole.

A story of the human heart cannot exist without at least one character exhibiting human qualities. Some writers occasionally have tried to circumvent this principle, but their ostensible stories end up as nothing more than descriptions lacking moving conflicts. In "August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains," for example, Ray Bradbury describes the last standing house in a ruined city, and, finally, the destruction of that house by fire.⁹ But the human characters are already dead, consumed in a nuclear explosion, and there is nothing but the house, some mechanical mice, and a dog to replace them. Serious as Bradbury's intent may be, his description is nothing more than that: a description, no more a story than is the blurb on a Burpee's seed package, though qualitatively superior. It fails as a story because its focus is the house, an entity with no human qualities with which a reader can sympathize or empathize and, thus, with no potential for an emotionally moving conflict.

Potential alone, of course, guarantees nothing. A story can contain human characters and still be ineffective. Despite its two characters, a dead woman and her murderer, Alain Robbe-Grillet's "The Secret Room" works no better as a story than does "August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains." Like Bradbury's story, Robbe-Grillet's is nothing more than description: in this case, as the final sentence clarifies, literally a description of a painting.¹⁰ What is missing in both compositions is action that helps define character and

present its conflict in a moving way. In "The Secret Room," neither character thinks or speaks, and the only physical action is the woman's momentary writhing described briefly in the third from the last paragraph. But that is nothing more than a reflexive animal-like response to pain and makes the reader care no more than he would for a bird with a broken wing or a grasshopper stuck in a spider's web. The man apparently moves from the top of some stairs back to the woman and then away again, but Robbe-Grillet describes him only in stasis at different points along his path of movement.

"August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains" contains more action, but it is superficial and, with one exception, emotionally unmoving. Among other actions, mechanical mice scurry about cleaning the house, the garage door opens and closes, and the kitchen sink automatically washes dishes. The one and only exception to the mechanical nature of the action occurs in a brief episode in which a dog frantically runs through the house and then dies. Had Bradbury selected the dog rather than the house as his focus, he might have created a moving fiction, for, again, it is the human quality of character that effective fiction must have. A dog frantic in its loneliness can perform actions that exhibit the same qualities the human heart in conflict exhibits. Even a cockroach, as in Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis," will suffice if created carefully.¹¹

Gregor the cockroach works as a fictive character because he continues to exhibit human qualities. Though as a cockroach he prefers eating spoiled food, huddling under a sofa, and walking on the ceiling, he continues acting in a qualitatively human fashion that causes the reader to care about him as a human, to respond emotionally to his conflict.

To have such an effect, action need not manifest itself in overt struggle. When Gregor the cockroach drapes a sheet over his sofa to spare his sister's natural feeling of revulsion, or when he lies still and wonders what his family is doing beyond his closed door, or when he drags himself slowly toward the music his sister plays, he performs actions at least as significant as his scrambling frantically through the door to escape his father, or his mother's fainting, or his father's throwing apples at him. They are significant because they reveal something about Gregor that causes the reader to care about him, about his family, and about the issues involved.

The same is true of stories containing little or no strong physical action at all, stories such as J. D. Salinger's "Pretty Mouth and Green My Eyes" or Virginia Woolf's "The Mark on the Wall." In Salinger's story, the action consists of a telephone conversation, a few hand movements, and cigarette smoking, but that is enough to make the reader care about and emotionally respond to the three characters--even to Arthur, who is only heard and not

seen.¹² Woolf's story contains even less overt action. A woman simply sits contemplating a mark on her living room wall.¹³ Her thinking is the only action in the story, but it does as much or more to establish her conflict and make the reader care than would an overt confrontation between her and a man exhibiting the masculine characteristics she resents.

Characters' human qualities may be as varied as the actions that make them worth caring about, for caring about is not necessarily the same as sympathizing with or liking. A reader may love or hate a character, wish him well or wish him evil, desire his success or desire his failure. In any case, the important thing is that the writer manipulate a character and his actions in such a way that the reader's response is strong. Blake in John Cheever's "The Five-Forty-Eight," for example, is not a likable character.¹⁴ His actions, in fact, demonstrate that he is morally despicable: he takes advantage of an emotionally crippled woman (apparently his rule rather than an exception); then he has her fired and refuses to communicate with her at all; he is petty with his wife and remains untouched by her tears; he criticizes Mr. Watkins simply because Mr. Watkins wears a corduroy jacket and lives in a rented house. But his lack of morality and compassion is precisely what makes him an effective character, what makes him worth caring about, what causes the reader's interest in Blake's fate, what creates and maintains the issue of the story.

"Inso far as we're unable to care about the characters," John Gardner says of readers' responses to fiction, "we can work up no interest in the issues."¹⁵ His comment is testimony to the inherent principles of character and action in serious fiction. The writer interested in writing a story with a significant idea for thoughtful human beings must write about characters whose actions make them worth caring about. If the writer ignores these principles, he produces, at best, "stories" like "August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains," interesting only to the extent that the issue happens to be fashionable, or "The Secret Room," interesting as a curiosity only, an accurate but issueless and unmoving description. On the other hand, if the writer formulates absolute rules to control the principles of character and action, he severely limits his craft. If he decides, for example, that all protagonists must be likable and all antagonists unlikable or that all action must be physically strong and overt, he is likely to be repetitive, and he certainly limits the types of human conflict (and, therefore, the issues) with which he may work. The middle ground--that of recognizing the principles and attempting to manipulate them to his advantage--is where the serious fiction writer must stand.

Although not always as important, setting is just as necessary to effective fiction as are character and action. If it does nothing else, setting at least gives characters a place and time within which to perform their actions.

Even if it plays a relatively minor role in developing a story's effect, it must be appropriate. It is unlikely, for instance, that the story of a character whose conflict involves learning to love the bride he ordered by mail could be told effectively if set in contemporary America or in a growing city of nineteenth century America.

Once he has assured its appropriateness, the writer can manipulate setting so that it complements, clarifies, or creates his meaning to relatively varying extents. He may make it relatively unimportant, as St. John Ervine does in "The Burial."¹⁶ The cite of a funeral procession in a small rustic Irish village is appropriate for two rustic villagers intermittently lamenting a young girl's death and haggling over the price of a cow. Beyond its appropriateness, however, the setting has little effect on the characters, their actions, or the meaning of the story.

In a story such as W. Somerset Maugham's "Rain," setting is not only appropriate but also complementary to the development of character and action.¹⁷ The oppressive atmosphere and the incessant rain parallel the oppressiveness of Davidson's incessant proselytizing, and the fact that the characters are isolated in Pago-Pago and living in dingy quarters with corrugated metal roofing upon which the rain pounds causes, at least in part, the frantic intensity of Davidson's actions and others' reactions to him.

Even more essential to its story's effect is the setting of Jack London's "To Build a Fire."¹⁸ The isolated

trail in the Yukon, where the earth lies below six feet of snow and ice and where the temperature drops to seventy-five degrees below zero, is the force against which the human character struggles. As such, it clarifies the physical, intellectual, and emotional nature of the character and does as much to create the story's meaning as does the character himself.

The point, again, is that setting is an unavoidable element in fiction, but that the writer can and should manipulate it according to the potentialities and necessities of each story he writes.

Implicit in the manipulation of character, action, and setting is the development of plot. Contrary to popular misuse of the term, plot is not equivalent to action. If character is the who of a story, action the what, and setting the when and where, plot is the how and why. It provides the logical and psychological coherence of relationships within and among characters, actions, and settings, a coherence that helps drive home the full significance of events in a story.

For definition by negation, Robbe-Grillet's "The Secret Room" again serves as a good example. Among other weaknesses in plot, the ostensible actions in the piece make little chronological sense. Robbe-Grillet begins by describing the dead woman and the "empty" setting in which she lies. Then, in the background, a man is fleeing, "ascending the last steps without turning around." Five

paragraphs later, the man has moved back and stands "on the first steps of the stairs, ready to go up." Gradually, Robbe-Grillet describes the man's different positions until the man is kneeling next to the woman and bending over her. And the woman, described as lifeless for roughly four printed pages, suddenly writhes, her flesh "still intact" until, just as suddenly, "the flesh is torn open" (by what or whom goes unsaid), and "the blood spurts out over the tender skin." In the following and final two paragraphs, the setting is empty again, and the woman's "wound has stiffened."

In all fairness to Robbe-Grillet, "The Secret Room" may be an accurate description of a painting or series of paintings. But as a story it fails because it makes little chronological or psychological sense. A writer certainly may choose to tell his story backwards in time if doing so serves his intent, and up to the third from the last paragraph Robbe-Grillet seems to be doing just that. The final two paragraphs, however, break the reversed time order in such a way that chronology cannot be clearly recovered.

An effective plot must contain a recoverable chronological ordering of action. It may be distorted, but it must be coherently recoverable. In Cheever's "The Forty-Eight," for example, what actually happens first chronologically--Miss Dent's applying for a job, Blake's making love with her and then firing and avoiding her--is not related to the reader until roughly halfway through the

story. But despite the distortion of chronology through flashback, the actual sequence of events is recoverable and coherent. Cheever simply manipulates chronology in order to make his meaning more emphatic. To emphasize the central and most significant actions of the story--Miss Dent's following, confronting, and attempting to humiliate Blake--Cheever begins with that action. Then, to make the reader understand the full significance of the central action, he interrupts it with an expository flashback that gives the reader information necessary to understanding. Because the chronology is distorted, the reader's attention focuses on the central action; but because he can reconstruct the chronology, the reader can understand how and why the central action came about and is worth focusing on.

The purpose of a recoverable ordering of events, in other words, is not simply to provide logical coherence but to provide emotional and psychological coherence as well. Without knowledge of what precedes Miss Dent's main actions, of what motivates her, the reader would have no clear indication of how to interpret her actions and, thus, no clear indication of the story's meaning. This is the other, and perhaps most important, way in which "The Secret Room" fails as a story. Even if the reader assumes that events are being related in reverse chronology and that the last two paragraphs flash back (or ahead) to where the piece opened, he still has no knowledge of the relationship between the man and the dead woman or of the relationship

between the man and his apparent actions. Thus, no significant idea, no meaning, derives from the scene of murder.

Setting, too, as I have previously indicated, is an element of plot that can be manipulated to help create logical and psychological coherence. In "To Build a Fire," the setting itself motivates the central character's actions; in "Rain," the setting clarifies and emphasizes Davidson's character and, perhaps, even partially motivates him; in "The Burial," setting makes the men and their actions believable.

In life, a man may freeze to death in his suburban home; a religious fanatic may kill himself after just having saved two hundred lost souls on the sunniest day of the year; two businessmen in New York City may haggle over the price of a cow while they watch a funeral procession of limousines go by. Stranger things have happened. But, to rely on a cliché, fact is stranger than fiction. Serious fiction requires that the writer do more than simply reflect the people, actions, and settings of life. As Wharton correctly observes, the writer must expand those elements, must reflect something beyond them, must "relate them to the whole stuff of life out of which they but partially emerge."¹⁹ He must, that is, recognize the absolute necessity of relationship, of coherence, of plot in fiction.

Fiction is not life; it is a rhetorical construct intended to create the illusion of life in a moving, meaningful way. Beyond character and action, beyond setting,

beyond plot, that illusion depends upon particularity. As Barbara McKenzie points out in her extensive introduction to Fiction's Journey, the writer must allow the "reader to experience the sensuous qualities of places, events, and characters" if he wishes to create and sustain both the illusion of reality and the reader's involvement with it.²⁰

Generalities are not moving, and because they are not moving they are not significant in any felt or emotional sense. A man does not shudder when he sees an ugly woman; he shudders when he sees a woman whose looks consist of particular features he considers revolting: small eyes that bulge in their sockets, for example, or thick black eyebrows that meet in the middle and look like a single fat caterpillar, or cheeks so riddled with acne that they could be used to scrub burned cheese out of an iron skillet. Nor does he come to love that same woman because, despite her physical features, she is kind; he learns to love her because she thinks, speaks, or acts in particular ways that make her emotionally irresistible. A reader's illusion that he is seeing, feeling, and experiencing the same kinds of things he responds to in life is what makes him respond to fiction, and that illusion is most emphatically achieved through the writer's use of particularity.

A writer who describes one of his main characters with terms such as homely, poor, and mischievous only is not likely to arouse much interest or feeling from his readers. A writer who describes that character's appearance, social

status, and personality in concrete detail is likely to succeed in strongly affecting his readers. In "Bad Characters," Jean Stafford does just that.²¹ Eleven-year-old Lottie Jump has a "pinched and pasty face" and wears clothes that are disgraceful because they are "not just ill-fitting and old and ragged but dirty, unmentionably so." Furthermore, she has small brown teeth that are "notched like a saw," and her "long, lank hair" looks "as if it might have nits." As for her social status, she lives in a cottage in a "wretched settlement" where "in nearly every ramshackle house" someone can be heard "coughing himself to death," and her mother works in the "dirtiest, darkest, smelliest place in town," a cafe "patronized by coal miners" who don't wash their faces and who sometimes get into "such dangerous fights after drinking dago red" that the sheriff must be called. The particular actions that delineate her personality make up the major portion of the story, but, in short, she is reminiscent "of one of those self-contained dogs whose home is where the handout is and who travels alone but, if it suits him, will become the leader of the pack."

Because Lottie, her background, and her actions are presented so concretely, she seems to be a real person performing real actions in a real setting. Thus, the reader can respond to her and to those around her in a qualitatively real fashion that affects his understanding of the story.

Like all of the principles I have been discussing, this one should be acknowledged by the writer, but it should not be transformed into some absolute rule. "The artist who ignores the specific qualities of his particulars," says Gardner, "can say only what everyone else says."²² Still, if he is engaged in serious art, he must ultimately say something beyond the particulars, must discover the "proper balance of detail and generality."²³

"Proper balance" is difficult, probably impossible, to define, but it is safe to say that the would-be fiction writer who handles his general ideas the way Kahlil Gibran does in The Prophet is, like Gibran, writing a tract on spiritual philosophy;²⁴ and that another hopeful who handles his particulars the way J. K. Huysmans does in A Rebours (Against Nature) is writing a study of aesthetics and decadence.²⁵ Neither emotionally moves the reader except to the extent that he is predisposed to be moved by philosophy or by aesthetics and decadence, because the one engages the reader's faculties for abstraction only, the other his senses only. Effective serious fiction, as Gardner notes, does both: it leads the reader "through imitated concrete experience to profound intellectual and emotional understanding."²⁶

In a similar vein, Cleanth Brooks says of poetry, which in terms of particularity operates much like fiction, that general meaning must issue from particulars rather than seeming arbitrarily forced upon them. He distorts the

point, though, when he claims that the writer must establish his details and then, through his realization of them, "attain to whatever general meaning he can attain," for he makes it sound as if the details are arbitrarily put down and the general meaning is more or less accidentally discovered through them.²⁷ The relationship between detail and generality in a fiction should be reciprocal: as the particulars establish the context out of which the writer's general meaning grows, so the general meaning to which the writer attains controls his selection of particulars.²⁸

The more particularized certain elements of character, action, or setting are, the more attention they draw from the reader; the more attention they draw, the more likely they are to affect the reader's understanding of meaning. Thus, when in "Rain" Maugham stops in several places to describe the rain at length--its sound on the corrugated roof, its torrential fury, its maddening effect on certain of the characters--he is emphasizing the rain in such a way that it becomes a central point of interest that helps define and clarify character and action. But when in "The Five-Forty-Eight" Cheever only briefly mentions the rain and its effect of making street noises louder, he is using it only as a means of establishing a credible setting, not as a major element of plot and meaning.

The writer, then, must understand that particularity is essential because it controls the reader's responses to various elements of a story and, therefore, the reader's

understanding of that story. But he must also realize that to exact that control particularity needs to be manipulated through selection. And he must avoid misinterpreting theoretical statements such as Percy Lubbock's that a story absolutely must be "shown," must "be so exhibited that it will tell itself."²⁹

As a general guide--the lamp in a mine, the hand-rail down a black stairway--Lubbock's suggestion is useful. But to look upon it as an incontrovertible fact is to overlook the single most important element of fiction's rhetorical nature: the implicit or explicit presence of a teller and the narrative stance from which he manipulates all of the other elements. No matter how immediately moved a reader is by particular characters, actions, or settings, he is always aware, if only vaguely, that some presence is behind them, a presence that intentionally selects them and the particulars that make them moving. This presence is what Booth calls the implied author, in order to avoid confusing its beliefs and characteristics with those of the actual author, and he clearly demonstrates that although this author can choose his various disguises he cannot choose to disappear entirely.³⁰

The disguise an implied author chooses is what has traditionally been called the point of view of a story. Useful as the concept of point of view is, it does not indicate the full range of choices available to the writer. At best, it indicates only five: first person peripheral,

first person central, third person limited, third person omniscient, and the so-called objective point of view. This system of grouping "disguises" simply cannot account for the differences between stories such as Nikolai Gogol's "The Nose" and Sherwood Anderson's "Unlighted Lamps," or John Updike's "A & P" and James Joyce's "Araby."

Both "The Nose" and "Unlighted Lamps" might be considered third person omniscient because each narrator is able to see the actions and know the thoughts of two different characters. But in "The Nose," the narrator takes a comic and skeptical stance toward his characters, and the implied author's presence is made explicit by his intervening comments.³¹ The narrator of "Unlighted Lamps," on the other hand, is serious and sympathetic toward his characters, and, though he is relatively obtrusive as a result of his choice of expression, he is not interrupted by direct comments from the implied author.³²

Toward the other end of the point-of-view scale, both "A & P" and "Araby" are told by first person narrators. But again, there are major differences. In "A & P," Sammy tells his story shortly after it occurs; this short time span between event and narration, coupled with Sammy's relative simple-mindedness, restricts his ability to articulate the significance of what happened to him.³³ The narrator of "Araby" tells his story many years after it occurs, and, judging from his language, he is a mature, intelligent adult; thus, he is capable of precisely articulating the

significance of his experience.³⁴ These differences, of course, affect the way a reader interprets information and arrives at a story's meaning.

Such differences are what James Moffett and Kenneth R. McElheny discriminate among when they arrange the stories in Points of View according to "who the narrator is, when and where he is telling the story, who he is telling it to, what relation to the events he stands in, and what kind of knowledge he claims."³⁵ These relationships are what Booth thoroughly discusses in terms of the physical, intellectual, emotional, and moral "distance" between the narrator and the implied author, the narrator and a story's characters, the narrator and the reader, the implied author and the reader, and the implied author and the story's characters.³⁶ And, finally, these distances are what tell the reader how to respond to and interpret the entire story.

In this respect, direct comment in a story can be just as effective as the illusion of immediate presentation. Without such comment, Gogol's "The Nose" would be less effective, perhaps even ineffective, as a serious fiction. The story of a man whose nose mysteriously leaves his face and traipses around dressed as a civil councilor may seem nothing more than silly escapism, whimsical entertainment. But when, through his first few interventions, the implied author establishes himself as intellectually close to the reader and conscious of the reader's needs, he changes the aspect of the entire story. And when, in concluding the

story, he calls into question everything he has related, claims to be baffled by his reason for relating it, but then ends up saying that "if you stop to think for a moment, there's a grain of truth in it," that "these things do happen"--when he does this, he establishes and drives home a significant idea for the thoughtful reader's consideration.

Intervention of this sort is rare in modern fiction, and with good reason. Generally speaking, a reader's response is more intense when he has the illusion that both the story and its meaning are unfolding around or in front of him. But to reiterate, the presence of a narrator and an implied author is always at least implicit, and it controls every other element within a fiction and, thus, the reader's response to those elements.

Even in a story such as Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," often included in anthologies as an example of "objective" or "cinematic" narration, the narrator's presence is observable.³⁷ When the narrator says, for example, that flowers are blossoming profusely, or that Mr. Summers has the "time and energy to devote to civic activities," or that Mr. Summers and Mr. Adams grin at each other humorously and nervously, that narrator is announcing his (or her) presence.

By nature, language is judgmental, and when judgments are made someone somewhere must be making them. Whether that someone stands directly in front of the reader, as it were, or hides behind a metaphorical camera, his presence

is indicated by the things he says, the judgments his language implies, the characters, actions, and settings he chooses to reveal. The writer who fails to recognize this, like the writer who fails to recognize the necessity of character, action, setting, plot, and particularity in fiction, runs the risk of miscarrying his intent.

My own general intent in each of the five stories that follows is to tell a story of the human heart in conflict in such a way that the reader will care about each main character and his struggle. That intent requires that the stories contain characters performing actions in certain times and places, all of which are logically and psychologically related through plot, are made vivid and believable through particularity, and are controlled by a definite narrative presence. It does not require, however, that those elements operate according to identical standards in every story.

It does not, for example, require that all of the main characters be likeable or even sympathetic. Toke Dodson in "Doing Good" is not an especially likeable character, nor is Bailey in "Inflections and Innuendoes" an especially sympathetic one. Toke is crude and vulgar and, like Blake in Cheever's "The Five-Forty-Eight," far from morally admirable. But, unlike Blake, he is intended to be a sympathetic character. Cheever places Blake in a situation conducive to

enlightenment and change and then has him fail to be enlightened, fail to change; thus, although the reader cares about Blake, he does not sympathize with him. Hoping to achieve a different effect, I have placed Toke in a situation that stifles his attempt to change.

Bailey, though not as disreputable as either Blake or Toke, is more like Blake in his failure to change. In both cases, the intent is not that the reader sympathize with the character but simply that he care about the conflict, desire a character change; the characters' unwillingness or inability to change makes them even less sympathetic. Despite this similarity between Cheever's character and mine, the manipulation of character makes them distinct. Blake lacks the requisite sensibility for enlightenment, change, choice. My intention is that Bailey's sensibility is the very thing that makes him unable to change, to choose. He observes, but he does not act.

Bailey's strongest physical action is his pulling up and throwing a tuft of grass, and that is one of the strongest physical actions in this whole collection of stories. Of roughly equivalent physical force is Natrelle Scoggins's grabbing the Mexican's arm in "Spring Hopes, Eternal," or Austin Calvert's crushing and throwing a beer can in "The Other Side of Mount Sam." In short, the following stories contain relatively little strong physical action. This is not because I am biased against such action, but because the nature of the stories and my own

intentions in them advise against it. Despite subordinate conflicts with others and with environment, these are stories of the human heart in conflict with itself. I have, therefore, chosen actions such as perception, thought, speech, and gesture to emphasize the internal nature of the conflicts: Les's contemplating his past in "The Undertow," for example, or Natrelle Scoggins's revelling in her housework, or Austin Calvert's conversing with his wife and friends.

Granted, strong physical action can imply a great deal about internal conflicts. Generally speaking, however, the stronger the action is, the more attention it draws to itself, to its physicality; the more attention it draws to its physicality, the less attention it may draw to its implications. Furthermore, though any action, if appropriate, can make the reader care about a character and his conflict, different types of action strongly affect a story's meaning. Natrelle Scoggins's threatening to brawl with Darrell Creeley if he attempts to cut down her pecan tree is an important action in "Spring Hopes, Eternal." Were she actually to brawl with him, the action would alter the meaning of the story. If she won the physical struggle (a highly unlikely outcome), her "victory" would be valid, both literally and metaphorically; if she lost, she would be forced to recognize her failure. Or if Toke Dodson in "Doing Good" actually broke down the bedroom door, as he

considers doing, his action would alter the resolution of his struggle to "do good."

While the types of actions and their functions are of the same general nature throughout the following stories, the functions of settings vary from story to story. In "Doing Good" and "Inflections and Innuendoes," the settings contribute little to character development or meaning; in each story setting is simply intended to be appropriate and believable. The settings of "The Undertow" and "Spring Hopes, Eternal," on the other hand, are intended to complement and clarify character and meaning. For example, one of the functions of setting--particularly the time of year, the heat, and the dryness--in "Spring Hopes, Eternal" is to parallel Natrell's character. In "The Undertow," relationships among settings such as the Texas, California, and Washington (only briefly referred to) coasts, Dallas and Denver, and the airports at Los Angeles, Denver, and Dallas are intended to clarify both Les's character and the connections he is looking for.

My design in "The Other Side of Mount Sam" requires that setting play a central role in developing the meaning of the story. Although Austin Calvert's main conflict is an internal one, his environment--from the extreme heat in which flies buzz sluggishly about, to the flat landscape broken by distant mountains, to Austin's run-down gas station where area residents gather--is one of the major forces that create and exacerbate his conflict.

Like the settings, the plots of the following stories vary considerably, ranging from the relatively simple one of "Inflections and Innuendoes" to the relatively complex one of "The Undertow." Covering a period of an hour or so, presenting only two main characters, and containing only three brief flashbacks, "Inflections and Innuendoes" requires little reconstruction of logical or psychological relationships. Toward the other extreme, "The Undertow" covers a period of thirty-five years, contains a variety of characters and settings, and relies heavily on flashback. Thus, plot becomes its most prominent element.

If summarized chronologically, the story can be fairly neatly divided into four parts: Les's childhood experiences with his father and with his grandfather; his meeting, marrying, and divorcing Delinda; his meeting and living with Stephanie; his confronting Stephanie, Delinda, and his mother as he makes his way to his father's funeral. This summary recovers the logical time sequence of events, but it also makes the parts appear to be separate narratives with separate characters and settings, narratives with little relationship beyond chronology. In order to synthesize those narratives and emphasize the central conflict, I have chosen to distort the chronology, focusing on the narrative of Les's confrontations and periodically interrupting it with flashbacks. My intent is that the reader, by being taken more or less backwards in time through Les's recollections, will be able to make the connections that Les

himself says he wants to make, connections that define and clarify his life.

The effect of "The Undertow" depends upon the reader's illusion that he is discovering those connections himself, which depends upon his feeling of involvement, which, in turn, depends upon the particularity with which various people, places, and events are presented. To take one example, I believe the story would be ineffective if Les, as narrator, were to make only a general statement about how close he felt to his father, how terrified he felt when his father let go of him in the ocean, and how those feelings were similar to the security he felt at home and the fear he felt when his grandfather died. For one thing, as a generality the metaphor might seem trite; for another, stating the generality would make Les an entirely different character; finally, receiving the information as generality would distance the reader from the events and Les's emotional response to them. Trite as an idea or metaphor may be when isolated as a generality, it can seem new when manifested through particular details about particular characters and events. Hoping to achieve that sense of newness, I have selected details of Les's experiences with his father at the beach, of his selecting a bedroom in a new house, of his being comforted by his mother and father at home, and of his feelings and actions during his grandfather's illness and death. Narrating those events, presenting those details, Les is a character

struggling to find the relationships among them, not a character who already understands them. Because Les doesn't understand, because he is struggling, and because his struggle is manifested through particulars, the reader has the opportunity to feel as if he is struggling with him, sorting through the particulars, discovering the relationships and meanings himself.

As I have said earlier, the writer's selection of particulars directs the reader's attention in a story and his understanding of the story. I consider that principle one of the most important not only in "The Undertow" but in all of the following stories. To isolate a few brief examples: because I want to emphasize the quality of Natrelle's life in "Spring Hopes, Eternal," I particularize certain of her daily tasks and her perceptions of them; because setting is a key element in "The Other Side of Mount Sam," I particularize it at more length than in the other four stories; because the differences among Toke's life as a single man, his life as a married man, and the life he desires are essential to the effect of "Doing Good," I particularize selected contrasting elements of all three; and because what might be called Bailey's aesthetic sensibility creates his central conflict in "Inflections and Innuendoes," I particularize his perception of various people and activities around him.

Although these particulars and others direct a reader's attention to features of each story that lead toward the

intended meaning, it is the fictive narrator from whom those particulars issue that ultimately determines meaning. The first two stories of this collection are told in the first person, the other three in the third person. Despite these surface similarities, however, neither the first two nor the last three narrators are intended to have the same effects on the reader's response. Les, in "The Undertow," and Natrelle, in "Spring Hopes, Eternal," are both first person narrators, but the positions they hold in relation to the events in their respective stories, to me as the "implied author," and to the reader differ considerably.

The most important difference between Les and Natrelle as narrators is that Les is essentially reliable while Natrelle is essentially unreliable. That is, Les is intended to function according to the norms of the implied author and the reader; Natrelle is not. Les is sincerely and consciously striving to understand the significance to himself of the events he narrates. The only major distinction between his view and the reader's derives from their emotional distances from the events. Temporally distant from most of the events he relates, Les is still emotionally close to them, as indicated, I believe, by his inability to remember his father beyond thirty-four years old, his constant references to his grandfather's death, and his exposition about, and conversations with, Stephanie, Delinda, and his mother. The reader, from his vantage point as "observer," is emotionally more distant from the events;

thus, he may intellectualize them more readily than Les is able to.

I intend the distinction between Natrelle's and the reader's views in "Spring Hopes, Eternal" to be much greater. Sincere as Natrelle may be in her narration, her perception consistently runs askew of the reader's. From near the beginning, for example, all indications are that the pecan tree is, indeed, dead, that Natrelle's fascination with the Mexican derives from emotions other than just fear and curiosity, and that she finds pleasure in her housework out of desperation rather than out of any inherent qualities of the work itself. If the reader's norms, his perceptions, are close to mine as implied author, then they are distanced from Natrelle's, and he will understand the true nature of the "victory" she claims at the end of the story.

Although the narrators of the last three stories do not directly indentify themselves as either characters or narrators, they do exist as presences, and the stances they take toward characters and actions determine the reader's responses.

By virtue of his present tense narration, the narrator of "The Other Side of Mount Sam" is physically and temporally close to Austin. Still, the story's point of view probably verges on what is sometimes called "objective." The narrator rarely reports Austin's thoughts or feelings; instead, he reflects them through outward signs such as setting, movement, and speech. Although that reflection

represents Austin's perceptions and emotional intensity, it does so in the narrator's language. For example, "the ashen pre-dawn haze" is what Austin sees and responds to, but the expression itself is not his, is not one that he would even think of using. In the first few pages, the same is true of expressions such as "monotonous ticking," "incessant buzzing and whirring," and "semblance of curves on her disproportionate body." In short, the quality of Austin's perceptions and emotions is similar to the narrator's representation of them, but the quality of expression differs. Thus, while the reader should feel temporally and emotionally close to Austin, he should feel intellectually distant.

My approach in "Doing Good" is different, but the effect I desire is similar. Speaking in the past tense and making extensive use of flashback, the narrator not only reports Toke's thoughts and feelings but uses his manner of expression as well. That expression is one of the major elements that distances the reader socially and intellectually from Toke, but it also makes him so intimate with Toke's feelings that he can sympathize within the context of the conflict.

I believe a roughly opposite response derives from the rhetorical structure of "Inflections and Innuendoes." Through the narrator, the reader is brought fairly close to Bailey's aesthetic and intellectual perceptions, but he is also made aware of the conspicuous lack of attending

emotions. The response I hope to elicit is an essentially objective or intellectual one, with the reader's sympathies, if they go anywhere, going elsewhere (i.e. to Marie).

In a general sense, the content of all of the stories I have been discussing is the same: human perception, human action, human conflict. What separates them is not so much their content as it is the shape of the rhetorical construct within which that content exists, or, put another way, the techniques with which that content is controlled.

O'Connor claims that in speaking of technique every writer must speak for himself, "even though he may not be sure that his work is important enough to justify his doing so."³⁸ Generally, I have found myself in that position as I wrote this introduction, though I can't quite accept that I speak for only myself when I speak of fiction's inherent principles. At the heart of my views is the assumption that effective serious fiction contains some idea, some thematic intent, some ethical or moral judgment about life that it presents in a meaningful and moving way for the intelligent reader's consideration. If my assumption is accurate, and if my secondary support is valid, then the principles or elements I have outlined are applicable to any serious fiction writer and the work he produces. Though different writers may choose to emphasize one element over the others, the ultimate effectiveness of each story they produce

depends upon the vital relationship among all of the elements of the story's rhetorical construct.

As for my own stories--the five that follow--any conclusive judgment about their validity must issue from their readers. The best I can say of them myself is that I wrote them with fiction's inherent principles in mind, manipulating those principles as I thought the need and my own intent required.

ENDNOTES

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THE UNDERTOW

When my father died, I was living in Long Beach in a small renthouse with a first-hand view of San Pedro Bay. After my mother called from Dallas with the news, I wandered out onto the covered but unscreened porch and sat there for three or four hours, staring out to where I knew the horizon should be and thinking about my grandfather. I suppose I thought of him because I had been so close to him when he died. Not emotionally close--I never liked him much--but physically close. I was only ten at the time, and the experience affected me so strongly that even after thirty-two years I vividly remembered every moment, every scene, every sensation of that day.

I tried to forget, tried to think of my father as I stared out across the bay. The early March day was perfect: seventy degrees or so, with a mild breeze, a brilliant silver sun, and a cloudless blue sky. Still, I shivered and buttoned myself up inside the sheepskin coat that was one of the few things I had brought with me from Denver two years before.

Small clusters of sea gulls, shiny white and graceful, hovered and dipped, hovered and swooped above sailboats gliding over the bay water. I squinted against the silver

glimmer of the sun upon the water and tried to distinguish the horizon. The farther out I looked, the harder it was to perceive any difference between the water and the sky. Where I thought they met, they did so without a visible seam, like perfectly matched wallpaper, and they formed what appeared to be one solid, massive cerulean wall haphazardly patterned with the little flocks of sea gulls and the bright white, yellow, green, red, and rainbow triangles of the boats' sails.

My father would have liked it there. He had always loved beaches and ocean water. When I was a child, the only vacations we ever took were to Galveston or Port Aransas. At least once every summer, sometimes twice, we went to one place or the other for a week. My mother divided her time between lying on the beach, cooling off in front of the TV in the air-conditioned motel room, poking around in nearby shops, and touring various historical sites in the area. But my father and I were always near the water.

Sometimes, we spent an entire day fishing from one of the piers. I easily got bored with the fishing but never with running up and down the pier, feeling the heat of the weathered wooden slats as my bare feet slapped against them, counting the seemingly lifeless jellyfish that listlessly floated just beneath the surface of the green water on either side of the pier, picking up stray pieces of bait that other fishermen discarded and throwing them to the sea gulls that always hovered above the pier, running back to my

father with news of some odd looking fish I had seen someone catch. I especially remember the small hammerhead sharks whose heads, I thought, really looked as if you could hammer nails with them; croakers that had yellow spots near their gills and that grunted louder than the fat, shirtless men who caught them; angelfish whose black and gray striped, laterally compressed bodies made them look much too pretty and much too skinny to eat.

When I occasionally ran a splinter into my foot or stepped on a fish hook, I hobbled back to my father, crying all the way. He would dig the splinter or the fish hook out, dab the wound with some of the mercurochrome he always carried in his tackle box, wrap my foot in one of the tattered hand towels he had brought along, and then hold me in his lap, pressing me against his sweaty, hairy chest and telling me everything he knew about the fish I had seen: hammerheads grew as large as fifteen feet and fifteen hundred pounds; croakers sometimes croaked and purred so loudly under water that you could hear them above the water; what everyone called angelfish were not true angelfish at all but were actually spadefish. When I felt better, he would go back to his fishing and I would sit nearby, watching the tail of his unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt flap in the salty breeze and studying his sweat-shiny, hairy chest, his broad, hard looking jaw, his squinting eyes, and his thick, curly hair, which became even curlier in the sticky humidity of the coastal air.

Other days, we walked miles along the beach. We looked for sand dollars and beds of multicolored coquinas; we chased sand crabs that would disappear into little holes near the dunes where the sand was hot and dry; we built sand castles that looked more like the big insurance building where my father worked than like castles; we jumped in and out of the waves as they washed up onto shore; and sometimes we went out into the deeper water where I would ride on his back while he rode on the waves. He was good at that, knew just when to lift his legs so a wave would carry him a good six feet or more even with me lying lengthways on his back, clinging to his neck.

Once, he went all the way out to where the water reached his neck. I cried and told him I was scared because my mother had warned me about the undertow. "Let go," he said, "and let's see you swim."

"No," I whined. "I want to go back."

He laughed. "Don't be such a fraidy cat."

"Mom says there's an undertow that will suck me down and drown me. Please, let's go back."

Bobbing up and down with the waves, he pried my hands off his neck while I screamed. "I'm going to let go," he said. "You swim to me."

When he let go, I went straight under, thrashing my arms and legs and sucking in a nose and throat full of bitter salt water. The water burned my eyes, but I kept them open, tried to see something in that murky, dark green

water. I tried to scream. I knew I was drowning. Then I bumped into my father's legs and he pulled me up. I gagged and choked and called him names all the way back to shore, and I refused to go down to the beach with him the next day.

Most of the time, though, we had a great time walking up and down the beach. Around noon, we would hunt up a hot dog stand on the beach or a hamburger joint just off the beach. We would sit outside, complaining about our sunburns and our salt-stung eyes while we ate rubbery hot dogs or hamburgers on rubbery buns and drank flat soft drinks or watery milkshakes. Then we would work our way back down the beach toward our motel. My mother always complained that we stayed in the sun too long, and we always winked at each other and told her about all the beautiful girls in bikinis we had seen. She would laugh, brushing our comments away with a sunburned arm because she knew that I was too young and my father was too happily married to have paid much serious attention to the girls in bikinis.

Sitting on the porch of my small rent-house in Long Beach, I closed my eyes and tried to remember what my father had looked like the last time I had seen him. I had not seen him for two years. There had been no rift between us, just distance. I was doing well just to pay for rent, groceries, and child support, and I simply could not afford the plane fare or the gasoline it took to get to Dallas.

My mother had flown out to see me a couple of times, but my father had emphysema and usually felt too weak for long distance travel. While she was away, he would stay at the V.A. hospital.

I wondered what that hospital was like, wondered if it had the same pale green hallways and the same purple-tinted soft white lights as the hospital where my grandfather died. I had stood in one of those hallways feeling dizzy, feeling bodiless and breathless, feeling as if I were about to be sucked down the length of that pale green tunnel and smashed through the emergency exit doors at its end. I had watched my father comfort my sobbing mother there in that hallway. That was the only face I could remember: my father's face, not two years before, but thirty-two years before, my father's thirty-four-year-old face.

Stephanie's face was a relief, a distraction for me when she came bounding out onto the porch bubbling over with the news of her success at the restaurant that afternoon. I used to call her Pixie because that was exactly what she looked like to me. She was short and small-boned with slim hips, and even slimmer waist, small but firm perfect breasts, the complexion of a five-year-old, glimmering hazel eyes that seemed as large and as round as lemon slices, and thick, sandy-blonde, feathered hair that always looked slightly tousled. And there was always about her that paradoxical air of innocence and roguishness, purity and sensuality that photographers and movie makers value so

highly. I was surprised that no one ever "discovered" her there at the restaurant. I was even more surprised that she wasn't looking to be discovered, wasn't looking for anything more than enough money to keep her in blue jeans, halter tops, yogurt, and light beer. If she ever made any extra money, as she had the day I heard about my father, she wanted to go out and spend it celebrating the fact that she had made it.

I had met her on the plane between Denver and Los Angeles two years before. We had seats together, and she did not stop talking from the time we took off to the time we landed. I was attracted to her in a distant sort of way. She was attractive, she seemed more vivacious than I had ever been even at her age, and she pleasantly filled my time during the flight. But she was also only half my age and a little too unrefined for my taste, and if there was one thing I was not looking for it was a mid-life fling with a teeny bopper. I neither anticipated nor desired any relationship with her beyond our conversation-- or her monologue--on the plane.

Then I got lost in the L.A. Airport. I had stood just inside the terminal, watching the chaotic rush of the people, thinking how much like overheated cars they smelled as they walked and ran and pushed and jostled their various ways to their various destinations, thinking that they walked and ran and pushed and jostled through the airport much as I had heard they drove on the freeways, wishing I

was back in Denver in the wintertime talking quietly with my ex-wife in front of a fire in a house half buried in snow.

I had little choice which way to go. Pressed between a fat man who smelled of Swisher Sweets and sweat, and a black kid who kept muttering something about "slow-assed, white-assed honkies," who themselves were pressed between me and someone else, I was dragged and prodded along in what I thought was the opposite of the direction I wanted to go. Two times I broke free of the wave of bodies I was caught up in, and both times I ended up in another wave rolling in an equally wrong direction. I felt dizzy and hot, and my eyes stung from the little drops of sweat that occasionally trickled down my forehead, oozed through my eyebrows, and rolled over my lids into my eyes. Finally, I was shoved against a smooth, round concrete pillar and I pressed my back against it, trying to remember from which direction I had come.

Stephanie found me there. She grabbed my hand and pulled me along behind her to our baggage pick-up area. As we waited for our luggage, she babbled non-stop about how exciting it all was. I gritted my teeth and wished I was back in Dallas. Baggage secured, we fought our way out of the terminal, me lagging a little and still considering staying right there until I could get a flight back home, her tugging at my hand or my wrist or my elbow and squealing delightedly every time she saw some unusually-dressed creature. I was reminded of the fish I used to see when I

went out on the pier with my father, and I thought there were more hammerheads and croakers than there were anglefish.

"In 1850," I yelled so that she could hear me over the drone and clatter all around us, "when California became a state, Los Angeles had a population of less than two thousand." I had done some research before moving; the whole metro area now had over ten million people. I side-stepped the outstretched hand of a skinhead in a soiled white robe. "Just think. You could have known practically everyone in the whole city."

"How boring," she hollered back.

"Sorry," I said, realizing that aside from telling her my name those were almost the only words I had managed to get out since meeting her. And they were boring. I was boring.

"I didn't mean you," she said, nudging several people aside and dragging me behind her as she exited through an entrance door. Outside, she let go of my hand and took a deep breath. "I meant knowing everyone in the city. Just look!" She waved her arm toward the ocean of parked cars and the massive schools of people and the smog-filled skyline.

I have never understood her reason--perhaps it was simply that she pitied me--but she latched onto me and half-led, half-followed me all the way to Long Beach. I checked in with my new chairman at the Long Beach campus of

California State University and spent five days looking for a place to live before I found the little rent-house on the beach. I have never understood my own reason--perhaps it was that she was the only person I knew out there--but when she begged me in her effervescent fashion to let her stay in the house, just until she found a place of her own, I concurred.

When I woke up on my first morning there, she was gone, but she returned that afternoon with a 1968 Mustang convertible she had bought for four hundred and thirty-five dollars. "Come on," she said, skimming through the house and picking up a few of the things she had scattered throughout the four rooms. "We can make it to Redondo Beach before dark."

I watched her rushing around stuffing things in her long green duffle bag. I chuckled. "I won't reach Redondo Beach at all."

She began digging through the drawers I had carefully filled the night before. She would hold up a pair of socks or underwear or a tee-shirt and either shake her head and drop it back in the drawer or shrug and stuff it in her duffle bag. "You're going," she said.

"I have work to do." It was a stupid response, but it was all I could think of.

"Don't be a fuddy-duddy." Apparently satisfied that she had gotten all that both of us would need, she grabbed my hand and headed for the door.

I pulled back. "I don't even know you," I said.

"You sound like somebody on a TV show," she said, tugging at me. "People don't worry about that stuff anymore. Besides, you do know me. I told you on the plane." I followed, trying to think of something to say--before we reached the car--that wouldn't sound like a TV program.

She was right. I did know her. Or, at least, I knew about her. She was all I had heard about on the plane. She was twenty; she had been raised in Louisville, Kentucky; her mother and father had been divorced since she was fifteen; her mother was remarried to a man with three vulgar teenage boys; she hadn't heard from her father in three years; she had spent one year at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. She had wanted to be a writer, she said, but in the introductory fiction writing course she had taken during her second semester she discovered the difference between writing and writing well. Writing well took too much concentrated time and effort for her. California sounded exciting, so she had borrowed a thousand dollars from her mother and there she was.

And there I was. I had two weeks before I began teaching, and she spent almost the entire time speeding me along the coastline. We drove from Long Beach to Malibu, from Malibu back to Santa Monica, where we picked up Interstate 10 through West Hollywood to Interstate 5, which we took down through East Los Angeles, Downey, Norwalk, La Mirada, Buena Park, Anaheim, Santa Ana, Irvine, and all the

way to San Clemente, where we got back on Highway 1 and drove the coastline back up to Long Beach. We drove and took pictures and ate and walked and swam and danced and drank for thirteen days straight. Stephanie tried surfing a couple of times. We ate lunches in dirty little hamburger or pizza or taco stands and usually ate dinners in the fanciest places she could find. Sometimes, we slept: half a night at Redondo Beach, a full night and another half at Manhattan Beach, a night at Santa Monica, one and a half nights at Malibu, another half at Santa Monica before we looped around and down to San Clemente, a night there, half a night at Newport Beach, a night and a half at Huntington Beach, a night at Seal Beach, and finally a night and most of the next day at home in Long Beach. I kept insisting that we go back early and she kept demanding that I not be a fuddy-duddy. By the time we did get back, I had to admit that I enjoyed it.

Then I started work and she found a job waiting tables at Beach Bums, a restaurant that an honest-to-God beach bum would have been thrown out of the minute he set one sandy toe in the doorway. We were almost penniless by then. I was exhausted, resolved to being a fuddy-duddy from then on, and ready to tell her she had to find a place of her own.

They were odd, my feelings at the time. I had had a terrific time with her, but I knew it had been a pretend life for me, an interlude, probably a second adolescence after the mid-life crisis of divorce. It was not the life

I wanted permanently. I cared very much for Stephanie, and I thought she cared very much for me. But not once had we done more than hold hands, not once had she said she loved me, and not once had I dared to let myself even think that I might be in love with her. Still, much as I wanted my life settled, much as I wanted either no relationship at all or one that I was sure of, one that I could count on, one with a woman closer to my own age--much as I wanted all that, I was not absolutely sure that I did not want Stephanie. So, for a time, I did nothing to encourage her to go, nor did I do anything to encourage her to stay.

By the time we each got our first paycheck, she was ready for another jaunt, or two, or three. Swayed by her pixie eyes and her dynamic pleading, I went along. If she lacked refinement, knowledge, and understanding, she made up for it in energy, curiosity, and interest. We spent weekends camping in the Santa Monica Mountains, in the San Gabriel Wilderness, in the San Bernadino National Forest. We drove to Los Angeles, toured Beverly Hills, visited movie studios in Hollywood, drove up and down Wilshire Boulevard, wandered through the L.A. zoo, explored the Griffith Park Planetarium. We pushed and jostled our way through Little Tokyo and China Town. We visited the Mount Wilson and Mount Palomar observatories, the UCLA and the Claremont Botanical Gardens, the L.A. Museum, the County Art Museum, the Hollywood Wax Museum, the Antelope Valley Indian Museum, the Lometa Railroad Museum, the Trolley Museum, and the Roy

Rogers Museum. We saw operas, symphonies, and plays at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, the Ahmanson Theater, and the Mark Taper Forum. And we spent several harried weekends doing and seeing everything we could at Knott's Berry Farm, Lion County Safari, Marineland, and Disneyland. It was then--and is now--a blur to me. But it all came into focus during our last night at Disneyland.

"Didn't you just love Fantasyland?" she said in my motel room that night. We got adjoining rooms whenever we could, and she always made herself at home in both of them. "I thought it was terrific!"

It was characteristic of her, I thought, to prefer Fantasyland. And, characteristic of myself, I said, "I think I liked Main Street U.S.A. better." I sat near the window scanning the front page of the newspaper.

She looked in the mirror, her back to me, and combed her hair. "But what about Tomorrowland? That ride to the moon!"

"I like my feet on the ground," I said. "Frontierland was interesting. You get a great sense of the past there. A great sense of connectedness, of continuity."

"Didn't you think Adventureland was exciting?"

I chuckled and set the newspaper on the table next to me. "I've been in adventureland ever since I met you."

She turned from the mirror and looked straight at me with those bright round eyes. "Wouldn't you like to make

love?" She stepped to me, took my hand, and pulled me out of the chair and onto the bed.

We made love three times that night and twice the next morning. She made love as she did everything else: spontaneously, dynamically, vivaciously, as if it were the first and only time she had ever done it or would ever do it again.

"Will you marry me?" I said the next morning, grabbing her arm as she started to roll out of bed and go to the shower.

She leaned over me, kissed me. "I love you. Don't ask me again." For the next year and a half or so, that was the only thing we ever seriously argued about.

The day my mother called from Dallas, Stephanie skidded to a stop in front of me on the porch and broke into tap dance and song: "Baby, I'm a rich girl, Baby, I'm a rich girl, Baby, I'm a rich girl now-ow." With the last syllable, she dropped to one knee and bowed, her arms outstretched to the sides. "Two hundred and fifteen bucks in tips, Les," she panted, pushing her bangs back off her forehead. They fell right back in place. She giggled, wobbling slightly as she tried to keep her balance on one knee. "A hundred and fifty from one table! One incredibly, fantastically, unbelievably gigantic table of big wigs. From Hollywood,

I think." Pretending to lose her balance, she collapsed against my knees and grinned up at me. "Let's go celebrate."

"Pixie," I said. "My father died."

"I'm sorry." She patted my leg. "You want to get drunk?"

I shook my head. "I've got an early flight to Dallas in the morning."

"Need some money?"

"I've got a little saved up."

She got off her knees and slid into my lap, folding her arms around my neck and kissing me. "I really am sorry. What can I do?"

"Will you take me to the airport?"

"You dread it, don't you?"

"Worse than the funeral."

She kissed me again. "You tell me what flight you're on and I'll not only drive you to the airport, I'll hold your hand and guide you to exactly where you need to be." Then she molded her thin lips into a pout and stroked my cheek with her small palm. "I'll miss you."

"I'll be back in a week."

"You'll miss him, won't you?"

"Yes. I guess I will." I eased her off my lap, got up, and walked to the edge of the porch. The sun was almost down, and I could finally tell where the horizon was. "I haven't seen him for two years."

"I know."

"I've been trying to remember what he looked like, what he said, what we did the last time I saw him. But all I can remember is what he looked like when my grandfather died. My God, that was thirty-two years ago."

"Is that bad?" She walked up behind me, massaged my shoulders.

I shrugged. "I don't know."

"Seems like it would be nice to remember him young."

"I guess so." I watched a sea gull swoop down near a sailboat, splash against the water, then rise back into the air with something clutched in its beak. I turned to Stephanie. "You could go with me."

"Then again," she said, walking toward the other end of the porch, "I could stay here."

"I need you with me."

"Don't be maudlin."

"Don't be so casual. You should go with me."

"Les." She turned and looked at me, sighed as if she were talking to a child who simply would not or could not understand. "I'm not your wife."

"As good as," I said, walking to her and putting my hands on her small, soft shoulders.

"No. Not even close. I love you, but I don't belong to you."

"What's wrong with belonging?"

"It's too confining."

"What's wrong with confinement?"

"Stop being rhetorical."

"Don't avoid the issue."

"You're just too damned possessive."

"And you're just too damned trendy." I paced back to the other end of the porch. "Damn!" She would not have admitted it about herself, but we were both talking as if our lives were a television program. The whole argument was a cliché with us. We could continue arguing, or we could skip to the happy ending in which we made up. Either way, the course of our personal histories would be unaffected.

I wanted to say something new, something that would make significant connections in our lives, something that would define and clarify our lives, my life. I wanted to tell her about sea gulls and sailboats, the water and the sky, hammerhead sharks and girls in bikinis, busy airports and long green hallways and undertows. But I couldn't find the connections. The cliché was much easier because of its familiarity. "I want you to be with me."

"Funerals depress me," she said casually.

They depressed my mother, too. I knew she would cry at my father's funeral, just as pitifully as she had at the hospital where my grandfather died. My father had held her then. He had said nothing. He had simply held her against his broad chest, his thick arms wrapped tightly around her, his jaw taut, the flesh at the outside corner of each eye wrinkled more than I had ever noticed before. He leaned slightly backwards, and I wondered if he was straining

against something, wondered if he felt what I felt, wondered if he knew what it was. Silently, he held my mother for fifteen or twenty minutes, held her until she slowly, slowly, slowly stopped crying. Then he kissed her forehead and took us home.

"I want to tell you about my grandfather," I said to Stephanie.

"Now you're avoiding the issue," she said.

"I was with him when he died. I was hugging him."

"Don't be morbid."

"And afterwards, I stood in this long green hallway watching my father hug my mother and feeling as if--"

"What's your point, Les?"

The sun had sunk by then, and the dusk almost hid her face from me. I squinted toward the other end of the porch and tried to make out the pixie features I knew were there. All I could see was a dark fleshy blob with two large, round eyes. "Marry me." I had meant to say something else, something about my grandfather, something about my father.

"I told you," she said as she stepped to the lounge chair and flopped down in it. "Funerals depress me."

I, too, stepped to the lounge chair. I sat on its edge, held one of her hands. "I'm serious."

She pulled her hand away, brushed at her bangs. "So am I."

"This is it, Pixie." I leaned my elbows on my knees and looked down at the concrete. "The beginning or the end."

"Depends on your perspective, I guess." Like her voice, her movements were haughty as she stood up and walked toward the sliding glass door that led into the house. "I had a good day today, Les. I'm going to celebrate."

"Don't leave." I said.

"I'm leaving."

"Then don't come back."

"Fine."

"Don't be stupid."

"Drop dead," she said.

Wrapped in my sheepskin coat, I sat on the porch in the dark, wondering where Stephanie had gone to celebrate, wondering if she would come back, wondering if either of us had meant what we said.

My father had literally dropped dead. That's what my mother had said as she cried into the phone. He was in the V.A. hospital, had apparently gotten out of bed to go to the bathroom, fell, and died. My grandfather's death had been gentler, but it seemed to me much more awful as I sat there trying to visualize my father's face. All I could visualize was his face as he hugged my mother when my grandfather died. That, and the long green hallway in which we had stood, and the cream-white door behind which I had climbed up beside my sleeping grandfather and hugged him while his heart stoppped beating. Afterwards, I had walked

slowly back down the hallway, feeling as if he, or something near him, were persistently trying to tug me back to his room, or perhaps past his room and down to the emergency exit doors at the end of the hall.

I shivered and stuffed my hands into the pockets of my sheepskin coat. Stephanie had turned no inside lights on before she left, and there was only a sliver of a moon. The darkness made me feel colder. I listened for the waves on the beach but heard nothing. I squinted, strained to see something or someone down near the water. Someone was always down there at night--a family with two or three young children who giggled as they walked barefoot along the cool wet sand, or someone walking a dog and talking to it as if it were a child or a husband or a wife, or a couple holding hands and probably wishing they could walk forever along the beach at night and, forever, feel as romantic as they felt right then. But that night I could see nothing through the darkness, nor could I hear any voices. I shivered again and suddenly felt the irrational fear that the waves were creeping silently up to my porch, that I would soon feel the wetness seeping into my shoes and then more quickly moving up my legs to my waist, my chest, my neck, until I would sink from the heaviness of my water-soaked sheepskin coat.

I went inside and turned on several lights. I checked my coat to make sure it was dry. It was an old coat, the only one I had worn during the past eight years. Delinda,

my ex-wife, had given it to me. In places, the rough-out leather was worn almost smooth, and in the right pocket there was a small hole through which I could poke my finger and feel the coarse-woven lining.

For a time, I sat doing nothing but feeling that lining. Stephanie did not come home, and I wondered if I would have to face the airport alone. Finally, I decided to call Delinda. I would have a layover in Denver, and I hoped she might bring Zach out to see me at Stapleton International Airport.

When she answered the phone, I remembered why she was so good at selling real estate. She made people feel comfortable, feel as if they were the only thing she cared about from the time she first answered the phone to the time they all signed the final papers. With her calm, soft voice, her odd but very appealing Amerasian beauty, and her long, elegant figure, she could sell anything to anyone when they felt she really cared about them. I used to tell her that women responded to her so well because they wanted to be like her, men because they wanted to be with her. She would laugh, call me a fool, say that most women were much more attractive than she was and that no man had ever indicated any desire for her. I knew she was lying about the women; I prayed she was telling the truth about the men. After our divorce, I used to lie awake at night conjuring up images of her male clients, images of them pawing at her in the corner of some empty back bedroom in some empty house

she was showing, images of her pawing back. The images disgusted me but at the same time relieved me; they made sense as a reason for our divorce, much more sense than her simply deciding that she had stopped loving me. After all, it was she who had pursued me when we first met, she who had initiated our serious commitment to each other.

When we met, I was living at home and commuting to the University of Texas at Arlington. We met in a course called "History of the World Wars," to which the professor attached the subtitle "The Decline of Innocence." The course was a requirement for me, and elective for her. Each student was required to write and read a research paper on one of the topics covered in the course. When we got to the American involvement in World War II, Delinda delivered the most interesting, most detailed report of the semester. Without ever glancing at a note, she gave an emotionally jarring account of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. More interested in World War II than in her, I invited her to dinner so I could talk with her about her report.

"My father was in World War II," I said, pouring a second glass of wine for her.

"So was mine," she said. She sipped the wine and then added, "Almost."

"Almost?"

She shrugged. "Where was your father stationed?"

"I don't know. I've asked him plenty of times, but he

refuses to talk about it at all. It must have been terrible for him."

"I'm sure," she said. She stared at her wine glass, turning it slowly by rolling the stem between her thumb and fingers. "Pearl Harbor certainly was. The bombing, the chaos, the screaming, the explosions, ships on fire, buildings on fire, men on fire." She shuddered and sipped more wine.

"Your report was great," I said. "You talk as if you were there. But I know you're too young for that." I waited for a response, but she remained silent, staring at her glass, jiggling it slightly so that small red waves of wine splashed against its rounded sides. "Your father must talk about it a lot." Her dark, almond shaped eyes looked shiny, even in the dim light of the restaurant. I suppose she was about to cry, though I didn't realize it at the time.

She looked away from her wine glass and away from me. "Are you majoring in history?"

"Yes. Are you?"

"No. Just interested. I'm a business major, I guess."

"You guess?"

She shrugged. "I just decided I should go to school a couple of years ago."

"What were you doing before that?"

"Nothing, really." She looked around at the waiter who

was just bringing our food. "Good. I'm hungry." Then, to me, "This is a very nice place."

I chuckled. "It looks nice," I said, leaning back while the waiter set my plate down. "But it's cheap. Second-rate wine and second-rate food in a first-rate atmosphere."

She laughed for the first time that evening. "Why did you bring me here?"

"I can't afford anything better."

"No. I mean, why did you ask me out?"

I pretended to have trouble cutting my steak so I wouldn't have to look at her when I answered. "I liked your report."

She laughed again. "And not me?"

I folded my napkin in my lap. "Of course. Yes. You too."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I embarrassed you."

"No. It's okay."

"I've forgotten my etiquette. I haven't been out for a long time."

I looked at her eyes, her tan skin, her shiny black hair. "It can't be because you haven't been asked."

She shrugged. "Do you like the water?"

She had lived in Washington, on the coast, she said, and we spent the rest of the evening comparing our experiences on the different coasts. She described the clear, blue-green water of the Pacific Coast, and I told her what I

remembered of the murky, brownish green water on the Gulf Coast. She had seen whales several times when she rode one of the ferries across Puget Sound. I told her about fishing with my father and seeing hammerhead sharks, croakers, and angelfish. She described in great detail the camping trips she had taken to Olympic National Park and the visits she had made to what she called the enchanting old world of Victoria on Vancouver Island, and I explained that we had always stayed in hotels near the beach but that my father and I were rarely in the room. Several times, I asked her about her father and about Pearl Harbor, and several times I asked her how she had ended up in Arlington. She avoided my questions by asking me something else.

That was the main reason I didn't ask her out again: she seemed to want to remain too mysterious. It was also the reason I went when she asked me to dinner at her apartment three weeks later. "I enjoyed talking with you," she explained when she asked me. "And I feel bad because I wouldn't talk about the only thing you really wanted to. I thought maybe I could count on your interest in my report to get you to have dinner with me."

"I'd like to," I said, and I hoped she really would talk about it. She did.

Her mother had taught her everything she knew about Pearl Harbor. Her father had been a naval officer stationed there when the attack occurred. He had married Delinda's mother, a native Hawaiian, six months before the attack, and

he had been killed in the first wave of the attack. Two months pregnant and with no remaining family of her own, Delinda's mother had moved to Seattle, where her new in-laws lived. Eventually, she had remarried and moved down the coast to Tacoma, but she had always wanted Delinda to love the father she had never known and to hate the Japanese for killing him, so she had never tired of describing the man and the terrible attack in which he died.

Delinda had taken it all to heart, so much so that she cried several times while she told me about it. I hugged her when she cried. She pressed herself tight against me, told me how embarrassed she was for crying, thanked me for the reassuring hug. That's when my view of her began to change. I actually admired her emotional intensity, and I told her so. I also vaguely felt sorry for her, which I did not tell her.

After that, I began dating her fairly steadily but tried to keep our relationship as casual as possible. She still kept her reasons for being in Arlington--a long way from Tacoma--very secretive, always avoiding the issue when I brought it up or just bluntly telling me to talk about something else. I was still dating my high school sweetheart, who lived in Dallas and worked as a secretary at my father's insurance firm, and I could not bring myself to switch my loyalties to a woman I thought I could love but not trust. One night, I finally told her that. She cried, we hugged, and she told me how she had ended up in Arlington.

The summer after she graduated from high school, she worked at a resort hotel in Bremerton, just across the Puget Sound from Seattle. She met a man twice her age, a very wealthy bank vice president from Fort Worth. At the end of his two-week vacation, he asked her to marry him and she jumped at the chance. Less than a year later, she decided it was a mistake, divorced the man, got a part-time job as a waitress in a sleazy hamburger joint in Arlington, and started school.

I was glad she told me, but I trusted her even less than before, at least as the woman I could establish a firm relationship with. I avoided her as much as possible, occasionally seeing her on campus and occasionally agreeing to have dinner with her at her apartment. We talked about trivial things, kissed goodnight, and that was that. I didn't tell her where I was going when I moved to Denton to work on my Ph.D. at North Texas State University. But she found me and confronted me one night on the steps to my second-floor apartment.

"I love you," she said. It was a quiet, simple statement. She sat on the top step, shivering and wet from the drizzle that had started an hour earlier.

I stood halfway up the steps, squinting at her in the dim yellow haze created by the lights outside each apartment door. "What are you doing here?"

"I moved here."

"To these apartments?" She shook her head. "What

about school?" I should have said something more relevant, less cliched, but I could think of nothing.

"I quit."

"You have less than a semester to go."

"I quit."

"Why?"

"You're so solid," she said. "So secure." She held her hand out toward me. Not knowing what else to do, I moved up the steps and took her hand.

We made love that night, softly, slowly, surely, as if we had done it a thousand times and each of us knew exactly what the other wanted and needed. It may have been that one act of lovemaking; it may have been a sense of duty to the woman who would give up her own plans because of her love for me; or it may have been her talk of solidity and security. In any case, I finally admitted to myself and to her that I loved her, and we were married two weeks later.

The first few years were horrible in a way. We had nothing, and we barely could live on my salary as a graduate assistant and hers as a waitress in another sleazy hamburger joint. But they were terrific in a way, too. We spent most of our nights at home, usually snuggled together in bed, making love or just talking about the things that pleased us most. She loved to talk about her childhood, about the beautiful beaches and water of Puget Sound, Henderson Bay, Case Inlet, Totten Inlet, Hood Canal, and Dabob Bay, about seeing the whales, and about her vacations with her mother and stepfather.

I finally finished my degree and got the job at the University of Denver. We had Zach, and we gradually moved from an apartment in Denver proper to a small house in Aurora to a larger house in Englewood. Delinda went back to school, learned everything she could about real estate management and sales, and became probably the best salesperson in the city. During summer vacations, we visited her mother and stepfather in Tacoma, or we visited my parents in Dallas, always taking them with us for the week or so we spent on the Texas coast. During the winter, we skied almost every weekend. Most hights, when we were all together, we would sit on the carpet in front of the fire playing games with Zach until he went to bed. Then the two of us would watch the fire burn down as we sipped coffee or wine or brandy and talked quietly, or we would snuggle together in bed, making love or watching television.

That's where we were the night she said she wanted a divorce: in bed watching television. She had been unusually quiet all night, but she finally leaned over me and kissed my cheek. "I want a divorce," she said.

I went through all of the stereotypical motions, from laughing as if she were kidding, to staring at her speechlessly, to calmly questioning her, to angrily shouting at her and calling her names, to desperately pleading with her. "If it's another man," I finally said, "I'll kill him."

She was calm, quiet, gentle. "It's not. And you wouldn't."

"If it's me, I'll change or kill myself trying."

"It's not. You're a good husband and a perfect father."

"If it's money, I'll get a second job. If it's Denver, we'll move. If it's--"

"Les, listen to me." I was kneeling in front of her on the bed. She took my hand. "You're being ridiculous. It's none of those things. I told you. I don't love you anymore. That's all. I can't in good conscience live with you."

"Terrific. Absolutely terrific." I got off the bed and paced back and forth in front of the television. "We've been married for fourteen years, we have a perfect ten-year-old son, we both have good jobs, we have the house we've always wanted, we're finally nicely settled. And you don't love me anymore! What the hell does that mean?"

She frowned, smiled, frowned again. "Les, this is getting us nowhere. You're talking in cliches."

"Cliches, Delinda . . . cliches exist because of their well tried and well known truth."

"I'm giving you truth, Les. I don't love you."

"That's stupid."

"I'm sorry you think so."

"Well I do. And I will not--I will not--see this family split up because of stupidity. I will not divorce you."

But I did. Or, rather, she divorced me. But for almost a year afterwards I continued visiting her and Zach two or three times a week. She never complained, always

greeted me pleasantly, always let me take Zach whenever I wanted to or let me play with him there at the house, often fixed meals for me and visited with me until long after dinner. We visited about the weather and politics and history and World War II and Zach and being single and anything else I happened to bring up. She did not love me, but she was good to me. I never understood it. I still don't. But I might have stayed there indefinitely had it not been for the day Frank Chambers answered her door.

Good old Frank Chambers. A bank executive who wanted to be an old time mountain man. He stood in the doorway, looking at me look surprised. He probably smiled, though I had never been able to tell what was going on behind the wad of red hair that was his face. His thick beard ran from his Adam's apple up to his cheekbones, and there was no way to tell where his moustache stopped and his beard began, where his beard stopped and his sideburns began, where his sideburns stopped and his hair began. He stuffed his big hands into the pockets of his gray down vest and asked me what I wanted. I tried to make out the expression on his face and told him I wanted to see Delinda.

"She's in the shower, Les."

"Zach then."

"He's at a friend's house." Frank did not budge from his spot in the doorway. I wanted to hit him.

"I'd like to come in for a minute," I said. "I'd really like to talk to Delinda."

I'm sure he smiled. "I'm sorry, Les. Really, I am. But you oughtta go."

"Frank, it's my house. She's my wife."

"You're divorced, Les." It was a simple thing for him to say, a stupid thing, really. I knew I was divorced. I was reminded of it every time I woke up alone in the dumpy apartment I had rented near campus, and I was more strongly reminded of it every time Delinda and I talked about what it was like to be single. I wanted to tell that to Frank. I wanted him to realize what a stupid remark he had just made.

But all I said was something equally stupid: "Yes. I guess I am."

That was in mid-April, almost too late for me to find a new job for the following fall. But I could not stay in Denver. I knew I could not refrain from going to see Delinda, but I also knew that I could not cope with again finding a man at her house. I felt as if she and Frank Chambers were almost physically pushing me away from Denver, or as if some other, stronger force were pulling me away, a force that reminded me of the way I had felt when my grandfather died. By the end of July, the only solid offer I had gotten was for a half-time position at the Long Beach campus of California State University. I was desperate. I took the job, hoping I could find something better by the following spring semester. I packed two large suitcases and a hanging bag--my sheepskin coat was in the hanging bag--and left everything else with Delinda.

* * * * *

Stephanie had not come back by the time I had to leave for the L.A. airport and my father's funeral. I managed to make it through the airport alone and, later, as the plane gradually slanted in toward the Stapleton International Airport in Denver, I wondered if I would spend my layover there alone. When I had called Delinda to ask if she would bring Zach out to see me, she had been calm and pleasant, as usual, but her commitment had been vague.

"Good evening. This is Delinda Whittle," she had answered when I called. She always answered with her name because clients often called her at home.

"It's Les," I said.

"Les. It's good to hear from you. How are you?" She sounded natural, sincere, unsurprised, as if we spoke daily.

"Whittle," I said. "I still can't get used to it, your using your maiden name."

"Well, Les, we are divorced."

"So I was once told. Delinda, my father died."

"Oh, Les, I'm sorry."

"I'm going to Dallas. I don't suppose you'd go with me?" I had promised myself not to ask.

"You know I can't."

"I suppose I do." Calling her was a mistake. I miss you, I wanted to say. Even the few words she had spoken

made it sound as if I was the only person she knew or cared about, as if nothing had changed since that night she sat on my apartment steps in the rain. Have you changed your mind? I wanted to ask. Is there a chance-- But I had already been more personal than I intended. So I said nothing.

She laughed at my silence. "Les?"

"How's Zach?"

"He's fine. Do you think he should go with you?"

"No," I said with more force than the occasion required.

"I mean, I don't want him to have to go through that." I was thinking of my own grandfather's death, remembering the way it had affected me, worrying about the way my father's death would affect Zach. He was older than I had been when my grandfather died, but he was also much more attached to my father than I had been to my grandfather. He had always loved our trips to Dallas, and especially the trips we took from there to the coast with my folks. He and my father went fishing together and walked up and down the beach together just as my father and I had when I was young. It was good for him, I thought, but I always demanded that my father not take him into the deep water.

I had hardly known my grandfather. I knew he was the tall, wrinkle-faced, deep-voiced man who came to visit from Oklahoma every Christmas and every Fourth of July before I was ten. I knew he was the gruff old man who frequently cursed, who occasionally burped without excusing himself, who rarely had more than three or four words to say to me on

any given day. Beyond that, all I knew was that he was the man whose wife brought him to our house one year in the middle of September, the man whose bed-ridden presence there for almost a month was somehow responsible for the terrifying recurring nightmares I began having, the man who died while I was hugging him in a hospital with long, pale green hallways and cream-white doors.

"I have a layover in Denver," I said to Delinda as we spoke on the phone. "I'd like to see Zach."

"I'm not sure, Les. I have some houses to show, and he has school. I don't know. I'll try."

Please go with me, I thought, but I didn't make the mistake of saying it again. Instead, I was silent again. She laughed again. "So," I said, unwilling to hang up. "Are you still seeing Frank Chambers?"

"Some."

"Has he shaved?"

"No."

"So you're really not seeing him." I laughed insincerely. So did she, and it was the only time she sounded insincere.

"What about you, Les?"

"No. No. Still happily celebrate." I had never told her about Stephanie.

"And your job?"

"Same old job."

"I still worry about you, you know. Are you trying?"

"Trying! Hell every semester I write and call everywhere. UCLA, UAC, Cal State in L.A., in Northridge, in Dominguez Hills, Loyola Marymount University, Claremont, Woodbury, Occidental, Whittier, L.A. City College, L.A. Harbor College, L.A. Pierce College, L.A. Southwest College, L.A. Valley College--"

"I'm convinced, Les. But what about somewhere besides L.A.?"

"Oh, sure," I said. "Sure. Listen, I'll stop bothering you. But will you bring Zach to the airport?"

"If I can."

"Please try."

"I will."

On the plane gliding into Denver, I looked down at the glinting gold dome of the capitol building and felt happy that it was real, solid, twenty-eight-carat gold. I was convinced that the first person to say All that glitters is not gold said it in Los Angeles. I wondered if Stephanie was back at the house in Long Beach. I hoped Delinda would be waiting for me at the Stapleton Airport.

I was sure she would be. She would bring Zach out and she would visit just as calmly and congenially as she always had when I used to go by and see her after we were divorced. We would probably visit about the weather and politics and and history and World War II and Zach and being single.

Then she would probably make some excuse to leave me alone with Zach for a short time.

I sat in the airport restaurant drinking coffee and thinking that Denver was colder than I remembered, thinking that the airport was much busier than I remembered, the people unfamiliar, the chaos almost as bad as at the L.A. airport.

When I had left Denver two years earlier, I had thought that it was home, that I could stay right there in the terminal and be just as comfortable as I would be in a house or apartment anywhere else. It was a stupid thought, but for a moment I actually believed it. Though I knew none of the hundreds of people milling around, they seemed familiar. They were in Denver, and Denver was home, so they were neighbors and I could live right there with them quite comfortably.

I couldn't really, of course, but it seemed that way at the time because I didn't want to move. I have always had trouble moving--from Dallas to Denton, from Denton to Denver, from Denver to L.A., and even from L.A. back to Dallas, where I am now.

The first time I discovered that people moved at all was when I was eight and my father told me we were moving to another house. He came into my room one night just before I had curled up under the quilt my grandmother had given me and sunk my head into the fat feather pillow she had given me. "We're moving," he said, and I cried. He laughed at

me. "Just a few blocks. To a bigger house with three bedrooms."

"Why, Daddy?" I shuddered. "Is Mamma going to have a baby?"

He laughed again and hugged me against his chest. "No, son. We just want a little more room. That's all." Years later I discovered that my mother had some serious complications when she was pregnant with me; the doctors had advised her to have no more children. I'm sure they both wished they could have more, but they never indicated that to me.

"Mamma and I will take the big bedroom," my father said, still hugging me and rubbing my back. "But you can pick either of the other two you want. How's that?"

That was all right. It made the move exciting. I spent a full day wandering in and out of each bedroom, considering each from every angle, carefully examining every inch of the closets, corners, walls, floor, and ceiling. To my parents' surprise--and to mine as I look back on it--I chose the smaller of the two rooms. With my bed, my night stand, my dresser, and my electric train set up in the room, there was little space for anything else. And, because it was surrounded by the bathroom on one side, my parents' room on another side, the other bedroom on another side, and the hallway and kitchen on the final side, it had no windows. It was always dark, and I had to have the light on anytime I played in there.

Still, I loved it. Most of all, I loved it at night. Every night, I would take a last careful look at the whole room, at the walls and all the things I had hung on them, and then I would curl up--even in the summer--under that thick quilt my grandmother had made for me, and I would sink my head as deep as it would go into that cool, fat feather pillow she had given me, and I would fall asleep smiling. I kept that feather pillow all through college and all through my marriage to Delinda, but I left it with Zach when I moved to California.

The only time my room became unpleasant for me was the time I was ten and my grandparents showed up in the middle of September. I was surprised; they never came in September. At first, I didn't understand why they were there, but I soon realized that something was wrong, that my grandfather never came out of his room, that he didn't snore at night. I began eavesdropping on the hushed conversations among my mother, father, and grandmother, conversations in which the word cancer was repeatedly spoken, conversations about his wanting to be with his family rather than in a hospital, conversations about how long it would be.

I knew he was dying, and I didn't think I cared. I hardly knew him. But then the nightmares began. The same dream recurred every night. It was a silent dream, a shadowed dream, a shapeless dream. It was a terrifying dream, but not really a dream at all. More like a void, a

vacuum, a cold, bottomless black pit that relentlessly tried to pull and strain and tug and suck me over its edge.

Every night, I wanted to scream. But I didn't. I couldn't. I would lie there, awake but still dreaming, or sensing the dream, feeling the tug, fighting it. Rigid, I would clutch the sheets, feel nothing, clutch again, and still again, until I finally felt the damp sheets against my damp palms. I would lie motionless, trying to focus on something--anything familiar--through the seemingly corporeal darkness of my little room. The steady tug would slowly diminish. My numbness would slowly recede.

But one night, it was worse than usual, Trembling, I reached for the bedside lamp, squinted against its brightness. When my eyes adjusted, I focused on the hands of my big, round alarm clock, a birthday gift from my father the year before. I watched the wide, luminous minute hand as it dropped or rose stiffly from one big black dot to the next, one after the other, minute by minute. Just before each time it moved, something in the clock would creak quietly, almost as if the hand was straining against its own movement.

That one night, that worst night, I could not watch for long. I shivered. The dream lingered. Despite the light, I was sure the dream was there in my room, a camouflaged beast of some sort skulking under my bed or coiled up in a corner or furtively peering from behind the big alarm clock my father had given me for my last birthday. I really believed it was there. I felt its tenacious tug.

I wanted to cry, but I couldn't. It was too huge and too vague for tears, too ubiquitous and too omnipotent to inspire anything but muted awe.

I would have gone to my parents if I had thought they could help. But I knew my father wouldn't understand and my mother would only cry. I lay there shivering, sure that the dream could at any moment suck me into darkness, into nothingness, into black oblivion. I ran to my grandparents' room.

All the other times my grandparents had visited, my grandfather would snore so loudly that everyone could hear him no matter where they were in the house. Sometimes, after I went to bed, I imitated the noise, sucking in huge drafts of air through my nose so that each one made a prolonged growling noise, and then releasing each breath so forcefully through my mouth that my lips vibrated. Before long, I would hear my father doing an even better, even louder imitation. I would giggle, my father would laugh, and we would both snore in unison with my grandfather until my mother, giggling also, would tell us to hush.

But that September, my grandfather made no sound as he slept. And that one night when I crawled up beside him in bed, he seemed barely to be breathing at all. He lay on his side, facing the edge of the bed. On the other side of the bed, my grandmother stirred slightly, sighed, but didn't waken. Very carefully and very slowly, I slipped one arm under my grandfather's side and folded my other arm over

him. I felt his ribs press against my arm; they seemed little more than brittle sticks wrapped in tissue paper. I pressed my cheek and ear against his chest, closed my eyes, and listened to the thump-thump thump-thump of his seemingly strong, steady heart. I not only heard it, but thought I felt it too. I felt it against my ear and cheek; I felt it in my own arms, in my own legs, and, most of all, in my own chest.

I liked that feeling. It was familiar. I had felt it hundreds of times, probably thousands of times before, times when I got a splinter or a fishhook in my foot, times when I fell down on a sidewalk or crashed my bicycle or fell out of a tree, times when I felt sad or frightened or lonely or just sleepy. It was those times when my mother would gently clutch me against her softness or my father would wrap a thick, hard arm around me and squeeze me against his broad, firm chest. My mother's blouses always seemed smooth and silky as I pressed my cheek and ear against her, as I felt the fleshy softness of her breasts beneath her blouse, as I smelled the candy sweetness of her perfume, as I felt the beat of her heart run through my own body. My father was much harder, his shirts scratchy with starch, his smell usually a vague reminder of the damp earth in the garden where the two of us sometimes searched for fishing worms; but the effect was the same; his heartbeat felt the same.

And it felt the same with my grandfather, even though I hardly knew him, even though he was sick and dying.

I felt the thump-thump. I smiled. The force straining against me diminished. Something scratched at the window across from the bed, and I knew it was the tall pecan tree whose branches my father perpetually threatened to trim. Something thudded against the front door, and I knew I had been awake all night, knew that it was five o'clock and the skinny, bearded man with milky skin and bloodshot eyes--the same man who came to our house for his money the first Monday of every month--had just thrown the morning paper. I felt my grandfather's heartbeat, smiled, yawned, and fell asleep.

Later, I woke to my grandfather's screams and, within a few seconds, after everyone was gathered in the room, I sat in my mother's lap while she cried, my father yelled at me, and my grandfather moaned, "Scared me, scared me, scared me, oh my God, scared me."

My father paced back and forth in front of my mother and me. "Damn it, Leslie--"

"Thomas!" my grandmother scolded.

"Well he should know better," my father yelled. He stopped and frowned at me as I sat in my mother's lap in a chair near the bed. "Damn it, son, you do know better."

Her face pressed against my chest, my mother cried. My grandmother stood next to us, fighting with the cloth belt of her robe. My grandfather continued moaning, and my grandmother stepped back to the bedside and stroked his

forehead. "It was only Leslie, dear. Only Leslie." Then, to my father, "He's a child, Thomas. He doesn't understand."

My father responded as if I had said it. "You should understand. Damn it, Leslie, you're not a baby." He had rarely cursed in front of me, and never at me. My pajamas absorbed my mother's tears. I felt the damp spot, cold and sticky against my chest, slowly growing bigger. I pulled her arms from around me, slid out of her lap, and left the room.

Every night after that, I tried to stay in my own room, tried to fight the tugging sensation by myself, but always ended up sneaking to my grandfather's room and snuggling against his chest. I didn't sleep, always lay awake waiting until I heard my mother or father in the bathroom, at which time I would sneak back to my room. My grandmother caught me several times, but she simply kissed my forehead and quietly sent me back to my room.

Then one day they took my grandfather to the hospital. "I thought he wanted to be with us," I said to my grandmother.

"It's time, dear," was all she said.

Stapleton Airport didn't seem like home as I sat in its restaurant during my layover and watched for Delinda. It was crowded and noisy and seemed somehow unfriendly. I was surprised to find myself thinking that the L.A. Airport

was preferable. I suddenly wanted to go back there, to forget that I had ever lived in Denver, to forget that my father had died, to forget that my grandfather had died. But I stayed and watched for Delinda's and Zach's familiar faces.

Delinda surprised me. She didn't show up. I tried to call her but got no answer. I tried to call Stephanie in Long Beach but got no answer. I boarded the plane for Dallas and my father's funeral.

My mother met me at the Dallas-Fort Worth Regional Airport, second-largest airport in the world but one that seemed to me much quieter, much less chaotic than either the Stapleton or L.A. airports. My mother wore dark glasses and I knew she had been crying ever since my father died. I drove on the way home, and we talked about my father.

"We both knew it was coming," my mother said, looking out the car window instead of at me. "I think he accepted it."

"I don't see how anyone really can," I said.

"One learns."

"I can't remember him, Mother."

"Don't be ridiculous." Her voice cracked. I had offended her.

"You should have moved to Long Beach with me like I asked you to." Right after I decided to take the job in California, I had flown from Denver to Dallas to see them. I spent three days there, at first only casually suggesting

that they move with me, and finally--perhaps because they so firmly resisted--emphatically arguing that they should move.

"I'm sure the air there is no better than it is here," my mother said, still looking out the window.

"He'd have liked it there," I said. "Right on the ocean."

"He liked it here." She was crying.

He had liked Dallas. When I moved to Long Beach, I might have persuaded my mother to go along had it not been for him. He was adamant about staying in Dallas. He had lived there all of his adult life, had never been anywhere else except during our vacations to the coast and during his stint in the Army during World War II. He never talked about that. It was his only mystery, the only thing about him that I knew nothing of. The few times that Delinda had talked about Pearl Harbor in front of him, he had always left the room with no apology and no explanation.

"My house is just a few miles from a V.A. hospital," I said.

"So is ours," my mother said.

"I still think you should have come."

"Leslie," she said, suddenly turning her face to me and taking off her glasses. Her eyes were bloodshot, their lids puffy. "Your grandfather came to us when he was sick. Do you remember? It didn't help. It doesn't help. Please, no more."

She had prepared the larger spare room for me, but I chose to stay in my old room. I lay in bed that night, thinking of what she had said about my grandfather. I tried not to think about it, tried to think of my father, tried to remember our vacations to the coast, tried to remember what he had been like the last time I saw him. But I could think only of my grandfather, and I felt as if I were ten years old again, lying in that bed and knowing he was sleeping in the room next door, or lying there wishing that he weren't in the hospital where I couldn't get at him.

He had stayed in the hospital for three days before he died. I was not allowed to see him, was not even allowed to go to the hospital for the first two days. But on Saturday when I had no school, my parents took me with them. On the sixteenth floor, they stopped at the nurses' station, told the nurse at the desk that I would be staying in the lobby, and asked her if she would keep an eye on me.

Children were generally not allowed in the rooms, but the nurse said, "He can go with you if you like," probably because she knew my grandfather would die soon.

"No," my father said.

"Please," I said.

"No."

I stood next to the nurse's desk and watched my mother, my father, and my grandmother walk halfway down the long, pale green hallway before they entered a room on the left. I asked the nurse what room it was and then wandered across

to the lobby. I knelt backwards in one of the steel-framed, orange-cushioned chairs and looked out the gray-tinted window. Although it was early October, the day was clear and hot. The Dallas buildings and Dallas streets and Dallas people sixteen floors below looked busy but lifeless as I watched them through heat-wave ripples.

My dream was no longer simply a night time fear. I felt the tug all the time, awake or asleep, in the light as well as in the dark. And at that moment, I felt as if it was about to jerk me through the gray-tinted window and suck me down until I splattered against the street below. I slid off the chair and hurried across the hall to the polished steel drinking fountain. I pressed my back against the wall, my side against the polished steel, believing that the drinking fountain was the only thing holding me back, the only thing protecting me from being sucked down that long hallway with a pale green floor, pale green walls, cream-white doors, and purple-tinged white lights, the only thing between me and the emergency exit doors I would be smashed against at the end of the hallway.

The feeling was so real to me at the time that I could not believe I was only imagining it. I could not believe that no one else felt it. I looked across at the people sitting in the steel-framed, orange-cushioned chairs in the lobby and was sure they felt it too.

There was a young Mexican woman who sat staring into her lap, her dark hands squeezing, releasing, knuckling a

loose fold of her purple knit skirt as if she were kneading dough. She tilted her head to the side and spoke harshly to the little boy who tugged at her sleeve and whined in Spanish. They felt it, I was sure. He clung to her sleeve and she clutched at her skirt trying to resist it.

A chair over from them, an old fat lady sat knitting, her ankles and calves grotesque with purple, worm-like varicose veins that bulged against her knee-high supports. She seemed to be clinging more tightly than necessary to her knitting needles as she knitted a chain of three or four inches, clucked her tongue, and ripped an inch or two out. Two chairs down from her, a young man with dirty-blond, uncombed hair sat staring at a Time magazine. He never turned the pages, and he occasionally looked at his watch, got up to peer down the hallway, then quickly returned to his chair as if he had felt the force in the hall.

Beside him, a middle-aged couple faced each other, sitting on the edge of their chairs. They squeezed each other's hands, she crying quietly, he frowning and whispering to her. I tried but couldn't hear what he said. The only word I could make out came from an old man sitting in the corner chair. His head was thrown back, his mouth open, and he snored. Every few seconds, his pointed jaw would move slightly and he would utter a half-formed no. I knew he was saying no to the force we both felt pulling at us. I wondered if he was a patient or a visitor.

When my parents and my grandmother finally came back down the hall, a doctor was with them. My father motioned to me to stay where I was. They all stood together in the lobby while the doctor talked. My father nodded gravely; my mother cried; my grandmother figited with her handkerchief. Another doctor in a long white coat approached the Mexican woman and sat next to her, leaning in to speak quietly. Without looking up from the fold of purple knit skirt she kneaded, she began to moan, deeply and quietly at first, but gradually shriller and louder. The doctor took her by the elbow, helped her up, and slowly led her down the hallway. "Ay, Dios mio," she wailed. "Ay, Dios mio, Dios mios, Dios mio." The words echoed through the long green hallway, and the little boy added his screams as he clung to her purple skirt.

I glanced at my parents, then at the nurse, none of whom were looking at me. I walked down the hallway to the cream-white door that opened into my grandfather's room.

His eyes closed, his mouth slightly open, he lay in the electronically controlled bed, the polished steel crib sides pulled up so he would not roll out. He looked as brittle and as hollow as the cicada shells I sometimes found stuck to the trunk of our tall pecan tree. Only his knees, propped up with small pillows, gave any contour to the sheet.

I felt the persistent tug. I climbed over one of the steel crib sides and hugged him, pressing my ear and cheek

against his chest. I lay there listening to his shallow breathing, listening to his heartbeat, feeling his heartbeat in my own chest.

I don't know how long I was there. It couldn't have been long, for I'm sure my parents would have discovered me if it were. However long it was, I suddenly became aware that the shallow breathing had stopped, although I still felt the heartbeat. I moved up on the bed, placed my ear against his mouth. He was not breathing. I sat up. I still felt the heartbeat. I climbed out of the bed, walked to where my parents and grandmother were.

"I think he's dead," I said.

"My God," said my mother, and she collapsed against my father's chest, crying loudly.

My grandmother began crying too. "I want to see him," she said. The doctor led her down the hall.

I thought my father would yell at me for having gone to my grandfather's room, but he said nothing. He simply squeezed my mother with his thick arms and pressed one of his broad hands against the back of her head as she pressed her face against his chest. I felt dizzy and so physically light that I could not fight the force I was sure was tugging at me. I watched my mother crying, my father hugging her. I noticed the little wrinkles around his eyes. I felt the heartbeat in my chest. I cried.

* * * * *

Remembering the whole experience, I did not sleep at all the night before my father's funeral. Weary and dazed from the night of sleeplessness, I went through the funeral feeling only numbness. I remember almost nothing about it now: only that my mother cried and that I felt as if I were being somehow pulled through it by a force similar to the one I had felt when my grandfather died. During the procession, it seemed as if the hearse in front of us were hauling us behind it while the long line of slow-moving cars behind us pushed at our rear. At the graveyard, my mother squeezed my hand as I walked beside her to the grave. I remember very little of what was said or done until almost everyone was gone. But I do remember suddenly realizing that my father was the man buried under the mound of dirt in front of me, that my mother was crying for that man, and that I still could only picture him as the man who stood in the hospital where my grandfather died.

I put my arm around my mother's shoulders as she cried, and when she stopped I walked her slowly to the car.

That night, she was calm. We talked about some of her memories and about some of mine. I reminded her of the beautiful girls in bikinis. She smiled and waved my reminder away with a pale arm.

After she went to bed, I sat outside in the fenced back yard. It was cool, and I kept my hands inside the pockets of my sheepskin coat. I remembered the sea gulls and sailboats I had watched two days before from the little porch of my rent-house in Long Beach. I went inside and tried to call Stephanie but got no answer. I considered calling Delinda but decided against it.

SPRING HOPES, ETERNAL

I love the spring, but some years it passes too quickly. Those are the years it arrives early--February, or even late January--and then can't seem to make up its mind how serious it is. There will be cool nights and mild days for a week or so, but just when I've decided to clean out my fireplace and pack my coat and gloves away, the nights drop below freezing and the days remain bitter and gray. For two or three months, the newsmen and I try to outguess the weather. We rarely succeed. Then, sometime between mid-April and May, a day shoots up to above ninety. From then on, it might as well be summer, and I'm left wondering if spring ever happened or not.

That's the way it happened this year, and it was on that first hot day that my new neighbors arrived. If I were superstitious, I'd say it was an omen. I was out inspecting my pecan tree when they drove up, and it wasn't long before I got the feeling they would cause some sort of trouble.

Each of them drove one of those huge U-Haul trucks, one towing a Volkswagon van, the other towing a shiny black sports car I couldn't identify. I waved as they drove down the long dirt driveway to old Mr. Casner's house. Neither of them waved back. Perhaps they didn't see me, but I was only a hundred yards or so away.

"Hello," I hollered when the man stepped down out of his U-Haul. He shaded his eyes with one hand, looked toward me, waved briefly with his other hand, and then turned and walked to the back of the truck. The woman parked on the other side of him, so I didn't see her until she rounded the back of the van he towed. She never looked toward me. She stepped straight up to the van and got in. As soon as the man disconnected the hitch, the woman started the van, backed up a short way, and drove around the U-Haul to park right on the carpet grass Mr. Casner had worked so hard to establish and maintain over the years.

I missed him. Up until the last few months, he and I met under my pecan tree once or twice a week. I always took a pitcher of lemonade or a thermos of hot tea, depending on the weather. We would sip our drinks and trade gardening tips, or neighborhood news, or pleasant memories of my parents and his wife.

"Hello," I hollered, and I waved as the woman stepped out of the Volkswagon. Like the man, she shaded her eyes, waved briefly, and turned away. She stepped to the porch and directed the man as he backed the U-Haul to within a few feet of it. I took another look at my pecan tree, sighed, and walked toward them.

"Welcome," I said when I got near enough that I didn't have to holler. The man had set up a metal ramp that slanted from the open back of the U-Haul into the middle of the porch.

"Thanks," he said, pausing halfway up the ramp. He was short and a little plump, and he had straight blond hair that just covered his ears. He was sweating already, his red and blue striped knit shirt dark around the armpits where it was wet. "Excuse me," he said, looking away from me and grabbing the end of a chest of drawers the woman was pushing out of the truck. He grunted as he hugged his end of the chest and lifted. When she lifted her end, he began backing slowly down the ramp.

She was tiny, no more than five feet tall and a hundred pounds. Her hair was the same color as his but was curly and shorter. "If you can wait," I said, "Mr. Tellick will be home soon. He lives just down the road. I'm sure he'd be glad to help."

They set the chest down on the porch. He leaned on it and puffed. "Thanks. But I guess we'll get a start."

"We're the Creeleys," she said, hopping off the porch and extending a tiny hand toward me. "I'm Gaynelle and that's my husband, Darrell." She nodded back toward him while I shook her hand. Her grasp was firm, almost like a man's. I guessed that they were in their late twenties, not married long, and not the type to stay in a rural neighborhood for long. Without knowing why, I was comforted by the last conjecture. "We're not rude, really," she said, smiling. "Just eager to get moved in."

"Of course," I said, glad that she had released my hand. "I'm Natrelle Scoggins. I live next door." I looked at him.

He nodded. I looked at her. She smiled. I glanced at the U-Haul's license plate. "What part of Oklahoma are you from?"

She looked around at the plate. "I hadn't even noticed. That's just the truck."

"I have an aunt in Lawton."

"We're from San Antonio."

"Oh. Such a short move."

"We just had to get out of the city."

He grunted. "She just had to get out of the city."

She laughed. "I love it out here. It's so peaceful and so spacious."

My neighborhood is five miles northwest of Kerrville, Texas. Mr. Casner was the first to build out here. My father was the second, over forty years ago. He bought one of Mr. Casner's two acres. All together, there are now only seven houses out here. They are well spread out, and most of the landscape remains untouched and natural.

"And I've never seen so many trees in one spot," Gaynelle Creeley said, spreading her short arms to indicate the whole area.

"I was just out looking at my pecan tree when you drove up," I said.

"It's a fine tree."

"It must have been," her husband said from the porch. He straightened, shaded his eyes, and squinted toward the tree.

I didn't like his use of the past tense. The tips of my ears tingled and I couldn't look straight at him. I looked at the big wet circle in his shirt under his raised arm. "My father planted it," I said.

"Too bad it's dead." He made a clicking noise with his cheek, lowered his arm, and again leaned on the chest.

"It's not dead!" I hoped he couldn't see my ears.

He raised his eyebrows. "I'm sorry. Didn't mean to offend. It's just that Well, it does look dead."

"It's late budding," I said, embarrassed for having shown my anger. "That's all. It's been an odd spring, you know."

"Right," he said.

"Will you excuse us?" said his wife, blushing but still smiling.

"Of course." I'm sure she saw me blushing too. Despite the heat and the sudden rubbery weakness of my legs, I walked briskly away. I intentionally didn't even glance at my pecan tree when I passed it, and I didn't slow down until I was in my house and back to the laundry room.

"The nerve of that man!" I muttered to myself as I pulled my laundry basket over next to the washer.

Reva Casner used to chide me for talking to myself. The two of us would be sewing together, or baking together, or just sitting under my pecan tree enjoying a beautiful sunset, when she would chuckle softly and say, "Am I such a poor conversationalist that you must rely on yourself?"

I would apologize, we would both laugh, and she would ask me what I had been thinking--or talking--about. She died seven years ago.

Doing the laundry calmed me. It always calms me. Everything about it is so relaxing, so peaceful: sitting with my eyes closed and listening to the comforting chug-slush, chug-slush of the washer; smelling the soapy freshness of the clothes and feeling their cool, damp weight against my palms as I transfer them to the dryer; pressing my forearms and palms against the smooth, warm metal top of the dryer and feeling the gentle vibrations as the clothes tumble inside; and, finally, best of all, feeling the soft warmth of the clothes against my fingertips as I slowly fold each piece. Towels are my favorites because they are so soft and thick and maintain their warmth the longest. I like dark, solid colored towels the best--maroon, navy blue, chocolate brown--because they seem so especially rich, so especially soft, so especially warm.

I washed two towels the day I met the Creeleys. One of them, the brown one, hadn't even been dirty. I saved it for last, and as I ran my fingers between its soft, dark folds, I felt much better. The Creeleys had done nothing so terrible. He simply had not seen my pecan tree well from where he stood. I simply had been prepared to dislike them because they weren't Mr. Casner. They would be fine neighbors. I would wait a few days, give them time to get settled, and then take them a casserole or a pie and get to

know them better. As I sat there pressing a warm folded towel against my cheek, I hoped that Gaynelle Creeley and I might even become close enough to meet occasionally under my pecan tree as Reva Casner and I often did.

As I expected, the next few days were hot. I went out early each morning to tend my small garden and then spent the rest of each day working indoors. I sew for a living--draperies, bedspreads, pillow shams, and such--and I like to get an early start each day so I can spend the late afternoons with some little pleasure such as house cleaning, cooking, or doing laundry.

Each evening, I went out to inspect my pecan tree, and not once in the next four days did I see either of the Creeleys. Their Volkswagon was always gone, and the sports car was always parked on the front lawn in the shade of Mr. Casner's big oak tree. I assumed that Darrell Creeley was off at work and his wife was getting the house in order.

I decided that Saturday would be a good day to visit them again. I thought perhaps he didn't work on Saturday, and even if he did she would be home and surely fairly well settled into Mr. Casner's house.

Saturday was my birthday. I planned not to work. I was going to sleep until the chirping of the sparrows in the redbud outside my bedroom window wakened me. I love awaking to the sparrows. Sometimes there is also a cardinal

or a mockingbird. They all look so pretty there among the purple-pink blossoms, and they chirp and sing so pleasantly that I could sit and watch them for hours. Because of my work, I hardly ever do watch for long, but for my birthday I intended to fix a cup of cinnamon tea, take it back to bed, and sit propped against my feather pillow while I watched and listened to the birds for as long as I pleased. Then I would get up and bake a cherry pie for the Creeleys.

The birds, however, did not waken me. When the doorbell first rang that morning, I sat straight up in bed, aware that I had heard something but unable to place it. When it rang the second time, I gasped and pressed my palms against my chest. It was still dark, and I could imagine no reason for anyone to be ringing my doorbell. I held my breath and listened but could hear nothing more than my rapid heartbeat and the blood rushing in my ears. Finally, the bell rang again. Better judgment told me to sit perfectly still until whoever it was went away, or, if they didn't go away, to wait at least until it was light. I peered at the luminous dial of my alarm clock. There was at least another half hour until sunrise. I knew my nerves would never stand it. So when the doorbell rang again, I crept out of bed and tiptoed to the closet for my bathrobe.

I pulled the robe tightly around me and tiptoed into the living room. Before opening the door, I made sure the chain lock was secure and switched on the outside light. Then I opened the door just far enough to look out through

the screen. I gasped when I saw the Mexican, and I shuddered when I heard his deep, heavily accented voice.

"Your husband is home?" He was perhaps twenty-five or twenty-six and very dark skinned. Illuminated by my yellow porch light, he looked vaguely familiar, the way people on the street sometimes do even though you know you have never met them. I was certainly glad I had never met him, and I shuddered to think that he was standing right there on my doorstep in the dark. "Your husband is home, please?" he repeated.

I opened my mouth but couldn't speak, so distracted was I by his appearance. He was an odd sort; everything about him seemed like an odd mixture of gentleness and malignity. He had large, dark eyes and long lashes that could make even an insensitive father's heart warm or a beautiful woman jealous. But beneath his right eye was a rubbery looking scar that made me shudder. Except for the scar and a downy black moustache, his face was smooth, as were his shoulders and arms. He wore a white tee-shirt with the sleeves cut out. His shoulders were broad, and the veins in his thick, almost hairless arms bulged noticeably.

"You are okay, lady?" he said, leaning closer to the door and peering in at me.

I shook myself and clutched the doorknob to steady my shaking hand. I am not especially attractive, and I was at least fourteen years older than he; still, I am a woman, and I stood before him wearing nothing but a nightgown and robe.

For all I knew, I might endanger myself by telling him I had no husband. "Does he expect you?" I said, my voice quavering.

"Yes." He ran his palm over his hair. It was thick, black hair, shiny with grease and combed straight back with no visible part. When he smiled, the scar beneath his right eye wrinkled stiffly and seemed to shorten slightly. "He has work for me."

I wondered if I could slam the door, get to the phone, and call Mr. Tellick before the young man broke in. But even if I could, Mr. Tellick lives a quarter mile down the road. By the time he got dressed and got to my house, the Mexican probably could have had his way with me and been gone without a trace. "What sort of work?" I said.

He stuck his hands in his jeans pockets and shrugged. "Work."

I squeezed the doorknob even harder. "He's changed his mind."

He raised his eyebrows. His scar stretched slightly. "But he just talks to me in town yesterday. You are sure, Mrs. Creeley?"

"Mrs. Creeley!" I could have shouted her name loud enough to waken her in the house two hundred feet away.

He smiled, chuckled. "Yes."

"The next house," I said, and I thought I might cry from relief. "The Creeleys live in the next house over."

"Thank you," he said. I closed the door and stood listening while he started his car. I didn't move, hardly even breathed until I could no longer hear the car. Then I walked back to my bedroom and collapsed on the bed.

The incident had frightened me more than I would have thought. I have lived in this neighborhood all my life, and until that morning I had never felt threatened or insecure, not even during the time I was adjusting to living alone. Reva and Mr. Casner had been a great help back then. One or both of them came around to check on me three or four times a day, and they invited me to dinner for two weeks straight.

That was right after my father died, almost fifteen years ago. My mother died much earlier. She was going to visit her sister in Lawton, Oklahoma, when the bus she was on stalled on a railroad track. I was only ten, and I think I cried nonstop for a month. I would sit in my bedroom, looking out the window at the pecan tree and remembering how much time she and I had spent out there. During the summer, I used to take my dolls out there and play under the tree all morning. About noon, she would bring lunch out; she, my dolls, and I would have a picnic of peanut butter sandwiches, lemonade, and apples. Sometimes Reva would join us.

As I lay on my bed after the Mexican left, I wondered what on earth the Creeleys wanted him for, especially so early in the morning. I could think of nothing except that

they might be dealing with narcotics. I sat up on the edge of my bed and peered out the window. The gray dimness of early dawn and the flowered branches of the redbud made it difficult for me to see old Mr. Casner's house. I could tell, however, that the porch light was on, and I thought I could see two men talking in the driveway. My vague distrust of the Creeleys, which I had almost overcome in the time since our first meeting, began growing again. And besides feeling suspicious, I felt disappointed because I would not be wakened by the birds and because I was not in the mood for a cup of cinnamon tea in bed.

To distract myself, I sat at my dressing table and combed my hair. My hair is very plain. Brown and graying, it is straight and bodiless and looks the same no matter what I do to it. Still, brushing it is a pleasure: pressing the bristles firmly against my scalp, pulling the brush slowly downward, closing my eyes and concentrating on the warm tingle that begins in my scalp after the first few strokes. After the one hundredth stroke that morning, I set my brush down. "Happy birthday," I said cheerfully to my reflection. Then I got up and walked to the window.

Two sparrows chirped loudly, flitting from branch to branch in the redbud. But what really captured my attention was the sunrise. The sun peeked over the rolling hill tops a mile or so beyond my house. Looking out between the purple-pink blossoms, I saw yellow-orange light spilling over the landscape, washing across the tree tops and making

their new spring leaves shimmer brilliantly. I smiled, wishing every sunrise looked that way.

But it wouldn't last long, that newness and brilliance. The summer would be dry, I was sure, and because the hot weather had started early the trees would soon lose their freshness. Their leaves would turn army green and hang there, almost dead in life, just waiting for the coming of fall when they could die properly. They probably wouldn't even turn, wouldn't have a few final days of lovely fall coloring. They rarely do in years like this one. They simply drop from the trees with the first cold days or the first gray drizzle of fall, and then they turn straight from dull green to dull brown where they lie on the ground.

But that morning they were beautiful. The whole morning was beautiful. I slid my window open and breathed deeply of the fresh morning air. The sparrows were not alarmed; they stayed where they were in the redbud. I took a last look at the sparkling hills and then looked closer in, half the distance to Mr. Casner's house, at my pecan tree. I thought perhaps I saw a few tiny buds on its highest branches. "I must go look immediately," I said.

I was wrong. There were no buds on the tree. I sighed and looked away from it, toward Mr. Casner's house. The Mexican had both back doors of a dirty, white panel-side van opened. He was just lifting a lawnmower out. I should have

known. The Creeleys were not the type to do their own yard work. I felt mildly ashamed for having thought they were up to anything worse than hiring a man to mow their lawn. I also felt mildly scornful of them for doing that. Everyone out here does his own work, and if he can't do it alone, we all help however we can. Sometimes Mr. Tellick or Mr. Blevins offers to mow for me, but I often do it myself.

"Hello," I hollered when Darrell Creeley walked out of the house and toward his Volkswagon van. He waved and kept walking. I had to run to catch him before he got into the van. "Off so early, Mr. Creeley?"

He opened the door of his Volkswagon. "Takes an hour to get to San Antonio." He grabbed the steering wheel, grunting as he pulled himself into the van. His blue and white striped seersucker suit looked too small, and as he sat in the van I could see that his stomach pressed tightly against his white shirt. He looked fleshy-soft, and I remembered thinking how bony-hard his wife looked when I first met them. They were Old Jack Spratt and his wife in reverse. I smiled at the thought.

"Oh," I said. "I didn't know you were still working there."

"For a time." He rolled his window down before shutting the door.

"I guess you don't have much time for mowing," I said, motioning back toward the Mexican, who had just started the mower.

"No, not much." He started the van, then chuckled and leaned his head out the window. "I hear he gave you a start this morning."

"Oh, it was nothing." I felt the tips of my ears tingling.

"Right," he said, and he started to back up. But he stopped and added, "By the way, Miss Scoggins, there'll be some other men out Monday. Surveyors. I don't think they'll get the wrong house, but just in case, I thought you should know."

"Surveyors?" I said, but he was already backing away again. I cupped my hands around my mouth so he could hear me over the lawnmower and his own engine. "Is your wife about?"

Without stopping, he stuck his head out the window and hollered back, "Still sleeping."

I stood there watching him go and wondering what on earth he could want with surveyors. No one in the area ever disputed property lines. It suddenly occurred to me that he might be intending to subdivide his little plot of land, his one acre. I knew that in city residential sections they crammed anywhere from three to six houses on a single acre. Coming from the city, he wouldn't be bothered at all by such living conditions. But I certainly would be, and if he thought he was going to turn his acre into a mini-neighborhood he had another thing coming. I would fight him to the end, and I knew everyone else in the area would too.

I looked across the driveway at the Mexican, who was facing me as he pushed his bulky lawnmower across the front yard. He gripped the handlebar tightly with both hands, his arms stretched their full length, his body leaning, slanting slightly forward as he forced the mower ahead of him. Had his chest been just a little broader, and had his muscles bulged just a little more, I could have believed he was one of those weight lifters I sometimes see on television when nothing else worth watching is on. On the other hand, if I focused only on his smooth, dark complexion or his large, dark eyes with their long lashes, I almost could have believed he was a woman, or at least a child. That was, I suppose, why he disturbed me: everything about him suggested contrasts that seemed unnatural. Despite the gentleness of his eyes, the scar beneath his right one suggested a roughness unfitting for a child. And, despite his lovely complexion, his broad shoulders and chest and his thick arms suggested a strength that could crush even the strongest of women. I shuddered and hurried back toward my house.

As I passed my pecan tree, I thought again of the surveyors. I remembered, too, how in the spring and summer Reva and Mr. Casner and my father and I used to sit out there after church and visit for an hour or so. Many times, Mr. Casner had laughed, put his arm around my shoulders, and hugged me while he reminisced about the day my father planted the tree. "He brought along the scrawniest little sapling you've ever seen," he would chuckle. "And when I

showed him where the property line was, he planted it right then and there. The two of us had a good laugh over what a sorry excuse it was for a dividing marker."

My father would smile and make a sweeping motion with his hand that indicated all of us sitting there. "It wasn't intended to divide."

As I walked on to the house, I made a mental note to check with Mr. Tellick about building restrictions.

I spent the rest of my birthday doing housework, working slowly so I could take advantage of all the little pleasures it provided to my senses. I began by lining my containers of cleansers along the counter by my kitchen sink. Then I fixed myself a cup of cinnamon tea and leisurely sipped it while I studied the containers. Backlighting by the morning sunlight that streamed through the window behind them, all but the Windex container appeared as silhouettes, their colors barely discernible. In its clear plastic bottle, the Windex looked brilliant blue, shot through with streaks of silver as it refracted the sunlight pouring through it. I tilted my head slowly from side to side so the shafts of silver light seemed to be marching back and forth in the blue liquid in a never-ending single-file line. I smiled, almost having forgotten the Creeleys, the Mexican, and the surveyors.

I began my cleaning in the living room, my favorite room to clean. I started with the windows, smiling at the little grunts the Windex bottle made each time I pulled its trigger and forced tiny air bubbles up the narrow tube; watching the liquid exit the nozzle and seemingly float toward the window in an increasingly widening cylinder of mist; feeling my cloth move smoothly over the slippery wet surface of the window; and, finally, listening to the little squeaks of my cloth against the pane as I wiped away the final traces of Windex.

Next, I dusted the table tops, occasionally stopping to breathe deeply of the lemony air created by the spray polish. Finally, I vacuumed, afterwards sitting on the couch and watching miniscule dust flecks swirl in the shaft of sunlight that pierced the space between my open draperies.

During the day, I stopped from time to time to look out the window and across at Mr. Casner's house. The Mexican worked diligently, mowing the entire front of the lot, edging the grass where runners crawled out into the driveway, trimming the bushes that Mr. Casner had planted all around the house, and finally raking together all the cut grass, leaves, and small branches, stuffing them into huge plastic bags, and loading the bags into his dirty white van. I had to admit that even though the Creeleys didn't do the work themselves they did seem to care about how the place looked. What I doubted were their motives. I assumed their primary concern was having the place look attractive to prospective

buyers of the tiny lots they intended to chop their acre into.

"I must call Mr. Tellick," I reminded myself as I walked into the bedroom with my cleaning things.

I was right. There were restrictions: no mobile homes and no more than two houses per acre. I didn't imagine the Creeleys would find that worth their while, and I was going to make sure they knew they couldn't divide their property into more than halves.

When the surveyors arrived early Monday morning, I went out and pretended to fuss with my garden so I could watch them. They started at the southwest corner of Mr. Casner's and measured out to about even with my pecan tree. From there, they measured up to the road and then back the other way about the same distance before turning east. They worked slowly, taking more care than I thought was necessary to rearrange and readjust their equipment each time they changed directions. I was sure they worked by the hour and, unfriendly as it was, I couldn't help smiling at the thought that the Creeleys were being cheated a little.

By the time they turned east, I was quite hot and my arms were beginning to burn. I have very fair skin. I decided to wait no longer, so I changed into a long sleeved blouse, put on my sun hat, and walked over to see Gaynelle Creeley.

On the way over, I stopped to look for new buds on my pecan tree. There were none. What I found, however, upset me worse than not finding any buds. A small iron stake with a bright orange plastic ribbon tied to it was driven into the ground about three inches from the tree-- on my side. The surveyors had obviously made an error, and I intended to let the Creeleys know about it.

Although the Mexican's van was at the Creeleys', I didn't see him. Gaynelle Creeley didn't answer the door. I wondered if she was still in bed. I wondered, ashamed as I was of the thought, if he was in there with her. I decided to circle the house, and I found her sitting in a bright yellow lawn chair on the east side. She wore extremely short white shorts and a sleeveless knit blouse. A transistor radio played quietly next to her chair, and she had her eyes closed. I could smell the suntan oil as I approached her.

The Mexican was there too. Stripped to the waist, he stood halfway up a ladder that leaned against the house. His dark brown back was shiny with perspiration. His right shoulder blade bulged prominently as he pressed a steel brush against the house, pushing the brush away from him as far as he could stretch and then pulling it back toward him. With his arm outstretched, the veins in his thick, sweaty arms bulged under his skin, and as he pulled the brush back his elbow bent and his bicep grew into a huge, hard ball.

"Mr. Casner rather let the house go," I said, motioning to the Mexican's work as I stepped up beside Gaynelle Creeley.

She opened her eyes. "Oh, Miss Scoggins. Hello." She looked from me to the house. "Yes. It desperately needs painting." Little flecks of chipped gray paint sprung from the wall as the Mexican stroked it with the brush. Some of them stuck to his perspiring arm and shoulder, speckles of light gray that contrasted with his dark, shiny skin.

"What color will you use?" I said, sitting on the ground beside her.

"Yellow, with gray trim." She stood up. "I'll get you a chair." As she walked toward the house, she called back, "I just love yellow. Don't you?" I did not. Not for Mr. Casner's house, anyway.

The surveyors had gotten to the far northeast corner of the lot and were starting down my way, though a good ways out. The Mexican waved to one of them and then continued scraping. His movements were smooth and liquid, like a cat's, each time he pulled the brush back toward him; but they were strained and somehow brutish when he shoved the brush away from him. His jaw was taut, his smooth brown skin drawn tightly around it.

"My, it's hot," I said as Gaynelle Creeley returned with a chair for me. She nodded in agreement. I moved to the chair. "Thank you. Checking the property lines, are you?"

"Oh them," she said, nodding her head toward the surveyors. "It was Darrell's idea."

"They have made an error."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Over by the pecan."

"Well, they're not finished. I'm sure they'll recheck everything when they finish."

"I hope so." I glanced back at them where they worked. "I was wondering, have you checked on the building restrictions?"

"For a fence?" She squirted some suntan oil onto her arm and began to rub it in. It smelled like coconut. Her arms were no bigger around than the bottle of oil she held.

"Oh," I said. "It's for a fence?"

"Yes. So what do you think of yellow, Miss Scoggins?" She rubbed oil onto her other arm. "I think it'll look terrific."

"I must admit that yellow is not one of my favorite colors," I said. The Mexican had paused for a minute to rest. Hanging onto the ladder with one hand, he placed his other hand on his hip and breathed heavily. His chest expanded hugely each time he inhaled. His soft looking, paint-flecked, dark skin, wet with perspiration, glistened in the bright sunlight. "It must be very hot work," I said.

She glanced at him. "Yes, I'm sure it is."

"Does it frighten you at all, being here alone with him?" I asked.

"Actually . . ." She paused to look at him and then winked at me. "Actually, I rather enjoy it."

I looked away from her. "So you're building a fence?"

"Yes." She had finished with both arms and was rubbing lotion onto one leg. "By the way, could you come for dinner tonight? I know Darrell wants to talk to you about the fence, and it would be nice if we could all get together anyway."

"Yes," I said. "It would."

"About seven?"

"That would be fine." The Mexican was scraping again. I wondered how much they were paying him. I wondered if he would build the fence. I made up my mind not to share one cent of the cost, which I was sure Darrell Creeley wanted to speak with me about. I stood up. "Thank you. Seven o'clock. If you'll excuse me, I really must get out of this heat." I had taken only two or three steps when I thought it might be well to remind her: "You will have those surveyors correct their mistake today, won't you?"

She smiled. "I'll ask them."

I tried to work the rest of the day but was simply too distracted by the thought of the surveyors' marker on my side of the tree. I began with what I thought would be a relatively easy job: sewing the lining into the last two of Mrs. Decker's eight draperies. The first one went well,

and I enjoyed working with the bright Oriental print. I had almost finished the last one when I realized that I had sewn the lining inside out, which meant I would have to rip the whole thing out and start all over. I wasn't up to that, so I began measuring and cutting the four small curtains Mrs. Whitton wanted for her daughter's room. As I measured the rainbow-patterned chintz, I slid my fingertips along it slowly, smiling at the smooth, almost slippery surface. I measured the last panel incorrectly, cutting only two and a half repeats instead of the three needed. I was so frustrated I could have cried. There was not enough material for another full panel, and there was no way I could mend my error without mismatching the pattern. Another measuring error--this one in the pleating of Mrs. Whoel's fifty-five-dollar-a-yard, rose-printed linen--meant more ripping, remeasuring, and resewing. I simply couldn't face that.

By that time, I was furious not only with myself, but also with the surveyors for their mismeasurement, with Darrell Creeley for having them there in the first place, with Gaynelle Creeley for asking me to dinner just so her husband could ask me to share the cost of the fence, and with the Mexican. I'm not sure why I was furious with the Mexican; I suppose it was because he had startled me so that morning he came to my door; I hadn't slept well since then for fear that he was prowling around outside my windows in the dark.

In any case, it was all so distracting that I simply couldn't work. I was making errors I never made. Even though I live five miles from town, my little business has flourished because I work quickly and accurately. As I sat staring at Mrs. Whoel's mismeasured pleats, I envisioned women lining up at my door to cancel their orders and demand the return of their downpayments. I simply could not--I would not--allow the activities of my new neighbors to ruin my business. I considered canceling my dinner engagement. I didn't like their thinking that with a single dinner they could bribe me into sharing the cost of a fence I neither requested nor desired. But I decided that the sooner I got the confrontation over with and the matter settled, the sooner I could get back to work in peace.

I wandered into my bedroom to look out the window. The blooms on my redbud were already beginning to darken and drop. Before long, they would all be gone and all the trees would be dry and dull. And my pecan tree still hadn't budded. I was beginning to think it was too late.

As I looked beyond the redbud and beyond the pecan, I noticed that the surveyors' truck was gone. I wasted no time running out to see if they had moved the stake. They had not. I marched back to my house, got my hammer, and returned to the stake. I had to hit it several times before it was loose enough for me to pull out of the hard, dry ground. I stepped to about six inches on the Creeleys' side of the tree and hammered the stake just far enough

into the ground that it would remain standing. I stood up, put my hands on my hips, and looked toward the Creeleys' house.

The Mexican, who was by then scraping the west side of the house, must have heard my hammering, for he turned on his ladder and looked across at me. Despite the distance, I could tell that he smiled, and though I couldn't see his scar I knew it wrinkled beneath his right eye. I hurried back to my house.

"She lied to me," I said, going straight to my linen closet and taking two towels out. "She said she'd tell them. She flat out lied to me!" I grabbed a third towel from the bathroom and took them all to my laundry room.

When I finished washing, drying, and folding the towels, I had just enough time to shower and get to the Creeleys' by seven.

Both the Creeleys smiled and greeted me pleasantly when I arrived. He wore plaid shorts and a yellow knit shirt with a little alligator applique on it. She wore the same shorts and sleeveless blouse I had seen her in earlier. I was wearing my best cotton dress.

He offered me a glass of wine. I declined. "It's an excellent Chenin Blanc," he said, pouring a glass for himself and one for his wife and then gently swirling his own

under his nose. "I'm sure you'd like it." I noticed the dark, damp spots in his shirt under his arms.

"Thank you," I said. "But I don't much care for wine." I wasn't about to make it easy for him. If he wanted something from me, he would have to come straight out and say so without first softening me up with fine wine and food. As for her, she would have to apologize for lying to me before I softened even a little toward her.

"It goes especially well with chicken," she said. She set her wine on the glass top of the coffee table and put one short arm around her husband's shoulders. "Darrell picked some up at H.E.B. on the way home. I wish I knew how they made that spicy sauce. I love it."

Store-bought barbecued chicken. I should have known. They were just the type to think that chicken wrapped in cellophane and kept warm under a heat lamp all day--or maybe two--was good food. I tried to smile as I glanced around the room to avoid looking at her.

Where Mr. Casner had had his tall, solid oak bookcase filled with paperback western novels, Texas history books, gardening books, and woodworking books, they had a chrome and glass etagere that matched the coffee table and held an expensive looking stereo, record albums, a small Sony television, and, on the top shelf, a row of hard cover best sellers. Their couch was one of those modular sets with wooly brown upholstery. The end tables matched the coffee table and etagere, and each held a chrome lamp the neck of

which bent in whatever direction you wanted it to. One of them also held a huge chrome ashtray with light blue porcelain lining; on the other were two neatly stacked piles of magazines, The New Yorker and Harper's.

"It's really very easy," I said to Gaynelle Creeley. "Making good barbecued chicken." It had been one of Reva's specialties. She used to say that she could make better barbecued chicken in the oven than even an expert outdoor chef could make on his grill. She and Mr. Casner would pretend to argue, with him always claiming that his outdoor chicken was better than her indoor chicken. Sometimes, they would have contests. Each took half a chicken and cooked it their different ways. They always asked me to be the judge. If it was fall, I always baked a fresh pecan pie to take along. They claimed that my pie was better than any kind of chicken, and I judged in favor of both kinds of chicken, saying that either one of them was better than any I had had before.

Gaynelle Creeley sipped her wine and then said, "Oh, but I just hate to cook. Don't you?"

"Not at all," I said, my ears tingling.

"It seems as if it would be really boring, cooking for one all the time."

"I find it a pleasure."

"All this talk of cooking when we should be eating," Darrell Creeley said. He laughed and poured himself another glass of wine. "I'm hungry."

Besides the chicken, dinner consisted of frozen mixed vegetables that Gaynelle Creeley decided to fix at the last minute and some canned biscuits, neither of which she cooked long enough. The vegetables were hard and sour; the biscuits were damp and mushy in the middle; the chicken tasted dry and tinny. I was sure it had sat under a heat lamp for at least two days. I wished I had stayed home and eaten a carrot-and-raisin salad or some pancakes or homemade soup.

He spoke to her about problems he was having with two employees. From their conversation, I inferred that he managed a department store in one of the San Antonio malls. I also inferred that he wanted to quit his job and work in Kerrville but hadn't yet found a position. I found myself hoping he never would because I thought if he didn't they might move back to San Antonio. He asked me about various stores in Kerrville, about whether stores downtown or stores in the two shopping centers seemed to do more business. I simply told him I really didn't know.

"You don't go to town much, do you?" she asked. While she spoke, he pointed to her half-eaten chicken breast. She nodded, and he slid the chicken off her plate onto his.

"About once a week," I said, reaching for the wine he had poured for me despite my protests. I needed something to wash down the gooey center of my biscuit. They had not offered water or tea.

I don't blame you," she said. "It's so peaceful out here. So quiet and private."

"Yes," I said. It was the perfect opportunity to mention the fence, and I didn't think he was ever going to. I could wait no longer. My palms had been sweating and my ears had been tingling all evening in anticipation of the confrontation. "I was wondering about the fence," I said after shuddering at the bitter taste of the wine.

He stopped chewing long enough to say, "I'm glad you brought it up. We need to talk about it."

I couldn't look right at him. I looked over his shoulder at the geometrical painting on the wall behind him. "It's none of my business, of course, but I really don't see the need."

"We're used to fenced yards," he said, shrugging. I could tell that he eyed my unfinished roll and chicken leg, but even he had better manners than to ask for them. "It's nice and private."

"I suppose so. But as your wife said, it's already very peaceful and private out here."

He glanced at her. "Right."

"And I must tell you that I have very little extra money."

"Money!" he said, and then he laughed. "Miss Scoggins, I wouldn't dream of asking you to pay anything. It's our fence; we'll pay for it. But I'm afraid," he said, suddenly leaning across the table. I thought he was going to grab my

roll and chicken leg.' Instead, he patted my hands where they were folded in front of my plate. "I'm afraid you'll have to donate the pecan tree." He leaned back in his chair and looked down at his plate.

I wanted to throw my roll at him. But instead I simply said, looking toward her and speaking as calmly as I could, "That won't be necessary. The surveyors made an error, you know."

She looked at me and smiled what I suppose she thought was a sympathetic smile. "I did ask them, Miss Scoggins."

"I really am sorry," he said. "But there was no error."

"That tree is mine." My ears burned.

"It's on our property, Miss Scoggins." He kept looking at his plate rather than at me. "And we'll have to take it out because of the fence."

"You will not take that tree!" I said. I stood up and would have pounded my fist against the table had I not been afraid of breaking its glass top. "You will not!" I turned and walked out, ignoring their calls for me to stay and discuss it.

I hardly slept at all that night. I tossed and turned, determined to discover some way of obstructing Darrell Greeley's scheme. The couple of times I did manage to doze off, I was awakened by some little noise or another. Then I lay there trembling, hearing something shuffling outside my

window. "It's just your imagination," I told myself, but I wasn't convinced. That Mexican knew I lived alone. I pulled the covers tightly around me, all the way up to my neck, and listened. The noises stopped for a time, but just as I felt assured, I heard them again. I occasionally glanced at the clock, sure that it wasn't working because its hands moved so slowly.

Finally, shuddering, I slid out of bed and crawled the short distance to my window. I raised just high enough to peek out. The full moon illuminated my redbud. The blossoms looked darker and more shrivelled than they had that morning, and there were fewer of them. I knew they would all be gone in a day or two.

I could see no one. But by then my adrenalin level was so high that it gave me the courage to go outside to make sure. With my robe tied tightly around me, I crept out the door and moved as stealthily as possible around my entire house. I was right: no one was there. I shook a branch of my redbud and watched several of the wrinkled blossoms drop off. They didn't flutter; they just dropped dully in a straight line to the ground.

Keyed up and wide awake, I thought a short walk might calm me. Wandering out to my small garden, I spooked a deer. She snorted twice, then ran. Her white tail was all I could see, and it looked like a detached object as it bobbed up and down in the moonlight. The deer had come, I knew, to eat the sweet green stalks and leaves of my spring

vegetables. Several people in the area put wire fences around their gardens to keep the deer out. Instead of keeping them away from food by fencing in my garden, I always supply them with food by scattering corn or maize along my north property line. This year, it slipped my mind until that night.

I walked to my small shed, filled a coffee can with maize, and scattered it along the back property line. Then I wandered out to my pecan tree. The surveyors' stake was propped loosely in the hole I had left when I first pulled it up. It was easy to remove, and I threw it as far as I could toward the Creeleys' house. I sat down.

The tree bark was hard. I knew that where I leaned against it, it would make red imprints across my back. When the tree and I were both much smaller, my mother used to laugh whenever I got ready for bed or a bath and she saw those imprints. She said that someday they would become permanent and I could join a circus as the world's one and only human tree.

My back hurt mildly where the bark pressed against it, but I didn't mind. I liked the hard, solid feeling of the tree supporting me, and the dull pain took my mind off the surveyors' stake and the Creeleys and the Mexican. I stayed there listening to the crickets, a distant owl, and the infrequent snort of a deer until sunrise.

I think I hardly knew that day had broken before the Mexican drove into the Creeleys' driveway in his dirty white

van. "You are okay, Miss Scoggins?" He accented the last syllable of my name rather than the first. I nodded, but I suppose he couldn't tell, because he walked toward me. I stood up and was about to hurry away, but he stopped several yards from me. "You are okay?"

After a night without sleep, I suppose I didn't really have my wits about me. Instead of answering him, I took two steps toward him and said, "You won't destroy it, will you?"

He shoved his hands in his pockets and frowned. "Destroy it, Miss Scoggins?"

I looked at his thick wrists, his broad forearms, his large, hard upper arms. I shuddered. "My pecan tree. You won't cut it down, will you?"

He smiled, his scar wrinkling. "I paint today."

"Fine. Good. Thank you." I hurried away.

I got almost no work done during the rest of the week. I tried, but I continued making stupid mistakes that cost me much wasted time and that frustrated me to the extent that by Friday I slammed the door to my sewing room, said a curse word, and determined not to look at another piece of material at least until Monday.

"This simply must stop," I said as I went to the kitchen to fix a carrot-and-raisin salad for lunch. "I simply cannot stand this much longer." Every morning all week I had found the stake placed back in its original spot on my

side of the tree. And every morning I had hurled it in a different direction.

On Thursday, I called Mr. Tellick for advice. He was shocked, as I knew he would be, and sympathetic. He talked to Darrell Creeley that night, but he called back with bad news. I could have the property surveyed again, he said, but it looked like Darrell Creeley was right. Mr. Tellick promised to support me as best he could if I wanted to go to court, but he was afraid I'd lose. He was a good man, but he was wrong. I was not about to lose that pecan tree.

It was also on Thursday that the Mexican finished painting. He had done an excellent job. Had Mr. Casner still been living there, I might have been pleased. As it was, I was discomfited because I couldn't help admiring something the Creeleys had done--though I certainly didn't like the bright yellow they had chosen.

I had purposefully avoided going outside or even being seen at a window whenever I saw either of them outside. But I had kept a careful watch. She went out daily to sit in the morning sun. About noon, she went inside and didn't come back out unless it was to drive off in her shiny black sports car. I was sure that when she stayed in she did nothing more than watch soap operas and nap and that when she left she simply went to wander around one of the shopping centers in town. I pitied her for leading such a dull life. But I was glad, too. I thought perhaps she would become bored enough to want to move back to San Antonio. I hoped

it would be before they got around to building the fence, but I feared that my hope was futile.

Thursday evening, the Mexican stayed late, and when Darrell Creeley came home the two of them walked the property line. They stopped frequently, Darrell Creeley pointing to the ground or up and down the line, the Mexican nodding. Then, on Friday, as I stood in the kitchen preparing my carrot-and-raisin salad and looking out the window, a lumber truck drove by.

I always enjoy peeling carrots: feeling how solid and cool they are against my palm, scraping slowly so as to remove a single full-length strip of peeling with each stroke, watching the strips drop into the sink, squirm beneath the running water, and slide down into the darkness of the disposal. But when the lumber truck drove by that day, I dropped a half-peeled carrot into the sink and ran to my living room window.

As I expected, the truck turned in at the Creeleys'. Two men got out, and they and the Mexican stood talking for several minutes before they started unloading the truck. As the two men unloaded, the Mexican carried the lumber to different spots along the property line. There were long, squared cedar posts and long cedar boards trimmed at the top so they were pointed. Darrell Creeley apparently intended to build a solid fence, a tall one that would certainly block anyone's view of his property and give him and his wife the privacy they said they wanted.

I watched until the men with the truck drove away. I had almost turned from the window to return to my salad when I saw the Mexican taking a chain saw from the back of his van. "Oh no you don't!" I said, my ears tingling, my heart suddenly pounding.

By the time I ran out to the tree, he was there. He bent over the saw, which was on the ground. He pushed down on it with one hand and gripped the rubber handle of the starter rope with the other. Without really thinking what I was doing, I grabbed his arm. It was as hard as the tree and slippery with sweat. "You promised," I shouted at him. "I asked you and you promised you wouldn't."

He straightened, frowning. I released his arm. "I said I painted that day, That is all."

"You can't. Please, you can't."

He shook his head slowly, looked away from me, then back. "Mr. Creeley he pays me." He shrugged. I could smell him, the sweat. And I could smell the gasoline of the saw. I shuddered.

"I'll pay you," I said. "If you don't do it, I'll pay you twice what he's paying."

He shoved his hands in his pockets and looked at the ground while he poked at the surveyors' stake with the toe of his dirty tennis shoe. "Mr. Creeley he has much work for me. I would like not to get fired. You can understand?" He looked at me, still frowning.

"Just for now," I said. "Just until he gets home."
Again I grabbed him, squeezing both of his hard arms in my hands and looking straight at him. "Please."

He looked away from me, looked back, smiled, frowned, smiled again. He shrugged. "Okay." When I released him, he picked up the saw and walked back to the van. I sat down and leaned against the tree.

I sat there all day, watching the Mexican work in Mr. Casner's front yard, watching for Gaynelle Creeley to come out of the house, watching the road for Darrell Creeley's arrival. The Mexican started by stepping off a wide half circle from the edge of the driveway out into the yard and back to the driveway farther toward the road. As he walked the arch, he occasionally stopped to drive a short wooden stake into the ground. I wondered if they intended to build a fence there too, but I couldn't imagine a purpose for one. When he had finished, he retrieved a large pick from his van and, using its wide, flat head, began digging a shallow trench that followed the pattern marked off by the stakes. I called to him several times, but either he didn't hear me or he just flat ignored me.

Mr. Casner had worked so hard to plant that front section of carpet grass, and he had been so proud of it and cared for it so lovingly that I could hardly stand to see it defaced. Having confronted the Mexican once, I felt

capable of confronting him again. Had it not been for my concern for the tree, I would have marched right over there and demanded that he stop.

Oddly enough, I began to feel hungry late in the day. I always eat light meals, and many days, when I'm absorbed in my work, I skip lunch without ever feeling a twinge of hunger. That day, I certainly had enough on my mind to distract me from my stomach. Nevertheless, I did get hungry and thus became even more anxious about Darrell Creeley's arrival. As the late afternoon wore on, I began watching the road more steadily and intently, though I knew it did no more good than standing with my iron in my hand waiting for it to warm up.

Because of the heat, there was very little activity in the wooded area across the road. On cooler days, it is not unusual to see squirrels chattering away as they bound from one limb to another, rabbits hopping to the edge of the road and standing absolutely still for several minutes while their long ears stick straight up and their noses twitch as they sniff the air, birds flitting in and out of the cedars, and even deer walking casually into plain sight and either crossing the road or turning back and trotting into the cover of the woods. All I saw that day was one armadillo rummaging through last year's fallen leaves searching for food, and a few mockingbirds that lit momentarily on one of the limbs that stuck out toward the road. The cedar limbs looked dry and brittle.

It must have been about six when Darrell Creeley got home. The Mexican had stopped working about half an hour earlier and sat in his van waiting. When the Volkswagon turned into the long dirt driveway, he got out and leaned against his van. I stood up. After Darrell Creeley parked, the two of them talked only briefly, the Mexican pointing toward me. Darrell Creeley shook his head, then walked over. The Mexican followed him. Darrell Creeley took off his seersucker jacket, slung it over his shoulder, and stared at me, his head slightly tilted. He sighed deeply. The Mexican stood frowning, his hands in his pockets.

I didn't like the silence but was determined to remain calm and casual. If there was to be a fight, he would have to start it. "Awful hot day," I said. He just stared. "It's none of my business, Mr. Creeley, but that young man has worked hard today. You should let him go home."

"You're right," he finally said, loosening his tie and unbuttoning his top button. Where his collar had been tight, it left a red ring in the flabby flesh of his neck. "So won't you please tend to your business and let me tend to mine?"

I stepped backwards and leaned against the tree. "That's what I'm doing."

"Miss Scoggins." He stepped toward me, speaking quietly. "It's dead anyway."

"It's not dead," I said. "It'll come back next year."

His voice became a little louder, a little firmer.

"It's on my property."

"That's a mistake."

"Do you have plats? Do you have surveyors' confirmation?"

"I don't need them."

"I have them, Miss Scoggins." He drew the back of his hand across his sweaty forehead.

"I'll go to court if I have to," I said.

"That's costly."

"For you too."

"And you'll only publicly embarrass yourself."

"I think not."

He looked at the ground for several seconds, then back at me. "What would you do if I went and got the chain saw right now?"

"I'd stand in your way." My hands were at my sides, and I clutched the tree bark.

"And if I came at you with it?"

"I suppose I'd move." I gripped the bark even tighter. "But as soon as you set the blade against the tree I'd hit you, and I'd pull your hair, and I'd claw your neck."

"There are two of us," he said, nodding back toward the Mexican.

"I can see that."

Again, he looked at the ground. Then he shook his head, turned from me, and said to the Mexican, "Build around

it." As he walked away, he said, without turning back, "But it is dead."

"It's been a bad spring," I yelled after him. "It'll come back next year."

"Right," he said.

The tips of my ears burned, my legs trembled, and I suddenly felt nauseated. I eased myself down and sat for a moment with my eyes closed.

"You are okay?" the Mexican asked.

I looked up at him. "I'm fine. Just hungry, I think." He nodded, smiled, turned to leave. "Wait," I said, and when he turned back, "The yard. Why are you destroying that fine yard?"

"Next week, Mr. Creeley paves the driveway. He makes a place to turn around."

"Through the yard!"

He shrugged. "He does not like backing so far."

I leaned my head against the tree, felt its bark pressing against my scalp. He stood watching me, as if waiting for my permission to go. "It's not dead," I said. "You don't think it's dead, do you?"

His eyes followed its forty or so feet from trunk to top. He stared at its highest branches. "Yes. It is dead." Without looking again at me, he turned and left.

When I felt stronger, I went home to finish preparing my carrot-and-raisin salad. The carrot I had dropped in the sink had dried out, its narrow end curling slightly, its

thick end beginning to split down the middle. I shoved it down the disposal and carried my box of raisins to the living room. As I sat on the couch eating raisins, I gazed out the window.

The dry, dull green trees looked even duller in the grayness of evening. I hoped that next spring would be milder, would treat them better. The Creeleys' bright yellow house seemed almost to shine through the dimness. It irritated me because, in contrast, the surrounding landscape seemed entirely to lose what little color had remained in spite of the dryness and heat. At least the fence would block my view of their house; I was grateful for that. But I imagined what my parents and the Casners would think if they could know that someone was building a barrier between their properties. I sighed, hoping Darrell Creeley wouldn't find the job he wanted, hoping they would move back to San Antonio, hoping someone nice would move in, someone who would repaint the house, tear down the fence, and meet me for a chat under my pecan tree once or twice a week. My poor pecan tree looked bare, its branches brittle, but I hoped--no, I knew--it would do better next spring. I had assured it the chance. I had fought Darrell Creeley and won.

To celebrate my victory, I did laundry, folding each towel twice and closing my eyes as my fingertips soaked up the warmth of the thick, soft folds.

THE OTHER SIDE OF MOUNT SAM

Austin Calvert sits at his bedroom window staring out into the ashen pre-dawn haze. His arms are folded on the sill, his chin resting on his hands. Behind him, his wife, Marta Rae, sleeps on their sway-backed bed. Her face is buried in her pillow, and she breathes in muffled gasps. The only other sounds are the monotonous ticking of their portable electric alarm clock and the incessant buzzing and whirring of the small electric fan that sits on the dresser and pushes a trickle of warm air toward the bed.

A fly lands on Austin's hand, just in front of his chin. He has to cross his eyes to see it almost directly under his nose. It slowly circles the wart on his hand, then creeps down his smallest finger, launches into the air, and bumps against the smoke-stained window pane. The drop of sweat on his forehead feels like another fly as it oozes between his eyebrows and onto his nose. He grits his teeth, counts the ticks of the clock until the drop reaches the end of his nose. Then he swipes at it with his palm, closes his eyes, presses the heels of his hands against his temples.

The bed springs moan. He turns and sees Marta Rae sitting halfway up, leaning back on her elbows. She squints at him. "Still dark, Auz."

He turns back toward the window. "I hate that mountain." His deep voice momentarily smothers the other sounds, but the ticking, whirring, and buzzing soon penetrate it, like tenacious mosquitoes squeezing through insect netting.

"So don't look at it."

"I always look at it."

"Come on back to bed," Marta Rae says. He hears her pat the bed, knows she is patting the damp indentation where he lay sweating half an hour earlier.

He sighs, turns back toward her, folds his hands behind his head. "Too hot."

She pushes some loose strands of her ash-blonde hair away from her sweaty forehead. "For October, anyway." The bed springs groan as she swings her feet off the bed and stands up.

"Too hot," he says, watching her naked body as she stumbles sleepily toward the battered antique dresser. "Period." Her breasts are lean, but not firm: small, thin breasts that droop as lifelessly as her straight, stringy hair. Still, they call attention to themselves because they create the only semblance of curves on her disproportionate body. Her trunk is long and thin, and there is little change in shape to mark the beginning of her hips and buttocks, which look much too low because of the shortness of her legs and the length of her upper body.

Yawning, she clicks off the fan, shrugs. "It don't do any good."

"Too damn hot."

"We've had worse," she says, listlessly pulling a brush through her knotted hair. The brush catches. She tugs, curses, pitches it down. It bounces once, then drops down behind the dresser. "Come on, Auz. Tell me." She reaches into one dresser drawer through the gap where another one is missing.

"Always too damn hot," he says. "Unless it's too damn cold. And that goddamn mountain." He shrugs. "I don't know."

Underwear in hand, she walks to the bathroom door, pauses. "Shower with me?"

"You go ahead on." He turns back to the window. When he hears the scrape of the metal shower curtain hooks against the rod, he slightly raises his voice. "Marta Rae." He waits until he thinks she's at the door again. "You ever think about leavin'?"

She snorts. "Which hour of which day?"

"Leavin' me?"

"Not you so much."

He shrugs. "Easy on the water. We'll be dry soon."

Dim light has gradually begun to spread over the flat landscape between the house and the mountain fifteen miles northwest. Mount Sam everyone calls it, though it was named Mount Salino Amadeo Mendosa by the Mexicans over a hundred

and fifty years ago. Like Marta Rae's breasts, it is significant only because of its contrast with the flatness that surrounds it. There is a moment, Austin thinks, a very brief moment every morning when it seems almost animate, seems to live and breathe. At night, it is nothing more than a darker blob against the darkness. But at that moment when the sun is just getting ready to rise above the horizon, when Mount Sam is gray rather than black, it seems to be a giant, a monster of some sort just taking shape, just on the verge of bursting into life, lunging forward, shaking and shattering the earth where it treads. The illusion passes quickly. The sun rises. Mount Sam is nothing more than a reddish-brown, barren mound of rock and dirt, the same reddish-brown, barren mound of rock and dirt that Austin stares at every morning, that he can't avoid seeing all day, and that turns into the same dark blob every night.

Several dark shapes move among the scrub brush a hundred yards or so beyond the house. Javelina, he thinks, rooting for something to eat. Around the corner from the window, the old pump wheezes and gasps as it struggles to build and maintain some pressure. In the bathroom, the shower hisses with sporadic force. Marta Rae alternately hums a medley of country-and-western songs and curses the old pump. A fly buzzes past Austin's ear, circles his head twice, lands on his cheek, and inches sluggishly toward the corner of his mouth. He swats at it, hears it buzz away, thump against the window, and buzz off toward the bed. The

newly risen sun now exposes Mount Sam's face, pock marked by shadowy crevices, in all its reddish-brown dullness. Austin closes his eyes, massages his temples with his finger tips.

His forefinger-hooked through the bent wire facing of the little electric fan, Austin saunters toward his gas station fifty yards from the house. He drags his heels, occasionally glances back to see the small billows of dust they create. There is no wind, so the dust rises a few inches from the ground, seems to hang motionlessly for several seconds, and then drifts straight back down. He rubs his stomach with his free hand, wishes the coffee had been fresh this morning. Marta Rae never brews fresh coffee if there's some left over from the day before. He glances at the dust his heels make, wishes for rain, thinks of the slippery, thick mud that would stick to his boot heels and make them heavy. He hasn't seen such mud for months, though Marta Rae's reheated coffee is a close second. He'd like to throw it up but knows it would never get past the pieces of stale cinnamon roll that still seem to be stuck about halfway down his throat.

Cal Davis's three-quarter-ton Ford is parked by the gas pumps. Cal slumps behind the wheel, his hat pulled down over his eyes. Austin steps across to the front of the truck, slams his fist against the hood, chuckles when Cal's

head jerks up and thumps against the gun rack. As he steps back across the dusty, oil spotted driveway, he hears Cal open the truck door. It creaks, then makes a loud crunching sound, and he remembers how it got caved in last February when he and Cal were trying to pull Rusty Dane out of a mud hole at midnight twenty miles from the nearest house. The narrow dirt road they were on was slick from the freezing rain, and the nearly new Ford had slid against a mesquite. Even worse, they had gotten stuck too, couldn't get anybody on the CB, and had to sit out the bitter night in the truck cab.

He unlocks the station door, hears Cal slam the truck door, curse, slam it again. "Mighty early, Cal," he says over his shoulder as he sets the fan by the cash register and plugs it in.

Cal steps inside, plops into the rusty metal folding chair by the door. He pants from the heat and from his fatness. "Old man Tindall wants me to pick up some things in Alpine." Austin sits behind his wooden desk, its top marred by knife-etched names and phone numbers, water marks, greasy fingerprints, and, along the edges, cigarette burns. He turns the fan so it blows on him. Cal lights a cigarette, clenches it between his teeth as he talks. "You ever think any more about carryin' feed and wire and such?"

Austin, too, lights a cigarette. "Yeah," he says, and he tilts his head back to blow smoke toward the crack in the yellowed ceiling plaster. "It's too much trouble."

"Trouble!" Cal coughs, a deep, heavy, congested cough. When the cough subsides, he spits through the doorway. "Hell, Auz, don't you know the trouble it is to have to drive all the way to Van Horn or Marfa or Alpine for every damn little thing you need?"

Austin blows another stream of smoke toward the ceiling. He picks up the wire-mesh fly swatter from his desk, fans himself with it. "It ain't my problem."

"It's everybody's problem."

"I run a gas station, Cal, not a ranch. It ain't my problem."

"But, damn it, Auz, you're the solution."

"Bullshit." He stands up, stretches. "You got any idea how much you owe me?"

Cal drags on his cigarette. "Not me. Old man Tindall pays my way." Smoke drifts out of his nose and mouth as he talks. "Don't he pay his bills?" He coughs, spits, grinds his cigarette out with his boot heel on the cement floor.

"Only when he pleases." Austin steps to the old, red metal cooler that says COCA COLA in big white letters across the front. "You and him and everybody else gotta have a water pump replaced today, or new belts in an hour, or a flat fixed yesterday." He pulls the cooler's cover open, reaches in for two Lone Stars, hands one to Cal. They pull their ring tabs at the same time, and the cans hiss in unison. He drains half of his in a single gulp. Then, extending his arm and tilting the can at Cal, he says, "And

that ain't all. You and Rusty and Creeper--hell, everybody comes around when they want to cool off or warm up or just plain hide out from workin'. Ya'll drink my beer when you're hot and my coffee when you're cold, and you never pay for a damn thing. You get in the way. You clutter up the place. You want everything done right now, and then you want me to do half your work for you. Pull some damn fool out of the mud in the freezin' rain, or some other damn fool out of the gully he thought his truck would make. Or haul hay out from town or cattle all over the country 'cause you're short handed or just too damn lazy to do it yourselves."

He stops to gulp down the rest of his beer. When he pitches the empty at the trash can next to Cal, it hits the rim and bounces under Cal's chair. He curses, bends down to retrieve it. "Who the hell do you think cleans up around here?" he says, straightening and pointing to Cal's flattened Marlboro butt on the floor. Cal shakes his head, grunts as he bends to pick it up. "Oh hell," Austin says, kicking it out from under Cal's hand.

"Marta Rae must've used left over coffee this mornin'," Cal chuckles.

"It ain't the coffee." Austin steps to the door, leans against its frame. Listening to the fan buzz and whir, listening to Cal wheeze, feeling the sweat trickle down his sides until it's absorbed by a fold of his loose work shirt, he crushes the beer can in his hand and looks

off toward Mount Sam. Cal coughs and Austin steps aside so he can spit. When he leans back against the door frame, he says, "You want to die out here, Cal?"

"Dyin's dyin'. I figure one place is as good as another."

Austin throws his crushed can across the driveway and into the Ford's bed. "You know what's past that damn mountain?"

Cal grunts. "Don't talk to me about Mount Sam. That sumbitch is evil."

"You're a fool, Cal. But I ain't talkin' about Mount Sam. I'm talkin' about what's on the other side of it."

"Just more of what's on this side, far as I've ever seen."

Austin smiles faintly. "Interstate Ten, Cal. Then a clear shot to New Mexico, Arizona, and California."

"So?"

Austin shrugs, steps back inside. "You want another beer?"

He leans in the doorway, his shirt unbuttoned, his sleeves rolled up, his hands stuck in the pockets of his jeans. Inside, the fan buzzes and whirs, and Cal's snoring sounds like the wheezy gasps of the old pump over by the house. A slight breeze has picked up, but it blows only hot. About halfway between the station and Mount Sam, six

or seven buzzards make smaller and smaller circles in the air. Probably a longhorn, he thinks, down from the heat.

Wearing cut off blue jeans and a sleeveless blouse with its tails tied above her navel, Marta Rae rounds the corner of the station. "You usin' the fan?"

"Go ahead," he says, nodding back toward it. "It don't do no good anyway." As she passes him, her sweaty arm touches his, slides across it. Her perfume smells like a salad of ripe fruits, and overlaying it is the smell of sweat.

"Feelin' any better?" she says as she unplugs the fan.

"Than what?"

"I figured not. I guess Cal's goin' after supplies again," she says, glancing at him where he snores.

"I guess."

"Where's Tink?" She brushes his arm again when she steps outside.

He shrugs. "He ain't here." The breeze blows her strong smell straight to him. "Got any plans?" He smiles and raises his eyebrows.

She sighs, wipes a few strands of her hair away from her forehead. "Aren't you hot enough already?"

Again, he shrugs. "Yeah. I guess I am."

"I tell you, Auz, I don't know why you keep him on. Tink Eggart hasn't done an honest day's work in his life."

"His old man owes me." He lights a cigarette. "It's how he pays."

"Damn poor pay if you ask me." She holds out her hand.

"I didn't," he says, passing her the cigarette and then lighting another one.

As she walks away, she says, "You comin' over for lunch later?" He gives no answer, nor does she wait for one.

Watching the buzzards, he smokes the cigarette slowly. When it has burned all the way down to the filter, he drops it among the nine or ten other butts around his feet and grinds it out with his boot toe. He wanders back inside, plops into the chair behind his desk. One fly crawls around on the side of the cash register, another over its keys. Very slowly, he picks up the swatter. He inches it toward the side of the register, and when it is about six inches away he suddenly slams it against the fly. The fly on the keys buzzes away, lands on the rim of one of Cal's empty beer cans. The dead fly sticks to the side of the register.

He recognizes the sound of Rusty Dane's Jeep. It is a steady, high pitched whine, interrupted every fifteen seconds or so by a second of silence and then a backfire. He has worked on the Jeep at least six times within the last month, sixty times within the last year. He has told Rusty to junk it, or at least to have the engine rebuilt or replaced. He has sworn he'll never work on it again. But he always does.

Rusty waits until the last second to jam on his brakes. The tires squeal against the concrete as the Jeep slides to a stop right in front of the door. Rusty is inside, keys in

hand, before the old dented, rust-spotted Jeep quits coughing and sputtering, backfires, and dies. Nolan Clare sits on the passenger's side, grinning his characteristic toothless grin.

"Damn thing's losin' a quart of oil a day," Rusty says, kicking Cal's foot as he walks past him. Cal yelps, starts awake, immediately begins coughing. Rusty stands in front of Austin's desk, takes off his straw cowboy hat, wipes his forearm across his forehead. "What d'you reckon's wrong with it?"

Austin fans himself with the fly swatter. "I'd say it's got a leak."

"Damn, why didn't I think of that!" Rusty slaps his forehead with his palm and turns to the cooler. "Now I know why we pay you."

"You don't," Austin says. Tilting the chair on its back legs, he crosses his ankles on the desk top.

Rusty pulls a Lone Star from the cooler, leans toward the door, tosses the can to Nolan. "Reckon we'll be here a while. Come on in, if you can get them damned ol' rheumatic legs of yours workin'." He gets a beer for himself, shoves the cooler lid closed, and sits on it. "How long you figure it'll take, Auz?"

"No time."

Just as Nolan is limping through the door, Cal quits coughing, turns, and spits. "Goddamn!" Nolan says. He pulls a red bandana from his back pocket, wipes the spit off

the crotch of his jeans. Then he limps over and sits on the floor, leaning against the candy machine that has no candy in it.

"No hurry today," Rusty says. "The longer you take, the less I gotta work in this damn heat."

"Cold front comin'," Nolan says as he unfolds the top of a crumpled pouch of Red Man. "'Fore the day's out you'll be wishin' you was hot." He stuffs a wad of tobacco into his mouth, begins gumming it. "Rain, too. My ol' legs ain't never lied to me yet."

"That's 'cause you do enough lyin' for the both of them," Rusty says. He chuckles and slaps Cal on the back. Cal chuckles too, then coughs. "So what d'you think, Auz? Couple hours?"

Austin lights a cigarette, flips his wooden match toward the trash can. "I ain't workin' today."

"Fine by me. But Dolby'll be pissed. He wants me and Nolan to do some fence work over to the east section. Can't get out there without my Jeep."

"It ain't my problem."

Rusty shrugs. "Maybe Tink'll do it."

"Maybe. But you'll have to find him first."

"He's comin'," says Nolan after spitting a mouthful of tobacco juice into the Lone Star can he has already emptied. "We seen him on his way, but every time he sees a jackrabbit or a armadillo he's gotta try to run it down with his damned ol' dirt bike." He motions to Rusty for another beer.

Rusty hops off the cooler to get him one. "Say, Cal," Nolan says. "I saw old man Tindall this mornin' too. Said he was bringin' some flats in. Prob'ly be here any time now."

Cal jumps to his feet. "You old fart, why didn't you tell me before?"

Nolan grins. "Why didn't you look before you spit?"

"You old fart!" Cal jerks open the cooler lid, grabs two beers, and runs out to his truck. He slams the door three times before it catches. The tires squeal as he pulls out of the driveway and onto the road.

Rusty and Nolan laugh. "I've never seen that son-of-a-bitch move so fast," says Nolan. He spits into his can.

"I have," Rusty chuckles, taking the chair Cal left empty. "That night we was all coyote huntin' over to the base of Mount Sam. 'Member how Cal was crawlin' around lookin' for tracks? And then he come face to face with a big ol' javelina boar. Hot damn, didn't he haul ass then!"

Tobacco juice dribbles out of the creased corners of Nolan's toothless mouth as he guffaws. Finally, he controls his laughter enough to say, "You know, I don't believe he's gone anywhere near Mount Sam since then. He says that damned ol' boar called his name before it come chargin' after him. Swears that mountain's got some kinda evil magic in it." He wipes his mouth on his sleeve, slaps his knee, laughs more brown juice out the corners of his mouth.

Austin swats at a fly on his boot toe, misses. "That mountain ain't got no magic in it." He lifts his feet from the desk, lets the chair fall forward onto its front legs. "Except maybe what's on the other side of it." He walks to the door and stops to look toward Mount Sam.

"So what's keepin' you?" says Rusty. "This ain't the first time I've heard you makin' noises like you wanted to leave." He gets a beer and hands it to Austin.

Austin shoves his free hand in his pocket, leans against the door frame, sips his beer. "Nothin's keepin' me, I guess."

"Hell, Auz," says Nolan. "You know damn well what's keepin' you. What you gonna do anywhere else?"

"Somethin'."

"Bullshit."

"You're an old man, Nolan."

"What the hell's that got to do with it?"

"You ever been anywhere else?"

"Been right here all my life, and I'm damn proud of it."

"And what do you have to show for all that pride?"

"Same damn thing I'd have to show for havin' been anywhere else."

Austin turns toward him. "You're a fool, Nolan."

"If I am--" He pauses to spit and wipe his mouth.

"If I am, then so are a lot of other damn good people around here. Your daddy among 'em, God rest his soul." He

looks down at his spit can, shakes his head. "He'd sure hate to hear you talkin' about leavin'."

Austin grunts. "He was a fool like you."

"Now hold on," Nolan says, pointing a thick, knobby finger at him. "Your daddy was a good man."

"Good, maybe. But stupid. Hell, comin' out here because he thought this was God's country. That's what he used to call it. Figurin' he could really help folks out here by buildin' them the only service station within thirty or forty miles. And figurin' he could build himself a great business. Hell, Nolan, look around." He turns a complete circle, his arm outstretched. He gulps the rest of his beer and slams the empty into the trash can. Then he wanders out and leans on the premium pump.

The breeze is a little stronger now, out of the north and not quite so warm as earlier. Far off to the north, a thunderhead appears to be building over Boracho Peak. Back toward Mount Sam, two buzzards still circle, the others probably on the ground pecking at the swollen carcass. He presses his fingers against his temples.

"I believe it's coolin' off," says Rusty, walking up behind him and slapping his shoulder.

He stares off toward Mount Sam. "How old are you, Rusty?"

"Twenty-nine."

"I got damn near ten years on you."

"Seems like you'd have learned how to keep beer cold by now," Rusty chuckles, handing him a fresh one and pulling the tab on his own.

"Cooler overheats," Austin says. "Then it just up and quits." He finally faces Rusty. "When you worked in Colorado, what was it like?"

Rusty studies the top of his beer can, runs his finger around its rim. "About the same as here, I guess. A little colder for a little longer. You goin'?" Austin shrugs. Rusty shrugs. Then they both walk back into the office.

"Looks like you're right, Nolan," Austin says, scuffing his boot heels as he walks back inside. "Storm's buildin' to the north."

"Here comes Tindall," says Rusty, stopping in the doorway behind Austin. "Looks like he's got Tink with him."

When Tindall pulls in, he parks his dark brown Wagoneer next to Rusty's Jeep. Only two weeks old, the Wagoneer is one of the few vehicles in the county that is not yet dented, scratched, faded, or rusted, but it is covered with a thick layer of dust.

Tall, skinny, and clumsy looking, Tink is the first one in the door. He smiles sheepishly at Austin, wipes a streak of blood off his forehead. Both his arms are scratched and bruised, and his tee-shirt is torn at one shoulder. "I had a little wreck," he says, still smiling.

Tindall steps in behind him. "Found him walkin'." Seems that damned motorcycle of his had a little run-in

with a stubborn rock." He chuckles and reaches into the cooler for a Lone Star.

"You need doctorin'?" Austin asks.

"No sir. Just a few scratches."

"Then get the hell out of here."

"Hold on," says Rusty. "Tink, if you're feelin' okay, my ol' Jeep needs a little work. Got a bad oil leak."

"I don't know," says Tink. He looks at Austin. "You usually do them things."

Austin is back at his desk, his feet propped up. "I ain't workin' today."

"Hell you ain't," Tindall says. "I got five flats need fixin', and Tink ain't patched one yet that's lasted over a week."

"Tires'll keep," Austin says. "I ain't workin' today."

"I guess I could try." Tink looks at his feet, shuffles them. "To fix the Jeep, I mean. It's just I ain't real good at them kind of things."

Nolan bares his gums with a wide smile. "You ain't real good at much of nothin'. If you was, you'd be out helpin' your daddy with some real work."

Austin glances at Nolan, then at Tink. He gets up and steps around the desk. "Tink, that Jeep work's between you and Rusty. It's your time, not mine."

"What d'you mean?"

"I mean," he says, striding out the door, "I told you to get the hell out of here."

"You can't fire me," Tink calls after him. "My old man owes you money."

"Hell with your old man," he calls back as he rounds the corner of the station.

When he walks into the house, Marta Rae is lying on the couch watching television. She has stripped to her panties and bra. Her head is propped on the hard, threadbare arm of the couch, and she uses her left hand as a cushion between the two. Her right arm dangles limply off the couch. Her right leg slants off the couch, her heel resting on the stained wooden floor, and her left leg slants up, that heel on top of the backrest.

"Want some lunch?" she says. She doesn't look at him, but continues staring at the TV. The picture is distorted by black and white "snow," and the sound crackles with static. "There's some bologna in the fridge. We're out of bread." With her right hand, she feels around on the floor until she finds her Salems. She shakes one halfway out of the package, clamps it between her lips to pull it the rest of the way out, and drops the package back onto the floor. Then she feels around for the matches and ashtray, sets the ashtray on her stomach, and lights the cigarette.

Austin stands just inside the door. He lights a cigarette too. "I fired Tink."

"Good."

"Won't get nothin' out of his old man now."

"What's new about that?"

He shrugs and walks to the kitchen for a beer. When he returns to the living room, he sits on the floor next to the fan, which is turned off. "I've been thinkin', Marta Rae." He leans forward, stubs his cigarette out in the ash-tray on her stomach. "Where would you rather be?" She shrugs, staring at the TV. "Come on. Where?" She shrugs again. He sips his beer, focuses on the fly exploring the TV screen. Then he glances back at her. "Why the hell don't you do somethin'?"

"I am doin' somethin'."

"Yeah," he says, standing up. "So am I." He walks into the bedroom, pulls a small canvas suitcase out of the closet, and stuffs a couple of shirts, a pair of jeans, and some underwear inside it. Before he leaves the room, he pauses by the window to look off toward Mount Sam. Gritting his teeth, he walks into the living room and past Marta Rae.

"Where you goin'?" she says. He pushes open the screen door. "You comin' back?" He lets the door slam behind him and strides toward the station.

He says nothing to the men at the station, but simply rings open the cash register and counts the money inside: fifty-eight dollars and thirty-three cents. He drops the change into his pocket and slips a ten, two fives, and five ones into his wallet. He hands the rest to Nolan. "You're the only son-of-a-bitch I trust around here," he says, half

smiling. "Take this over to Marta Rae before you leave, okay?"

Nolan spits into his can. "What the hell you doin'?"

"I'm gettin' past that damn mountain. Just as far as I can get."

"Don't be stupid," says Nolan. "You ain't got nothin' past that mountain."

"That ain't no less than I got right here." Austin nods to Rusty, Tink, and Tindall as he steps by them and out the door. They nod but say nothing.

He drives the thirteen miles to Highway 90 slowly, listening to a country-and-western station on the radio. He occasionally glances off to the east at the hazy outline of the Davis Mountains or back to the northwest at the clearly visible reddish-brown hulk of Mount Sam. When he turns north on Highway 90, he drives even slower, and he more frequently looks out the passenger side window at Mount Sam. Though the angle from which he views the mountain gradually shifts, he feels as if he is parked, so constant are the flat, brushy landscape and the grim, lifeless face of Mount Sam. But as he nears the county line, he notices that the shadowy pock marks of the mountain's face are shifting. He smiles.

When he can no longer see Mount Sam, when it is behind him, he speeds up, watches the Van Horn Mountains as they

seem to pass by off to the west and the Wylie Mountains as they seem to approach from the northeast. He feels hungry, remembers that he hasn't eaten since breakfast and Marta Rae's warmed over coffee.

Just beyond the intersection of Highway 90 and Interstate 10, he turns off into the Dairy Queen parking lot in Van Horn. He steps out of his truck, stretches. The north wind is even stronger now, and it is mild, not hot. The sky has become overcast, and not far to the north wide gray streaks of rain seem to connect the earth and sky. Back to the southeast, he sees the darkened shapes of the Wylie Mountains, and miles beyond them is the massive shape of Mount Sam. It looks gray under the darkened sky. It is the same gray that he sees every morning just before sunrise, the same vague gray that seems ready to take on a living shape, step forward, and shatter the flat landscape all around it. He sucks in a deep breath, smiles.

Inside, the Dairy Queen is empty but for the waitress and one old man who sleeps in a corner booth. Austin orders a cheeseburger and a chocolate milkshake. He chooses a booth next to the window and looks out at Mount Sam while he waits for his order. The mountain's illusion has not passed as it does so quickly on the other side in the morning. It remains that mysterious gray that seems to capture it somewhere between lifelessness and animation.

The waitress, a girl of eighteen or so who smells like French fries dowsed in Emeraude, sets his cheeseburger and shake in front of him. Her jeans are so tight that it looks as if she painted them on, and he watches her slim waist and rounded butt as she walks back toward the counter.

A gust of wind blows the top off the aluminum trash can just outside the window. Several fat drops of rain splatter against the glass next to him as the trash can lid clatters metallically against the sidewalk. He touches the window, feels that it is cool, watches the raindrops drip down it and wash away the thick film of dust that has probably gathered there for the past eight months. He eats slowly, alternately looking out toward gray Mount Sam and back toward the waitress. Her long black hair dangles around her face and reflects the lights above her as she leans on the counter flipping through a magazine. The old man in the corner booth snores loudly.

When he is finished eating, he calls to the girl for some coffee, and when she sets it down he smiles at her. "You look bored over there." She shrugs. "Join me?" She shrugs again but slides into the seat across from him. He is still smiling. "You out of school?"

"Last May," she says, fingering the napkin holder.

"Married?"

She shakes her head, glances away from the napkin holder and up at him. "You have a reason for asking?"

He chuckles, shrugs. "You like livin' around here?"

"Not especially." Her fingers move from the napkin holder to the glass sugar canister and then to the salt shaker. The wind rattles the window, and the rain beats at it harder and steadier than at first.

"Me neither. When I was your age, I always figured I'd go to New Mexico some day. Or maybe California." He leans against the wall, his back to the window, his legs stretched out in the booth seat. His coffee smells fresh, tastes good as he sips it. "Now I'm goin'. I'm finally goin'." She taps a little salt onto the table, pushes it into a pile, and then flattens the pile with her fingertip. "You ever want to go somewhere else?" he says.

She shrugs. "What for?"

This time he shrugs. "Somethin' different. A change."

Again she pushes the salt into a little pile, again flattens it. "I guess working in a Dairy Queen here is about the same as working in one anywhere else."

He reaches across and pats her hand. "Listen, it don't have to be a Dairy Queen."

"Yeah," she says, fingering the salt. "I guess it could be Burger King or Wendy's or something."

The door opens, letting in a rush of cool wind and three men in dripping clothes. "Damn, it's wet," says the first man in. "And gettin' cold. Glenda, get over here, gal, and get us some coffee."

"Speaking of working," she says, and she slides out of the booth.

He sits up straight, lights a cigarette, leans on his elbows against the table, stares down into his half-empty coffee cup. The wind blows hard and steadily, whistling slightly around the corner of the building. A clap of thunder arouses the old man in the corner booth. He coughs, clears his throat, coughs some more, and finally hollers at Glenda for more coffee. The three men sit in a booth across the room, praising the rain because it is so badly needed and because it keeps them from work. They curse the developing cold. Probably the same way they cursed the heat this morning, Austin thinks. The rain beats at the window incessantly, creates a tinny drone as it pours into the lidless trash can outside. He sips his coffee, finds it cold.

Finally, he looks out the window. In the darkness of the stormy sky, and through the almost solid sheets of rain, Mount Sam looks black, nothing more than a darker blob against the darkness. He squints through the window and across the road at the sign that points the way to Interstate 10 and El Paso. Beneath it, another sign identifies Highway 90. Again, he squints back toward the lifeless blob that is Mount Sam. He presses his fingertips against his temples, closes his eyes.

DOING GOOD

Toke Dodson hadn't felt so bad since the last bash back at Helling Headquarters down on Brunt Street in Houston. That was over seven months ago, right before he married Kristina and moved to Goliad, and it had lasted almost four days. As he neared the stairs to his apartment, he wondered how long he and Stinger had been out this time. Long enough for Kristina to be pissed, that was for sure.

At the bottom of the stairs, he lifted a shaky hand to his forehead to shade his eyes from the sun that slanted down over the top of the building. His eyes burned, worse than that time he had watched Kristina's old man welding in the shop out on Bell Street. He had been waiting for Kristina to get off work, and that son-of-a-bitch Red Morris didn't tell him he could go blind watching. It didn't hurt at first, and he hadn't watched long, but by the time he and Kristina got home his eyes burned like he had grains of hot sand under his eyelids. Kristina made him keep little slices of potato on his eyes all night. He felt like a damn fool, but it worked.

That was the thing about Kristina: she knew a lot of stuff. Not like Candy and Sal, back at Helling Headquarters, who only knew how to eat and drink and screw.

He lit a Marlboro, but only got the first drag half-inhaled before he started coughing so hard he thought he'd cough his throat bloody. He flipped the cigarette into the tiny yard that was supposed to make apartment living seem more like living in your own place. A lot of good it did. It was no bigger than the bed of a cattle truck, and it smelled just as bad. Rusty, the downstairs neighbors' dog, always crapped in it.

Toke had driven a cattle truck, a small one, when he and Kristina were first married, after Red Morris had said Hell no you can't work for me, and before Kristina had got him the job down at Tino's Meat Market. He drove it for old man Cassidy who had a place over near Fannin. Cassidy wasn't really a rancher, but he did have a few cattle and his own 1951 dump truck he'd converted into a cattle truck. He was always trading cows for a bull, a bull for cows, something. He'd even got the truck in a trade. After spending long days and nights in that unheated, shit-smelling truck, driving way over to Stephenville or out to Marathon, or once even all the way up to Wichita, Kansas, Toke told old man Cassidy to shove his job. Kristina had been pissed.

When he told her he'd quit, she tilted her head to the side and squinted her eyes up real tight, like she always did when she was mad. "It stinks," he had said. "The cows stink. The truck stinks. Even old man Cassidy stinks." Kristina had stomped to the bedroom. "I'll get another

job," he had said. "A better one." She locked the bedroom door. But the next day she got over it, went out and found him that job at Tino's.

She'd get over it this time, too. She'd be pissed, but she'd get over it. He stood at the bottom of the stairs, wondering whether he or Rusty's crap smelled worse. Maybe he should go to Stinger's room over at the Best Western, sleep it off, get cleaned up before facing Kristina. No, he'd been out long enough already.

He climbed the stairs, pulling himself along by the black iron railing. Whenever one of his palms scraped across a rusty place in the railing, the feeling ran up his arm and into his mouth, like he was licking the rusted iron instead of just touching it.

At the top of the stairs, he stopped, tried to stuff his tee-shirt tail into his jeans, tried to smooth his hair by running his palms over it. He fumbled in his pocket for the Life Savers peppermints he'd picked up on the way home. He broke one out of the roll, chewed it. The crunching hurt his head, his eyes, his ears. He stuck two more in his mouth to suck on, scraped his front teeth with his fingernail, stepped to the door, took a deep breath. That was a mistake. With the breath, he sucked up a nose full of his own stink. He bent over the railing and heaved, but nothing came up.

This was sure like the old days back at Helling Headquarters down on Brunt Street in Houston. Except back then

he could sleep it off for as long as he liked. No wife. No job. No nothing. Now he had Kristina. She was going to be real pissed.

Toke straightened, looked at the door, at its chipped brown paint, its tarnished brass-plated numbers. The numbers were supposed to make a 16, but the 6 had slipped so it looked like a crooked 9. Like he figured, the door was locked. He knocked.

Also like he figured, Kristina didn't answer. He waited, knocked again, waited. Finally, he shoved aside the little hibachi next to the door and sat down, leaning against the wall. The smell of the hibachi, its months of grease drippings and its left over charcoal ashes still damp from yesterday's rain, mixed with his own wine-sweat smell and made him feel like puking again. He swallowed hard and pushed the hibachi farther away.

Whenever Tino had T-bones or sirloins he thought were a day or two too old for his customers, he'd sell them to Toke for half-price. Toke and Kristina would sit out on the little porch at the top of the stairs charcoaling steaks. They'd drink a Coors Light and talk about the kind of house they wanted someday, the kinds of furniture it would have, the garden they'd grow. Sometimes they'd even talk about kids, but Kristina wasn't sure. The house was going to be natural stone, like Kristina's old man's, with a fireplace in the living room. Kristina wanted some stained glass lights, like the ones over at the Pizza Hut. He wanted a

dark brown corduroy couch and recliner. That was fun, sitting out there charcoaling. He just wished the hibachi would hold both steaks at once.

His head was sore where he leaned it against the wall. He tilted it forward, closed his eyes, immediately opened them again. With them closed, he felt like he was falling and falling and falling, right off the porch and into the tiny yard and Rusty's crap below.

He cussed. Stinger was probably back at the Best Western by now. Sleeping it off. By tomorrow, he'd be back at Helling Headquarters down on Brunt Street in Houston. Doing what he damn well pleased. Toke would be over at Tino's Meat Market. Stuffing floppy chunks of liver and sticky gobs of brains into those little round plastic containers. Folding the bloody butt ends of tongues under so they'd look nicer in those cellophane packages. And he'd still be feeling like all that Boone's Farm he drank with Stinger was eating a hole in his guts and fizzing in his brain.

When the door opened next to him, he stood up. Kristina looked at him, her head tilted, her eyes squinted up. "Well," was all she said. That was another thing about her: she never yelled and never cussed. She said it was unrefined, unladylike. It was nice when girls didn't cuss. But she sure managed to say a lot without cussing, without saying hardly anything at all. He never knew what to say back.

Kristina walked back down the short hallway. He shrugged, followed. He'd done pretty good up to now. She'd get over it.

In the living room, he flopped onto the old couch with black plastic covering that was supposed to look like leather. White stuffing poked through in a couple of places where the plastic was ripped. Kristina was going to re-cover the whole thing soon. She was good at stuff like that. Right after they got married, she re-covered the seat of his BMW 750. It looked real good. He had hated to sell it.

He rubbed the roof of his mouth with his tongue. Even though he'd sucked the Life Savers, his mouth still tasted like the inside of a sweaty jock strap. That's the way Tiny used to say it, and Stinger would say, You oughtta know, like Tiny really had tasted the inside of a sweaty jock strap. Stinger was damn funny.

Toke dug the Life Savers out of his pocket again. As he stuck one in his mouth, he watched Kristina move behind the bar that separated the little living-dining room from the little kitchen. She wouldn't ask, that was sure. But he'd be sleeping on the couch tonight if he didn't explain, that was just as sure. "We was just over to the Hollow for a couple drinks. But then Stinger says Goliad must be the asshole of the universe and he wants to go somewhere where he can really party." Toke laughed. That hurt his head. He pressed his temples with the heels of his palms.

Kristina opened a can of something, turned to the stove, emptied the contents into a pan. She stirred it with a wooden spoon. "I lost track after a while. Hell, he must of drug me halfway to Houston." Kristina stepped away from the stove and started chopping something. Mushrooms, he thought. "I kept telling him forget it, but he wouldn't listen." Kristina scraped the mushrooms off the cutting board into the pan. Then she started chopping an onion. Those were funny things to be cooking for breakfast. But Kristina was a good cook.

For his birthday she had cooked a real special meal. A baked ham with brown sugar on it and some kind of expensive red sauce poured over the top. Big baked potatoes with grated cheese, sour cream, and Bac-0 Bits; not the Safeway kind, but real Bac-0 Bits. And an angel-food cake with white frosting and his name spelled out in those yellow and green sugar-letters. She sure beat hell out of Tiny or Blank for cooking.

Mostly, though, none of the guys at Helling Headquarters ever used to cook much. They'd live on Vienna sausages and saltines and beer until Mum and Skote would make a run down to Mum's folks' place in the hill country and bring back some venison or beef. Man, would they have a feast then. They'd buy or steal some champagne, build a big fire in the pit back of Helling Headquarters, and party all day while the meat cooked.

"What're you cooking?" Toke asked Kristina. If he hadn't felt so lousy it might have smelled good. "Smells good." Kristina dumped the onions into the pan and started stirring again. Damn it, she didn't have to keep ignoring him. He had come home. He was trying to be nice. He had done real good for the seven months they'd been married. No dope. Hardly any drinking. A steady job down at Tino's Meat Market. "Damn it, don't ignore me."

Kristina turned around, head tilted, eyes squinted. "What do you want, Anthony?" She did it to him every time. No matter what they were arguing about, she would ask a simple question in that tone, and it always left him with nothing to say. She wasn't really asking him a question; she was saying something else. But he was never sure what. And she always called him by his real name to remind him he was supposed to be different now.

He pulled a small chunk of white stuffing from one of the rips in the black plastic that was supposed to look like leather. He rolled it into a little ball between his palms. Damn it, he was different now. He'd been doing good since they got married. He threw the ball of stuffing on the floor. "You ever gonna cover this thing or not?" he asked, slapping the couch. Kristina stirred faster than before.

Corduroy. That's what he wanted. A couch covered with dark brown corduroy, like the one his aunt used to have. When he was a kid, his folks sent him to San Marcos Baptist Academy. They weren't Baptists, weren't anything so far as

he knew, but he had to be sent somewhere. That's what they said. His aunt lived in San Marcos, and he used to visit her on weekends. She had a couch covered with dark brown corduroy. Soft and rich looking. She was soft and rich looking too. He used to pile rocks up outside her bathroom window so he could get high enough to look in and watch her get in and out of the bubble baths she always took. The best part was watching her sit on the edge of the tub and spread lotion all over her soft skin. She was about Kristina's age back then. Kristina looked a lot like her.

Toke watched Kristina in the kitchen. "Really," he said. "Will you cover it? Maybe we could get some brown corduroy." She kept stirring, her back to him, silent. He swung his feet up onto the coffee table, digging at it with one boot heel. He watched for her reaction, but she ignored him. It was an old table anyway, marked up with scratches, water marks, and cigarette burns. Kristina always said she was going to refinish it. But she never would. Just like she never would re-cover the couch. All she'd done besides covering his cycle seat since they got married was covered the steel-framed folding chairs and table with some damn yellow and green flowery plastic.

She had been excited when he got back from hauling some cows to Stephenville for old man Cassidy. "Close your eyes," she had said when she met him at the door. "I did something while you were gone." He was sure it was the couch. She led him inside and told him to open his eyes.

The folding table and chairs. Green and yellow flowery plastic. "Nice," he had said. "But I thought maybe the couch." She hadn't talked the rest of the night. And she hadn't done any fixing up around the apartment since then. She had gotten just like her old man, always promising something but never doing it.

Red Morris owned the welding shop out on Bell Street. He did a lot of work for a lot of people within a hundred miles of Goliad. He had lots of money. Anybody could tell that just by looking at his building. It was about the length of four eighteen-wheel trucks and about the width of two. Most of it was made out of blue corrugated sheet metal, and the slanted roof had three skylights on each side. The part that faced the street, the office, was red brick. It went all the way across the front but was only about a third of a truck length along the sides. Inside, the office was carpeted and air conditioned, closed off from the rest of the shop. Besides Kristina, another girl worked in the office, and Red Morris spent a lot of time there too.

Kristina said he'd promised to give her a thousand dollars whenever she got married, but they'd never seen more than two hundred of it. "I don't like you, boy," Red Morris had said, flipping his face guard up when Toke went to see him in the shop. His right cheek bulged with tobacco. He carefully set his welding gun on the concrete floor, next to the steel-barred sheep stall he was working on. He pulled

one of his thick gloves off and dug into his jeans pocket. His jeans and denim shirt were speckled with tiny burn holes. "That's all you get for now," he said, shoving the check at Toke, his voice seeming louder and raspier than the electric sander one of the workers was using across the room.

Toke had stuffed his hands in his pockets and looked at the bottom of the sheep stall, tapping at it with his boot toe. "Kristina said a thousand, sir."

Red Morris jerked his glove back on, picked up his welding gun, said, "If it works out, we'll see."

"Works out, sir?"

Red Morris shook the welding gun in Toke's face. "You do good, boy. You do right."

If he hadn't already been trying to do good, Toke would have called Red Morris a son-of-a-bitch and shoved that welding gun up his ass. But he just stood there trying to think of something good to say. He stared at Red Morris's chest, at the little burn holes in his shirt. He nodded toward the shirt. "Ain't there some kind of aprons for welders?"

Red Morris squirted a stream of spit from between his lips, brown bubbly spit that splattered among little shards of steel on the concrete floor. He flipped his face guard down, torched his welding gun. Toke curled his toes up inside his boots, fisted his hands in his pockets. Red Morris bent over one of the steel bars of the sheep stall,

sparks bouncing off the bar, bouncing on the floor, then settling and fading out. Toke tapped on the face guard. Red Morris stopped, looked out from behind the tinted eye slot. "I was thinking," Toke said. "Maybe I could work here."

"Hell no you can't work for me," Red Morris rasped.

Damn it, Toke thought as he watched Kristina in the kitchen. Seven months should mean something. It had worked out. He had done good. Even Kristina said so most of the time. He wanted the rest of his money. Their money. He wanted his brown corduroy couch.

Kristina finished chopping a green pepper and dumped it in with the red sauce, onions, and mushrooms. She pulled a big pot out from under the sink and started filling it with water. Toke wondered what she was cooking. He thought of the sun hurting his eyes outside. "What time is it?"

"Almost six," Kristina said without looking at him. "And Sunday." She turned the knob on the stove, mumbled something Toke couldn't understand, then turned to him and said, "The left pilot's out again."

He sat forward, elbows on knees. "Sunday night? Jesus!" Whatever Kristina was cooking was starting to smell stronger. Although he thought it would smell good if he felt better, it made him feel like puking now. It was like he could really feel the smell, something thick and mushy that clogged his nose, his throat, slowly slid down into his stomach, tried to push its way back up again.

"The pilot," Kristina said, waiting by the stove.

"Okay. Okay." He stood up. He felt dizzy, steadied himself by pressing one hand against the wall. His other hand held his stomach. "I'll never drink Strawberry Hill again," he said after the dizziness went away. He tried to laugh. Kristina didn't even smile. She just stood in the kitchen, head tilted.

The damn pilot was always going out, and she always refused to light it. Said gas scared her. At Helling Headquarters, Stinger used to say that gas stoves were great inventions because you could do so many things with them. You could cook, suffocate yourself, or blow yourself up all with the same contraption. Stinger was damn funny.

In the kitchen, Toke struck a match and leaned over the stove. "God you stink," Kristina said, stepping out of the kitchen.

Toke eased himself down into the bathtub. Somebody downstairs must have been doing dishes or taking a shower, because all he could get was cold water. He wished he could take a shower too. But the shower didn't work. Never had, probably never would. The damn landlord wouldn't get it fixed.

At Helling Headquarters there hadn't been shower. But it didn't matter back then because he didn't have to worry about keeping clean for a wife or a boss. Didn't have to

worry about nothing. In warm weather, they used to gather out in the big back yard when Candy and Sal and any other girls were there and have water fights with hoses. They got pretty clean that way. And damn, it was fun. Stinger and Skote were best at bringing girls over. Candy and Sal were almost always around, but Stinger and Skote brought different girls, sometimes two or three each, all the time. They'd all get naked and drink and squirt each other with hoses for hours, until old lady Mamsey down the street would call the cops and have them arrested for disturbing the peace or indecent exposure or something. They always got out in a day or two, and then they'd go back to the house and celebrate by partying for a couple of days.

It was fun, but Toke always ended up feeling crappy for a couple more days. Back then, he didn't have a quiet place of his own to sleep it off. And nobody cared much how he felt. Now he had Kristina.

He had gotten used to the cold water in the tub. He lay back in it with his eyes closed. "Ten minutes," Kristina yelled from the kitchen. Things were okay. His head still hurt, but not too bad. He didn't feel like puking any more. And Kristina wasn't as pissed now. She was getting over it.

The only bad thing was that Stinger might come back. He was heading back to Houston tomorrow, so he'd probably come by tonight or in the morning. Toke's life was different now. He was doing good. But Stinger was a damn good

friend, and Toke wouldn't tell him to shove off. Kristina would get pissed again.

He soaped himself and dunked his whole body to rinse off. He had done pretty good since they got married. This was the first time he had seen any of his friends since then. It wasn't fair for Kristina to get pissed. It never had been.

She had even gotten pissed the first time they met. That was the day Stinger, Tiny, Mum, Blank, Skote, and he were making a run down to Mexico and his cycle broke down just outside of Goliad. Mum lifted him to town. Red's Welding and Machine Shop was the first place they'd come to. Mum dropped him there and went on. There was Kristina standing behind the desk and looking sexier than Candy or Sal or any of the girls Stinger and Skote ever brought over. Looking just like his aunt used to, or like some of the girls he used to see whenever he'd work for Stinger's old man.

Stinger's old man ran a crew for Harlan and Mason Commercial Construction in Houston. Whenever he was short handed he'd ask Stinger and them to help out. They worked a lot around shopping centers and fancy stores. Summer was best. Those girls in Datsun 280's or Porsches or Triumphs, kind of slow-sliding out of their cars like strippers out of satin panties. Their tight white shorts and bright striped halter tops. And all that tan skin showing, smooth from soaking in bubble baths and massaging with all kinds of

expensive lotion. They always walked with their shoulders straight and heads a little turned so you'd know you were just supposed to look.

That's the way Kristina looked when he first met her, only she wasn't quite as tan, and she looked right at him. She was pretty small, but she had big tits. Some of the buttons on her sleeveless yellow and white flowered shirt were undone, and she had pulled the shirt open to where it just barely covered her nipples. Her jeans were real crotch-cutters, and when she walked her little ass wiggled like she wanted him to notice how nice and round it was. Her hair was long and dark but instead of keeping it all back over her shoulders she let it hang sort of loose and wild around her face.

She stuck something in a filing cabinet, slid the drawer shut with her hip, and walked back to the desk. "Help you?" She sat down in a cushioned chair with wheels on it and looked up from between those two loose ruffles of hair.

"Hope so," said Toke. He wanted to laugh. Whenever a girl said that to Stinger in a store, Stinger would say, If you'll take my check you can.

After he told her what happened, she tore a sheet of paper off a pad that had a picture of a welder and the words RED'S WELDING AND MACHINE SHOP printed in brown ink across the top. She wrote down the address of the Texaco garage. He wondered how she could write so pretty. It seemed like

her long fingernails would get in the way. Their shiny red polish was a lot nicer than the hot pink or aqua blue Candy and Sal sometimes wore.

Smiling up at him, she handed him the note. "You like Houston?" He shrugged, then nodded. "Always seemed too big and crazy to me," she said. "There is lots to do, though, I guess."

Toke shrugged again, trying to think of something to say. She seemed like she really wanted to talk to him, like she liked him. He looked at her lotion-smooth shoulders and tits. Stinger and them would never believe him if he got a lay from somebody like her. But he couldn't just ask a girl like her. He shrugged. "Thanks," he said, holding up the address she had given him. When he got to the door, he looked back. She smiled, waved. With the door half open, he stopped. "I was thinking. Maybe we could get a hamburger or something later."

It seemed like she looked at him a long time before she shrugged and said, "I guess so. I'm off at five."

She took him in her car to the Dairy Mart. While they ate, she did most of the talking. He hadn't been so close to a girl like her since he used to visit his aunt in San Marcos. At least, not one that really seemed to care about talking to him. Talking about real things, important things. About how her folks got divorced and how her mother wouldn't have anything to do with her and her old man. She liked her old man, but wanted to move out of his house and

have a little place of her own. Toke tried to look her in the face while she talked, but he couldn't help watching where her shirt gapped a little. She said she didn't have a lot of friends in Goliad because most of the people her age were crude and didn't care about much of anything. They'd all been born and raised there and didn't really know about the world, about life. Never had and never would. She talked a lot about things she wanted to do and have eventually. Things like Toke had sometimes thought about when he was laying around Helling Headquarters hung over or with nothing much to do.

He sometimes wondered what it would be like to have something besides only a motorcycle that belonged just to him. And that he belonged to. Things like a house, a wife, maybe even kids. Making some good money. Going on real trips, not just back and forth to Mexico.

When Kristina asked him questions, she really seemed to be interested. He tried not to cuss or talk crude. "You know," Kristina said, finishing off her fries and stuffing the container into the Dairy Mart paper sack it came in, "you're different than I thought you'd be." She wiped her hands on a Dairy Mart napkin, tapped at her lips with it, then folded it up and put it in the sack. Her lips were the same color as her fingernails. She leaned in a little closer to him. Her shirt gapped wide, and he could see her nipple. He figured she must have been horny, but her kind of girl would never come right out and say so. "I mean,"

she said, "I didn't think you'd care about anything like houses and vacations and so on." She put her arm on the back of the seat, not so it touched him, but so her long fingernails were right next to his shoulder.

He looked at her lotion-soft arms and tits. Jesus. She wanted to give him the hint without coming right out and saying it. Candy and Sal would have just said it. Or, if one of the guys was horny, they'd just tell Candy or Sal. But he knew he couldn't do that with Kristina.

"It's getting kind of late," he said. "Maybe I'll just stay over. You want to go somewhere or something?"

That's when she got pissed. She had been leaning in pretty close, but she pulled away and tilted her head. She squinted up her eyes and just stared at him for a long time. Then she jerked her arm off the back seat, started the car, shoved it into reverse, her foot on the brake. She stared at him, tapping one long red fingernail on the steering wheel.

"I just thought," he started, but he couldn't figure out how to say it without really saying it. He shrugged, got out of the car. "Hey," he said as she started backing away. "We go to Mexico a lot. Maybe I could stop again." She acted like she didn't hear him.

When he told Stinger and them about it, they laughed. He laughed too. But he still thought about her a lot. Sometimes he'd close his eyes and imagine her taking bubble baths, spreading lotion all over herself, sitting, soft and

naked, in front of a lighted mirror while she painted her long nails bright red. He even imagined going to bed with her on a huge bed with colored sheets and overstuffed pillows. And once, he tried to think what it would be like to be married to her, to have a nice little house with a fireplace, a brown corduroy couch and recliner, a color TV, shag carpet, a cat. He'd laugh about that with Stinger whenever they got stoned. And they all laughed at him when he stopped to see her on the next trip to Mexico.

At first, she acted like she didn't know him. "Help you?" she said, sitting behind the desk at Red's Welding and Machine Shop, filing her long red nails.

"I was thinking," he said, but he stopped, watched her spread her fingers out in front of her and cock her head from side to side as she looked at her fingernails. "I guess not," he said. He started to leave.

"Hey," she said. "It's Toke, right?" He nodded. "You sorry?" He shrugged. Nodded. "Did you come here just to see me?" He said yes, didn't tell her about Mexico.

They went to the Pizza Hut that time. "What's your real name?" Kristina asked, cutting and eating her pizza with a fork.

"Tony."

"For Anthony, right? Nice. That's what I'll call you from now on."

From now on. She didn't say it like she meant anything special. But she didn't say it like she meant nothing,

either. Maybe he still had a chance of making it with her. He'd just have to be careful. "You're pretty," he said.

She smiled, took a sip of iced tea, tapped at her red lips with her red cloth napkin. "You're nice, Anthony. Nicer than I thought." Then she told him what she had thought of him the first time. He laughed, said he was sorry. Then he told her what he had thought about her. About how he'd thought she had tried to hint that she was horny.

That was a mistake. She set her fork on her plate, tilted her head, squinted her eyes, said she wanted to leave. That was the end of his second visit with her.

But he went back to see her on the next three runs he made to Mexico. It was pretty much the same every time. He'd try to act good, and she'd get real friendly. The third time, they even made out a little. But as soon as he'd hint around about making it, she'd get pissed.

He always told Stinger about it, and they'd have a good laugh. "Why do you put up with that crap?" Stinger asked one time. Toke shrugged, chuckled. "You got Candy and Sal and any of the other girls who come over. You don't have to worry about nothin' with them." Toke shrugged again, nodded. Stinger laughed and added, "'Cept maybe the clap."

That night, Toke couldn't sleep. He went to bed pretty early, lay there listening to Stinger and them party with Candy and Sal and a couple other girls. Listened to the

Leon Russell, Bruce Springsteen, and Bob Seger albums they played full blast. Candy came into his room once.

"What're you doin', Toke?"

"Nothin'."

She straddled him on the bed, leaned down and kissed him, her breath sweet with wine, sour with cigarettes.

"Come on out and party."

"Maybe after a while."

The next day, he went to Goliad. He and Kristina went out to the little lake and built a fire. At night, they spread a blanket on the ground and made out a lot. But when he tried to get her shirt off, she pulled away.

"I figured," he said, standing up and kicking dirt on the fire.

They didn't talk on the way back to town, but when she dropped him at his cycle she said, "Please come back."

It was the next time that she said okay to him. But she wouldn't do it out by the lake or in the car somewhere. They checked into the Best Western. Toke pulled down the covers on the bed, started to unbuckle his jeans.

"Take it easy," Kristina said. She put her arms around his neck and kissed him. "Anthony, did you mean it that time you said you wanted a house and all that?"

He felt her big, soft tits pressing against him, her long red fingernails gently scratching his neck. "I don't know. Sometimes I think about it, I guess."

She pushed him back onto the bed and fell on top of him, giggling. They didn't talk again until after they had made it. He was putting on his clothes to go get some pizza and beer. She said, real softly, "Why don't we get married?"

He stopped, his zipper halfway up. There they were, all the things he thought about sometimes, being offered to him in that one question. Kristina looked sexier than ever lying there in bed and looking up at him from between those two ruffles of loose hair, the sheets pulled up to just below her big tits. She wanted to marry him. She would belong to just him, instead of to every guy in the house. A girl who came from good people, a good society. A girl who dressed nice, talked nice, acted nice. A girl who could help him do the same, if he wanted.

But he liked the way he lived. Most of the time. It wasn't fancy, and it sure wasn't always comfortable, but it was easy. He didn't have to worry about nothing. Not about where he went, when he went, or what he did when he went somewhere. Or when to go to bed or get up. Never had to worry about talking good or dressing fancy. Or keeping a wife happy or working steady. Not about what anybody thought of him. Not about nothing.

He shrugged. "I don't know."

Kristina kept looking up at him from between those two ruffles. "My daddy's going to give me a thousand dollars when I get married. We could have a little place of our own.

A wife. A place of his own. Something besides Vienna sausages, saltines, and beer. Maybe a steady job. A good one. One that gave him something and made people think he was something. A wife. Sex whenever he wanted it and with somebody nobody else would get it from. His own woman. His own place. He shrugged again.

"I really want to," Kristina said.

She went back to her old man's house that night. He stayed in the Best Western watching movies on some all-night channel on the color TV. With the thick, brown curtains closed, none of the parking lot lights shone into the room. He watched the flickering of dim colors the TV made on the white ceiling with gold speckles. He lay there on the wide, firm bed, taking deep breaths so he could suck in the smell and taste of the cleaning stuff the maids must have used that morning, a smell that seemed like oranges, peppermints, Vaseline, and creosote all mixed up together. Everything was quiet, except for the TV and the eighteen-wheelers that would occasionally grind by on Highway 59. He smoked a lot.

He had just gone to sleep when Kristina knocked on the door. "You look awful," she said, walking in and turning off the TV. She looked great. The shiny green material her dress was made out of fit real tight over her big tits, her flat stomach, and her round little ass. She kissed him. "Good morning." He sat on the edge of the bed, rubbed his hands through his hair. "Well?" she said. Her perfume smelled nice, sweet, like fruit and flowers, not sickly

sweet like Candy and Sal wore. Without taking his eyes off her, he reached for a cigarette on the bedside table, lit it.

"Okay," he said, squinting through the smoke that drifted up into his eyes.

She hugged his neck tight, French kissed him, then said, "Daddy wants to meet you. I'm on my way to work. You get cleaned up and come by the shop about ten." She kissed him again. "You'll be glad. I promise. I'll be good for you."

And she had been good for him. When they first got married, she had talked him into cutting his hair and shaving, and she had bought him some new jeans and shirts so he'd look good when he went hunting for a job. And after he had quit driving the cattle truck for old man Cassidy, she had got him the job at Tino's because she knew Tino. She had done lots of things to help him get where he was. Kept him from visiting back at Helling Headquarters down on Brunt Street in Houston; that way, he kept out of trouble. Kept him from blowing all his paychecks; that way, they could save up and buy nice things some day. A place of their own, some nice furniture, a decent car. As long as he kept doing good, she'd keep helping. And he was doing pretty good.

* * * * *

Kristina stood over him by the bathtub. "I said ten minutes, Anthony. It's been twenty."

He stepped out of the tub, reached for a towel. "I've done pretty good since we got married, huh, Kris?" She had already turned around, and as he spoke she walked out of the bathroom.

When he got to the folding table covered with green and yellow flowery plastic, Kristina was eating, and she had set a place with a heaping plate of spaghetti for him. When he saw the spaghetti, he felt like his stomach shrunk up and kind of shivered. He didn't feel as much better as he'd thought. But he had to try to eat. Kristina wasn't as pissed now, and he wanted to keep it that way.

"I've been thinking, Kris," he said as he wrapped some of the spaghetti around his fork. "Do you think your old man would give us some more money now?" She shrugged. "Maybe we could get a little house. Maybe some better furniture." He swallowed his first bite, felt it try to come back up. "It's good," he said, reaching for his iced tea. He watched her sip her tea, tap at her lips with her napkin. "Let's go out tonight. Down to the Hollow maybe." She shook her head. He wrapped some more spaghetti around his fork, felt his first bite still stuck somewhere between his throat and stomach. He swallowed hard, took his second bite. "A movie?"

Kristina shook her head again. "Got to work tomorrow. You too." She took her last bite, got up, and walked into the kitchen with her plate.

Toke followed, his full plate in hand. "Out to the lake then. Just for a little while. We'll build a fire maybe." She took his plate, looked at it, pursed her lips. "Stomach," he said, patting his gut and frowning. "Come on." Standing behind her as she dumped his spaghetti into the trash can, he put his arms around her and squeezed her big tits.

She jerked away. "I said no!"

"Damn it, Kristina."

"What do you want, Anthony?"

"I've been doing good."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." He followed her out of the kitchen and toward the bedroom. "This was the first time I've seen anybody from Helling Headquarters since we got married."

At the bedroom door, she looked at him, tilting her head and squinting up her eyes. "It's not them." Before he could say anything, she stepped into the bedroom and slammed the door.

That's what her old man had said to him the first time they met. That day he had said okay to her. Red Morris sat behind his desk leafing through a Western Horseman, his feet propped up on the desk. His round-toed rough-out boots were hardly rough-outs anymore. Worn almost smooth, they were speckled with little burn marks. When Toke walked in, he looked up from his magazine. Kristina introduced them. He made a sucking noise with his lips, stained brown from

spitting the juice from the wad of tobacco that made a big lump in his right cheek. He looked at Toke for a long time before he said anything.

"You got a job?" he finally said.

"I was thinking I'd get one here in Goliad," Toke said, feeling the sticky wetness of his shirt under his armpits.

Red Morris swung his feet off the desk and spit into the trash can, the tobacco juice splattering against the side of a crushed Coke can. "I ain't talking no damn think, boy. I'm talking job."

"No, sir," said Toke as he watched Red Morris and wondered if this was all a big mistake.

Red Morris made another sucking noise. "I seen them boys you come through town with. You a hippie?"

Toke curled his toes inside his boots. "I won't be seeing them much no more."

Red Morris stood up. "Answer straight, boy. It ain't them I'm asking about."

Just like her damn old man, Toke thought as he stood by the bedroom door. He figured he could break the door open. It was just that flimsy hollow kind, and the frame was probably half rotten under all those coats of paint. But what could he do after he broke it open? He shook his head. He'd act good. She'd get over it.

Back in the living room, he clicked on the TV and stretched out as best he could on the four-foot couch cov-

ered with black plastic that was supposed to look like leather. When the picture finally came clear on the TV, it was a Billy Graham crusade. Toke cussed. That was the only channel the TV got because the damn landlord was too cheap to put up an antenna.

Stinger was probably stretched out in a double bed watching the Sunday Night Movie in color over at the Best Western. Toke thought about going over there, cussed again, and closed his eyes. Billy Graham jabbered on.

It was probably one or two in the morning when the phone woke him up. His neck was stiff. There was nothing but static on the TV. He heard Kristina answer the phone, say it was a wrong number, and hang up. But it rang right away again. This time he could hear Kristina pick it up and slam it back down without saying anything. It had to be Stinger. Kristina must have opened the door sometime, because he could hear everything real clear.

That's the way it used to be back at Helling Headquarters down on Brunt Street in Houston. He could always hear what was going on in other rooms because none of the rooms had doors. They either had dirty green curtains for doors or they didn't have anything. One time, he hadn't listened good enough to what was going on in Stinger's room; he had walked in on Stinger while he was in bed with some girl. Take a number, Stinger had said. Stinger was damn funny.

The phone rang again. This time, Toke got up and hurried to the bedroom. He reached Kristina just as she was about to slam the receiver down. He grabbed her arm, but she pulled free, shoved the receiver under the pillow, sprawled across the pillow.

"I want to talk to him," Toke said.

"Why, Anthony?"

She could say so much without saying hardly anything. You're supposed to be Anthony Dodson: that's what it seemed like she was really saying. Not Toke Dodson from down on Brunt Street in Houston. Not Toke Dodson with lots of close friends who have nothing and are nothing. But Anthony Dodson from Crockett Drive in Goliad, Delmar Apartments, number 16. Anthony Dodson with a wife, a home, a job. Anthony Dodson with a future.

He shrugged. "I just want to talk to him, that's all." Kristina sat up, cocked her head, squinted her eyes, handed him the receiver.

He took the receiver, put it to his ear, cupped his left hand over the part he was supposed to talk into. "Toke? Hey, you there, Toke?" said Stinger from the other end. Toke could hear Stinger's TV going. Probably a late movie on a channel that ran all night. In color. "Hey, man, you there?" said Stinger. "I gotta go in the morning. Just wanted to say so long to my old buddy." Toke watched Kristina. She looked up at him from between those two loose ruffles of dark hair that fell across her face. "You there,

man? Hell raisin' good time this weekend, huh? Just like before." Underneath her short, lacy nightgown, Kristina's big tits moved up and down with her breathing. "Hey, I'll tell Tiny and them hi for you. Candy and Sal been wonderin' about you too."

Toke lowered the receiver to waist-height. "I've been doing pretty good since we got married, huh, Kris?" She nodded. Barely. He dropped the receiver onto the hook. She smiled. He leaned over and pulled the plug out of the jack, then knelt on the bed, kissed her. They kissed several times before he eased her onto her back.

She rolled aside. "Got to work in the morning." She clicked off the bedside lamp.

Toke lay back too, his hands folded behind his head, his eyes open. He listened to the number plates in the digital clock flip over every minute. He started to check the time, remembered that the clock bulb was burned out. Kristina lightly snored beside him, her lacy nightgown brushing his arm as she breathed. Rusty barked downstairs.

"Hey, Kris," he finally said, tapping her soft bare shoulder. She groaned. "I was thinking. Maybe we could get some brown corduroy for the couch." He felt her shrug beside him, and then she was lightly snoring again. In the dark, he listened to the click of the number plates on the digital clock.

INFLECTIONS AND INNUENDOES

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.

Wallace Stevens
"Thirteen Ways of Looking at a
Blackbird"

Bailey adjusted his mirror-lensed sunglasses and looked across the seat at Marie, who kept her eyes on the road, her hands tightly on the wheel, her lips pressed together. She drove slowly. He lit a Camel, exhaled audibly, and studied her profile: her high, smooth forehead; the silky auburn hair that swept back from her forehead and seemed to float down to her shoulders and back; the smooth, dark complexion of her cheek; her slim nose, almost too long; her narrow chin and taut jaws. The profile was backlighted by the bright mid-morning sun, a striking contrast of rich dark skin and hair with the silvery brilliance that backlighted it.

Working his tongue against the roof of his mouth, Bailey shuddered at the bitter aftertaste of the three Anacins he had chewed earlier. "Quite a party last night," he said. Marie glanced at him, her lips pursed. He shrugged,

took another drag from his cigarette, leaned his head back against the seat. The Anacins were starting to work, but his head still hurt. "Enjoy it?" He watched her cheek curve inward as she sucked its inner wall between her teeth. He shrugged again, dragged on his cigarette, then flipped it out the window. He reached across and rested his hand on her shoulder, bare, smooth, brown. She dipped her shoulder away from his touch. "Come on, Marie," he said, watching her brush her hair back over her shoulder with long, slim fingers.

"Did Melissa?" she said, barely moving her lips.

Melissa, he remembered, had worn a pastel blue sundress with a print of yellow roses. Her shockingly black hair had fallen in natural corkscrew curls onto her ivory white shoulders. There on the patio, surrounded by the fragrance of blooming honeysuckle, he had stared the longest at her translucent blue eyes, their uniqueness intensified by the glow of the full, silver-white moon.

He started to touch Marie, pulled his hand back. "She has pretty eyes." Marie clicked the blinker on, turned onto the gravel road. "That's all," he said.

"Yeah?" She slowed for a bump, spinning the wheels in the gravel as she sped up again.

"Marie," he said, then paused and squeezed his temples between the middle finger and thumb of his right hand. He listened to the gravel crunch and crackle beneath the tires. It was a sound not like, but reminiscent of, brittle leaves

under his feet in the fall. "Forget it. Okay?" He massaged his temples.

He had met her last fall, his first semester at Southwest Texas State University. She sat by one of the little ponds near the library, leaning against a tall oak, reading an English assignment. She wore rust-colored corduroys and a pull-over sweater that matched the corduroys at the bottom and gradually changed shades until it was white around her neck. She blended with the trees and fallen leaves. She seemed to belong there, like a leaf or tree herself. But breathing. Breathing life into the scene around her. That's how it looked, and he had told her so. She had smiled, her thin, glossy lips parting slowly, shyly.

Marie steered into a space between two other cars. She looked across at Bailey. He watched her, listened to the nearby waterfall, thought how much like a dark waterfall her hair was as it flowed down over her shoulders. When he touched her, tentatively, she didn't move, didn't respond at all. He almost spoke, but silently looked out through the windshield instead.

Through the blue tinted portion of the glass, the bright green leaves of the tall pecan trees and the blue specks of sky that peeked among them looked more vivid than they really were. When he moved his line of vision, the clear glass washed the colors paler. The windshield dappled with jagged spots of sunlight and vibrating shadows of the leaves that fluttered in the breeze. Several times,

he slowly shifted his eyes from the tinted glass to the clear, the clear to the tinted.

"Do you love me?" Marie finally said. He smiled, leaned toward her, lightly kissed her forehead. She put her arms around him and squeezed.

After unloading the trunk, they walked down a grassy slope toward the San Marcos River. Carrying a wicker picnic basket and a huge beach towel, Bailey lagged behind, deliberately dragging his toes in the grass so he could soak up as much of its tree-shaded coolness as possible. It felt good, almost as good as the constant seventy-two degrees of the river. Ahead of him, Marie's hips swayed slightly; her brown plastic bottle of Tropic Tan, held loosely in one hand, lightly slapped her thigh; her bright yellow towel, flung over one shoulder, flapped gently against her tanned back. From those movements and sounds, Bailey picked out a gentle rhythm. He concentrated on it, his head beginning to throb more slowly, less painfully.

Marie stopped in a level open area outside the shade of the trees. "This okay?" she asked, dropping her bright yellow towel to the ground.

He glanced downstream where six girls sat Indian-style on a large blanket and passed a joint. Two guys in wet cut-offs were just approaching the girls. They were an odd pair, he thought, one of them skinny and almost unnaturally white, the other thick, broad, and tan. Up the slope from

them, two girls played Frisbee, rather badly. He shrugged.
"Sure."

Marie, too, looked downstream. She plunked her bottle of Tropic Tan onto her towel. "Go, if you like," she said, her tone flat. She sat down, squirted some lotion onto her palm, and began rubbing it onto one leg. Bailey dropped the picnic basket from where it dangled in his hand. Then he shook open the big beach towel, popping it once in mid-air and letting it spread over the ground. He sat down and pulled his Camels out of his tee-shirt pocket.

"Don't be stupid," he said, shaking a Camel out of the package.

Marie, just about to squirt more lotion into her hand, paused, frowned at him. "Thanks."

He lit his cigarette, flipped his match into the grass.
"I didn't say you were. I said don't be."

"Which implies that I am being."

"Marie. Don't."

"Well, doesn't it?"

"No."

"That's what you meant."

He jabbed his unsmoked cigarette into the grass.
"Okay. Yes. You're being stupid." He watched her suck her cheeks in, watched her complexion change from golden tan to something like maroon as she flushed with anger. "And while we're at it, do you still want to know about Melissa?"

"No."

"Why don't I tell you about Melissa."

"Stop it."

"She's beautiful. Beautiful."

"You bastard." A whisper. They stared at each other for several seconds, her brown eyes watering. Finally, she turned her head, squirted a glob of lotion into her hand, and rubbed it vigorously onto her leg. Bailey lifted his mirror-lensed glasses, watched her, frowned.

"Marie," he said, touching her. "I'm sorry."

She stopped rubbing, looked up. "I'm sick of it."

"I know." He hugged her.

"You always say that."

"I know."

"See." She smiled faintly.

He kissed her cheek, then leaned back and extended his hand. "You forgive me?" She sighed, shrugged, took his hand. He smiled and said, "Let me help," as he picked up the Tropic Tan and edged around behind her. The lotion felt good on his palm, cool and slippery. He rubbed his palms together, then cupped them over his nose and breathed deeply of the strong, sweet scent of coconut oil. He smeared the lotion onto Marie's back, noticing how bright white it looked against her deep tan. Running his fingertips through it, he created stripes that ran from her shoulders down to the waistband of her white bikini, which seemed even brighter than the lotion.

When he was through, Marie lay back on the towel, the soles of her feet on the ground, both knees bent and slightly angling away from each other. She took his hand and laid it on her flat, smooth stomach. Her eyes drifted closed, and her lips barely parted as she wet them with the tip of her tongue.

Bailey heard laughter downstream, turned to look. The pot smokers passed their joint as though well practiced. With natural, fluid movements, one of them brought it up, held lightly between thumb and forefinger, to her perfect O of lips, which never touched the joint; she sucked a slow, deep breath through her mouth, her chest expanding, her lips afterwards clamping together; she flipped her hand over, pointing the ash of the joint upward and passing it to the pale skinny guy beside her. Bailey smiled.

"Like what you see?" Marie said, sitting up.

"Interesting," he said as he turned back to her.

"I bet." She glared, her lips pursed.

His elbow propped on his knee, Bailey pressed his forehead against his palm. "Not again," he sighed.

She looked downstream. "Should I have longer legs?"

"No," he said between clenched teeth.

"Slimmer hips maybe?"

He moved his hand to the cool grass, clutched a handful, squeezed it into a matted clump. "Marie, please."

"Bigger tits?"

He jerked the grass up by its roots. "Maybe so!" he said, throwing the clump toward the river. He stood up, took several long strides in the same direction, stopped. Across the river, several people stood around a cast iron charcoaler, roasting hot dogs and sipping beer. He watched them, listening to the splash and gurgle of the river.

Last spring, he and Marie had spent lots of weekends camping at Canyon Lake. They would pitch the tent as close to the water as possible. At night, they would build a fire and sit by it listening to the frogs croak, the crickets chirp, and the water lap at the shore; they watched the stars, the moon, the orange reflection of the fire on the black surface of the lake. It was after one of those weekends in May that he had moved in with her.

He turned and walked back to where Marie sat. Her back was to him, her face in her hands. "I'm sorry," he said. "I don't know what's wrong today."

When she lifted her head, he could tell she had been crying. "Every day," she said quietly. He shrugged. After running a finger under each eye, she said, "I've been thinking. For a long time. About us."

He sat beside her, put his arm around her waist, kissed her cheek. "No. Please."

"Maybe it would be best."

"It wouldn't."

"I'm just not sure."

He shook his head. They were both silent. Looking back up the slope, he noticed how the late morning sunlight caught just the tips of the grass, giving the unshaded part of the slope a silvery gleam. A bright orange Frisbee suddenly blotted out a small circle of that gleam. One of the girls who had been playing with it laughed huskily and trotted over to get it.

He watched as she threw the Frisbee back toward her friend, using her entire arm instead of just her wrist. The bright orange disc wobbled through the air, far off course. Her clumsiness with it was, he thought, incongruous with her appearance. Wearing shorts and a halter top that barely held her large breasts, she was tall, broad, and big-boned. But not fat. Athletic rather than fat. Where she might have had fat on her upper arms, belly, and thighs, she instead had well toned, taut muscles. As she moved, those muscles rippled smoothly beneath her tanned skin, shiny with suntan oil.

"I guess I am sure," Marie said. Bailey shuddered at the bitterness of her tone. It reminded him of the after-taste of the three aspirin he had chewed earlier. He massaged his temples with his fingertips. Then, smiling, he turned to Marie.

"Let's go swimming," he said.

She shook her head. "It's not that easy, Bailey."

"Come on," he said.

She shook her head again, got up, and walked to the river bank, where she sat down and dangled her feet in the water. Bailey watched her. He cursed.

Three guys in inner tubes floated past her. The tubes looked new. Jet black. The surface where they floated was smooth, so that it reflected clear images of them and their tubes, images that wavered slightly with the current. Beyond them, on the far bank of the narrow river, huge elephant ears, also reflected clearly on the river's surface, bent on thick stalks toward the water. Bailey watched the tubers float downstream, sipping Coors, until they drifted around the bend.

When he looked back to where Marie had been, she was returning. She looked calm, and when she spoke her voice was unusually steady. "Pick up your things any time. But leave the key." She scooped up her bright yellow towel and her bottle of Tropic Tan.

"You're kidding," Bailey said, trying to smile.

"Not this time."

"You really don't understand, do you, Marie?"

"I think I do. Do you?" She walked slowly away, up the grassy slope toward her car. He called after her. She ignored him. He sat motionless, watching her go.

The slope glistened, and the light that shone on Marie seemed to be shining both up from the grass and down from the sky. Her dark hair, too, glistened as the light shone on it. Blown by the soft breeze, it fell to just below her

shoulder blades and brushed lightly against her dark back. Her white bikini seemed to sparkle, emphasizing her sleek tan. As she moved into the shadow of the pecan trees, Bailey called again. When she reached the car, he pounded his fist against the ground, got up, and ran after her. She had already shoved her things into the back seat and gotten into the car when he reached her.

"Marie?"

She looked up at him through the open window and shook her head, a barely discernible movement. He started to speak, but she shook her head more noticeably. He leaned through the window and gently kissed her forehead. "I know," she said, faintly smiling.

He watched her drive away, then turned and walked slowly back to his beach towel. Downstream, the pot smokers were just folding their blanket. The Frisbee players were still at it, clumsily throwing the bright orange disc at each other. Beyond them, a man in checkered shorts, a woman in a one-piece flower-print swimsuit, and a little girl in a similar suit had just arrived. The little girl, a canned drink in her hands, ran to catch up with the man and woman. Halfway down the slope, she dropped the can, and it rolled down ahead of her, its silver top glinting in the sun.

Bailey adjusted his mirror-lensed sunglasses, lit a Camel, and lay back on his towel. He tried to blow smoke rings toward the cloudless sky, but they never formed

completely before the breeze transformed them into thin, snake-like wisps and blew them away. He flipped the cigarette away, closed his eyes. He imagined Marie standing there, bathed in sunlight, her white bikini seeming to shine against the background of her darkly tanned skin.

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