

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL OKLAHOMA
JOE C. JACKSON COLLEGE OF GRADUATE STUDIES
Edmond, Oklahoma

THE TURTLE

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH
WITH CREATIVE WRITING EMPHASIS

By
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Edmond, Oklahoma
2008

THE TURTLE

A THESIS
APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
NOVEMBER 21, 2008

By


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ABSTRACT OF THESIS
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PAGES: 392

ABSTRACT:

The Turtle is a novel that incorporates elements of fiction genres including fantasy, horror, and American gothic in an attempt to synthesize a unique postmodern sensibility that is simultaneously rooted within and drifts outside conventional literary forms.

The novel's story is told in the first person by an unreliable narrator who filters events through his lens. This narrator is almost paralyzed by anxiety and, later, grief. The story begins as a conventional family drama, but then moves into a new, fantastical setting populated by mythical characters displaying quirky human characteristics.

There are two major settings in *The Turtle*, both of which relate metaphorically to the protagonist's inner life. The first setting is within his family, in the first part of the book. His wife is terminally ill, and the protagonist is forced to operate almost entirely within the context of her illness and his responsibilities to her. In the later part of the book, the protagonist travels to an Alaskan valley in which the various characters and landscape features serve as symbolic foils for his personality and emotional state. His interaction with these symbols in some ways provides the protagonist with a more constructive way of viewing life, though in other ways it illustrates the fact that, given human nature and the nature of time, any wisdom or personal revelation we might reach will inevitably be temporary.

The entire novel is offset as a 'frame' story, a convention of American gothic stories and novels. The book contains a fictitious Editor's Note explaining the origin of *The Turtle* as being physically delivered to the world's attention not by its author but by one of the author's friends long after it was written. The reputation and history of the book are further filtered and altered by the passage of fictional time. The events in the novel take place in 2001, but the Editor's Note is dated 2062, and the author's true identity remains a mystery. This is done to offset the fantastical nature of the later parts of the book. Obviously, not all the events in the novel could really have taken place, but the question of who really wrote the book and what really happened to him or her creates an added narrative dimension that comments not only on the unreliability of the narrator in this specific work, but on the general unreliability of literature as a medium for communicating encoded experience.

Introduction

Writing *The Turtle* has taught me about the unpredictability of the writing process and has shown me that it may be inadvisable to stick too rigidly to a plan of action when it comes to long-form fiction.

The Turtle was born out of both experience and necessity. The first part of the book is based on my own experiences with my first wife, who died in October of 2001 of complications from secondary cardiopulmonary hypertension, the same disease that kills Sharon, her fictional counterpart in the novel. That experience and its aftermath represented a major ending and beginning in my life. Before her death, I supported my wife and her daughter working at different manual labor jobs. I was always interested in reading and literature and wanted someday to learn writing, but there was never enough time for it, and it was hard to convince myself that doing so would even be worth the effort. After my wife died and my stepdaughter went to live with her biological father, I had what I'll call an "episode" that made it very difficult for me to go back to my old job and live my old life. I quit working and enrolled at the University of Central Oklahoma in January of 2002, majoring in journalism.

After graduating in May of 2005, I decided to enroll in the graduate program in the English Department at UCO, majoring in creative writing. I wanted to write a creative thesis for the degree, but at first I didn't want to write about my own experience, because I thought doing so would somehow cheapen my lived experience and upset other people who had been involved. I eventually decided I was avoiding the subject because it was

painful. I reckoned the possible benefits of writing out the story would outweigh any possible negative results, and I started writing *The Turtle* in July, 2006.

The first 200 pages of my first draft were pretty straightforward, because they were drawn directly from events in my life as I had perceived them and from my reaction to those events. I gave my stand-in, Gary, a different job (he originally worked in a box factory) and included several flashbacks to events that led up to my (now his) wife's illness and illustrated general points of interest from our/their relationship. Since I really don't know anything about making boxes, I eventually gave Gary one of the jobs I had during that period, working in a lab testing soil samples from construction sites. Without thinking much about it I created Harrell, Gary's supervisor, who isn't really based on anyone I ever knew, but is completely fictional.

But when I got to Sharon's death, the story felt too short – and it felt far too autobiographical. I felt I had realized some therapeutic effect by re-living the loss, but I didn't feel I had created anything with which a reader would strongly identify or even find especially interesting. The story was too scattered, and it didn't have much direction. I had been workshopping the first 150 or so pages over two semesters in novel-writing classes, and many of the comments I received from the other students confirmed that the plot moved too slowly. Gary was static and self-absorbed, and although he had his entertaining moments, he was a bit depressing and uninspired overall. One bright point in the earlier part of the first draft was the appearance of Father New Year, whom the people in my novel-writing class found both confusing and interesting. I shared their feelings, to a certain extent. It seemed outrageous to have Father New Year appear in reality, even though only Gary could see him, which indicated that Gary's emotional

problems went much deeper than we had first believed. Father New Year, like Harrell, represented a movement outside my personal experience and foreshadowed subsequent developments in the novel.

In the meantime, I had written an incomplete short story about a man who travels out into the wilderness and meets a giant woman living in a big log cabin. It was more a situation than a short story, and it didn't have much narrative arc or movement. At the same time, the general concept nagged at me, and it occurred to me that I could graft the idea onto *The Turtle*.

Looking back, this was the point in the process where the project fully transformed from an exercise in self-pitying self-therapy into a novel with its own internal, universal logic, characters and momentum. I gave myself two paths from which to choose: I could keep moving Gary along the choppy narrative course my own life took after my wife's death, or I could come up with some way to move Gary out into the world, where he could discover the giant woman's valley. Watching Gary meet a giant woman seemed more interesting than watching him sit in an apartment, crying and eating cheese and crackers for a couple of years, so I chose the giant woman.

When I started the project, I had made a commitment to produce at least ten pages a week. I forced myself to push through Gary's post-funeral experience for two or three weeks, finally getting him back to work testing soil samples from construction sites. I still had no real idea of why or how Gary was going to move out into the world. But as I wrote about how miserable Gary was at work, he kept mentioning the knife I used when I tested soil samples. It was blunt and short, with a white plastic handle. It stood out in my mind more clearly than the other details in the testing lab, and after Gary had mentioned

it three or four times I realized I was trying to tell myself something. Harrell, who hadn't had a real purpose before, provided the vehicle by which Gary breaks away from being a shadow version of me to become his own character, a protagonist with his own inner life and set of motivations.

I was fairly surprised when Gary stabbed Harrell in the neck and ran from the police. It took a fair amount of feeling my way along in the dark before I got him on a bus headed north with Dan Tacos, a new travel companion, and even after he was on the road, I wasn't sure exactly what was going on. I've never been to Seattle or Alaska, so I relied on MapQuest to give me a general idea about distances, travel times, and landscape. The Gates of the Arctic National Park seemed like a good place to put Karen's valley because, on the map at least, there's basically nothing there but huge stretches of mountains and snow.

Chandler was created one night when I woke up and wrote down a couple of titles for children's books (oddly, I have no interest in ever writing children's books). One title was *Chandler the Minotaur*. It seemed random inspiration at the time, but like Harrell, Father New Year and Karen, it's easy to think I drew Chandler out from my subconscious without realizing exactly how he would be useful. One could argue that I was appropriating unrelated ideas to incorporate into a project that had no direction, but I'm inclined to think otherwise, simply because Chandler, Karen and Father New Year fit so nicely together for me, in a symbolic sense.

This brings me to a major influence on this project, *A Dictionary of Symbols* by J.E. Cirlot. Unlike the Norton-published *Dictionary of Symbols* by Carl G. Liungman, which deals mainly with graphic symbols and their denotative meanings, Cirlot's book is

rooted in mythology, art history, and the Hermetic tradition associated with the connotative symbols alchemists used to communicate from ancient times through the middle ages and into the eighteenth century. First published in 1962, only a year after Carl Gustav Jung's death, Cirlot's book taps into the same types of 'archetypal' symbols Jung used in his theories of psychoanalysis and dream interpretation. There is a continuity among many of these symbols, at least within the context of the Western cultural tradition, that I found attractive. In an effort to explain his intentions in creating his dictionary, Cirlot quotes Romanian philosopher, writer and historian Mircea Eliade:

Symbolism *adds* a new value to an object or an act, without thereby violating its immediate or "historical" validity. Once it is brought to bear, it turns the object or action in to "open" event: symbolic thought opens the door on to immediate reality for us, but without weakening or invalidating it; seen in this light the universe is no longer sealed off, nothing is isolated inside its own existence: everything is linked by a system of correspondences and assimilations (xiv).

Cirlot also paraphrases Jung: "...Jung observes that all the energy and interest devoted today by western Man to science and technology were, by ancient Man, once dedicated to mythology" (xii).

I find this concept fascinating. The idea that symbolic readings can be performed on works of art including paintings, sculptures, architecture, and especially literature became a minor obsession of mine during the period, starting during the fall semester of 2006, when I was writing the section of *The Turtle* that takes place in Karen's valley. The idea also appealed to me that before scientific determinist ways of looking at reality came to dominate our thinking, writers and artist in earlier centuries deliberately used certain

symbols to communicate messages to their audience. I found Cirlot's book while taking an Early American Gothic Fiction course. As far as I can remember, the basic idea that water is symbolically associated with femininity and air with masculinity came up, and I started thinking about the use of water and air in some of the American gothic stories we were reading. As I looked into the matter, I found that not only is water associated with the feminine and air with the masculine, but earth and passivity are also associated with the feminine, and fire and activity are associated with the masculine. I also found that at the same time, these symbolic gender distinctions are tied up in each other. Cirlot, in his 'Man' entry, writes, "Honorius of Autun, in his *Elucidarium* (12th century), states that the flesh (and the bones) of man are derived from the earth, blood from water, his breath from air, and body-heat from fire" (197). Under 'Woman,' Cirlot writes that one of the basic aspects of woman is "...as the mother, or *Magna mater* (the motherland, the city or mother-nature) related in turn to the formless aspect of the waters and of the unconscious..." (375). Another important distinction occurs between 'upper' and 'lower' spaces and 'upper' and 'lower' waters. 'Upper' spaces are associated with masculinity, while 'lower' spaces are associated with the feminine. 'Upper' waters such as rivers and waterfalls are associated by Cirlot with a more 'active' feminine element, while 'lower' waters like swamps, moats, or tarns represent an inert, passive feminine aspect.

When creating Karen, Chandler, and Father New Year, I kept Cirlot's symbolic definitions in mind, but didn't rigidly limit myself to those definitions. For example, Cirlot writes of giants:

The deepest and most ancient meaning of the myth of the giant alludes to the supposed existence of an immense, primordial being, by whose sacrifice creation

was brought forth ... the giant is, in himself, neither good nor bad, but merely a quantitative amplification of the ordinary... This sense of the giant as ‘that which surpasses’ human stature (here symbolic of power and strength), is also indicative of the broad significance of the giant (118).

Cirlot doesn’t address the possible symbolic differences between male and female giants here, but limits their interpretation to the context of masculinity, identifying them with the father, and indirectly with the Christian God, in the sense that the world was thought to be created by a giant’s sacrifice. In Karen, I created my own gender inversion of the giant’s symbolism to fit my purposes. Within the context of *The Turtle*, Karen is representative of Gary’s feelings for Sharon and the sway she still has over his emotional life, even in death. In this sense, Karen is a “quantitative amplification of the ordinary,” though not in the same way Cirlot describes. Karen also projects immense erotic power and strength for Gary, which is another way of playing Cirlot’s song, in a different key. At the same time, Karen does conform to the conventional female associations with water and low spaces, in that the valley and the lake in its center are Karen’s domain. For example, when Gary first sees Karen in chapter thirteen, she’s swimming in the lake, and most of Gary’s later encounters with Karen take place either by or in the lake. The lake itself represents Gary’s subconscious, of course, which is why it’s so appropriate that Karen ultimately disappears into it. Another difference between *The Turtle* and Cirlot’s account of symbolism is in the use of water. Cirlot identifies as ‘upper’ waters rivers, waterfalls, creeks and other moving bodies of water that flow downhill. Despite its being in a low place, the lake in the center of Karen’s valley is very much active in the sense that Cirlot’s ‘upper’ waters are active, but since the lake is fed by a subterranean hot

spring, the movement comes from beneath, and is hidden until Gary actually enters the lake. At the end, after Karen and Chandler have disappeared into it, the lake becomes inactive, so much so that it's actually frozen.

According to my loose symbolic template, Chandler represents Gary's anger over Sharon's death. Cirlot writes, "The minotaur all but represents the last degree in the scale of relations between the spiritual and the animal sides in man" (210). Cirlot goes on to say that while the centaur, with a human upper body and a lower body of a horse or bull, represents the "prevalence of the monstrous," the minotaur "implies the dominance of base forces carried to its logical extreme" (210). I did not originally picture Chandler as being as gruff as he eventually turned out to be. I thought of him as being very well-mannered and considerate, which seemed like a funny portrayal of a minotaur. But as the story went on, Chandler began expressing some of Gary's internal anger. As I went through my first revision, I made Chandler angrier and ruder to reflect this. I still think of Chandler as essentially comical, but I think now he's a more sympathetic character, because his anger is pointless and misdirected, though he seems to be the only one who doesn't understand this.

Father New Year doesn't have an entry in Cirlot, of course, though I did give him symbolic attributes taken from Cirlot's book. For example, he lives on a mountain above the valley, which could have a whole range of implications. Cirlot goes on at length about the many appearances of the mountain in different religious traditions, but the main portions of his interpretation that served my purposes are that the mountain represents the "...inner 'loftiness' of spirit, that is, transposing the notion of ascent to the realm of the spirit. In alchemy, on the other hand, the reference is nearly always to the hollow

mountain, the hollow being a cavern which is the ‘philosophers’ oven’” (219). Cirlot also notes that there is a concept of a ‘cosmic’ mountain that is roughly analogous to the Tree of Life in that both are located at the ‘center’ of the world, “...thus underlining the idea of the Centre and, in particular, linking it with the Pole Star – the ‘hole’ through which all things temporal and spatial must pass in order to divest themselves of their worldly characteristics” (219, 220).

Father New Year’s mountain suggests that Gary is going through some sort of transformation in the valley. Gary passes through the hollow center of the mountain, or ‘philosophers’ oven,’ and out into the ‘Centre,’ where he’s confronted by Father New Year. I meant Father New Year himself to be a God figure of sorts, but more an existential God who reveals to Gary that there is no objective truth so Gary has to make his own. To reinforce this message, Father New Year transforms into a lion and rapes Gary. This act in turn had its roots in John Donne’s Holy Sonnet 14, “Batter my heart, three-personed God.” I am mainly referring to the two final lines of the poem, “Except you enthrall me, never shall be free/ Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me” (Norton, 1271). I had real reservations about including this scene, and as I got closer to the end of that chapter, I changed my mind about it several times. I was concerned that maybe it would only serve as a shocking event and not accomplish much for the story’s structure. But in the end I realized the scene is necessary for Gary to get over his bruised feelings and childish sense of unfairness and to realize there are no reasons for what happens except for the reasons we create. In other words, the fact there is no ‘creator’ or anyone else steering the ship, and the fact that Gary himself obviously isn’t in control of life or death, gives Gary an ironic freedom to believe whatever he wants and to live accordingly.

In a literal acting out of what Donne no doubt meant metaphorically, Gary is forced to recognize and accept this reality.

In another sense, I think this existential framework applies to literature itself. There's a lot more to life than what we present in a story, because the minutiae of day-to-day living does not make for a compelling read. When we choose what to include in a narrative, we are choosing to use specific events within the story's life to represent reality as a whole. Ideally, these choices will be based on the needs of the reader, not the author's need for a positive self-image. The events we choose to recognize and emphasize make our reality, whether they are on the page or not. This can be a very difficult realization for a writer. Events that have happened to me seem important, and sometimes it seems there must be a reason for them, especially when they're painful. But really, they only seem important because they happened to *me*, and for other people those events seem pedestrian and boring. Facing the fact that I'm not particularly special and that the events of my life are no more important than anyone else's is, for me, tied into the same issues of mortality and existential terror Gary must face in order to move past his grief.

I would be severely remiss if I didn't discuss the symbolism of the turtle. There are many different associations made with the turtle, depending on which culture one consults. Cirlot writes that in Asian folklores, the turtle's rounded shell represents heaven, while its flat under-shell represents the earth. To alchemists, the turtle represented the very rawest material, which would go through a series of transformations on its way to becoming either gold or the philosopher's stone, depending on the alchemist's goal. This series of physical transformations is of course itself a metaphor for spiritual

transcendence. According to Cirlot, “the turtle is a symbol of material existence and not as any aspect of transcendence, for even where it is a combination of square and circle it alludes to the forms of the manifest world and not the creative forces, nor to the Origin, still less to the irradiating Centre” (353). This perfectly describes Gary at the beginning of the novel. He has no real sense of a spiritual world or of anything outside what he can see. Even his sense of the material future is pretty shaky, and he doesn’t seem to anticipate that his situation can improve or even change at all. Until he is forced to do otherwise, Gary simply puts one foot in front of the other.

Another important turtle-implication isn’t in Cirlot or any other source I could find. I wanted to suggest that we’re all turtles to the extent that we carry our pasts around with us. As we get older the past, or ‘shell,’ grows and thickens, slowly becoming heavier. Sharon’s death is something Gary knows he’ll be carrying for the rest of his life, and he isn’t sure he can carry it, or wants to do so. This ties in with the idea that the turtle is a strictly earth-bound creature but, oddly, it also indicates we’re bound to earth by one of the qualities that makes us human and gives us a ‘soul,’ that is, our awareness of mortality and our ability to consider the past, present and future simultaneously. This is also reflected in the neat symbolism of Karen and Chandler’s disappearance into Gary’s unconscious, frozen in his mind. Their condition at the end of the book represents Gary’s emotional state concerning Sharon and Carrie. The past has finally settled into a static set of memories and associations, allowing Gary to shoulder its weight and finally move into the future.

These are some of the general templates I kept in mind as I wrote. There are many other elements in the story that could be held up to symbolic interpretation: the strange,

asexual children from the lake, the bull Gary paralyzes with a sword, the sword itself, the ice tunnel through which Gary leaves the valley, the glacier itself, and Karen's house, among many others. I have my own ideas about how all these details could be interpreted, but I also recognize that it doesn't really matter what I think. My hope is that readers of *The Turtle* will formulate their own ideas about the novel, and if they do they'll probably have ideas that have never occurred to me.

Most of all, this is what *The Turtle* is about for me. On its surface the book is a story about a man who goes places and does things, but under the surface, there's another whole story with a slippery, imprecise meaning. The letters and words on the page are symbols, the characters and events are symbols, and the concepts behind the characters and events are symbols. Nothing is exact, and nothing is static. Any person who reads *The Turtle* – or any novel, for that matter – will have different ideas about its meaning. I find it fascinating that the entire system of symbols at my disposal, from letters and words to abstract, mythological context, comes from the West's common culture and is shared by a wide range of potential readers, but as individuals we can never fully communicate with each other. Even now, I'm having a hard time communicating my conception of the difficulty of communicating. We have to apply our own experience, logic and temperament to other peoples' ideas and work, creating each time an extension of our own personal realities.

If I had the opportunity to rewrite *The Turtle* knowing what I know now, I would change the beginning entirely. I would come up with some other personal tragedy for Gary that has nothing to do with me. As it is, I cut the first hundred pages off the original manuscript, pages that dealt with Gary and Sharon's relationship. I cut another hundred

or so pages from the manuscript as a whole, which tells me I was too preoccupied with my own feelings and issues and too poorly focused on the needs of the narrative and the reader. At the same time, I realize I had to have this experience to understand where I went wrong. I can't complain, because I'm proud of *The Turtle*, especially considering it's my first full-fledged try at writing a novel. One of my fondest hopes is that I will have the time and energy in the near future to write another one and apply what I've learned from this experience, which has been long and difficult, but ultimately more valuable and rewarding than I had hoped.

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The Turtle

by

Mike Robertson

Editor's Preface

The Turtle is an oddity among American literature. Like *A Confederacy of Dunces* or *Finnegans Wake*, *The Turtle* is one of those rare artifacts with such an unlikely history attached to it that the work itself often takes a backseat to the work's reputation. As with the aforementioned, more famous works, much of this reputation centers on the author. But while O'Toole's mystique lies in his post-suicide validation by the literati and Joyce's lies in his absolute unintelligibility and insistence on turning his own strange inner landscape to the world (not to mention his perverse personal peccadilloes), those who know about Gary Floyd at all are drawn by the fact that there is almost nothing to know. In a sense, *The Turtle* represents a forced exercise in New Criticism; the critic need not make an effort to divorce him- or herself from evaluating it through the lens of the author, because the author is not only "dead," but he may not have ever been alive to begin with. Ironically, this very lack of information makes it impossible for some readers to think about anything else, and their speculation about Gary Floyd and how much of *The Turtle* is reality and how much is fantasy tends to dominate any discussion of his work, if in fact it was truly created by Floyd.

Fifty years ago, the great J. Gordon Brown was Head Fiction Editor at Kinsley Owens Publishing when a man named Alan Flick began showing up in the company's lobby. In Brown's account of the incident some ten years later, he wrote that Flick came to the Kinsley Owens offices every day for a month, begging the young man at the front desk for audience with him, Brown. Apparently Flick, then in his mid-forties, was a bit grubby and desperate, waving an equally grubby manuscript. One day Brown happened

to get into the elevator with Flick, who had grown bored with standing in the lobby and was riding from floor to floor, sampling from coffee machines in different departments. The two struck up a conversation and Flick, realizing Brown was the man he'd been trying to reach, managed to tell Brown enough about the grubby manuscript to pique his interest.

In his account, Brown relates Flick's story of the manuscript, a story now so well-worn in literary and publishing circles that retelling it is mostly a formality.

According to Brown, Flick said the manuscript was written by Flick's childhood friend Gary Floyd. Flick didn't go into any detail about Floyd's past but said the manuscript was, at least in part, a "true bunch of stuff that happened, and I was there for a lot of it."¹ Flick gave a brief synopsis of the book to Brown, and then left. Records are unclear but indicate Flick died six or seven years later of lung cancer.

Brown read the manuscript sometime over the next two or three months. He wrote, "It's a bit rough, but so odd I felt I had to find some place for it..."² *The Turtle* was released in the lowest-budget paperback format possible by Shrimp Boat, a Kinsley Owens imprint that mostly released pulp action and horror novels for men. The first printing of only two thousand sold poorly. Since the edition was printed on stock that can barely be classified as paper, most of the copies that weren't thrown away disintegrated within ten years of being printed. There are only seventeen copies still known to exist, and those are incredibly delicate.³

¹ J. Gordon Brown, "Memoir of a Constant Reader" Kinsley Owens: New York 2024.

² *Ibid.*

³ The text for this edition was prepared by Harvard's most prominent Gary Floyd scholar, Rich Smoot, taken directly from a first-edition copy owned by the Library of Congress.

Fortunately, in 2019 a copy of *The Turtle* found its way into the hands of fourteen-year-old Elmer Dudge, who of course grew up to become best-selling author Jim Tim Riley. The Turtle made an impression on Riley, and after the release of his first book Riley mentioned Gary Floyd as an influence.⁴ Critics and fans of Riley's work began hunting for *The Turtle*. Since there were so few copies in circulation - Riley didn't even have his copy anymore - those looking for the work began contacting Kinsley Owens, which issued a re-released edition in 2042.

Since then, the mystery of Gary Floyd has grown proportionally to the popularity of his supposed work. Like the works attributed to Homer, *The Turtle* seems impossible to tie to a historically verifiable person. This is especially frustrating for researchers, considering Floyd could conceivably still be alive, though somewhere in his eighties by now.⁵ Several attempts have been made to track down the real Gary Floyd [the issue is complicated by the existence of a singer named Gary Floyd who was part of a Texas punk rock band called The Dicks] using clues in the text about his job, clues about Sharon and Carrie, and clues centering around well-known historical events that put Floyd in a specific places at specific times. None of these attempts have yielded Gary Floyd, and the growing consensus is that Gary Floyd never existed at all. Some believe the manuscript was written by someone else and the name Gary Floyd was a pseudonym. Some, like Harvard's Rich Smoot, have posited that the manuscript was written by Alan Flick, and there was never any Gary Floyd to begin with, only Flick. Smoot's hypothesis, however, doesn't explain why Flick would go to the trouble of attributing the work to a fictional other and not take credit for it himself. Despite the growing consensus that

⁴ *The Robot Wife*. New York: Houghlin Little Brown 2040.

⁵ Based on clues from the text and what little ancillary paper material is available, researchers put Floyd's birth between 1972 and 1976.

Smoot's ideas about Floyd are correct, the mystery of Gary Floyd and *The Turtle* still remain a mystery.

This new edition attempts to restore the original of the first pulp edition. In preparing the text, Smoot corrected only misspellings and made a few editorial shifts within sentences here and there for clarity's sake. We believe this represents the most complete, definitive version of *The Turtle* released since Shrimp Boat sent it out into the world half a century ago.

And Gary, if you're out there, give us a call, won't you?

*Tom Kinsley,
Head Fiction Editor
Kinsley Owens
June 2061*

The Turtle

by

Gary Floyd

Once upon a time I went in my back yard. I saw a great big hole. I ran in to get a flashlight. I climbed into the hole. Underground, I heard a voice.
It was a leprechaun.
Now I live underground and I'm rich.

- Attributed to Gary Floyd; said to be his first written fiction, produced age six or seven

One

In the summer of 2001, Sharon set up appointments with specialists at the University of Southern California hospital in San Diego. It was one of the only hospitals in the country that did research on secondary pulmonary hypertension. I guess that's because not that many people got it. A lot of old people got *primary* pulmonary hypertension, and so a lot of doctors did research on *that*, but no one really gave a crap about the secondary kind. I still don't know what the difference is, but I do know the difference in the money to be made treating one over the other had a lot to do with how hard they tried to treat the disease. In Sharon's case, it didn't seem like they were trying very hard. The doctors said she got the disease from having a Norplant birth control thingy and smoking cigarettes, so there were some people who acted like she almost deserved to get sick. It was like, "Hey, you wanted to fuck, and you wanted to enjoy smooth blends of Turkish tobacco, so what did you expect?" She didn't see it that way of course, and I didn't either. And Sharon was only twenty-four when she was diagnosed. In those birth control commercials they always say, "Women who take the pill shouldn't smoke, especially if they're over thirty-five." Any twenty-something feels bulletproof with that kind of assurance, because when you're closer in time to your prom than your thirtieth birthday, you tend to be optimistic about that stuff.

In any case, Sharon got sick, and they had to do something about it. The first time we went to San Diego, in 1995, they cracked her open and dug the scar tissue out of her lungs, which I guess was the best thing they could come up with. It took four weeks for

her to recover enough to come home, and I don't even know how much it cost. Somehow the state covered it, though it took a few calls to one of Oklahoma's senators to make it happen with DHS. Sharon's grandparents used to be big Republicans, was how they did it. Anyway, she was on a respirator and had a big tube down her throat for almost that whole time, and she told me later she thought she was going crazy. She couldn't talk, and in the middle of the night she sometimes had weird nurses that would come in and talk to her all crazy and she couldn't call anyone or do anything about it. And she wanted to drink water, she said that was the worst of it, almost. She was on morphine and would have these long, detailed dreams about underground caves full of cool, sweet water, where big rock golems lived and told her stories. Painkillers will do that to you. The same thing happened to me when I got my wisdom teeth out.

In early September 2001, Sharon, her mother Althea, her daughter Carrie and me flew to San Diego, hoping to get some kind of cure for Sharon's lungs. We rented a station wagon, drove to the hospital and after circling the place three or four times parked at the hospice care set behind it.

The hospice care was set on top of a hill at the back of the hospital's property, overlooking a freeway and a mall with more sandy, brush-dotted hills on the other side. I like San Diego for that. Central Oklahoma doesn't have many hills, even ones overlooking a freeway and a mall, so when I get out of there and see some real hills it gives me a sense of exotic charm and sweeping landscape. I guess I'm easily amused that way, like a home-schooled kid that never gets out of the house and thinks riding in a car is super neat.

From where we parked, the building itself seemed small, like a one-story sort of bungalow-style place, but once we got out of the car I saw that it was built down the hill past the façade, and went pretty far back. I was loading the lighter bags from the trunk into Carrie's arms when a thin, burr-headed woman came out to meet us. "Hello. I'm Katharine," she said, approaching Althea and Sharon at the front of the car. "You must be Sharon," she said, taking one of Sharon's hands. She held it for a moment and looked into Sharon's eyes, with her head tilted down. She took a deep breath and rubbed Sharon's hand, closed her eyes and leaned her head back. I saw Sharon give Althea a look, and Althea just shrugged. Sharon doesn't usually go in for that kind of thing. It was like Katharine was trying to channel energy or something. She took Althea's hand and repeated the smiling-and-breathing routine. Sharon and Althea looked a lot alike; they were both semi-short, at least compared to me, and wide with spread-out eyes and short noses. Althea was twenty-five years older than Sharon and her hair was a graying, grizzling frizzy corona, while Sharon's was soft and short-cropped, dyed dark cherry. Still, they made the same exasperated expression when the burr-headed woman took their hands and breathed down her nose into their faces.

"Here you go, kid," I said, putting one more bag on Carrie's outstretched arms, pulling her attention away from her mom, grandma and the lady. "Are those too heavy?"

"No," Carrie said. She looked like Sharon and Althea too, but Carrie was blonde and blue-eyed, just a wisp of a kid at eight. I wished she was mine. She struggled a little under the bags piled in her arms, swaying back and forth like she was channeling Katherine's spirits, but she held up. I smiled and gathered some more bags and shut the trunk, then walked to the front of the car with Carrie trailing behind me. As we walked

up, Katharine let go of Sharon's hand and took one of Carrie's, even though she was using it to hold the armload of bags. Katharine held Carrie's hand for a few moments, the way she had done with Sharon's and gave her the same little half smile like she was concentrating on sending friendly beams of life energy or whatever at her. Carrie looked up at me and I held back a smile. I nodded at her and she held still. Katharine may have looked like a New Age hippie, but I could still tell she'd seen some stuff. She had the thousand yard stare they used to talk about in Viet Nam movies and TV shows, and she wore too much makeup for a hippie. The foundation was thick and flaky like she was covering the hollows in her eyes and cheeks, or something worse.

"And you must be Carrie," Katharine said, letting her hand go. Carrie nodded with her mouth half-open, her blue eyes wide and turned to the corners. "Welcome." I wondered if she was going to take my hand too, but her eyes slid over me as she turned toward the door. "Come in and I'll show you to your room, tell you the rules, and get you settled in."



Katharine told us about the communal kitchen, the alarm system, and when we should and shouldn't come in and out at night. Then she left us in room six, at the bottom of the stairs, next to the elevator, and just down from the kitchen. The room had two double beds, a bathroom and a little table up against the wall with two chairs for sitting. It was really pretty nice. There was a sliding glass door at the far end that looked out over the freeway and the mall.

Sharon slid the door open and stood there, with the screen still closed, looking out at the sky. "Hey, Carrie, look, look, there's a blimp!" she said, pointing. Carrie tore

across the room and ran out onto the porch, knocking the screen door down in front of her as she ran. The look on her face was priceless. Me, Althea and Sharon all cracked up, and stood there in the airy room, laughing and laughing while Carrie stood on the porch, getting mad.

“It’s not funny!” she said, crossing her arms and turning red. She was nine at the time, and even when you were trying to be considerate it was really hard not to laugh when she got mad. Her shoulders hunched up and she frowned, which added comic effect when combined with her pigtails and the SpongeBob SquarePants shirt. “You guys don’t laugh!” She was about to cry when Sharon pulled it together enough to go out on the porch with her and give her a hug.

“I’m sorry, Carrie, did you hurt yourself?” Carrie looked down at herself as if she hadn’t considered this yet. She inspected her arms and legs, even tried to look at her back over her shoulder, then shook her head. “No? Are you just embarrassed?” Carrie nodded. Althea and I were still smiling a little, but we went about unpacking so Carrie wouldn’t think we were staring at her. “Hey, Gary?” Sharon said, “can you put the screen back in?” I went out on the patio, still trying not to laugh, and picked up the screen. Luckily, it just popped out of its frame, instead of being ripped out of it when Carrie went through. I’m sure that would look great to the people that ran the place, ripping out the screen five minutes after we got there, considering they were letting us stay there for free, and all.

I fit the screen back in the frame with no problem and looked out from the patio. The hill dropped off sharp underneath us. There was no grass, just a steady mass of rough-looking ground cover; dry looking, woody bushy plants that look like they were

adapted for desert life, which they were, I guess. It's funny how San Diego is right on the ocean, but it's also got the desert on the other side, so it doesn't rain there very much.

I watched the cars pass for a few minutes until Sharon came out.

"Hey," she said, stepping up to the rail next to me and putting an arm around my waist.

"Hey. You doing all right?" I said.

"Yeah. Are you?" she said.

"Yeah. It's a good view, huh?"

"Yeah." We looked out over the ant-sized mall shoppers.

"So what's the plan tomorrow?" I said.

"Blood tests, I think. I don't have the whole schedule yet, but they're doing tests the whole week," she said.

"Do you have to be admitted?"

"I don't think so. It's just tests."

I put my arm around her shoulder. She turned toward me and we kissed. "I love you," I said.

"I love you, too." We stood there for a while. It was getting on toward evening, and the sun was melting red to yellow from the west, on our left. It occurred to me we were living in a postcard moment right then, but I still got a bad feeling. If this were a movie, I thought, a perfect moment like this would be a sure sign something bad was going to happen.

Two

Sharon didn't have any tests the next day so we went to see the sights in sunny San Diego. We decided to steal a wheelchair from the hospital since sightseeing would require a lot of walking and Sharon wasn't up to it. She could walk short distances okay, but anything more than like half a block made her face pale, her lips blue, and her breath wheezy and labored. We worked out a plan in our room, and then after breakfast Althea, who was quiet and solid enough to be the perfect wheelman (or woman), drove me and Sharon to the front of the hospital and stopped in the loading zone. I ran inside and got one of the wheelchairs they keep by the front desk for people to bring patients in that can't walk, nodding to the pretty brown woman answering phones. She nodded back, like we'd talked about this before and everything was cool. I rolled the wheelchair back out front, and Sharon got out of the car and into it, carrying her portable oxygen tank in her lap. Althea drove off back to the hospice to get Carrie and our snacks and stuff loaded up. I wheeled Sharon in through the big front doors and past the desk, nodding at the brown woman again. She smiled a little at me this time, giving Sharon a little sympathetic nod and a small finger-wave. Sharon just smiled and held onto her tank.

I pushed the chair down the hall behind the desk, headed in a more or less straight line for the back of the hospital. We passed doctors and nurses and scrub techs and patients in various states of disrepair, past the blood testing office, past the cafeteria and the MRI scanning room, until we got to the warren of hallways that housed the first floor examining rooms. I took a few wrong turns, but eventually managed to get us to the big back doors and out onto the sidewalk. This was the tricky part. It was okay for me to use the chair to take a patient to a room inside the hospital, but I didn't know if anyone would

stop me from taking it to the hospice hotel behind the hospital. We both just acted natural, and Sharon put on a show of being a little sicker than she was, hunching down in the chair and closing her eyes halfway. We passed a bunch of people as we rolled down the sidewalk, but no one even looked at us, at least not directly. The day was beautiful, and everyone seemed happy, even to be going to work. The hospital campus really is very nice; the landscaping alone must cost about a million a year. As we rolled down the sidewalk we passed continuous flowerbeds full of birds of paradise, bougainvillea, roses and lots of other colorful, fragrant stuff that I didn't recognize. The weather was perfect, sunny and bright but cool enough for Sharon to wear her green cardigan.

"I hope I can get this thing folded up," I said, looking down at the back of the chair. The place you would normally loosen to fold it was fastened with a tight-looking nut.

"I'm sure you can. I think mom has a little tool kit somewhere," Sharon said, watching a bird pick a seed out of some ground cover.

"Are you sure you're up to this? How's your peeing?"

"Not too bad." Sharon had to take blood thinning medicine to keep more clots from forming in her lungs, but it made her retain water. To counteract that side effect, she had to take diuretics to make her pee a lot, but that depleted her potassium level so she had to take potassium. But sometimes, the potassium got too low anyway and she got arrhythmia, which made her heart speed up to about two hundred beats per minute. I'd had to take her to the emergency room a couple of times a month or two before in the middle of the night because of it, and I was constantly worried about the delicate state of her body chemistry. "Don't worry. I've got plenty of everything. It'll be fine."

“Okay,” I said. We got to the end of the sidewalk and turned down the long, sloping drive to the hospice house. I grinned a little and tipped the wheelchair back. Sharon grabbed the armrests.

“Gary, be careful ...” She was trying to sound worried, but I could tell she thought it was fun. I eased the chair off the curb and onto the smooth black asphalt. I pushed her fast, jogging a little to keep up as the hill steepened. “Gary, slow down!” she said, but she was laughing with her face turned up as she said it, the breeze pushing her reddish brown hair up around the back of her head. I slalomed the chair back and forth along the wide drive, making big S-shaped curves as we worked our way down under the shadow of the big medical office tower to the right.

When we got to the bottom of the drive, we were both laughing and a little bit out of breath, me from the running, Sharon from the excitement and from laughing so much. Althea and Carrie were standing by the car, smiling as they watched us come. We came skidding to a halt at the back of the car. “So you got away with one,” Althea said, “did anyone say anything?”

“No,” I said. “We just went right on through, and nobody even gave us a second look.”

“Good. Can you get that thing folded up, do you think?”



It took some doing, but I finally got the nut on the back of the wheelchair loosened with some pliers and got it folded and crammed into the trunk. By the time we pulled out it was late morning, and the sun was starting to warm the chill out of the air. We stopped at a hardware store on the way and bought a little set of sockets, and then

went to the zoo. It was a lot easier to get the chair folded and unfolded with the sockets, so we were in the zoo making the rounds in no time. Some guy gave us free tickets in the parking lot while I was putting the chair together, which I thought was nice, but a little embarrassing since he seemed like he just did it because Sharon looked so sick. We took them anyway. The San Diego Zoo is really nice, but it's pretty hilly, and after a few hours of pushing Sharon up and down the hills I was getting hungry and worn out, so we stopped to get some lunch. Althea and I were surprised to see that you can buy margaritas in the food area there, and even though it was only about one, we couldn't resist the novelty of drinking at the zoo so we each had one with our hamburgers. I should know better than to drink while I'm out in the sun. I get that head-pounding sensation that means I'll really need a nap later. And there's a certain dizzy carelessness that comes from drinking in the afternoon. Still, the only really embarrassing moment was when we went through the panda bear enclosure. They take the pandas real serious there and they make everyone file through slow, being as quiet as possible. Even the tour guide guy that narrates panda information was whispering into his microphone. He actually hunched down a little while he spoke, as if he were ready to stop, drop and roll if the pandas paid any notice to him. The problem was that I was slightly drunk, and I kept pushing Sharon into the people in front of us, clipping the backs of their legs with the foot rests. They were very well-mannered types, with sun visors and new-looking tennis shorts and shirts, sneakers with shiny-stiff laces. I imagined they were professionals down from La Jolla or even north of L.A. to see the sacred pandas sleep and take muffled dumps. I was trying sincerely to stop, but I still kept hitting their ankles, and Sharon kept turning around and glaring at me. I know it wasn't funny, but I couldn't stop laughing

about it, which made it even harder to stop hitting them with the chair. After a while the tour guy was giving me and Althea looks because we were giggling so much, and after we got through the enclosure there were some guys with dark slacks and sunglasses on standing there, giving us their own stern looks. I pushed the chair fast up the hill, trying not to laugh out loud, but once we got to the top out of earshot we all cracked up, even Sharon. That's one of the great things about Sharon; she never totally lost her sense of humor. Carrie laughed too, but I don't think she really knew why we were so giggly, and we weren't going to tell her.

After the zoo we went to Oldtown and had a nice meal at a Mexican place that specialized in rotisserie chickens on the money we saved from the free zoo tickets. After we ate again my margarita buzz wore off and I felt a lot better, though a little sheepish about the panda thing. Sharon was cool about it, though. That's one of the great things about her. She was always very accepting, and didn't judge people for making asses out of themselves, even when she was implicated by association.

After we ate, we went down by the bay to look at the ships and the water. There's one long sidewalk that runs from the shipyards out along the shore for a long way, maybe all the way to Los Angeles, for all I know. We parked, and I put the wheelchair together and we walked down to see the navy ships from all over the world. We stopped and laughed at a Venezuelan guy who was dangling over the side of his ship on a rope, scraping barnacles off the hull with a putty knife while an officer stood above him, yelling at him in Spanish.

“Why's he doing that, Gary?” Carrie said.

“I guess he got in trouble for something,” I said.

“Why didn’t they just make him go to his room?” Carrie said.

“I don’t know, sweetie. Maybe he was extra bad.”

After we looked at the ships we walked down the sidewalk, looking at the water and the seagulls and other people and stuff. We got down to a stretch where there was only a toney restaurant and an old ship that someone had moored to the sidewalk, putting out a gangplank and turning it into a gift shop. Althea and Carrie were looking at the thick links on the gift ship’s anchor chain while Sharon and I waited. “I have to pee,” Sharon said. She had gone probably ten times at the zoo and a couple at the restaurant, but it had been maybe an hour.

“You can probably go in there,” I said, motioning at the ship.

“Yeah. I don’t guess the chair will fit on the gangplank, huh?”

“No, I’m sorry. Can you make it on your own? I can come in with you if you want.”

“No, that’s okay. It’s not that far.” Sharon got out of the chair and, carrying her portable oxygen puffer in one hand and leaning on the chain-link rail with the other, walked slowly up the angled gangplank and into the belly of the ship. I pushed the brake lever on the wheelchair with my foot and walked over to Althea and Carrie. “She trying to find a bathroom?” Althea said.

“Yeah. She went at the restaurant, but those water pills are ... I don’t think she even drank anything for lunch, either.”

“Yeah,” Althea said. Carrie put her hands on the chain rail and swung forward and backward with her arms held straight and her head down. “Don’t do that, Carrie. You’ll fall in the ocean.”

“I hope I do,” Carrie said. “I could eat seaweed and take a nap in a clam.”

“Just be careful, okay?”

Sharon came back down the gangplank. “He said the only bathroom is upstairs,” she said.

“Crap,” I said. “There’s not like an employee bathroom downstairs he’ll let you use?”

“He said that was the only one.” She looked at me for an idea. I felt like I was supposed to pull a port-o-john out of my back pocket and set it up for her. I thought about going inside to try and reason with whatever heartless son of a bitch was working the goddam counter, but I was afraid I’d lose my temper and even more time would be wasted.

“Well,” I said, trying to keep the tone light, “let’s roll down the way to that restaurant and see if you can use the one there.” Sharon got back into the chair and I rolled her fast down to the toney restaurant while Carrie and Althea trailed behind us, throwing rocks into the water. It was the kind of place where the restaurant itself is really small and most of the tables are actually outside, with waiters spilling in and out and customers standing and sitting everywhere, talking on cell phones and to each other and waving their hands all over the place. I got the sense that it was for locals, just by the way everyone seemed to pretend we weren’t there. Maybe it was the wheelchair. Either way, it was pissing me off.

“Here you go,” I said, stopping in front of the little building. There was no way the chair was going to fit in there with all those people. “Can you make it?” Sharon turned around and looked at me.

“I don’t want to,” she said in a quiet voice.

“Why not?” I said, ignoring the stares from the people outside. A couple of waiters gave us curious looks, but then walked off fast with their trays and order pads.

“I just ... don’t want to go in there,” Sharon said.

“Goddammit,” I said. “I don’t know what to tell you, then, unless you can hold it until we get in the car and drive somewhere.” We stood there for what seemed like a long time. I had become slightly disconnected from myself, the way you do when you’re about to do something you’ll regret later. “Are you sure you don’t want to go in?” She didn’t say anything. “Did you hear me? Hey.” I turned the chair a little and leaned down. “Can you hold it or not?” I barked into her ear, like she was a three-year-old. My sense of guilt was already drifting back toward the rest of me like a dirigible that had come unmoored but was being reeled patiently in. I looked around at Sharon’s face, and there were a couple of little tears on her cheeks, of course, pooling along the top of her oxygen tube to either side of her nose. “Fuck!” I said, drawing a lot more looks from the crowd. Looking back, I suppose yelling at them would have been all I really needed to do. Instead, I turned the wheelchair toward the car and started pushing it fast that way.

“Wait, Gary, I can go in,” Sharon said. “Just stop, okay?” The way her voice sounded just a bit scared and panicky made me angrier and reeled the guilt-dirigible a little closer into dock.

“No, goddammit, let’s get back in the car and find a fast food place, or something. That’ll be easier. Okay? That’ll be easier.” Sharon didn’t say anything. “Come on,” I said as we passed Althea and Carrie. “Let’s go find a restroom someplace where everybody’s not a bunch of assholes.” They fell in behind us without a word, and we all

walked fast back to the car and they got in. I folded the chair in record time and threw it in the trunk and we were off. We found a Wendy's a couple of miles away, and though Sharon tapped her feet the whole way there, she only peed a very little in her pants before she made it inside.



After the silent drive back to the hospice, I called my aunt and uncle's house. They live in San Diego. When we came out in '95 I stayed with them while Sharon was in the hospital, and Althea stayed with an aunt of hers that lives out there. I didn't really feel like doing a lot of visiting, but I knew if I didn't call there would be a ruckus and we can't have that. Besides, it would be my mom that heard the worst of it from my aunt, and I would feel bad causing her all that griping and whatnot.

I was surprised when my cousin Joy answered the phone. "Hi! When did you get in?" she said.

"Oh, not too long ago," I lied, slipping off my shoes and sitting on the chair by the patio door. "We just got into our place, you know, getting settled in. How are you guys doing?"

"Oh, great!" she said.

"Are you ... staying over there?"

"No, didn't your mom tell you? My mom got us tickets to Street Scene! It's tonight!" she said.

"Tonight? Gee, I don't know if I can ... wait, what's Street Scene?"

“It’s this thing they do downtown every year! They have a bunch of concerts on a bunch of different stages set up all over downtown! The Black Crowes are playing! Isn’t that cool? My friend Angela is going with us!”

“Oh. Gosh, I wish I had known.” I kind of hate the Black Crowes, to tell you the truth. “We just got here and everything, and we’re all pretty tired ...”

“You have to go, though. My mom bought tickets. I mean, we won’t be gone that long, and I’m sure Sharon wouldn’t mind if you came out with us for just a little while, right? You’ll totally come, right?”

I looked over at Sharon and Carrie, sitting together on the bed, watching an episode of *Fairly Odd Parents*. I could tell Sharon was listening. “Uh, sure, I can come out for a bit,” I said, making my finger into an imaginary gun, holding it to my head, and pulling the trigger. Going out would just add passengers to my growing guilt zeppelin, but I have to admit some time away from the room sounded good, despite my mimed suicide. It had only been a day, but it already felt like a very long trip.



Joy and her friend Angela picked me up in front of the hospice hotel in Joy’s purple convertible Firebird. They were both dressed up for a night out, with tight jeans and blouses and their hair sprayed and tousled just so. They both smelled like really fruity gum. I had kissed a slightly melancholy Sharon on the way out, who had just finished a shower and smelled like an apple orchard. I wanted to go back inside and lay down with her. I was wearing a pair of khaki cargo shorts, a T-shirt and those sandals with the Velcro straps. I felt weird and underdressed, like I had stepped out of the building onto another planet.

From the moment I got in back seat, I could tell Angela knew the score about me and Sharon and everything else. I could tell because they were careful not to bring Sharon into the conversation, and when I brought her up they would get all quiet and look out into traffic. Angela was about Joy's age, a few years older than me, sort of nondescript and dirty blonde. Joy put the top down and we passed around a joint on the way. It was too windy in the backseat for me to really talk to them, so I just hit the joint when it came my way and watched the scenery pass by in the darkening city, letting the unintelligible conversation from the front seat blow past me with the wind, really only hearing the occasional burst of shrill, howling laughter.



By the time we pulled into the parking garage I was having trouble focusing. I hadn't smoked any weed in four or five days, mainly just from lack of opportunity, so the joint, which was also fairly strong compared to what I usually smoked, hit me really hard. Driving around and around the levels of the parking garage made me even dizzy, and Joy drove too fast anyway, which made the tires make that parking-garage-squealing sound they make. When we got out, Joy popped the trunk and pulled out a six pack of Smirnoff Ice malt beverage. It is not tasty in my opinion, and I declined to take one. Joy just shrugged, and she and Angela downed the whole six of them in about five minutes while I looked off the top of the garage. There were rivulets of people trickling one way down the street while cars weaved slowly through them going the other way like big, patient metal salmon. To my left there was a dome of light glowing up from the buildings like a fake sunset, and I could hear a throbbing pulse of voices rising and falling on the breeze. I felt a mixture of anxiety and anticipation move up from my guts,

making them twist a little and making my eyes cross. I shook my head to clear them, and immediately regretted it, since it just made me dizzy and blurred my vision more.

After Joy and Angela finished their malt beverages, we got in a smelly little elevator and rode down to the street. I felt like I had accidentally fallen in with a couple of high school girls on their first night out alone. They giggled and talked too loud, smacked each other and squealed like my older sister used to when she was twelve and had sleepovers. As we rode down, the fruity gum smell closed in and pushed into my temples, and for a minute I got scared I would throw up. Then the doors opened, and even though the city air smelled of exhaust, food, beer and people, there was just enough hint of humid ocean tang to leach away my nausea.

The thing about San Diego that's different than Oklahoma City is that there's a lot more people living there than there are here. I used to go downtown in OKC for New Year's Eve and concerts or whatever, and it gets sort of crowded, but as we moved into downtown San Diego the crowd became something entirely new to me. The next day I would hear on the news that there were half a million people packed into however many blocks, like ten or something. Half a *million* people.

I tried to keep up with Joy and Angela as best I could. They acted like it was no big deal, like they walked around in crowds like that all the time. I became focused on their backs as they darted in and out of people, making their way toward the stage where the Black Crowes were going to play. The people around me blurred together and the sound of the crowd became a sticky, amoeba-shaped thunder pressing and encasing my head. Only Joy and Angela's backs were clear. Joy would occasionally look back at me,

annoyed, and would slow down a little bit for a couple of seconds until I thought I was starting to catch up, and then they would forget and be off again.

They eventually stopped when we got to a narrower street lined with green plastic Porto-johns. The reek was greater than the sum of its parts; puke, shit, piss, Porto-john chemicals, corn dogs, popcorn, beer, cigarette smoke, and I think probably tacos all mixed together into an entirely new, towering olfactory monument to mass-scale urban recreation.

Joy and Angela waited in line for one of the toilets, and I tried to find a place to stand without being in the way. It was sort of impossible. If you weren't standing in line, you had to move, so I was pushed along up and down the row of green, stinky toilets, wading through the trash on the pavement in my sandals. I eventually found a flyer with all the concerts on all the different stages printed on it. I caught my breath when I saw that James Brown was playing on another stage down the street from the Black Crowes at the same time. *James Brown*. I couldn't believe it.

I kept circling until Joy and Angela finally got in and out of one of the green stink boxes. "Hey," I said, holding up the flyer. "Did you know *James Brown* is playing tonight at the same time as the Black Crowes?"

"Oh, yeah," Joy said. Angela looked off into the crowd. She had a little smear of white powder under her nose.

"Well can we ... I mean, he might be dead this time next week for all we know, so I thought maybe it would be cool if we went over there instead of the Black Crowes, you know?"

“Yeah, I don’t know,” Joy said. “We kind of had our hearts set on the Black Crowes.”

“Yeah, I don’t like James Brown,” Angela said. “What’s he got, that ‘I Feel Good’ song, or whatever? He’s like, old.”

“Well, maybe I can walk down that way and meet you after ...”

“No, you’ll get lost, and it’ll be four in the morning before we find you again. Come on. It’s almost dark.” Joy grabbed my hand and pulled me along behind her and Angela for a bit, then let go and moved ahead, picking up the same pace as before they stopped to powder their noses. I followed along again, moving through the crowd like a dumb fish in a strange coral reef. They finally slowed down at the edge of a big, milling crowd. My claustrophobia was getting better since I was starting to come down, but I still felt confused and worried I was going to get lost. I stood up on my toes and saw a stage far away at the end of the crowd. There was no one on it yet, but I surmised it was reserved for the Black Jerkes.

Joy and Angela started pushing their way into the crowd, slipping between people and cutting ahead of them with singular purpose. I followed without their motivation, so it was harder. Unlike them, I felt embarrassed when people glared at me and shared looks with whoever they happened to be standing with. I lost sight of Joy for a moment, and felt a quick stab of panic in my belly. Then I saw her up ahead, trying to slip under some guy’s arm. I pushed forward to catch up, but stopped when I kicked something, and felt a lot of warm fluid wash over my foot, under my sandal straps and down under my foot, pooling in the sole. I looked down and saw a red beer cup lying on its side by my foot. I tried to tell myself that it was just beer, but logic explained to me that the fluid

was very warm, and that if it was beer it would have to have been sitting there undisturbed by the half a million people milling around since early in the afternoon, when it would have been warmed by the sun. Not only that, but it had cooled off a lot since sunset, about two hours ago, so it was that much less likely that the beer would have retained heat it was unlikely to have absorbed in the first place. Therefore, Logic Brain concluded, some asshole had pissed in a cup and set it on the ground, I had knocked it over onto my sandal, and now my foot was squelching around in it. “Goddammit,” I said. I had been getting steadily more and more frustrated as I followed Joy and her stupid friend around in the crowd, and up until I kicked the piss cup I was on the verge of real anger, but it was just too much, and it burned out like an overloaded fuse. Looking back, my worry over Sharon was probably most of my problem, but at the time I didn’t directly think of her. I gave a big, weird-sounding laugh and a guy with long hair and a big hat with a peacock feather in the hatband gave me a funny look. “Fuck it,” I said to him. “Isn’t that right, Johnny Hatband? Fuck fuck fucking fuck it.” He raised an eyebrow at me, and then looked away toward the stage. I grinned, turned around and walked back the other way, squishing piss out of my sandal with each step.



I walked straight down the street away from the stage. I found that once I wasn’t trying to follow someone I didn’t really mind the crowd as much, and once the piss started drying I tried to forget about it. It was such a big crowd. It was like walking through head-high water that was made out of really big particles that talked and yelled and drank. I lit a cigarette, drawing a few looks since people in California aren’t as fond

of smoking as the people at home, but they were immediately absorbed into the deluge and I started feeling good and anonymous.

I kept going and wound up at the edge of another crowd pointing toward another stage. The people in this crowd were different; there were no assholes with long hair and big hats, no screaming dumbass girls with tight jeans and ratted hair, no jocks wearing Dave Matthews Band T-shirts and gelled hair. There were more black people, which was encouraging, and more hipster-looking kids and punkers, and more older people who looked like they didn't get out of the house much and were having a really good time just being outside.

I slowly worked my way up in the crowd until I was about thirty feet away from the middle of the stage. I could have gotten closer, but the bodies became more and more compacted, and at thirty feet away it was like trying to press through something dense and semi-solid, like bread. After a while the lights on the stage went down and the crowd roared while shadow shapes moved out and picked up shadow instruments. One of the musicians gave a signal, and the band started up. They played a medley of funk and soul for about ten or fifteen minutes, warming to the sound, building an edge that they pushed and pushed until the crowd was in a frenzy. Then the band stopped and a single spotlight came up center stage. "Ladies and gentlemen," a voice said over the P.A., "put your hands together for Soul Brother Number One! Mr. Dynamite! The Godfather of Soul! Ladies and gentlemen, the Hardest Working Man in Showbusiness! Brothers and sisters, Mr. James Brown!" The crowd was ramping noise like pressure behind a steam whistle as it moved closer to full-on frenzy. I howled at the top of my lungs, feeling like my throat was going to tear itself out, but I couldn't hear myself at all. The spotlight went

out for a moment, and when it came back up, James Brown was standing there, wearing a white three-piece suit trimmed with rose-colored sequins, his hair piled and lacquered into a helmet almost as tall as his face. He looked at the crowd for a moment, sizing us up, already developing a sheen of sweat over his forehead and temples. He flicked his microphone cable like a whip and said, “two, three, four,” and the band moved into “Sex Machine” like they had been playing it the whole time and we just couldn’t hear it, like they were *always* playing it.

Time took on the solid, sheet-of-glass still-motion of pure catharsis. I jumped and yelled, sang along, sweated, and even cried a little. The crowd to me became a single body, an extended network of nerves that absorbed grief, guilt, pain and worry, metabolizing all the uncertain future and excreting it into the starry sky as a howling cloud of sound where it dissipated into the black glass of the atmosphere. It had been so long since I wasn’t worried or subdued or hiding something from myself that it seemed like a new experience to feel okay. The next thing I knew the band had done three encores, the lights were up, and I found myself surrounded again by indifferent strangers separating back into themselves. The weight of reality settled back down on my shoulders like a familiar scar, and I carried it back down the street.

Three

The tests started the next day. Althea and I took turns wheeling Sharon over to the hospital, sitting in waiting rooms with her and then by ourselves while nurses took blood samples and did scans and stuck tubes places and scraped things. I worked

my way through several crappy novels. It's funny, when I first started spending a lot of time in hospitals, I thought I would take the opportunity to read good books, classics and stuff I never got around to. I still never did get around to it. It's too hard to concentrate. Trashy books are the best in a hospital, since you don't really have to pay attention to them, but they take your mind off things.

One day we were waiting in a room, I forget what for.

"Are you pregnant?" The man next to Sharon on the other side was leaning toward her.

"No," Sharon said.

"You are very big," said the man. He had a tinge of an accent, somewhere in the Middle East, I thought. He had a round head and a lazy eye. "Not fat, but large on the inside, it seems."

"My heart's swollen," Sharon said, which surprised me a little.

"Ah," the man said, "that will explain it. You are sick, yes?"

"Yes."

"As am I. I have come down from L.A. for this scan. There is something happening to my liver, they say."

"What's wrong with it?" Sharon said.

"I don't know. It's always something. I have had cancer in my bowel two years ago, and now this. I just come to my appointments. I do not ask why." I was struck for a moment at how polite and friendly they both sounded, like they'd just discovered that they'd gone to the same high school at different times, or that they both owned tabby cats.

"What is wrong with your heart?"

“I have blood clots in my lungs, and it makes my heart work too hard, so it’s swollen.”

“Can they fix it?” the man said.

“I don’t know. How about you?”

The man shrugged. “I do not know. It is hard, because I am an actor, and I don’t have insurance. I wish it would resolve itself so I can work more and not spend all my earnings on my traitorous flesh.”

“You’re an actor?” I said.

“Yes, you may have seen me! I was in *Three Kings*, with George Clooney and Marky Mark, you have seen it?” Sharon and I both nodded. “Yes. Do you remember the part, when Clooney must take the jeep from the man with the eye patch? That is me! And I must tell him he can’t have the jeep, and we make a deal. Me. That was me. I am supposed to be Iraqi warlord, but I am Afghani, for real, you know? But they said it was close enough. Was good job, meeting Clooney.”

“That’s really cool,” I said. “I’ll have to go back and watch it again. I remember the part, but I can’t remember it that well.”

“Yes, it’s good job, when you can get one,” the guy said. “When I am strong again, I will do more work, and you will see it, yes?”

“I hope so,” Sharon said. A nurse came to the waiting room door and called a name. The man stood up.

“That is me. Good luck to you. Good luck.” He took Sharon’s hand and shook it with both of his. He gave me a nod and then followed the nurse.



Toward the end of the week Sharon had an appointment with a specialist that was supposed to interpret all the test results and tell us our options and what she thought was the best course of action. I took Carrie down to the hospital cafeteria and bought her a Chipwich, which is just a big ice cream sandwich with chocolate chips all over it, while Althea and Sharon talked to the specialist. I always get Chipwiches at the hospital. They're like a comfort food overload that shorts out most worry circuits. Carrie and I sat there and picked at them, sharing a root beer while we waited. Carrie was hunched over her ice cream, head propped on her left hand. She looked so small in the chair, but her posture was all jaded adult. It was somehow endearing and sad at the same time.

“What are they doing?” Carrie said.

“They're just talking to a doctor. They did a lot of tests, and now the doctor is telling them how the tests came out,” I said.

“I want to go back to the room. Can't we go there and wait?” Carrie said.

“No, they'll be down in a few minutes. Then we can go do something fun. Okay?”

Carrie picked chocolate chips off her Chipwich and rubbed them on her lips, creating a sort of chocolate lipstick effect. The effect amplified her young-but-old posture, which in turn amplified my sadness and affection for her. “Gary, what are they going to do, anyway? I mean, is my mom going to get better?” She looked up at me. Her blue eyes were round and curious and her mouth was solemn, despite having melted chocolate all over it. I took a deep breath and a sip of root beer.

“I don't know exactly what they're going to have us do. It's kind of complicated. That's what all the tests are for, so they can figure out the best thing. But I think your

mom's going to get better. I don't know how long it'll take, but I think in the long run she'll be okay. Okay?"

Carrie looked back down at her Chipwich, hunching her shoulders up a little. Then she nodded. "I just want her to feel better," she said. "So she can do things again, and we can go do stuff. Like that."

"I know, Carrie. It's really hard for everyone, but I know it's probably harder for you, in some ways. I just want you to know everything's going to be okay. We just have to hang in there." I felt like an idiot. I had no idea.



Sharon and Althea came down to the cafeteria after about an hour and had some soup. They acted like they hadn't been anywhere special and there was nothing really to report on. I didn't want to bring it up in front of Carrie, since I didn't know if it was good or bad, so I just sat there eating packages of crackers.

"Mom, can we go to the ocean today?" Carrie said.

"Maybe in a little bit, Carrie," Althea said. "I think your mom is kind of worn out. Let's give her a chance to rest up a little and maybe we can go this evening."

"So," I said, "how was the meeting?"

Sharon shrugged. "It was okay. Not a lot happened."

"Oh." I stripped the plastic off another bundle of crackers. "That seems ... odd."

"The doctor was really nice," Althea said. "I guess she grew up in Ada, back in the seventies. Came out here for medical school. Real nice girl."

"Yeah," Sharon said. I looked over at Carrie, who was blithely dissecting the melting remains of her Chipwich with a coffee stirrer. I looked back and Sharon was

looking at me. I couldn't read what was in her eyes, which was rare. I shuddered a little, feeling like a stranger.



After Sharon and Althea finished their soup we went back to the hospice to get the car and drove out to Ocean Beach. I like Ocean Beach. I'd been there a few times when I've been in San Diego to visit Joy and my aunt and uncle. My mom used to live there back in the sixties when my dad was in the Navy and my older sister Rachel was still a baby, and it still has that hippie vibe to it.

We got down there around seven or so, when the edge of the sun was about to touch the ocean and the crowd was thinning. All the tourists were going off to Oldtown or downtown or wherever they go to get big steaks or handmade guacamole or fish tacos. The restaurants in Ocean Beach were mostly like taco shacks and burger stands, and a lot of bars.

We parked on the main drag, which runs out of the hills between a long row of shops. The road stops right where the beach starts a few hundred yards from the ocean. That's one thing that always blows me away about California, you'll be driving along or walking somewhere and you'll look over and see the edge of the continent. I picture maps from almanacs books and wonder at the fact that I'm there, right at the edge where the brown ink stops and the blue ink starts.

We made our way down onto the beach. Carrie kicked off her shoes and ran ahead along the edge of the water and Althea followed her. Sharon and I walked slowly together along toward them. We held hands and didn't say anything for a little bit. Finally, Sharon spoke up. "So they said there's nothing they can do here."

“What do you mean? What the hell were all those tests for, then?” I said.

“Just to see what the situation is, and to tell what needs to be done,” Sharon said, toeing an old beer cap.

“Did they say what’s to be done?”

“She said I should go home, get on Flolan as soon as possible and get on a list for a heart and lung transplant.”

“Goddammit.” I pulled Sharon’s hand up and kissed it. “How long do you think the wait is for one of those?”

“I don’t know. I’ll make an appointment with Dr. Paradis when I get back and see what they can do,” she said, still not looking at me.

“Flolan’s the thing with the neck tube, right?” I said.

“Right.”

“Well ... how long if you don’t ... I mean, how long can you go on without it, did they say?”

“Not too long, I don’t think. Maybe six months,” she said, her voice so quiet.

“Goddammit.”

“Look, Gary, I want you to promise me something, okay?”

“Look, please don’t do that. Not yet. I mean, it looks bad now, but I think you’re going to be okay. We’ll get you on a list and do what we need to do, I’ll take care of you and everything’ll work out. Don’t start making me promise things.”

“Gary, I’m trying to be realistic. I don’t know what’s going to happen. But I’m not so worried about myself anymore. You know, I’m scared and everything but I’m more worried what’s going to happen to you and Carrie.”

“You don’t have to worry about us, because you’re going to be all right,” I said.

“I just want to know that if something did happen, you’d be there for Carrie. I don’t know if she’ll have to live with Kevin, or if she’ll get to stay with my mom or Lynn or what, but I want to know you’ll at least be involved in her life, you know?” I hated to think of Carrie living with Kevin, even if he was her real dad. He drank a lot, and was the kind of jackass that thought spending his big inheritance on houses and random shit was actually a worthwhile way to spend his life.

I frowned down at the sand. “I know. You don’t have to worry about that. I’ll always be around for Carrie. I’ll always be around for you, for that matter.”

“I hope so,” Sharon said, and turned toward me. We held each other there in the sand, standing in the end of the day’s light at the edge of the world. I held on to Sharon and watched the limp waves slapping in, coming slow like they were being pushed by a slowing heart. Down by the water, Carrie splashed and ran through the rim of the ocean. Althea turned back to look at us. With the sun behind her I couldn’t read the expression on her face but from the way she stood there, head cocked a little to the side, hands half stuffed into her front pockets I could guess. I felt a sudden wave of gratitude for her, knowing that whatever happened, Althea would be there. As Carrie ran behind her, I felt grateful for her too. As long as the last of the warming sun lasted and the cooling salt air breezed out of the west, washing over us, and as long as Sharon’s oxygen tube puffed softly in my ear, I felt grateful for all of us.

Four

Sharon had her meeting on Friday. Because we were traveling on the cheap and we got what discount tickets we could, I was supposed to fly home Tuesday and Sharon, Althea and Carrie were going back the day after. We had three days to kill in Southern California, which should have been fun. But the bad news from the hospital put a damper on everyone's mood.

Those days were more or less uneventful as far as drama was concerned; Saturday we drove up the Pacific Coast Highway to Los Angeles and drove around. It wasn't what I expected. Coming from the PCH we passed the port of Los Angeles and what seemed like an endless stretch of industrial development, a filthy network of pipes and concrete and metal structures as far as we could see. We passed through Torrance, Long Beach, Compton, and a few other places I'd heard of from movies, but they didn't look like places from movies. They all looked just like the string of suburban shopping centers that radiate from the middle of Oklahoma City, only with a lot more people and cars in them. It was like a TV show outside the window, all the different sections of town that I kept expecting to become different, but kept staying the same.

Eventually we passed through a section of blocks that did look like a movie, except it was like a movie about homeless people, lined with liquor stores and honest-to-God bums lying on the sidewalk asleep, covered with cardboard or newspaper, with small, cheap bottles of booze next to their heads. And then the funny thing was, we turned a corner and we were in Beverly Hills, which looked more or less like its movie self, only smaller.

Sunday we went to Ocean Beach again, watched TV and hung around the hospice hotel. They had a room full of books and videotapes you could borrow. I got a couple of tapes and stole a copy of *The Beautiful and the Damned* by F. Scott Fitzgerald to keep as a souvenir. I've always liked his stuff and I thought it was fitting to steal it in Southern California, since Fitzgerald more or less drank himself to death just up the road in Hollywood. Though I read somewhere that when he actually died, Fitzgerald was eating a Butterfinger. Not very poetic. I went to dinner with my aunt and uncle Monday night, my last night in town, and dodged questions about Sharon and what had been going on. Other than that, Sharon, Althea, Carrie and me just sort of hung around like we would have if we'd been at home. We were just waiting, I guess. Waiting to fly home so we could wait. We didn't talk about the transplant list or the Flolan any more after that night on the beach, and Carrie didn't give us too much crap about hanging out in the hotel all the time.

I went to bed Monday night feeling sad. I hate traveling alone, but like I said, discount-seat beggars can't be choosers. I set the alarm in the room for seven since I had to be at the airport early to get checked in, and my flight was out at ten. I crawled into the bed next to Sharon, who was reading my stolen Fitzgerald book, lying on her side. I spooned up next to her and pressed my face into her back, smelling her smell and her under smell and feeling the peculiar energy I always felt between us. Next to us, Althea and Carrie were sitting on their bed watching a movie on Nickelodeon called *Snow Day* about kids who get out of school because of snow and the things they do. I'd seen it before. I tuned out the sound of yelling and snowmobiles. Sharon put a hand on my leg and gave me a pet. I hated traveling alone for its own lonely sake, but I especially hated

that I wouldn't be around to help Sharon out on her trip home. I knew it would work out, and that Althea could handle it and it would only be a day, but still. I guess I'm kind of a worrier. I finally drifted off to the sound of Chris Elliott screaming at kids over the roar of his snowplow, over the low hum of Sharon's compressor.



The next morning, at about six, the phone rang and I woke up. "What the fizz?" I said, and flopped over. I raised my head and listened to it ring, even though it was right by my head and there was nothing mysterious about what it was or where it was coming from. Sharon, Carrie and Althea all raised their heads up, waiting to see if someone else would pick it up before they couldn't stand it anymore and had to do it themselves. Since I was technically closest, I ended the standoff and picked up the phone.

"Hello?" I said.

"Gary? Is that you?"

"Uh huh. Mom?"

"Oh, Gary, are you all right? Is everyone okay there?" She sounded like she was crying a little, which didn't mean a lot, since she cries at the drop of a hat.

"Uh, yeah. We're sleeping. What's going on?" I said.

"Oh, bad things are happening, Gary. This is the end, or the beginning, I don't know. This is so awful."

"What are you talking about? What happened?"

"Oh, God. I have to go. I just wanted to make sure you were all okay. Turn on the TV."

"Okay," I said.

“I love you, honey.”

“Uh, I love you too.” She hung up. I put the phone back in the cradle and sat up. Dawn was growing outside on the patio, but it was still pretty dark in the room.

“What’s the matter?” Althea said, half rolling toward me.

“I don’t know, my mom’s wiggling out about something. She said to turn on the TV.”

“What did she say?” Sharon said, sitting all the way up.

“I don’t know. You know how she gets sometimes. It’s probably nothing.” I got out of bed, turned on the TV, and switched it to one of the network channels before it was even warmed up. Carrie, Sharon and Althea all half sat up, looking over their shoulders, still covered with blankets like curious possums. I sat on the edge of the bed and we watched the picture brighten and swim into view just in time to see an airplane fly into the side of a glass skyscraper. It punched right through it like my pellet gun used to punch through paper targets in the backyard. “Holy shit!” I said, coming fully awake.

“What was that?” Sharon said, sitting the rest of the way up.

“A plane flew in that building,” I said. “What is that, the World Trade Center?”

“Yeah, it is,” Althea said, getting up and coming over to where I was sitting.

“Holy shit,” I said again. We all sat there for a while, hair ruffled and sleepy-eyed, and watched smoke and flame billow out of the towers. Whoever was running the camera was freaking out, running up and down the street trying to get out of the way of the pedestrian stampede flowing away from the destruction. The network guy that was speaking over the video sounded like he was having a tough time keeping his shit together too, and he wasn’t even down there where the camera was.

I won't give the whole blow by blow, because chances are you probably saw it all on TV too, and you know what it was like. Suffice it to say that we sat there and watched people jumping out of the buildings, the scale making them look like fleas bailing out of a flaming flea circus, which somehow made it worse than if we could have seen them up close. The buildings burned some more and people ran around screaming, and eventually the buildings collapsed and a big cloud of smoke and rubble and whatever came boiling down the street and swallowed the camera.

By eight o'clock California time, eleven in New York, things were in total mayhem down on the street. The news guys didn't really have anything new to say, so they were spending the time it was taking for new news to happen to speculate on what all this meant. A plane was forced down in Pennsylvania on its way to Washington, D.C., and they had slowly put it together that it was all part of a unified plot. The government had shut down the airports (I wouldn't be going home alone after all), but there were still planes in the air, and the news guys were afraid that one or some of the planes headed for California might be harboring terrorists that hadn't made themselves known yet for fear they would be shot down before they could reach their targets. Not only that, but they thought it was likely that there would be germ warfare on the coasts, possibly dirty bombs and God knows what else. No one knew the full damage or if it was even over being done.

After a while I turned off the TV. "Well, what do you think?" I said.

"I think we should think about getting the hell out of here," Althea said. Sharon nodded. Carrie just looked scared, almost shell-shocked, like she didn't know what she'd just seen and didn't really want to.

“Yeah, that’s a good idea,” I said. “What are we going to do, though?”

“Drive. We’ll just take the rental car and go. Worry about them getting pissed off about it when we get back,” Althea said.

“Fair enough,” I said, “Let’s go.”

It didn’t take but about twenty minutes for us to load all our stuff in the car.

Katherine, the skeletal woman who’d greeted us when we got there, gave Sharon a hug in the driveway and handed her a crystal. “Thanks,” Sharon said, hugging her back.

Katherine whispered something in Sharon’s ear. “Okay. I will.”

I was surprised there wasn’t more traffic but there wasn’t much at all, much lighter than you would expect on an average weekday morning. I pictured everyone in the city doing what we had been doing just a half hour before, sitting and standing around TVs watching and wondering if what they were seeing was real or if someone had slyly turned the channel to a network in an alternate dimension where permanent, immovable objects fell over and fleas jumped off their burning circuses as part of the act. By eight thirty we were headed north on I-15 toward the I-40 junction, where we would swing east and drive straight back to Oklahoma.



Althea is a driver. She loves it. She’s said on other trips that she gets nervous if she’s not the one driving, so whenever we go somewhere, I don’t mind letting her. Not that I don’t like driving, but if someone wants to do it that bad, I’m not against letting them. I rode up front with Althea while Sharon and Carrie shared the backseat. That arrangement just sort of insinuated itself, and that’s the way we kept it.

It was an eerie day. We made our first gas stop in Needles, which is right on the border between California and Arizona and one of the hottest places in America. It was 113 degrees when we pulled up about eleven, and Needles was like a ghost town. There was no traffic at all, and I only saw a couple of people walking around. I got the feeling the gas station was the only thing open in town. For all I knew, the people we saw walking around were heat mirages, the station itself could have been a figment of our imaginations, a product of the panic-driven quest to escape what we feared was the doomed edge of the continent. The only thing that made the place seem like a part of the current time continuum was the fact that when we pulled up, the attendant was changing the price of unleaded from two dollars to two seventy-five.

“Are the prices really going up that fast?” Althea said.

“Sure are,” the attendant said, ruffling his reddish-sandy mustache around as he spoke. “TV says ‘cause of the attack, oil’s going up like a weather balloon. Supply’s going to dry up.”

“Good God,” Althea said. “If it gets much over three dollars, we’re going to have trouble making it home.”

“Be a couple of days before that happens,” the guy said. “You’re hitting it at the right time, I say.”

I filled the tank as fast as possible, since we had to turn the car off and Sharon can’t stand too much heat. By the time we got it filled and the AC back on, she was sweating and breathing like she’d jogged up a steep hill. I ran in and bought a big bag of beef jerky and ran back out and we took off.



We drove non-stop, across the I-40 dogleg of California desert, into the Arizona desert and onward toward Flagstaff. The desert weirded me out a little. I mean, Oklahoma is also mostly flat like the desert, but Oklahoma is ugly and uninteresting, like a buck-toothed, flat-chested, cross-eyed girl who also happens to only love talking about her stamp collection. The western American desert is different. The girl may be buck-toothed, flat-chested and cross-eyed, but she maybe has amazing-looking skin and hair, the color of sun-faded burgundy plush upholstery, and she wants to tell you stories about giants and mythical things she's seen in the nooks and crannies out where she lives while she braids your hair. I think the desert was the perfect landscape for our escape from an apocalyptic coast. As the day went on I kept looking over my shoulder, almost involuntarily, to see if there was a mushroom cloud growing back there under the westering sun. We kept the radio on, listening for more news, and I wondered if I would see the cloud before I heard about it on the radio, kind of like people say they feel the bullet plowing into them just before they hear the report, but backwards.

Except for a few 'yes' and 'no' answers to questions, Carrie had been quiet since watching the towers go down on TV that morning. I figured she'd ask about it when she was ready, and I was glad Sharon and Althea weren't trying to reassure her with a bunch of unnecessary information. I was having trouble enough processing what had happened, I couldn't imagine what it would be like to be eight and have to think about it. I was riding in the front with Althea while Carrie and Sharon sat together in the back, and when I folded down the sun visor and looked in the mirror I could see Carrie slumped back there the same way she had back at the hospital. She looked even older and more jaded. I imagined the weight of Sharon's illness trembling under the new weight of a possible

ending to America, piled up on her frail shoulders to the car's ceiling. I wished I could take it off her.

Towards dark we started climbing out of the desert bowl. As the elevation rose, the air cooled and the cactus slowly gave way to short pine trees and brush. After a while the cactus was gone and the pines gradually grew taller and straighter, like we were driving past a long, elaborate growth-of-a-tree display in the biggest museum of all time. Finally at about ten o'clock, after fourteen hours of mostly silent, slightly shell-shocked driving, we pulled into a motel parking lot in Flagstaff, Arizona.

Althea went in and rented a room and then, moving like a bunch of zombies, we moved all our crap in from the car. After I got Sharon's condenser plugged in and got her settled, I took the car across the street to the Burger King and got burgers and fries and whatnot for all of us. We all sat on the edges of the two hotel beds and watched a censored version of *Pecker*, a John Waters movie about a kid that gets famous taking pictures of losers in Baltimore. Somehow it made me feel sad. After Carrie went to sleep I turned it over to the news for a minute, but there wasn't anything new to hear. They kept showing the planes punching into the sides of the buildings, and the flea acrobats abandoning the circus, and then the buildings collapsing. I turned it right off. I only needed to see it once.

I crawled under the sheets next to Sharon and put my arm over her. She always sleeps on her side, facing the edge of the bed, so I try to go to sleep every night with my arm over her, facing into her back. I eventually have to roll onto my back, but it's part of the routine. I missed our bed at home. Between the smaller beds at the hospice place and the thin pillows and then a motel bed, with its slick-feeling blankets and also too-thin

pillows, I hadn't had a good night's sleep since we left. It was still better than when Sharon was gone. I would rather sleep on a pile of sticks with Sharon than alone in the nicest bed in the world.



Apparently Flagstaff was a big railroad town back in the day. Everything was railroad this and railroad that. I hadn't noticed the night before since it was dark and I was tired as hell, but when we went out in the morning I saw that we'd stayed at the Railroad Junction Motel. I don't know what else went on in Flagstaff, but I guess nothing that's happened since has matched the trains. Or maybe it's just that we were right off the freeway, and the town played it up for any tourists that came through. In any case, after we loaded up and checked out we wound up eating breakfast in a diner at the bottom of the hill that was made out of three old train cars that had been connected with little walkways. It was kind of like eating in a long hallway lined with tables. I guess it was spacious enough, but it still felt like I was being slowly suffocated.

As we ate our spirits perked up and we started feeling more normal again. The West Coast hadn't exploded, and neither had anywhere else, except the World Trade Center and part of the Pentagon. That was bad enough, but we were glad it wasn't any worse. Sharon had got a road map of Arizona from the motel room, and she read it while she ate her waffle and hash browns.

"Hey, we're going to pass the Petrified Forest national park. You wanna go there?" Sharon said.

"Yeah!" Carrie said, slurping down a fried egg. "What's a petrified forest?"

"It's a place where there's a lot of petrified wood," I said.

“Huh?”

“It’s like fossils. Over millions of years, if the conditions are right, wood can turn into stone,” Althea said.

“Weird.”

“So do you guys want to go?” Sharon said to me and Althea.

“I guess,” I said. “If we’re not in any hurry, it’s cool with me.”

“Yeah,” Althea said, “we’re already in trouble with the car rental company, so we might as well get our money’s worth.”

Sharon looked at the map again and pointed to a spot on it. “Hey, and here’s a big meteor crater about thirty miles from here! We should go see it!”

I smiled at Althea, and she just smiled and shook her head. “I don’t have to be back at work until next week,” she said. “We might as well have fun while we can.”

I got a bite of chicken fried steak and some egg on my fork and ate it while I looked out the window. We were sitting in a booth on the backside of the train car, and I was on the inside of the booth, so I could look out the window to the woods behind the café. All I could really see was the hill’s continuous climb, some trees and some big boulders scattered around. The boulders were mossy and old-looking, and it seemed funny that I could sit in a train car, eating chicken fried steak and eggs just a few feet away from boulders that had probably been sitting there as long as the petrified wood we were going to see.

I put some butter and jelly on a piece of toast and took a bite as I tuned back to the window. Sharon was telling Carrie about meteor craters. Their voices faded to a blur and the grape jelly burned and stuck in the back of my throat as I looked out and saw a

head peering at me from behind one of the boulders. It wasn't that I was scared exactly, but I was surprised. I started to recover, thinking it must just be a homeless guy who'd been sleeping behind the café, but then I got a good look at the face, and my guts froze. I felt like the world was turning around my head, and the only still objects in the universe were me and Father New Year out there crouched behind the boulder, looking at me with those crazy, mocking eyes.

Five

When I was a little kid, I would have this nightmare a few times a month. I was in a long hallway with a far, high ceiling. There were windows above me letting in malnourished moonlight, but there was only one door, at the far end from where I was. I wanted to get out of the hallway, but I was afraid of the door. Eventually there would be enormous claps of thunder and lightning flashing through the windows and the door would bang open down at the end of the hallway. The effects were straight out of whatever bad horror movies I had already seen at that age, including creaky door hinges and burps of fog filling the space outside the door. Then, out of the fog came a tall, gangly man. He wore an old-fashioned black suit with a black ribbon tie through his starched white collar. His shirt and jacket sleeves were too short, and his white, bony wrists were exposed above his long, clenching strangler's hands. He had black hair and a thin black mustache with crazy, bulging eyes between. He was always grinning. His teeth were shiny and square, and his jaw muscles bulged like he was trying to convulsively bite through them. As I shrank to the farthest corner of the blind hallway, the man would search for me with his crazy eyes. When he found me hiding there would throw back his

head and howl, then say, “Ahhhhh! It’s Father New Year!” and run at me hunched over with his long hands clutching at the air between us. I always managed to wake up before he got me, though there were a few close calls.

The nightmares went away as I got older, but I never forgot them. Mainly, I just wondered what I could have ever seen or heard about that would have created him in my subconscious.

Now, as I sat in a waffle house made out of a train car, Father New Year and I looked into each others’ eyes for a good five or ten seconds. Time wasn’t really on my mind, so I don’t know if it was longer or shorter. It seemed long. I tried to convince myself that it wasn’t him. It couldn’t be him; he was a figment of my imagination, a phantom manifestation of the hidden fears and anxieties that I carried around with me. As I watched him I looked for clues that would tell me he wasn’t real. I looked to see if he was transparent or blurry or if he flickered in and out of sight. He didn’t. He seemed very solid, almost more solid than the trees and boulders, like he was hyper-real and crisp-cut from the construction paper of reality and laid over the backdrop like a blue screen shot in an old movie. He put his hands on the edge of the boulder he was standing behind and rose up slow, revealing the old-fashioned ribbon tie in his starched collar. His mustache was the blackest black imaginable, like priest-clothes black. His eyes bugged out at me, and I could see little wet bits of spit forming in the corners of his mouth, he was grinning so hard.

The lump of unchewed chicken fried steak in my mouth, which had been lying there in a coating of gravy, started sliding down my tongue toward the back of my throat. I sort of choked and coughed at the same time, grabbed for my glass of water with one

hand and pounded on my chest with the other. After a short struggle I got the food down the right pipe and took a gulp of water. I looked back out the window, but Father New Year was gone.

Sharon pounded me on the back. “Geez, are you okay, Gary?” Carrie said, looking around Sharon at me as I downed more water.

“Sure,” I rasped, trying to clear my throat. “Great. Just went down the wrong pipe, I guess.”

“You got spitty gravy all over your plate.” This made Sharon and Althea laugh, and I forced a grin around the rim of my glass.

“I’ll save it for you, if you want, Carrie,” I said. “I’ll see if the waitress can bring a doggie bag, and I’ll scrape it all up for you.”

“Gross!” Carrie said, wincing and giggling at the same time. “You want to eat the spitty gravy, not me!”

“You *are* the spitty gravy,” I said, forcing another smile and a laugh.

“Nuh uh, you are, Gary!” I stuck my finger in my mouth, reached around behind Sharon and stuck it into Carrie’s ear. While she was squealing and wiping her ear out with her napkin I looked out the window again. Father New Year was still gone, and there was no sign that anyone was out there, or even had been. I ordered another cup of coffee while Sharon, Carrie and Althea finished their breakfasts. I wasn’t hungry anymore.



The farther we got from Flagstaff the easier it got to convince myself that the person behind the boulder was just a homeless guy or a maintenance guy or a mountain

man or some dude that was looking for his girlfriend's panties or something. I couldn't think of a good reason his girlfriend would have left her panties behind there, but you never know about people, they do random stuff sometimes.

I forget what rationalization I finally settled on, but within the forty-five minutes it took for us to get to the Barrington meteor crater east of Flagstaff I had settled on it. Only five miles or so down the hilly pine slope from the town, the pines and the cactus switched places again and the landscape blended smoothly back into desert.

It didn't take long, but by the time we got to the crater Sharon said she felt nauseous and weird, and she asked me to take Carrie in while she and Althea stayed in the car with the AC blowing. It probably didn't help that they were charging like fifteen dollars a head for adults and eight for kids. If it were up to me we would have turned around and left, but Carrie was all excited to see it and it was off the highway a little bit, so we had wasted time getting there. Anyway, I took Carrie's hand and walked her from the parking lot up to the front of the little building the owners had erected in front of the crater to justify the admission price and to shield the crater from public view. It was at least air-conditioned inside. The entire building was made from poured concrete and was lined with big photos taken by telescopes of comets and planets and, of course, meteors.

We made our way through the building, looking at space rocks in glass cases and spent rocket pieces until we walked out of the air conditioning back into the oven heat on the "crater viewing platform." It was kind of cool in a way, but I definitely don't think it's worth what we paid to see it. I've come across that sort of thing before, on different road trips. There are all kinds of natural landmarks off the nation's highways with little buildings built in front of them and greedy assholes sitting at the door, waiting for you to

pay them an outrageous amount of money to see something that's sitting on public land in the first place. Adding to the insult is the fact the crater is basically just a big hole in the ground, about half a mile across, roughly bowl-shaped and lined with scrubby grass and boulders.

We walked down along the rail a little ways until we came to a row of those coin-operated telescopes. "Can we look in the telescope, Gary?" Carrie said, still holding my hand.

"I think so," I said, digging in my pocket. "I think I have some quarters. How much is it?"

"Seventy-five cents for two minutes," Carrie said, reading carefully from the side of the machine.

"Seventy-five cents? Goddamn." I dug some change out of my pocket and dug through it. "You're in luck. I have exactly seventy-five cents right here." I handed Carrie the three quarters and turned the telescope closest to us around toward her. "Do you need a boost?"

"No, I'm tall enough," she said, and stood way up on her tiptoes, stretched her neck out, and got her head just high enough to see through the eyepieces.

"You need to put the money in, remember?"

"Yes, Gary, I remember," she said, sounding just like Sharon when she was making fun of me about something. I heard Sharon in my mind, doing a spot-on impersonation of me saying, "Oh, for fuck's sake" and I suddenly missed her, though I had just seen her two minutes ago. Carrie fed the quarters into the slots on the front and turned the metal knob until it clicked and the timer started ticking off the two minutes.

Carrie got back up on her toes and peered through, holding herself up partly on the metal handles on either side of the viewer, turning it back and forth as she did it. “All I can see is bushes and rocks,” she said after about half a minute.

“What’s that down in the bottom?” I said, pointing to the middle of the bowl. There was some sort of box or something down there. Carrie pointed the telescope back and forth.

“I can’t tell. It looks like a refrigerator. Or a dog house.”

“Can I look?”

“Hang on,” Carrie said, and kept swinging the scope back and forth. “I’m not done.” After another half a minute she pointed it up toward the sky and looked through it like there was something really interesting going on up there, even though it was just solid blue nothing. “All I can see is bushes and *rocks*,” she said, and let the scope go. There was still about thirty seconds left on it.

“Can I take a look now?” I said.

“Okay,” Carrie said, putting her foot on the bottom rail. She hauled herself up as far as she could and leaned out over the two or three hundred-foot drop into the crater.

“Look out, now,” I said, putting my eyes up to the scope.

“*Okay*,” Carrie said, “I’m being *careful*.”

“Okay,” I said, and pointed the lenses toward the bottom of the crater, where I’d seen the metal box or whatever it was. I finally found it, and it really did look like a refrigerator or a doghouse or something. I couldn’t tell much else. The time was running out, so I swung it around the bottom of the crater, looking at the bushes and rocks. Then something caught my eye and I panned back to the boulder I’d just swung past. Father

New Year was peering out from behind it. As the last seconds ticked off the telescope he grinned and held up his hands. His ruffled shirt cuffs, poking out of his black suit jacket cuffs, pulled back and showed his bony white wrists as he gave me the finger with one hand and held up an oxygen tube with the other. It was hard to tell, but it looked like the oxygen tube had a little bit of blood smeared around the part where it would go into someone's nose. He grinned that wild grin, his jaw muscles working like he had just bitten into a lemon and he thought it was funny. Then the time ran out and metal shutters clacked down over the front of the lenses, shocking my eyes with sudden darkness.

"Come on," I said, and pulled Carrie off the rail by the back of her shirt. "Let's go, we've got to get going now." I tried not to sound too freaked out, but I don't think it worked.

"God, Gary, what's the matter? I was looking down there," Carrie said, pulling her shirt back into place. I think she was trying to pretend like she was mad, but I think the tone of my voice scared her a little. "Why do we have to go all of a sudden?"

"I just ... we need to get on the road, okay? And I want to check on something, your mom shouldn't just be sitting in the car for so long, and it's bad for the car if they just idle with the air conditioner on, you know? It's not good for the car." I dragged Carrie along behind me as I babbled, instead of holding her hand companionably now I was pulling it like a leash. "I mean, we're in the desert, for Chrissake ... you can't just sit in a car with the AC on in the desert, it's like asking the car to blow up."

"It's going to blow up?" Carrie said, sounding scared.

"No, I don't mean literally, just it's bad for the compressor, it might blow. Not up, but break, you know?"

Carrie didn't say anything else as I pulled her through the thin crowd, past the meteor displays and oversized photos and back out the front door, down the concrete walkway to the parking lot and over to the station wagon. It was still running smoothly, but the sun was glaring off the back window and I couldn't see what was going on inside. About ten yards away I let go of Carrie's hand, ran across the blacktop, jerked open the passenger side front door and lunged inside.

Sharon and Althea were just sitting there, listening to the Allman Brothers as I burst in, breathing heavy and looking wildly around the inside of the car. "Are you okay?" I said to Sharon.

"Yeah, I'm fine," she said. "What's the matter?"

"Oh. Nothing. Uh, you know, I was just uh ... it's just ... it's hot, and I was worried it was getting too ... hot."

"No, it's not that bad," Althea said, turning down the stereo. "Were you running?"

"Oh, not really." The driver's side back door opened and Carrie got inside, giving me a weird look.

"What were you running for, Gary?" she said, closing the door.

"I wasn't *running*," I said. "I was just trying to stretch my legs, you know, since we won't stop again for a while."

"Actually," Althea said, "we already need some gas, and Sharon has to pee, so we're going to stop up the road at the first place."

"Oh," I said. They all kept looking at me. "Well, let's get going, I guess."

"How was the crater?" Sharon said. "Is it big?"

“Yeah,” Carrie said. “Me and Gary looked through a telescope and there’s a refrigerator or a doghouse at the bottom, or something. And bushes and rocks and dirt. But it’s real big.”

“Cool,” Althea said. “Did you guys have fun?”

“Yeah,” I said. “It was really cool.” I was freaking out.

“I wanted to stay, but Gary said the car would blow up if it sat in the sun too long,” Carrie said.

“No, I was just saying it’s probably not good to let it idle too long,” I said, turning around and looking at Carrie. “We could have stayed longer if you wanted.”

She looked at me for a few level seconds. “You’re such a weirdo, Gary. Do you know that?”

I turned back around as Althea drove out of the parking lot and watched the horizon resume its slow, inevitable march toward us. “Yeah, I guess,” I said. “Pretty much.”



I was jumpy the rest of the day. After the crater we drove east until we got to the Petrified Forest national park, where we took a driving tour of the “forest.” We had to leave I-40 a ways to get to the road they had installed through the middle of the area, which was really just more desert, but with chunks of petrified wood of different sizes and shapes scattered around the landscape. We got out a few times to take pictures and look at the more interesting features, and whenever we did I was always on the lookout for Father New Year, watching for him around the edges of the low hills and the petrified wood and cactus. I didn’t see him again, but I might as well have since I was so nervous

it felt like he was always behind me or on the edge of my peripheral vision, watching just out of my sight. It was kind of like when you find a spider or a roach or something crawling on you unexpected, you can knock it off and kill it or throw it outside or whatever, but for hours you still feel like there's something on you, and you keep checking yourself to make sure there's nothing there trying to bite you or lay eggs in your ear. It can ruin your day.

We drove up the petrified forest loop until we got back to I-40 and then headed east again. We'd lost a lot of time doing the tours, so after driving all the rest of the day we only got as far as Albuquerque about nine that night, where we got another motel room. I was still paranoid the whole time. I watched a little bit of news, but there were no real developments.

Still, the whole thing was making me tired. I watched long enough to find out everyone was worried about getting anthrax, and then laid down with Sharon. She had seemed a little better that day, not as pale and weak, and she had been in a pretty good mood. It was too bad I couldn't enjoy it with her because of my weird hallucinations. I guess I had decided that that's what it had been; hallucinations. It was the stress of the trip, the worry over what the doctors had said and the worry over what had happened in New York, what was still going on. Airplanes weren't allowed to fly, and there were people stranded all over the place who weren't lucky enough to hijack a rental car. As I lay there listening to the familiar sounds of the oxygen compressor and light snoring, I wished I had a joint. The first couple of days after leaving home had been sort of unpleasant without weed, but they had been so busy that I didn't have too much trouble not having any. I know some people who would have brought some with them, like my

friend Alan, but I'm too much of a wiener to do that; I would much rather go without than run the risk of getting arrested. To me the stress of worrying about getting caught would outweigh the benefit of getting high. The worst of it is just feeling slightly irritated and having a little bit of trouble going to sleep. I had brought some over-the-counter sleeping pills that helped at first and then I mostly forgot about it. The thing about habits like that is it gets old after a while, needing to think and worry about them. Addictions are like kids you don't want, in a way. It's your kid, and you made it, but it creates way more trouble than happiness. As I lay there I thought about how when I was a teenager it was a lot of fun, getting together with Alan and sometimes his brother and other people and smoking a little, feeling more excited about doing something we weren't supposed to be doing than anything else, really. I miss that feeling sometimes, that everything is funny and nothing bad can ever happen.

I finally fell asleep, though my brain was running like a hot engine. But then I had the old nightmare about Father New Year, the one where there's a thunderstorm outside and I'm small, standing in the hallway of my parents' old house watching the front door, wanting to run but not being able to move because my feet are stuck and my legs don't work anymore. When he finally broke in through the door and scrambled through the narrow hallway toward me, hunched over with his hands formed into grabbing claws, grinning and dragging the rain and wind in behind him, I woke up. The room was quiet and still except for Sharon's oxygen compressor, chugging and wheezing its way through the dark.



We were all getting tired, which sucked what fun there had been in the trip out of it the next day. We left Albuquerque the next morning early, about seven. I was tired because I had woken up about one in the morning and laid awake for a couple of hours, but I don't think Sharon, Carrie and Althea slept much better than I did. When I woke up about six-thirty Althea and Carrie were already up and dressed. The day was cloudy and windy, which I think is fairly rare for that part of the country. I had noticed a lot of thunderstorms off in the distance as we crossed the desert, riding high above the magnified sky and land, making the light bend into a purple tinge as the lightning reached down to touch the flat plain with white, crooked fingers. It was weird, though, because as many storms as I had seen out there over the couple of days we had been driving, none of them were ever directly over us. So when we woke up to muted light and the sound of wind howling around the corners of the building, I think it put us all in a quiet mood.

We picked up some breakfast and headed out of town. As the morning wore on the landscape became less and less interesting. The cacti were thinning and the scrub bushes and rock-strewn hills that would characterize west Texas started to dominate. It was still more desert, but not the kind that we had seen between there and California. That desert had been huge, with a sense of magnified space and vastness that west Texas just doesn't have. Maybe it has something to do with the elevation, but the western desert was just so much more entertaining. Once we got into eastern New Mexico I started getting bored, and then when we crossed into the Texas Panhandle especially, I started counting the miles it would take for us to get home.

We stopped in Amarillo to get something to eat, and I got out the map to see how much farther we had to go. It was only about two hundred and fifty miles, but it seemed

like it might as well be a million, as bad as I wanted to get there. I wanted to smoke a little weed and take a shower and eat something that didn't come from a fast food place and take a nap in my own bed for once. We had been gone two weeks by then, and I was starting to feel like it. Maybe it was just Amarillo that made me feel like that. It's pretty gross.

In the end, getting home was anti-climactic. Althea drove us to our house, I carried our stuff inside, and then she went home to Edmond. Carrie, Sharon and I just kind of stood around the house for a while, not sure what to do with ourselves. Sharon seemed scattered and distracted, like she'd wound up for real in a life she's thought was just a dream. I sat down with her and watched the afternoon news, which was just more about the Twin Towers. There were still no airplanes, and the government was still on edge about what other plots might be in the works. They were worried about someone sending powdered anthrax through the mail, and Sharon eyed the pile of junk mail that had been waiting for us. I had put it on the coffee table to go through later. "Why don't you throw that stuff away, Gary?" she said. "It's all just junk anyway." I threw it away, feeling stupid but still scooping the letters into an old Wal Mart bag with a folded out-of-date newspaper. It was Thursday, and I didn't have to be back to work until Monday. I did all the stuff I had wanted to do in Amarillo, and then later I went down the street to see Alan while Carrie and Sharon watched TV at the house. It was like there hadn't been a point to the trip at all. We went to California, put Sharon through all the tests and strain and worry only to find out that there was nothing they could do for her after all, and we might as well have stayed home, for all the good it did.

Six

It gets hard to keep things together. Between the strain of working with the bunch of idiot dipshits I had to work with and keeping track of Sharon's appointments and what I needed to do for her, I felt like I was losing it. The stuff with Father New Year didn't help. After we were home a few days and settled in again, I thought it would go away but I stayed paranoid and scared, looking out for signs of him wherever I was. It kind of reminded me of how H.P. Lovecraft stories made me feel when I was a teenager, the characters were always going along, thinking things were one way, and then all of a sudden the veil was ripped away and they were shown that the world was really another way, a dangerous, scary way. That's what I felt like, that at any moment I was going to see something to confirm my suspicion that reality wasn't real and that there were things hiding just out of sight that wanted to tear me apart and rape my mind and leave me in a gibbering pile.

It scared me how easy it was to lose my grip. As I went around doing my daily stuff I knew in my mind that it was all just in there, in my head with the rest of the normal thoughts, and that reality was real and there were no monsters or crazy men with nineteenth-century-style clothes out to get me.

Still, weird things kept happening. I lost my coat one day when there was no one around and I knew just where I had left it. I only left it for a couple of minutes, but it was gone when I came back. It was upsetting because it was my favorite coat, one Sharon had given to me when we first got together. It was leather and warm, like an animal blanket. And then one morning my work boots were gone. I had left them in the hallway

where I always left them the night before, but in the morning they were gone, just like my coat. Sharon and I tore the house apart looking for them, but they weren't there.

There were other things, little things that can be explained away without too much trouble, but the thing that got me the most was the wheels on my truck. They kept being loose. I mean, the lugnuts would be loose when I started driving it. The first time it happened, I didn't know what the sound was, it was just this sort of clanking noise that sounded like it was coming from the underside of the truck. My dad had said something about the U-joint getting worn out the last time he had ridden in the truck, so I thought that's what it was, and that there was nothing I could do about it, so I ignored it. Looking back, I was probably not thinking straight, as high, worried, paranoid and scared as I was, all at the same time.

I was going across town to see a couple of guys I used to hang out with but hadn't had time for in a long time. I was in a pretty good mood for once. I drove down the on-ramp to I-44, easing up the speed, trying not to put too much pressure on the U-joint that was supposedly going out. I got up to about fifty miles and hour, when there was a loud bang and the truck lurched. I thought, "Well, there goes the U-joint," but when I looked out the side mirror to check traffic, I saw a huge shower of sparks coming off the driver's side back wheel. Then something caught my eye on the same side. I looked over and there was the wheel, bouncing along in the lane next to me. I had already hit the brakes and the tire passed me, angling over towards the median where it eventually fell over and stopped. In the meantime, I managed to pull over, shooting sparks all over the place, and got out to look at what had happened. The clanking noise had actually been my wheel, which I had been driving on with the lug nuts most of the way off. For all I know, it may

not have even had any lug nuts on it to begin with, or maybe just one or two that were really loose. Either way, it was just enough to get me out on the highway, going fast enough that I could have been hurt. I shudder when I think of what probably would have happened if it had been one of my front wheels.

I got the wheel back from the median, managed to get a ride home from a weird old man that stopped to help me, and I got the thing put back together without too much trouble. The brake housing was ground to shit, but it wasn't so bad that I had to replace it and there was a pretty good dent in the wheel well from when the tire came off, but the truck was so butt ugly anyway it didn't make any difference. And when I put the wheel back on with new, locking lug nuts I really cranked those fuckers down on there, thinking they would never come off even if I wanted them to. So that was okay, and I felt better about it. But the weird thing is, a few days later I pulled out of our driveway and heard the same clanking noise again. I stopped and looked, and sure enough, the goddam lug nuts were loose again, and two of them were gone.

Looking back, that little stuff seems more important than it did then. I think that's usually how it goes.

At the time I was focused on the big things. As soon as we got home Sharon got in touch with her doctors and got on a heart and lung transplant list in St. Louis, and set up an appointment to install Flolan, that neck tube heart drip stuff she didn't want to get a couple of years before. It was going to be a few weeks before they could do it, so we just sort of waited around. Carrie was in Girl Scouts, so I took her to her meetings and stuff, and Sharon managed to still take her to and from school while I was working. We slid right back into our routine. I kept drinking and running around with Alan and the other

guys and Sharon stayed home, watching TV and making sure Carrie did her homework. It makes me sad when I think back on it. I could have done a lot more.

It all started to seem more real when the nurse from the drug company came to tell us about how to manage the Flolan connection. We were expecting her, so I had cleaned the house that morning and we were all waiting in the living room for her when she finally showed up.

She was short and nondescript, with short brown hair and those sort of almond-shaped eyes that look like they maybe came off a paper doll or a drawing by a kid with talent but not much imagination.

“Hi! I’m Sally!” she said.

“Hi, Sally,” I said, “come on in. This is Sharon, the patient, and this is Carrie.”

Sally came in hauling a big rectangular case in front of her. It made me think of a salesman’s case, but more synthetic. “Hi! It’s so good to meet you,” she cooed at Sharon, shifting the case to her left hand and shaking Sharon’s hand with her right. “And it’s so good to meet you,” she cooed at Carrie, squinting her nondescript eyes and turning her mouth up. Sally grabbed Carrie’s hand and pumped it. Carrie dead fished her and looked up at her wide-eyed, with her mouth hanging open.

“Do you have a table or something, so I can get my things out?” Sally said, straightening up and swinging the case at me a little. “I’ve got a lot of stuff to unpack!” she said, looking around at us like she came to give us Christmas presents or a cookie cake instead of a presentation on how to keep the hole in someone’s neck from getting infected.

“Sure, come on in here,” I said and led her into the tiny breakfast nook room between the computer room and the kitchen. Until that morning there had been about a million pennies piled up on the table, a pretty nice parquet wooden one, part of a dining room set that we got from Sharon’s grandparents. I hadn’t had a chance to wipe the table down after I took the pennies off, so it was all dusty-looking and didn’t seem very sanitary.

“Okay,” Sally said, setting her case on the floor next to the table. “First of all, you need to make sure you have a clean surface to work on. It’s easy for people to get infections from a dirty area, so you need to keep it clean.” She opened the case and got out a couple of disposable alcohol wipes, tore them open and started wiping a large swath on the table top. “See how dirty that was?” she said, holding the black-stained pads up for us to see. Carrie and I were standing in the door way coming from the computer room, while Sharon was stationed in the kitchen doorway. We were all staring at Sally and her dirty pads, transfixed. We all nodded. I was reminded of those infomercial people selling miracle cleaning products, and how the audience oohs and ahhs all through their demonstrations.

“Right,” Sally said, reaching into her case. She set a plastic bag of clear fluid on the table and then set a couple of vials next to it. “The thing about Flolan is that you have to mix it. Now who’s going to be the primary caregiver?” I raised my hand. “Good! Okay, so you need to have a clean surface, like I said, so always have alcohol wipes around. Right. Now, you take this vial here, and you open it. Then set it aside ...”

Sally went through the procedure, which involved timing, cleanliness and concentration. And I would have to do it three times a day. Then there was a lesson on

how to keep the “lock” clean, which was the end of the tube where I would hook the bag up so it could drip into Sharon’s neck. Then there was a little motor in a square casing that went between the bag and the lock. “You need to make sure you always have fresh batteries,” Sally said. “If the motor runs out of juice, Sharon’ll only have about five minutes before the pressure in her heart returns to its previous state, which could cause a lot of problems. And I’m going to be honest with you, you don’t want that to happen. It could cause death, right? Good! Okay, do you have any questions?”

Sharon raised her hand halfway. “So, does that mean I’ll have to be on it for the rest of my life?”

“That’s right,” Sally said. “You’ll have to have a steady drip of Flolan going into your heart either for the rest of your life or until they find a heart and lung donor, whichever comes first. Anything else?” All of us shook our heads. Carrie looked completely shellshocked. “Good! Now Gary, this is a lot of responsibility, so you need to realize that Sharon’s counting on you, right?”

“Right,” I said. “I know I have to be on top of it. I can do it.”

“Good! I’m so glad!”

After Sally left, Sharon was quiet the rest of the day. I made a point to stay home and hang out with her, but she didn’t seem engaged by anything. I went out and rented *Dumb and Dumber*, which she had thought was really funny when we saw it at the movie theater a couple of years before, but she couldn’t seem to focus. She just stared at the screen, smiling a little, her eyes glazed. I can still only imagine what she must have felt.



From that point on it was all downhill. The fake sense we had resumed our routine from before was gone. I kept thinking all the time about how I was going to mix the Flolan drugs, going over each step again in my head the way Sally laid it out and the way it was written in the pamphlet she left me. While I was working, driving, cooking, washing clothes, drinking or anything I was going over each step in order. Occasionally during the day, but mostly while I was trying to go to sleep at night, I would imagine what would happen if I fucked it up. I would picture Sharon after I put a new bag on her machine, standing there looking at me, her eyes widening as she realized something had gone wrong. She would go pale, have to sit down, drool, grab her chest, and then her whole chest would expand, there would be a muffled popping noise as her heart exploded in her chest, and then she would fall over dead, blood leaking out of her mouth and eyes. I would go to jail for mixing the stuff wrong. I would join a white supremacist gang to keep from being raped. I would lift weights for my ten-year stretch and come out with a swastika tattoo and huge, flabby muscles from eating bad prison food. I didn't feel good about any of it. I was losing more stuff as the couple of weeks leading up to Sharon's Flolan appointment went by, and I had started checking my lug nuts every time I left the house. Most of the time I had to tighten them, and a few times some were missing. I went to Wal Mart and bought a handful of them to keep in my glove box, but then pretty soon those started going missing too so I had to keep them in my toolbox in the house.

The Flolan appointment was scheduled for a Tuesday. On Friday Sharon's potassium got too low and her heart started going nuts, hitting about two hundred and ten beats per minute. Carrie was at her dad's, which I was grateful for as I loaded Sharon in the truck and took her to the Baptist Hospital emergency room.

I got Sharon checked in and then sat in the waiting room while they fed her liquid potassium through an I.V. hookup. After about an hour, Dr. Norton, her heart specialist, came out to the waiting room.

“Hello, Gary,” he said, sitting down next to me.

“Hi, Dr. Norton. How did it go?”

“It’s okay for now. We got the potassium level back up where it needs to be, and her heart’s gone back to its normal rhythm.”

“Good deal. Is Sharon ready to go? Or do you need to do anything else?”

“Well, Gary, I wanted to tell you we’d like to keep Sharon here for now, since we’ll be installing the Flolan pump on Tuesday. That way we can wean her off the Coumadin and transfer her to Heparin for the blood thinning, and keep an eye on her vitamin and mineral intake so this doesn’t happen again before then. That way we’ll have a better chance of getting everything evened out and monitored correctly.”

“Yeah, it’s getting hard to keep potassium in her.”

“I know, Gary. This way we can keep her on the I.V. so that won’t happen. Okay?”

“Well, that’s fine with me, if you think it’ll help.”

“Good. We’re getting her set up in a room upstairs and getting her admitted. I’ll send someone to get you and bring you up when she’s settled.”

“Okay. Thanks.”



They got Sharon admitted and in her room about eight that night. I went up and stayed with her, called Althea and Lynn and my parents and a couple of other people.

“It sucks you have to stay here all weekend,” I said. We were watching a rerun of *Seinfeld*, and Sharon had a small, expectant smile gluing up the corners of her mouth. It was the episode where the guy tells George the ocean called and they’re running out of shrimp, and George spends the whole time trying to invent the perfect comeback line.

“Yeah,” Sharon said. There was an I.V. bag of potassium snaking into the back of her right hand, and she scratched absently at the dock with her left. “It’s going to be pretty boring.” George had come up with his comeback line, and was running it by Jerry. Sharon’s expectant smile cracked like a thin-shelled egg as George said, “Yeah, well the Jerk Store called, and they’re running out *you!*” Sharon laughed with the canned audience, which sent her into a coughing fit. I got her cup of water off the little table that straddled the bed and handed it to her. She sipped it, trying to hear Jerry’s reaction.

I said, “It’s like I’m kind of relieved but I feel bad, too. I mean, if you stay here they’ll be able to watch you until Tuesday, but you know. You’ll have to stay here.”

Sharon sighed and muted the TV. “I don’t want to stay here all weekend, Gary, but it’s not like it’s your fault or something. Don’t worry about it.”

“I know,” I said. “I’m just going to miss you, that’s all.”

“You can stay up here if you want,” she said.

She was right. I could have stayed there if I wanted to, but I would have to sleep in the armchair. It reclines, but it’s really more for worrying in through the night when someone is really, really sick and you know you aren’t going to sleep anyway, even if you’re in your own bed. “I hate sleeping in these chairs,” I said. “I’m just saying, I wish you could just come home.”

“Oh, Gary,” Sharon said. I could tell I was getting on her nerves a little. “Don’t worry. It’s going to be okay.”

The nurse came in. He was a Kenny Rogers-looking guy who I could tell was impressed with his own beard. He started fiddling around with the I.V. bags, and then unplugged the potassium from Sharon’s hand.

“I guess she’s got enough potassium now?” I said.

He smiled at a point over my right shoulder. “Yes, she has enough for now.” Then he looked at Sharon and said, “Don’t you?” like she knew something about it. I hate nurses. “We need to switch Sharon over to a Heperin feed now, so her blood will stay nice and thin. Isn’t that right?” He was one of these nurses that wants to pretend all the patients are like subnormal eight-year-olds.

“But, Sharon’s still got Coumadin in her system, right?” There are two kinds of blood-thinners they gave Sharon. One was Coumadin, which was in a pill form. She took it every day. The other kind was Heperin, which came in an I.V. and they only gave it to her at the hospital. The difference was that Coumadin built up in the bloodstream and took two or three days to metabolize out of the system, where Heperin acted instantly and left the system almost instantly when they took it away. “I mean, she took a Coumadin this morning, and it’s not out of her system yet, right?”

The Kenny Rogers-looking nurse smiled patiently and shook his head. “We have to switch her over to the Heperin for the operation on Tuesday,” he said. “Don’t we?”

“Right, I get that part,” I said. “What I’m trying to say is that there’s still a bunch of Coumadin in her system right now. And if you put in Heperin, it’ll like turn her blood into water, right? Make it too thin?”

Kenny Roger's dorky twin finally started to seem irritated. "Look, the doctor ordered blood tests, and the doctor decided that the patient needs to be put on Heperin. If you want, you can ask the doctor about it when you see him." He hung the bag marked "Heperin" on the I.V. rack and plugged it into the back of Sharon's hand. I looked at her, and she shrugged.

"Yeah, but the doctor won't be in until like Monday," I said. It was Friday night.

"Don't worry about it, Gary," Sharon said. "I didn't have a Coumadin this morning, I forgot to take it. So it was yesterday."

They both seemed so sure about it, so I let it go. Sharon turned the TV back up and finished watching the *Seinfeld* episode. I felt weird, like I was in the Jerk Store, but I couldn't tell who was the jerk, me or the nurse or what.



I went home and smoked a big bowl and finished my dinner from earlier. We had been just sitting down to eat some food from Wendy's when Sharon's heart went crazy, and I had stuck everything in the refrigerator as we were hurrying out the door. Most of my hamburger was left, and some cold French fries. Sharon had finished her chicken sandwich, but her cup of chili was left. I didn't eat it, figuring it would keep until she got home. I scarfed down the burger and fries cold, eating as fast as I could since I wasn't really very hungry but I needed to eat. Then I went to bed and dreamed of Father New Year.

I woke up about six. I figured Sharon wouldn't be up yet and I didn't want to wake her, so I worked on a short story about a guy who gets his neck broken while he's really drunk. I had been trying to write some stories over the last year or so, just when I

had the time and the inclination. It had always seemed like hard work, but the few times we had to write stuff in school I always got really good reactions from my teachers. The guy in my story breaks his neck and passes out, but then when he wakes up he doesn't have any control over his body. It just goes around doing things and all the guy can do is go along for the ride. I didn't make much progress on it. It made me wonder about how much I was really suited to be a writer. I've read a lot of interviews with writers, and a lot of them say they write because it helps them stay sane; when things get bad they have to write to escape reality and that's why they get so good. It's like they have this compulsion to do it, not because they're all disciplined, really. I hate thinking about it because it makes me start doubting myself, but I really don't work very well when I'm worried or depressed or scared.

Anyway, I finally gave up and took a shower and went up to the hospital about nine. Althea was already there and Sharon was awake, sitting up in bed while they watched a rerun of *Bonanza*.

"Hey," I said, leaning over to kiss Sharon. "I wasn't sure you'd be up yet." The Heperin bag was still hanging on the I.V. stand. Sharon seemed fine, so I didn't bring it up again.

"Yeah, they woke me up at like six when the shift changed to take my blood pressure and all that stuff," Sharon said. "I hate when they do that. One time they actually woke me up to give me a sleeping pill."

"Yeah, I remember that nurse. The one with the buck teeth." Sharon laughed a little, which made me glad. She looked a little better this morning, with more color in her cheeks than she'd had the night before. That heart arrhythmia business always scares the

hell out of me, and her too, I'm sure. It can't be good for your heart to go that fast.

"What time did you get here, lady?" I said to Althea.

"Oh, about seven thirty, I guess. I just woke up early. Thought I'd go ahead and get out of the house." It had taken me a long time, but I finally got to where I could read Althea pretty well. She was always quiet and seemed very placid, but I could tell by how she was perched on the edge of the recliner seat and how she was ruffled like she'd skipped showering that morning that she was worried as hell. I felt bad for her.

"Yeah," I said. "I was up early too, but I thought they'd let Sharon sleep. Shows how much I know." I pulled up one of the other chairs from by the door over to the side of the bed and held Sharon's hand while we watched the end of *Bonanza*, and then an episode of *Little House on the Prairie* came on. "Did they bring you any breakfast?" I said.

"Yeah, they brought some eggs and stuff, but I couldn't eat much," Sharon said, wrinkling up her nose. She doesn't care for hospital food. I don't think it's really that bad, at least not as bad as everyone jokes that it is, but I can see why it's not her favorite thing in the world.

"You want me to go get you something? I can go to Sonic or whatever. Get like a breakfast burrito."

"No, it's okay. I'll just wait until lunch," she said

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, don't worry about it. I'm not that hungry anyway."

They brought Sharon a fried fish filet with rice, green beans and corn bread at about eleven thirty, but she didn't eat it, either. She picked around at it and took a couple

of small, experimental bites, but left the rest. I ended up eating it, since I hate to see food go to waste and I didn't feel like going out to get anything or going downstairs to the cafeteria. It wasn't bad, though the rice was kind of dry and flavorless. I offered again to go get her something, even though I didn't feel like leaving, but Sharon said no again. Althea went down to the cafeteria and brought Sharon back up a chicken pita wrap and more or less forced Sharon to eat about half of it. She looked queasy as she put it down.

“Sorry, I just can't eat anymore,” she said. “It feels like I just ate a rock, or something.”

“Well, maybe you'll be hungry for dinner,” Althea said.

“Yeah, maybe they'll bring something really good. Either way, you need to keep up your strength,” I said.

“For what?” Sharon said, nettled. “Lying in bed? It doesn't take that much energy, Gary.”

I didn't say anything else about it. When chicken fried steak came that evening, I ended up eating most of it, too.



Sunday was the same. The doctors and nurses came in throughout the day, changing bags and monitoring things, giving Sharon pills and occasionally taking blood out of her. I sat in the room with her until about six, watching a bunch of episodes of *The Rockford Files* (Sharon's choice), re-reading *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and trying to talk Sharon into eating her meals. She ate a little, and though it wasn't great I took it as a good enough sign.

I had to leave in time to get home before seven, when Carrie's dad was going to drop her off. She still didn't know Sharon was in the hospital again and I wasn't looking forward to telling her. I got home about six-thirty so I could smoke a small bowl before she got there because I knew I wouldn't get a chance to smoke any after she came home. She had gotten so nosy in the last couple of years, and I think she had smelled pot somewhere else and knew what it was. I don't think I knew what pot smelled like when I was nine but I knew a lot of other stuff, so there's no telling what Carrie knew and when she knew it. I do know that kids are almost always smarter than adults give them credit for. I may not remember everything about being a kid, but I do remember that.

Anyway, I was mildly baked when Carrie got home at seven, but not so much that she knew or anything.

"Hey, girlie, did you have fun?" I said when she came in the door. It was getting cold outside, one of the oscillating swings towards winter the weather around here makes in the fall, and Carrie's cheeks were flushed. She was wearing a bulky blue sweater, and her hair was pulled back into two blonde pigtails. She was breathing a little hard from running to the door.

"I guess. I didn't really go anywhere or anything. We just watched TV and my dad shot his gun out in the yard." She set her bag down on the floor next to the rocking chair and then sat down next to me on the couch. I turned off the TV. "Where's my mom?"

"Well, the thing is, we had to take her to the hospital again." She automatically looked sad and worried, though this had happened enough times that she didn't start crying, at least not right away. "It's okay. I mean, we were going to have to take her

tomorrow anyway, it's just that her heart started going all fast again Friday, so I took her up there and they just said she might as well stay, since she was just going to have to come back anyway. This way they can watch her, and it's even more likely that the operation Tuesday will go the way they want it to, and she'll come home good as new."

"Okay," Carrie said, and looked at the blank TV screen.

"Now, it's up to you, but I wanted to know if you still want to go to your Girl Scout meeting."

"Can we go to the hospital?"

"Well, I was thinking about that. I mean, you have school in the morning, and I have to go to work, and I didn't know if you needed to do any homework or anything ..."

"No, I don't have any homework, I did it yesterday. I don't want to go to Girl Scouts if my mom isn't home. Can we go to the hospital?"

I didn't really want to drive back up there that night, but I could see Carrie really wanted to go. "Sure, we can go up there. I just thought you might want to wait until after school tomorrow, since it's getting late and all ..."

"No, I want to go see my mom," Carrie said.

"Okay. Let me get my coat. I'll bet it's getting pretty cold outside, huh?"

We drove back to the hospital and spent a few hours watching more TV with Sharon and Althea, who was still there. Carrie talked nonstop, going over the details of her dad's gun and what he shot, who came over and drank, what they said and wore, who her dad was seeing at the time and what she had said to Carrie and what they ate at each meal over the weekend. Sharon held her hand and laughed at everything she said, and I was glad I brought Carrie up, because it really seemed to make Sharon happy. I was

starting to get slightly worried about her not eating; I hadn't noticed it before, but she actually looked thinner than she had Friday, and while her color had been good for the most part there had been periods where she had gotten really pale. And on top of that, her cough had come back. She had coughed most of the summer before, but it had cleared up by September, not too long before we went to San Diego. At the time I thought it was because of allergies, and the dry summer we had. That may have been, but now it was back and Sharon kept coughing over what Carrie was saying, trying to hold it down so it wasn't too loud. Althea and I took turns pouring more water for her, though it didn't seem to help for more than a couple of seconds when she took a drink. At first I was annoyed that she had to be in the hospital for the weekend, but now I was starting to be glad, since she didn't seem to be doing too good. I was looking forward to Tuesday when they would put in the Flolan and Sharon would start feeling better, and then we could get back to normal, or as normal as you can be with a hole in your neck vein.



The next morning I called in as soon as I thought Harrell would be in the office to tell him I wouldn't be in until late because I had to take Carrie to school. That was another reason I was looking forward to Sharon coming home; her being gone was screwing up our whole routine. Harrell seemed pissed off that I wouldn't be in until after nine, even though it wasn't like there were a hundred deadlines that had to be met that day or we would all be spiked through the eyes with hot irons. That's always what bosses act like though, like it's the end of the world if you don't show up on time. It's not like I wasn't going to come in, and I was actually going to stay late to make up for it. Althea was taking the day off (her bosses weren't dicks) and would pick up Carrie and

take her to the hospital after school so I could work clear until six or seven, if that's what Harrell wanted, the bastard.

I got Carrie up and fed and washed and dressed and dropped off at school on time and then I went to work, though I don't think there had been very many times when I felt less like being there. I clocked in and took my spot at the sample table and pulled a tray of bags over and started taking moisture samples of each one. It's a tedious process, and the drillers bring in hundreds of samples a week. Each bag has to be opened and logged, and then you have to weigh the container you're going to dry the sample in, write that down, break off a chunk of the sample, stab it with the pocket penetrometer to give the engineer an idea of the soil's compactness, then put the sample in the container, weigh it again, write the new weight down, then put the container on a tray. You do that like fifty times until the tray is full. Then you put the tray in the oven until the samples are dry, and then you weigh them again to see how much moisture they've lost. It sucks pretty bad, mainly because it's so mindless and there's really nothing to do but think about other stuff. When Sharon was sick, I would just sit there worrying about her for ten hours. It didn't help that the radio in the lab was always set to the Christian station. It's wasn't even Christian rock, which is bad enough, but it's KLOVE, which plays the worst kind of cheesy, pre-programmed keyboard crooning syrupy I-love-Jesus-so-fricking-*much* music, interspersed with long, rambling lectures on how you should act. I hate that shit and I itch about it all the time but Harrell seems to love it, or at least he doesn't hate it as much as I do so he thinks its funny to play it all the time. I used to change it when he left the room, but then he started writing me up for it, calling it an "attitude problem," and the management wasn't interested enough to listen to my defense.

Harrell came around for a few minutes to make sure the radio was on the right station and then he went back to his office to sit around and talk on the phone and eat Chili Cheese Fritos and suck on wads of snuff. I swear to God I don't know how his wife can even stand to be in the same room with him, much less kiss him.

I had only been at it for about half an hour when the phone rang in Harrell's office. The management won't let us have a phone in the lab because they think we'll spend all day on it the way they do. I could hear him, though.

"Dang it," he said, "can you hang on, darlin'? There's another call. No, I better get it, I don't recognize the number. It could be corporate or something. Hang on." I heard him punch the hold button and then the button for the other line. "This is Harrell. Yeah. Well, he's pretty busy right now, he didn't come in until late. Maybe he could call you back on his lunch break ... uh huh ... now, when you say emergency, do you mean like a real emergency, or like an I-need-him-to-pick-up-milk-at-the-store kind of emergency?"

I got up and went into his office. He looked up at me with that shitty little smile on his face, that goddam little moustache curled up at the corners, flecked with snuff and chip crumbs. I grabbed the phone out of his hand. "Hey, now, Gary, you can't ..."

"Shut the fuck up," I said and held the receiver up to my ear. "Hello?"

"Gary?" It was Althea.

"Yeah, it's me. What's going on?"

"I don't know. You better get down here. Sharon called me this morning, and when I got here they'd taken her to I.C.U. I'm still waiting for the doctor."

“Oh, goddammit,” I said. “I’ll be right there.” I tossed the phone back at Harrell. “I have to go.” He opened his mouth like he was going to say something, but when I leaned forward to hear what it was, he changed his mind and said, “Okay.” I looked at him for a second longer, wishing he’d said what I thought he was going to say, decided it wasn’t worth it, and left.

Seven

The hospital is only a couple of miles from the office so by driving like hell I got there in just under five minutes. I parked and ran for the doors. It still took me another five minutes to get inside since the parking garage is like a mile away from the building. I ran to the elevators and got up to the sixth floor I.C.U. just fifteen minutes after Althea had called the office.

I found her in one of the waiting rooms, looking at the wall and crying a little.

“Hey,” I said, breathing heavy from all that running, “what’s the deal? Is she okay?”

“I don’t know,” Althea said, wiping her eyes with her sleeve. “She called this morning about six and asked me to come up, but then when I got here she was already in the I.C.U. The nurse I saw said she was unconscious, and the doctor was in looking at her.”

“Oh, shit,” I said. “I hope nothing went wrong. Maybe she just had arrhythmia again, and now they’re putting the Flolan thing in early, you know? I’ll bet that’s what they’re doing.”

“I don’t know,” Althea said, and leaked a few more tears. It was unusual to see her so emotional. She could be pretty tender at times, but I don’t think I’d seen her cry more than maybe once or twice through all the hospitals and different things that had happened to Sharon. Now she seemed on the edge of uncontrolled weeping, and it scared me. It made me wonder what Sharon had sounded like on the phone that morning. I found myself wishing she’d called me, but at the same time I was kind of scared to know what she said. I opened my mouth to ask, then shut it again. I decided it didn’t matter. She was going to be okay, she was going to get better and I was going to take care of her, no matter what I had to do and Carrie was going to grow up and Sharon was going to be there to see it.

We waited around for about an hour and a half before one of the doctors came into the I.C.U. waiting room. Sitting in there hadn’t helped my nerves. Unlike the other waiting rooms on the other floors, the I.C.U. waiting room was full of people whose friends and relatives were actually dying while they sat there, and they knew it. There was a big fat chaplain guy that kept going around to them, trying to give them advice and encouraging them to pray with him. Some of them did, some of them didn’t. I wished we could move somewhere away from all the drama, but it was where we were supposed to wait for news, so we stayed put and talked as little as possible.

I hadn’t met the doctor before but I guess he’d met Althea because he came right over to us. “Mrs. Walker,” he said, and sat down next to her. I leaned over next to her to hear what he was about to say. “Are you a relative?” the doctor said to me.

“Yeah,” I said, “I’m Sharon’s ... husband.” The word felt weird in my mouth.

“Oh, yes,” he said. “I am glad you are here, then. I am Dr. Nazami.” He was short, with a smooth, bald head that looked like he polished it with furniture wax.

“So what’s the deal?” I said. “Is Sharon okay?”

“Well,” Dr. Nazami said. He took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose and the corners of his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. “She is not okay, no. The strain on her heart has become too much, and this morning she had ... an episode. I believe she will die today.”

It took a couple of seconds for it to sink in. I hadn’t let myself think this would happen and if you’d suggested it to me five minutes before I would have called you an asshole and maybe even punched you. And it’s not that it had never occurred to me, because it had. It had been circling the edge of my brain for six years. There had even been several moments when I had thought to myself, “if she’s going to die, I wish she’d hurry up and do it so I can get on with my life,” moments I immediately felt horrible about and buried as best I could. After all the edging around it and telling myself it wouldn’t, couldn’t happen, that God or the universe or whatever force is out there keeping tabs on what’s fair and not fair wouldn’t, couldn’t be cruel enough to let things turn out like this, I was shocked to find that things were indeed going to turn out like this, and there was nothing anyone could do about it.

“What?” I finally said. “How can that be?”

“I’m sorry, but I’ve been telling Sharon for some time that she needed to get her weight down and get on the Flolan to help her heart, but she has not done this. I am afraid it’s too late now,” he said.

“But she’s supposed to get the Flolan tomorrow! She has an appointment! And she *has* lost weight. You can’t tell me she hasn’t lost any weight lately,” I said, looking at Althea to back me up. Dr. Nazami put his glasses back on. His manner was maddening to me right then; he actually seemed to think the conversation was tiresome, that he’d had it so many times before and couldn’t suppress his contempt for people who didn’t take his edicts at face value, that he was almighty in matters of life and death and he couldn’t understand how people had the audacity to question his claims.

“I am truly sorry,” he said, standing up. “There is nothing to do now but wait. They will let you in to see her soon. A nurse will come to help you.”

“Thank you,” Althea managed to croak as he was walking away. He didn’t slow down, but gave a curt nod at her over his shoulder, with just enough of a sympathetic smile to cover his obligations as a caregiver. I felt a sharp stab of rage so strong that I would have jumped up and pounded his face in if I hadn’t been struck with a paralyzing fear at the same instant. I just sat there and watched him go, my vision tunneling down to a vanishing point of shock and full-body emotion. I was barely aware of Althea next to me, sobbing openly now. I was locked inside myself like I was packed in a deep wad of thick wool so the only thing I could hear clearly was my own breathing mixed with my heartbeat. The sound of wind coming in and out of my body got more and more ragged and started picking up heat, the way the winds do in the summer coming out of the south. The heat floated up and burned my eyes, filling my sinuses from the inside, working up through my face until it pushed out hot water, and then I was crying.



Eventually a nurse came out of the big double I.C.U. doors across the hall from the waiting room and ushered us back into a small room lined with chairs and a telephone hanging on the wall. Althea got on her cell phone and called Lynn, and I was about to use the wall phone to call my parents and some other people when the chaplain guy from outside came in and sat down next to me.

“Hello, I’m Karl,” he said. He was a big guy with a craggy face, large wire-rimmed glasses and that sort of carefully combed brown hair that’s swept over and thinly hair-sprayed in place and looks like a helmet. He wore a charcoal suit with a blue and green striped tie and a small gold American flag pin in his lapel. I didn’t like him when he was in the other room, and I didn’t like him now. I imagined he hung around the waiting rooms all day, waiting until someone was losing someone, and then he would swoop in and do his business. I wondered if he got paid for it. It would be just as bad either way, I thought. If he got paid it made him a phony, since he pretended to be all worried about people and their feelings, but then if he didn’t get paid that meant he was the kind of guy who was arrogant enough to think he was meant to make a difference in strangers’ lives at their worst possible moments. “Is there anything I can help you with?”

“I don’t think so, Karl,” I said, trying to keep my voice even.

“I’m one of the hospital’s chaplains,” Karl said. “I help people find ... spiritual guidance when they’re going through hard times. The doctor told me you might be going through a hard time. Is that right?”

“Yeah, I guess you could say that, Karl. The thing is, though, is I’m not very religious,” I said, looking at the wall.

“That’s okay,” Karl said. He had been using that sort of fake calming tone of voice, like a guy that’s trying to get a hurt animal to come out from under the house, but now he took it a step further and put his hand on my arm. I pulled back from him, and he jerked back. “We’re non-denominational here, so whatever you’re comfortable with is okay with me.” He tried on a little smile, but it just made me madder.

“No, it’s not a denominational thing, Karl. I don’t believe in any of it. Now if you don’t mind, I need to make some phone calls.” I turned away from him and picked the wall phone out of its cradle.

“Okay,” Karl said, not getting up. “That’s okay. You make your phone calls, and I’ll just be here if you need me.” He settled back in his seat and rested his arms across his broad belly. I turned back toward him.

“Goddammit, Karl, I don’t need your help. I’m sorry to be rude, but could you please get the fuck out of here and let me call my family and tell them my wife is fucking dying? Do you think you could do that?” My voice was unsteady, and I could feel that blow dryer heat prickling at the corners of my eyes again. Karl recoiled and looked shocked, and then hid it back under that unctuous demeanor again, as if it had been against his will.

“Uh, okay, Gary. I’ll just leave you to it, then.” He got up and walked out with his back stiff and his hands clenched. I felt bad as I watched him go, but also angry, since he had pushed me to it. I hate that, when someone does something shitty and it makes you mad, and then they get all damaged because you got mad and yelled at them and then you’re supposed to feel like the bad guy.

I started calling people. I called my mom and told her what was happening, and then I called Alan, who said he would come right up. Then I sat there, thinking I must have a million people to call, but I didn't. My mom had said she would call my sisters and my grandma and tell them and they would be up as soon as they could, and Althea was calling everyone else. Sharon's family is a lot bigger than mine anyway. She has all kinds of aunts and cousins and step-cousins and other people, so I knew there would be a big gang in there before long. Carrie was still at school, and someone would have to go after her at three. Planning something like that seemed beyond me at that point. I just kind of sat there for a while, wondering what the hell I was supposed to do with myself. I wanted to sleep, scream, cry, run, punch somebody, hug somebody, throw things, rip off my skin, jump out the window, eat something and throw up all at the same time. It was an uncomfortable sensation.

After a while a mannish nurse with thick glasses, thin lips and short brown hair showed up in the room. "Would you like to see her now?" she said, giving us a smile that looked like she learned it out of a book. That's the thing about hospitals; they try to be kind and compassionate and human, but it's like there's a hospital version of those things and the practitioners have to learn to do it the hospital way, because to do it the normal way just wouldn't be good enough. Or maybe it would be too painful to be genuine all the time, and to feel real feelings for people day in and day out. I can't say I blame them, but it was making everything scarier and harder instead of the other way around.

Althea and I looked at each other and nodded. It's not like we really had a choice. We got up and followed the nurse down the corridor, past rows of rooms with big, open

glass doors with curtains covering their entrances until she stopped in front of a curtain toward the end of the row. She turned around and gave us that same textbook smile again and said, “Now don’t be shocked. We’ve made her comfortable.” Then she pulled the curtain aside with one hand and waved us in with the other like a carnival barker inviting rubes into a particularly interesting freak show. I was scared, but I was glad Althea was there with me. I took her hand and we stepped inside.

Sharon looked awful. They had hooked every machine imaginable up to her. There was a thick respirator tube running down into her mouth, an I.V. tube running into each hand, a tube running up under her gown, draining the piss out of her bladder. There was the obligatory oxygen sensor and pulse keeper and blood pressure cuff. But the worst thing and the most novel was the addition of cotton balls taped over Sharon’s eyes. *I’ll never look into your eyes ... again*, Jim Morrison sang inanely from down in my brain.

“Why are her eyes taped like that?” Althea said in a trembly voice.

“Well,” the nurse said, “to make her comfortable, we’ve had to give her something to paralyze her, and something to help her sleep. This way is better.” She didn’t really answer the question, but I was afraid to press her and I guess Althea was, too. I had a moment when I considered taking the cotton balls off Sharon’s eyes, but then I changed my mind. I pictured myself pulling them off and seeing her staring up at me, paralyzed and unable to speak because of the tube down her throat. I just stood back next to Althea in the narrow space between the foot of the bed and the door that wasn’t crowded with machinery and watched Sharon’s body buck up and down with the oscillations of the respirator. The nurse stood there behind us for a minute or so like

maybe she was scoping us out to see if we'd touch something we weren't supposed to, but then stepped quietly out without saying anything.

We stood there together for about ten more minutes, not saying anything. I think we were each waiting for a cue from the other to leave the room; at least I know I was. I was horrified at what they'd done, and horrified at how there was nothing I dared do about it.

We went back down the hall to the little waiting room to wait for people to show up, holding hands like a couple of kids sticking to the buddy system on a school trip.

That was how we spent the day. I sat in the waiting room talking to the people who came to see Sharon off, interspersed with bouts of crying. Sharon's sister Lynn came, and then my parents, and then Alan. Alan and me had been best friends in middle school, though that sounds dorky to say now. But we had stayed friends. It wasn't like the old days anymore, but we had spent a lot of time drinking together, especially over the last couple of years when Sharon's sickness had gotten worse again. It was nice to know if I called him, he would show up. Lynn left about two thirty to pick up Carrie from school. We hadn't seen the point of getting her out of class, since it looked like Sharon would hang on into the evening, and we wanted to give Carrie as much time as possible to enjoy the innocent, unshattered, whole part of her childhood. I was grateful that Lynn volunteered to get her and tell her what was going on. I didn't feel like I could move, much less drive, much, much less explain to a little girl that her mom was dying.

Time stretched out, lost its definition and sort of swallowed itself like the proverbial snake eating its own tail. I wished I could do that, swallow myself so I wouldn't have to finish. At times I thought this was the last bit of a hill I'd been climbing

for a long time. It had been getting progressively steeper, and I'd been able to develop my legs so I could climb what I had to, but this last bit was almost vertical and I didn't know if I could do it. And then at other times I thought about how maybe it wasn't the last of the hill but only the end of the foothills and there was the actual mountain still stretching out above me, the kind of icy mountain with sheer cliffs and stony crags, the kind of mountain that was going to take specialized equipment like picks and ropes and tents that attach to the side of the cliff and would take forever. And then what's at the top? Is there a climb down the other side or is it another sheer cliff that would just be easier to fall from?

After a while all the analogies started hurting my head and I got Alan to come outside with me and give me a cigarette. I felt bad because I'd been trying to quit, but it seemed like it might make me feel a little better, at least for a second or two.

It hadn't been that long since I'd had one but the cigarette felt strange between my fingers, like foreign money. The first rush of nicotine hit my brain, and I marveled at the traffic moving on the Expressway. Thousands of people going here and there, living their lives, going to dinner, going home and going to work. It made me even sadder. I didn't feel like that would ever be me again. The steep grade of the future stretched out above me.

"You doing okay?" Alan said after a while. He had showed up about a half an hour after I called him and he hadn't really said or done much. He gave me a hug when he got there and then blended into the background. It felt good to stand there with him. He and I went back so far, and having a connection from my former life before all this mess made it easier, like an anchor point.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“All this waiting.”

“Yeah. In one way, it’s ... I don’t know. It’s like she’s already dead. But then she’s not. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah.”

We stood there and watched the traffic go by for while and finished our smokes. I sighed when I saw Lynn coming across the parking lot with Carrie. “Ah, shit,” I said. Alan put an arm around my shoulders for a second.

“I’m going back upstairs,” he said.

“All right. Thanks, man.” He went back in and I crossed the drop-off lane to meet Lynn and Carrie. Carrie took a few running steps and I gathered her up and held her while she cried. Lynn stood there watching us, her eyes wet and red from the constant daylong leaking. “Are you okay, sweetie?” I said, putting Carrie down. She looked at the ground and shrugged, tears dripping onto the pavement.

“Come on,” I said, “let’s go upstairs and see your grandma and everyone, okay?”

Carrie shrugged again and I took her hand and led her in through the automatic double doors. Lynn came along behind us and I reached back and got an arm around her neck and pulled her up with us. It’s funny how people don’t seem to notice stuff in hospitals, or they pretend not to. Anywhere else, and three crying people pulling each other along would draw stares and questions of concern from passersby, but not us. We passed nurses and cleaning people and other people waiting for news about their family and friends, and no one batted an eyelash at Carrie’s sobbing, Lynn’s eye leaking or my

strained, chokey breathing. We staggered onto the elevator and even though I knew it wouldn't have mattered I was glad we were alone.

“Gary, can I see my mom when we get upstairs?” Carrie said.

“I don't know, Carrie. I'm not sure you really want to.”

“Why?”

“Well ... she doesn't look too good right now. I mean, I'm not sure if it wouldn't be better for you to remember her how she was, you know? It might be ... nicer that way.”

Carrie sniffled and wiped her nose with her hand. “I want to see her, though.”

I pulled her closer to me. “I know, sweetie, I know. We'll see. I want to find out what your grandma thinks, okay?”

Althea didn't see a problem with it, so I didn't see one either, I guess. Lynn, Althea and I walked Carrie down to Sharon's I.C.U. room and took her through the curtain and into the sound of the ventilator and the beeping heart monitors and the other hissing, hushing machines. It was worse with Carrie in the room because I started seeing Sharon not only through my own eyes, but through Carrie's, too. My mom was down the hall sitting in the waiting room, waiting around, and there had never been a time when she was even seriously sick, much less dying, so I didn't really know what that felt like, but I could start to feel the edges of that sadness watching Carrie watch Sharon. She didn't say anything but I could tell the cotton balls bothered her, too. I didn't want to think too hard about it, like I said before, not knowing how aware Sharon really was, and I could tell Carrie didn't even want to address it.

We all just stood there for a while. The sound of all the machines lay over us and between us like blankets, isolating us into our own thoughts, even though we were standing right next to each other, touching each other. Eventually I looked over at Althea and Lynn, and we all nodded at each other and then we pulled Carrie gently away and took her back down the hall. They got quiet when we walked back in, and I wondered what they had been talking about. Not that it was really hard to figure out, but I wondered what all their particular takes were. Alan and my parents were sitting together and Sharon's aunts and cousins were on the other side of the narrow room, grouped up like cliques in a high school lunchroom.



We all sat there not talking, and then about eight-thirty that night I went back outside with Alan and my sister Evelyn and Lynn. It had only been twelve hours or so since Althea had called me at work and I'd come to the hospital. Only eleven hours since the doctor passed Sharon's death sentence. It felt like ten minutes and a million years. I had spent stretches of time throughout the day standing by Sharon's bed, watching the machines jerk her body. When I couldn't deal with that anymore I would go back to the waiting room. When the silence got to me, I would go back down to see Sharon, and so on. It felt good to feel fresh October air, even if it made me feel guilty to acknowledge it felt good. We sat outside the doors again, me and Alan smoking while Lynn and Evelyn stood off to the side a little. We kept on not talking. The only things we had to talk about were too painful, and the minor chat we could have come up with was too trivial and would have only highlighted the things we couldn't say. It reminded me of something I read by Francis Bacon one time about superstition. He made the point that

an ape seems uglier by his resemblance to a man, and in that way superstition was that much uglier because of its resemblance to religion. In an obscure sort of way that's what it was like out in front of the hospital. We all knew small talk would only make the real issue at hand that much more painful and tragic by contrast.

About eight forty-five, Althea came just outside the double doors and said, "You guys should all get in here now," and we understood.

Back upstairs, we all crowded into Sharon's room. The nurse moved around as we came in, adjusting the machines one last time. I wondered how they could know what was about to happen with such precision. Sharon's pulse was slowing down and her body bucked with growing violence as the ventilator tried to keep her going against death. Finally, the nurse turned off the ventilator and left. I moved to the side of the bed with Carrie next to me and took Sharon's hand. I still wished I could see her eyes, though I was still too afraid to peel the tape and cotton balls off, still afraid of what I might see in her expression.

The noise of the ventilator was replaced with the noise of about ten people crying as Sharon's pulse continued to wind down and there were longer and longer gaps between the beeps coming from the monitor. I held Sharon's hand tight, feeling the connection that had built between us for the last six years straining like a tired muscle, or a tendon that had been pulled too tight and was about to reach the end of its elasticity and snap off into a hidden recess. "It's okay, Sharon," I whispered, low enough that no one could hear. "Let go, sweetie, it's okay. Just let go. We're here."

Time stretched to a vanishing point so far away that those last few minutes stopped being minutes; they stopped being measurable units of time and became simply

organic blobs of experience that took up more memory than some years do. Sometimes it seems like those moments are still stretching out, like I walked into a painting trying to find the point on the horizon line that gives the illusion of depth, only to find the earth's round and instead of getting to the end I've just kept going, circling back to where I started. *"The universe is shaped exactly like the earth, if you go straight long enough you'll end up where you were, the universe is shaped exactly like the earth ..."* My mind was already creating a soundtrack of sorrow, automatically cataloging every sad song I'd ever heard into a nonverbal, coded, crystalline monument to the frozen block of misery growing inside me: *"This is the end, beautiful friend ... I'm not here, this isn't happening ... I hope my pony knows the way back home ... the type of memories that turn your bones to glass, that turn your bones to glass ... Deliah's gone, one more round, Deliah's gone ... goddamn the sun, goddamn the light that shines on this world of shadows ... children get older, I'm getting older, too... your heroes for ghosts, hot air for the cool breeze ... golden slumbers fill your eyes, smiles await you when you rise, sleep pretty darling do not cry ..."* I wanted to stop them but I couldn't. It was like the illumination of pain by small talk; the shallow surface of pop music only illustrated my absolute inability to process the depth of tragic sadness I felt about what was happening in front of me, the destruction not only of one life, but the collapse of the lives around that life into the void left behind, and the burst of resistance that would throw us all apart the way a star explodes after gravity in the core reaches critical mass and everything burns up in a second, blowing the pieces across the universe and back out into the clutches of chance.

And then it was over. The beeping of the heart monitor gave a few hiccupping tics and fell into the flat tone I'd heard on TV a million times, but never quite connected to its real meaning. Sharon's body relaxed and the group around her bed let out a short, collective wail that spread out and collected in the corners, where it dissipated. We all stood there holding our breath, one mind connected in a network of disbelief, soaking up the sudden future like reluctant sponges.

The nurse reappeared and started turning off machines. I was still holding Sharon's hand, and the nurse worked around me like I wasn't there. It amazed me how efficient she was at her job, and I wondered how she got into her line of work and what kind of person she was to be able to do it. The people at the outer edges of the room started drifting out, and after a while it was just me and Carrie and Althea and Lynn there again, crying and postponing the moment we'd have to leave and admit it was really over. The nurse finally took the cotton balls off Sharon's eyes, standing with her body between me and Sharon's face so I couldn't see what her eyes looked like. Then the nurse passed her hand down over Sharon's face and left. Sharon looked like herself again with the cotton balls gone. She looked so tired and pale, like she'd been through a long, hard journey and she couldn't stay awake any longer. I put my hand on her forehead and stroked her face; she was already getting cool. I leaned down and kissed her forehead, and smelled deeply at the juncture between her hair and her face to get one last imprint of her into my sensory bank. She didn't smell like herself, but already like corruption, an unpleasant, almost chemical smell that made me pull back. I looked down, still holding her hand, and cried for a few more moments then laid her hand carefully down next to her and let it go.



The next couple of hours were surreal. We made our way back to the waiting room, and everyone hung around in there for a while like they didn't quite know what to do with themselves. I know I didn't quite know what to do with myself. As people finally started leaving, I stood around by the door, telling them goodbye. I felt like I was a host at a party, somehow.

"Thanks for coming," I said to an aunt, and got a funny look, like she was wondering if I was cracking up. I kind of was.

Eventually, Althea, Carrie, Lynn, Alan and me were the only ones left. Alan said I could stay at his house until I got my shit together, and Carrie was going home with Althea for the time being. I knew she would probably end up going to live with her dad before long, and I hugged her close. I didn't know what to do or think. Carrie still felt like my daughter, but without Sharon we didn't feel like a family. It didn't make any sense, but at that moment, nothing did to me.

Eight

I didn't go home for three days. Alan had rented a big house a few months before, and there was plenty of room. I slept upstairs in an extra bedroom, which was empty except for a queen-size mattress. It was one of those historical old houses in Heritage Hills, so the room had high ceilings and hardwood floors. I lay in there, curled up on the mattress, and the reflective surfaces of the mostly-empty room gave my crying a reverb that made it sound extra creepy and bereft, even to myself. At the same time I took a vain sort of satisfaction in the setting. It seemed sort of poetical that I was lying on a bare

mattress in an empty room in a turn-of-the-century house, listening to the train pass several times a day. Also, there was a bakery across the street from the residential block we were on, and every morning I woke up to the smell of hundreds of loaves of fresh bread coming out of the ovens over there. I wasn't hungry, but the smell was soothing and it added to the overall atmosphere.

Alan left me alone most of the time but he was always around when I made my way downstairs. I couldn't talk, but it was still nice to have him around. He wasn't working at the time. When I would come downstairs after my initial morning crying fit, he would have a joint rolled, and we would smoke it in companionable silence. This was one of the reasons I had turned down my parent's offer to let me come stay with them; my mom wouldn't have even let me smoke cigarettes in the house, much less roll joints for me three or four times a day. I felt like I was feeling too much and all I wanted was to blunt the edge. I didn't realize that blunting the blade was only making the inevitable cutting process slower and more agonizing, but I wouldn't have cared even if I did.

I took a shower the second day but I had to put on the same clothes, which got kind of gross after a while, and I knew I would have to either sit around naked while I washed my clothes or go to the house and get something else to wear. On the fourth day I went to the house. I had stopped thinking of it as home, since it wasn't home without Sharon and Carrie. I had talked to Althea the day before, and she told me Carrie's dad had laid claim to her and she was going to go live with him out in Yukon where he had just bought a big new house. I didn't even get any say. Sharon and I had never been legally married, and while I had put my name down as her spouse on her death certificate it didn't have any bearing on Carrie or what happened to her. It made me sad that she

wouldn't live with me anymore and that I wouldn't take her to Girl Scout meetings anymore and that she'd have to start at a new school where she didn't know anyone.

I thought about it while I sat outside the house. Alan had offered to come with me, but I knew being there was bound to be pretty hard and I didn't want to embarrass myself any more than I already had.

I was nervous about going in. I had developed this weird thing where I kept imagining Sharon standing around in different places. The first time had been the morning after she died and I was looking out the bedroom window, watching the dead leaves skip down the street and the sidewalks like happy little husks on their way to husk school. I looked back up toward the corner, and there she was in my imagination, standing on the sidewalk looking up at me. I stared back at her. She looked lonely, standing in the wind in her long sweat shorts, her tie-dyed T-shirt flapping around her, her hair blowing over and off her face.

I had seen her standing around on street corners and up on top of light poles and on top of the tall bell tower at Oklahoma City University on my way over to the house, and once I got there I didn't want to get out because I was imagining her standing on the porch, like she'd been waiting for me. I finally worked up the nerve to get out of the car and up to the front door.

I stood there for a little while, thinking about the summer before, this one day when me and Sharon and Carrie were standing out on the porch just sort of talking and watching the trees and stuff in the evening. It was getting on toward dark and the sounds of the traffic on 23rd were drifting over from a couple of blocks away, and the birds were out and the air had a lot of moisture in it, so it smelled good and the temperature was just

right. Our house was on the corner off 22nd and Villa, so there was the occasional car passing, and the stop sign was actually in our yard, so people kept stopping there on their way to wherever they were going. It was like something out of a lemonade commercial, with kids running around, playing and whatever. Anyway, we were standing on the porch, at the edge under the arch leading to the front walk, and Carrie was goofing around in the yard with a stick or something. I had my arm around Sharon, and she seemed to be feeling pretty good. This was two or three months before the last trip to California.

We were standing there, feeling all nice for once, when this junky car pulled up to the stop sign. Then, without even looking over at us or giving any indication that he knew what he was doing wasn't cool, the guy in the passenger seat dumped a bunch of fast food trash out into the yard. It wasn't like he'd even put it all into one bag or anything, it was a big loose wad of hamburger wrappers and French fry boxes and ketchup packets and all that, and a mostly full cup of soda. The lid came off the soda and it ran out into the grass and down the curb and back into the street.

"Hey!" I yelled. The guy that had dumped out the trash gave an incurious look out the window at me, and then flicked a burning cigarette butt into the yard as the driver gassed the shitty old car, blowing dark exhaust into the yard where Carrie was standing. They blatted off toward 23rd.

Sharon and I looked at each other for a moment, our mouths open. Carrie had pretty much the same look on her face in the yard, staring at the pile of trash and the smoldering cigarette end. After a few moments she walked over and stomped the cigarette out and looked back at us. Then Sharon and I just started laughing. We stood

there together with our arms around each other, laughing and laughing, and pretty soon Carrie started laughing too and she came up on the porch and laughed there, and then we went inside and I cooked something for dinner. And we felt happy.

I stood there on the porch and thought about that night. I probably was idealizing it in my head, but I didn't think I was too far off. Standing there in the watery late October light, the chill biting into my nose and ears, watching the dead, crispy leaves scutter down the street and through the yard, that night seemed like the greatest time I had ever lived, full of a casual happiness that I suspected would never come back.

Inside, the house was warm but the air was stale. I had left the heater on the night I took Sharon to the hospital, and the floor grate was still ticking away faithfully. It felt weird to be in there, and the memories were crowded around me so thick it was kind of hard to breathe. I tried not to think as I walked fast to the bedroom and got into the closet, shuffling the clothes around on the hangers as I looked for my good slacks, shirt and a tie. It was hard to ignore Sharon as I shuffled her clothes aside from mine and picked out what I needed. I threw the pants and shirt and tie down on the bed, went to the dresser and got a wad of clean underwear and socks, and then fell on the bed and wept for a while with my face in Sharon's pillow. When I was done I went to the laundry room and got an old grocery sack, went back to the bedroom, put my clothes in it, grabbed a pair of dress shoes from the back of the closet again while I held my breath, and then got the hell out of the house before I lost it again. I locked the door, feeling a weird, strong mix of guilt, anger, grief, and aching loss, like I was turning my back on Sharon's memory, like maybe I should have been stronger and sat in the house all the time, thinking about her, wasting away until I could join her.

On the way back to Alan's she was on every light pole, every power line, every roof top and every street corner. I stared straight ahead as much as I could, trying to hold it together long enough to get back to my mattress so I could hide for the rest of the day, maybe the rest of the week.



Sharon's funeral was the next afternoon. Althea had reserved a pavilion in Hafer Park in Edmond to have a memorial service, since she was tapped out from the trip to San Diego and I didn't have any money, either. I went with Lynn, Althea and Carrie to Kinko's that morning to make programs. We used a really nice picture of Sharon from the year before that Althea had taken on Sharon's last birthday at a Mexican restaurant while Sharon was laughing at something. She looked really pretty. She was thirty. We all wrote something for the inside about Sharon and got one of the guys that worked at Kinko's to help us put it together and get it printed so it looked nice, on some nice paper.

After that we sat around Althea's house until it was time, picking at the food people had been bringing over for the last few days, not talking much. Sharon's ashes were in a wooden box that Roger had made a couple of years before, sitting on the table in the kitchen, waiting to be taken to the park so everyone could stare at them. The service was supposed to be at three, so about one-thirty we went over to the park just so we'd have something to do.

There really isn't much to say about the service except it was the last time for a few things. Carrie's dad came and sat with her for the beginning of it but let her come over and sit with me while the preacher my mom got to come from the Unitarian church she was going to at the time gave his spiel about nature and wholeness and the

insolubility of memory and all that crap. Carrie and I sat together and cried in front of everyone, though we were facing away from them toward the duck pond that the preacher was framed in front of. That was the last time Carrie and I sat together that way without feeling the division of other people's expectations. Really, it was the last time she was my daughter, since after the service she went home with her dad to stay for good, and I only talked to her on the phone once or twice to see how she was getting along. It was a rare day for mid-October, as I may have said before: clear and blue and cool without being chilly, at least in the mid afternoon. All my friends came, the guys from Cat War and some other guys in different bands that we shared our practice space with. It was the last time we were all together. It was the last time Cat War was all in the same place at the same time. We never played again. The last time we had practiced had been a couple of weeks before, and at the time I didn't know it was the last time. I hate that, when it's the last time for something and you don't know it, but I guess sometimes it's better that way.

It was also the last time I was in close proximity to Sharon's ashes, the last time I wore a tie and nice shoes, the last time I heard a preacher speak and the last time I was in Hafer Park. It can be depressing when you think about how many things you might be doing for the last time on any given day.

After the preacher had said his piece, we played some of Sharon's mix CDs. They had a lot of upbeat songs like "You Sexy Thing" but with some sad stuff like "Landslide." We all stood around for a while, talking and shaking hands and hugging until people started drifting away, the way they did at the hospital the night Sharon died. And again, pretty soon it was just me and Althea and Lynn and Carrie, with her dad and

step-mom and Alan sort of hanging out in the background. We all sat around the box of Sharon's ashes for a little while and held hands, feeling the moment slip away without talking, and then Carrie's dad cleared his throat and she had to go. I rode back to Althea's house with her and Lynn, and hung around there for awhile, and then me and Alan got in my car and went back to his house.

"How are you doing?" he said as we pulled out onto Broadway.

"Shitty," I said, pulling off my tie.

"I hear you, man. I'm sorry."

"Nah, don't be. It's just ... you know. I'm not too sure what I'm going to do now," I said.

Nine

Three weeks and two days after the funeral I went back to work. I had lain on the mattress upstairs in Alan's spare bedroom for those nine days, smoking cigarettes, crying every couple of hours or so and re-reading *The Catcher in the Rye* three times straight. It had been my favorite book when I was twelve or thirteen, and I thought it would cheer me up. It didn't. It passed the time, but in the back of my mind there was always some open wound or another. It wasn't just Sharon dying; everything had fallen apart. After the funeral Carrie had been whisked away by her dad, taken out to his palatial new mansion in the wilds of Yukon, of all places. Lynn and Althea were living in Edmond, and they were a help, though they were going through the same thing I was and didn't feel too social, either. And then a couple of weeks after the funeral, my landlord told me

he was evicting me. I hadn't paid any rent the month before, and even though I begged him not to kick me out, he said he didn't have any choice. I never did stay there without Sharon. My dad and Alan and me cleaned the place out and put everything in storage so I could go through it once I got my shit together. I didn't know when, if ever, that would happen. All I knew then was I didn't have a home any more. Sharon and Carrie were gone, and even if I had some form of legal entitlement to see Carrie I was just too depressed. All I had left of my "old" life was my stupid goddam job.

So I got up that Monday, put on my jeans, T-shirt and work shirt, pulled on my Redwings and went to the lab. It felt strange to be up so early. When I wasn't lying around crying and reading I went downstairs and ate with Alan, and we had been smoking a lot of pot. So that gave an added dimension to the unrealness of how I felt as I drove. It was just before dawn, and the streets were still mostly empty. It felt like my truck was floating.

It wasn't too bad when I first got there, because it was just me and Harrell, and Harrell was posted up in his office with some coffee and donuts and a magazine, following his usual morning ritual. I knew in about a half hour he would go to the toilet out in the loading area and stink it up, then come back and do nothing some more until lunch time. The only deviation had been his failure to say anything to me when he came in. I had been weighing moisture samples with the radio off, trying not to think and doing a poor job of it. I opened each bag of samples with the little blunt-ended paring knife we kept around, and each time I did it my mind strayed just far enough from Sharon to consider putting it through my eye and getting the whole thing over with.

The field testers started trickling in from their early morning pours and inspections, some of them bringing in loads of concrete cylinders for smashing and recording, some of them bringing in mortar and soil samples for proctors, plasticity indexing and gradation washes. A lot of them didn't say anything to me but walked quietly by as they came in through the loading bay, their conversations fading off like a stereo turned down by a nervous kid up past bedtime. I didn't mind. I sat at the blue table facing the wall, logging in and weighing my moisture samples. About ten the drillers came in and dropped off another big bunch of sample bags to be logged and weighed, which I was glad for. It would keep me busy the rest of the day and I wouldn't have to talk to anyone if I didn't want to.

True to form, Harrell came out of his office about eleven-thirty, on his way to the Chinese buffet down the street where he went at least three or four times a week. I heard his door open across the room, and I hoped he would just go out, but after his keys rattled in the office door there was a pause and then his boot heels clocked their way over to the counter where I was working. I hunched my shoulders and stabbed my pocket penetrometer into a big hunk of fat red clay, pretending it was my throat. Harrell came up next to me and leaned one hand on the counter.

"How's it going, bud?" he said, trying to sound like he cared without sounding like he was trying too hard to sound like he cared.

"Living the dream," I said, not taking my eyes off my sample.

Harrell shifted around a little. Normally he would have given me shit for saying something so disloyal to his father-in-law's company, but I think he was picking up that it was the wrong day to split hairs with me. "Look, some of the guys took up a little

collection. You know, since you missed all that time without pay and all.” I had been gone for almost two whole weeks, and since I had used up all of my vacation and sick time on that last trip to San Diego, I wasn’t getting paid for any of it. I hadn’t been thinking much about it, but truth be told, I was starting to run pretty short on cash. Harrell dropped a white letter-sized envelope on the table and put his hands in his pockets. “I’m going to lunch. See you in a bit.”

“Thanks, Harrell,” I said. My voice was only a little unsteady, but for some reason I thought if I looked at him he would be able to hear it better, so I didn’t look at him.

“Don’t thank me, thank the guys. And the company,” Harrell said, and walked out, his boots clocking fast for the door. He slammed through it, farting a little as he pushed it open. Harrell is such a charming guy. Even though he had basically just told me that he hadn’t chipped anything into the envelope, the fact he wasn’t too much of a dick about it was pretty nice, for him.

I waited a few minutes and weighed the four or five more samples there was room for on the tray, then put it in the drying oven over the counter before I opened the envelope. For some reason, I was really touched. And really relieved, actually. Alan was doing okay, but he didn’t have money falling out his ass and I felt bad freeloading for so long. As I looked at the outside of the envelope I imagined opening it and finding a check for three or four thousand dollars. If the company had chipped in, it was probably something pretty good. There was no way, but it’s easy to get carried away when someone gives you an envelope and tells you there’s an undisclosed amount of money in it.

I held the envelope up to the bank of fluorescent bulb over the counter, but I couldn't see anything through it. I was one of those company envelopes with lead lining to shield criminals and employees from seeing what's in them until the people responsible for what's in them are far away and outside the jurisdiction of wrath. I shrugged and tore open the end and blew into the end to pop it open. I mentally crossed my fingers and pulled out the check and looked at it. It was for fifty-seven dollars and thirty-two cents. I looked back into the envelope and then shook it over the counter, hoping something else would fall out onto the scale. Nothing did. That was it. Between my twenty-three co-workers and the 300-or-so-branch corporation I had worked for over the preceding six years, all they could come up with was fifty-seven dollars and thirty-two cents. I wondered where the thirty-two cents came from, whose car ashtray it had been cleaned out of.

I sighed and put the check back in the envelope. I thought for a moment about tearing it up and putting it in the trash, then about tearing it up and putting up Harrell's nose, but in the end I folded the envelope in half and put it in my shirt pocket. What the hell. I could buy a half ounce and maybe a bottle of whiskey with it, so it wouldn't be a total loss. Maybe that's all they meant for me to do with it in the first place; get good and loaded and forget about my self-pity for a little while. They were those kinds of guys. For them, coping skills meant working through whatever was bothering you, never talking about it and getting as drunk as you could whenever you could. Die at fifty (if you're lucky) and let it go at that.

I started a new tray of samples and tried to forget about the check. Once I started thinking about it, I realized the fifty must have been from the company, and the seven

thirty-two from one or two of the guys. I turned on the radio to take my mind off it, though I hate the radio. The only stations I could just about stand were KRXO, the classic rock station, and KOMA, the oldies station, which was really just like classic rock but with more emphasis on the sixties in their play list. The only thing about them, though, is that they play the same thirty or so goddam songs over and over. KRXO was playing “Landslide” by Fleetwood Mac, with Stevie Nicks singing about getting older, too. It made me think about Sharon, and I started tearing up. I switched it over to KOMA, but they were playing “Wish You Were Here” by Pink Floyd, which was almost as bad. The only difference was that I pictured “Landslide” being sung from Sharon’s point of view, where “Wish You Were Here” was from mine. “Landslide” was worse. I slapped the plug out of the wall and the radio went dead. I felt so bad. I had been going over things that I’d done to Sharon, things that I’d wished I’d done different, stupid little arguments that didn’t really mean shit at the time that made them seem even more petty and cruel in retrospect. I could remember every time I hurt her feelings, and each incident chewed at my brain like a little guilt rat.

I weighed out moisture samples and put them on the tray without thinking about what I was doing. I started thinking about a couple of weeks before Sharon died when she had to go to the hospital to get some blood tests done. They had to do that about once a month so it wasn’t a really big deal, and I had to work so I didn’t go with her. I mean, I could have gone, but I was worried about the time I had missed in California and I didn’t want to miss any more. Besides, I had had about enough of hospitals by that point, though I’m sure she had, too. The thing I remembered was she told me later that after they took the blood, they wanted her to walk some paperwork upstairs to one of the other

offices. It wouldn't have been a big deal, since she just had to take the elevator up and go across the hall and give them the papers, but somehow she got lost on the way back.

Sharon said she walked around for like twenty minutes, pulling her oxygen tank behind her on its little cart, trying to find the elevator again and the way back to her car. The worst thing was that she had to stop and catch her breath a lot and people kept walking by, but no one would help her. She was too embarrassed to ask anyone, and no one offered.

When she first told me the story I felt bad and gave her a hug and kissed her and everything, but as I sat there going through the bagged samples the incident took on a whole new dimension of nightmare. I just kept feeling guiltier thinking about Sharon walking up and down the half-empty corridors, stopping every few minutes to lean against the wall and breathe from her oxygen tube. I imagined her getting paler, then breaking a sweat, her green eyes taking on a wide-eyed combination of weariness and panic and sorrow. All while I was sitting right where I was sitting then, sorting through little bits of dirt for the fuckhead engineers in the back offices, probably listening to Steve Miller or goddam Eric Clapton or whoever, maybe out back having a cigarette break while Sharon was slowly suffocating under her own weight.

I was just about at the point when I thought I might really take the knife to myself when the door banged open and Harrell came back in, picking his teeth with a wooden toothpick and belching softly. He ambled over to me, rubbing his fat belly and dragging his boot heels across the concrete floor. As he leaned against the counter again, facing toward me, I could smell stale garlic and sesame oil coming off him in waves, mixed a little with the Brylcreem he used to stick his dark hair back off his forehead.

“What say, Gary?” he said, and belched again. The smell made my stomach clench. I didn’t say anything. “Pretty good little collection there, huh? The company doesn’t usually do that kind of thing. Made an exception, since you’ve been here so long.”

“Yeah, they really knocked themselves out,” I said.

“You ought to be grateful they did anything for you. This is a Christian company, and you and Sharon weren’t actually hitched, after all.”

“Yeah, they’re a bunch of real princes. Fucking royalty. I’m surprised Jesus doesn’t rise from the dead just so he can come to work for such a sterling bunch of charitable fucking saints. I’m going to write my Congressman and tell him to send a goddam medal.” My face was getting hot and my hands were shaking. The blunt, wedge-ended knife was by the scale. I pushed it to the other side, out of sight.

“Hey, I know you’re under a lot of stress, and you’re probably pretty upset. But I can write you up for that kind of talk. You just remember that,” Harrell said, leaning in too close.

“Yeah, I’ll remember that. Just like I’ll remember you’re a shit-ass, cunt-faced, cock-gobbling douchebag.” It didn’t even make sense. It was like someone else, someone fluent in profane rhetoric and maybe a little bit drunk, was speaking through me. I kept trying to weigh out samples for my tray, but my hands were shaking so bad I was having a hard time keeping the soil in the little tin cups. Harrell took a deep breath.

“All right, goddammit,” he said. “Gary, you need to get on out of here until you get your attitude under control. I don’t get paid to stand here and listen to you talk to me like ...”

“No, you get paid to sit on your fat fucking ass, talking to your fat bitch of a wife on the goddam telephone, eating microwave pork rinds and scratching your sweaty balls. Isn’t that about right?” Completely on its own, without any help from me, my hand reached back around the scale and picked up the wedge-tipped kitchen knife. I turned toward Harrell and scooted my ass off the stool so I was half standing. I was holding the knife down by my leg, and Harrell looked at it as he took a couple of steps back.

“Now Gary, don’t be crazy now,” Harrell said, and licked his lips. He arched some sweat off his forehead while his eyes shot back and forth between the knife and my face. “Just go on home and take you some rest. Maybe take a few days. Okay?”

I half stood there looking at him, feeling the knife handle getting a little slippery in my hand as I started to sweat. I felt hot all over and it was hard to breathe. I knew I had crossed a line, but not very far; if it had been a real line I could have looked over my shoulder and still seen it, probably could have just scooted back a little and been on the right side. Only I didn’t want to cross back. I wanted to keep moving, but I wasn’t sure how. I did the first thing that came into my head, and drew the knife hard across my wrist, not sure what it was exactly that I wanted to happen, but hoping it would be *something*. I whipped the blade across my skin hard, looking into Harrell’s piggy little eyes. I followed through on the sweep, ending with the knife held up about shoulder height in my right hand. Harrell and I looked at each other for a long moment, and then we both looked down at my wrist at the same time. It burned, so I assumed I had managed to open it up. I hadn’t. There was just a red, scraped-looking weal running across the outlines of the veins and tendons, with a little thin scratch at the end where the

tip nicked off the side. A tiny drop of blood oozed out and sat there, looking up at me like an accusing evil red rat eye.

Harrell and I looked at each other again. All the heat had drained out of me and I felt dizzy, like my blood had gone into my feet and left my brain to fend for itself. I was still shaking. I just stood there, holding the knife up where it stopped at the end of its swipe, like a kid who had swung high on a swing set just when time froze.

Then Harrell did exactly the wrong thing. He started laughing. It came shuffling out of his nose, then his mouth opened and flapped his blubbery lips with the growing force of it, jiggling his little butt chin and skimming out his patchy mustache in isolated strands. As his chuckles ramped up he started blowing that stale garlic and sesame oil smell at me some more, making my stomach clench all over again. All of a sudden my vision sharpened down to a fuzzy tunnel, magnifying Harrell's face in the center. I noticed that I could see his pores sitting in the surface of his skin like oily little potholes, some of them packed with slimy-looking dirt. Fine hairs were blowing out of his nostrils, not quite touching his mustache. The laughter moved from his throat down into his belly, and started coming out in full-throated honks.

“Oh,” Harrell said, slapping his knee. “Oh, I’m sorry. I know it’s not really funny, but you’re just such a *fuckup* ...” and he was off again, blowing that smell into my face as his body jiggled and wheezed. The part of him that was in the center of my vision, the part that was magnified, turned from color to black and white.

“You dumb fucker,” I said, and swung the knife in a neat, almost polite arc across from where it was still hanging to an endpoint in Harrell’s neck, a little bit above his collar. I let it go and it stayed there, with only about half an inch of the three-inch blade

still showing above his paling skin. Harrell stopped laughing. He stood there for a few moments, his skin losing color and his eyes widening until I thought they would pop out. After what seemed like a long time he said, “Ahhhhg!” and fell to his knees. He looked up at me, touched the knife as if he was making sure it was indeed there, said, “Hiiiiig!” and fell over on his right side so the knife was sticking up in the air. I watched him pant there for a little bit until his eyes closed.

As soon as Harrell’s eyes closed I snapped back into myself. Color came back into the room, my peripheral vision came back and I was aware of the sounds coming from the loading bay out back; the sound of the other radio out there, a couple of people talking and the sound of a proctor hammer tapping up and down on a molded sample. And the faint buzzing of the fluorescent light banks hanging over the sample shelves. There was no one else in the lab. The color and sound had come back into the world, but my thoughts were suspended, like they were in a broken rollercoaster car, stuck at the top of the big drop.

I nudged Harrell with my foot. He didn’t move. I thought about feeling for his pulse, but I didn’t want to touch him. I stood there for a moment longer, vaguely thinking that maybe I should tell someone what I had done. I was really thirsty. My mouth felt so dry, and my tongue felt swollen, like it had been bruised. I figured I would go out into the loading bay, get a drink of water from the water cooler out there, and then go up front into the office and tell someone, probably the secretary, what I had done. Then that person would call the police while I sat quietly on the floor, sipping my water.

I stepped over Harrell, trying not to look at him. He wasn’t bleeding a lot, but the edge of his skin where it was wrapped around the blade was coated with blood and a

medium-size trickle was running across his throat and down his shoulder onto the floor, where it formed a small pool. It wasn't that big, but enough that you would slip in it if you weren't watching what you were doing. Harrell was just lying there still, his eyes closed, but I felt scared stepping over him anyways. I kept thinking he was going to reach up and grab my ankle, pull the knife out of his neck and stick it up into my balls. That's one thing that's ironic about me stabbing Harrell I guess, since I'm super scared of being stabbed. That's one of my things, like I lie awake at night sometimes thinking that someone is going to sneak into my room and stab me, maybe with an ice pick or a rusty knife. Especially in the one week, four days and sixteen hours or so that Sharon had been dead, I had been thinking about it a lot.

I made it over Harrell without him making some sort of zombie-movie grab at me. I tiptoed over to the door leading out to the loading bay. There was no one around, but I had the idea that if I made too much noise somebody would jump out and grab me. I was sweating a lot even though I felt cold except for my feet, which felt swollen and itchy. I eased the door lever over as silently as possible and went out into the loading bay.

It's not unusual for the technicians to all be out on jobs, testing concrete and soil densities or picking up mortar or whatever. The only person out in the bay was Tino, a young guy who had taken over crushing the concrete cylinders a month or so before. He looked up and waved at me as I came out the door, and then he went back to watching the cylinder he had in the machine. I stood there for a few seconds until the cylinder reached its pressure level and exploded out on the side toward Tino, who didn't even flinch behind his safety glasses. Concrete bits littered his boots and bounced off his jeans. I

had done the job myself for a few months, and you got used to bits of concrete flying at you. I only got hit in the face a few times, and only cut once, on my forehead.

As Tino dumped the shattered remains of the cylinder out the other side of the crushing machine into a wheelbarrow I turned right and went across to the connecting bay where they kept all the field equipment. The water cooler sat against the wall at the back. I took the top paper cup off the dispenser and threw it automatically in the trash can next to the cooler since the top one is always dirty, and I pulled off the next one down and filled it with water. I stood there sipping it, looking out through the open bay door into the back lot. It was nice out. It was November, but it could have been March, April, September or any other month for that matter. The air was moist but cool enough not to be humid. Low-lying enamel-white clouds scooted steady across the cobalt sky like construction paper cutouts on a motorized string. The clouds were tinged with dark edges, making it look like they had shadows against the sky, enhancing the illusion of unreality. It was my favorite sort of weather. The wind was high up, pushing the clouds fast across while the air on the ground remained relatively still.

I sipped my water and tried not to think about what I had done. Since I had formulated my little plan to have a drink of water and then confess, I had been just trying to follow one step at a time, moving forward. I tried to think of it like I was walking down a road and time was the painted dashes down the middle. I would keep my eyes on the next little dash, and then the dash after that and so on. It seemed simple. But somehow the dash that was the moment I stabbed Harrell in the neck kept getting in front of me, sitting on top of the dash I was supposed to be focused on so I tripped over the double-thick paint while I was looking forward to the next stripe and didn't notice the old

stripe sitting there. It doesn't make any damn sense, but that's how I was thinking of it while I stood there. I was just trying not to trip over any more paint stripes, but the more I tried not to the more I did anyway.

I finished the water and threw the cup into the trashcan. There was still no one around and I assumed no one had gone into the lab, since no one was running around freaking out about Harrell's body lying in there. According to my theory, the next paint stripe I was supposed to be moving to was going to the front office and telling the secretary that I had stabbed Harrell in the neck. But as I was standing there, looking at those cutout clouds sliding over their background, I didn't feel like it. The more I thought about time, the more I realized it wasn't so much a straight line of painted dashes, but just one big painted dash spreading out everywhere. That's why I kept tripping over that stabbing moment, not because it was getting in front of me like magic, but because I was walking in circles. It was my own fault. Everything was my fault.

Instead of going up to the front and confessing, I figured I would just wander off that straight line and see what happened. I walked out through the equipment bay into the muted sunshine, then across the narrow drive past the drillers' equipment shed and into the gravel parking lot.

"Hey!" I heard behind me. I felt a little jump in my gut, but since I didn't expect to get very far anyway, it wasn't too much. I turned around, expecting cops with guns pulled on me to be standing there. Instead, it was just Tino. "You going to lunch?" he said.

I shrugged. "I guess."

"Where you going?" he said.

“I don’t know.”

“Can you pick me something up?” he said, picking concrete chips out of his hair.

“Sure,” I said, and walked back toward him. Tino reached into pocket and pulled out his wallet. He fished around in it, pulled out a five dollar bill and handed it to me.

“Just get me a burger or something, or whatever. Burrito, or whatever. Okay?”

“Yeah, no problem,” I said, tucking the bill into my shirt pocket, feeling another doubling of unreality. “You got a lot of cylinders today?”

“Yeah, Harrell said I can’t go anywhere until we’re caught up. That’s why I’m not going to lunch. There’s a couple hundred more in there.”

“Shitty,” I said. “That’s Harrell for you. A real company man.” I giggled, then stopped. I wasn’t sure how hysterical it sounded.

“You mean a real company dickhead,” Tino said. I laughed a little, trying not to think too hard, and we just sort of stood there for a few moments. “So, you doing alright?” Tino said it like he wasn’t sure he wanted to, but like he thought he should at least say something.

“Ah, you know. Taking it as it comes,” I said, looking off toward the street.

“Yeah, I guess that’s all you can do,” he said.

“Yeah.”

“Well, I was real sorry to hear about it. I never met her, but, you know ...”

“I do. Thanks,” I said.

“Sure.” We stood there for a few more awkward seconds, and then I patted my shirt pocket.

“Well, I’m going to go so I can get back. Harrell’s got me up to my neck in it, too,” I said, letting out another hysterical giggle.

“Okay. See you later.” Tino turned and picked up another concrete cylinder like it was a good friend that had come to help him out of an awkward conversation. I didn’t blame him. I turned back and headed for my truck again. I was having a hard time wrapping my mind around what had just happened, so I didn’t even try. I had taken Tino’s five bucks and I wasn’t coming back. No one came out and grabbed me. Either no one had come out into the lab, or no one had noticed Harrell there lying in blood. The construction paper clouds were still moving across their blue backdrop. I was getting in my truck and starting it up. I had no idea where I was going or what I would do when I got there. And it didn’t seem to matter. I was off the painted line and everywhere I looked there was just more empty space.

Ten

After I left the lab I just drove around for a while. I wasn’t sure what I should or shouldn’t think. I didn’t know if one particular thought would lead down a dangerous road that I didn’t want to go down or if it was all the same and it didn’t matter. The thought I was most actively avoiding was connected to Harrell. I kept imagining different scenarios in which first the secretary, then one of the engineers, then a technician or two, walked into the lab and saw Harrell lying on the floor. I imagined they would see my clipboard and stuff on the desk and know I was responsible. I couldn’t remember exactly what I’d left behind. It wasn’t much, though it didn’t matter since I’d

probably left a couple of big fat bloody fingerprints on the knife handle and probably on the door. Probably the water fountain too, for that matter. And the cup I'd drank out of. Not to mention the dusty cup I'd thrown away before I drank out of the cup I'd drank out of. Footprints. Saliva. Hair samples. Who knows what all.

Worse, I kept picturing what those hypothetical people would see when they wandered into the lab. Fat, dead Harrell, lying on the dirty floor like a sack of neglected flour, the blood pooled under his face and body, soaked into his green company golf shirt and thickening like soup skin as it cooled. And that collar of blood around the knife blade. I wondered if anyone at the office would pull it out. Then I decided as stupid as most of them were, they wouldn't be that stupid. They would wait for the paramedics. I pictured Harrell's face as a rubber-gloved hand reached down, grabbed the knife handle and pulled with slow, steady force until it loosened, and then the sound it would make as the hand pulled it the rest of the way out, a kind of slurping, vacuum-cleaner-on-your-skin sort of sound that made me feel sick to my stomach. I wondered how long Harrell would have to be dead before blood didn't shoot out the wound.

I headed north for a while past Quail Springs Mall and the mid-afternoon shopping traffic, then headed west out past the vast housing tracts toward County Line, where there were still farmhouses and empty fields spaced with the occasional mega-church. It hadn't changed much since I was in high school and I had driven out here when I had nothing better to do, driving up and down the two-lane roads with Alan. As I drove I tried to think of something memorable from back then to take my mind off Harrell and his neck wound, but I couldn't. And when I did manage to banish my fantasies about what was going on back at the lab for a while, the other thoughts I was

trying to avoid would surface, sea snake thoughts about damnation and God and what happens to a murderer's soul.

As I drove along the deep drainage ditches at the side of the roads I considered bumping the truck up to seventy or eighty and just driving off into one. I thought I should just find the nearest police station and turn myself in, but I couldn't quite make myself do it. It wasn't like I was going to just get grounded, or maybe spanked. It would mean prison, even though I was mostly out of my mind when it happened and I barely knew what I was doing. I remember one time in junior high they got a bunch of inmates from the prison in El Reno to come out and talk to us. One guy seemed really nice, and he said he got super drunk one night and killed his wife when he found her fucking some other guy. He didn't even remember doing it. But there he was, shackled to the rest of them. What was worse was that he seemed okay with it. I guess he'd been there long enough that it had become his home. Of course, one of the loudmouths in my class asked if they had sex with each other, and the nice-seeming guy just laughed and said we shouldn't knock it until we'd tried it. The memory of his face as he said it freaks me out to this very day, a little.

It was getting on toward late afternoon and I'd made my fourth or fifth circuit around the square bordered by 150th, County Line, 122nd and Council when my head started spinning and my stomach clenched up like a knot in a sausage. I pulled over fast into a graveled gate entry, turned off the truck, lunged out as far away from the truck as I could before my knees buckled and I went down on them. I hadn't had any breakfast, so all that came up was a little bit of drool and bile, though my stomach kept clenching and heaving for a good couple of minutes before it settled down a little, probably more out of

tiredness than anything. I knew there was no way I was going to be able to choke up what I needed to get rid of.

As I knelt there, staring up at the puffy clouds going by, I realized that at I hadn't thought about Sharon in three hours or so. I had been trying to do that for days, years, really. I thought I'd never get her off my mind, and all I'd had to do was stab somebody in the neck.

That gave me the giggles, which gave way to chuckles, which gave way to belly laughs, which gave way to hysterical weeping. That went on for quite a while, until I started to get worried that I couldn't stop, but then it tapered off until finally I was just kneeling there, breathing long and heavy. I felt a little better, not quite cleaned out, but like someone had opened a pressure valve on me somewhere and let off just enough of my built-up misery to get me by for a little bit. As I came back to myself I realized that the big, chunky gravel in the turn-in was digging like hell into my knees. I got up slow, wincing as I let the muscles in my legs shift and stretch enough to bear my weight again. Just as I got to my feet and was massaging my knees back to life, staring out across the field, I froze. On the road behind me, a vehicle with a low, smooth sounding engine had slowed down. I wasn't sure, but I thought I could hear a faint, crackled voice, like on a police radio.

I wiped my eyes off as best as I could, knowing my face was going to look like hell no matter what I did, and said a silent prayer that the vehicle belonged to some well-meaning passerby and not a cop, much less a cop that was out looking for me. I don't know why I bothered, since there was no good reason for God to help me out, if he was listening at all, the stupid son of a bitch.

I tried to act all casual as I turned around like I'd just heard the car and thought maybe it was an ice cream truck. It wasn't an ice cream truck though; it was a black and white Oklahoma City cruiser. My stomach knotted again. I tried on a friendly, non-committal country-boy smile. I don't know how it looked, but it felt swollen and bloodshot on my face, like my facial muscles had been replaced by spongy tire tube rubber and a stupid little kid with a tire pump was trying to inflate them to explosion. I smiled a little harder, flexing the muscles, almost interested against my will with the weird way they felt, and imagined them bursting, throwing blood and lymph down across my face in watery sheets. I felt like laughing as I made my way across the chunky gravel back over to my truck. I had this sort of crazy, out-of-control feeling, the kind of feeling you'd be scared of if you didn't have it, but once you did you'd realize it was the best, most natural state of being.

I stood by my truck, behind the cab with my elbows resting on the back part of the bed so the cop could see my hands. He was driving by super slow, looking down at something, probably running my tag. I waited for the dispatcher to tell him I was a wanted neck-stabber and to use all necessary force to bring me in. I pictured the cop sneaking out his baton from under the seat with one hand while he unlatched his service revolver with the other, using his feet to arm a gas canister missile that would fire from the front of the cruiser at a verbal command. Adrenaline had sharpened my senses to a scary level. I could see the different shades of blue and black alternating feathers on the crows roosting in the trees across the field, see the wiggling forms of the little worms they dug out of their bark homes and swallowed whole. My blood vessels felt like they'd all opened into super highways and my lungs were pumping pure enriched oxygen into

them; I felt like I could have run clear across the city back to Alan's house in about five steps and not even break a sweat. My brain was going a million miles a second, ready for problem solving and direct action, but while the cop was just creeping slowly past and not jumping out to arrest me the wheels up there were just spinning around and around, inventing gas cylinder launching systems for the cruiser, wondering what my mom used for the frosting on my last birthday cake (it was really thick instead of whipped, like usual), wondering if it would be suicide to use an air mattress for a parachute. I was getting anxious.

I waited. The cruiser was moving so slow it may as well have just stopped. All I could see of the cop was he was fairly young, with a big, thick neck that tapered up to a pair of jug ears and on into a close-blended, stiff crew cut that made it look like he was trying to emulate the top of the Frankenstein monster's head. All he needed was a couple of bolts under those jug ears and some green face paint and he would be set. I didn't like the crew cut. Not to be stereotypical, but most police I see anymore just have regular haircuts; it's usually the military guys or the real assholes that have flattops. I couldn't tell if he had a mustache. I decided that's what would tip the balance in my favor; if he didn't have a mustache he was just a former Marine or something, if he did have a mustache he was an asshole that couldn't get into the military and got into police work to compensate and therefore got a lot of jollies out of fucking with people.

After what seemed like forever, without even looking at me directly, the cop stepped on the gas and took off up the road.

As I watched the back of the cruiser move up the next rise expecting every second for it to turn around and come back, the adrenaline slowly drained out of my veins. I

stood there for a while, my legs feeling weaker and my vision blurring around the edges as more tears sort of crept out onto my face. I finally snapped out of it and realized I was fucking lucky as hell and that I'd better get out of there before the cop really did get the call about me and come back, siren blaring.

I got in the truck and lit a cigarette. I sat there and took a couple of drags, letting the nicotine soak into my bloodstream and steady me a little, then backed out and headed for Alan's.

I decided to drive up Northwest Expressway from County Line all the way up to Classen. It would take a little while, but there's no good way to get from that part of the city back toward downtown. It would take forever to drive down Council to I-40, and I'll be damned if I'm going to pay for the goddam turnpike. Besides, Northwest Expressway may not be very scenic, but I've got a lot of memories placed along it. I passed the Outlet Malls of America, where I got my first partial blowjob when I was seventeen, and where I also got busted by a security guard with my pants down. It was also where, years later, Sharon was going to massage school when we first met. That's a weird overlap. I sort of felt guilty for thinking about my first partial blowjob and Sharon at the same time. I passed the Braum's parking lot where I felt my first breast, and where Sharon and I used to take Carrie sometimes when we were out shopping and goofing around. Everything kept doubling like that as I drove, memories overlapped on each other, places I went as a kid with my parents, then when I got my car in high school, then as an adult at different times. I guess when you live in a city for a long time that happens. It can be depressing. I found myself wishing I could go someplace away, where I wasn't forced to carry around the past like a giant turtle shell, where things were different and no one knew me

and I could be a different Gary and it wouldn't matter. But I knew even if I did get away from Oklahoma City, it wouldn't really be different, though. That's just how it works.

I drove to the IHOP at Belle Isle and used their payphone to call Alan's house. It's getting hard to find payphones anymore; those goddam cell phones are everywhere. You know it's getting bad when you even see homeless-looking people walking down the street or waiting at the bus stop talking on cell phones. I guess that's really what's killing pay phones. If poor people don't need them, who does?

Anyway, I found some change in my armrest and called Alan from the payphone at the IHOP.

"Hello?"

"Hey. It's me," I said.

"Oh, crap. Where are you?" It made me feel a little better to hear how worried Alan sounded. I probably didn't deserve any sympathy, but it was still nice.

"I don't know. Why do you ask?" I said, being careful.

"I guess I really don't want to know. There were some cops here earlier. They may have bugged the phone, and there's a car outside. What the hell happened, man? Did you flip out, or what?" he said.

"Yeah," I said, "I guess I flipped out. I don't feel too good about it, actually."

"I bet. What are you doing?"

"I don't know. I guess I can't come back over there. Probably can't go to my parents' house. I don't know." I started getting sort of weepy again. I hadn't felt like I had a home since Sharon died, but now that I was shut out of Alan's and my parents' houses, my backup homes, I realized how much I appreciated having them as options.

“Maybe you should just come turn yourself in,” Alan said. “I hate to say it, but I don’t think you have any other real options.”

“Yeah. That goddam Harrell. He kept pushing,” I said. “I didn’t have to go so far with it. I was just ... I don’t know, he was fucking with me and it was like I stepped outside myself and just sort of watched what was happening. Does that make any sense?”

“Sure, Gary. I don’t think anyone really blames you. I mean, it’s still really bad and all, but I don’t think anyone is really surprised. I don’t know man, maybe you should just come home and turn yourself in, I’ll bet it wouldn’t be too bad. I know I’d testify on your behalf, and Althea and Lynn and Carrie would too, I bet, and lots of people would be character witnesses ...”

“I doubt that’d really help,” I said. “I think no matter what, it’s prison time. I need time to think, you know? Tell the cops I won’t hurt anyone else, but I need a little time to think and then I’ll probably come turn myself in. Maybe.”

“Hey man, the cop car outside just took off really fast. I think maybe they were tracing you. Do whatever you need to do, but I think you should let them catch you,” Alan said.

“Look, whatever happens, thanks for everything. I don’t think I’d have even made it this far without you. I really appreciate it. You’re a good friend.”

“Don’t start saying your goodbyes yet, Gary.”

“If you talk to my parents, tell them I’m sorry.”

“Be careful, Gary. Don’t do anything stupid.”

I hung up the phone. “Fuck,” I said to the curb, and walked over to my truck. I was about to get in when it occurred to me that the cops would be looking for it, and were headed out to get me at that moment. I opened it and grabbed my cigarettes off the seat, and then looked in the glove compartment, in case there was anything in it that I wanted. All that was in there was my insurance paperwork, the ancient owner’s manual that came with the truck back in ’81 and one of Sharon’s hair ties, all used and stretched out with a little bit of her hair still wrapped around it. I grabbed the hair tie and thought about Sharon, about how this truck was the last vehicle she ever rode in as I drove her to the hospital to die. I bought it the year before I met her, paying it off a hundred dollars a month to a guy at work. It was the first vehicle I bought completely on my own, and I felt sad that I had to leave it. I told myself I would come back for it, and tried not to think too hard about how unlikely that was.

I locked the truck, put Sharon’s hair tie in the little coin pocket in my jeans and walked across Classen away from the IHOP. I went under the highway and walked up the hook past Edna’s Bar and Grill and across the highway off-ramp, headed toward Western. I walked fast, trying to put as much distance between myself and my truck as I could. At that point I figured it was only a matter of time and the cops were going to pick me up and take me to jail for the rest of my life. I decided I would try and stay free as long as possible. I didn’t have anything left to lose but my freedom, and that was effectively lost anyway.

I cut across Western into a neighborhood and walked east until I got to Robinson, then I turned south until I saw a driveway to a parking lot behind an old apartment complex at around thirty-seventh street. The railroad tracks ran between the backs of the

houses on that stretch of the east side of Robinson and I-235, creating a sort of no-man's land strip that housed trash, broken glass and the occasional wino. I crossed the apartment complex parking lot quick and vaulted over the fence into the railroad easement, then turned back south again toward downtown. I walked along, avoiding the glass and winos. It was getting dusky and I wanted to leave the easement before the sun was all the way down. There weren't that many winos. The ones I passed were asleep or completely uninterested in me. It was hard to believe the evening was the continuation of the same day I had tried to go back to work. I thought back to waking up that morning depressed about Sharon and wished that was still all I had to worry about. I would have given anything to be able to go back to Alan's, smoke a joint and curl up on my mattress upstairs. I might have even read a little, maybe eat something.

I finally got to 23rd Street and had to leave the easement. I crossed 23rd, went past Byron's liquor store and walked down Broadway past the fire station and the bakery until I could cross back onto the railroad tracks again. I didn't see any cops. As I passed 18th I could look down from between the warehouses and see Alan's house, halfway up the block toward Robinson. His car was in the driveway. A police cruiser was parked on the opposite side of the street. Even the little curl of vapor coming up from behind the running cruiser looked inviting and homey. It was getting cold and I felt lonesome. I thought about just walking down there and knocking on the cruiser window. I lit a cigarette and stood there for a little bit and smoked, standing in the slanting shadow cast across the sidewalk from the streetlight on the other side. As I stood there I thought about how I must look. I had lost weight from the grief sickness and had dark circles under my eyes, like some lonely junkie out on the street with no family, no ties, no future

and no past. It was the sort of thinking I would have indulged in as a teenager, and it made me feel a little sick to my stomach to think this was the sort of thing I would have thought was romantic at sixteen or seventeen, the way I'd thought the gutter punks that hung around the old Belle Isle power plant were cool and free and the way I thought orphans and amputees were actually lucky to have such tragic and meaningful lives outside my boring suburban world. I felt bad about myself. I wondered how much of that stupid kid was inside me, encased in the intervening years like the third or fourth layer in one of those Russian layered dolls. I wondered if the younger me met the present me whether he would think I was cool or scary or a loser or what. I got the feeling he would think I was super cool, standing in the shadows by the railroad track, taking a cigarette break while I was running from the cops. I could only guess at what my younger self would think, but I did know my present self thought my younger self was a jackass.

I pitched my smoke into the street and went back along the railroad tracks until I got to Fourth. I didn't see anybody.

When I got to Fourth I cut back west and crossed Broadway where there was an ATM. I still had the fifty-two whatever from the "collection" they took up at work, but I needed more. I hadn't checked my account for a while, but I was glad to find there was two hundred and twenty-four something, and the machine let me have two-twenty of it. I wondered how long that other four something was going to sit there. Probably not long, knowing the bank. They'd come up with some fee or other to get their hands on it, and probably charge me a fine for the trouble. It made me sad. I'd had the account since I was twenty, the year before I'd met Sharon, before everything went to shit. I wasn't bitter

about meeting Sharon, that's not it at all. It was just this long series of bad luck. It wasn't anyone's fault. But it made me sad. From the moment Sharon herself was gone, little particles of our life together had been breaking away like bits of ice burning off a comet. Soon there'd be nothing left. It sucked to stand around and watch while Carrie, the house and everything was either thrown out or rearranged. Losing the bank account, a particle that had been attached to my comet, so to speak, since I was fresh out of my parents' house with my first real job, losing that hit me. I felt like an asshole for doing it, but I stood around the corner from the ATM and had a good cry over my bank account.

After that I headed southwest into downtown toward the west side of the business district. I like downtown Oklahoma City at night. There's hardly anyone around in the business district since all the restaurants and bars and clubs and stuff are over in Bricktown. It's fun in a spooky way to walk down the broad, empty sidewalks with the tall office buildings rising up on either side. It feels like a corridor in the world's tallest haunted house.

I felt wrung out and tired. I felt a little weak, though not actually hungry. I knew I was going to have to eat something eventually, but I thought for the time being it would be fun to see how long my body could go on panic and grief and anger.

I made my way past the county and federal courthouses, the municipal building and the new museum until I finally got to the bus station on Sheridan, past 5th street. It was only a little after eight. I was surprised it had taken me almost three hours to get there from Belle Isle. I had spent some time standing around smoking and thinking about how cool I was. It didn't matter, I had avoided the cops, and I didn't see any hanging around by the station as I walked up to it. Even if there had been a few cruisers posted up

around the building the place was pretty big and almost always busy with people who looked like they might be wanted for something. I still had that sort of reckless feeling, like I wanted to get caught. I walked right up to the building, and went in dreading and anticipating that fifty SWAT guys with dogs and tear gas would jump out and start screaming at me to get on the floor. No one did. I crossed the big lobby without anyone even looking at me. I stopped to study the board. I hadn't even thought about where I might go.

There were buses leaving for almost everywhere eventually, but there were only two leaving in the next half hour. One bus was going south to Texas, clear to San Antonio. I thought about it. If I got far enough south I could figure out how to get across to Mexico and then maybe even keep going to South America. I'd always wondered about Tierra del Fuego. The other bus was going north to Seattle. I thought about that. I could keep going and see if I could get into Canada, and maybe make it up to Alaska.

Going into the big spaces of the northern wilderness was more appealing than the idea of the South American jungle. Besides, that's where Butch and Sundance got killed by the army, in South America. And they spoke English in Alaska, as far as I knew.

In the end I bought the ticket to Seattle, since that was pretty far north and it was the bus leaving the soonest. I felt weird doing it; I didn't have any luggage and I felt conspicuous, like the guy at the ticket window knew what I'd done and knew what everyone had done but he was so cynical he didn't care. I went out to the parking lot to wait for the bus, transferring my wallet from my back pocket to my front as I went through the big double doors. Buying the ticket gave me a feeling of officially being on the road, and on the road people were cutthroat. They'd steal your money and leave you

in a ditch in a heartbeat, I thought. I looked around at the other people and felt another weird doubling as I realized I was now one of the rumpled, homeless and dirty.

I got on the bus about nine and we took off about fifteen minutes later. I got a seat in the back, the last one with a window view. I was glad there weren't very many people riding. Only a handful of shadow shapes shifted up front, distant but present like swallows flitting through the chinks of light in the top of an old barn.

As the bus pulled out I watched the skyline of Oklahoma City, wondering if it was the last time I would see it. I felt rotten inside. At the same time I felt like nothing much mattered and that song lyric came into my head, written by Kris Kristofferson but sung by Janis Joplin, who probably knew what she was talking about, "freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose." It feels good and big inside but lonely, that freedom.

As my view of the bus station receded I saw a police car pull up to the curb in front of it. A policeman, a crew-cutted guy that could have been the same one that almost stopped at the side of the road earlier when I was puking, got out and scanned the crowd, occasionally referring to a sheet of paper in his hand. I couldn't make it out, but I got the feeling it was a photo or a description of me. As we turned the corner the cop went inside the station. I settled back in my seat, wondering if I was even going to make it out of town. I hadn't given a name, but the guy at the counter would probably remember my face. I decided not to worry about it. I was acting on borrowed time and borrowed steam, just trying to see how far I could get. All the same, I had the feeling the guy at the ticket counter hadn't really marked me, and even if he did I didn't think he'd rat me out. It was just a feeling, but it was enough to let me put my head back against the

seat and close my eyes, and before we'd even cleared downtown on our way to I-35 I was asleep.

Eleven

Potheads have a pothead radar. I don't know what it is, but people approach me sometimes who just know. I had another of those moments on the bus, like when I decided to call Sharon's personal ad, that there's no telling how things would have turned out if I'd gone the other direction.

I hadn't even thought about pot since I had gone to work the day before and I wasn't thinking about it when I woke up the next morning on the bus, either. There's nothing quite like waking up on a bus at dawn when you spent the day before murdering a guy, running from the cops and leaving everything behind. I'd like to say that I enjoyed a moment of peace right before and after I opened my eyes while I didn't remember about Sharon and Carrie and Althea and Harrell and Alan and my parents and everything and everyone else, but my mind actually transitioned smoothly from dreams about those people into dark thoughts in the watery yellow dawn sunlight. My face was against the edge of the window, which had pressed a long, deep crease into my face that stung when I sat up.

I wiped the spit off my face with my arm and then jumped a little when I saw there was a guy sitting in the seat next to me, watching me. He was squirrely-looking, with slight buckteeth pushing out from under a sparse, fake-looking brown mustache. He wore thick horn-rimmed glasses and had sort of thin, curly brown hair that looked like a

rockabilly pompadour someone had pressed down with an iron and then rubbed with a pillow. His eyes were close together and beady, shifting from my face to the window.

“Um. Hey,” I said, rubbing the crust out of my eyes.

“How’s it goin’, man?” the guy said, trying on a little smile.

“I don’t know. What, did the bus fill up?” I sat up and looked over the top of my seat. There were only maybe ten other people riding, with empty seats all over. I looked back at the guy.

“No, I just got bored, thought I’d come talk to you. Introduce myself. You look like a cool guy.” He gave that little smile again, and I scanned it for anything weird or manipulative. I didn’t get a gay vibe from him, and he didn’t seem menacing or dangerous. There was actually something likeable about him, though I couldn’t put my finger on it.

“I don’t know about that,” I said, looking out the window. The landscape was flat. “Where are we, do you know?”

“Nebraska somewhere,” the guy said.

“Wow. I guess I passed the fuck out. I didn’t think we’d be past Kansas.” I didn’t want to encourage the guy any more than was polite, so I kept looking out the window as I talked. I don’t know why I’m such a snob sometimes. I probably looked worse than he did. Smelled worse, too.

“Yeah, it gets kind of boring. How far you goin’?” the guy said. His accent was country, but unfamiliar. It reminded me of a guy I’d known from Maine that went to my high school, but it wasn’t quite right.

“Seattle,” I said. “Maybe Alaska, if I can find a good way to get there.”

“Oh yeah? That’s where I’m goin’. Alaska,” the guy said.

“Cool.”

“Hey, we’re about due for a rest stop.” The guy reached in his shirt pocket and pulled a joint halfway out of it, so I could see just the top. “You look like you could use a little rest, huh?” He smiled and gave a conspiratorial laugh. I was struck again by whatever friendly quality there was about him, and against my better judgment I nodded.

“Yeah,” I said, “I definitely could. It’s been a long haul, if you know what I mean.”

“So what’s your name?” he said.

“Gary.”

“Good to meet you, Gary. I’m Dan. Dan Tacos.” We shook hands and he laughed at the look on my face when he said his name.

“Tacos, huh?” I said.

“Yeah. It’s really more of a road name. I just like it better, and people seem to like it, too. Kind of an ice breaker.”

“Sure thing,” I said. “My name is Gary Buns, by the way. That’s my last name.” We both cracked up at that, and rode along in silence for a while until the driver pulled in at the rest stop. It was one of those WPA jobs they did back during the Depression, some concrete tables in the shape of big ears of corn, I guess in honor of the Cornhusker state, with some sparse woods behind it separating the picnic area from the next corn field over.

“Come on, G.B.,” Dan said, and we hoofed it out behind the picnic area into a little clump of trees. We smoked Dan’s joint fast, trading off fast hotbox puffs until it was a smelly little nub. I was out of cigarettes, but Dan had some and I took one

gratefully and smoked it as fast as I had the joint. Apparently the bus driver didn't have patience to stop for anyone or anything except his own bowel, bladder, or belly. We walked back up the incline smoking like crazy, and then broke into a run when we heard the shush of the air brakes being released and the bus grinding into gear. We got on just in time for the driver, a blobby, greasy looking little guy with balding hair and almost no eyebrows, to give us the fish eye and close the door behind us.

We clumped back along the aisle to our seats, out of breath and laughing a little at nothing in particular. As we sat down I had to marvel at how I was getting along with Dan Tacos, like we'd been friends for a long time. I felt marginally happy as I watched the scrolling landscape pick up speed outside the window, feeling the buzz from the pot and the afterglow of nicotine settle into my bones. I thought back to when I was a kid, when I was a little kid, and making friends was only a matter of asking a likely-looking kid if he or she wanted to be friends. It seemed like the last time I had made a friend like that was when I met Alan, in the seventh grade. Not too long after that we all got too old to fall in with each other like that without feeling funny about it, somehow. That homoerotic vibe creeps in after a certain age and you wonder about yourself, at least until you've been with a woman for a while and know for sure you're not wired that way. By then it's too late for that kind of innocent friendship, since you and all the guys you know are wrapped up in women and what they want you to do, too stuck to them to break away and live like Lost Boys the way you always thought you would, the way you always wanted to. Meeting Dan at that moment was like rediscovering my Lost Boy tendencies and my ability to make friends with someone just because he was there at the same time I

was. We were both on the same adventure to wherever, and we might as well go there together for a while to make it more fun.

After a while Dan got out a pack of cards and we played gin rummy, using an empty seat between us. Dan talked about this and that, jobs he'd had, women, dreams. It was a good patter since he didn't seem to expect much by way of return conversation, but he wasn't so annoying that it got hard to listen to him. It could have been my imagination, but I think maybe Dan knew there was something wrong with me, that I was broken a little bit and needed to just stay quiet for a while.

We rode for the next couple of days, playing cards, stopping in every town it seemed like, to drop someone off or pick someone up. Dan chatted up a couple of girls that said they were going to Yakima to get waitress jobs but didn't seem to know anything about restaurants or anything. I'm pretty sure Dan and the ugly redhead had awkward standing sex in the bus toilet, though I didn't ask. I didn't want to know.

When we finally got to Seattle Dan and I kept palling around together. By that time I wasn't much worried about getting arrested anymore, but at the same time I thought I should keep moving. "Hell yeah," Dan said when I brought it up. "I got to keep on going, too. I'm like a shark, if I stop for too long I'll drown, you know? No, what we need to do is find us some place or another to hole up for a couple of days. You still want to go to Alaska?"

"Yeah," I said, "that would probably be my best bet. How were you planning on getting there?"

"Well see, here's the deal," Dan said, rubbing his hands together. He hadn't taken a shower since I'd met him, and his hair looked even more smashed and weirder than

ever. It bounced up and down slightly when he talked. “They have these cruise ships, see, that go up the coast. Take people up to see the whales and shit from Seattle and wind up in Anchorage. Go shopping and shit. You know, like that.”

“So what, how much is it? I don’t think I have enough for something like that, do you?” I had spent most of the couple hundred dollars I’d left Oklahoma City with on my bus ticket. It sounded like a pricey cruise, and between the two of us we looked like an ad for a clothes-burning service.

“No, man,” Dan said, shaking his head, “what we do is we get *jobs* on one of those ships. They need people to work down below, you know? You know how to fix an engine, right?”

“No, not really.”

“Well, neither do I. But still, we’ll find some angle, right? That way we’ll get a nice trip on the ocean and get to Alaska.”

“What about when we get there?” I said. “What are you going to do?”

“Oh, my cousin lives up there, outside of Fairbanks up north. Lives out in the middle of nowhere practically, in this big cabin. If you want, you can come out there too, hell, Carl won’t care. He’s a little edgy since he grows a lot of weed in this greenhouse he’s got, but if you’re with me he’ll be cool.”

“Sounds good,” I said. I didn’t know how I really felt about it, but I was trying not to think too hard in general. We spent about a week in Seattle, sleeping in shelters and trying to look presentable enough to get jobs on one of the cruise ships going up the coast. After I got a shave and some different clothes I looked okay, and I was surprised at how well Dan cleaned up, too. He got this seersucker suit at a thrift store and found a

gold and purple bowtie to go with it. He looked hilarious, but it brought out even more of that likeable quality he had and he talked the personnel guy on a ship, the *Orca* (which I thought was real original) to hire us on as dishwashers and mess hall help.

The night before we left Seattle I found the pay phone in the shelter and got Carrie's dad's number from the operator, then called out there. I didn't figure Carrie would answer the phone, but by some weird chance, she did.

"Hello?" My stomach clenched up at the sound of her voice. Everything I'd been trying not to remember came back, filling my mind and body. Carrie sounded tired and I tried without success to figure out what time it was in Oklahoma. I couldn't remember if it was earlier or later.

"Hi," I said, for some reason whispering.

"Gary? Is that you?"

"Yeah, sweetie. It's me. How are you doing?" I said, still whispering.

"I'm okay. But Gary, where'd you go? They're all looking for you," she said.

"I can't tell you, Carrie." I had a sudden flash of inspiration. "But I'm where it's warm." I smiled to myself. It was cold and wet in Seattle. Big surprise there.

"But why did you leave? My dad wouldn't tell me, and my grandma said I didn't need to know, but that you were having a hard time ..." she said.

"She's right, you don't need to know. You'll know someday, okay? I wish you didn't have to, but I suppose there's nothing I can do. I just wanted to know how you were doing, that's all. Did you start at your new school?"

The line clicked. "Hello?" It was Kevin, Carrie's dad. I hung up right away, feeling a few stinging beads of hot sweat break out on my scalp and upper lip. I stood

there looking at the handset, trying to stop the tears from running up and out of my face. There was a line for the phone, and I dodged through it and made it into a stall in the restroom before I lost it.



The next day I set out with Dan as a dishwasher on the *Orca*. We had to share this little cabin under the kitchens, stacked in bunk beds on top of each other like a couple of Legos, but we didn't care. Dan managed to score an ounce of good, green shit from a guy in Seattle, and we'd open the porthole in our room and get good and baked at night, so it didn't feel so claustrophobic. It was a pretty decent job, though I'm a little claustrophobic and the kitchen in a boat like that isn't all that big. I doubt they make the kitchen in *any* boat very big, since they're so focused on using as much room as possible for cabin space and all that. But it really wasn't that bad since it was usually just me and Dan in there on the dinner shift, sometimes at lunch, washing half the food down the chute and out into the ocean, then putting the plates and silverware in one of those big industrial dish washers and letting it go. You build up a rhythm pretty fast and we got along really well, so it was actually fun. It was hard for me to have too much fun because I would start feeling guilty and think about Sharon and Harrell and how they were dead and it was all my fault, but still. It occurred to me on the ship one day that I should have made Sharon get the Flolan installed back when they first wanted her to have it, in '98 or '99, when she was too embarrassed to go to work with it on and decided not to have it put in. I couldn't believe, looking back, how I had just agreed with her, and didn't try talking her into it. I would load the dish washer and reenact the conversation in my head.

I would start by reconstructing the room; the blue paint that I had bought at Home Depot instead of Wal Mart because they had better colors, and the two or three days Sharon and I spent putting it on the walls. I remembered the ragged edges up along the molding over the closet door where I had taken off the masking tape too soon, tearing the paint. I thought about how I'd decided to paint the room in the first place because of the time Alan, Sharon and me and a couple of other people had taken mushrooms in the house and the mint green paint that was in my room originally mixed across our senses until we could taste, smell and feel it on our skin, and we ended up puking our guts out.

I would stand there in the steam, listening to the clatter of dishes as Dan rinsed them off with the high-powered hose, and reconstruct the way the light slanted into the room as Sharon and I laid on my bed together, two careless, innocent lovers who were experiencing one of the highest peaks of existence without even knowing it, taking it for granted like a couple of idiots. At least I was an idiot. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed Sharon knew what was going on the whole time, the way she thanked me the last time she talked to me, that was just creepy and sad. I wondered how I could have been so blind to the facts.

I spent a lot of the trip up to Alaska thinking about that one particular day, thinking over what I could and should have said to make Sharon get a Flolan tube installed in her neck and that the embarrassment was going to be pretty mild compared to being dead. Maybe she knew exactly what she was giving up, and why. I don't know.

The other good thing about the dishwashing room, besides the steaminess and warmth and relative seclusion, was that it was too loud in there for us to talk to each other. They put it next to an engine room I think, or at least a room with some other noisy

equipment in it. It's ingenious how they hide the noisy, dirty stuff from the passengers on ships. Dan and I weren't supposed to walk around during the day when the passengers were out since we didn't fit in with the clean, environmentally-friendly image the cruise line was trying to convey, but when we did go out on the decks late at night, it was like we were on a cruise ship ride at Disneyland or something instead of an actual cruise ship. I was impressed in spite of my depression, since I hadn't ever been to sea before. Not that we were technically at *sea*, since we were only just out of sight of the coast, but there were still whales sometimes, blowing water and splashing in the moonlight, and you could see stars like you wouldn't believe out there. And I've been pretty far out in the country before at night, but it was nothing like the stars were out on the ocean. It was like there were actually more stars than empty space up there. It scared me a little. Sometimes I felt like I might fall up off the boat and into all that jeweled space and never come back. What's worse is sometimes that's really what I wanted to do. I would find myself leaning over the edge while Dan and I stood at some secluded stretch of rail, passing a joint or smoking cigarettes before we turned in for the night, thinking about falling not into the sky but its reflection below. I figured it would be the same either way. It was cold and deep and dark and vast, the sky's face on the deep.



Naturally, it got colder as we went north. I say naturally, and it was, but for me it was an intellectual natural reality, something I didn't take seriously until it actually started happening. I started to really wish I'd decided to brave South America after all, language barrier or not. It gets fairly cold in Oklahoma, at times the wind chill can get maybe ten below zero at the worst, but anyone that lives farther north knows that isn't

anything. As we got closer to Anchorage I couldn't believe how cold it was. I mean, I literally couldn't believe it. I would be standing out on deck wearing my coat and all three pairs of my pants and all my shirts and socks and everything, and I would think I had a handle on how cold it was, but then the wind would gust in from somewhere, like the north fucking pole I guess, and it would go through my clothes like I was wearing a Hawaiian shirt and sandals and I would hop and yelp while I tried to finish my cigarette. Me and Dan stopped opening the porthole window when we smoked weed in the cabin, and we got in trouble when one of the stewards caught a whiff.

After a week, we docked in Anchorage. Dan and I got our paychecks from the cruise line before we got off the boat, and the first thing we did when we got to Anchorage was buy better fucking coats. I swear to God I thought I was going to die just getting out of the cab and running into the sporting goods store. If only Sharon had decided to die in the spring or I had waited a few more months to murder a guy, it would have been much nicer.

I had never even seen the kind of clothes they had in that store. Cold weather gear is a serious business in Alaska and everyone has to buy the stuff or else they'll die, end of story. Me and Dan each made about four hundred dollars on the trip up and we didn't bat an eyelash at spending most of our checks on clothes. I got a whole snow suit, these crazy gloves that supposedly only lost a degree of heat every four hours or so, glove liners, just in case the glove people were full of shit, some socks made out of the same stuff as the gloves, boots, a hat and a mask, the thickest long john pants I'd ever seen, thermal shirts, and a big fucking coat to go over it all with a giant hood lined with this

fake fur that was made out of some miracle fiber that keeps the astronauts warm in the vacuum of space.

“Shit, man,” Dan said as we walked out of the store, “I’m warm as fuck, but I can barely walk.”

“Yeah, but it’s totally worth it,” I said, turning my face into the wind. “I thought I was going to shatter like a goddam icicle on the way here. Even in the goddam cab it felt like zero degrees, for Chrissake.”

“Just wait until we get out in the open, headed up to Carl’s place. You’ll appreciate those gold-plated duds even more than you do now. Shit, it’s like Miami here in town compared to how it is out in the open.”

“How are we getting out there, anyways? How far is it?” I said.

“It’s a fair hike. We’ll have to probably snake us a car, drive up to Wasilla. We can rent a couple of snowmobiles there and ride the rest of the way up to Carl’s place in three or four hours, probably, if the weather holds.” Dan seemed pretty casual as he said all that, but it scared the hell out of me.

“Oh, that’s sounds fun,” I said. “That sounds like a real good time. I hope Carl is okay with me coming out. You think maybe we should call him?”

“Nah, he doesn’t have a phone,” Dan said. “I just hope he’s home. He usually doesn’t go anywhere, but sometimes he gets a wild hair up his ass and takes off to this little, tiny-ass town even farther up north from his place where they got a couple of whores. He doesn’t lock the place, but he’s been known to put booby traps around, like grenades with trip wires and stuff. He’s super paranoid about his crop, you know.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet,” I said, trying to keep the nervousness out of my voice. “You know where he puts the grenades at all?”

“Oh, you know, here and there. We’ll figure it out. If worse comes to worse we can sleep in the old smoke house until he gets back. There’s a wood stove in there and all.”

“Oh, right,” I said. We were walking along a sidewalk in the business district. “Hey, didn’t you say something about snaking a car?” I didn’t much like the idea of stealing a car, not only because it was a shitty thing to do, but because if we got caught I’d be sent straight back to Oklahoma.

“Yeah,” Dan said, looking around the street. There wasn’t a lot of foot traffic, but there were some people and he looked nervous like he thought one of them was going to grab us. “But keep it down. Let’s get something to eat and kind of come up with a plan. This doesn’t look like the right kind of neighborhood for that sort of thing. We need to find something a little more ... anonymous, right?”



We found a diner down the street a ways that had a sign in the window advertising chicken fried steak. As soon as I saw the sign my stomach started rumbling and I got the worse craving I’d had in a long time. My appetite hadn’t been that great since Sharon died, but it was slowly coming back. That in itself made me kind of sad. Time was already coming between us. It was like Sharon and I had been in a boat together, going down a river and then she’d fallen out. Only the river had such a strong current that I couldn’t turn the damn boat around, and all I could do was sit and look back at her head bobbing in the water until I got so far away that I couldn’t see her anymore. I

had gotten to the point where he head had disappeared a long time ago, but I had been sitting staring back at where she'd been ever since, and I had only spared maybe a few glances to what was in front of me and where the river was carrying me next.

Metaphorically, of course. That doesn't have a lot to do with how I got hungry, but it kind of does. I was starting to look forward again, at least off and on even if it was scary and sad. I guess that's how it goes; the river carries you forward whether you want to go or not, and if you don't pay attention it'll throw you off a big goddam waterfall when you're not looking. It's not a very good deal all around, that's for sure.

What was even worse though is they don't know how to make a chicken fried steak worth a shit in Alaska. I don't know how someone could fuck up something so simple so badly, but whoever was cooking in the back of that Anchorage diner really did a job on that piece of meat. I mean, I don't think they'd ever even seen a *picture* of a chicken fried steak, much less eaten one in person. For one thing, it wasn't breaded, it was just pan fried and greasy. And second, it had that weird chicken gravy or something on it instead of the creamy white kind. Third, I'm not convinced it was actually steak. It just wasn't quite right. Anyway, it killed my appetite right off and I sat there picking at it while Dan looked at a gas station map of Anchorage between bites of some kind of seal blubber porridge that smelled like a fish trying to fuck a burnt tire.

"What I need to find is a shitty neighborhood," Dan said and shook out the map.

"Do they include that information on city maps?" I said. I took a bite of the hashbrowns that came with the "steak." They were the only edible thing on the plate.

“Not exactly, smartass,” Dan said. “But most cities are the same, right? All the poor people live around downtown, and all the rich people live in the suburbs on the edge of the city.”

“Wait,” I said, “haven’t you been here before?”

“Sort of. I came through here one other time, but I was in a car and we drove straight through. I didn’t have to steal a car or anything. In fact, we didn’t even stop to piss, just went up to Carl’s place.”

“Oh.” I sipped at my coffee. It wasn’t very good, either. I wondered if everything in Alaska sucked, or if it was just this particular restaurant.

“Okay,” Dan said, pointing to the map. I don’t know why he bothered, since I couldn’t really see with his bowl of seal porridge sitting on it. “We’re here, and here’s downtown. These streets here have tree names, so I think they’re probably residential. What we’ll do is, we’ll walk a couple of miles down here, find a car, and then hit the highway where it meets up right here headed north. Once we’re out of town, we’re home free.” I had to give Dan credit, he was at least careful. I don’t have a lot of direct experience with being a criminal, so a lot of my conceptions of the criminal mentality come from TV. They’re never careful on TV, they just take the first car they see and the next thing you know they’re being shot in a ditch or something.

“Cool. I know I never told you why I was bailing out of OKC, and you probably don’t want to know, but I just want to say that if we get caught boosting a car ...”

“Yeah, you don’t have to tell me, pal. I never told you why *I* was bailing either, but I will say it wasn’t for fun and the nice air up here. Don’t worry. I’m a careful guy.” I felt better, but it made me wonder what he did and what kind of trouble he was in back

there. I figured I wasn't one to judge, since I was a wanted neck stabber. It's not like I would have stabbed anyone else, or at least I don't think I would have, and I wanted to give Dan the benefit of the doubt and trust that whatever he did he wouldn't do to me either.

"Right," I said. "I know you're on the level and all, I just want to be clear and everything."

"Yeah yeah," Dan said, and took a bite of his porridge. "How's that steak, buddy?"

"Fucking gross," I said. "How's that porridge? I smells like Moby's dick."

"The singer or the whale?" Dan said, his face still.

"I don't know. Whichever one has the smelliest cock," I said, and laughed a little.

"I don't know," Dan said, and took another bite. "But don't knock it 'til you try it. Seal blubber has magical qualities. Keeps you warm."

"Yeah, it's burning my nose, and I haven't even tasted it."



After a couple more cups of crappy coffee and a few forced bites of chicken fried "steak" to keep away the shakes, me and Dan walked toward downtown Anchorage and the neighborhood he'd found on the map. As we walked the shops thinned and we entered an old industrial area that looked like it had seen its last boom of relevance back when people still liked Ike. I didn't know what it had been built for, but I assumed it had something to do with fish. The day was still cold as fuck, and the fog and clouds coming in off the shore were crowding down over our heads like a shrinking rubber room, making me feel claustrophobic. After a couple of miles all the other pedestrians

disappeared and we were alone with the close, wet silence and the occasional shrill cries of isolated sea birds. Our feet crunched through the snow and the icy crusts of past snows and the undercoat of gravel and cinders that littered the road and sidewalks.

“Are you sure we’re going the right direction?” I said, feeling nervous.

“Yeah. What are you nervous about?” Dan said, watching a mangy dog chew on a dirty rat carcass at the base of a crumbling brick wall.

“I’m not nervous,” I said. “I just wondered. It seems like we’re headed nowhere, you know what I mean?”

“That means we’re headed in the right direction,” Dan said. “Just wait. We’ll be out of here in no time, headed for Carl’s sweet hydroponic bud and hot showers galore.”

“Sweet. It seems like forever since I had a good shower.” They didn’t let us have hot water on the ship, so we didn’t wash much.

“Yeah, I know,” Dan said.

Sure enough, after a couple more miles we moved out of the industrial area and into an older residential district, lined with old brick apartment houses and big houses that looked like they’d been divided into sections. As we’d been hoping, the street was lined with cars but almost devoid of people, as far as we could see. Most of the buildings were only two or three stories, but it seemed like there was no sky at all, the fog and clouds were so close to the ground. The street Dan wanted to get a car from, with the most direct access to the freeway, started at the bottom of a hill, so when we turned onto it I had a weird sensation of unreality. The houses and buildings swept away from us moving up, so they seemed to disappear into the clouds the farther up the hill they were, and I couldn’t even see the far end of it.

“Okay,” Dan said. We started along the sidewalk, slowly walking next to the cars parked at the curb. “Look out for one with the door unlocked, right? And I know it’s a long shot in this day and age, but make sure and check the ignition for keys, just in case.”

“Right-o, captain,” I said. “What if we don’t find one with keys. You know how to hot wire one or something?”

Dan looked at me like I had asked him if he knew how to walk. “Well, yeah, of *course* I know how to hot wire ‘em. Don’t you?”

“No,” I said.

Dan shook his head. “Well God, what’d you do for fun when you were a kid? Play tiddlywinks?”

“I read a lot. Rode my bike, I guess.” I was on the inside of the sidewalk, away from the curb, while Dan walked closest to the cars. It was hard to look into the cars from where I was anyway, so I was keeping an eye on the doorways and the alleys as we passed them in the gloom. They were creepy. Even the doorways had fog in them, and I couldn’t see more than a few feet down the alleys.

“Geez. See, that’s what’s wrong with the world today. You got kids reading all the time, going around eating ice cream and whatever, don’t even obtain any useful real world skills. I always used to tell my sister Imogene ... ah, hang on, now.” Dan leaned over and peered through the window of a rusty old green Dodge Dart. I thought I heard a stealthy scratching in the alley behind me, but it was so quiet I figured it was probably a cat or something. “Whaddaya know,” Dan said. “I ain’t seen nobody for years and years left their keys in their car.” Dan gave a look around the street to see if anyone was watching, as if he would be able to see them or them him, for that matter. Then he

walked around to the driver's side and tried the door handle. It didn't open. "Shit," he said. "Hey Gary, try that side. The button's up over here, I think it's broken. Give it a squeeze, willya?"

I heard that shuffling noise behind me in the alley again. I turned around and peered into the cloudy gray murk, but I couldn't make anything out.

"What is it?" Dan said, tensing like he was about to run.

"Nothing. Probably just a cat or something." I turned back to the Dart and grabbed the door handle. I thumbed the latch button and grinned over at Dan when I heard it click and the door came loose in my hand. "Now, if this old heap has any gas in it, we're in good shape ..." I trailed off as I got a look at Dan's face. He was looking behind me with his mouth open, heaving in a big breath like he was about to scream, but wasn't sure if he needed to yet. I didn't want to, but I turned around with my back against the Dart and faced the alley.

It took a second to realize exactly what it was coming out of the narrow corridor of fog, shambling along like a windup robot with a couple of broken gears. I pressed up against the car door, watching it come toward me. It made a weird clanking noise and whatever it was, a person or not, it was breathing real heavy and sounded like it was spitting and slobbering, or something. After the initial shock wore off I realized it was coming pretty slow. I relaxed a little, turned around and looked at Dan. He just shrugged at me and I shrugged back. I picked half an old brick up off the sidewalk and rubbed the crumbling porous surface of it with my thumb. Randomly, I thought of my grandmother. She's from New England originally, and she has a whole fund of weird New England sayings. She always used to say 'hard as a brickbat' when something was hard, and I

never knew what the hell she was talking about. Then I looked it up one time and found out a brickbat is a piece of brick you throw at someone or something, to break someone or something you want to break. I think the term goes back to the nineteenth century street gangs of New York and Boston. I didn't know if I wanted to break whatever was coming out of the alley yet, but I wanted to be able to if it needed breaking. Brickbat. It's such a cool word. I felt it in my hand and pretended I was one of those tough immigrant gangsters, about to clear the teeth from some territorial rival's mouth.

The clanking, huffing thing cleared the alley and I almost laughed.

It was hard to tell for sure, but it looked like an old man with a metal funnel for a hat like the Tin Man in The Wizard of Oz movie, except this guy's funnel actually looked like it had been used extensively and maybe not for just funneling oil but like clam chowder and syrup and other stuff. And rust. Under the funnel were two bright points I took to be eyes, under that a mass of white and gray hair coming from under the funnel and the big collar, covering most of the face. The collar was from a big anorak parka, the kind with a big bunch of matted, dirty yellow-white fur poofing up around the head and neck. But instead of a green or brown material, the guy had wrapped metallic duct tape around the sleeves and middle of the parka, then down to cover the legs and even the feet. The tape had worn away from the soles, leaving crusty frayed edges of tape flapping against the sidewalk.

The alley knight stood there looking out at me and Dan through his hair veil. The clanking I had heard coming down the alley was from two chained-together trashcan lids that hung over his shoulders and rested in the front and back like a chest plate and a back plate. In his right hand he held up a makeshift sword that looked like it had once been a

lawnmower blade, sharpened on one edge with cardboard and more duct tape wrapped around the other for a handle.

I looked at Dan, who was still standing on the other side of the Dart, poised to run. He shrugged and I shrugged back, and I turned back to the guy. He was baring his gums at me through his filthy hair, pinkish-black gums that looked like they had never held teeth, but had only ever produced ooze and corruption, yellowish gunk that might make you have hallucinations if it got on you. I started feeling weird. The building behind the crazy guy took on a construction paper feel, and loomed up behind him like it might topple over on us. Most things were shadows at that moment, and Dan shrank away behind me. Something about those gums. My skin felt loose and my legs felt like rubber crutches as the knight took a step forward on the crumbled soot-spongy sidewalk, rubbing particles off into the air that walked into my sinuses and made a taste like hitting my head with loose iron.

I backed up against the Dart again like it was going to make everything okay and rested my back there as the knight came forward. I wanted to run more than anything, but I was trapped in that nightmare state of irrational terror that sticks feet to pavement. A hole opened behind the hair veil. “Cranto! Shabble grang timblintinkle! Hacklehackle crickrackle!” The voice was the kind of sound I imagined would come out of a rubber tube squashed under the weight of a billion maggots. All I had strength to do was raise my arm against the shadow of the crumbling rectangle behind the knight as he raised the lawnmower sword and swung it at me. I was only passing aware of the brick that flew past my head until it hit the knight in his hair veil and knocked him back. The sword, which would have probably cut off my hand a little above the wrist, went cockeyed and

glanced along my left arm. It bit into the fabric of my heavy coat and through the shirt underneath and I felt a sharp, thin pain, but I couldn't tell if it was from being cut really deep or really shallow. Blood from under the hair veil splattered my jacket and the Dart's passenger side window as the knight went down, clutching at his face. I just stood there for a moment, shocked. The surreal quality of the street disappeared when the old guy fell and the buildings looked normal again, the sidewalk just a dirty old sidewalk with a dirty old man rolling back and forth on it, bleeding and huffing into his beard.

Dan came around the Dart and grabbed me. "Holy shit, did he get you?" he said, looking me up and down.

"Yeah, a little," I said, trying to look at where he'd cut my arm. My new coat was covering it mostly up, but there was some blood on the surface of the cloth, and I could feel a vague, warm flowing sensation inside all the layers, moving against my skin. "I don't know how bad, though. I didn't really feel it when it happened. What the fuck's wrong with that guy?"

"Shit, I don't know," Dan said. "We'd better get out of here before someone calls the cops." Dan jerked open the Dart door and shoved me in. It had those slick vinyl seats that I always hated when I was a kid, the kind that can burn the shit out of your legs if you have shorts on in the summer. They hold the same sick plastic smell all year round. I slid across and pulled the handle on the driver's side while Dan walked around. He got in and started the thing up like it was his. I couldn't believe someone had just left the keys in it, like they knew we were going to need it. I held my hand on my arm, not sure I wanted to know how bad I was cut. I could feel wetness spreading, and a dull ache was

starting to build in my upper arm muscles, but it was too cold to take off my coat and shirt and stuff to look.

“Let’s hope this heap of shit has some battery juice,” Dan said, and touched two of the wires together. The ignition started turning sluggishly over, like it was on the edge of exhaustion. “Come on, you fucker,” Dan said, and pumped the gas pedal a couple of times. The engine rolled over a little slower for a second and I thought we’d have to move on to another car, but then it was like things loosened up in the engine and it picked up speed. Dan held the gas pedal down, and the engine coughed into life. “Fuck yeah!” Dan said, and let the wires drop. “We hit the fucking jackpot, Gary. This thing’s actually got enough gas in it to get us most of the way there.”

“Sweet,” I said, and leaned back. I felt a little weird, a touch sick in the top of my stomach, a little dizzy around the edges of sight. “Think we might stop and get some Band-Aids?”

“If we need to. Let’s get some distance between us and old Trashcan Lid.” I looked out the window and was actually a little relieved to see that the old guy with the funnel on his head was still moving around a little. It really was hellishly cold, and I found myself worrying about him a little.

“Do you think we should help that guy, or something?” I said.

“Hell no, man. Fuck that. Besides, he probably lives right inside there anyways. He’ll be fine, he just might need a couple of Band-Aids himself. I’ll bet you got the worst of it.”

“Maybe,” I said, and put more pressure on my arm. “I hope so.” Dan got the Dart in gear and pulled away from the curb. I watched the old guy shift around on the

sidewalk in the side mirror until fog swallowed him. I fumbled with the heater controls, hoping that the shaking, numb feeling in my hand was from the cold and not some sort of nerve damage. I held onto my arm as Dan navigated the foggy streets looking for the freeway until the engine warmed up the inside of the Dart enough for me to slowly unzip my coat and gingerly pull my arm out. Dan's mustache twitched nervously as his eyes darted back and forth between the road and my emerging arm. Neither of us said anything when I pulled it out. The sleeve was soaked with blood. I pulled apart the flaps and peered in the gap. "Oh, motherfuck!" I said. Dan leaned over and looked.

"Shit, Gary. That's not good." Looking at the look on Dan's face was somehow worse than looking at the giant gash in my arm, so I looked back at the gash. It ran from just under my shoulder in a clean line down and petered out toward the back of my elbow. It wasn't bleeding too bad anymore, so I figured I'd gotten lucky and the stupid crazy bastard hadn't hit any major arteries with his goddam lawn mower blade. "Shit," Dan said again, "that's not good."

"Yeah, you're right. You're completely right, Dan," I said, starting to feel agitated, "what the fuck am I going to do about this? I can't go to the goddam hospital."

"Why?" Dan said.

"Because I'm *wanted*. Didn't you know that? Aren't you wanted too?"

"No. What are you wanted for?"

"I stabbed my boss in the neck," I said, poking at the edges of the gash. Dan kept peeking over at it as he drove. We were on the freeway, or what passes for a freeway in Alaska, headed north on Highway 1 towards the Highway 3 junction that jogged off to the northwest and Dan's cousin Carl's place. "I didn't mean to do it, but I was under

stress and he was fucking with me and I didn't think about it I just did it and now I'm on the run."

"Geez, Gary," Dan said. "It must have been a lot of stress. What was eating you?"

"My wife died three weeks, two days ago. And ten hours," I said, leaning over to look at Dan's watch.

"Ah. Shit, Gary, that's not good."

"Yeah, you keep saying that."

"Well, it's not," Dan said, looking over at me. The highway was deserted in front of us, just a two-lane stretch of blacktop headed off into a big white empty. "It's not good at all. I thought you were just sort of dodging around, like me. Like dodging child support or something."

"Well, I thought you were running from the cops, like me," I said, and looked out my window, so I wouldn't have to look at Dan's face or the huge gash in my arm. I pulled the sliced edges of my coat down carefully across the sticky skin around it so I wouldn't get it to bleeding again. "I suppose you're going to drop me off now, or something, right?"

"No," Dan said, watching the road again. "I mean, I don't know. I don't think so."

"If it makes you feel any better, it made me sick, what I did. I would never do it again. I'd rather die than do something like that again."

Dan was quiet for a few minutes and I watched the scenery, or lack thereof, pass by the dirty Dart window. The immediate environment was almost entirely mounds of

snow, scattered with loose evergreen clusters for what looked like a couple of miles on either side of the road until the forest thickened and swept off into the distance. Farther on, a row of big-ass mountains rose out of the landscape like snowy cruising shark fins on the horizon. I wondered what, if anything, was out there in all that icy expanse. It made me think of Jack London stories, especially the one about the guy who tries to start a fire but ends up freezing to death in a river bed. At one point, the guy thinks about gutting his dog and sticking his hands in it so he can get just a little bit of warmth and stave off death for a little longer. I shivered as I thought about what it would feel like to wander around out there with no compass, no food or matches, no Dart and no Dan Tacos.

“Look,” Dan said. “I’m not going to kick you out or anything, if that’s what you’re worried about. It’s just kind of a surprise, you know? I just thought you were this regular guy from Oklahoma, right? So that’s all I’m saying, it’s just kind of a shock to find out you’re not exactly the kind of guy I thought you were, you know?”

“I know exactly what you mean,” I said. “Imagine how *I* feel. I had to find out after like twenty-eight years I’m not the guy I thought I was *that* whole time, you know? It can fuck with your head.”

“Yeah.” Dan looked back over at my arm, brows furrowed, mustache drooping over his lips. “We’ve gotta figure out what to do about that arm. Does it hurt?”

“It’s starting to.” I had been trying to ignore the growing ache in my arm, which instead of spreading out over my skin was spreading deeper into the flesh itself, mining its way down into the bone where it was digging in like tree roots into a water pipe, finding cracks and spreading them out. “It’s not too bad yet, though. And I think it stopped bleeding awhile ago, mostly. Now it just feels sort of ... sticky.”

“So really, if we got you some aspirin and some Band-Aids and stuff, you could probably go for a while, right? Without stitches?” I hadn’t thought about stitches. I hate stitches.

“Do you really think it needs stitches?” I said.

“Are you shitting me? That fucking gash? You probably need like, twenty stitches in that fucking thing. At least. And then some penicillin, right?”

“Great,” I said. “Where are we going to get that? I’m serious, man, if I go to a hospital, I’m going to jail.”

“Maybe not. We’re pretty far from Oklahoma.” I thought about it. Dan was right, but it was better safe than sorry.

“I still don’t want to risk it,” I said. “You may be right, but there’s no telling what kind of databases and shit they have set up, you know?”

“It’s your call. All I’m saying is, even if they do ID you and take you back to Oklahoma, it might be better than the alternative. We can stop at the next town and get some aspirin and bandages and maybe some hydrogen peroxide, and then when we get out to Carl’s we can patch you up. But for what it’s worth I think the hospital is your best bet. And if I were you I might just turn myself in and get it over with, Gary.”

“Does Carl have all that stuff for stitches? And penicillin?”

“Yeah,” Dan said, “he lives practically as far from civilization as you can live. He’s got to have all that stuff. It would take him like a day to get to even a clinic, much less a hospital. We can take care of it there, no problem.” Dan gave me a couple of sharp pats on the thigh and a reassuring grin. I was feeling pretty crappy, but I managed a smile all the same. I looked back out the window and felt glad to be in a warm car with

a friend instead of out in a creek bed somewhere with a domesticated wolf and a couple of matches.

“I can’t go to jail, Dan,” I said. “I feel bad, but I just can’t.”

Twelve

I had to take off my coat and shirt and everything to clean off my arm. I put hydrogen peroxide on it, which was a mistake since it dissolved the clots in the cut and got it bleeding again. But it was good once I put three or four linen pads on and taped them down real good and took a few Tylenol and it stopped hurting enough for me to go to sleep for a while.

When I woke up we were driving down a black line that stretched to the horizon through endless moonlit white. My arm felt swollen and hot, with a deep bone ache that moved through the muscles like a restless ghost. I had been leaning against my good arm against the door with the cut arm resting on my coat, so my good arm didn’t feel very good from leaning on it, though it still felt great compared to the swollen one. I was hot and really thirsty, and my eyes felt twice their regular size. It was dark and quiet except for the deep hum of the Dart’s engine and heater.

“Alan?” I said, trying to sit up. “Is the oven still on?”

Dan leaned over out of the darkness on the other side of the bench seat and looked at me. “I’m Dan, Gary. How’re you feeling, man?”

I made another feeble attempt to sit up but couldn’t seem to get my center of gravity far enough forward to make it. I rocked back and forth a few seconds then gave up and laid back. I took a few heavy breaths and didn’t like the way it seemed harder

than usual. “Man, I got the moon mouth,” I said, smacking my arid tongue against the roof of my mouth, “you got any Dr. Pepper or whatever?” Dan reached down to the floorboard between us and brought up a plastic jug of water.

“Here ya go, Gary,” Dan said. It was a little too heavy, but I managed to get the jug up to my mouth with my good right hand and take a few sips. I only spilled a little bit on my shirt, but it made me shiver.

“God, that’s cold,” I said. “It’s good.”

“Yeah, I filled it with snow. Probably been snow since before we were born, you know? Sitting out there in the fields until I stuffed it in the bottle and set it by the heater. Fucking clear stuff, I’ll tell you that.” Dan’s tone was light and airy, but I could tell he was worried about something.

“What’s the matter? You seem worried,” I said.

“Huh? Oh, nothing. Nothing, I’m fine. I was just thinking though, we’re almost to Cirlot, the last little outpost up this direction. That’s where Carl keeps his snowmobiles.”

“Uh huh.” I was listening, but I felt more like looking out the top corner of the windshield at the black sky. The clouds had cleared off and it was crowded with bright star clusters. I used to have this thing when I was a kid where I thought I would be happy dying if I was in a position to look at the sky when it happened. Like that would make a difference, or something.

“So you know,” Dan said, “I was just thinking about whether or not you’d be able to ride your own ‘bile, or if I’d have to piggy back you, that’s all.”

“Oh,” I said, “that shouldn’t be a big deal. If I can get on the thing I should be able to ride it. And if not, you know ...”

“Yeah,” Dan said, looking over at me again. “Maybe you should take a few more Tylenol. Does it feel swollen?” Dan poked at the skin under the bandages, around the edges of the cut, and I winced.

“Yeah, a little,” I said. “But it’s not too bad. I think I just got tired all of a sudden, and now I’m having trouble getting woke up. It was a really long day, you know?” I found a little reserve of strength and used it to pull myself upright. I grunted a little, but suppressed the little cry I wanted to make when I shifted my arm over and set it on my lap. It wasn’t that it hurt exactly, though it did, but I could feel the opposite sides of the gash shifting around like two sides of a loose fault line. “It seems weird to think this time last night we were still on the ship, drinking that Canadian beer and talking to those girls from Portland.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” Dan said, searching restlessly with his eyes in the field of the headlights. “The world’s a damn funny place. I’ve been wandering around long enough to know not to expect too much from one day to the next. You think you’re going to be living in a palace or something, taking it easy, and you wind up on a chain gang. Or I remember one time I was dead sure I was going to jail, and I wound up on a shipping vessel bound for Greece, where I had one of the best times ever. It’s a damn funny world, I’ll tell you that.”

“I hear you buddy,” I said, leaning my head back against the window. The cold glass felt good. I imagined the cold night air conducting itself through the thin pane and through my skin, into my bloodstream, where it cooled my too-hot blood and shrank the

inflamed tissue in my arm. I don't know if it really worked, but it made me feel better to think about it. I sat back up and took a couple of Tylenol from the bottle on the dash and swallowed them with a mouthful from the water jug. "There's no telling what's going to happen. You gotta just enjoy the ride, right?" I thought I knew what I was talking about.



The thing about Alaska is it's really pretty damn big. Dan told me we hit Fairbanks, which is about three or four hundred miles north of Anchorage, while I was asleep where he filled up and got food and all that. Then we struck out north again, headed out toward the Gates of the Antarctic National Park. Dan said Carl's place was on the edge of the park, tucked out behind some mountain or another. There was a road, Route 2, that went north all the way to the glacier on the northern edge of the Yukon Territory, but we veered off it as we were passing between the Gates of Antarctic and the Arctic Northwest Reserve. I don't know the difference between the two. I don't think there is any. Both sides of the road were lined with endless stretches of snow and mountains. Route 2 actually goes up on a glacier, Dan said, but we didn't go that far. We drove off onto a private road screened by a giant boulder on one side and a bunch of tall pines on the other. I felt nervous, to tell you the truth. Route 2 was narrow and scary, and a couple of times we eased the Dart over big patches of snow and ice that had crept across the road. The worst part was there was absolutely nothing, and I mean nothing, out there except for us, the Dart, and ten-below-zero temperatures. Dan said it was relatively warm compared to other times he'd made the trip.

Dan had filled a bunch of gas cans in Fairbanks and put them in the trunk, which didn't make me feel any better, though I was at least glad we had gas with us and as long

as the Dart kept running we wouldn't freeze at least. Going up the private road reminded me of what I had felt in the desert when I was coming home with Althea and Carrie and Sharon that last time, the feeling of sublimity, of something so huge and awesome that you feel both scared and reverent at the same time, like what looking at the face of God would be like. Except the mountains and glaciers and the sheer size of the northern territories trumps the desert, hands down. All the same it got me to thinking about Sharon and Carrie and everything. I turned my head to the window for a while and cried as quietly as I could. I just felt so homesick and rotten, even though I was in one of the most beautiful places I'd ever been. I think Dan maybe knew what I was doing, but he didn't say anything. He tried to find a music station or something on the radio, but all we could get was this one station. It sounded really crackly, but underneath it there was this robot-sounding voice, only with a British accent, just saying numbers and random words over and over. And then it would play a section of really creepy music that sounded like it was coming from a kid's jack-in-the-box, all loopy with variable speed like a recording of a dead kid's memory. I thought it was sort of funny and weird at first, but then the music part started scaring me and I had to turn it off.

"That must be one of those spy stations," Dan said when it was quiet again.

"Spy stations?"

"Yeah, Carl was telling me about it once. No one knows where they come from, and the frequencies change a lot so you never know where they are. And the numbers and words and music change. Supposedly it's for spies, for them to get messages."

"What spies would be way the fuck out here?"

Dan shrugged. "I don't know, man. There's a lot of things goes on out here no one knows about. Take Carl, for instance. The guy has like, a secret compound, with green houses and an indoor swimming pool and all kinds of shit. Only no one knows about it, except me and Carl and the guys who work for him. There's not many. And he turns out some of the best pot in the western hemisphere. I mean, it's like rock star shit, the kind of stuff only really rich people can afford. And I've heard stories about the glaciers, you know, people seeing weird shit out there. It's a weird place for people to be in, that's for sure."

"What kind of weird shit?" I said. The Tylenol was making my arm feel cooler and my eyes feel less swollen. I drank a little water. "Hey, do you have any more joints, now that I think about it?"

"Sure," Dan said, and opened the glove compartment. He pulled out a cigarette pack and fished out a medium-sized joint. He lit it and passed it to me. I puffed on it contentedly, hoping it would mix with the acetaminophen and let me sleep a little more. "People tell all kinds of stories," Dan continued, taking the joint back. "I've heard some people say it's because of the elevation, that people get hallucinations and go crazy from being out in the thin air and the cold too long. But I've also known people who said they've seen shit with their own eyes. And they weren't crazy, you know, and I believe them."

"Shit like what?" I said. "What kind of stuff did they see?"

"Well, like this guy Terry that works with Carl, one night him and this other guy were out on the snowmobiles, just cruising around 'cause they felt cooped up. Anyway, Terry said they came over this hill and could see this valley down below, like a small one,

but really deep. All filled with mist, right? And Terry said he could make out in there like a big head on a long neck like a dinosaur but huge, like bigger than Godzilla, even. And Terry said it looked at him and winked.” Dan took the joint back and puffed it under his mustache.

“Yeah, that sounds like a hallucination,” I said. “How’s a dinosaur going to be living someplace so cold? And what would it eat?”

“I don’t know,” Dan said. “But this other time Carl said, and I believe Carl, you have to believe Carl, just meet Carl and tell me you don’t believe whatever he says, Carl said one time he was out riding around when it was warmer, and he said he saw like, a Minotaur.”

“What? Like, a minotaur just sort of standing around?”

“No, Carl said it was walking, like walking away from him, and when Carl drove by on his ’bicle the minotaur just sort of looked around at him and kept going, like the noise was annoying or something.”

I laughed. The joint was halfway gone and when Dan held it out to me I shook my head. He grinned and put it out in the Dart’s ashtray. “You’re so full of shit, dude,” I said. “There’s no dinosaurs and minotaurs running around out here.”

“Hey, I’m not the one who said it,” Dan said. “It was Carl and Terry. If you want, you can tell them they’re full of shit when you meet them. Though I don’t think you’ll want to.”

“Probably not,” I said. I didn’t know much about them, but if they were big pot growers and sellers they probably weren’t the kind of guys you insulted right off the bat,

if at all. “Besides, there’s all kinds of weird shit that goes on. Hell, Sharon’s aunt ...” I stopped.

“Who’s Sharon?” Dan said, looking over at me.

“Uh. She’s ... she was my wife.”

“Ah, shit man, I’m sorry,” Dan said. “Do you want to talk about it? I mean, shoot, I’ve lost people before. Brothers and stuff.” Dan sounded sincere, but I wasn’t in the mood.

“No thanks,” I said. “Maybe some other time.”

Dan shrugged and smiled at me, pulled out his pack again and offered me a cigarette. I took it, feeling like I never needed something more. “So anyway,” Dan said, “what were you saying about Sharon’s aunt?”

“Oh,” I said. “Yeah. Well yeah, her aunt lives out in Arkansas, way out in the boonies, kind of like Carl, I guess. I mean, you have to drive to this really small town out in the hills, in the middle of the state and then you get on this dirt road. And the dirt road winds into the hills and you have to drive like, forty-five minutes or something to get to their cabin. It’s kind of funny, ’cause it looks like the sort of place you see in movies about coal miners or whatever, it’s a log cabin, but they have a satellite dish out front and they have electricity and plumbing and air conditioning and everything.”

“Right on,” Dan said, cracking his window. He flicked his butt out into the snow and I handed him mine, and he flicked it out, too.

“So anyways, Sharon’s aunt, she lived out there with her husband and her two boys, but they would always tell us stories about shit they saw out in the woods.”

“Like what?”

“Well, like Hortense, that’s Sharon’s aunt, she said she was always seeing aliens popping around the trees out in the woods, and she said one time she saw the mountain across from their cabin open up like a big hinged door and a flying saucer came out of it and flew off. And another time she said she saw a tree wearing tennis shoes.”

“What? Did they do a lot of drugs, or what?” Dan said.

“I think they probably were doing quite a bit of meth and smoking a lot of weed, you know. There’s not much else to do out there,” I said.

“Yeah, it sounds like it,” Dan said.

“Yeah, but it isn’t really any different than Carl and Terry seeing that stuff, is it? I mean, I’m not saying they were fucked up or they were crazy or anything, but it’s just weird that people who live in the middle of nowhere are prone to seeing shit that anyone else would say is impossible, you know?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Dan said, lighting another cigarette. “Is your arm doing okay, at least for now?” Dan said.

“Yeah, I guess so,” I said. “As long as I don’t move it around too much, it seems okay. And I think that joint helped a little.” The deep muscle ache was still there, but it had receded.

“Good.” Dan was peering intently out into the dark. “Okay. Here’s the end of the line. You think you can steer a snowmobile for a while?”

“Probably,” I said, not knowing whether I could or not, but leaning toward not. “I never drove one before. Are they hard to steer?”

“No. Once you get your arm up on the handle it shouldn’t be hard. It’s not like you have to do a lot of turning or anything. It’s mostly leaning,” Dan said. He pulled up

to a large shed. It was one of those metal prefabricated jobs, painted a light gray so it would have been hard to spot. “Stay in here until I get the door open, and I’ll turn on the heat. There’s a kerosene furnace in there. Okay?”

“You don’t have to do all that. If you just get the door open and point me toward the snowmobile I’ll be okay,” I said, trying to get my arm back into my coat sleeve without ripping the gash open again.

“No, it’s not that,” Dan said, pulling on his hood. “It’s a *big* kerosene furnace, and we’ll need it to get the snowmobiles warm enough to start. It’s cold as fucking hell out there, dude. But once we get them going it’s not too far up through the pass to Carl’s place, okay?” Dan pulled on his gloves and looked at me through the eyeholes in his hood. He looked like a kid about to go play ninja in the yard.

“Okay. Sounds good,” I said.

Dan got out of the Dart and slammed the door behind him. He ran across the few yards between the Dart and the shed door and started pulling at it. I couldn’t see if it was iced up or what, since Dan was blocking the door. After a few minutes, during which I thought about getting out to help but didn’t, Dan finally wrenched the door free from whatever was blocking it and slid it open. He turned and gave me the thumbs up and then went in and slid the door closed.

I sat in the idling Dart, waiting. Without moving, the car wasn’t generating as much heat so I started to get a little chilly, even though I had the thing cranked up as hot as it would go. Idling, the Dart sounded like it was having a hard time keeping itself going, like it was a person being slowly crushed to death by a heavy weight. It was like the cold was the weight, and the engine was the Dart’s lungs. Every once in a while it

would stutter and the car would lurch, the lurches more pronounced each time it happened. I knew it wouldn't be long before the Dart gave one last big lurch and stalled out. I scooted across the seat, trying to keep my arm still, and sneaked my foot across the floorboard to goose the gas. The engine chopped up and gave a low roar, like a lion that just got its toe stepped on, and then let back down as I took my foot back. I sat there half-leaning across the bench seat with my left leg over on the driver's side goosing the gas every so often, until I noticed my arm was starting to feel warm and weird. I had put my coat on in anticipation of driving snowmobiles and I had closed the rip in my coat with duct tape to keep the cold out, so I couldn't see what was going on in there. I was thinking about taking my coat back off, though it seemed like the last thing I would want to do if I didn't want to disturb the gash in my arm, but I was interrupted by Dan shouting at me from the shed door. I hadn't been paying attention. I looked out through the windshield and there he was waving his arms around his head and shouting, the sound of which barely made it into the Dart's interior, rushed off with the wind like the snow.

I hesitated. I wasn't sure if I should turn the Dart off or not. On the one hand, if I turned it off it might get too cold and we wouldn't be able to get it going again if we needed to. On the other hand, if I left it on there was a good chance it would stall out and if it did, the lights and everything would stay on and the battery would die and we would be even more fucked. I decided to turn it off. I winced a little against my will as I pulled apart the wires Dan had twisted together under the dash. The engine died and I sat there a moment longer, listening to the wind and the skittering of the hard, icy snow crossing the hood. I could hear Dan now.

“Hurry up, goddammit!” he was shouting. “I'm letting all the heat out of here!”

I scooted back to my side of the Dart, still trying to keep my arm still, though I knew it wasn't doing me any good. I opened the door with my good arm and got out. The cold hit me hard like a punch in the face or a limb chopped off, I can't think of any way to describe it that isn't clichéd. Suffice it to say that it was unbelievable, incomprehensibly, outside-of-the-realm-of-the-mind's-ability-to-process cold. "Fuck!" I yelled, slammed the car door and ran to the shed, forgetting about my arm for the first time. I still held it relatively still but I wasn't being as careful as I should. I ran past Dan into the shed, and he slammed the door behind me, closing us inside.

"Come on, the heater's in the back, it'll be warmer there," Dan said, and took my bad arm. I winced and pulled it away, though it didn't hurt any more or less than it had before he grabbed it, and Dan gave me an apologetic look. "Sorry," he said, "how's it feel?"

"About the same," I said, "though I think it might be bleeding a little again. It's hard to tell. I'm not taking my coat off again to check, so we'll just have to wait and see. I don't feel faint or anything." It was ironic I said that because as soon as I did I felt faint. A big clear wave of distortion washed over my vision and I had to really concentrate on my feet and how they were connected to the ground and how my body was centered over them to keep from falling. I guess it only lasted a few seconds, but it felt like a long time to me.

"Are you all right?" Dan was saying as the wave passed by.

"Oh, sure," I said. "I was just thinking. I just remembered I left the stove on at home. I should go back and check it." Dan grinned at the joke, even though he still looked worried and uncertain.

“Come on,” he said, and we walked to the back end of the shed. It went further back than it looked like it would from outside. It was long and low, made of tin or whatever they use for those prefabricated sorts of buildings. Someone had used a bunch of that spray foam to line the inside of the shed, to insulate it and keep out drafts. Dan was right; as we moved to the back, passing between seven or eight large shapes under tarps that I assumed were snowmobiles, it got warmer and cozier. Against the back wall was a long table made of plywood with big four by fours for legs and a couple of stools sitting next to it. I sat down on one, resting my arm on the table top. Next to me was a largish kerosene heater that looked like a big boiler tank with a stove burner on top, only without a place to put a pot or a pan on, just flames coming out.

“Just sit here for a few minutes,” Dan said. “I’ll get two of these things going, and then we’ll take off. Are you sure you feel okay? It’s probably a thirty or forty minute ride up the mountain to get to Carl’s and if you pass out, I don’t know what we’ll do. It’s not like there’s a pay phone where we can call an ambulance.”

“Yeah, I’m okay,” I said, feeling grateful for the stool. “Once we get going, I’ll be even better. And once we get there, I’ll be even better still.”

Dan looked at me like he was trying to decide whether or not he believed me. Then he shrugged. “I guess we’ve got no choice, right? I think there’s a storm whipping up anyways, so we can’t go back.”

“Yeah, and who wants to go back anyway?” I said. I thought of Carrie sitting in her dad’s place in Yukon wondering if I was okay. I wondered about Althea and Lynn and Alan, and my parents and everyone I knew, the guys at work and even the people I had worked with and gone to school with for my whole life. I wondered if they knew I

was a murderer, if they all hoped I was dead or if they just wanted me to come back so I could go to jail. I thought about Harrell's wife, now a widow, and those piggy kids of his, knowing that their piggy dad would never come home. But mostly I thought of Carrie and Sharon. I knew Sharon was still gone, and that she wasn't going to come back to talk to me or help me out or give me a sign, but I still found myself every once in a while thinking she was watching me. She was still always on my mind and I had been imagining her standing different places here and there as Dan and I had traveled north, but it was like my brain was doing it automatically and I didn't really think on it too much. It was getting less and less and I knew after a while it would stop happening, which was a sad fact on its own. I wondered about Carrie, and whether she was in school and if she was getting good grades, if Kevin was being good to her and taking care of her. I finally pushed her off my head and stood up. There was nothing I could do anymore, it was too late.



Our luck held and the snowmobiles started right up. The snow outside even seemed to have slowed down as we pulled out of the shed. We had put on every bit of clothing we had with us and found some more big ski masks and goggles to wear. Once I had everything on I felt like I was walking through something thick like yogurt and my head felt buzzy and stuttery again. I felt a little better when I got on the snowmobile because I was sitting down, but once we were outside in the wind and snow again I just felt lighter and lighter. It reminded me of the first few times I drove stoned. It took a constant effort to pay attention. I had to keep reminding myself what I was doing and why I couldn't get distracted. The wind and the sound of the snowmobile's engine was

muffled through my earmuffs and the ski mask, and everything looked bent through the goggle lenses.

I was reminded of following Joy and Angela through the crowd in San Diego as I followed Dan's back out of the shed and up the mountain. The wind blew the snow around him the same way the crowd kept trying to close around Joy. It was hard for me to concentrate on the throttle and the brake and keeping the thing steered right and watch Dan at the same time. I had never driven a snowmobile before and it was like running any kind of machinery, it takes extra thinking the first time to keep from breaking something.

After a while the cold bit through my coat and I could feel where I was bleeding out on my upper left arm. I was holding my arm more or less straight out to keep hold of the handlebar so the coldness was pooling under the back of my arm, from under my triceps down to just above my elbow. I started concentrating on that, trying to watch Dan's back and hear the engine and steer and control the throttle and watch the path we were on. The path was narrow and I don't know how Dan knew where he was going, because it all looked like featureless white to me. All I had to follow was Dan's tracks, and even those were erasing almost as soon as he made them. I got the sense that we were going up, but it was hard to tell. Then, after what seemed like a long time we turned a corner and I looked to my right and almost crashed. We were riding along the top of a ridge. The mountain continued up on the left, but on the right it dropped away below us so far that I couldn't even tell how far it was. It was still all covered in snow and fog. The wind blew clouds of snow across the bottom and the sides of the slope next to me, making it even harder to judge distance. But something in me knew it was far enough

because my stomach knotted. My scalp tightened under my three snow caps and felt like needles of sweat were pushing their way through its surface. I couldn't stop looking down the slope. I felt boneless.

I managed to snap my head around front, but when I did Dan was nowhere to be seen. I searched through the snow clouds and vague outlines of surfaces but I couldn't pick out his silhouette anywhere. I tried to listen for the sound of his snowmobile, but the sound of mine covered it up and I was afraid to turn it off. I twisted the throttle and sped up, hoping that Dan had just gotten a little ahead of me and that I would catch up to him.

I went on like that for a while, driving as fast as I dared in the direction I thought we had been heading before I lost Dan. I kept thinking, 'He's just up ahead, don't panic, he's right up around the corner, just a little farther,' but I just got more scared and panicky. I started breathing heavier and I felt like I was sweating stinging acid needles all over my body. My head was buzzing like a beehive, though it felt empty; my throat felt thick and my mouth tasted like it was full of metal from a cage that had held a rotting animal carcass. The whole backside of my arm felt cold and wet. I slowed up a little. I had even less idea than ever where I was. The snow had picked up again as we got higher and higher, and it was impossible to see more than ten or twenty feet, though that was only a guess, since it was all shifting white curtains anyway. I slowed down even more and tried to feel my left arm with my right. The whole back of my coat sleeve, the part that had been under the wet-feeling part of my arm, was heavy and solid and hard, like the whole thing had been packed with ice. I felt it for a second, foggily trying to figure out why it could possibly feel that way, and then I realized what it was; my arm

had been bleeding into my coat sleeve the whole time and had frozen solid, creating a sort of gruesome ice pack inside my coat.

As soon as I realized that, the bees in my head became agitated and swarmed, stinging the parts of my brain that were still working properly, paralyzing them. The shifting white snow curtains became a grainy black-and-white TV shade of gray, and what looked like ribbed columns of electrical current ran up and down, touching each snow flake and making them visible where they hadn't visible before. I opened my mouth to try and let some of the bees out, but my throat muscles were too tight and instead of bees I let out a hot stream of puke into my mask where it pooled up, covering my mouth. I breathed through my nose as best I could but in all the excitement I forgot to steer the snowmobile. I only remembered it as I felt it shifting sideways, commanded by gravity coming from some direction or another; I couldn't tell which way was up or down anymore. Then there was only the sensation of falling, the world and my body turning around the center of me, trying to reach out but not even sure I was reaching, definitely not finding anything to grab, just that awful turning until it stopped with a thump, and then the gray turned from white into black.

Thirteen

I don't exactly remember waking up. It seems like it was all very shadowy for a while. I don't know what parts were dreams and what parts were real. I would occasionally have the feeling I was awake and look around, but then think that I must not be awake, because everything was all wrong. For one, I wasn't out in the snow, bleeding and freezing to death. I was inside, in a bed. And the bed was huge, and the room I was

in was so big that I couldn't see the ceiling very well and the corners were so far away and dark they were like blank spots where the walls met. One time there was a bull looking at me. I closed my eyes tight and pretended I didn't see it until I went to sleep and dreamed about a field covered by a herd of running lions. That's what it was like for a while. I woke up by degrees, catching snippets of the room I was in, or thought I was in, or was dreaming I was in. I think in the back of my mind I figured Dan had somehow found me out in the blizzard and got me to his cousin's place and patched me up, and I was feverish and that's why I thought the room was so big and why I thought I saw a bull standing by the bed.

Then my eyes were open, I was lying in bed and everything felt very real and calm and quiet. I felt cool, and the bone-ache in my arm was gone. I was relieved to feel stitches along the length of the gash on my arm, and the skin felt cool and normal, not stretchy and hot anymore. There was a bandage around my head, but my head felt fine. I lay back on my pillow, and then sat back up and looked at it. It was the size of a kid's mattress, covering the two or three feet between me and the headboard. And the headboard was probably almost as tall as me, which led me to look around the bed itself. It was probably about seventeen by twelve or so feet, as far as I could guess. There was a huge, thick quilt covering it made from some kind of homespun material with faded pinks and blues and greens worked into a patchwork pattern. I was tucked under the very edge on the left side of the bed, my feet barely clearing the wide blanket border. I pulled myself out from under it, scooted over to the edge of the bed and looked over the side. The floor looked far away, though it was probably only eight or nine feet. That's still

pretty tall for a bed. I thought about climbing down, but I was worried about my arm. I didn't want to pull any stitches out.

I crawled back to my little quilt border and slipped back under. I tugged at the edge of the pillow and got it set under my head and stared at the ceiling. There was a window past the foot of the bed on the left, and the sunlight coming through filled that part of the room. There was a huge dresser under the big window on the left, a bedside table next to me and a chest across from the foot of the bed up against the wall next to the huge door. Set in the wall to my right, across from the far side of the bed, was a massive stone fireplace that looked big enough to roast a dinosaur. The overall effect of the whole room was so large it seemed to swallow the light from the window. It occurred to me that maybe the sun was on the other side of the house from the window and that it was possibly late in the afternoon and getting on towards evening time.

I tried not to think too much, but these things just came. I tried to ignore the question of why the room was so huge and what I would eventually have to discover about its owner.

I was lying there when I heard the doorknob turning. I closed my eyes tight the way you do when you're little and there's a monster under the bed and you know that if you only see it the monster will have permission from whatever forces govern monsters to drag you under the bed and eat your face off your skull. I kept my eyes closed and even tried to regulate my breathing so that it would sound like I was asleep. The doorknob squeaked lightly as it turned, and then I heard the door scrape a little on the jamb as it opened. I heard heavy breathing, then heavy, long steps coming toward the bed. My body tensed all over, and it felt like my skin was going to crawl right off, even

though I made a reasonable job of keeping my breathing normal. The heavy steps came to the side of the bed and stopped. The heavy breathing was right next to me. Now I could feel it, warm and somehow wild-smelling, not bad but wild, coming around me like a crowd of curious fireflies. It took all my willpower and fear combined not to open my eyes.

Then I felt a finger poking at my arm, flipping the ends of the stitches back and forth, and the source of the heavy breathing gave a grunt as I flinched. “Are you awake, little fella?” the breather said. Its voice was deeper than any voice I’d ever heard and slightly rough, like the owner smoked two or three packs of cigarettes a day. Still, it was friendly-sounding, and I figured if it belonged to whoever patched me up, I probably shouldn’t be scared. I opened my eyes just enough to see and looked as far to the left as I could without moving my head.

It was the bull I had thought I saw before, only in daylight it was hard to deny it was real. I closed my eyes all the way again. *Oh God, oh God do not forsake me save me from this fucking scary-ass place ...* It was the first prayer I had said in a long time. It was really difficult to keep my breathing under control, but I managed it. I did start sweating a little, though.

“You hot, you unconscious little bastard?” the bull said. “Well, too bad. I’m not getting a palm leaf to fan you with.” The bull laughed a little to himself, and I tried not to start crying involuntarily. “You look pale again, though.”

I listened to some rustling and more raspy chuckling from the side of the bed while I tried to figure out what the hell the bull was talking about. Then I stiffened when I felt something pierce the skin in the crook of my elbow, like he was giving me a shot.

“Here we go, you rat parasite,” the bull said. I peeked out from under my eyelids again and saw that the bull had pulled a stool next to the bed. I could see his torso and realized it wasn’t a bull but a Minotaur, the thing from the Greek myth that lived in a maze and ate teenagers. I saw the Minotaur had inserted a needle with a rubber tube attached to it into his arm, and the other end was dangling out of my arm. The rubber tube was yellowish like it was made from natural rubber, the kind of thing you would see in an old movie about hospitals. I could see through it enough and could tell from the heavy way it was hanging between us that the Minotaur’s blood was running through the tube and into me.

I sat up and flailed around, trying to pull the needle out. Now that I knew what was going on I thought I could feel the Minotaur’s blood in me, hotter than the rest of my blood, scented with sweat and a weird spiciness, like curried lamb or marinated meat in an exotic market that the Department of Health had never heard of.

“I knew it!” the Minotaur said. “You were breathing way too hard to be asleep, you little bastard rat faker. Don’t do that to the tube, you’ll mess up the sheets.” The Minotaur reached across with his other arm, the one without a needle in it, and pushed me back down onto the bed, blocking my right arm from getting across to my left and pulling the needle out of it. His hand was the size of a turkey platter, hairy and flat and thick and hard, like someone had cast them out of bronze and then covered them with a layer of thick leather that had been hardened in a furnace. The hair on the back of it spoked down onto the fingers, making it past the middle knuckle and only petering out before the tip joint. It was wiry and black and looked like maybe you could use it to pierce someone’s skin or twist it together and make a rope to hang yourself. “You should be thanking me,

you little cunt,” the Minotaur said. “I never gave anyone my blood before. Karen told me to do it, and even then I almost said no.”

“But ...” I said, and not very clearly. My throat felt swollen. It had probably been that way already, but I didn’t notice until I tried to talk. I tried to clear my throat and swallow but it hurt too much so I laid there, wincing and trying to figure out what was wrong with me. Then I realized I wasn’t just sweating out of fear; I had a raging fever and my throat was probably sore and raw from some sort of infection. Eventually I choked out, “... blood type? How do you know it’ll help?”

The Minotaur shrugged and laughed. “How the fuck should I know? You’re not dead, so I guess it’s okay. You were pretty much dead when we found you, so what was there to lose, right?” I shrank back against my giant pillow; when he laughed the Minotaur blew little flecks of moisture off of his big bull nose, his tongue lolling out of his bull mouth, wetting the fine bull fur on his bull chin. Seeing that and knowing the growing feeling of too-hot blood swelling through me, the strange, exotic and unpleasant spicy smell coming from my own pores and thickening my eyesight and burning my nostrils; seeing the purple vein bulging and pulsating under the skin of his huge arm just under the flexing bicep made me feel nauseous and dizzy. I felt my gorge rising and as my chest heaved I heard the Minotaur laugh again and say, “Not on the sheets, you dumb rat cunt turd,” and then the sonorous buzzing of unconsciousness rose in my head and I went under it gratefully, half hoping I would never come back up.

◆

Down in the bottom of my head, new thoughts started bubbling up from an unknown well, a place that held the distilled essence of things which couldn’t live on the

surface and didn't like the air in the top of my brain, things the top of my brain wouldn't tolerate living with the rest of the things that lived up there, clean and sleek and clear like new babies packaged in mountain spring water. The things from the well were corruptions, scaly rat babies born out of a sewer.

The well sent up bubbles, which translated themselves into the closest approximation of the language of the surface as they could:

I hate you God, fucking ass master dick-mouth cum gibbering fuckfaced piece of dog shit, you call yourself a deity, 'oh, look at me, I'm God! I like to make people live and make them like it, and then take them away and watch them squirm while I jack it onto the clouds and make it rain down on them while I laugh!' You make me want to fucking puke, you douche. God, you fucking bastard, why'd you have to take her away? Why'd you have to do that, huh, you stinky dick licker? What purpose did that serve? We spent six years in love, trying to deal with what you gave us, trying to carve a life out of the fucking stone-hard wad of knots you gave us, and we'd almost done it when you lit a fart and flamed out our whole existence. Do you think that's funny? Huh? Is that a big joke to you, you goddam cuntheaded shitbag? You think it's funny to leave little girls motherless with their dickhead, inconsiderate booze-hound shitheel fathers? You think it's funny to ruin everything, to send people off to the wilderness to die, to get chopped with lawnmower blades, to fall off cliffs and have to take Minotaur blood? Are you even there? Answer me! I fucking dare you to answer me! Burn me up, finish the fucking job, strike me down, you shiteating coward, you stupid, dirty fucking cum spot! What can I say to make you show your fucking ugly, coward's face? What can I say to make you take me, to make you acknowledge that you're a colossal, universal fuckup?

This kind of monologue that circulated through my head as I lay suspended between sleep and consciousness. It welled up from an untapped source, broke out from under a scab that I didn't even know was a scab, a scab lying on the bottom of my mind like a cleverly concealed manhole, ready to tip open and spill out the collected sewage of a lifetime.

I woke up and looked around. The room was dark, utterly dark, without even a hint of moonlight or starlight coming in at the window. I couldn't even see where the window was. I lay on the huge bed, trying to feel the space around me, feel the dimension of it so I could convince myself it was real and that I wasn't dead, and tried to tamp the dialogue back down under its manhole. I couldn't do it. It continued to circulate, like a rat trying to find its way out of a maze with no exit. It was a relief, in a way, since the dialogue was the only thing convincing me I wasn't dead, that I hadn't fallen off the cliff on the snowmobile and crushed my skull on the mountain spine or fell buried under an avalanche to lie frozen until some enterprising archaeologist of the future found me and put me in a museum.

I didn't feel like myself; that was the reason I needed something to convince me I was alive. I felt strange, like somehow an extra set of thoughts and feelings had been planted in me like in that movie *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers*, like I had been re-grown in a pod and now I was a clone of myself, but a clone with an extra, invisible brain that kept sending in signals like *eat my ass, God, you dumb fucking whoremaster, and if I ever get to meet you, I'll spit in your fucking face, you fucking traitor*, and so on. The buried, Catholic-school-altar-boy part of me was horrified, while the pot-smoking, who-gives-a-shit part of me thought it was funny, or at least thought it should think it was funny. In

reality the pothead version of me contained the altar boy version of me just as much as the new version of me. The murdering bereft widower version of me lying in a giant bed with Minotaur blood in him contained both the altar boy and the pothead, among many others. All those versions were tied together by the linear course of time like the rings in a tree, held together simply by the fact that one creates the next and the next the next and the next the next. All the rings were terrified, to different degrees, by this new, reckless, blasphemous, gleeful hatred of God, though that fear was pointless since it was coming from those layers in the first place. Maybe what they were really terrified by was the sense of true self-recognition; once the mirror had been held up, there was no way to ignore that everyone else in there had a mirror, too, and all faces carry the same scars.

I rolled in the bed, feeling the feverish, spiced heat of the Minotaur's blood. I couldn't get comfortable. The blankets, which had seemed plush, warm and protective now seemed thick, heavy and restrictive. I got on top but they were too lumpy and pressed into my back. I managed to heave them over far enough so I was lying only on the sheet, but then I got cold, and I had to fold the bottom blanket back onto me. After a while I had to pee, but I was afraid to try and get down. Even in the daylight it had seemed far to fall from the mattress to the floor, and in the dark I was convinced I would break my neck. The pressure in my bladder grew and grew, until finally I felt my way to the edge of the bed, wincing at the pain in my arm where the stitches pulled. I stood up, feeling woozy and disoriented, and pissed off the side, impressed at how long and far away the splattering of my urine sounded as it landed on the floorboards.

I felt thirsty after that, but getting up and moving around even that little bit made me tired enough to lie still and close my eyes. The blasphemous prayer still ran around

my head (*dirty son of a bitch, why don't you fuck yourself and die?*) but it took on a muted, automatic tone that made it easier to ignore, like it didn't need me to keep working and I could leave it to its own devices. I got myself settled back under the blankets and thought about Sharon and Carrie. Mostly I wondered about Carrie, though Sharon was a close second. Finally, after what seemed like a very long time, I drifted off. I didn't dream about Sharon, much to my disappointment. I never dream about her. I dreamed about clear, sweet water, run through with something red that could have been either red Oklahoma clay or blood. In my dream I just sat and watched the red invade the clear, threads of it spreading through like creeper vines or the spreading tendrils of a cancer, wondering if it would ever rain.



When I woke up the sun was pushing hot through the window to my left. I still didn't know what side of the house the window was on and what direction the sun was coming from, but it was slanting in at what looked like a pretty direct angle, so I figured it was either on the east or west side. So that would make it either about ten in the morning or two in the afternoon, depending on the direction, not that it mattered that much to me. Either way I felt pretty good, at least compared to how I had felt. There was no Minotaur in sight, and seeing how full of light the room was and feeling the warmth of it was almost enough to let me forget that I'd ever seen it in the first place.

I inspected my arm and saw that the swelling was a little worse and most of the redness along the edges of the gash had deepened toward a purplish magenta. It still felt tender. It wasn't a solid tenderness, if that makes sense, but the kind of liquid, sharp

stinging pain of infection. The skin was tight against the stitches in a way that let me know the strands were holding down a little hot growing city of infection.

I took my first good look at the chest under the window. From what I could see it was a kind of wood that I hadn't seen before, very dark with a fine grain. It looked stained, but something about it told me it wasn't. I decided I wanted to climb up on top of it and look out the window. I still had no idea where I was at all.

I crawled to the side of the bed and looked over. It still seemed high, about eight or nine feet to the floor. I scooted over to the top edge of the blanket where it ran down the side of the bed. I turned around and held the edge of the blanket like it was a rope, mostly with my right hand and just guiding with my left so I wouldn't pop any stitches. I let myself down like that, sliding along and dropping the last couple of feet to the floor when the blanket ended.

The floor was wood, though it wasn't as smooth as most wood floors I've seen. The planks were very wide, maybe three or four feet across, and really long. I tiptoed to the chest under the window, though no one was around. It was farther away than it had looked from the bed, and once I got under the chest it seemed taller.

The chest had a lot of chunky molding around the edges, like whoever made it wanted to make it as ornate as possible but only had a dull pocket knife to carve with. Not that they did a bad job for only having a dull pocketknife, but it still wasn't very delicate-looking, even if it was very unusual. Not like I'm a molding expert, but I had never seen anything like it. It undulated up the side and moved across the front of the chest under the lid where it formed a rough-looking carved lion with its body facing right, but with its head turned looking out from the chest.

There was a pile of giant blankets stacked next to the chest. I flopped up onto them and managed to stand up, keeping my cut arm as still as possible. From the blankets, the top of the chest was only chest height, but I still got dizzy trying to heave myself the rest of the way up. I just lay there a few minutes, catching my breath and watching the little sperm-shaped transparent fainting bugs swim around the edges of my vision. When they went away I sat up and looked at my arm. The color still wasn't good, but the stitches had held. There was a drop of yellow-clear fluid seeping from each end of the gash and from between some of the stitches.

I went over to the window and looked out. I know it sounds like a cliché to say my jaw dropped, but it actually did, and my breath caught in my throat, too.

The window looked over a body of water that was probably too big to be called a pond, but was small to be a lake. It was roughly circular, a clear, deep blue that had the same transparent, bottomless sheen as the towering glaciers that stood behind it like the world's tallest row of teeth. All around the small lake was shaggy looking, deep green grass that looked as if it would feel like lying down in marshmallows. The wall of glaciers was so tall that I could only make out a small, placid patch of sky above their peaks. The water mirrored the glaciers and the sky that was reflected in it, so it was like looking at a continuous stretch of the same material, broken by that band of perfect green across the bottom.

As I looked, something surfaced in the lake. It seemed huge, like a great fish or a serpent, throwing big clouds of foam and clear water off it, disturbing the whole surface as it came up. It seemed impossible, but as I watched I realized it was actually someone swimming. I could make out the elbows pumping up and down, see the feet breaking the

surface as they paddled in perfect time, the body twisting from side to side with the stroke. The impossible part is that it couldn't be a person, because if it was it was the biggest person I ever saw, that probably anyone ever saw. It was hard to tell from where I was, what with the distance and the scale of the lake and everything, but the person would have to be at least fifteen feet tall.

There was no one else outside that I could see, and I was curious to see whoever was swimming when they got out of the water, but I also wanted to see the rest of the land around the house. I know I gave the impression that the glaciers were peaks, but it was really like a solid piece of ice, like a giant semi-circular gum with jagged, pointy teeth imbedded in it. The semi-circle stretched out to the right and left of my window and disappeared. Out across the lawn there were no other signs of habitation; the only movement came from the pond.

Whoever had been taking care of me had dressed me in clothes that looked like they were made out of some kind of sack material, loose and brown and a little rough, but not too scratchy. They had fashioned a rudimentary shirt and a sort of loincloth that was tied at my hip and came about halfway down my thighs. There wasn't a mirror nearby, but I could see a transparent image of myself in the window. I had lost a lot of weight, which I could tell without the reflection, but I was still surprised at how my face had changed. My cheekbones were much more prominent than they had been, and the skin under my chin was drawn back tight against my throat. My hair was clean but matted as if it hadn't been combed, though of course I'd been lying in bed, rolling around on it for however long. I looked like a caveman from a bad seventies movie about cavemen. All I needed was another week or so to grow more beard and I would be there.

The splashing in the pond died down and I watched the mostly submerged shape coast to the shore. I could see the top of a massive head and the arms pushing the water aside, the legs giving powerful sweeps. Then the person got to the shallows and got his or her feet under him or her, and at that point I found out it was definitely a she.

The head cleared the water first; wet brown shoulder-length hair cut in a Prince Valiant/Betty Page bangs chop across the front, melded wet down over the head. Her face was round and soft and reminded me of the sort of girls I thought were attractive when I was in junior high; the kind of girls who went to private schools, wore tartan skirts, maybe glasses, with warm smiles and facial moles. I couldn't tell from the window what color her eyes were, but I got the impression they were green or blue instead of brown like her hair. Her shoulders cleared the water as she walked up the incline of the shore, not narrow or broad, not muscular but not soft, collarbones that held little pools of lake water in their top hollows until it dribbled out and cascaded down. Her breasts were full and round on the bottoms with a slight cone-shape at the ends, tapering into medium-sized blush-colored nipples. The skin was pinkish-pale with a few more dark, round moles scattered across the tops and down onto her ribcage. Her belly was not quite flat, but fleshy enough to make you want to lay your head on it.

Her pubic hair was like a brown cloud of soft-looking down, like someone had tied an auburn sheep to her pudenda. I didn't suppose there were any razors big enough for trimming it or else she wasn't the type to worry about it. I was in the mountains, after all.

The giant woman stepped out of the water, lifted her arms, and wrung out her hair, sending a shock of water down to peel mud off the shore. Her legs were as well-

proportioned as the rest of her, a little wide in the thigh, tapering down to perfect ankles and feet that looked dainty given her overall size, though could have flattened me in a second. She turned and looked reflectively off at the glacier's leaning icy teeth while she wrung the rest of the water out of her hair, sending clear diminishing streams off her shoulders, down the ravine of her spine to the little divot valley at the top of her ass, which was perfect.

I was suddenly aware of a burning ache spreading clear from behind my balls all the way up through my bladder and into my belly, where it diffused into a whisky glow sending fumes up through my blood and into my brain. I looked down and saw that the rough loincloth the Minotaur or whoever had put on me was tight, barely holding my straining cock back against my leg. I was surprised for a moment. I hadn't felt anything down there since Sharon had died, and actually not much for some time before, at least a month or two. As Sharon's health had dwindled, naturally her sex drive was one of the first things to go. I had wanted it, had still wanted her off and on, but it was mostly an intellectual sort of wanting, or maybe just the ghost of habit haunting me in idle moments. I couldn't remember the last time I felt the level of horniness I felt; it reminded me of the uncontrollable, almost mystical type of arousal I had felt at the onset of full puberty, when the hormones running through me actually heightened my senses, made me more aware of the movement of trees, grass, wind.

I didn't even look around to make sure I was alone. As the giant woman stood outside, brushing water off her body, swinging her hair around and then walking around the lake drying off, I loosened the knot on the side of my loincloth and dropped it on the top of the chest. Staring out at the walking giant, her tightened, goose-bumped nipples,

her breasts swaying gently back and forth as she walked, the matching opposite movement of her hips and the sexual furnace that I imagined was burning between her legs was too much, and after a very minimal amount of manipulation I deposited an improbable amount of male essence on the window glass. The ache moved from back to front and out and I felt like I was actually projecting part of my soul out of my body, shooting hot light from my nipples, forcing me to put my other hand on the glass to steady myself.

As my orgasm abated I stood there with my eyes closed, trying to hang on to it as long as possible and stave off the growing wave of guilt I knew was building, that had been waiting behind the sudden passion. It wasn't only the inevitable feeling of having betrayed Sharon by being turned on by another woman, but it was also a function of my Catholicism, something that had been ingrained into me from childhood. I can't even remember how many times the nuns shamed me for talking about sex, how many times the priests had done the same. Even my godfather, who lived next door, tried to instill the idea that sex was not only a sin but a sign of bad character. Every time I had ever had sex or masturbated I had felt the same feeling of shame pop up (so to speak) in the afterglow. This time it was proportional to the strength of the orgasm, and I cried a little, leaning my face against the glass, thinking about Sharon. Grief is a series of road marks. Everything you do after a death is done for the first time. Taking a piss, eating, sleeping, talking, scratching an itch, driving a car. Somehow coming seemed like a huge milestone, it had been almost three months since Sharon died. It felt like a miniature loss, another piece of the former world breaking off and dissolving into oblivion.

Then, from behind me boomed out the deep voice of the Minotaur, “Oh, goddammit, I just washed those windows.” I spun around, almost falling off the chest. I covered my wang with my hand and crouched down, feeling for my loincloth. “What?” the Minotaur said, walking the rest of the way into the room. He was wearing a red and blue pinstriped Oxford shirt with a button-down collar, snug-fitting blue jeans and black square-toed loafers. His bull head, about two times too big for the rest of his body, loomed over his ensemble like a lollipop mounted on a blade of grass. He set the tray he was carrying at the foot of the bed and walked over toward me. “Why are you so red?”

“I, you know ...” I said, pulling the loincloth up and fumbling with the ends, trying to get them back together. “It’s embarrassing, I don’t know what came over me ... I’m sorry.” I got the cloth knotted and stood there looking at him, then scooted over to block the streak of semen on the window as if he hadn’t already seen it.

The Minotaur laughed. “I don’t give a shit if you play with your pud, just don’t shoot it all over the fucking glass, guy. Somebody’s gotta clean that up, you know?”

“I’ll clean it,” I said. “I didn’t mean to ...”

“Yeah, you’ll fucking clean it,” the Minotaur said. He came over to the window and looked out, then laughed. “Ah, I see, you’ve been peeping the mistress after her swim. She’ll think that’s pretty fucking funny.” I couldn’t tell if he was being serious, and she would think it was funny, or if he was being sarcastic.

“Hey, don’t tell her, okay?” I said. “I mean, I didn’t mean to... I don’t want her to get the wrong idea about me...”

“What, that you get horny when you see a beautiful woman? I doubt she’ll be surprised to hear that. Everyone wants to fuck her, me included.”

“Oh.” We stood there for a moment, watching the giant woman walk off to the right, into the house below us, I assumed. “Is there a giant ... man?”

“No. No more giants, you know. She’s the only one.” The Minotaur was dressed like a wine bar hipster, but he smelled like he’d just come from rolling around in a barn. Not necessarily a *shitty* barn, but not a real clean one, either. He stood next to me, looking out at the glacial cliffs. “No, we’re both one of a kind, me and her.”

“What’s her name?” I said.

“Karen,” he said.

“Oh. What’s your name?”

“Chandler,” the Minotaur said. “Are you hungry? How’s the arm? Getting better, huh? I wouldn’t have thought you’d be able to climb up on this chest, that’s for sure.”

“Yeah,” I said, “I was wondering about that. How long have I been here? It seems like it’s healing really fast.”

“Oh, just four days, I think. Yeah, four. You came crashing down on the other side of the house, where it’s not so steep. I thought you were dead for probably the first hour. I was going to throw you down the tunnel, but Karen wouldn’t let me. Said there was something about you.”

“I don’t remember how I got here, really. I mean, where am I, exactly?”

“Shit, how the fuck should I know?” Chandler the Minotaur said. “We’re all pretty much off the map, one way or another. Does it matter? The world still is what it is.”

“Yeah, I guess,” I said. I had noticed the smell coming from the tray Chandler had brought in. It smelled delicious, like all the childhood memories of my mother’s and

my grandmother's cooking rolled into one. My mouth started watering a little, and I craned my neck to try and see across to the tray from the top of the chest. "What'cha got there?"

Fourteen

I woke up. It was dark in the big room. I didn't know what had brought me out of my dream. I still hadn't dreamed about Sharon, but I had been dreaming about Carrie and Lynn, which was almost as good. I had that feeling where I wanted to hunch right back down into myself and burrow into the dream again, even though I knew it wouldn't work. I pushed my head into the pillow and closed my eyes.

Then I heard a noise, soft but sharp, and knew it was what had woken me up. I opened my eyes again and saw a faint growing glow from past the foot of the bed. I sat up and peered toward the door but I couldn't see very far. As I considered scooting out from under the covers and walking over to the edge, the light slowly moved from the foot of the bed around to my side.

I tried to get up, but I couldn't move. I was too scared. The room loomed around me, full of shadows and deep recesses full of God knows what; I didn't want to know. The darkness around the bed was like an ocean, the kind of place you expect the devil to live, a bottomless chasm full of sharp things.

I decided I was dreaming. The fact that I was too scared to move proved it. My bones felt full of some poisonous lead, making them heavy and aching at the same time, making them brittle and immovable, the muscles around them atrophied. The light stopped to my left. I couldn't move my body, but I could turn my head just enough to see

that it was only sitting there, and I thought I could hear a light rustling coming from down by the floor, like someone opening something. I wanted to look again, but now I was too afraid of what I would see. I tried to wake myself up the way I did when I was a kid, flexing my brain and turning my head around it like the earth moving around the hot core, burning liquid brain singeing the thin flesh in my nostrils, the way the hot smoke felt the first time I smoked a cigarette, or when we would light fireworks on the Fourth of July when I was a kid and the smoke would follow us around the neighborhood like a stolen dog.

Except I didn't wake up. I opened my eyes and I was still there lying straight under the covers. I tried again to wake myself up. Only it wouldn't work. Every time I tried and opened my eyes again the rustling was still going on in the faint pool of light by the side of the bed.

Just about the time I was starting to get less scared, there was a tugging on the blanket like someone was climbing up the side of the bed. I was petrified, literally, like the wood we'd gone to see the summer before out in the desert, as if my muscles had mineralized and turned to stone. The tugging went on for a minute or so as I watched the edge of the bed. I wanted to turn my head away and hide under the blankets, retreating into the logic of early childhood where monsters can't get you if they can't see you, under a magic blanket with the world shut out. But I couldn't move, I couldn't look away.

A small hand came up over the side, white as fish bellies in moonlight. The pale hand lay against the rough brown blanket like drowned skin on riverbank dirt, limp and considering before it gripped the blanket again and pulled.

It was a child, as far as I could tell, holding a long pole in its trailing hand. The gender was difficult to guess, but whatever it was it was so small that it didn't matter. The child put the pole down and moved on all fours farther onto the bed toward me until he or she got a better footing, then picked up the pole and stood up again, considering me in the half-light. The moon was behind him or her, and the light from the floor wasn't strong enough to illuminate anything other than its own presence, so I was looking only at a silhouette of a small shape, maybe only three feet high with slender, tender limbs, a head too big for the body cocked to the side like it was listening to the faint music of my terror, trying to pick up the beat as if about to dance.

I pulled in a long breath and tried to speak, but the air clogged in my throat and all that came out was a ragged, wet rumble. I heaved in again and cleared my throat. Encouraged by the ability to accomplish this simple task, I opened my mouth and said, "Where's a light?"

The shape didn't reply. It stood there some more, head cocked, pole held loose in its left hand. "Where's the Minotaur?" I said, hoping this kid, or whatever it was, would respond.

The shape said nothing. I opened my mouth to ask again, and it suddenly lifted the pole and stretched it across the bed toward me, casting a long shadow across the blanket. I tried to move, but I still couldn't. As soon as the shape moved the terror clamped back down. The tip of the pole pressed against my skin, and I felt the sting of a short needle. I hadn't been able to see it in the light, not that it would have made a difference. I shut my eyes and tried to wake up, flexing my mind as hard as I could,

flexing it and spinning my eyes around in their sockets, but instead of waking up I felt myself fading, like falling asleep inside myself, sliding into a dream inside my dream.



When I woke up the diffuse morning sunlight filtered from the other side of the house, wrapping itself into the room and around me on its way back from the glacier face in bright, clotting glints. I rolled over, scratching my cock and balls, trying to burrow back down into the sleeper hole. My head had that thick feeling that comes with sleeping really late, that three or four extra hours when the brain kicks into overdrive and sends the most lucid dreams.

I had been dreaming about a building, just a big building that may have been a school or an office building. I was just walking through it, meeting people, talking to them and solving problems. That was all, just walking. I was thinking about it when I remembered my dream of the little kid with the pole, and I sat up straight in bed.

There was no one there. The fire was burned down to a mass of red coals, covered with a layer of fine ash. The chest stood where it had, the tables. The day seemed clear and still outside; I could only make out that narrow strip of sky over the tips of the glacier wall, but what I could see was translucent blue, like a pane of glass floating on the still ocean.

Without really thinking about it, just staring off into space, I felt my left arm where the gash was. The day before it had been hot and stinging, and I'd only lightly prodded it with my fingers around the edges for fear I'd deepen the infection that was obviously growing under Chandler's half-assed stitches.

As I petted the damaged area it was cooler, and didn't sting. In fact, it felt smooth.

The wound was gone.

It wasn't like it was healed, because there was no scar tissue, no lines, no lumps, nothing to mark that it had ever even been there. I felt a curious doubling in my head, like the wound had shifted from existing in both the world and in my mind to only existing in my mind. I pushed on the skin, trying to feel if there was some clue lurking down in the muscle, some lump or sore spot to tell me it really was real. There was nothing. It felt like a brand new arm.

The more I looked at it, the more that feeling of disconnect between inner and outer reality grew. I noticed that the scar on my shoulder, where I had cut myself as a teenager for no good reason, just to watch myself bleed (I was that kind of teenager), was gone, too. And I wasn't completely sure, but it seemed like the freckles on my arm had rearranged themselves, subtly, and some of them seemed to even be gone. Again, I couldn't be sure, since I don't have a complete diagram of my arm freckle configuration memorized, but I was pretty sure they had at least moved around.

I looked at my left hand, searching for other clues. I know my hand a little better than my arm, like most people. I guess that's where that expression comes from. The hangnail I'd had the day before on my ring finger was gone, along with the scar on my index finger where I'd accidentally rammed it onto a tiller blade I was trying to bend one time. My skin still had cross hatching over the knuckles, but it looked different. I compared it with my right hand. The wrinkles that ran along the skin between my index fingers and thumbs were different. On my right hand there was still a semi-circular shape to the wrinkles from when I was a groundskeeper; wrapping my hand around the grips on a lawnmower for so much of each day changed the shape of my hand wrinkles. The

circular shape was gone on my left hand. The more I looked at it, the more it looked like someone else's hand.

I put the whole arm under the blanket and tried not to think about it. I had to piss so bad it burned a little. I was thinking about how I was going to get down and where I was going to piss when Chandler came in.

“Hey Gary. You get some fucking sleep?” he said, not unkindly.

“Sort of,” I said. “Hey, are there any little kids living here?”

“No,” Chandler said, putting a few small logs on the bed of coals in the fire place. “Who would have any goddam kids around here?” He was probably about nine feet tall, so the sound of his laughter resonated in his chest that much more, creating a bass vibration that I could feel a little in the back of my jaw. “Why? You want to play fucking Cootie Bug?”

“No,” I said, “I thought I had a dream about one, but then I wasn't sure if I was awake or not.”

“Oh. That's fucked up,” Chandler said, finishing with the fire. Today he had on darker jeans and a flannel shirt, tucked in under a big brown leather belt. He had on big homemade boots instead of loafers. “Don't take it too seriously. That asshole on the mountain plays tricks on people sometimes. Fucks with your head.”

“What asshole on the mountain?”

“It's not like I *know* him or anything. I don't think he even has a goddam name. I've never even really seen him. Kind of crazy, got big teeth. I think Karen knows some stuff about him, but she doesn't like to talk about it. I think he's sort of important, you know what I mean? Like, part of the shitting ecosystem.” Chandler delivered this speech

with his hand down the front of his pants, scratching madly at his package. “You gonna get the fuck up or what?” he said.

“Yeah, I need to find the toilet, you know?” I said, pulling myself out from under the blankets, still trying not to think about my arm.

“Here, let me help you down,” he said, coming toward me with his hands out.

Thinking about what he was just doing, I said, “No thanks, I can do it,” I said, and climbed hand over hand down the blanket to the floor. “Just point me to the pisser.”

“Come on,” Chandler said, and held the door open, waiting for me to go ahead. I was excited to go out of the room, where I’d been since I’d crashed into the valley. “The head’s down on the left,” Chandler said. “I think you’ll be able to reach it all right, just don’t fall in.”

As I went into the bathroom, I thought it was odd Chandler had said nothing about my arm.

The toilet was just a big hole in the floor, which I could indeed reach. There was a tall sink I couldn’t reach, and a huge bathtub against the far wall, a gigantic thing carved out of wood, dark with pitch and years of drips and soap stains. I got as close to the hole as I dared; it was about three feet across, big enough for me to fall in, but mostly I didn’t want to get too close because it smelled so bad. I imagine if it was proportional to my size it wouldn’t have been so pungent, but I reasoned that a Minotaur and a giant had been crapping in the hole since time immemorial, so it wasn’t surprising that it gave off the kind of smell that seemed to suck the air out of lungs and singe nose hairs. I pissed with my face turned away from it, and after I was done I ran out as fast as I could, holding my breath until I was out in the hall again.

“Pretty rank, huh?” Chandler said, leaning against the plastered wall. “I had to reach down there once to get something out that Karen dropped in. Fucking gross.”

“No shit,” I said, doubting that smell came from beautiful, swimming Karen.

“Come on,” Chandler said, “let’s go get some goddam food, and then I’ll take you out and show you around.”



I discovered that the room I had been sleeping in was on the second story of a three-story house (four, counting the attic) on such a massive scale that it took me almost a half an hour to walk around.

The house gave me the impression of a castle from the sheer size of it, but it wasn’t designed like one. Castles are made to keep people out, but the house was open and inviting. About fifty yards away from the house’s front door was the lake, which Chandler explained was a hot spring, the product of what he called a “hot spot” under the mountain that melted pure water off the glaciers. The spring fed the grass and trees all over the valley floor, which grew tall and green. The house was roughly in the center of the valley. It was hard to gauge the size, since the air was so clear it seemed like it magnified distance somewhat. It was sort of like the desert, where you might think a mountain is only a few miles away and then you drive all afternoon to reach it. But as we walked around, I guessed it had to be at least two or three miles across, possibly more, bounded on one side by sheer glacial walls, on the other sides by mountains. Most of the mountains were as sheer as the glaciers; tall, straight peaks that rose up out of the valley floor. In a couple places were lower points that could have been called passes, though they were almost vertical. “That’s where you came in,” Chandler said, pointing to one of

the low spots. “You looked like pounded ass. The only thing about you that was moving was your blood as it left your body.” He sounded serious, yet somewhat cheerful as he talked about it. Just thinking about it made my stomach curl up like a damaged caterpillar.

“What about my snowmobile?”

“What’s a snowmobile?” Chandler said.

“It’s a machine ... was there any metal bits or anything around where I was lying?”

“Not that I saw,” Chandler said. “Just a bleeding guy.”

I wondered what could have happened to the snowmobile, and thinking about that made me wonder how, or if, I was ever going to get out of the little valley. I hadn’t been there long enough to even get to know much about it, barely long enough to get over the shock that I was hanging out with a Minotaur and to look forward to meeting a fifteen or sixteen-foot woman who owned the house. At least I assumed she owned it, since it seemed to be scaled to her size. I thought about walking out to where I had landed but decided there was no point. The snowmobile was surely destroyed, and even if it wasn’t, it wouldn’t do me any good. It was way too steep to drive out, though once I got to the top a snowmobile would have been very useful. And I had a bad association with the whole incident. It was the same way I felt about the hospital Sharon died in. Before I left Oklahoma City, every time I drove up Lake Hefner Parkway past Northwest Expressway and saw the complex of buildings looming over the traffic I thought about the fifth floor and what had happened there, and what probably happened there every day of the week. And then I thought about the basement and what must go on in there, the

bodies wheeled in, sealed in bags or however they do it until the funeral home comes to take them away. In Sharon's case they took her to the funeral home's furnace to burn her. I pictured the guys who did the job, bored and tired of the routine of burning bodies, maybe remarking on Sharon's physique as they put her on the furnace slab and then when it was over trying to crush up the extra little bits of bone that didn't incinerate with a rake or some other garden implement.

"You want to go look around over where I picked your ass up?" Chandler said, breaking me out of my reverie.

"No, thanks," I said. "I doubt there's anything to see, and it wouldn't do any good anyway. Do you ever leave here?"

"Not really."

"So there's not like, a convenient way to get out, to get on the other side of the mountains." It wasn't a question, but me accepting out loud that I wasn't going anywhere. I had a fleeting thought of Carrie sitting in Yukon, wondering if I left because I hate her. I pushed the thought away.

"Not that I know of," Chandler said. "Maybe Karen knows. I think the asshole on the mountain goes lots of places, but I doubt you'd want to ask him."

"Why?"

"Well, you know, he's an asshole. He makes it storm down here a lot, and he's always doing shit to scare people. Like sometimes he dresses up like my mom and taps on my window in the middle of the night, and when I look up he takes off his head and screams. Then he laughs his ass off and flies away."

"What do you mean, he flies? I thought you said he was a guy."

“I say he’s a guy because he looks like fucking guy. Mostly. But at the same time he’s not. Like he brings storms, he flies, and he can make it get dark. He’s an asshole.”

“Which mountain does he live on?” We were standing back at the front of the house where we’d started, looking out over the lake and facing the glacier walls.

“Up there,” Chandler said, and pointed to the first mountain on the right side of the glacier wall, the tallest peak. “I’ve never gone up that high, so I don’t really know. But whenever the asshole sends a storm, the clouds spread out from up there, like they’re coming out of the tip, you know? It’s fucked up.”

“Yeah,” I said. We stood there looking for a moment at the peak. I couldn’t imagine how anyone could ever climb up there, so I guessed the guy that lived there would have to fly to get back and forth. I had another of those distorted moments of distance perception, where the magnification of the air made it seem the peak was fairly close and off up into the atmosphere at the same time. It seemed to move closer and loom over me, like those camera tricks in horror movies where the door gets farther away from the person running down the hall, or the background gets farther away while the camera zooms in on the person’s face when they see a monster. I felt dizzy for a second, and was about to sit down when I noticed a faint vibration coming up under my feet. It thumped, about three seconds apart, like a slow waltz beat.

“Do you hear that?” I said to Chandler.

“Sure,” he said, and crouched down. I kept being struck at how nimble he was. With that big bull head perched on his man body, it seemed like he would be really top

heavy and off-balance. He started picking little pieces of grass, the most tender shoots I guessed, and nibbled them between his big, square teeth.

“What is it, do you think?” I said. The vibrations were getting louder, like someone in a Monte Carlo with eighteen-inch woofers and a three thousand-watt amp was about to drive around the side of the house, blasting some Wu-Tang Clan. Chandler didn’t say anything, he just nodded in the direction the noise was coming from.

Karen came around the corner swinging her arms and smiling up at the sky. Her dark, medium-length hair, which I had only seen wet, swung between her shoulders. It looked clean but uncombed, like she’d just run her fingers through it and let it air dry. She was wearing a big, shapeless dress, sleeveless and loose with a big, open neck. It was made out of a brownish, slightly rough-looking fabric that hung down mid-thigh and closely matched the fine brown hair that covered her legs. I could see the edges of armpit hair poking out over the bottom of her sleeve hole. Uncontrolled body hair on women makes me feel sort of nervous. There was a time in church when I was eleven or twelve when a women sitting in front of me had a knee-length dress on with long, curly brown hair over her lumpy, cellulite-clad legs, and I spent the entire service revolted but unable to look away. But for some reason Karen didn’t make me feel that way. I felt a twinge of distaste in the back of my mind as a force of ingrained, reactionary habit but it faded immediately when I noticed Karen’s breasts swaying under the rough fabric in time with her hair, only with a slow, heavy, dense weight that made me feel that certain tightening in my groin again. There’s something to be said for body parts being covered. The mystery makes it that much more enticing, of course. I could see the faint outline of her nipples as she moved closer, towering over us, and I knew when she got close enough I

would be able to look right up her dress. My anticipation grew as she drew closer, much closer than she had been when I saw her from the window, and I noticed her bare feet were clean, soled with smooth, brown callused skin.

Karen finally noticed me and Chandler and smiled, changing direction to the hedge where we were standing, staring up at her like a pair of slack-jawed fools. I didn't know the rules of Minotaur-on-woman relations, but it seemed obvious Chandler found Karen as attractive as I did. I made myself smile as she came closer, shaking the ground with her strides, shaking her breasts and hips back and forth, making me want to fall down and hump the ground. I stayed on my feet in anticipation of the moment when she got close enough for me to see up under the hem of that rough fabric.

But just before she got close enough and I had my head bent back like a seven-year-old about to take his first communion, the giant woman knelt down in front of us, folding those massive, beautiful legs underneath her like a Girl Scout in a story circle and, still smiling, placed her hands on her thighs and beamed at us. The illusion of youth was enhanced by the way her hair was carelessly parted in the middle and tucked behind her slightly elfin ears and the way her dark eyes, ringed with long lashes under narrow-but-unshaped eyebrows, glinted down at us with unfeigned curiosity and good humor. The lack of makeup helped too.

“Hi, your name's Gary, right?” she said. Her voice resonated in that huge torso, filling the air and moving it like it was full of electricity. “Are you feeling better?”

“Uh, yeah, I am, thanks,” I managed to say. “My arm was messed up, but now ...” I didn't want to mention the dream about the kid with the needle pole. I didn't want her to think I was as crazy as I felt when I thought about it. “But it's ...better now.

Feels pretty good.” I swung my arm around like Pete Townsend and grinned like a little kid doing a trick for his first grade teacher.

“I’m glad to hear it!” the giant woman said. “I’m glad you got here! There’s no one but Chandler and I, and I like to meet new people. I would go out and meet some, but it’s so far and I think once I got anywhere, people would just be scared.”

“I don’t know about that,” I said, “you seem really nice to me.”

“That’s really sweet,” Karen said. “I could tell you were sweet.” She smiled at me and my guts melted, adding a new dimension of helplessness to the tension in my groin. I was leaning forward slightly, trying to conceal my erection even though my jeans were tight enough to hold it down pretty well, and she seemed oblivious anyway.

“I don’t know if Chandler told you, but my name is Karen, and this is my house.”

“Of course I fucking told him,” Chandler said. “You think I fucking forgot or something?” I looked at Chandler and almost laughed out loud. He was standing with his big chest out, his arms crossed high over it. It looked like he was flexing his arm muscles. His voice had changed too. He was making it even deeper than usual as he spoke to Karen. He made me think of a fourteen-year-old with a bad teenage mustache trying to be smooth when he comes across a girl way out of his league.

“Aww, you’re a sweetie, too,” Karen said. It sounded more polite than anything. Karen turned back to me: “So, do you have everything you need?”

“Yeah, I think so,” I said, shuffling my feet. “I can’t think of anything else I could want, other than a place to sleep and food. This place is so cool, I’m glad just to be here. Not that where I was wasn’t cool too” —I suddenly felt a twinge of guilt about Sharon—“but you know, I had some problems back there, and I needed to get away, and

this is better than I could have hoped for, to be around so many nice people, and you seem really nice and hospitable, I mean, I could have wound up with some mean people or something, right?” Karen just listened politely with that attentive, friendly look on her face, her hands still placed carefully on her thighs. I was trying hard not to look at the shadowy gap where the skirt started. Her legs were pressed tight together and I knew I wouldn’t be able to see anything and looking would only get me in trouble anyway, even though I knew Karen would probably be too polite to say anything. I managed to keep my eyes on her eyes, which I was relieved to find was much easier than I thought it would be. It reminded me of when I went to the doctor for a checkup, knowing she was going to inspect my balls and worrying in the waiting room about whether I was going to get an erection against my will when the time came. And then when the doctor, a middle-aged woman, was sitting on her low stool in front of me, probing my testicles with her rubber gloves on, pressing rather too hard on the pelvic wall to check for swelling, my worry would feel stupid and pointless since sex was the farthest thing from my mind. It wasn’t exactly the same, because with Karen kneeling in front of me sex definitely *was* on my mind, but the situations were similar because of the disparity between how much control over myself I thought I would have and the amount of control I actually had when the time came. Only it was happening in real time; I kept thinking I didn’t have control, but I kept having control the more I didn’t try to look up Karen’s dress.

“So what did you used to do, Gary?” Karen said. The way she said my name made it sound exotic and cool to me, like instead of Gary my name was Narciso or Antoine or something. I kept my eyes above board.

“Well, lots of stuff,” I said. “I used to be a groundskeeper ...”

“What’s that?” she said.

“A groundskeeper? It’s just someone that cuts grass, plants trees, keeps things watered. You know, someone who takes care of grounds.” I gestured around me, to the bushes and trees and grass. “Trimming bushes and stuff.” I felt my eyes heading between Karen’s legs on their own accord, so I forced them quickly to the ground. I bent over and picked a blade of grass. “I’ve never seen this kind of grass before.”

“It’s just what grows here,” Chandler said, picking a blade of his own. “I take care of it. I guess you could say I’m the groundskeeper here, among other things.” He suddenly seemed stiff, and almost a little hostile.

“Really? You do a really great job then,” I said, “the place looks great. How do you cut it?”

“Chandler doesn’t cut it himself,” Karen said before Chandler could answer. “He takes care of the cattle that eat the grass and keep it trimmed.”

“But I cut the bushes with shears,” Chandler said, sounding a little defensive. “And sometimes I have to saw dead limbs off trees.” Karen just nodded and kept smiling, though I thought the smile was starting to look a little vacant. There was a pause, and as it started moving into the territory of an uncomfortable silence, I spoke up again.

“But lately, I mean, my last job was testing soil and concrete for construction sites and stuff.”

“What is that?” Karen said, some of the interest coming back into her face. Chandler turned around and started fiddling with the twigs on the nearest bush.

“Oh ...it’s sort of complicated. Whenever they build commercial buildings ...I mean, big, tall buildings, they have to test the soil underneath it so the engineers can make recommendations about how to make the foundation more stable... it’s actually pretty boring.”

“It fucking sounds like it,” Chandler said from behind me, without turning around.

“Yeah,” I said, keeping my voice light, “it was, a little. It was interesting for a while, until I figured out how everything worked, and then it was kind of ...”

“I think it sounds really interesting,” Karen said, interrupting me, giving a short glance to Chandler’s back. I could see the huge muscles in his back tense a little under his flannel shirt, but he didn’t turn around. He reached into the bush and pulled out a whole dead branch and held it up, looking at it. Then he snapped it in four or five segments and bundled it into his massive fist.

“I’ll take it back and burn it in your room later,” he said, looking down at me, his face almost neutral. I didn’t know what to make of his attitude shift, but it made me a little nervous.

“Okay,” I said, and we all stood there.

“What about hobbies?” Karen said.

“Oh, I don’t know. I used to play music, but it doesn’t look like I have that option here. Unless I was a really good carpenter, which I’m not.” Thinking about it, it was actually a bit of a relief not to have to play. I remembered when I first started playing I used to work out regimens for practice, like I had to play so many hours a day and so on. Then later I only made myself pick up the guitar at some point during the day, the theory being that if I at least picked it up I would play it for a while, which would be good.

There's a certain thing that pressure does to me. It's funny, because I tend to perform well under pressure. If I have to get something done I'll get it done, but if there's no real deadline and I put pressure on myself to do something, it's likely I won't do it at all. I'll get sulky and rebellious and say "fuck it" and leave it alone. That's how I was starting to feel about playing guitar. It could have been the stress of dealing with Sharon, but that was only part of it. I stood there looking out towards the mountains and the lake and the giant woman and the rest of it that I didn't care if I never played guitar again.

"Oh, that's too bad," Karen said, breaking my reverie. "What do you play?"

"Guitar, mostly, but some drums and bass," I said, not wanting to go into too much detail.

"I'd really like to hear you play," she said, sounding wistful, like she really meant it. "The fish really like music too, but no one here knows how to play any."

"The fish?" I said.

"Sure," Karen said. "The fish in the lake. They're really interesting. I can swim down and hear them talk, but to get them to come up, you have to play music for them. They really like it."

I stood there for a moment, trying to decide if I was hearing correctly. "That's... interesting. I've never heard of fish that like music before."

"Oh, yeah, they love it. But like I said, they never get to hear it."

"Then how do you know they like it?" I said.

"The asshole on the mountain used to play for them," Chandler said, turning around. He seemed to be over his sulk, like it had been a small cloud blowing fast across the sun's face. "He used to have this instrument ..." Chandler looked at Karen, who was

looking at him, and he paused, his face falling into that weird neutrality again. "... but then he stopped."

"Oh," I said. I wanted to ask Karen about the guy on the mountain, but I could tell it was a touchy subject, so I didn't. There was another awkward silence.

"You should try to figure something out, Gary," Karen said, leaning toward me. It was alarming to see her face moving close at what was probably a reasonable speed for her, but what seemed to me like a car running down on me, the way a gazelle must feel when a cheetah is almost there in a blink. Something to do with proportions, I guess. Her face was close to mine that fast. Her breath smelled like fresh waffles before the syrup: light, sweet, wholesome. "Surely there's some way for you to make an instrument, something you can play for the fish, right? I think it would be worthwhile. After all, you don't have much else to do." Karen seemed to be trying to insinuate something, but I couldn't be sure what. I thought she might be fucking with me, offering a sarcastic alternative to me sitting on my ass, eating her food and beating off, but at the same time she didn't seem nasty like that. I felt like she would be fine with whatever I did, even if I never got out of bed again. But there was still something weird about her suggestion.

"I guess I could try, right? I would just need some wood and something to carve with. It would take some time. Give me something to do." I forced a laugh as I felt a sudden pang of homesickness. In a flash I imagined what everyone was doing; Alan sitting around smoking weed, Althea and Lynn working and worrying, Carrie trying to get along at a new school, my parents and sisters probably wondering how long they had to wonder about me before they could write me off as lost. It had been at least a month since I left Oklahoma, though I wasn't sure how many days exactly I had been in the

valley. I hadn't marked them down or anything, and besides, I was unconscious for some of it, so I had no way of knowing. "I don't know what I'd do for strings, but I guess I could figure something out."

"Sure," Karen said, sitting up straight again. I had that feeling of vertigo again as her face moved away as fast as it had come, unnervingly swift given its size.

"Chandler'll help you, and you can help Chandler with other stuff he needs help with, right?"

I looked at Chandler. He nodded at me, his big liquid eyes fixed on me like a sailor considering a potentially troublesome sea. "There's plenty for us to do," he said, "and I know where some goddamn wood is that would be perfect for you. And you can use my fucking knife."

"Good," Karen said. "So that's settled. I'm glad you're here, Gary, even if you did get hurt. You'll have to come eat with us from now on at night. I want to hear all about you, where you came from and how you got here. I haven't heard a story for so long ..." Karen looked off toward the lake as she trailed off, the sun striking blue off the water, obscuring her eyes. I shivered, goose flesh rising on my arms and scalp. The swelling in my groin, which had been so steady as to become unnoticed by me, wilted. Karen turned back and smiled slightly, as if she knew what had just happened. "I'm going for a swim before it gets too late and the sun goes off the lake. That's when it gets coldest. I'll see you both at supper, okay?"

We both nodded and smiled and waved as Karen stood up to go. As she got to her feet I couldn't help but catch a glimpse under her dress, a half-visible impression of different shades of shadow that in my mind assembled into a patch of pubic hair at the

top of her thighs. She turned her head and smiled back at us again as she walked away, again as if she had read my mind. My chill passed and my erection shot back up again, shocking me a little and making me bend slightly over at the waist to keep it from pressing too painfully against my pants. I was getting a little worried about my strong sexual response to Karen.

“You need to watch out,” Chandler said, breaking into my thoughts. I had thought he was still over by the hedge, but he had moved over next to me so quietly that I didn’t even notice. I was distracted, but still.

“What do you mean?” I said.

He reached down and flicked my crotch, and I flinched. My erection wilted again. “You need to be careful of that.”

“Sorry,” I said, feeling the blood rush into my face. I looked at the ground, embarrassed. “I don’t know why that happens when she’s around. I usually don’t get that way, I mean, it’s not like I’ve never been around women, it’s the strangest thing...”

“She has a certain power,” Chandler said. “I’m not immune to it either. It’s not your fault. But she can be dangerous. She can inspire obsession. I know what I’m talking about. I’ve lived with her for many, many years.” Chandler seemed sad as he said this, as if he were reciting a set of facts he wished he could erase and forget. “Just know it’s a goddam illusion. Don’t let your mind work too much on it.”

“Sure,” I said, looking back up. “I wondered. It’s like my body has a mind of its own.”

“It does, you dumb son of a bitch,” Chandler said. “Every man’s body has a mind of its own. I wonder, though, if it doesn’t have to do with the blood I gave you.”

“I forgot about that,” I said. We started walking along again, heading toward the front of the house away from the lake, which Karen was approaching and in which we both knew she would soon be naked. “Thanks, by the way.” I looked up at the peaks around the edge of the valley and felt the same wave of unreality I had been feeling off and on since I got there. I was walking along away from a swimming fifteen-foot woman, thanking a Minotaur for giving me a blood transfusion. I smiled a little to myself and lightly pinched my arm, the one that didn’t look the same anymore. Pinching it felt the same.

“Don’t fucking mention it,” Chandler said.

“How did you know it would work?”

Chandler shrugged. “I’ve heard of such things before, transferring blood from one to another only requires a tube and two needles, really...”

“No,” I said, “I meant, how did you know our blood would work together? You know about blood types, right?” Chandler looked at me, puzzled. “If two people have different blood types,” I said, “the body of the receiver sort of rejects the other blood, and the receiver gets sick. The blood has to match.”

“Beats the shit out of me,” Chandler said, shrugging again. “I just thought I’d give it a try. You were fading out so I thought, what the hell? Might as well give it a goddam try.”

“Oh.” I thought about this for a moment, trying to decide what mixture of fear, anger, gratitude, ambivalence or appreciation would be appropriate. I said, “Well, no harm, no foul, right?” I thought that was probably the best thing to say, though I was actually kind of pissed off. He seemed so casual and blasé about the whole thing, when

his fucking around could have killed me dead so easy. I even imagined his big, stupid cow head was smirking a little as he ambled along the side of the house, though we had passed into the shady side so it was hard to tell for sure. “I guess I lost too much blood, so you had no choice, right?”

“I guess,” Chandler said, and gave a small, barking laugh. “You probably would have pulled through, actually. After I patched up your arm your color got a lot better. I just had the idea and wanted to give it a try.”

I felt an urge to jump on him and punch his wet, sloppy fat face until it was broken and bleeding, but like I said before he was around nine feet tall and pretty muscular.

“Anyway, he said, “I wonder if that’s why you want to fuck her so bad. Because of my blood.” Now his voice sounded like it was smirking too, though there was something bitter in it, as if what he found funny was at his own expense.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Is there some weird connection between Minotaurs and giant women?”

“Sure,” he said. “At least for me. My asshole father was a god, see, and my mother sold wolf nipple chips in the Roman Coliseum back in the day.”

“So why does that make you attracted to giant women?” I said, stepping over a log. We were heading away from the house now, out into the first belt of trees that surrounded it. I hadn’t been that far out before, and saw now that the trees were very tall and straight, and though I’m no arborist, I thought they were redwoods.

“Well,” Chandler said, “since my dad was a god, I came out really fucking big. You can imagine what happened, especially with this head, right? My mother died in

childbirth. So her shithead employers, the people who ran the Coliseum, they wanted to keep me for when I got older and they could use me in the shows, right? So they found me a wet nurse, the biggest woman they could find, to nurse me. Her name was Loretta. She loved me so much that she kept nursing me until I was grown. I was fifteen when she finally dried up. It had an effect on me, nursing until such an advanced age, especially after I got to puberty. I developed an erotic fixation with Loretta. After I would nurse, she would ... help me. Just with her hand, mind you.” He looked at me closely, making sure I understood that his wet nurse had only given him handjobs instead of fellatio or intercourse, which would have been just sick. “So ever since she died,” Chandler continued, “I’ve wanted a large woman, someone my size or bigger, who would make me feel the way Loretta did. Karen is the only woman bigger than me I’ve ever met.” Chandler trailed off and looked moodily up at the trees around him, as if he were playing the long-suffering lover denied.

“Wow,” I said. “that’s an... unusual story. I can see why you’re attracted to Karen. But... I mean, if you’re attracted to her because of your childhood experience, then how do you figure that’s why I’m attracted to her? I mean, it isn’t in your blood to like her, right? It’s because of the way you grew up...”

“It all goes back to blood, Gary, you stupid fucker,” Chandler said, as if explaining to a third-grader why it rains. “I grew up the way I did because of my blood, because my father was a god and I killed my mother leaving the womb. It’s all because of who I am, what my blood is.”

“Okay,” I said, choosing my words carefully, “but don’t you think that’s sort of incidental? I mean yeah, you look the way you do because of your blood, but that

doesn't mean your attraction to Karen is encoded in your genes the way your appearance is, right?"

"What are genes?" Chandler said.

"They're ... you know, it doesn't matter. Whatever."

"Yep," Chandler said, kicking at the twigs and leaves on the ground. We had passed most of the way through the belt of trees around the house and were coming into a clearing. I could see another forest on the other side, though it looked like it was made of different trees than the tree belt we were in. All I could tell was that most of them were evergreens. "I fear that as long as I live here, I won't stop hoping that one day Karen will take me in her arms and allow me to call her Loretta," Chandler said. I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing, which didn't completely work so I covered up the sound by pretending to cough. We walked along in silence for a while as we crossed the clearing. "There's a lot of good goddamn wood in these trees," Chandler said as we got to the edge of it. "You can make fucking anything from what's in here."

"Oh, right," I said. I had almost forgotten about Karen's request for me to build an instrument to play for the fish in the lake, not only because it was crazy but because I had been so preoccupied with what I imagined was up her dress. "I've never made any kind of instrument before. I don't even know where to start."

"Just get some fucking wood," Chandler said. "Carve it and put some fucking strings on the goddam thing. It's not that goddam complicated, Gary."

"Right," I said. We entered the edge of the new patch of trees and I could see from how dark it was farther in that it wasn't just a band of trees, but an old-growth forest that looked like something out of a fairy tale. I dropped behind Chandler, only half

realizing what I was doing, and followed him. He seemed perfectly at home. I couldn't imagine there was much in the woods scarier than Chandler, and we had somehow become friends, so I was safe. "So, which god was your dad, anyway? Was it Zeus?" I said casually, conversationally, though I was fully aware of how ridiculous the question felt in my mouth.

"I don't know!" Chandler said, wheeling around, his head lowered and his shoulders bunched like a pair of hams. His eyes were narrowed and his nostrils flared like he wanted to suck my question into them and destroy it. "And I don't care, all right! He left me to be to amuse the Romans like a common Thracian! He didn't need me, and I don't need him, and that's that!"

"Okay," I said, holding my hands out in surrender, taking a few uneasy steps back. "I'm sorry I brought it up. I was just curious. No offense, all right?"

Chandler straightened up a little, and some of the redness went out of his eyes. He blew hard out through his nose and seemed to deflate a little. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm just... a little sensitive about that. I don't like to talk about it. Fuck."

"Hey, I understand," I said, "I don't blame you. It was insensitive to bring it up like that."

"No, it's that asshole's fault." I assumed Chandler meant his father, whoever he, or it, was. "I'll be one thousand, eight hundred and seventeen this year, and I've never even had a card from him, or a letter, much less a present or a visit. Not a goddamn word." He choked on those last four words, as if they were a bone he'd wanted to sick up.

"Gosh, I'm sorry, Chandler. That must be really painful." I tentatively moved toward him and put my hand on his arm. He jerked away.

“Get off me, Gary,” Chandler said, speeding up. “Just because you can’t get in Karen’s pants doesn’t mean you get to gay out on me.” It wasn’t that I didn’t actually feel sorry for him, but that feeling that this was all some sort of elaborate joke hadn’t completely gone away, and I couldn’t make myself completely embrace the reality of my situation. “Come on, queer bait,” Chandler said, straightening the rest of the way up, brushing his hand across his eyes and taking a few deep breaths, “let’s go find some goddam wood. I think I know just the tree.”

“Lead on, good sir,” I said, bowing to him. He ignored me. Chandler moved off into the woods and I followed, not sure I wanted to, but sure there was no point to going back, even if I could.

Fifteen

As we moved into the darkening trees I was glad Chandler was with me, because those woods were fucking scary. Parts of it reminded me of the talking trees from *The Wizard of Oz*, those gnarled trunks and sparse branches that made you think that they could actually be conscious and full of malice. The darkness didn’t help, since anytime an animal or a bird moved in my peripheral vision my brain processed it as a moving tree or something worse. Chandler didn’t seem fazed at all, though. He pointed out the different species of trees as we walked along: sycamore, ash, oak, different kinds of pine, redwood and maples all grew together. Again, I’m no arborist, but I thought it was unusual that so many different kinds of trees would occupy the same space. I suppose it’s not that unusual, though. I’m thinking of jungles, those documentaries on the rainforest where every couple of feet there’s a new something to see.

Eventually we came to a rise in the land, a grade that started off gentle and got steeper and steeper as we climbed up it.

“There’s a tree up here,” Chandler said. “It’s the biggest one in the valley. I don’t know what kind of tree it is, but something tells me that the wood on it would make a good instrument. It’s real solid, but light, and it makes a good goddamn sound.”

“What’s it look like?” I said, panting a little. Chandler had a long stride, and when he was walking full pace it was all I could do to keep up with him without running. My shins were burning and my heart was going a mile a minute.

“It’s hard to say. I mean, it’s so big. It has green leaves shaped like leaves, and brown bark that’s rough like on any other tree. The top is above the rest of the forest, so maybe there’s something interesting up there. I’ve never climbed it myself. I’m afraid of heights.” He said this last unapologetically and without the sort of bitterness he gave off when talking about Karen or his father. He said it the way someone would tell you they had a knee injury and could no longer play soccer. “It’s just a little fucking farther.”

I followed him the rest of the way, wishing we had brought some water and possibly a hammock to lie down in. We hadn’t brought those things, and it was apparent that Chandler wasn’t wishing for them anyways. He moved straight up the hill without slowing, and I started to fall behind. After a few minutes Chandler disappeared between two trees, and I didn’t have the breath to flag him down. I had gotten into better shape on the trip up to Alaska, but it was taking a long time to get all those fast food meals, cigarettes, whisky and Cokes, and the marijuana resin out of my system. I was sweating, my muscles burning, the sun suddenly seemed like the cruel August Oklahoma sun, trying to cook the world below into a big red brownie.

I stopped, trying to catch my breath for a while. I wondered if Chandler had noticed I wasn't behind him or if he figured I'd just be along eventually. I heard a noise off to the side, something that sounded somewhere between a rustling and a scraping. I looked over.

Father New Year was standing in a bush only about ten yards away, grinning at me. The bush came up to his waist; the rest of him projected out like the bush had sprouted the weirdest fruit imaginable. The rasping scraping noise seemed to be coming from him, but from far away at the same time, floating down from farther up the mountains like malevolent snow. I froze for a moment, watching him. He lifted his hand up and pulled it across his throat in the universal gesture for "I'm going to kill you."

I didn't wait around for him to make good on his threat. I jumped down off the boulder and ran up the hill, through the trees where Chandler had disappeared.



I ran like hell for a couple of minutes until the forest floor leveled out and it wasn't so hard to push my weight. The woods thickened and then thinned again as I got to the leveling top of the hill, a maze of pointy-edged tree tunnels full of leaves and animal whispers. I never looked behind me. The rasping faded as I ran, and I got the sense that Father New Year was just fucking with me, threatening me for fun as I had a moment of clarity or relief, something he doesn't like me to have, apparently. The fact that I had seen him here was cause for worry in itself, not so much because I was worried that I was seeing things the way I had been worried before about going crazy and hallucinating and having a brain disintegrating cell by cell. Now I had to worry that I *wasn't* seeing things, that here, where Minotaurs and giant women and little pale floppy

dead-fish kids with needles on sticks roamed the landscape, Father New Year might be real. He had always seemed like a threat to me, but now he seemed like an external threat instead of an internal one. At least when I thought he was coming from inside me there was some illusion of control, the belief that I might be able to negate his effects by knowing he wasn't real, by naming the dream within the dream.

I caught sight of Chandler ahead, looking up at the most massive tree I had ever seen, or even heard of. The trunk was so gnarled and variegated and ropy that it actually looked like a collection of tree trunks growing extremely close to each other, fused into a symbiotic relationship of reciprocal water and nutrient supply. But as I got closer I saw that it was in fact one trunk, almost as wide as Karen's mansion, so wide that it was hard to see the entire thing at once after I was less than a hundred or so yards away. I couldn't even see where the top of it might be. Standing off away from it I craned my neck up like Chandler was doing, reflectively considering the massed tangle of brown, green and black around the trunk farther up, the edges of the corona overlapping the much lower canopy of the trees around it so from the ground it made it look like one continuous canopy meshed together. It was like how big cities don't really stop, but feed into suburb after suburb until the whole complex feeds into the next big city, like San Diego feeding into Los Angeles or Philadelphia feeding up into New York, which continues on up to Boston. The tree would have to be the biggest city of all, sitting in the center of America feeding into every other town and city, itself only in name since everywhere else was part of it and vice versa.

"Holy geez," I said, stopping next to Chandler. "You weren't kidding around. That's a big fucking tree."

“It is, isn’t it?” Chandler said, still looking up at it. “It’s shit nuts how no matter how many times I come up here, it’s still a surprise.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know, it seems bigger than it did in my mind, like my head can’t hold a memory that big. If that makes any sense,” Chandler said.

“Yeah,” I said, “I think I know what you mean. There’re those things you can’t really hold, they’re so big. You only get glimpses of them every once in a while.”

“Right,” Chandler said, and looked at me. “So are you going to climb that shit or what? You’re not afraid of heights, are you?”

“Me? Not usually, but there’s heights, and then there’s *heights*, if you know what I mean. That’s a pretty tall tree. That would be like trying to climb up the side of a skyscraper, or something, like the Eiffel Tower or the Washington Monument.”

“What the fuck’s that?” Chandler said.

“They’re just tall things, that’s all. Buildings in the world.”

“Oh, yeah. Like the Colossus, right?”

“Uh huh.” I couldn’t stop looking at the tree. I thought there must be something more to what Chandler had been saying about it than that it was just too big for the mind to comprehend all at once; as I looked at it, the tree actually seemed to grow and shrink, as if it were breathing. It was disorienting to watch, like looking through a magnifying glass that was moving slowly toward and then away from an object so everything else around the object seems to expand and contract, too. What sky I could see above the tree seemed to move, and the trees in my peripheral vision did, too. I was suddenly afraid to look down, sure that the ground under my feet, and possibly my feet themselves, would

be changing. “Do you think I really have to climb *this* tree? I mean, there’s lots of other trees, it’s not like we aren’t in a forest, for Chrissake. There’s wood everywhere.”

“Yeah, but you know. I just get the feeling this is the fucking *tree*. I can’t explain it, but it’s one of those goddamn feelings. You know?”

I thought about it for a second. “Yeah, I guess so. Now that I see it. But I don’t know what the hell I need the wood for, though. What’s in the lake, anyway?”

“How the fuck do I know?” Chandler said. “But what else do you have going on?”

I laughed a little. “Yeah, you’re right, I guess. Spoken truly like someone who’s not about to climb the biggest tree of all time, right?”

“You don’t have to be a dick about it, Gary,” Chandler said, looking at me with his big cow eyes all droopy, his bovine mouth all turned down. I laughed again.

“Sorry, I was just kidding, Chandler. Don’t get all mad.”

“Just start climbing, jackass.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said, suddenly losing patience with standing there. It was one of those moments when you’re afraid of doing something, but then you get so tired of talking about it that you just feel like attacking whatever it is.

I walked fast toward the base of the tree. It was like walking up to a building or something, it took longer to get to the actual tree than I would have thought, and as I got closer the barky surface rose over me, creating an optical illusion that if I walked too close it would actually topple over on top of me.

The tree was so large the outlying roots were like foothills around a mountain; their height grew from bare humps under the forest floor into spiny arcs that broke the

loamy surface like subterranean serpents frozen in the act of sunning their backs. I climbed over them as they grew taller and more tightly massed together as I got closer to the actual trunk. The lowest branches, as far as I could tell, were fifty feet or so above the ground. The usual strategy for climbing trees, which involved finding a low branch to jump up and grab, wasn't going to work here. I wished I had a ladder. The lower branches were really far up, and the trunk was way too big to shimmy up on. I climbed over the roots until I got to the vertical base and stood there for a while. Like I said before, the trunk was more like a series of trunks sort of fused together. When I got close up, I could see that where the different sections of the trunk met, they formed little troughs between them, about two or three feet wide.

I looked back at where Chandler was standing, fifty or so yards away, and waved at him. He waved back, and then yelled, "What the fuck are you doing?"

"Nothing!" I yelled at him, and turned back to the tree. *God, he's so pushy*, I thought, and then added, *but you're a fucking asshole, God. Don't forget it*. I climbed up into the closest trough and turned sideways, so my feet were up against the side across from me and my back was pressed against the opposite. I'm not generally afraid of heights, but I made a conscious decision not to look down as I started scooting up through the trough in the trunk, pressing out with my legs and pushing myself up with my arms. As I climbed I marveled at how good my arms felt. It was hard to believe that just a couple of days before I had been worried about either losing my right arm or dying from the slash I got in Anchorage. I felt a twitch of worried unreality about how the cut was just gone. Both arms felt strong and limber and light, as if they were made out of flexible rubber steel, and they didn't get tired. My *legs*, on the other hand, felt shaky and

weak before long, which I thought was odd. I started sweating, and my stomach muscles got all shaky, too, and my back started to hurt. I looked down, and was surprised that I wasn't more than maybe thirty feet up the side of the tree. The trunk was angled, so it seemed like I had gone farther up than I really had. Discouraged, I wedged myself in as best as I could to rest. I was wedged in such a way that from the side it would have looked like I was sitting in a chair, with my thighs parallel to the ground, my knees and hands against the trough wall on one side and my back against the other.

As I was about to start climbing again, I heard something above me. I peered up, still wedged in the surface of the tree trunk. There was something falling toward me. I only saw it for a second, but it looked like a good-sized chunk of wood. "Oh, fuck a duck," I said, and put my head down. The chunk knocked its way down the angled trunk toward me, each clunk getting louder as it came. I had my chin on my chest, and my hands over my head with my fingers crossed that the chunk's fall was timed so it would bounce over me. There was a loud clunk close above me, and I visualized it moving over me. There was a long pause, and I started to hope the sound of the next hit would come from beneath me. As I was opening my eyes to look down, the chunk of wood angled over me and landed on the outside of my right thigh. The force, shock and pain threw off my balance, and I started to fall. I grabbed around me, trying to find something solid, but I only managed to scrape the skin off the knuckles on my left hand as I moved away from the trunk trough I had been wedged into. As I fell out and followed the chunk of wood down the side of the tree, I saw up the trunk for a few moments. Father New Year was up there, leaning over the side of a branch, grinning down at me. He gave me the finger and I closed my eyes. *This is it*, I thought to myself. I tried to look on the bright side, hoping

that I would see Sharon on the other side of the fall but suspecting all I would experience from here on out was pain and the sensation of falling.

Sixteen

I woke up in a dim state of mind lying in the huge bed in the huge bedroom with Chandler standing over me, messing with my pants.

“What’s my pants gotta do with kickball?” I mumbled. I was trying to burrow back into sleep but Chandler kept touching the backs of my legs, and it hurt too much to ignore. “Cut it out, dude. Hurts.”

“I’ll bet it does. Your leg’s broke as fuck.”

“Goddamn Father New Year. Son of a bitching bastard,” I said. It hurt to move and I tried to be still, but I had to breathe, and even that made my whole body throb.

“Uh huh,” Chandler said, “well, this is gonna hurt like shit.” Chandler pulled my pants down, and my leg burst into white flame.

“Ah, fuckfuckfuck!” I tried to scream, but the pressure and friction from the fabric created a burning, itching sensation that made me want to scratch my eyes out and pull off my scalp at the same time, and it came out a series of ragged whispers.

“I have to clean this shit. The bone’s coming out in a couple spots. Looks fucking gross,” Chandler said.

Chandler had a rag and tub of warm water, and he wiped things off. The pain continued, but then he started moving things around, down there and I grayed out for a while. I felt like I was in a very special episode of *Little House on the Prairie* or something, and I was a minor character who got fucked up being thrown off a horse or

something. Chandler was playing the part of Dr. Baker, patching me up without any of the modern conveniences. “Don’t you have any codeine or morphine or something, doctor?” I said. I was feeling pretty delirious.

“What, do you think I have a codeine machine out back? I don’t even know what that is, Gary. Now hold still. I got all the bones back into your leg, and now I have to tie the fucking thing up. Maybe your leg won’t get infected and fall off, though now I think about it I forgot to wash my hands. Maybe I can do a little better in the morning, when I can see what the fuck I’m doing.”

“That should be fun,” I said, turning my face into the huge pillow. “Maybe you can get Karen in here with some cake and we can have a party, right?”

“Just shut up,” Chandler said, bending over me.

◆

It felt late. The house was still, and the moon was down, it was very dark. I had been fever-dreaming about flying to Los Angeles to get an award with my fifth grade teacher, Mrs. Lanegan. I don’t know where that came from, because it didn’t have anything to do with anything. Like an idiot, I tried to sit up, but then fell back holding a scream as the pain in my legs flared back up to full-heat-barbecue pain levels. Even through the pain though, I thought I spied a bit of moving light shining up from the floor.

It was a full replay of the night before; I watched the light move from the doorway over to the side of the bed, and then watched the pale, dead-fish-looking little hand come up at the edge of the bedspread, and the silhouette of the little kid or whatever it was climbed up. And of course I couldn’t move. It was like in a nightmare when you’re little, you want to get up and run, scream, do anything, but you’re frozen because

the monster wants it that way, that's the monster's power. I just had to lie there while the kid came across to me with its needle on a stick, and I closed my eyes when it stabbed me with it, a tiny bee sting that was somehow worse than being chopped into bits. I kept my eyes closed while I felt whatever the kid injected me with spread into my blood, diffusing out like a spoonful of sugar in coffee until my consciousness was dunked down into blackness.



Chandler was shaking me. I opened my eyes, half afraid of what I would see. It was just Chandler, the morning light gleaming mellow off his black and white horns, shining off his bovine nose and in his brown liquid eyes. He was holding a tray with a piece of cake on it, a spool of thread, scissors, a needle, a flask and some bandages. Improbably, Karen was standing behind him. The room was obviously built for her, and seeing her in it actually made it seem normal for once. She stood comfortably by the door, smiling.

“Good morning, Gary,” Chandler said. “Are you ready for stitches, or do you want cake first?”

“Uh, I don't know. Stitches, I guess? Get it over with?”

“How do you feel, Gary?” Karen said, coming over next to the bed. Seeing her next to the bed made it seem normal, too, and it occurred to me that it might actually be her bed, and she had probably at least slept in it off and on. She had on the same outfit she always had on, a sort of *Flintstones*-style rough brown fabric dress, but without the jagged hem at the bottom, her hair hanging down and resting on the collarless collar. Karen came over next to Chandler, leaned down and patted my shoulder, smiling. Her

smell washed over me, a wholesome body odor mixed with flowers and good-smelling earth. Unbidden, I felt the usual stirring in my groin that I felt whenever she was around. I tried not to think about it, pushing it to the back of my mind, writing it off as a biological function, like if I had to sneeze. “Do you feel feverish or anything?” she said, leaning over and touching my forehead with two fingers the size of bananas.

“No, I feel okay,” I said. “Listen, this is going to sound weird, but do you know if there’re any kids running around here? Like little ones, even smaller than me?”

Karen stood up and looked out the window, her eyes going blank. “No,” she said. “Why do you ask?”

“No reason,” I said, not sure what to make of her reaction. I looked at Chandler, but his face was unreadable. Chandler set the tray on the edge of the bed and pulled at the blanket.

“Let’s get to work on these effing stitches. And we need to re-bind it so it won’t heal crooked as a Frenchman’s dick. It’ll take an effing bunch...” Chandler stopped talking when he pulled the blanket back and saw my legs. I lay there on my side, waiting.

“How do they look?” I said. “Are they bleeding?” They didn’t hurt at the moment, and I’d be lying if I said I didn’t already suspect they were healed. I felt a strange mix of relief and utter bewildered panic.

“They’re gone,” Chandler said, and Karen came over to look. They stood there behind me, staring at me. It made me nervous. I reached back and felt along my right thigh, where the chunk of wood had hit originally hit me. The skin was completely smooth. There weren’t even any scars that I could feel. In fact, it felt like a brand new leg. I turned over and pushed the blankets the rest of the way off and looked my legs

over. The scar on my knee from the time I was riding my bike down the hill by my house and hit the curb was gone. The shiny patch on my shin I got from scraping it open on a flower pot and then picking at it all summer when I was eleven was gone, too. I looked on the bottom of my left foot. The rust stain from when I stepped on a nail when I was twelve was gone. And my skin looked better, smoother and more even.

“This is really fucking weird, Chandler,” I said. “I tell you, it’s this kid that comes in here in the middle of the night, he has this stick with a needle on it, and he climbs up on the bed and stabs me with it and I go to sleep. It’s like yesterday, my arms are different, and when I was climbing the tree I could feel a difference, and I was stronger...” I laid back on the pillow. Both Chandler and Karen were looking at me like I was crazy. I felt crazy.

Karen came over and sat on the edge of the bed. I barely noticed my erection. “Gary, listen. I know you don’t understand what’s going on. Maybe you’re going through some changes, feeling different about things. But I just want you to know it’s normal. Everyone goes through that sort of thing sometime. I remember when I started getting my third growth spurt. I felt like a different person everyday, do you know what I mean? I felt like I had a new body, like I’d never been the person I was before.”

“Yeah, but this is something else,” I said. “I’ve gone through puberty too, and it wasn’t like this. I don’t mean that I *feel* different, I literally *am* different! I have different arms and a left leg than I had the day before yesterday! Different!” I knew I was raising my voice, but I couldn’t stop myself. Karen had that sort of patient expression your mom gets when you’re freaking out and she knows, or thinks she knows, it’s just hormones and it’ll go away in an hour or two.

“Let me ask you this, Gary,” Karen said, the tone of her voice matching the forced patient expression on her face. “Is there anything you think that we can do about it, if there is something weird going on?”

“Well, I don’t know,” I said. “I figured, you know, that you would know who the little kid is...”

“I told you, Gary, there are no little kids living here. It’s just me and Chandler, and now you. And it’s like I said, this must be a big change from where you came from. The world was really different from here the last time I was out. I can only imagine what it’s like now. But there’s nothing here that can hurt you, all right? You have to trust us. There’s no one here but us.”

“Who’s living on the mountain, then?” I said. I wasn’t being combative or anything, I actually felt like going back to sleep, really tired in my brain.

“What gave you the idea there was anyone living up there?” Karen said, looking at Chandler, who was trying to look puzzled. It’s not hard to look puzzled with a bull head, somehow.

I’m not stupid. It was obvious Chandler wasn’t supposed to tell me about the guy on the mountain, and even though I didn’t completely believe them that they didn’t know anything about the little kid and that both of them, Chandler included, were keeping something back from me, I decided to let him off the hook. “When I was up in the tree I could see a lot more of the valley and I thought I saw a cave at the top of the big mountain on the east side of the valley, with a fire in the mouth of it.”

“Did you see anyone?” Karen said, leaning forward.

“Did you, Gary?” Chandler said, dropping the innocent act and leaning in, too.

I watched them for a second before answering. They didn't seem to think I had any ability to read their expressions at all. They kept looking at each other, obviously excited about what I'd just said, but then when they looked at me they tried to act like they weren't really that interested. It's hard to explain. Again, it reminded me of how people might talk to a little kid. Little kids aren't good at the subtleties of reading facial expressions, so most people don't bother trying to mask their expressions.

"No," I said. "There wasn't anyone there, just the fire. But I figured, if there was a fire, there must be someone inside..."

"Not necessarily," Karen said, interrupting me. "Like I said, there isn't anyone else here but you, me and Chandler. There's a lot of lightning around the valley. There could have been some wood up there that some animal carried up, or it could have blown down from the tree, and then the lightning set it on fire." Karen seemed to become increasingly satisfied with this line of bullshit as she spun it, obviously making it up as she was going along.

"Sure," Chandler said, "there's lots of goats and stuff up there, one of them could have carried wood up for a nest."

"A goat nest?" I said. "What kind of goats you got living up there?"

"Oh, those crazy goats are always doing strange stuff," Karen said, giving Chandler an over-emphasized "Shut up, dummy" look. "There's no telling. The point is, there's no one up there, I know that for sure. I've been here a long time, and I should know, right?"

I shrugged. "Sure," I said. "I was just curious. Come to think of it, there were lots of clouds around. Lightning could have set that stuff on fire easy." I knew it

couldn't be true, but I decided for the time being to play as dumb as Karen seemed to think I was.

"That's right," Karen said, sounding somewhat relieved. She looked at Chandler and nodded, narrowing her eyes as if to say "That was a close one," and I almost laughed. "Now," Karen said, getting up and leaning down next to the bed. I saw right down her shirt as she did it, and became painfully aware of my erection, which hadn't ever gone away. "This is a nice piece of wood." Karen brought up the wood and set it on the bed where she had been sitting.

"It sure is," Chandler said, finally setting the tray down on the chest by the window and coming back to the bed. He picked up the chunk of wood and knocked on it with his soft-looking knuckles, making a resonant, hollow sound. "I knew there had to be some good shit in that tree. What are you going to make out of it, Gary?"

I shrugged, looking at the oblong piece of wood. I couldn't picture what sort of instrument it would be. "I don't know. I never made an instrument before. I never even thought about it, really. I know how to play the guitar, so I suppose something with strings?"

"That sounds like a great idea," Karen said, patting my leg again. Her hand was the size of a serving platter, and as gentle as she was, I was still nervous under all that weight. "Let me know if you need anything, anything at all." Karen gave me sort of a flirty look and patted my leg some more, coming uncomfortably close to the petrified lump at my crotch. I wondered how dumb she thought I really was.

"Thanks, Karen," I said, shifting into more of a sitting position. "Thanks for everything."

“Sure, Gary,” she said, and turned to Chandler. “Come downstairs when you’re done in here. I need to talk to you about...” she looked at me over her shoulder, “some of the rose bushes.”

“Sure,” Chandler said, and Karen left. We both watched her go, her stiff brown skirt shifting up and down her hips a little as they swayed from side to side. When she was gone and we could hear her walking down the stairs, Chandler quietly closed the door. He came back over to the bed and sat down where Karen had been, leaned in. His bull breath was hot and humid, like a wind blowing out of a desert full of wet hay. “Look, I meant to tell you, Karen doesn’t like to talk about the guy on the mountain, she’s kind of got... a problem with him.”

“What kind of problem?” I said.

“Well, I don’t really know that much.”

“So who is the guy on the mountain? Did you ever meet him?”

Chandler shrugged and shook his massive head. I had to lean back out of the way to avoid getting hit in the face with his left horn. “No, I never even saw him,” Chandler said. “All I know is that he makes it rain a lot, especially when the moon is full. Sometimes he manages to make it snow, and once he actually froze the lake.”

“So was I right though? Is that him up on the mountain?”

“Probably. I don’t know why he would need fire, though. I’ve never seen any fire up there.”

“Yeah, but you never climbed the tree,” I said, feeling the surface of my piece of wood. There was something good about it; it had its own energy. I could almost feel my

own body heat doubling back on me when I ran my hand across it. “Or maybe he wanted someone to see it.”

“Maybe,” Chandler said. “But I don’t know why. He’s been up there for like a thousand years.”

“Who knows?” I said. “Maybe he’s bored.”



After we ate some bread and butter and a bit of leftover chicken from the kitchen, Chandler took me around the back of the house and showed me a little shed sitting back there, a low, stone structure covered mostly with ivy on the outside, making it look like it sprouted out of the ground when no one was looking. The rounded look the ivy gave the roof added to the illusion of organic origin, and the little round-topped door made me think of a Hobbit hole, picked up and moved from Bag End by the sort of eccentric millionaire that moved London Bridge to Lake Havasu, Arizona. Only there were no tourists to see it out here.

The door was a little low for Chandler, and he had to duck and turn his head sideways as he went in to keep his horns from gouging the doorframe. “This has been sort of my workshop for a while. It’s not big enough for me to do a lot in, but I keep all the tools here that I’ve made. It’s probably a good size for you.”

The inside of the shed looked the way I expected it to from outside. The walls were the same stone, only not ivy-covered and there were thick, old, darkened wood beams running up to the apex of the ceiling. There was a window on either side of the door, which I hadn’t been able to see from outside, filtering chlorophyll-tinged sunlight into the room, and two windows opposite in the back wall doing the same. At first glance,

it seemed like the kind of place that any suburban housing board or city council would order torn down. But as Chandler started shifting things around, kicking up big clouds of dust and swiping at the top of a hulking workbench with an old rag, I could see that it was actually pretty solid and useable, just slightly neglected. There was no telling how long it had been there. It seemed older than the house itself, but that didn't mean anything. The mansion itself seemed pretty damn old.

“Where did all these tools come from?” I said, picking up an old planer. It was almost black with age, the blade in the bottom dark but not rusty.

“I made them,” Chandler said, moving a miter box off the workbench to the floor. He started wiping the dust off the table top where the box had been sitting.

“What do you mean, you made them? How'd you do that?”

“Gee, Gary, I've only been living here for like, a couple thousand years. It's not like I haven't had any fucking time.” I looked around the walls. There were several saws, chisels, and hand-driven drills hanging on hooks.

“Yeah, but what about the metal? Where'd it come from?”

“The ground.”

“What, you dug a mine and got out iron ore, and then made a bunch of tools out of it?” I said it sarcastically, though I wasn't trying to be a jerk. I just couldn't wrap my mind around the amount of time and work it would take to make all the stuff there was in the shed, by hand and from scratch.

“Yeah, Gary, I did. There's a little bellows and an anvil down the way a little where I do blacksmithing. If you want, I'll show you how later.” Chandler was acting like he was talking to a little kid again, and I suppose I couldn't blame him. Everything

about what he was saying just didn't register with me, though. I grew up in the suburbs, where doing something yourself just meant going to the Home Depot and buying the pieces of the thing you wanted to make, not making the pieces and the tools to make the pieces and digging up the material to make the tools to make the pieces. In a way, though, it had a certain charm, the more I thought about it.

I held my chunk of wood from the tall tree and looked around the shed, feeling like Robinson Crusoe. I was even growing a beard, which was a first-time experience for me. It wasn't going too well; I looked like a thirteen-year-old Amish kid. My hair's blond, so the beard was fine and patchy, and it just made my face look dirty, and it felt itchy. I put the wood down by the door and helped Chandler clean up the shed. I found an old handmade broom and started sweeping the dirt and old wood shavings and sawdust out the front door, feeling like I was working as a re-enactor in one of those Old Tyme towns they have in New England. I remember me and Sharon went to Plymouth Plantation in Massachusetts one time, and we watched a dirty guy eat a rabbit in his little wooden hut. It was gross, but cool at the same time.

As I swept and wiped off tools and moved things around I thought about what I was going to make. Narrowing it down to a stringed instrument helped, but not a whole lot. The piece of wood was already becoming familiar enough in my mind, the dimensions, grain, and density of it sort of imprinted in there so I could mentally turn it, cut it, dissect it and reassemble it in different configurations. I could tell I would be worrying over it in my head for a while, that the project would become sort of a worry stone and only through rubbing and rubbing at it would I get it smoothed down and turned into something that looked like a human product. I felt the same odd, not-

unpleasant tightening in my bowels I would feel when I was a kid and I was helping my dad out in the garage. I don't know what causes it or what it means, but I would always get that feeling when I was starting a project or looking for something, or taking my car apart. Because of it, I started feeling less strange toward Chandler. He'd been great to me, but he *was* a Minotaur after all, and that's just not something most people are familiar or comfortable with. Watching him move things around, looking at them as if he were evaluating each tool and cataloguing it in his mind reminded me of my dad, and I felt one of those sudden surges of sadness and nostalgia and out-of-placeness that washed over me a few times a day. I suddenly had a vivid memory of me and my dad trying to replace the transmission in my grandma's old blue bomber, this old Chevy station wagon she had. We got the old transmission out without too much trouble, and we got the new one under the car on the pneumatic jack, but it wouldn't slip in the way it needed to. So my dad crawled under it and was finagling it in, and it slipped off the jack and onto his chest. I think I was about thirteen. He laid there under it, his face turning red, grunting at me to help him. Scared, I crawled in next to him and we heaved and pushed at the transmission until it slipped into place, and then we held it there with knees and elbows until my dad got a hand free and bolted it into place well enough that we could let go. We laid there for a few minutes, catching our breath and counting our scrapes and bruises. Then we looked at each other. "Goddamn," my dad said, and that made me laugh a little. That made him laugh a little, and pretty soon we were laughing it up under there, grease all over us, dirt in our eyes and hair, blood on our knuckles and under our fingernails.

"So," I said, breaking a long silence, "what was Rome like, Chandler? At the Coliseum?"

Chandler looked up from what he was doing. He seemed surprised at the question. “What was it like in Rome? Jeez, Gary. It’s been such a long time since I thought about it. Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know, no reason,” I said. “Just curious. Just making conversation.”

“Shit,” Chandler said, still working, but a little slower now. “What do you want to know?”

“I don’t know,” I said, “just regular stuff. Like, where did you live?”

“Hmm. Well, I lived under the Coliseum. They called me Bestia back then. They kept me in a cage under the stadium until it was time to come out and kill someone. It’s amazing when I think back, how different I was.” Chandler had stopped working, looking out through the ivy in the back window.

“What do you mean? How were you different?”

Chandler turned around and looked at me. His face was serious, his mouth turned down, his eyes searching. “Are you sure you want to hear this stuff?” he said.

“Yeah, why not?” I said, and kept sweeping the floor.

Chandler shrugged and went back to moving things around. “I didn’t know anything,” he said. “I just sat under the Coliseum, eating what they gave me, and then a few times a day they would lead me up into the arena and I would kill someone while the crowd watched. And that was another thing, I really enjoyed that, where now I don’t like the idea at all. I mean, one of the reasons they kept me around was that I would kill anybody without question. They needed that because so many of the gladiators could be squeamish, especially if they knew the person they were killing. But not me. That’s what I was trained to do. I remember this one time there was a guy they brought in

because he wouldn't observe the festivals. I never got that, we used to get a lot of people that didn't want to observe festivals to the gods, and they would get in trouble. I mean, they're festivals, right? Why wouldn't you want to have fun, even if you didn't believe in the gods? Shit, no one believed in the gods, not really. The politicians would talk about it a lot, like that made a difference in how they legislated, but they believed in it less than anyone, the guys that talked about it the most. That was one thing I liked about Jesus, he told people to quit going around bragging about how religious they were all the time. Of course, his followers started doing it later, but I guess that's human nature.

“Anyway, there was this guy who wouldn't observe the festivals, and they decided to make an example, you know? That was the sort of thing they used me for, was to make an example. I mean, everyone would show up just to see me, and then I would do crazy shit. Like this guy that didn't like the festivals, I tore one of his arms off and stuck it up his ass and then chased him around until he bled to death. Like I said, I was different then and I didn't even care. I was just getting the job done, you know? That kind of thing was my specialty, tearing things off and scaring the audience. Talk about your weird sort of paradoxical psychology. You know, the people would come to see the show, and they would clap and cheer and have a good time, but then for months afterward no one would say anything bad about the festivals or whatever it was the person I killed had been in trouble for. I guess it was the same thing later, when they had public executions, like burnings and stuff. People would make like a picnic holiday out of it, bring the kids and all, but really the whole thing was there just to scare the shit out of everyone, keep them in line. Do they still do that?”

“No,” I said. “They still execute people sometimes, but they only invite maybe ten people to be witnesses. A lot of people show up outside the building, though, some of them protest, and some cheer.”

“Protest?”

“Sure. A lot of people don’t think the government should kill people, that violence only breeds more violence, or something like that.” Oddly, I didn’t feel nervous after what Chandler had just told me.

“Really? That’s really surprising. I always thought people couldn’t get by without their little spectacles. That’s actually very encouraging.”

“Well, there’s still movies and television. There’s a lot of death on those, but it’s pretend. But still. I think it probably might have the same effect.”

“What’s movies and television?” Chandler said, picking up the workbench and setting it down a few feet away, as easily as if he were moving pillows.

“Oh. It’s... hard to explain. I guess it’s like theater, you know? Except it’s different, there’s more room for fakeness, for illusion. You don’t know what electricity is, I suppose. It’s really hard to explain if you don’t know certain things about technology. Let’s just say it’s like theater, and in a lot of the plays people get killed, but they make it look more realistic than on stage. And you watch it at home. Except when you go to the movies.”

Chandler looked at me. “I see,” he said.

“Anyway,” I said, “did anyone live with you, or were you just there by yourself?”

“I lived with Loretta. The man in charge of us at the Coliseum, Viperus Lurco, he bought her from her father. Like I said, she was the largest woman in Rome they could

find, but her family was very poor and they had to sell her. It was really very sad. She was such a sweet-natured woman, very quiet and humble, and Lurco took advantage of that. Really, that situation is what made me realize there was something beyond sitting in my cage, eating whatever I could get, nursing from Loretta and killing people when they told me to. Seeing the way Lurco treated Loretta and the way she took it without complaining, that made me understand finally what injustice was. Of course, by then it was too late. But I think Loretta would have been all right with it if she had known I learned something. Like I said, it was such a long time ago. I haven't even thought of it in so long."

"What happened, if you don't mind me asking?"

Chandler stopped what he was doing and looked at me again. "I don't know if I really want to talk about it. Is there any point to it, except to pass the time? It's painful, it's a goddamn hurtful memory, like so many other things in the past. I'd rather not fucking think about it."

"Sure, Chandler. I didn't mean to push or anything. It's just that it's such a different time and place from what I'm used to. I mean, I used to ask my grandmother all kinds of questions about when she was young, thinking that was a long time ago, a lot different from the present, but ancient Rome, I mean... that's real history, you know?"

"Sure. You should have heard some of the stories my grandfather used to tell. He was around in Ur and shit. They made him live outside town, but he knew a lot of what went on. It was very interesting."

"Like what? What were some of his stories?"

“I’ll tell you some other time,” Chandler said, looking around the shed. It was much cleaner than it had been when we came in, and the tools were wiped off and organized in their designated spots. “I think you can start working. Do you know what the fuck you’re going to make?”

I picked the wood up from by the door and put it on the cleared workbench. “I’m not sure,” I said, and we stood there looking at it. “Something with strings. What do you think?”

“Beats the shit out of me,” Chandler said. “I don’t know anything about that stuff. You’re going to have to figure it out for yourself, chief. I’ll help you with tools if you need it, and if you need something made out of metal, I can do that.”

“Yeah, I guess,” I said. “I’ll just have to think it out, huh?”

“I need to go talk to Karen. I’ll come back later.”

“See ya,” I said, and Chandler left. I watched him go. I was fascinated with how long he had been alive, how much he had seen and all the places he had been. At the same time, I couldn’t wrap my mind around what he had told me. I couldn’t imagine the Minotaur walking across the grass toward the house in his button-down shirt, neat jeans and loafers as a savage Minotaur living in a cage, ripping of people’s arms and sticking them places. And the whole issue of Loretta was just bizarre, not that the whole situation wasn’t bizarre, but in a relative sense Loretta was really weird. I decided I would have to ask him about it again, though I knew it would probably bother him. It was just too interesting.

I turned back to the workbench and took a mental inventory of the tools. There were a couple of different kinds of saws, one with coarse, chopping teeth, and the other

with finer, sharper ones. Chandler had set several differently-sized planes at the back of the bench in a row, next to a long line of chisels with differently-shaped cutting tips. There was a hand-drill, with one lumpy-looking bit. I thought about home again, about the rows and rows of tools my dad had in the garage, shiny smooth machine-milled tools that fit into electric motors, saws that could cut wood and fingers in a blink, routers that created curves and hollows with no effort other than enduring the deafening noise.

I sighed and ran my hands across the wood. I had a feeling if I didn't think about every step as hard as I could, I would muff something up and then I'd have to climb the big tree again, and probably get killed in the process.

But then as I stood there running my hands over the wood I decided I didn't need to think about it at all. I got the fine-toothed saw and sliced off about two inches from the face, working my way slowly down from the narrower side. I wound up with a slightly curved slice of what I was coming to think of as the face of the wood. Then I started shaping the outside of what I'd sliced off. There was one spur of wood, about an inch through and four or five inches long, that I had to cut off, but the rest of it was roughly the shape I wanted it to be. I used Chandler's different planers to shape the outside, smoothing off the humps and wavy spots until it looked and felt right in my hands. Then I got Chandler's wedge-shaped chisel and cut an outline around the edge of the area I'd sliced off, creating about a half-inch border. I got a chisel with a curved, half-tunnel-shaped end and started hollowing out the wood inside the half-inch border, basically making a big oblong bowl. Chandler came back to the shed later that afternoon, but seeing how absorbed I was and how I barely answered his questions, he left again after

ten minutes or so. I worked on hollowing out the wood for the rest of the day, and only got about halfway to the bottom.

As I walked back up to the house after dark my hands hurt and my head felt fuzzy and strange from not eating since breakfast, but overall I felt pretty good. I ate a quick dinner in the kitchen with Chandler keeping me company, and then I climbed the stairs, got undressed and fell into the pillow. I was asleep almost instantly, and I didn't have any dreams.

Seventeen

As soon as I woke up the next day I went out to the shed without even looking for Chandler or Karen. I found some bread and cheese in the kitchen and cut some of each to take with me. I felt funny doing it. I had to find a step stool to get up high enough to reach the counter, and the knife I used was the size of a small sword. Instead of feeling alien, though, I laughed while I did it. It made me feel like a little kid, but in a good way. I felt like I did when I was eight or nine, and I would get up early and go fishing before my parents got up, getting together a little something to eat, getting my gear and going without supervision or help and feeling like it was a novel experience, that I was doing something new and interesting and exciting and that anything could happen.

The feeling was furthered by the process of getting outside, which wasn't easy in itself. The door latch was over my head far enough that I had to stand on tiptoes to reach it. It was made of heavy, chunky metal, and I had to really bear down to get it to turn. I went out through the back of the house, and as I got farther away I could see the tip of the tall mountain where the mysterious guy was supposed to live. The sun was coming

up behind it, shooting rays west across the valley. There was no sign of activity up there, just some haze, probably from snow blowing up off the other side, pushed by the warming morning air.

I walked along toward the shed, eating my bread and cheese, feeling the dew from the thick grass soaking through my jean cuffs, damping my ankles. Chandler had cleaned the jeans and sewn them after I fell out of the tree. I was glad they hadn't been ruined, and they felt even more like a roadmap of my life for the last six or seven years, but now they were part of this weird continuation, or side road, or whatever it was. I didn't have anything else to connect to the world I was formerly a part of, the series of events that make up my memories. I've heard before that the cells in the body regenerate themselves constantly, and that after about seven years, all the cells in the body have replicated themselves so that none of the cells that were there at the beginning of the seven years exist in their original form anymore.

I thought about the person I was seven years before, and how crazy it was that on a physical level, the only original connection I had with that person anymore was a pair of jeans. Even the people I was connected to were different people. There were other objects back in Oklahoma that were tied to me, but the more I thought about it the more I realized that the past didn't even really exist, not even in our memories. The significance I attached to the jeans and whatever other objects had their meaning because of my memory, which wasn't based in the same physical medium that it was based in when the memories were created.

So if all that is true, who was I now? Was I the product of memories that didn't even really exist, or was I the product of something else? Was I even real? It sounded

like a dumb question, and it is. Descartes cleared that one up nicely a long time ago. But what was the basis? If the medium of thinking is variable, is being stable? How could we ever know? And how many licks *does* it take to get to the center of a Tootsie Pop?

When I got to the shed I pushed it all out of my mind. It was the kind of thing I could spend a lot of time thinking about and not ever get anywhere. The fact was, I was where I was, and I had to make do with it. I ran my hands over the wood again, feeling the smooth grain, following its patterns with my eyes, listening to the sound as I tapped it here and there, enjoying the sweet, slightly fruity smell of it.

I got the chisel and continued on. Chandler came out and brought me some lamb and green beans and potatoes and then left me alone again. By the time the light coming through the ivy over the windows was too weak to see I had hollowed out the piece of wood most of the way. I had put together an improvised set of calipers to measure the thickness all the way through the bowl, but it wasn't that necessary. It was like I could see the thickness somehow, or feel it with my fingers, because whenever I measured it with the calipers it was about what I had guessed.

I went back to the house again the way I did the day before, without seeing anyone. I got some food from the kitchen and went to bed, wondering what I was going to do about strings.



The next morning I planed the first piece I had sliced off into a soundboard. When Chandler came out to the shed with lunch, I showed him the pieces I had made so far.

“These look smooth,” Chandler said, turning the soundboard over in his hands. “I should have used some of that wood when I built the new bureau for Karen’s room. I used some redwood, and it was really hard to smooth out.”

“I was wondering if you knew how to make any glue? Obviously we don’t have any nails, and I don’t think they’d work very well anyway, so I was thinking glue would be good.”

“Fuck yeah, we can make some glue,” Chandler said, putting the soundboard down. “Can you run in those shoes?”



“The thing about glue,” Chandler said, “is that you have to have the right sort of source material. The way I learned is to find the strongest animal around and use that animal, whether it be for glue, bone meal, or whatever. When you’re building something you can’t screw around, you have to use the best, right?”

“I’m not sure I know exactly what we’re talking about here. What kind of glue are we making?” I said, trying to keep up with him. Chandler seemed all excited, like he was a little kid and we were headed for an ice cream party. He had a long sword in a leather scabbard strapped around his waist. Like I said before, his stride was long, and I had to almost run to keep up with him. He stepped right over the creek that ran from the south of the spring lake into the forest like it was a chalk line or a crack in the sidewalk. I had to back up, get a good running start and vault over it, and even then I got my trailing foot a little wet. “I mean, what do you make glue out of, anyway?” I had a fleeting memory of those “Sugarfoot” cartoons I used to see as a kid, where the farmer threatens to take the horse to the glue factory, but the horse always gets out of it.

“What do you think, Gary? We have to make hide glue, since hide’s the only thing we’ve got to make glue out of, man.” He clapped me on the back and laughed that weird nervous laugh. He seemed wilder today.

“What kind of hide?” I said. I figured with my luck it would be something dangerous like a leopard or a cave lion or something mythical, like a griffin. All things considered, I wouldn’t have been surprised.

We were coming up over a low rise. Off in the distance I could see where the eastern edge of the forest met the mountains on the eastern side of the valley. Between us and the forest was a small herd of cattle. They were big, fat, heavy-looking cows. I’m not an expert on different cattle breeds, but even I could tell that these were really unusual, with thin horns curling up and over their heads hanging suspended over their necks, like they were designed to run really fast, sort of like those long, trailing helmets bicyclists wear. Their fur was long and wooly, tightly curled to protect them against the cold nights.

“From cow hide? How do you make it, anyway?”

“Shhh,” Chandler said, and crouched down just behind the rise in the ground, so we were peeking over it into the field at the cattle. “We’re not using one of those cows. They’re too weak, their blood is too thin and it won’t make strong glue. We need virility and fierceness for good glue. Now, what’s the most fierce, virile animal out here?”

“Well, leopards are pretty fierce, and griffins ...”

“Shit, you can’t make glue out of a goddamn leopard, Gary. What kind of sense does that make? The spots would make holes in the glue’s sticking power, duh. No,

what animal here is powerful, and solid enough in color and constitution to make the very best glue?"

"Uh, good lord, Chandler, I don't know what the hell you're talking about. If it isn't one of these cows, and it isn't the leopard, I don't know what it could be."

"Shhh, look!" Chandler said, hitting me on the back. Even if I had wanted to keep talking, I wouldn't have been able to since he knocked the wind out of me when he did it. Instead I tried to get air back into my lungs while I looked in the direction Chandler was pointing. Off on the other side of the cow herd, there was a much bigger cow. For a few seconds I thought there was some sort of optical illusion at work, because it seemed to be more than twice as large as the other cows, with bigger horns that swept over the top of the massive head and ended about halfway down the massive back, where the tips tilted up slightly, as if tasting the air. Its fur was a bit longer than that of the cows, and coarser, at least as far as I could tell from where Chandler and I were crouching. "See? It's the bull, Gary! *That's* the strongest animal."

"It's also the fucking biggest, isn't it?" I said, feeling weak. I hoped Chandler wasn't going to suggest what I thought he was going to suggest. The bull came closer, hopping on its hooves, jiggling its mass like a mountain tiptoeing across a plain. I couldn't be very accurate, but I guessed it had to be at least ten feet tall from hoof to the tallest hump of its island of a back, and maybe fifteen, even twenty feet from its nose to its tail. "Jesus Christ," I said, "it's like its big enough for its own goddam weather system."

"Yeah," Chandler said. "Sumbitch has been running around here two hundred summers."

“We’re not going to kill it, are we? I mean, that’s pretty old, shouldn’t we let it live out its life?”

Chandler looked at me like I’d just smeared a booger on his lip. “What the hell do you mean? You need the strongest glue, there’s the strongest animal. Besides, that fucker’s about had it anyway. See the smaller one, over by the herd?” he said, pointing to the cow clump.

“Uh huh,” I said.

“Well, that’s one of the other males. He’s not quite big enough to take out the big one, but he’d be in charge this time next year anyway. So actually, we’re doing them all a favor. Sometimes both males kill each other in the fight, and the cows don’t have a stud. And then I have to step in and help out, and let me tell you, that’s no fun for anyone.”

I looked at him as if he had just smeared a booger onto *my* lip. “You have to... when the male’s not... dude, that’s fucked up.”

“Don’t knock it ’til you’ve tried it,” Chandler said, and laughed. “But seriously, it’s not that much fun. And then I can’t eat out of the herd for a long time, ’cause I feel gross about it. So it’s really good for everyone all around if you take out the big fella, all right?”

“Me? Take out the big fella? Fuck that, man. This was your idea, I thought *you* were going to do whatever it is you’re going to do. What do I look like, a fucking matador?” I was keeping an eye on the bull as we argued, and though it wasn’t really that close it was making me nervous. It was a lot more nimble and quick than I had thought when I first looked at it. As I watched, it broke into a run around the cows,

giving a low bellow that signaled the cows to turn toward the forest and move off away from us.

“Oh, great, he knows we’re here now. Way to go, loudmouth,” Chandler hissed at me. “If you don’t hurry up he’ll draw the cows off to the forest, and we’ll have to wait until tomorrow. Here.” Chandler unbuckled his belt and handed me the long sword. The scabbard was stained leather and had an old, greasy feel under my skin as I reluctantly took it. I pulled out the first six inches, noting the blade wasn’t very fancy, either. It had a slight sheen of rust and a rough-looking edge, like it had been sharpened with a coarse stone.

I tried to hand the sword back, but Chandler just smiled and shook his head. “Dude, I don’t want this,” I said. “Surely we can make glue out of one of those cows, or maybe even like a squirrel, or something. I mean, I don’t need *that* much glue, right? Don’t you think this is sort of overkill?”

“Look Gary, don’t you trust me? I’m telling you, this is the thing to do.”

“How do you know that? I’m not even sure why Karen wants me to make this thing, so what will this shit accomplish if I’m dead from the giantest bull on the fucking planet?”

“Well, it’s up to you,” Chandler said. “All I can do is lead you to the water. But I tell you, these things work in very specific ways. If you don’t do this now, I’m pretty sure you’re just going to drift around the valley until you die.” Chandler looked at me, and I looked out at the field. The bull was circling the cows closer and closer to the woods, giving them that low, earth-traveling bellow whenever they showed signs of slowing.

“You know about the little kid with the needle, don’t you?” I said, turning back to look at him. Chandler didn’t say anything, just shrugged and looked off back toward the house, but I found suddenly that I could read his face better, as strange as it seemed, and I could tell from the slant of his horns, the turn of his mouth, the way his black, wet nose pulsed a little in the afternoon breeze and the way his round, liquid eyes narrowed just slightly that he *did* know and it wasn’t just nightmares, just my random crazy brain. He reached over and took the sword and held it in his lap, contemplating the stained scabbard. “I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about, Gary,” he said, but so carefully that I knew it wasn’t true.

“Gimme that,” I said, and grabbed the sword back from him. I stood up and looked out across the field. The bull and the cow herd still had maybe a quarter of a mile between them and the forest, and there was maybe half a mile between me and them. “My legs feel good,” I said. “I trust you.” Chandler smiled a little, still looking off toward the house and the spring-fed lake.

“You’d better fucking hurry,” he said.

I stepped up over the little rise, pulling the sword out and letting the scabbard fall to the grass. The bull was across the field, still circling toward the forest. Keeping my eyes on the bull, I started jogging across the field, stomping down the thickgreen, widebladed grass under my feet.

The more I ran the bigger I felt, the more grass my feet seemed to flatten, and the stronger my legs felt. My arms felt strong. I had Chandler’s sword out in front of me, an extension of my arm that felt natural. I felt like I could run a million miles without wearing out. My lungs and heart and blood felt like an infallible plant churning out

atomic energy megawatts a second like its own sun. I had only had that feeling in dreams before, the feeling that I could run forever. The difference was in dreams I felt like I could run without effort. As I ran across the field I felt like I could run forever, but it was painful. It was the difference between being able to do something easily and being able to do something at all again, the way I felt when I was climbing the tree. It's like me and math. I can do it, but it's hard, where language stuff always came easy. Running across the field toward the bull and his cows was like algebra; I had to bend my mind hard to it, concentrate all my force into the action like I was counting every step in a complicated equation.

The bull saw me coming and tried to get the cows into the woods with a few more circles as I approached, but when he saw that I was coming too fast he broke off and ran to meet me. The bull was even larger than he looked from a distance. My guess was right; he was about ten feet tall by twenty feet long, those weird-looking horns curved up off his wide forehead, sweeping ribbed back over his neck and halfway down his back. He ran at me with his head down, and it occurred to me that it was good his horns weren't pointing forward, and I at least had that going for me. At the same time, the bull looked extremely angry, and I could see that unlike most other bovine species the bull had pointy teeth, fangs almost, and I wondered what it ate. They weren't grass-crushing herbivorous chompers, but bloodthirsty meat grabbers. The bull bared them as we closed, his eyes wide, bloodshot and furious.

As I got right up to the bull and I thought it couldn't change direction fast enough, I swerved to the left and raked the sword down his side, feeling pretty proud of myself. Unfortunately, the fur was so thick and coarse that I didn't even cut through to the skin, I

just parted the fur, took off a few clumps of it and scratched the bull enough to make it really, really mad. It bellowed loud enough so I could feel my eardrums trying to retreat down into my skull, and I dodged to the right past the bull's ass as I peripherally saw the bull rear around, trying to knock me down with his head. I took another swipe with the sword, trying to put a little more muscle into it this time, and cut the bull's right rear leg pretty bad, making him bellow again, this time a mixture of both rage and pain. A splash of bull blood flipped up and landed on my shoulder, warming it as the bull tried to turn, and I smiled but only for a second because out of nowhere the bull managed to deal a glancing kick to my left side. Just the tip of the hoof passed over the skin, splitting it open, and I thought I could hear something crack. I ran in the direction I was already pointing until I thought I had a little distance, and then I turned around and checked my side. It hurt even more to breathe now than it did already, though I could still do it, and that was something. I knew if the kick had hit me directly I would be dead, probably getting my guts ripped out and eaten by the bull.

I didn't have much time to think about it. I only had a few moments to decide whether one or more of my ribs were indeed cracked before the bull was headed for me again. The bull was limping a little, but he was still coming pretty fast.

To my surprise, my mind actually cleared. I focused on the warm center of my brain, the humming power center that generated all thoughts that didn't need thinking about. I remember reading one time about a guy who had a theory that morality is actually an evolutionary adaptation, and that we're wired for making moral judgment calls without having to think them through. I don't know if I believe that completely, but it makes sense, and he had some good points. For example, he pointed out that if we had

to think through every moral decision we made, we'd do nothing else with our time, we would be too busy deciding what to do to actually do it.

My legs felt really good. As the bull came so close again that he couldn't change direction I jumped up. I was surprised at how strong the jump was, and if it had been much stronger I would have cleared the bull altogether. As it was, I landed towards the far end of his back, bringing the sword straight down as I came, with all the force of my falling weight.

The bull screamed as the sword went in, severing his spine a couple of feet from his ass. His back end immediately dropped out from under me and I went head first off his back, losing my grip on the sword and landing on the juncture between my neck and my shoulder. I felt something else crack somewhere in my torso, accompanied by a white flash of pain. I rolled a few times, and then laid there wondering if I was dead, dying, or what. After the initial flash I went numb, a phenomenon with which I was familiar from my youth spent riding and falling off bicycles. I thought my eyes were open, but it was like it had suddenly gotten dark outside. I could dimly hear the bull, bellowing and screaming off to my right somewhere, the sound slowly moving toward the left like a faraway sailboat creeping across the horizon. The sound of the screaming was terrifying in itself, loud as a tornado siren, shrill and keening the way dogs sound when they're mortally wounded by car tires. It made my stomach shrivel up and my chest contract so suddenly that it squeezed a couple of tears out of my eyes.

I listened to it for what seemed like a long time, to the bull screaming, until I noticed there was a dim film of light in my eyes. I put it together that the lids were down, and I opened them. The sky was up there, being blue, chalky, slightly curved. It made

me feel a little better to see it. As soon as I thought that, the news of damage came crashing in from around my body, a phalanx of janglenerve information that made me groan and close my eyes again for a moment. I tested my muscles, my arms flexed a little, but that was all. My legs just sat there, indifferent to my commands, and there was a horrible sensation from the center of my body. Something was broken in there. I couldn't tell what it was, but it was obviously bad.

I moved my head toward the sound of the bull, who was still screaming that hurt animal scream, rubbing my nerves raw with it, making me wish more than anything it would stop. Seeing the bull made it even worse. He was pulling himself around the field on his front legs. His back legs were stretched out behind him like a couple of furry banners, his belly dragging the ground, the sword sticking perpendicular out of his back where I'd left it. The bull's face was lifted to the impassive chalk blue, his mouth pulled open loose in a rictus communicating disbelief, sorrow, agony. His sharp teeth had cut his lips as his mouth worked, and dark ruby blood ran a triangle stain down onto his chest like a grisly bib. He had lost interest in me entirely, which was lucky since I couldn't move. At the same time I felt so guilty that I almost wished he would drag himself over and finish me off, if it would make things better for him. The screaming was the worst part. It was getting into my skin, infecting my bones with its suffering vibration.

It went on so long I started to wonder if Chandler was going to come out or if I was going to have to drag myself over on my hands and try to finish the bull off, just to stop his suffering. At least we would be on an even playing field, two foes burdened by useless legs. I pictured myself trying to catch up with it, probably screaming myself after I got moving and almost laughed, but not quite. I didn't have the heart for it right then. I

was about to call out for Chandler when a new sound drew my attention to the bull, the sound of galloping. I looked over, and my call for Chandler froze in my throat.

The young bull, who had been crowded in with the herd this whole time, was coming across the field toward the crippled bull. I could have been wrong, but I thought I could read a smirk on his young face, a downturn of the lips, a mocking narrow cast to the eyes. The old bull wasn't even paying attention to the young bull, he never saw him coming, he was too busy screaming at the sky. The old bull didn't notice until the young bull gave a short, barking woomph of triumph, lowered his head, and knocked the old bull over on his side. The old bull's scream took on a rasping quality, as if there were blood now in his throat, as he waved his good legs in front of him pathetically, useless in confusion. The young bull watched this for a moment, sneering I thought, and then bent his head to the old bull's throat and with his own sharp fangs tore it out in one strong rippling tug of his young neck muscles.

I laid there watching. I don't know when exactly, but I had started weeping uncontrollably and I kept doing so as the old bull's blood glugged out into the grass, his body still trying to pull air, that massive body hanging on to the tenuous rope of life as long as possible, refusing to give up until every bit of strength and will were exhausted. The young bull stood over him, blowing little drops of his own blood into the old bull's eyes with each overexcited, horny-sounding breath.

I couldn't stop crying. It was as if the spectacle had emptied little bits of forgotten broken glass from my bloodstream into my chest, and the furnace of grief melted the glass into thick, hot tears that burned tracks in my skin on their way out onto

my face, down to pool in my ears and eventually fall off into the grass. With each wracking, coughing sob I thought I couldn't stand any more, but it kept coming anyway.

When I looked again, the old bull was still, and the young bull was looking thoughtfully at me, his head tilted to the side as if he were wondering how I would taste, and if he was still hungry. I actually felt relieved in that low moment when everything seemed hopeless and pointless and cruel; relieved that I would be given a reprieve from the rest of my life. The young bull started toward me, and I fancied I saw that mocking expression flowering on his face again like a poisonous mushroom. I watched him come a moment, and then I closed my eyes, wondering if I would see Sharon, if it would be the way I'd dreamed it, that we would simply go from place to place together, always moving and laughing.

Then, listening to the young bull's hoof steps and the abrupt puffing sound of his breathing growing louder, I heard soft crunching in the grass behind me and the sound of the young bull stopped. I opened my eyes and peered up, and was almost disappointed to see Chandler standing above me, looking at the young bull with a stern expression I had never seen before. His head was lowered, horns pointed forward as he took a few snorting breaths and stamped his left foot.

"Go on," Chandler said to the bull, "take your herd into the forest, and take them as you please. But this one is for me. Go."

I turned toward the bull. He stood for a moment, as if he were trying to stare Chandler down. I was reminded of a time when I was in high school, and I was in the marching band. One night we went out for pizza, and Alan left a note for the waitress that said, "You get no tip, bitch." I guess she was being snooty to him and some other

people, though I was ignoring her anyway, so I don't know. But as we were standing outside with Mr. Randall, our band teacher, waiting for my mom to come pick us up, one of the cooks came outside. I had seen him around before. He was a thuggish guy with blocky shoulders, sandy hair, bad skin, and pale blue eyes that never seemed to have any expression.

“Who's the asshole that left the note on her in there?” the cook said. Our little group tensed up, except for Mr. Randall, who just smiled and said, “Asshole?”

Long story short, watching Chandler stare down the young bull reminded me of Mr. Randall staring down the thuggy cook. After sticking it out just long enough to save face in the eyes of all the pizza place employees watching secretly from the windows, the cook said, “Pffff. Whatever, man,” and walked away. And in the end, after standing there long enough to save face in front of his new herd of cows the bull did the same thing. He made a movement very like a shrug, blew some snot out of his nose onto the ground, and then sauntered away. After a bit he broke into a run, bellowing loudly at the herd. The cattle circled obediently in front of him and disappeared into the forest. The bull, going last behind them, shot us one last look and disappeared.

After they were gone Chandler bent over me. The stern look was gone, and I didn't like the look of worry on his face, not at all. “How bad is it, Gary?” he said. “Can you move anything?”

“I can move my arms, pretty much. Not my legs. Not yet, anyway.” I was trying to be optimistic, but it didn't come across as very sincere. We both knew what had happened.

“Well,” Chandler said. “It doesn’t look too bad. Let’s get you back to the house, and we can take a look. All right?”

“Sure,” I said. “No problem, right? Just watch my back, is all. I think I sprained something.” It was just wishful thinking, of course.

Chandler thought for a moment. “Here, let me do this,” he said, and took off his shirt. It seemed like the size of a sail to me as he laid it on the ground next to me, shaking it out like it was a picnic blanket and we were about to have some fried chicken. I hadn’t seen him without it before. Without the flannel tucked into his jeans, he looked really wild, like you would expect a Minotaur to look. He didn’t have much hair on his chest, and what hair he did have was like the fur on his head, that close, short, fine-looking fur that bulls have. “Okay, now I’m going to scoot you over. Just stay still and tell me if you think I’m making it worse.”

“Right,” I said and closed my eyes while Chandler gently picked me up under the shoulders, cradling my head like a baby’s, and moved the top half of my body over onto his shirt. Then he got a hand under the small of my back and the other under my legs and moved the rest of me over. The whole time I was thinking about the First Aid class I took in eighth grade summer school, and how one of the biggest rules was that you should never *ever* move someone you think even *might* have a neck or back injury. At the same time, there were no paramedics roaming around by the lake or in the glacier’s shadow who would rush over and put a full-body splint on and Medi-flight me to the nearest hospital.

Once I was on the flannel, Chandler stood back and looked me over, trying to hide the wince that wanted to come to the surface of his features. “How’s that?” he said.

“Good, real good. You’ve got good hands, man. I barely felt anything.”

“All right, then,” Chandler said, and came around to the collar of the shirt, where my head was, and picked up the sleeves. “I’m going to go slow, so tell me if you start feeling any pain.”

“Okay,” I said, and he started pulling. When we got to the creek he picked me up like a baby in a sling and carefully waded through the water, and then set me down on the other side. I still felt the same. I couldn’t feel my legs, and the upper half of me felt like a developing bruise. As we approached the house I wondered where Karen was, if she had been watching the field somehow, if she knew what had happened. I didn’t see her. As Chandler picked me back up in the shirt and started carrying me upstairs, I thought of the scary little kid with the needle stick, and I actually found myself hoping to see him or her, or whatever it was. In fact, the only thing keeping me from having a complete shit fit was the hope that I would see the kid and that the next morning my back would be fixed, and all the scars on my body would be gone.

Eighteen

After a couple of hours, I didn’t feel too good. I had a lot of pain from my bruised parts, and there was a deep, untouchable ache in my back above the spot where everything went numb that the pain stuff Chandler gave me couldn’t touch. It was some kind of plant from the forest he kept on hand, and he told me to chew it. It didn’t do much except make my tongue and throat numb, though it did quell the general pain a bit and brought down what I thought must be a growing fever. My head felt increasingly swollen and hot. Even my hands started to swell a little. I kept telling myself I just

needed to hang on until night, and do my best to fall asleep until the kid with the needle pole showed up.

The evening seemed to drag on forever. My back hurt more and more, no matter how much of Chandler's plant I chewed. "I'll have to go out to the forest tomorrow," he said, "this has been sitting around for a while, and it's probably lost most of its potency. If you can stick it out, I'll go first thing in the morning." I barely registered his face and voice. I was floating in a sea of solid iron misery with no shore in sight. I remember vaguely Karen coming in toward dark, standing over my bed, looking down at me with a sad face like a concerned parent. She seemed so tall, so distant, her head swimming in the shadows above me like a nightmare version of my own mother, the shadow from her nose running down over her chin like a stain.

"Chandler," I said, "can you go out to get the stuff now? I feel like I'm going to die."

I drifted off some, though I wasn't really asleep, it was more like a vivid fever dream. In it I was at my grandmother's house, and my grandmother and my mother were there. For some reason, my grandmother had a pet lion, a huge, scary beast that I could tell couldn't wait to take a bite out of me. But my grandmother would stroke it and pet it, and rub her face in the lion's face, and coo to it and hug it, and the lion didn't do anything to her. "You should watch out, Nana," I said, "even if you raised it, lions can turn on you. They're wild."

"Oh, Gary," my mom said. "Don't be ridiculous. She's had the lion since it was a kitten, it wouldn't hurt anyone."

They laughed at me, but I wouldn't go near the lion. It kept looking at me like it knew a secret and it was going to tell it to only me with its teeth. I pictured the lion jumping on my back, since that's what lions do. They wait until their prey isn't looking and then jump on its back and bite the neck so it breaks. I wouldn't turn my back on the lion. I could almost feel its claws penetrating my shoulders as it pounced on me, the feel of its hot breath on my neck just before the teeth severed my spinal cord.

My dad showed up. He happened to have a pistol, but it was one with a safety on the trigger you had to hold down at the same time you were firing. "I don't trust that lion," I said, "Can I hold the gun?"

"That's a good idea. That lion is dangerous, I'm sure," he said, and let me have the gun. I kept my eye on the lion, rehearsing in my mind how I would need to hold down the safety before I shot.

Then I was outside in Nana's backyard, sitting on a bench with the gun while a bunch of kids ran around playing ball. The lion was sleeping in a little pen by the fence, and I was worried the kids were going to wake it up. I kept telling them to be quiet, but they only yelled more, laughing shrill and high, throwing their ball against the house and the fence so it made loud thumps over the lion's head. Sure enough, the lion woke up and ran out of its pen, looking around at all the kids, shaking its head and swishing its tail like it was mad. I held the gun on it, feeling the safety on the trigger, waiting for the lion to make its move. Finally it noticed me and moved toward me, crouching down like it was going to spring. I fumbled with the trigger, trying to thumb the safety down and squeeze the trigger at the same time, but I couldn't get it right, of course. It was classic dream logic, like when you need to run but you can't. The lion jumped at me but I woke

up drenched in sweat, my hands curled up under my chin. I felt like I was burning alive. I wanted to kick the blankets off, but I couldn't move my legs and I felt the first of many waves of frustration and anger. I pushed the blankets as far down as I could with my arms and lay there, wishing I had a glass of water.

I heard a noise at the door and I pushed myself up on my elbows, though the pain in my back shot up immediately. I thought I could see a very faint light at the foot of the bed and I giggled a little in relief. I laid back down and took a deep breath. Then the noise came again and I looked back up. The door was opening, and I realized the light had been coming from under the door, which was why it was so faint. The door was opening, the light getting brighter. I wished I could sit up farther, because I could barely see. Then Chandler's face peered in at me, his features shadowy and grotesque as the light from the lantern in his hand cast up under his chin. "Gary?" he said quietly. "Are you awake?"

"Yeah," I said. "I heard a noise, and... I thought you were someone else."

"Who else would it be?" Chandler said, coming the rest of the way in. In his other hand, he was holding a bunch of leaves.

"You know, someone else. Someone... littler."

"I don't know what you mean," Chandler said, though I knew he did. "There's no one like that around here, Gary. You're the littlest one in the valley." Chandler came to the side of the bed. He put the lantern down on the side table and picked a few of the leaves out of the bunch in his hand. "I found some of the painkiller in the woods. It was pretty dark, and it took me a while. Sorry." He offered me three of the leaves and I

stuffed them right in my mouth. The flavor was strange but good, minty but with a hint of flower, something that reminded me of old lady perfume.

“That’s okay,” I said. “Thanks.” The leaves were a lot stronger than the dried ones I’d chewed earlier, and I could feel whatever was in them spreading through my blood almost immediately, relaxing my nerves and muscles, evaporating the pain out like steam. “Oh, that’s a lot better. These are way stronger, you were right. I really appreciate it, Chandler.”

“Hey, if was a fucking blast. I love falling down in the dark,” he said. “How’s your back? Can you feel anything yet?”

“Not yet,” I said. “Maybe in the morning, you know? Maybe I just need some good rest.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Chandler said. “Try to get to sleep. Those should knock you the fuck out. I’m going to leave these here, but don’t eat any more until morning.” He put the leaves in the little side table drawer and slid it shut.

“No problem,” I said. “I don’t think I’ll need them, that’s for sure.” I was actually starting to feel pretty good. Whatever was in the leaves was spreading and it kept ramping up, making me feel like I had candy in my veins instead of blood. I found myself wishing that the leaves weren’t making me so sleepy; I wanted to stay up and enjoy the high. I had forgotten about being high. I managed to lie there for a little bit after Chandler left, my eyes crossing against the moon glow coming in the window, and I thought about how things had changed. It had only been a few weeks since I’d left Oklahoma City, but that was the longest I’d gone without smoking any pot in years. What was strange was that I hadn’t even missed it. I had heard from various people that

it wasn't an actual physical addiction, but it was based in routine and mental dependence and I had always believed that, at least on the surface. But the reality was that I would get really upset sometimes, if there was no pot to be had. Alan and I would spend whole days sitting around, calling anyone we thought might have a line on some weed, just wasting the day until the sack came around. And then we'd roll a big joint and waste the rest of the day sitting there. I used to write a lot of crappy song lyrics in notebooks, thinking at the time they were brilliant, and then not understanding what I had been going for when I looked at them later. The few times we couldn't come up with anything it was really hard to go to sleep, and we'd usually resort to getting drunk. It's not quite the same.

I enjoyed the high from the leaves as long as I could before I drifted off against my will, hoping that the weird, pale little person would come in and fix me before morning.



When I woke up the room was bright and I still couldn't move my legs. The ache in my back was growing again. It was still tolerable, but my head felt swollen and I was incredibly thirsty. Whatever the leaves were that Chandler had given me, they were powerful enough to give me the sort of hangover I associated with taking good pills. I felt too heavy, my blood felt thick, and I felt dehydrated and slightly dizzy, even when I wasn't moving. I was reminded of the time I had my wisdom teeth out and the doctor gave me a prescription for some codeine. I took it for four days, sleeping most of the time. I would wake up and take a pill and go back to sleep, eating some pudding every once in a while when it occurred to me, but mostly I slept. Eventually I started seeing

shit and forgot how old I was and where I lived for a couple of hours, even though I was already home, and I had to lay off.

I managed to scoot up in the bed with my arms enough to reach the glass of water on the side table and drink it. It tasted like it had been sitting there a while, but it was still like a happy river wending through me, hydrating my internal shores. Scooting up made the ache in my back worse so I got into the drawer in the side table and fished out one of the leaves Chandler had left the night before. It was difficult to lean over without being able to brace myself with my legs, and I almost fell out of the bed. I looked down at the six or seven foot drop below me and tried not to think about how it would feel to fall all that way with no control.

I put the leaf in my mouth and got situated back against the pillow. I thought, not too seriously, that this would be the time for me to have a book and I eyed Karen's huge volume of Swift on the far side of the bedside table before deciding it wasn't worth trying to get it. I wondered what sort of chemicals were in the leaves Chandler brought me. The feeling reminded me again of pills, but with a smoother, not-so-chemically-artificial delivery. I wondered if it would grow back in Oklahoma, whatever it was. If no one had ever heard of it, I would have a good couple of years before the government caught on and outlawed it, and by then I could have made a fortune, like the guy who invented ecstasy. I heard he was selling it in Dallas for a couple of years before anyone in law enforcement found out or cared, and by then he was rich. Of course, I think he blew all his money on cocaine and had a heart attack, but if I could avoid that little pitfall, I'd be rich. And after I had enough money I could buy a house in the neighborhood where Sharon and Carrie lived with me, and I could try getting custody of Carrie, or maybe just

get her to come stay in the summer or something. If I could get her there in the school year I could put her back in her old school, and get her back in her Girl Scouts troop and let her play with Talisha and that Brandon kid with the lazy eye and everything would be back to normal. Except Sharon would still be gone, of course.

There had been a lot going on, but she had always been there on some level in my mind, back in the shadows, sometimes peeking out. I wasn't imagining her everywhere anymore the way I did at first, seeing her on light poles and street corners and on top of buildings. I think the valley had something to do with it. I had never seen Sharon in that context, so it wasn't natural for my mind to place her there, over the lake or the glacier or the trees. I still missed her. For some reason I started thinking about the time, maybe five years before, when Carrie had needed to take cookies to school. She needed them the next day, and like a kid she didn't tell us until the night before. The only problem was we didn't have any money. I mean, none at all, not even a few bucks to buy cookie dough for a batch of cookies. With Carrie in the back seat, Sharon and I drove around town, trying to think of how we could get some cookie money. I don't remember specifically all the options we went through, but in the end I wound up writing a hot check somewhere for the dough and Hamburger Helper and some hamburger for dinner. What mainly came back to me as I sat there in bed was the sense imprint of what it was like to be with her, to be worried, to be together. It wasn't the biggest crisis in the world, but Sharon was upset about it because she thought the other mothers of kids in Carrie's class would think she was a bad mother. If they thought she just forgot they'd think she was bad, and if they knew we didn't even have enough money for cookies they'd think she was worse, or at least feel sorry for her, which she didn't like. I turned it over and

over in my mind, the feel of driving through the mid-fall night looking for a grocery store I hadn't floated a check to before, and one that didn't have that goddamn Telecheck business that knew if you were a hot check writer.

It had only been five or so years, but I felt like I had aged a century. Looking back at that version of me was painful. He felt so far away from who I was at the moment, not that I had any real idea who that was; and maybe that was why it hurt, because I didn't know who I was anymore. I didn't have any sense of myself the way I did back then, and now I didn't have Sharon to help define me anymore. It's like the regeneration of the body, the way it becomes something different all the time when you're not paying attention. Is an identity that way, too? Even if Sharon were still around, would there be a gap between us after another ten years, between who we would be ten years from now and who we were the night we drove around trying to come up with a little bit of grocery money? Was what happened for the best, since something similar would have happened no matter what?

I was high and it was making me all emotional. I pushed up in that giant bed, looking askance out the giant window over the valley toward the glacier, alternately crying and laughing, remembering so strongly what it had been like to be me back when I didn't know there was any alternative, much less that I would be forced into one no matter what. After a while the leaves overcame me and I fell asleep again. I dreamed about the lion at my grandma's house again, about having the gun and watching the kids playing in the yard. Only this time Sharon was in the house looking out the window at me as I sat in the back yard, guarding the kids. I kept waving at her to come out, but she would only smile at me through the glass, showing her broken tooth, the one she broke

when she fell in the bathtub that time at my apartment before we found out she was sick. Apparently in my dream, she hadn't had it fixed.

When I woke up again the light was dimming toward dusk. Chandler was sitting on the chest under the window, watching me. I sat up, unnerved. "What are you doing?" I said.

"Your dreams smell weird," Chandler said. He was holding a tray of food in his lap at a sloppy angle, like he'd forgotten about it. "Like... something stretching. Or maybe like a crushed bit of steak under someone's boot heel. Savory and ruined at the same time. What were you dreaming about?"

"Oh, geez... nothing," I said. "Or I don't remember, at least. Something about home. Something like that."

"What is your home, Gary? Is it far away?"

"Yeah, it is," I said. "Farther than I could ever go."

"How could it be farther than you could go to be there?"

"It's in the past now. You know? Kind of how Rome is still there, but the Rome you lived in is gone, right?" I didn't like the way Chandler was looking at me. It reminded me of this guy I used to know who drank a lot. He would get this same look sometimes, usually before he blew up at someone.

"Rome is eternal," Chandler said, standing up. He crossed to the bed with the tray and set it down over my legs, just out of my reach. "You know the aqueducts are still there, right? And the coliseum? Does that sound gone to you, Gary? And what about the fucking roads?"

“That’s not what I’m talking about, Chandler. I’m talking about, you know, the people, the small things... there’s still a lot more of my home left, from the time I lived there, than there is of ancient Rome. I mean, what about the Senate? Or the guy you used to buy food from, or whatever? Those people are long gone, and there’re only a few things left, like the aqueducts and the Coliseum and the roads, you know? They’re all relics of the life you led there, at least to you. You know what I mean?”

“What about me, Gary? Am I a relic of my own life?” He still sounded miffed, but he was taking on the air of someone who thinks the person they’re talking to is so full of shit as to be silly.

“Look, I’m not saying you are or aren’t anything. All I’m saying is that I feel like my home doesn’t exist anymore, it’s in the past for me. You don’t have to get all dickish about the whole thing, okay?”

“I’m not trying to be dickish,” Chandler said, “I’m trying to point out that you seem to have exiled yourself for no good reason. You don’t need to believe that your home is gone. As you said, there are more pieces of the world you left still there than are gone, right? It’s like taking a brick out of a house and saying the house no longer exists.” I was surprised by the sudden patience with which he delivered this last, his voice low and clear, his head bent down so he could look me in the eye.

“More like taking the foundation out of a house, but still. I see what you’re saying,” I said.

“I know how this sounds, but please, take it from me. I’m very old, and I’ve seen many, many people come and go, many that I’ve loved very much. You will regain your appreciation of life, your love of your own cleverness. It seems impossible now, as if

those things never existed, as if you never enjoyed anything or loved anything, but they will come back.”

I shrugged. “I know,” I said, though deep down I knew it was a lie, that I would never feel the same again, never be as carefree or enjoy anything the way I did when Sharon was alive. “I suppose it’s just a process, right?”

“It is,” Chandler said. “And part of that process is eating something.” He pushed the tray toward me, up onto my senseless lap. There was a big piece of meat, some green beans, a few small boiled potatoes and a wooden cup of water. I picked at the meat a little with the fork, peeled off a bit from the side, and took a bite. It was bland, but not bad. Chandler started fiddling with something at the foot of the bed. “It’s kind of tough, but the old bull yielded up some good meat. I’m surprised.”

I spat the bite of meat back onto the plate. “This came from that bull?” I said. “How could you do that, feed it to me?”

Chandler looked at me, surprised. “You don’t want to waste it, do you? I already boiled the heart for the glue, by the way. It looks really thick and strong, like I thought.” He brought up another, larger tray, this one with the wooden parts of my instrument and the carving tools. “If you’ll eat, you can finish the last of the carving, and then you can start gluing. I’ll have to make you a little glue pot to heat it. Have you ever used hide glue before?”

“No,” I said, poking at the meat again. I was hungry but I kept seeing the bull, dragging his legs around the field, screaming. On the other hand, Chandler was right. It would be a shame to kill the bull and then waste it. I took another little bite. “It’s just glue, right?”

“Sure, but you have to keep it hot. And then you have to be fast when you put it on. It sets fast. You’ll figure it out. It’ll just take some practice.”

“You’ll have to show me. It’s going to take a little bit to get the rest of the carving figured out, and I still don’t know what I’m going to do about strings.”

“Oh, right, I was thinking about that,” Chandler said. “I don’t have any ideas.”

“Great,” I said. I carefully scooted myself up with my arms, dragging my legs along under the sheets. I thought about the bull again, dragging his back half around, and lost most of my appetite again. I ate a couple of small bites of potato and drank some of the water, and my throat opened back up again. “Give it some thought. You seem to be sort of the idea man here. You know where to find me.”

“Are you going to finish that meat?” Chandler said, nodding at the tray in my lap.

“Fuck no,” I said. “I keep thinking about that bull. Why don’t you finish it?”

“I couldn’t,” Chandler said. “I think he was something like my great, great, great second nephew, or something. It’s distant, but you know how it is.”

“Oh. Yeah, sure,” I said. “Just leave it here. Maybe I’ll feel better in a little bit.” I suppose there’s a difference between eating a distant relative and boiling a distant relative’s heart to make glue, and then butchering the relative to feed to other people, but it seemed like a pretty thin line of distinction to me at the moment. More and more Chandler, with his flannel shirts and penny loafers, was starting to scare me. “Thanks for bringing up that wood and stuff,” I said. “It’ll give me something to do while I’m sitting around.”

“Don’t mention it,” Chandler said, looking out the window. I thought I could hear splashing out there, and I knew suddenly that Karen was swimming in the lake.

“I wish I could get up and look around,” I said.

“I’ll bet you do,” Chandler said, turning back around. “But you can’t feel your cock, can you?”

“No,” I said, stung. “I can’t. Thanks for bringing it up.”

“Don’t mention it,” Chandler said, smiling a little. His eyes had taken on a sort of clouded, mocking look as he moved toward the door. “I think I’ll go down and sit by the water. You better get to work, Gary.”

“See you later.” After Chandler left, I just sat there for a little bit. He was getting weird, and I had known Karen was weird from the beginning, though I hadn’t actually seen her since before I’d climbed the tree. I had wanted from the beginning to get out of the valley and find my way back to civilization, though at first it hadn’t seemed bad; I was definitely outside the reach of the law, and they fed me and seemed fairly agreeable. But things had been getting weirder and weirder of course, and now Chandler was acting strange and I suddenly really wanted to go someplace where actual *people* lived, where I could have a normal conversation about normal, inconsequential stuff, and maybe get some tacos.

More and more, too, I was thinking about home. Even if I got arrested and went to prison for what I did to Harrell, it was starting to seem preferable to what I was putting up with. Like I said, it came mainly down to the lack of actual human contact. Even in prison there would be people. Some of them would probably want to hurt me, but on the other hand, some of them might not. Maybe after a while it would be like in that movie *The Shawshank Redemption* where all those guys become friends and they look out for each other. Sure, Tim Robbins gets raped a bunch of times in the beginning, and that one

old librarian guy hangs himself, and that young guy gets shot and other bad stuff happens, but at least they're friends. The more I thought about it, the more I realized it would be easier to just go someplace else, maybe some small town in Alaska or Canada, where no one knew me and where I could have an alias and start a new life. Maybe the Oklahoma police would find me after twenty or thirty years, and I would see Carrie and Lynn and my sisters and everyone before I died.

But I wanted to see Carrie and everyone again, mainly Carrie. She was so much like Sharon. It had hurt me at first some, in both a good and bad way, to see her and how much like Sharon she was, and I knew that as time went on she would get more and more like her. But now that the initial pain was smoothing down, that started to seem like a source of comfort rather than pain, that there would be a healthy, young, different version of Sharon walking around doing things Sharon never did, thinking things and being a continuation of Sharon's life.

I was feeling really homesick.

Instead of crying about it, I pulled the tray with the wood and tools on it over toward me and looked over everything. There was the main chunk of wood that would serve as the body that I'd hollowed out pretty well, and the thin slice that would go on top of it as the soundboard. I sat there and looked at it. I didn't know if it should have a neck. Even if it needed one, I didn't have any more wood to make one out of, at least out of the original piece I was supposed to work with. Then I saw the spur of wood I'd cut off when Chandler first took me into the work shed sticking out from behind one of the planers on the tray. I picked it up and looked at it. It was long enough that after I smoothed out the roundness and splinters and everything it would span the length of the

soundboard with three or four inches sticking out at the top. I figured that's where the strings would attach, and then I could make a little bridge down at the other end, with the neck itself resting on the soundboard, kind of like a dulcimer. I didn't really know how to play one, but I had tapped around on a dulcimer a couple of years before at a music store, so I at least knew it would need four strings. I didn't know what they needed to be tuned to though, and I wished I'd paid more attention, maybe asked some questions about it instead of pretending it was an electric guitar and dancing around like an idiot.

I decided once I figured out what I was going to use for strings I could come up with the tuning. I started using the smallest plane to go around the edges of the body, evening it out so the soundboard would fit snugly when it was time to glue it. Then I worked on the soundboard itself, going back and forth between it and the body until they fit together as perfectly as I could get them. Chandler hadn't managed to manufacture any sandpaper, which wasn't surprising, so I could only be so exact in shaping the pieces. After I got the soundboard and the body to fit together I worked on flattening the face of the soundboard so that when I got the neck piece done it would sit flush. At some point Chandler came up and gave me some more of the bull meat and potatoes and green beans, and took away the plate from that morning which I hadn't touched since. I ate the potatoes and green beans, but left the meat alone. I hated to be wasteful, but since Chandler told me he was actually related to the bull I just couldn't overcome my initial revulsion.

After I ate I chewed on a couple of Chandler's painkilling leaves and started on the neck. I didn't have a vice to clamp the wood still so it was slow going, especially during the hour or so after I took the leaves, since they got me so high. I ended up being

able to brace the end of it against the lip of the tray, which made it easier to plane it down flat on the sides, so I eventually wound up with a long rectangular piece that was a little bit thicker one way than the other. As I worked the wood I was impressed with the grain and the color, which was really light. It had a really cool pattern to it, wavy with dots in it that looked like little cartoon eyes. I appreciated more and more how well-suited the wood was for what I was doing; it was light and had a nice ring to it when I knocked on it, but it was super stiff and strong, even the soundboard, which I planed down as thin as I could so it would vibrate better. By the time it got dark and I ate some more leaves and got too sleepy to keep working, I thought it was going to turn out pretty good, especially for someone who had never made an instrument of any kind before and only had the most rudimentary woodworking skills. I was actually pretty excited to see how it was going to turn out, and I kept thinking over what I could use for strings.

I laid there a while waiting for Chandler to come up and take the food tray and light the lamp, but he never did. I pushed the work tray off to the side with the food tray and fell asleep wondering if the scary little kid would come in the night. I was pretty sure he or she wouldn't, but I still hoped. My back didn't hurt as bad, and most of the swelling from my other bruises was going down. I still couldn't move my legs, which was starting to really scare me, the fear gathering in the back of my mind like a raw blister on a heel. I knew not to worry it too much, since if it broke open I would be flooded with fear that led nowhere, worry that would accomplish nothing. I at least had the dulcimer to work on, and I supposed playing it by the lake was something to look forward to. Maybe something would happen, something important, something that would bring the scary little albino to knock me out and fix me, give me a new torso and let me

walk again so I could get out of the valley. I hated to think what it would be like if I stayed that way forever, especially where I was. I didn't like being dependent on Chandler. I forgot to mention he gave me a bedpan, which I could use okay without him but I had to empty it into a bucket he had set on the bed next to me, and since he hadn't come back it was starting to really stink. I pushed it as far away from me as I could, trying not to make it slosh around too much.

Nineteen

Chandler showed up in the morning and cleaned out my piss bucket. He seemed to be in a better mood than he had the day before, and I was relieved, somewhat. I wonder sometimes if I'm not being paranoid about what people are thinking and what their intentions are. He took out the piss bucket and cleaned the bedpan, which was nice, and brought some pancakes and some kind of good fruit juice that I couldn't quite place.

"This is really good, what is it?" I said.

"There's a tree out by the creek. Fruit on it."

"Oh. Hey, are you doing okay?"

"What do you mean?" Chandler said, not looking at me.

"I don't know. You've just seemed sort of... moody the last day or two. I just wondered if something happened."

"No," Chandler said, but with a little laugh, like he couldn't believe I had the nuts to ask him the question, to pretend I didn't know what was wrong.

"I... look, if there's something I did, just tell me, all right? I don't know why you would be mad at me."

“You’re being paranoid, Gary. I’m not mad about anything.” He said this looking at me, but with a completely expressionless, robotic face. “Don’t worry about me or Karen or anything. Just finish your little instrument so you can meet the lake people.”

“People? I thought Karen said they were fish. What do you mean, lake people?” I tried to sit up, but of course it didn’t work. I hadn’t resigned myself to the fact that I was still broken and that even if I was fixed, I would never be fixed.

Chandler let out a tired sigh. “I don’t know, Gary. I don’t know anything. I don’t know what you’re talking about at all. I meant to say fish.” He went out in the hall and came back in with a little metal pot with a sort of scaffold under it with a candle in the middle. “Here. This is the glue pot. Light the candle when you’re ready to put the goddam thing together.” He set the pot down on the big working tray. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a wad of string and threw it down next to it. “I don’t have any clamps. Tie the pieces together when you glue them, or they won’t hold right.”

“All right, thanks,” I said, giving up trying to get anything out of the cow-looking motherfucker. “I’ll see you later?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Chandler said on the way out the door. He slammed it behind him, but just a little, so I wasn’t sure if he was really mad or if it was the breeze from the open window.

“Goddammit,” I said, and looked in the glue pot. It just looked like dried glue, dark brown and thick. I thought about what Chandler had said, that the glue was the boiled heart of the bull I’d killed, and I shuddered.

I spent the rest of the morning putting the pieces of the dulcimer together and taking them apart again, scraping a little bit here and there, trying to get each piece to fit together as tightly as possible. It was really difficult since it seemed like once I got one area of the soundboard to fit together right, I would notice a bump or something on the other side and try to scrape that down, only to discover it had thrown the first side off and I had to do them both again, or else some other part would be wrong. I discovered that getting it right was dependent on relationships between the parts, that when one part did one thing it would cause another part to do something else, and the trick was anticipating the result of one action and deliberately doing it in such a way that the result was desirable. It was a process of more and more minute detail, of increasingly smaller adjustments, diminishing returns of reaction in different parts of the wood, so that finally I felt like I knew all the parts intimately and it finally fit together the way I wanted it to. My back was starting to flare up and really hurt, but I wanted to keep a clear head for the next part. I pictured the leaves in the drawer next to me as I worked, trying to strike a balance between the temptation of knowing they were right there and the comfort of knowing they were right there and I could have a couple as soon as I was finished.

I made a few final scrapes to the underside of the fingerboard, getting it perfectly straight so that it fit with the soundboard like it was made for it. Which it was, I suppose. I fished over the matches Chandler had left for me on the tray, wondering how he got matches and what he made them out of. The thing I was discovering about Chandler is that he was very resourceful, almost in a suspicious sort of way. For example, how did he make such good chisels? And how did he seem to know a lot of stuff that he wouldn't

admit to knowing, and why did he act like he didn't know what I was asking him so many times when it was obvious that he really did? How did he make matches?

I decided there was nothing I could do about Chandler at the moment, even if I had known what the deal was with him and what he was really up to. Not to mention Karen, who was still an utter mystery. And the guy on the mountain. I spent a lot of time thinking about all three of them over the time I was in the valley, and I still didn't know any more than I did the day I got there. It was annoying. I shrugged them out of my head and lit the candle with one of the matches. I set the glue pot off on the bedside table, got the bedpan and took a piss. It was weird how my cock didn't have any sensation in it, but I could feel when my bladder was full. And of course I could feel my cock with my hand. My sad, small, permanently flaccid cock. It was also odd, I thought, how the impulse to sexual desire was still there. I thought of the day before, when Chandler had been watching Karen out the window and I had wished I could see her swimming naked across the lake like a carefree seal. I couldn't have felt anything if I had seen her, but I was surprised at how much I *wanted* to feel something. It was the memory of sensation that spurred the desire for desire, if that makes any sense. I always thought that if the apparatus wasn't there, the desire would disappear. Like those eunuchs that supposedly guarded the harems in old Arabia, I thought it was because they didn't want the women that made them good for the job. The more I thought about it though, I think it wasn't because they didn't *want* to do anything, it was because they *couldn't* even if they did want to. What a horrible life, I thought. It's kind of like those stories about people who wish for immortality from a trickster genie, and they still get older and older, incredibly,

mummy-town old but they never die. They have what they want but they can't enjoy it, or even really have it.

In any case, I thought about that cheery stuff while the glue warmed over the candle flame. It eventually started giving off a cooking smell, and I carefully picked it up to check its progress. It was liquid now, boiling slightly. Half a minute off the flame though, and it gelled over on the surface and formed a skin. I put it back over the candle and gathered a brush, a knife, and the string Chandler had left, along with all of my dulcimer parts. I cut the string in seven pieces: three for tying the soundboard, three for tying on the fingerboard, and one to tie on the little bridge block at the foot of the fingerboard. I looked at all my pieces one more time, cracked my knuckles and took a deep breath. Despite my back and the bull and falling out of the tree, I had enjoyed my little woodworking project. I was in that place you get when you make things, where you can block out all the clutter of thoughts you can't do anything about at the moment. It must be something close to meditation, I think. Once I made sure everything was ready, I stirred the glue quickly with my brush and then spread it carefully and fast along the edges of the body where the soundboard would sit. Like Chandler said, it seemed to start drying almost immediately. I put the glue back over the candle and then split the difference between speed and care in putting the soundboard on, and did the same lashing it down with the string. After checking to make sure everything was fit right so far, I flipped glue down the length of the underside of the fingerboard and down the matching surface in the center of the soundboard and then tied on the fingerboard as fast as possible without fucking it up. It went on exactly as I hoped it would, and I breathed a sigh of relief. I glued on the bridge piece and tied it down, and then, after checking the fits one

more time, put the whole thing on the tray and got a few leaves out of the drawer. There were only a few more left and I thought about only having two but the upper half of my back felt like it was on slow-ember fire, like the blood was boiling my nerves away and dissolving them. I chewed the leaves, pulverizing them well enough before swallowing so they would have the full effect. I sank farther and farther into the pillow as the medicine seeped into me, leaching out from my mouth up into my brain and down, turning everything it touched into a happy pudding.

I was drifting off when I remembered the candle next to me on the table and gave a start. It took all my will just to lean up and over to blow it out. It was a good thing I had remembered, too; the wax had pooled deep around the wick and was sputtering as it got hotter, throwing little drops of it out onto the table and the side of the bed. I managed to blow it out, and then fell back again into a deep, dreamless sleep without Minotaurs, giants, or lions.



I woke up in the morning to Chandler angrily yanking the piss bucket off the bedspread beside me. A little bit of bucket matter flipped over the rim and landed on my hand. I winced and wiped it on the blanket without thinking, and then wished I had wiped it farther away. Chandler glared at me and put a fresh bucket in the old bucket's place.

"Hey, Chandler," I said, trying to sit up. I gave a grunt of frustration and pushed myself halfway into a sitting position with my arms. Despite my annoyance I noticed that my back didn't hurt nearly as much as it had the day before and the day before that.

There was still an ache in it, but it seemed like a healing sort of ache, like the parts that had been torn asunder were still damaged, but now joined again. “What’s up, buddy?”

“Don’t call me ‘buddy’,” he said. “Nothing’s ‘up.’ I just came to clean up your shit, that’s all. Did you sleep like a fucking prince? Like a fucking Emperor?”

“Not really,” I said. “Not that I’d know what a prince or an emperor sleep like. Is it different?”

“How the shit would I know?” Chandler said, looking at my work tray. “I guess you got the damn thing glued together, huh?”

“Um. I did. Thanks for the string, by the way. I wouldn’t have thought of that. It worked really well.”

“What about the glue? I boiled that fucking glue for like four hours, you know. How did it work? Or wasn’t it good enough?”

“It was fine, it worked really well. You were right about how it sets up fast. I had to really hurry to get it on there and get the parts together and tied,” I said, realizing I needed to piss. I decided to try and hold it, since I didn’t want to do it in front of Chandler, especially when he seemed so pissed about whatever was eating him. “I really appreciate you taking the time.”

“Yeah, well.” Chandler stood there for a moment, looking around the room. “I’ve really got nothing better to do than boil hearts for you and clean up your shit, right?”

“Geez, Chandler, I didn’t know you...”

“Oh, and go get your goddam breakfast, right? Fucking right, Gary? Yeah, don’t get up, man, I’ll take care of it, you just lay there and take it easy, okay?” I thought he

was going to throw the piss bucket for a second, but then he let it hang by his side. “I’ll be fucking back,” he said, and went out.

As soon as Chandler was out I reached over by the fresh piss bucket, looking for the bedpan. It wasn’t there. I guessed Chandler had thrown it into the bucket he had taken with him, and I let out a groan. “Son of a bitch,” I said to myself. The bucket was too big for me to wrangle over and piss in directly. I sat there trying to hold it in, concentrating on muscles that I could barely feel, willing them to remain clamped. “He just went down to get the food,” I thought, “he’ll be right back, it’s only a few more minutes...” I tried to take my mind off my bladder by looking at the dulcimer, how the joints had dried and how the glue had cured. They all looked good. The seam between the soundboard and the body was tight and even, and the seam between the fingerboard and the soundboard was the same. I would have to whittle pegs to hold the strings, but that wouldn’t take very long and I still had some bits of wood left over that would do perfectly. Around the time I was looking at the head of the fingerboard, deciding where I would cut the holes for the tuning pegs, I realized the sensation of pressure in my bladder was diminishing. I put the dulcimer back on the tray and lifted the blankets. “Goddammit,” I said. There was a dark stain spreading out from my crotch down onto the mattress. I was glad I couldn’t feel the wetness, though it brought to the surface of my mind memories of being very little, peeing the bed in my footie pajamas in the night when I was too scared to get up and go to the bathroom, the shadows on the walls in the waving windy moonlight coming through the window turning into toothy monsters, angry dogs, snakes, hairy somethings waiting in the corners to taste my ankles. With the sense memory I got a wave of childhood guilt thrown up on the shore of the present and I felt

my throat tighten and constrict with hot, slimy insistence, like a constricting snake in there that wanted to make a meal of whatever peace I might possess.

Of course, as soon as the stain stopped spreading Chandler came back in the room carrying a tray of bread and cheese. Irrationally, like the four-year-old I felt like, I tried to cover the wet spot on the mattress before he saw it, but I wasn't fast enough. Chandler stopped where he was, his mouth fell open, his eyes opened wide, he shifted his weight onto one leg as he looked at the ceiling like he was asking advice from someone he knew wouldn't give it. Then he looked at me again, dropped the tray on the floor and walked back out, his penny loafers squeaking against the wood floor.

I laid there wondering what to do. I didn't have many options. Again, I was glad I couldn't feel the wetness under me since I knew the pee was cooling and if I could feel it my skin would be clammy and uncomfortable. On the other hand, if I could feel it, I would have the ability to get up and do something about it. As it was all I could do was lie there, waiting for Chandler to come back and clean me up, making shitty, sarcastic comments as he did it. Out of shame and frustration I cried a little bit, hot bitter tears soaking into the pillow case, creating an annoying clamminess when they cooled that I *could* feel.

After maybe a half hour the door opened again, but instead of Chandler, Karen's huge form filled the doorway. Every time I saw her I was struck by the sheer volume of space she took up. At fifteen or so feet tall and proportioned in width and thickness to match, Karen seemed simultaneously improbable and inevitable. She leaned in around the door, her eyebrows up, checking out the situation. I pulled the blankets up and looked down into my lap.

“Gary? Are you okay?” Her voice was soft, but it resonated in that huge torso so it filled the room.

“Oh, I suppose,” I said. “Where’s Chandler? Is he mad at me?”

“Chandler’s got an attitude problem, you know. He’s a Minotaur. It’s in the blood. He can’t keep it together too well.” Karen came all the way into the room, but stayed close to the door. “Did you have an accident?”

I nodded down into my lap. “Yeah. I’m sorry. Chandler took the pan to clean it, and I couldn’t hold it. Sorry.”

“That’s okay,” Karen said, and came over to the bed. She smelled really good, like fruit and spices. “It’s probably time for these sheets to be changed, anyway. And you look like you could use some cleaning up, too.” It was true. I hadn’t had a bath in probably five days. My hair was greasy and I had been feeling increasingly itchy, especially my scalp.

“I suppose,” I said again. “I feel really frustrated not being able to do that stuff myself, you know. I really appreciate all Chandler’s help and everything. I know it’s a lot of work.”

“It’s okay, Gary. It’s not that Chandler doesn’t really want to help you, he just has a problem controlling his emotions. I think more than anything he feels bad about what happened, but Chandler’s not the kind of person who just comes out and tells you how he feels about things. Did you ever know anyone like that?” Karen had come over to the side of the bed and was half sitting on the edge of it, down past my feet. She was wearing what looked like the same loose-fitting Flintstones dress she always had on. I couldn’t tell if it was the same actual one or if she had several she rotated out. I felt that

same stab of unfulfillable desire I had felt when Chandler was looking at her out the window, that urge to want something I couldn't want. As Karen sat on the edge of the bed she held her legs together like an old-fashioned debutante, crossed at the ankles, the pressure of her squeezing the thighs together pushing the plump flesh up.

"Sure," I said. "A lot of people have a hard time talking about what they really feel about things. I've been guilty of it myself more than once."

"I doubt you've ever been as bad Chandler, though. He's kind of a turd most of the time, if you haven't noticed." Karen smiled and touched my leg. I shivered and blushed a little, even though I couldn't feel it. I laughed. "Come on," Karen said, standing up. "Let me get you cleaned up. I feel bad that you've been up here like this and I haven't even visited you. I want to take care of you, Gary. You know I really do like you, right?"

"Uh, I guess, sure," I said. "I kind of wish I'd got to talk to you more, too."

"Do you like me?" she said, leaning forward, her face open as the sky. She reminded me of some of the girls I had been friends with in middle school and high school; so direct but closed off, only pretending somehow. I couldn't tell what she was really getting at, but I was glad to play along with her for the time being.

"Of course I do," I said. "I've always thought you were really... cool." The word felt thick and foolish in my mouth.

"Good," Karen said, standing up. "Now let's get you cleaned up." I winced as she pulled the blanket down, knowing she would see the piss stain, but she only smiled and looked off into the corner. I looked down and blushed. My cock was standing straight up, straining at the fabric of my shorts. I couldn't understand it. I couldn't feel

anything. “Here,” Karen said, “let me get a towel and start running a bath and I’ll be right back, all right?”

Karen took me into the bathroom down the hall from my room, undressed me and put me in the bathtub. It was proportionally huge, big enough for Karen to stretch out in, and she only filled it about a foot, spiked with a creamy-feeling soap that smelled like crushed grass from the fields around the house. I felt like a little kid, like I was living in a dim memory of being bathed by my mother in the house we had in Kansas City until I was eight, with the pea-green tile and brown linoleum on the floor. It was slightly embarrassing, and that sense carried over to the associations I was getting in the bathtub. Karen leaned my back against one end of the tub; it didn’t have a faucet, but Karen brought a big bucket of water from downstairs to fill the bottom. My legs sat out in front of me like a pair of water-logged logs, their tops peering wearily out of the water as they waited to rot and dissolve.

I tried to keep a hand over my cock, which refused to lie down, as Karen leaned over the side of the tub and scrubbed me with a big, rough washrag the size of a beach towel, smiling and squeezing water over my hair, down my back and all over. She held out the bar of soap for me to rub some off to scrub my hair with, and after I had rubbed it in she rubbed it in some more with her huge fingers, the size of big soft round rulers. “Come on now,” she said, moving my hand. “Don’t be shy, Gary. We have to get you clean.” I wished I could feel it as she washed me down there and kept washing me. I closed my eyes, trying to imagine what I would be feeling if I could feel anything. “There we go,” she said after a while, and rinsed the washrag around in the water. “All clean.” She pulled the plug and the water drained out, creating a whirlpool at the far end

of the tub bottom. “Now we’ll rinse.” Karen poured water from another bucket over my head. It had been as warm as the bathwater when she brought it up originally, but it had cooled during the bath and it felt cleansing in a way the warm water hadn’t, like the way it felt, when I was six or seven, to run out the back door while it was raining hard and stand under the runoff as it poured off the corner of the roof.

As Karen toweled me off I wondered how it was possible, what made it happen that I could come like that, or come at all without even feeling it. It was like my body was having a life without me; going out, meeting people, feeling things, having summer romances with girls I would never meet. It was a step beyond the idea that I could want to want something, to actually have the thing I wanted to want without actually having it, only watching the end result go down the drain.

“Thanks for the bath, Karen,” I said as she carried my back to the bedroom. “I feel a lot better. It’s funny how you don’t realize how much better being clean can make you feel.”

Karen smiled, setting me down on the bed still wrapped in the blanket-sized towel. The bed pan was back next to the piss bucket; Chandler must have brought it back while we were gone. “You know,” Karen said, “I just realized you don’t have any clothes of your own, other than these. You’ve just been wearing the same things this whole time, haven’t you?”

“Sort of,” I said. “I mean, yeah, I have. Chandler sewed my jeans back together after I fell out of that tree.”

“Oh. Well, let me wash these for you,” she said, gathering up my jeans, boxer shorts, my T-shirt and work shirt, my jacket and socks. My heavy cold-weather gear was

sitting in the corner, gathering dust. I hadn't worn it since I got there because it was too warm for it in the valley. "Just stay wrapped up in that towel and I'll bring these things back later." She set the clothes in a pile at the foot of the bed, but instead of leaving she sat back down on the edge of the bed where she'd been sitting earlier. She leaned over and picked up my work tray and set it in her own lap. She picked up the dulcimer, still held together with the string, and turned it slowly. In her hands it looked like a toy version, or a perfect miniature someone would put in their doll house. "This is what you've been working on with Chandler?"

"Yeah. I just glued it yesterday. It's pretty much done, except I have to figure out what to use for strings," I said.

Karen looked at it some more, turning the dulcimer over and over. "The fish will like this, I think," she said.

"I meant to ask you, what kind of fish live in the lake? I mean, when you say 'fish' do you really mean fish, or is it like otters or something?"

Karen just smiled. "You'll like them, Gary," she said, and put the dulcimer back on the tray. "Here." Karen reached up and pulled a half dozen of her long, dark hairs and laid them carefully on the tray. "Try these. I don't know if they're strong enough. But they might work."

"Oh, thanks!" I said, picking one off of the tray. It was thicker than normal hair, but unless it was a hundred times stronger, I didn't think it would work. "I'll bet this is just the thing. For the life of me I couldn't think of what to use. This is perfect."

"Well, if it works, great, and if it doesn't... we'll think of something else. But I think it will," Karen said, standing up. "Do you need anything else right now?"

“No, I think I’m okay,” I said. “I’m going to make some pegs and try to string this thing.”

“Good. I’m going to go find Chandler, see if he’s still being a jerk. Yell if you need anything, all right?”

“All right. Thanks again, Karen. I mean really, I really appreciate the bath and... everything.” Feeling like an idiot, I held up the piece of her hair I was holding. She just smiled again.

“Don’t mention it. I’ll see you later,” she said, and left.

As soon as she was gone I pulled the work tray over and found four bits of wood to make pegs, got a sharp knife out of the tool pile and started whittling. It didn’t take long. The more I thought about it, using Karen’s hair for strings made a certain crazy sense. Getting the hairs from her had that sense of rightness that made me think it would work out. Once I had matched the pegs more or less to the holes in the end of the fingerboard I drilled with a hand auger, I cut deep notches into the ends of the pegs to slip the hairs through to keep them from slipping. Then I cut four smaller pegs and tied the ends of four of the hairs around them, and then cut holes in the butt of the dulcimer under the bridge so I could seat them.

I took inventory. I had: one dulcimer. Four hairs with seating pegs tied to the ends, and four tuning pegs with notches cut to keep the hairs from slipping. Everything was glued together, and looked sound. I cut off the binding strings one at a time, paying attention to how the change in pressure affected the glued joints and seams. Everything held up exactly. The soundboard bowed out a little, taking the fingerboard with it, but the seams held perfectly, much to my relief. I cut off all the binding strings, checked the

bridge piece to make sure it was sound, then seated the string pegs into the holes I had just cut at the base of the dulcimer. Then I ran them over the bridge and up the fingerboard to the tuning pegs. I threaded the hairs through the notches I had cut for them, and gave the pegs a few turns to take out the slack. I checked over everything again to make sure the strings were spaced correctly across the bridge and the ridge of wood I had left at the head of the fingerboard for a nut. With the head of the dulcimer to my left, the two strings closest to me were right next to each other, and would be tuned the same. Then halfway across the fingerboard was another hair that would be tuned a fifth above the two closer strings, like a two-string bar chord. The fourth string, on the far side of the fingerboard, would be tuned the same as the two closer strings, but an octave lower. It was, to the best of my memory, the way the one I had played was laid out. I didn't know about being able to tune them an octave apart, if I could tune them at all, since all four strings were the same thickness, but I figured it wouldn't hurt to try.

It took a while. When I played guitar I always used an electronic tuner since I had a crappy ear, though over the years I got better at it so I could sometimes get a fair tuning without one. I decided to tune the root strings to E, since I could play "Where is My Mind?" by the Pixies in my head, and the first chord in it was an open E and I could hear it pretty good. Once I got the string on the far side of the fingerboard more or less tuned to what sounded like the lowest E I could get out of it, the rest was pretty easy. All I had to do was tune one of the two closest strings to the low string I had already tuned, only an octave higher, and then tune that string's mate to match. Then I tuned the middle string to B, a fifth above E, and then screwed around with the pegs until it sounded right. I

knew when it was right, because the second it was in tune with itself the volume actually doubled, the whole dulcimer vibrating like an excited little animal in my hands.

I hadn't put frets on the fingerboard since I didn't know how to space them correctly, and I had been a little worried about it. Not having them actually seemed to help the sound a little, though, which made me glad I hadn't tried to put some on and ruined things. I found a short, oblong piece of smooth, rounded wood from my little scrap pile to run up and down the two closest strings with my left hand while I picked and strummed with my right. It was a different angle, of course, but it wasn't that different from playing guitar. It was really just a matter of knowing how it was tuned and what was where, following the ear. That was the hardest part. I sat up there with it for a couple of hours before I figured out if I just quit thinking about where the frets were supposed to be marking the notes and how they weren't, my hands would find them on their own. What surprised me the most was how well Karen's hairs worked. They really were a hundred times stronger than normal hair and they had a really cool sound to them, sharp and clear but with a certain smoothness that didn't jar the ear. I was also surprised that the bridge seemed to be the right height and that the strings sounded correctly all up and down the fingerboard without any buzzing. For having no experience and no practical knowledge about what I was doing, I thought the whole thing turned out really well. It wouldn't win any beauty contests; there was no Mother-of-Pearl inlay or carved scrolls, no decoration at all, actually. But it played, and that was all I cared about.

After I had played it for a while and felt like I had worked out whatever kinks there were in the setup and in my playing, I set the dulcimer aside and laid down against the pillow. My back was aching pretty bad by that point, and I thought about chewing

the last couple of leaves in the drawer, but I decided not to. I had the feeling I would need my wits about me. Besides, the pain wasn't really that bad. It was the kind of pain you get after doing some good work, and I didn't want to lose it so quickly. It was the same way I had felt about being high a few days before. I wanted to enjoy it while it lasted, to bask in the afterglow of finishing the dulcimer after climbing to get the wood and all that had entailed, killing the bull for the glue, and all the carving and thinking and devising that went into it. I sat and looked toward the window, watching the angle of light change, imagining what it looked like outside, the lake down below and the green grass beyond, and the glacier looming blue-white over it all.

Twenty

I decided again to skip the leaves before I went to sleep, so I slept shallow and dreamed thin, brittle dreams about walking, skipping, searching. Sharon was always up ahead of me, buying a vanilla waffle cone, standing at a window looking in on some scene or other, holding her arms across her front like she was keeping some small something warm. She wouldn't see me. I rushed across whatever surface toward her, calling, but she wouldn't look over or hear.

I woke up feeling thick and rubbery before the sun filtered through my window. Whatever membrane in the head catches rest and stores it for use it was full and thick, vibrating with a rare bass frequency under the weight of my thoughts. I wanted to take my dulcimer out by the water and play it as the sun came up. My back hurt above the break, but there was still nothing from below except the dull feeling of fullness in my bladder. I hooked the bedpan and used it, dumped it into the bucket with a wince. Even

overnight in that chilly climate it took on an unpleasant, skunky thickening smell which, when stirred up, coated the nostrils. I laid back and watched the light fade slowly up through the window, waiting for Chandler or Karen to show up.

I felt restless, and I knew it was going to be a long day. My tendons and muscles and bones all felt like my brain; full with the weight of too much rest, a capacity of rest that couldn't be sustained, everything tight and wound as if the cells themselves were tiny springs twisted hard like the individual fibers in a rope, creating the shape and tension of the overall construction. I felt ready for something, anything. I didn't know what might happen down by the water, but I didn't care much at that moment as long as it was *something*. I had been lying in bed for a week, pissing in a bucket, eating what Chandler fed me, only getting that one bath from Karen, eating narcotic leaves and sleeping hallucinogenic fever-dream sleep most of the time. I thought about playing the dulcimer while I waited but it somehow seemed wasteful, like there was only so much playing time in the wood and I needed to save it.

I only had to wait about an hour before Chandler showed up, bleary-eyed and huffing through his massive snout. He didn't say anything at first, he just took the piss bucket off the bed and out of the room. When he came back he had a fresh bucket. He put it on the bed and then stood by the window, rubbing his eyes with his thick fingers.

“Hey, Chandler, how's it going?” I said.

“Nunya,” he said.

“Huh?”

“Nunya. Nunya goddam business.” Chandler turned around and came over to me, dragging his feet like a zombie in a bad movie. “What about you, Gary? How're you

doing? Getting better? Feeling like a fresh fucking daisy, a princely fucking champ that doesn't need his piss cleaned up by a hungover Minotaur every goddam day? Any chance of that?" The last couple of days his tone had shifted from grouchy-but-not-unkind to purely grouchy, closer to sullen, pouty and dickish. As he spoke he lifted the blanket and looked at my legs, gave them a ginger poke. I thought for a moment that I could feel his hard, callused finger on my calf, but knew it was just wishful thinking.

"I don't know, Chandler," I said, trying to pull myself into a more erect sitting position. "I feel okay, I guess. I'm pretty restless, though. You think you could take me down by the water?" I picked up the dulcimer and plucked the lowest of Karen's hair strings. It vibrated throughout the room in such a way that if it was a liquid it would have been hot and thick and sweet like hot chocolate, maybe with some whiskey in it. It hadn't sounded so rich the day before. It was as if the parts had settled into each other, enhancing the properties of each in the process. Chandler gave a start, his eyes widening from reddish lumpy slits into an expression of stunned interest. "I think it's ready," I said, "I mean, it's what Karen wanted, right? She said I should play it by the water."

"Um," Chandler said, distant. He scratched his balls, looking through the dulcimer, mouth half open. He took a long, slow breath. "Yeah, that's what she said," he said finally. "You want anything to eat, or do you just want to go down there?"

"Oh. I don't know. I don't feel that hungry. Do you think I should?"

"Beats the shit out of me," Chandler said, coming out of his reverie. "How the hell should I know? Loretta always used to say I shouldn't go swimming after I ate. You ever hear that?"

"Uh huh," I said, smiling a little. "But I'm just going out *by* the water, not *in* it."

“Whatever. Just make up your mind. It’s almost time for me to take a crap, so I want to get you settled, one way the other. Goddammit.”

“I’ll just skip it, then. The food, I mean.”

“Whatever,” Chandler said. He came around the bed and flipped the covers off me, then picked me up. “You need that fucking thing?” he said, nodding at the dulcimer.

“Yeah,” I said, and he leaned over far enough for me to grab it. As we left the room I felt a little ball of excitement forming in my belly, the kind that feels like a kiss from a new lover. I wondered if Karen was going to be down by the water, and if she was, if she would be impressed with what I’d done. “Hey, where’s Karen?” I said as Chandler and I were going down the stairs. “She might want to come see this, since she was the one who suggested it ...”

“I don’t know where she is,” Chandler said. “She left this morning and walked off somewhere or other. She never tells me shit.” He spat this last out like a staple. I smiled again.

“Oh well,” I said. “No big deal.”

When we got outside, I started to get nervous. I had been thinking about this moment in the vaguest terms, but hadn’t really thought through what would actually happen when I started playing by the lake. What were the fish like? What would they do? What would happen when they came up, if they even did at all? The ball in my stomach swelled and the rest of me tightened. It wasn’t a bad feeling at all; it was just that feeling you get when something unusual is about to happen, when you don’t know what it is, but you’re not scared enough to forgo finding out.

Chandler marched me out the front door, across the immediate front lawn and out to the water. He stopped a few feet from the edge and put me down, leaning me against a medium-sized boulder so I could sit upright. My legs just sort of laid there at odd angles like an afterthought, my feet inches from the water. I hadn't been this close to the water before. Looking out across the lake from the level of its surface, it looked much larger than it did from the downward angle of my bedroom window. Also, the water was more transparent from close up. I could see that it was deep; the shore didn't seem to slope down into the water at a gradual angle, but drop right off, as if it had vertical sides that ran straight to the bottom. It was hard to tell how far down I could really see, but it seemed like a long way before the shadows of depth blended up and collided with the streaming-down sunshine, blocking it from exposing the void below.

"All right, I'm going to take a dump," Chandler said. "You sit here and fiddle around with your whatsit, and I'll be back when I'm done."

"Sure, thanks, Chandler," I said, grinning up at him. "I'll just stay here, playing with my whatsit. Sounds good."

"Shut up, Gary. Why do you have to make everything dirty?" Chandler frowned down at me, his horns swinging long and unruly out to the sides of his head. He snorted once, raining a bit of moisture.

"Nice. Now I have Minotaur snot on me. Thanks."

"Fuck off, jerk," Chandler said, and walked away.

I was left alone, staring across the water, back against the boulder, holding the dulcimer. Beyond the lake, the glacier rose up out of the green valley floor like a cold idea, casting its shadow below, turning the bright green grass and trees dark. The sky,

one of those unrealistic, translucent crystal shades of blue, was offset with equally unreal-looking wispy white clouds. I had one of those moments, sitting there, when everything seemed unlikely, unreal, as if existence itself couldn't exist the way it was supposed to exist, and I should definitely not be able to see it any particular way. I have that feeling still sometimes, like I don't feel like a human. I'm just something in a weird casing with flesh branches on it for moving. Hair like a curiosity, being and thinking and feeling.

The sheer improbability of circumstance that led me to be there: My mother meeting the particular man who sent a specific sperm into that particular egg which developed on the particular path of gene development dependent on diet and environment and temperature and God knows what other variables to be me, and for that baby to grow the way he did and go the places he went, to eventually make the arbitrary decision to call a personal ad and meet Sharon and then follow her through six years of life, to watch her die, to follow another arbitrary path to Alaska, to find this valley and the rest of it. And the paths that Karen, Sharon, Chandler, Dan Tacos, and all the people I had ever known, those endlessly complex and twisting paths which were subject to change at the smallest action.

I thought about certain moments that I could have done different things and my life would have been completely different. The one that wore on my mind as I sat there by the lake was the decision to call the personal ad that Sharon had posted those six and a half years ago. I almost didn't call it. And if I hadn't, where would I be? I wouldn't have met Sharon and Carrie, and they wouldn't have met me. Who would have taken care of Sharon? Anyone? Or was I the only one meant for that job? I suppose Althea would have worked things out, but the more I thought about it the more I realized that I had a hand in their relationship, to a point, in that they didn't show each other much

affection until I encouraged Sharon to try and break that shell. How would their lives have been different without me? Would they have been happier or not? Of course I was inclined to think that they would have been unhappier without me, but that was just me being self-indulgent.

I had built the dulcimer and I had it in my lap, ready to play. But I hesitated. I had that feeling again, the feeling I had in retrospect about the things I had done that had changed the course of things for me, and I wanted to think about what I was doing. So I sat there and thought about it. If I played the dulcimer, something might happen. The fish in the lake would either come up or they wouldn't, and if they did they might just come up only to look at me politely. On the other hand they might come up and do something to me, hopefully something good. I couldn't imagine what, but something. And there was the chance that it might be something bad. No matter what, it was likely to be weird at least, if not scary. Naturally, scariness isn't something I embrace.

I thought about it for a while and came to the conclusion that I didn't have much choice. In the end I think those other times, the times I made those important decisions without realizing it, it was the same. If I hadn't called Sharon's ad, I would have just continued on the path I was on, working and living the way I was living without growing, without changing the shape of who I was. It's like the way a turtle's shell changes over the years; layers build on layers slowly, each one a close, but not exact, approximation of the layer beneath until eventually, if the turtle saw its younger self, it wouldn't recognize it, it would be just some strange turtle.

That made me sad. But regardless of how I felt about it, it was happening anyway. Losing Sharon had shown me that the past doesn't exactly exist. The person I was when

she was alive and the family we had died with her and was now just a layer on my shell, already being covered by another layer. I wondered, and this made me sad, too, how much of my grief was directed not at Sharon and everything she had lost but at my own loss, my own little death. With her gone I had lost my family and my home. I hadn't realized before how much the concept of a home could be tied up in the people who lived in it, rather than the structure itself. I was carrying my home around with me, and had been the whole time. And if that was true, then the past was my home, and always had been. Even then it was still totally abstract, and wasn't really real. It occurred to me that maybe everything is like that. There's no objective reality, and all we can do is filter our past through whatever lens we happen to favor.

It made me think of a girl that Jack, a drinking buddy of mine, had been with for a couple of years, Terri. She was unpleasant, really moody and demanding. She was always putting Jack down, going into rages at him, and getting really pissed if he did anything without her or wasn't paying full attention to her needs at all times. The thing was, she told Jack she had been molested as a kid by her step-dad, and that was why she had emotional problems, and she couldn't help it. And I think that's why Jack stayed with her for so long, because he felt bad for her and wanted to help her. But that was the thing, no matter how patient Jack was, no matter how much he talked to her about her problems or listened to her or let her treat him like shit, she only got worse. I never liked Terri, and I was glad when Jack broke up with her, but the main thing I didn't like about her was that claim, that she didn't have any control over any of it. Bad things had happened, and from what I saw, she either let it control her life, or she was using it as an excuse to be a raging, bitchy, selfish jerk. She kept molding the future around the shape

of the past, refusing to ignore the one horrible thing that had happened to her outside her control, relinquishing control of everything that happened afterward.

I couldn't understand that, and I didn't want to be that way. Sharon had died, and it was horrible, but it was outside my control. I didn't have to let it control me. I didn't have to mold the shape of the future around the shape of the past. I could kick off that old shell and walk naked for a while until a new shell grew new layers of a different color and shape. As much as I missed Sharon and wished she hadn't died, she had and there was nothing I could do about it. If the universe was so cruel and arbitrary and uncaring, it didn't make sense to keep doing what I had been doing, which was basically trying to destroy myself. It seemed to me that a more meaningful form of rebellion would be to live well.

Thinking about her and the death not only of her but of us, and just as importantly the death of Carrie's original, unblemished childhood, I started to pluck the strings on the dulcimer. Karen's hair had stayed in perfect tune overnight, which surprised me. Usually instrument strings go out of tune after the first couple of tunings, and you have to adjust them until they settle. But the hairs sounded loud and perfect. I moved the dulcimer in my lap into a more comfortable position and tried out a few picking patterns, eventually settling on a waltz time, alternating with hard percussive strums with the backs of my fingers on the two upbeats and a hard thumb pluck on the higher strings on the downbeat. I got the stick I had been using to fret the day before out of my pocket and experimented with different chord progressions until I found a rotating circle of fifths that I liked, alternated with a dissonant fourth at the end of each circle. I started to feel it the way I used to when I was just learning how to play, like what I was doing was fresh and

new, like I was charting uncharted territory, feeling excited about the sounds. The dulcimer was so loud and clear that the sound traveled across the lake, over the field and up to the glacier where it hit and bounced back at me. I adjusted my playing tempo to match the slapback from the glacier and felt more synced with the dulcimer and myself and the sky and the water, two blue mirrors with me and the world sandwiched between.

I kept my eyes pointed up toward the sky and top of the glacier, watching the tips of the dreaming blue mountain silhouettes beyond and the sun sinking toward the edge, not thinking about what I was doing, just plucking and hearing the sound, trying to channel everything into the song. I forgot about the lake. A cloud slipped over the sun, casting the valley into glowing shadow as its light diffused like that of a strong bulb coming from under a lampshade.

A rippling caught my eye and I looked down at the lake's surface. With the direct sun off the water I could see down into it, far down into the deep cylinder of the lake.

Somehow I kept playing.

All along the walls of the lake, I could see shapes poking out from little cavities, little earthen caves lining the round curve of the wall like what I imagine ant houses would look like in an ant high-rise, lined into the walls with the bare minimum of space and the maximum of collective social closeness.

The shapes moved out into the water, and I could see that the shapes that had been originally poking out of the holes were heads. Small, sleek human-type bodies followed the little round heads out, still just shadows down in the water with little wisps of hair floating off the tops like matches with ghost flame sputtering, little legs kicking and scissoring flickers.

I kept playing the waltz and the shapes swam out into the center, about halfway to the bottom of the lake, and met in a knot. Then they swam around each other, individuals breaking off from the center in time with the music, sometimes meeting and hooking arms together, sometimes just passing or tapping feet. I leaned forward and peered down, watching them swim. It wasn't exactly like a water ballet or synchronized swimming, because it wasn't that organized, but there was a certain loose, anarchic order to the movement. I felt a little jealous, watching them. When I was a kid I would go to the pool a lot, and I always liked swimming underwater. But I was always frustrated with how little time it took to get that drowniness in my chest that forced me to push for the surface. I would let out all my breath and sink to the bottom in the deep end and sit looking up at the shimmery surface for as long as I could stand it. I imagined what it must be like for the people in the lake, never needing to surface, always floating free in the warm deep womb, always surrounded and safe and close.

After a while my playing started to slow down and I leaned farther and farther over the water to watch the little shadow people swim until my back was screaming at me somewhere in the far reaches of the back of my brain. I was so entranced with what I was doing that I barely felt it. The swimmers were slowly rising toward the surface as they circled, and I thought I could see the vague outlines of their faces here and there: the shadow of a nose, the fleeting circle mouth shape, a hint of ears and eyes. I couldn't look away from them, and as they rose closer and closer to me I could see that they most closely resembled children, smooth, sexless, naked children, lineless and with a bare minimum of features.

As I watched, I gradually stopped playing the dulcimer and let it slip off to the side where it sat half in the grass, half on my leg like it was waiting to go somewhere. The swimming figures rose until they were pushing the last few feet of water between them and the open air into convex sliding humps, the fast, flexing movement of their arms and legs kicking bubbly wake swirls behind. They came closer to the shore now, only a few feet away from my useless feet. I was grinning for some reason, though I was terrified. The swimmers looked more or less human but seemed distinctly inhuman somehow, aside from the obvious fact that humans don't live underwater in little pods along lake walls. Like I said before, they seemed sexless, and now they were so close I could see that indeed they were. They had no nipples and no sex organs that I could see, and nothing that could indicate gender differentiation. They all had the same thin shock of pale hair floating out from their heads, which seemed to be the only hair on their bodies. They didn't seem even to have eyebrows.

I smiled and watched them swim by for a while, not sure what the hell was going on but feeling happy that something was happening, at least. Again, I was terrified, but there was nothing I could do about it unless I wanted to try crawling away, an idea that seemed pointless. I jumped a little as the swimmers got closer and their hands came out of the water, reaching up to tap my feet as they passed, but then I started to laugh. Their hands were totally white and lineless; the fingers creamy thin as if they were formed out of rubber. As creepy as it sounds it wasn't actually that bad. After everything that had happened since I got to the valley the lake people seemed unusual at worst, whereas in the normal world they would have seemed like the creepiest thing ever. Especially at night, when one was sneaking into my room to knock me out. I don't know why it took

me so long to put it together; I should have known as soon as I saw the first one swimming out of its little hole, but I didn't until they were right up close to the surface, slapping my foot with their little flapping wet white hands. I sat up even straighter and looked up at the glacier as if there were someone up there I wanted to tell what I'd figured out. There was nothing but the cold knife profile of the glacier's summit, translucent blue against the glow of the sun's cloud-muted glow.

I turned around, excited, and saw Karen and Chandler standing together about fifty feet behind me, watching. They looked a little sad. I grinned and waved at them and Karen gave a weak smile and a little wave back. Chandler just nodded vaguely.

"They were the ones that fixed me!" I called, wishing I could get up and run over to them. "I thought I was fucking nuts, but it was them! You guys said there was no one else, that there was no one ..." I looked at Karen, who was looking off toward the glacier. It was hard to tell, but I got the impression she was avoiding my eye. "But you had to know ..." I said, more to myself, "you're the one who told me about the lake ..." I don't know if she heard me or not, but Karen turned around and looked the other way, off towards the mountains where there was a thin line of smoke coming off the tallest, hanging in the sky like an imaginary crooked hair. I looked at Chandler, but he just shrugged and smiled a little, then gave me the finger.

I sat there for a few moments, dumbfounded, staring around the boulder at them, Karen looking off like there was something interesting in the sky and Chandler giving me the finger and grinning like he'd really put one over on me. In the middle of pulling in a deep lungful of air to shout at them again I felt something tugging at the point in my hip where feeling reestablished itself. It felt gentle and noncommittal at first, and I thought it

was just my imagination but then it pulled more firmly and I turned back toward the water. A tiny arm snaked out of the water's edge, the hand at the end of it clamped around my ankle. My first instinct was to scream and jerk my leg away, but since I couldn't move my leg I just screamed and flapped my hands around. It didn't do any good. The hand stayed where it was, tugging and tugging, becoming more insistent with each pull. I looked around me for something to hit the hands with, but there was nothing close by but grass, aside from the large boulder I was leaning against, which I probably couldn't have moved even with all my limbs. For some reason using my hands to push the hands off or to hit them wasn't an option; it was like my subconscious contained a preformed sense-memory of the disgusting, rubbery, semi-solid texture of the lake children's skin. I already knew that if I touched or hit them, my fingers would sink into the skin like accidentally touching a rotting animal. It would be hot and viscous, like creamy, honeyed-liquid movement under the surface, and I couldn't bring myself to do it.

The most I could do was to lean forward and look down into the water. The face attached to the head attached to the body attached to the arm attached to the hand attached to my ankle was staring up at me. I felt like puking. The smooth, white, rubbery looking kid had very few features, but the one he did have made it look exactly the way I looked at about four years old; blond with blue eyes, smooth indistinct features, thin mouth and close-set ears. The fine hair wisped off the top of its head Kewpie Doll-style. It smiled at me without opening its mouth, but even so I could tell there was no cavity behind the blue-tinted lips, there was only more skin, or some kind of dark membrane. Even the eyes, which seemed to move, looked up close like they were

painted on, or like they were part of the face skin and moved by strange, minute muscles underneath.

I just kept screaming while it floated there, inches below the water, smiling up at me like it had a great secret to impart, but the suspense was too great to end just yet.

“Chandler! Karen! Help me! It’s got me, it’s got me it’s got me it’s got me!” I thrashed my arms around as best I could and whacked the back of my head against the boulder, but it didn’t do any good. The water monster kept pulling on my ankle, harder and harder. I tried to hang on to the boulder but it was too wide and awkward; I tried to turn myself around and hug it, but I couldn’t quite maneuver. I looked around and there was a second hand sliding out of the water. It clamped down on my leg and I looked back in the water. There were two of them now, both identical, weird mirror images sent from some crazy other dimension to pull me into the lake and drown me. Once the second hand was clamped firmly around my ankle they gave me identical smiles, synchronized perfectly, and pulled together. I couldn’t really feel it, but I knew my ass was sliding across the grass toward the edge of the water, because my back and shoulders were moving away from the boulder. Out across the water the rest of the children, maybe as many as two or three hundred of them, were circling faster now, throwing up white combs of water as they passed close under the surface.

For some dumb reason I grabbed at the dulcimer, which had fallen off my lap and was sitting innocently in the grass as I was pulled into the water. I don’t know what I thought it would do for me, but it definitely wasn’t big enough to keep me afloat. “Karen! Chandler! For God’s sake!” I screamed as my hips slid in the water and I could feel the icy sting of it for the first time. I couldn’t see them now, since the boulder was in

between me and them, though I thought I could see a sliver of Karen's brown hair along the top edge of the gray rock. Whether I could see them or not, I knew they were still there, pretending they didn't know I was about to be drowned. I should have known I couldn't trust them, and I wished I had set the house on fire or something while I still had the chance.

My chest cleared the shore and I flopped the rest of the way into the water, still holding the dulcimer. As the two children turned over and started pulling me down, I took a deep breath, and then I was under. The air in the body of the dulcimer tugged it back toward the surface, and I let it slip out of my hand. I didn't figure it was going to do me any more good, and maybe it would make Chandler and that dirty bitch Karen feel a little guilty to see it floating by itself. I watched it up there, sitting on the shimmering silver surface, riding the skin between me and the sky as the children dragged me deeper and deeper down. All around me the other ones who had been circling were diving behind us, swimming around me, mocking smiles on their faces.

The lake was incredibly deep, much deeper than I had been able to tell from the surface. I watched as the dulcimer got smaller and the oxygen in my lungs got shorter. I tried pulling away from my drowners with my arms, but it seemed to burn the rest of my oxygen immediately and my arms went limp as the pressure in my chest built. The light was so far above me now that I knew even if I broke loose I couldn't make it back up there. The shadow of the dulcimer became indistinct among the glints of light among the little waves the lake kids had left, and I looked down and around me. I couldn't tell if it was getting darker or if my vision was starting to fail, or both. The pressure in my chest was becoming a panic-tinged pain, and I was having a hard time controlling the urge to

breathe involuntarily, knowing that as soon as I sucked water into my lungs I really was finished. It's funny how even in a moment like that, when it's obviously the end and there's nothing to be done, I still couldn't admit to myself that I was about to die, that it was over, the end of me. I still thought if I held on long enough I would be taken someplace with air, like a cave under the lake or something. I looked around me, watching the dark, oblong holes in the lake walls move slowly up as we went down past them, wondering how long I could will myself alive. My lungs were on fire now, the sensation spreading out into my arms and up into my head, making my eyes feel swollen and hot as if they would rupture any second.

And we kept moving down into the darkness. I had been so preoccupied by my lungs that I hadn't noticed the water pressure building against my eardrums until finally something broke in first my left, then my right ear. I assume it was my ear drums rupturing and the pain seemed, for a moment, to trump the pain in my lungs and the rest of me, a white-hot lancing, aching fluid pain that blotted out everything. Having just lost the last shreds of my ability to think, I closed my eyes and tried to scream. As I did it, I blew out the last few bubbles of my last breath, choked, and then drew in double lungfuls of water, which felt like double lungfuls of lava or melted metal, and I doubled over, still moving down.

I was grateful for going numb.

Twenty-One

I woke up half in the shadow of the boulder Chandler had leaned me against before I drowned. I was lying on my back, stretched out, with my head resting in a thick

clump of grass. The sun was just streaming over the mountain tops to the east, the strong beams hitting my eyes like a loud noise. I blinked up at the clear sky, feeling the top of my head warming in the glow, and looked around. To my left I could only see the boulder, the gray stone still in its own shade, damp with dew in the craggy runnels of shape.

To the right was the lake, and beyond the glacier still loomed. I felt uneasy for a moment, realizing I was in the same spot I'd been when the weird lake kids dragged me down, but then I was distracted by the fact I wasn't dead. I looked at my hands and arms, and half sat up. I was naked, but I was all there. I didn't think to try out my legs, but looking back, I think I subconsciously realized I could feel the morning sun on them.

As I half lay there wondering what had happened and how I got where I was, the surface of the lake stirred out in the middle. I watched it, frozen as it seemed to dip in the center and then throw ripples out toward the shore. I gave a start as the disturbance moved toward me, the water being thrown up by something under the surface, something big. The sun was glaring on the water, so I couldn't see down into it the way I had in the evening but I pictured all the creepy little kids in the lake just underneath, racing across from the middle of the shore so they could grab me again and finish me.

I started crawling backwards, using only my elbows and twisting my body around as best I could, trying to move away from the edge without taking my eyes off it. The thought of being grabbed from behind by something I couldn't see, and not knowing the precise moment it was going to get me, was somehow much worse than seeing it coming, whatever it was. It still hadn't occurred to me that my legs might work again; after all that was my secret hope in the whole process of making the instrument and playing it for

the lake people, and they were the same creepy little kids who had sneaked into my room and fixed my arms and everything. All the same, I was half asleep and very groggy, and my head felt swollen and hot, almost like a hangover, but without the queasiness.

The main drawback to crawling backwards was that I couldn't see what was behind me, and I didn't have the presence of mind to plan ahead or think about anything other than how scared I was, so I backed right into the boulder as I tried to go directly opposite the lake. My head hit it first and then my shoulders, but I still kept trying to press through it, keeping my eyes on the water. The disturbance was almost to the shore, and then suddenly something broke the surface. It was another pair of hands, and I gave a little scream. It didn't register that they were much, much larger than the hands that had grabbed me before, and they weren't nearly as pale and rubbery. As they gripped the edge of the land near my feet, the hands threw up a giant splash of cool water that washed over my legs. It made me wince and woke me up a little more, so that it finally occurred to me that I shouldn't have been able to feel it, that the muscles were twitching involuntarily. My attention was momentarily split between the hands on the shore and my now-functioning legs, but then something huge and dark emerged.

I cowered against the boulder for a couple of seconds until I realized what it was. The dark thing was Karen's head, streaming dark hair and freshets of water behind it, and it was her hands that were planted on the shore, not those of the creepy little lake kids. I still flinched back as more and more chilly lake water washed up onto the grass as first Karen's head, and then her shoulders and arms cleared the water just a few feet in front of me, and then her voluminous breasts, which acted like big, fleshy ramps for the water. She emerged to about the bottom of her rib cage, and then floated there with her arms

crossed over her belly, her breasts resting on them as the rest of her body rested on her elbows in the grass. I was still leaning against the boulder facing her, my terror melting away. I couldn't stop looking at her shivering tits.

“Hi, Gary!” Karen said. “How do you feel? Better?”

“Uh ...,” I said. I hadn't had time to think about it yet, but I did feel different.

“You look really good,” Karen said, squeezing more water out of the back of her hair with one hand. As she turned her head I saw a mole there on the side of her smooth, long neck. It was long enough that I could have laid down on it with my legs on either side of her shoulder and been comfortable. As I felt a familiar stirring of heat through my midsection, I again became aware of the fact that I was naked. “You look more ... fit, or something.”

I looked down at myself and gasped. She was right. My body had lost most of its fat, and the muscles now stood out in soft relief. I had never seen my abdominal muscles before, and my chest was also defined for the first time. Oddly, the long, fine light brown hair that had patched out from the center of my chest and spread down across my belly to my crotch was gone; only the pubic hair remained. “I didn't realize,” I said. “I'm sorry, I feel kind of ... confused, or something. I'm not sure what happened, I thought I was ... dead.”

“Oh, you were!” Karen said, giving me a bright smile. Her breasts were perfect and huge, each one probably the size of my entire torso. They were firm and sleek, tapering from a wide base down to a rounded cone-shaped end, tipped with hard, pinkish nipples. I kept trying not to look at them, but my eyes were drawn back to their swaying motion, the goose bumps spread over their surfaces, the perfect, unblemished skin. “You

were dead for a couple of days, actually,” Karen said, “but you’re alive again, right? Alive and perky.” And much to my surprise, she reached over and took my rigid cock between the thumb and forefinger of her right hand, gave it a gentle squeeze and then stroked the underside with her thumb. I gasped and twitched against my boulder, feeling a fiery stab shoot from my groin up into my belly. Karen just grinned, now a little mischievous, took her hand back into the water and blushed. “It’s good to be alive, isn’t it?” I got the feeling her hand wasn’t just sitting idle under the surface.

I was now fully awake and felt like my skin was on fire. “It is good,” I said, breathing a little heavy. “It’s really good, especially after being ... not alive. It feels really ... strong.”

“Yeah,” Karen said, looking me up and down. “I’ll bet. I’ll bet it makes you want to, I don’t know, move around? Do you want to swim with me? Because, you look a little hot. Don’t you feel hot?”

“Yeah, I really do,” I said, standing up for the first time since the accident with the bull. It was the first time in weeks and I suddenly felt immortal, like I was a giant or a god carved from some flexible, indestructible material that only gods are made of. “I feel like I’m on fire, actually.”

“Come in, then,” Karen said, pushing off the shore, floating away on her back, her eyes still on me. “The water feels really good, really cool and good.”

I watched her for another moment or two, watching her breasts float and bob above the surface, the quick flash of shadow from between her legs when she kicked out farther into the water, and then I jumped in. The water didn’t feel so cold, and I remembered that Chandler had told me it came from a hot spring down in the bottom,

which was the only reason the whole valley wasn't covered in ice like the rest of the land around. Whatever chilliness there was left disappeared as I pulled hard across the water, feeling the new strength in my arms and legs, feeling my lungs inflate and deflate in a way they hadn't for a long time. Since I had started smoking at fifteen, and even before that since I was never inclined towards athletics, I had felt half drained and flabby without even realizing it. I suddenly felt like a bigger, more developed version of my little kid self, when all my parts had been new and the force of gravity hadn't pulled so hard, when I was small and could run up and down the street all day and never get out of breath. It was as if every burden of adolescence and adulthood had been taken off me, the plaque of worry extracted from each and every cell, my physical self re-created by a kinder, more considerate God.

I shot like a horny seal across the water to where Karen was floating inclined on her back and slid up her belly, between those huge tits and up to her face. The friction between her skin and mine was electric, like there was a charge between us. It reminded me of something that nagged a little at the back of my mind. Her lips and eyes loomed ahead of me, three times the size of mine and we both laughed at the physical awkwardness of our kissing. Again, I had the sensation of being a kid again just from being so outsized by her, I guess. I suppose there could be weird associations made about mother figures and that kind of thing, but I don't think that's what was going on. I mean, I'm six feet two inches, and in the regular world there's not many women that are much taller than me, much less women who are three times bigger. Alan, who's six-seven, was always fantasizing about those ultra-tall beach volleyball chicks who are like six-six or

whatever. Scale is a strange thing; it can really make a difference in how you perceive a situation.

Between the lake water and her spit, kissing Karen reminded me of my first kiss. It wasn't nearly as unpleasant though, because Karen tasted like honey, a sort of spicy honey that made me think of buzzing field of bees with floating pollen. She wrapped her arms across me and held me between those magnificent huge titties, and I felt like I was finally a functioning piece of the universe, like there was something to look forward to and there was never any death, not really. I had always wanted to feel that way and had even fooled myself into thinking that I did a couple of times, but deep down I always knew it was bullshit; I'm really an existentialist at heart, I guess. No God, no afterlife, the only real choice we have is between suffering and suicide, all that stuff. But being there, encapsulated between all that flesh I felt for a little bit that the world wasn't just an illusion.

I won't go into a lot of logistical detail, but I'll just say that Karen and I had sex there in the water and then three more times on the shore. It was like her body had some sort of sexual energy-replenishing vitamins in it that fed through my skin and made me need to go over and over, and I guess she felt the same because she shouted and shivered and seemed to get as much out of it as I did. It was a good thing she was so perfect, ideal skin and everything else. It made me think of the dirty parts of *Gulliver's Travels* my high school English teacher told us not to read that we immediately went out and read, the part where Gulliver goes to Brobdingnag and the young giant women want him to hang around in their dressing room. Gulliver gets sicked out because he says at that size he can see every defect, every little hair and blackhead and enlarged pore. I especially

like the part where they keep setting him on their nipples, and when he sort of implies they use him for a dildo.

Eventually we were all used up, lying together in the patches of sun on the side of the lake away from the glacier, looking up at it. My sense of wholeness was more complete than ever. I have a theory about what happened when Sharon died. The way I see it, when you live with someone for however long, and your lives become intertwined and your life is their life, your souls sort of grow together. Whatever souls are. Take the term 'souls' figuratively or literally, whatever you want, I'm not interested in arguing their existence. But whatever it is, the essence of people's lives, whatever it is that they create together, whatever parts of them that become connected, call that the soul. My theory is that when Sharon died her soul was torn away from mine, leaving a big, ragged wound. That wound made me feel like I didn't have a home or a family, like I didn't want to live or think or be anything anymore. I didn't think that hole would ever close, and it might not entirely. Or maybe it will, and the scar will ache and itch like an amputation, and Sharon will be my phantom limb.

Whatever it was, at that moment lying in the soft grass next to Karen, the wound felt closed or at least patched with a temporary bandage, like someone found a scrap of Sharon's soul on the floor and taped it onto my soul. It would eventually dissipate since a dead soul, like a dead body, can't keep existing without being alive, growing and turning into something new, falling into the future the way the rest of matter does, but for the time being I felt like I was home again, like I was whole and home with her one more time.

I looked over at Karen's profile etched into the green background blur by a golden line of sunlight, and sighed. She even looked sort of like Sharon, mostly in the nose and eyes, though I hadn't noticed it before. I looked up at the sky, where the silver moon was fading out of the deepening blue like a gentle wave from a distant friend. If there's one thing I had learned from Sharon and her sickness, it's that the world is what it is and things happen, and trying to control them is usually not very productive. I figured everything would fall apart on its own sooner or later no matter what I did, so I might as well go along with it and enjoy feeling like my old, human self for a while.

"How do you feel?" Karen said, rolling toward me. Her still-damp hair was pulled into a lumpy, untied ponytail held together by wetness, reminding me of every pretty girl I had ever seen at a swimming pool in my life.

"I feel very, very good right now," I said. "How about you?"

"I feel like I just ate something really delicious that I'll regret later." She said this frankly, looking deep into my eyes.

"What do you mean?" I said, feeling my stomach drop a little. Karen raised her head a little, motioning toward the house behind us. I looked around at it, but didn't see anything. "What?"

"Up, see the window over the entrance?"

I looked up and groaned a little. Chandler was standing up there, looking out at us. It wasn't like he was balling his fists and screaming, but from the way he was standing I could tell he was upset. I knew what Karen meant. We had done something very satisfying that was going to cost us a lot in the long run, maybe more than it had

been worth. I felt embarrassed, knowing that Chandler had been up there watching.

“Shit,” I said, turning back to her. “What’s that mean?”

“There’s no telling,” Karen said, looking back across the water. “I’ve lived with Chandler for a long, long time, and I still don’t know everything he’s capable of, what he thinks about and why. I suppose I can’t help but love him a little, but I don’t know what he wants from me. Sex, I guess, which wouldn’t be a big deal if he didn’t make it one. I don’t know. I guess I’ll never understand him. It’s kind of sad. I hate to see him eat himself up the way he does. He’ll be hard to live with for a while. There’s no telling.”

“You’ve done it with him before?” I said, knowing how it sounded, but unable to help it.

“Sure,” Karen said, smiling. “We’ve been here for like two thousand years, Gary. Doesn’t it seem inevitable? Of course, that was about twelve hundred years ago and he’s been obsessed about it ever since. Like I said, I don’t know what he wants, a guarantee or something. Forever’s a long time. I don’t think he really understands that.”

“I’m not sure I do either,” I said, sounding pouty against my will.

“Oh, jeez,” Karen said, frowning at me for the first time. “Don’t tell me you’re jealous too. That’s all I need, two jealous men running around, pouting and huffing. I thought you’d be different, you know? I thought you’d understand ...”

“I do, I do,” I said, “It’s just that ... I don’t know, it’s a surprise. I mean, Chandler told me he had a thing for you, but I guess I didn’t think about what may or may not have happened. I just didn’t think about it. But it’s okay with me, really.” With great effort, I put on a reassuring smile. Karen looked at me for a few moments, unsure, but then she returned it.

“I’m glad. I like you, Gary, and I’m glad you’re here. I just hope we can get along okay now that we’ve been together like this.” She reached over and squeezed my arm, and I knew everything had just become difficult again.

“Sure,” I said, “no problem at all. Everything’s fine with me. What should we do about Chandler, though?” I looked back over my shoulder, and he was still standing up there, looking down. Now he really was clenching his fists, and I felt a little nervous. He was pretty big.

“I wouldn’t worry about it too much,” Karen said. “He might try to beat you up, but he won’t try and kill you or anything. I don’t think. Just avoid him for a while and we’ll see how it goes.” She sounded very casual about the whole thing, and I started to wonder about her. She was starting to remind me of the kind of girls I had known throughout my life who would ask for favors that would invariably get me in trouble somehow. “Well,” Karen said, standing up and stretching, giving me an interesting view, “I’m going to go for a walk in the woods. I’ll see you at dinner?”

“Uh, sure,” I said, a little disappointed she didn’t ask me to go with her. “I guess I’ll just hang out ...” She wasn’t listening, but was walking around the edge of the lake toward her clothes, about thirty yards away. I sat and watched her pull her dress over her head. That’s all she wore, and I started feeling excited again, thinking about what was underneath it, even though I had just seen it and actually satisfied myself with her body several times. I tried to push the thoughts of her warm, naked skin away, the shape of her breasts and ass, the soft down between her legs ... I shook my head and noticed Karen was smiling over at me, holding the hem of her dress down with one hand, swaying back and forth.

“I almost forgot,” she called, “I found this in the water this morning. I thought you’d want it back.” She held out the dulcimer with her other hand, waving it back and forth like someone offering a tasty treat to an especially obedient dog. I walked over to her, trying not to think too hard about my raging hard on, acting like it wasn’t there, just letting it swing out in the breeze like a horizontal clock pendulum.

“Thanks,” I said, taking the dulcimer from her hand, fighting a strong urge to stick my head under her dress just for a few moments. Karen kept her hand on the hem of the dress, smiling down at me.

“Well, see you later, Gary,” she said, winking. She gave a little wave and walked away, shaking her ass in a way that was both suggestive and, I was sure, deliberate.

I felt annoyed with Karen as I walked back toward the house, wishing I didn’t have to be worried about Chandler and my out-of-control libido when I should have been glad that I was alive and could walk again. My head and groin may have been a mess, both literally and figuratively, but my legs seemed to be in pretty good shape. They felt strong and solid as I walked across the lawn, full of springy energy. I even jumped a little to warm up, and felt a vague sense of satisfaction through the cloud of worry I was under. I figured if nothing else I could run like hell if Chandler tried to do me in.

Truth be told, I felt sorry for him more than I was scared of him. I could imagine what he must have felt like. I imagined how I would feel if I had watched him out the window having sex with Karen, and my stomach clenched.

In the house, I walked up the stairs and peeked around the wall to my right, looking down the long hallway that led to my bedroom. I half expected Chandler to be there, since that’s where the window looking out on the lake was, where I had seen him

standing earlier watching me and Karen. I let out a big breath when I saw the hallway was empty but I still crept along, keeping to the center of the burgundy carpet runner as I went. As careful as I was, the boards under the runner still creaked like hell, way more than I had ever noticed before, even when I heard Chandler or Karen walking on them.

I got to the big window that Chandler had been watching us through and stopped. I stood there for a few moments, feeling a mixture of confusion and disgust. There was a huge glob of a pearly, transparent substance that could only have been semen, the volume of which led me to surmise it could only have come from a male creature the size of a Minotaur. After this little Sherlock Holmes moment, during which I shuddered at the thought of Chandler spraying onto the window while he watched Karen and I screw on the lake shore below, I walked on down the hall. I managed to get to the last door on the right, my room, without making another sound. I congratulated myself and pushed the door open, then let out a groan.

Chandler was sitting on the bed, facing the window. He was sitting on his big, knobby hands, his head inclined in such a way that reminded me of my own self-important sulking as a teenager. He didn't look around but I could see his face in profile, and as I watched, as if he had timed its arrival to coincide with my own, a tear slid quietly out of Chandler's big cow eye and tracked its way down the side of his face where it hung on the edge of his jaw for a few moments, catching the sunlight from the window, magnifying the room in miniature before it fell onto his oxford shirt's shoulder and soaked in, leaving a dark stain that he probably thought represented the dark stain I had left on his soul.

“Chandler, look,” I said, coming the rest of the way into the room. “I’m sorry, it was just one of those things, you know...”

“Four times, Brute?” Chandler said, his voice quivering. “Four? Right in front of me?”

“Brutay?” I said. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“I guess you don’t know your Shakespeare very well, huh, public school?”

Chandler finally turned toward me, his eyes narrowed, his mouth pressed into a hard line. “You know, Julius Caesar? Et tu, Brute? You went to ninth grade, right?”

“Oh, yeah,” I said, trying not to laugh. He suddenly reminded me of my younger sister the time I spray painted her Barbie’s hair green. “Look, like I said, it just sort of happened. I woke up and she was there, and she ... you know, sort of came on to me. It’s not like I went after *her*, we just sort of ... did it.”

“Oh, *right!*” Chandler said, sarcastically. “You were just there, and she was there, and you both happened to be *naked*, and as you were saying hello Karen fell out of the lake and your dick accidentally fell into her cunt, and while you were trying to figure out what was going on, you just kept fucking for like an hour and a half, right!” He laughed a weird, sarcastic, high-pitched laugh and stood up. I still had the dulcimer over my crotch but it wasn’t making me feel better the way it had been before. Now I just felt like I was trying to protect my nuts from a hammer with a walnut shell. It had been a while since I had really noticed how big and muscular Chandler was. He looked like a computer salesman or an accounting student with his white oxford button-down tucked into khakis with brown loafers, but his chest and arms bulged against the fabric as he leaned toward me with his arms out. His disproportional head made him seem top heavy,

like he was about to fall over on top of me, pinning me with those long, pointy horns, chewing my stomach out with those big, flat, grass-chewing teeth.

“Look, I can see you’re upset,” I said, backing away. “If you’ll just let me get in my room to get some clothes I’ll go back out and let you cool off, and we can talk about this later, okay?”

“What do you need clothes for, loverboy? You’re just going to find Karen and give it to her again, right, you fucking jerk? Huh?”

“No, Chandler, I ... I don’t know if that’s going to happen again ...” I lied, “I mean, I like Karen, but ...”

“Don’t fucking lie to me, you little douche,” Chandler said, coming closer. His arms were still out in front of him, his hands curled into hooks ready to scoop me up. His breathing was coming slower and heavier now and I could smell it; a hot, spicy smell that reminded me of how the meat market my mom used to go to smelled when I was a kid.

“You don’t know what she’s really like, Gary. Now that you’ve got a taste, you’ll want it all the time. You won’t be able to think about anything else. Don’t tell me you’re not thinking about getting more right now, even as scared you are you’re thinking about those big, sweet titties, that fragrant box, that smooth, milky skin ... I know, Gary. I know what you’re thinking.”

“No, I’m not, Chandler,” I lied again, still backing down the hallway. I was trying to guess how far the stairs were behind me while trying not to imagine what would happen when Chandler sprang at me, but he was also right. Under those thoughts there was a constant stream of sexual fantasy involving me and Karen out by the lake, in her bedroom, in my bedroom, in the woods, in every position and variation. I said, “I’m not

like you. I can control it. She doesn't have that kind of hold over me." It's funny how you can convince yourself of things sometimes, things you know aren't true. But even as the words were coming out, I was convincing myself that it was the truth, that I didn't have it that bad for Karen. "I hate to say it, but I think you're just jealous."

"Jealous? *Jealous?* Of course I'm jealous, you goddam idiot! I'm fucking *really* jealous! I'm murder-your-shitty-human-ass-for-fun jealous! I'm triple fucking murder suicide jealous, man! That's what I'm trying to tell you, Gary, that she's got me so crazy jealous I can't help myself, I want to die! I want to die, Gary!" He came toward me faster now, hot tears leaking down into his facial fur, matting around his snout. His breath spouted fast out of his nose, throwing fine droplets of moisture almost fine enough to be mistaken for steam. "And that's how you're going to feel before long, pal," Chandler said, adopting a sadder, wide-eyed, fatalistic tone. "She'll do you the same. After a while she'll get bored and she'll turn you away. And at first you'll be able to deal, but eventually the memories will start to eat at you and you won't be able to sleep, and you'll be like me. You'll want to die, too."

"No, I won't, Chandler. I won't." It's also funny how sometimes you think if you just keep saying something it'll be true. That's how I feel about Christians and it makes me laugh, but I have to admit I do it, too. Everyone does, sometimes. "And I don't think you really want to die, you're just upset right now. I'm really sorry you saw that, I'm really sorry I did something to make you feel bad. After everything you've done for me, that wasn't right. I should have thought about that. But what happened happened, and I can't take it back. I just wish you would calm down so we can talk..."

Chandler shook his head, like he'd just noticed it was covered with stinging bees. "Shut up, Gary! You don't know! You don't know." He stood there breathing heavily, the light from the window streaming in over his left side, darkening his right side and throwing his shadow onto the wall. "And I don't want you to know. Not ever." He started toward me again, not slow or fast, but steady.

I turned to run down the stairs, but they were right there and as I tried to put my weight on my left foot to turn I discovered it was above the first step. I had one of those cartoon moments in which I felt like I was hanging in midair. If I had been Wiley Coyote I would have looked at the camera and held up a sign that said something like "Is there a doctor in the house?" before I plunged forward. The thing about falling down stairs is that it's really difficult to catch yourself since you're falling on such an uneven surface. I hit the fourth and fifth stairs, trying to stop myself with my left hand while I cradled the dulcimer against me with my right. That threw off any stability I might have had and my left arm collapsed beneath me as I rolled thumping and sliding down to the first floor.

As preoccupied as I was with falling, I heard Chandler following me, his big feet stomping the risers just behind my head. As soon as I hit the floor I jumped up and ran for the door. I crossed from the landing and tore the door open fast as a blink. I was well across the lawn before I realized I wasn't even hurt from falling down the stairs, and that I actually felt pretty good. My body felt tuned and I was reminded of how I felt when I killed the old bull out in the field, how my legs had felt.

I ran twenty or thirty yards, then stopped and turned around. I felt something rising in me like light diffusing through my cells, a kind of liquid energy that I only imagine certain artists must feel when they're doing their best work, a sort of all-

powerful feeling like I was a glowing ball of sun, the source of creation, the sum total of the meaning of existence, the opposite of the drudgery most people spend their lives in, one of those shining moments that make it all worth while personified. Fucking *ubermensch*, right?

Chandler wasn't far behind. He had long legs and he was running all out, his head down, his eyes bloodshot and watery. He had actually split his shirt open Incredible Hulk-style, along the biceps and the buttons, so it was hanging open down the front, showing his hairy, huge chest. His khakis were also split down the thighs from running so hard. Somehow it really struck me as funny and I laughed as he ran after me, feeling the fuck-all, couldn't-give-a-shit feeling I hadn't felt in a long time, probably not since I was a kid. Unlike Chandler, who said he wanted to die, I just didn't care if I did or not. It's a good feeling, though it's kind of a paradox: You feel most alive at the times you probably won't stay that way for long.

I laughed and when he got to me, shaking the ground and bellowing with his head down, I jumped to meet him.

As he tried to grab me with his hands, I put my arms around Chandler's neck and let my momentum carry me around, just barely under his horns, so I was on his back. He stopped and tried to reach up and grab me, but since I was still naked and now sweaty his hands slipped off me and I grabbed his horns, sitting on his shoulders. I felt like I was riding a motorcycle with big ape hanger handlebars and I pulled them back and forth like I was steering and made motorcycle noises.

"Brrrrrrrrrr, brrrrrrrrrrrrrrroooooommmmm! Let's go, bull chopper! Go! Gogogo!" I screamed, yanking Chandler's head from side to side by his horns, laughing

like crazy. “Oh, wait, here you go,” I said, and farted against the back of his neck.

“There’s a motor for you, right Chandler? Right, you fucking psycho? You like that?

Yeah yeah yeah!”

Chandler was running around with his hands over his head trying to grab me, but his head was so big that it was too hard for him to reach all the way behind it and get a good grip on me. “Let go of my goddam horns, Gary! Don’t touch my goddam horns! I GODDAM HATE WHEN PEOPLE TOUCH MY HORNS!” I just laughed some more and jerked his head around. I was a little surprised with myself since it’s usually not in my nature to be cruel, but the surprise I felt was distant and clinical, like it was someone else. Chandler started freaking out. He had never said anything about hating to have his horns touched before, but I guess there had never been a reason for it to come up. I felt a little bad torturing him, but at the same time he had threatened to kill me, and I was in such a crazy mood it was easy to overcome whatever sympathy I might have had.

“Get it up, bull chopper! Let’s go! Brrrrrrrrroooooooooooooooooommmmmmmmm!!!!”

Chandler lost it and started screaming. He started running for the lake. I just laughed and kept pretending like I was steering him by the horns until I saw he was heading for the boulder he had leaned me up against when my legs still didn’t work.

“Hey, look out, Chandler. You’re going to run into that rock, man! Look, I’ll let go, just calm down, will you...”

“Leggo leggo leggo leggo leggo leggo leggo LEGGO LEGGO LEGGO MY GODDAMMIT HORNS ...” Chandler chanted, still running right for the rock. I shifted my weight over to the left a little and waited for a good opportunity to jump off. I was finally aware that I was riding twelve or thirteen feet off the ground and I didn’t like the

idea of falling off and fucking my back up again, especially when I was torturing the person who I would need to take care of me. Just before Chandler hit the rock though, I made a jump for it, landing in the water. Chandler hit the rock and tripped, splashing in a few yards away.

Chandler kept thrashing, throwing his arms up over his head.

“Gary!” he said, mouth half full of water, “I can’t swim, you fucker! Help me!”

“Are you seriously?” I called. “How come you can’t swim?”

“I don’t...” he swallowed some water, “...have fucking time to tell you whole story, asshole. Are you going to help me or what?” His head was riding low in the water now, and he sounded tired. His flailing had slowed and while his voice was lively, I could hear the beginning edge of exhaustion creeping into it.

“And you won’t try to drown me if I come over there?” I said, starting toward him.

“Gary, for fuck’s sake...” Chandler said, and started to sink. I crawled fast over to him and grabbed his big-ass hand before it disappeared under the water. While Chandler’s struggles couldn’t technically be classified as swimming, he had managed to move himself a good way from the shore, about halfway out to the middle of the lake. I pulled on his arm, but he was so heavy it was all I could do to get his head above the surface again. My reward was a stream of snotty lake water shot in my face from Chandler’s bull nostrils as he struggled to clear his airway and get a good breath. I almost sank in disgust but managed to get his arm around my neck and start pulling slow toward the shore.

After a few yards the water stirred in a circle like there was a sudden tornado coming down over us. Little chopping waves sprang up, folding over little white tops

against the transparent blue. I didn't think too much about it except that it was weird, since the sky was still clear and it didn't look like a storm, but I kept swimming until I felt Chandler getting heavier by increments. I looked down around me and saw those little swimming forms under the water again, moving in a big circle underneath me and Chandler.

"Oh, fuck a duck," I said, and swam harder. There were three of the creepy little lake kids hanging on to Chandler's legs, tugging at him, and as I watched two more joined them. Our progress slowed to a crawl.

"Gary, don't let them get me, okay?" Chandler said. He didn't sound like I had ever heard him before, like a scared little kid begging his father to check the closet one more time.

"You let them get me, remember?" I said, toying with the idea of letting him go. "Do you remember that, you son of a bitch?"

"Yeah, but that was different, that was for your own good. If *I* go under, I won't come back."

"Why?"

"Again, Gary, I don't have time to explain. Just don't let them take me, please? Carry me over, Gary. I don't want to go. I don't want to, not yet." Another pair of kids had swam over and grabbed on to Chandler. Their faces were indistinct under the water, just blurred shadow shapes, but I got the feeling they were smiling. Once they started pulling I barely made any progress with Chandler at all; it was getting really hard just to hold his head above the water.

“I’m trying, Chandler, just hold on. We’re getting close.” This was mostly a lie, but not entirely. We weren’t really that far from the shore, but we might as well have been miles away, as likely as it was that I would be able to pull him there against all those creepy little water kids. Still, despite the fight we’d been having, it seemed as important to save Chandler as it would have seemed to save myself. Over the weeks I had known him Chandler had done a lot for me and we had gone through a lot together. He had become a friend, no matter how much he yelled at me or accused me or put me down. I felt like he was a part of me now, and I didn’t want to see him go.

I started pulling as hard as I could, which I was surprised to discover was a lot harder than I had been pulling. Say what you want about the creepy lake kids, but they fixed me up pretty good. My legs and back and arms and lungs and heart all felt strong. Even my blood felt more efficient, carrying more oxygen to my muscles than it used to. I felt like a big, flexible piston as I folded and unfolded myself, pushing through the water against the resistance of both Chandler’s weight and the weight of the six little fuckers trying to pull him away.

I actually thought for a minute or so that we were going to make it. But then another small swarm of kids, at least five or six, swam up and joined the others, almost doubling the weight I was working against. I heaved and strained for a few moments more but then Chandler started slipping out from under my arm. There just wasn’t enough friction between us to keep him there against all that weight, and the muscles I was holding him with were finally running out of oxygen and strength.

“Gary?” Chandler said, gripping my arm. “Don’t let me go, Gary, please! Please, Gary, I want to stay.”

“Well, if you’d help a little…” I said, trying to pull harder. “At least kick with your goddam legs, maybe you can shake them off.”

As if this was a rare, bright idea Chandler started kicking like crazy, scissoring his legs in every direction. A few of the kids lost their grip, but only for a few seconds at a time. As soon as they let go, it seemed like they shot right back on with better grips.

“I can’t shake them, Gary! Do something!”

“Goddammit, Chandler, keep trying! I can’t do it all myself, you know! You have to help.” I pulled, but I couldn’t keep up the pace, and Chandler was just hanging there like an anchor, crying and freaking out. After a bit all I could do was keep our heads above the water. The water kids pulled us slowly toward the middle again.

“Chandler! You have to fight and kick! Don’t just fucking float there, jackass!” But Chandler had regressed to a limp, weeping lump.

“It’s no use, Gary,” he said, turning his head a little to look at me. I had never noticed how truly big, round, brown and cow-like his eyes were. Maybe it was the tears and the look of resignation in them, but I thought I could feel something tearing in my chest, he looked so sad. “Just let go. Maybe they’ll leave you alone. Tell Karen that …well, tell her I never meant any harm.”

“Godammit, if you’d just *help*,” I said, trying to ramp up my efforts again. There was nothing left to draw on and I let out a yell of frustration. As I struggled against the weight I felt little slimy fingers on the arm I had around Chandler. They were prying my fingers loose from his shoulder and pulling at my arm. I tried to look into their faces, but they wouldn’t take their heads out of the water and all I saw was their pale, floating hair billowing in their own little waves.

The next thing I knew they had pried my fingers and arm away from Chandler enough that he had slipped away from me.

“Thank you, Gary,” Chandler said, looking at me one more time before disappearing under the water. The water kids gave me a little push toward the shore as they dove after him. I dove down, knowing it was pointless, and tried to follow but they were moving away fast, Chandler’s upturned face growing smaller and smaller, his arms out toward me, his face both beseeching and serene. I opened my mouth to scream after him, but only got a throat full of water. I watched as long as I could until Chandler’s features became as indistinct as his drowners before I kicked for the surface.

Twenty-Two

I laid upstairs in my bed, waiting to hear Karen’s heavy steps coming through the front door, up the stairs, down the hall to my room. I divided the time imagining Chandler’s death and the sound of Karen’s approach, and then her face when I told her what had happened. What was worst was it was my fault. If I’d been able to control myself I wouldn’t have had sex with Karen and then Chandler wouldn’t have been upset and we wouldn’t have fought, and I wouldn’t have driven him into the lake. It was like Harrell and how now his wife was widowed like me. Only it was my fault, what happened to her. What happened to Sharon was no one’s fault. I had been blaming God, but the more I thought about it the more I realized God didn’t give a shit what happened to any of us. He didn’t play an active role, and that being the case, he didn’t have anything to do with Sharon’s death directly. That had only been a series of unlucky circumstances that had no significance in themselves but just turned out, in their sum

total, to have horrible significance. I wondered, if there was a God, what he or she did with his or her time. I decided it didn't really matter. Even if I knew, it wouldn't change anything. I was still here, missing a wife and adopted daughter, a fugitive murderer. As I thought about Sharon and Carrie I got homesick again for the first time in a while. I wished I could at least go see Carrie and Althea and Lynn and Alan and my parents. I really wished I could talk to Sharon, but the sadness of not being able to was losing its edge. It was starting to seem natural that she was gone, a fact that held its own kind of fresh, new sadness.

Somewhere in the dark, after silence had come down over the valley, I must have fallen asleep. When I woke, watery light bounced off the glacier in through the window, throwing a watery blue cast over the pale walls and the yellow bedspread. My brain felt too thick and full to think about anything, so I didn't bother. I just watched the light for a while until I became aware that I had to piss. I climbed down, dragged the big porcelain chamber pot from under the bed and used it. I was still naked. As I pissed I thought back and decided it had been almost two full days since I had clothes on. It's funny sometimes how only a day or two can seem like a lifetime, or at least one of those eras in your life that you don't realize are even eras until they're over. I still couldn't believe Chandler was gone for good.

My bladder muscles seized, and the rest of my body stiffened. If I had come back from the bottom of the lake after a day, why couldn't Chandler? I remembered he said if he went down he wouldn't be back, but how did he know, really? He had seemed like he was guessing about a lot of things over the time I had known him, and he could have been wrong about that. I didn't know why it hadn't occurred to me right away that he

might come back, but as soon as I thought of it I grabbed onto the notion like a shiny lure and held on tight.

Still naked, but now flinging little drops of piss onto the floor and the edge of the bedspread, I ran for the door. I pelted down the hall, down the stairs, and out the house. The sun hadn't been up for long. It was just peeking over the top of the tall mountain, where there was already a thin finger of smoke pointing at the blue above. I headed for the boulder, the one I had woken up under, and the one Chandler had tripped over the day before when he fell in the lake. It was sitting still and gray, dew-dappled. As I ran closer I was increasingly convinced that when I got to the other side of the boulder I would find Chandler curled up asleep, somehow improved. Maybe his temperament would be kinder; maybe he would be bigger or smaller; maybe he would be able to do sweet magic tricks. Maybe he wouldn't be a Minotaur anymore but a real boy, ready to climb trees and do chores for his dad. My mind was racing, outstripping my legs as I pumped toward the shore.

I was so sure he would be there that as I came around the side of the boulder I actually thought for a second that I saw Chandler there, but it was only the boulder's shadow lean-bleeding into the edge of the water, ruffled in the morning breeze. I stood there panting, trying to make myself see him lying there again. I didn't. I scanned the edge of the lake, thinking maybe the water kids left him somewhere different. There was nothing but the usual scatter of rocks, the grass, and the glacier looming over everything. Wisps of steam swirled aimlessly off the surface out in the center, the hottest part of the spring-fed water reacting with the morning chill. I felt lonely as hell. I knew Chandler wasn't there but I didn't have anything better to do so I walked around the lake, ignoring

the chill on my skin. The run from the house had warmed me and the disappointment of not finding Chandler seemed to have insulated me against the breeze. After a while I sat down on another rock and picked at the grass, trying to regain the ability not to think.

I sat there until the sun flooded the valley floor. I didn't notice too much when it touched my skin, taking the chill off it, pinching a little at the nerves with radiant heat from a million miles away. From where I was sitting I could see the little finger of smoke up on the tall mountain and I wondered again who or what could possibly be up there. Normally I would have assumed that it was a person, but given recent events I didn't. I wasn't sure I really wanted to know, actually. If Chandler and Karen had been good to me, weird but good, then it would stand to reason that if who or whatever was on the mountain didn't want to live with Chandler and Karen it was because the mountain thing had a different way of looking at things and may be none too friendly. And then the fact that Chandler and Karen had avoided talking about the mountain thing very much made me wonder if they weren't shielding me from something unpleasant.

All the same, as I sat there I wondered if maybe I shouldn't try to come up with a way to get up there. I had begun to think that movement was preferable to non-movement. Besides, I thought maybe I would find a way out of the valley, another goal that had been forming in my head. I had that homesick feeling. I knew I couldn't go home because of the police and the situation with what had happened to Harrell, but I wanted to be around people again. It would be halfway like going home just to see a normal-sized, completely human person again. I wondered whether I dared sneak back to Oklahoma to see Carrie somehow.

I sat there by the lake for most of the morning. I couldn't think of anything else to do but wait for Karen to show up. I didn't feel hungry. As the sun was climbing toward noon I saw her come out of the trees, off toward the tree where Father New Year had almost killed me with the chunk of wood I made the dulcimer with. She was smiling to herself, walking with long, jaunty strides toward the lake. I was on the opposite side from her approach, so I could watch her without moving. She didn't seem to notice me as she walked up to the edge of the water, stripped her dress off, threw it on the ground and walked into the water. It sounds odd but I could have sworn she was maybe as much as a foot or two smaller than she had been the day before. It was hard to tell, of course; at that size, subtle differences are hard to detect.

I was only waiting for Karen to notice me there so she would come over and I could tell her about Chandler, but I wound up watching her swim for a while. I tried getting excited watching her, but now nothing happened, at least not physically. It was like when I was paralyzed and I had wanted to want her, but my body just wasn't interested. When Karen finally noticed me sitting there I knew I couldn't put off telling her what had happened.

“Well hi, Gary,” Karen said, swimming over. “How long have you been watching me?”

“Since you got here,” I said, my voice thick with tension. “Where did you sleep last night?”

“Oh, I don't really sleep,” she said, smiling as she looked me up and down, her eyes lingering on my crotch. “I usually just walk around at night, looking at the trees and the stars. Last night was good. I had a lot to think about.” Her breasts were resting on

the grassy bank; the nipples contracted into pink pebbles as she spoke, a rose shadow creeping on her neck and cheeks.

“You look ... different,” I said.

“Is that good or bad?” Karen said, moving back a little.

“Oh, it’s not bad,” I said. “You’re just as beautiful, but I was thinking when you were walking this way you don’t look quite as tall as you did. It’s probably just my imagination, though.”

“Maybe,” Karen said. “Do you want to take a closer look?” She grinned at me and pushed off the bank, back into the water. I hesitated. After what happened to Chandler I didn’t like the idea of going back into the lake, not to mention I knew I should tell Karen what had happened to him. At the same time I wanted to put off the inevitable and have her one more time. I waited for the blinding urge I’d felt the day before to come over me again, but it didn’t.

Thinking again about Chandler being dragged down to the bottom, I slipped into the water and swam after Karen. We circled for a little while, Karen grinning, making me chase her, and I followed a little halfheartedly. She finally let me catch up to her in the warm center.

“Did you talk to Chandler?” Karen said, rolling over to face me. I stopped and thought what to say. “Was he mad? What did he say?”

I didn’t want to lie. “Well, he was pretty upset,” I said. “I guess he watched us from upstairs and when I went up there he was waiting. He yelled at me some, and then he started chasing me. Then I managed to jump up on his shoulders and grab his horns.”

“Oh, he hates that,” Karen said, smiling fondly. “What did he do then?”

“Well, he freaked out and I couldn’t get off him. He ran over here and tripped, and we fell in the water.”

Karen, who had been smiling and listening while she tread water, froze. “What happened then, Gary? Did he get out?” She sounded scared, and the look on her face suddenly matched the gray feeling in my belly. I shook my head.

“No, I tried to pull him out but the water kids ... I thought maybe he’d be back this morning. That’s why I came out here, but I haven’t seen him ...”

Karen stared at me. All the pink drained out of her face and her skin took on a pale, marbled tinge. “Gary, listen. This is really important. If you’re playing some kind of joke you need to stop now, because it isn’t funny.”

“I’m not joking,” I said. “I’ve been sick about it all night, waiting for you to come back. I didn’t know he couldn’t swim. Once we were in the water I tried to pull him out, and I would have made it if the water kids hadn’t pulled him down. They all ganged up, there was a bunch of them pulling his legs, and then a couple more pried my fingers off him... then they pushed me away and took him. They took him straight down. I’m really sorry,” I said, and started crying. I wanted to cover my face, but I was treading water so I just turned away from Karen and cried into the water.

When Karen finally spoke, her voice sounded huge and loud, right behind my head. “WHY DIDN’T YOU SAY SOMETHING RIGHT WHEN YOU SAW ME, GARY? WHY DIDN’T YOU COME FIND ME LAST NIGHT? WHY DIDN’T YOU DO SOMETHING?”

I turned around, suddenly scared. Karen was so beautiful, and I had been so preoccupied with my sexual feelings for her that it had never occurred to me that as a giant, she could have picked me up and squashed me into a hamburger patty.

“Karen, I’m sorry,” I said, trying to swim away from her without bolting in a panic. Her face was now low in the water, her features arranged in a non-verbal definition of menace that no one could misinterpret. “I swear, I tried as hard as I could to pull Chandler out, there were just too many of them! And afterward I was exhausted and I wasn’t thinking straight I guess, and I didn’t know where you might be. And then I thought since I came back from the lake that maybe Chandler would, and I sat up waiting all night and came out here at dawn, but he wasn’t here and I didn’t know what to do... please don’t blame me, please. I tried to save him, I really did...”

“SHUT UP, GARY. LET ME THINK.”

We bobbed there for a while. “Look, I really am sorry,” I finally said. “Is there anything I can do? I mean, is there any way he can come back?”

“I don’t know,” Karen said, the worry falling back across her face. “I suppose there’s only one thing I can try, though. You might want to move back, Gary.”

I swam back away from Karen toward the shore. “What are you going to do?” I called.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “But if I don’t come back, look along the glacier. You’ll find something there for you. Will you do that?”

“Sure,” I said, “but where are you going? And why wouldn’t you come back?”

Karen just shook her head. “Watch out for the man on the mountain, Gary. He can be really tricky. If I’m not back in the morning, look along the glacier. You’ll know what I mean.”

“But wait, who’s up there? You know, don’t you? Who is it?”

Karen just smiled and shook her head again. “Be careful, Gary,” she said, and then dove down into the water. I dunked my head under and watched as she pulled herself down, her huge arms and legs kicking against her own buoyancy, pulling her farther and farther away. I watched the little holes in the lake walls, but none of the little kids came out to follow Karen. I wasn’t sure if that was a good sign or not.

Coming up for a breath every so often, I watched Karen until she was a faint shape down in the shadows. After a while I swam back to the shore and sat there for a while. I felt wiped out again, though it was only mid-afternoon. I decided I was tired of being naked and walked up to the house. It was dead quiet when I walked in, though there was something comforting about it instead of fearful. I made my way up the stairs to the bedroom and found the spare clothes that I had brought from Oklahoma with me. As I put them on I remembered where each came from; Sharon had bought the underwear for me at Target after all my old ones had holes in them and she couldn’t stand to look at them anymore. I had bought the T-shirt at a Wesley Willis show at the Green Door, a night that I got severely drunk and drove home blacked out. The jeans came from the thrift store at 23rd and Meridian, where I bought a lot of my jeans. The flannel shirt I had bought at Wal Mart when I was in high school, maybe sixteen or seventeen. It had held up well, but the fabric was thinning and there tears were developing along the seams. The blue, yellow, white and black dye muted several shades lighter than their original

hues. The socks had come from Wal Mart, the boots from the Redwing store when I still worked.

After I had put everything on I felt weird. They were an old, dirty skin. All the memories attached to the clothes seemed remote and distant, like places remembered by someone else, someone in a book I'd read or had met one time. They felt like someone else's clothes, but I didn't have anything else to wear and it was getting chilly, even though it was still afternoon.

I didn't know what to do with myself. I climbed up on the chest under the window and sat there for a while watching the lake and wondering whether Karen or Chandler would ever come back out of it. I thought about sitting there all night, waiting for the sun to make its round until it was time to see if Karen had done whatever it was she was trying to do. But I didn't last long. I was too tired and as I took off the shoes, socks, flannel and jeans and climbed up into the bed I felt just a little bit of weight fall off me, and felt light enough to pull up the covers and fall into a dreamless state.

Twenty-Three

Karen never came back. I waited for three days but there was no sign of her, Chandler, or anyone but me. I walked around the lake several times a day looking for any signs of movement, wondering if maybe I would see Karen down there waving up at me to come help her. She simply wasn't there.

It only took a day after her absence for the valley to take on an autumnal, leaf-falling sort of feeling. There wasn't any change in the temperature but it seemed to me that the cast of the light had changed just a bit, and instead of a nourishing feel, the

sunlight felt thin and watery like it does sometimes. It has something to do with hanging around at loose ends, I think. I felt bad in general. Alone with nothing to do and no one to talk to made me think more about Sharon, and then I felt guilty about what happened to Chandler, too. And I felt worse as the days went by and I became more certain Karen wasn't coming back, either. I wanted to go home. Everyone I'd met since Sharon had died had disappeared. I wondered what happened to Dan Tacos, if he ever made it to his cousin's compound. At that point I felt so low that just giving up and going to prison seemed like a good idea.

What's ironic is that sometimes when you feel that low you get restless. I knew that heavy feeling in my bones wouldn't go away until I was moving on to some goal or other. There were only a couple of options: I could find whatever was along the glacier that Karen had been talking about the last time I saw her, or I could try and find a way up the mountain. I got the impression Karen hadn't wanted me to go up on the mountain or know about whoever was up there and whatever he might have to do with the creepy kids in the lake. I didn't know if she wanted me to stay away because it would be dangerous, or if she was just scared. Either way, I was leaning toward climbing the mountain. There was no real good reason, but it felt to me like a fork in the road, but one that would loop back to the straight path like those scenic routes you can take along the highway sometimes. I had the idea if I went up the mountain I would still be able to come back down and find whatever was along the base of the glacier, and I also had a feeling if I didn't climb up there, I'd always wonder what I'd missed.

Of course I didn't know fuck all about mountain climbing and I still don't. If there had been any Sherpas around as I was getting ready they surely would have been

taking bets with each other on how long it would take me to either freeze to death or tear one of my organs out on a sharp rock.

I found some rope, a hammer that looked like it might do a reasonable job as a pick (not that I really knew what to do with a pick, even if I had a real one), rigged a bag out of an old coat, put some food in it, and that was pretty much it. I had my flannel and my jeans and the rest of it, and I found some big skin clothes in Chandler's room that I managed to cut down into a sort of dorky-looking cloak and hat, but tied with an old bootlace I found.

Nerdy or not, as I walked away from the house for the last time I felt that autumn feeling dropping away and the weight of the fur wrapped around me seemed more natural. I felt like a caveman taking big wizard strides out across the virgin wilderness on my way to nowhere in particular, but somewhere I would probably kill a bear. I had found Chandler's cache of homemade matches, so I knew I could start a fire if I got stuck out in the cold. I still had that feeling that I was headed for a scenic loop, that what I was doing was a reasonable option and I would land back on track no matter which way I went. It was just a matter of time.

I took my caveman wizard strides toward the forest, the tall mountain looming taller ahead, the glacier receding behind me like a friend watching a friend leave town. The ground rose steadily after I passed the lake, which I bravely didn't look into, feeling that as I was set on my path, it would be undignified. Besides, I knew there was nothing there. It was sad, but it had that feeling of finality that I got after Sharon died. I didn't like it, but from the moment it happened, I knew there was no taking it back. There would be no ghost reunions, no dream Sharon come to give me an important message

from the grave. I knew Karen and Chandler were gone for good, and I think really moving away from the time and place they disappeared was what was lifting that dead leaf feeling off me.

The tall mountain was not only really tall but really wide, so I walked most of the day without feeling like I was really on the actual mountain yet, just still in the preliminary slopes. It reminded me of that movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, when Richard Dreyfuss and that mom from *A Christmas Story* are climbing up Devil's Tower and they don't even get to the tall, rocky part until after the Army has sprayed that sleeping powder on that dude from L.A. I'm not sure that there was any good reason for the mountain to remind me of that, because it didn't look like Devil's Tower, but more like a tall, craggy, pointy mountain you might see in a movie about Dracula, all shadowy.

As it started getting dark, I stopped under the peak and made a little fire, and then heated up some food I'd brought along. I ate, feeling achy and worn out from the climb, and watched the peak above me. I had been able to see the usual thin hair of smoke streaming off into the clouds, but since I was a little closer than before I thought I could see a faint red glow as night came down around.

It didn't take long for me to remember how much I hate camping. I used to like the idea of it when I was a kid, but once you've built the fire and eaten your cowboy dinner and thrown the leftovers into the fire to watch them burn, you're left there in the dark with nothing to do. Even with other people it's pretty boring. Sometimes it's *especially* boring with other people, especially if one of them has a guitar and a repertory of goddamn folk songs. I sat there a while looking into the little fire, wishing for morning. It was probably only about eight or nine o'clock though, so that was a laugh.

And it was getting super cold. I didn't like the idea of sleeping out there on the ground with only my clothes and coat and maybe never waking up. I looked back up the mountain. The red glow was more distinct now that night had deepened, a tiny red beacon high above me like a star with a ladder leading up to it.

It was dark, but the moon was coming up over the glacier on the other side of the valley. It was almost full, throwing out huge, silver, pale light over the house and the lake and the trees. It wasn't as good as daylight, but I thought I'd be able to see more or less where I was going right in front of me, and the fire up above would let me know if I was going in the right direction.

I shrugged and started picking up my stuff. I kicked some dirt over the fire, took a piss and started back up the mountain, moving much more slowly now. It was like walking through a mostly dark room at night, but in the city where's there's lots of glow from the streetlights outside and other houses. I found if I just concentrated I could pick a path between the shadowy boulders, bushes and trees, and I made slow but regular progress up the foot hills.

After a few hours, when I was getting sleepy and wished I had stayed in my little camp, I came to a dead end. Ahead was a blank, vertical rock wall that stretched up into the darkness so far that I couldn't see where its blank expanse broke. The path I was on, which really was only a path because I could walk on it, not because it led anywhere, narrowed to a point at the base of the wall, crowded on either side by thick bushes and boulders, indistinct and blurred in the weak moonlight. I walked the rest of the way down to the wall, ran my hand over the cold flat of it.

“Goddammit,” I said to the dark, my breath puffing out around my face. It had gotten really, really cold. I was up higher than the valley floor where the hot spring warmed the air a little, so it was bound to be North Pole cold the way it was supposed to be. I looked up the face of the rock wall again, then sat down at the base of it, wrapped my arms around my knees and looked off the way I had come, toward the glacier. There was no way I could climb up that rock face. Even if I had climbing equipment I wouldn’t know how to use it well enough to make it all that vertical way. I had the feeling that even an expert rock climber would have a hard time with that wall.

As I sat there breathing, I noticed that I was sitting in a big cloud of vapor, which didn’t seem right. I looked around, and noticed that most of it seemed to be coming from the bushes off to the side of my “trail.”

I leaned over that way and stuck my head into the bushes. There was a hole in the wall a couple of yards into the undergrowth. It must have been warmer inside the hole than it was outside, because there was a lot of vapor hanging in the air around it. I crawled into the bushes, making my way toward the hole. It was jagged, sort of a rough vertical diamond shape, black as death inside. I didn’t like the idea of going in, but it was getting so cold. When I had thought about freezing to death before, it was mostly an idle excuse to keep moving because I was afraid of the dark; now it was a real concern. I was shivering, and I could feel a disturbing sort of numbness starting in my hands and feet. Not only that but the sleepiness I had felt creeping over me didn’t feel like regular sleepiness anymore, and I was afraid it might be the onset of hypothermia. I was suddenly certain of it, and my stomach clenched in panic.

“Well, all right,” I said to myself, and dragged myself under the bushes until I could work my way into the hole. It was a tight fit for me, especially with all the clothes I had on, and I had to work my way in. It didn’t help that the bottom of the hole was as pointed as it was at the top, so my coat and pants kept getting caught in the crack.

Once I was finally in a ways, the opening widened out. I couldn’t see, but at first I could feel the walls with my hands and the ceiling with my head, but they gradually moved out and up as I walked along. It was dark as a panther’s dick in there, not that I have a lot of first-hand experience with panther dicks. I had some of Chandler’s matches, but I wished I could find a leg bone from some animal and wrap strips of my shirt around it to make a torch like Indiana Jones or one of those movie guys. None of that stuff was handy though, and I wasn’t going back outside, so I just lurched up the tunnel, feeling my way along the walls with my hands. It was hard going. The farther in I went, the steeper the floor got. After a while I felt like it was so steep that my boots had barely enough traction and they kept almost slipping. The floor was fairly rough-feeling, though, like someone had shaped it with a pick.

That seemed to go on for a really long time. I walked up and up and up, wishing I had stayed at the house. I was getting really sleepy. I figured it had to be after two or three in the morning. I thought about trying to catch a nap there in the cave, but the roughness of the floor made it too uncomfortable to lie down. I tried, and even sitting down was like sitting on a sack of sharp rocks.

After what seemed like forever, I got to a place where the floor leveled off. The sides of the tunnel widened out and I couldn’t feel both sides with my hands anymore. So I stuck to the right wall, feeling my way along. The air, which had been relatively

warm and dry compared to the temperature outside, seemed steamier with a weird, spicy animal smell on it that I couldn't identify. It made me think of when I was a kid and we would go to the zoo in Kansas City, how the monkey house smelled. I remembered there was a railing around the outside with a concrete shelf across from it where the chimpanzees would sit, sometimes pitching handfuls of shit at us, sometimes eating it.

I didn't like the smell. It wasn't reassuring. I slowed up, trying to be quieter, picking up my feet higher so the soles of my boots wouldn't scrape on the sharp stones, holding my breath a little, letting it in and out as softly as I could, which was difficult because I was getting scared.

Sure enough, after fifteen or so minutes of creeping along, a soft but resonant voice came out of the dark ahead.

"Who is there?" It's hard to describe, because the voice didn't have a recognizable accent, but there was something about it that was distinctly inhuman. What it was exactly I can't say, but it made my skin crawl, and I had to stifle a scream as I hugged the wall. "Who is there?" the voice said again. "Is it a bear? Or is it a chair? Who is there?"

I didn't say anything, but pressed my face against the cool stone with my eyes closed. The voice resonated in a strange way that made my bones feel like tuning forks.

"I hear a sound," the voice said. "The sound of two hundred pounds of bleeding ground round. Who is there? Shall I light the light? Will it be a fright if I light the light?"

I shook my head against the stone. If the owner of the voice saw me in the dark it didn't let on, because there was suddenly a glow coming through my eyelids, all the more shocking after the long hours of walking up the pitch tunnel.

"Ah, it is a young man," the voice said. "Open your eyes, young man. Are you a clever man? If you are a clever man, you have nothing to fear."

I peeked away from the wall, down the tunnel. After Karen and Chandler I don't know why I was surprised, but I was. There was a griffin standing in the tunnel. It had a green eagle's head and a lion's body. It was standing behind a gold lantern that looked like something a nineteenth-century railroad guy would hold.

"Come closer to me, young man," the griffin said, shifting a little on its front paws. The griffin had an eagle face, but it had a lot more expression than an eagle face would normally have. It looked amused, cruel, vacant and tired all at the same time. The corners of the beak were flexible and kept turning up and down, and the eyes seemed to dart around more than they should, though occasionally they would focus on me, and the pupils would expand and contract. It made me nervous, and I wished I had been able to just keep my face against the wall, or even better yet that I would have stayed in the house where I would be asleep under the covers of my giant bed.

I did the only thing I could do. I walked a little closer to the griffin. I got the feeling if I didn't it would spring on me.

"What is your name?"

"Gary," I said, looking at the tunnel floor.

"Please look into my eyes, Gary. I have so little company. The eyes are the windows of the soul. I want to look into your soul, Gary. Is it a clever soul?"

I looked into the griffin's eyes. They were focused on me now, so piercing it felt like my eyeballs were actually itchy. "I'm not sure what you mean," I said. "How can a soul be clever?"

"Ah, so you are clever," the griffin said, the corners of its weird flexible beak turning up. The light from the lantern, shining up into its face, made it that much creepier. "Do you question the existence of the soul?"

"I guess," I said. "I mean, I've never seen one. Though I guess that doesn't mean anything in itself."

"Mmmmm, that is so very clever." I was starting to wonder if the griffin wasn't a little retarded. "What does 'retarded' mean?" the griffin said, its eyes narrowing on me, the body leaning forward on the huge velveteen lion paws as if it were about to spring.

"Uh, you know. Not clever."

"You wonder if I am not clever, Gary?"

"No, not really. It's just that you kept saying that what I was saying was clever, when what I was saying didn't really seem that clever to me, so I wondered if maybe you weren't really that clever, since you thought that I was so clever. Does that make sense?"

"Of course it does, Gary. But I think you're forgetting that no man knows the true measure of his own cleverness. But of course I am not a man, I'm a sphinx."

"Oh. Shit."

"Why do you say that, Gary?" The griffin smiled, a little condescendingly, I thought.

“Well, I thought you were a griffin, not a sphinx. My mistake, I guess. I mean, I’m not familiar with griffins or sphinxes, so I guess it’s not surprising I can’t tell the difference...”

“I see,” the sphinx said, tilting its eagle head a little to the side. “Why does that make you speak of excrement?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I guess it’s not much difference, it’s just that sphinxes are known for telling riddles, and I’m not really good at them.”

“Oh.” The sphinx stood there for a while. I know I’ve started calling it a sphinx, but I swear to God it was actually a griffin. “Um, listen, I have a question. I know you said you’re a sphinx, but don’t sphinxes have women heads?”

“Yes. What is your question?”

“Well, you have an eagle head.”

“No I don’t. I have a woman head,” the griffin said.

“Oh,” I said, leaning toward the griffin, squinting. “Yeah, you’re right. Sorry, my mistake. I guess it’s dark and I didn’t see you as clearly as I thought...”

“You don’t have to lie, Gary.”

“I’m not! I just couldn’t see with that lantern and all. Sorry.”

The griffin looked at me for a while, its mouth twitching up and down in that disturbing, flexible way, his eyes focused and unmoving for once. “Gary, I meant to ask you before. Are you climbing up the tunnel?”

“Yes,” I said. “Is that all right?”

“It is. But only if you answer a question, Gary.”

“Oh, great. Is it a riddle?”

“Yes, Gary. It is a riddle, and a difficult one. I must warn you that if you don’t answer correctly, I am obligated to kill you with my woman teeth. Are you prepared?”

“No, but go ahead,” I said. I hate riddles. They always seem so obvious when someone tells you the answer, but I can never figure them out.

“Very well,” the griffin said. “The riddle is this: How many eyes does a Cyclops have?”

I stood there for a few moments, waiting for the rest of it. The griffin didn’t say anything else, just stood there looking down its beak at me like it had just beat me at table tennis, or something. “Uh, is that it?” I said.

“That is your riddle, yes,” the griffin said.

“But, that’s not technically…” I trailed off. I didn’t want to get in another argument. If the griffin thought eagle heads were woman heads and thought a simple question was a riddle it was fine with me. “Well, let’s see,” I said, straightening up. “That’s a real stumper. Cyclops, Cyclops. Okay, a Cyclops has… one eye. Right?”

The griffin looked disappointed, and lowered his head. “I confess I am surprised. That is the correct answer, Gary. You may pass.”

“Thanks. Can I borrow the lantern? It’s pretty dark.”

“You can take my lantern if you answer another riddle,” the griffin said.

“All right, give it to me.”

The griffin took a deep breath. “How did Mark legally marry three women in Michigan without divorcing any of them, becoming legally separated, or any of them dying?”

“Never mind,” I said. “I’ll just go slow the rest of the way up,” I said, walking past the griffin, who was making a weird, birdy grin.

“It was nice meeting you Gary.”

“Okay, buddy. See ya.” I walked off fast. I had that feeling he wasn’t really going to let me go, that as soon as I turned my back the griffin would run up behind me and sink its claws into my spine, snap at the exposed nerves with its beak. I got that anxious feeling between my shoulder blades, a kind of tingling, and I actually started to run. The light from the lantern disappeared behind me, and a couple of seconds later I tripped over the rough floor and cut the shit out of my left hand, right in the meaty part under the thumb. “Goddammit,” I said, getting up. I sucked at the blood as I walked on, feeling the contour of the gash with my tongue. I found the wall on my right and followed it up. It seemed like the air was freshening, though I wasn’t sure if it was because I was just leaving the zoo smell of the griffin behind or if I was actually getting somewhere.

I felt like I had been walking forever. My feet were sweaty and hot inside my boots, and felt inflated with hot blood. My back was killing me, and all the muscles up the entire line from my heels to my neck were needle sore.

I sucked my hand and walked some more. After a while, I came up over a little hill in the tunnel floor. Below me there was a circle of weak morning light sifting in onto my face. I stopped for a second, and then walked toward it.

Twenty-Four

I came out of the tunnel and felt a million times better. Like most people, I don’t like being shut up inside tunnels and close places, but I hadn’t realized how much it was

bothering me until I walked out into the purple, cool dawn air. It was like taking a drink of water. I sucked in deep, feeling the oxygen spread through my veins and into my cells. It took me a few minutes to realize it wasn't freezing cold, which seemed weird. The temperature felt like it was somewhere in the mid-50's, which wasn't exactly shorts weather but it wasn't thirty below, either.

I was in a narrow little canyon that looked more or less like the tunnel with no ceiling, and it widened out. I was still walking up at a steep grade but I felt so much better physically that it didn't bother me. Even my sleepiness mostly dissolved, and I had that feeling I would get when I was a kid and I would wake up at dawn on a Saturday morning.

The walls of the little canyon gradually petered out and I was on a wide, flat rocky grade, still heading up. I looked over the side. From the view, it seemed I was almost at the very top of the mountain. The glacier was off in the distance, far below me, and I could see the lake and the house, but only as tiny model versions of themselves, waiting for someone to pick them up and put them on a Monopoly board. I could even see the top of the huge tree I'd climbed.

I kept walking up for what seemed like a long time. Eventually the grade softened and then leveled out, and I was on the very top, walking between big boulders. Somehow there were even a few stunted trees and bushes, and it occurred to me that not only was it warmer than I would have expected, but there was more oxygen in the air than there really should have been, considering the elevation. Again, I'm no Sherpa, but I at least could figure that.

After a while I came to a clearing. There was a small house in the center made of rounded stones that looked like they'd been fitted together as they were picked up so there were no straight lines on the walls, though the stones fit tight together, and you probably couldn't have even slipped a piece of paper between them. There was a narrow stone chimney rising out of the back of the house with a familiar, thin finger of smoke rising out of it. I walked around until I found the house's door. It was made of planks of some dense-looking wood, grayish with dark veins of color. Unlike the stones, the wood had been planed and joined straight so the planks fit together symmetrically, sanded smooth and finished with maybe beeswax. It looked heavy. The knob was a dull gold color in the shape of a lion's head, teeth bared, mane spread in a tangle.

I walked up to the door and knocked on it. The heavy wood seemed to amplify the vibrations from my knuckles, making the house boom like a big drum. I stepped back, startled at the noise. Then I heard a high, tremulous voice from inside:

“Come in, dearie!”

“Oh, jeez,” I said to myself, turned the knob, and pushed open the door. I went in and closed it behind me with another resonating boom.

The inside of the house seemed much larger than it should have been, given the size of the outside. All the same it wasn't enormous, just one good-sized room with low partitions set around to demarcate different areas. Off to the right there was a small table set next to a sink. On the table was a plate of meat with a wooden cup and a dark glass bottle next to it. Against the wall to the left there was a three-sided curtain with one side pulled back so I could see a tall porcelain chamber pot.

Across the room from the door against the far wall was a large bed with a wolf in it, under the covers with only its shoulders and head poking out. Naturally, the wolf had on a nightcap, pulled low in an attempt to cover its face, and the shoulders were covered in a frilly nightgown with a lacy collar across the furry neck. “Why don’t you have some meat and wine, dearie? And then get into bed with your old grandma.” The wolf was speaking in a high, quavering voice while it grinned from ear to ear, showing long rows of pointy fangs.

“Are you being serious?” I said, staying close to the door. “I’m not eating anything, and I’m definitely not getting into bed with you.”

“But why, dearie? Take off those hot clothes and get into bed with your old granny. We’ll have such a gay time! We can make coils of rope together, and water them until they grow.” The wolf seemed to be really enjoying itself, grinning wider than ever. Its eyes were narrowed and watering with suppressed mirth.

“Yeah, I don’t think that sounds fun. Gay, but not fun. In fact...” I was distracted by a clattering noise coming from behind the kitchen partition. I leaned that way so I could see the other side. There was a dismembered pair of feet in shiny red shoes twitching around, knocking against the cupboard. The raw, slashed flesh above the ankles surrounded hacked, splintery-looking bones. The blood looked old and dry, congealed in spongy looking cakes around the bone and down the ankles. The feet seemed to dance to silent music, but music as old, dry and worn as the caked blood. “What the fuck are those?” I said, my gorge rising like a gassy corpse.

“Oh, those belong to a bad little girl. She’s long since gone, but I like to keep them around. I think they’re funny, you see.” The wolf’s granny voice was fading; there

was a lot more growl and malice in it. The wolf made a snarling laugh that sounded like dying animals. “If you want, I could take off your feet and put those on your legs. You could dance forever in her pretty red shoes, like a happy little girl. Would you like that, Gary?”

The wolf’s voice dropped all pretense of being anything other than that of a wolf, and for part of the speech it was hard to understand, since most of what the wolf said sounded like growls and yelps. I watched the shoes knocking weak against the pantry door, horrified. Then it began to sound less and less like a wolf. “You’d like to be a pair of dancing dead girl’s feet, wouldn’t you, Gary? You’d just dance down empty streets at night, out in the desert, empty streets lit by the muted closed shades on houses you’ll never enter because you’re clacking through the night, alone, only seeing the silver world in the morning hours. If a dismembered pair of dancing feet had a dick, it would make yours hard, wouldn’t it, Gary? To dance only through the night, right? To be a dead girl’s feet forever? Forever, Gary? Forever?”

I watched the feet as the wolf spoke, seeing what it was asking me. I did want to clatter down empty streets at night, a pair of dismembered feet in red shoes. What could be more simple and attractive? The consistency of motion, the illusion of progress from one point to the next without guesswork or failure. To have one purpose only, to never have to apologize or cry or remember anything but the squares of light passing by in the periphery...

The wolf’s voice was no longer that of a wolf, nor a grandma. I looked away from the dancing feet to the bed, and my breath caught in my chest like a hooked, squirming fish.

Father New Year was sitting in the bed grinning at me. He looked just the way he had looked in my dreams, just the way he had looked in the desert, in Flagstaff, in the crater. His black hair framed his head and face like a smudge of shoe polish; his long mustache divided his face. Under it, his teeth bared out at me, square and shiny with spit and enthusiasm. Father New Year pushed back the covers and got out of the bed. He wore a priest-black suit with a starched white collared shirt and a priest-black ribbon tie. He had a gangly build, and his boney wrists poked out from his starched white sleeves like the ankle bones on the dancing feet poked out from the white, slashed flesh.

I backed toward the door, suddenly terrified. I knew then I should never have come up on the mountain; it was a trap. I should have taken Karen's advice and left when I could.

Father New Year walked slowly toward me, his arms slightly out in front of him like he was going to raise them up and claw my eyes out at any second.

"What do you want from me?" I said, back against the door. I felt around for the knob, but couldn't find it. "Who are you?"

"I don't know," Father New Year said. His voice was weird. It was like a normal voice, except it sounded like it was transmitted from an echo chamber in a radio station fifty years in the past. "I'm just a dancing pair of shoes." I blinked, and Father New Year was the wolf again, holding out its paws. Instead of claws, it had sharp metal tips that looked like bits of broken scalpel. "I only dance along, Gary," the wolf growled.

I blinked again and the wolf was Dan Tacos shuffling toward me, a cigarette pasted to his lower lip. "You wanna cigarette, Gary?" He reached into his pocket and pulled out a battered pack of Camels, held it out to me.

“Uh, no thanks,” I said. I really did want one, but not from him. I doubted they were actually cigarettes. On the other hand, the one smoldering at the edge of his mouth smelled pretty good. “Actually, yeah. Lemme have one of those.” It had been so long that I’d stopped thinking about smoking most of the time, but seeing and smelling them made all my sense memories light back like a flock of sticky birds. He held the pack out to me, I took one. Dan handed me the Zippo we had shared on our way up to Alaska, and I felt a strange folding over of reality. “So, you were always... him? Not you?”

Dan Tacos smiled. “I was always me, Gary.”

I took a deep, long drag on the Camel, then coughed most of it back out. I smiled at Dan. “It’s been a while, I guess.”

“I know, buddy. Come sit down. I want to talk to you.”

We sat down at the table. The red shoes continued clacking around the room. I couldn’t quite ignore them, but almost. I watched them shuffle under the bed and disappear. When I looked back up Dan was gone and Father New Year was sitting in the chair across from me, grinning. He was leaning in like he was trying to smell my breath or look up my nose. It was the closest I’d ever been to him, and he had the same spicy smell Chandler had when he was about to attack me.

When he talked Father New Year’s voice had that faraway quality, like someone was playing a crackly radio through a pipe. “Have you ever thought much about time, Gary?” he said.

I shrugged. “What about it?”

“The thing about time is that most of it doesn’t exist,” Father New Year said. He looked down at the floor and snapped his fingers. The red shoes came tapping over to us,

the bloody ankle stumps like rusted iron pilings. “I mean, what is it, really? The past only exists in our minds, and those memories are actually very incomplete because we only remember certain things that have meaning for us, right?”

“I suppose.”

“So really, the past doesn’t exist. Only a shadow of what was once the present. And we only assume the future will happen based on our past experience. You know what happens when you assume, right, Gary?”

“I make an ‘ass’ out of ‘u’ and ‘me’? I said.

“That’s right. The future is a concept based on past experience, and we’ve already agreed that the past doesn’t even exist, right?”

“Well, I never really agreed to that, to be fair...” I said, waving a hand across the table.

“I’m telling you it’s true, Gary, insofar as anything can be true. Look, just for the sake of my argument we’ll assume it’s true, all right?”

“Yeah, but you know what happens when you...”

“Yeah yeah, just shut up,” Father New Year said, waving back at me. The lines on his palm were in the shape of a clock, both the hour and minute hands at half-past six. “You know fucking good and well the past doesn’t exist. Just try going there sometime smartass, and see how far you get. Just listen: If the past doesn’t exist, and the future is only a shadowy assumption based on that imaginary past, that only leaves the present, right?”

“Yeah, but without memory and expectation, there’s no context...”

“For fuck’s sake Gary, if you’ll shut up, that’s my point.” Father New Year was leaning close toward me across the table again. The smoke from my cigarette floated up and gathered under his nose and around his mustache. I had forgotten it in my hand on the table and the ash had grown long and bent almost to the filter. He reached over and took the cigarette out from between my fingers, maintaining the ash, tapped it into the severed indentation at the top of the left dancing foot on the floor next to him. I winced as he ground out the cherry in one of the spongy blobs of old blood. The foot didn’t seem to notice; it just kept tapping around the table with its mate. “If the past and future aren’t objectively real and are at best arbitrary reflections of memory, you’re under no obligation to acknowledge a particular version of your identity.”

I looked at him for a moment, and then shook my head. I had that feeling I remembered from math class when I was a kid like I almost understood, but not quite. It made my head hurt. “I don’t get it. What identity?”

Father New Year shook his head. “You dumb son of a bitch. Look, since Sharon died you’ve been going around like you don’t have a home and you’ve destroyed your body. Why?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. What was I supposed to do? Just pretend like everything was fine, like nothing happened?”

“Why not?”

“Because that would be an insult to her memory, that’s why,” I said, leaning forward into his breath. “Without her I’ve got nothing.”

“You’re just feeling sorry for yourself, Gary. You have everything.” Father New Year leaned back and looked at me, his black eyes blank like shark eyes.

“I have everything, huh? Like what? I’ve got no wife, no job, no home. I’m in the middle of nowhere on the top of a mountain with a figment of my childhood imagination. You call that everything?”

“You’re not getting it, Gary,” Father New Year said, shaking his head. “All anyone has, really, is open paths. All roads in front are wide and long. Some are not so smooth, some are very dark, but they’re all open to you.”

“What if I don’t want to go forward, then? What if I want to go back, or nowhere? What if I want to sit here in this house and hold my breath until my face turns blue? Huh?”

“That’s still a path. You see, you have no choice. You can sit around, moldering in your own self-importance. You think you’re the only person that’s had grief? Your grief is nothing. There are literally billions of people who have lost much, much more than you have or ever will. And no one cares. They were all on their own, just like you. And most of them picked themselves up and lived. Some of them didn’t. You have no choice but to make a choice, you see? You don’t have to go home, but you can’t stay here, you know what I mean, Gary? You can’t stay here.”

I watched the red shoes clack around the table. “But where will I go?” I felt small, and my throat ached as I tried to form words. “I can’t go back home. I’ll go to jail. And I don’t know anywhere else. I don’t know what to do.”

He leaned into my face again. “Stop your goddamn crying, Gary. Why can’t you go back home? Isn’t that an option, to face what you’ve done, to face the world you left behind? What about Carrie? Do you think she would choose never seeing or hearing from you again over seeing you face up to what you did and take the consequences? What do

you think sets a better example for her? And what do you think honors the memory of your precious Sharon, eh? Answer me!”

“I don’t know,” I said, “I don’t know. Get off my back, okay! What do you even care? Who are you, anyway?”

“Who am I?” Father New Year said, his voice roughening. “I am what I am.” I looked up, and he was gone. In his place was a huge, panting lion. “I’m patient, Gary, almost to a fault. But your unwillingness to consider the situation properly tests my patience terribly, yes it does.” The voice was deep and terrible. It had lost the quality of a distant radio broadcast and had taken on an immediate, hot presence of vibration that shook my bowels and bones, making my blood feel as if it were congealing under intense heat. I could almost see my own reflection in the shiny curved surface of its slavering teeth, I could hear the sound the claws would make against my guts and spine as they scratched restlessly against the wooden floor. The table between us might as well have been made of sugar floss for all the protection it would provide against the sheer bulk and muscle of the beast.

“Please,” I managed to rasp, “don’t... do anything to me. I’ve had enough done to me...”

The lion laughed, and I peed a little. “Oh, Gary. Much has been done to your body. But your mind and soul... those remained untouched. And what good is a strong vessel without worthy contents? I ask, and you will answer.”

“I... don’t know what you want me to say,” I said, standing on my rubber legs. “I don’t know what you want...”

“Exactly,” the lion said, winding back on its haunches. “I have to make you pregnant with knowledge, Gary.” The lion sprang up onto the table, which shuddered under the weight. I stumbled back a few steps, fell on my back. From my new vantage point I could see the king of beasts carried its scepter between its legs. I scrambled away from it, crawling like a broken, dying insect, refusing to accept the inevitable. The lion watched me crawl until my head hit the wall, and then it pounced.

Twenty-Five

I didn't feel good. My mouth was dry and felt like it was coated with oily lint and my head felt hollow and sick, like a tree fungus had eaten out the center of my brain, leaving a shell behind. My body hurt like I'd been working a lot. It was dark in the tunnel, but I could see the mouth up ahead filled with the weak, lemony morning light. The wind was up outside, and the sound of it whooping past the tunnel opening carried down to me like a ghost greeting. I had a sense-memory lying there of being a kid in the fall or winter, waking up on a Saturday or Sunday morning when I'd been allowed to sleep in, and the wind was whipping the leaves past my bedroom window. I would lie there under the covers for a long time, listening and feeling that pleasant melancholy one sometimes feels at those moments. I had that feeling on the tunnel floor, but I wasn't in my comfortable bed so I got up and stumbled toward the exit, feeling the stiffness in my limbs and reminding myself that it would work its way out soon enough.

The valley was different as I came out of the tunnel. The wind was high and strong, dancing the tree tops as it ricocheted back and forth off the glacier and back. It was bitter cold, colder than I had felt it there, and I put my hands in my jeans pockets,

wishing I had gloves and more clothes. Karen's house stood off on the other side of the pond, dark and empty-looking. The pond itself was gray and choppy, with little white knives of foam rolling across the surface to cut the shores. It was a lonely view. There was no sign of animal, bird or insect, much less Chandler or Karen. Even the grass looked like it was shriveling up as I stood there, and I wondered if the full winter outside the valley was finally moving in.

I jumped up and down a few times to get the blood moving in my legs and feet, stuffed my hands in my coat pockets and started down the hill, my shoulders hunched up to protect my neck as much as possible. A few minutes down the hill and the wind had numbed my ears. I tried to ignore the dull ache in them as I half ran down into the flat of the valley floor across the browning grass to the edge of the pond. Unless I'd been in some kind of Rip Van Winkle time warp, I'd been gone for not quite a whole day, but it had gotten so cold the edge of the water was icing over, leaving a sharp, crusty border for the little foamy waves to roll onto. The surface was like slate. I couldn't see down into the water at all, only my own blurry outline which was more like a shadow than a reflection.

I hurried around to the house and ran in, slamming the door behind me. It was just as cold in the house as it was outside, but at least there wasn't any wind and I could rub the feeling back into my ears. My breath plumed out in front of me and I was suddenly scared at how cold it was getting. I thought I could actually feel the temperature plummeting around me and my jeans, flannel shirts and coat felt like nothing more than tissue against the freezing air. I ran up to my bedroom, climbed up on the chest and looked out the window. The icy crust at the edge of the pond had extended out halfway to

middle in just the couple of minutes since I'd been inside. The darkening clouds seemed to be bulging into the valley, their roiling undersides between the glacier and the peaks on the other side. A few fat, swirling snowflakes floated down into the unfrozen center of the pond, dissolving in the water, and I knew I had to either hurry up and light a fire to wait out the storm or get out of the valley. I don't know how I knew, but it was like there was a little compass somewhere in the center of me that swung towards getting out, and I didn't question it. I hopped down from the chest and ran downstairs to the kitchen. I rooted around until I found a sharp knife, small enough for me to use but still about as big as a short sword. I ran back upstairs and pulled at the corner of the blanket on the bed until I could hack off a good sized, rough strip of fabric. I hacked it up until I had a number of cloth strips and some bigger pieces I used to wrap around my legs and torso, which I tied on with the strips and then wrapped more around my head and neck, leaving just enough of a gap to see out. I tied some more of the blanket into a makeshift bag and ran, awkwardly now because of my heavy wrappings, back down to the kitchen and into the pantry. There wasn't much left but some dry-looking bread, some dried meat and a few big potatoes. I threw it all into my bag and headed back to the front door. I stood there for a few seconds making a mental inventory of everything I came to the valley with and everything I needed to take, listening to the wind beat at the door like an angry lover. I had everything I needed and I knew it, but I kept standing there. It seemed too sudden to be leaving, almost anticlimactic. I knew it was just the habitual side of my mind holding on to something familiar, but it still felt strange that things were over in the valley and it was time to go. I figured that's how it always is when chapters end in life. They just end. It reminded me of that part in *The Catcher in the Rye* when Holden is

standing around the frozen war memorial on top of the hill, trying to get some sort of goodbye.

I couldn't get one. Holden remembered playing football with a couple of guys, and felt like he could go. I couldn't think of anything like that. Everything that had happened there had been so strange and crazy that it all stuck together in one big ball of melted memory, so I couldn't separate any one thread and hold it up to scrutiny.

"Fuck it," I finally said and threw open the door. The wind blew the door out of my hand and slammed it into the wall beside me with a huge, echoing bang. Like a starting gun, it threw me into running motion and I hurtled out into the freezing cold, blanket bag clutched in my blanket-wrapped hands.

I ran as fast as I could with all that cloth on me toward the glacier, hoping I would be able to spot the creek that ran from the pond to the glacier under the piling snow. The blanket wrapping helped a lot, but I could tell my body heat was seeping out through them just slightly faster than my metabolism could replace it. The snow was falling thick and fast now, and I could tell the temperature was still dropping, though it was already so cold that the difference was academic.

As I passed the pond I looked out and saw that it was now completely frozen over except for a small circle in the middle. As I ran past I watched the circle freeze over, just that fast.

I was getting scared as I passed the pond and crossed the hundred or so yards of blowing snow to the glacier wall. My strength was seeping out with my body heat; my legs were weakening and my arms were heavier and heavier as I ran.

I stopped, trying to catch my breath and let the burning sensation in my legs abate enough to keep going. I scanned the uniform surface of the snow field between the pond and the glacier wall, looking for any sign of the creek. The light was so muted by the clouds above and the snow swirling between that any topographical features in the snow that might have cast a shadow just blended into an off-white smear. I walked forward, fighting the urge to panic and run again.

Finally, when I was almost out of patience, I saw a slight difference in the snow up ahead. Once I had spotted the slight color difference it was easy to see that it was the shallow indentation of the creek running back toward the whited-out pond on my right and to the glacier wall on my left. I walked to the edge of the snow-covered creek and followed it toward the wall. I couldn't see the wall through the thickening snow, and I started feeling scared again. If there was no opening there I was dead, simple as that. I reckoned Karen wouldn't lie about a tunnel, but it was possible that the glacier had shifted or so much snow had blown in the entry that it was blocked. My mind turned over all the possibilities of what could have gone wrong. At least worrying took my mind off how tired I was getting. My legs felt like they do in bad dreams.

Then I saw it: a narrow, dark wedge in the glacier wall. Seeing it gave me a burst of energy and I hustled over to it and battered my way inside, scooping snow and chunks of ice out of my way.

It was dim inside the tunnel. It was cold too, but without the driving wind I felt like my body was replacing heat. I stood inside the entrance letting my eyes adjust to the light and stomping my feet to keep my circulation up and keep my extremities warm enough to feel. I had a long way to go, and I didn't want to lose any digits to frostbite. I

worried about it. The floor was smooth from where the creek had been running into it. Now the floor was frozen.

After I felt recovered and could see enough I began to navigate the floor of the tunnel, which was littered with ice boulders from the ceiling. The silence was a tremendous wall of white noise interspersed with the faint sounds of cracking ice carrying through from other parts of the glacier. There were a few cracking noises that sounded closer from time to time and I worried about being crushed but again that compass feeling, whatever it was, seemed to dismiss my concern and turn me toward the downward-slanting path of the tunnel.

I walked down a ways. When I got far enough in that it was getting dark I stopped in front of two shapes behind the ice. They were three or four feet behind the ice. Normally it would have been hard to tell what they were but they were so familiar I knew. The shapes were Karen and Chandler, naked. They were curled up in balls like kids hiding in a closet. I stood there longer than I should have, looking at them. They looked like idols. They finally looked like the mythological movie monsters they were. When the numbness got to my shins, I left them there.

I walked for a long time. The tunnel stayed the same width, though the light from outside didn't reach very far. I had to take it slow so I wouldn't fall over the ice chunks on the floor.

All the same, I was getting tired. The bread, meat and potatoes in my bag, which had seemed adequate when I was trying to get out of the house as fast as possible, didn't seem great to me as I rooted through the bag. I ate some of the meat, which tasted both bland and gamey, and felt a little better. I also had time to think about how far I was

going to have to walk when I got out of the tunnel out in the middle of God's nowhere wrapped up in blanket strips and with enough food for a day at most. I tried to convince myself that it would work itself out and felt better for a minute or two. But then I would think again that I didn't have enough food and I was going to die a freezer pop. Maybe someone would dig me up in the future and bring me back to life.

I ate a potato, which was hard because it had partially frozen in my bag. I wished I had a big bottle of water.

After what seemed like twelve freezing eternities the light in the tunnel changed. I saw the rocks now. It was still pretty dark. I looked up ahead and thought I could make out a speck far, far ahead. As far as it was, it made me feel better. It was the speck at the end of the tunnel, after all.

I got to the speck. I stepped out into white glare and wind. I had a sudden feeling that's hard to describe without sounding like a jackass. Solid. I felt solid and dense, immovable like a super robot. I didn't feel myself as much. I didn't feel especially jazzed up, but I also felt like I could walk and walk, no problem. The world seemed denser too. Seeing it so solid made me realize that for the longest time the world had seemed porous to me, as if there were pockets around me that one could fall into and out of normality, like hidden mines. That feeling was gone as I walked out away from the tunnel and looked around.

I was close to the base of the glacier, on a little ledge. There was a slick trench threading the rest of the way down to the snow field at the bottom, which stretched off into the horizon. I couldn't tell for sure, but I figured that since the glacier had bordered the northern edge of Karen's valley, and I'd walked more or less straight through the

glacier, that I was facing north. That meant when I got off the glacier I had to walk all the way back around the valley, skirting the mountains before I could really start back to civilization. I didn't think I would make it, but I was in that sort of mood that makes the idea of dying seem less worrisome than it should, on par with stubbing your toe or cutting your finger.

"Fuck it," I said, and sat down in the slick trench. I wondered if it would be there much longer. I had the feeling that the hot spring under the valley had lost its heat and the water wouldn't flow through the glacier anymore. I imagined before long the tunnel would collapse in on itself as the glacier shifted and Karen and Chandler would be buried in there forever. I tried to feel something about that. Nothing came. There was nothing I could do about it, and I didn't want to go back to be buried with them so I pushed myself forward and slid down the ice trench. It was a long ride and the base of the mountain was steeper than I'd thought when I was looking down at it, but I got to the bottom okay and started trudging my way over the snow. There was no telling how deep the snow was, but the icy crust on the surface was thick enough to hold my weight if I didn't stomp too much and I made it around to the south in a few hours. I dipped into my blanket bag again and ate another potato, but it didn't do much for me. My muscles felt like they were on the edge of giving out, and I couldn't seem to catch my breath.

I kept walking far past the point I would have normally thought possible, past the familiar thresholds of pain and fatigue into a virgin territory of effort I had never experienced. I walked for probably three or four more hours toward what I took to be the south, feeling at times like my bones were brittle and cracking under the weight of my

muscles and organs, like my muscles and organs were themselves turning into some sort of hot pudding, like my head was a swollen bag of buzzing flies.

I came over the top of an ice ridge, one in the endless, featureless white spreading out in every direction, and stopped. There was an object on the snow at the bottom of the incline that looked like a snowmobile. I laughed, and then started down toward it. I didn't think it was real, but thought I was reaching the last bit of life left in me when mirages appeared in the wind and the subconscious threw up its fondest hopes for a reprieve in the form of visible fantasy.

But when I got to the snowmobile I found I could touch it. There was snow blown up over the treads, but otherwise it looked new. I looked around. There was no one and nothing anywhere in sight.

I dropped my blanket bag in the snow and climbed on, curled my blanket-wrapped hands around the grips. Something crackled under my right hand. There was a piece of paper wedged in between the grip and the snowmobile's body. I pulled it out and unfolded it. It said:

Gary,

Don't be red shoes. There's a carton of smokes under the seat.

Dan Tacos

I smiled out at the wind. Then I started up the snowmobile and pointed it south.

Twenty-Six

There was a big bag of beef jerky and a big bottle of water under the seat with the carton of smokes, so before I took off on the snowmobile I ate and drank. When I took

off I felt like a commercial for feeling wonderful. The sun was out. Where before it had seemed too bright and glaring on the snow, now it seemed warm and nourishing, reflecting from the horizon and under me, surrounding me with the future. I thought about photosynthesis, how plants convert individual photons into energy via carbon atoms. Everything seemed like a machine. I could imagine the ice crystals in the snow, their complex patterns, the symmetry of wind, mountain-building processes, and it all seemed connected in a way it hadn't for a long time. The snowmobile was a reflection of the symmetry of natural processes and I laughed into the wind as I thought about how people, one arbitrary result of those natural processes, created complex machines that were in themselves a reflection of the natural processes that created them. It was like postmodernism, self-aware and shaped like self-awareness itself in a series of metaphorical fractals laid over each other everywhere I looked.

If that even makes sense.

As I crept farther south that sense of future grew stronger. I knew I was going home, and for the first time since Sharon died I felt like home was a place I could actually go to. I didn't know what would happen when I got there, but I was going anyway. The issue of Harrell weighed on my mind quite a bit, as it had off and on since I'd stabbed him. It felt odd in my mind but it seemed like whatever happened, if I had to go to prison, do hard labor, drink the ocean with a spoon I would do it. I didn't feel exactly forgiven for what I did and didn't know I ever would be, but somehow a symmetrical matrix had been created around my life that would allow me to make it at least okay. I didn't know how killing someone could ever be made okay, but it seemed that way as I headed back to civilization. Maybe I was just fooling myself.

As the western horizon slipped toward the sun, the snowmobile finally ran out of gas. I didn't have a watch, but I figured it had run a good seven or eight hours. I could have gone faster, but the snow humps made me nervous and I had kept it to a moderate speed. I figured I had made it maybe a hundred and fifty miles or more. I was relieved in a way when it sputtered and stopped since my legs felt like a couple of old salamis from being bent up, straddling the seat that whole time. I was ready to do a little walking again. I munched on my beef jerky and swigged water as I wandered along, keeping the lowering sun to my right as best I could. It was getting dark, but I didn't feel worried about much.

After a while I walked down a sharp embankment onto something flat and black. It took me a second to realize it was a road. I looked back and forth, wondering at the sheer length of it. Now that I had spent some time in the wilderness I appreciated the effort it took to put roads through it all.

I walked south on the road. It was a small one, almost narrow enough to be considered one lane, though there was a white line painted down the middle. I finished up the beef jerky and the water. I went off the road a little and filled the bottle with snow, put it back in my bag to melt. I was getting tired and it was getting much, much colder as it got dark.

There was a growing noise. It swelled from behind, a deep, bassy rumbling that I could feel through my feet. It grew louder and I just stood there looking back up the road. I wasn't even trying to put meaning to the sound. I just waited to see. Finally a glow grew over the edge of the road behind me, the sound loudest now, and a burst of light came into view, making me close my eyes and put my hands over my face. There was a loud

screeching and the light stopped close to me. There was a clunking noise and a figure appeared at the edge of the light. I squinted, trying to see who or what it could be.

“Get out of the road, you dumb motherfucker,” a voice said.

I tried to speak, but only made a clogged, gagging sound. I cleared my throat. “Huh?” I said.

“I said, get out of the road,” the voice said again. The figure came close enough for me to make out some of its features. It was a short, stocky guy. He looked almost as wide as he did tall. His big round face, the only part of his skin visible, was chapped red from the cold. He had lots of freckles and I knew under his green, ear-flapped hat he had bright red hair. As he got closer, I guess he got a better look at me, too. “Jesus, mister. What the fuck happened to you?”

I didn’t know where to start. The answer stuck in my throat, and I could only shrug and grunt.

“Where’d you come from, anyway?” the man said, looking around. “There ain’t shit out here for miles.” I grunted again, shrugged. We stood there in the headlights for a little while, staring at each other. The man studied me carefully, like someone was going to give him a test later. “I guess I can’t leave you out here,” he said. “Come on, get in. I’ll take you back to town. Gets cold as a motherfucker out here at night.”

I had to really think about what I was doing. I hadn’t been in a truck for a while and I was having trouble adjusting to the regular world. I managed to walk around and climb up on the truck’s sideboard, get the door open and haul myself inside. It was one of those really tall trucks with a snow plough attachment on the front. The seat was slick, making it hard to get a grip on it with my blanket-wrapped hands and legs. Once I got in,

though, I breathed a sigh of relief. The heater was on full-blast. It smelled like a salty fish had been living in it, but the cab was cozy. I started unwrapping my hands and head as the man climbed in the other side.

“Jesus, mister,” the man said again, “where the hell’d you come from, anyway? There ain’t shit for miles. This’s a preserve, you know. Gates of the Arctic, for Crissake.” He took off his hat. He had bright red hair, just like I thought. He frowned as he watched me unwrap my hands.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I got lost for a while. I had a snowmobile, but it ran out of gas this afternoon and I was just walking south.”

“Jesus,” the man said. “You’re a lucky motherfucker, then. I only come through here once a month or so. Government has me make sure no one’s out here shooting wolves and shit. You’re the first person I’ve even seen out here ever. Motherfuck.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Motherfuck.”

◆

The fat redheaded guy’s name was Randal. He lived in a place called Fox, about ten miles north of Fairbanks. He kept talking about how the government paid him to drive out to Gates of the Arctic National Park to make sure Inuits weren’t killing wolves, but there was something poking out from behind his seat that looked suspiciously like a wolf leg so I had my doubts he was telling the truth. Either way it was lucky he showed up. It was another hundred or more miles from where Randal picked me up to his house in Fox, and there’s no way I could have made it down there walking, that’s for sure.

Randal lived in a small log house set off the byway far enough that you couldn’t see it. At the same time, Randal sacrificed not having to look at the road by having to see

the Alaska pipeline from his back porch, an irony that seemed lost on him. “Sumbitchin’ government comes around puts in these sumbitchin’ roads, next thing you know you got tourists coming by watching you like yer a fuckin’ nature show special,” he said. I suppose he didn’t mind the pipeline because it didn’t look at him. If I were him I would have felt the same. Randal was unlovely. When we got back to his little log hideaway he stripped down in the front room, all the while bitching about the government. I felt uncomfortable but I figured they did things different out in the middle of nowhere so I didn’t say anything. I just stripped off my own blankets and coat and sat down by the flagstone fireplace. It was down to embers, and I threw a couple of logs on and got it going again while he talked. Still, I couldn’t help but see him naked, which was terrible. He was a redhead after all, and his body was blue-white like a sleek, shiny cave worm. He was covered in freckles and zits, though. The overall texture is hard to explain. Maybe like if some unlucky leper had stored a year’s worth of scabs on a marble statue. Maybe it wasn’t really that bad, but the smell of him was rancid and that certainly didn’t help. Randal would never win a Charming Young Man contest, that’s for sure.

After the floor show, Randal went off to take a bath. I needed one too, but I figured I’d bide my time. Randal seemed like the kind of guy who’d want to watch.

I was by the fire, poking the logs around and wishing I was somewhere else when I heard a vehicle come crunching up to the house and stop. I listened to a door clunk open and shut, the sound magnified in the sub-zero air outside, then footsteps crunching toward the cabin. I didn’t move but I felt tense, like maybe I should run out the back door. I could hear Randal splashing around somewhere in the back of the house, singing a Metallica song in a sick-duck voice that was probably supposed to sound tough.

“Stranger now, are his eyes, to this mystery, he hears the silence so loud. Crack of dawn, all is gone except the will to be, now the will see what will be, blinded eyes to see. For whom the bell tolls, time marches on, for whom the bell tolls...” Randal did the little guitar part with his mouth during the chorus, sort of a “j-j-j-juh, j-j-j-jeh” that was pretty funny. Metallica is so dorky. I knew the song from junior high, and even then I knew it was lame.

“Hey, Randal?” I said.

He stopped in mid guitar riff. “What?”

“I think someone’s here.”

He splashed a bit. “Probably Hum. Got my shit. Let him in.”

The footsteps crunched up onto the porch and to the door. I got up as the cruncher pounded, shaking the doorjamb and part of the wall. I opened the door. The guy who’d been making all that big noise was actually pretty small, maybe a whole foot shorter than me. He seemed to float inside his huge anorak and snow pants like a swimmer, and despite the blast of frozen air that swept in around him his face actually looked sweaty. He had a couple of wrapped bundles under one arm.

“Who are you?” the guy said. He had what I thought was a French accent. “Where is Randal?”

“He’s in the tub,” I said, stepping out of the way. The guy stared at me as he came in, slower than he had to, making me wait for him before I could close out the wind. I felt like I was back in high school, being sized up by a bully. I stared back down at him, and the little shit finally looked away and moved into the room. I shut the door while he dropped his bundles on the big wooden table by the kitchen.

“I am Hum,” the guy said, taking off his gloves. “You are who?”

“I’m Gary,” I said.

“Why are you here, Gary,” Hum said, unwrapping one of his packages. “Shall you take one of these south?” Hum pulled out six thick bundles as he spoke. They were green and oblong, wrapped in thick plastic wrap.

“No,” I said. “Randal just gave me a ride. I was up in the woods.”

Hum seemed to tense up. “What were you doing in the forest, Gary? Are you some sort of polices?”

“No, I was just lost,” I said. The guy was creeping me out. I’ve been in situations before when I had to deal with sketchy drug dealers, but I had never had to do it out in the middle of nowhere. I was practically at Randal’s mercy until I got to a town. “I guess Randal’s going to take me into Fairbanks tomorrow, and I’ll go home from there. To Oklahoma.”

“Mmmm, Oklahoma. I have been there. I drove through with a friend of mine some years ago. A quite charming friend, if you catch my meaning.” He looked off, dreamy, while he said this, but then looked back at me again, eyes narrowed. “You are certain you are not affiliated with any law enforcements?”

I shook my head. “No, man. I couldn’t be less of a cop. Don’t worry about me.” Hum considered me another moment, shrugged, and then smiled to himself as he pulled up a loose corner on one of the bundles and pinched some pot out of it. It was a vivid, minty green, and I could tell just by looking at it that it was some pretty powerful stuff. I had heard stories about people growing pot in the mountains of Alaska, and it reminded me of Dan Tacos. I never found out if the place he was taking me was real, though. This

may have been from his cousin's place, for all I knew. I hadn't had any pot since my trip up north with Dan. I didn't know that I wanted any of Hum's pot. Aside from the fact Hum and Randal were creepy I just didn't like the idea of getting high.

"I suppose it wouldn't matter," Hum said. "We are so far from anyone."

Randal walked back into the front room wearing clean jeans and a flannel shirt. His red hair was wet, with strands plastered against his ghost-white forehead. His wide, round face was shiny, with spots of shining moisture glinting in the creases and dimples. He heaved a huge breath and sat down at the table across from Hum's packages. "What you got, Hummy my boy? Some of that good shit?"

"Indeed it is, as you say, the good shit. I procured it this morning from the Inuit gentleman on the northern edge of the forest. I will keep one of these, so the rest are yours. For four hundred each."

"Four hundred?" Randal said. "Goddamn! Did they grow it in fucking gold dust or what?"

Hum shrugged. "Inflation, my friend. There was a time I could have had all this for a twenty dollar bill. Now, I suppose it's the demand, yes?" Hum was packing crushed bits of the pot he'd taken out of his own bag in a small pipe he'd taken from his coat pocket. I could smell it, sharp and clean. Hum handed the pipe to Randal.

"Well, it better be fucking primo shit, that's all," Randal said before taking a hit. I hadn't ever sat down at the table, so I started drifting over toward the fireplace. "Where the fuck you going?" Randal said, holding his hit in his lungs. "You gotta hit this shit, Gary. You smoke weed, right?"

"Uh, I gave it up," I said. "Makes me too paranoid."

“This shit’s too good to make you paranoid,” Randal said, holding the pipe out to me. “It’s a clean high, clean as a nun’s box. Come take a knock.”

“No, thanks,” I said, sitting down next to the fire. “I’m pretty tired.”

“Hell, more’s the better,” Randal said. “It’ll knock you the fuck out, let you sleep like a fucking champ, right Hum?”

“Indeed,” Hum said, taking the pipe out of Randal’s hand. Hum took a long puff and held it, squinting over at me through the smoke curls coming off the top of the bowl. “Perhaps your new friend hasn’t been entirely forthcoming with you.”

“What’cha mean?” Randal said, taking the pipe back.

“I mean, perhaps Gary hasn’t been entirely forthcoming concerning his status as an agent of law enforcement,” Hum said. “I for one can’t think of a reason a man wouldn’t partake of such fine marijuana if he had nowhere to go unless he didn’t want to incriminate himself.”

“I thought that stuff didn’t make you paranoid,” I said.

“It don’t, smartass,” Randal said. “Is that it? Are you fucking cop, Gary?”

“No, Randal. I told you, I used to smoke a lot of weed, but now I don’t. I don’t like it anymore, all right?”

“Your shit don’t stink, is that it? You think your shit don’t stink? You don’t want to hit this weed with us ’cause your shit don’t stink?” Randal stood up.

“What the hell are you talking about?” I said. “I didn’t say that. Look, I’ve just had a really long day, and if I smoke any of that I’m going to be up for hours, thinking about shit. I just want to go to sleep. Maybe I’ll hit some up in the morning if you guys are smoking, okay?”

“A little wake and bake, huh?” Randal said, sitting back down. “I’m gonna hold you to that, motherfucker.” Randal and Hum sat at the table smoking bowl after bowl while I stared into the fire. Randal’s fireplace was simple, built out of rocks I thought he probably found lying around his house, but it was big. He could have roasted a good-sized pig in there. The logs were big too and I sat fascinated, watching the ember beds forming on the undersides of the logs, the red glow pulsing as more and less oxygen reached the fire’s heart. Hum and Randal’s murmured conversation wasn’t very interesting, from what I could hear of it. I guess Hum was some sort of sex fiend. He told Randal about every single girl he’d seen in the last month. Randal’s only contribution was to ask Hum what each girl’s breasts looked like, to which Hum always answered in great detail. Then they talked about the different pot they’d had over the years, the different times they’d got drunk and wild out somewhere or other. It was a pretty boring conversation.

Then Hum pulled over the other package he’d come in with from the other side of the table. “I forgot to show you, my friend,” Hum said. “I found it along the road as I was leaving our Inuit friend.” Hum unwrapped the burlap and picked out my dulcimer, the one I’d made while I was paralyzed. It had blown off the mountain top, and I’d thought it was smashed to bits somewhere. I couldn’t believe it. “It’s obviously handmade,” Hum was saying, “and I should get some good money for it in town yes?”

“Yeah, that’s really something,” Randal said, taking the dulcimer. He strummed it a few times, and though it was out of tune all the strings were still on it and it sounded clear and true, filling the room. I stood up and walked over to the table.

“That’s mine,” I said, holding out my hands. “I lost it on the way. It’s mine. I made it.”

“The fuck you say,” Randal said, pulling the dulcimer toward him. “This’s Hum’s. He found it fair and square, didn’t you hear?”

“But I lost it,” I said. “I made it. It’s mine.”

“Well, fucking finder’s keepers, loser’s weepers, right, Hum? You shouldn’t a left it by the goddamn road Gary, you dumb shit.”

I tried to stay calm. I really did. “I didn’t leave it by the road, Randal. It was blown out of my hands while I was on the top of a mountain. It blew away and landed in the snow, where Hum found it. The fact that he found it and brought it here, where I, the person who made it, happen to be seems fairly clear proof that it belongs with me and that you should kindly hand it over.” It’s so hard to maintain composure when you’re angry like I was. Every nerve wanted to set Randal’s fat face on fire. My voice had that tense-but-under-control thing that everyone knows means suppressed anger, and Randal smiled.

“Well, if you want it so bad, what are you gonna fucking do, Gary? Huh?”

I looked at Randal and Hum. They were both regarding me with the sort of peripheral scrutiny that feels like a storm cloud coming. As pissed as I was I made myself calm down. “Hey,” I said. “I was just saying. I just want to *see* it, that’s all. I mean, Hum found it. I thought it was totally gone, that’s all.”

I couldn’t tell if Randal believed me or not, but he said, “Well hell, if you just want to look at it, go ahead.” He put it on the table and pushed it toward me. I sat down with them and pulled the dulcimer over. I looked at its seams, the top, the neck.

Everything was tight and solid, the way it was the day I glued it. I couldn't believe the hide glue stayed together sitting in the snow, but I realized there's almost zero humidity in cold places and the glue was frozen, too. Still I would have thought it would be cracked or something, having fallen off a mountain and all.

"Lemme see if I can tune it," I said, and started messing with the pegs, mostly so I wouldn't have to look at Randal and Hum. They went back to talking while I tuned the dulcimer. I got it sounding pretty good. It struck me again that I usually had to use a tuner but it was so balanced, it just resonated a certain way when each string was where it was supposed to be. I took the dulcimer over by the fireplace and got a smooth chunk of stick from the woodpile. I sat down there and played a little bit, and Hum and Randal came over.

"Here, allow me to play," Hum said, taking the dulcimer. He didn't know what the fuck he was doing, and he kept just banging the stick around on the strings instead of bending the notes.

"Sounds like shit, man," Randal said, and grabbed the dulcimer. He started playing it like it was an electric guitar, doing rock god poses and strumming the shit out of it so I thought the strings were going to break. Hum laughed and clapped. I wanted to club both of them with firewood, but I didn't say anything.

The two bastards eventually fell asleep. Randal went back to his bedroom, leaving me and Hum to the two couches, which was fine with me, though I got stuck on the short one. It didn't bother me too much because I got up an hour after the two fuckers were asleep, got dressed, grabbed the dulcimer and took off.

It was cold as shit outside but I kept warm enough by running. I knew the general direction to Fairbanks and I figured I could sleep in a bus station or something until I could call someone and get them to wire me money to get home. Or else I would hitch, though it didn't seem likely I could get enough rides. If I could get back to Anchorage I might be able to get back on a ship going south, but that was another stretch of hitching in subzero temperatures.

I walked about a half hour when lights came up behind me. I didn't turn around but tried to act nonchalant and somewhat invisible with the dulcimer stuffed under my shirt. Then red and blue flashers came on and I groaned. I thought about dodging off the road into the woods, but as soon as I thought it a bullhorn-voice said, "Don't move! Put your hands on the back of your head and turn around!"

I put my hands on the back of my head and turned around. The dulcimer made a huge bulge under my coat. I looked like I was pregnant with a rectangle's baby. The lights were flashing on top of the cruiser, and the headlights were right in my eyes, making everything a sort of kaleidoscopic glare. A figure emerged, holding a gun. "Is there a problem, officer?" I said in what I thought was my most innocent-sounding voice, like I was reading a book in the park.

"Shut up," he said, pointing the gun at me. "Sir, do you have any weapons on you person?" The cop sounded like he was trying to hold something between his butt cheeks.

"No," I said, feeling like I was about to be holding something between my butt cheeks.

"So if I pat you down, I'm not going to find any knives, box knives, anything? Not even nail clippers?" the cop said.

“No, sir,” I said. “I do have a musical instrument stuffed under my shirt, but I don’t think I could hurt anyone with it.”

“Right,” the cop said, walking behind me. “For my own safety, I’m going to handcuff you, sir. Please hold your hands still.” He put cuffs on me. It was cold as it was, but the freezing steel acted like a conductor, moving the cold into my bones. I shivered. “Don’t move, sir,” the cop said. Now he sounded bored. He tightened the cuffs so they pinched the skin and gave me a little push between the shoulder blades. “Walk toward the car, sir.”

I walked back to the cruiser, and the cop opened the back door. I got in, sitting on my hands. It was positively tropical in the cruiser, at least compared to outside, so I almost didn’t mind being arrested for a moment. The cop got back in the front and U-turned the cruiser. He drove back up the road and he turned into Randal’s drive.

Randal was standing on the porch when we pulled up to the house. I saw Hum looking out the window, peeking through the very corner, his eyes round and possum-bright in the cruiser’s glare. The cop came around and pulled me out of the cruiser and said, “Is this the guy?”

Randal crossed his arms and nodded, giving me this smirking, shit-eating look. I just looked back at him. The cop hauled me up to the porch. He reached under my shirt and pulled out the dulcimer. “This what he stole?”

“Yes, officer, it is,” Randal said. “It’s a valuable antique. I made the mistake of doing this sumbitch a favor and giving him a place to sleep, and then I mentioned this instrument was worth some money. I guess some people just don’t appreciate anything, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right, Randy,” the cop said, giving me a nudge. “Well. You coming out to momma’s Sunday?”

“Sure am,” Randal said. “Wouldn’t miss it. Carla said she’s making stuffing.”

“Yeah,” the cop said. “Well, see you later.”

“Yeah, see you,” Randal said. “Gary. You stay out of trouble, all right?”

I didn’t say anything. I just got in the car. It occurred to me as I watched him up there that he was such a chickenshit. It didn’t really matter about the dulcimer because I realized this was the absolute pinnacle of his life. Maybe not this moment, but what this moment represented in his world. He was the king of this corner and he was happy with that, proud of it. It was just so pathetic that I suddenly didn’t care. Let him have the dulcimer. I made it, I created it. It didn’t matter if he had it because he would have it in one of the most miserable places I had ever been, a place Randal would never leave. As I watched out the back window I couldn’t help but laugh. Randal’s shitty little smile disappeared and his expression turned sour and greasy. He held the dulcimer up over the porch rail and looked at me like he was waiting for a dare. I kept laughing and he brought the dulcimer down over the railing, smashing it. I felt better, and sat back in my seat the best I could, given I was sitting on my hands. The cop drove me away through the icy black night, never saying a word.

Twenty-Seven

When the cop got me back to the station in Fairbanks he put me in a cell and did a computer search on my name. I still don’t know if they do that for everyone or if Randal

had something to do with it. But they found my Oklahoma warrant and I was extradited back here.

There was a trial and everything. But the charge was attempted murder rather than murder. Apparently after I stabbed him Harrell lay there for a while until Tino went back in and found him there and called 911. I got to hear his testimony during the trial, so I know. It made me laugh because he was nervous and took the judge at her word about not leaving any detail out, and when he said he kept gagging while he dialed 911 because Harrell had crapped his pants so he had to go to another office to make the call, there was a little wave of tittering through the courtroom. Anyway, Harrell was fine. It was one of those freak things where the blade went in his neck in just such a way that it missed everything important. They took it out at the hospital. The worst danger came from infection since the knife was covered in dirt, so they kept Harrell in for a few days while they irrigated the wound and such and then he was right back at work chewing tobacco and eating Cheetos, being a dick. He reminded me of Randal in the courtroom, the way he looked at me so smug, like he couldn't wait to see me pulled apart on the rack. In the end all that happened was I got six months, mostly for running. The judge took some pity on me in the sentencing, which I appreciate still. I had to tell all about Sharon and everything, and the judge had to listen to Harrell's testimony too, so I don't think she liked him a lot. I really got the minimum, and some of that fell under time served while I was waiting for trial and going through the trial, which took about a month by itself. So after the trial and all I only did three solid months, one week and two days after the trial and then I was free, or as free as a convicted felon can be.

I was really nervous about seeing Carrie. I emailed her a couple of times but I don't think she knew what to say, which isn't surprising.

The day finally came and I drove up to Edmond in my new-to-me little Chevy pickup. Althea still lived in the same house. I remembered the last time I'd driven Sharon there. It had been at the end, when she was much worse than I would admit. It had been almost nine months before, which seemed strange to me. It was that weird thing about time. It seemed like a long time ago, considering what had happened to me since then, and a short time considering how much it still hurt and how much I still missed Sharon. Driving by places I associated with her for the first time since she died was part of it. The street we turned onto in her mom's neighborhood was rough, and I remembered she kept complaining about how fast I was going. I was only going maybe fifteen miles an hour, so I had thought she was just being cranky, saying she couldn't catch her breath. When we got to Althea's, she was so out of breath she couldn't walk to the door, but she wanted to stand up. I helped her out of the car and we stood on the sidewalk in front of the house for a while together, Sharon leaning against me with her eyes closed as I held her. This was only four or five days before she died.

I found myself crying as I drove. It's something I had been doing a lot since I got back home.

Lynn answered the door, and I went back with her to the den. Carrie was there with Althea, and we had hugs all around. I thought I was ready to see Carrie, but she was so different it threw me off. She was almost ten, and was starting to get her dad's height. She was almost as tall as me. She had a shorter haircut and her face had filled out some,

in the beginning of its elastic growth toward its adult shape. Althea and Lynn went to the kitchen to get drinks. Carrie and I sat there a few moments, smiling.

“Hey, Gary,” she finally said. Carrie was always pretty low-key and I couldn’t tell if she was as nervous as I was.

“Hey, Carrie,” I said. “How’s it going?”

“Okay. How are you?” God, she looked just like Sharon. I couldn’t believe how much she looked like her. Only it was a Sharon I had never really known, a fresh, disease-free Sharon. I felt gross and bullet-headed next to her.

“Fine, Gary,” Carrie said, smiling. I had repeated myself. “You look different. Better, somehow.”

“Yeah?” I noticed the box that Sharon’s ashes had been in were on a shelf by the fireplace. Althea had put a picture of Sharon next to the box, so I assumed her ashes were still in there. Sharon was laughing in the picture, sitting in a restaurant booth. I remembered the day it was taken and knew I was there too, just outside the frame. My own shadow was on the wall next to Sharon, tracing me in the flash.