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Disconnected

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ABSTRACT:

The eight stories in *Disconnected* tell of displacement, emotional stagnation, and personal transformation. *Disconnected* utilizes all-male, first-person narrators to explore contemporary, mostly rural settings primarily in the American South. The narrators range from a 12-year-old boy in "Fresh Paint" to a 35-year-old ex-convict in "Second Chance."

Many of the stories in *Disconnected* use fishing or fish-related subjects as a way to explore the themes of moral judgment, class inequities and the search for identity. "Minnow Man," for example, is the story of a teenager's consignment to the rural South after the death of his parents. Displaced from his native Chicago, the narrator is challenged by the rural atmosphere and the blue-collar environment of his foster parents as he simultaneously struggles to earn a starting position on his high school football team. In "An Angler at Heart," a wayward individual with no direction in life gets a glimpse of his future after he is taken to jail for trespassing and fishing without a license. And "Walleyed" portrays the desperate struggle of a young man trying to earn a living in spite of his isolated setting and unscrupulous employer.

The military figures prominently into two of these stories, where the themes of displacement, character and responsibility are explored through the viewpoints of veteran and civilian, and supervisor and subordinate. In the title story, a war veteran grapples with post-traumatic stress disorder as he attempts to reintegrate into civilian life following his return home from the Persian Gulf War. And "Heat" is the story of a young serviceman who attempts to balance his own goals and fears with the duties and responsibilities of his position as a Marine squad leader during the same war.

These stories of isolation and camaraderie, of hope and despair, showcase the struggle for identity and redemption in a world of moral corruption, materialism and conflicting values.

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Introduction

Disconnecting My Journalistic Tendencies

Reading Jack London is how I became interested in writing fiction. I consider his "To Build a Fire" the greatest short story ever written, and in studying it over the years I am always amazed that London could accomplish so much with only a single man and dog as characters. I understand that the impetus for this story was a failed sailing expedition from San Francisco to Hawaii, and it is clear that London borrowed from this experience and used it as the basis for his famous man-versus-nature story. "To Build a Fire" gives us a character who is challenged not by another human, but nature – a force so permanent, powerful and unpredictable as to defy comprehension by the humans who try to understand it, challenge it.

I suppose I wanted much the same thing with my short-story collection, *Disconnected*. While the protagonists of these stories are never so physically isolated as London's, they are struggling against forces greater than they are, which are completely out of their control and which make them emotionally reticent and skeptical of those around them. These protagonists cannot rely on entitlement or privilege to help them gain what they want. Instead, they must utilize their own instincts, intellect and moral judgment to succeed in a world where there is always a demarcating line between themselves and those around them. Despite the various obstacles they face, however, the

protagonists in these stories prove that character, identity and redemption aren't necessarily destinations, but personal journeys revealed in the decisions we make.

"Winston Green" is a story about identity and class disparity, which are two of the themes of this collection. While the story's narrator isn't as physically isolated as the protagonist in "To Build a Fire," he endures a type of social alienation due to his family's economic status. In this story, three acquaintances engage in a night of underage drinking. Circumstance has brought the three together; they're schoolmates. But in nearly every other way the narrator stands apart from his two buddies, whom are the children of upper-middle-class parents.

After leaving the bar where the three had been drinking, the narrator's friend Laurence, in a wild, inebriated fit of laughter, crashes his car. Laurence and Nathan, the other friend, go to jail. The narrator, being sober, is driven home by the police officer. But instead of going back to the volatile household where he lives with his mother and abusive stepfather, he directs the officer to take him to a neighborhood on the other side of town, where he gets out of the car and walks a snowy street of mansions as if sheer proximity to another class will elevate him from his own.

Ultimately, the narrator faces a moral dilemma when Laurence's father attempts to pay him off to take the rap for the automobile accident. Tempted by the money and what it could buy him, the narrator struggles with his decision until finally he realizes that honor and integrity are more valuable than money. When a television commercial reminds him of his older brother who has left home to join the Marine Corps, the narrator decides to tear up the check Laurence's father had given him. He realizes that he is going to have to earn everything he gets, and that there is satisfaction and pride in doing so.

In making this decision, the narrator passes an important test of character. But unlike the man in "To Build a Fire," his instincts have guided him in the right direction.

The narrator in "Winston Green" is a type of character heavily influenced by Elwood Reid's blue-collar protagonists in the short-story collection, *What Salmon Know*, which are described as "working men, part of a culture that's no longer relevant in a shinier America" (Reid). Like Reid's characters, most of my protagonists are tough young men living on the fringes of mainstream America, in a world that is tougher than they are. Almost to a man, they are laconic and reserved individuals who, due to their lower-middle-class backgrounds and anonymous family names, are forced to make their own way through the world. This type of character dominates Reid's stories and found favor with me because, in some way, I could identify with their rejection of, or disinterest in, mainstream America.

From Reid's collection, "Dryfall" offers an excellent example of this type of character. "Dryfall" is a story about a college dropout from a broken home who paints houses for a living. The narrator tells us "I stayed around town, drove a delivery truck for a bakery for a while and finished high school. I got by. I was average and people liked me because I wasn't in a hurry to go places like my classmates who dreamed of going to Chicago or New York City" (141).

Certainly there are many writers who delight in writing about characters who escape from such humble backgrounds to the big cities on the East Coast. But I find the character that hasn't the ambition or inclination to leave the familiarity of his home much more intriguing. Instead of escaping, these characters must deal with the reality of broken homes, financial insecurity, and the moral corruption around them. Such

characters can also be assets in writing fiction for the simple fact that many would consider them dysfunctional for their reluctance to leave what is familiar. This makes for a natural source of conflict.

Another natural source for conflict is work, and having worked so many different jobs in my life, it is only natural that I drew on some of this experience for *Disconnected.* This is also something that I learned from Elwood Reid, whose stories in *What Salmon Know* feature protagonists who work as a YMCA fitness instructor, house painter, farmhand, and a machine-shop foreman, among other occupations. I learned that creating workplace scenarios can do many things for the writer. Work can reveal character, and it can help establish setting in a story. Somehow, work is also a source of interest to readers.

In his book *On Writing*, Stephen King mentioned the importance of writing about work: "Write what you like, then imbue it with life and make it unique by blending in your own personal knowledge of life…and work. Especially work. People love to read about work" (161).

With this in mind, I created a farmhand, pager salesman, fishing guide, and a minnow dealer for my stories. Not only do these various types of work help create unique worlds for readers to explore, but by showing how my protagonists deal with the duties and challenges of their jobs, they help reveal character. In one story, "An Angler at Heart," it is the protagonist's aversion to work (and love of fishing) that helps reveal his character.

Mark Twain is another of my influences in fiction writing. I have always admired *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which is a story that sparked my interest in writing

from the perspective of a young boy. What I admire most about this novel is Twain's ability to incorporate humor and innocence into a story that explores such serious subjects as racism and slavery. This was made possible, in part, through the use of first-person narration, which gives the reader a young boy's view of the world.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn inspired me to write "Fresh Paint," which is the story of a 12-year-old boy who learns that he is responsible, and accountable, for the company he keeps. I wanted to capture the voice of a young boy and find out how he would describe his adventures with his neighborhood friend. What is special about this piece, to me, is that while Mike, the narrator, is from an economically and socially average American family, he is nevertheless a rung higher on the ladder than his neighborhood buddy, Melvin. Of course, at 12 years of age, Mike doesn't fully understand this, but his mother and grandmother do and they constantly admonish him from running with Melvin. Despite these warnings, he does, and his association lands him in trouble.

By the story's end, the reader is able to see the major difference in these two boys: their parenting. Mike's mother and grandmother are working to instill a sense of values and ethics in the boy, while Melvin's parents take a hands-off approach to parenting at a time when they should be very involved in their son's life.

"Fresh Paint" is also the story that helped me find my voice as a writer of fiction. I suppose it is natural that I gravitated to first-person narration for this story, and indeed this collection, because I feel it is the most intimate, most sincere way to tell a story.

It is strange that, as adults, we can recall how we behaved as children, but it is not until we spend time around kids that we begin to understand how far removed we are

from childhood, how differently we see the world. I wanted "Fresh Paint" to remind the reader of this. Using a first-person narrator, I reasoned, would lend the story a degree of authenticity and credibility that would help pull the reader into the world of an adolescent boy, much as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* does.

Telling this story from a boy's point of view was also a challenge, however, not only because the years have dulled my memory about how, exactly, a 12-year old views the world, but also for the fact that the world has changed since I was this age. In this sense, "Fresh Paint," which is set in Louisiana in 1980, captures a simpler time, a time before kids spent their days playing video games.

Along with this earlier time, I wanted to capture in the narrator's voice, in his actions and thoughts, that out-of-sight, out-of-mind mentality that plagues us as children. I wanted to find out what he had to say about running with his friend Melvin, about challenging authority, about listening to his mother and grandmother. And as I learned, Mike knew right from wrong all along. But by the end of the story, he learned something about why his mother and grandmother had cautioned him against running with Melvin. He also learned something about himself. And by hearing Mike tell his own story, in his own language, the reader experiences the same kind of subtle, yet glaring, lesson that the narrator receives.

My favorite story in this collection, "Minnow Man," stems from my childhood experiences spent around a distant uncle, who was a commercial minnow dealer back in the 1970s and '80s. A big fish in a small pond, my Uncle Willie was the richest man in the small town where he lived. He sold a lot of minnows and, consequently, his kids were the best dressed and most popular in school. He owned the largest house in town

and his wife always drove a new Cadillac. I used to look upon my cousins, my aunt and uncle with envy, wondering what it must be like to live in a small town where I could ride my new dirt bike on the street and the sheriff not give me any trouble because of who my father was.

Such were my thoughts when I sat down to write "Minnow Man." Having grown up in and around small towns and rural areas in the South, I wanted to imagine what it might have been like if I had been consigned to go and live with my Uncle Willie. How would I have handled being around the minnow business, the migrant laborers? And where would I have fit in when I tried to make the football team if I had been, not one of the tallest kids in my class, but one of the smallest?

To fully realize the impact of such a situation, I imagined the narrator coming from a completely opposite background, from a vastly different way of life than the one he experienced in the story. How would he adapt and cope with his displacement? How would he fit in?

Set in the rural Arkansas Delta, which is in fact home to the world's largest minnow farm, "Minnow Man" is the story of a teenaged boy who moves to the South to live with his father's best friend, "Uncle Billy," after his father is killed in an accident. Mark, the narrator, never knew his mother because she had abandoned the family shortly after his birth. Coming from such a dissimilar background, he might have resisted integrating into the rural South, but his aunt in Canada is petitioning for his custody. To avoid having to go and live with her (whom he has never liked) in her tiny apartment, the narrator absolutely must fit in with his new family and his new environment, which he works assiduously to do.

As the title implies, minnows figure heavily into this story. Not only does Uncle Billy deal in minnows, but the term is also used metaphorically as the narrator is a "minnow" himself. Attempting to secure a starting position on his high school football team, he must overcome his small size and use his speed to his advantage.

Throughout the story, Uncle Billy compares his minnows to his goldfish, citing the differences and the advantages of one over the other. Segregation of these fish according to species and size, and understanding the relative value of each, mirrors the class inequities the narrator witnesses between the migrant laborers and "river people," and his own family, and between the big guys and "minnows" on the football field.

Interestingly, "Minnow Man" is the story that helped me understand and begin to overcome one of my initial weaknesses as a fiction writer, and that was my reluctance to seek constant conflict for my protagonists. As one who naturally avoids conflict and shuns tension, as one who is forever trying to foster a sense of harmony and peace for himself and those around him, seeking trouble is simply contrary to my nature. After all, what good can come from making trouble for oneself? While this view may have its merits in real life, it is debilitating in writing fiction.

The problem with this mindset seemed obvious after submitting the first draft of "Minnow Man" to the short-story workshop during my first semester in the MFA program here at UCO. This was apparent in the criticism I received from my colleagues, who told me that the story's narrator, was having too easy a time of things. This wasn't the case in my mind, in the way I had envisioned the story, but after considering these comments I had to agree. Where Mark should be struggling, he was simply getting along

without too much effort, even though I knew he was never going to completely assimilate to his new environment.

With this understanding, I rewrote "Minnow Man," striving to reveal how out of place Mark was as he arrived in the rural South from Chicago, with no parents, with few natural abilities to rely on, and with an uncertain future. I also tried to increase the tension for Mark by having him realize that adapting to his new home was imperative because his aunt in Canada, whom he did not like, was petitioning for his custody. The result is that in this version of "Minnow Man" there is something at stake for Mark. He has to face his deficiencies, his shortcomings in size and strength, which threaten to prevent his assimilation into rural life and which constitute a barrier to his making the football team. If he is unable to do, Mark knows there is a good chance he will be sent to live with his aunt in Canada.

Part of my inspiration for "Minnow Man" was not another short story, but an essay by Ian Frazier entitled "An Angler at Heart" (10). Published in his book *The Fish's Eye,* "An Angler at Heart" is a famous profile of Jim Deren, a legendary fisherman who once owned a New York City tackle shop called the Angler's Roost. Frazier's essay captures the setting of the tackle shop through the inclusion of myriad details, such as the types of tackle, lures and other fishing-related accoutrements; by describing the store's customers; and through the dialogue of Deren himself. In reading this essay one understands immediately how the Angler's Roost looked, smelled, and sounded.

Similarly, I wanted to show readers what a minnow farm looks like, how it smells and sounds. I wanted to reveal the farm's customers and laborers, and show how it feels to spend hours working in the heat of the Arkansas Delta. Frazier's essay demonstrated

to me how scores of minute details contribute to the creation of a new world for the reader. With this understanding, I tried to include as many concrete details of setting, as many idiosyncrasies of character and dialogue, as I could think of.

"Walleyed" offers a good example of creating another world for the reader, this one being a fishing guide's life on a remote lake. The narrator of this story works for an unscrupulous man who has more money than sense. "The Boss" has inherited his money and has used some of it to purchase a fishing lodge and guiding business, which was formerly owned by the narrator's grandfather. As the story is set in the remote northern Minnesota backcountry, the narrator's options for employment are extremely limited. Despite the change of ownership, he remains here as a fishing guide, working for the lodge's new owner because this is all he knows. A very accomplished and capable angler and guide, the narrator struggles to move through the monotony, hopelessness and despair of each and every day until his employer's actions during a fishing tournament present him with a compelling reason to make a change.

"The Boss" cheats his way to winning the tournament and the prize money, and while the narrator functions as a counterpoint to his employer's character, ultimately he is trapped and stands little chance of breaking away to start a new life. By story's end, we leave the narrator knowing that, despite his hopeless situation, he is going to report for work again the next day because this is all he has. It is what he knows. It is who he is.

The Ernest Hemingway story "Out of Season" was a source of inspiration for "Walleyed" for its description of angling methods and tackle, and for its symbolic use of lead weights and alcohol. "You must have some lead," says Peduzzi, the fishing guide in Hemingway's story. "You must have piombo. A little piombo (177). Lead weights and

alcohol figure into the fishing scene in “Walleyed,” and they also function symbolically in describing character. Lead weights sink the bait to the bottom of the lake, but when “The Boss” uses them to cheat his way to winning the tournament, they also sink his character. Of course, his character plummets even further because his is a drunk, which sinks the narrator’s respect for him to new lows.

Respect – specifically, self-respect and respect for the law – is one of the themes of “An Angler at Heart.” When the story’s narrator – an unemployed, unfocused, unsettled young man – attempts to fish a posted section of river, he is caught and taken to court, where he ultimately finds himself facing a jail sentence for his offense. Here, he fully realizes the consequences of his actions. Though he had only been fishing for supper, his disregard for the law has landed him a front-row seat at a live performance where the actors are playing out his own future. Continue down this road, they seem to say, and this is what you can expect to receive.

Ultimately, the narrator decides to apply for his fishing guide’s license at the behest of the game warden who had caught him, as this seems to be the inevitable and only logical career and life path for this young angler.

I suppose the stories “An Angler at Heart” and “Walleyed” stem from my experience as a journalist in that I was compelled to write them because of the central situations the protagonists find themselves in. In “An Angler at Heart” this situation is the jailhouse scene, while the fishing tournament serves as the scene for “Walleyed.” In both cases, and despite using first-person narrators, I wanted to show the reader how each character responded to these pivotal moments by simply describing the environment, the action and exchanges that occur, objectively so, as I would if I were writing a newspaper

article. It has taken me a couple of years to realize, however, that this isn't necessarily the best approach for writing fiction.

As a journalist, I have often reported on events like football games, on actions or policies implemented by municipal governments, or on experiences readers can have by simply by traveling to places I have visited. Usually, I try to remain objective in this type of writing, and I simply report on the situation, the destination, by describing the setting, the actions, and the outcomes. Of course, one of the key elements to this type of writing is the inclusion of certain details which complement the specific angle of the story I am trying to write. And while one may argue that this is a journalist's way of conveying a message in a seemingly subtle and objective manner – and it is – readers are generally able to arrive at their own conclusions about what is being reported.

Early on, I tended to resort to this kind of "reporting" in my fiction writing, especially in scenes that were central to a reader's understanding of a story. In "An Angler at Heart," I labored to describe the environment of the jailhouse the narrator finds himself in; in "Walleyed," I wanted to put the reader right there in the boat with the narrator and his boss. But in this kind of writing, I realized that there wasn't enough of a takeaway for the reader. I realized that I needed to show the reader what these scenes mean for the characters, how experiencing this kind of situation changes them, or causes them to consider a change. And this illuminated for me what has turned out to be my most difficult challenge as a fiction writer: conveying feeling from my characters.

As a fairly private and introverted person, it is not in my nature to easily display my emotions or feelings. Also, having served in the U.S. Marine Corps, I have been trained to show no emotion, to maintain my composure in any and all situations.

Fortunately, I have forgotten much of this training as I have aged. In any event, it was only natural that when I began to write fiction, my protagonists would behave the same way as I always had, for this is what I knew. But this makes for boring characters and uneventful stories.

Thus, I began to experiment with internal monologues for my protagonists and, by focusing on increasing tension for them, I was able to squeeze some feelings and emotion out of these formerly reticent characters. While my protagonists are never going to be emotionally uninhibited, I believe that the inclusion of emotion, the mention of a certain feeling here and there, has made them more fully developed and more convincing. I also think that these characters can, through their responses to conflict, reveal something more of themselves, despite their situations or personalities. So while the narrator in "Walleyed," for example, is not going to explicitly tell the reader that he is doomed, that he is not going to leave his job to get away from his unscrupulous boss, that he has no future, his mention that he will be back to work the next day, despite what happened in the fishing tournament, reveals something of this for the reader.

I believe the aspect of my work that I can most improve upon in the future is making my characters more dynamic and palpable through emotion.

The collection's final two stories focus on the military and the class distinctions inherent to this segment of society. The title story explores the dichotomy between military and civilian perspectives as the protagonist, a Marine veteran of the Persian Gulf War, attempts to reintegrate into civilian life while struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder. His wartime experiences have so affected him that he is psychologically absent from his present life and even his relationship with his wife. He attempts to cope by

consuming himself with work, but when he perceives an act of disrespect to the sacrifices he and his fellow veterans have made, the act of violence that ensues reveals that he is a long, long way from achieving the serenity and balance he seeks.

This story resulted from a writing exercise we did in one of the short-story workshops. Dr. Squires asked us to list all the different jobs we had ever had, and then to select the worst of these jobs and write about it. I don't know if "pager salesman" is the worst job I ever had, but it is one of them. So I wrote about it. I built the story "Disconnected" around this situation and included my own experiences as a Marine Corps war veteran grappling with PTSD.

Other than this exercise bringing the experience to mind, I don't know why I wrote these military stories. Having served in the armed forces and having moved on with my life, I don't care to relive those days. Yet here I am writing about those SCUD missile attacks in the Gulf War, and the civilian/veteran barrier I tripped over so many times in the years after I left the service. Then I realized that these incidents and experiences are themselves manifestations of the class inequities that have fascinated me for most of my life.

I suppose that my experience in the military, my familiarity with this way of life, have dulled the novelty of it. Not that I'm not proud of my service; it's the career accomplishment I'm most proud of. But like selling pagers, it's just something else I've done with my life. In fact, I was surprised at the positive feedback I received from my colleagues about these military stories, and I had to remind myself that most people never have the opportunity, or burden, of rigging a claymore mine; most people will never fire

a crew-served anti-tank weapon; and most will never be locked inside a concrete chamber and forced to choke on CS gas. Maybe there is something to write about here.

"Heat" is a story I might have thrown out if I had not received so many positive responses in the short-story workshop. I wrote it, in part, because someone in one of my writing classes commented about how terrified he is of sharks. I found this view understandable but strange because I am so fascinated with them and have studied sharks my entire life. Thinking back through all my shark encounters, all the sharks I have ever caught on my fly rods, those my son caught last summer in Florida, I recalled my days of living beside a shark-infested sea during the Persian Gulf War. I also recalled one of my colleagues challenging the colonel's no-swimming order. It seems that the threat of sharks was more terrifying than the fish themselves, for I don't recall anyone being attacked by them, yet most of us stayed out of the water. Maybe it was the threat of the colonel that kept us out.

So I built the story around this scenario, using sharks and heat as the main threads. There was the threat of sharks, as there was the threat of heat – both from the sun and the missiles. Both eventually were realized as the missile exploded in camp, causing an inferno, which sent the Marines into the water in the ominous scene at the end of the story.

Strangely, "Heat" has become one of my favorite stories and lately I have been enjoying thinking back on my days as a Marine. Maybe this is because I am a writer and the military is such a rich source of material for stories. In fact, I am beginning to view the military as one of those "submerged population groups" Frank O'Connor talks about in *The Lonely Voice* (18). Essentially, this is telling the story of the isolated individual,

one who finds himself physically or emotionally segregated from the mainstream world. A great example of this is the story "The Pugilist at Rest" by Thom Jones. In this story, the narrator's wartime experience separated him from mainstream life in America, and this led him down the road of violence to his ultimate brain injury which seems to have isolated him from his own family, even himself, years after the war.

The military seems to fit the model of the isolated individual, in part, because of the unique and unusually structured lifestyle of sailors, soldiers, and Marines. Another serviceman I know once commented to a civilian that being in the military was almost exactly like being in prison, "except you have just a little more freedom." I can't comment on the prison part, but this seems pretty accurate. In fact, I have never heard a better description of the military. Maybe there really are some situations I can recall and write about.

As for fishing and the many fish-related themes in this collection of stories, I felt compelled to use what I know, though fishing makes a fine literary motif, if you ask me. According to the National Sporting Library, *The Compleat Angler* – a book about fishing, first published in 1653 – is the third-most frequently reprinted book in the English language after the Bible and the works of Shakespeare (Walton). Clearly, someone is reading about fishing. I read somewhere that more literature has been written about fly fishing than any other sport. If you ask me, however, fly fishing is not a sport. It is a way of life.

Henry David Thoreau said "Now I go a-fishing and a-hunting every day, but omit the fish and the game, which are the least important part" (480). I subscribe to this notion because, for me, fishing is about being in the places where wild fish are found, which

humankind can never create for itself. It is about standing in a stream in the warm sunshine and smelling the damp autumn leaves strewn about the banks, hearing a woodpecker hammer a tree and feeling the cool water gurgling past your legs. It is about walking an immense bonefish flat in the Bahamas and seeing no one else all day. It is about standing on the beach at dawn, the surf roaring before you, the briny air filling your nose, and the satisfaction that you are casting to breaking fish while everyone else is still asleep in their hotel rooms. It is the planning of a fishing trip, and the getting there. It is coffee from a thermos, and conch salad prepared by someone whom you have only just met, but whom is already your friend. It is the opportunity to contemplate what you have done with your week, with your life, and what you will do.

Recently, I was deep-sea fishing in Florida with someone from a vastly different background – religious, economic, cultural – from my own. I realized it was not mere circumstance that brought us together; it was fishing. Had we not shared a love of being on the water, we would not have met and became friends, for on the water our differences did not matter. And this reminded me how powerful an experience fishing is. Some of the first things I learned in life were learned in and around the water with a fishing rod in my hands – knowledge and skills I am still utilizing today.

Fish and fishing appear in many of these stories as part of character, setting, metaphor, and to underscore class inequities. The protagonist in “An Angler at Heart” can’t help himself; he will fish until the day he dies, while noodling for flathead catfish in “Second Chance” helps highlight the story’s rural southern setting and its blue-collar characters. Fish are used metaphorically in “Minnow Man,” while the accoutrements of fly fishing in “Winston Green” help reveal the narrator’s character.

I feel as though fishing and my love of the natural world, and pastoral settings, will continue to influence my work. While I may never be known for my fishing-related short stories, I think my work will always be defined by the settings and situations, the details, one finds in and around rural areas and especially the water. After all, these things and places are who I am. They are what I love.

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FRESH PAINT

After lunch, me and Melvin ride our bikes up to the little stand. It's part grocery store, part fruit stand. There is fruit and beer everywhere, flies buzzing around the tomato baskets, baby chicks and bunnies in the spring. But my grandma calls it the little stand. She lives a couple of blocks away and I stay with her during the summer. Grandma sends me up here for bread or milk, but they've got the coldest pop in Mienwell, Louisiana. Forty cents a bottle.

There's this house that sits right behind the stand and we dump our bikes in the backyard, pass through a hole in the fence to get there. We don't park the bikes at the stand because Melvin says someone will steal them.

Inside, I reach down into the cooler and grab a bottle of sarsaparilla. Melvin gets cream soda. His bottle is clear and the pop is a weird kind of blue, like electricity. Makes me think something's going to happen when he opens the top. When we put the bottles on the counter to pay, the guy starts quizzing us.

"You old enough to drink that stuff?" he asks me. There's a grin on his face that reminds me of my dad when he was living with me and mom. He used to play jokes on her all the time, hide her stuff. That's when he wasn't drinking. He's been gone a long time.

"Yep," I tell him.

"What does it taste like?" he asks me.

"Huh?"

"What does sasprilla taste like? You're old enough to drink it you should know."

I look at Melvin. He's always giving me tips about something.

"I don't know," he says, raising his shoulders. "I'm drinking cream soda."

What do I say? I picked it because it looks different. Never tasted it before.

"Root beer," says the man. Grinning, he rings up the pop and I give him the money. "Y'all stay out of trouble, now."

We take our pop and walk out of the air conditioning, past the green tomatoes, and the red ones next to them. Some are so red they are almost purple.

Outside, the grass around the stand is covered with old junk. It's starting to turn brown and die. They call the stuff antiques, but all of it's rusted and I never see anyone look at anything. Plus, it's way too expensive. They want twenty-five dollars for this old

saw blade that has a smiley face painted on it. And the blade is missing some teeth. Crazy.

Well, we stand there next to the junk and drink our pop. There's a trash barrel out back with flies buzzing all around. Smells like bacon grease and old bananas. I look at all the watermelons and cantaloupe, kick them, try to tell which ones are ripe. I'm halfway through with my pop before Melvin gives me the tip of the day.

"That's not how you hold your bottle," he says. He's always telling me things like this. "Like this. Watch." He takes a drink. "See? You keep your top lip between the bottle and your teeth. That way if anyone comes up and whacks the end of the bottle you won't break your teeth on the glass."

"Far out."

Melvin says there's always someone waiting to jump us, to steal our money, beat us up. I've never seen them. Mienwell is a cotton town and most of the people here are old and retired, or out in the fields working. Everyone's pretty nice around here. But Melvin says they're all around us and that they come out of the woodwork if they see you with your guard down. I'm not sure where he has seen people like this, maybe over in Vicksburg, or on TV. I figure I'm pretty safe to drink with the bottle next to my teeth, but if anyone comes around I'll remember his advice and slip my lip between them.

"Hey, I've got a good idea," he says. "Come on, and don't throw your bottle away."

"Why not?"

"Just trust me," he says. "You'll need it."

We leave the flies and the smell of fruit, crawl through the hole in the fence and into the backyard where our bikes are stashed. The house looks empty when we ride by. The window curtains don't move and the driveway is empty. It's like the house went to sleep. I don't know who lives here. Never seen them. But the grass is always cut.

Out on the street we ride with our bottles in hand. Judging from the direction we're going I can tell we're headed to the old cotton gin at the edge of town.

"Squirrels," says Melvin. "I know where we can find some squirrels."

"Cool," I say. I don't know what he's got planned, but I'm up for anything. Besides, I've got lots of time. Mom's working until late this evening.

When we get to the gin yard we ditch our bikes next to the railroad tracks. Then we follow a little dirt trail in among the dusty buildings. The buildings are all pretty old, cracked white paint, tin roofs. The grass is thick and green just about everywhere except for in between the buildings. Here, the grass is worn down and there are dirt trails where the trucks and trailers drive. Up ahead I can see the gin building, where they separate the cotton from the seeds, and right beside it is a small wooden building with a covered porch. I'm not sure, but I think this might be the office because there is an old truck parked next to it. Except for the truck, the gin yard looks empty right now. It should be because the farmers just planted in April. They don't harvest until August.

We slip into one of the warehouses and slide the big door shut.

"Leave it cracked so we have some light," says Melvin. I pull the door open enough so a nice beam of light shines in, then open it a little more in case we have to get out quick. It's pretty dark inside, and warm, and it smells like dirt and hay. There are a

couple of windows on each wall, but they don't let in much light. I guess the glass is pretty dirty. When my eyes adjust to the dim light I can see there is hay in here, lots of it, and a dirt floor. There are two truck trailers parked in the middle of the building and they're both loaded with stacks of hay bales. Must be a hundred bales on each trailer.

"Hey, look what I found," says Melvin.

I walk over to the first trailer where he is crouching down by the wheels.

"More bottles."

"That's what you call a six-pack," he says.

"Six-pack of beer?"

"Budweiser. The good beer."

"Cool. What does it taste like?"

"We're not going to drink it. They're empty, anyway."

"What are we going to do with them?"

"I'll show you. Let's get up on top of this hay."

I follow Melvin onto the trailer and up the stacks of hay bales. These are the small, square bales, so they're easy to climb. I kick my feet into the space between the bales, step up to the next, grab the next one higher. The hay is pretty dusty and it causes me to sneeze a couple of times.

When we get to the top, I notice the rafters are right on top of our heads. If I raise my hands I can touch them. Then I see Melvin grabbing on to one, pulling himself up.

"Little bastards are up here. I know they are," he says.

It's exciting here in the barn, up on top of the hay. My stomach feels light and funny, and I feel sneaky, so I say it too. "Yeah, the little bastards are up here somewhere."

After a few minutes Melvin hops back down on the hay.

"They're here," he says. "We'll find them. All we have to do is throw a few bottles up into the rafters. We'll get them to come out. Then we'll light them up."

Melvin grabs one of the bottles and flings it into the black space between two of the rafter beams. It hits something and shatters.

"Okay, you fire one over that way," he says.

I pick up a bottle and throw it in the opposite direction. Same thing.

I stand and listen for a few seconds, trying to hear any sounds of squirrels rustling up in the rafters. Melvin grabs one of the beer bottles and throws it in a different direction. I sneeze again, then listen, ready to hear the bottle crash into the beams, explode. It seems like a few seconds have gone by and I'm wondering if he missed it. Then I hear the sound of the glass breaking. Lots of glass. Then I see why.

"You broke it!"

"Screw it," says Melvin. "Nobody here, anyway. Come on."

He grabs what is left of the beer bottles, climbs down the hay bales. When I get to the bottom, he hands me two of the bottles. "You go bust out those two windows over there."

"Those windows?"

"Oh, don't worry about it. Nobody here, anyway. That'll get the squirrels out."

I walk over to the nearest window. Just as I lift the bottle over my shoulder I hear glass breaking behind me. I fire. The glass makes a horrible racket, falls out of the window in huge, jagged pieces. For a second I get kind of nervous, peek out the window. It's quiet though. Doesn't seem to be anyone around. So I take the second bottle and run over to the last window. I'm just about to fire the beer bottle when I hear another sound.

"There they are!"

Melvin must have found the squirrels. I turn and see the light inside the warehouse getting brighter. Then I see someone pushing the sliding door open. I take off and run to the door on the other end of the building. Melvin is already there, pushing it open. The bright light hurts my eyes, and I have a hard time seeing. But I can run all right, like a deer.

"You kids come back here!" shouts the man. He's somewhere behind us, but I don't stop to look. "Hey you kids! Get back here!"

I grab my bike and take off running. Then I jump on. But when I do, my left foot misses the pedal and I slide off the seat and onto the top tube. I rack myself, hard. Melvin is ahead of me, speeding away. For a few seconds I'm all jammed up. Can't do anything. Can't move. I'm just coasting with the bike. The pain shoots up from my crotch into my stomach. My heart is speeding and my mouth feels dry. I feel pretty stupid. Racking yourself is the worst.

Finally, the bike slows enough so that I can put a foot down, stand up off the top tube and grab the pedal with my other foot. I take off, trying to catch Melvin. The pain in my crotch and stomach is wearing off. When I catch up to him, I notice he is sitting up in his seat and grinning.

"Take it easy, Mike. He was an old man. He can't catch us."

"I don't know, Melvin." I look back over my shoulder, glad to see no one behind us. "He was pretty mad."

I notice a couple of cows beside the road. They are Black Angus and one of them is poking its head through the barbed-wire fence. The cow stretches its neck, sticks out its tongue, trying to get the thick green grass in the ditch.

Then I hear the sounds of an engine revving. I turn back and see the truck from the gin yard pulling onto the road about two blocks back.

"Here he comes!" I yell. I stand on the pedals and spin them as fast as I can, throwing the handlebars side to side. My arms and legs feel cold and shaky all of a sudden, even though it's hot.

Soon we're back in town and flying past the houses on either side of the road. Then I remember the getaway place Melvin showed me a few weeks ago. I guess he remembers it too, because a few seconds later we're shooting down a side street. I look back and see the pickup turning the corner, engine clattering.

We finally make it to the getaway house, where we turn in and ride through the backyard, under a clothesline, into another backyard and out onto the next street. It's the only place on the whole block where you can get through like that. No fences.

"See you later, Mike," says Melvin.

"See ya."

I ride down the street, cut over on another and then down an alley. The man in the pickup is gone. Two minutes later I'm at my grandma's house, out of breath, drenched in sweat.

"Well lookie there," says Grandma. She looks up from her crocheting, sees my sweaty red face. I feel like an angels-food cake in the oven. I don't know how she can stand it with the air conditioner on the lowest setting. The smell of bacon is still strong from this morning's breakfast.

"Hey Grandma," I say, in between gulps of water. Then I open the refrigerator, pour some iced tea, because water never does the job.

"You haven't been running with that old Melvin, have you?"

"No, Grandma. Just riding bikes."

Silence while she thinks of another question.

"Well, you shouldn't run with that old Melvin. He likes to get into trouble."

Everything is "That old" no matter how young or good it is: that old boy who works up at the little stand, the one who lets his hair grow a little too long; them old Germans down the street who keep a bottle of liquor in their house; them old weeds that spring up in the driveway, even though they're covered with an inch-thick layer of gravel; that old pipe that Uncle Gus smokes, the one that stinks up the house whenever he and Aunt Mabel come to visit every August; that old Melvin who I shouldn't run with, even though he's only a year older than me. And I'm only twelve.

Then she looks up at me. "That old boogey man will get you if you're out a running around."

The next day, I ride over to my mom's office. It's not really her office; it's Doctor Savage's. Mom's his secretary. Always sitting behind the typewriter punching

keys like crazy. Sometimes, at night, she works down at the ER, filing and whatnot. Always telling me we need the extra money, asking me to spend the night with Grandma.

When I walk in she's got a phone jammed between her shoulder and ear, writing something on a notepad. She looks up, smiles. There's no one in the office this morning, but usually it's packed with women and girls. Some of them don't look much older than me.

I put my hands in my pockets, walk over to a bookcase that's filled with stacks of little brochures. One of them says *The Facts about STDs*. I figure it's about something Doc Savage takes care of. He's a – well, he's one of those kind of doctors.

"You're not in any trouble, are you?" asks Mom. She hangs up the phone, rips the message off the notepad and puts it in a basket.

"No, I haven't done anything." For a second I think of the old man from the gin yard. But she doesn't know about that. "I just wondered if I could go to the gameroom this afternoon and play games. Nothing else to do."

Then it hits me that I messed up. Shouldn't have said that. Usually, if I tell her there's nothing to do she starts in on all these things that I could do – pulling weeds, washing the car, cleaning my room.

"All right, as long as you're not running around with that Melvin."

"I'm not. He's fishing today."

"I see."

"You think we might be able to go fishing sometime?"

"We'll see when the time comes. Here, you'll need some money for the arcade." She gives me five dollars. I can spend all night in the gameroom with that. Have money

left over in the morning. "Sweetie, I'm going to work late tonight in the ER. Can you spend the night with Grandma?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"I promise we'll do something this weekend," she says. "Okay?"

"Yeah. Thanks, Mom."

"Stay out of trouble."

I leave Mom's office and on the way over to the gameroom I see someone familiar coming down the street. They're riding a bike and from the way they ride I can tell that it's Melvin. Melvin's not the most graceful guy on a bike; instead, he uses his muscles and pushes and powers the bike where he wants it to go. Watching him riding up the street, he reminds me of a monkey on a football. I heard somebody say that once. I think it was Melvin's old man.

"I thought you were fishing?" I shout.

"I was." He rides up next to me, hits the brakes, skids. "Fish weren't biting today. Plus, Dad ran out of beer."

"Oh," I say. I've heard that before, too.

"Where you going?"

"The gameroom. You want to go?"

"I guess. I was going to ride up to the store and get a pop. You wanna ride up there, then swing back by the gameroom?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

So we ride over to the little stand, ditch our bikes in the backyard, hop through the hole in the fence and walk into the fruit stand, then into the air conditioning of the

grocery store. The same guy from yesterday is behind the counter, watching a little black-and-white TV. It's really tiny and it reminds me of the CB in Melvin's dad's truck. I go with cream soda today because I don't feel like a lecture. Melvin gets the same and we both grab a Snickers.

"What do you say, guys?" asks the man. "Staying out of trouble this summer?"

"Yeah, we're trying," says Melvin.

We pay and walk outside, between the metal roof and green outdoor carpet, where there's so much fruit and vegetables I feel like we're in somebody's blender being made into a shake. I notice the tomatoes in the baskets have a lot of flies on them today.

When we get to the trash can behind the stand, Melvin gives me today's tip.

"Okay, take a bite of Snickers," he says. He's chewing with his mouth open (something my grandma tells me not to do) and is already halfway through his candy bar. "Okay, you got the Snickers in your mouth?"

I nod, crush the peanuts with my teeth.

"Now take a drink."

I lift the bottle and take a swallow. What's the big deal? I wonder.

"Isn't that cool?" he asks. "The foam? You feel the foam in your mouth?"

I nod yes and swallow.

"Now that foam will help you out if you ever get punched in the stomach," says Melvin. He points at my stomach, rolling his mouth like a cow rolls its cud. "Say somebody comes up and sucker punches you right in the gut. Feels like you swallowed a brick. Well, you eat a Snickers and drink a pop and get that foam in your mouth. Your stomach will feel way better."

"No kidding?"

"I ain't kidding."

By now I'm ready to get going to the gameroom. I have a lot of money to spend and games to play. But Melvin starts kicking around the watermelons and says he's got an idea.

"Hut, hut," he says. He grabs a melon like a center just hiked it to him, hands it off to me. "Through the line! Blast through the line! We need yardage!" He points at the hole in the fence.

I don't know what he's up to now, so I just stand there.

"What line?" I say.

He picks up a melon and takes off running down the trail, stiff-arming invisible opponents, then he dives through the hole in the fence. A couple of seconds later, he comes back through without the melon. I'm pretty sure it busted when he fell.

"Come on, let's get some more," he says, reaching for another watermelon.

I remember the gin yard from yesterday and I start to get nervous. I look around the place, but all I see is a bunch of old rusted junk, some boxes with lettuce that has turned brown. I grab a melon and duck my head through the fence.

When I get to the other side Melvin has them lined up next to the fence like green bombs. He's really busy, moving back and forth carrying watermelons. After a few minutes we've got ten, stacked up like firewood.

"All right," he says. "Keep a lookout. You see anybody coming you whistle like a quail."

"What are we going to do?"

Then he grabs one of the melons and takes off for this little shed on the other side of the yard. Just now I notice that its doors are open. Inside, I can see a bunch of old lawnmowers and gas cans. I guess someone does live in this house. But where are they?

Melvin gets to the shed. Then he grabs the melon with both hands, raises it over his head, lobs it inside. GUNK comes the sound as the melon hits one of the mower's engines, splits open, fruit spilling all over the place. Melvin's already running back, a grin on his face.

"Come on," he says.

I look over at the house, study the windows. Since we're not being watched, I grab a melon and join in. It's a heavy one and I put it up on my right shoulder, wrap my hands around its dusty skin. My stomach has that upside-down feeling again. My heart is starting to really thump and it's kind of exciting. If my mom saw me, I don't know what she'd do. But I'd be in serious trouble.

When I get to the shed, I can see the busted melon, the red slush and little seeds all over the mowers. Someone's going to be crazy-mad when they find this, I think. My heart is beating so fast that it's getting hard to breathe. But it's exciting. I raise the melon over my head and with both hands push it down onto the mowers. It explodes. Pieces of watermelon are everywhere.

I run back to the melons, grab another and take off to the shed. Then the yelling starts.

"Hey! Stop that right now!"

I drop my melon. Someone has walked into the backyard. It's an old man.

Melvin is closer to the shed than I am. He still has a melon in his hands. My stomach feels like it's trying to crawl up to my throat and my mouth feels dry again. I start walking toward the bikes. The old man stops, looks into the shed, them back to Melvin. He's wearing faded overalls, a blue cap and big glasses. He must be a hundred, I think. Then he points his crooked finger at Melvin, spits brown juice into the grass.

"You boys is messing up!" he yells. He takes a step forward, still pointing his finger at Melvin. "What in the hell do you call this?"

I move over to my bike, pick it up off the grass. Then I see Melvin. Instead of dropping the melon and running over to grab his bike, he raises it over his head with both hands.

"Put that melon down!" says the old man. "I'm going to skin you!

Melvin throws the melon down. It splats open on the grass.

"You little shit! Come back here!" he says. I get on the bike and tear out of the man's backyard. "Goddammit! I'll skin you kids! Get back here!" I don't look behind me, but I'm pretty sure he's running after us now. I hope Melvin gets away.

I forget about the gameroom and head straight for Grandma's house. Get there in about thirty seconds. Melvin's nowhere to be seen.

I hide my bike behind some honeysuckle bushes and jump inside the house, peek out the door. Looks like we gave the old man the slip.

"Well, where you been?" says Grandma. I jump, my heart up in my throat, pounding the breath out of me. She sounds as surprised as me.

"Uh, I was just riding around…" I tell her. It's the only thing I can think of. She stops sweeping the floor, leans on the broom and points.

"You been a running with that old Melvin, ain't you?"

"No," comes my response. It's automatic; I can't help it. But then again, I'm not supposed to lie. "Well…"

"Now don't you story to me," she says. "You know you're not supposed to be a running with that boy. He'll get you into trouble again. What did you do?"

I tell her the story, part of it, almost, but leave myself out.

"I didn't have any part of it. I mean, he started it, Grandma. I was drinking my pop and then I saw him throwing watermelons into that shed."

"And you didn't take part?"

"No. Well…"

"Well, we're going to find out and I'm going to call his momma." She's pointing toward the driveway. When I look out the door I see an old pickup pulling in real slow, gravel crunching under the tires. It takes about an hour, it seems like, but finally this old man gets out. My heart drops into my stomach. He pulls a bandanna from his overalls, wipes his face as he walks up to the door. Grandma lets him in.

"It was him and that other boy," says the old man. But instead of acting mad, he kind of laughs, like maybe he understands why two boys come along and blast his lawnmowers with watermelons. "I tell you Miss Ferguson, for the life of me I couldn't figure out what was a going on. I kept a hearing these funny noises. Here in a little bit there would be another noise, then another. I walked back there and seen these two boys a carrying those melons over to the shed, you know. I realized then what was a going on."

I still can't believe he's not mad. At least he's not acting that way.

"Well his momma's a going to hear about this," says Grandma, looking at me. "She sure is. And I'm going to tell that old Melvin's momma what he's been a doing."

Well, Grandma tells Mom all right. She makes me go up there to the old man's house and clean off his mowers, and the shed. The watermelon is pretty hard to get off. Seeds stick to the metal, sticky as molasses. The old man doesn't seem too mad; he just keeps telling me I ought to put my energy into something more productive. Says when he was my age he didn't have time to play around. Says he was always picking cotton, milking cows, plowing gardens, shoeing his mules. Says he only got to go to town twice a year and that was to buy new shoes for school. Says he only went to the eighth grade; his dad kept him at home after that to work on the farm.

I get pretty tired of listening to his stories. But he isn't too mad, or doesn't seem like it, anyway. I'm pretty happy about that.

I clean everything up and think I'm all done, but he pulls out a pocket knife, opens it up and bends down by one of the mowers. He scrapes out some more seeds and watermelon flesh from the flywheel.

"Looks like you missed some spots," he says.

It takes me two hours to go through all the mowers, scraping out the seeds and watermelon from the little cracks and holes in the engines. By the time I finish, my hands are sticky, my knees and neck sore from bending down for so long. He asks me if I'm going to throw watermelons on his mowers again and I tell him no. Then he shakes my hand.

Mom had told me to offer to mow the old man's yard, so I ask him. He says he doesn't need me to do that.

I get grounded for two weeks – no bike. Mom locks it in the garage, says I can have it back when I prove that I'm responsible. But that's no big deal. It's happened before, after I clipped all the roses off Mr. Jennings' bushes; that time I didn't go to my dentist appointment but said I did. Both of those times Mom made me do some sort of job around the house – pick weeds, wash the baseboards. Well, this time she makes me paint Grandma's house. All by myself. And it's a big one.

Monday rolls around and Mom drops me off at Grandma's about the time the sun comes up. Grandma cooks a big breakfast, just like always, then I take the money Mom gave me and head off to Mason's Supply to buy the paint.

"How much do you need?" asks the man in the store. "How many gallons?"

"I don't know. I'm just painting the house. It's a big one."

He thinks for a minute.

"Well, how about we start you off with two gallons?" he says. "You can come back and get more if that's not enough."

"I guess."

I pay for the paint and the brushes, and he gives me some sticks to stir the stuff. Tells me it's oil-based and to keep it away from my mouth. I already know all that.

I get started by 8:30, but the painting will have to wait. First I have to scrape off the old stuff with a putty knife. About halfway through the first board I remember that

scraping is the worst part of painting. It's like two jobs in one and the first one is the hardest.

It takes me all morning to get through just one side of the house. After lunch I start on the back side and I barely finish with it when Mom picks me up to take me home.

Next day all I do is scrape. I get the little white flakes all over my arms and neck. I'm hot, sweaty and flecked with these itchy little flakes. They're scattered all over the grass around the garage, too. More work for later, I guess. I don't think I'll ever finish.

But I do. It takes me all day. I have to replace a couple of rotten boards along the bottom, but I finally get through it all.

So Wednesday morning I start painting. By 11:00 it's so hot I have to stop and take a break. The thermometer on the side of the garage says 98 degrees. We'll probably hit 104 today, I think. Maybe more.

Just before lunch Melvin rides up on his bike.

"You painting this all by yourself?" he asks. He's eating a cupcake, icing on his lips. The knees of his jeans are covered in dirt, as usual, but he looks a little different today. I can't decide just why.

"Yeah, got grounded for two weeks. I can't hang out for a while," I tell him. I look over at the windows, make sure Grandma's not watching. "I'll get in trouble if I don't keep working."

"Man, that sucks."

"What are you doing?"

"Hanging out. I'm going to go up to the gameroom later. Today's my birthday," he says. "Old man gave me twenty bucks."

"No kidding?"

"I ain't kidding," he says. He pulls the bill out of his pocket to show me. Then I notice the dark spot under his left eye. It's a little swollen, the shape of a carrot; looks like a bee got him. "How much they paying you to do this?"

"Nothing."

"That ain't good," he says. "You always want to get the money part fixed up front. That way they can't come back on you and say 'Hey, you ain't getting nothing.' Shouldn't work for free."

I take that as the tip of the day.

"Well, I guess I don't have no choice," I tell him. He finishes the cupcake, drops the wrapper on the ground. "Hey, pick that up or I'll be the one getting in trouble. And don't let my grandma catch you hanging around. She'll get mad."

"I'm out of here anyway," he says, picking up the wrapper. Then he gets back on his bike. "Hey, whatever happened with that old man?"

"Had to go up there and clean everything up. Got grounded. You know," I tell him. I wait for him to fess up, tell me what happened after Grandma called his parents, but he doesn't. I don't bring up his eye. "Well, what happened to you?"

"Nothing. Old man just said stay away from there for a while."

"Yeah, I guess I won't be around there for a while, either. No bike."

"Well, I'll see ya," he says, riding off.

"See ya, Melvin."

I watch him ride off. When he gets into the street, he drops the cupcake wrapper and disappears. I stop what I'm doing, walk down to the street and pick up the litter, place it into the trash can.

MINNOW MAN

Uncle Billy says the minnows won't survive in the goldfish tank. He says the goldfish can live just about anywhere, but the minnows need cool water and lots of oxygen. I thought he was joking at first because I once had a goldfish – I named him Samson – and I kept him in a glass bowl in the kitchen. He did fine for about a month, then I decided to change his water. He didn't take well to the clean water. He began to list to one side, swim around in circles like he couldn't find his way. He didn't make it long in that new water. My dad told me to flush him down the toilet, that he'd wash out into the river, then downstream to the sea. He used to tell me that everything flows downstream, that it's the natural way of things.

So I didn't believe Uncle Billy, but you know, he's right. One night, I took a dip net and scooped some minnows, flipped them into the goldfish tank. A few days later I noticed they were floating belly up, dead. Goldfish were fine, though.

Right now, it's the minnows that are selling – a certain size of minnow. Uncle Billy says the walleye are biting up North and that's why folks want the six-pound minnows. "The four pounders are too small," he says. He pronounces it as "pound-uhs," with an emphasis on the first syllable. Uncle Billy talks funny. They all talk funny down here, real soft and slow, and they make the words sound really long, like it feels good just to say them. "They for ice fishing. You're from Chicago. You ever go ice fishing?"

"Not since Dad died. It's been three years, at least."

"Your daddy and me used to go ice fishing when we were in college," Uncle Billy says. He is unfolding a seine net, which we're about to use to drag one of the finishing ponds. "Best friend I ever had."

"Yeah," I say. I still get upset about my dad sometimes. Never knew my mom. She left when I was a baby. "Well, at least I'm not living with Helen anymore, in that apartment with her cat."

"I'm glad you could come live with us. Protective custody's still going to come around and check in, but they just want to see that you're adjusting okay."

"Let them come. I'll show them I'm way better off down here. I'm not going back to Canada. I don't know why she'd want me back anyway."

What I do know is that the blue van wasn't here this morning – the blue van, the one all the Mexicans drive. It wasn't here when I came out after breakfast. Uncle Billy's got me, but I'm only one. And I don't want to spend my time chasing minnows. There

are four or five Mexicans, usually. Sometimes six or seven pile out of that van, the one who can speak good English asking Uncle Billy if he can use one more, or two more, saying they're hard workers, that they'll work until dark, that they don't need to stop for dinner.

So it's Uncle Billy and me, a seine net between us, dragging the muddy bottom of the finishing pond. I can feel the soft mud on my feet, oozing between my toes as my heels sink, and I can't stand it. It smells like fish and dirt, and cow manure. I can't see the bottom, which worries me because Uncle Billy says there are snapping turtles in some of these ponds. He takes a spot near the bank, tells me to swing around wide and come back to him. "See the world and come back home," he says.

I step off the pattern, one slow, mucky step at a time, trying to keep my balance while the thick mud sucks at my ankles. The mud and the water are warm, but every few steps the mud feels softer and the water cooler. In these places I sink nearly to my knees. At one point I go in a little deeper, trip and drop the net. I'm wet from the waist down and I manage to swallow some of this muddy water. Now I've got that earthy, fishy taste in my mouth, pieces of grit between my teeth. Feels like I'm biting down on sandpaper.

I'm glad Helen isn't here. If she were, if she could see me now, I'm sure she'd throw a fit and use this as evidence for why I should be up in Canada with her. But I'm tougher than she thinks.

"Let's go back," says Uncle Billy. I grab my end of the net and move carefully back to the bank, trying to keep myself from falling in again. "Them Mexicans are faster than you," he says, pronouncing it "Mez-kins." "They light and they don't sink into that

old mud so bad." I glance over and think that he's grinning at me, but it's only that cigar in his mouth making him look that way.

When I get back to the bank, I turn and try it again. I make a big U-shape with the net, like the upside-down shape of Uncle Billy's cap brim, then I bring it back to the bank, come back home. When I get there, we drag the net up the dike on to dry ground, where flies are buzzing around the cow piles. I still can't get used to the smell of cattle, but it's the heat that bothers me the most. It's so hot down here that it feels like you're carrying around extra weight on your head and shoulders. Hotter than a firecracker, Uncle Billy says.

In the water, when you get them up near the surface, the minnows look like a big dark cloud, their black backs straight and narrow, all facing the same way, calm and orderly. But things change once you get them out of the water. The net gets heavy and the dark mass of minnows turns shiny and bright. The fish flip around in constant motion, flanks flickering in the sunlight, gills lifting and falling, bodies bending into so many thousands of silver question marks. Uncle Billy says they're most vulnerable at this time when there is no water to support their weight, give them buoyancy. Plus, you know they can't breathe out of water.

"I still don't know why they're called six-pound minnows," I say. "They look pretty small to me."

Uncle Billy, cigar stub in the corner of his mouth, his breathing heavy and pronounced, just laughs. His shirttail is hanging out of his jeans, the bottom half wet and shaded deep-blue from the water, the top half dry and light blue, buttons open halfway

down his brown, hairy chest. "Let's get them over to the tank," he says. "Get them some oxygen and let them settle in. Larry'll be here tomorrow."

We hoist the net into a tub of water, which supports the fish until we can get them to the tanks. Uncle Billy drives the tractor and I sit back on the trailer as we make our way to the open-sided pole barn where a dozen or so concrete tanks are located. Here, we lift the minnows out of the temporary tub and move them to one of the tanks. The water inside is clean and clear, but looks black because of the shade from the roof. Holding either end of the net, we lower it into the black, bubbling water. Then we open the net to release the fish into their temporary home. I peer into the black water, but I can see only a few of the minnows, the ones near the surface. The tank is only three feet or so deep, but it may as well be nine or twelve. Seems a shark could hide in that water and you wouldn't see it.

The fishy smell is very strong here at the tanks. This is where the minnows are graded, separated and finally loaded into the tank trucks for transport to their destinations. This batch we just brought in from the pond is headed tomorrow afternoon to Larry's Bait and Tackle in Ely, Minnesota. Uncle Billy ships his minnows all over the country. He says as long as they have some oxygen along the way, they're fine. But you have to keep them out of the sun and give them lots of cool water or they'll die on you.

Uncle Billy says the trotliners are the ones who buy the goldfish. He says they last a lot longer than minnows and do better on the hook.

Raising my voice to be heard over the sound of the bubblers, which are buzzing from tank to tank the length of the building, oxygenating the water, giving life to the fish, I ask Uncle Billy where the Mexicans have gone.

"They haven't gone far," he says. He removes the cigar from his mouth, spits, looks out at the field in the distance. "Work and family are the only two things a Mexican has. They won't be gone long."

It is nearly noon and there is a haze from the heat hanging out over the land and the ponds so that the distant reaches appear blurry. If you stare out there for a few seconds the field looks like it's jumping, floundering around way off in the distance, like a fish on land. These ponds are separated by miles of green dikes running the length and width of the field. You can't see them all from here because it's so flat. But from the air, the ponds look like window panes, all square and neat and even. Too bad the water's so muddy you can't see through them.

My Aunt Martha says that school starts in about a month. It seems too hot to be thinking about that, but they tell me it's hot down here through October. I don't really want to think about starting school right now. Seems too far off. I have to go back, sometime, I suppose. I don't know what to expect from a small-town high school, but I've been thinking about going out for football.

"You gonna be a defensive end?" says Uncle Billy, crumbling a piece of cornbread into a glass. Once it is half-full with cornbread, he tops off the glass with buttermilk. This is his lunch, which he calls dinner, and which he eats with a teaspoon.

I shake my head, wondering what buttermilk and cornbread taste like. Is it sweet or sour? Soft or crunchy? Whatever it is, it can't be too good. And the people down here eat the stuff like we do salad.

Uncle Billy's question tells me how out of touch he is with where I am in life. He thinks I'm young enough that I might still grow some more, maybe grow big enough to play defensive end. I would need to be bigger, taller, stronger. But it's not going to happen. I turned 16 in March and I'm old enough to know I'm never going to be a big guy. I am pretty fast, though.

"Receiver," I tell him, stuffing the last of a peanut-butter sandwich into my mouth. "If they can get me the ball, I can do something with it." Hearing myself, I realize my response makes me sound pretty confident. I shouldn't be. At home, I went out for football my freshman and sophomore years, but I didn't make the team. Coach said I needed to work on the physical aspect of my game, which really means that I need to be able to take a defensive back's body check, shake it off and go on about my route. But that's hard to do when you're one of the smaller guys on the field. In a big city there is just too much competition. Plus, being an underclassman is a disadvantage itself because the juniors and seniors, being older, are bigger and stronger. Too many people competing for too few positions, I guess.

But I'm out in the country now.

"You ever thought about wrestling?" asks Uncle Billy. "You're a small fellow, but you wrestle other guys your same size. You gotta work hard to keep yourself in shape, keep in top condition. It's a very disciplined sport," he says. "I have a lot of respect for wrestlers because they have to show up and make weight, or they don't compete."

Aunt Martha walks by and pats Uncle Billy's stomach. "You wouldn't make the team, would you?" she says.

"It's football for me," I say. "I'll get my chance one of these days."

Less than a week after the Mexicans disappear, another group shows up at Uncle Billy's looking for work. Two men and a teenager step out of a rusty Ford truck. The teenager stays with the vehicle, while the older men approach Uncle Billy at the barn. Their clothes look faded and dusty. One of the men has a scraggly beard with a cap tipped way back on his head, which gives him that I've-had-a-long-long-day look. Their skin is brown enough that I can't decide if they're Indian or just white guys who have been out in the sun. Lifting an iron disc onto a bar, I watch them from the garage for a moment before lying back on the bench and gripping the bar.

After a few presses I hear footsteps on the garage floor. The teenage stranger has walked over from the truck.

"How much you lifting?" he says.

"Oh, I don't know. It's only a hundred," I tell him. "Trying to warm up."

"How much can you bench?"

What a rude question, I think. What does it matter to you? Buzz off and get your own weights. But what I say is, "I don't know. I haven't lifted in a while."

"You got any more weight?" he asks.

I point and he walks across the garage, grabs another 50-pound disc. I go over and grab another and we slide them onto the bar. Then he lies back on the bench and pushes, drops his hands to his chest and pushes again, lifting the weights. He has thick arms and a barrel-shaped chest which is covered with a tattered gray T-shirt. As he pushes, he exhales sharply and I can smell that same sweet-and-sour scent that my old

basketball coach's breath used to smell like when he would talk to us in the huddles during timeouts. It's not appalling, but it's not pleasant, either. He smells like he needs a shower, too.

After six or seven repetitions, he gets up, pats his biceps.

"Let's see what you got," he says. As he smiles, I notice that his teeth are very small for someone of his size. They have little gaps between them, but they're all even.

I get down on the bench, take a deep breath and adjust my grip on the bar, over and over. Finally I push. Getting the bar up is no problem, as my arms are already nearly extended. I bring the bar down near my chest and then push again, straining against the weight, feeling the pressure mount in my face. I'm sure my eyes are bulging when I feel the bar get light. Before I know it, the bar is back in the notches, at rest.

"Thanks," I say. "I need to work up to that."

"No problem, man," says the stranger. He leaves the garage and joins his elder companions near the truck. They climb in and the truck comes to life through a series of coughs. Even from this distance I can smell the worn interior of the truck, which reeks of dust, sweat and cigarette smoke. As they drive off, the teenager, his arm resting on the door, raises his finger in a lazy wave.

I walk over to the barn, where Uncle Billy is gassing up the tractor.

"You gonna hire those guys," I ask him.

"No, them river people wouldn't work out," he says. "They work long enough to collect a little bit, enough to buy them a bottle. Then they take off on you. They like to steal, too."

A few minutes later, he walks over to the truck and pulls out a .22 rifle. His eyes are focused on something in the distant field. "Cormorant," he says, steadying the rifle against one of the barn poles.

After living down here for six months, I've learned that the cormorant is sometimes called a water turkey. And nobody likes them. They're medium-sized birds that like to eat fish. They stalk the edges of the ponds, sometimes several of them, picking off the minnows. Cormorants are protected by the government, but that doesn't matter to Uncle Billy. He says they'll eat up your profits, and that since they're protected there are too many of them. Maybe so, but I wish he wouldn't shoot them. I hate killing.

A few seconds later I hear the *crack* of the .22, the *clink, clink, clink* of a spent cartridge striking the concrete floor. There is a heavy feeling inside my chest when he says, "He won't get any more fish."

With two-a-day practices starting soon, I tell myself it's time to get back into shape. Besides the fact that I like football, I figure that making the team will prove to everyone (especially Helen) that I am adjusting well to life down here. I received a letter from her the other day, asking me how I'm getting along, telling me her door is always open if I decide I want to move back to the city and "get out of the mud," as she put it. Some part of me appreciates her willingness to take me in, but she doesn't seem to understand that I'm not a little kid anymore. I can make my own decisions now – most of them, anyway – and decide what I want to do with my life. Right now, this includes making the football team.

So I've started lifting weights on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. On the days I don't lift, I run – usually between two and three miles. I'm never going to be a heavy, muscular guy, but if I can build my strength a little, it will really help when those defensive backs come up and body check me right off the line.

I run all through the month of August, and it's hot. The air here is heavy and humid, and your clothes stick to you pretty much anytime you go outside. Running makes it even worse, and some days I wonder just why anyone would want to live in a place that is so hot. The Arkansas Delta is an oven.

A few weeks before school starts, I go up to Lincoln High and enroll. I'm thrilled when I find out that I've already taken all the math I need to graduate, so I choose an accounting class, instead. The enrollment counselor tells me it's all about organization – organizing your debits and credits and assets and liabilities. "Each one has its own column, and as long as you keep the figures in the right column, you come out all right," she says. Whatever.

Another class I enroll in is typing. I don't really care about typing, but the two girls in line ahead of me (Becky and Susan) enroll in it, so I decide to do the same. They're both good-looking girls.

I round out my schedule with geography, English literature (boring), American history and French (I'm told that mostly girls take French, so we'll see). Also, I sign-up for football.

On the way out of the school, I walk past the senior lockers, then the girls' bathroom, then the junior lockers, then the boys' bathroom. Just before I reach the door I hear girls' voices, lots of them, and the sounds of tennis shoes squeaking on a wooden

floor. I look into the open doorway, into the gymnasium, and see the cheerleaders practicing their drills. I'm glad I signed up for football.

Football practice has already begun and school is only a week away when Uncle Billy tells me it's time to grade the fish. By now I've all but forgotten the Mexicans and I guess Uncle Billy has too because I've been helping him all summer. I don't really enjoy this, but I don't hate it either. Besides, with school starting, I know I'll be spending less and less time around here. That's one good thing about school.

Walleye season must be very good for the anglers up North because we get trucks in for the six-pound minnows several times a week.

"But they don't want the four pounders," says Uncle Billy.

"Why not?" I ask. "Won't they eat the smaller fish?"

At this he stops what he's doing, removes the cigar from his mouth and tells me, "Mark, some folks like a nice, big old steak. That's what they want to eat. Other folks like to eat hamburgers." Streams of sweat run down his cheeks, staining his shirt. He takes his cap off, pulls a handkerchief from his back pocket and pats his face dry.

He replaces his cap and then folds the handkerchief, very neatly, into a perfect square and returns it to his back pocket. "You know, if it was me," he says, "I'd want a big old steak every time."

In an effort to separate the steaks from the hamburgers, we take an aluminum grate and place it into the minnow tank. The grate is nothing more than a series of parallel slats connected to a main bar, which serves as the handle. There is a very small

space between each slat – just large enough to allow the smaller minnows to escape while trapping the larger fish.

We start at one end of the tank and slowly move the grate through the water until we're only a foot of so from the opposite end. Uncle Billy takes a piece of rebar and runs it through the handle, which allows us to rest the grate on the tank. Here, the trapped fish will remain until a truck arrives to take them to their destination.

Looking into the water, I can see a few minnows swimming near the surface of the large end of the tank. Most of the fish, meanwhile, are undoubtedly trapped in the small end, behind the grate. I can see a cloud of them – the larger minnows – just beneath the surface. Yet I can't help but think that there are still some smaller minnows in here, mixed in with the larger fish.

We repeat this process with three additional tanks until Uncle Billy feels satisfied that we have segregated enough of the larger fish to fill the next order.

"Why do you call them six-pound minnows?" I ask him.

"A thousand minnows of this size will weigh six pounds," he says through his teeth, as he bites on the cigar stub. "You take a thousand of the smaller fish you only get four pounds. There's a big difference."

Football has really helped me focus on something besides books and homework and studying. Sometimes I think about my old life and living at home with Dad, but that seems so long ago now. Things are getting better, but I'd trade everything if I could just have my Dad back.

Getting back into football has been the best thing for me. It all came back to me very easily – trying to show the coaches what I am capable of, the stretching and running, the competition. There are three other guys going out for receiver, and there is one guy who plays sometimes at receiver and other times at tight end. Coach Mike likes him at tight end because he's so big and because he can block. Fine with me. If he can block, I can run.

To my surprise, we have a quarterback who can really throw the ball. Coach Mike likes him to throw the ball to mix-up our attack. If this continues, there's a good chance I'm going to fit into the offense.

One evening when I get home from practice, Aunt Martha tells me a man from protective custody has been out to talk to her and Uncle Billy to ask them how I'm adjusting to life down here. I notice the glassy look in her eyes and it makes me wonder if they could force me to leave here and go live with Helen in Canada. This worries me a little, but more than anything it makes me mad. They're not going to tell me where and how to live. As far as I'm concerned, things are fine here and only getting better. They're not going to send me anywhere.

"You know I love you and Uncle Billy," I tell her, giving her a hug. "They're not going to tell me how to live."

"You're a sweet young man, Mark. And I'm so glad that you're happy here. "

"I guess I need to tell Helen to drop this and to leave me alone. I'm not interested in moving to Canada."

"I know you're not, baby. Don't worry about anything. You're doing fine. We're proud of you."

"You know, I had a good practice today. I think I have a really great chance of making the team."

At this, Aunt Martha's eyes water up and she buries her nose in a Kleenex. "They said they were going to send someone to observe you at one of your practices. I wasn't going to mention it, but I think you should know."

"No kidding? When?" I try to sound indifferent, but there is a sinking feeling overtaking my stomach.

"They didn't say."

Now, stunned and confused, and quite angry, I resolve to giving everything I have to making the team. I don't care about being a small guy. I don't care that I didn't grow up in the South. I don't care about the oppressive heat. I'm going to show the custody people they're wasting their time.

"Well, they're going to see a first-string receiver at the top of his game," I say. "They can turn up the heat, but I'm not going to melt."

I hear sounds of tires crunching gravel, the low rumble of an engine, out on the driveway. It's Chip, the driver for Larry's Bait and Tackle, who is making his third trip down this month to pick up minnows. It is Saturday morning, the sky cloudy and uncertain, and I'm helping Uncle Billy mostly because he's still without any other help right now. He doesn't mention anything about the visit from protective custody and I decide not to bring it up. I'm just going to go about my business and try to show everyone that I'm happy, content and capable of living my own life. I'm not a damn kid anymore. Why can't those fools just leave us alone?

"Them walleye still biting, are they?" says Uncle Billy.

Chip, climbing down from the tank truck, shakes his head. "Man, it's the best walleye season I can remember. One of our customers brought in a twenty-seven incher the other day he caught on one of your minnows."

"Hot damn!" says Uncle Billy, clapping his hands sharply. "I told you my prices doubled, didn't I?"

This morning we have three tanks fully segregated and stocked with the six-pound minnows, while the smaller fish have been moved to a single tank on the opposite side of the barn. I grab a thick hose and connect it to the valve on the first tank of big fish, while Chip connects the other end to the tank on his truck. When it's all connected, the minnows and water are drained into the truck. While we wait for the first tank to drain, Uncle Billy and Chip shoot the breeze, and I duck down and knock out 20 pushups. I rest a couple of minutes then try to do 20 more. But I can only do 15. A few minutes later a sharp *crack* sound startles me.

"He was way the hell out there, Bill," says Chip. "I don't think I could've hit him, either." I smile when I hear this.

Aunt Martha doesn't like Chip because she says he's rough around the edges. He has a couple of earrings in his left ear, a tattoo on his right arm, and a ponytail. I see where she gets that, but he's really a good guy. Uncle Billy even says so. Aunt Martha says she still doesn't want him in her house.

"Daddy spent twenty years in the service," she says very matter-of-fact, right hand over her heart. "He'd of just *died* to see a grown man wearing an earring. Lord have mercy."

I wonder what Helen would think if I had an earring and a tattoo. Would she still want me to come live with her? What would those people at protective custody think? *He's a lost cause, lady. He's one of them now. Forget him.* Would they leave me alone?

We drain the second tank and begin on the third when a white truck pulls in off the road and approaches the barn very slowly. A couple of short, dark-skinned men with mustaches get out and wave. Chip and I finish up with the third tank, while Uncle Billy goes over to talk with the men. After several minutes he returns to the barn.

"Did you get you some help?" says Chip.

"They offered to start right now," says Uncle Billy. "I told them to be here Monday morning at six and they'd have a job. These guys are hard workers. They just put their noses down and go. That's why I like Mexicans so much."

It is as though a weight has been lifted from my shoulders. Uncle Billy has his help now, which means I'm off the hook. Now if I can just make the football team, I'll be happy.

It is one week before our first game, against Forrest City, and Coach Mike is just about to let us go from practice. I haven't been approached by anyone from protective custody, nor have I noticed anyone strange lurking around the practice field. Are they going to send someone out to watch me, like an NFL scout? Who knows? I try to keep my mind on football.

It has been a good week of practice considering how badly we played in our last scrimmage. We did all right moving the ball until the other team figured out we didn't have a running game, and they began to key on the receivers, playing us man-to-man. I

did pretty good. I caught three passes and one of these was a big third-down conversion. But we just couldn't run the ball and that was our downfall.

So today, before letting us go, Coach Mike calls the team together for a huddle.

"How many of you know Kevin Truman?" he asks. This question elicits a strange response. I see only a few players raise their hands, but suddenly, nearly everyone is talking.

"Coach, you talking about the Kevin Truman who was suspended the last three months of school last year?"

"That's the one. Who knows him?"

Now, most of the team seems to be grinning.

"Coach," says another player, "Kevin Truman got into three fights the first day of class."

"Won them, too," adds another.

"Coach, he's the toughest kid in school," says Jay, who is a particularly husky linebacker.

"Good!" says Coach Mike, smacking his hands together sharply. "That's the Kevin Truman I'm talking about. I'm glad you all know him so well. Now, which one of you is going to get him to come play tailback for us?"

Most of the players start laughing and slapping high fives.

Uncle Billy says there are snapping turtles in one of his finishing ponds. He doesn't know how they got in there, but they like to take their share of fish, like the cormorants. Of course, he doesn't want them in there and if it wasn't for the Mexican

men he hired last week, it would be me out there getting my toes bitten off. Thank you, Mexicans!

From the barn I watch as the men seine the pond, moving slowly, carefully in the soft mud. I look for any movement in the top of the net that might indicate they've picked up something heavy, but I see nothing so far. If I were to go out with the Mexicans and net one of these turtles, is this something that protective custody would report back to Helen? I consider this for a minute until Uncle Billy slaps me on the shoulder.

"Mark, I finally found a use for these little minnows," he says.

"I thought they were for ice fishing."

"They are. But not this time of year. So I got lucky and sold them to a chemical company up in Ohio. Every last one of them." I can't tell if he's grinning or if it's the cigar.

"What does a chemical company want with minnows?"

"They turn them loose in their outlets to find out if they're leaking chemicals. If the fish can survive, they figure they're all right. If they're leaking anything, why, they'll know it."

A few minutes later Uncle Billy nods his head in the direction of the Mexican men out in the hot field. They are out of the water now, standing on the dike and holding the net between them. A large dark shape fills the net.

"Looks like they got them one," says Uncle Billy. "I told them they could have it if they caught one. They like to make soup out of them turtles."

The Tuesday before our first game I arrive late to practice and am ordered to run laps around the field. I am only five minutes late, but Coach Mike tells me to start running. He says he'll tell me when to stop.

It's brutally hot outside and even though I took a long drink from the water fountain before coming out here, my mouth and throat are parched. My face and head feel hot, I think to myself as I make my first lap around the field. Why am I not sweating much?

I notice a man sitting alone in the bleachers and observing our practice, a baseball cap on his head, sunglasses shielding his eyes. I'm fairly certain he's the one Aunt Martha was talking about, but I can't be sure. If Coach Mike hadn't ordered me to run laps, I think that I might just walk up to him and tell him he's wasting his time, to go back to his office and find someone else to harass. Seeing him makes me run harder, faster, even though I feel shaky and tired today. I guess it's because I started cold. But I'll warm up.

Then I pass the defense working out on one end of the field, the lineman pushing the skids, assistant coaches standing atop them, yelling to push harder, faster. Accounting is the reason I'm late, I think to myself. I'll admit it's a boring class, and part of the reason is that they go to such lengths to make sure everything is in its own little column. This charge here and that charge there.

Man, is it hot. Running around the field, I'm cursing accounting while also wondering how I'm going to pass that class. I have to pass or I can't play football. Man, it's so darn hot out here.

I round the opposite end zone and watch the other receivers going out for passes. I should be out there with them, I tell myself. If it wasn't for that stupid ledger assignment. Assets equal liabilities plus owner equity. Who cares? Hey, isn't that the new guy? The new running back? They got him. He's on our team now. When is Coach Mike going to tell me to stop? I am so thirsty.

But I'm cooling off. It's hot. It's darn hot, yes, but I think I'm beginning to cool off. Beginning to. Beginning. Is *beginning* spelled with two Gs and one N? Or is it spelled with one G and two Ns? *Beginning*. Why did I have to take accounting? That counselor was right, but she didn't tell me the whole story. What is that girl's name in the first row, right side of the room? She was checking me out today.

I pass the bleachers and the strange man again, now no longer sweating, but feeling very hot, feeling the pressure of the heat boiling beneath my helmet, its weight on my shoulders. I continue running, watching Coach Mike to see his signal for me to stop, to go for a drink of water. Rounding a corner, I notice him standing and talking with one of the other coaches. Perfect occasion, I think to myself.

Occasion! That's another one! That's the other word I was thinking of. Another one that tricks me. Is it spelled with two Cs and one S? Or is it the other way around? What the heck does occasion – however you spell it – have to do with accounting, or football?

God, it's hot! Does he even see me out here? Old Coach Mike. He even know I'm still out here running? What about the man in the bleachers? He see me? He see I can run, I can play? I don't need your help, dude!

There's old Gary waving. Or is he rolling his arm? Signaling me to run faster? I can't go any faster. But that man is here today, watching me. I can go faster. I have to go faster.

But my head feels so hot in this helmet. And there's the new guy again. Running back. Now we'll have a running game. Balance the passing attack.

Heck, am I going to be able to start? Old Coach Mike better start me. Only five minutes late. No big deal.

It's been fifteen minutes, anyway, I think to myself. Does he know I'm out here? I need water. Bad. Water.

Why is my heart beating this way? Feels like it's coming out of my chest. God, I can't remember if *beginning* is spelled with one G or two…one N or two. Oh well. Just think about football. First game coming up Friday night. Am I going to start? Is Coach Mike going to start me? Why does my heart feel this way? Why is it fluttering? Why is my back all itchy now? Dry and itchy. Why is the goal post flashing? What is his name? The new guy? Running back? Meanest kid in school?

Just keep running, I tell myself. Keep your balance. Keep that nice, smooth stride. The man in the bleachers is watching.

It is some time later – could be two minutes or two hours, I don't really know – and they've got me. My heart is still racing and it is difficult to breathe. But I don't feel hot anymore. Two guys helping me off the field…their faces sweaty and flushed. Why am I not hot? My teeth are sore, and my chin, too.

"You're going to be all right," says one of them. I don't know which one. I look over and see Dan's face. Big Dan, I think to myself. Big tight-end. I wonder if he is going to start on Friday. Or if I will. Then my heart flutters again, the grass before me flashing white and green and black, my arms feeling dry and cold, skin on my back intensely itchy. I feel thirsty, winded, hot, cold. Looking up, I see a sweaty face that seems so familiar, but I can't place it. Then I hear someone yelling something about water and shade. I close my eyes and don't open them again until a wave of cold water splashes my face. Then I see the familiar face again.

"Mark, it's me, Kevin," he says. "You'll be all right. Ambulance is on it's way."

I feel a cold, wet rag on my forehead and I close my eyes. My heart is knocking against my chest in high hear. Then I open my eyes again. Kevin – I think it's Kevin – starts saying something, but I can't understand him. My eyes focus right on his teeth – very small teeth for someone as big as Kevin, I tell myself. All small and even. Little gaps between them.

Just then I imagine myself diving into a swimming pool, an Olympic pool, with marked lanes and deep, clear, cool, refreshing water.

When my head breaks the surface, I glimpse the other end of the pool, which looks so far away. Everyone is standing there yelling, clapping. I take a deep breath and extend one arm, then the next, twisting left and right, carving my arms through the water. I take a deep breath and keep my head down, my arms churning. With each extension of my arm, I hope and expect to feel the pool's concrete wall on my fingertips, which I strain to reach before the man next to me.

Coming up for air, my head light and dizzy, I hear people shouting. “Stay in your lane!” they say. “Stay in your lane!” But they can’t be yelling at me. I’m not crossing any lanes. I’m just trying to get to the other side.

WINSTON GREEN

Six beers, two shots of bourbon, a boilermaker, and I'm not even 18. Tonight I'm at the bar, watching, learning. This place is the only one in town that touts itself as a real Irish pub, but I don't see anyone drinking Guinness; only light beer.

Laurence and Nathan are arguing about who has the better watch. Laurence has a Rolex – a gift from his parents on his 18th birthday. I hear him say that he was ready to move up to the best, which elicits a predictable response from Nathan, who's wearing a Tag-Heuer.

"It might not have the reputation of a Rolex, but just look it," he says. The bartender takes a look, lifts his eyebrows and nods.

I'm down on the end of the bar, sipping my beer when Nathan turns and hits me up about my timepiece.

"It's a Timex," I tell him. "An Ironman." Without saying anything, Nathan nods his head. Laurence and the bartender turn away and for a moment, my Timex is hanging in the balance. "I do a lot of running," I say.

I left home two hours ago and I'm wondering how long it'll be before I go back, if I go back at all. I got into it with my step-dad tonight. He yelled and cussed me like always. Said the school called him again. Told him I cut class. Mom hasn't found out just yet. She works a second job now, nights at the hospital, ever since the Cherokee was repossessed last month. She's the lucky one, though. Doesn't have to sit around the house with Leroy.

My rich friend Laurence, the one I cut class with, picked me up this evening in his new Mustang. He's got his own car. His dad's some kind of engineer – a scientist, not a train driver – and a department head at Wake Forest. Big house and all. Lucky bastard. He told me I could stay with him tonight and I'm taking him up on it. My parents don't know this just yet. Leroy'll be mad as hell when he finds out. But I'm leaving home, sure as hell. No way I'm going back to that house tonight. I've still got bruises from the last time I skipped.

Now Laurence is talking with the bartender about his family, and about the academy he attended up north, a place called Deerfield. It sounds like a place with old buildings, ones with ivy growing all over the walls, where the students wear sport coats and slacks to class. Laurence would certainly fit in. He never wears jeans.

"Mom's from Massachusetts," Laurence says. "We just moved here last month." His voice, loud and boisterous, makes him sound confident. Confident, maybe, that the credit cards in his wallet, which really belong to his parents, carry a higher spending limit than those of anyone else in the bar. They probably do.

The bar is filled with college students, sipping diluted beer and raving, I'm sure, about the things their parents' money has allowed them to have, places it's allowed them to go.

"What do your parents do?" the bartender asks. As he wipes the varnished bar, I notice the sleazy gold bracelet jingling on his wrist.

"Dad's an engineering professor," Laurence says.

This response lands us a free shot. Lucky me.

Nathan, who is right there with Laurence as far as money is concerned, is sipping Bud Light and listening. He laughs at Laurence's comments, nods his head understandingly. Nathan doesn't have to imagine, wonder or pretend. His parents, one a lawyer, the other a state senator, bought him a Bronco. He's got it made. He's never had to watch two unshaven fat men drive off in a new car his parents couldn't pay for. These things do not exist for him. Like Laurence, he lives in an insular world where loose ends are mended with the thread of green bills, or plastic, which proclaims the availability of many such green bills. But tonight, none of this matters because we're drinking and everything is all right.

The bartender, who wears wire hoop earrings in both ears, asks if we'd like another round before closing. My head is warm and spinning inside, subconsciously moving to the rhythm of the REM song blaring from the speakers. Irish pub, my ass.

I feel like I could fall from the barstool at any moment, down onto the tiled floor, revealing my lack of money, exposing my young age, blowing my cover. I could really care less about another round, but since Laurence says that his dad is paying for it, I take the bottle placed before me and drink.

Until I'm pretty damned drunk. Left home and I'm not coming back, I think. Staying with Laurence tonight, at his big house, where the street address has only two digits. Everything will be fine. Tomorrow…well, we don't have to think about tomorrow right now. There's beer to drink. So I drink.

We finish our beer, pull on our coats and file outside to Laurence's Mustang. Laurence (actually, his father) has given good ol' Sven a generous tip so that he'll be able to drink here again, unquestioned about his age. The green thread fixes everything.

Though I am taller than Nathan, I am somehow relegated to the back seat. Maybe I relegate myself; I'm not really sure. Somehow, the back seat just seems the right place to sit.

It has started to snow. The streets are turning white as the small flakes fall in and muster, invading our world like a strange, alien army. Laurence and Nathan are laughing between themselves, the last beer having put them into their groove. The Mustang, which is all engine, grumbles as we drive down the street, begging to be driven hard.

We pull up to a deserted four-way stop, the snow falling harder now, flakes as big as fifty-cent pieces in the headlights. Except for the tracks of a few cars before us, the road is all white. Laurence pops the clutch and the Mustang, true to its name, rears and spins like an enraged beast.

We're spinning in the intersection, doing doughnuts, tachometer about to explode. For some reason I think of my brother, David, who's gone off to the service. He gave me some advice once. Said to keep a low profile, that it'll keep me out of trouble. Well, right now our profile is about as low as King Kong's nose. I wonder if David was speaking from experience.

Hunkered down in back, I grip the headrest of the driver's seat with both hands and hold on. Suddenly the car finds a bit of traction and we lurch forward through the intersection before Laurence's heavy foot causes us to fishtail back and forth across the white road. He and Nathan explode into laughter and I wonder why we let him drive.

Now, the back end comes around and we're sliding sideways across the road. Off the road. Into a field.

The Mustang hits a ditch, knocking it unconscious as it careens sideways through the field. Snow and pieces of plastic fly into the air. I can hear the frozen grass raking the underside of the car as we plow through the field, out of control. I can feel it through my running shoes. Laurence laughs like the devil, steering in vain, as we bounce this way and that, sliding through the snow in a field where the car was not designed to go. I'm growing delirious from adrenaline. What seems like two or three minutes of daring automobile handling has actually been only a few seconds of idiocy.

The car comes to a sudden stop, frozen in time. The Mustang's last wind, blue-gray in color, floats across the air, integrating into the snowflakes in the headlights. We're sitting in the middle of a white field, which is bordered on one side by an apartment complex and on two sides by quiet, deserted roads. Laurence and Nathan are

laughing their asses off; my heart is racing. I try and figure out how we're going to get out of here. We've got to get out fast. Why are they laughing?

The exhaust hangs in the headlights like a fog, like smoke from a professor's pipe, pollution somehow disguised by its source.

"Car won't start," says Laurence, still giggling. He laughs as though he has easily accomplished a great feat.

"Pipes are buried," I say. If there's one thing I know about, it's how to get a disabled car back onto the road. Many times I've had to dig my parent's pickup out of a ditch, out of the ruts of a muddy driveway connecting a dirt road to a house we used to rent. My nerves keep me looking over my shoulder toward the street. If Leroy could only see this, I think. He'd really freak. "Let's see if we can dig them out."

We climb out of the car and instantly the snow peppers our hair and shoulders. It's nose-burning cold and only the tallest of the weeds are protruding through the accumulating white blanket. The tracks, which so clearly tell our story, are visible out in the street, a childish scribble, scrawled by inept and inexperienced hands. Despite my night of drinking, I feel very sober now, my heart still thudding from the saddle-bronc event.

As I bend down to investigate the exhaust pipes, headlights appear from the road. A car crawls to the point where our tracks leave the pavement, snow crunching beneath its tires. The car, which is black and white, stops. Flashing red and blue lights come on. Suddenly, everything turns yellow.

"Shit," I say. "This is all we need." I stand, my body as rigid as a dead cedar. I want to run.

"You were driving!" yells Laurence. He throws the keys at Nathan.

"Not me man! It was you!" says Nathan.

They go back and forth, laughing and tackling each other, rolling around in the snow. They seem oblivious to the cop who is walking our way. The officer approaches me, nods and says good morning, asks who was driving and what happened.

"Him, the one making the snowball," I say. I am surprised that the cop is so polite.

The officer is small, dark, and wiry, and he has a thin black mustache. I can smell his cologne of soberness and responsibility in the cold air as he walks toward the other two. Standing next to the disabled car, contemplating my own fate, I watch as he questions Laurel & Hardy.

After a brief interrogation, he handcuffs the two, apparently unimpressed by their act. He walks them to the street, where another cruiser has just arrived. I follow in tow, wondering if I'm going to jail tonight, wondering where I'll get bail money, listening as Laurence cusses the cop.

"Man, I wasn't driving!" he yells. "Leggo my arm, you sumbitch! Jimmy, you were driving, right? Tell him. You're sober."

I say nothing. For a moment, the many things separating Laurence and me seem multiplied. And for just an instant, I don't mind.

Laurence and Nathan are now in the back seat of the second cruiser, handcuffed, reminding me of circus clowns in a Volkswagon, headed downtown to try their show. If it were me I'd be shitting bricks, but all they do is laugh, their arms immobile. I'm wondering if I'll be joining them.

The officer walks over and says he'll give me a ride home.

Home, I think. What home?

"Where do you live, young man?" he asks me. I notice the small gold name badge on his uniform. It says GARCIA. I hesitate, wondering instead about him, thinking that we probably have a lot in common. For some reason, I suddenly feel more connected to him than my two buddies.

"Oh, over that way," I say, pointing. "Across town."

I can hear Laurence yelling from the second cruiser. "Hey amigo! How about some cerveza!" he says. He and Nathan explode into laughter.

I'm in the back seat of the cruiser now, giving the officer directions. The snow is falling faster, harder, fuller. The car creeps through town, a tired, sluggish voice erupting sporadically on the CB.

"Turn right. Here," I say. I point to the neighborhood's entrance, where houses peek out at us from behind a tall brick wall. They are giant, elegant homes, some with lights on, shining through plantation shutters or stained glass. We enter the neighborhood and follow the winding street until I tell him to stop in front of a large English Tudor, a BMW 7-series parked out front, sleeping beneath a white quilt. I pull on the door handle but it's locked. The officer gets out, comes around to my door.

"Thanks for the ride," I say, as he opens the door.

"No problem. Stay out of trouble, young man," he says.

I walk up to the house as the officer drives away, pretending to search my pocket for a key. Then he's gone and the neighborhood is quiet, the houses settled like sleeping giants in the snow. It's 3:00 am.

The snow is falling. Snowflakes, half as big as my fist, fall through the cold night, feeling fresh and new, cleaning the air as they go. As it accumulates, the snow blurs the memory of my recent exploits. The bar, the drinking and car rodeo now seem like distant events buried back in the haze of summer's heat. I realize that it will all melt very soon, but for now it's thick, soft and deep.

I walk away from the house and down a path I determine to be the sidewalk. The snow distorts my sense of direction, my judgment, causing me to wonder how far down my next step will take me. The falling snow reminds me of a curtain and I don't know what's on the other side.

I round the corner and stop in front of a mansion. There are no cars in the driveway, though it could easily hold six or seven. I stand and admire the enormous house, imagining what it would be like to unlock the door and go upstairs to a warm bed. The house number is visible over the front door. It says 17. I wonder about the food in the refrigerator, imagine a fire roaring in the fireplace, smelling warm and woodsy. For a moment I think I hear the phone ringing inside the house. Then I recognize the noise as car brakes, squeaking from somewhere beyond the tall brick wall in the outside world. The squeaking stops and it is quiet again.

I consider going up to the house and ringing the doorbell, but decide against it. The phone will be ringing soon enough, and besides, I wasn't driving. I have other

friends who live just around the corner. Surely I can stay with one of them and forget about tomorrow for now. It bothers me to think that tomorrow is already today.

I leave the house, plowing through the snow, which is now over my ankles. It feels like I'm walking across a balance beam, one that is growing more and more slippery with each step.

I stay gone for two days, come back home one evening when Mom's at work, Leroy out at the bars. I watch TV for a while then eat a sandwich and turn in early, wondering what I'll say when interrogated tomorrow.

I wake to what sounds like a bowling ball crashing into my door. The door flies open and there's Leroy, a straw hat big enough to sail with on his head, his lanky body a mast tucked into a pair of elephant-hide cowboy boots.

"Where the fuck you been, boy?" he asks. His breath has that sweet, sour note that tells me he has been drinking. No surprise. "I say where you been?"

"Staying with friends," I tell him. I rub the residue from my dreams out of my eyes. Right away I know that I can't stay here and I sense that change is imminent. Something has to give.

"Staying with friends? Well that's real nice," he says. His voice is like a bull nettle in the foot and his grizzly whiskers remind me of cactus thorns. There's a freeway inside my body and I can feel vehicles buzzing from top to bottom, carrying blood to my arms, legs. My heart is straining to keep traffic flowing. "Well your brother's joined the Marines!" he yells.

"Yeah."

"They're working his ass off every day. He dudn't have time to go and stay with friends."

I pull on my shoes just as he moves over to my bed. He's wearing a white tank top, faded jeans and cowboy boots. He pokes my head with a stiff finger.

"Don't touch me," I tell him.

"Boy, I'm getting pretty sick of your act. Coming around here like you own the place, playing hooky and all this bullshit. Fishing all the time." I stand up and feel the dry knot in my throat. I'm nearly as tall as Leroy, though he has me by a few pounds. If he was sober I might take a swing at him, but when he drinks he gets this look in his eyes. Sometimes I think he'd like to kill me. "I want you to get out there and run," he says.

I walk around him, open the front door and go outside. Leroy's right behind me. It's a cold morning but I don't feel it. I jog away from the house, feeling him a few paces behind, hearing the quick CLOP CLOP of his boot heels on the sidewalk, where the snow has already melted.

"You better run, boy!" he yells. "Run, run. You're brother's a Marine! You better run and keep running! Run til your goddam legs fall off!"

I hear his words growing distant behind me, and I run, not knowing where I'm going, what I'm going to do.

About a week later I'm over at Laurence's watching television when his dad walks in and asks to speak to me in private. He's a short, graceful man with smooth, white skin and gray hair. He leads me into his office, slides the wooden door shut and asks me if I'd like to do a favor for him and Laurence.

"I know he thinks a lot of you," he tells me. "We'd both be grateful if you'd help us out with this mess he got into last week." He adjusts his sport coat and falls silent, looks me in the eye. I sense that it's my turn to say something.

"Yeah. Sure, I'd be glad to, sir," I tell him. "But what can I do?"

"Oh, you don't have to call me sir. Just call me Rob," he says, grinning. He walks over to his desk and opens the top drawer. On the wall behind him are framed diplomas from universities I'll never be able to attend. I suppose Laurence will have his choice of schools. "Well, the attorney sent this form," says Rob. "It's an affidavit saying that you were driving the car on the night of the accident." He looks up at me as though I'd be signing a letter of intent with a university, as though there is something in it for me. I feel my mouth go dry, my stomach fall to my feet. I try to conceal my shaking hands by placing them on my knees.

But I wasn't driving.

Rob rubs his hands together, interlocks the fingers. "Now I understand that you weren't drinking that night. Is that right?"

"Well, I had a few."

"I see," he says. "Laurence got himself in over his head. He and that other boy. What's his name?"

"Nathan?"

"Right," he says, looking down at the floor. "Senator's son."

I don't mind Rob; he seems like a good guy. He's taken me golfing, says that I'm his kind of man because I'm happy shooting thirty over par. Once, I fished the San Juan River with him and Laurence. Rob loaned me a fly rod to use since I don't own one.

Nice one, too. A Winston, I think. Pretty emerald green color with shiny nickel-silver fittings, an action as smooth as butter. But I'm beginning to wonder if I shouldn't just leave, tell him I have to go home. Maybe I can just tell him that I need to think about it. Yeah, that's what I'll do.

"Jimmy, do you plan to go to college after high school?" he asks.

"I don't know. I'd like to, but I'm thinking about joining the service. My brother joined the Marines and he's got a pretty good deal. They're going to pay for his college when he gets out."

"Well the military is a fine experience for a young man," he says, crossing his arms, leaning back on the desk.

"Were you in the service?" I ask.

He looks at me, then down at the floor, shakes his head. "No, I couldn't get in," he says, lifting his eyebrows. I can see him straining to put a grin on his face. "Flat feet. Even the soda bottles wouldn't have helped me." He laughs, stands and places his hands in his pockets. "Well, Laurence is planning on applying to some of the Ivy League schools. This would really help him out. Tell you the truth, it'd help *all* of us. That way he could get his driver's license back, and you wouldn't be in any trouble since you weren't intoxicated."

I nod my head, wince like I'm in deep thought.

"Now I don't want you to think that this obligates you in any way to the damage to the car. It doesn't, so don't you worry about that. We'll take care of the car."

"Oh, I'm not worried about that," I tell him, though the thought had crossed my mind.

"Tell you what, Jimmy," he says, moving back around behind the desk. "Why don't you take a few days and think it over. I don't want you to do anything that isn't right for you. You see?" he asks, grinning at me.

"Yeah."

"I'll just give you this affidavit and you can take it home, look it over, whatever. You can even have an attorney go over it with you if you'd like."

There's a knock at the door. The wooden slab slides open and the maid peeks her head inside.

"Mister Lucas, you have a telephone call downstairs. A Mister Stewart."

"Not now, Jenny," he says. "Take a message, would you?"

Jenny nods, slides the door shut. Rob opens a large black book, scribbles something inside. I look down at my old Nikes, which hadn't looked too badly until now. Now, standing on the shiny wooden floor, they seem dingy, old. Maybe it's the lighting.

I hear a sharp tearing sound and watch as Rob places the affidavit inside an envelope, seals it shut. He walks over and hands me the envelope.

"Here you are, Jimmy," he says. "Now take your time and think it over. Just let me know whatever you decide. If you'd like to have an attorney go over it with you, then let me know. I'd be happy to find you one." He adjusts his sport coat, looks at his watch. "And don't worry about the fees. I'll take care of that too."

"All right."

"Thank you, Jimmy," he says, slapping me on the back. "We appreciate you helping us out. Maybe we can all get together and go out to the San Juan again sometime."

"Yeah, that'd be nice," I say.

"Say, have you been up to the fly shop lately?" he asks. "They've got those new Abel reels in, and *boy* they're nice."

"Uh, no. I haven't been over there in a long time."

"Well you ought to look at them, Jimmy. You know what I say. Buy an Abel and you've got it for life."

Why is he telling me about Abel reels? I wonder. I can't afford one of those. They're four or five hundred dollars, at least.

"Well, I might do that. I'll get back to you about this."

"Just let me know, Jimmy. And thanks again."

"No problem," I tell him, though I haven't yet decided to help anyone. I guess, first of all, I have to help myself. I have a lot of thinking to do.

Rob leads me out of the office, down to the den where Laurence is eating nachos in front of the television. He doesn't seem too concerned about anything at the moment, except eating. I wonder if he knows about his dad's plan.

"Want some nachos?" he asks, rolling the food around in his mouth.

"No, I need to get home. I've got some things to do."

"Cool. See you around, Jimmy."

"Later Laurence."

I walk out to the street and hop into my mom's old Cutlass, fire it up. It leaks oil a little so I always park out in the street.

When I get home mom's sitting in front of the television filing her nails, hair in curlers. She has to work tonight. I slide the envelope into my back pocket.

"Hey, Mom."

"Did you leave me any gas?" she asks.

"Yeah, there's plenty. Where's Leroy?"

"I don't know. Probably finishing those cabinets," she says.

I plop down in the recliner across from mom. "Probably finishing off a bottle," I say.

"Jimmy, that's not nice. You shouldn't talk about him that way."

"Well, it's the truth," I say. "You should've seen him the other morning, all drunk and telling me to go run because David's in the Marines."

The filing stops; mom looks up at me. "He's under a lot of stress right now with his blood pressure and everything. You shouldn't be so hard on him."

"I'm hard on *him*?"

"I saw the envelope in your pocket," she says, ignoring me. "Are you in any trouble?"

"No, I'm not in trouble. Letter from David," I tell her. I stand and walk into my room. "I think I'll go read it."

"Tell me what he says. Is he all right?

"Yeah, I think so. I'll let you know how he is."

"I won't be home until late tonight. You'll have to find something to eat."

I lie down on the bed, take out the envelope and rip it open. Inside is the folded affidavit. I take it out, open it up and a smaller, rectangular slip falls out. It's a check for $1,000. I feel a knot in my throat.

I look over the affidavit, its legal jargon, noticing the blank space at the bottom for my signature. All it takes is my signature, I think. I feel strangely like a businessman, or some entrepreneur that exchanges a commodity for cash. But what commodity am I exchanging?

I return the papers and check into the envelope, slide it under my pillow and close my eyes. Later, I hear the front door open and shut, then the car starting and driving away. Sometime later I doze off.

Next day I borrow Mom's car and drive over to the fly shop.

"Hey, what's happening?" says the guy behind the counter. He's got a hook in a vise, winding thread, palmering a hackle, cementing – building a fly. I've seen Laurence's dad do it. "Looking for anything particular?"

"No, I heard about your new Abels. Thought I'd come take a look."

"Oh, man," he says, standing. He comes around the counter and leads me to the reels. "Have you used one of these babies?"

"No."

"Here," he says, removing the rubber rings holding the reel to the little stand. He spins the handle once and slaps the shiny black reel into my hand. "Feel that. That's precision machining, baby. Abel's the best."

I take the reel, spin the handle, hear the gear clicking, feel its smooth purring on my palm. I look up at the other reels on the shelf, but they don't look like the one in my hand. The Abel reminds me of a shiny new Cadillac.

"That's a sweet reel," I tell him, handing it back, reaching for another.

"What kind of rod you gonna put it with?" he asks.

"Well, I don't know. I guess I need to get a new rod first."

"What kind of rod you been using?"

What was that rod I used on the San Juan? I ask myself. A Winston? Yeah, that's it.

"Been using a Winston, but…"

"Oh, dude. We've got Winstons. Prettiest fly rods in the world. Just got some new ones in yesterday." We walk over to the rod rack. The guy slips one off the rack, hands me the cork. "Here you go, dude. Check that out."

I take the rod, whip the tip back and forth the way my dad used to do with spinning rods in department stores. That's all I ever remember him doing, and doing so seemed to tell him everything he needed to know about the rod. I whip the rod again, but I'm still lost. On the wall, I notice a poster for Winston Fly rods. In the foreground is a shiny green Winston, while a cluster of nondescript brown, blue and red fly rods appear in the background, slightly out of focus. The caption says *If fishing with reds and browns makes you blue, try a Winston and make your friends green with envy.*

"Winston is the only fly rod that has its own proprietary color," says the clerk. "Winston green. Did you know that?"

"No, but you're right. It's pretty."

"The best," he says. "Now that's a six weight there. What weight you normally use?"

"Oh, I don't know. Five, six."

"Oh, well, we're out of fives right now. That's a good all-around trout rod, though. I can order you one if you like."

Just then the phone rings from the counter.

"Excuse me, dude," says the fly guy. He walks over to the counter, picks up the phone. I place the rod back into the rack, pick up a few others, inspect the price tags. Right away I notice that I'm not going to be able to afford a new Winston if I want the Abel reel. I feel a compromise coming on.

I pick up another rod, this one half the price of the Winstons. I whip the tip back and forth, which tells me nothing, but for some reason I like the rod. The fly guy hangs up the phone, returns.

"Oh, now that's a sweet rod, dude. Not quite as good as a Winston, but it's a nice rod that'll do the job. Lifetime warranty, too."

"I guess it'd be a good compromise," I say The word seems somehow like poison on the end of my tongue, especially since I have a thousand-dollar check in my pocket.

"You wanna cast that baby?" he asks. "You know you should always cast before you buy. That way you find out if the rod suits your casting style. That one there's a little bit fast for me. The Winstons are a little slower and smoother."

"No kidding?"

"Yeah, man. Winstons are known for their feel," he says.

I don't know the difference, but the Winston just sounds better. Hell, if it's smoother, it has to be better. I return the compromise to the rack, pick up the Winston again.

"Now that six is a good rod, but if I was going to buy a new trout rod I'd go with a five," he says. "Five's a good bet."

"Yeah, I think that's what I've been using," I tell him, remembering the rod I'd borrowed.

"You put it with that Abel I showed you and you'd have a *sweet* rig. Top notch."

I nod my head, contemplate. If I order the rod, that would give me a week or so to get the extra money I'd need for the reel, I think. Besides, I've still got a hundred or so in savings. I reach into my pocket, feel the satisfaction of the neatly folded check.

"Well, could you order me that five weight?" I ask.

"Yeah, dude. I'll do it right now. Probably be here by Friday," he says. "You want me to call you when it comes in?"

"Yeah, that'd be fine."

"Tell you what, you buy the rod and the reel and we'll give you free line and backing. Free casting lesson, too."

Sold, I think. Again I'm feeling like quite the entrepreneur. Working deals and all.

I give the guy my phone number and leave the store.

When I get home I'm relieved to find the house empty, everyone gone. I pull out a bag of chips, flip on the TV and think about my new rod. A Winston, I think. I can't believe I'm getting a new Winston.

Family dinners aren't too common at my house. Since mom and dad split up I bet we haven't had ten of them, and that's been five years ago. But every once in a while mom'll have the night off and she'll make fried chicken or meatloaf, and we'll all sit down and eat together.

Well, one night we're sitting at the table eating dinner, watching the news. Leroy's there, too. He's tolerable only because he hasn't been drinking. Doctor gave him some sort of new blood pressure medicine, says he's supposed to get back on the wagon and stay off the sauce.

But what makes our family dinners so different from most peoples' (besides the fact that they only happen about twice a year) is that we don't talk much. Mom doesn't know that I've ordered a new fly rod that costs more than she makes in a week. Leroy knows less than Mom, which isn't any big deal because he's not my real dad. Just a fill-in, an imposter. Basically, we just go through the motions. It seems to keep Mom happy, so I guess that's why we do it.

On television, there's an advertisement for the Marine Corps. *The few, the proud,* they say. *If you have what it takes, maybe you can be one of us*.

Mom watches intently, chewing her food. "Maybe we'll see David on one of those commercials some day," she says. "Wouldn't that be something?"

"I doubt it," says Leroy. "They're looking for a certain kind of person for those commercials. Just because he's a Marine doesn't mean they're going to let him do a commercial. He's gotta prove himself."

Prove himself, I think. How would he do that? What sort of proof does he need to provide? And to whom would he provide it?

I don't feel like another lecture from Leroy, so I take my plate into the kitchen, rinse it off and place it into the dishwasher. As I do I hear the nightly news brief on television, the announcer saying that one of the Kennedy grandchildren has gotten himself into some kind of trouble.

"That figures," says Leroy. "But it's not going to make a damn bit of difference. He's a Kennedy. You watch, he's going to get off just because of who he is."

"Dinner was good, Mom," I tell her. She smiles without looking at me. Her eyes are still focused on the television.

I go into my room and shut the door, thinking of the Marine commercial, the announcement about the Kennedy grandson. I pull out the affidavit that I'm supposed to sign, look it over, think about it long and hard. I lie back on my bed, arms crossed behind my head, staring up at the ceiling. I listen to the sounds of our house winding down for the evening – Mom clearing the table, water running through the pipes as Leroy takes a shower, sitcoms coming and going on television, the phone ringing once.

I'm still awake at midnight, thinking about the affidavit, about my commodity that I'm to exchange for, what? A new fly rod?

No, a *Winston* fly rod, I tell myself. The best. And maybe a new Abel reel if I play it right. All I have to do is sign my name. The thought is so exciting that I can't sleep.

For a moment, I wonder what my brother David would do. Then it occurs to me that he's already done it: he has left home and gone out into the world to make something of himself, to prove himself.

At 4 a.m. I finally decide to do what I've been putting off. I get up out of bed, flick on the light, and address an envelope to Laurence's dad. Before sealing it I take the check from my pocket, tear it in half and stuff this into the envelope. Then I do the same with the affidavit. I wasn't driving, I tell myself.

I walk out in the dark, cold night, drop the envelope into the mailbox and raise the flag.

WALLEYED

When you've filleted stringer after stringer of fish every day for the past twenty-nine days, you just lose all interest in going fishing. All you really care about is sleeping, and making it through another day as quickly as possible so that you can go home and sleep some more. This is because you are exhausted, because you've been on the docks working since 5 a.m., and because you know that you won't be home again until long after dark. Sleep is all too brief to really be enjoyed, and before you know it, it's time to hit it again. Then, because the reels need to be spooled with fresh line and because the boat needs to be gassed up and bait netted, you get out of bed and walk down the dark

lake road to the dock, where bugs are still sizzling on the hot street light, and begin your day.

I'm about to wash the blood and scales from my hands, making it twenty-nine and a half, when the boss walks up the dock with a couple of morning clients. I want so badly to tell them all just to leave me alone for five minutes so that I can eat a sandwich before taking the knife to another thirty-six fish. But I manage to keep my tongue under control, probably because the boss is smiling and waving goodbye to the couple. Catch-and-release types, I assume. Fine with me. But I bet the boss didn't like it. He says that heavy stringers make for bigger tips from his customers.

He walks up to me with that big grin, slaps me on the back and right away I know he wants something.

"Sam, how about knocking off early this afternoon and we go fishing?" he asks, his bushy gray mustache and fat, jiggling jowls reminding me of a walrus.

The boss never calls me by my real name, so I'm suspicious right off the bat. And why does he want me to go fishing with him? He's got lots of buddies. Besides, I'm too busy. Since he took over the lodge and guiding business my granddad used to own, I haven't had the least bit of interest in fishing. Either I'm filleting fish, or taking a tourist fishing, or doing some odd job around the docks.

But it wasn't always that way.

Granddad used to take me out in his old aluminum boat and we'd listen to the loons crying and the wood saws buzzing in the distance. He'd wear that cowboy hat, big as Montana, and smoke that pipe. I can still smell the cherry-blend tobacco, see the smoke billowing out from beneath his hat brim. We would fish until we had enough for

dinner, then we'd take the walleye home and fry them in corn meal. "Take all you can eat for dinner," he used to say, "but never freeze them." Granddad always told me frozen fish have no flavor and he said folks who freeze their fish are greedy. If you have to freeze the fish you take home, you've taken home too many, he believed.

Sometimes, when I'm washing the boss' boats or filleting fish or changing lower-unit fluid, I wonder why the Lord spared me. I had gotten out of bed early that morning to try and catch a pike over in the grassy coves on the other side of Black Bear Lake, here in northern Minnesota. I noticed the smoke on the way back in, about mid-morning. By the time I reached the house, everything was charred and black, still smoldering. That was four years ago, but seems like a lifetime.

"What do you say?" says the boss, whose name is Bruce and who has more money than sense. I don't know how he came into it. "You want to make some money?"

"Sure. When is the tournament?"

"Tonight, and Sly done cancelled out on me. If we win, I'll split the money with you," he says, bringing his tattooed hand down as though it were a butcher knife halving a flank.

Everything is about the money. If I had had any of it after my family was killed, I would have been able to take over my granddad's business. He had been teaching me how to guide since I was eight or nine; I'm 20 now and I know this lake better than the boss ever will. If tourism hadn't been so slow those last few years before granddad died, if he hadn't gone into debt, I could be running the business right now.

All I can manage is a "Humph," as if I've got better things to do than drag a few lures through the water in hopes of hooking into a fish big enough to buy the groceries. It

sounds corny even to me, the guy with only three dollars in his pocket – and that has to last until Friday.

"Come on! What do you say, Sport?"

"Sport" is certainly a new one. The boss has called me a lot of names, but never this one. I can smell the alcohol on his breath so I figure it's just the beer making him say this.

I finish washing the slime and scales from my hands and then spray off the fish-cleaning table. I still haven't given him an answer but with three dollars in my wallet, what choice do I have?

"Yeah, I'll do it," I say, wondering how I'm going to tolerate being in a boat, in such close quarters with the boss, for the evening.

"Starts in two hours," he says. "We'll fish until dark."

The thermometer at the bait shop says it's 95 degrees when we motor off from the docks. I'm sure that I've fished a lot of times in weather hotter and more miserable than this. I just can't remember when. We're in "Fred," one of the boss' old 14-foot aluminum boats, with a twenty-five horse, tiller-drive outboard that sputters and smokes like it has emphysema. Why he gave the boat a man's name, and not a woman's, I'll never know. But that's the boss for you.

Because the noise from the motor is quite loud, and the temperature is so hot, I find myself in an unusual position, and temperament, to take advantage of this situation. Cruising across the lake, my arms crossed, hot air blowing across my face, I let out a

"Fuck you, boss!" an "asshole," and a couple of "stick its!" for good measure. Somehow, I feel a little better now.

"Stick ups?" the boss yells from the tiller. "Sticks ups this time of year? You think they'll hold fish?"

"Dumbass!" I shout.

"I didn't hear you," he shouts, never letting off the throttle. "Where?"

I hold up my arms and shake my head. "Wherever you want to go," I say.

We leave the Long Creek arm and round a gravel point, then parallel a tall rock bluff that looks white in the sunshine before veering into Coon Creek. This surprises me because the boss normally doesn't fish this part of the lake. I feel like he's coming up here somehow for my benefit, probably because this is the water I know best. This is where my family's house used to be, where I used to fish with my granddad, where he used to smoke that pipe, the smoke of which, he used to tell me, would keep the mosquitoes away. I can still remember the location of every ledge and shoal.

"Back of the creek?" he yells, over the coughing outboard. I turn and give him a thumbs-up, nod my head. The wind, which is convection-oven warm at this hour, blows his mustache back on his cheeks, exposing his yellow teeth. For a moment he reminds me of an aged Viking.

We stop the boat over a hump situated in about 40 feet and put our baits down near the bottom. Almost immediately I feel a tap and set the hook. The fish shakes its head, but doesn't pull hard, which tells me it is a small one. The boss doesn't yet know this, so I decide to mess with him.

"I think I got a big one!" I shout. I turn to look at him, eyes wide, forcing a grin. I think he's what we're looking for.

"No kidding, Sport. Get him!" he says. He claps his hands smartly, rubs them together. "Yes sir!"

Soon, I pull a 14-inch walleye to the surface, shake my head. "I sure thought he was bigger than this. He felt bigger," I say.

The boss says nothing, but I think I can feel his head shaking side to side. I know he's disappointed, which makes me happy.

There is a protective slot limit on all walleye between 13 and 16 inches, so I drop the fish back into the lake, rig another minnow and send it to the bottom. For several minutes all is calm and quiet. We sit in the boat and bake.

"Wish we had some of that shade over here," says the boss, looking at the cedars lining the shoreline. From my position the trees look like green sentries or chaperones, supervising the proceedings for everyone's best interest. Moments later a raccoon emerges from the trees and begins policing the shoreline, shuffling its front paws through the water, feeling, withdrawing them and repeating the process farther down the bank.

I hear a rustling noise and look back at the boss, who pulls a pistol from his bag and aims it at the raccoon.

"What the hell are you doing?" I say.

"Watch this," he says, drawing a bead on the animal. "This ought to be fun."

I do the only thing I can think of, which is to rock the boat side to side in order to throw off his aim. I grab the gunwales and lean forward and back to get the boat rocking,

but the boss shoots anyway. The sound of the shot echoes off the water's surface, scaring the raccoon, apparently unscathed, into the trees.

"What are you, a softie?" he says. "It's just a raccoon."

"Exactly. What did a raccoon ever do to you?"

"Come on, Sport. They're just varmints."

"We came to fish, so let's fish," I say.

The boss returns the pistol to his bag and goes back to fishing. Only now do I notice my heart thumping, though all is quiet and calm here on the lake. Beads of sweat roll down my temples. A couple of motorboats go racing by out in the main lake, the sounds of their outboards buzzing loudly for a moment, then growing faint. I imagine the fresh, clean scent of the cedar trees, but with no wind, all I can smell are the oil and gas from the boat's engine.

A few minutes later the dimmer switch on the sun is turned down a notch as the first clouds roll into the area. About this time, I get another tap on my rod. The fish whacks the bait and the fight is on. Instantly the line is tight and weaving back and forth, slicing through the water's emerald surface. The fish feels like a kind of mild electricity being transmitted through the fishing rod. It strains and pulls, bending the rod, causing the reel's drag to buzz.

The result is a 22-inch walleye that sure makes the boss happy. In fact, he's so happy he just starts laughing.

"I knew you knew what you was doing over here. I'm glad you came along, Sport," he says, still laughing. Then he reaches into the cooler and draws a beer, offers. I shake my head, tell myself that I'm only here because I have to be.

The boss knows that I grew up on Coon Creek and he also knows that I'm familiar with the different features of this arm of the lake. But I still don't know why he asked me to come along. He's got plenty of pals who he likes to fish with, most of them silly about drinking beer, just like he is. I wish one of them would have come along instead of me, I think, still miffed about him trying to shoot the raccoon.

The sky is growing darker. And after being glass-smooth only moments ago, the surface of the lake is now choppy and agitated from the wind. The breeze is a welcome relief from the stifling heat and it heralds that coveted moment that anglers dream about, when the fish begin feeding prior to the arrival of a front. If you're a real fisherman, this is the time you want to be on the water.

I look back at the boss, who is taking a long pull off the bottle. He pitches the bottle cap into the lake.

I can't stand people who litter. But that's all right. This season is almost over. Soon I'll be cutting wood for the winter and I can forget the boss for a while. Maybe next year I'll get a job with a different outfitter. Maybe I'll start my own guiding business one of these days, put this bastard out of business.

"You still got your bait? Check your bait, boy," he says.

I reel in the hook, lift it out of the water where he can see the wiggling minnow, hook and lead weight that takes it all down. He nods and I drop it back into the deep.

"How about yours?" I ask. "You haven't checked yours in a while."

"Mine's fine. Just catch us another one, Tiger," he says.

At this point I hear the sound of another outboard and I look to see a small boat cruising into the creek. The boat doesn't keep its distance; rather, it approaches closer

and closer. Gradually, I begin to recognize the boat and its captain. It is Sly, the boss' fishing buddy and fellow outfitter, whose real name is Sylvester.

I turn around and look at the boss. "I thought Sly wasn't fishing."

"What's old Sly doing?" he says, ignoring my question. "He got that boy driving him around?"

"No, Sly's at the tiller," I tell him. Sometimes, I wonder if the boss doesn't need glasses.

The black dot at the bow is none other than Sly's laborer, Toussaint, and as the boat approaches I hold up two fingers. Toussaint, or "Two," as I call him, is one of the few people around the lake who I have any respect for. He works his ass off, as hard or harder than me, and for less money. He's even got a wife and two kids at home. He's the only black guy I've ever seen this far north, but he knows the lake, knows it better than the boss or Sly. I taught him.

Sly lets off the throttle as the boat swings in close, its wake causing us to bob up and down like a buoy. "You going to be netting anything today?" he says with a grin.

"Got one keeper about twenty-two," says the boss. "You?"

Sly shakes his head. I really want to tell the boss that he needn't ask this question because if an angler is having any luck then he stays put. The ones who aren't catching anything are the ones you see running all across the lake. My granddad taught me that.

"What's going on, Two?" I say, trying to have a conversation of my own. He and I stick together because we must be the only two stupid enough to hire out to guys like the boss and Sly. And if there was anything else around here to do, I think we would have split by now and found an easier way to make a living.

Two shakes his head, wrinkles his brow. "Man, if I'd of had more notice that I was going fishing I'd have brought some real drink. Not this Rhineland beer crap. Stuff taste like pine needles."

At this, Sly, who wears a beard in order to cover a scar on his cheek, turns and glares at Two. "I said I'd split the prize money with you if we win. But you haven't found shit. You want to get paid you got to find the fish."

Then Sly trains his dark eyes on me. With a sweaty Minnesota Twins cap cocked back on his head, a tattered gray T-shirt draped over his skinny frame, he says, "A good guide should be able to put his clients on fish. Where's the fish?"

I know Sly's remark is intended for Two. I also know it wouldn't be worth the hardship, but I sure wish Two would just pop that skinny old coot right in the mouth, put him in the lake. Two's solid. One punch is all it would take. But he has bills to pay, like me. So he keeps his mouth shut.

A refreshing rush of cool air hits us just as Sly and Two motor off. It feels like cool lake water on your body when you jump off the dock. It smells like water and dirt, and for a moment it is invigorating. Then exhaust fumes from Sly's outboard hit me. I hold my breath until they pass.

The sky has turned purple to the northwest and slate gray to the east. Thunder rumbles as the boss reels in his hook, which I notice is bare.

"Where to, Sport?" he asks, twisting open another beer. "You say where and we'll get there."

I shrug my shoulders. Though I haven't fished this creek in probably three years, I know that there is a long point tapering off into the channel a few hundred yards west of here. On the lower end of this point is a stump bed and the area always holds fish. It's especially good for big fish. But I'm not telling the boss. After seeing Sly and Two, I know he's up to something. He wants to win the tournament and that prize money like he always does. I'm not sure how he does it, but he always seems to win. I'm going to see if I can help him lose this time.

"Let's go back out to the mouth," I tell him.

"Mouth? Don't you think they'll be moving shallow with these clouds?"

"Nah. I think the mouth is the place we need to hit. We're going to have to hurry. Sky's getting pretty dark."

"We've got over three hours yet," he says, cranking the engine. Before motoring off, he pulls a rain suit from one of his bags and slips it on. I'm angry with myself for forgetting mine, and I know the boss didn't bring another jacket, so I don't even bother asking.

"Sniff them out, Sport," says the boss, a cigar wedged into the corner of his mouth. After idling around the mouth of the creek for several minutes, I motion for him to stop, tell him that this looks like a good spot, though I know it's completely featureless beneath the surface. Rain begins falling as soon as we put our baits into the water. It progresses from sprinkles to a solid, soaking rainfall in minutes, and the temperature seems to have dropped 20 degrees.

"Come on," I yell, over the noise of the rain. "Fish aren't biting. Let's go back."

"To hell with that," comes the response from beneath the rain suit. "This is the best weather for catching fish. We just have to find them."

"I don't think they're going to bite. There's fish all over here and we would've been bit by now. Let's go home. I'm soaked anyway."

Then, as if a giant hatch has been opened somewhere up in the sky, the rain begins falling in heavy, solid layers. The water's surface is alive and it looks as though ten million tiny white basketballs are bouncing up and down excitedly. Fishing is out of the question. I reel in my hook and drop the rod. I'm finished.

At dusk, it's still raining. Sitting in the bow on the way in, cold and shivering, my sopping clothes permanent fixtures to my clammy skin, I notice the boat swerving to port and starboard. I look back at the boss and there he is, walleye in one hand, lead steroids in the other, dropping the weights into the fish's mouth, poking them in with his finger. With his rain hood pulled down over his head, he doesn't see me, but I turn back around anyway. I feel a fire burning in my stomach, even though I'm cold and wet. People like the boss are of a different breed.

The lead weights are his insurance policy. He's going to make sure he wins this tournament. But why? He has plenty of money, big tuck, nice house. Why is it so important for him to win these tournaments for a few hundred dollars? I've never liked the boss, but I always thought it was because of the circumstances of how we met, him buying my granddad's old business and all. Now I know why I can't stand him.

Ours is the fourth boat to reach the dock and we have only a single walleye to weigh in. The boss grins as he hoists the fish into the air for the others to see. There is a collective groan from the other anglers gathered on the dock; apparently their luck hasn't been so good.

Sly and Two are already there, standing back from the edge of the dock, beneath the bait shop's awning. Like me, Two is dripping wet. I duck under the awning, thankful to be out of the rain, and someone hands me a paper cup of coffee. The smell of coffee and cigarettes, and the coffee's heat on my fingers, are like luxuries after being out on the water, cold and wet. I watch as another pair of anglers walk up the docks, empty-handed, heads cowered from the rain.

Two turns and says, "Remind me again why my ass is not out in California where it's warm."

"No shit," I say. "If you ever go, take me with you."

Sly is beaming as the boss puts the fish to scales. He reminds me of the carnival attendant who situates his bottles in such a way that the lightweight ball will never knock them over, or the one who coats his balloons with a thin layer of lacquer, which helps to deflect the dull-tipped darts.

"Five-two. No, five-three," says Melvin, the owner of the bait shop. He looks warm and comfortable in his plaid Mackinaw jacket. I've always liked Melvin, but now I wonder if he is in on the boss' scam. It makes me sad to see these dozen or so anglers here on the docks, who have come out to fish in the wet and cold, while the boss cheats his way to a paycheck. "Not bad," says Melvin, "but I figured the fishing would be a lot better with this system moving in."

The boss looks at me, then over at Sly, who is still grinning.

The covered space beneath the awning is completely full as the crowd waits for the remaining three or four boats to get in. One guy is already trailering his boat over on the ramp, while several more are leaving the docks, rain hoods covering their heads and thoughts.

I sip the coffee, listen to the rain drumming the bait shop's tin roof, watch it falling through the illuminated space above the docks. I'm exhausted, hungry, disgusted. There's really no use in me staying around because I know who's going to win the tournament. It was decided long before Melvin put the fish to scales. But it doesn't concern me and I couldn't care less. I'm just going to slip off and go home, put on some dry clothes and forget about all this. And I'll keep my mouth shut because I need the money.

Tomorrow makes 31 days.

AN ANGLER AT HEART

Salmon-sized trout are visible down in the river as I kneel beneath the leaky umbrella of a pine bough, waiting for the warden to leave. I peer down into their world, watching the fish hug the bottom, their slipstream bodies shedding current. I count thirteen trout, but there's only one Hyram, and that's one Hyram too many. I look from him, to the fish, telling myself that I need only one of them for dinner.

Across the river, Hyram gets out of the truck. Slowly, but effortlessly, he dances over the chunk rock and moves down to the water, unaware of me. The river's dank, earthy air filling my head, I watch as he produces what looks like a small stick, dips it into the water. Thirty seconds later he removes the thermometer, notes the reading, then

repeats this process with a second instrument. After a few minutes he returns to the truck, picking up a stray can along the way, tossing it in back. I hear the engine fire up and soon Hyram is herding his truck up the muddy road. He makes it up the hill, over, then he's gone.

As the sounds of the laboring engine fade into the distance, those of the river return to prominence. Water slides downstream, tumbling through riffles, funneling into runs, easing into the pool before me. Somewhere across the river, a woodpecker hammers a tree.

I wait a full five minutes before emerging from the trees, snagging my jeans on the arthritic, barbed-wire fence as I slip between its rusty strands. My legs and feet stiff from playing solo hide-and-seek for the last half hour, I slide on the gravel and chunk rock as I move down to the water. My rod and reel have been rigged and ready all morning, but only now do I remove the sculpin pattern from the hook keeper, kneel down next to the water and cast.

I botch the effort and have to wait for the current to carry my line downstream, past the brown trout on the gravel bar. I fire again, but I'm nervous and straining to control my breathing so that I can hear any approaching vehicles. I miss again.

Reaching into my ass pocket, removing its contents, I transform half a flask of bourbon into one of three-quarters air. Relax and focus, and apply yourself, I think, recalling the instructions my mother has given me all my life. And it's about Mom now; she lost her job at the hospital yesterday and I'd like to bring home something for dinner. She loves fresh fish. So I take another pull off the flask and focus on the task at hand.

Several minutes go by and my breathing becomes relaxed. It's just me and the river now, the smooth, glassy surface of the water sliding silently, powerfully, through the pool. I cast and place the fly where I want it, upstream, off the tip of the gravel bar. I mend the line and watch the fuzzy strike indicator on my leader as the current carries everything downstream. I mend again, trying to keep the water's drag off my line so that the fly appears natural to the fish.

Raindrops begin falling and while I don't yet feel them on my neck, my hands, I can see the droplets peppering the river, producing hundreds of tiny rings. Within a few minutes, the rainfall intensifies such that I can no longer rely on my ears to warn me of an approaching car. The rain is loud as it assaults the river's surface, my back and head. I look down and notice the mud stains on my best pair of Levi's, which reminds me that I had told Mom I was going out this morning to look for work. This is like work, in a way, and if I can bring home one of these big fish it will amount to the same thing: putting food on the table.

I need to be helping her more; Mom's almost 60. She's getting too old to stand on her feet all day, too slow to keep up with progress. The hospital told her she was no longer physically able to perform the functions of her nursing job. It hurt me to hear her say that because I don't want to think of her as being old. If she's old, what does that make me?

My tongue is still numb, my mouth dry from the 90-proof smoothie and nicotine bagel I had for breakfast. Standing beside the river, a fly rod in my hand, I imagine myself walking into the grocery or hardware store, the manager offering me a job. But it's so unlikely that anyone around here in Minden, Virginia is going to give a 25-year-

old college dropout work. Our town is just too small and jobs are scarce. Best thing I can do is try to put some food on the table. So I keep casting.

About the time the rain begins to let up I get a strike, which nearly pulls the rod out of my hands. I can't see the fish, but it doesn't come up to the surface and thrash, which tells me it's a big one. My heart thumping excitedly, I take a deep breath and try to calm my breathing as the fish peels line from my reel. Just one fish, I tell myself. One good fish and I'm out of here, safe, before anyone has the chance to see me fishing without a license on this closed section of the James River.

The fish takes most of my line, leaving me backing and little more, before I can move to counter. Then, just as I do, it takes off for its chambers somewhere downstream, as if to tell me the case is closed.

Thinking that I might slow the fish, get it to stop its run, I try palming the reel's spinning spool, but it's no use. The fish is too strong and it is working with the current now.

I'm squatting at the water's edge so that I'm less visible from the road and bridge. With the rod's butt jammed into my gut, the nine-foot fly rod protruding between my knees and up into the air like Viagra gone wrong, I feel like a vagrant wino pissing a sherry icicle. A pair of wood ducks shoot out of the trees, then, seeing the ongoing dispute over rights to line, leader and fly, they about-face and disappear into the dark woods, whistling their aversion to potential witness duty.

The fish comes up to the surface, rolls and wallows like a pig, then it jets off on another run across the river, its powerful, sleek brown body disappearing into the depths. Again my reel sings, loudly enough to announce to anyone in the vicinity that I'm

connected to a big brown trout. With the drag on my reel hissing, spraying water from the wet line, the spool spinning, I feel the handle strike the knuckles on my right hand. A sharp pain flashes in my hand like an electrical shock, surging up my arms, through my torso and into my temples and eyes, which are now throbbing.

The spinning reel handle cuts my finger, splattering my hand and eyes with blood droplets. Suddenly, everything goes blurry and then black as I fight my invisible opponent in the water, feeling the fish surge and strain against my rod. Eyes stinging, watering, I rub, trying to regain my vision. When I look up, Hyram is standing on the low-water bridge, next to his truck.

My eyes dart from him to the fish swirling on the surface some 20 yards distant, then back again. Feeling my heart speeding, my throat getting tight, I do the first thing that comes to mind. I grab the reel and lock up the spool, feeling the handle carve a slow groove into my palm. Simultaneously, my rod bends over with the pressure, strains, then relaxes just as the reel handle stops spinning. I hear the *Snap* of the popping leader and I reel in my line.

"Why'd you do that?" yells Hyram. I shrug my shoulders. He's not quite six feet, but in his olive uniform with the shiny gold badge he looks much larger. Even the boulders between us look like pebbles as he saunters my way, shaking his head. He comes so close I can smell the Old Spice on his face. "That was a nice fish. I'd liked to have measured her," says he.

"No kidding. I'd like to have eaten it."

He shakes his head. "Jimmy, Jimmy. You just don't listen." Then he shakes his head and snorts. "The heck you been drinking? You been home at all this week, Jimmy?

Or you got a bed down at Merle's?" he asks. "I could get soused just thinking about what you been drinking."

There're a half dozen potential retorts floating around in my mouth, like yellowjackets, looking for a soft place to sting. They're turning my tongue to sandpaper, my stomach to a boiling pit of acid. What can I say? Hyram knows me, knows where I live, has my driver's license number and the county has $200 from my last visit. Suddenly, the lyrics from Humble Pie's "30 Days in the Hole" spring to mind.

"Jimmy you know you're gonna have to come with me this time," he says, not asking, but telling. "And I'll have that rod and reel."

I hand him the battered old 5-weight rod, the scuffed reel with its 10-year-old line. I left my nice outfit at home.

"Look at your bad self," he says. Hyram looks from my eyes, down to my boots, then back again, oblivious to the rod and reel in his hand, the trout out in the river. "All dressed up and nowhere to go. Shoowee!" he howls. "Judge Parker sure going to be glad to see you again. Reckon?" He grins and the little mustache on his upper lip stretches, reminding me of a woolly-worm pattern in one of my fly boxes. I'd love to feed it to the fish right now, but I'm already in over my head.

We walk back to the truck and Hyram lays my rod in back, gently, right next to the empty beer can he picked up earlier. I get in and we start towards town, and the courthouse. Then the muddy road acts like I've paid it off. We spend several minutes trying to inch up the sloppy hill, the tires spinning, digging, sinking. When they hit a

rock or something solid the wheels grab and the truck jerks forward a few feet before the tires lose traction and the old vehicle veers off course, slides into a rut, lost.

I'm dizzy and in a mild state of shock, but I can't decide if this is a result of the whisky or the violent, jerking motion of the truck. Finally, Hyram slams the tranny into reverse, slides back down the hill, comes to a stop on the bridge. For a moment I look down and see what is surely the largest brown trout I've ever seen. The fish, which looks to be at least thirty inches, is holding behind a boulder in a shallow, pea-gravel-covered pocket no more than three feet deep. Then I notice the fish's confinement within the tiny pool, the perimeters of which are protruding above the surface on three sides, like rock walls. The fourth side is the shoreline. Cut off until the water level rises, the fish is sulking away in the deepest part of the pool, like a rat hiding in its burrow.

Suddenly the engine roars, tires spin and we're moving. In the side mirror I see blue-gray exhaust pouring from the tailpipe like smoke from a chimney. Hyram's foot is to the floor, cap pulled down low and bending his ears like a bull rider's, hands clamped to the steering wheel in something of an eight-second death grip.

"Shoowee!" he yells. The truck bucks, slides, leans, slips. Then we slide off the high ground and into a deep rut. High-centered. "You ready to get dirty, Jimmy?"

"Hey, man. This isn't my truck. I was just fishing, minding my own business," I tell him.

"Lookie here. We got no time for that. You want the judge to show you some leniency, or not?" He pronounces it as "*lean*ency.

What choice do I have?

I step out of the truck, drain my flask and move around to the rear bumper.

"All right. On three," he shouts.

Through the back window I watch as three of Hyram's fingers snap to attention. I lift up on the bumper, lean into the tailgate, push. Again the engine roars but this time the tires paint my jeans with reddish-brown decoupage until they're a solid, soiled work of art. Why did I have to go fishing today? Why couldn't I have just slipped out of the house and stopped by a few businesses around town to put in a job application. Now what am I going to do? What is Mom going to do? I'm angry at myself, and disappointed, but not surprised. I guess if I had it to do all over again I'd do the same thing. Those big trout spend most of the year downstream in the deeper water, so I can't miss an opportunity to fish for them when they're up here in the shallows.

"Come around to the front. I need to get another run at it," he says. Then he laughs. "Look like a bird done got you."

I flick the mud from my face, lean into the grill and push the truck free, watch it slide downhill to the bridge. For a moment I consider running. But it's no use. I have nowhere to go and I can't run forever. Hyram's still laughing when he slams the tranny into gear, punches the gas. I leap out of the way.

The truck begins sliding off the high ground, but somehow he manages to keep it out of the deep ruts and makes it to the top, the back end fishtailing.

He waves. I hop in to the sound of his laugh echoing off the cracked dashboard, the dusty vinyl seat, as the moisture of the wet mud seeps through my jeans, feeling cool and clammy on my thighs.

"Shoowee!" he yells. "Look at you now. Maybe we can get you some of them oranges they wear over at the city morgue. Reckon?"

Word is, the three-story brick structure that is today the Defiance County courthouse was once a hospital. The third floor, where today inmates are housed, was the morgue.

"Whatever. Let's just get this over with. I'm starved," I tell him.

"Oh, don't you worry none. They got good bread downtown."

That evening I've exchanged my muddy jeans for a pair of county oranges about three sizes too small, as if they think I might hang myself with any excess material. I keep thinking that any minute the little guys will come in, wearing their white lab coats, holding clipboards and showing me the little flash cards with bird shit all over them, asking me do I see the poodle or the elephant.

They've put me in with Tiny, who looks every bit of 390, wide as a cattle car is long and every bit as smelly. He was talking when I came in and hasn't shut up since.

"And Alabama. Alabama's another one," he tells me. "In Alabama, they don't mess around. They don't fool with you. Your ass blow a point-six two block from the crib, they find a new crib for your ass. You know what I mean?"

Somehow I've always managed to avoid the county hotel. I mean, last time they put it to me for two bills, and the time before that I got off with a warning, but the court cost's $52. But I always knew what kind of people I'd find here. Tiny's one of them, the square root of the third floor's circus sideshow.

"And then they's Tennessee," he explains. "They don't fool around with your ass in Tennessee. No, they don't. And Georgia. You been to Georgia, Dawg?"

I nod.

"You know, they don't fool around with your ass down there, neither. Not in Georgia."

He goes on for hours, days, weeks, in the span of a few minutes. I've only just met him, but I feel like I've known Tiny all my life. He's an insider's guide personified – *Off the Beaten Path for Assholes*.

"And then they's North Carolina. You been to North Click, Dawg?"

I shake my head.

"Man, they don't fool around with your ass in North Click. Not there they don't. They even catch you with a bottle in the car…"

"Man, what'd they say you did?" I ask him. "Why you in here?"

"They don't fool around in Virginia, neither, Dawg. I ought to know something about this place."

I lean back on my bunk, wishing for a cigarette and a shot.

"You know what, Dawg? They don't fool around in South Carolina, neither."

Next morning I'm standing in front of Judge Parker, who looks like he just woke from a nap inside one of his law manuals. His hair looks like a crow's nest that might hold other birds, too. I look from the nameplate on his bench into his glasses, which make his eyes appear huge.

Hyram's here, along with a couple of blue suits and a bailiff. I've been appointed an attorney because I can't afford one. Wouldn't pay for one if I could. He tells me to call him Ron.

"This is just a blatant disregard for the law," says the judge. "Trespassing, third offense, fishing without a license. Council, what can you possibly tell me about this man to make me think that we shouldn't throw him away?"

"Your honor, my client has no serious criminal record. He's on break from the university in Lexington and has plans to return in the spring. He has expressed remorse for his actions."

Is that what they call it? I wonder. Been on break for two years.

Then Hyram makes his statement.

"Your Honor, I've known Jimmy for some time, and he's never struck me as a threat to society. He falls off the wagon from time to time, but he's a good kid. He just needs some guidance and leadership. I ask the court to go lenient on him."

If lenient on me is sharing a cell with Tiny, I wish the judge would throw the book at me. And after some deliberation, he nearly does.

"I'm imposing the maximum sentence on you, Mr. Cotton. And I'm going to hold it all over your head. You so much as jaywalk and you're going to find yourself serving some time up at the state penitentiary. You understand me?"

"Yes, your honor."

"Except the fine. I'm imposing a fine of $500, which you can either pay today, or you can pay out in time. The choice is yours."

It may as well be $5,000, or $5 million. I don't have it and I'm not going to ask Mom for it. "I guess I'm going to have to serve my time," I say. Hyram shakes his head and turns back to the judge.

"Mr. Cotton, because I'm a merciful judge I'm going to allow you to serve weekends until you meet your obligation. I don't wish to interfere with your education. And you certainly need one," he says. Glaring at me, he adds, "Maybe if you spend less time fishing and more time hitting the books, you might turn out to be a productive member of society."

"Thank you, your honor," says my lawyer, Ron.

I want to slap this Ron. He's a real bright one, all right.

Before I leave for my first weekend in jail, I decide to come clean with Mom. I take a seat at the kitchen table, where she is peeling potatoes for a meal she thinks I'm going to eat with her. She has the radio on the corner table tuned to a jazz station and she hums along with the trumpets and trombones.

"It's only for five weekends," I say. "I come in Friday night and leave Sunday evening. I'm going to start looking around for something next Monday. I'll find something."

Her shoulders sag and she shakes her head, dropping the knife and potato into the colander. "Jimmy, you just don't learn. There are no shortcuts, honey. When are you going to learn there are no shortcuts in life?"

"I thought I would bring home a fish for dinner. I know you love fresh fish."

"But you've been down this road before. You've had your warning and you knew what would happen." She turns her head and sighs, reaches over and turns off the radio.

"I'm sorry, Mom. I wasn't going to ask you for the money. I messed up and I'll pay for it myself. I've got nothing but time, anyway."

"If you were younger I'd take those fishing poles away from you and whip your little butt. But I can't do that anymore. Not that it would do any good, anyway. You're hard headed, like your dad was."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Jimmy, I want you to promise me you'll use this time wisely. Please tell me you'll think about what you want to do with your life. You can't keep on like this. There's no future in it. You've got to find something you love and put your heart into it. That's the only way you'll ever be happy."

"I know. I'm sorry. I have to get going now," I say, standing from the table. "I have to be there in a few minutes, but I'll be back Sunday evening. I'll have it figured out. Don't worry about me."

"Well, I was going to tell you I'm starting Monday with Doctor Braxton over in Stott City."

"No kidding? That's great news!" I say, trying to sound upbeat, though I know she's never going to be able to retire and live the way she'd like to. She worked only a short time after her and Dad married, and for most of their 17 years together she was a housewife. She has no retirement account to fall back on. Mom went back to work only seven years ago, after Dad left us for some woman in Richmond.

"Thank you. I just want you to figure it out, Jimmy. There's no future in this."

I stand from the table and walk over to the radio, turn it back on.

"Turn that music off. There's nothing to sing about," she says.

"Sorry." I give her a hug and a kiss and walk out to my old Toyota pickup, realizing that no door is going to open until the first one closes shut behind me. I have a date with the county and plenty of time to consider my future, whatever it may be.

At five-o'clock on a sunny, warm Friday afternoon, I arrive at the courthouse and check myself in. An officer with a bald head and ghost-white skin leads me to the third floor, to the community cell with the jailbirds. Right away I see Tiny. When I walk in he raises an arm into the air, which looks like a side of smoked beef. He slaps a card down onto one of the bunks.

"Take that, Jack!" he yells. Then he sees me. "Well lookie there. I done told you they don't mess around in Virginia, Dawg."

"You got that right."

Spanning the center of the room are five concrete slabs, elevated three feet or so off the concrete floor. There are no pillows, blankets, mattresses. Across the room are a series of windows, which are open, and which feature vertical bars on the outside. The place smells like a plumber's glove.

The game's only non-participant is some flannel hippie lying barefoot on a slab across the room. He's smoking a cigarette.

"Who the fuck is this?" asks a black version of Mr. Clean.

"He all right. He with me," says Tiny.

At this, all prodding eyeballs return to the card game. Then Tiny reaches down, produces a can of Budweiser, drinks. He's so big that the can reminds me of something they'd serve on an airplane.

"What do you need, Dawg?" he asks, without looking up. "Beer? Smoke? We got you covered."

I don't know what to say. I'm in Community Cellblock Number 1, supposed to be doing time until Sunday night. Am I dreaming?

Suddenly, there is a bottle of vodka in my hand. I'm drinking. Then, a lanky guy everyone calls Marcus is leaning on my shoulder, trying to suck yesterday's resin out of a little wooden pipe. He sucks so hard I feel my hair stand on end. Then in a raspy voice he tells me to leave my problems at the door, that they don't exist today, or tomorrow. He offers me the pipe; I refuse.

"Get off him, Cus," says Tiny. For once, I'm glad to have made the big man's acquaintance. "Jimmy here's a fisherman…a damn good one, too. Ain't you Jimmy?"

The others look at me like he said "an astronaut." The one they call Marcus grins. Even his three gold teeth come out to have a look.

"Hey, now. We gots to talk," says Marcus. "I gots a place with catfish this long." He spreads his arms wide, yellow eyes squinting from the smoke, the little pipe jutting out of the corner of his mouth.

I don't know much about catfish. But the brown trout are up in the shallows right now. Easy to catch. I might have said that already.

"Look here," says Marcus. "We needs to go shopping. I needs some more smoke and Petie here want a pint a clear ball."

I take a seat in the desert of a concrete slab halfway between the card game and the hippie, who's now forming bubbles between his lips with his saliva, like a bullfrog. What the hell is clear ball? I wonder.

"Put it on the list," says Tiny.

What are they talking about? They have shopping privileges?

Someone hands Marcus a stub of a pencil and a notepad. For a moment, he studies the notepad like a general does a map, then he looks up, attempts to will spontaneous combustion on me with his jaundice-like eyes. For some reason, I expect a thoughtful question, such as "How are we going to get out to go to the store?" or "Does anyone have any money?"

But instead, he says, "How you spell lighter?"

Laughter explodes from the card game and soon everyone is playing 52 Pick-up.

"What do you mean how you spell lighter?" says Tiny. "You the one asking for it, ain't you?"

"Hey, get off my tip."

Marcus looks from me to the others, back to me.

I spell the word for him, wondering if I'm not the crazy one.

About this time the cell door opens and one of the deputies walks in and the cell gets quiet. The deputy, who I notice has an envelope in his hand, is a tall, skinny black

man with a young face but an old man's gait. He walks with a slight limp, like his feet hurt. "Which one of you is Jimmy Cotton?" he says.

"That's me," I say.

I walk over and take the envelope and the deputy turns and leaves the cell without another word. He closes the door behind him and the others resume their card game. I take a seat on one of the concrete slabs and look at the envelope, which is blank. Inside, I find a Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries form, which is blank. It's an application for a fishing guide's license to which there is a yellow sticky note attached. It says:

Jimmy, Do it the right way and maybe this fishing will amount to something for you after all. Hyram Glass.

I place the form back into the envelope and slip it into my back pocket, wondering how I would handle being a guide, taking clients to the waters I know so well, telling them how to catch fish, and getting paid for it. Looking around at the cold, hard walls, the company I'm keeping, I tell myself I'm going to have to consider it.

The grocery cart is a gray sock attached to a long cord, which is wound around a toilet-paper spool. It reminds me of the quarter I once found in a personal film booth in back of a porn shop. It had a small hole bored into the edge, string attached, so that whoever owned it could use it over and over.

Marcus walks over to the barred window, inserts the note into the sock. He looks outside, yells something, lowers it like his life depends on it. Then he ties the string to one of the bars and begins pacing the room, stopping frequently to peer out the window.

Fifteen minutes later he's reeling the sock back up, hand over hand, like an offshore fisherman. The contents of the sock reveal a plastic soda bottle filled with what looks like water; a Copenhagen snuff tin; pack of Pall Mall filterless and a book of matches. Marcus takes the snuff tin, loads his pipe with its contents, lights up and sucks like he's trying to siphon gas from a car parked a block away. He holds his breath, his ribs and collarbones trying to bust through his tight black skin, and exhales.

The soda bottle goes to Tiny, who opens it, sniffs, drinks.

"Whoa, man!" he yells. "This stuff made in a radiator?" He passes it around. The bottle comes to me. I sniff it, drink, and the smell of paint vapor fills my nose. I bum a cigarette, wondering if I'm going to explode upon lighting it. Then I move over to investigate the grocery store downstairs.

Outside, there is a small courtyard with flowers, shrubs and a bench, all of which are cast in a warm, orange-tinted glow from the evening sun. A few people are out walking about the streets and sidewalks, holding hands, eating ice-cream cones. Down below, I notice a gray ribbon of sidewalk stretching from the parking lot to a small, rectangular-shaped pond directly below the window where I'm standing. In the pond are a few atomic-orange goldfish swimming around and around like circus bears on bikes. Who the secret shoppers are, where they come from, I don't ask.

The others have started a new game of spades; the hippie's standing on his head in the corner. They pay him no mind. I piss in the room's only toilet, pull the handle and get my hand soaked in the process. Nothing else happens, which explains the ammonia-like stench.

Marcus is sitting, tapping the wooden pipe on one of the slabs. I take a seat.

"So who's hooking you up out there?" I ask him.

He offers me the profile of his grin, observes me through his ear.

"Like I tell you, man. We gots no problems in here. You leave your problems at the door, come in here and join the party. We gots ways," he says. He looks over at me. The three golden eyeballs are peeking out of his mouth, checking things over. "You see the light?"

"I see something. I don't know what."

"Well, you will. You stay here a while, you see the light. We gots ways," he says, loading the pipe. "So say, man. What you need? Just tell Brother Cus, cause we gots ways."

My knees are supporting my elbows, the concrete slab my ass, eyes burning holes into the cold, hard floor. In a crevice next to the bunk I notice a dust bunny. I reach down, pluck up the cottony fibers, roll them into a ball. Seconds tick by. A baby is born in China. A liquor store is robbed in Los Angeles. Each of us is another day closer to our day of fame.

Led Zeppelin's remake of "In My Time of Dying" sneaks into my mind: *In my time of dying, want nobody to mourn. All I want, for you to do, is take my body, home…*

"I guess you couldn't get me a hook or two and fifty yards of monofilament?"

Marcus strikes a match, inhales.

"Say what?"

"Just a hook or two, about that big, and some line," I tell him.

"Here, man. You needs some relief," he says. He hands me the pipe. I light up, feel my tongue turn into green concrete. I hand it back, chase it with a cigarette and a shot of stale jailhouse oxygen.

"I'll see what I can do," he says.

This is Friday night.

On Sunday morning, I'm twisting the soft dust fibers around a rusty hook shank, the point of which wouldn't penetrate butter. I have no thread, bobbin, or head cement, so genuine fly tying is out of the question. So I roll the dust fibers so tightly around the shank that any more friction might produce a spark. Next, I tie the hook to the line, wind the excess around a cardboard toilet-paper spool. Then, using the floor as a hone, I file the hook point until it hangs on my thumbnail.

The others are corpse-stiff on their bunks, hungover and reminding me of a tintype of an old cowboy gang shot up by some posse. I move over to the window, lower my Jimmy's Dust Bunny fly down to the goldfish pond.

Three of the fish are floating upside down on the surface, belly up, like shot-up gangsters, while a single survivor, probably the group dissident, swims the same concentric pattern as before, seemingly none the worse for the confinement in which it's living, the company it's keeping.

Then and there, I decide that I'm going to fill out the application for the guide's license and send it in. It seems worth a shot and, besides, I really can't imagine myself doing anything else. I'm certain that I can have some business cards printed, maybe take

out a newspaper ad here and there to convince tourists to pay me to take them fishing. After all, no one knows the water around here like me. But this will have to wait.

For now, I look out the window and observe my reflection on the pond's smooth surface, telling myself I still have a chance, as I lower the fly on down.

DISCONNECTED

It was after midnight when the phone rang. My wife, Sheila, and I had been asleep for a couple of hours when the noise woke me. I must have jumped out of bed on the first *Boo-doo-boo-doo-boo!*

I hit the floor with my heart thumping, adrenaline coursing through my body. On my hands and knees, I jammed my arm underneath the bed, frantically searching for my gas mask.

Boo-doo-boo-doo-boo!

Somewhere in the back of my mind there were voices shouting, sounds of the unadulterated excitement and fear and groaning of twenty-four men taking precautionary measures against a nighttime air attack. Then I heard another voice, this one closer, different, but I wasn't listening to the words and they didn't register. I heard them unconsciously, the way you hear a clock ticking without ever noticing.

Boo-doo-boo-doo-boo!

Still searching under the bed, feeling around in the dark, I was vaguely aware of a knot forming in my throat. Why isn't it there? I wondered. Where is it? Am I going to die?

More voices, muffled voices, and the sounds of heavy rubber being slapped around, nylon straps being cinched tight and popped under tension. Now someone else was shouting, a single voice, sounding different somehow, but the words still didn't register.

I made long sweeps with my arm, my hand raking the carpet. Where the hell was it? It was dark in the bedroom, so I couldn't see anything beneath the bed. My breathing was quick and shallow and my tongue felt dry and thick as I extended my arm as far as I could reach beneath the bed, desperate to make contact with that smooth, heavy canvas bag that contained my life-support system.

During the war I had lived this scenario every single night for forty-one nights: It was long after dark and everyone was asleep. Without warning, the siren erupted with its loud, concussive wail and instantly the entire camp was awake. We reached beneath our cots and grabbed our gas masks, slipped them over our faces, pulled the straps tight and sealed them shut. Situated next to our camp was a company of Royal British Marines,

part of the allied coalition who worked with us to root out Saddam's troops from Kuwait. The Brits operated the siren and loudspeaker system, and on some nights the wailing of the siren was accompanied by a British voice saying *Gas, gas, gas!*

But it was the waiting that was terrifying. Where the missile would strike or what type of payload its warhead carried was anyone's guess. Though we had our gas masks and MOPP suits, the thought of having to seal yourself inside them during a chemical attack was terrifying. Wearing them was hot and you never could see very well. Their thick rubber muffled your voice such that you had to shout in order to be heard. Wearing mine made me feel claustrophobic. I also felt helpless because, during missile attacks, my rifle was useless.

Sitting around in our masks, listening to the sirens wailing, the same kind of sirens they sound during tornadoes or other natural disasters, was like waiting for death to come knock on our door. We knew he was around, but we never knew quite when or where he would appear.

Boo-doo-boo-doo-boo!

Still shaking, heart still thumping, and still I raked my hand beneath the bed, trying to pull out that gas mask. Where the hell is it? I wondered.

"James, the phone! It's only the phone!" yelled Sheila. Recognizing her voice, I sat up, still not conscious of the setting, the time, the circumstance. She came around the bed, moved down beside me on the floor where she clamped her hands to my shoulders and shook me in quick, hard jolts. She put her face close to mine and yelled: "It's only the phone!"

I leaned back against the wall, out of breath, my T-shirt and face sweaty. About this time, it all began to come back to me: my home, my wife, my new life in Texas, the fact that I'd been home for five months.

Why is this happening to me? I wondered.

As I seldom thought about the war anymore, I assumed everything was fine. And most days were. I never considered that I had brought home anything other than unpleasant memories. But later I would realize that I was what the VA counselors tell you about. I was one of those statistics, the kind of guy they talk about on those television commercials – *You don't have to go through this alone. You are not alone.*

Boo-doo-boo-doo-boo!

This cycle of ringing didn't bother me so much. I was beginning to calm down and gain some perspective. But then I got angry. Sheila stepped over me and answered the phone. Her sweet, warm scent filled my head and reminded me that I was indeed home.

"Oh, hey Carmen," she said. Her voice was soft and low. "No, no problem. Hey, can I call you tomorrow? James is feeling bad tonight. Okay."

She hung up the phone and moved down beside me on the floor.

"Why the hell does she call in the middle of the night?" I said. "She drunk again?"

"Honey, she's still single. She doesn't go to bed as early as we do."

My heart was still beating much too quickly, jabbing against my chest like it was trying to hammer its way out. I felt like I had just returned from a run, though I didn't

feel invigorated. I was confused and angry, at the telephone, at my wife's friend for calling so late. "No kidding, she's probably out whoring around."

"James! That's enough. You have no right to…"

"She wakes me up like this again, I'm going to let her have it," I said.

I stood up, walked into the bathroom and splashed some water on my face. For a moment, I thought about going downstairs for a beer, but I was to start a new job in the morning and needed to sleep. I took a shot of mouthwash, gargled, and changed into a dry T-shirt. When I got back into bed, Sheila moved over next to me and wrapped her right arm around me, squeezed. I felt her forehead resting on the back of my head, her warm breath on my neck. She patted my chest.

"You just need to take it easy. Relax."

I lay there waiting for the fire in my mind to smolder out, still seething at Carmen for calling so late, being so damned inconsiderate. It was almost 2 a.m.

"You want to talk about it?" she said, running her hand across my chest, across my stomach and down over my abdomen. She kissed the back of my neck.

"No, I'm all right," I said, which was a lie and we both knew it.

The Arabian Desert was a monotonous, depressing place with rolling dunes of orange-gold sand for as far as the eye could see. There I endured both the coldest and warmest temperatures I've ever experienced, and saw hundreds of burned and bombed out Mercedes cars and buses lining the highways. Most of the cars had diesel engines, so the air was thick and hazy with smog. Of course, when the retreating Iraqis began setting fire to all the Kuwaiti oil wells, the billowing smoke was so thick it blocked out the sun

and turned the daytime sky to night. For a long time I wondered how these pollutants were going to affect the environment, my health.

I recall thinking at one point that I would probably never come back home alive. If Saddam's missiles didn't get me, I reasoned, then one of the Muslim factions sympathetic to his cause, which I could never keep track of, would hit me in a drive-by shooting while I stood guard duty or walked a night patrol. If the smog and airborne carcinogens, which had turned my snot black the day I arrived in country, didn't kill me, then the vaccinations we were being given to protect us against all those chemical agents Saddam was firing at us surely would. If not right then, maybe three years later. Or five.

So why was all this coming back to me now, nearly half a year after I had come home? Except for an occasional television commercial or bumper sticker on some car, I just didn't think about it. I was too busy, I guess, working temporary jobs, hoping one of them would turn permanent. I was also exercising regularly: running, lifting weights, trying to keep my body fit. My mind seemed completely on board with everything. What part of me wouldn't let my wartime experiences go? And why were they coming back to me now? Was it possible these things had been percolating inside me all along and that maybe I just hadn't noticed?

Thinking back, the night of the telephone call was the worst incident, but not the first. A couple of weeks earlier I had been driving alone in my car when a siren began blaring. It was one of those early-warning sirens that the city's emergency management tests every Saturday at noon, and it was the same kind of siren they used during the war to announce an impending missile strike or gas attack.

When I heard the blaring, I was seized with that same feeling of absolute amazement, terror and helplessness. I was also very angry. The feeling was so powerful that it seemed I was jerked back in time to the war with the intensity of a lightning strike. I saw once again those dead Iraqi soldiers we used to pull from the Persian Gulf, bloated, their heads the size of basketballs, skin sloughing off their faces like hot taffy, and their open eyes lifeless, cold, indifferent. Hearing that siren wailing, it was as though my present life was strangely nonexistent, forgotten, like I had never left the war and come home. Mostly though, I was scared, scared at what this feeling might cause me to do.

I drove past the siren tower as quickly as I could, sweating, chest pounding, knuckles bone-white and locked to the steering wheel. If I had seen the man who had been running the siren, I'm afraid of what I may have done to him.

By the time I returned home I had calmed down, but I couldn't stop thinking about that siren and how angry and helpless I had felt that time the lieutenant got our platoon lost in the desert; how my eyes burned and blurred after being plugged with storm-driven sand; the smell of rotting feet from living for weeks in those waterlogged fighting holes; the vegetable-oil taste of the Saudi Arabian Pepsi with its Arabic writing on the can; the souvenirs my buddies were taking back home with them, against orders. I hadn't wanted a damn thing from over there, yet it seemed that I had brought home something after all.

At 8:00 on a Monday morning I walked into a business called Pagers Plus, which was located next to a nail and tanning salon in a north-Dallas strip mall. There, I

introduced myself to the receptionist who was seated in the lobby and told her I was to start work that day.

"Oh, the new guy," she said. "We've been expecting you." Then her phone buzzed and she held up a finger indicating that I needed to wait while she answered the call. "It's a great day at Pagers Plus. How can we help connect you today?"

As I stood there waiting I considered what she had said: "the new guy." I was the fucking new guy. The FNG. I tried to push this out of my mind, but there it was and I couldn't deny it. Fucking new guy. Everyone hated the new guy. Thinking back to the day I arrived in Saudi Arabia, the day that sergeant introduced me to the company lieutenant, saying "Here's the new guy," and the lieutenant ignoring me for several minutes before telling me where to report and what to do, I was reminded that I had been the new guy before.

"Oh, you're the new guy," came a new voice, this one belonging to a girl about my age, with wire glasses and long, brown pigtails. She walked over to me, smiled and extended her hand. "I'm Rhonda, the sales manager. I'll be your supervisor. Please follow me."

I followed her into a small office where a half-dozen people sat at desks wearing headsets. These headsets were outfitted with tiny foam-tipped speakers that curved around their chins, hovering near the corners of their mouths. She led me to an empty desk at the far end of the space and motioned with her hand. "This will be your desk. Go ahead and read through these papers and I'll be back in a minute to help get you set up."

I took a seat and looked around. The others were talking into the speakers on their headsets, saying things like, *I recommend this model* and *No, for that you would*

have to upgrade to this plan. The agency that sent me here told me I'd be selling pagers and they assured me that this industry was growing, that this could be a long-term assignment. My previous assignment had been a two-month stint with an investment firm, which had ended the week before at the conclusion of the company's annual direct-mail campaign. It was a shitty job because it was all data entry. Truthfully, I was glad it was behind me. But I was optimistic about this new job because I knew that it wasn't just sitting in front of the computer all day. I'd actually be speaking to people, having contact with others.

I sat back in the chair and picked up a brochure and a thin stack of papers, filling my nose with the scent of corporate America: cheap coffee, industrial carpet, my new colleagues' perfumes and colognes. The brochure contained photos and descriptions of several different Motorola pagers, while the information on the papers was divided into sections: *Mission*, *Purpose* and *Strategy*. Beneath *Strategy* was a script, beginning with the words "Hi, my name is _____."

Presently, a tall slender man walked through the front of the office holding a paper coffee cup. He had a strained look on his face and as he walked by he eyed me before disappearing into the reception area. A few minutes later he reappeared, walking in the opposite direction and again glancing over at me. I nodded but the man didn't return my gesture. A moment later he disappeared into another office on the opposite side of the room.

Rhonda returned after several minutes and she pulled up a chair at the desk next to mine.

"Did you figure out what we're doing yet?"

"Selling life insurance?" Seeing the vibrant expression fade from her face, I grabbed the pager brochure and said, "Oh, I'm kidding. I think I know what we're doing."

"Good," she said, scooting back in her seat. Then she kicked off her shoes, raised her legs up off the ground and crossed them in the seat. This made her sit a few inches higher than before. "Now, before you start making calls, we need to practice."

She began to explain how the phone system worked, how to operate the headset, how to diagnose a potential customer's needs, and finally how to recommend a pager and service plan based on this information. She told me that we were concentrating our efforts on the Florida panhandle, and since the company had only just begun to target this area, the market here was wide open. "Do you know anyone in the Florida panhandle who might be thinking about a pager?" she asked me. "We could start with them."

I told her I did not, that I had never been to Florida.

"That's all right. We work from these contact sheets," she said, handing me a new stack of papers containing a list of names, in alphabetical order. Beside each name was a telephone number and address, which were all in Pensacola, Florida. "We're concentrating on Pensacola and Tallahassee because these are the areas where people are most likely to have jobs. They're the ones who'll be able to afford to carry a pager." she said.

"Got it."

"OK, let's practice," she said. "Pretend I'm a potential customer and you're calling me."

I glanced at the clock on the wall. It was only 9:15 and already I was wondering how much time we were going to spend practicing. Even though I just walked through the door, knew very little about pagers, I was ready to get going on my own. I'd figure things out as I went along. "Okay, I'm ready."

"Ring, ring…Hello?" she said.

"Hi, my name is James and I'm with Pagers Plus," I said, reading from the script. I tried to keep my voice down so the other employees wouldn't hear me because I felt stupid having to practice like this.

I remembered being nineteen years old and the sergeant of the guard handing me a 30-round clip of ammunition one evening as I reported for guard duty at Fort Bragg, where I was stationed in North Carolina. It was my first time standing guard at night and as I pushed the clip into my M-16, the SOG warned me about falling asleep. "You fall asleep and we're all dead," he said. "The enemy gets their hands on our weapons and ammo, we're dead. Our lives are in your hands." Though this was during a time of peace, it didn't matter. In the military, nothing was ever so important as security.

Following the script, I said, "I'm calling to ask if you would be interested in receiving a free Motorola pager."

"Sure, what do I have to do?"

"It would require a one-year service plan. If you're interested, I would just need to ask you a few questions to determine which plan would be best for you."

"Sure."

"Okay. Would you use a pager mostly for business or personal use?"

"Oh, keeping in touch with friends, mostly."

"Friends?" I said. "You don't need a pager for that."

At this, Rhonda was silenced. She had that look on her face that told me she didn't know what to say, didn't know whether I was kidding or serious. Finally, she took a deep breath and said, "Okay. Let's back up and start from the beginning. This is going to take a while."

Monday was my first day at Pagers Plus and by Wednesday I was actually making calls on my own, trying to interest people in a free Motorola pager. I sat at my desk beside the other sales reps, a headset clamped to my ears, reading from the script, listening carefully to the customers' responses and trying to sound like I was pager savvy. Which, in fact, I wasn't. But I had the script, the product brochures, and the confidence and determination the service had instilled in me. If I could hit a dinner plate-sized bullseye at 500 meters, I reasoned, if I could rig, camouflage and detonate a claymore mine without killing myself in the process, I knew that I could push pagers on the public. Once, it nearly worked and I sensed an imminent commitment from a woman who told me she was looking for a way to stay connected to her mother, who lived somewhere in the North and who was suffering from a condition called Seasonal Affective Disorder. But just as I was about to ask her which address I could send her free pager to, our conversation was interrupted by a cacophony of growling and squealing, at which point the woman told me her terrier Butch had gotten a hold of the cat and she promptly hung up the phone. I was unable to reach her when I called back that afternoon.

As a perk of the job, the company loaned me a new top-of-the-line Motorola alpha-numeric pager, which I wore clipped to my belt like I was someone important. I

had little use for a pager and only once did it ever go off. It was Sheila's work number, so I called her back.

"Honey, I'm thinking about painting the bedroom and I want to run these colors by you," she said.

"What? Painting?" I said. It was nearly lunchtime and I was intent on making it through another page of contacts before knocking off to eat.

"I was reading an article in *Redbook* and it says a nice soothing green may be the best color to help women conceive. Which color do you like? Serenity…it's like a very light seafoam green, or…"

"Serenity? Babe, I'm busy. I can't talk about colors and paint. I have work to do," I said, trying to keep my voice down.

"But you haven't heard the other color."

"I have to go. I'll see you tonight," I said, hanging up the phone.

I wasn't too keen on the idea of having a baby anytime soon, but I never told Sheila this. After the night of the phone call, I knew she must have some misgivings about my state of mind, and telling her that I wasn't interested in having a baby would have sealed it. After that night, I felt like an implicit line had been drawn in the sand between us. Either I could cross that line and get on board with my new life, or I was doomed to be left alone to figure it out on my own.

I was trying to get on board, but I still wasn't keen on having a baby. Work, then, seemed like a convenient excuse. Surely Sheila, a career woman herself, could understand this.

Mostly though, I didn't want the others there in the office to hear me on a personal call. I thought it might reflect poorly on me, and I wasn't sure if management monitored our calls because they were so diligent about tracking our sales performance.

A large dry-erase board had been fitted to one of the walls of the office where I worked. On this board was a graph with a horizontal line drawn near the bottom. This line, I was told, represented the baseline from which all the pager sales staff began their efforts. Vertical black bars, of varying heights, stretched upward from this line and corresponded with numerical values appearing at the left-hand side of the board: 25, 50, 100. At the top of each black bar was a name: Mickey, Angela, Janice, Albert, Sonny and Marcus. My name had been added to the far right side of the board. But as I had yet to make my first sale, there was no black bar beneath my name. Instead, a short red bar had been drawn into my column, beneath the baseline. This, Rhonda explained, indicated that I was essentially in the red as far as the company was concerned. She told me that the company had invested a certain amount of money in training me and that I would need to sell five service plans in order for it to recoup its investment.

I wondered how the company could consider a couple of days of reading through a script with my boss as an investment. It wasn't like they were issuing me uniforms, a sleeping bag, weapon and ammunition. Besides, we were selling pagers, not worldwide peace or prosperity.

But I also realized that it didn't matter what I thought. I was the employee and I needed to get the monkey off my back and sell something. This didn't seem so difficult to do, but the dry-erase board and the phone call about paint and all the other distractions

seemed like barriers to success. It was beginning to aggravate me because I knew that I could do this.

As I dialed the next number on the contact sheet, I wondered briefly what serenity looked like.

On Thursday I sold my first pager service plan. It was bound to happen, I suppose. The customer, the wife of a naval aviator stationed in Pensacola, wanted a pager to help keep in touch with her husband who was often away on duty. The one-year agreement entitled her to a free, entry-level pager, but she opted to pay extra and upgrade to the alpha-numeric job like the one I wore on my belt. I told her that she wouldn't be disappointed with her choice and before hanging up I wished her happy paging as my script directed me to do.

That afternoon, Roy, the tall lugubrious-looking owner of the company, who liked to stroll around the office sipping coffee from paper cups that featured pictures of playing cards – Ace, King, Queen, etc. – walked up to the dry-erase board on the wall and, with the quick flick of his eraser, reduced the size of my red bar by 20 percent. Then he turned, glanced at me and left the room without saying a word.

Not even a *Nice job!* or *Way to go!*, I thought. Just a flick. His condescension aggravated me, but it also made me even more determined to sell another service plan.

Just before leaving for the day, Rhonda came over and reminded me about Halloween dress-up day, which was tomorrow.

"I'm coming as Elvira, the queen of darkness," she said. "What are you going to be?"

"I guess I'll come in with a white sheet over my head. I think I'll be a ghost, because I'm dead to that guy."

"Oh, don't worry about Roy. He just wants to see his business succeed. He'll be your best friend as soon as you sell a few more service plans."

As it turned out, I didn't need to sell any more pager service plans. Friday morning rolled around and shortly after arriving at the office and plugging in my headset, Roy strolled over to my desk and said hello for the first time that week. He was dressed in his usual business attire – white pinpoint oxford, dark slacks and a pair of long black shoes which reminded me of skis. In his right hand was his trademark paper coffee cup, which featured the picture of a Joker card. "Pretty realistic costume you're wearing," he said.

For the first time since leaving the service I had slipped on my old desert-tan camouflage utilities, which were soft and faded from the sun. When I had dressed that morning, Sheila had already left the house to go to work, so she had no way of knowing what I was wearing. I was thankful for this because I was determined not to give her any indication that I was still thinking about my past. I was moving on with my life, or trying to.

Still, had she known, she probably wouldn't have said anything, anyway. Just as I was pouring myself into my work, trying to keep busy, Sheila was consumed with the idea of redecorating our bedroom, such that she spent all her free time perusing home-decorating stores and pouring over paint samples. We were preoccupied in very different ways.

Along with my camouflage utilities, I wore my service-issue desert boots and floppy-brim cover, which is what the military calls a hat. Though this uniform had once helped me blend into the Saudi Arabian landscape, it brought me some curious stares on my way to work that morning, and it seemed largely responsible for my boss' sudden change of attitude.

"Well it's all I had on such short notice."

"Looks like the real deal. Army soldier, huh?" he said, reaching out and pinching my sleeve. He rubbed the fabric between his thumb and forefinger, spinning it around as though skeptical of its authenticity. And then he asked me what everyone used to ask me in the months after I returned home from the war: "What was it like over there?"

He stood there sipping his coffee, his white neck looking constrained behind his starched collar. On his face was a kind of half grin, half incredulous look that seemed to say, *Are you for real?* or *What are you doing here?*

"Great place to get a tan," I said.

"Yeah? So is Florida. You getting to know the Florida panhandle by now?"

The other sales reps were already into conversations with customers and I was ready to get to work. I wasn't happy knowing I was seen as a liability, an expense, and I wanted to prove to these people that I could do my job.

"I'm getting to know it."

"Good." he said. "Because you know what we do when we see too much red?"

"What's that?"

Roy walked over to the dry-erase board and picked up an eraser. Then he placed the eraser up top, hovering over my name, and made a long slow motion down the board,

as if he were removing my column. "We color it white," he said, grinning. "You get my point, Soldier?"

Roy, starched and stiff, and with his detached, unfeeling eyes, reminded me of the company lieutenant who used to lecture us about getting our anthrax vaccinations. He used to tell us that the anthrax would disperse into the air through osmosis and kill those of us without the required two-stage vaccine. While telling us this, he would flip little white cardboard discs at us as say, "I'm anthrax and your dead." He would repeat it to the next man, and the next, saying "You don't have your shot? You're dead too." For a moment, I could see these little white discs in Roy's eyes and I wanted to grab the stapler off my desk and hurl it at him to get him to stop and go away.

Roy dropped the eraser back onto the table, turned and walked out of the office. On his way out I heard him say, "Good morning, Angela."

I turned back to my desk and dialed the first number of the day.

At noon that day I left the office, got in my car and drove down the busy Dallas street to a sandwich shop. I had noticed that the other sales reps ate at their desks, and up to that point I had done the same. But it had been a long day already and I needed to get out of there, away from Roy and his dry-erase board.

I ordered a sandwich and a drink, then took a seat to wait on my food. When the man called my number, I walked up to the counter and took out my wallet.

"No, no," said the silver-haired man, shaking his head. "Let me buy your lunch. It's the least we can do for you soldiers."

No kidding? Is he joking? Then I remembered what I was wearing, that this was Dallas, where people weren't used to seeing servicemen.

"Thank you, sir. I really appreciate it."

"I was in the Army," he said. "Two tours in Vietnam. I've seen a little of what you've seen."

"Two tours? Wow."

"Yeah, then a career with the phone company, a wife and three kids. Now I'm retired and running a sandwich shop," he said, wiping his hands on his apron. "I like to stay busy. What can I say?"

"That's impressive, sir."

"No need to call me sir. I was an enlisted man like you."

"Well, thanks," I said.

I took a seat and ate quickly so that I could get back to the office, hopeful that I might make a sale before the day ended. Two service plans during my first week wasn't bad, I thought, and I figured Roy couldn't balk at that, even if he wouldn't deign to say something like, *Hey, way to go!* or *Nice job!*

After lunch, I drove back to work, pulled into the parking lot and got out of my car. Walking up to the office I passed a blue Corvette, parked sideways and taking up three spaces in the front parking row. What a cocky, disrespectful son of a bitch, I thought. I looked at the car, walked around to see if anyone was inside, and about this time I began to feel the first waves of heat rushing up my back, through my neck and into my head. People like me park in the rear of the lot and hoof it into the office because

that's what we're supposed to do. But why? Why do we do the right thing only to have someone else cheat the system, cheat the honest players who are trying to earn a living?

The car was empty. I glanced around the lot but saw only the traffic zipping by out on the street. No one around. Then I looked up at the office in front of which the car was parked. The sign on the door said NGC, Inc. and something told me I would find the owner of the car inside. My heart was beating quickly now and I could feel blood surging through my neck and temples. The dry air was making my back itch and suddenly I could see nothing except for NGC, Inc.'s tinted glass door.

I walked in and a girl dressed in a pregnant nun costume looked up from her desk. She had electric-blue eyes.

"Whose car is this out here?" I asked. "It's taking up three goddamned places right out front. I want to know who the hell owns it." My stomach was turning flips now and my breathing was quick and shallow.

"That car belongs to our president."

"Get his ass out here," I said. I sensed that I was screwing up badly, and in my mind I kept telling myself that I was screwing up, that I needed to get out of here and get back to work. But I was committed now. There was no turning back.

The girl sat motionless for a couple of seconds, a blank expression on her face. Then she picked up the phone and dialed a number. Several moments passed in silence. I was steaming now and suddenly I couldn't think of selling pager plans or my lunch hour or how what I was doing would reflect upon Roy and his business, two doors down. For some reason, however, I did think of the old man who had given me my lunch. I told myself I was doing this for him.

If this president, the owner of the blue Corvette, had appeared in the lobby just then, it would have been a disaster. In my mind I was picturing how his face would look when I grabbed his throat and squeezed, when I knocked his front teeth out of his mouth. Later, this would seem to me a trivial matter, but at the time I was primed to fight and I was ready to take on whoever was going to walk into the lobby and claim that car.

"He's not answering his phone," said the girl.

"Lucky for him," I said. My heart was thudding in my chest and it was a chore to get my statement out without gasping for air. I had to take a deep breath and deliberately slow my speech in order to get my point across. In the service, they always taught us to maintain our composure and now I was straining to maintain mine. I knew I was screwing up, but I also felt that I was on the right side of this. Damn civilians, I told myself. They don't understand the sacrifices we make for them. It's up to us to keep them in line, call them out when they're too flagrant with their freedom. They're entitled, I guess, but we paid for it.

"You tell him that I am sick and tired of people like him acting like they're better than everyone else. If I can park in the back of the lot, so can he. If every other employee who works in this strip mall can park way out there," I said, waving my arm, "so can he."

She was speechless, and the confounded look on her face told me she had never encountered someone like me. I turned and marched out of the office, flung the door open and was gone.

Walking down the sidewalk toward my office, past the nail salon, I took several deep breaths, feeling the blood surge through my neck, my head, my eyes. My sight was interrupted with black and white flashes and for a moment I wondered if I might faint.

I walked into Pagers Plus, removed my parka and cover, flung them on my desk. A girl with a thick, black wig, black eyeliner and a low-cut black dress walked by and winked. It took me a moment before I remembered that it was Rhonda. I took a seat and plugged into the phone system. God help anyone who was going to refuse a pager service plan now. But before making the first call, I decided to take 10 seconds and try and clear my mind, calm my breathing. I took the first deep breath when I heard a strange voice in the lobby.

At this point I removed my headset and placed it on the desk. Then I stood and pulled on my cover, fitting it snugly on my head, then put on my parka. I walked into the lobby.

"…some big guy in Army clothes," said a short, middle-aged man dressed in a white Polo and khaki pants. When he saw me, he squinted his eyes, looking both agitated and confused. As I walked toward him, he stuck his arm out, pointed at me and began yelling.

"You're the one…" he screamed. His voice was surprisingly high-pitched and it seemed to bounce off the lobby walls and puncture my ears. "You got a problem with me? I own those fucking spaces!"

I walked up to the man without hesitation, twisted my shoulders and waist to the right, and released this stored energy in a quick, fluid forward motion. I saw the look on his face change from confusion to fear, like clouds passing in front of the sun.

I busted him in the nose as hard as I could, not punching *at* his face, but trying to put my fist *through* it. He stumbled backward and tried to brace himself by grabbing the receptionist's desk. But his hand only slid across the surface and he fell back into some chairs that were lined up against the wall.

Expecting him to stand up, I waited with clenched fists, ready to deliver a second blow. But already blood was trickling out his nose and onto his upper lip, and I could see the amazement and disbelief in his eyes, the look of shock.

"Oh my God," said Grace, the receptionist.

Standing there, I felt no sense of victory or pride, no sense of satisfaction. Instead, a wave of disgust rushed through my body, feeling heavy and hot in my stomach. The smell of cheap coffee and paper and the dusty, artificial flowers atop Grace's desk filled my head, burning my nose, throat and lungs. Pangs of dizziness shot through my head and for a moment I felt myself hovering in the air, looking down at this surreal situation I had caused. I hated myself because I realized that there was much more where this came from.

The man's eyes were watery now and with his thumb he wiped away the blood forming on his upper lip. He was done, but somehow I knew that I had lost much more than he had. He could stand up and walk out of here, clean his face off and forget about today. He could tell himself that if only he were twenty years younger, he could have kicked my ass. He could chalk it all up to a bad day and forget about it.

But what was I going to do?

I removed the pager from my belt and placed it on Grace's desk, beside the vase of dusty fake flowers. Then I turned and shoved open the front door, walked outside into

the cool, dry October air. As the door was closing behind me, I could hear Grace saying, "It's a great day at Pagers Plus. How can we help connect you today?"

Despite the heavy Dallas traffic, the drive home helped calm me. I drove in silence, with the windows up and the air conditioner turned off. It was a warm afternoon and though I should have been sweating, I was cool, even to the point of being chilled. Just before reaching my apartment, I turned in at a home-improvement store and went inside.

Forgetting that I was wearing my old uniform, oblivious to the people who were surely looking at me and wondering who I was, what I was doing, where I was going, I walked up and down the aisles until I came to the paint section. I stopped in front of the display of color samples and there in front of me were the beiges and browns that had so colored my world during the past year that I couldn't take my eyes off them. The lighter hues appeared at the top of the display, fading into the olives and browns and, at the very bottom, a row of black. I looked down at my sleeve and then back at the display. These color cards seemed to represent pieces of me, a puzzle of myself that I couldn't fit together.

I moved down the aisle to the brighter colors, stopping in front of another cascade of shades that progressed from light to dark. They were all blue.

A moment later a man wearing an orange apron walked up next to me.

"Can I help you find something?"

"Looking for serenity," I said.

SECOND CHANCE

At the bus station I buy a one-way ticket to Biloxi, take a seat in the terminal, build a newspaper wall in front of my face. The information age, technology at the speed of light, mobile telephones, and I'm taking the bus to Biloxi. Going with a few old folks, a fat lady with a hat big enough to shade Montana and a couple of rowdy kids. Feels like the fifties or something.

After a few minutes I get a tap-tap on my leg. I pull down the paper and there's this little girl, about five, crooked teeth and a T-shirt about three sizes too small.

"Mister, can I have a dollar?" she asks.

"Sorry, Honey. I spent all my dough on this bus," I tell her. My response is reflexive, instinctive. But looking into her blue eyes, feeling the sharp pangs of guilt rushing through me, I slide my hand down into my pocket. I can't help myself. Before I can remove it, however, the woman I take to be her mother comes over, grabs her arm.

"I'm sorry," she says. "She just started doing this about two weeks ago. Asking strangers for money."

"No problem," I say, smiling, releasing the bill pinched between my fingers. When they're gone, I replace the newspaper in front of my face, close enough to smell the ink, my eyes scanning over stories I don't read, flip a page. Then they stop on a little photo in the upper-right corner of page A-3. I feel like I'm looking into a mirror. I read the part about being released on Thursday, the serial burglar who broke into the district attorney's house. They dedicate two tiny paragraphs to my release, describing the case, the prison sentence, and the child neglect and string of burglaries that sent me there. Funny, but they don't mention the fact that I'm on parole for the next year, which means I have to walk a fine line or else I go back to the joint.

Yeah, yeah, I know all that, I tell myself. Burglary. So what? I've let all that go. It's not the burglaries that bother me. It's the memory of leaving my son, Adam, in the car that night while I went out to pull that job. It's the guilt I felt when I got caught, when they cuffed me, knowing Adam was going to wake up to the police instead of his father. I served my time and paid for the burglaries, but I can't shake the guilt from leaving my son alone that night. I'm reminded of this every time I see a child and it makes me wonder how Adam is these days, what he's doing, if he's playing sports or planning to go to college some day. He should be starting high school this fall.

The bus pulls in 15 minutes late and passengers crowd the steps, getting off, getting on. The air inside the bus is heavy with the scent of people – sweat, perfume, cigarette smoke. I take a seat near the back, over the wheels. The seats around me are empty when I sit down, but moments later an elderly lady appears, skinny red-headed boy hanging from her hand like an ugly purse. She looks around like a hen searching for a nest, turning her head this way and that, then decides on the seats directly across the aisle from me. The boy looks over at me from behind a cloud of freckles, smiles, smacks his gum. I wonder where his father is and what kind of relationship they have.

The old lady glances up a couple of times, then picks up a newspaper and busies herself. Several minutes later I hear the paper drop. I can feel her studying my profile. Quickly she takes the boy by the hand and scurries off toward the front of the bus.

It's a little over 200 miles to Biloxi so I lean back in the seat, close my eyes and listen to the diesel engine grumbling, feeling every bump in the road. When we arrive, I leave the bus station and head over to the hardware store, spend my last seven dollars on a garden spade. It's a small one; fits inside my back pocket. Then I walk three blocks south, west a block and another two south. Just ahead is the Gulf of Mexico. I'm walking through a neighborhood of giant antebellum homes situated on huge lots. The yards are full of these tall pine trees that you see all over the South, smelling clean and green, and mixing with the salty ocean air to remind me I'm not in prison anymore. There are also live oaks with Spanish moss hanging from the branches. The grass is so green it looks artificial. I want so badly to just drop down in it, roll around, feel the soft blades on my neck. But I have a job to do, so I keep walking.

The house is just ahead now. There is a Jeep in the driveway. The house next door is a football field's length away, but there are people sitting on the front porch. This is a job that'll have to wait until dark.

I go down to the beach, take off my shoes, walk through the water. The waves are sweeping the floor of the sea, pushing the debris and whitewash up onto the beach, then retreating, bringing another load. Judging from the debris marking the high-water line, the tide is out right now. I notice a couple of ships way out on the horizon, probably cargo ships. They don't seem to be moving, but when I look away and then back a minute or so later, they've changed positions. Gulls and terns scream from the air, searching, hovering, diving into the sea, emerging with tiny fish that glint like newly minted coins. The wind is blowing, the sun is shining and the roar of the surf is invigorating. Life is all around me, which is so refreshing after spending five years in a tiny steel-and-concrete cell. I wish I had a fishing rod and a few lures right now. I'd like to try my luck.

After a while I break out the spade, build a sand castle near the water's edge. Then I move up onto the dry sand and lie down, place my cap over my face and close my eyes. When I open them again it's nearly dark.

The cicada chorus in the trees is in full swing when I take off down the beach. It's night now and I feel safe. I locate the house and move into the yard, kneel beneath a massive cypress tree. On the backside of the house the windows are illuminated like a country clubhouse, one side of the deck hugging the back door, the other side cascading into the yard. I study the windows, then the deck, then the trees nearest the house.

It was the biggest tree, I tell myself. Huge. I move farther into the yard, kneel, listen. A light breeze wafts voices my way from a house down the beach. I smell cigar smoke, hear laughter, feel the hunger pains in my stomach, see nothing but trees and a few giant homes, sense that I may be screwing up. I'm sweating profusely. Fourteen hours out of the pen and I'm risking going right back, for what? A little bit of cash? The promise of a new life?

I creep closer to the house, deeper into private property, feeling pine needles crunch beneath my feet, smelling the dewy richness of the trees. Roosting birds cackle and clatter up in the branches. It's a clear night and through holes in the canopy I can see stars, hear the surf growing distant behind me as I move still closer to the house.

Maybe the other trees have grown, I think. Maybe they're all the same size now. Then I see what I think is the tree. It's as big as the others, branch like an elbow coming off one side of the trunk. It's unmistakable. Of course it's the one.

I move up to the giant pine, put my back against the trunk and count ten paces out, directly toward the beach, as though the tree and I are in a duel. Then I pull out the spade and start digging.

When I get about a foot down into the soil I hear voices coming from the house. A man comes out onto the deck, cigarette cherry glowing in his right hand. He takes a seat in one of the chairs. It's him, all right: the DA man. Though I'm far enough away that I can't make out his facial features, I can still see him in my mind: him in that courtroom, in the newspapers, that smirk on his face after I was convicted. He is physically unremarkable – average height, build, features – but he's the DA man, so

people listen to what he says, especially judges. I wonder what he would think if he only knew some of his missing money was buried in his own backyard.

I'm not too worried about him seeing me because the floodlights illuminate only the open yard. I'm well inside the trees, in the dark. But then I hear voices behind me. I hit the dirt.

Turns out it's only a couple on a nighttime beach walk. A minute later they're gone, but the DA man is still on the deck. I keep my eyes on him, watching the cigarette cherry rise and fall, adjusting my grip on the spade. After several minutes, he stands, drops the cigarette butt into a can and goes back inside the house. I resume digging.

Eventually I hit something solid, dig some more and pull out the Mason jar. I twist the lid off, dump the contents into my hand. They consist of two keys and a roll of money -- $1,300 and change as I recall. I'll have to check later. I dump the jar back into the hole, along with the spade, push the dirt back in, cover everything with leaves and pine needles. Then I retreat back to the beach, disappear into the night, stopping once to wash my hands in the surf.

After breakfast the next morning, I walk over to the storage unit owned by a distant uncle, where several years ago I stored a car. The car's pretty dusty, cobwebs connecting antennae to mirrors. I open the hood, look the engine over, check the spark-plug connections. To my surprise she fires right up. It's a '78 Monte Carlo, dated, dusty, hasn't seen the light of day in five years. But I've got wheels now, so I drive.

West. And then north. I don't know exactly where I'm going, so I'm in no particular hurry to get there. I just want to get out of Mississippi, away from the papers,

the prodding eyeballs, the people who come up asking for money. You might say I'd planned for this day, planned for my post-prison life by stashing away some dough. I figured the last place anybody would look for it was the DA man's backyard. It's not much, but I hope it's enough to give me a head start on a new life.

I'm supposed to check in with my parole officer once a week and report on my job prospects, let him know what I'm doing. And I'm not supposed to leave the state of Mississippi. But that's exactly what I need to do. I have to put my past behind me. So I think I'm just going to drive on and hope that I can find something quiet and low-key, where folks won't notice me. I need to go somewhere new and become a new person.

I was supposed to do eight years, but got out early because I made no trouble, did what I was told, and because the state's going bankrupt housing and feeding petty joint smokers and kids with no direction in life. Truthfully, some of those kids reminded me of myself at their age – running around unsupervised, hanging around the wrong crowds, getting into trouble. Looking back, if my parents hadn't divorced, if I hadn't spent my summers unsupervised and running with Lenny – the older kid who lived down the street, who taught me how to break into houses – I like to think I would have turned out differently. But that's all behind me and there's nothing I can do about it now.

I stop for the night in a small town in Arkansas, walk into an all-night diner and order fried chicken, mashed potatoes. There's a newspaper on the table so I read the classifieds while waiting.

The ad says:

FARM MANAGER NEEDED

LARGE SWINE OPERATION IN CENTRAL ARKANSAS.

GOOD PAY AND HOUSING FOR RIGHT PERSON.

I call and inquire. Next morning I go out and meet the guy.

"Bo Cartwright," I say, extending my hand.

"Cartwright? Any kin to Ben Cartwright?" says the man, laughing. He's a tall, lanky guy with cowboy boots, salt-and-pepper hair. I guess that he's twenty years older than me, probably in his mid-fifties. With his boots, hat, big belt buckle, he looks like he ought to be running a quarter horse operation somewhere. Says his name is Sam Roberts. "Know anything about hog farming?"

"I was raised on a farm," I tell him, recalling the twenty acres in south Mississippi where I had once lived with my parents before they split up. Sam's place is much more modern than any farm I've ever seen and it is obviously well-maintained. We're standing on the edge of a circle driveway, which is covered in gravel, and which is surrounded by beige metal barns on three sides. The barns appear new and the grounds around them very clean. I don't see a bit of litter and the grassy strips separating the buildings are neatly trimmed. Each barn has a vent fan spinning up in the loft, just beneath the roof peak, and the air smells of swine and dirt, grain. "We had a lot of hogs and cattle."

"Where you from?" he asks.

Too many questions, I think. What does it matter? "Texas. Been working as an underwater welder on some of the cargo ships down there."

"Now that's an interesting occupation," says the man. "What makes you want to leave something like that?"

"Way too dangerous for me. There was an explosion a couple of months ago, killed two of the guys. I figured I'd get out while I could."

"Get while the getting's good, huh? Well, why don't we take a walk through some of the barns? I'll show you around the place."

Sam says that he likes the fact that I know how to weld, tells me that a good welder always has a place on the farm. Then he asks me if I'm married; I tell him no. Divorced. When he asks me if I have any kids, I tell him I have a son, but that I don't see him much. It turns out that Sam is single, a widower. Wife died of cancer seven years back. He's got a son who's eleven, a couple of hands around the place that I'd have to keep in line. Tells me they're good workers, but they need leadership.

Inside the first barn it's warm and the smell of hogs and sawdust permeates the air. The floors are impeccably clean and we move down a slatted walkway, pens on either side. In each pen there is a white sow with piglets. Looks to be four dozen pens.

"This here's the farrowing barn," he says. "This is a farrow-to-finish operation. We raise them from the time they're born, keep them up to about two hundred and twenty pounds, then we get them out of here."

"That's a lot of pork."

"Well, we run about four hundred head a month to market."

We stop at a corner pen, look at the little white products rooting around in the sawdust. A metal self-feeder runs along one side of the pen, surrounded by a red cage.

"Creep feeder," says the man. "Had to install these in every pen. We were losing too many babies. Say, you know the gestation for hogs?"

"Something like three months," I tell him.

He nods his head, lights a Camel.

"Three months, three weeks, three days, and sometimes three hours," he says. "They're pretty predictable."

"Why you raise Yorks?" I ask.

"The mother breed," he tells me. "We average about fifteen babies a litter. We used to run Durocs, but you only get about eight with them."

We walk to the far end of the barn, where a couple of Mexicans are bottle feeding runts. Sam introduces me and I nod hello, grinning at the pink little piglets which, in six months' time, will grow to be heavier than the men now holding them.

"You always take on the runts like that?"

"We don't get many runts," says Sam. "When we do, we get them started and give them to the 4-H kids."

We leave the farrowing barn, move into a larger building, vent fans humming in the loft, hog stench stronger. Fluorescent lights in the ceiling shine down on the concrete walkways and pens full of adult hogs. "This is the finishing barn," he says. "We put them in here at about one-forty, finish them off and get them out."

Sam's takes a call on his cell phone and after a "yeah, yeah, all righty then" he flips it shut.

"Well, Bo, what do you think?"

"Looks like you've got a first-class operation here. I'll do my best to make you a good hand."

"Job's yours if you want it. You can start tomorrow. Pay is ten an hour to start, and after six months we'll look at putting you on salary."

"Sounds good to me."

"That includes the little house out back. That'd be all yours."

"I appreciate it, Sam," I say, shaking his hand.

"Now we don't allow no drinking, no dope, anything like that."

"I'm clean," I say. He looks down at my jeans, tennis shoes.

"You'd better get yourself some boots and gloves. They've got them up at the hardware store."

"I'll do it. See you in the morning."

"One more thing," he says. He places his hands in his back pockets, looks me in the eye. "I'll need to get some references from you, if you have any."

My heart jumps up in my throat, mouth goes dry. I was afraid of this. The production factory upstairs is churning, but the output is nil. I say the first thing that comes to mind.

"Well, the guy I was working for in Texas is one of them that went down in that explosion. I can give you the number, maybe someone else can talk to you."

"That'll be fine."

That afternoon I pull into a drive-in and order a steak sandwich and onion rings, which I eat in my car. I feel safe here in the car, safe from curious eyes, unexpected questions. Though I've done my time, I can't shake this feeling of paranoia. Whenever I interact with another person, I catch myself wondering what they're thinking about me, whether they suspect that I'm an ex-convict. It's hard to look people in the eye, but somehow I managed to do it with Sam. Does he suspect that I've just got out of the pen?

Does he think I'm lying about my background? Should I just shove off to another town, another job where the boss doesn't ask so many questions?

As for my references, I have none, at least none that I could give for a job. Sam's bound to find out. But my intentions are honorable and I know I can make him a good hand. So I decide to go over to the hardware store and buy boots, gloves, jeans and a set of wire cutters. But if Sam checks my references I'm screwed. Won't need any of it. So I make it a point to keep the receipt.

Next morning I show up at the barns bright and early. The Mexicans are already there and I introduce myself again, tell them I'm the new manager. One goes by Tug, the other tells me his name is Hector. They both seem to know what they're doing because they're always busy and don't ask many questions.

A little while later Sam appears, walks me around and shows me the ins and outs of the place, gives me the keys to the trucks, tractors, shows me where the tools are kept. He also shows me where the medicine cabinet is because you're always needing bandages and antibiotic ointments around the farm. I notice a Folgers coffee can inside the cabinet, faded and scratched from age, with a thin hole in the lid.

Sam gives me his cell-phone number and tells me to give him a call if I need anything or if I have any questions. I fully expect him to hit me up about the number I'd given him for the reference, but he doesn't mention it. Then he tells me he's got business in town, drives off in his pickup.

Later, I get Tug and Hector to help me out clipping needle teeth. Hector distracts the three-hundred pound sow while Tug grabs a squealing piglet, holds it while I clip the

teeth. We move away from the infuriated sow while we do this. She expresses her anger by head-butting the steel panel, grunting – *roaring*, practically – biting the bars. When we finish with one we return the pig to its mother while Hector distracts and Tug snatches another. We go from one pen to the next. It takes nearly six hours to get through them all. On the last litter, the sow rams the fence panel where Hector is perched, knocking him to the floor. Luckily, he falls onto the walkway, outside the pen.

A little later, a young boy walks into the barn, baseball cap turned backwards on his head. He walks up, tells me his name's Jeff, that if I need anything just to let him know.

"I know where my old man keeps the keys to the diesel, petty cash and all that," he says. "You need anything just let me know. You need some help right now?" he asks.

"No, we're just flushing the pens. I appreciate it," I say. Jeff seems very eager to pitch in and work, which amazes me. I expected him to be a little cocky, distant, if I ever saw him at all. Then I notice the scar on his arm. It's pink and smooth, runs from wrist to elbow. I guess that it's an old wound, but it's healed well. I know a little bit about scars, wounds. Saw a lot of them in the pen.

"Well, if you need anything just let me know. I'm going to run this place some day," he says. "So I need the experience."

"Thanks for the offer, buddy."

Tug must have caught me noticing Jeff's scar because after the boy leaves he tells me how it happened. Turns out, Jeff got his arm caught in one of the fence panels over in the boar pen. "Ripped it open before he could get it out," he says.

I go back to flushing the pens and when I reach the end of one of the aisles, I look up and notice the medicine cabinet on the wall. Seeing it, I am reminded of the coffee can inside, so I go over and check it out. I peel off the plastic lid to find the can full of money. This must be petty cash, I think to myself, my heartbeat kicking up a notch or two. Must be $500 in here, anyway. I replace the lid, return the can to the cabinet and get back to hosing down the pens, thinking that $500 is a lot of money.

One morning shortly after I hire on Sam comes into the barn, asks how I'm getting along. Each time I see the man I expect him to bring up the reference. But he never does, which tells me he either called, got a wrong number and doesn't care, or he hasn't called at all. I figure the odds aren't in my favor, and every time I think about this it bothers me more because I'm starting to like this place. We're out here in the country, just Sam and me, and Hector and Tug. Nobody asks questions, nobody messes with us.

I mention Jeff coming out to introduce himself.

"I don't mind him coming out here," says Sam. He jams a cigarette between his lips, lights up. He's wearing a straw cowboy hat this morning, faded Wranglers with razor-blade creases burned white. "But he's not to lend a hand in any way. I don't want him messing around out here and getting hisself hurt again. You heard about what happened with the boar?"

I nod. "The guys told me."

"Well, I worry about his safety out here. These hogs are big and strong, and they can do a lot of damage if you're not paying attention. And when they have a litter, look

out. Momma hogs are the worst. But you know all that," he says, waving a smoke trail with his hand.

"I'll keep him out of trouble," I say.

"Well, since his momma's been gone, I have to really look after him. I mean, he's big enough to look after hisself, but I've kinda gotta be his momma too. You know." He takes a long drag, exhales, observes the hogs. "I want that boy to go to college some day. Want him to have something more than this," he says. "It'd be too easy for him to fall into this and never know anything else."

My mind races back two decades and I remember Lenny showing me how to slide that library card into the back door of that house, sliding it in and pushing, the lock sliding aside and the door swinging open. No signs of forced entry, he had said. They probably won't even know they've been hit for a few days. That's how you cover your tracks, he told me. And he was right. For a long time this worked. It worked so well I fell into that rut and never found anything else.

"I'll keep an eye out for him, Sam," I say, partly to settle his nerves, partly to get him to clear out so that I can get some work done. After another cigarette, he leaves.

"You can turn it up a little now," I yell to Hector. He looks at me; I give him the thumbs up. Then he walks over to the little transistor radio hanging from baling wire on the barn wall, turns up the volume and sounds of accordions, guitars and singing mariachis fill the air. It is happy music and even though I can't understand the lyrics, I like it. Each day I'm able to put my past a little farther behind me, and this makes me feel like I'm moving on with my life. I thought the other day about calling my probation officer, but he'd probably throw a fit that I'm living out of state. Besides, I'm working

now, leading an honorable life, staying out of trouble. Just keep my nose clean for the next year and I'm home free, I tell myself.

As the days and weeks roll by, the thought of the reference check goes from a sharp, nagging pain in my side to something like a name that I can't remember. Each week I figure that Sam'll walk up to me, tell me I gave him the wrong number, ask for another. But he doesn't. I attribute this, in part, to the job I'm doing around the place. First and foremost, there haven't been any accidents with the crew. Also, we haven't lost any hogs, and Hector and Tug seem to be getting along all right. They work hard and the farm is running smoothly. Every Friday I take a trailer full of finished hogs to market, bring back the ticket, deposit a hundred dollars in the coffee can and close up shop for the night. We're up to $733 in petty cash right now and because the balance is growing every week, I have taken it upon myself to check the can twice every day just to make sure none of the bills grow legs and walk off. It's all there, and it's amazing to me how it adds up so quickly. In fact, it has inspired me to begin saving.

Each week, I save half my paycheck, buy a money order with the other half and mail it to my son in Texas. I got his mother's address off the Internet. The first time I mailed him some money I included a note saying I was sorry for what I'd done, that I knew this wouldn't make up for it, but that I hoped it would help somehow. Even though I don't hear from him, I feel like it's the right thing to do. Maybe some day he'll forgive me.

At night I sit around the little house they've given me. Not much to do, so I take a shower, pop a frozen dinner in the microwave, eat and read. I do a lot of reading. On

those occasions when I go into town to eat, I pull into a drive-in and eat in my car. Don't much care to sit in a café and eat by myself. I'm too paranoid. Prison does that to you. The thought of it, the memories and images follow you around always, like some vagrant cloud looking to dump on you. But it is getting better, every day, and the more I think about it, the harder I work. This helps.

One evening I'm sitting around the house, reading, and there's a knock at the door. It's Jeff. He walks in wearing shorts, a baggy T-shirt and a pair of old boots, looks like he's just in from safari.

"What's going on?"

"I was going to see if you might want to go fishing down at the creek," he says. "My friend Robbie was supposed to go but his old man made him cut the grass."

"Sure," I say. "What do you fish for?"

"Catfish, mostly. There's some bass down there, but mostly catfish."

"I don't have a pole. You have one I could use?"

"Oh, you won't need a pole. We're noodling," he says.

"Noodling?"

"Yeah, with your hands," he says. He grins, adjusts his cap. Jeff is brimming with confidence. It's hard to believe he's only eleven. "You ever done it?"

"No, I've always used a pole to catch my fish."

"It's a blast," he says. "All you need's a pair of gloves. Robbie doesn't even use them."

"Well let me get my gloves, then. I'm not that tough."

We walk down to the creek, skirting the edge of a large cornfield, stalks like green minutemen standing in formation. Jeff carries a rope and a pair of gloves. He grows more and more excited the closer we get to the creek. It's hot and humid. Grasshoppers fly out in front of our feet like rocks we've kicked.

When we reach the creek we walk the sandy bank downstream to a small bridge. There are six concrete pillars supporting the bridge; the middle two rise up from the water.

"See those pillars?" says Jeff. "Fish oughtta be laying right around there. It's a little deeper there."

"How deep?" I ask, remembering Sam's concern about Jeff's safety. For a moment I consider saying something, wondering whether I should stop him. But then the realization hits me that I am the adult and I am present. Jeff isn't unsupervised; I'm here with him and I'm not going to let anything happen to him.

"Oh, it shouldn't be more than shoulder-deep for you."

"Well, how we going to grab the fish?"

"I'll have to go under and do it," he says. "Unless you want to go first."

"No, I guess I'll just watch this one. You swim okay, I guess."

"Me? I'm a good swimmer."

"Well, what does your dad say about you doing this?"

"He doesn't say anything, but he doesn't always know. I mean, he wouldn't care. He knows I know what I'm doing."

We move into the water. Jeff puts on the gloves and wraps one end of the rope around his right hand, like a bull rider fighting the butterflies in his stomach before the big moment. He puts the other end between his teeth.

"Okay, quiet now," he says. "Move real easy."

We close in on the pillars, water rings radiating out from our knees, then our waists as we move into deeper water. About five feet from the structures the sandy creek bottom falls off. I move to the edge, feeling with my feet, watching Jeff's torso shrink into shoulders, then a head. On his face there is a look of stern concentration, sensing. With only his head visible on the surface, the rope in his mouth, he reminds me of a retriever.

"They're here," he says, spitting out the rope.

"How do you know?"

"I can feel them with my feet. Feels like there's a big one down there, too."

"What are you going to do?" I ask.

"I'm going under, find one and slip this rope through its gill."

"No kidding? They let you do that?"

"These are momma catfish, flatheads. They're on the nest right now, in these logs, and they'll bite you when get your hands down there. That's how they protect their nests, and that's why summer is the best time of year to noodle."

The butterflies hatch in my stomach and I'm only watching. I feel like I should do something to help him out, but he seems to know exactly what he's doing. Besides, what can happen?

Jeff takes a big breath, grabs the loose rope and disappears beneath the muddy surface. With my feet I feel the bottom sloping off toward the pillar. Must be five or six feet deep, I think.

After thirty seconds or so Jeff shoots up out of the water like a deployed torpedo, chest heaving, mouth open wide. He wipes his eyes.

"What happened?"

"There's a good one down there, but it closed its mouth when I tried to put the rope through," he says, heaving. He holds up his glove. "Bit down on my hand."

"Well, what now?" I ask.

He holds up a hand, inhales deeply, disappears again. Seconds later he appears, spitting carbon dioxide, sucking oxygen.

"No go," he says. "They've moved off."

"You want to try that other pillar?" I ask.

He looks, shakes his head, moves toward the bank.

"No, let's try a different place. There's this logjam just downstream. It usually has a good fish or two."

A few minutes later we come to a bend in the creek, lazy current pushing around the far side, carving the bank, before disappearing around the bend. The water on the inside of the bend is shallow, the sandy bottom sloping off to the deeper stuff on the far side. On one end of the bend is a pile of logs, driftwood and brush, having been deposited by high water. We approach the pile from the shallow side.

"All right," says Jeff. "This is what we'll have to do. We'll find a good log and I'll need you to plug up one end while I reach in and grab the fish."

"You're going to reach your hand into the log?"

"Yeah. I do it all the time," he says. "We might find a big fish here, 'cause this is where the females come to lay their eggs, in these logs."

Jeff winds the rope around his right hand, bites the other with his teeth. As we approach the logs, the smell of dead fish becomes very strong. Jeff works his way around the logs, head just above water, reaching, feeling.

"Okay, found one," he says.

"Is it a big one?"

"A log, not a fish. It's good and hollow, so it should have one inside."

"Tell me what to do," I say, moving in close.

"Got your gloves on?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, let's find the other end."

Jeff tells me to stuff my fists into the hole in order to prevent the catfish from escaping once he reaches inside. We're all but inside the log pile, muddy water flowing past, sand and rotted wood on the creek bottom. The area feels fishy. My hands are shaking, my breathing quick and shallow. Should I say something to Jeff? Should I stop him from noodling? I keep telling myself he knows what he's doing. And he seems to.

Jeff takes the rope from his mouth, reaches into the log. It's only inside for a second.

"Ouch!" he shouts. He pulls his arm from the hole like it's been shot out. "Shit!"

"What happened?" I ask, yanking my hands free of the log. About that time a long black shape appears just beneath the surface, slicing back into the logs where it disappears, causing my stomach to boil.

"Snake!" he says, holding his hand up, clenching his wrist. He stumbles out of the water.

"Shit! Let me see." Just above his wrist are two fang marks the size of pinheads, blood oozing out. I pull out my pocketknife. "This is going to hurt." I make two slits across the fang marks, hold his wrist up to my mouth and suck, spit, repeat.

Not long after I went to prison a couple of inmates tried to escape by threatening one of the guards with a copperhead snake. As it turned out, the snake bit the inmate who was handling it and I watched as one of the guards used his knife to score the fang marks and then suck out the venom. It worked and the inmate survived, though I never quite understood why the guard made any attempt to help the convict after what he'd done.

"Clamp down on your arm right here," I tell him. Again I suck blood, feeling the warmth against my tongue. "Come on, Jeff. We've got to get you to the doctor. Was it a moccasin?"

He nods, holding his arm. "I think so."

I grab his other arm and we climb the bank, walk back to the farm. Jeff wants to run.

"Take it easy, buddy," I tell him. "Just calm down and you'll be all right."

"Damn it hurts," he says, jaw clenched, sweat beading on his forehead.

We reach the farm and climb into one of the trucks. I don't see Sam's truck, so I punch the gas and we take off for town. On the way in I look over and notice that his wrist is swelling. Jeff leans out the window, vomits.

"Snake bite," I tell the lady in the ER. "I think it was a cottonmouth." She gives me a clipboard with some papers to fill out. A nurse takes Jeff and they disappear down the hallway. "His dad will fill these out when he gets here. You got a phone I can use?"

I hesitate to call, only because I know Sam's going to blow his top. It's going to cost me my job, I'm sure. But Sam needs to know that his son is hurt.

I call him and he arrives thirty minutes later, walking right over to his son. He doesn't look at me.

"How are you, Sport?" he asks. "You got to hang in there. I know it hurts, but you'll be all right."

Then he looks over at me. "Was it a moccasin?" he says.

"I think so." I feel ridiculous. He hired me to look after his operation and I can't even keep his son out of trouble. And looking at Jeff, I am reminded that this isn't the first time I've let a child down. Any minute I expect he'll tell me to hit the road. I don't know where I'll go or what I'll do. I guess I'll be back in the car driving until I fall into something else. Things have been going so well; I can't believe they're in jeopardy all of a sudden.

Sam shakes his head. "How long ago?"

"About forty minutes."

He takes out his smokes, shakes out a Camel, jams it between his lips.

"Sir, you can't smoke in here," says the nurse.

"Oh, sorry," he says. He removes the cigarette, mumbles something, takes a seat. "I'll stay with him now. You can go ahead and go."

Sam is uneasy, fidgety. I wonder if he's that addicted to nicotine. Jeff is lying on the bed, shivering, his face pale and distant. I feel horrible and now I can't stop thinking about my own son, Adam.

"Hang in there, buddy," I tell him. "You'll be all right."

I leave the ER, follow the signs through the hospital to the cafeteria. There I buy a cup of coffee and walk to a quiet waiting area I had passed on the way. It's my fault he's in here, I tell myself. My fault. I didn't stop him from getting into the creek. I didn't look after him like Sam asked me to. For a few minutes, I consider walking back to the ER and resigning. But I decide to stick it out and see what happens. I was never one for confrontations, anyway.

The following Friday I'm spraying down the finishing barn, the water hose in my hands reminding me of the snake that I can't seem to get out of my mind. The doctor fixed Jeff up and he's walking around now like nothing ever happened. Kids are resilient like that.

Sam comes in to give me my check as usual, then he lights a Camel and says, "Say, did I ever tell you I served in the Marines, in Vietnam?"

"No, I don't think so."

"You remind me of this old boy I served with, name was Ramsey and he was from California. He was my squad leader and boy he was just shit-hot. Knew everything

about everything, taught us everything we needed to know, looked after us like a father. He went on leave one time and didn't come back for a while. When he returned, why, the colonel was ready to bust him down to private, but the platoon sergeant stood up for him and said he was his best Marine, and asked the colonel to spare him. He did and he never lost a stripe."

I smile and shake my head, wondering why Sam is telling me this story.

"It wasn't just because of his technical knowledge. It was his sincerity that saved him. He loved being a Marine and he gave his heart to his job. When your heart's in the right place, you can overlook a lot. I can tell you enjoy working out here and I sure appreciate what you did for Jeff. He might not have made it if you hadn't been here to get him to the doc."

"Well, I didn't do much. But I'm sure glad he's all right."

"Thanks again, Bo," he says, patting my shoulder on the way out of the barn. After he leaves I open the envelope to find an extra week's pay. Note inside says he appreciates what I did, thanks me for looking after Jeff.

A couple of weeks after the snakebite incident, I ask Sam for three days off, tell him I want to head down to the Gulf and do some fishing. "Redfish," I say. "Tomorrow's the full moon and they'll get a big tide for the next couple of days. Fishing should be great."

"Bring us back some fresh fish to eat," he says.

Before leaving, I go back into my room and remove $1,347 from one of the jars where I keep my money, stuff it into a large, padded envelope, seal it shut. I can't

remember the address, but I don't need it anyway. I'm going to make an in-person delivery that I hope will help clear my conscience.

The envelope stays on the front passenger seat the entire day, all the way down to the Mississippi Gulf Coast. I arrive in Biloxi and drive immediately to the neighborhood, to the big house which is shaded by tall pines and the live oaks. I park my car in the street, in front of the house, and pick up the envelope.

Should I just leave it on the porch? I ask myself. Or should I ring the doorbell? Would they be home anyway?

I glance around, across the street, check my rearview mirror, wondering if I'm being watched. Just do it, I tell myself. Get it over with and you'll feel better.

A few minutes later I am still in the car, still debating on what to do, when I hear a car coming up behind me. Glancing into the rearview mirror, I spot a police cruiser, which, to my surprise, pulls in behind me, its lights flashing. Shit! I say. What the hell is this?

My heart has kicked into gear and is now racing, my breathing shallow and quick. My stomach has that light, jittery feeling I used to get before I would break into a house. I haven't felt it in a while now, but it's unmistakable. Through the mirror, I watch the officer get out of the car and approach me.

"Afternoon, sir. Can you please state your business here?"

What can I say? I look down at the envelope in my hand, hold it up to show the officer. "I was just going to make a delivery."

At this, the officer steps back from the car door, places his right hand on his sidearm. Then he draws the weapon out of the holster, points it my way. "Sir, please step out of the car, slowly, and place the envelope on the ground."

I can't believe what is happening. Why me? Why now? I wasn't doing anything wrong.

Perhaps it is being in such close proximity to law enforcement – the police officer, the district attorney, whose house I am parked in front of, and to which I was about to make a delivery – but I am suddenly very aware of my parole officer, whom I have avoided contacting as I was directed to do. I haven't thought about him in months. I thought I could just keep my nose clean for a year and then fade into obscurity, but now that seems like such a stupid idea.

I'm still face down on the ground, hands cuffed behind my back, when I hear and then see a second police cruiser speeding up to our position. But instead of thinking about going back to prison, all I can think about is how I've let Sam down and how he's going to wonder what happened to me when I don't show up for work next Monday. I'm going to let him down. But for some reason the thought of having sent money to my son in Texas makes me feel better. At least I've tried. And as for the money in the coffee can, inside the medicine cabinet back at the farm? It's all there, Sam. I didn't let you down. You'll see.

HEAT

Sharks were said to have infested the waters of the bays and inlets near the Persian Gulf port city of Al-Jubail, where we were temporarily stationed, awaiting orders to move up into the action in Kuwait. As members of the coalition force attempting to oust Iraq from its tiny neighbor to the south, Marines of the Third Battalion, Tenth Marine Regiment, Second Marine Division, were forbidden from dipping a toe into the Gulf's blue waters. But since the temperatures consistently reached 120 degrees during the day, dropping to only 95 at night, something had to give.

We spent several weeks at Al-Jubail during Operation Desert Shield, gearing up for the offensive that would soon liberate Kuwait. And with preparations nearly complete, we had a lot of free time on our hands. During the heat of the day, which lasted from mid-morning until just before dark, we took refuge inside our tents, in the shade, where we cleaned our weapons, played cards and wrote letters home.

One hot afternoon I sat on my cot, cleaning my rifle and keeping tabs on the card game taking place across the hooch. You could always tell who had the best hand even if you knew nothing about cards. The loudest "Bite me!" always took the pot. I hadn't the stomach to lose money gambling. I had another year left on my tour and my plan was to leave the service once my enlistment was up. Unlike a lot of the other guys, I wasn't a lifer. The military was only temporary for me. It was a means to an end – that end being money for college. Getting caught gambling meant getting busted down a rank, which meant less money in my wallet. In my mind, gambling wasn't worth the risk. I was going to need a lot of money, and an honorable discharge, to attend the University of Texas.

On this afternoon my machine gunner, Lance Corporal Ramsey, walked into the hooch, dripping wet. His camouflage fatigues were glued to his lean body, and his face and shaved head glistened like he had just run a 10K. Ramsey was a comical looking guy, in part, because of the pronounced Adam's apple that protruded from his neck. I could see it jiggling now as he swallowed.

"Well, I knew it would happen sooner or later," I announced. The spade game's four participants looked up, silently regarded Ramsey and then returned to the matter at hand.

"What's the big deal?" asked Ramsey, in his Yankee accent. Ramsey was tall, strong and stubborn, and the best man in my squad. But I could have guessed that he would be the first to test the no-swimming orders. He was so damn hard-headed that he reminded me of myself.

I shook my head, went back to my rifle.

"There's no sharks out there," he said, confidently, like he was a marine biologist.

"You get caught and the sharks are the least of your problem, man," I said.

"I'll take my chances," said Ramsey, sitting on his cot and unlacing his boots. "You know, it's just too damn hot."

"Bite me!" came a voice from the card game. I looked over and the losing team was shaking their heads.

"How much did you take them for this time, Johnny?" asked Ramsey from across the hooch.

"Twenty dollars. You want in?"

"Come on Thompson. You want to win some money?" asked Ramsey, evil grin fixed on his face.

"I don't have money for cards. Can't stand to lose anything, anyway," I said, which was true. Though we were earning tax-free money, and receiving hazardous duty pay on top of that, I had an allotment set up that transferred nearly all of my paycheck to my savings account back home in Texas.

"Oh, come on. It's only money."

I hesitated, wiping my rifle's barrel. He's right, I thought. It's only money. And I'm saving most of my paycheck anyway. Besides, spades seemed like a harmless game. It's not like they were playing poker. And if I had to have a teammate, it may as well be Ramsey. He was as shifty as they came.

But, still I hesitated. If the company commander walked into the hooch and saw us playing cards for money, we'd all go up the river. And being the senior Marine present, I'd get hit the hardest. I'd probably lose a stripe and that amounted to a few hundred dollars a paycheck.

But I was freed from having to disappoint Ramsey because just then the company runner came into the hooch.

"Thompson, the captain wants to see you."

I looked up from my rifle, nodded, and the runner disappeared.

"Well, looks like I'm out of this one," I said, standing and slinging my newly-polished rifle over my shoulder. Walking out of the hooch, into the heavy, early-afternoon sunlight, I heard Ramsey mumbling.

"Fuck it," he said. "It's chow time anyway."

"At ease," said Captain Jeffrey Walker. I relaxed my stance, standing at parade rest inside the makeshift company office with cracked tile floors, dusty plaster walls. During time of peace, this office belonged to the Saudi dockmaster who supervised operations here at the port. Now, most of the commercial ships were gone and in their

place were Navy cruisers and battleships, and dozens of small rubber Zodiac boats from which the Coast Guard patrolled the harbor.

Walker was a stocky middle-aged man with a flat-top haircut. Had he been a civilian, his hair would have been brown, probably, but the military had aged him prematurely and as a result he looked at least fifty, though he was probably only forty. His closely cropped hair was silver, and his square jaw and deeply set eyes told everyone he meant business.

"Corporal Thompson, I have received word that you are my only man who hasn't yet had his anthrax vaccination," he said. "Is this true?"

He rested his tanned, hairy arms on his desk and on his right forearm I noticed a tattoo of a bulldog. The shiny silver bars on his collar glinting in the fluorescent light, he glared at me with a face that bore no discernible expression. I had seen that face once before.

At the ceremony in which I was promoted to corporal, six months earlier, Captain Walker had been the one who pinned my rank on me. After the gunny had read the promotion warrant, Captain Walker removed my old lance corporal chevrons and pinned corporal onto my collar. Only he didn't replace the caps on the prongs on back of the metal chevrons. With these prongs poking into my shoulders, uncovered, he "pinned" my rank on me by coming down hard on the chevrons with each of his hands. This drove the sharp prongs into my shoulders maybe a half inch. I still had marks – twin snake bites – on my shoulders from that day and I recalled how afterwards he looked at me with that blank face before shaking my hand and congratulating me, as if to see if I was going

to wince or grimace and thus lose my Marine composure. I did not, and I wasn't going to now.

"Yes sir," I said.

"Corporal Thompson, dare I ask why you haven't had the shot? This was a direct order from the battalion commander. Why haven't you had the shot?"

My heart was skipping around and I worried that my response would sound labored, making me appear weak. Walker's reputation as a hard-ass was well founded and he routinely busted Marines for the most trivial infractions, making them work extra hours, run farther, exercise harder, longer. He was reputed to have once thrown a trash can – what we Marines so colorfully referred to as a "shit can" – across the office after a private had failed to inform him of a colonel waiting to see him. I knew there was no excuse good enough for him, so I offered the first thing that came to mind.

"Sir, I'm just afraid of the side effects," I said, which was the truth. The rumor was that the anthrax vaccination had been tested only on cattle, never on humans. I didn't like the thought of being used as a lab rat. Besides, what if I got cancer or some other crazy disease? I had a lot yet to do with my life, and getting through this war, out of the service and into civilian life with all my faculties was my first priority. The anthrax vaccine felt like a risk I couldn't afford to take.

Walker did not reply. It was so quiet inside the office that I wondered if he could hear my heart pounding in protest. Any second now, I expected the shit can to come flying at me.

I thought I could see the blood vessels pulsing beneath the thin skin on his temples when the captain said, "The side effects. What goddamned side effects?"

"Sir..."

"There are no goddamned side effects! You heard the corpsman in the briefing the other day! There have been absolutely no side effects, nor any adverse reactions to this drug! There are no fucking side effects!" he said, pounding his fist on his desk.

"Yes sir."

"Yes sir, what?"

"Yes sir, there have been no side effects reported."

I knew the Iraqi army had a history of using biological and chemical weapons against its enemies. I also knew they had a reason to use them now, as we were positioning ourselves to root them out of Kuwait. But I didn't think they would because doing so would change the rules of the game called war. We wouldn't just run them out of Kuwait. If they used chemical weapons against us, the American military would pound their asses into oblivion and blow them off the map. Iraq may have used them against its own people, and against Iran, but they had too much fear and respect for the United States to use them against us. This was a gamble I was willing to take.

"Then why the hell haven't you had your shot, Marine?"

"Sir, I was just worried."

"Worried? You are a Marine. You do not worry! You do as you are ordered!" he yelled, from his seat. "Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Now get the hell out of my office, get on your horse and get on over to the corpsman's tent and get your shot!"

"Yes sir," I said, moving to attention.

"Dismissed," he said, finally toning his voice down.

I did an about face and walked out of the office.

The corpsman wasn't in when I stopped at his hooch. A clerk sitting behind a small field typewriter informed me that he was at chow.

"When will he be back?" I asked.

"Oh, he won't be back until late tonight, if then. He's going up north this afternoon," he said. "Might not be back until tomorrow."

I thanked the clerk and left. What are the chances of that? I wondered. All I knew was that I would be on Walker's shit list until I had my shot, so I decided to avoid him as best I could.

In the meantime, I walked to the chow tent and found Ramsey.

"You got any ass left?" he asked, his mouth full.

"Barely."

"What did he want?"

"Said someone told him some of my guys have been swimming in the Gulf," I said, opening my carton of mango milk. Though I was only twenty-four, and only two years older than Ramsey, I felt like his father just then.

He had a strained look on his face and I noticed the smooth skin on his forehead was wrinkled.

"Did he mention my name?"

"Well, have you been swimming in the Gulf?"

"Don't fuck around," he said. "Am I going to have to go see the man?"

I grinned, thinking how fun it was to play big brother and fuck with someone else.

"No, he didn't mention any names. He just told me to keep my guys out of the water. Said the place is full of sharks."

"Good," he said. "I was sweating bullets for a second."

"You're going to be eating them if he catches you out there."

"It's so fucking hot. Hell, even the showers are hot. I had to do something," he said.

"Well, next time find some shade or something."

We ate without speaking for several minutes as I listened to the laughing and joking taking place at adjoining tables. The food wasn't bad at all and as a result the morale was high among the troops. Every day we had three hot meals there in the chow tent, but it was the circumstances of being out in the desert, waiting to move north, waiting for something to happen, that really got to me. I wanted the war to end so we could all go home, but short of this, I wanted some action and so did my guys. We hated sitting around waiting and there was only so much exercising, so much rifle cleaning we could do. Like a lot of others, I felt confident in the training I had received during my three years in the Corps. I was ready to use some of it so that we could get the war over with and get the hell out of there.

"I guess you didn't get in on that card game," I said.

Ramsey shook his head. "You know, we should though."

"Why?"

"Man, we can make some money. I'm great at spades."

"I've never played. I don't know much about cards."

"You need to take a chance. Come on, trust me. We can make some easy money. Hell, we can kick anybody's ass in spades."

"Well, we can lose a lot of money, too. You know about that. And we get caught, we're screwed."

"Don't worry about that. Just leave it to me," he said.

"Leave it up to you? Yeah, right."

"Oh, fuck off," he said.

That evening, I walked into my hooch to find the spades game in full swing. Two others, Luttrell and Woodfin, were sitting on the edges of their cots, straining to write letters in the dim light. Outside, the sun was nearly down and it was giving off that soft glowing light that lasts only for a few fleeting moments before darkness arrives. It was still very hot and after baking all day in the sun, the tent's thick canvas walls and roof had that oily diesel smell that you find in nearly all military gear.

"Hey Johnny," I said. "You seen Ramsey?"

He shook his head.

"Shit, that ain't nothing. Bite me!" he said, slamming a pile of cards down on the table. "Nice doing business with you." Then, looking up at me, Johnny said, "You and Ramsey want in?"

"Not me. Ramsey might. He's supposed to be here."

"He's probably swimming again," said Luttrell, looking up from his letter.

"That sonofabitch better not be," I said, furious at the possibility.

"Did I tell you I saw a shark out there?" he said. "Big ass tiger shark, I think. Cruising the shoreline. Made me queasy just seeing it. That motherfucker was a good twelve feet, maybe more."

"I guess I'd better go find him," I said. "I'm not going down for him."

I slung my rifle over my right shoulder and left the tent, walking north, past the guard shack at the front gate, away from camp and down the road that led to the docks. Palm trees lined either side of the road and up ahead in the waning light I could see a column of Abrams tanks headed to the maintenance compound just up the road. Directly ahead, in front of the Royal British Marines' camp, I saw a tall, lanky figure conversing with the guard. The Brits were always wanting to swap gear with us and this is something else we had been warned against doing. But that hadn't stopped Ramsey, who had an incredulous look on his face as I approached him.

"I'm going to kick your ass," I said, moving towards him. His fatigues were wet and I could smell the saltwater they had absorbed. The Royal Marine guard started to say something but all I heard was "Hey, Mate."

Then the sirens went off.

I did an about face, completely forgetting my business with Ramsey, and sprinted back down the road to the nearest bunker, not far from camp. I didn't notice Ramsey again until after I dove behind the sandbag wall.

"Got your gas mask?" I asked, my heart thudding, not from the exertion of the run, but from the sudden excitement, the sheer terror those sirens induced in me. They were just like the ones back home that erupted each tornado season.

"Oh shit!" he said. " It's in the hooch."

"You couldn't take it swimming, huh?"

Just then, two explosions sounding in quick succession shook the ground. I could feel the displaced air as the concussive sounds rattled my teeth and caused my ears to ring. I knew trouble was heading our way. The Army hadn't placed the battery of Patriot missiles there for nothing and they didn't deploy these weapons unless radar picked up a SCUD missile heading in our direction.

"Shit!" he yelled. "I don't have my gas mask!" He stood and made for the sandbag wall. Grabbing his wet shirt, I yanked him back down on the ground.

"Here. Put it on," I said, giving him my gas mask.

"No man, it's yours. I can't take it." The whites of his eyes were showing and his face was dripping with sweat as he looked up over the sandbag wall.

"Just put it on."

"You might need it. You keep it."

"All right, but if we get hit, you're going to put it on," I said.

The thought of the anthrax vaccination came to me and for several minutes all I could do was wonder why I hadn't gotten mine. The side effects, I thought. Fuck the side effects. This is a side effect!

I prayed and repented for having not received my anthrax shot. At times like this, there was nothing you could do but sit tight and wait, hope one of the Patriots took out the incoming missile, or that it missed you somehow. We had grown used to the sirens and the missiles, which the Iraqis fired indiscriminately nearly every night. These missiles were notoriously inaccurate, but they were very effective in inciting terror. You never knew where they would hit. But experiencing this so early in the evening was

something entirely different. It seemed more personal, more sinister. I knew there were supply ships in port that day, and they were docked a few hundred yards from where Ramsey and I were taking cover in the bunker.

A moment later I heard an explosion and saw the sudden flash in the darkening sky to the east. Even from this distance, the force of the explosion radiated through my body, shaking the ground like thunder and I felt a wave of heat blow across my face. The air smelled like fumes and exhaust from a welding torch.

Unlike those other times when the Patriots were deployed, when we expected to hear or see fireworks in the sky, I knew instantly that something had gone wrong. This explosion had occurred on ground level.

Was this it? I wondered. There was no turning back, nothing I could do, for I was the captain now, commanding a two-man ship.

I dared to peek over the sandbag wall, wondering if the SCUD had delivered some kind of chemical agent, wondering if death was dispersing into the air around us. The siren continued its wailing, but I couldn't hear any instructions being given over the loudspeaker, so I figured we were safe for now. Had I been alone, I may have donned my gas mask just to be safe, but since there were two of us and only one mask, I was afraid Ramsey would have panicked. Besides, he was my responsibility and I took the issue of his safety, like that of all my guys, personally.

With the blackout rule in effect and being unable to use lights at night, camp was very dark. All I could see was a long line of tents around us, the lower half of which was concealed by the walls of sandbags. The glowing illumination to the east was becoming

more and more pronounced as the evil flames were leaping up into the sky above our camp.

"Come on," I said, slinging my rifle over my shoulder. "Grab your weapon."

We raced down the main corridor through camp, tents and sandbag walls on either side of us. As we neared the fire, the feeling of heat on my face and arms intensified. Smoke filled my nose and lungs, and I began coughing as my eyes watered and burned.

It was a massive fire and very hot, even from a distance. Everywhere, there were Marines and sailors running to and fro, carrying buckets of water and stretching hoses. Men were yelling and in the background you could hear the roar of the fire churning, consuming fuel and oxygen, burning into the night.

Off to my right, I spotted a group of Marines pushing a water buffalo toward the fire. I couldn't see how the 400 gallons of water in that tank was going to make any difference in putting out this fire. It was just too big. But, still coughing, my eyes burning and watering, I nudged Ramsey anyway and we ran over to help push. Everything was in chaos; people were running back and forth with tools and weapons in hand, yelling, cursing. Being so close to the air-raid siren, its wailing felt like it was piercing my ears, and then I began to hear the thumping of a chopper – probably a Chinook with a water bag suspended beneath it – though it was dark and I couldn't see it. I kept thinking how stupid I had been in avoiding the anthrax shot. Was this it? Is this what they had been preparing us for? Was there any anthrax in the air, invisible to my eyes, molecules expanding, compounding, approaching me through osmosis? Why couldn't I have just taken a student loan and gone to college right out of high school, like my brother?

Regardless, it was too late now. And with the fire burning, engulfing more tents, more oxygen, producing more heat, and visible now to my left, growing bigger still, all I could think about was making it through this tragedy and to the next day.

I wondered whose tents the fire was burning now. My hooch was located on the opposite side of camp, so I wasn't worried about my guys. But these tents belonged to someone. Had anyone been hit? How many people were dead?

Then, several small explosions capped by a sudden, quick burst of gunfire sounded and instantly everyone around me hit the deck. I pulled my hands from the water buffalo and grabbed my rifle, pointed it in the direction of the noise, when I realized the noise was the result of the fire consuming a cache of ammunition. We remained on the ground for several moments, heads down, cursing our luck, the situation, before someone yelled to get the buffalo down to the fire.

Back on my feet, pushing the water buffalo along with a half-dozen others, feeling the heat on its metal fender, on my face and hands growing progressively warmer, the buffalo suddenly stopped rolling. For some reason, I looked back and saw a wall of flames where Ramsey and I had stood only a few moments before.

"This way! Down to the water!" someone was shouting.

Marines were speeding by me left and right, yelling at us to get down to the water. We left the buffalo where it was, where it would surely be engulfed in flames within minutes, and sprinted to the rocky seawall at the edge of camp. In the distance I could see huge cargo ships at dock, lights twinkling from their bridges.

Nearing the seawall I noticed for the first time the wind blowing against my back, agitating the water down below. The air reeked of diesel fuel and sooty, thick smoke. And then my stomach sank.

Grouped there at the edge of the water, I noticed excited, stunned, and incredulous faces illuminated in the glow from the fire that was moving our way with the wind. I located Ramsey and moved over beside him.

"Stay with me," I said.

"We're cut off!" he said. "We're fucked."

"No we're not. They'll send boats for us."

Saying this, I felt the heat pressing on my face, moving the crowd of Marines back against the seawall inch by inch. I smelled the thick, choking smoke from dozens of tents going up in flames. I heard the thumping of the chopper hovering above, and then someone shouting "Into the water, Marines! Now!"

Just then, eight hundred men stumbled over the seawall, down the rocky embankment and into the dark, agitated waters of the Persian Gulf like a strange field of triathletes. Leading the charge was Captain Walker, who turned, picked me up in his sight and then looked away as he made his way down the embankment. The glow from the fire illuminating the water before us, the wind whipping against the surface, stirring it violently, the sea was a caldron of terror and uncertainty.

Moving out into the black water, feeling the jagged rocks beneath my feet fall away, I was waist-deep after only a few steps. With Ramsey beside me, my rifle slung across my back, I took another step to move away from the advancing fire and went up to my shoulders. With the next step I was treading water. Behind me I could hear the fire

roaring, moving closer still. I could feel the heat on the back of my head and neck as I kicked out away from shore, where I began raking my arms back and forth, kicking my feet to keep my head above the surface. I looked left and then right, then turned around and examined the water behind me, waiting, and hoping that the boats arrived before the sharks.