BIG CITY BLUES: A NOVEL WITH A CRITICAL PREFACE EXPLORING BLUES FORM AND THEME IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE

"Now this trouble I been having, I brought it all on myself": A Critical Preface Exploring Blues Form and Theme in Contemporary Literature

I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees,

I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees,

Asked the Lord above "Have mercy, save poor Bob, if you please" . . . .

I went to the crossroad, mama, I looked east and west,

I went to the crossroad, mama, I looked east and west,

Lord, I didn't have no sweet woman, ooh-well, babe, in my distress.

--Robert Johnson "Cross Road Blues"

On Friday, November 27, 1936, Robert Johnson entered a San Antonio recording studio and finished laying down the tracks to what was to become the legacy of half his recording life. The songs he recorded during the first scheduled session of the day would come to express more than simply Johnson's feelings. The music recorded that day would prove to become some of the most significant recordings of the twentieth-century, impacting blues artists for years to come. Even Johnson's death, a suspected poisoning by the jealous husband of Johnson's lover, on August 16, 1938, would become legendary. In many ways, Johnson's music and mysterious death

create an anchoring point from which to explore the influence of the blues on twentieth-century literature and culture. Although such a discussion could certainly become a study of substantial proportions, the objective here is not to duplicate the already established, comprehensive histories of blues artists, movements, and music but to find a workable definition of the form and theme of blues music and examine its impact upon contemporary literary fiction, including my own. As my study will show, the blues novel, like Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man and Sherman Alexie's Reservation Blues, is a form using a self-conscious, self-critical lyrical voice emphasizing themes of improvisation and survival. In such a novel, the blues hero fights against inconsequentiality and against self-annihilation in the struggle to have his or her voice be heard.

The blues constitute one of the twentieth-century's most prolifically produced, commercially successful, and musically innovative art forms; however, few studies explore the literary influence of the blues. Though important authors and scholars such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Albert Murray, Houston Baker, and Phillip Brian Harper have taken up the discussion of blues and literature, few have followed their lead. What emerges from this discussion are many definitions all pointing to the blues' multi-faceted nature.

The origin of the term "blues," according to Murray, can be traced to Elizabethan England where "blue" was a reference to changes in skin pigmentation brought on by changes in emotion (Stomping 63). The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) traces the term "blues" from "blue devils"--a "baleful demon" or state of "despondency" (328)--to a letter by David Garrick dating from 11 July 1741: "I am far from being quite well, tho not troubled wth y^{e} Blews as I have been" (326). By

1807, Washington Irving's Salmagundi uses the phrase "a fit of the blues" (OED 326). As both Murray (64) and the OED show, the term "blues" began to be used more and more frequently throughout the nineteenth century, especially in America, where it denoted a state of melancholia.

The birth of the blues can commonly be traced to the historical and social circumstances of African Americans in the post-Civil War Reconstruction period. As scholars William Barlow, Stephen Calt, Albert Murray, and LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) point out, the blues has its genesis in a combination of musical and cultural developments of that time. Barlow's work, one of the most thorough and well documented studies to date, describes how the blues can be traced back to African American field songs known as "arhoolies" or the "whoops, hollers, calls, and cries, as they were called, that had been commonplace among southern African Americans since the antebellum plantation days" (17). Barlow further suggests that African American spirituals, work songs, and ballads also contributed to what later became known as "the blues." Calt notes this genre of music evolved more directly from the spiritual "Roll Jordan," which was one of the earliest spirituals learned by slaves (38). Murray confers with both Barlow and Calt on such influences; however, he also points out that the development of the blues as a distinct and recognizable musical form has its genesis in the combination of African "sensibility" (brought to America by slaves) with European musical tradition (63). More importantly, for Murray, the blues are an indigenous music native to American culture and a product of the Reconstruction period, where ex-slaves were free to experiment and even earn livings as musicians. In Blues People, LeRoi Jones similarly traces the genesis of the blues back to the forces of African and European culture. He suggests, like Murray, that African

music, particularly its polyrhythmic patterns, combined with European traditions influenced the birth of the blues. According to Jones, African Americans adopted European practices as a result of forced acculturation. In the blues, the European desire for regularity in their musical tradition conflicts and contrasts with the African movement toward irregularity or atonality with respect to European musical scales: "It was also during these years [at the end of slavery] that the Negro's music lost a great many of the more superficial forms it had borrowed from the white man, and the forms that we recognize now as the blues began to appear" (59). As Barlow, Calt, Murray, and Jones show, the blues as an indigenous music grow out of the very historical circumstances of African Americans in the antebellum and Reconstruction periods. The pioneering field work of John Alan Lomax and John Work, who recorded blues artists in the first half of this century; the influential writings of scholars Howard W. Odum and Guy B. Johnson in Negro Workday Songs; and, the film works of William Ferris, Director of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi, further the ideas of Barlow, Calt, Murray, and Jones.

As a musical form, the blues has a relatively simple structure with complexity arising from stylistic variation and a musician's ability to improvise. Though there are many variations, a typical blues song uses a twelve bar, three line AAB verse structure in which the first two lines repeat and the third responds in rhyme, as in the following example by Skip James from "Hard Time Killing Floor Blues":

> If I ever get off this killing floor,
>
> If I ever get off this killing floor,
>
> I'll never get down this low no more.

Many blues also make use of a pentatonic scale with a flattened third or seventh, which give the music its "bluesy" quality. As Richard Middleton describes, a suggestion which echoes Jones' description of the contraries of blues music, the "pentatonic, inflectional musical language" is "antithetical to the functional-tonal language of bourgeois [European] tradition" (77). Another factor contributing to the distinct sound and to the antithetical nature of the blues is the tendency for musicians and vocalists to bend notes above or below the tonal center, creating a "blue note." As William Tallmadge notes, such practices have their origins in African pitch play (159), where "a pitch which, according to European expectations, would be a natural, is flatted; a flat would be double-flatted; a sharp would become natural" (156). Often times, the vocalist works together with the musicians to create the unique blues sound. Such "accompaniment" gives "structure to the song" (Burns 222). Though blues music can have a repetitive quality, a musician's or vocalist's variations and stylizations, as well as the musician's regional background (the original regional centers of blues culture being the Mississippi Delta, East Texas, and the Piedmont) give the music an individual sound.

More particularly, a distinct vocabulary has developed around blues music to describe the numerous stylizations of musicians and vocalists involved in the making of this kind of music. Murray identifies six important characteristics. First, there is the "vamp" or "improvised introduction;" secondly, there is the "riff" or "repetition phrase;" thirdly, there is the "break" or "temporary interruption of the established cadence;" fourthly, there is the "fill" or the improvisation required during the break; fifthly, there is the use of railroad onomatopoeia or sounds imitative of a locomotive's whistle and rhythm; and lastly, there is the important improvisatory talent of the blues

musician (Blue Devils 94). Blues music is also marked by a "unique combination of spontaneity, improvisation, and control" (Stomping 50). The beauty of the music lies in its performer's talent and ability to work within the form through individual stylizations.

Also contributing to the beauty of the blues is the intertextual nature of the music. As Robert Palmer suggests, in the blues originality is not a major concern; instead, the blues musician relies heavily on tradition and on borrowing (69). A similarity in the riff or in the lyric is not uncommon. According to Middleton, the musician uses "collectively owned themes and devices" to craft a "highly personal sound" (144). In this fashion, songs may resemble other songs. Songs and styles are exchanged between musicians with each musician adding an individual signature. For example, as Barlow points out, Robert Johnson's "Walkin' Blues" borrows its melody and guitar work from Son House's "My Black Mama" (47). Likewise, Johnson's "Sweet Home Chicago" builds from Son House's "My Black Mama" and Kokomo Arnold's "Old Original Kokomo Blues" (47). A helpful way to think of such intertextuality is in terms of jazz standards or commonly copied songs to which the jazz musician asserts his or her own stylistic interpretation. In many ways, intertextuality can be seen as an homage to past musicians, a way to celebrate the achievements of previous masters. The intertextuality of the blues might also be said to move against the bourgeois myth of originality. The emphasis is less on the new and more on tradition and the self's relationship to the past. The focus is less on originality and more on asserting the self within the traditions of the past. In such an assertion, the past bears on the present, bringing to the present its history.

The assertion of individuality against the grain of tradition gives each blues

musician a stylistic signature. For Murray, the blues music represents a movement from chaos to one of order in which the musician strives for self-assertion. Musical interludes or breaks offer a musician an opportunity "to do [his] thing, to establish [his] identity, to write [his] signature on the epidermis of actuality which is to say entropy" (Blue Devils 95). Murray bases his notions of the blues on two fundamental principles--"the blues as such" versus the blues as musical expression. Murray describes the "blues as such" as a condition, even a recurrent condition, marked by melancholia and emotional affliction: "Blues lyrics express an urgent and unmistakable concern with defeat, disappointment, betrayal, misfortune, not excluding death" (Stomping 17). Mississippi John Hurt's "Got the Blues Can't Be Satisfied" speaks to such concerns brought on by troubles with his girlfriend:

> Whiskey straight will drive the blues away,
> Whiskey straight will drive the blues away,
> That be the case, I want a quart today.

However, to see blues music exclusively as a reflection of melancholia or depression would be misleading. In fact, as Murray points out, the music itself, though the lyrics may suggest melancholia, is largely uplifting, positive, and affirmative. The lyrics, too, can express such affirmation in describing a movement past down-heartedness, as is the case in Sonny Boy Williamson's "Collector Man Blues":

> Tell him but some day I'll have some money, now I want everybody to watch and see,
> Tell him but some day I'll have some money, now I want everybody to watch and see,
> Well now tell him that it's hard to keep down, you know, a real good

man like me.

As Richard Wright notes of the blues: "though replete with a sense of defeat and down-heartedness, they are not intrinsically pessimistic; their burden of woe and melancholy is dialectically redeemed through sheer force of sensuality, into an almost exultant affirmation of life, of love, of sex, of movement, of hope" (Wright, "Forward" 9). Seen in this fashion, the blues serve a cathartic function, a cleansing of the spirit. Celebrating life through recollection and movement beyond its dimmest moments, the the blues represent an "agent of affirmation and continuity in the face of adversity" (Murray, Stomping 38). Such music expresses a heroism in the fight against absurdity (Murray, Hero 33), a heroism of "self-reliance" (44), of "developing a conscience" and "acquiring a sense of responsibility" (63). In other words, the blues fill the void of life's absurdity, its meaninglessness and believed senselessness. The blues find a reason for continuing in a world which seems to make no sense. Blind Lemon Jefferson's "Rising High Water Blues" reflects a concern for living in a world which seems to make no sense. The song focusses on the Mississippi flood:

> Water all in Arkansas, people screaming in Tennessee,
> Water all in Arkansas, people screaming in Tennessee,
> If I don't leave Memphis, black water been all over poor me.
>
> .....
>
> Backwater rising, come in my windows and doors,
> Backwater rising, come in my windows and doors,
> I leave with a prayer in my heart, backwater won't rise no more.

The blues as Jefferson sings them attempt to make sense of the tragic, to make order of chaos. Confronting absurdity, it forms a kinship with contemporary literary texts

which also struggle to deal with the apparent absurdity of a post-Holocaust, postmodern atomic age.

Murray's view of the blues as a heroic movement from adversity to affirmation figures prominently in other definitions of this genre. Ralph Ellison similarly focuses on the personal nature of the blues song. For him, blues music represents an "autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically" (79). Albert King's "Born Under a Bad Sign" clearly expresses Ellison's idea:

> Born under a bad sign, been down since I began to crawl,
>
> If it weren't for bad luck, I wouldn't have no luck at all.
>
> Hard luck and trouble is my only friend,
>
> Been on my own since I was ten.
>
> Born under a bad sign, been down since I began to crawl,
>
> If it weren't for bad luck, I wouldn't have no luck at all.
>
> I can't read, hadn't learned to write,
>
> My whole life has been one big fight.
>
> Born under a bad sign, been down since I began to crawl,
>
> If it weren't for bad luck, I wouldn't have no luck at all.

Ellison and Murray find in King's "Born Under a Bad Sign" the poetically rendered story of the self in conflict. As Ellison further explains, blues songs "at once express both the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit. They fall short of tragedy only in that they provide no solution, offer no scape goat but the self" (94). This definition in many ways parallels the story of his Invisible Man as a "personal catastrophe expressed lyrically." Through the character of Invisible Man, the "agony of life" and the "toughness of spirit" emerge even in the

face of adversity.

As blues musician Jimmy Witherspoon describes, the music he plays is "nothing but personal," an attitude expressed by many blues artists and critics (Deffa 17). Similarly, for jazz and blues writer Graham Vulliamy, "The blues emerged in order to express the personal feelings of the singer. The ballad told the story of someone else . . . . But the blues simply expressed the mood of the singer. It gave musicians a chance to talk about themselves: Their loves, their hates, their attitudes to work and so on" (18). The need to sing blues music can be brought on by personal conflicts of nearly any sort including problems of love and family, problems arising from social class, and/or racial conflict, even philosophical problems of ontology. Songs such as Howlin' Wolf's "Ain't Superstitious," B.B. King's "Nobody Loves Me But My Mother," Albert King's "When You Down," or Muddy Waters' "You Can't Lose What You Never Had" represent a sampling of the concerns of blues singers in our time. For blues scholar Paul Oliver, this genre of music addresses the "agony of indecision, the despair of the jobless, the anguish of the bereaved and the dry wit of the cynic. As such the blues is the personal emotion of the individual finding through music a vehicle for self-expression" (6). The importance of these suggestions by Witherspoon, Oliver, Murray, Ellison, and Wright focus on the individual in conflict with his world, his existence, and even the society in which he finds himself. As Arnold Shaw notes, "[t]he Blues describe the deprivations, problems, and troubles, but in an *existential* vein" (114), a vein noted by Murray who describes how the blues hero confronts the "nada" of existence (Hero 101):

> the blues statement is nothing if not an experience-confrontation device that enables people to begin by accepting the difficult, disappointing,

> chaotic, absurd, which is to say the farcical or existential facts of life. Moreover, even as it does so it also prepares or disposes people to accept the necessity for struggle. (Hero 104)

The existentialism nature of the blues seen in Murray's ideas about the "necessity for struggle" recalls Sartre's notion that "existentialism's first move is to make every man aware of what he is and to make the full responsibility of his existence rest on him" (16). In this fashion, the existentialism of the blues refers to a movement toward self-responsibility. The blues song is not one of giving in or giving up. Blues songs are not music of passive acceptance so much as songs of self-expression, even action. They declare as they question. As Middleton suggests, the blues sing about "loneliness, alienation, and travel" (144), not about an acquiescence. The blues, as Robert Johnson sings, are about crossroads, about meetings and forking pathways, about change and transition, about the recognition and expression of one's situation. The blues hero fights against inconsequentiality, against annihilation, and, importantly, against the loss of voice.

For African Americans, the conflicts expressed in the blues are largely grounded in problems of racial injustice. Washboard Sam's "Levee Camp Blues" captures just this sense of hardship in describing the harsh labor conditions African Americans faced in building levees:

> We slept just like dogs, eat beans both night and day,
> We slept just like dogs, eat beans both night and day,
> But I never did know just when we were due our pay.

Similarly, Robert Hicks' [Barbecue Bob's] "We Sure Got Hard Times Now" expresses the difficulty not only in finding work but in finding a well paying job:

You hear about a job, now you is on your way,

You hear about a job, now you is on your way,

Twenty mens after the same job, all in the same old day

.....

Lord and bacon gone to a dollar a pound

Lord and bacon gone to a dollar a pound

Cotton have started to selling, but it keeps going down and down.

As Hicks' song helps to show, the history of blues culture grew out of "agrarian poverty and racial segregation" (Barlow 26). The traditional regional centers of the blues in the Mississippi Delta, East Texas, and the Piedmont clearly seem to suggest further evidence for Barlow's contention. Sterling Brown, an early philosopher on blues and their impact on literary culture, also links African American experience with the blues. For Brown, "You can't play the blues until you have paid your dues . . . as a Negro in America" (291). As Brown seems to suggest, the experiences of African Americans on the margins of society give rise to the music itself. The blues, according to Paul Oliver, "gauge . . . the frustration within the colored community" (106); or, according to Baker describe the "anonymous (nameless) voice issuing from the black (w)hole" (5). As these scholars suggests, the blues seem to result directly from discrimination and prejudice faced by African Americans. For Jones, the blues can mean nothing else: "*Blues* means a Negro experience, it is the one music the Negro made that could not be transferred into a more general significance than the one the Negro gave it initially" (94). According to Jones, this music comes from and speaks to the experiences of African Americans and cannot possibly signify anything else.

Phillip Brian Harper takes a similar position to Jones, but he finds that the blues of soul music additionally reflect an African American psychic decentering. According to Harper, the condition of postmodern decentering exhibited in a number of specific Contemporary and even Modernist literary works including film "derives specifically from the socially marginalized and politically disenfranchised status of the populations treated in the works" (3). In other words, as he further clarifies, a decentering reflected in such works results from "'minority' experience" (12). Among the numerous texts studied, Harper identifies Ellison's Invisible Man as a text in which the protagonist's psychic decentering results from his minority experiences, the discrimination and prejudice he faces as an African American male. Harper similarly concludes that the protagonist/narrator of Maxine Hong Kingston's Woman Warrior is similarly decentered because of her specific status and experiences within the mainstream culture as an Asian American.

However, in contrast to Ellison and Kingston, Harper criticizes Alan Parker in his film The Commitments, based on the Roddy Doyle novel of the same name, for the cooptation of African American experience to signify decentering and despair. The Irish band depicted in the movie uses soul music to signify a similarity between working-class Irish Dubliners and African Americans, but the band's experience lacks the actual experience of being African American (190). Unfortunately in restricting psychic decentering to minority experience, Harper, like Jones, limits the importance of his study. Harper cannot account for experiences other than race giving rise to the blues or to the psychic decentering reflected in the works. He fails to see how the blues and even the decentered state can arise from specific conditions such as class status, regardless of race.

Clearly, in The Commitments, class status shows itself to be the source of the band members' blues. Parker makes this evident by setting his film in the impoverished sections of Dublin. His frequent scenes focusing on the poor living conditions of the various musicians and vocalists further emphasize the class nature of the band's blues. Importantly, Doyle shows how class, in addition to race, can give rise to the blues. My criticism of Harper ideas seeks not to suggest that race is unimportant to blues culture and history; to make such a claim would be an egregious error. Instead, I wish to clarify how the blues, which originated in the specific historical and cultural circumstances faced by African Americans in the Reconstruction period, can also give voice to concerns grounded in class status as the Parker film helps to demonstrate.

In addition to voicing concerns about race and class, as Ralph Ellison suggests, "[t]he blues speak to us simultaneously of the tragic and the comic aspects of the human condition and they express a profound sense of life shared by many negro Americans precisely because their lives have combined these modes" (256). Ellison sees the blues as representative of both the tragic-comic nature of the human condition *and* the experiences of African Americans. In this way, the blues are a complex form of expression that speak to our human condition on many levels at the same time. This complex nature of the blues is precisely what makes this music a unique form of artistic expression.

Murray addresses the blues as a distinct art form. For Murray:

> Blues musicians do not derive directly from the personal, social, and political circumstances of their lives as black people in the United States. They derive most directly from styles of other musicians who

> play the blues and who were infinitely more interested in evoking or simulating raw emotion than in releasing it. (Hero 83)

Murray describes both the intertextuality of the blues and, perhaps more importantly, he defines the blues musician as an artist working within the conventions of a particular art form. For Murray, blues music is a learned art in which the artist is self-conscious about the very techniques which go into the making of a work. The ideas of Carl Boggs and Ray Pratt support Murray's notion of the blues as an art form. Boggs and Pratt suggest that although white musicians first imitated the blues, their work grew to reflect a practice of blues music as an art form, a form suitable to voice the concerns of subversive social movements (288). As these studies show, the blues, initially created by African Americans, entered the mainstream culture for artistic as well as commercial reasons. According to Barlow, "an unusual cross-section of people are currently engaged in blues culture. Their race, class, and generational differences have made it one of those rare, eclective and in many ways utopian social experiments" (346). Blues form today is a predominant vehicle for artistic expression for many artists, including those artists working within the field of literature.

The blues novel reflects in varying degrees the ideas and forms of blues music. Foremost among such characteristics is the voice of the story. The focus of such a voice is on personal expression, the individual's struggle to tell his or her story. As in blues music, in the literary text the voice seeks to be heard through a combination of spontaneity and control. The voice of the blues novel has a lyrical quality to express the personality and style of the speaker. In other words, the blues novel makes use of

lyrical style in order to help give voice to its blues themes. According to Eileen Baldeshwiler, a lyrical voice focuses on developing the subject through tone and mood (231). Such writing attends to the "nuances of nature and human feeling" in "emotionally laden situations" (232). Lyric writing, typified by the writings of James Baldwin, Ernest Gaines, John Updike or Ann Beattie, seeks states of feeling, focussing on emotional change. As Charles May suggests, lyricism desires to create a mood which helps to understand character ("Chekhov" 200). Working in a similar fashion, the voice of the blues novel also emphasizes creating moods reflective of the character's emotional state. The lyricism of the blues is precisely in its emphasis on feeling. The use of language plays a role in crafting such a voice. As Suzanne Ferguson explains, the tonal qualities created by attention to syntax and diction heighten a story's emotional center (226). Likewise, in a blues novel, attention to the particular language used by the voice can deliver emotional heightening.

In addition to the voice, the blues novel can be characterized by its use of blues vamps, riffs, breaks, fills, and intertextuality adopted to the literary text. A vamp or improvised introduction may begin a chapter in the form of an epigram or a prologue; riffs may resemble a stream of consciousness or extended monologue; fills may come in the form of flashbacks in the narrative or in introducing exposition. Although such techniques help to identify the blues novel, they need not all be used by the artist. Working like the blues musician, the blues novelist uses such techniques to various degrees depending on the type of stylization desired. The use of blues stylization in the form of vamps, riffs, and fills in the literary text is by no means limited to these few examples, though the blues novel can be said to be characterized by such techniques. Blues intertextuality and blues allusions, which place the work within a

blues tradition as well as give homage to previous blues masters, represent yet another characteristic of the blues novel.

Just as the voice, stylistic variations of form, and blues intertextuality help to describe a blues novel, theme articulated through the blues hero's struggle for survival is likewise important. Blues stories, whether rendered in blues music or in another artistic medium, tell of the individual in conflict. The blues hero in the midst of loneliness and despair, in overcoming racial prejudice and discrimination, in facing down-heartedness in love, in resolving family conflict, or in confronting existential anxiety, must assess his or her condition and seek to rise out of the dark hole. Sometimes through improvisation, sometimes through self-assertion, the blues hero struggles to make the world cohere. Such a hero must fight against inconsequentiality, against self-annihilation in making his or her voice heard through story or music. In this fashion, the blues novel addresses the problems of self-reliance and self-responsibility, a lack of either of which might result in inconsequentiality and annihilation. Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man and, most recently, Sherman Alexie's Reservation Blues provide two similar yet different examples of blues novels in what might be called a tradition of blues writing.

The importance of music, particularly blues music, played an integral role in Ralph Ellison's life and writing. In many writings about music, some of which he collected in his book of essays Shadow and Act, Ellison defined what he felt to be the essence of the blues: "The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a

near-tragic, near-comic lyricism" (79). With consideration to his novel, Invisible Man, Ellison's comments provide much insight. Invisible Man's recollection of his predicament seeks like the blues "to keep the painful details and episodes of brutal experience alive." As Shelby Steele contends, Ellison sees in the blues a way to transcend pain (153). By telling his story, by playing the role of blues singer (Olderman 143), Invisible Man is able to transcend his pain and rise above the prejudice and discrimination that has been keeping him literally and metaphorically in a hole. Ellison articulates this blues theme through the particular formal aspects of blues writing.

Using the formal blues technique of vamping or introducing the number, Ellison provides paratextual apparatuses that establish the text's central focus. As Gérard Genette explains, a novel's introductory paratext represents a "zone not of transition, but of transaction; the privileged site of pragmatics and of a strategy" (261). In other words, the paratext, acting like blues vamping, can establish or prefigure the text's focus. Ellison's vamping in the form of paratextual material, particularly the initial, prefatory quote from Melville's "Benito Cereno" which begins the novel, establishes racial tension as a predominant focus of the text. The quote also acts intertextually, like the intertextuality of blues music, to suggests a relationship between the past and the present. From Melville, Ellison quotes: "'You are saved,' cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained; 'you are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?'" The quote recalls "Benito Cereno" as a text about racial tension and mistaken identity which resulted in disaster. The quote also asks readers to remember Captain Delano, who sees Blacks through antebellum notions and prejudices about their inferiority. Readers must further remember Delano's inability

to recognize that the masquerade resulted from the fact that he did not believe slaves intellectually capable of leading a rebellion. Using the blues technique of intertextuality, Ellison quickly established the focus of Invisible Man as an exploration of how African Americans are signified within our society. The allusion to the "shadow" which hovers over Cereno suggests both the lack of presence permitted to Blacks as well as the cloud hanging over all who might find themselves in Cereno's and Delano's situation. In these ways, Melville's text also acts as a shadow on Invisible Man, reminding readers of the historic problem of racial conflict in American culture and literature.

Ellison's vamping does not end with the Melville quote, but continues into the novel's Prologue where the blues hero begins a lyrical riff on the nature of his blues. For Invisible Man's, his blues come from his marginalization from mainstream society because he is an African American. Such a condition of marginalization has caused him to seem invisible and unimportant: "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me" (7). Invisible Man must find a way to rise up from his absurd situation underground, beneath white America. Just as Robert Johnson sings about being at a crossroads, Invisible Man likewise finds himself at the crossroads of his life searching for answers about which direction to take. In this existential fashion, the prologue begins a cathartic blues story designed to help Invisible Man recognize his predicament. As Shelby Steele suggests, "[h]is blues has a confessional aspect common to the blues itself" (160). His blues make him self-conscious of his life so that he may contemplate his self-assertion. Pancho Savery importantly contends the very telling of his tale, his blues singing, leads to self-discovery (66-67). By reaching a sense of self-understanding, Invisible Man can contemplate further

action. He must, Steele explains, "assume responsibility" (158). The Prologue makes clear, Invisible Man as blues hero has already begun to assert himself by stealing light from Monopolated Light & Power, which, like the rest of society, is unable to see him. The tragic-comic irony of such a situation, characteristic of the blues, is that even in all the light surrounding him, he remains invisible. The Prologue, making use of such irony, establishes the tragic-comic as an important aspect of the novel at large.

In addition to the Prologue's importance in establishing the blues hero, it also uses blues allusions to establish further the novel's theme. More particularly, Invisible Man expresses his love of Louis Armstrong and his song "What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue": "Perhaps I like Louis Armstrong because he's made poetry out of being invisible. I think it must be because he's unaware that he *is* invisible. And my own grasp of invisibility aids me to understand his music" (11). Armstrong's music presents a paradox: Armstrong's blues are grounded in his "being invisible" as an African American, but he seems unaware of his own invisibility. Invisible Man is able to recognize that Armstrong's blues come from the same sources as his own; and, Invisible Man recognizes that such blues offer the opportunity to transcend invisibility through self-assertion. Gene Bluestein suggests that Armstrong differs from the narrator not only in being "unaware of his invisibility" but "because he is positively and deeply associated with the cultural sources of his art" ("Blues" 611). I would agree that Armstrong's art lies in his African American culture, but, more importantly, Armstrong has transcended his invisibility through self-assertion. Like Armstrong, Invisible Man similarly becomes a bluesman singing his story, "I play the invisible music of my isolation" (17). His blues are grounded in the conditions of being African American in America; through self-assertion, like Armstrong, he can

move to overcome adversity through affirmation. To transcend must not be confused here with denying one's cultural background. Rather, such transcendence seeks to celebrate culture in order to move past those obstacles of prejudice and discrimination which impede self-assertion.

In addition to blues allusions establishing the thematic center of the text, the articulation of such a blues story through a lyrical voice is also important to the text. The voice effectively creates the tone and various moods of the novel. The voice speaks to a range of emotion from frustration to affirmation. His reflection on the day of the "battle royal" speaks vividly to his frustration after having been forced to pick up worthless coins on an electrified rug and after having delivered his graduation speech to a laughing crowd:

> I spoke automatically and with such fervor that I did not realize that the men were still talking and laughing until my dry mouth, filling up with blood from the cut, almost strangled me. I coughed, wanting to stop and go to one of the tall brass, sand-filled spittoons to relieve myself, but a few of the men, especially the superintendent, were listening and I was afraid. So I gulped it down, blood, saliva and all, and continued (What powers of endurance I had during those days! What enthusiasms! What a belief in the rightness of things!) I spoke even louder in spite of the pain. (32)

The voice captures the agony and torture of his feelings that day while also articulating a clear sense of his own lack of self-awareness at that time. Only in reflection, only in the telling of his story as Pancho Savery points out (67), does Invisible Man come to understand the true meaning of that day's events.

As the text progresses, Invisible Man reaches an even greater self-consciousness about his situation. Again, the lyricism of the voice captures the mood and feelings of Invisible Man and his situation. Following his continual problem of mistaken identity with Rhinehart and after a falling out with the Brotherhood, Invisible Man reflects on the nature of his situation:

> Well, I *was* and yet I was invisible, that was the fundamental contradiction. I was and yet was unseen. It was frightening and as I sat there I sensed another frightening world of possibilities. For now I saw that I could agree with Jack without agreeing. And I could tell Harlem to have hope when there was no hope. Perhaps I could tell them to hope until I found the basis of something real, some firm ground for action that would lead them onto the plane of history. (438)

His reflection allows him to sort through the problems of his situation. Although he recognizes his invisibility, his story itself attests to his being. Raymond Olderman convincingly describes how "the narrator has sung his song to create an awareness of chaos and to assert his humanity against it" (159). Clearly, even in his hopeless situation, the telling of his story becomes a first step in his desire to find a "firm ground for action."

At the end of his story in the Epilogue, he recognizes that he cannot place all the blame for his problems on the environment in which he finds himself:

> I'm not blaming anyone for this state of affairs, mind you; nor merely crying *mea culpa*. The fact is that you carry part of your sickness with you, at least I do as an invisible man. I carried my sickness and though for a long time I tried to place it in the outside world, the attempt to

write it down shows me that at least half of it lay within me. (497-98)

Again, the singing of his story allows him to come to an understanding of himself. He recognizes a most fundamental element of the blues as a movement toward self-responsibility. In the telling of his story he asserts himself against the nada of his existence. Ronald Walcott contends that Invisible Man learns by the end of the novel how the blues are "pervasive and sustaining," lending to his ability to survive (9). As blues hero, Invisible Man fights against inconsequentiality, against annihilation, and the loss of voice.

Using blues techniques and themes, Ellison effectively establishes the blues nature of his novel. Recalling the shaping events of his life, Invisible Man moves past his down-heartedness; he overcomes his experiences with Mr. Norton, Mr. Bledsoe, Liberty Paints, and the Brotherhood to reach in the Epilogue an understanding of self-empowerment and self-understanding: "Too often, in order to justify *them*, I had to take myself by the throat and choke myself until my eyes bulged and my tongue hung out and wagged like the door of an empty house in a high wind" (495-96). Although his situation, because of racial prejudice and discrimination, gives him the blues, he realizes at least part of his problem lies within him: "I carried my sickness and though for a long time I tried to place it in the outside world, the attempt to write it down shows me that at least half of it lay within me" (497-98). In the end, he has come to a self-understanding and has made a move toward self-responsibility characteristic of blues fiction. The Invisible Man's triumph is not that he may or may not have a definite plan for his future so much as that he has told his story, sung his song: "[W]hat else could I do? What else but try to tell you what was really happening when your eyes were looking through?" (503).

Like Ralph Ellison's use of blues techniques to shape the form and themes of his novel, Sherman Alexie's Reservation Blues also makes use of the blues and blues techniques. In many ways, as Jennifer Gillan helps to show, the blues have always been a part of Alexie's work. Gillan identifies "Red Blues" of Alexie's Old Shirts and New Skins for its blues qualities and tragic-comic nature (109). She also hints at the similarities between Alexie and Ellison. Gillan's ideas can be taken a step further by showing how Reservation Blues not only finds a place in the tradition of blues fiction but also uses many strategies found in Ellison's blues novel. Like Ellison, Alexie uses vamps and blues intertextuality. Alexie's tragic-comic novel also has strong blues themes conveyed through a blues voice. Additionally, similar to Ellison, blues heroes fight against inconsequentiality, against annihilation, and against the loss of their voices in a struggle to have their story told. Although such similarities exist, there are a number of distinct differences. While Ellison's story is about an African American in an urban setting, Alexie's story is about Native Americans living on a Spokane reservation in Washington state. While Ellison uses a first person narrator, Alexie uses third person. Such differences are critical but a closer look at them should reveal similarities between Reservation Blues and Invisible Man.

As in Invisible Man, the framing devices of Reservation Blues are important in establishing the text as a blues fiction. The title itself, Reservation Blues, immediately alludes to blues music and all it represents. The title recalls countless musical compositions which also use the term "blues" in the title--W.C. Handy's "St. Louis Blues," Leadbelly's "Fort Worth and Dallas Blues," Little Walter's "Blues with Feeling," and Robert Johnson's "Cross Road Blues." Such a title like Alexie's acts as a framing device, placing his composition within an established blues tradition. The

title proclaims its similarity to other blues while it also establishes its difference. This is a blues, Alexie's title tells its readers, but this is a "reservation" blues, a blues about or because of the reservation.

Alexie uses other framing devices for similar purposes. One of the most important of these devices is the use of the Robert Johnson quote prefacing the text. Just as the Melville quote from "Benito Cereno" acted in an intertextual fashion to recall the situation of Captain Delano and the slave rebellion, Alexie's quote from Robert Johnson's "Cross Road Blues" acts in a similar intertextual fashion. As a paratext, it directs the reading of the text from outside the story. Johnson's "Cross Road Blues" recalls not only the blues tradition, but it importantly asks readers to recall the song itself and even Johnson's mythic life, each of which plays an important role in Alexie's text.

In "Cross Road Blues," Johnson sings about being at a crossroads, at a junction of sorts. This junction might be a metaphoric turning point in life, while it may also represent a place of uncertainty, a place where choices in direction might have to be made. As the rest of Johnson's song confirms, the persona evoked by the lyrics is clearly at a cross roads seeking direction. The line "fell down on my knees" alludes to the low point or the down-heartedness of the persona's life. There is even an asking for the Lord's help: "'Have mercy, now save poor Bob, if you please.'" To move past the cross roads, the persona seeks to "flag a ride," wherever that may be. Allusions to "east and west" establishes the persona's need for direction. Lastly, in the final line, Johnson grounds the conflict in matters of the heart, the persona forlorn in love with "no sweet woman . . . in [his] distress." The Johnson quote at the beginning of Reservation Blues solidifies a number of important themes in Alexie's

text. As in Johnson's song, in Alexie's novel characters search for direction at the cross roads of their lives, as well as suffer from down-heartedness in love.

In addition to the importance of "Cross Road Blues" in Alexie's novel is the very life of Robert Johnson. Johnson's legendary life and death by poisoning become a focal point of the story, as does the myth of Johnson's pact with the devil who gave Johnson the talent to play as powerfully as he did. In Reservation Blues, Alexie resurrects the spirit of Robert Johnson, who finds himself at the Spokane reservation asking for directions on how to find the spiritual healer, Big Mom: "Johnson considered his options. Old and tired, he had walked from crossroads to crossroads in search of the woman in his dreams. That woman might save him" (6). Like Johnson, the Spokane protagonists also need saving and similarly seek direction from Big Mom.

The themes of Johnson's "Cross Road Blues" recalled by the prefatory quote and by Johnson's role as a character in the text frame the central themes of Alexie's novel. The main characters--Thomas, Victor, and Junior-- find themselves tired and disgusted with the reservation, tired of their jobs or lack of them, tired of their poor living conditions, and tired of government commodity food. As the narrator explains:

> Thomas thought about all the dreams that were murdered here, and the bones buried quickly just inches below the surface, all waiting to break through the foundations of those government houses built by the Department of Housing and Urban Development . . . . [T]he house had never really been finished because the Bureau of Indian Affairs cut off the building money halfway through construction. The water pipes froze every winter, and windows warped in the hot summer heat.

During his childhood, Thomas had slept in the half-finished basement, with two blankets for walls and one blanket for his bed. (7)

Clearly, Thomas Builds-the-Fire has the blues. As in Invisible Man, the blues of Thomas's life come largely from his experience as a minority, experiences shared not only by him but by Robert Johnson and Invisible Man. As Invisible Man is the singer of his blues, Coyote Springs--the band formed between Thomas, Victor, and Junior--is in many ways a vehicle for their blues.

To further frame the blues story of Coyote Springs, Alexie uses blues songs to preface each chapter. The prefatory paratextual material acts to direct each chapter's focus. Each blues song preface establishes the thematic focus of a particular chapter and recalls the tradition of the blues. In many ways, these songs, "Reservation Blues," "Treaties," "My God Has Dark Skin," and "Urban Indian Blues," reflect the very nature of the many problems faced by Coyote Springs and other Native peoples. The songs offer hard-hitting criticism rendered in a tragic-comic fashion, and conform to the blues tradition. For example, "Reservation Blues" offers this critique:

I ain't got nothing, I heard no good news
I fill my pockets with those reservation blues
Those old, those old rez blues, those old reservation blues
And if you ain't got choices
What else do you choose? (1)

The song, using blues grammar, frames the concerns of the first chapter and even the novel at large. A focus on reservation issues and choices, or lack of them, will be central concerns of the text as it progresses.

At other times, as in Chapter Two, the prefatory blues quotes respond to

historical and even present-day issues for Native Americans. In Chapter Two, the problem is treaties and the long history of broken promises with the U.S. government:

> Treaties never remember
>
> They give and take 'till they fall apart
>
> Treaties never surrender
>
> I'm sure treaties we made gonna break this Indian's heart[.] (31-32)

While criticizing the history of broken treaties with the U.S. government, the song also alludes to the broken contract between Coyote Springs and Cavalry Records in New York City. Furthermore, the name of the record company itself suggests the history of genocide perpetrated by the U.S. Cavalry upon Native peoples.

Although there are many similarities between Invisible Man and Alexie's novel in terms of the use of blues techniques and themes, there is also an important difference. While Invisible Man uses a first-person narrator as blues singer, Alexie's text uses the voice of a third-person narrator. This third-person narrator acts in the role of blues singer as a composite, communal voice, one which reflects the individual blues stories of the text. In other words, the communal voice speaks for the tribe as it reflects individual stories. Just as the voice of Invisible Man is self-reflective, the communal voice similarly acts to provide reflective insight on the community:

> The word *gone* echoed all over the reservation. The reservation was gone itself, just a shell of its former self, just a fragment of the whole. But the reservation still possessed power and rage, magic and loss, joys and jealousy. The reservation tugged at the lives of its Indians, stole from them in the middle of the night, watched impassively as the horses and salmon disappeared. But the reservation forgave, too. (97)

The communal voice can speak authoritatively about the reservation and its history. In this way, the blues story transcends the individual for the communal or tribal. Alexie suggests that although Thomas, Victor, and Junior experience the blues in their own way, the blues they live are directly linked with their common tribal experience.

At times, nevertheless, there is a noticeable tension between the community and the individual, which is reflected through the voice, as in the scene where Thomas finds his drunk father Samuel passed out on the kitchen table:

> He walked outside while the women stayed inside. They understood. Once outside, Thomas cried. Not because he needed to be alone; not because he was afraid to cry in front of the women. He just wanted his tears to be individual, not tribal. Those tribal tears collected and fermented in huge BIA barrels. Then the BIA poured those tears into beer and Pepsi cans and distributed them back onto the reservation. Thomas wanted his tears to be selfish and fresh. (100)

As this passage shows, there is a tension between the communal blues and the individual blues. The problem of tribal drunkenness becomes a personal problem for Thomas because his father is a "zombie" (99). As Alexie suggests, the tribal blues transcend the individual blues because the individual blues are "selfish" in nature. For Alexie's Spokanes, the individual asserts his identity against the tribe. A sense of self is rooted and in tension with the community.

This moment between Thomas and his father, between the individual and the tribal, captures in many ways a general tension of the book. The members of Coyote Springs seek to establish their own identity. They desire to move outside the tribe to make it on their own. They leave the reservation along with its myriad of problems

and go to New York City, only to have to return back to the reservation because of complications with Calvary Records. Returning back, however, they perceive themselves as failures, so much so Junior Polatkin takes his life. As a ghost after his death, Junior offers to Victor a reason for his suicide: "Because when I closed my eyes like Thomas, I didn't see a damn thing. Nothing. Zilch. No stories, no songs. Nothing" (290). Although Junior's identity roots itself in the tribe, the tribe, because of its problems, cannot offer Junior any hope or redemption.

Suffering from a similar loss of hope, Thomas feels he must leave the tribe and does so with Chess and Checkers Warm Water. The decision to leave is very much a moment filled with anxiety:

> They all held their breath as they drove over the reservation border. Nothing happened. No locks clicked shut behind them. No voices spoke, although the wind moved through the pine trees. It was dark. There were shadows. Those shadows took shape, became horses running alongside the van. (305)

Even in their leaving seen as an assertion of their individuality, they bring with them a part of their tribal culture symbolized by the shadow horses. These horses linked to Big Mom represent both their tribal culture and the blues spirit of triumph over adversity. Big Mom, the tribal healer, taught them "the shadow horses' song, a song of mourning that would become a song of celebration: we have survived, we have survived." (306). Although their anxiety turns into rejoicing, this moment at the end of the novel is paradoxical. Although Thomas leaves triumphantly bringing his tribal culture with him, symbolized by the shadow horses running alongside the van, he does so to escape tribal life on the reservation with its numerous problems of drunkenness,

poverty, and run down housing. His movement away is a poignant reminder of the crisis back home. The blues also function in this paradoxical fashion. In blues music, no matter how celebratory or upbeat the rhythms, there is always the reminder of a genesis in adversity.

In a review of Alexie's novel, Frederick Busch asserts that Alexie "goes wrong" because "he tries to suggest a rock band can bear the metaphorical weight of an entire culture" (10). However, Busch fails to see the text for the blues novel that it is. The band, rather than desiring to "bear the metaphorical weight of an entire culture," seek to have their individual stories heard. Coyote Springs' desire to be heard recalls a similar concern in The Commitments. The band, The Commitments, makes no pretense about speaking for *all* Dubliners or even *all* the Irish. The Commitments speak for individual band members and individual blues rooted in social class conditions. In other words, Jimmy's unemployment blues are not the same as Joey the Lips' middle-age blues, but both Jimmy's and Joey's blues are rooted in their class status. The blues speak not for an entire culture but for individuals within a culture. Similarly, Coyote Springs speaks to the blues of each band member which are rooted in tribal concerns. Thomas's blues, some of which can be traced to family problems and his father's drunkenness, are not the same as Junior's blues coming from a seemingly hopeless future, but both Thomas's and Junior's blues are rooted in the tribal problems of Reservation life. Bands such as Coyote Springs and the Commitments seek not to be a voice of an entire culture. Instead, these blues heroes fight against inconsequentiality, against annihilation and the loss of voice. Seen as a blues novel, Reservation Blues certainly does not "go wrong." Alexie succeeds because the form and design of his novel succeed within the tradition of blues fiction.

Voices are not silenced but heard with all the raw feeling and energy of a blues song.

In addition to Ellison's Invisible Man and Alexie's Reservation Blues, scholars have identified a number of contemporary novels, short fictions, and even autobiographies which show the influence of the blues. A brief look at a number of these texts should help to further substantiate a blues literary tradition, as well as help scholars who seek to do more work in this little-explored area. Ralph Ellison cites Richard Wright's autobiography Black Boy as "filled with blues-tempered echoes of railroad trains, the names of Southern towns and cities, estrangements, fights and flights, deaths and disappointments, charged with physical and spiritual hungers and pain" (Shadow 79). Albert Murray suggests Saul Bellow's hero in Dangling Man resembles a blues hero (Blue 186). Although Hemingway is generally considered a Modernist, Murray cites his In Our Time as a blues book with "vamplike and rifflike sketches . . . the mood of which suggests *Blues in Our Time*" (Blue 217). Wolfgang Karrer shows how Murray's very own Train Whistle Guitar is distinctly blues in nature "from its title on down" (246). Gene Bluestein argues in "Laughin' Just to Keep from Cryin'" that Richard Fariña's Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up to Me is a blues novel because of its tragic-comic nature, its blues theme of survival, its blues allusions, and its lyrical writing. Houston Baker suggests a number of books from the nineteenth century to the Contemporary period fit the description of a blues text. For Baker, the autobiographical Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass presents a "riffing . . . on *personal* troubles" (13). Baker also cites as blues fictions Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God, Richard Wright's Black Boy, Ralph Ellison's Invisible man, Amiri Baraka's (LeRoi Jones') The System of Dante's

Hell, and Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon (14). Joyce Wegs also sees Morrison's Song of Solomon as a blues novel in which the narrator takes on the "role of blues singer" (211).

I would also argue that a number of other texts could be considered as blues fictions since they have protagonists resembling blues heroes, use rifflike and vamplike techniques, and thematically focus on the tragic-comic nature of life. Such works would include: Bellow's The Adventures of Augie March and Herzog, J.D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye, William Styron's Confessions of Nat Turner, James Welch's Winter in the Blood, Bret Easton Ellis's Less than Zero, and Jay McInerney's Story of My Life.

In short fiction, Darryl Hattenhauer reads James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" for its blues influence, which helps "foster an understanding between brothers" (4); Richard Albert, along with including a short list of authors who have treated blues themes in "Sonny's Blues," describes how the work builds from a tradition of the blues; and, Marlene Mosher suggests a blues theme of survival in Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues," Another Country, and If Beale Street Could Talk. In another study of the relationship between blues and short fiction, Marie M. Foster convincingly shows how the blues influence the stories of Ernest Gaines' Bloodlines by helping to create an understanding of the characters' states of being (10). I might also include stories by Louise Erdrich, Raymond Carver, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Ann Beattie for their blues qualities. Certainly, in light of understanding the blues for their thematic and formal characteristics, this list could be expanded to included many more titles. However, the list does help to substantiate the large influence of the blues on contemporary texts, and perhaps even a limited number of Modernist works.

Other areas for research might include looking at works outside the genre of fiction for their blues influences. A short list of authors, some of whose work has already been cited for its blues influence, includes poets: Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes, Melvin Tolson, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Rita Dove. In drama, Ronald Walcott suggests Charles Gordone's play No Place to Be Somebody expresses a blues theme of struggle (15). Likewise, as the studies of Jay Plum and Sandra Adell both show, the drama of August Wilson is indebted to the blues. Further substantiating a tradition of blues writing and blues influence is significant work at the dissertation level by such scholars as Johnanna Lucille Grimes, Cherry Revona Baylor, Michael Charles Carroll, Chekita Trennel Hall, Marie Valerie Lovegrove, and Ann Fisher-Wirth, though there is more room for future study in this area.

* * *

The elements of blues fiction discussed above have also largely influenced the writing of my novel, Big City Blues. In creating my novel, I sought a form which best emphasized the novel's theme so that the two would mutually influence one another. As I worked on my book, I kept in mind Percy Lubbock's early ideas on the novel, which grew out of his study and work with Henry James. Lubbock explains in The Craft of Fiction that fiction is an art informed by its form and design (14-25). As Lubbock suggests, a novelist needs to be concerned with both these aspects, which are mutually influential to the finished art work and to its style. The emphasis on style and how style itself seemed to be a function of the novel's form and design recalled for me Susan Sontag's important ideas on this issue. For Sontag, styles belong to traditions and are based on conventions (545). As Sontag suggests, a writer works within or against such traditions and conventions. Placing my novel within a tradition

of blues fiction, I discovered a form which influenced both my novel's design and style.

In writing and revising Big City Blues, I incorporated many of the elements of blues fiction discussed above. Formally, my book makes use of blues techniques such as vamps and riffs. I also incorporated paratextual material in the form of quotes from blues songs for each chapter or "Verse," the use of which acts within the blues tradition of intertextuality. Additionally, I modeled my protagonist on the blues hero as one who fights against inconsequentiality, against annihilation and the loss of voice in a transcendent movement from adversity toward affirmation. The voice also falls within the tradition of blues fiction with its self-conscious, self-critical lyric style emphasizing themes of improvisation and survival. The movement of the blues hero toward self-responsibility is likewise an important aspect of my text, as are a tension between the individual and the community and a sense of the tragic-comic. In these formal ways my text resembles Ellison's, Alexie's, and other texts within the tradition of blues fiction.

Many of the changes I made over the course of revising the novel helped to shape it into its blues form. The addition of the Prologue was one such important change. The Prologue of my work, as in Ellison's Prologue in Invisible Man, establishes the voice of the blues hero, the singer's vamping until ready. A form of paratext, the Prologue also acts, as Gérard Genette explains, as a "site of pragmatics and of a strategy" (261). The Prologue figures the central concerns of the text. One such concern is the protagonist Mark Callahan's desire to come to an understanding of himself in order to transcend his blues. As Mark declares in the novel's opening lines, "I don't think you can ever really know anybody until you begin to know

yourself. You might say that's what I'm doing now, getting to know myself better and remembering" (1). These lines establish memory as an important aspect of my text, as it is for Ellison's text though for a different purpose. The Prologue of my novel also prefigures the conflict with Mark's family and foreshadows the relationship between Mark and Sheila, his ex-girlfriend. Lastly, the Prologue establishes the voice and comic-tragic mood of the text, as well as the sense of down-heartedness which Mark must transcend.

In addition to my vamping Prologue and its purpose within the text, the novel's voice also plays an important role in establishing the blues style of my work and in controlling the ironic distances generated by the first-person protagonist. Similar to a blues song in which the voice shapes the song's style, the voice of a fiction acts to generate a style. As Wayne Booth explains, the voice everywhere in a text gives shape to every word and sentence, controlling the tone and mood (74). The stylistics of voice also act, as Sontag suggests, to manipulate the ironic distances in terms of the amount of emotional participation of the reader (555). The voice acting in this fashion can draw the reader closer to or further away from the protagonist. At times, the reader can be at great emotional, intellectual, and even temporal distance from the protagonist, resulting in a loss of sympathy and even a condemnation of the protagonist; however, at other times, this distance can be relatively close, suggesting greater empathy with the main character. Control of the voice then is essential to controlling how the reader reacts to the protagonist and to conveying, if any, a change in the protagonist over the course of a story, a change reflective of the blues hero's movement toward self-responsibility.

The voice of Mark Callahan, a streetwise character who speaks in slang and

regional idioms, takes on these functions. At the beginning of my novel, there is a greater sense of emotional and intellectual distance than at the end. For example, expressing concern over his job and the state of affairs with his girlfriend, Sheila, Mark tells the reader:

> I made some calls and took an early lunch to soak my brain with a few beers and fill my stomach with Vienna redhots smothered in relish and mustard. After a couple cold ones, I got the courage to call Sheila and ask her to meet with me at Blacky's after she got off work. It took some pleading, but she finally agreed. I felt too good to be going back to the office, so I spent the rest of the windy afternoon at Belmont Harbor on a park bench feeding pigeons french fry crumbs, watching joggers, and thinking about what to say when I saw her. (12)

At this point in the story, Mark has not yet reached a sense of self-responsibility about his actions, which is conveyed to the reader by the glib voice. However, Mark's ability to become more self-conscious about his actions and his feelings toward others grows as the novel progresses, consistent with the thematics of the blues novel. Reflecting on the possibility that his friend's mother might lose her job, he responds:

> I stopped for a few moments outside Duke's place. A light was on in the front room, but the curtains were closed. I thought about checking in to see if he had made it home the night before with Linda and to find out how things were going with his mother. I worried about his mother. I didn't want her to lose her job, especially with winter coming on so fast. (155)

At this point late in the story, the distance between Mark and the reader, a function of

the sincere voice, is much less than at the beginning of the novel. He shows himself, in the tradition of blues fiction, to be moving toward greater self-consciousness and self-responsibility. As the function of the blues voice in my text demonstrates, consistent with similar strategies in Ellison's and Alexie's texts, the voice can be used to manipulate the ironic distances to display the emotional and intellectual growth of the protagonist.

In addition to voice, the formal use of blues quotes to preface each verse or chapter helps in the creation of my text as a blues fiction. These quotes, songs from famous blues artists, function similarly to the blues songs prefacing each chapter of Alexie's Reservation Blues. In my text, each blues quote of each chapter prefigures the thematic focus and comments on the action of a particular chapter. Such quotes also act to recall the tradition of the blues in an intertextual fashion. Once again, as Murray suggests, the blues "derive most directly from styles of other musicians who play the blues" (Hero 83). In other words, the blues are a learned art in which the artist is self-conscious about the conventions of the art form. Blues artists learn and build from the work of musicians who have come before them. In using such prefatory quotes, I establish my self-consciousness about working within the conventions of a tradition of blues fiction. Such a move recalls Robert Palmer's suggestion that the blues musician relies heavily on tradition and borrowing (69). In this fashion, blues musicians, through the intertextuality of their music, assert themselves against a collective past. Likewise, the blues writer recalls such a past and works within it to establish his own style.

Just as voice, intertextuality, and the structure of my novel help to place it within a tradition of blues fiction, the role of blues hero has a similar function. The

blues hero, as I have defined it, fights against inconsequentiality, against annihilation and the loss of voice in a transcendent movement from adversity toward affirmation. The blues hero, as Murray cogently argues, asserts himself against the nada of existence. Such a hero is a fighter. In the midst of loneliness and despair, in confronting racial injustice, in facing down-heartedness in love, in the loss of a job, in overcoming family conflict, and/or in confronting existential anxiety, the blues hero must assess his or her condition and seek to rise out of the dark hole. In many ways, the blues hero struggles to make the world cohere. The blues hero, as Ellison contends, also strives for self-responsibility, seeking for his or her voice to be heard. My protagonist, Mark Callahan, reflects the nature of such blues heroes. He strives for self-assertion and seeks for his voice to be heard, sometimes against an overwhelming sense of defeat, disappointment and misfortune. As Ralph Ellison explains, the "attraction" of the blues is that "they fall short of tragedy only in that they provide no solution, offer no scapegoat but the self" (94). The blues hero, as Ellison points out, must take responsibility for his actions, even in a world which makes such a possibility difficult.

Blues hero Mark Callahan, when good work is difficult to find and when there is nowhere to turn, must look to himself. The struggle for survival and self-consciousness about one's actions represents the thematic center of my text. In the blues spirit of improvisation, Mark must sometimes be quick on his feet, using his resources in a streetwise fashion, as in his meeting with Father O'Brian in which he makes excuses for his whereabouts. At other times, Mark riffs on life, speculating about his ability to pull through crisis:

> I only got paid once a month after my quota was filled. I never made

> enough, and after paying back all my debts from the month before, I never had a cent to my name. I promised myself time and time again that I'd quit spending all my dough, stay home a few nights a week, and get out of debt. Problem is, I could only make it work for a couple days before being home drove me crazy--Pops's yelling, Sean's crying, Karen's complaining--and then I was back out drinking my fill of Style and telling myself one more's not gonna break me. (22)

Such riffing, the repitition of a common theme or motif in blues fiction, aids in Mark's self-understanding. In the way Invisible Man riffs or speculates about his ability to transcend his problem, Mark's riffing serves a similar purpose.

The focus on Mark's blues also addresses a number of other conflicts important to the tradition of blues fiction. Class conflict, down-heartedness in love, and the tension between the individual and the community represent additional thematic concerns of my text. Mark comes from a Chicago working-class background, which limits the availability of choices he can make, such as pursuing an education with the luxury afforded to many middle-class students. Mark's class difference also figures prominently in his relationship with Sheila, his girlfriend. Sheila comes from a suburban background, and her parents would prefer her to marry within her class. To Sheila's family, Mark does not represent the best suitor. Likewise, there is a predominant difference in class between Mark and Skylar, who comes from a wealthy background. Unlike Mark, she is at leisure to live as she pleases, a quality which Mark finds attractive in her. Although she does help Mark in a number of ways, he will never be her class equal, nor will he have the same opportunities that she has. A scene with the doorman in Verse Eight vividly depicts this difference:

> This doorman, D. J. Simms, looked me over, staring into my bloodshot eyes and at my denim jacket. I knew he knew I was stoned, that I wasn't a regular in these places. I'm sure he had ideas about why I was there, but he didn't say a word. He just stared, his eyes burning a hole in my jacket. (90-91)

In this moment, Mark feels his transgression as a working-class kid in a building on the city's Gold Coast. He recognizes his difference, as well as the doorman's perception of him. Big City Blues represents a spectrum of class differences, which in many ways reflect the rigid class structure of the city itself, a city "[w]ith so many bigots . . . they didn't name a street Division for nothing (31). Combined with Mark's need for self-responsibility class difference clearly contributes to his problems. Although he does have limits placed upon him by his class, family, and lack of employment, he must learn to live within the limits of his fate. The blues hero, as Ellison makes clear, must seek to transcend such limits in order to rise out of the black hole fate offers. Until Mark can become such a hero, he limits his possibility for transcending the adversity he faces.

The tension between the individual and community, another element of blues fiction, also plays a vital thematic role in my text, a role similar to that found in Ellison's Invisible Man and Alexie's Reservation Blues. Citing the importance of community for Invisible Man, Phillip Brian Harper explains that Invisible Man can only confirm his identity, his sense of self, through the African American community (139). It is this realization that enables Invisible Man to achieve not only a sense of self but a sense of self-responsibility. Similarly, identity rooted in community shapes the thematic center of Reservation Blues. Likewise, Mark Callahan must also come to

an understanding of where he is from and how much his identity roots itself in his neighborhood community. The Widow McKinley, Sal the grocer, Haziz the convenience-store owner, as well as Duke and his mother, each helps to give shape to Mark's sense of self. Without community, Mark is adrift:

> [N]o matter how much I wanted to go home and draw a hot bath, where I could slip under the water and let the warmth seep into me, it wasn't going to happen anytime soon. Eventually, though, I did have to go back to the neighborhood to check on the widow, but I didn't want to face Sal or Haziz. I didn't want to say I failed them[.] (132-33)

Only through a reconciliation with his neighborhood and the members of his community can Mark reconcile with himself. Furthermore, the recognition of his role within the community would be for Mark a significant step in moving toward self-responsibility.

By employing these formal and thematic aspects of blues writing, Big City Blues seeks to find a position within the tradition of blues fiction. However, to recognize such a tradition, one must remember how the blues developed from the specific cultural and historical circumstances in which former slaves of the Reconstruction period found themselves. Poor, many times hungry and desperate for work, African Americans sought to overcome their adversity in the affirmation of song. Through the blues and the power of song, African Americans revered life and endured the unspeakable hardships of being Black in America. Their songs about racial injustice, hunger, natural disaster, poverty, prejudice, love, work, jealousy and betrayal addressed problems fundamental to the African American community, and finally to the human condition. Blues music spoke about suffering and offered a

glimmer of hope. So powerful were these blues, the music discovered and developed by African Americans grew to influence the larger American culture, and today such music is internationally embraced. The tradition of blues fiction, originating in the tradition of blues music, addresses these same concerns. The blues hero vamping and riffing through story fights against inconsequentiality, against annihilation and the loss of voice. In their intertextuality, the blues brings the past in contact with the uncertain present. In our postmodern nuclear age on the verge of the millennium, this sense of uncertainty expressed by the tragic-comic nature of the blues reflects a more general sense of uncertainty in our nation. We are, as Robert Johnson sings, at a cross roads seeking direction. The blues artist addresses such concerns and the need for self-responsibility, even in the face of problems which may at times seem insurmountable.

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BIG CITY BLUES

The epigrams for each Verse are borrowed in part from the following:

Prologue: Buddy Guy. "First Time I Met the Blues." The Blues: Volume 1. LP. Chess-MCA, CH-9253, 1986.

Verse One: Lowell Fulson "Reconsider Baby." The Blues: Volume 1. LP. Chess-MCA, CH-9253, 1986.

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Verse Fourteen: W[illiam].C[hristopher]. Handy. "Train's a Comin'." Blues: An Anthology. Ed. W.C. Handy. New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1926. New York: MacMillan, 1972. 48.

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The author has tried his best to render the actual milieu of Chicago, although the names of some places described have been changed to protect the author from the wrath of future litigation. The characters in this novel are also fictitious. Any resemblances to persons living or living only in memory are purely coincidental.

PROLOGUE

Good Morning, Mr. Blues,

I keep wondering what you doing here so soon,

You know you been with me every morning, Blues,

Every night and every afternoon.

I don't think you can ever really know anybody until you begin to know yourself. You might say that's what I'm doing now, getting to know myself better and remembering. I pride myself on my memory and can remember things about my life since about age two. That's about twenty years. When I called my family to tell them I was going to write it all down, they told me to change their names and stuff, like somehow they were afraid of the truth. I don't think I'd paint anyone in a light that's not their own, and besides, if I ever wrote it down, all they'd find are bits and pieces of me.

I really have nothing to worry about. If my Pops read books, he'd only read the blurb on the back. He's not one for long narrations. "Tell it to me short and sweet," he'd say. On the other hand, if my mom read anything but the Bible or *Life* magazine, she'd want to hear my whole story since I began remembering. I know it's crazy, but that's just the way she is. "Tell me everything, Mark," and I'd have to give her all the details. Then there's my sister, Karen, who's always too busy with her brat. "You think I have time for books?" she'd tell me. Some day, if I ever wrote it all down she'd be the first to read it.

I could go on forever talking about my family and how I'm planning on writing stuff some day, but right now I'm still remembering, putting it all back together, trying to find a beginning somewhere in all the endings. I think I'm much better at starting than finishing. At least that's what Sheila, my ex, told me. I haven't seen her in about six months now, although it seems more like years. If I had a story to tell, it'd begin with the day she split, because that's really the day everything in my life came crashing down.

VERSE ONE

You said you once loved me,

But now I guess you changed your mind,

Why don't you reconsider, baby,

Give yourself a little more time.

Nearly four-thirty, I'd been out in the Chicago cold all afternoon and couldn't wait to get into some place warm. The air was sharp, the October wind blustery. Thinking about the last time I saw Sheila, I hurried through the revolving door into Blacky's Bar and Grill on Grand to meet with her. We'd been seeing each other for about two years, but that afternoon it all seemed much longer. Everything can seem much longer when it's so intense, like slow-mo. Minutes can seem like hours, hours like days, days like years.

We were getting together to talk, "to work things out," as she so easily put it. I'd been ducking her for about a week, since the night I asked her--for the second time--to marry me. "You're just drunk," she told me.

"What does that matter?"

"Because it does."

"Will you marry me or not?" I said.

"Ask me again, later, after you've sobered up, Mark."

"I'm asking you now, for the last goddamn time, will you or not?"

I could go on, but you probably already know what she told me. I blew up

afterwards and stormed out of her place, slamming doors and thumping my feet. After all I shouted on my way out the door, I couldn't see her, not right away that is. She didn't even return the messages I left on her machine.

Hoping to get her back that afternoon, I brought along a purple iris, her favorite flower, to soften things up. In the early days, I always used to bring her stuff, like Frango mint creams from Marshall Fields or the latest tapes of local blues bands. I even brought her a kitten once, which she named Alley. The name was all her idea.

Anyways, the place was packed, wall to wall, the happy hour suit-crowd, and the mirrors that covered the place made it look all the more crowded. The noise was an incredible muddle of Muddy Waters' blues over the conversation of a hundred people. The place stunk, too, cigarettes and stale beer mixed with char-broil, the kind of stink that really makes you hungry. I found a spot in the corner of the bar and sat down. With a few minutes to kill, I called for a couple Old Styles--I had a nervous thirst--and ordered a world famous Blacky burger with grilled onions. The bartender even gave me a glass of water for the flower.

I drank down the first beer in a hurry, all the while keeping my eyes on the brass and glass revolving door looking for Sheila. I felt the long day catching up with me and felt even worse when I remembered how Pops came blasting through my bedroom door at six a.m. "You're out of here," he bellowed, flipping on my light, "now!"

"Pops?" I said, squinting at him because of the brightness.

"Don't Pops me, let's go, move it, time's up. We had an agreement."

"Just another day," I pleaded, my head throbbing from the night before. "All I

need's just a little more time to pull it all together."

"You've had your time," he said, his deep voice resonating about the room, "plenty of time. I've been telling you every month for the last three years: you don't carry your load, you're out. On your own, big shot. Let's go, Mark, get up."

He just stood there in front of my bed like a big log, expecting me to do something. I took a long look at my broad shouldered old man, dressed for work in grease soiled jeans and a flannel that covered his gut, and shook my head. He was so loud he probably woke my sister's baby.

"Listen, Pops, all I need's a little extension. Payday is at the end of the week. Besides, I haven't even got a place to stay yet," I told him. I sold ad-space part-time for *North Side News*. They paid me by the hour and gave me five percent on anything I sold. Truth was, though, they didn't owe me much at all, hundred clams tops. Business over the last month had been lousy, real lousy. Nobody was buying space. I even tried working after hours for nothing except commission from what I could sell, but that too was a bust. I had a hard enough time just trying to meet the quota and renew the ads we did have.

"No deals," he said. "Today's the day. I've been telling you for months. Let's go, out of bed." That's when he began picking my clothes off the floor and stuffing them into my laundry bag.

"Just a minute, just a minute!" I said, my head pounding as I jumped out of bed.

He took a long look at me as I stood in front of him, naked except for my white skivvies. I never felt shorter than when I stood in front of my old man. At six feet, he was nearly eight inches taller than me, a measly five-four and a half--and I

stress the half. My old man was probably wondering too how such a skinny, sunken-chested, pale, knobby-kneed kid with long hair could ever be his son. Sometimes I wondered about it myself. We had very little in common besides Cubbies baseball and beer. He ate cereal for breakfast and I preferred scrambled eggs. He drank Bud, I drank Old Style. He liked Polishes with mustard, I preferred redhots with ketchup. He got up early, I rose late. He had hair on his chest and I had pimples. I could go on, but I think you're getting the picture.

That morning, he did a lot of head shaking. "You've got fifteen minutes." Then he pushed the heavy sack into my arms, nearly knocking me on the bed.

While I dressed and gathered what I could, I heard my mother in the kitchen pleading my case, but my situation was hopeless. Before leaving, I made my way into my sister's room to say goodbye to her brat, the only one who might really miss me besides my mother. Trying to be as quiet as I could, I opened her door and stepped inside only long enough to kiss the kid softly on the forehead. He opened his little blue eyes, looking confused. "Makka, Makka," he cried and I tried to quiet him so as not to wake my sister. Whenever I looked at the kid, I couldn't help remember how once I might have been a father, but this was no time to dwell on the past. "Take care little wheeler," I told him, "and stay out of trouble." I gave the kid another kiss and lifted a few cigarettes from the pack of Marlboros on Karen's dresser before making my way out. Carrying my bag under my arm and wearing my denim jacket, I walked quietly down the stairs, slipping unnoticed out the front door.

The bartender placed in front of me a steamy Blacky burger, dripping with cheese and grease and piled high with bacon, onions, and tomatoes on a poppy-seed bun. Before taking a bite, I took another look towards the door for Sheila, and began

to think she was blowing me off. It had been just that kind of day, a day which only became worse when I finally made it to work at the *North Side* office later that morning. My boss, Dave, editor-in-chief of the dinky neighborhood paper, was on my case about my not meeting the weekly ad quota.

Things at *North Side* were bad, but about nine months before, Dave had been my number one supporter when I was the top space seller riding a rosy wave of success. When you're on top, everything seems to go your way. People look at you different, they treat you different. You even smell good. The honeymoon between me and Dave lasted until I was unable to repeat my selling feat the next month, August that is, the month Sheila lost the baby. That's when I became just another part-time joe needing simply to meet the quota or not bother coming back the next day.

Anyways, when I walked into Dave's office shortly after Pops threw me out of the house, Dave was steaming about the quotas. "Where's this week's ads, boy?" he shouted over the sound of banging typewriters. "I need those ads. If we don't fill the space, we can't print the paper." He blew smoke from his cheap Honduran into my face, making me want to puke. He was flushed red, and the wrinkles in his leathery forehead seemed deeper than normal.

"I don't have them," I told him. "Haven't finished making my calls yet."

"Don't have them, don't have them? Haven't finished your calls? Goddamn son-of-a-bitch, boy! When are you ever going to get it together?"

Since Sheila had refused again to marry me, I didn't do much else for a week other than sit in my room during the day watching reruns of *Bewitched* and *Gilligan's Island* or spend nights getting loaded with my buddy, Duke. All together, I blew off

four straight days of work. At the time, I didn't see anything wrong with what I was doing--you never do when you're in the middle of it all--and I felt sure Dave would come around once I filled my quota. Hell, I needed the time to think, to mull things over. Everybody needs a little space once in awhile.

"I've got a good mind to fire your ass," Dave said, "but I need those ads for this week's paper. Come up with something by tomorrow, Callahan, or I'll find your replacement." I knew by the red in his neck he was serious. I really couldn't afford to lose my job. I needed the cash to pay back debts to the widow McKinely, to Sal at the grocery, to Duke, and even to my sister.

I made some calls and took an early lunch to soak my brain with a few beers and fill my stomach with Vienna redhots smothered in relish and mustard. After a couple cold ones, I got the courage to call Sheila and ask her to meet with me at Blacky's after she got off work. It took some pleading, but she finally agreed. I felt too good to be going back to the office, so I spent the rest of the windy afternoon at Belmont Harbor on a park bench feeding pigeons french fry crumbs, watching joggers, and thinking about what to say when I saw her.

That's most of what happened before I showed up at Blacky's where I polished off the burger and waited for her to meet me. She was late, probably making me sweat on purpose. I ordered another beer to calm my nerves. After paying my tab, all I had was a few bucks left to my name. Not that I wasn't used to being low on cash, but I had promised the widow McKinley I'd pick up some grub for her on my way back up to the neighborhood--to Duke's place--that evening. I couldn't let the old lady down; she was counting on me.

In many ways, the widow was my adopted grandmother, since my own

grandparents had all kicked by the time I was born. The old lady and her husband, Hal, were close friends with my mom's parents, church friends, who got together every Sunday after mass for coffee and snacks. "Donut day," the widow called it. She had two kids once, twins, but they both died in infancy from polio, and because of complications at their birth, the widow was unable to ever have children again. At eighty-five, she was one of the oldest residents of my neighborhood, that is, of Wrigleyville at Clark and Addison near the ballpark. I really didn't mind helping the old lady out. We hit it off right away, spending our afternoons smoking cigarettes and playing gin rummy--that's her favorite game if you're not up for five card stud. I've run errands for her for years, did the laundry--or I should say brought it home for my mother to wash--did the shopping, and took in her mail each evening, that sort of stuff. I should also say that whenever I had a problem with Pops, the old lady's door was always open.

Anyways, I had promised the widow I'd pick up a steak, potato, and some green beans if she called the doctor about her cough. "Make sure they're Green Giant," she told me. She wouldn't eat any other brand--you know how old people are. But after paying off my bar tab, I didn't have enough cash for anything other than macaroni and cheese.

It wasn't long after I vowed to ask Sal at the grocery for more credit when Sheila showed up. I waved her down and watched her move toward me through the heavy crowd. She stepped deliberately and confidently, a confidence I attributed to her navy blazer. She looked very professional and all, especially with her long chestnut hair in a bun. I must say the hair was a bit disappointing, since she had such beautiful hair and promised on the phone to wear it down. She looked a bit up tight

in such clothing. I much preferred her in blue jeans and a t-shirt with some of that lacy stuff on underneath. When she walked up to me, I pushed my dish to the side and rose to greet her. I gave her a warm, friendly hug. "You look great," I said. "And here, I know it's your favorite," I added, giving her the purple iris.

"You didn't have to," she said before smelling the flower.

"Please, sit down," I offered. "This might be the only seat left in the place. Can I get you a drink?"

"Ice water would be nice," she said, sitting down and placing the flower on the bar. I ordered her a water and another beer for myself.

"How you been?" I asked.

"Just fine," she said, pushing a few stray hairs from her forehead.

"And your parents?"

"The same, you know."

"Anything new? Anything you want to tell me about? Been anywhere lately?"

"It's only been a week, Mark, and I've worked every day since last Thursday. And you? How's things with the paper?"

"Couldn't be better," I said. "You have plans tomorrow night?" I asked.

"Like a date?"

"Since you brought it up."

"I told you, I've been working," she said and took a sip of water. "I knew I shouldn't have come down here. I knew you'd be this way."

"What way?" I asked, looking at the bartender mixing drinks.

"Upset. Angry."

"Me? About what?"

"You know," she said tapping her fingers on the bar.

"No, really, I don't."

"You don't have to get defensive; you're always getting defensive."

"I'm not being defensive," I said, rolling back my eyes.

"You are."

"I'm not," I said, "For crying out loud, Sheila, what the hell's got into you?"

For a few moments she didn't say a word. The bar seemed to get louder. She took a sip of water and I stared at her glossy fingernails. "I knew I shouldn't have come down here," she said again, breaking the silence.

"Then why did you? Can you answer that?" I said, raising my voice.

"You don't have to yell."

"I bet you just came down here to rub it in, that's all."

"I came to see you," she said, "I thought we'd be able to--"

"I thought you'd have changed your mind," I told her.

The conversation stopped and Sheila started to get up. "I have to be going," she said, picking up the purple flower.

I didn't know what to say next. "This all has to do with losing the baby, doesn't it? It always comes back to the baby. The whole world didn't stop last August. A lot of women miscarry in their first pregnancy."

"How I feel about us has nothing to do with losing the baby." Maybe she was right. Maybe it had started before that, like with the pregnancy and the first time I'd asked her to marry me.

"Then what about all our other plans?" I asked. "What about the apartment? The trip to New York City? Don't you still want to see a show on Broadway?" It

had always been her dream to see a show on Broadway. "What about all that?"

"I knew I shouldn't have come down here," she said.

"What do you want me to do, Sheila, go back to the warehouse with my father and Brin Jansen? You know how I feel about that place," I said, turning away.

The cigarette smoke was thick, the air resting heavily on our shoulders. The crowd seemed nearly to smoother us. I finished off my beer and turned to Sheila. "What do you say we just take off, get out of this town right now? Maybe getting away will do us some good, give us some time together like the old days. Let's go up to Lake Geneva. Remember last time, skinny dipping at three a.m. in that freezing water and drinking champagne until the sun rose over the lake? Remember the creaky bed and the sounds of those damn frogs? What do you say? Let's get out of here and do it again. If you don't want to go to the lake, pick some place else, anywhere? Maybe we could just get a room for tonight at the Drake?" I didn't have the cash for such extravagance, but I knew that if I could get her to go, she'd pay. We really did need some time alone.

"We can't just take off. I have to work, you know."

"Call in sick. What do you say?" She'd done it before, call in sick that is. I'd blow off work, too. Then at her place, we'd spend the rest of the morning in bed. In the afternoon, we'd go to Belmont Harbor to count sailboats or we'd walked along the beach with our feet in the cold water, the way I used to do with my father when I was a kid. Afterwards, we'd go back to her place, get back into the sack, and order Chinese from Fong's on Irving while we watched old movies on WGN.

"We can't. It wouldn't be right," she said.

"So this is it? Is it? Sheila?"

"We need some time apart," she said, staring down at the purple flower. "It might help us to get some perspective."

Perspective. It all sounded so smart, but for me it felt plain and simple like the end. I began to feel my head spin, nauseous like, and in a bad way I needed to get out of the place before I cracked.

"It's best this way, Mark, it really is," she said, starting to go.

"Whatever, Sheila, whatever."

She took a long look at me. I moved to kiss her, but she turned her face away. Instead, I held her tightly in my arms, burying my face in her hair, until she broke it off.

"You're not making this easy," she told me.

"Neither are you," I said. "If you still want to get away, I'm ready when you are." Without a word, she turned to go.

I watched her make her way through the thick crowd towards the revolving door. I wanted to kick myself for saying everything all wrong and nothing like I planned earlier that afternoon on the park bench at Belmont Harbor. I wanted to run after her, to tell her all about my troubles with Pops and about how hard it was to sell space these days. I only wanted one more chance to set things straight. I just needed some time to pull it all together. I watched her push through the doorway onto Grand. The traffic was heavy.

VERSE TWO

Everyday, everyday I have the blues,

Everyday, everyday I have the blues,

You see me worrying,

It's you I hate to lose.

I bolted from Blacky's as fast as I could before I lost it. I felt like slugging someone or something, but instead gave the revolving door a good stiff push. The cold air reeked like rotten eggs from a steady stream of rush hour exhaust. Almost six o'clock, I felt sure the widow McKinley expected me to show up any minute with the steak and beans. I headed to La Salle to catch the northbound CTA back to my neighborhood. Out of cash, I luckily still had a ride left on my transfer.

I paced about the bus stop and bummed a smoke. I wasn't a regular smoker--couldn't afford it--but it hit the spot something good like those Marlboros I lifted from Karen earlier that morning. I sucked down the cigarette and distanced myself from the crowd gathered at the curbside. The glass skyscrapers looming overhead seemed to press down upon me. I couldn't get Sheila off my mind.

When the bus arrived, the fat driver punched my ticket and I squeezed my way to a standing position between two smelly bellhops still in uniform. Pits stained with sweat, their breath reeked like garlic. I couldn't wait to get back to the neighborhood to see the widow. She could always cheer me up, and she always had cold beer waiting for me in the refrigerator. The ride, however, seemed to go on forever as the

bus creaked and chugged its way north to Clark, stopping at every corner to pinch out some riders and squeeze in a few more.

The bus coughed me out at the corner of Clark and Addison across from Wrigley Field. Taking in a deep breath of the cool air blowing off the Lake, I began the four block walk to Sal's Grocery on Halsted to pick up the widow's grub. Sal's place had been on Halsted for as long as I could remember and although Sal Sr. himself no longer ran the business, Sal Jr. kept the place in fine shape. They still had the best beer-soaked salami in the entire city and people came from all over the north side just to take a few pounds home. You might say the husky Sal Sr. and Sal Jr. even looked like salamis with their dark complexions and smooth bald heads. Their storefront was covered with the stuff; long strands like love beads hung across the entire front window where large advertisements announced the week's best buys.

I stepped on the rubber mat and the automatic door, which Sal Jr. put in when he took over the place about five years ago, swung open. Sal's place wasn't the largest grocery in our neighborhood, with only eight skinny aisles packed into a store only big enough to really fit six, but it had more to offer than any of those large stores ever could. Barely large enough to fit a grocery cart, the aisles at Sal's were one-way only with no room for passing. Along the rear was the deli with its refrigerated cases displaying Sal's best cuts of boiled ham, turkey breast, and the most tender corned beef this side of Ireland, not to mention the prime-choice pork chops, lamb chops, and steaks. On top of the case, Sal kept his loaves of home-baked wheat and rye stacked next to a fish bowl filled with large German dills.

I had shopped at Sal's so many years it seemed like home. Walking past the checkout, I greeted Nina, Sal's niece, and headed straight for the deli. From behind

the casing, the doctor of salami, Sal Jr., dressed in his usual white apron, white shirt, and white pants stained with salami juice, greeted me. "Glad to see you today, Mr. Callahan," he said with a voice that came from deep within a chest bristling with dark hair.

"Likewise, " I said.

"What's new? How's the family? How's Sheila?" He always asked about everyone. He knew Sheila, too, because I often took her with me to get a salami sandwich or to do some shopping for the widow. He liked to kid me about marriage and kids, how one day I'd have brats of my own.

"Things aren't so good," I told him.

"Not so good, why not so good, Mr. Callahan?"

"It's a long story," I said.

"I understand, I understand," he reassured me. He was always understanding and sincere, like his father used to be. When I looked at Sal Jr., it was like looking back at yesterday when I was a boy and went to Sal's with my mother.

"Sal," I told him as I looked over the various cuts of beef, "I need a favor."

"Let me guess," he said, looking down at me from behind the counter, "you need more credit?"

"Just a bit," I said, "for the widow."

He looked down at me again. "This isn't Goodwill. I got bills to pay around here. But for the widow, I could even give you more credit, at least until the end of the month."

"You know I'm good for it," I told him, thinking about the sixty or so I already owed him. "And I'll keep after them over at *North Side* to make sure you

keep getting the discount rate on your ad space." Sal needed the cut-rate space to bring in the extra business which kept him from going under. To get him the cheap space, I dropped my commission; that's why Sal was always willing to float me some credit. Usually, I paid him back at the end of each month with time to spare for him to cover his own bills. Lots of us in the neighborhood counted on Sal in this way. We scratched each other's backs. That's just the way it worked in my neighborhood or you just weren't considered a part of it.

"The widow wanted some round," I told him.

"This here's the best I've got," he told me, holding up a juicy slice for me to inspect.

"Looks great, wrap it up with a shake of your seasoning." Sal not only had the best cuts of beef in the city, but he gave your meat a free shake of his own secret blend. He handed me the small package, and on my way to the register, I picked out a russet and grabbed a can of Green Giant. The widow McKinley had to have Green Giant and claimed all the other brands tasted like grass clippings and bits of wet cardboard. One time I brought her a can of Sun-West and she refused to eat. "I'd rather starve than eat this crap," the old lady bitched, dumping the beans into the sink. She could be that way sometimes, old and cranky. I guess if you live long enough and take all the crap life throws you, you got a right to be a jerk-off.

The old lady was a special case. Besides being old and arthritic, she had no income except for her welfare. She outlived her husband's life insurance, and his pension from GE Hotpoint barely covered her medical bills. She owed so much she refused to see another doctor ever again. "Better off dead," she muttered when she got really drunk, but I knew she didn't mean it.

Hell, when it comes down to dying, I don't think anybody's ever ready to go. She did get a little welfare, but that went to pay the rent. Each month she barely had enough left over to feed herself, and since she lent me fifty bucks already this month, I had no choice but credit with Sal. I only got paid once a month after my quota was filled. I never made enough, and after paying back all my debts from the month before, I never had a cent to my name. I promised myself time and time again that I'd quit spending all my dough, stay home a few nights a week, and get out of debt. Problem is, I could only make it work for a couple days before being home drove me crazy--Pops's yelling, Sean's crying, Karen's complaining--and then I was back out drinking my fill of Style and telling myself one more's not gonna break me.

I took a spot in the register line that normally moved along slowly because Nina, the skinny, teenaged checkout girl gossiped with all the customers. A wrist full of silver bracelets and four earring studs up the side of her left ear, she had the scoop on everyone in the neighborhood. And when she wasn't talking with customers, she was combing her jet-black hair or chewing another stick of Doublemint. This time though, the line moved along more swiftly than usual. I watched my groceries slide forward along the purring rubber belt. "Sorry to hear the news," Nina told me, as she rung up my goods.

"What news?" I asked.

"About you being booted from home this morning," she said. "Your sister was in here earlier picking up some stuff for the kid. Said you woke them real early. Lots of noise and crap."

"Mostly crap," I told her. She wrote my name down in the credit ledger.

"Are you going back tonight?"

"Don't think so," I said.

"If you need a place to stay," she said, batting her eyes at me.

"I'll be at Duke's, at least until his mother boots me too." Someday, I thought, she'd be a real cutey. But if I ever did anything with her, I'd never live it down. She smiled at me while putting my groceries in a paper sack. For Chrissakes, I thought, she was Sal's niece and only sixteen.

With the goods in hand, I headed back down Addison towards Freemont. The widow lived at the far end of Freemont on the corner at Waveland on the top floor of a three-story brownstone facing Wrigley Field. I lived, or I mean my family that is, in a similar brownstone a block south. Duke lived with his divorced mother, just a few buildings before the widow's place. Duke and I grew up on these streets. We waited for Cubby home run balls on Waveland and hung out together at the Bagwan Convenient Store on Halsted playing Space Invaders and Pac-Man till all hours of the night. We played stickball in the vacant lot just down the block and we always ate Vienna redhots smothered with tomatoes, mustard, relish, and peperoncinis at Louie's on Addison. I never once thought about what it'd be like to live anywhere but in my neighborhood or eat redhots at any other place in the city besides Louie's. Generations lived and died in these neighborhoods, unless they let them get all ratty or something.

It shook me up to think about moving away, and down inside I just didn't have the heart to do it. I couldn't think of being too far from my mother, or for that matter, my sister and her baby, and even my father when he wasn't being an asshole. We had been a close family once and never argued before breakfast, but lately things had changed.

It didn't take long to get to the widow's place, and when I arrived I pressed the call button above her postbox after taking out the day's mail. "It's me, Mark," I said and she buzzed open the door. I climbed the six flights of stairs to her apartment, where the front door was slightly ajar awaiting my arrival. Sometimes she left the door open to let in heat from the hallway. I guess it saved a few bucks, but I kept warning that she needed to leave the door locked. "This ain't Peoria," I told her. She did have a revolver, which she kept in a kitchen drawer, but she was so slow, the gun would never be of any use.

Before entering, I gave her door a few taps. The widow's apartment was small and dark, and smelled like stale cigarettes mixed with the odor of the rubbing alcohol she used to massage her stiff legs. She had a tiny bedroom with a bathroom off to the side and a kitchen barely big enough to fit a table, two chairs, and an old pink Westinghouse refrigerator. Next to the kitchen, there was a sitting room with a tattered couch covered with an old white sheet, a Motorola television console, and an end table stacked high with outdated magazines like *Life*, *Reader's Digest*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*.

I walked into the kitchen where the widow, smoking a filterless Camel and coughing up a storm, waited for me. The room with yellowed cracking paint was filled with smoke and unusually dim because a bulb in the fixture needed replacing. I had promised on numerous occasions that I'd buy a bulb, borrow my old man's ladder, and change the light, but because of all my troubles, I never got around to it. Someday, I even planned to paint the place, but the widow was sure she'd be dead before it ever happened.

"You're looking good today," I told her, putting the mail and groceries on the

kitchen table before taking a seat across from her.

"Not bad for an old bag," she replied in a rough voice with a short hack. For a bony old lady, she had a tough, leathery look. Wrinkles crisscrossed her face like streets on a city roadmap. She had dark, sunken eyes and a prominent, rounded nose. Her grey, stringy hair was pulled back in a tail, making her thick, large forehead seem even wider. With a permanent slump to her back, she tried her best to sit up straight in her wheel chair.

She inspected the mail and then rolled her chair back to the frig to take two Blatz beers from the cooler. She rolled herself back to the table and gave me the cans to open. It wasn't easy for her to move around the cramped apartment in her cumbersome metal chair, but she managed. If she only had a bit more income, she could've moved downstairs to a bigger place where it wasn't so hard to get around.

"I brought the steak you wanted," I told her. "Did you call the med-center for an appointment?" Pushing aside the mail and emptying the grocery bag, she pretended not to hear a word I said. I didn't want to pressure her about the appointment, so I let it drop until a better moment. I couldn't stand to think about what life would be like without her griping and complaining.

The widow inspected the meat before wheeling herself to the stove. "Are you staying for dinner?" she asked.

"I already ate," I said, thinking about the greasy Blacky burger rumbling in my stomach. With arthritic hands, she took the can opener from her drawer to open the beans. "I'll get that," I told her.

"Sit down, sit down," she said. "An old lady's got to do some things for herself." After opening the can, she took a pan from the cabinet under the stove and

poured in the beans. I watched her fumble with the matches while she lit the stove. "Why so quiet, son?"

"It's nothing," I told her.

"Must be Sheila," she said, rubbing out her cigarette in the ashtray. "I can always tell when you got trouble with your girl."

"It's hopeless," I told her. "It's all over." The widow was fond of Sheila, who used to come over and play cards if I had to work nights. They played gin rummy, drank a bit--the widow her Blatz, Sheila some wine--and made girl-talk. At least that's what Sheila told me. On such nights, my ears rang for hours.

"You must be some kind of fool," the old lady said. "How can you let a catch like her get away?" I didn't respond. The old lady already knew the whole story. For the last week, I had talked about nothing else besides the night Sheila turned me down for the second time.

"Let's drop it," I said.

"Let's drop it, let's drop it," she parroted me. "'Fess up, son. She's still on you about the job, isn't she?" the old lady said.

"But I've got a job at the *North Side*," I said raising my voice some. "For Chrissakes, I just need some time to get on my feet. Who wants to be a pipefitter for the rest of his life? You couldn't pay me enough to go back to that warehouse."

"You would be out in the field with your father. It's good, steady pay," she said.

"They wouldn't put me in the field. I'd be back filling orders again."

The old lady stirred the steaming beans and flipped her steak, which was sizzling on the stove. She puffed down her cigarette and took a sip of her beer. "Maybe you should reconsider," she said.

"Whose side are you on?" I said. "You know how I feel."

"You know what's best," she said. The conversation was starting to sound like one of my old man's lectures.

"I have to go," I said.

The widow took her steak from the pan and placed it on a plate. "Stay and eat."

"I'm not hungry," I told her.

"Go home and think things over then," she said. "Give Sheila a call and have a good long talk."

I watched her put the plate on the table and then wheel herself back to get the pot of beans. "I'm not going home," I said. "Pops booted me this morning."

The old lady shook her head and I felt real bad. I hated to let her down. "Go talk with your father," she told me. "Apologize."

"It's no use," I said. "I couldn't pay him my rent anyway."

The old lady wheeled herself over to the cupboard next to the frig and took out a coffee can. She opened the lid and pulled out a fifty from her emergency fund. It was bad enough I already owed the widow and had credit all over the neighborhood. "Take this," she said. "Tell him you'll pay the rest later."

"I can't," I said.

"Take it," she said again, holding out the bill.

I took the money and pushed it into my pocket. "Thanks," I said. "I'll pay you back at the end of the week." With the money in my pocket, I felt a tremendous need to come clean, to tell her how work at the paper wasn't going well and how it would be some time before I paid back all the cash I owed her. I also wanted tell her

about my credit problems at Sal's, but couldn't. I knew if I did, she'd want to know how I spent her grocery money, and then I'd have to account for all those nights with Duke at the Blue Note Lounge or downtown at Hummingbirds. I was hopeless.

Before leaving, I stuck around for another beer while the old lady ate dinner. When I rose to leave, she grabbed my hand with her crooked fingers. "I'll call tomorrow morning," I said. "Promise me you'll give the doctor a ring about that cough."

"Take care, son," she said, squeezing my hand, "and stay out of trouble."

VERSE THREE

Worry, worry, worry,

Worry's all I can do.

My life is so miserable, baby,

All on account of you.

The hope I was going home to iron things out with Pops and Sheila lasted about as long as the walk down the six flights of stairs from the widow's place to where I sat down on her building's front steps to think about my next move. The night air was cold and crisp. The city moved around me, a siren fading in the distance down Halsted, cars honking their way through the intersection at Addison. On a chilly night like this, a fellow couldn't last too long on the streets without someplace warm to go. I myself didn't have a whole lot of choices. If I didn't make up with Pops, I was on the street, or at least would be after Duke's mom got sick of me sleeping on their couch, sucking down their Pepsi, and lounging in front of their t.v. With only a part-time job at *North Side News* where I wasn't selling any space and occasional weekend work unloading trucks at Sal's grocery, I was going noplace fast. I had to make something happen, like being the top space seller of the month again. Sure, I was mostly a lousy employee, cutting out for early lunches and coming back after a few beers, but I knew I had it in me, somewhere, to do it again.

I was plain sick of part-time positions, never having enough money, and not being able to move out on my own. But no matter what, it was still better than going

back to work at Pops's warehouse with Brin Jansen and the rest of them clowns. Field work? Who was Pops kidding? I'd never get to see the light of day again if I went back, and Jansen would have me in that dingy warehouse before I could spell Budweiser from the brim of his red and white cap. Then again, perhaps the widow was right. Maybe going home and making up with Pops was the best thing. At least it'd buy me a bit more time to work things out with Sheila.

My father and I hadn't always on bad terms. We had many years together without bad blood between us. When I was a kid, we hung out together on Saturday afternoons. He worked half-days on Saturday, and if it was summer he came home around two o'clock, about the third inning if the Cubbies were at Wrigley. On game days, because of all the traffic, it sometimes took him a bit longer, but I waited, tuned to the game we watched together while he ate lunch and drank a few Old Styles. Sometimes I even turned down the sound and gave him the play by play, pretending I was right there in the booth above home plate along with Jack Brickhouse. "It's the bottom of the seventh with two men on and Billy Williams steps up to the plate with a chance to bring this game home." I knew all the players and all their averages and even had a ball Williams hit over the fence onto Waveland Avenue. It didn't matter much how long I waited for my father to come home covered with grease and soot from fitting pipes all morning, or even if he smelled like a rusty pipe. I just wanted to hear him tell me, "You're all right, kid," as he brushed his large hands through my curly hair.

Some afternoons, if there wasn't a game to watch, we played catch in the street while my mother sat on the front steps braiding Karen's hair. "You've got quite an arm," the old man told me, even though most of the time the ball reached him on-the-

hop. Some nights we stayed out in the street tossing balls until it was so dim we could barely see. Gnats buzzed our heads and mosquitos nipped at our arms and neck, but nothing seemed to matter.

My plan was to go home and humble myself, suck in my Callahan pride. I was going to tell Pops I'd consider going back to the warehouse without somehow committing myself. It only mattered what Pops wanted to hear to get me in the house and into my warm bed for a good night's rest before heading back to the *North Side* office in the morning to sell space like never before.

I hiked the few blocks down the street toward home with renewed enthusiasm and thought about how after talking with Pops, I'd call Sheila. I'd tell her about my new plans and how I didn't get the chance at Blacky's to say what I really wanted. I'd set things straight once and for all. Outside our apartment, I could see the flickering light of Pops's t.v. He was probably watching WGN reruns again--"Barney Miller," "Kojak," "The Rockford Files"--he was into the detective stuff and probably had a secret desire to be a cop so he could beat and lock down all the "spics and niggers," as he called them, "running down the city." It sickened me to hear him go off, but that's just the type he is. With so many bigots like my old man in this city, they didn't name a street Division for nothing.

Walking up to the front steps, I could hear Sean crying and my old man yelling. These were the sounds of home. "Quiet down for Chrissakes! Shut him up!" Pops hollered, but the little half-pint suffered from a bad case of colic, especially after feeding. Poor fellow. Gas built up in his stomach and he couldn't fart right. I would've walked away if I wasn't so desperate, and the more I thought about going in, the more nervous I became. I planned to ease into the situation, slowly.

Hearing Pops, I changed my mind about entering through the front, and made my way quietly around to our back door. I tried not to trip up and knock into a garbage can or something, so the old man didn't come out yelling or shooting at me. Safely around back, I gave the aluminum screen a few soft raps. My mother was in the kitchen where she always was after dinner, doing the dishes and staying out of Pops's way. It took a few moments for her to come to the door, but she finally opened up.

"Mark, Mark," she said in hushed excitement, holding open the door for me. "What happened this morning? Where have you been all day?" she asked, wrapping her small arms around me. My mother was a short, stocky lady with a round face that beamed in the kitchen's bright light. She kept her brown hair streaked with grey pinned behind her ears. That night, she had on her stained yellow apron, the one Karen and I gave her for Christmas when we were both in grade school. She was listening to radio.

"I've been at work," I told her, my eyes adjusting to the kitchen's bright light. I could hear Sean crying upstairs and Pops grumbling over the sound of the t.v.

"Have you eaten, son?" my mother asked, brushing back a few grey hairs from her face.

"I'm fine, thanks," I told her. I just didn't want Pops to come busting into the kitchen to find me eating before I even had a chance to explain why I came back home.

"Maybe you should go talk, apologize," my mother said, sounding like a recording of the Widow McKinley. "Tell him you're sorry. He'll listen."

I watched the t.v. light flickering against the walls of our family room. "I

have to make a call," I said, walking over to the phone on the wall next to the back door. She looked at me as I dialed, then turned briefly toward the family room before picking up the dishrag from the sink.

"Don't hang up," I said. "Let me explain." There was a long pause. "Today at Blacky's, can we forget about that?" I waited for a response. "I'm not calling to pressure you, just to say I need you, that's all." I waited again for her voice, but she remained silent. There's nothing I hate more than the silent treatment. "Say something, anything, for Chrissakes." She could really get under my skin sometimes.

"You know the situation," she said.

"For crying out loud, I'm calling to say no pressure, forget the marriage thing, let's just concentrate on you and me. Forget how I acted. You know how I can say stuff I don't really mean. Let's just start all over. What do you say?"

"I think we need some time apart," she said.

"You know something, Sheila, you can be a real ass sometimes," I told her. My mother turned to look at me. "A goddamn, first-class bitch." She hung up, and I wanted to boot myself for losing my temper. Sometimes, I just can't help myself, words just come out before I can stop them. My mother shook her head and turned back to her cleaning. I re-dialed and waited for her to pick up. I tried to stay calm, but after the tenth ring I lost it. "Pick it up, pick it up!" I was yelling into the receiver, forgetting Pops was in the other room. "Goddamn pick it up!" Sure enough, just as I was about to hang up, Pops and Karen came busting into the kitchen.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Pops shouted. I hung up the phone. Karen walked over to the sink with an empty baby bottle. She looked at me shaking her head. "When I said no coming back this morning, I meant it, for Chrissakes.

Let's go, out, you're on your own. You're a big shot now and can take care of yourself." An apology was out of the question. My mother turned to my father. "Keep out of it," he told her. Karen turned to him as well. "You, too, if you know what's good for you," he barked. Pops walked over to the back door and held it open.

"Come on," I said, "let's talk this over."

"Enough," he said and kicked open the screen door. "No more deals."

"Whatever," I told him. "Whatever." Before walking out, I gave Karen a long look and then turned to leave. She quickly followed after me.

"You leave with him, you can stay with him," Pops yelled then slammed shut the door.

"What are you doing?" I asked, both of us standing on the back steps.

"Don't worry, he won't lock me out with the kid still inside. Besides, I simply ignore him. How many times have I told you to do the same?"

"It's different between us," I said. "Look, it's cold out here and you should get back in the house before you catch pneumonia or something."

Karen was dressed in her blue bathrobe with a pair of pink fuzzy slippers on her feet. Whenever I looked at her I couldn't help thinking about how my mother must have looked in her twenties, the same height and round face, except Karen was thinner, though the pregnancy two summers ago left her with bigger cheeks and a sagging ass. She had dark hair cut just below the shoulders, like mine, but not as wavy, like my mother's used to be. Karen wasn't the type to take crap from others, but unlike me, she knew when to shut up. She lived with my parents mostly because of little Sean, and when she wasn't being too bitchy, she could be your best friend. I

think down deep inside, she's the better of us two, more like my mom than Pops. She's really a swell gal, even if she was married to a deadbeat who never paid his child support.

"Why did you follow me out here?"

"Thought you might want some company."

I took a seat on the steps and looked out into the backyard. There wasn't much to it except for the chain-link fence, which kept the neighborhood dogs from pissing on what little grass did grow. We shared the yard with two other elderly couples who lived in the smaller apartments across from ours. When I was a kid, I cut the lawn--if you could call it that--with my father's old push-mower on Saturday mornings. In the city, we had no need for a gas mower, not enough grass. Sometimes Duke would help me out and afterwards, with the few bucks I got for keeping the place trim, we played videos at the Bagwan Convenient. The last few years, though, I hadn't been cutting the grass or pulling the weeds, so the place was overgrown and needed fixing up. The last thing my father wanted to do after working all day was come home and cut grass. "Nobody can see it anyway," he said.

"Don't worry about me. I'll be all right," I told my sister.

"That's why I'm worried."

"Look, if you want to help, I need a few bucks to float me until this whole thing passes over. Got any cash?"

"You got that money you already owe me?" She cut right to the point.

"I'm busted," I told her.

"You're a deadbeat," she said. "Dad's right. You never have anything. What do you do with all your money? Drink it?"

"What money?"

"I forgot, I'm sorry, you don't have a job, I mean a normal job."

"What the hell's *normal*?" I said. "You don't have a goddamn job either, for crying out loud."

"I've got a kid to look after."

"You've got an ex-husband who's a loser."

"Why don't you try Sheila, or have you tapped her already?"

"Why don't you mind your own damn business?"

"Testy, testy. Sore nerve, bro?" she said.

"Look, Karen, if you want to help out, lend me some dough?"

She gave me another smirk. I was in a tough spot and she was forcing me to beg. "I'll pay you back with interest when I get paid," I told her.

"Knowing you, you probably don't even have a job any more," she said. There was a brief silence when all I could do was look at her until she broke the ice. "How much do you need?" she said, her hand on her hip. She always puts her hand on her hip when she thinks she's won an argument.

"How much you got?" I asked.

"How much you need?"

"Seventy-five should hold me."

"Twenty-five's all I got."

"Okay, sixty-five will be enough."

"Thirty is all you're getting."

"Just give me fifty-five," I said. "I'll pay you back sixty."

"I'll give you forty and you can pay me back fifty."

"Deal. Forty it is," I said. We shook.

She stepped inside for a moment and then returned with two twenties. "Don't waste it because you're not getting another cent till you pay back the forty you still owe, plus the fifty I just gave you."

"You only gave me forty."

"Interest, little bro, interest." She drove a hard bargain, but I had the cash now and was feeling much better.

"Are you on drugs?" she asked. "Is that your problem now? I know the signs. I've been there, you know."

"Shut up, Karen. Quit asking so many damn questions. You got a smoke? Bum me a smoke."

"Is there anything else you need?" She pulled two smokes from a package of Marlboro Lights in her pocket and sat down beside me on the steps. We hadn't spent much time together since the baby was born. I was taking college night classes then and working long hours at the warehouse.

"What's new?" I asked, trying to change the subject. She held her lighted match for me.

"The baby was asking about you this afternoon," she said, exhaling. The kid was only two, but already he could mumble a few words, or at least we all wanted to believe he was talking some sense. That's all we really want to believe about most people anyway. "Couldn't get the little wheeler to shut up," Karen added, "'Makka, Makka,'" he kept mumbling. Thinks you're his father or something."

Besides Pops, I was the only other male figure in the kid's life, since his own old man didn't give a crap. I kind of liked being so endeared by the little guy. He

could always make me smile, and the 'Makka, Makka' bit, well, I've been called worse things. If you ever saw us crawling around together or building trucks from Lego blocks, you might even say we were best friends. The kid needed a father. All kids do.

"Heard anything from Stan lately?" I asked. "When are you going to court again to get what he owes you?"

Karen blew a few smoke rings. "Why waste the money on a lawyer?" she asked. She had a good point. It cost her more for the lawyer than she got from Stan in a month.

"I wish something could be done," I said. "It's just not fair."

"Whoever said things had to be fair?" Karen said turning away and I looked up at the glowing city sky. "You should be glad you're finally out of this place," she said, breaking the silence and exhaling a cloud of smoke. "Dad can be such an ass sometimes, like tonight when the baby was crying. He tells me I don't discipline the kid enough and that's why he's always acting up. Sean's got the colic. He knows that. Then at dinner the old man's telling me it's my fault Stan's a deadbeat. Like I'm to blame. Sure, I'm sorry I ever married the guy."

"He was probably tired from work," I told her. "I'm sure he meant well."

"Every night?" she said. "I'll tell you something, if I didn't have this baby to take care of, I'd be out of here in a second, but with daycare costs and all, it looks like I'll never get out, ever."

"He's still your father," I told her.

"Yours too," she said. I couldn't believe I was defending him.

We finished our smokes and threw the butts into the overgrown lawn. I put

my arm around Karen and hugged her. "I better get going," I said, "before he does something stupid and calls the cops on me for trespassing. I'll be at Duke's if you need me, at least for tonight. And hey, thanks for the cash. Pay you back soon as I can," I told her. "You know I'm good for it."

"You better," she returned, "with interest."

VERSE FOUR

Motor's in bad condition,you have to have these batteries charged . . .

Mr. Highwayman, please don't block the road,

Because she's registering a cold one hundred,

And I'm booked till I got to go.

I walked up the alley toward Waveland where Duke and his mother lived in a brownstone two buildings from the corner. Like the rest of us, Duke lived in a small brownstone along Freemont. The block was more commonly known as workman's row with building after brown brick building uniformly lined up along the street. In some spots, the buildings are so jammed up against each other you can't even walk between them. The city's cramped that way, people on top of people, but if you've lived there all your life like me, you don't really ever notice how cramped it is until you get away into some open space.

The chilly air blowing through my denim jacket gave me goose bumps. I knew it wouldn't be long before winter returned to the city and ice began to cover the Lake. Moths and mosquitos were already disappearing and touches of yellow and orange brushed the tips of the maples along Freemont. Out at Belmont Harbor, people began to drydock their yachts. Winter always comes early to the city. Even in the summer a touch of Jack Frost can be felt in an evening breeze, especially one sweeping down over the lake from the north.

Passing Kim's Panda Palace on Waveland, I could smell the fry grease. Mr.

Kim, the Korean master of Chinese cuisine, had the meanest egg foo young in the city, little round patties of egg and onion dipped in batter and fried to a golden brown in hot lard. The Koreans cornered the market on Chinese food, at least around our part of the city. Every once in a while, we ordered take out when Pops had to work late. He couldn't stand the stuff. Claimed it gave him Korean revenge, punishment for his role in the war. My old man needed sausages, potatoes, and beer, and even that gave him gas something fierce. No wonder Sean's got the colic; it runs in the family.

Whenever we ate Chinese, I ordered egg foo young, and my sister always had egg rolls. My mother usually ordered something chicken without m.s.g., even if she couldn't tell the difference whether it had it or not. My mother is fussy sometimes, worse than Pops. She hates toothpaste left in the bathroom sink, crumbs on the counter are a cardinal sin, and mud on the kitchen floor used to get me grounded. Thank God we never had a dog. Hair and drool would have given her high blood pressure or eczema. My mother was very particular about the house or "her office" as she liked to call it.

Anyways, the best part about ordering from Kim's was not the food, but the fortune cookies. My mother and my sister took the messages literally, like words from an oracle. *Kindness Will Follow Those Who Are Giving. Find Peace in a Passing Cloud. Your Lucky Numbers: 8, 14, 22, 31, 36.* The messages might have said something more like *Look before Crossing Busy Streets* or *Fortune Is a Comfortable Pair of Old Shoes*, and they would have been just as excited. Karen saved her messages in a small envelope in the top drawer of her dresser and kept track of which came true. My mother, after cracking her cookie, would cross herself and

mumble "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," as if calling on higher powers might make something better happen. After reading mine for a good laugh, I threw it away with those extra little packets of soy and hot mustard that always seemed to be left over. "What'd it say?" my sister would nag and then I'd do some dumb Confucius bit like "lady who walk into airplane backward have bad assident." I try not to be a bigot like my old man, but sometimes it just slips out of me. Anyways, our lucky numbers always became the family's next Lotto picks. Needless to say, we're not millionaires living our old lives because it seemed like the right thing to do, but Pops is certainly the type who would keep going to work after winning. He loves the regularity of it all, and those he works with are his best friends. If it were me, I'd quit the second the State signed my winning check. Then I'd board the first plane out of O'Hare with Sheila for a long Hawaiian vacation. Hula girls, cold Primo, and poi-poi for the entire hotel. And when I returned to the big city, it'd be highrise time with a penthouse on Lake Shore Drive. Downtown, baby, the Loop, that's where I'd go. I'd buy a season box at Wrigley and a big screen for Bear games. You wouldn't find me sitting out at Soldier's Field in the middle of winter. If I was in a really good mood, I might even take Karen out to lunch.

Those are the dreams, but first I'd repay all my debts and set up the widow some place big and clean, without rats and with an elevator. I'd buy my mother her own church. I might even get Pops a new car if he agreed to let me buy it for him. Karen and Sean would never again have to worry about Stan the deadbeat, and I'd get Duke his own gym.

In many ways, Duke deserves his own gym for all the years of surviving a friendship with me. We've been best buddies since we were four; that's when his

parents moved into the neighborhood. Duke's a big fellow with a big heart. When he was a kid, he wore shoes more than twice the size of any kid in the neighborhood. While everyone else was wearing twos and threes, he had eights. He was nearly six feet in the fifth grade and could already palm a basketball. He even had to duck under most doorways. His father was sure his son was The Bulls' next Jerry Sloan. All his life people treated Duke like a circus freak, but nobody dared say anything to his face. He was a husky Scandinavian, third generation, with blond hair, blue eyes, and a head thick as a block of wood. He could bang into anything head first and never get more than a small bump. He was named after his father's favorite actor, John Wayne, and he certainly grew into it. For a little while, after his father took off and his parents divorced, he wanted to change his name to get back at his dad. Before, and even more after his old man split, we did nearly everything together--played ball, skipped school, dated girls, drank beer, smoked cigarettes--you name it, we did it.

Since I was a short, skinny kid with a big mouth, I was always getting into fights. If it weren't for Duke saving my ass, I'd probably be mashed potatoes by now. Even though Duke bailed me out of most situations, I surely believe that if you dish it out, you have to be prepared to have it dished right back, even if that means throwing punches. I was getting into so many fights in junior high, coming home with more bruises and scratches, the widow started calling me Little Napoleon, which I think is an oxymoron. "Watch that temper," she would tell me, but I was hard of hearing. I've come a long way since then and am now a bit more reserved, especially since nobody fights with just fists anymore.

Like me, Duke was also employed only part-time. Full-time jobs couldn't be

found anywhere in the city. He worked at Gem's Gym on Halsted as a weight trainer. He took up body-building his senior year in high school and hoped someday to be Mr. Chicago. He dreamed of having his calendar picture hanging in beauty salons across the city. Duke was vain that way, always flexing in the mirror and combing his hair. With body-building he found peace with himself about his size, realizing he was certainly gifted in that way. Some people think he's stuck up, but he's really a nice guy once you get to know him.

Besides protecting me, he also protected Karen. He treated Karen like the sister he never had, being an only child and all. This one time when Tommy Ponaski gave her a black eye for backtalking, Duke pounded him a new face. "He needed it," he told Karen. Karen and I were a bit worried the creep might come back with a gun or something, but he never showed his face in our neighborhood again. I guess we were lucky. People are the biggest psychos these days. No telling what someone might do. The city's real bad, but to the north out in the fields, it seems much better.

I've only been outside the city a few times, mostly for yearly visits to relatives on my mother's side, who live in Waukegan about an hour north along the Lake, but this one time Duke and I made a road trip to Kenosha. We were sixteen at the time and doing what most teenagers in our neighborhood did: hang out at the Bagwan Convenient and play video games. We did a lot of hanging out back then and we were so good at Space Invaders we could play all night on a quarter if we wanted.

The Bagwan was a cramped hole in the wall with rat traps and roach hotels, but we didn't mind. It was a place to go and every teenager needs somewhere like that. Haziz, the Bagwan's East Indian owner, tried, like Sal, to cram as much crap

into the place as he could. He had aisles of mismatched stuff like Campbell's Soup, Spam, aspirin, tampons, car oil, condoms, but mostly the place sold newspapers from around the world--India, Saudi Arabia, Germany, and Mexico. He carried both the *New York* and the *Los Angeles Times*, and had any kind of magazine you ever wanted, including stacks of pornos. He sold cigarettes and beer too, even to minors. He didn't care much about getting into trouble with the law, figuring he'd bribe his way out. That's how it worked in our precinct, where big Christmas bonuses for the fuzz bought a year of turning heads the other away.

Anyways, that Thursday afternoon we won the lottery. We were on our second hour of Space Invaders when Duke traded our twenty credits for a buck from the next kid in line. With my urging, we bought a lottery instant scratcher and the rest is history. I let him rub off the numbers, since I lost the night before. We traded on and off that way, sometimes winning enough small change for a sixer of Old Style and a pack of Marlboros. With the edge of a dime, Duke rubbed off the silver circles. The first hundred spot didn't make us too excited because we'd been that route a thousand times before, but the second hundred needed to be followed by a small drum roll with two hardened Milky Ways--all the candy in the place seemed about two years old. For the third spot, Duke slowly rubbed off the silver exposing our jackpot, one-hundred clams. "Yes, Yes, Yes!" I was yelling, knowing we had enough for a month of partying, if we rationed our smokes. But Duke had another idea.

"Let us borrow The Bomber, Haziz?" he asked.

Haziz turned to us; his brown eyes grew large, "You want to borrow my car?" he said in his best Calcutta English.

"I'll give you twenty-five bucks for it and have it back by Sunday," Duke told him. "Besides, you don't drive much, and it's only sitting out back collecting rust." Haziz stroked his wiry black beard with his thin brown fingers. "Come on, Haziz, we did paint your storefront last month," Duke reminded him.

"You didn't get your pay, no?" he reminded us.

Haziz's '74 Impala was a boat with dents in every panel and a cancerous case of rust. It was a miracle the thing even ran. Haziz bought the car from his brother who sold it to help raise money to open a convenient market on the southside. He rarely drove the car, only in emergencies; he didn't even have a license. Sometimes he let us sit in the Bomber to listen to the radio or smoke cigarettes, and once in a while back in high school, we even took our dates there when we thought they'd put out. The Bomber had a green vinyl interior with bench seating and a roomy back big enough to lie across, if you were short like me. In the summer, the vinyl got real sticky and the car smelled like a plastic factory. The parched dash was cracked from years of sun, and the carpet was worn thin enough to see the pitted floor boards underneath. In some spots, the boards were so rusted you could see clear through to the road. On the upside, the Bomber did have enough rumbling horse power to make up for its sorry appearance, and after blowing a few black clouds of smoke when starting, it ran fairly well.

"You can have the car," Haziz told us, "if you clean out the backroom when you return."

"You game, Marco?" Duke asked, turning to me.

I thought about dinner the night before, the spat I had with my old man about working weekends at the warehouse. Things had begun to turn sour between me and

Pops, and my mother felt soon our entire family would collapse. She went to mass every morning to pray for us, but it was no use. Karen stayed out to all hours of the night, didn't seem to spend much time in her classes, and was sleeping with all sorts of losers. Pops spent much of his time at the local tavern with his work buddies. We didn't seem like much of a family then.

I really needed to get away. "Count me in, buddy," I said.

Besides cleaning out the backroom, we also had to give Haziz forty bucks to hold until we completed our end of the bargain. We resented giving him the cash, but we did have the car and a few bucks left to blow. Without telling anybody where we were going except Haziz, we hopped in the Bomber, blasted the Loop on the crackly Philco radio, and hit the open road.

We had no idea how long the car would run, but we planned to keep driving as far as it took us, maybe even all the way to Green Bay. Duke piloted us north up the Kennedy to the Edens, and stopped in Northbrook only long enough to fill the tank. The snotty suburban kids hanging out at the gas station looked at us as if we were fugitives on the loose. I wanted to punch a tall skinny fellow who looked at us funny, but Duke talked me out of it.

Back on the road, the further we drove from Chicago, the more desolate the landscape became. Living in the city all my life, I never realized how flat Illinois could really be. Once we were north of Waukegan, it was nothing more than cows and corn, cows and corn, slipping past the window at seventy. The further we drove, the less and less the situation back home with Pops seemed to matter. Even the radio's reception began to fade. When we finally reached the Wisco border, we could hardly tell it was a border because it all looked the same, miles and miles of Midwest

farmland. We pulled off the road in front of a big sign that said "*Welcome to Wisconsin*" to stretch and piss.

When we got back into the car, Duke turned to me, "We can go back if you want. Maybe this wasn't the best idea."

"No chance," I told him. We had plans to live it up and I wasn't going to change my mind. "It's cool," I said. "I'm fine."

Duke pulled back onto the highway and we drove for another half-hour until the sun began to set. We were both thirsty and pretty much sick of driving. At the first gas station, we picked up a couple sixers of cold Old Style--they never enforced the drinking age in Wisco--and a new pack of Marlboros. The Mobil station was surrounded by corn. I never saw so much corn in my whole life. When you eat a bowl of corn flakes, you never really think about where they come from other than out of a cardboard box with a demented green and yellow chicken on the front.

Before getting back on the road, we pulled into the station's rear lot to drink a beer. I remember sitting on the Bomber's warm hood and looking out over the corn waving in the steady, howling wind. The heavy, moist air smelled like cow shit and straw. Gnats and mosquitos buzzed about my head, and an orange sun sank on the horizon. The green land seemed to roll on forever in uniform rows of corn. I wanted to lose myself in that land, in the wild green. Out here in the fresh air at dusk, nothing mattered.

We sat on the hood without saying a word until the sun sank into the field. I felt relaxed and calm. When the moist air began to give me the chills, I turned to Duke. He agreed it was time to go. We drove down the road from the Mobil station to a cheap highway dive called The Roadside, where we decided to give it a rest

before continuing north the next day to Green Bay.

Our Roadside room came complete with vinyl curtains, two queen size beds with rubber safety sheets, and a Magic Fingers machine that took only quarters. The carpet had cigarette burns and stains from who knows what kinds of liquids, while the bathroom had mold growing in its corners. The room was dim with only one wicker shaded lamp bolted to the nightstand. Secured to the wall between the beds was a picture of some old fellow in a rowboat on a stormy sea. There was no t.v. The heater creaked every time the air blower came on, and the room reeked like stale sweat. It was the first time either of us had spent time outside the city, and besides the squeaky heater, the place, like the cornfield, was real quiet. No sirens. No horns. No traffic or planes. That's mostly how I remember Kenosha, as quiet as it sounds when you say it out loud.

Soon as we settled in and chose beds--I took the one nearest the window--I began to think about my mother and wondered if maybe she was worried about me. I wanted her to be worried about me. I hadn't seen her since breakfast and I didn't show up for dinner because of the night before. Not wanting to look like a wussy, I told Duke I was going out to order us some pizza, but went to call my mom. There was a pay phone outside the office. I called collect. The wind was blowing so hard I could barely hear anything at the other end of the line.

"Hello, Ma? Ma? Is that you? You have to speak up, it's a bad connection . . . Yes . . . Yes . . . I'm fine . . . I'm in Kenosha . . . Ken-osh-a, Wisconsin . . . with Duke . . . It's a long story . . . Windy mostly . . . Maybe Sunday afternoon . . .What? You have to speak up . . . I love you too . . . Pops? . . . I can't make it . . . We're not coming back . . . Tell Jansen I'm out of town? I'm not going to argue

about it . . . I said I have to go."

I hung up the phone real hard and cursed him. I was in no mood to begin thinking about that warehouse again and my super, Brin Jansen. If Pops hadn't put in almost twenty years with the company, I would've punched Brin in his fat gut a long time ago. The guy rode my ass all day. "You missed a spot over here, Callahan." "You're nothing but a pussy, Callahan." "You're soft inside, Callahan." It wasn't something I could go tattle about to my old man. That would've only made things worse. The job was supposed to pay for college, but that day seemed then a long way in the making.

I headed back to the room where I found Duke stretched across the bed with a beer in hand. "Grab a cold one from the tub," he told me. While I was on the phone, he filled the bathtub with a pile of ice to keep our brews chilled. I grabbed a can and then plopped down on my bed, which sunk in the middle. Duke put a quarter in the Magic Fingers machine. The bed hummed. "Thing could give you a hard on," he said. I watched him in the lap of luxury, vibrating and drinking, and I tried hard not to think of Pops and the warehouse.

"How's your, Ma?" Duke said. "When I was out getting ice, I couldn't help overhearing."

"She's fine," I said.

"You don't sound so fine yourself. What's the beef, Marco?"

"It's nothing," I said.

"Trouble on the home front?"

"Pops is bitching about the warehouse gig. Wants me to come home."

"We can go back tonight," Duke suggested.

"We ain't going anywhere. We just got here for Chrissakes."

"Maybe we should. You do need the money, don't you?"

"Blow it off," I said. "We're not going back."

"What about your old man?"

"He'll get over it," I told him before sucking down some beer.

"You two sure do have some tension these days."

"He's just always on my case. 'Go to work,' 'Clean your room,' 'Get better grades,' 'Don't turn out like your sister,' and on and on. You should be so lucky. Pops could drop dead for all I care."

Duke didn't respond and the room fell silent except for the creaking fan. When I finally looked over at him, his eyes were glossy and his face a bit flush. It was real strange looking at a great big guy with glassy eyes; goes against everything you're taught about how guys, especially big guys, should be. Duke finally broke the silence himself. "Sometimes I wonder if my old man ever thinks so much of me," he said.

"You still think about him, don't you? Even after all these years."

"Mostly I just want to slug him," he said. "If only he would call once in a while, like he used to on my birthdays or at Christmas. It's been nearly two years since we spoke. His kid must be five or six by now."

"I didn't realize it'd been so long."

"Maybe longer," he told me.

We spent the rest of the night getting shitty, drinking beer, smoking cigarettes, and talking about driving up the next morning to Green Bay. Neither of us had ever been to Green Bay, but it was always a place we wanted to go, home of Vince

Lombardi, Bart Starr, and the Packers. If we weren't Bears fans, we would've been Packers fans. I even had a green Packers hat when I was a kid. "When we get up to Green Bay," I said, "we could buy some poles and fish for musky. We could rent a boat and cruise up to Door County. Maybe we could even rent a cabin or something and never come back down."

"We could dig our own worms," Duke added.

"We might even be able to make it all the way to Canada."

"We could build a big fire on the beach."

"We could fish for salmon too," I said. We didn't know the first thing about boats or fishing.

The next morning, I woke up dressed in my jeans and t-shirt and still wearing my sneakers. Duke said I passed out sometime around one-thirty. Instead of going to Green Bay, we drove back to Chicago with big headaches. Every so often Duke had to pull off the road so I could puke. "We'll never get back at this rate," Duke chided and I did the Yankee holler out the window. By the time we made it back to the city, I was feeling much better except for the fact I had to face my old man. I did make it to the warehouse that Sunday, but ever since I've been dreaming about somewhere like Green Bay.

VERSE FIVE

Winter is coming, wonder what the poor people are going to do?

People talk about the time that they never have seen before,

But hard times is knocking on everybody's door.

Standing outside Duke's door, I was beginning to feel like a failure. Duke's mom made me feel that much worse. She was so nice, so polite, so caring, and so proper, she made you feel like you just couldn't let her down. God, I hated that. I only wanted her to think the best of me. There's nothing worse than when people expect stuff of you, because if it doesn't pan out, you end up feeling real shitty. I had no choice but to ring the bell. I just couldn't see myself sleeping on a park bench at Belmont Harbor on such a cold October night. I sucked in my Callahan pride best I could.

"It's me, Mark," I said into the intercom. Duke's mom buzzed me in, and I walked into the building down the dingy hallway to where she was waiting for me at the door.

"Good to see you, Mrs. Morgan."

"Good to see you too, Marcus James," she said, giving me a hug and wrapping her thin arms around me. She was always using my full name and always giving out hugs. I imagine it was something like living with Leo Buscaglia, the hug doctor. Her hug felt warm and reassuring, but the harder she squeezed, the more of a failure I felt. Not even her clean, soapy lilac smell could lift my spirits as it usually did.

After letting go, she ran her hand over her short pink skirt to smooth out any wrinkles. She did the same to her sheer white blouse, underneath which I could see the white lace of her bra. Duke's mother was a tall, pretty lady about three inches bigger than me. She had long blonde hair, which she always tied in a tail, and a round face with chubby cheeks that dimpled at the sides of her mouth. She looked very Scandinavian, especially with her long slender legs. In her prime she must have been quite a catch. She was still very pretty and it was no wonder Duke himself was such a looker--not that I ever checked him out or nothing.

"I'm so sorry about your troubles at home, Marcus James," she said leading me to their sitting room. I wondered if Duke had told her something, or maybe she heard something from Nina at Sal's--Western Union couldn't have sent out a faster message around the neighborhood. "Maybe time away is just what you need. The whole family and a baby in that small home has to create so much tension," she said.

"It's not so bad," I told her. "Sean's really quite a good kid."

"He must be getting big now," she said.

"I imagine he'll be talking soon. He's already trying to say my name," I said proudly and then took a look around for Duke. "So where's the big guy?" I asked.

"He's in the shower," she said. "He just got back from the gym. Please, go sit," she told me. "Make yourself at home."

"Thanks," I said. I had the strangest feeling Duke hadn't told her about my staying over, and I didn't want to be first. It was bad enough we even had to talk about the subject. When I was around her, I wanted to be perfect, like the house, dust-free, without a blemish.

She led me into the sitting room and I followed, my eyes glued to her small

round ass. She was one of those women, like Sheila, who could really walk. She moved carefully, sashaying from side to side, like a model down a fashion runway. I liked watching her until I remembered she was Duke's mom and then I felt something awful. If she hadn't married so young, she certainly could've been a cover-girl making hundreds of dollars an hour, but instead, she wound up with the rest of us down here along workmen's row.

All the apartments along our street were mostly the same and Duke's place wasn't any bigger than our own with its three bedrooms, two baths, a sitting room, dining area and kitchen, except there were less people and less furnishings. You might even call his place sparse. Along the wall of the sitting room, facing the window, there was an old lavender-colored sofa covered in plastic--his mom kept everything in plastic--and a mahogany coffee table in which you could see your reflection. Above the couch was a brass wall clock with large Roman numbers--I never could get used to its loud ticking. To the right of the window was a small thirteen inch t.v. on a brass stand where underneath Duke's mom neatly piled her old magazines--*Cosmopolitan, Vanity Fair,* that sort of stuff. In the corner to the left of the window, they had a small bar with a decanter of vodka and one of whiskey, mostly for decoration. The hardwood floor was covered by a large grey area rug, except around the edges. The place was exceptionally neat, almost as if nobody lived there. The rug was usually raked, old pictures of relatives hung from the walls, and everything was thoroughly dusted. Whenever I came over, I always felt conscious of where I stepped and where I sat down, and I felt terrible if I accidently lost control of myself and put my feet up on the table.

I took a seat on the plastic-covered couch and stared out the spotless front

window into the empty street. In the summer, the street is usually filled with children running around, playing catch or kick the can, but that evening it was empty and leaves blew in circular eddies across the cement. Duke's mother sat down next to me, like she did when I was a kid waiting for Duke to get ready before coming out to play.

When we were kids, we spent endless hours in the street. With an old broomstick, we played streetball with old tennis balls we found around the courts at Belmont harbor. "Game's on!" someone would shout and a few minutes later we all came together to play. It was no problem getting a game going, and if we were short a player, Pops joined in. To make it fair, he hit and threw lefty. I can see him clear as day in his white t-shirt that showed off his full chest of dark curly hair. He was more stock than flab back then. "Comes from lifting iron pipes," he said. "Puts hair on your chest."

When I was in high school, I thought for sure I too would grow a healthy chest of hair, but it didn't pan out that way and it bothered me. I was what you might call a late bloomer, and when the rest of the guys were strutting their stuff in the locker room showers, I was toweling off and covering up. There's nothing worse than gym class showers to make a guy feel small. I never felt so naked as when I stood in that cold stream of water rubbing soap over my hairless body, while thinking every guy in the room was watching me or wanting to call me a "fem." That was something nobody wanted to be called. It was a tough place, that locker room, and I kept my eyes on the floor or in my locker like you were supposed to, but every now and then I took a quick look around, for comparison that is. I felt hopeless and wimpy, at least for most of my freshman year. Because of my arrested development I was always the

last guy picked for a team. Talk about humiliation; it sucks being the last guy every time. By sophomore year, I finally managed to grow a few scraggly hairs here and there, but nothing like Pops. I wanted his hair, those dark curls I imagined girls like Maria Denato would run their hands through, but it never happened, the hair or Maria.

As I waited for Duke, I couldn't keep my eyes off his mother's legs, and it almost gave me a hard-on, especially when I thought about running my hand up under her pink skirt along her silky looking thighs. I felt guilty thinking like that, and I felt a strong urge to confess, so that she could clean it out of me with some of that lilac soap she always smelled of. I was like that though, thinking about the strangest things at the worst times. I was plain hopeless. During church services, I thought more about getting a good peek down Sarah Slattery's shirt than the gospel, and I felt even worse when I remembered my mother's stories about the saints and how each of them lived such perfect lives and all. No matter how many prayer candles I lit, I was never going to be a saint and it bothered me something terrible. I always felt guilt, even in high school sex ed. when Mr. Howard--or Mr. How as he was often called--showed us a penis and said it was perfectly natural to masturbate. I knew then I was going straight to hell.

"Would you like something to drink, Marcus James?" Duke's mother asked. She walked over to the bar and poured herself a whiskey. It was odd for her since she rarely sipped the comfort, but it was nice of her to ask. I never passed up a free drink. I'm a Callahan; it's in my blood. "Sure thing," I said, "double whiskey rocks."

"One whiskey for Marcus James," she said. It was cute how she always called

me Marcus James. Made me feel like a kid who had to be on his best behavior. In high school, there was a time when I wanted her to stop calling me that; I wanted to feel older, more mature. She handed me the drink , and before I took my second sip, she finished hers. The way she acted, I wondered if she'd been drinking before I arrived. She poured herself another and paced the room. I tried not to look at her ass.

"So how things going, Mrs. Morgan?" I said, hoping to figure out what was happening. She seemed not to hear me and turned away. She continued to pace the room. Occasionally, she would look at me, shake her head, and turn away. I felt the tension rising, the moment turning serious. I didn't want to pressure her, but I had to speak up: "You don't mind me asking, Mrs. Morgan, but is something wrong?" She stopped pacing and tears welled up in her eyes. She drank down the rest of her whiskey.

"It's the factory," she said, "they're laying off a hundred people next week." She looked down at the carpet. "Even in my office. Not enough orders these days. Nobody knows who will be asked to leave," she told me and then took a tissue from her bra to blow her nose. She was a secretary for Morton Textiles and had worked for them for as long as I could remember. "We can't keep up with the factories in Mexico."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"If I lose that job, Marcus James, I don't know what we're going to do. I could even lose my pension if the company goes belly-up, and with winter coming soon and Duke without a full-time position, I'm not sure how we'll pay for the heat. I don't know where this could end up. Fifteen years," she said. "Fifteen years with

them and now this."

"That's a long time," I told her. I couldn't imagine holding down a job for fifteen months.

For a long while, she didn't say much else. I sipped my drink and listened to the loud ticking of the wall clock above the sofa. "Are you cold, Marcus James? I feel a chill in here," she said breaking the silence and rubbed her hands up and down her arms.

"I'm all right," I said.

"I think winter will be early this year," she told me. "I can just feel it." She walked over to the window and looked out into the dark street. I took a sip of my whiskey. A few moments later, Duke called to me from atop the stairs.

"Come on up," he shouted.

Mrs Morgan turned towards me, her eyes watery. "Go," she said, "I'll be all right." This time I found myself doing the hugging. After our embrace, she turned back toward the window. I waited a few moments to see if she was all right. I felt badly for his mother, I really did, especially when I could do nothing more than drink her whiskey and ask to sleep on her plastic-covered sofa.

Leaving my empty glass on the bar, I headed upstairs to Duke's bedroom. I was bumming, down on myself and down for Duke's mom. I was in one of those moods where I needed to find a little hope. I could get hopeless for long stretches of time. My mom said I got it from her side of the family, probably from my great Aunt Margaret who was a manic-depressive. She was hospitalized in the fifties at a state institution down south near Springfield. My mom hardly ever talked about her. It was one of those family secrets everybody wanted mostly to forget. Sometimes I

longed to meet this woman to see what else we had in common, to see how loony she really was, but she died a little over three years ago.

Duke's bedroom was a reflection of his house, neat, orderly, and organized. His bed sheets were folded and tucked, the few books on his shelf were stacked with care, and his dumbbells were nicely arranged along the floor in ascending order of weight. His desk was immaculate, dust free without the smallest pile of paper, and even my laundry bag, with the clothes Pops stuffed into it earlier that morning, was sitting in a neat pile at the foot of his bed. You might say Duke's room was the opposite of mine, where clothes were scattered in various piles and junk strewn across the floor.

I found Duke where he usually was, flexing his muscles in front of the mirror . He was listening to Music Radio WLS on a small, scratchy sounding transistor. "Lean and mean," I said.

"I could still lose a few pounds here and there," he returned, sucking in his stomach. "What's shaking, Marco?"

"It's been a rough day," I said.

"Then I guess you still want to shack up here for the night."

"If it's not too much a problem," I said.

"Anything for you" he told me, as he walked over to his dresser and took out a pair of blue jeans. "And Sheila? How'd it go with her today?" I shook my head in disgust and walked over to the window to look into the empty street. The elms along the parkway stirred in the gusty lake wind. "You all right?" Duke asked, a bit of worry in his voice.

"You want to know something," I said, turning to face him. "Sheila can be the

biggest goddamn bitch," I blurted out.

"Easy, Marco, easy," Duke said, trying to calm me down.

"She's making me insane," I said. "Driving me nuts. I can't get through. I've tried everything and promised her the city for another chance. Just one more try to show her I can do it right, that we can work through our problems. But she won't even speak to me."

"You got it bad," Duke said.

"Sometimes I could just slap her one," I said, cringing at my thought and wondering if I could ever do something so stupid, like the way my father hit my mother. It didn't happen a lot, but it happened--Pops has a real violent streak.

About five years ago, my father was coming home drunk from work every night for about a month straight. His buddy Freddy Hull was killed on the job, at a site on Cicero. The way Pops told it, Freddy was standing beneath a swinging stack of iron pipe, directing it to the twelfth floor, where Pops waited to receive the load. "The wind gusted like all hell," Pops said, "blowing the load back and forth, back and forth, like a pendulum," he told me. Because of the momentum, Pops couldn't get the stack to settle. "Damned if I could've done a thing," he said and Pops is a big guy. The crane operator couldn't do anything either. He couldn't dump the load until it settled; otherwise, the big iron tubes could've rolled off the twelfth floor or into the building, taking out a few men or dumping an electrical line. "It was impossible to stop the motion," Pops said. Worried about Freddy, he even tried yelling a warning for him to move out from underneath the swinging stack in case a cable snapped or the load tipped. But it was so windy, Freddy didn't hear him calling. "Someone should've gone down there," Pops told me. "I should've gone down there."

After the accident, Pops came home drunk from Schwartz's Tavern every night. My mom worried about him. "He needs to open up," she said. "He's been hurting too long." Pops and Freddy worked together since they were both apprentices in their early twenties, and every Friday, like ritual, they went to Schwartz's for a few beers with the other men from the company. Each summer, usually in late August, Freddy and Pops went fishing at Devil's Lake in Wisconsin. "You have to move past this, Jack," my mother tried telling him. "It's tearing you up and hurting us all."

"What do you know about it?" he said.

"You need to get over this. That's what Freddy would have wanted."

"Don't tell me what I need or what Freddy wanted," he said.

"Damn it, Jack, listen to me!" My mom hardly ever swore or raised her voice.

"You listen to me!" he roared back and slapped her across the face. Karen and I heard the commotion and rushed in from the t.v. room to see what was happening. My mother, slumped over the sink, ran cold water across her cheek. Karen went to her side and I confronted my father.

"You're an asshole," I told him and braced myself for a blow, but he just shook his head in disgust and walked quietly away into the family room to sit in his recliner.

"You okay, Marco," Duke asked me. "Marco?"

"I'm cool." I told him. Perhaps I was a bit manic like my great Aunt Margaret and sensitive like my mother.

"You sure?" he asked again.

"Drop it already," I said.

"Maybe a night at Hummingbird's can cure your blues," he said.

"I don't know," I told him. "Maybe we should just stay in tonight."

"I told Linda we'd meet her after nine." She taught aerobics at the gym where Duke trained and worked.

"I don't know," I said again. "It's not like I have a wad of dough, and besides, I'm supposed to be at the office early tomorrow morning."

"Has that ever stopped you before?" he asked. "Look, Marco, I just thought going out would help you forget about your problems. We can hang here if you want."

"First, I have to make a call," I said.

"Be my guest," he told me, handing me the phone from atop his nightstand.

I carried the phone into the hallway and shut Duke's door. The hall was still and quiet, except for the sound of Mrs. Morgan pacing slowly around the room below. The silence reminded me of those late nights when I called Sheila from my bedroom. I called her almost every night just to hear her voice, to talk about whatever was on my mind. It didn't matter if I just saw her an hour before, I still called. I took the phone from the hall--we only had two phones, one in our kitchen and one in the upstairs hall--and dragged it into my bedroom, tucking the cord under my door the way Karen did so often in high school when she talked for hours with one of the many guys she dated. I used to think Karen was a real idiot, spending so much time on the phone, until I found myself doing the same thing.

Whenever I called Sheila, everyone was usually asleep and the apartment was real quiet, except for the mice scampering between the walls or the wind rattling the

windows. Before calling, I usually climbed in bed and turned out the lights. It was always real dark, except for the faint glow of the streetlamp coming in through the window. Most of the time, Sheila was in bed too and sometimes already asleep--she got up early to be at the library by eight. We talked about all kinds of stuff. I liked making her tell me what she wore to bed, describing every detail down to the lacy fringe of her silk nightshirt. Then she made me do the same. We were good at talking on the phone, even talking about sex. It was sometimes even better than the real thing.

Some nights, the two of us were on the phone for hours. She told me about her ex-boyfriends, especially her high school sweetheart, Vinnie Petrucci. "We were going to get married," she said, getting sentimental whenever she talked about him. "He was my first, you know." I tried hard not to think about him, to believe I was the first guy she ever loved. As it turned out, Petrucci got another girl pregnant, married her, and a couple years later was busted for stealing cars. He got ten at Joliet, and every once in a while, he calls Sheila from jail to tell her he still loves her. Before she met me, Sheila even had an affair with a married man, some downtown attorney who hung out at the library on weekends. "The best men are always married," she told me, but I don't think she meant to hurt me. He broke up with her after reconciling with his wife, but like Petrucci, every so often, he calls to ask her to lunch. Sheila attracts men and looks wherever she goes.

Anyways, like best friends, we sometimes talked at night for hours. I told her about my problems with Pops or my troubles at work, and she told me nothing else mattered except for the two of us. We planned trips around the world and talked about what restaurant we planned to eat at on the weekends. We tried to go out once

a week. It put a heavy dent in my wallet, but sometimes she paid, too. One of Sheila's favorite places was Tonelli's on Wells, where she always ordered basil linguini with steamed mussels. I liked Kecks on Dearborn because they had the best steaks in the city. When we didn't go out, Sheila cooked for me. She was a fantastic cook, even rivaling my mother. I could go on forever describing the meals she made--fettuccine with spinach cream sauce, teriyaki chicken, or a simple but hearty split-pea soup. I blew a lot of dough buying food for her to cook, but it was worth every last cent.

Before calling, I took a deep breath and thought about what to say when she answered. I didn't want her hanging up on me again. I planned to remain calm at all costs--at least as calm as I could be that is. I slowly punched in her number and waited for her to pick up. She answered on the fourth ring. "Hello," she said. "Hello? Is this you, Mark?" But for some reason I couldn't say a word.

After she hung up, I wanted to call back just to hear her voice, but instead, I walked into Duke's room and placed the phone neatly on his nightstand. Duke, combing his hair, asked how I was. He turned off the transistor radio. "I'm fine," I told him. I wanted him to put back on the radio, anything to mask the silence. I walked over to the window and opened it a crack to let in some cold lake air. I let the cool breeze wash over my face. Leaves still blew in circular eddies about the empty street. "How about a cold beer at Hummingbirds?" I said, breaking the silence.

"That's the spirit," Duke said. "That's the Marco I know."

Only I didn't know that guy anymore, who he was or what he really wanted.

VERSE SIX

I say hey Mr. Bartender come here,

I want another drink and I want it now . . .

I want to get drunk, get her off my mind--

One bourbon, one scotch, one beer.

When I got the blues, sometimes I think the best thing to do is keep moving. In a big city with millions of people and plenty of places to go, it's easy to do. Cruising the El with Duke on our way to the Loop, I was trying hard to lose myself, but instead I found my distorted image reflected in the train's window. My hair hung limply over my face, nearly covering my tired eyes. The few pimples on my forehead around the hairline seemed to have swelled some and my skin appeared a whiter shade of pale. Duke and I were the only ones in a car which smelled like stale piss. The train swayed from side to side and squeaked and clanked its way down the tracks, rumbling the street below like passing thunder. The city's lights spread out in all directions in parallel lines along the streets. Buildings glowed in the darkness. The city seemed like a giant machine, pulsing and pumping, almost breathing, ready to swallow me up.

During the ride downtown, I couldn't stop thinking about my father, couldn't get his voice out of my head. Sometimes I can even hear him yelling in my sleep--"Dammit! Goddammit!" along with his slamming of doors and cabinets. I remember nights when I was a kid that I tried putting a pillow over my head or simply wishing it

would end. Sometimes I even tried praying, "Jesus, just make him stop." Mostly I just wished he didn't bust into our rooms and go off about them not being clean or something. "I told you to pick up this crap!" he'd yell. "I told you to pick it up!" Soon as I would hear him begin to yell, I started cleaning my room. Some nights I even thought about running away.

If he wasn't yelling at us, he was yelling at my mother. When the fighting was real bad, Pops ended up sleeping on the couch. This happened at least a couple times a month. When I was about fourteen, there was a stretch of about two weeks when he slept on the couch every night. I was sure he would soon leave us for good and that I'd be fatherless, just like Duke. I prayed for Pops to stay and it didn't matter if I had to clean my room every day for a month straight. Every night when he came home from work, my mother told him he needed to go to confession. "You better get yourself down to see Father O'Brian," she would say.

"I've got all the religion I need," he told her.

"If you don't confess to the Lord, the next time you come home you just might find us gone."

"I have nothing to confess," he said.

"Don't lie to me," she battled back. "I know where you've been and with what type of woman you've been keeping company. For Chrissakes, it's all over your shirt collar, Jack!" I'd never before heard my mother take the Lord's name in vain. I couldn't sleep for days. I never saw her so upset. It was much better to confess your sins than lie to her. In my bedroom at night, I tried real hard to hear what they were saying, but all I could hear was my mother's crying. I had a good idea what my father did, but it was never spelled out. I didn't need so much to know exactly what

he'd done, but like my mother, I needed to understand why. I remember Karen telling me "all men were assholes" and that I would be lucky to escape the curse of my gender. It was about this time I remember she began smoking in her bedroom while my parents were downstairs arguing. I could smell the smoke drifting out her window and into mine. Around this same time, she began to stay out past her curfew and sometimes she didn't come home at all. This only caused further tension between my parents, even after Pops went to see Father O'Brian. "You're too tough on her, Jack," my mother would say, "You're driving her away." I don't think my father was all to blame. Karen seemed to be running not only from the family but from the world. Elvis, John Lennon, and disco were dead, Reagan was almost assassinated, people were gunned down at McDonald's, and each day might have been the one we nuked the Soviets into submission.

Duke and I got off at Carol and La Salle and footed it from the station to Hummingbirds in the basement of the Waterford building. "Promise me we'll only have a couple beers and then we'll leave," I told him as we approached the club.

"Whatever you want, Marco," he told me. "Just give me a nod when you're ready to go." The plan seemed simple, enough for me to stay out of trouble.

Duke and I made our way to the front of the line where the bouncer, our buddy, Charlie, let us in without the wait or the five dollar cover. Charlie, who worked with Duke at Gem's Gym, moonlighted at Hummingbirds for extra dough. Jobs were scarce and people our age took to doing whatever was necessary to get by. "You should be grateful you have a job," the widow would tell me when I complained too much, and some days I was. But part-time is a fine line between prostitution and

honest work.

I followed Duke in the door and through the heavy crowd to a small table in the rear of the club. Although we couldn't see the stage, we were lucky just to find an empty table. Hummingbirds was one of the Loop's hottest blues clubs and people crammed into the place like they did on the El at rush hour. Although drinks were cheaper at the Blue Note Lounge, at Hummingbirds we didn't have to pay the cover, and the bands were better. Draped in black velvet, the small stage in front of us saw some of the biggest names in blues: Albert King, John Lee Hooker, Muddy Waters, and B.B. King. Their autographed cover shots hung along the rear of the stage, and bolted to the ceiling was a guitar once owned by Stevie Ray Vaughan. The cramped, smoke-filled basement screamed blues, and when a guitar cried, the music echoed off the walls all the way down to the city's southside. There was nothing fancy about Hummingbirds, only sticky floors, old wooden tables, and blues. It was a good place to forget your troubles.

Duke ordered a pitcher of Old Style and our waitress soon returned with the beer. "Keep an eye out for Linda," he told me and poured out a round. Duke and Linda weren't officially dating, but they spent alot of time together. Linda taught aerobics at Duke's gym. When they were together, Duke forgot anyone else in the world ever existed. I wanted to be happy that Duke's love life was looking up, but it was hard when my own was going down.

I drank my first beer in a hurry and reached for the pitcher to pour another. "Easy, buddy," Duke said, "what about your two beer limit?"

"When I'm two beer from shit-faced that's my limit," I told him and poured us another round. My best plans always fell through after a couple beers. I was on a

roll and there was no stopping me. We had beer and it had to be drunk. It's a Callahan tradition.

"That's the spirit, Marco," Duke said, raising his dripping mug in the air. A worse friend might have stopped me, kept me to my word.

"Here's puke in your face," I yelled, smashing my foamy glassful into his.

While we were starting to party, the house band, The Monotones, took the stage and fired up their amplifiers. Within minutes, the club was rocking and couples crowded onto the dance floor in front of the stage. When the band cranked out "Caldonia," we joined in singing with everyone else on the chorus, raising our hands into the air and shouting: "Caldonia! Caldonia! What makes your big head so hard!" The joint was jumping and my troubles seemed light years away.

Duke turned to me when the song was over. "I'm going to get us another pitcher and see if I can find Linda," he said. "Be back in a flash."

With Duke gone, I watched couples on the dance floor spin and twirl their way around each other. Nothing is lonelier than watching people dance when you're without your girl. I thought about the few times Sheila and I spent dancing on that same floor. On slow songs, I held her firmly at the waist, pressing her lightly against me to feel her move with me. I'm a terrible dancer, but Sheila's pretty good. She took dance lessons in high school on the urging of her parents that she needed to know the waltz for her wedding--I've never been to a wedding yet where anybody waltzed. She came from a lesson-oriented family. Her mother took drawing and painting lessons, and her father golf and tennis lessons. In grade school, Sheila even took piano lessons, but never played again after she moved out of her parents' house. The only songs she claims to remember are Beethoven's "Fleur de Lis" and the first eight

notes of his "Fifth Symphony," although I know she can play much more. If it weren't for Sheila, I probably wouldn't know much Beethoven at all, but I sure can talk an ear full of Muddy Waters. All in all, I think the dance lessons paid off the most. On slow numbers, she really did move gracefully across the floor. Holding onto her, I felt like Fred Astaire. "And you're my Ginger Rogers," I sometimes whispered in her ear. I said corny stuff like that once in awhile, and she liked it.

Before I met Sheila, I never did much dancing at all, mostly because of the time I went to my high school's winter sock-hop with Nancy Shoemacher. Nancy was the daughter of one of my mother's friends from church. She went to St. Mary's, an all-girls Catholic academy down the street from my high school. She usually had bad acne, pimples across her forehead and craters where her cheeks should have been. She wore her brown hair, parted in the middle, cut short about her ears. I argued all I could to get out of going, but Pops wouldn't hear of it. "You're going and that's final," he told me. I even had to wear a suit, which Pops paid for and I never wore again. I remember going after school with my mother to Leonard's Men's Clothing on Halsted to buy one. Leonard's had rows and rows of suits in every shape, size and color. I tried on about twenty suits that afternoon--pin stripes, solids, plaids, cottons, synthetics, and wools--and each time I came out of the dressing room, my mother tried to give me some encouragement. "That looks very nice," she said about a million times. Three piece, beige polyester, bell-bottom flairs best describes how the whole dance turned out.

Pops drove us to and from the dance and when we picked up Nancy, I couldn't have been more surprised by her transformation. She actually looked real good in a dress, a red linen which matched well with the pin-on corsage my mother made me

take her. Even her acne cleared up, and her hair, curled in small loops, was something special. I should have been more proud with Nancy at my side, but on our way to the school, I remember slouching down in the back seat as low as I could, just in case we passed someone I knew. When you're a teenager, nothing's worse than wearing a suit and being driven around town by your old man. At the dance, where giant cut outs of snow flakes hung down from the gym's ceiling with white streamers, Nancy and I played wilted wall flowers. We tried dancing a couple numbers, but every time I ended up stepping on her white shoes. Only more embarrassing was the moment in the parking lot when I tried to kiss her. As I moved to slip her the tongue, she turned her head, giving me instead a mouthful of ear. Somewhere is a Kodak her father took when I gave her that corsage--I'd pay about a million bucks to get that back.

If it weren't for Sheila, I may have never danced again, but when we came to Hummingbirds, Sheila and I didn't do much dancing at all. Usually we spent our time listening to the music from a small corner booth. We always sat together on the same side and drank exotic drinks like screaming orgasms and fuzzy navels, which I chased with an Old Style. Sometimes we took candles from empty tables and stacked them across ours like an altar. People gave us these crazy looks, like we were freaks, and it was worse when we both dressed Hawaiian for the night. I think there's a certain pleasure in perversity.

Waiting for Duke, I wondered if Sheila was thinking about me, and just as I was about to go call her, Duke showed up with Linda, two pitchers of beer, and another girl. Linda had shiny black hair well past her shoulders. She dressed to kill in a black mini and a sheer, v-cut blouse showing off her black bra underneath. Her

face was brushed with rouge, her eyes heavily outlined in black. Pink lipstick highlighted her lips, and with her stiletto heels, she was about four inches taller than me. Her body was tight and muscular, her breasts firm. She was an aerobics instructor and I had no trouble believing she must have jumped herself silly. Wherever she went, she drew looks from men and women. Duke dated these flashy types on a regular basis, and although I certainly enjoyed the view, she was definitely not my type.

The curly blonde with her seemed Linda's opposite. She was about my size, not too thin or too heavy. Along with faded baggy blue jeans with holes in the knees, she wore a loose fitting, Jose Cuervo t-shirt that swallowed her up. She had a comfortable appearance with a round face, blue eyes, and big spiral curls running down her back. She used only the slightest touches of make-up for accent. Large silver hoops hung from her ears. Her fingernails were glossed with pink. On her right middle finger was a small blue sapphire and on her left pinky, a tiny gold band. She had a wrist full of silver bracelets.

"Hope you weren't waiting too long," Duke told me, placing the pitchers on our table.

"I was just about to make a call," I said.

"You remember Linda."

"Sure thing," I said. "Hope things are going well at the gym."

"And this is Linda's friend--"

"Skylar Jameson," she said, cutting Duke off. Her voice was deep and scratchy. She put her hand out to greet me, her bracelets jingling.

"Nice bracelets," I said.

"My father bought them for me in Acapulco."

"Sit down and stay awhile," Duke said, having rustled up two chairs for the ladies. Linda sat close to Duke, who filled our glasses with beer. "Toast, toast, we need a toast. Up with the glasses." Duke was big on toasting. We raised our glasses and waited for him to speak. "Dearly beloved," he paused, "let's party!"

"Hear, hear," I added as we smashed glasses with one another. It wasn't the greatest of toasts, but it brought us all together. Duke gulped down his beer and banged his glass on the table. Skylar soon followed and Linda cheered her on: "Way to go, girlfriend."

"Let's go, Marco, drink up," Duke was saying as Skylar wiped foam from her lips.

"Bottoms up," I said, and a few seconds later I placed my empty glass on the table. That's when Skylar belched and Linda laughed so loud nearly everyone in the bar turned to look. Linda had the most obnoxious laugh in the city, worse when she began snorting herself into hiccups. But you had to love her then, especially if her eyeliner began dripping from the corners of her eyes. Skylar was soon laughing with Linda. I was sure the next thing I'd see was beer dribbling from her nostrils, like the way Pepsi does if someone makes you laugh when you're sipping the stuff. I was sure they'd already had a few more than us, especially when Linda, tipping her stool back, almost fell on the floor. "Easy, easy," Duke told her, "we still have the rest of the night."

While the girls and Duke were busy talking, I tried my best to look interested. The Monotones cranked out a version of Little Walter's "Juke," and during the song, I found myself staring at Skylar, tracing the loops in her curls and looking at the big

silver hoops hanging from her ears. My eyes moved from her small ears to her bracelets and then to her slender fingers. I watched her face and the dimples her cheeks made when she talked. I couldn't keep my eyes off her. She must have felt me looking at her, because she turned my way, catching my glance. I was like a cat stuck in a car's headlights. I felt my face go flush. She smiled and winked. There's nothing worse than when a girl catches you staring at her.

"You come here often?" Skylar asked.

"It's kind of a regular hang out," I told her.

"It's a nice place," she said, "and the music's not bad either. I've never really listened much to the blues before."

"The bluer the better," I said and reached for the half-empty pitcher of beer to refill our glasses. "It's soul music to me. Been listening to it all my life. Hell, it is my life, but that's a long story."

"I like long stories," she said taking a sip of her beer.

"Not this one," I told her. "Definitely not this one."

"Where you from?" she asked.

"Northside, Wrigleyville. About a stone's throw from the ballpark."

"That's cool," she said, "I bet you get to see a lot of games."

"When I was a kid," I told her. "These days not many people in my neighborhood can afford a ticket. It's a crime, truly. How about you? Where you from?" I asked.

"Kenilworth," she said, sipping her beer. "Rich-bitch capital of the world. But I'm living now in my parents' condo on Lincoln Park West."

"You get to the zoo much?" I asked before sipping my beer.

"Mostly when I'm lonely," she said. "The animals can always cheer me up."

"Me too," I said. "The zoo's kind of this special, magical place. It makes me think about summers when my mother used to take me and my sister there for a picnic. We made our own sandwiches before going--I'd have bologna with the crusts cut off--and we brought Cokes wrapped in tin foil to keep them cool, although it never much helped," I told her.

"That's really sweet," she said.

"And then we all took the bus. My favorite part was dropping in our fare and listening to it clink and clank its way down the metal cylinder. We usually spent all afternoon at the zoo, seeing every animal at least once and our favorites twice. My sister always had to feed the elephants, and I never wanted to go home at the end of the day," I told her.

"That's a sad story," she said.

"I never really thought about it like that before," I told her. "I guess the sad part is we can never go back and have it that way again, like it was when we were all feeding the elephants." Without saying a word, Skylar looked at me and sipped her beer. While I was talking, Duke and Linda slipped away. They were probably dancing, but I couldn't see them in the thick crowd. Skylar refilled our glasses. "How do you spend your days?" I said breaking the silence.

"I'm a student at Chicago Circle."

"Small world," I said, "I used to take night classes there a few years ago. What's your major?"

"I'm undeclared. It's only my second year," she said. She didn't sound much interested in continuing the conversation any further. She turned away for a moment

to look out at the dance floor. "Would you like to dance?" she said.

"I'm not much of a dancer. To be honest, it all goes back to high school." And then I told her all about that sock-hop.

"Dance with me, just this once. I promise not to laugh," she said, looking into my eyes. I've always been a sucker for pretty-please looks.

"One giggle and it's over," I told her, then finished off my beer before following her to the dance floor.

The wooden floor vibrated from the loud music and the crowd pressed in around us, pushing us closer together. I felt the warmth of her body next to mine. Her perfume reminded me of sweet summer flowers. She moved fluidly to the rhythm, shaking and turning her body with ease. I felt rigid and uncomfortable, very self-conscious. I missed beats and steps. She tried to reassure me, taking my hand in hers. "Just follow me," she whispered. Her skin was warm and perspired; beads of sweat dripped down the sides of her face. Together we circled in and out of the crowd, moving and spinning about the other couples. We danced a few songs this way, while colored lights of blue, green, red, and yellow pulsed to the music. When the beat slowed, she put her arms around my waist and rested her head against my chest. I placed my hands on her shoulders and we swayed together, slowly, from side to side. I was thinking about Sheila and how sometimes after drinking wine, we used to dance this way in her kitchen. We'd turn the lights off and light candles, which gave the room a soft glow. We tangoed through her apartment or waltzed to one of her scratchy old records. Sometimes Alley tried to swat our shadows.

When the music ended, Skylar looked up at me. "You did good," she said, "real good."

"You made it look too easy," I said, walking her back to the table. She took a napkin, wiped the sweat from her forehead, and brushed back her hair from her eyes.

"How about a shot of Cuervo?" she said pointing to the logo on her shirt. I nodded in agreement and she gave the order to a passing waitress, who quickly returned with the shots, a few lime slices, and a shaker of salt. Skylar took a twenty from her pocket.

"Put it away," I said and slipped the waitress a ten. I never felt right about a woman paying my way. Sheila, a traditionalist, always expected me to fork out the bucks, whenever I had any that is. But Skylar made no objections and we lined up the shots with a lime slice. She licked her hand and I mine before shaking on some salt.

"Klutzy dancers," she said raising her glass in the air.

"Northshore rich-bitches," I added. We licked off the salt, downed our tequila, and quickly sucked a lime.

"The lime's my favorite part," she told me, juice dribbling down her chin. I reached over with a napkin and dabbed it off. "I don't think your buddy's coming back," she told me, placing a strand of hair behind her ear. "I hope you didn't need a ride home."

"We took the El," I said.

"I've always wanted to ride the El, especially at night," she said. "Maybe you can take me for a ride sometime."

"It's kind of dangerous," I told her.

"I like dangerous," she said.

"Mostly the train's filled with smelly, thoughtless people, enough to make you wanna puke."

We went on talking real casual and all about the city, her favorite places and her favorite restaurants. She ate in so many places, I couldn't begin to name them all, although one her favorites was the revolving room atop the Hancock Tower, where she went for her high school prom. "Real ritzy," she told me.

We kept chatting until the waitress came around for last call. "I guess this means the night's over," I said.

"Only the bar is closing," she told me.

"I need to find Duke," I said. "I'll only be a few minutes."

Making my way through the bar, I kept my eye open for Duke, but he was nowhere to be seen. I walked all around the place looking for him and checked the crowded bathroom. On my way out, I stopped at the pay phone. I picked up the receiver and held it to my ear. It was some time around one-thirty. I wanted to call her to tell her goodnight. For a long time, I did nothing but listen to the repeating dial tone, then I finally hung up.

When I walked back up to the table, Skylar smiled. "Something wrong," she said. "You don't look so good."

"I'm fine," I said, "just a bit tired."

"Maybe this will get you going," she said, pointing to the waitress bringing us another round of shots. "It's on me," she said. "Call it even." It was just what I needed to set me straight. We lined up the glasses and salted our hands. "You make the toast," she told me.

"For the Blarney," I said. It was a Callahan tradition, especially at holiday gatherings. We clicked our glasses together and downed the tequila, which quickly warmed my gut and sparked my engine.

"How about a lift home?" she asked.

"I'll take the El. Don't worry about me," I said, watching the band take down their set.

"You won't be imposing at all," she said, running her fingers through her hair. "I insist." I certainly didn't feel like riding the damn train back up to the neighborhood, and there was no telling how long I'd have to wait in the cold before Duke came home, if he ever remembered to at all.

"If it's no trouble," I said and she seemed satisfied. People were clearing out of the club. The help began sweeping the floors. "If you're ready," I said. "Let's blow this joint."

Outside, the crisp autumn breeze still gusted off the Lake and the Wrigley building across the river glowed white against the backdrop of the glass and steel skyline. I was down, but not out. Sklyar slipped her arm into mine and I held on tightly as we headed to her car on State, following the steaming river west along Wacker with the wind at our backs.

VERSE SEVEN

Cocaine habit is mighty bad,

It's the worst old habit that I ever had . . .

I love my whiskey and I love my gin,

But the way I love my coke is a doggone sin.

"Take a pop," Skylar said, handing me a vial. "This will perk you up." We were cruising down Lake Shore Drive, when she reached into the glove box and pulled it out. "It's the best stuff in the city," she said.

I stuffed the vial up to my nose and took a few quick whiffs. I felt the blow seep into my nostril and down my throat.

I hadn't used coke for a long time. Couldn't afford it, and besides, it always reminded me about Karen's problems with Stan. He was an addict and got her hooked. It was a wonder he was ever able to hold onto his day job driving heavy machinery for City Works. He plowed snow in the winter and changed light bulbs in the summer. Once in awhile, they put him on road crew. With people like Stan building our city's roads, it's no wonder they're always falling apart.

A Polack from the south side, Stan had broad shoulders, a large forehead, and big hands. He combed what little hair he had over his ever-expanding bald spot, like Dave at North Side. His nose was big enough to snort the Hancock Building. He was big, but never seemed overweight. He wasn't exactly muscular like Duke, more just a natural brute. He wasn't the friendliest guy either. He had a bad case of middle-child

syndrome, coming from a family of eight where he was one of two boys. He trusted nobody and when we were out drinking, he pointed at people. "That guy's probably FBI," he'd tell me. The lunkhead believed the whole world was conspiring to get him. He had a bad case of paranoia. I still can't figure out how Karen was so attracted to him. I think mostly he offered her security, like an overgrown Teddy bear. It was something Karen felt she needed at the time. She only wanted someone to love her. She was sick of guys using her, and Stan seemed different, at the beginning.

Karen's addiction to Stan and his coke lasted about a year. There were times when she was so wired, she seem unable to do anything for herself. I remember this one time Karen missed her period and wanted to go see a doctor at Cook County. She was too afraid to tell Stan and didn't want to go by herself. Stan didn't want kids. In fact, he hated kids. "They're just too damn disgusting," he told me once when we were drinking beer at Belmont Harbor. He had Karen taking the pill, but she didn't do it regularly like she was supposed to. "You gotta help me, Mark. Take me down to Cook County. We have to go today," she demanded over the telephone at seven in the morning. "We have to go before Stan gets back from work. "I think I'm pregnant." She was wired out of her mind, strung out and desperate. She'd been on a run for three days.

"Are you sure?" I asked, groggy and sleepy. "What makes you so damn sure?" I was recovering from a binge of my own the night before at Hummingbirds.

"I'm three weeks late. Three weeks late," she said so fast I almost couldn't understand what the hell she was saying. "I'm telling you I need to see a doctor. I need you to take me. Are you going to take me? We have to go today."

"Sit tight," I said. "I'll be over in half an hour."

"Can't you come sooner?" she said. She and Stan lived around the block on Grace. "Can't you come any sooner?" She was freaking.

"Just mellow," I said. "I'll be over soon as I can." I first had to go to the Bagwan and borrow the Bomber from Haziz. After I explained the situation, he even gave me five bucks for gas. In exchange for the car, I promised to clean out his storage room that evening. Then I drove the Bomber, spewing blue smoke and misfiring at every stop, over to Karen's. She was waiting for me at the curbside, her hair disheveled, eye liner dripping from the corners of her bloodshot eyes. Her clothes were wrinkled and soiled. She smelled, too, like a rotten onion. She hadn't taken a shower for days. "You stink like shit," I said, driving toward the freeway. She tried hard to keep her hands from shaking. "You're a goddamn wreck," I told her.

"Just take me to Cook County. And please don't tell Stan or Pops. Promise me."

"Mellow out," I said. "Take a lude."

While we were sitting in rush hour traffic on the Eisenhower, she started to come down a bit. When we finally made it to Cook County, she looked tired and worn out. We drove around the hospital a number of times looking for a parking space. That's the way you do it in the city, drive in circles until you find a spot. On our third time around the block, I finally found a place and carefully backed the junker into position. It wasn't the easiest of cars to parallel park. "Give me some quarters," I said, "for the meter."

She reached into her purse to look for some change and I noticed an empty

vial. "What's that?" I said. "For Chissake, you want us to get busted?" I told her and grabbed the vial out of her purse.

"I need a beer," she said, handing over the change. "Let's get a beer."

Ignoring her, I got out of the car and waited. She didn't move. "Let's go!" I shouted. "Let's move. I don't have all day." While she took a brush from her purse and combed her hair, I tossed the vial into the gutter. She then took a tissue and wiped the dripping make-up from her face before finally getting out of the car. She looked a bit better, but in the bright sunlight, she appeared pale and sickly, like a ghost. She was skinnier than I'd ever seen. It killed me to see her like that--it really did. I blamed it all on Stan.

Once inside the hospital, we took a seat in the waiting room until a doctor was available to give her a blood test. Since she wasn't bleeding or otherwise wounded, I knew it was going to be a long wait. We had no other choice because Stan didn't keep up the health insurance premium. "We're young," he said. "What could happen?" He surely was an idiot. I should be lucky enough to even have such an option, because without insurance, if something ever happened to me, it'd be best to leave me dead or I'd owe cash till that day finally came.

Anyways, the waiting room was crowded and a thin haze of smoke hovered below the fluorescent lights. When Karen sat down, she pulled a wrinkled pack of Marlboro Lights from her pocket. "Want one?" she offered. I couldn't refuse. Karen sparked a match and I jumpstarted mine off hers.

If you didn't come to the hospital already sick, the place could easily make you so. The waiting room had no windows and the lights flickered and vibrated enough to make you dizzy. Everyone seemed to have whooping cough. Sitting in the corner, an

immigrant woman with a scarf over her head clutched her rosary and mumbled "Hail Marys." A fat guy a few rows over was flushed red and moaned miserably like he was about to die. "Please don't tell Stan," Karen repeated.

"Don't worry," I told her. "I'm just the guy who bails you out of trouble."

Sitting to my right was a halfway decent fellow with dried blood on his cheek, holding an ice pack to his head. "Reginald Williams," he introduced himself. "My old lady did it with a ball bat." I didn't ask why. I was just glad Karen was only here for a routine blood test.

We waited for what seemed like hours and then waited and waited, and waited some more. We smoked all of Karen's cigarettes and then I bummed Kools from Reginald Williams, who didn't feel much like smoking. When they finally led him away, he gave us the rest of his pack. "You'll need 'em," he said. I couldn't thank him enough.

We waited another hour and then a little after 1:00pm, they took her away for the five minute test, the results of which she wouldn't get for at least three days. By the time we were out of the place it was just after two. Karen was looking much better, especially after she ate the turkey sandwich and drank the Pepsi I bought for her from the vending machine.

The Bomber was ticketed and I gave it to Karen to pay. "Step on it," she said, once we were back in the car. "I have to get home before Stan."

"I thought we'd stop for a beer," I told her, "on me."

"Just take me home," she demanded. "Stan will be home soon." Rush hour on the Eisenhower had just begun and I maneuvered the Bomber in and out of traffic trying to make the best time I could. I managed to get Karen home with a few

minutes to spare.

"You better stay off the blow for awhile," I said before she stepped out of the car. "At least until you get the results." She looked like she was ready to collapse. "Did you hear what I said?"

"I gotta go," she told me.

"Look, Karen, if you need a way out, just call." She looked at me without responding and I told her another time, "Stay off the blow."

I took another hit of Skylar's blow before passing back the vial. She popped in a Cheap Trick tape and started to sing along. "Come on," she said, "let it out." Before I could help myself, we were shouting together at the top of our lungs-- "I want you to want me, I need you to need me"--until we both broke into a laugh attack. Skylar was laughing so hard the car began to swerve and the more it swerved, the harder she laughed. She pulled off onto the shoulder. "You drive," she said, red in the face.

Skylar got out of the car and we changed seats. I had never sat behind the wheel of anything besides the Bomber before. I sunk into the leather and gripped the small wheel. I revved the engine a few times. Skylar reloaded her vial and took another wiff before passing it to me. I did a hit, adjusted my mirrors, and shifted into gear. I pulled onto LSD and within seconds we were pushing sixty in a forty-five. "Faster," she said and I punched it to eighty. The car reacted smoothly and responded to my slightest touch. It felt like we were hardly going forty. I moved in and out of traffic. Along open stretches, I pushed ninety, one-hundred, one-ten, before letting the gears wind back down.

I pitched off the road at Belmont Harbor and pulled into the abandoned parking lot. Skylar took a bag of pot from under her seat. "You want to get high" she said and started to roll a joint. I was feeling jittery from the blow, probably cut with speed. I was hoping the pot would bring me down some. "This should take off the edge," she said and sparked the doobie. I rolled down the window for some fresh air. I felt slightly flushed.

We smoked out, watching the lights of Belmont Harbor sparkle off the water. A few boats were still moored to the docks. In the summer, the harbor was filled to capacity. The light seemed to bounce off the water, which lapped against the boats. The cool wind blowing strongly off the lake had a fishy odor. "Do you have a cigarette?" Skylar pulled out a pack of Winston Lights.

"I like to watch the lights on the water," she told me.

"Me too," I said. "I've been coming down here all my life." She passed me the reefer and I took a hit before passing it back. "I used to come down on Sunday morning with my father before church," I started to tell her. "We came about six when the sun was just starting to rise. We would walk up and down the beach, mostly in silence, but every once in a while, my father put his arm around my shoulders, like this," I said, slipping my arm around her. "The sea gulls followed us, circling around our heads and screeching. You hardly knew you were even in the city. In the summer, we sometimes built sand castles or went for a swim in the cold water. My father was an excellent castle builder."

"You two must be real close," she said. We spaced on the water.

"I need a drink," I told her. "I've got cotton mouth something fierce." Near the bathrooms at the far end of the parking lot was a drinking fountain next to a pay

phone. "I'll be right back," I said stepping out of the car and throwing the burning cigarette to the pavement.

I walked across the parking lot to the backside of the bathrooms. The cold wind felt refreshing, but gave me goose bumps. I leaned over the fountain and took a long drink before splashing some cold water across my face. I was high, but still jittery from the coke. I held out my arm in front of me to see if I had the shakes. Things seemed steady. Then, for reasons I can't explain, I picked up the pay phone and called Sheila collect. "Who may I say is calling?" the operator asked.

"Mark Callahan," I said. I waited a few moments while the phone rang. Sheila answered on the fifth ring. She sounded half asleep.

"Hello? Hello?"

"This is AT & T with a collect call from Mark Callahan. Will you accept the charges?" There was a long silence. "Mark Callahan is calling collect. Will you accept the charges?"

"It's me, Mark," I shouted into the mouthpiece, hoping she'd hear me. "Accept the charges, goddammit. I need to talk." That's when the line went dead.

"She must have hung up, sir. Do you wish to try again?"

I slammed down the phone and gave the brick wall a couple solid kicks. "Damn bitch, answer the phone, for Chrissakes." I wanted to hop the next taxi over to her place and give it to her good. Slap some sense into her. I kicked the wall another time. "Fuck you," I said. My heart raced. "Fuck you." Beads of sweat formed on my forehead. I splashed water across my face. Then I remembered Skylar.

I took a few deep breaths and tried to collect myself. I pissed against the wall.

Before heading back to the car, I took another drink of water. I opened the door and Skylar looked at me, her eyes red and glassy: "Are you all right?"

"I need a smoke," I said and she handed me the cigarettes. I must have looked real wired. My hands were shaking some, my heart racing. "A beer would be good too."

"I've got some Heinekins in my frig," she told me, "if you don't mind stopping over."

I turned the key and revved the engine before pulling back onto LSD heading south. Skylar cranked back on the Cheap Trick and I put the pedal to the metal. With one hand on the wheel, I slipped my arm around her. Skylar leaned over and kissed me softly on the cheek. I was way stoned. It was about three in the morning.

VERSE EIGHT

All night blues ever, ever on my mind,

I've got those all night blues, feel like catching

some old train and flying.

I felt so low, don't know what to do,

Ain't got nobody to tell my troubles to.

I was coming down. My nose ran, I had the shakes, and sweat dripped down the side of my face. My heart raced and my mind was messing with me something bad. I was crashing hard. My eyes were pindrops. Skylar's were too. As we walked into the bright lobby of her building, the smell of stale beer poured off me. Light from a large silver chandelier with tear drop crystals bounced about the room and off the gold-plated walls, creating an incredible glare. Even the blue floor tiles seemed to sparkle.

The place was so bright, the doorman himself wore a pair of dark wrap-around shades. He was a tall black fellow, his hair peppered grey. When we entered the lobby, he stood up from behind a well polished mahogany desk to greet us. Security monitors on each end of the desk flickered. "Ms. Jameson," he said with a deep voice that seemed to shake the room, "I should have known it was you." He walked towards us to unlock the glass door separating the lobby from the elevators.

This doorman, D. J. Simms, looked me over, staring into my bloodshot eyes and at my denim jacket. I knew he knew I was stoned, that I wasn't a regular in

these places. I'm sure he had ideas about why I was there, but he didn't say a word. He just stared, his eyes burning a hole in my jacket.

I followed Skylar through the glass door to the elevators. The inside of the elevator was a miniature of the lobby with its own chandelier and gold plated walls, except for the wall-to-wall red carpet. Skylar hit the button to the fifty-first floor and I watched the numbers change as we rose higher. We were going up, but I was coming down. The blow had worn off and my heart stopped racing. I had the burn. "There's a pool on the roof," she told me, "Care for a dip?"

"I didn't bring my ice skates," I said.

"On sixty is a sauna. Need some heat?"

"Place is a regular health club. Should have brought my trunks." She didn't know whether to laugh or not. I didn't know whether or not I was even trying to be funny. For the first time all night, we had nothing to say to each other. All I could hear was the purr of the elevator and the circulating air fan on the ceiling blowing warm air upon us. I felt like sinking to the floor in the corner and calling it a night. I was sliding and wanted to fly again, to sail outside myself into the dark sky high above the city, higher than the Sears Tower, up in the clouds to lay my head and kick my feet up on a star. I wouldn't come down except for a redhot at Louie's. Maybe I'd come back if the Cubbies won the pennant, but that wouldn't happen in this century. I wanted to get outside myself something bad, take this run as far as it would go. There must be a certain peace in forgetting yourself, in not remembering anything.

Like it's July and I'm with Sheila at Belmont Harbor. It's partly cloudy and eighty degrees. We're listening to the Cubbies on my transistor radio. They're

playing the Phillies at Wrigley. We have our shoes off and our feet are dangling off the pier in the cold water. Sheila is swatting away gnats that are swirling around her head. I tell Sheila the Cubbies still have a chance to win the pennant. "Sandberg's hitting over three-hundred and Dawson is on a homer streak. They're on a roll," I say. She's too busy swatting bugs to listen. I change subjects. "Do you ever want to sail over to Michigan?" I ask but get no response. "I want to do that someday, go to Mackinaw." She's looking at the water now. "My job with North Side isn't going so well. I can't seem to sell anything. Dave's on my case. I'm pretty worried." She's still looking at the water. The gnats are now circling my head. "Let's just blow this town. Take off on a long vacation. Rent a car and drive to the west coast. What do you say?"

"Look at the fish," she says pointing at the school of minnows circling the pier. "I can't believe there're so many fish."

Now we're at Marshall Fields. It's a Saturday and there is a sale. The place is swarming with shoppers. I follow Sheila around the store from rack to rack. She checks prices, then labels. Every once and a while she pulls a dress from the rack and holds it against her. "What do you think?" she asks. I'm watching other shoppers. A woman and her young daughter. Three old ladies with shopping bags from Nieman Marcus. Sheila picks out another dress and holds it against her. She checks the price twice. I'm wandering away, nowhere in particular, just wandering, looking at the racks, checking out blouses, listening to the Muzak and the intermittent, coded security beeps. I want to know what the code means; what's the difference between one beep and three, between long and short. Long, short, long. Long, short, long. I look at a rack of sweaters.

I'm on an escalator at Water Tower Place.

I'm on the Kennedy Freeway.

I'm in the Wrigley bleachers.

I'm on the front steps of the Art Institute.

I'm at the top of the Sears Tower.

The elevator door opened and I stepped into a dim hallway with gold wall-to-wall shag and silver striped wallpaper. "This is it," Skylar said, taking a key from her pocket. I tried to stay with it, tried to get a grip on my situation. Skylar did most of the talking. "Sure are quiet," she said. "I can take you home if you wish." I tried to smile. She slipped her key in the door. "You look a bit burned."

"I could use that Heinekin," I said.

"Heinekin, St. Pauli, Beck's, it's all the same."

While she was unlocking the door, I noticed she didn't have a purse. Unlike her, Sheila was a bag carrier, whose purse was a regular mini-mart: hairbrush, compact, lipstick, Band-Aid, rubber bands and paper clips, deodorant, condoms, tampons, and mounds of Kleenex. "No purse?" I said.

"Don't need one," she told me, "only weighs me down. Something extra I have to keep track of. The less the better. Traveling light's the only way to go. I do keep a credit card in my back pocket in case of emergency. With me, what you see is what you get."

Once inside, she flipped on the light. She had a one-hundred-and-eighty degree view of the city from north to south along the lake shore. You could see lights stretching all the way to Indiana. "You still want that beer?" she asked, as I walked over to the window.

"Sure thing," I said stepping gently over the white sheepskin rug. From the fifty-first floor the cars along Lake Shore Drive looked like Duke's Hotwheels. I scanned my eyes across the city, where in the distance I could see Sheila's building about a block from the lake on Broadway. I could almost hear her creaking elevator and see her cracked shower tiles. Her windows shook when airplanes took off from O'Hare and her pipes rattled when she ran the water. I had a hard time sleeping in her building, even on nights as quiet as the last night I spent with her.

It was warm that night and Sheila and I lay together with just a sheet over us. A fan whirled at the foot of the bed. I couldn't sleep, couldn't stop thinking. The curtains blew in and out from the fan. I remember watching Sheila sleep, how I looked at her closed eyes and the way her brown hair rested gently against her face. I wanted to ask her to marry me. This was after we lost the baby and I was getting my life back together. I needed to marry her. I needed her stability. I woke her up. It was two in the morning. "Do you love me?" I asked. "Tell me you love me."

"It's late," she said.

"I need to hear you say it. Do you hear what I'm saying?"

"I'm tired," she said. "We can talk in the morning." She had to be at work in six hours.

"Just tell me you love me, that's all," I said.

"You know how I feel," she said, turning away from me and closing her eyes.

"Don't turn away," I said.

"It's really too late to get into this tonight," she paused, "and yes, I love you."

"Say it like you mean it. Say it like it matters." But she didn't say another word.

Skylar returned with an opened bottle of beer. "You want to see where I live," I told her and she moved closer. "Just take a look to the north. You see the harbor. That's where we were earlier. Follow it inland until you can see Wrigley. See it?"

"I think I can see it," she told me, her face pressed to the glass to cut the glare. I took a long sip of cold beer.

"I live just north-east on Freemont," I said.

"That's neat," she said. "Almost like living at the ballpark."

"Almost," I said.

We spent a few more minutes looking out the window and locating the landmarks we knew like the Hancock building, the Sears Tower, and Oak Street Beach. It was like she could see the whole world and maybe Canada. I finally turned away from the window and for the first time gave her apartment the once over. Since there wasn't a whole bunch of furniture, the place seemed spacious. Just behind us, facing the window, was a black leather couch and matching ebony coffee table. Along the left wall was a bar complete with a refrigerator, a sink, and shelves stocked with gin, vodka, whiskey, and imported scotch. On the right wall was a gas fireplace where beside it hung a Nagel original, a portrait of a woman with jet black hair. She even had a Nieman, an impressionistic marathoner in aqua blues and reds. I had a similar one on my bedroom wall, a poster which McDonald's gave away during the '76 Olympics.

Looking at the Nieman made me think about my room and how much time I spent there when I was a kid. I used to love staying home from school and spending the day pretending I was on a desert island or something. I'd fake sick, which

sometimes meant making myself puke, but that never mattered. Being sick and all, I got special privileges, like my mom let me take the family's black and white Zenith up to my bedroom where all day I did nothing but watch reruns, "I Dream of Jeanie," "Bewitched," that sort of thing. I had the hots for Elizabeth Montgomery. At lunch, my mom brought me a sandwich, a Pepsi with chips, and a Twinkie, the sort of stuff that could make any kid feel better. Sometimes I wondered if she was on to me, but I didn't much care as long as I was able to stay home from school. I hated school. Bored the hell out of me. Everyday was pure hell with all the fights and all. And the teachers never wanted me there either. "Your son has attitude adjustment problems," they would tell my parents. The worst part about getting in trouble at school was not detention, but having to go home and face Pops. He'd knock the crap out of me, like it would help or something. In my room I was safe and I could have stayed up there forever. I had all I ever needed until Pops came home and took back his t.v. Then I still had my ballcard collection, model cars to build, or my radio with which I tried to tune in stations from around the country. Living by the lake, I sometimes could pick up Syracuse or Buffalo, Pittsburgh or Toledo. Once I even got Omaha and this Spanish station I swear was Mexico, although it was probably a broadcast from the city's west side.

"You all right?" Skylar asked. "You sure are quiet." She took a seat on the couch and I sat down next to her.

"Long day," I said. I was tired but because of the blow, my eyes didn't feel very heavy.

"You want to tell me about it?"

"It's nothing," I said. I finished my beer and rested my head back against the couch. The city lights sparkled along the lake shore. "You haven't told me much about yourself," I said.

"What's there to tell?"

"Tell me your favorite color?" She looked at me for a few moments.

"Red," she said, "but sometimes emerald green. It depends on my mood. And yours?"

"Let's talk about you," I said. "Blue, like the lake on a winter afternoon."

"That's a nice color," she said, running her fingers through her hair.

"Tell me something else," I said. "Anything."

"Really, there's not much to say. I already told you. I'm from Kenilworth and I'm a north shore rich-bitch."

"Tell me something I don't know."

"My mother's a personal injury lawyer," she said.

"And your father?"

"He doesn't work now. He used to be an investor. He spends most of his time at the country club playing golf or tennis. That's what he tells us. You need another beer?" She got up and grabbed a couple more Heinekins. "Like I said, there's not much to talk about. I've led a pretty boring life. Nine years of ballet, private high school in Lake Forest, a horse I ride on weekends. Boring. Very Boring. It's not the stuff of memories or walking along the beach with my father. Not any of that stuff. Like I said, my father's never around and the only time I spend with my mother is shopping at Marshal Fields. It's not much," she said handing me a beer.

"Ballet?"

"Nine years, but I don't dance anymore. Everyday, three hours a day was enough for me. There's only so much dance a girl can stand. My family is really very boring. I'm an only child, I was raised by a nanny, we spend each July at our cottage in Lake Geneva, and I'm spoiled. There's not much to talk about. You said you had a sister?"

"That's right," I told her. "Just the two of us, her baby, and my parents."

"I want to have children some day," she said. "I want a big family. Five maybe six kids. How about you? You want any children?"

"Maybe someday," I said thinking about what might have been with Sheila and the pregnancy.

"You'd be a good dad, I can tell," she said. I watched her peel the label off her bottle. She looked at me and then I looked at her. "Kiss me," she said. "Go ahead, kiss me, don't be shy."

"I can't" I finally said. "It wouldn't be right."

"Are you married? Is that your secret?"

"Not exactly," I said. "I have a girlfriend, but it's more complicated than it sounds."

"It always is," she reassured me. "But tonight it's just you and me and tomorrow's a new day. When you think about the past and the future, it only gets in the way of right now." I stood up and walked over to the window. "I'm sorry," she said.

"It's not you," I told her, "really."

"I didn't mean to pressure you."

"You weren't," I said.

"I'll take you home now if you want to go."

"I can grab a cab," I said, but I had nowhere to go. It was much too late to be knocking on Duke's door and I didn't have enough money to blow on a hotel.

"You can stay here if you want. No funny stuff, I promise."

"I don't want to cause any problems."

"You can sleep right here on the couch. It's pretty comfortable. I've fallen asleep on it plenty of times." I walked back over to the couch and sat down.

"If you're sure," I said.

"Positive." She stood up, went to her bedroom, and returned a few moments later with two pillows and a blanket. She was barefoot and wearing a big White Sox jersey. "I hope you don't mind," she said. Her cleanly shaven legs were thin and slender, and when she was busy spreading the blanket over the couch, I could see the white of her panties. She fluffed the pillows.

"That's great," I said, taking off my shoes. She turned off the light and cuddled next to me, letting me rest in her arms. She comforted me, running her fingers through my hair. She moved her hand up my shirt and rubbed my nipple. I never had my nipple rubbed before. Her fingers were soft and warm. The more she touched me, the more sensitive my body became. "It's chilly in here," she said and wrapped the blanket about us. Her hand continued to move over me, sliding up and down my body. She pulled gently at the hairs around my belly-button.

"That tickles," I said and she did it some more.

"Your skin's real soft," she said.

"I've tried everything to toughen it up," I told her and she laughed some. She

took my hand into hers and guided it under her baggy shirt.

"Don't," she said. "I want you to." She guided my hand across her chest from one breast to the other and I felt her nipples harden. Her skin was smooth and warm, making mine feel rough. I slid my hand over her as she did me. I ran my finger around her belly-button and then cupped my hand under her bosom and gently massaged her, squeezing ever so tenderly. "That feels good," she said and she kissed me just under my ear. I snuggled next to her and rested my head against her shoulder. With the tip of her finger, she traced the outline of my face and forehead.

"Talk to me," I said.

"What about?" she asked. "I've already given you the basics."

"Tell me about your high school or about the horse you ride on weekends."

"I love my horse," she told me. "I've had him since I was fourteen; he was a birthday present of sorts. I keep him stabled in Lake Forest and go there on Saturdays to ride. I should take you sometime," she told me.

"I'd like that," I said.

"I named him Sienna because he's a dark brown Arabian stallion with a white chest. His hair is real shiny, and he has a long bushy tail and mane. He's tall and very strong. He was once a show horse."

"Where do you ride?" I said.

"The stable sits on the edge of the woods and I ride trails that wind through the forest along the river. Mostly I go alone to relax, to get away from the city, or my family. My father rides with me a few times a year, when he's not golfing. My mother doesn't much like riding. I never feel better than when I ride through that forest. The moist air coming off the lake and blowing through the green leaves has a

fresh sweet scent, and I just love to look at the sunlight filtering through the trees onto the forest floor. It's even prettier in the fall. Right now the leaves are changing and the maples are a brilliant red with hints of orange."

"It sounds like a great place," I said, holding her against me.

"It is," she said. "It really is. You should come with me some time."

"I've never ridden a horse before," I told her. "I'd probably get thrown."

"It's easy," she said, massaging my shoulders. "I could show you." She told me all about how she started riding in high school and took lessons at the stable. She trained for about a year, at her father's insistence, to ride for shows, but after a few competitions she lost interest. "It wasn't for me," she said, "I'm not the competitive type. I just like riding for fun."

I told her about my nephew and how he'd probably get a big kick out of riding a horse. "He's a real cool kid," I told her, "and he's quite good at piggy-back."

"Sounds like you two are very close."

"We're buddies," I said. "We don't go a day without hanging out together. He can build a mean Lego skyscraper."

"I really do want a big family," she said, yawning.

"I guess they're not so bad when they're not smelly or dirty," I told her.

She rested her head against mine and we didn't talk much more. I held her tightly and kissed her forehead. I rubbed my cheek softly against hers and ran my fingers through the curls in her hair. Her body felt warm against mine. Caught up in the moment, I wanted to touch her more, but stopped myself. She held my hand snugly in hers and I watched as she closed her blue eyes and slowly drifted off to sleep.

The city continued to move in shadows about the walls, and soon I could hear nothing but Skylar's deep breathing. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't stop thinking about Sheila and everything that had happened since I left home that morning. I thought about the widow and wondered if she would call the doctor about her terrible cough. I wondered if Duke ever made it home or if Sean's colic had cleared up. I was sure Karen had everything under control. She's come a long way since breaking up with Stan. On the other hand, I seemed only to drift. I needed direction; I thought I needed Sheila, and believed somehow she would set me straight. Gazing into the darkness, I felt my world closing in, but could do nothing then to help myself, nothing to stop what came to be.

VERSE NINE

I'm worried about you, baby,

I'm worried about you, baby,

I'm worried about you, baby,

I'm worried about you, baby,

I can hardly sleep at night.

I couldn't fall asleep. A million thoughts swam through my head. For some strange reason, all I could think about was little Sean and how in the morning he'd wake without me around. Every morning we hung out together. We watched "Bugs Bunny" or "Tom and Jerry" while I drank a few cups of coffee and he suckled his bottle. I looked after the kid while Karen made her daily trip to Sal's to pick up whatever she needed--baby formula, cigarettes, diapers, that sort of stuff. Mostly, the kid drank his milk and farted some, but occasionally I had to do a diaper change, throwing on extra powder to kill the smell.

The more I thought about Sean, the more I thought about how close I really came to being a father myself. I still clearly remember the cold February day, a little over a year ago now, when Sheila called the warehouse and asked me to meet with her at Blacky's after I got off. We spent a lot of time at Blacky's. It was one of our favorite restaurants and not far from where either of us worked. That morning it snowed five inches and that night we got three more. The streets were icy and all day plows were out moving the snow and putting salt on the roads. I took a bus from the

warehouse and Sheila took a cab from the Newberry. With all the snow, traffic was slow. I was about a half hour late. She arrived early and was at the bar with a cold beer already waiting for me. She was drinking water, and I knew then something was up because she usually drank vodka tonics with a lime twist when she came to Blacky's. I prepared myself for the worst. She was leaving me; she had met someone else, a tall man with dark hair who drove a Jaguar. I'd seen him at the library and she did mention something about him once. Maybe it was her parents; maybe her father needed a cardiac by-pass. I can't say why, but I'm always expecting bad news. People rarely call to tell me something good happened.

Blacky's was busy as usual and smoke hung like a fine cloud above the crowd. I pushed my way over to her where she sat in the corner and gave her a kiss. "You look great," I said. She wore one of my favorite silk blouses. She looked splendid in silk, shimmering even, especially in the white silk she was wearing. She had a number of silk shirts from Fields, which I bought her for her birthday. Her blouse matched well with her short navy blue skirt. She was even wearing the diamond earrings I gave her for Christmas. They weren't all that big, but at least they sparkled some. I loved buying her stuff, even when she got on my case about being unable to save money.

Compared to her, I was underdressed in my Levis and checkered flannel. My steel tip work boots weren't very flattering either. She gave me one of her big smiles, which helped to ease my apprehension, though she had this unusual giddiness about her and couldn't stop smiling. She was certainly glowing.

"And how was your day?" I said.

"Wonderful," she told me and I began again to get suspicious--the library was

never wonderful. She took a sip of water, leaving a ring of red lipstick on the glass's rim. "I've been to the doctor's," she said. I completely forgot about her appointment and began to feel even more worried, like she was going to tell me she had leukemia or diabetes, cancer even.

"I'm sorry, I forgot," I told her. "Did everything go all right?"

"Wonderful," she said.

"Wonderful?"

"Great," she said. The tension was killing me. I cut to the chase.

"What's the problem, Sheila? You can tell me. I can take it." She was still smiling.

"I'm pregnant," she said.

"You're what?" I said. We used protection almost all the time.

"You heard me," she said. I didn't know quite how to respond, whether to be happy or to panic. I just looked at her, the big brown eyes, and she looked at me.

"Do you think we're ready?" I said. "What are we going to do? What will your parents think? What will my parents think?"

"Relax," she said. "I told my mom and dad this afternoon. They're excited." I expected something different, something about how we needed to be married.

"And I'm the father?"

"What kind of dumb question is that? Sometimes you're such a lunkhead. I guess it's just a typical male response."

"I was just kidding," I said. I wanted to feel as excited as she did, but somehow I felt more scared. A baby wasn't something I planned for. Maybe I was being selfish. Maybe I wasn't ready for such responsibility. I thought about my sister

and little Sean, about all she did to care for him. I had a hard enough time just looking after myself. Sheila looked at me, expecting me to say something more. "That's great news," I told her, thinking there may have been other options. I felt real guilty to be thinking such things, but they just came to me.

"I'm two months," she said. Two months, and I didn't know the first thing about fathering. I thought about Pops and wondered how much I'd turn out like him.

"We did a sonogram," she said handing me the picture. I took the photo into my hands and carefully looked it over. The inside of her uterus appeared mostly like grainy swirls of black and white. "That's the baby," she said, pointing to a small blob of light grey. "And those will be the arms and legs." I couldn't tell the difference between one swirl and the next. "That's the heart," she said, pointing to a small dot. Though at first everything seemed mostly like a blur, the more I stared at the photo, the clearer the baby became.

"What's this?" I said.

"I think it's a leg."

"And this?"

"That's the head." Sheila saw the child more clearly than I ever did, but every piece, every fragment of life, finally came together for me into a whole. Holding the picture was almost like holding the kid in my hands.

"Unbutton your shirt," I said. "Let me touch your stomach."

"Not in here," she told me.

"Just let me touch you," I said. "I want to feel the baby move."

"It's too early for that," she said, but I did finally convince her to unbutton her shirt and let me stick my hand inside. We did this under the bar. Her stomach felt

the same as it always had, soft and warm. I tried to feel for a heartbeat, and although Sheila assured me I wouldn't be able to feel anything for a few months, for a moment I believed I sensed movement, if even the smallest of heartbeats.

I left the bar excited about telling Karen and the widow, my mother and father, and Duke and his mom about the baby. When I showed up at the widow's place that evening with her groceries, I broke the news while she was fixing dinner. I planned to do it slowly, wanting to surprise her. We were both sitting at the kitchen table drinking Blatz. She was smoking.

"Sheila's been to see a doctor," I said. "An obstetrician."

"She's pregnant." the old lady said. She always knew everything before I could tell her.

"Sheila's a nice girl," she said, her voice rough and scratchy, "a woman with a good head on her shoulders. You do her right," she told me. "You make sure you go to work every day now, you hear." She knew I had a bad habit of taking days off, calling in sick when I had hangovers. She didn't need to say anything more.

In the months that followed, I kept the widow up to date on what was happening. She supported me by chipping in a few bucks here and there when I needed it. The widow's firmness helped me keep my own head up, especially on days when I worked for twelve hours or more. After a long day, she was always there for me to vent my frustrations. She listened to my endless complaints about the job or about Sheila's moodiness. She listened to my fears about the birth, about complications, if any, about fatherhood. I could always talk with her in a way I couldn't with anyone else. She gave good advice, but let me dig my own holes.

Karen was more apprehensive. When I told her, we were up in her bedroom.

She was holding Sean in her arms, feeding him a bottle, "You sure you can handle it?" I reassured her as best I could that I'd make it, that I'd continue to work at the warehouse, even if it killed me. "Having a kid's a big responsibility," she reminded me. "You have to be prepared."

"I know," I told her.

"You're not going to be able to stay out all night anymore," she said. "Sheila's not going to stand for that," she told me, sounding like Pops. "You don't want to be like Stan." I paced the room in front of her, looking at the mobiles swinging above Sean's crib and at the stacks of diapers on the shelf next to her hamper. I didn't like changing diapers, but I assured myself and Karen that I'd get used to it. "I'll be pulling for you, little bro." Coming from Karen, it meant a lot.

My mother was excited, too. "Father O'Brian will be happy to speak with you," she assured me. Pops didn't say a word, no congratulations and no lectures. He just paced about the kitchen, took a beer from the refrigerator, and went to sit in his recliner in front of the television.

The next two months, I tried my best to do things right: to help Sheila anyway I could; to make appointments and go with her to the doctor's; to listen to her bitching, especially in the morning; to go to work each day no matter how much on some days I didn't want to; to look after the widow. I didn't go out with Duke to Hummingbirds or to the Blue Note Lounge. Instead, I stayed with Sheila at her apartment. I worked Saturdays at Sal's and ran errands for Haziz for extra cash to help us out. I didn't even do that much drinking, limiting myself to two beers a day. Although I was drinking much less, I felt more worn out than ever. I was planning on asking Sheila to marry me.

Days passed real quickly then, and since I was staying at Sheila's, I lost track of what was happening at home. I was going to bed real early too--responsibility was taking its toll, sapping my energy. Things were quite different. Instead of me staying up late, it was her. She always wanted to talk when I wanted to sleep. "Do you think it's a boy or girl?" she often asked.

"A girl," I said one night.

"Why?"

"It's just a feeling."

"Do you want a girl?"

"It doesn't matter," I told her.

"I want a boy," she said, except she changed her mind frequently. "Do you like the name Joshua?"

"Hate it," I told her.

"Why?" she said. She always asked *why*.

"Sounds funny," I told her. "It reminds me of *Little House on the Prairie* or something dumb like that."

"How about Mark, junior?"

I thought about it for a moment. "I don't think so. I'm one of a kind," I told her.

"Well?" she said. She had a book of names with pencil scratches next to the ones she liked. In the A's were Alexander, Albert in honor of Einstein, and Alan. She had marks for nearly every letter, except Q.

"I like Quentin," I told her. "It's very distinguished."

"Albert Quentin Callahan. How's that? Do you like the ring?" she asked.

She was really hung up on Albert. If it was up to me I would have named the kid Ernie Banks Callahan or Billy Williams Callahan.

"How do you like Ryne Sandberg Callahan?" I asked.

"Sandburg, as in Carl, the poet."

"Not exactly," I said, "as in the Cubby's greatest second baseman ever," I told her. "Ryno Callahan, I like it."

"I don't think so," she said, but from that night on, I called the kid Ryno, just to bug her. I even had her father doing it too.

"How's Ryno?" he would say when he called. In fact, he liked Ryno so much he thought it should stick.

"If it's a girl," I told Sheila, "she can be Ryna."

"Very funny," she said. "This isn't something to joke about. A person's name sticks with them forever; it shapes them."

"What's a Sheila then?"

"Smart, intelligent, good-looking."

"Conceited?"

"Well, maybe," she said.

We played the name game nightly, sometimes well past midnight, and I felt by morning I hardly ever got any sleep. During that time, I remember most feeling tired, but it was a good tired.

Everything was going well until the end of the third month, which was really the fifth month of her pregnancy. I was working ten hour days and staying up late with Sheila, who was having bad cramps. The doctor didn't know what was wrong and advised her to stay in bed. She took a leave of absence from work. Her moods

worsened by the day. I tried to give her support, to keep her going, to cheer her up, but she bitched at me something bad about not cleaning her apartment or not doing her laundry, which she was unable to do because of her condition. She was upset about me being late for doctors appointments. She wanted me to stop drinking. That's when, with all the stress and everything, I started drinking more; my two beer limit was now my two beer cocktail and some mornings I didn't even hear the alarm clock go off.

At the warehouse, Brin was on my case about being late and not having orders filled on time for the field crews. He seemed more pushy, always on my back. He followed me around the warehouse and made lists of things I needed to do: sweep floors, inventory the racks, file back-orders, make coffee, clean the restrooms--as if I didn't have enough to do making sure all the present orders were filled for the field crews. Without supplies, nobody worked. I think Brin took out his problems with his cheating wife on me. Then one morning he was on my case so bad, I just snapped.

"Get with it, Callahan, you're behind on your orders again," he barked. I had just put in three twelve hour days in a row and worked the entire weekend--not to mention, when I came home from work, I cooked dinner for Sheila, did laundry, paid bills, and listened to her bitch at me about how I didn't fold her clothes correctly. "Callahan, get moving or get out," Brin told me. He was like that everyday and worse if he was drinking the night before. The worst part was that most of the time, even when there were more orders than I could possibly fill by myself, he sat and watched. "Callahan," he was telling me that morning, "I got a good mind to fire your ass."

"You know what," I said with twenty orders yet to fill by the end of the day,

"I quit." And I walked out.

I went to Sheila's that afternoon and she wouldn't speak with me. "How could you!" she said. We needed the money bad, but when Brin was pushing me around, money was the farthest thing from my mind. "Go back," she told me, but I just couldn't. Sheila wouldn't speak to me, and a few days later, she had her locks changed. When Pops found out, he nearly blew his stack.

"What the hell are you doing?" he told me. "Are you out of your mind?"

I spent my days thereafter at Belmont Harbor, feeding pigeons and thinking about what to do next. For about ten days, I did nothing but stay out late, sleep all morning, and go to the harbor--it's a habit of mine when things go bad. I was smoking reefers. I didn't shave and wore the same pair of blue jeans for about a week straight. Then, on the eleventh morning at about seven, my sister came busting into my room. "Sheila's in the hospital," she said. "They just called."

I dressed as fast as I could and took the El downtown to Wesley Memorial on Chicago Avenue. The hospital was busy with people coming and going. The waiting room was crowded with patients needing help and families waiting for news. It reminded me of the time I took Karen down to Cook County, except this was a higher class joint. They only took you here if you had insurance. The waiting room was brighter at Wesley and smoking was only allowed down the hall in a designated room, beside the hospital chapel.

When I arrived, Jim and Claire, Sheila's parents, were already waiting for me. Claire looked at me. I was still unshaven and in a dirty pair of Levis. It was amazing that even in an emergency, Claire looked permanently pressed. Not a hair out of place or a wrinkle in her blouse. Jim looked more disheveled, and like me, he

also needed a morning shave. "How's Sheila?" I said. I wasn't sure how much her parents knew about our troubles or if they knew I'd been out of work for nearly two weeks.

"She's resting," her mother told me.

"How's the baby?" I said. "Is the baby all right?" They both looked at me, their faces drawn and tired.

"I don't know how to say this, Mark," her mother began, but I had already heard enough. I tried hard to suck in my anger, my rage at the world. I wanted to slug something, anything.

"Just thank God, Sheila is all right," her father added. They filled me in on the details, the hemorrhaging and the blood loss. We cried together that morning for what seemed like forever; I never cried much, but that morning it just poured out of me.

The three of us went together to the chapel, which was dimly lit. In the corner near the altar burned a number of prayer candles. People were scattered about the pews. Near the front, we sat together in silence. I kneeled and prayed "Hail Mary" to a God I couldn't believe in, not then anyway. I prayed that Sheila would be all right and wished it had been me who had suffered instead of her. "If you're out there," I said, "Sheila needs you." I felt entirely helpless, that I could do nothing to change what had happened.

After some time in which all I could do was stare up at the illuminated cross above the altar, I walked over to the candles. Before lighting a match, I reached into my pocket and pulled out a wrinkled dollar. It was all the offering I could afford. Striking a match, I lit two candles for Sheila and said three "Our Fathers." I prayed

"Our Fathers" whenever I needed God. I never became more religious than in times of crisis. These were times I both believed and doubted desperately, times when God mattered and didn't.

After lighting the candles, I made my way back to the pew to thank Sheila's parents for their concern, for coming to the hospital at four in the morning. They sat together holding hands. We didn't say much, but I thanked them for being there when I wasn't.

When we were each finished praying we left the chapel and the burning candles. Her parents went down to the cafeteria for some coffee, and I went to see Sheila. Her room was bright with morning light streaming through the blinds, the kind of room I always imagined where I'd meet my child. Sheila lay in the bed nearest the window and another older woman slept in the bed closest to the door. A moveable curtain separated the two of them. Sheila's arm was connected to an i.v., which dripped into her a clear saline solution to replace the fluids she lost while hemorrhaging. A monitor displayed her heart rhythms. She was dressed in a light blue hospital gown. Her closed eyes were swollen with large dark bags beneath them, like she had been in a street fight. Her hair was tied back behind her head. When I saw her, she was soundly asleep, breathing deeply.

I pulled up a chair next to the bed and watched her sleep, watched her breathe calmly and slowly. "I'm here now," I whispered. "I'm right here." Pigeons cooed outside the window. Every once in awhile, the nurse came in to check on her. She slept most of the day, but I waited the entire time. I sent her parents home late in the afternoon for some rest. "She's doing fine," I assured her mother. "Go home, get some sleep. I'll call when something happens."

When they left, I continued to sit by Sheila's side. I kissed her forehead and brushed my hand against her cheek. I watched her sleep, her chest rising and falling in a regular pattern, which was displayed on the heart monitor's green screen. I held her hand in mine. I most have whispered *I love you* about a million times. I prayed some too, a couple more "Our Fathers" and a few "Hail Marys."

When Sheila finally opened her eyes, it was around dinner time and the room was dark with shadows. "How long have you been here?" she asked still drowsy and tired, her voice scratchy.

"Since about eight this morning," I said. "I'm sorry, Sheila, I really am," I told her.

"It's not your fault," she told me.

"I didn't mean to cause you all that stress," I said. "I didn't mean to--"

"We'll be all right," she told me and took my hand in hers. She had a much different understanding than me. She was sad, but felt somehow that everything happens for a reason. I tried to be strong for her, but inside I was a wreck.

I didn't say much that night and she was too tired for any lengthy conversation. She ate some food. We watched t.v., and I called her parents. When she fell off to sleep near the end of visiting hours, I left. I didn't eat that day, not even when I got home late that night.

The next week when Sheila was home from the hospital, I went back to the warehouse and apologized to Brin. He gave me my job back on the condition that the next time I messed up I was out for good. My relationship with Sheila improved somewhat, but only for a while. She was pleased I went back to work--I never missed a day for a month straight--and eventually she gave me a key to the new lock on her

door. During this period, Sheila took a leave of absence from the library in order to recover fully. She spent most of this time at her parents' place. When she was up to it, we went to the movies or out to eat. Things seemed better between us, but we never talked about losing the baby. I don't think either of us ever really got over the loss. We tried to forget it ever happened, but forgetting is something really hard to do.

VERSE TEN

I should have quit you, a long time ago,

I should have quit you, babe, a long time ago,

I should have quit you, pretty baby,

Then went on to Mexico.

I didn't know how long I slept or when I even finally dozed off, but waking up, my head throbbed and I had this terrible pukey feeling. My nose was raw and my lungs felt like I had smoked ten packs of Marlboros. Sun streamed in the big picture window filling the room with light. I needed a pair of cheap sunglasses, and I had a bad case of cotton mouth, like the tooth fairy painted the inside of my mouth with latex paint.

I sat up on the couch and looked out the window at the city below me. I tried to sort out all that happened the day before and nothing much made sense. It was half past ten in the morning. At home I have a hard time sleeping this late because of Karen and the kid, my mom's vacuuming, and Pops's complaining. It's hell around my house in the morning, especially since my family's not very cheery until everyone's been sufficiently pumped full of caffeine, coffee for my parents and Pepsi for Karen. For Chissakes, just thinking about Pepsi in the morning is enough to make me throw my cookies.

Skylar was nowhere to be found and I didn't know what to think. It's one thing spending the night on some chick's couch, but it's another when you wake up

and she's gone. In some cases, that's a plus because God only knows how many people look worse than I do in the morning. Other times it's real bunk, because after you spend the night with someone, you want to share the morning. Some of my favorite times with Sheila were in the morning. Sheila's always real horny then and after sex we're always both real hungry. I must say there's a certain wholesomeness in flipping your girl's over-easy eggs and buttering her toast. Morning's usually the best time of day for me, once I swallow a few aspirin. It's a time of clarity and vision.

Anyways, I reached for my shirt and pinned to it was a note from Skylar:

8:30am

Hey Sexy,

Sorry I couldn't be here with you but I had a psych test this morning and couldn't miss it, you know how that goes. Hope I pass (please-please). I left out the aspirin for you on the kitchen counter. If you feel anything like I do, you'll need it. We really partied last night! Help yourself to anything you need (just don't steal the paintings, they're my father's--ha, ha). There's some food in the frig and I left out a towel for you in the bathroom so you can shower your sexy bod! I keep my grass in the freezer if you need to blow a doobie. Sleeping beside you last night was real great, I just wanted to tell you that--maybe next time I'll get lucky! Oh well, gotta go, running late. Close the door behind you. Wish I could be there.

Kiss, Kiss

--Sky

p.s. my number's on the other side if you get the urge to call. I'll understand

if you don't.

She sprayed perfume on the note and it smelled real great. I even smelled it a couple more times before stuffing it into my pocket. I wanted her to be here with me. I wanted her to tell me things were looking up. I needed her good vibrations. Some people are just born with high spirits.

I was already three hours late for work and thought about calling in sick and spending the rest of the day out at Belmont Harbor goofing off. I felt too good to be going to work. I even thought about sitting all day on Skylar's couch just looking out the window at all the blue water, but my accounts needed me. I had to finalize the ad-layouts for Sal and Haziz. I had to confirm space for Gem's Gym. Sal and Haziz counted on the cheap space I got them and the extra business their ads drew. I dropped my commission just so they could get the cheaper rate. They couldn't afford to advertise in the big city papers--the *Trib* or *Sun Times*--and they needed all the extra business they could get, especially Sal, who had trouble keeping prices as low as the big stores like Dominik's and Jewel Foods.

Thinking about them, I swallowed a few aspirin and hit the shower. I tried thinking of an excuse for Dave at the office. I had already used so many stories, which ones were getting hard to remember: Sean swallowed a penny; my mother needed someone to take her to the doctor's; the old lady needed a ride to social security; the bus broke down on the way to the office. I just hoped Dave was in a good mood. I could already hear his voice and it was making me nauseous. "Boy, you're headed for trouble, big city trouble!" he would tell me, blowing smoke from his cheap cigar into my face. The man was a regular chimney.

After showering, I toasted a couple English muffins, fixed a bowl of Cheerios, and drank a few cups of instant coffee. With something in my stomach I was feeling much better. Some people can't eat with a hangover, but I always feel a good meal's the best cure. I left my dishes in the sink and before leaving, paused for a moment to check out the view one last time. The city was still moving. People filled the sidewalk; cars cruised the outer drive; boats sailed along the Lake. Clouds reflected off the glass windows of the neighboring skyscrapers. I could've stared out that window all day. The city's real beautiful when you're not mixed up in it. Pulling myself away, I headed out the door. Thinking back, I probably should've left her a note or something, but I knew somehow I'd get back to her.

I made my way down the fancy elevator and through the lobby. Outside, a bunch of gray clouds had rolled in and it looked as though we were in for some drizzle. You never know what kind of weather you'll get in Chicago.

I took the bus up to the north side. At this time in the morning, the rush was over and only the crazies rode about the city. I took a seat up front across from an old lady in tattered clothing. Wrinkles were etched across her face like lines in dry soil and her dark eyes were small slants. She had a scarf tied around her head and two shopping bags stuffed with newspaper at her feet. The bags looked like they'd been carried around the world. A few seats down from her sat a man in a faded green army jacket. His stringy grey hair hung at his shoulder and he had a red bandanna around his head. He was mumbling to himself and asking people for spare change. I tried my best to ignore those around me and to watch out for knife-wielding lunatics. Crowded buses were much safer than empty ones. You always have to be on guard in the big city. You can't have sympathy for a wino or they might just follow you off

the bus.

I got off at Clark and Irving and walked a few blocks south to the *North Side* offices in an old brick building next to the El tracks. If you ever wanted to know what the city looked like just after the first World War, this is the place to go. Each dirty brick building was about three to five stories with flat roofs. Even some of the streetlamps looked like they were from the twenties, the kind Gene Kelly danced around. This part of town was mostly settled by Krauts around the turn of the century and you could feel the German that went into these buildings, see it in the straight bricks and concrete sidewalks. The delis along Irving gave Sal a run for his money. I loved the German dills and whenever I came up this way, I bought a couple to take home for Karen and Sean.

The bars too, nearly one on every corner, were great places to spend the day, and as I passed the Guest Haus, one of my local favorites, I felt like stopping in for a cold one. I usually took long lunches there; they had the fattest bratwurst in the city. I'd order two smothered in sauerkraut and spicy mustard with a pitcher of beer. Some afternoons, especially ones when the Cubbies were on WGN, I didn't go back to work. I just sat in the Guest Haus all afternoon cheering with the locals or playing pinball--I held the bar record at one time. Afterwards, I usually took the bus over to Sheila's for dinner, if I didn't have to stop to check on the widow. Sheila wasn't too keen on me coming over drunk, so I had to hide it the best I could, although I think she always knew anyway. Some nights if I was too wasted, she got mad and stuff, and even more so if she knew I blew off work. I remember this one time she went off. "You'll never hold down a job," she bitched. We were standing in her kitchen.

"Cram it, Cleary, give a guy a break." I told her.

"Sometimes you can be the biggest jerk. It's a wonder you even have a brain in your thick head."

"What's a little baseball on a summer afternoon?"

"Maybe you should go home and sleep it off," she suggested.

"Maybe you should just cook some dinner."

"Maybe you should leave."

"Maybe I will, if you loan me a five-spot. I spent the last of my cash to get here."

"Maybe you should've thought about that while you were watching the game."

"Cubs won you know."

"I really don't care." She only liked baseball when we were sitting in the bleachers.

"Dawson hit a homer."

"And you struck out. I think you should be going. I can see this night is a total washout. I was really looking forward to spending time together. I even rented two movies."

"Put 'em on! Roll 'em," I told her.

She gave me a long, stern look and walked over to the door. "Don't call either," she said.

Anyways, since I had to see Dave, I tried hard to repress my urge to step into the Guest Haus, but it was no use. I could already smell those brats cooking and I wanted to regain my pinball record. Hell, I was already late for work and the morning was just going too good to waste at the office calling on ads. I had all

afternoon. Besides, I only planned to stay for an hour.

I stepped into the Guest Haus where Schmitty, the bartender, greeted me with a cold tapper. "Mark Callahan," the old fellow said with a German accent. "Wie geht's? How you been?" He was happy to see me. I hadn't stopped in for over a week, since I was spending my lunches at Belmont Harbor. The Guest Haus was best on cold winter days. Its wooden tables, wooden floor, and panelled walls made it seem like an Alpine lodge. The Haus even had the best German food--Wienerschnitzel, pork roast, dumplings, strudel, that sort of stuff. Pictures of Bavaria and Munich hung from the walls. They had Dap and Beck's on tap, but I always drank Old Style. It was only a buck a glass.

Schmitty, who had a soiled white apron tied around his waist, put a foaming mug in front of me and poured one for himself. "Gutten Morgen," I said in my best German. "Was ist los?"

"Kids in school, wife's at home, couldn't be better. And you, my friend."

"So far so good, if you don't count yesterday."

"It's always the day before," he told me. Bartenders were always saying that kind of stuff.

Schmitty and I drank together and he filled me in on the latest news with the Bears. A man could get all the news he ever needs in a Chicago bar. Schmitty not only knew his sports, but he knew his politics. He could tell you all about the city's big wheels and claimed to have shaken hands with Daley himself in 1965. "I got me a sister on Addison who gets paid twenty dollars to vote Democrat in every election," he told me once. "They'll even pick her up, take her to the polls, and bring her back. Swear to it." The man had a story about everything, and the way he told them made

them all seem true. "Smoke?" he asked and then pulled two Luckys from his shirt pocket.

"Sure," I said and he struck a match. When Schmitty smoked, he blew smoke rings nearly all the time, and mostly he didn't even know it. He did all sorts of cigarette tricks, too, and could put one out in his mouth like they do on t.v. "I used to swallow swords in Paris," he told me once, "before I was married."

We smoked and watched "The Donahue Show." Schmitty even poured me another beer, "on the Haus." Those were the privileges of being a regular and having friends in high places. I stayed through "Donahue" and "The Dick Van Dyke Show," which came on after, and I ate a couple brats with kraut. I also had a couple more beers and tried to break the new pinball record, but it was no use. I was too much out of practice. Giving up hope of regaining my pinball wizardry, I thanked Schmitty for the brew, then paid my tab. "Bis bald. See you soon," I said, impressing him with my best "Hogan's Heroes" German before stepping out the door.

Outside, the day had turned an ugly grey--a steady rain came down--but I was feeling real good. I was on top of the world. I hummed a little James Brown, "I *feel* good, I feel good, so good, I got you. Wow!" If I didn't have to confirm the layouts for Sal and Haziz, I might have gone over to Fast Eddy's to shoot some pool. It crossed my mind a number of times as I walked down Irving toward the *North Side* office.

I finally did manage to make it to the building without managing to become too wet, but stepping inside I was sorry I ever showed. The building was enough to depress anyone. The lobby was practically ready to come down on my head. Only one light bulb worked in the tarnished brass fixture, and the acoustic ceiling was

falling down. Plaster flaked from the lobby walls and the jaundiced floor tiles were well scratched and scuffed. It was the kind of place that would give Duke's mom nightmares. It smelled, too, like an old shoe, because of the fungus and mold which grew around the dripping water pipes. It was a sorry building indeed, but the rent was cheap.

The *North Side* didn't need a bigger place. With a circulation of about twenty-thousand , it certainly wasn't the largest paper in the city, and it didn't make much cash. Mostly, it was the voice of the North Side and an ad-sheet for its merchants. I took the job thinking one day maybe I'd become a writer, like Royko or Bob Green, but ad-men don't become editorialists. Dave had a bunch of college punks, journalism majors from Chicago Circle, doing the print copy. They came to work in houndstooth blazers and wore fedoras. One guy drove a V.W. Beetle, for Chrissakes. They drank gin and scotch after work at Clancy's up the street from the Guest Haus. You wouldn't catch me dead in that preppy breeding ground.

Since the elevator was broken, and probably had been since the late '70s, I took the stairs to the fourth floor. Walking down the hall, I could already smell Dave's cigar. Because of all the paper, only Dave was allowed to smoke, although sometimes the college punks hung out on the fire escape smoking cigarettes or cloves. I joined them on occasion, when they bummed me a smoke. Dave made all the rules and nobody could go smoke unless they were on break. "No slackers around here," he'd tell us, "and all of you are slackers, especially you Callahan." If it weren't for that one month when I was top space seller, it could've been worse. Dave treated us like rats, but if the paper turned a sizeable profit, he sometimes gave us a bonus. If he would've paid more than minimum wage and the five percent commission on all ad

sales, maybe I might've worked a bit harder. The place was a regular newspaper sweatshop, and every week I fooled myself into thinking the job would eventually get better. It's funny how when you're a part of something, you can fool yourself into believing it's gonna get better. If you tell yourself enough times it will, you begin to believe your own propaganda. You lose objectivity and work towards something that's not really there at all. You hold on to hope because that's all you got. It's better than nothing. On a good day, that's all I had, the crummy-ass job and a little hope. You can live a long time off hope, but sooner or later you lose that too. You go to work more because doing it keeps you going, the dismal routine; and you keep doing it until you drop dead or it blows up in your face.

The closer I came to the office, the more I thought about turning back and heading for the Guest Haus. I can't say what kept me going, maybe my neighborhood accounts, but I did, right through the door past all the college patsies towards my cubicle outside Dave's office. I was over a half-day late. Nevertheless, I planned to stay until all my work was done. It didn't matter if I had to stay till midnight. I had nothing to go home for anyway, except to check on the widow.

I went straight to my cubicle, but when I got there I found some dopey new guy in a white collared shirt at my desk. "You're at the boss's desk," I told him. "Haven't they told you who sits here? You new guys are all the same."

"Excuse me," he said, "I didn't get your name."

"Mark. That's Mr. Callahan to you."

"Peter," he told me and gave me a limp handshake.

"You're at my desk, mate," I said.

"I'm sorry," he returned, "but I've been sitting here since nine this morning."

"Well it's my desk," I assured him. "It's on the nameplate."

"The nameplate?" he seemed confused, and so did I when I noticed it was missing--Sheila had bought me that nameplate when I got the job.

"Where's my nameplate?" I demanded. "Where's my shit?" I was losing it. "For Chrissakes, where the hell's all my stuff," I yelled throwing a bunch of papers into the air. Peter looked scared. He was probably expecting me to pull a semi-automatic pistol from my pants and begin shooting up the place, starting with him.

He quickly got out of my chair. "The desk was empty when I arrived," he said.

"Empty!" I shouted, knowing full well it was Dave. I kicked my chair, and then stormed off to Dave's office, giving his glass door a good rattle when I slammed it behind me. "Callahan," he told me from behind his big aluminum desk, "your ass is canned, boy. Go on home and don't bother coming back."

He had fired me before, but this time he took my stuff from my desk and I knew he was serious. "Fired? You can't fire me. What about my accounts?"

"The new fellow will take care of it. Go on home, Callahan, it's over."

"They're my accounts, my fucking accounts!"

"Boy, I told you to be here by eight. I told you to have your space filled. I can't print a paper without selling space," he said, blowing smoke in my direction.

"Come on, Dave, give me a break. I've kept those accounts rolling week after week. Those folks are counting on me," I said, knowing Sal and Haziz wouldn't get a discount anymore.

"You should have thought about all that earlier," he told me. "Take a lesson, Callahan, just look at the new kid, he's a sharp young man--clean pressed shirt--a real

go-getter."

"You can't do this to me, you just can't. I need this job. You have no idea how much it means. I'll work overtime, anything. This is the last time, I promise, no more messing up. I've had some tough times lately. You have to believe me."

"We all have it hard, kid," he said and picked up the *Tribune* sitting on his desk. "I got work to do."

I stood there a few moments waiting for him to hire me back, waiting for a small miracle, but he didn't say a word. He simply ignored me and continued to read the paper. "Fuck you," I said. "Fuck your goddamn paper. You're an asshole." I thought about socking him in the face or dumping his desk. If for one moment he would have turned from his paper, I might have done it, but instead I kept shouting at him, loud enough the whole damn place must've heard me. "Fuck you! Fuck this paper!" I repeated. Then I turned away and slammed his door as hard as I could. The glass shattered, but I didn't bother turning back. The office fell silent and people stared at me. Others didn't dare turn an eye my way. I walked faster and faster, and when I was out the door, I took off running down the hall. I thought for sure Dave would call the cops, and I feared something terrible.

VERSE ELEVEN

I worked on the levee, mama, both night and day,

I ain't got nobody to keep the water away,

Crying won't help you, praying won't do no good,

When the levee break, mom, you got to move.

By the time I neared the bottom of the stairs, I was soaked with sweat. My hair stuck to my moist forehead and my pits dripped something fierce. I figured the pigs were already waiting for me. Taking a deep breath, I ran from the stairwell into the lobby, but found it deserted. Figuring I had Dave beat, I took off up Irving, splashing my way through the freshly collected puddles. I turned into the first alley and ran down the narrow passage until I could run no more. I never once heard a siren. Breathing heavy, I bent over, put my hands on my knees to try to catch my breath. I coughed and made a few dry heaves. Stomach acid burned the back of my throat. My lungs stung something bad. With my shirt, I wiped the sweat from my face. I heard a siren in the distance drawing nearer and nearer, but I didn't want to run anymore. I sunk down against a brick wall behind a dumpster. The siren never stopped and became fainter with every second. I waited a few moments listening for something more, but all I could hear was traffic hissing along Irving. The cops never came. Dave probably never even called them; he just didn't care.

I felt badly about Dave's door and wished it never happened. I hoped nobody was hurt by the broken glass. I wanted to believe I wasn't the violent type like my

father, raging at the world and those around him, but I had a mean streak in me. In high school, I was always getting in fights. I never knew when to walk away, like this one night at the Bagwan when I was hanging out playing video games with Tammy Tonelli. You might consider her the first girlfriend I ever had. She was real sweet, always hanging onto my jacket, chewing Doublemint, and kissing me on the cheek. She was short with big breasts and frizzy brown permed hair, which she usually wore in a pony tail or under a ballcap. We started hanging out together just after she broke up with Ralph Rikowski, a tough from Lincoln Avenue with a leather jacket and greased hair. I met Tammy at the Bagwan playing videos. We'd play for a couple hours and then go sit out back in the Bomber where she'd tell me all about the guys she dated and how every guy always gave her a raw deal. She even told me she was on the pill. I had never met a girl on the pill before. Her father was a furniture mover, and her mother worked nights as a cleaning lady at the Methodist church. They weren't Methodist though. In fact, they didn't go to church at all. She was the first girl I ever went with all the way and afterwards she made me tell her I loved her. She liked me to wrap my arms around her and whisper it real slow in her ear. If I didn't, she'd cry and then it was hard as hell to get her to stop. She drank Pepsi in plastic bottles and was constantly screwing on and off the plastic tops.

Anyways, we were at the Bagwan playing videos. She was hanging onto my jacket and chewing Doublemint while I blasted invaders from space. Then in walked Rikowski wearing his leather jacket. A cigarette was pushed up behind his ear. Rikowski's was shorter guy than me, but a real bulldog with thick shoulders and thick legs. He had two friends with him. They're also wearing leather. "You like this twerp?" he asked her. "He's probably got a limp wrist from playing too many

videos."

"Get lost," I said. "Beat it.

"You talking to me," he said, getting in my face.

"Yeah," I said, turning to look him in the eye. "Get lost."

"You going to hang with this Mickey?" he asked her.

"Who you calling Mickey, Polack?" I said.

"You calling me a Polack. You calling me a Polack!" Then he took a swing at me. I saw it coming, blocked it, and then landed one in his stomach. He jumped on me and we rolled around the floor while his friends kicked me. It happened as quick as that. Next thing I knew, Haziz was beating us both with the end of the broomstick and yelling, "Break it up, break it up, take it outside."

When we finally broke it off, my nose was bleeding and I felt like I busted a rib. Twinkies and Suzi Q's were all over the floor. Rikowski had a fat lip and a broken cigarette dangled behind his ear, but he was still yapping at me. "You're dead, Callahan," he said leaving the place with his buddies. "You're dead."

"Go to hell," I told him, holding my shirt to my nose.

After Rikowski walked out with his buddies, Haziz came over with a pack of ice. "Hold it steady," he told me, placing it on my face. He then began picking up the Twinkies and Suzi Q's which weren't smashed. Tammy helped him. "I told you no fighting in the store," he said, shaking his head, holding an armful of Hostess baked goods. "I should forbid you from coming back."

"I'll pay you back," I said.

"It's not the money," he told me. "It's not the money."

A steady drizzle started coming down and I watched the little drops fall into the puddle in front of me. A roof's overhang kept most of the rain off me, but my shoes were soaking wet. The drops came down faster and faster, soon becoming a steady rain, then it poured for a moment before turning back into a drizzle. I tried to find a pattern in the way the drops fell and wondered how many came down per minute. The rain seemed to come and go, on and off, without any noticeable pattern, but I wanted to believe there was a pattern to everything, that what seemed random was really a pattern of randomness.

The fresh, oily smell of the rain on the street reminded me of Duke sailing newspaper ships down our street gutter river. It reminded me also of how little Sean and I liked to jump in puddles, though it made Karen pretty mad. "What kind of stuff are you teaching him?" she'd say. "Do you want him to grow up to become someone like you or something?" She sounded just like Pops sometimes.

Sitting in the rain in an alley on Irving with my feet wet, I wanted nothing more than to go home, like I did on rainy days when we had to walk to and from school. I walked with Karen and Duke on busy streets and through back alleys, even on the coldest days or in falling snow. While we were walking, I was thinking about being at home eating Oreo cookies with milk or watching Pops's black and white Zenith in my bedroom. Somedays the cold was so great, the tips of my toes got numb, and when they thawed they stung something fierce. There's nothing worse than spending too much time in the Chicago cold.

Anyways, no matter how much I wanted to go home and draw a hot bath, where I could slip under the water and let the warmth seep into me, it wasn't going to happen anytime soon. Eventually, though, I did have to go back to the neighborhood

to check on the widow, but I didn't want to face Sal or Haziz. I didn't want to say I failed them, that I wouldn't be able to pay back my debts. I couldn't go back now and ask Dave for the cash he owed me either, not after shattering his glass--I would never see that money. And Sheila, she'd just say, "I told you so." Only the widow, after giving me a mouthful, would listen, like the time I finally quit the warehouse for good, about two months after Sheila lost the baby.

During Sheila's leave of absence from the library, I went to work everyday for a month straight. I spent most of my nights with Sheila and her parents. Her mother had also lost her first baby in the months following Jim's return from Korea. "I thought we were losing our future," she said one evening. "I thought we'd never have another chance."

Until that night, I used to think Claire was mostly a phoney, but she was strong when Sheila needed her. Many nights, Claire even fixed dinner for us. Sometimes, I stayed with Sheila quite late, and then took the bus back to the north side, only to return to the warehouse early the next morning. I never felt more on the go. I had a track and stayed on it. Keeping busy helped me forget about the miscarriage, though maybe I should've spent more time getting in touch with how I felt instead of ignoring my feelings like my old man. He puts things away down deep inside, until like a volcano, they all come shooting back out.

The first few days after losing the baby were the hardest. I blamed it mostly on myself and the stress I caused Sheila. I would have done anything to change what happened. Work had no point. I went only to please Sheila and my father. In some ways, I went mostly hoping for forgiveness, a sort of penance, like doing it would

change everything, would make it better and take away the hurt, like those times I used to clean my room when Pops was raging. Morning after morning, I went to the warehouse at six-thirty to fill orders, stack pipes, and take inventory. I stayed late whenever Jansen asked. I came early whenever he needed. The day ended only when he was ready.

During that time, I remember most not eating, never being hungry. I lost about seven pounds in three weeks, and I'm a pretty skinny guy as it is. Sometimes I even skipped lunch all together. After work and after stopping to visit Sheila at her parents, I bought a couple quarts of beer at the Bagwan on my way home. I even bought a pack of Marlboros one night, although Karen smoked most of them. I had trouble sleeping--worse than usual--and not even the beer was any help. When I did finally drift into sleep, I had this reoccurring nightmare.

I'm walking over this bridge, like the steel bridge over the Chicago River at Wacker. Nobody else is around. I am alone in the middle of the bridge, looking through slits in the girders at the green water passing underneath, looking at the tall buildings looming overhead and casting their shadows over the river. I am young, too, in my early teens. As I step to cross over, the bridge collapses like a card house. Beams of steel fall around me into the river, showering me with water. The current pulls at me, dragging me slowly under. I try to swim, but make no progress. Underwater, I can see the surface above me, but can't get there. Everything is distorted. Out of focus. Buildings seem ready to topple upon me. I see faces looking into the water, but I recognize no one. It is very hard to see. The water is warm and murky. Filled with tiny bits of algae. I am blind. I swim into debris until, with no more energy, I can only float in the current. I hear only the beat of my heart echoing

about the river. Thumping rhythmically. Boom-boom. Boom-boom. Boom-boom. I wake in sweat. I dream this every night for weeks.

At the warehouse, Brin had no sympathy. All that mattered was the job. While Sheila was in the hospital, his wife left him, taking their daughter with her. Neither would talk to him. He drank before, during, and after work. He was tired and angry all the time, and so was I. He hated me and I hated him. We both couldn't sleep. He seemed uglier than usual with his short, uncombed red hair and his face covered in a three-day stubble. His belly hung so far over his belt, you could barely make out "Chevy" from the brass buckle. He never washed his grease-soiled pants and his breath reeked like rotten trash. I even hated his country music, the whining guitars and hound-dog singing. I wanted to smash his radio with my heavy wrench. I hated the warehouse too, the dust and the loud noise of clanking pipes. The heat was unbearable. My future seemed bleak, filled with endless days, one after the other. I thought I'd never get a transfer to the field to work with Pops.

It was ninety-five degrees for the third day in a row. The fan only pushed around the humid air. A truckload of pipe had just arrived and we had to unload it, all of it, by the end of the day. At dinner the night before, Sheila bitched at me about being late, about drying out her mother's pot roast, about having grease under my fingernails, about not calling her during my lunch hour. I didn't sleep that night either, nor the night before, or the one before that. I had large circles under my eyes; my body was tired as hell. I still didn't feel much like eating.

Brin was drinking beer when the truck arrived. Nobody was at the warehouse that day but the two of us. He ordered me around while sitting on his cooler. "Fill the Hotpoint order." "Sweep up the back room." I'd been sweating since I arrived

on the bus that morning. Brin turned on his country music and I felt like smashing his radio. When the truck driver left the flatbed of pipe, we had to unload it, sorting it by size and type, galvanized or steel. The stack on the flatbed was eight feet high.

The pipe was heavy, seven feet of solid iron. To move it, we worked together. Brin was up on the truck pushing off the pipe. I was down below steadying it on my shoulder. Then he jumped off the truck, put the other end on his shoulder, and we carried it over to the rack. We had to be careful. Each pipe weighed hundreds of pounds and we could have easily injured our backs, or smashed our toes if we were to drop one.

We moved pipe like that, one after the other, stopping only so Brin could sip his beer. We got no breaks. "Breaks are for union wussies," he said. Even though I belonged to the union and paid my dues, it didn't matter. I gave to a union I never saw. Nobody at the warehouse enforced the rules, like how I was supposed to get a break every two- and-a-half hours or time and a half for overtime. There was no union at Pops's job sites either. Regulations were never followed. If they were, Freddy Hull would not have been dead.

We moved pipe from mid-morning straight into the hot afternoon. We had to empty the truck, so the driver could take it for his next job. Since breakfast, I'd only eaten a bag of Doritos with a bottle of Pepsi. By mid-afternoon, my back and knees ached from the bending and lifting. "We have to have it off today," Brin kept telling me. "And you're staying till it's finished, Callahan."

"With overtime," I said. "Union regs."

"Fuck your union," he told me.

I thought about walking out, leaving him with a truck load of pipe, but I

couldn't do it. I couldn't let down Sheila and my father. "It's a good company," my father used to say.

The Cubbies were on WGN radio, but Brin had to listen to country. The humidity was getting to me. My hands were raw and slippery. My pants rubbed against my thighs, giving me a rash. "Get under it, get under it," Brin yelled. The stack seemed to be growing instead of shrinking. I tried telling him about my back.

"Just get under it, pussy," he said. Brin was a big fellow and could lift a lot more than me. My hands slipped off the pipe, but I managed to get it on my shoulder. I tried to keep it balanced while Brin got down off the truck to lift his end. "Hold it steady," he said.

"It's slipping," I told him. "I can't hold on." The pipe began to roll. "Get out of the way! Move! Move!" I yelled and it crashed to the floor with a loud bang.

"Goddammit! Mother-fucker!" he screamed.

"You all right? You hurt?"

"That could have been my Goddamn foot!" he said, pointing at the chip in the concrete floor left by the pipe. "You're nothing but a sorry punk. A wimp. I can't even believe you're Jack Callahan's son." He paced in front of me, spit on the floor and then wiped away the sweat from his thick red brow. "You're just a sissy punk."

I wanted to slug his fat gut and stomp on his radio. "I quit."

"You can't quit until the truck's unloaded. You're going to do it or you're fired. You go now and you'll never work here again. This time it's a promise." I walked away and he came after me. He got in my face. "Let's go, Callahan, cut the shit. Back to work." I kept walking. I tried hard to control my temper, to remain calm. Nothing mattered.

He threatened me again about the job. I walked out the door and kept walking until I could no longer hear his country music.

After leaving the warehouse, I didn't go to Sheila. Instead, I got on a bus and took a seat in the back. The bus chugged and churned its way up Clark toward Addison, toward my neighborhood. When it came to a stop near the ballpark, I didn't get off. I stayed in my seat, sweating against the dirty green vinyl and breathing stale diesel fumes coming in through an open window. It was over a hundred degrees in the bus. I melted in my seat. I watched people get on and off, on and off, but I didn't move. Many people sat next to me, looked at me in my grease-soaked jeans and shirt, with dirty hands and a grit-covered face. I kept my eyes on the passing city. I rode the entire route three, maybe four times, from the northside to the Loop, back and forth, back and forth, until the bus driver finally kicked me off at the corner of Clark and Belmont sometime that evening. I took a seat on an empty bench and watched traffic, watched headlights approach and pass. The pain in my back and knees slipped away. For the first time in weeks, I felt hungry.

I couldn't go home to face Pops or Sheila. I walked to a phone booth and dropped in my last quarter. "It's me, Mark," I said.

"Where are you, son?"

"In front of Walgreens," I told her. "I hope I didn't wake you." I spilled my guts and explained how I quit and didn't want to go home. I even cried some.

"I'll leave the door unlocked," she said.

It took me a half hour to walk up Clark to the neighborhood. The widow was waiting for me in her kitchen. Two cans of Blatz, dripping with moisture, were on the table in front of her. Campbell's chicken noodle was cooking on the stove. I ate

soup and we talked until two in the morning. "You have to put it past you. It's not your fault," she told me. "The Lord has a way of holding back his children who aren't yet ready for His world. There will be a next time for you and Sheila to try again." The soup was warm and salty.

After eating, I rubbed the widow's shoulders with alcohol to ease her arthritis. I wondered what it must have been like to have had pain like hers, the swollen joints and aspirin by the handfuls. She'd been crippled for years. I rubbed her back deep and hard. The alcohol numbed my raw hands. I even massaged her fingers, one by one, joint by joint. "You're a good boy, Mark. A fine, young man," she said. I wanted to run away, somewhere far like Green Bay.

VERSE TWELVE

Say come on sister with her nose all spoiled . . .

Saying coke's for horses, not women or men,

The doctors say it will kill you, but they didn't say when.

The sidewalk swelled with people. I moved with them, around them, next to them. My shoes were wet and I was starting to feel a chill. I had to go back to the neighborhood to check on the widow. I made a plan to avoid everyone except the old lady. Instead of stopping at Sal's to pick up my nightly groceries--I was in no shape to see anyone in the neighborhood--I would stop at Jewel Foods just up the street. Once at the widow's, I'd tell her what happened, take what I knew was coming to me, and give Sheila a call. The old lady would listen--she always did--although I knew she wouldn't give me any more cash. My plan was simple, clear up each problem one at a time.

I stopped at a phone booth outside Jewel Foods on the corner of Irving and Ashland to call the widow. Closing the door behind me, I lifted the receiver and dug through my pocket for some change. After slipping a quarter into the slot, I punched in her number and waited for her to pick up. I let it ring a few times and then a few more. Because of her arthritis, she had difficulty getting to the phone quickly. If she wasn't seated next to it, she'd have to wheel herself over to it, which was a bit tricky in a place as small as hers. I let the phone ring a few more times, but there was still no answer. It didn't seem like she was about to pick up any time soon, so I decided

to call again later, after she had time to maneuver her way to the phone. She was even slower if she was drinking.

I stepped out of the booth and rested my back against the street corner's lamppost. While I waited on calling the old lady, I watched people move up and down the sidewalk, and in and out of Jewel Foods. It seemed everyone had somewhere to go but me. I tried to think of all the places I could make it to if I decided to leave town, how far I could go on fifty bucks. Indianapolis, Louisville, Cleveland. Maybe even all the way to Green Bay. I wondered how many people I'd miss or if any of them would miss me. I wanted to know what it would be like just to disappear without a trace. I was sure my mother would worry most, and maybe even Karen would worry some too. The old lady wouldn't worry, because she believed I had "sense," as she liked to call it, only I didn't use it as much as she suggested.

While standing on the corner, I saw Father O'Brian come out of the market with a bag of groceries. I couldn't believe how grey his hair had turned, and he seemed shorter than he once looked in his prime. I remembered him as a tall, thin man with dark hollow eyes and bushy eyebrows, someone who could stand before the altar with outstretched arms and rise up straight to the heaven. He spoke the words of God from memory in a low, mumbling manner, rarely raising his voice. Karen and I believed he could even read minds. He knew that during services I paid more attention to the pretty girls all dolled up in their Sunday dresses than to him. He knew that while kneeling during the eucharist prayers, I thought more about my aching knees than the pain Jesus suffered dying for our sins. He knew that after my confessions, I never did all my penance. He gave me the creeps. I was sure that when I died, I'd find him guarding the gates of heaven with Saint Peter. He was the

most pious person I knew besides my mother, even if he did smoke cigarettes.

When I saw him coming out of Jewel, I tried to turn away. I was in no mood to talk with him. I didn't need to be reminded of my sin and guilt, of heaven and hell, or any of those things, like how I hadn't been to church for weeks. My mother went every Sunday, rain or snow, and even a few times during the week. She could have made a good nun. She knew her saints, her beatitudes, her ten commandments, her Bible and her blessings. Pops was less noticeably religious, but went with her to mass on weekends and still gave a monthly donation. My father never spoke much about his faith or why he went to church each week and on holy days; he just did what he did, like going to work or something. He said grace at dinner, and no matter how hungry we were, we couldn't so much as touch our plates until he was through. Even putting our hands near a knife or fork got us a slap on the head. In church he made us kneel correctly at the proper moments, which was important to my father. He made sure our backs were straight and our hands properly folded in front of us. No slouching was allowed or he'd snap us hard in the ear with his finger. Chewing gum during mass was a capital offense. He even made us follow along in the prayer book, and we couldn't be caught flipping to different pages. Although he didn't sing, he made us do it. He respected the service and its traditions and would only allow a priest to give him communion.

Sometimes, my father seemed crazy with religion, although I'd never seen him pray like he made Karen and I do each night before we went to bed. Praying was a part of my nightly ritual. Put on my pajamas, brush my teeth, and then meet with my father in my bedroom for a few Hail Marys, an Our Father, and my personal intentions. Before I recited my Hail Marys, Pops made me kneel at the bedside. I'd

say my prayers real slow and stare up at the small crucifix above my bed, a silver Jesus against a white cross where my mother placed a piece of palm. Looking at Jesus, I always wondered how much it must've hurt to have nails driven through your hands and feet.

When saying my prayers, I tried to keep them honest, thinking of others before my self. "God bless my mother and father and keep Karen healthy and safe. Please help me to do well in school and try to keep Pops from arguing with my mother." I never prayed for toys and crap like that, because if I did, my old man warned I'd go straight to hell. I lived my whole life around the fear of hell.

Anyways, the guard of heaven's gate, Father O'Brian, spotted me and walked over. He looked paler and bonier than usual. Crazy enough, I wanted to be a priest once. I wanted to lift my arms up to God, like he did, and call on Him to watch over us all. I used to practice in my bedroom sometimes. I hung a sheet from my shoulders and prayed aloud from an open bible, which I placed atop my dresser. I closed my eyes and pictured myself on the altar, leading the people in prayer. "Thy Kingdom Come," I said in my deepest voice, which I believed I could hear echoing off the church's marble floor. I heard the droning organ, too, the deep chords of misery, and I sang aloud, "Alleluia, Alleluia, Al-le-lu-ia." Sometimes, I said mass for Karen and gave her communion, chocolate mint wafers which my mother kept in the kitchen for her Sunday coffee with the widow. I wanted to be like Father O'Brian. There was a time during my first year of high school when I even went to church every day in the morning before school, or in the afternoon, if I missed morning services. Hardly anyone knew I went except Father O'Brian, who gave mass each day. This was about the same time Karen stopped going to church, claiming she no

longer believed in God. "It's all just a bunch of crap," she'd tell me. During this time of my first year of high school, Karen began staying out late, pulling all-nighters, and coming home with beer on her breath. "Can't you get her to listen," Pops would tell my mother. He'd stay up until she came home, and then in the kitchen at two in the morning, they went at it. "Where have you been, for Chrissakes?"

"You aren't the boss of me," she'd say.

He'd yell, slam the kitchen cabinets, and pour himself a shot of Vodka--he always drinks Vodka when he's angry.

"But it's not fair."

"You come home or you don't come back," he'd tell her and it would go on like this back and forth for a half hour or more. It was no use trying to sleep through it. The worst part was hearing Karen crying in her bedroom or my parents arguing after it was all over. "You're too hard on her, Jack," my mother would say. "You're driving her away."

"I can't work all day and stay up all night waiting for her," he'd say. During all this, I held a pillow over my head or put on my transistor radio to make the noise stop, but it was no use. The walls were just too thin.

It took almost to the time Sean was born before Karen changed her tune and became more of a believer than me. I've had problems ever since Sheila lost our baby. Some days I try hard to believe and on others I'm sure there's never been a God at all.

"Good to see you, Mr. Callahan," Father O'Brian said as he approached me. "How are you, sir? Long time it's been." We shook hands. His appeared wrinkled

and dotted with liver stains.

"Doing great, Father," I told him. He looked me up and down.

"What brings you to this part of town?" he asked.

"*North Side News*," I said. "I'm selling ad space now."

"So you are," he told me.

"It's not a bad job. I get a small kickback on all sales and I'm doing real well," I said, not really sure why I was telling him such nonsense.

"That's good to know," he told me. A moment of silence came between us and I felt my heart beating swiftly. "How's the family?" he asked. "I don't see very much of you these days except for your mother. You're still saying your prayers I hope," he said and winked.

"Everyone's doing great. Even little Sean," I said. "Never been better. I'm even thinking of moving out into my own apartment, but still within the parish," I said.

"The parish will always be with you," he told me, "as long as you're with the parish."

"I might even be getting a raise soon," I said, the words just pouring out of me. "And I'm thinking about getting married."

"Make sure you come to see me once the plans are made," he said.

"She's a real swell gal and Catholic even."

"You sound right well, my friend, right well," he returned, looking me over once again with a discerning eye. I felt transparent, like he was looking right through me.

"Tip-top," I told him. "Tip-top. Never been better."

"You take care of yourself, son," he said and then added: "You look like you've been out too long in the rain. You better get yourself inside before you get sick."

"It's been a long afternoon," I said, "but it was great running into you."

"Likewise, old friend. Give my best to your dear sweet mother now," he said, patting me on the shoulder.

"Sure thing," I said. Where he touched me I thought I felt a sensation of warmth, like the holy spirit making contact. For a moment I wanted to come clean, to confess three years worth of sin since my last confession, but I was mute. He looked me over one more time and I forced a smile.

"The Lord be with you, Mr. Callahan," he said before turning to leave. My armpits were soaked and I could feel a drop of sweat dripping down the side of my face. As I watched him walk off slowly down Irving, I heard the church bells toll the hour six times. The guy gave me the creeps and made me feel real guilty and all. I really wanted to come clean, but it was no use. I could only watch as he grew more and more distant, merging into the crowd of people moving along the sidewalk.

Seeing Father O'Brian brought back a bunch of unsettled memories, like how much I didn't pray except in emergencies. There was this one time, I even prayed for Karen, thought I'd never admit it if she ever asked. I remember how everything began with a phone call, with a ringing that wouldn't go away. Pops had already left for work and my mother was at Sal's shopping. She liked to go early in the morning when Sal put out freshly brewed coffee for his customers. My mother usually stayed for a couple cups while she chatted with Sal or his niece, then she'd pick up a few things and come home. Normally, nobody called before my mother came back from

the store and if they did, they never let it ring more than four or five times. Since the only people who called that early were for my mother--her church friends or the old lady calling to gossip--I never bothered to pick up if she wasn't home. Nobody I knew would ever call me before twelve. That morning things were different. I remember most how I had this pounding hangover, which that ringing only made worse. It was one of those mornings where your spit sticks to the roof of your mouth and you feel as dehydrated as the Sahara desert. It's hard to say why I finally picked up, but I did.

"Mark, Mark," she was going all fast and breathing heavy, "you gotta help me. You gotta tell me what to do. I can't think straight. I got the call. I got the call."

I had no idea what she was saying. She was so wired she was even slurring her words. It was happening all over again, only a week after Cook County. I could tell nothing much had changed. "The call?" I said, "What the hell you talking about?"

"From Cook County," she said. "They finally returned my call. They finally told me my test results," she said, her voice shaky. If you didn't call five times a day demanding answers, it could sometimes take weeks to get a response from the County hospital. "They finally called. I can't believe it. They finally called." I wondered how much she knew she was repeating herself. "I'm pregnant," she said. "I'm going to have a baby. I'm pregnant."

I didn't know exactly what to say and this time I needed her to tell it to me again. "You're what?"

"I'm pregnant," she told me.

"I guess, congratulations," I said. "Hey, look, I gotta go," I said. "I need

sleep A.S.A.P. My head's pounding. You can tell me all about it later."

"Don't hang up," she said. "Don't hang up. I can't stop shaking," she said. "Stan's gone too. I can't stop shaking. I haven't seen him for days. I didn't want to tell anyone. What am I going to do? What am I going to do?" she said, breaking into tears. She cried into the phone while I tried to think of how to get her to stop. "Mark? Are you there? Are you listening? Did you hear what I just told you? I'm pregnant. I can't stop shaking. You have to help. I don't feel right," she said. "I'm going down to the Lake. I need a swim."

"Don't go anywhere," I said. "Just sit still," I told her.

"I'm so hot, Mark. I don't feel good. I'm going to pass out."

"It's probably morning sickness and the coke," I told her. "Karen? Are you listening?" She didn't respond and I couldn't hear her crying or her breathing. "Karen? Karen! Say something for Chrissakes."

After a few moments she spoke, but I could barely hear her voice. "I don't feel good," she whispered. "I don't feel right."

"Don't go anywhere," I said, "I'm coming over right now." Then I hung up and jumped out of bed, my head pounding something fierce. I hurried on a pair of blue jeans and headed out of the house. I ran up the street and over to her apartment on Grace, feeling all the time like I was going to puke. I buzzed the door, but there was no answer. I buzzed again and again, and then I buzzed every damn number on the board until somebody finally let me in. I ran up the stairs to her place on the second floor and pounded on the door, but there was no response. That's when I kicked the door, breaking it open. She was half naked in her bra and panties passed out next to the sofa. The t.v. and radio were both on and dirty dishes were stacked

five high on the coffee table. The place reeked too, like rotting vegetables. Dirty clothes and old beer cans were scattered about the floor.

I tried slapping her a few times to bring her around, but she only mumbled some jumble to this day I still can't figure out. That's when I called 911. While I waited for them to arrive, I dug through the piles of crap to find her something to wear. I dressed her and combed her hair. I didn't want people showing up to find my sister half-naked. All that time I was praying too. "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, please help. Don't let my sister die," I kept saying over and over. Every so often her muscles twitched. I looked around for any coke and flushed what I found on the tabletop down the drain. Since there wasn't more than a few lines, I figured she must have done a whole bunch.

I heard sirens first and then I saw them pull up, the police first, followed by the ambulance. People gathered on the sidewalk out front. Two policemen carrying a wooden stretcher and two white-shirted paramedics with black medical bags came up the stairs and entered the apartment. The paramedics gathered around Karen. "Cocaine," I told them. They took her pulse and radioed the numbers to Cook County. They asked me her name and age or if she had any medical conditions. "She's possibly pregnant," I said. They checked her eyes for dilation. They took her blood pressure and temperature. Then they filled a syringe with a clear white liquid and shot it into her arm. It didn't appear to have an immediate effect, but they assured me it would help.

A few moments later as they put her on the stretcher, she began mumbling again, something that sounded like "my baby, my baby." While they carried her down the stairs to the ambulance, the police asked me a number of questions: "Are

you the father? Is this your apartment? How long has she had a drug problem?" I tried my best to answer as I headed outside, following the paramedics.

A crowd of gawkers gathered around the ambulance. The paramedics loaded Karen into the back and hooked up an E.K.G. to her chest. They let me ride along with her to the hospital, and while the siren wailed through the streets, I watched the heart monitor move in waves across a green screen. Karen stopped her mumbling and was finally beginning to talk some sense. "Where am I?" she kept asking. "Where are they taking me?" I filled her in as best I could. The paramedics reassured her she was doing well, although they wouldn't respond to her questions about the baby.

Before I knew it, we were at Cook County again. They unloaded her and wheeled her into the emergency room. That was as far as they let me follow her. I ended up, again, in the crowded, smoke-filled waiting room. The worst part was explaining to the nurse about her insurance and filling out admission papers. "Are you sure she's covered?" the nurse kept asking me.

After filling out the papers, I called my mother. I knew Karen would be against it, but she had a right to know, especially if the problem was life threatening. I punched her number and waited, but there was no answer. That's when I called Pops. I phoned the warehouse and Jansen patched me to the field site. "Pops," I said. "I'm at the hospital. It's Karen."

"Jesus Christ," he said. "I'll be right over." I was expecting a bunch of yelling and blaming, but he didn't say much else. When I finally got a hold of my mother, she took the news much worse, crying herself into near hysterics, "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph." She took a taxi to the hospital and met me in the waiting room.

We waited together for some answers about her condition. Pops continually pressed the nurse for a response. "She's conscious and alert," the lady said.

"And the baby?" I asked. Pops and my mother didn't know about the baby.

We waited for what seemed like hours and all things considered, my parents took the news about the pregnancy rather well. They were less reassuring about the fact that Stan hadn't been seen for days. "He's a Polack deadbeat," my father said. He's always more prejudiced when he's flustered.

The real yelling didn't start until after Karen was put in rehab a couple days later. Pops blamed me and my mother for Karen's problem, and my mother blamed him. I saw it as Stan's doing, though I ultimately blamed Karen herself. When it finally comes down to it, you are the only one who is responsible for yourself. It's something I've come to know.

Stan came by the rehab a couple times, but mostly he stayed away. Karen was eventually evicted from her apartment, which I had to clean out for her, and when she was finished with her eight weeks at the hospital, she came home to live with us. About six months later, Sean was born and Stan showed up at the hospital. I haven't seen him since. Since Stan lost his job and insurance, most of the costs for Karen and the baby came out of Pops's pocket. It's something he still grumbles about from time to time. "Just thank God that child came to us all right," my mother tells him when he gets going. Most of the time, Pops is a pretty good grandfather, when he's not yelling that is.

VERSE THIRTEEN

Deep River, Deep River,

when I feel worried I come to you,

I come to sit beside you when I'm feeling blue,

Cause you're the only one I can tell my troubles to.

I stepped back into the phone booth and dropped in a quarter. I waited for her to pick up, letting it ring a number of times. Not only was she slow but she had recently begun to take naps in the late afternoon. "My gears are wearing down," she'd tell me. Since I was getting no answer from the widow, I hung up and tried again. I even called the operator to make sure there was nothing wrong with the line. "Everything seems to be in order, Sir," the operator reassured me. I tried yet another time before giving up. After a sixer of Blatz, the old lady could sleep through tornados or a nuclear bombs. I figured it was best just to show up at her door.

I took the bus from Irving back to the neighborhood. Unable to find a seat, I had to stand most of the way, holding the steel rail above my head. The sky was already dark and the city lights reflected off the wet streets. Soon it would be winter.

In the winter, the widow's place gets real drafty. There's nothing you can do to stop the cold except turn up the heat, but in her building where everyone shares the same furnace, the heat isn't evenly distributed. When it gets real cold, in the minus zeroes, the widow sits in her kitchen and turns on the oven. It heats up the room well, but it makes me worry that she's going to gas herself or burn the place down.

She can get pretty forgetful after a few beers.

If the cold is not bad enough, her arthritis gets worse in the winter. Her joints turn real stiff and some days she can't bend a finger. Not even my massages help much when she gets it bad. What she needs is a place in Florida. We talk about Florida sometimes, especially when it's freezing outside. It seems just talking about the place warm us up. "If we had the money," I'd tell her, "we could go down to Miami Beach."

"I hear they have plenty of bugs in Florida," she'd say.

"And we could eat all the oranges we ever wanted."

"They have terrible humidity, too, you know."

"There's always Disney World."

"It's expensive and crowded." The more I'd talk about the place, the more set she'd become on never going. "You know, they only have one season in Florida," the old lady told me, "tourist season." For the widow, no place in the world matched Chicago and our neighborhood. Even on the coldest of winter days, there wasn't a more perfect corner in the world on which to live.

When we weren't talking about Florida or some other retirement center "where people relaxed their way to death," as the old lady put it, we played cards. Nights spent playing gin rummy with the widow made the cold nights pass quickly. She was quite a card player and sometimes I even suspected the cards were marked. Hanging out at the widow's made living at home with my parents tolerable because I always had an escape, somewhere to go when Pops's yelling and complaining became too much. Even when I was a teenager, I could always go to the widow's when times were bad.

When I wasn't with the widow, I spent time with Sheila. In the winter, Sheila and I liked to order carry out and take hot baths together. We liked to put on the blues or Motown, Willie Dixon or The Supremes, and crawl into bed, pulling the sheet clear over our heads like a tent. We stayed under the sheets for hours, and even Alley climbed in and purred at our feet. Sheila had a small queen size bed, and with the cat and all, it was pretty crowded. "I can't wait until we can get our own apartment with a bigger bedroom," Sheila would say.

When we weren't camped under the sheets, we made Irish coffee with an extra shot of whiskey and then stayed up late watching old movies on WGN. Around Christmas time, I'd make her watch *It's a Wonderful Life* about a hundred times. "Every time you hear a bell," we'd recite together with Clarence, "an angel gets his wings." Plenty of times, Sheila and I talked about our own Bedford Falls miracle, buying a place and moving in together. Her library job paid well and was a regular monthly income. She worked Tuesday through Saturday and was usually off Sundays and Mondays. She rarely called in sick unless I could talk her into spending the morning with me. She didn't even take all of her two-week vacation. Mostly I was the reason we never got a place of our own. I could never save up any money, and work was never a for-sure thing.

Sheila really hoped to have a bigger place. Her small one bedroom on Broadway felt even smaller in the winter. The bedroom itself was stacked with piles of books, some she'd read and others she planned to read. She read lots and always wanted me to read more. With all her books, the dresser barely even fit in the room. Her living room wasn't much bigger and the kitchen like a closet. "I want a big kitchen someday," she'd tell me, "with a dishwasher and microwave." We sure did a

bunch of dreaming.

Even with all the people surrounding me, the bus felt drafty. Each time the door opened and closed, a shot of cold Lake air blew in the door. Soon it would be heavy coat weather, time to pull out the wool cap. Everybody made fun of my plain, grey wool cap--Sheila, Karen, even the widow. "You look like a crook," Sheila would tell me. "A hoodlum," the widow would say, but the hat kept me warm and that's all that really matters on a cold day.

The bus chugged and creaked its way up Clark toward my neighborhood awash in light coming from the streetlamps and pouring out of homes. There were puddles in the street, and a small stream flowed along the curbside. I got off at Addison and walked through the neighborhood to the widow's. I stopped for a few moments outside Duke's place. A light was on in the front room, but the curtains were closed. I thought about checking in to see if he had made it home the night before with Linda and to find out how things were going with his mother. I worried about his mother. I didn't want her to lose her job, especially with winter coming on so fast. Mrs. Morgan was always one who deserved much more than the world gave her. You think a looker like her would have it easy, but she didn't. I just wanted her to have things right.

I turned away and headed up the street. At my place, I saw the flickering light of Pops's t.v. He was probably watching "Barney Miller" reruns as he did every night about this time. My mother was probably in the kitchen washing dishes, and Karen up in her room trying to get the kid to stop crying. About an hour earlier, they would have eaten dinner when Pops came home from work. I could picture it clearly.

The old man walks in the front door. His bluejeans are soiled with grease; his shirt soaked at the pits. He has on the Jansen company cap and dirt is smudged across his face. Without even greeting my mother, he goes upstairs to his bedroom to change and shower. While he's in the shower, my mother makes Karen set the table. Karen puts out the dishes and the silverware and sets up Sean's highchair. My mother is in the kitchen stirring green beans or mashing potatoes. The cooked meat--and Pops eats meat every night--is warming in the oven with the bread. When all the food is on the table, Pops, dressed now in a clean pair of pants and a loose-fitting flannel, comes down from the bedroom. He has on his slippers, the top notch of his pants unbuttoned. He still hasn't said a word. When everyone is seated and the baby strapped in his chair, Pops breaks his silence with grace. He bows his head and brings his hands together, but before he actually begins the prayer, the baby starts to cry--always does--but Pops continues only after first giving the kid a mean stare. Pops prays speaking real slowly, pausing after each group of words. He makes a few moments seem without end: "Bless us, O Lord, for these our gifts, which we are about to receive, through Christ, our Lord, Amen." No sooner than he's said the final "Amen," everyone begins reaching for the food which must first go through my father's hands. God forbid anyone touch a plate before he's had his helping. Karen passes a dish to my father who takes a helping and passes it down the line to my mother. During all this passing of dishes, the baby is still crying and Pops is shaking his head, "Shut him up," he tells Karen. "No crying at the table." The more Karen tries to do something to get Sean to stop, the louder he cries. "Every night," my father shouts, "every goddamn night!" And the kid cries more.

"You're only making it worse," Karen tells my father. "Just be patient. He'll

tire." But the kid never does. It's always my mother, sacrificing her warm food, who gets up and goes to sit with the kid in the kitchen while Karen and Pops finish eating. "I don't mind, I don't mind," my mother repeats as she takes the crying kid away. Soon as the kid gets into my mother's arms he stops yapping. Pops and Karen finish their meal, and in the kitchen, alone, my mother feeds Sean. After Pops is through eating, he grabs an Old Style from the frig and goes to watch reruns on WGN. Karen relieves my mother, who finally gets to eat her cold dinner.

As I stood out front of our apartment, I could see and hear it all clear as day. In a way, I was sorry I missed out, but in another way, I was happy not to be a part of it, not to have to answer the usual nightly questions: Are you going back to the warehouse? Have you found a place to live yet? Are you and Sheila ever going to get married? Will you ever learn to save your money? How much do you drink? It's enough to drive a fella crazy. As I stood out front I felt somewhat paralyzed. Part of me said walk away, but another said go inside. I even heard the old lady, *Set things straight. He's a good, hardworking man. He means well, Mark.* But I was hopeless, a prodigal son, only my father had no fortune and wasn't going to be welcoming me home with any lamb roast. I took one last long look at the apartment before turning away. At least the old lady was expecting me.

I started up the street. With a cold wind blowing at me, the walk to the widow's place never seemed so long. I figured it was already some time after seven and I still hadn't spoken with the widow about what she wanted for supper. I was even beginning to feel a bit hungry. Since Sal's was only open until eight and sometimes closed earlier if business was slow, I needed to hurry. I thought about what to tell Sal about losing his *North Side* ad discount and about the money I still

owed him. Losing the ad would cost him business, and I only hoped it was much less than I feared. Since he was paid up for the next few issues, I wouldn't have to break the news right away. I could walk-in and pretending nothing at all was wrong. I could tell him payroll was late with our checks and that I would pay my bill soon as I had the money. Because of the old lady, he'd probably let me slide some, but only because of her. I couldn't bear to think about being banned from shopping in his store, being put in the same category as the Kendalls and the O'Malleys, who never paid their bills. I didn't want to have my name displayed in big black marking with theirs on the "overdue list" behind the register for all to see. I also didn't want my mother and sister getting any funny looks because of me. I had no choice but to come clean with the widow. Tell her about losing my job at *North Side* and about all the money I owed Sal. I knew she'd think of something to help me set things straight.

I walked into the strong wind believing it was washing away my sins, setting me free and cleansing my body. Feeling a rhythm to my pace, I felt a serene calm come over me, like I'd reached the end of a long journey. The widow's building a block ahead was like a lighthouse and me a boat heading for mooring. With new hopes, I hadn't felt more relaxed in days. I thought about how after I confessed to the widow, we'd drink Blatz and maybe play a few games of gin rummy. I'd massage her sore shoulders and hands.

Whenever I was at the widow's, everything in its proper place. We could drink beers, play cards, and talk Cubbies for hours. She knew all the stats better than me, like who was in first, who led the big leagues in hitting, or how many games the Cubs needed to win the pennant. She knew about all the great ballplayers, Mantle and DiMaggio, Koufax and Brock, Clemente and Hammering Hank Aaron. Her favorite

player of all time was Mr. Baseball, Ernie Banks. She told me about hot summer afternoons when she and her husband drank cold Blatz and listened to games on the radio. In the off season, the widow and I talked about the next season. In my neighborhood, the only thing that got us through the winter was hope for the next season, The One, as we all liked to call it.

When I got to the widow's building, I rang and waited for her to buzz me in the door. I couldn't wait to spill my guts to get the heavy load off my shoulders. I needed her lecturing, a strong dose of do-right to set me straight. I needed her forgiveness and absolution, like Father O'Brian used to give me. For some strange reason, when she told me stuff, it made more sense than when I heard it from somebody else like Pops or Dave. Maybe it was her delivery, the stern and strong voice mixed with the compassion in her eyes. She was tough, but cared like I suppose a grandmother would. I waited a few more minutes before ringing again, and just as I was about to ring a third time, a man stepped outside and I quickly grabbed the closing door.

Once inside, I climbed the six flights of stairs up to her apartment. The stairs creaked with each step I made. I could hear voices and radios pouring out of the apartments I passed. I smelled the garlic of a leftover spaghetti dinner and someone's hamburgers with grilled onions. At the top of the stairs, I paused for a moment to catch my breath. I could hear the old lady's t.v. spilling out from her slightly ajar door. I knocked a few times before entering.

I found her in her wheel chair with her eyes closed. Her arms hung loosely at the sides of her metal chair. In front of her on the table was a half-empty can of

Blatz. A cigarette butt, burned to the filter, rested in the ashtray. The apartment stunk something terrible. I remember most running around and opening all the windows to let in the cold, fresh air. Everything happened in a blur. I didn't know what to feel, since I had felt so much in the last couple days. I looked at her for a long time, at the deep lines in her cheeks and at the wrinkles around her closed eyes. I didn't know if I should touch her, but eventually I did, brushing back a few grey strands of hair from her forehead.

I knelt before her and took her cold hand into mine. I held onto her for some time, as if waiting for her to wake up. I didn't want to let go. I was too shocked to cry. I turned off the t.v. I felt alone, like the wind blowing over the corn fields in Kenosha.

At some point, I called the police. While waiting for the cops, I grabbed the old lady's coffee can from the kitchen cabinet and took the few hundred dollars inside. I felt bad, like I was stealing, but she was dead, I rationalized, and wouldn't be needing that money as much as I did. I folded the bills, mostly twenties and a few fifties, into a small pile and stuffed them into my pocket. I was going to pay back Sal and use the rest to float me until I turned things around. I had all kinds of plans.

After the cops showed up, I called Karen and told her the news. "The widow's dead," I said, "the widow's dead."

"Where are you, Mark?" Karen asked.

"Her place," I said. "The cops are here with me. I found her at the kitchen table, just like she was waiting for me to arrive."

"I'm coming over," she said. "Are you all right?"

Meanwhile, the cops walked around the place as if they were looking for clues

to a murder or something. The department sent three cars and they all arrived with their lights flashing. Neighbors gathered around the cars and the building's tenants kept peeking in the door to see what was happening. The old lady wouldn't have believed such a circus. "You'll be all right," Officer B. Reynolds kept telling me.

I didn't really begin crying until Karen arrived, not until she hugged me. "I'm sorry, Mark," she said. I tried my best to hold in the tears, but somehow they snuck out the corners of my eyes and dripped down my face in a steady stream. Karen was much more composed than me. Her eyes were glassy, but she managed herself well. I tried my best to stop the tears, but they kept coming. I hated crying in front of others and especially in front of my sister. I remember repeating, "This can't be happening. This can't be happening," before I told Karen, "I need to get out of this place."

"Go home," she told me, "Pops will understand. I'll take care of things here."

"All right," I said. When I left, Karen was ordering the cops around, telling them where they could and could not sit or snoop. If it weren't for her, I don't know what I might have done.

I remember walking out the widow's door and into the dim hallway. I remember the neighbors staring at me as I wiped the tears from my face. I didn't stop to talk with anyone and walked right down the stairs and past the crowd that had gathered around the police cars. I kept walking, faster and faster, until it felt like a small jog. I didn't stop at home or at Duke's place, but just kept on walking and walking. I turned left on Addison and headed toward Broadway. The cold air felt good against my hot skin. I felt like I could walk forever. Cars zipped past me along the street. I heard a siren in the distance. I stepped in whatever puddles were in my

path. It didn't matter if my feet got wet. On Broadway, I headed south and stopped only when I reached Sheila's building. Without hesitation, I walked into the lobby and pushed her buzzer. "It's me, Mark," I said, "the widow's dead."

VERSE FOURTEEN

Train's a comin', train's a comin', train's a comin',

Better get ready, better get ready, better get ready,

Got my ticket, got my ticket, got my ticket.

Everything happened so fast.

Even though it was a brisk forty-five outside with a wind chill in the thirties, I felt warm and flush. I was in bad shape and my reflection in the glass door of Sheila's building proved it. Under my eyes were dark bags, like the kind my father gets when he's overtired. Trails of dried tears lined the sides of my cheeks and my hair was messed something awful. I had a small headache. Sheila thought I was just pulling some kind of gag to get her to let me upstairs. "The widow McKinley's dead," I finally said again, and a few seconds later, without saying a word, she buzzed me in the door.

I took the old creaky elevator up to the eighth floor and walked down the dim hall to her apartment. The building was mostly quiet and I could hear my feet shuffle along the worn green carpet. I had a blister on my heel from all the miles I'd walked in the last twenty-four hours, but the pain didn't much bother me. My feet felt swollen too, but it just didn't matter. I was in motion. I was at Sheila's, and I didn't even know what I was going to say.

When I turned the hall corner, she was waiting for me in her doorway. The soft light of the hall's lamp reflected off her face, making her round cheeks glow.

She was wearing a short blue flannel robe, tied tightly around her waist, with the pink slippers I'd given her as a stocking-stuffer at Christmas. Her hair hung freely about her shoulder, as if she'd just brushed it, like she did every night, working it to a fine shine. "I'm so sorry," she said, reaching out to hug me.

I buried my face in her shoulder, my cheek against hers. I felt tears again escaping from the corners of my eyes. She ran her fingers through my hair the way my mother used to do when I was a boy. She let me continue to hold her, and for a moment, it was just like it had always been. "Come inside," she said.

I followed her, walking around the stacks of books piled about the room. In the kitchen, I took off my jacket and hung it from the back of a chair. The room was bright and clean. Sheila gave me a warm towel to wipe my eyes and the sides of my cheeks where the tears had crusted. While I cleaned up, Sheila reached to a cabinet above her sink and pulled down a tall glass, which she filled with milk. "Drink," she said, "you'll feel better." I took the cold glass in my hands and lifted it to my lips. I sucked down nearly half a cup, and she quickly refilled it. From another cabinet, she took down a bag of chocolate chip cookies. "They're all I've got," she said and handed me the half-empty bag. "Just eat," she told me.

I took the cookies, dipped them in milk, and ate until I almost finished them all. Sheila had a few with me and washed them down with a Pepsi. For a moment, Sheila left the room and returned with her hairbrush. She pulled up a chair behind me and began brushing my messy hair. She tugged lightly at the many snags. She slid her hand over my forehead, pushing hair from my eyes. Her fingers were soft and warm. "That's real great," I said. "The best I've felt in days."

When she finished brushing my hair, she put on some Fats Domino, my

favorite collection of his greatest hits. The music filled the room with Fats' piano as he sang "My Blue Heaven." When I heard the horns I couldn't stop thinking about the widow. I imagined throwing the old lady a New Orleans funeral with an ensemble of horns blowing my sorrow clear to Chicago's south side.

The old lady, though, would have prefered an Irish wake at Maloney's. They'd lay her out in a coffin and do her face with enough make-up, so she'd look ten years younger. They'd remove a bunch of the lines from her forehead and fix her hair like she never did herself. They'd put her in some dress she hardly ever wore and they'd fold her wrinkled hands across her stomach. They'd make her seem almost living. When the widow was ready for viewing, they'd move her into their parlor, where a big brass chandelier hung from the middle of the ceiling. The dim, red carpeted room was big enough for twenty-five people to stand comfortably around her coffin, which would be placed near the back wall. Beside the coffin on both ends, long thin candles would cast shadows over the old lady's face. In front of all this would be a prayer kneeler for last respects. After everyone had seen the widow's body, Father O'Brian would lead them in prayer. They would gather around the coffin and mumble "Our Fathers" until the old lady was good and saved. I hated wakes, especially when somebody touched or kissed the dead person. It all gave me the creeps and I couldn't sleep for nights afterwards. When I closed my eyes, I saw that person's face, and the image followed me like a shadow. I even dreamed about that person, only in my dreams the person wasn't dead.

If it were my funeral, I'd want it simple. Dress me in blue jeans and a Cubs t-shirt with my hands folded over my Cubby cap. No organ music either. Only guitars, horns, and blues.

"I'll miss her," Sheila told me. "I'll really miss her."

"So will I," I said.

"Who will you call? Where will the funeral be?"

"I haven't thought much about it," I told her. Although the widow McKinley didn't know too many people and that many of her own friends had passed away years ago, there was still much that needed to be done. Besides the arrangements with Maloney's for the wake, the graveyard would need to be notified about preparing her plot. The widow always planned to be buried beside her husband and the children she lost. A time for church services also needed setting. I tried to think about who would come. Certainly, my family would go; Pops would wear his wedding and funeral suit, a dark grey wool with a black tie, and my mother and Karen would wear their black dresses. Duke and his mom would come. Someone would have to call Sal's family, Haziz, and Father O'Brian. Church parishioners would need an announcement of the services; a mass would have to be dedicated for her.

"You look tired," Sheila said, breaking the silence.

"I feel like I've been up for days," I told her.

"Did you sleep well last night?" she asked.

"Look, I'm sorry about the call. I know it was late."

"Let's just forget about it," she said.

I stood up and faced her, tried to put my arms around her waist. "I don't think this is a good idea," she said, brushing my arm away.

"Don't say that," I told her. She sat down and crossed her legs. I went over behind her and started to massage her shoulders.

"Please don't," she said.

"I haven't stopped thinking about you since you left me at Blacky's," I told her.

"Not tonight," she said, "not tonight, Mark."

"We need to straighten this out," I said.

"Let it go," she said.

"I can't," I told her. "I need you, Sheila."

"I'll always be here for you," she said. "You know that."

"You're just not getting it," I said raising my voice some.

"Don't start," she said.

"Don't start, don't start. What am I supposed to do, for Chrissakes?" She didn't say a word. She just watched me become more and more crazy. "How did we ever get this way? For crying out loud!" I said, yelling like my old man. "Is this the way you want it? Is it?" She still didn't say a word. "Answer me, goddammit. Say something!"

"Just stop it," she finally said.

"Tell me how you really feel about us, about me," I said, "that's all I want to know." She stood up and moved to the kitchen's corner. She looked at me long and hard. "Go ahead," I said. "Tell me."

"It's not easy," she said.

"It never is." She continued looking at me. The moment seemed to drag on without end. Steam rose from her cup on the table. It seemed she would never speak, but she finally did.

"I love you," she said, "I do, but I need some time to myself. I think it would do us both good."

"Take all the time you need," I told her. "I understand."

"I don't want to hurt you," she said.

"I understand," I told her, but I didn't, not everything, not then. "I'm fine," I said. "I'll get over it." She moved towards me as if to hug me.

"I'm sorry," she said and I moved away. She couldn't hug me and tell me it was over. It made no sense.

"I have to go," I said.

"You can stay here," she told me, but I couldn't. "I think you should stay," she said again.

"I have a lot to do," I told her.

"I can help," she said.

"That's all right. I can handle it," I said, grabbing my jacket and walking towards the door. Sheila followed after me. We stood face to face in the doorway. Neither of us could bring ourselves to say something. I wanted to hurt her like she did me, to get even, to tell her about the night with Skylar, but something didn't let me. I put on my jacket and opened the door. "Thanks for listening," I said, then walked out, closing the door behind me. I stood for a moment just outside the door, hoping she might come after me, but she didn't.

I hurried out of her building as fast as I could, taking the stairs down instead of waiting for the slow elevator. I didn't know exactly where to go.

Outside, the city seemed to swallow me up. I walked south on Broadway and then east on Belmont towards the harbor. My feet hurt something awful, the blisters burning. The closer I came to the lake, the harder the winds blew. I felt colder and colder. Goose bumps formed on my arms. I continued walking, following the howl

of the wind. Headlights nearly blinding me, I crossed Lake Shore Drive, dodging oncoming cars from both directions. I followed a winding sidewalk down to the water and climbed atop a large rock overlooking the black lake.

Along the shore, the winds blew even harder. Whitecaps covered the lake's surface. The water, pushed by strong gusts, pounded the rocks. The few yachts still moored in the harbor bobbed up and down on the passing waves. In the distance, a glaring skyline stood like a wall. The wind blew hard against me. A beacon far from shore flashed its red warning light to those coming and going from the harbor. As a child, I wanted to swim to that beacon, which was always barely visible on the horizon. When Pops took me down to the beach on hot summer evenings, I practiced swimming long distances along the shoreline. While I swam, Pops followed on the beach. He was always there in case something happened, in case I didn't make it. The cold water always gave me chills, but I still swam, goose pimples covering my skin. I swam until my arms felt heavy with fatigue and then I swam more, sometimes floating for a few moments on my back to regain my strength. It was Pops who taught me to swim, told me "float when your tired." I wanted to jump, but I didn't have the guts.

When I could stand the cold no more and my body shook uncontrollably, I stepped down from the rock. I made my way over to the sidewalk. My feet still ached, but the walking warmed me some. I hailed a cab. "Downtown," I said, climbing into the back seat, "Union Station."

The cabby, a heavy man with a thick brown beard, hit the meter, and the dollars ticked away as we headed south along Lake Shore Drive. He weaved in and out of traffic. I watched the city pass before me. Irving. Diversy. Fullerton. North

Avenue. Chicago. Grand. At Wacker, we turned and followed the steamy river west, past the glowing Wrigley Building, toward Randolph. The cabby stopped at Jackson, and I paid him a ten which I pulled from the old lady's stack of bills stuffed in my pocket. I quickly crossed over the green river and walked down a long flight of stairs into the underground station. I took an escalator further down to track level. The station was mostly empty, except for a few bums seeking shelter from the cold.

I walked up to a vacant ticket window and stared at the wrinkled man behind the thick glass. "Where to?" he asked, his voice rough with age. I looked at him for a long time without responding. "Where to, fella?"

"I don't know," I said. Through a hole between the window and the counter he pushed through a thin green schedule with all the daily arrivals and departures heading south, west, and north. I ran my finger down a row of station names. Northbrook. Deerfield. Waukegan. Milwaukee. "Do you have a train that goes to Green Bay?" I asked.

"Milwaukee's as far as she goes," he told me.

"How much?" I asked. "To Milwaukee."

"One way or round trip?"

"One way," I said and reached for the stack of bills in my pocket.

I made my way out to the platform and over to track D. A large locomotive, readying for departure, hissed and whined. A heavy odor of grease and diesel hung in the dusty air. The conductors walked the length of the platform, checking tickets and helping board the few people who were leaving the city so late at night. Before boarding, I looked down the tracks, which faded from view inside a long black tunnel where I could see a flashing red light in the distance.

On the train, I found an empty seat in a nearly vacant car. The bench's brown vinyl was old and cracked, the cushioning worn. I tried to get comfortable. A conductor walked up and down the length of the car until the train began to move. Listening to the hum of the engine, I waited to enter the tunnel.

EPILOGUE

Ooh, baby, don't you want to go . . .

Ooh, baby, don't you want to go . . .

Back to that same old place, sweet home Chicago

That's most of what I remember. On the way to Milwaukee, I slept nearly the whole way and when I arrived the sun was just rising over the Lake. It was a brilliant orange, real beautiful and all, and Sheila would've liked it. The first thing I did after leaving the station was get some chow--I had a terrible hunger for the first time in days--and then with the money I had left, I took a room not far from the state university. I called Karen to tell her I was all right. She told me that she had made all the plans for the widow's wake and funeral. "You better be back in time," she said, but I just couldn't go. On the day of the services, I had a few Blatzs and a couple bratwursts in her honor; she would have wanted it that way.

For a long time, months even, I felt real lonely and depressed, especially around Christmas--there's just something about kids and Santa and all those lighted trees that gets to you down deep inside. I thought a bunch of times about going back, but I knew I just couldn't, not until I worked things out. Not too long after arriving, I found a night job tending bar at this place called Wolsky's Tavern. It's a pretty good job and Charlie, the manager, says I'm a natural. I've been working there ever since and have been trying to save a bit now and then as best I can.

I've also taken to writing letters. I sent Duke a postcard of the Pabst Brewery I

toured one afternoon, and he sent me back a shot of Wrigley Field--I keep it on the wall beside my bed. He told me his mom still has her job, but there's no telling how long it will last. I finally sent Sal most of the money I owed him, and I've sent a number of letters to Skylar too, the first telling her about everything that happened to me after leaving her apartment. She always writes back saying she's gonna visit some day, but with her you just never know.

I don't write Sheila, even if it kills me sometimes. If I can get the guts to admit it to myself, I think in many ways she was right; time apart has done me some good. I can't say that if I went home tomorrow I'd look her up again, but if I did, I'd know how to handle it a whole lot better.

The winters in Milwaukee are real tough, worse than Chicago, if you can believe it. With the ice starting to break up along the lakefront and baseball season not too far around the corner, I've thought a bunch about returning to the big city. "You better come home real soon because I need my money back," Karen keeps telling me when I call. I'll pay her back someday; I'm sure of it. I also know from her that my mother and the brat miss me something awful, and I miss them too. I haven't talked with Pops in a long while, since everything fell apart last October, but he's probably square with me finally making it on my own, if only barely. When I get to thinking about it, Milwaukee's a nice place and the gals are real swell, but like the old lady would say, it's just not the neighborhood. I'm sure if I went back I'd be persona non grata for a good long time, but I think I can handle it now. Most of it anyway.

VITA

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