

THE WATERHOUSE

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1988

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1993

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate College of the
Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
July, 2000

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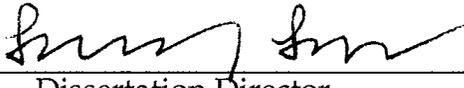
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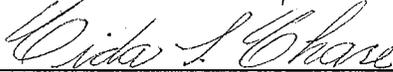
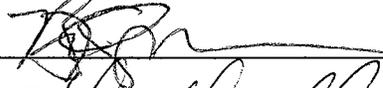
July, 2000

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Dissertation Approved:



Dissertation Director



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my sincere thanks to my major professor, Dr. Brian Evenson, for his creative guidance, constructive comments, inspiration, encouragement, and friendship. Also, the other members of my committee, Dr. Leonard Leff, Dr. Linda Leavell, and Dr. Cida Chase, have my gratitude and warmest thanks. I would like to express my appreciation for the writing instructors that have helped shape this work: Brian Evenson, Gordon Weaver, Mark Cox, Jane Smiley, Steve Pett, Joseph Geha, Ray Young Bear and Troy Boucher. Thank you all for your tireless wisdom and encouragement.

To those of you who sat with me in workshop at Iowa State and Oklahoma State, in classrooms, living rooms, and bar rooms – this one's for you.

I would also like to thank the Oklahoma State University English Department, especially the secretaries – Kim Marotta, Shirley Bechtel, Dale McLaughlin, and Cecilia Austell.

Thanks go to my parents for their support, both in morale and money.

Finally, to Tara, whose good eye and greater heart made this work possible and has enriched my life in vast and untold ways.

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Introduction

Fifteen years ago, as a freshman at Southwestern College in Winfield, Kansas, I took a four-week intensive course called “The Hemingway Contest.” During the course we read a number of Hemingway’s works and wrote short humorous parodies of his style, sending them en masse to the International Hemingway Contest, sponsored jointly by the two Harry’s Bar and Grills in Los Angeles, California, and Florence, Italy, where they were judged along with other entries from all over the world.

Though I did not go to Florence for dinner at Harry’s Bar and Grill (first prize in the contest), I did have the best entry among my peers (as a prize I was treated to breakfast at Winfield’s own Hemingwayesque Little Hooker Restaurant and Bait Shop) and was continually inspired by the reading for class. I was fascinated by Jake Barnes’s impotence in *The Sun Also Rises*, infuriated by Catherine’s death in *A Farewell to Arms*, nurtured, entertained, and surprised by such stories as “A Clean Well-Lighted Place,” “Hills Like White Elephants,” and “Killers.” The most engaging text for the course, which would continually work change in my study of literature and my writing of fiction over the next decade and a half, was Hemingway’s collection of interlinked stories and vignettes, *In Our Time*. As a college freshman, I was most moved and intrigued by what I saw in “Big Two-Hearted River” – the healing and eventually whole Nick Adams who fishes the river prayerfully – reminiscent of the last summer I spent fishing on the Gunnison River in Colorado, after my senior year of college.

Three years after graduation, I lived with Tony Myers, a schoolmate of mine, in a two-bedroom townhouse in Wichita, Kansas. I taught English at Goddard High School and wrote stories in my spare time, while Tony worked in the Friends University Admissions Office. Tony and I shared much – serious relationships with twin sisters we were dating, tastes in music and film, a passion for coffee, and a growing interest and concern in what it meant to be a man in today’s world.

Our shared interest in the concept of masculinity was fodder for many late-night conversations about how we had each been educated to be a man through the media, our friends, and our families. It was Tony who first introduced me to Robert Bly’s *Iron John: A Book about Men*, a national bestseller at the time. I glanced over the drawing of the cragged and bearded face on the cover, turned a few pages, and handed it back to him. It would be two years before I read *Iron John*, even then finding Bly’s mythical tale difficult to integrate realistically into everyday life. However, his picture of the malaise of the contemporary male struck a chord with me, pushing me to find other works which explored traditional and contemporary concepts of manhood.

The conjoining of these two disparate fields of reading – American literature and work about so-called men’s movements – created the point of inception for *The Waterhouse*. Reading *In Our Time* while studying for entrance exams at Oklahoma State University, then again two years later in a course focusing on the Short Story Cycle, while also doing research on various men’s movements for other graduate classes, looking at sociological works on masculinity by Michael Kimmel, Michael Messner, Sam Keen, Lynne Segal, and others, I began to look at the messages received by men from both these areas of discourse. Interested in the cycle form, both as a concept for structuring fiction

and as what seemed to be the natural conclusion to graduate fiction workshops, I searched for other interlinked stories. I fell in love with Charles Baxter's Saul and Patsy stories, read "Adultery," by Andre Dubus, only to see later it is the second part of three interlinked novellas, and found the form of Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace* influential on the structure of my fiction writing, much as Hemingway's *In Our Time* had been a paragon of form when I was a freshman at Southwestern. I also found the forerunners and contemporaries of Hemingway's cycle, Joyce's *Dubliners* and Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*, interesting and important to writing the stories that were to become *The Waterhouse*.

During graduate school, in my study of literature dealing with masculinity, I began to notice the difference in the ways men were portrayed in classic literature and contemporary fiction. It is this conflict between traditional and contemporary images of masculinity around which the following "composite novel" orients itself and finds its place in the tradition of American literature. The fourteen interlinked stories in *The Waterhouse*, chronicling the successful or failed journeys toward a positive masculinity undertaken by the characters Copper Gale, Marcus Gale, and Jimmy Timberlake, constitute a significant voice in defining and redefining the masculine image in American literature, depicting traditional and contemporary male images of men in relation to other men, men in relationships with women, fatherhood, and finally men in relation to the Earth.

The Waterhouse begins its link to the tradition of American literature through what many critics see as a fairly new or emerging genre -- the short story cycle, or the term I prefer for my work, the composite novel. Although significant formal criticism on

the short story cycle has begun appearing in critical discourse only recently, the form itself is old. In their book, *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition*, Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris catalog 377 works, mostly American, which fit their definition of the "composite novel," beginning with Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* in 1820 and ending with works such as *The Bingo Palace*, by Erdrich, and *Working Men*, by Michael Dorris, in 1993, where the Dunn and Morris chronology stops (xvii-xxxii).

Similar to earlier definitions of the short story cycle by such scholars as Forest Ingram, who defines the short story cycle as "A book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader's successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts" (19), and Susan Garland Mann, who discusses the short story cycle's formal organization around "a composite type, or a set of characters; through a dominant explicit theme . . . or through delineation of a particular locale, milieu or community (Kennedy ix)], Dunn and Morris define the composite novel as "a literary work composed of shorter texts that -- though individually complete and autonomous -- are interrelated in a coherent whole according to one or more organizing principles" (2). Two features of the composite novel as laid out by Dunn and Morris make it the choicest term to classify *The Waterhouse*: 1) they categorize a number of organizing principles through which stories can show their interrelation, such as setting, a singular protagonist, collective protagonists, pattern and storytelling itself, and 2) Dunn and Morris state that "the reasonable approach here seems to be to accept that all text pieces need not be equally autonomous for a work to meet the genre criteria of the composite novel" (9-10). *The Waterhouse* meets

composite novel criteria through setting and a composite protagonist, much like Joyce's Dubliner, Hemingway's Nick Adams and company in *In Our Time*, and the McCaslin family in Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*, or the tribe of Native Americans that people Erdrich's landscape.

The Waterhouse has for its base setting Labette, a fictional town on the open grasslands in the middle northern part of Oklahoma, just as Joyce has his Dublin, Hemingway his battlefields, and Faulkner his South. Labette is where the three main characters of *The Waterhouse*, Jimmy Timberlake, Copper Gale, and Marcus Gale grow up and meet each other and is the setting for seven of the fourteen stories in the work. The mindset of the Midwest resonates throughout the lives of the characters, from hay-bale-burning beer bashes ("Ownership"), and trick-or-treating door to door in a safe neighborhood ("Pumpkin Guts"), to the romanticized lyrics of country music ("Country Western Love Music"). In recounting how important setting is to the American novel, Richard Chase, in *The American Novel and Its Tradition*, restates an idea from Henry James, writing "The great thing is to get into the novel not only the setting but somebody's sense of the setting" (Chase 23). Jimmy, Copper, Marcus, and even Fileman Wirick, the old codger who runs Labette's radio station and used to be a circus hand ("Tilt-a-Whirl"), have different senses of the ironies and values of a wide-spot-on-the-prairie town which informs their characters and shapes their lives throughout the stories, no matter how far from Labette they may roam.

Character, in the concept of a "collective protagonist," works throughout *The Waterhouse*, much as it does in *Dubliners*, *In Our Time*, *Go Down, Moses*, and even the contemporary novel *Love Medicine*. Defending those four works as composite novels,

Dunn and Morris define a collective protagonist as the following:

either a group that functions as a central character (a couple, an extended family, a special-interest group) or an implied central character who functions as a metaphor (an aggregate figure, who cumulatively, may be the 'typical' or 'archetypal' or 'the essence of' or 'the developing presence of' or 'the soul of' -- and so on. (59)

According to Susan Garland Mann, "critics often fail to notice that the book (*Dubliners*) presents the gradual maturation of what one might consider the archetypal Dubliner"

(Dunn 60), illustrating that each character deals with the paralysis the city sets upon them as they grow from young ("Araby") to old ("The Dead"). Also, Nick Adams, who appears in eight of the stories and one of the vignettes of *In Our Time*, and those young men and women locked into battle or adrift in their own lost years who people the other eight stories and fifteen vignettes, can be seen as a collective. Krebs, Joe Butler, the Elliots, and the unnamed characters deal with the same vagaries of love and war, following Nick Adams, as implied central character, to form an archetypal collective protagonist.

Faulkner's three lines of McCaslin progeny in *Go Down, Moses*, much like Erdrich's interrelated Native American characters in *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace*, work as a family or a tribe ("special-interest group") in making up a collective protagonist, each of the family members mixing and mingling over a number of years (81 years in *Go Down, Moses* and 47 years in *Love Medicine*), portraying the legacy of the old South and the contemporary world of the Native American, on and off the reservation, respectively.

The Waterhouse employs a collective protagonist that works to depict both a "special-interest group" and an aggregate character (even though each fictional person

which is part of the aggregate is separate in both character and action) for the contemporary white male and his situation between the ages of 15 and 35 during the last forty years in America. Jimmy Timberlake, the two Gale brothers, Fileman Wirick, and other less-developed male characters work as a collective protagonist for man searching for his way in the contemporary world.

Finally, the arrangement of the text pieces for a composite novel is important as well, and *The Waterhouse*, while similar to its predecessors mentioned here, departs rather markedly from their arrangement of stories, coming closest to the order of Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*. Unlike Joyce's and Hemingway's virtually chronological order (especially when dealing with the longer text-pieces related to Nick Adams), Faulkner's work jumps back and forth through time, the first story beginning in 1849, then moving to 1941 for the second and third stories, back to 1878 for the fourth and fifth texts, then finally to 1940 for the last two stories in *Go Down, Moses*, giving a sense of evolution, family heritage and miscegenation that exemplifies Faulkner's South. *The Waterhouse* itself has an ordering that works less on chronology and more through character development. The first three stories, "Steam," "A Long Slow Roll into Darkness," and "Atlas," all take place in 1992 or 1993, and show each of the main characters -- Jimmy, Copper, and Marcus -- at points of crisis in their understanding of masculinity. Story four, "Down by the River," moves back in time to 1978, showing the three characters becoming friends and witnessing the death of Papa Gale, the grandfather and patriarch of the Gale family. A time-span from 1989 to 1994 is encompassed in the next four stories, which illustrate Copper, Marcus, and Jimmy at a "mid-point" in their journey toward an understanding of their own place in the world as men. "Shutters,"

story nine, takes place in 1987, continuing the dynamic of violence which reaches culmination in the title story, taking place in 1999, holding position ten in the work. The final four stories portray the major characters coming full circle into a positive or destructive understanding of their own manhood. Each of the text pieces also stand alone, but in varying degrees -- some are more dependent on the vision of the whole work than others. Text arrangement, a collective protagonist, and setting firmly entrench *The Waterhouse* in the tradition of the short story cycle or composite novel as it works to examine American manhood.

A search for manhood is not a new theme in American literature. In many ways it is the thematic cornerstone of what early, and much of contemporary, American literature takes as subject matter, and what many scholars are concerned with when writing criticism that goes beyond the part of the tradition of American literature encompassed by the composite novel.

In *The American Novel: From James Fenimore Cooper to William Faulkner* --a work which has sat on my library shelf for years -- critic, teacher, and fiction writer Wallace Stegner edits this anthology of 19 essays on what can arguably be considered some of the best novels in the American tradition before 1929. He includes essays on Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* and Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, which, like other works by Hemingway and Faulkner, deal with issues of masculine identity on some level. What is most intriguing about Stegner's collection is that he lays no claim to a pattern for the works selected. In fact, he begins his Preface with the following:

A book on the American novel by sixteen scholars, many of whom are foremost authorities on the authors they treat, is unlikely to develop a

thesis or maintain a consistent point of view. This one does exactly the opposite, and that may be its virtue. For if it fails to achieve a concentration and singleness, it also avoids tendentiousness and the bending of evidence to fit a line; and, if it risks diffusion, it gains a rich variety. (vii)

Stegner's statement is akin to the larger history of the American novel itself. The American tradition is not a tradition of "concentration and singleness," but one where many disparate ideas touch gloves and vie for a piece of the theoretical and historical "title," creating a tradition that is often full of contradiction and argument. Continuing on, Stegner denotes themes that tend to figure in the novels and their corresponding essays that helped mold the American tradition, such as the dichotomy of realism and romanticism (between the novel and the romance), the juxtaposition of innocence and experience, and the theme of autonomy of the will and its diminishment at the hands of industrialism, all of which inform *The Waterhouse's* place in the larger tradition of American literature.

The differentiation between the romance and the novel is a major concern of many critics including F.O. Matthiessen, Richard Chase, Richard Ruland, and Malcolm Bradbury. Matthiessen references Hawthorne and Trollope to strive for a distinction, marking the novel as aiming at "minute fidelity . . . to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience" as compared to the romance, which can bend "reality" a bit, making "some use of the strange and marvelous" (267). Chase largely agrees with Matthiessen, attempting to illuminate the differences in the novel and romance early in his chapter "The Broken Circuit," then following his "delineation" between the two forms (after

making the disclaimer that no real delineation can be made) to examine works from Brockden Brown to Faulkner. Bradbury and Ruland attribute the rise of realism over romanticism (hence a move more toward the novel than the romance) primarily to Henry James, Mark Twain, and William Dean Howells in the late 1860's. Contrary to many critics who attempt to make distinctions between the novel and the romance, James, in "The Art of Fiction," writes "These clumsy separations [between the novel and romance] appear to me to have been made for the critics and the readers for their own convenience" (Richter 428), and in the end writes that nothing can take the place of whether or not the reader actually "likes" the work. Still, American literary tradition is often caught between these two poles and shards of these two forms are found in many works. While *In Our Time* is steeply entrenched in realism, there is a mythic, even "strange and marvelous" quality to the potential revitalization for Nick Adams while fishing the "Big Two-Hearted River." Faulkner utilizes more of the "strange" in *Go Down, Moses*, hinting at the supernatural throughout, from the ghost of a dead wife haunting her husband in "Pantaloons in Black," to the appearances of the mysterious buck and the mythic Old Ben in "The Old People," and "The Bear." In a similar fashion, *The Waterhouse* mixes nodes of romanticism into its overall realistic content. "A Long Slow Roll into Darkness" gives space to Troll, a Caliban-like mechanic with a good heart and cerebral palsy who is pitted against the stylized star quarterback of Midwestern myth -- Marcus Gale. "Tilt-a-Whirl" is the story of "strange and marvelous" Fileman Wirick, a one-armed carnival hand turned disc jockey called "Tilt." The piece details his youth with the carnival and his unlikely fall into love which costs him his arm. Ghosts appear for Copper Gale in "Pumpkin Guts," heralding a new understanding of his relationship with his step-daughter, and

finally, Iron Mountain, Michigan, hosts a strange basketball ritual every New Year's Eve in "Hoops," with Jimmy Timberlake, Cate Marrin and others, where rumor has it that "the lights from the gym grow brighter for a moment, electrified by the sound of our voices" (214).

Besides mixing the romance tradition with that of the novel, *The Waterhouse* contains two stories which utilize fragmentation similar to some postmodern works, even though Hemingway uses a fragmented format between the stories and vignettes in *In Our Time*. Both "10-Watts" and "No Lick-Spittle Proposition," organize themselves in fragmented narrative style, "10-Watts" in radio sound bytes and "No Lick-Spittle Proposition" in a more traditional epistolary fragmentation. Two other stories, "Down by the River," and "Shutters," work with multiple viewpoints or fractured thought processes which place them also on the periphery of postmodern form.

Another theme in Stegner's Preface, the idea of innocence and experience, is a major tenet of American literature. This theme, which includes the idea of a new literature in an America of innocence that opposes, when possible, the influence of the experience held by the British tradition, can be seen in *In Our Time*, *Go Down, Moses*, the aforementioned works of Dubus, Baxter, Erdrich and *The Waterhouse*.

Both *In Our Time* and *Go Down, Moses* are coming of age stories, a favorite type of narrative in the American tradition since it mirrors the expanding country, culture, and literature. Nick Adams goes from a young boy in "Indian Camp" and "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife" to an older character who experiences moments that shape him -- the break up of a relationship ("The End of Something"), the futility of male bonding ("The Three-Day Blow" and "The Battler"), the entrapment of childbirth and marriage ("Cross

Country Snow"), and the wounding of a veteran, forever changed and likely beyond healing ("Big Two-Hearted River"). Other pieces, such as "Soldier's Home," "Cat in the Rain," "Mr. and Mrs. Elliot," and "My Old Man," mirror the themes of the stories focused on Nick. Similarly, Faulkner's Ike McCaslin comes of age through his relationship with Sam Fathers, the hunt, the bear, and the land in "The Old People" and "The Bear," only to find the land and his life on the brink of destruction, the coming of age bitter in the end because Ike is too old to change any of his or his ancestors' past ("Delta Autumn"). Ike, like Nick before him, has lost his innocence in the face of destruction -- the destruction of war, of land, of the human spirit.

The contemporary works by Dubus, Baxter, and Erdrich, also deal with the theme of initiation. In the linked novellas "We Don't Live Here Anymore," "Adultery," and "Finding a Girl in America," a number of characters define who they are once they reach their mid-thirties -- primarily Hank Allison. Baxter's stories depict Saul and Patsy Bernstein finding a place in the world for themselves, experiencing crisis, having a baby, and growing and evolving as characters. Through two works by Erdrich, *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace*, Lipsha Morrissey finds his father, falls in love, experiences loss, and develops a sense of self-worth in the back seat of a car in a snowstorm, keeping an inadvertently kidnaped baby alive with his body heat. Similar to the above examples, old and contemporary, *The Waterhouse* is a coming of age story, positive or negative, for its three main male characters, chronicling their lives from innocence at age fifteen to experience by the age of thirty-five in their relationships to each other, the women in their lives, and the earth.

Stegner also identifies free will against industrialization as a theme which can be

found in *In Our Time* and *Go Down, Moses* through transgressions against nature and the earth: in Hemingway from war, and in Faulkner from growing cities and "progress." *The Waterhouse* itself has issues of the destruction of the earth, but takes a different tack than Hemingway or Faulkner in "The One Who Both Feeds and Eats," and "Hoops," which are set in Iron Mountain, Michigan, featuring Jimmy Timberlake and Cate Marrin fighting against the AMEX logging company through activism and education. Instead of despair or rage at the destruction of the land after it is too late, characters in *The Waterhouse* work to prevent such crimes against nature.

Finally, there is another darker, criminal part of the tradition of American literature that potentially poses a counter argument to the worth of *The Waterhouse*. Nina Baym, in her article "Melodramas of Best Manhood," chronicles the "tradition" of male marginalization of literature written by women. Baym discusses the ambiguous criteria developed by most critics who are searching for an "Americanness" to our literature, pitting our tradition against British tradition, finding romanticism a distinguishing quality, which became a defining trait of much early American writing. The critics situated their debate around male, white, middle-class authors, accepting criticism by their peers only -- all male, middle-class, and white -- effectively excluding any female or minority voices in the discourse, making American fiction look like it is historically male (Richter 1146-57). Baym might argue that *The Waterhouse* is simply another book about men, which is what the tradition has focused on since its inception. She might ask why we need any other book that might reconstitute male authority, dehumanize women and minorities, cast the land as feminine so it can be raped at will, and continue the myth that only males have creative and imaginative power. However, unlike its predecessors *In*

Our Time and *Go Down, Moses, The Waterhouse* has a distinctly different education for males. *The Waterhouse* aligns itself with contemporary work by such authors as Andre Dubus, Louise Erdrich, and Charles Baxter to redefine the concept and perception of American masculinity.

Like me, both Baxter and Dubus acknowledge a debt to the writing of Hemingway and Faulkner. In Thomas E. Kennedy's *Andre Dubus: A Study of the Short Fiction*, Dubus is quoted as saying "I learned the most when I was young from Hemingway and a lot of that was physical stuff . . . Hemingway inspired my romantic side when I was eighteen or nineteen" (114). Baxter also states he was influenced by Hemingway, but both he and Dubus say that before and after Hemingway and Faulkner, their greatest influence was Chekhov. Dubus states he was moved by Chekhov "because of his enormous compassion for his characters, because of his ability to bring his characters to life and because of his dictum he stuck to so well: you won't find me in my stories" (Kennedy 115). Though not greatly influenced by Chekhov, I am inspired by the characters of Dubus, Baxter, and Erdrich, who, like Chekhov, find in their characters enormous compassion and, moreover, often show their male characters in positive relationships with the world around them.

The world of American literature often deals with relationships between men. In *In Our Time*, Hemingway portrays a largely stereotypical image of men in relation to one another. Such stories as "The Three-Day Blow," "The Battler," and "Cross Country Snow" are about masculine bonding where men attempt to out drink each other, talk about sports, and see women and marriage as enemies which force a man to be "absolutely bitched" (Hemingway 46). They hunt, go to war, or are locked mainly in

embraces which are violent. Only alone, in "Big Two-Hearted River," does Nick begin to regain his sense of self and his own quiet masculinity, but Hemingway hints he may never fully recover what the war and violence have taken from him.

Hemingway's depiction of men with women is equally bleak. In "The End of Something," Nick breaks off a relationship childishly because "it isn't fun anymore" (34). He feels bad later, but his friend Bill convinces him that he should not act on his feelings and make up with the woman because he'll find somebody new and that will make it okay, and if he were to marry the girl, she'd get this "fat married look" (46), be a nag, and ruin his life (even though it seems the woman, Marjorie, is everything Nick might want in a woman -- she's even a good fisherperson!). Women in relation to men in the stories "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife," "Mr. and Mrs. Elliot," and "Cat in the Rain," are seen as manipulative, nagging, threatening, frigid, entrapping, and in general as "spoil sports." Again, the place where Nick is seen as the most whole is when he is fishing the river alone, out of the company of men (except in memory) or women -- the Hemingway code hero.

Fatherhood doesn't fare well as a positive male quality in *In Our Time* either. Nick's father, while being sorry for bringing a young Nick to witness a difficult birth at a nearby Indian camp ("Indian Camp"), nevertheless brags about his ability as a surgeon, even though his method is indirectly responsible for the death of the Indian father, who slits his own throat because "he couldn't stand things"(19). In "The Doctor and The Doctor's Wife," Nick and his father do bond, but it is less with each other than against the mother. The Nick-like Krebs in "Soldier's Home" can't bond with either his mother or father after wartime experiences. His father is seen as "non-committal" (70), and when

interested in Krebs at all is only interested in him working. The final story that deals with fatherhood, "My Old Man," chronicles the demise of a father from a good jockey to a drunk, from a life of prosperity through horse racing and betting, to his eventual death in the last race he rides. During the story, this father, who has stood alone, leaves his legacy to his son, Joe Butler, who will stand alone in his life too, with only the advice that "you got to take a lot of things in this world, Joe" (118). By "things," the old man means the circumstances, mostly bad, that life hands out and must be unquestioned in order to become a man.

As discussed briefly earlier, in order to be masculine in Hemingway's world, one has to control not only himself, his comrades, and his women, but also the environment. The ravages of war are a thread through this book, and the spot on the earth where Nick goes for solace and possible healing is a "burned over stretch of hillside" (133), populated by grasshoppers which are black, having adapted to the burnt landscape. The land in *In Our Time* is the last casualty of a war by men, an innocent bystander in the hunt for victory.

Where Hemingway leaves the hunt, Faulkner picks up, organizing most of *Go Down, Moses* around that theme: hunting for gold, hunting for women, hunting for new wilderness, family lineage, and most of all for deer and the crippled but massive bear, Old Ben. Hunting is seen as an exclusively male activity for the McCaslin clan. The hunt and the kill is Ike McCaslin's induction into manhood and instructs most of his dealings with other men. The legacy he repudiates in the fourth section of "The Bear" is one where white men have oppressed black men, and miscegenation has take place through the McCaslin family line. Ike as a boy seems to be caught between the white gentry who lead

the hunts and Sam Fathers, Ike's half-Native American, half-black surrogate father (hence the last name), who is tied symbolically to the environment in the book. He teaches Ike to respect the environment, but when Old Ben is slain, signaling the death of "wilderness," Sam dies as well. Later in the book Ike can only weep for the destruction of the lands he hunted as a boy: he cannot deny successfully his own complicity in that destruction -- his education as a man is forever linked with it, right or wrong. This dichotomy -- that one must take from the "earth mother" in order to become a man, but must also attempt to respect her by not abusing her -- is redolent throughout Faulkner's work. Like the feminized landscape that is destroyed, despite the grief of Ike, Faulkner sees women (when he includes them at all) in much the same manner as Hemingway: traded as commodities between men, linked to poverty, deception, betrayal, evil, emasculation and death.

The Waterhouse, though it owes much to Hemingway and Faulkner, diverges from the image of man in their works (and in the historical period in which they were written) and focuses on images of masculinity that are more contemporary and similar to the recent work of Dubus, Erdrich, and Baxter. In the beginning novella of Dubus's three linked tales, "We Don't Live Here Anymore," the major character, Hank Allison, has a hunting mentality as well -- hunting for his next pretty woman. He also has stereotypical ideas about his relationships with men, such as his connection with friend, Jack Lindhart, which is double-fold: Hanks sees Jack as his running partner and sleeps with Jack's wife, Terry. He is a drinker and a womanizer in this first novella.

In "Adultery," Edith, Hank's wife, is the viewpoint character, and most of the narrative is about her past relationship with Hank and her current relationship with her

lover, Joe Ritchie, who is dying of cancer. What we see from Hank is that he is beginning to realize that his idea of marriage without monogamy is costing him his relationship with Edith, who he treats more like a maid than a partner. In "Adultery," he is isolated from the world of men and meaningful relationship with women.

Hank, in the final novella, "Finding a Girl in America," is seen with Jack in their usual locale of communion, a bar. But as opposed to the bar scene in "We Don't Live Here Anymore," Hank is not with Jack to tell of his sexual exploits. When Jack asks after the second drink "It's either woman-trouble or work-trouble. Which one?" ("Finding" 167), Hank replies "Just to shoot the shit" (167), intimating that it is male camaraderie he seeks, far from the boasting Hank of the first novella. The scene in the bar lands Hank in a fist-fight with a regular at the bar, and though Hank wins, in reflection he feels little pride, part of him wishing and saying to himself, "I hope he (the regular) finds me and beats shit out of me" (170). All out of braggadocio, he wonders what "men without friends do on the day after they've been drunken assholes" (170). Though most of Hank's growth into a positive masculine identity is in relation to women, he gains a deeper relationship with Jack in "Finding a Girl in America."

Through the first two novellas, Hank's relationship with women as husband, lover, or father is marginal and stereotypically male. To help counter this, Dubus draws strong, realistic women characters: Terri, Jack's wife, who can make the decision to stay in her marriage after infidelity; Edith, who chooses to leave Hank; and finally, in "Finding a Girl in America," Julie Meadows, a student with whom Hank is in love. He decides to "court" Julie, even going as far as visiting her parents to tell them the news that they are engaged, though the parents will be displeased. He suggests that he and Julie not make love

anymore, that it can wait. Hank, it appears, has learned responsibility and respect toward life, sex, and this woman he loves. A friend of Dubus wrote him after reading this story and said, "Hank has finally learned that loving is as hard and takes as much discipline and working commitment as writing does" (qtd. in Kennedy 100). Dubus himself says, in speaking of the order of the book (which had "Finding a Girl in America" last) ". . . what I was trying to do was move up from violence to what I thought was the first celebrative ending I had ever written in my life. So I wanted the reader to end up with [chuckles] I don't want to say 'a happy ending' [laughs] but celebrative, affirmative" (Kennedy 115), much like what *The Waterhouse* attempts to achieve in its Epilogue, "Hoops."

Dubus also celebrates fatherhood in "Finding a Girl in America," as Hank takes a renewed interest in his daughter with Edith, Sharon. Hank grieves for lost time with her, and Dubus clearly sees fatherhood as a positive path for males to learn new ways of relating to the world as evidenced in his stories: "A Father's Story," where a devout catholic father learns his love for his daughter is stronger than his faith; and "The Winter Father," in which a father learns to deal with divorce and seeing his children only part-time, finally establishing a positive relationship with them; as well as in the three interlinked novellas.

Fatherhood is an avenue for male bonding in Louise Erdrich's works *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace*. In *Love Medicine*, Lipsha Morrissey figures prominently only in three stories, including the final piece, "Crossing the Water," in which Lipsha meets his father, Gerry Kashpaw, who has escaped from prison, and learns who his mother is, beginning a journey of identity which culminates in *The Bingo Palace*, where

he is undeniably the main character (he is narrator in ten of the twenty-seven text pieces). Lipsha discovers that he is a whole person, that his mother and father have always been with him, and that he can be a giving man, a father-figure, saving a baby with his body warmth in a snow storm, vowing to never abandon this child like he was abandoned. Erdrich's novels include violence between men, from King's drunken destruction of pies in *Love Medicine's* first story, "The World's Greatest Fisherman," to Lipsha's own troubles in "The Bingo Van." Besides creating many strong female characters as do Dubus and Baxter, Erdrich offers up Lipsha -- a healer, a helper (against the laws of the white man at times) who finishes his journey of self-discovery as a whole human positive man and father figure.

As in Dubus and Erdrich, Patsy is of Baxter's virtues in his three interlinked stories "Saul and Patsy are Getting Comfortable in Michigan," "Saul and Patsy are Pregnant," and "Saul and Patsy are in Labor." She is a strong and developed three-dimensional female character. She plays Scrabble ruthlessly and is realistic about pregnancy, saying "she feels like a human rain forest: hot, choked with life, reeking with reproduction" ("Saul and Patsy are in Labor" 99). She is sexual, confident, and as a character well-rounded and realistic. Through Baxter's depiction of Patsy, Saul is grounded by his love for her and can strive to find answers for his constant angst about the world, connected with his Jewish heritage, which is a source of his concern about his place as a man in relation to other men. The main male counterpart Saul has in the first two stories is his barber, who thinks him a little odd, and in the final story his two most problematic students, Gordy Himmelman and Bob Pawluk, who counter Saul's equanimity with surly hatred for the world, especially Saul. Besides these two characters,

Saul's relationship with other men is more on an intellectual level, acknowledging guilt and gender responsibility for what he calls "the hobbies of war and the thoroughgoing destruction of the earth" ("Saul and Patsy are Pregnant" 203). He meets other males in the story with equanimity, non-violence, and comradeship, even seeing a responsibility to help Gordy Himmelman after the boy destroys Saul's beehouses in the final story of what is sure to be an ongoing series. Saul shines most in "Saul and Patsy are in Labor" as father to their daughter, Mary Esther. Baxter breaks, like Dubus in "Adultery," from Hemingway and Faulkner, in using Patsy, a strong female, as viewpoint character in the story. Saul is an important player, of course, and with the birth of their child, he respects Patsy's space, not pushing for intercourse, and takes an equal part in loving and caring for their daughter. Saul is a model of responsible manhood, fatherhood, and with Patsy, couplehood.

Through their fiction, Dubus, Erdrich, and Baxter make steps toward a "re-educated" male – one who is open emotionally, caring as a father, respectful of women as equal human beings, and progressive rather than destructive. This new edge on the portrayal of masculinity, and its more traditional precursor in Hemingway and Faulkner, is where *The Waterhouse* joins most importantly into the tradition of American literature.

The Waterhouse portrays coming of age stories and masculine journeys for three characters: Marcus Gale, Copper Gale, and Jimmy Timberlake. In the vein of Hemingway and Faulkner, Marcus is the more traditional male. He is the high school quarterback, the "guy" who can get all the girls (and in this case abuse them), torture and shame other males, and embody the stereotypical traditional male. Marcus subscribes to those signposts, and in the end they fail him. In the chronological beginning of *The*

Waterhouse (“Down by the River”), Marcus is obsessed with violence, watching any footage from Vietnam he can find, fighting with and bullying his brother, and seeing how many girls he can sleep with. He witnesses the death of the Gale family patriarch, his Grandfather, and is totally shaken. Copper narrates the next story Marcus plays a vital role in, “A Long Slow Roll into Darkness,” where Marcus is portrayed as the town hero from his glory days as quarterback for the Frederick Remington High School Rangers. He is trying to recapture his past success with a promotional stunt to break the speed of sound in freefall and is again womanizing, even though he is engaged to be married. In the end he gets a girl drunk and offers her to Copper. When Copper refuses, Marcus beats his brother senseless and rapes the girl, starting a series of such encounters in the book – demeaning any women he can. In “Shutters” and “Ownership,” we see Jennifer Gale, Marcus’ wife, emerge as a strong female character and choose to leave him, but she does not before Marcus has left his mark on their son, Chris, starting him down the traditional path, failing as a father by passing down his legacy of destruction. Bereft and bereaved, Marcus stalks Jennifer in “Atlas,” then finally tries to win her back by joining a Promise Keepers’ rally in “No Lick-Spittle Proposition.” But he misconstrues the message of positive male empowerment through religion into a reinscription of male domination, ending with a total meltdown in the title piece. Marcus’ journey is a descent into a negative male image that the codes and education of the traditional male, as partially espoused in Hemingway and Faulkner, will eventually lead – to destructive relationships with and for all those he touches: men, women, and children alike.

Played against this negative image are two positive images and journeys – those of Copper and Jimmy. Copper is affected greatly by his relationship with his brother at the

onset of “Down by the River,” and “Shutters.” Sibling rivalry is strong, and Copper is attempting to find his footing, as he exemplifies what Robert Bly terms the “soft male” (2). Yet he has a positive male relationship with both Jimmy and Fileman Wirick, a mentor of sorts who helps Copper become a radio disc jockey and fills the place of the absent Gale father, a guilty workaholic who cannot help his sons. Copper takes a journey away from college to his first “gig” in the mountains. During the drive, Copper meditates about failed relationships with women and struggles of power between his brother and others, mirrored in the story by power struggles in the world. Finally, in “Pumpkin Guts,” Copper has found South, another strong image of a female – as breadwinner and single mom – married her, and is fraught with anxiety over being a good father to his adopted daughter, Mercy. Ultimately, Copper understands that he must love Mercy and yet let her be her own person, and he finds fulfillment as a man through his roles as father and husband, one who is positive, affirming, loving and freeing.

Jimmy Timberlake exhibits another path toward positive masculinity, largely through his relationships with his mother, Cate Marrin, a horse named Sugar, the forests around Iron Mountain, Michigan, and the ability in the end to distinguish what is real from what he has been led to believe by the Western romantic tradition. In the opening story, “Steam,” Jimmy has suffered the break-up of a serious relationship with a woman named Glennis, and he is mulling over the problems that lead to the failure of the relationship in his memory in a romanticized fashion. Soon after this, his mother, a single college professor living in Oklahoma, dies, and Jimmy is forced to go back to Labette and execute her estate, including a horse that has a thirty pound tumor in its side. Filled with romantic images of “putting down” the horse and burying it alone, John Wayne style,

Jimmy eventually realizes that the logistics of burying a five-hundred pound horse with a shovel by himself are ludicrous. He asks for help in “Country Western Love Music,” a sometimes unmanly action, and gets it from Troy Camplin and Marvin, two of the men in Jimmy’s world of male connection. He is able to save Sugar after all and begins to realize that he has romanticized most relationships in his life. With horse in tow, he tracks down Cate Marrin, an old high school friend, and becomes part of the cause to save the woods of Iron Mountain from the logging industry. Jimmy becomes a male invested in the protection of “mother earth,” learns to grieve for his losses, and falls in love with Cate, a “real” woman in “The One Who Both Feeds and Eats.” Finally, in the Epilogue, “Hoops,” Jimmy comes full circle, from a male suffering from the Western tradition of romantic illusion, to a male who is a good husband, a new father (to an adopted Native American child), who still has strong male bonds with Camplin, Marvin, Copper and the men of Iron Mountain, and is a man willing to steep himself in the reality of becoming a fully-actualized contemporary male, caring for and respecting those around him, including the planet.

It is through the attempt to fashion a new vision of what manhood could be that *The Waterhouse* makes its most significant contribution to American literature, which has been defining and redefining masculinity from the moment Natty Bumppo stepped foot on American soil in James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Pioneers*. It has continued through Faulkner and Hemingway, and up to contemporary authors like Dubus, Erdrich, and Baxter. It has been the subject of scholarship and criticism and found a niche in many short story cycles and composite novels, including *The Waterhouse*.

Finally, what is interesting about many of the critics, including Stegner, Chase,

Mathiessen and others, is that part of this defining of not only masculinity, but also of the American novel, even American literature as a body, leads to a critique of the American culture, and often to the idea that literature has a moral responsibility. Some readers will find *The Waterhouse* political, and certainly culturally aware of the male condition at the end of the Twentieth Century. It is, like its forbears and contemporaries, a cultural statement on the morality of art. John Gardner says it best in *On Moral Fiction*:

In a democratic society, where every individual opinion counts, and where nothing, finally, is left to some king or group of party elitists, art's incomparable ability to instruct, to make alternatives intellectually and emotionally clear, to spotlight falsehood, insincerity, foolishness – art's incomparable ability, that is, to make us understand – ought to be a force bringing people together, breaking down barriers of prejudice and ignorance, and holding up ideals worth pursuing. (42)

It is this “breaking down of barriers” and “holding up” what is worth pursuing, such as a positive masculinity, that *The Waterhouse* works toward – a breaking down of social and cultural negativity in masculinity, and a building up of the image of the positive contemporary male in the tradition of American literature.

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Steam

(1992)

Jimmy Timberlake

The last paper plate. I marvel at its scalloped edges, its look of stoneware, the durability. It is not one of the thin plates they give you at school picnics when you're nine, but an adult plate, made of compact cardboard, ready for adult portions -- thick chicken legs, a mess of baked beans, corn drowning in butter, juicy cheeseburgers mired in ketchup and mustard, thick rolls, watery salad under a tractor-load of ranch dressing.

There had been a stack of them, hundreds, in the third drawer on the left of the sink, nestled close into one another, the blue gilt patterns twinning each other intimately. No flowers here: just a sturdy pattern that looked like bent blue wrought-iron fence work. As I had said when she bought them, they were masculine plates.

I twist the cap off a warm bottle of Schafer's beer, stare at the last plate for a moment, then place the ham and Swiss sandwich and a few Doritos on it. Sitting it on the coffee table, I look at it again, careful not to drip or smudge the plate unnecessarily -- maybe I can use it another time. Even if I can't, I know that I can eat delivery pizza out of the box, trying them all, the Hut, Dominos, Mazzio's, Devinchi's, even Pizza Shuttle. I could go on a while longer, cutting a Styrofoam takeout container along the hinge, creating two new platters. I could go on without having to survey the wreck of the kitchen.

The other plates, the ones like this one, its predecessors into the landfill, had gone better or worse to their ends. I remember the one Georgia had lost control of while running in my back yard, smearing the contents all over her new dress. Her tenth birthday. The dress was pink, and my special Worcestershire baked bean sauce never did come out. But she laughed and Glennis took her in for a change of clothes. I kept the other kids contained while Glen helped Georgia redress in a sweat outfit that was also

new, just not wrapped yet. Glen liked to spread birthdays out, make them stretch, a few gifts here, a party, going out to dinner one evening, followed by a night of videos. It was something to be nine, or ten, or twenty-eight, she felt. Glen was good on the compliments, good on making the right things count. She liked to keep it going, a gift in the closet, a slight envelope under a pillow, more surprises yet to come.

This plate, after the sandwich and chips were gone, had only a slight spot and a little mayonnaise on the edge. I could use it again, keep it going, see how long I could make it last, like I do with bottles of soap now, filling them with just a little water, until they run clean without bubbles. Or how I refuel candles, stick matches and string as wicks, keep the fires burning an extra hour, an extra day, longer into the night. One more time. How I had with Glen, one more time, one last fuck. But the look in her eyes told me she was seeing a stranger -- thin, hard, unknown to her. She backed away from me on her bed after it was done, the most open look of fear I have ever seen on a face.

I sit at the coffee table, finishing my beer and opening another, in the curtained darkness of the room. I scan the channels, finally turning the television off. I down the second beer, wait until the empty bottle is warm in my hand, until my hand warms in the heat of the room. The clock gives me enough time to shower and shave, make it to The Novel Before 1900, the grad class where I am guaranteed to see Glen. But I'm not ready. Have not been ready, have not been in how many weeks now? Three? She calls, I know it's her, the richness in her voice still coming through on the tinny recording of the answering machine. She's checking in on her "friend," wondering why I haven't been in class, been at the office, why she hasn't seen me. I know eventually she will stop by. I'll hear her brisk steps coming up the walk. Have to choose. Answer, not answer. Answer, not answer. Perhaps her appearance is what I wait for. At least I am still teaching my composition classes, so all the department can do is wonder about me, not fire me.

I stand in the doorway of the kitchen, waiting for the silence to end, the doorbell or a knock announcing her arrival, for that final scene, the emptying of her drawer, the

real send-off, hoping it wouldn't come. I think of this as I look over the dishes. Every cabinet is open. Blue and black plates are stacked high. What was mustard or sauce is now hardened like dull wax. Half-finished loaves of bread have a green cast. Mold floats on two-week-old coffee, still in the pot. The smell of dead foodstuffs decaying greets me. The last time I sprayed Lysol it couldn't kill it all. I can smell it in every room of the house now, in the bathroom, the living room, curled up with me at night in bed. Slowly I clear the sink, make stacks, run hot water and soap. It is good spring has come. There will be plenty of hot water. I stop the tap, dip a rag into the soapy basin, scalding my hands instantly, but bearing it out.

I guess the end really began with dishes. I mean there was a first kiss, a first caress, a first time to make love, a first real date, all in about two weeks time, but it really sounds like every other story you've heard, how hot and full it all was. Every story has its origins in the same place, the ones you tell the guys at the bar after it's over, while it's going on. Though you regret it later, lots of times you lie about it before it ever happens. But every story truly begins differently. This one, this story called Jimmy and Glen, began with dishes. Somehow it ended with dishes as well.

In my mind I still see her hands soapy with water in the sink, see her fingers taking mine into them, the ring on her right hand, the red stone replacing the diamond that was once there. We went to the mall, both of us drunk one night, ice cream the agenda. Zales or Helzberg's or someplace was having a special. She picked ruby or amethyst, maybe her birth stone, I'm not sure, and in an hour it was done. They took her diamond and gave her back some cash, even though it was obvious we were both stoned. Maybe they saw a lot of divorced women drunk and out to destroy their rings. Her marriage three years cold, and here she was, trading out the stone, slipping the ring back on her right hand, slipping her hand hot into mine, smiling.

* * * * *

"You don't have to do those," Glen said as I met her at the sink after the first dinner she cooked for us.

"Hey, let's set a precedent," I said. "You cook. I clean. Vice Versa."

"How about I wash. You dry." She leaned over and licked my cheek and threw me a kitchen towel.

"For tonight."

"Sure thing, lover,"

"You know, that is a very old fashioned word. Most people don't consider it politically correct. How about partner . . . significant other?" I said.

"Sure thing . . . lover. You've run into a modern old-fashioned girl. Oxymoronic, I know. But I like 'lover.'"

"Don't you mean old fashioned woman?" I said.

"Sure thing, lover. Dry."

I dried as she washed, studied a little while she put Georgia in the bath, tucked her in. I read a couple of tales in Kipling's *Just So Stories* until she was fast asleep. Glen had lit candles in her room and pulled me there after I had shut Georgia's door. "God, I've been hungry for you all night," she whispered in my ear, pushing me down on the bed, stripping us both and straddling me, soon coming violently, our mouths tight and open, struggling to keep our breathing down, not letting any sound escape to scare her daughter. We untangled ourselves, made popcorn, watched "M*A*S*H" and "Cheers," knowing we would make love again and fall into exhaustion later. I watched Hawkeye in the store room, Sam Malone behind the bar, looked at all the momentos and decorations on the walls, heard the hum of the dryer, held her close to me on the sofa, and was home.

Georgia sat on the sidelines, eating a hotdog and cheering us on. We were taking on The Tubes, a rough-and-tumble volleyball team from the Department of Chemistry, for a spot in the semi-finals. Glen was on a serving streak, overhanding past Bob

Teneson, too small for his position at the net, to Lamont Goddard, too poor a player to return such power. A ruthless strategy. I could hear Georgia shouting for her mom and I watched Glen's body arch up and over, her fist smacking the ball like gunpowder behind a cartridge from a .22, a taut recklessness released, a grunt like Jimmy Connors coming from her with each blast.

Between games we sat on the grass, Glen leaning up against me and gently pressing my back into the trunk of an oak, its bark marking small ridges on my back, my chest and thighs warm from her body heat, the light sweat from her bare lower back dampening my shirt, her forehead glistening like crystal.

"You're beautiful," I said.

"Thanks, slugger."

"Dinner tonight?"

"You cooking?" said Glen.

"I thought out. The three of us."

"I want a hamburger and curly-q fries," said Georgia.

"I know just the place," I said. "They even serve pickles while you wait for your order."

"Mmm," said Glen. "I love pickles."

"Why don't we get married," I said.

"We'll talk about it over pickles," she said, smiling bright-eyed like the first late night I'd brought that subject up, naked on a chair in her kitchen.

"And a cherry Coke," said Georgia, eyeing us, making sure we knew she was still there.

"A cherry Coke," I said. "For three."

I often imagined we were on a desert island, when Georgia was gone with her father. Or a dessert island. Lust was the main course, orgasm after orgasm that ran the

gamut from Chocolate Mousse to Lemon Merangue. We were lost. Lost in each other. I couldn't get enough of her talking, her pinched lipped groan, low in her throat, a growl. Talk, telling me all the things she thought I was supposed to hear, from "Love you forever" to "C'mon, fuck me hard." From all the muttered "Gods" I thought maybe we were in a choir loft someplace. It was sheer hedonism. Nothing but food and our bodies. We didn't wear any clothing those weekends. We ordered pizza and ate it from each others stomachs, spoonfed our bodies with strawberry yogurt. We showered but couldn't make it out of the bathroom without ending up with each other again, her ass on the white porcelain sink, tan back and black hair in the mirror, looking like a passenger settling in for a long ride through the back window of a bus.

One night we did wake Georgia. She called out for her Mom and was scared, not from a nightmare but from sounds coming from the bedroom. We froze. I was still in Glen from behind.

"It's okay, honey."

"Mommy, are you okay?"

"Yes. Go back to sleep sweetheart," she said, looking back at me, a tense laugh bookended between ragged breaths.

"What's happening?"

"Nothing. Everything's fine."

Glen didn't lie, especially to Georgia. I wondered why all the ignoring. I mean we went to a party of some friends, came home with condom suckers, and when Georgia asked what that was, Glen got a cucumber out of the refrigerator, rolled the condom down on it, and told her in straightforward, unambiguous language, that when she was with a man sexually someday, he needed to be wearing one of these.

"Georgia," I said. "This is what people do when they love each other. It's okay."

I could hear her shuffle a step and go back into her bedroom. Glen got up, wrapped herself in her robe, tucked Georgia back in bed. After getting us a glass of water, she put her head on my chest and said "Do you mean that?"

"What?"

"What you said to Georgia?" She lifted her head and looked me in the eyes.

"Yes," I said. "I love you."

She kept staring me in the face, not really waiting for something in my eyes to disprove this, not looking like she was thinking this was it, or that she'd been lied to before, or that she should feel the earth shifting. She was just taking me in, like a portrait painter waiting for the right light from a western window on an overcast afternoon.

"I love you, too," she said.

We had visited her family at Thanksgiving. As the kids played in the yard after turkey and trimmings, we drank coffee around the deep oak dining room table, in the yellow kitchen, or on the back porch, on down until dusk. Everywhere in this rambling farmhouse were relatives of hers, a big connected extended family. I felt warm and accepted and even marvelled at as the new beau. Glennis was proud, you could see it in her eyes, and she looked at me with this mix of emotion that dripped bits of happiness, warmth, sex and satisfaction.

They even had a few presents for me as it was near my birthday. Obviously, Glennis had been on the phone. A nameplate for my desk in the office at school, a tie, a nice pen and pencil set. It was like graduation and Father's Day for a 50 year-old man wrapped into one until we got to her parents. They were older than mine, a little hard of hearing and a little dim of sight. I unwrapped their presents and found a battery-operated truck that would climb anything, able to right itself automatically if it rolled over, and a keychain that made sounds of different weapons when you pushed buttons. I thanked them, even had a lot of fun with the car, didn't think much about it when Glennis said her

father was a member of a discount club at Radio Shack and bought everything but food there. I figured they didn't know me, so how could they guess what I might like. It should have enraged me I imagine. But they were innocent gifts and I was already at a point of surrender. Surrendering my hard-earned adulthood, surrendering who I had worked to become. I was malleable, hot in the smelter, ready to be made into a molten new image, one that poured hot and steaming and then solid into the cracks and fractures of these lives that surrounded me, a perfect fit.

Copper said that I should just go for it, ask her to marry me. He said he'd never seen me so caught up. Over the phone and the time he'd driven from Colorado to meet her over the Fourth of July, he kept saying *It's a psychic wave, Timby. You've got to get your board. Hit the surf. Ride it out or have a pina colada in the clubhouse and forget about it, one way or the other. Yeah, the surfing comparison sucks, I know, but it's just how it is.* I picked out a ring, put down five hundred for them to hold it for me, and waited for the right time. *There is no right time, man. That's the whole thing. If you wait the wave will pass you, and you'll be left waiting in the kiddie pool.* What the fuck did he know, I thought. But the wave passed. Transferred itself. It washed onto her. She said the psychic waves were coming off me, pulling for how it had been, and she was sorry, but it just pushed her away. *The only way you'll ever get back with me is if you're not trying.* But it was moon and tide. I couldn't not try.

We played pool one night with some friends. She and I had the table and before the others arrived I was hot, sinking balls with every shot, making unbelievable combinations. Glen said I should have one hand tied behind my back. So I humored her, shooting with only one hand, letting the leading edge of the cue rest on the felt border of the table. She won and was happy.

Later, when I did the same for one of her friends, she said I was patronizing her, making it easy for her because she was a woman and I was the big macho man. She'd had a few beers and that lets-get-mean-and-go-to-bed look in her eyes. I left it at that and made love to her in her car, parked in the alley behind the bar, drunk on imported beer, her breath sweet with tobacco.

Only a month ago I had stolen up to their back door and dropped an Easter basket full of brightly colored eggs and toys for Georgia, a bracelet and some music for Glen, catching a glimpse of them. They were playing Monopoly like we all used to play together. Georgia was fully into the game, counting her money over and over, managing the bank and the properties, stubborn to ask for help. Glen kept one eye on the game and another on *The Crying of Lot 49* for her Postmodern class. How she could do it I never figured out. Maybe she felt she had lost time to make up for. She said she hardly picked up a book at all when she was married. I surveyed the apartment. Answering machine that used to have my voice on it as well as theirs. Crayon drawings on the refrigerator. Thriving plants. The kitchen counter clean as an oyster shell, the cabinets all closed, the dishes stacked neatly, the platter that was her grandmother's on a special shelf, nothing ever stacked upon it, a safe distance from other dishes to prevent chipping or breaking, its hunter green cast the only oddball color in all the blacks and whites and blues.

"Be careful with that," she'd even said to me just a few seconds before. But I had been complimented on how good I was with games and with Georgia, able to become a kid at will to play with her, and so I was making everything a game, washing dishes using each dish as something other than it was, getting Georgia to guess that a fork was a sword as I parried and thrust in front of the sink, the salad bowl the helmet of a soldier, a wooden spoon a magician's wand. The hunter green platter the shield of a great Stone Age hunter of Mastodon before it slipped from my soapy hands.

* * * * *

The platter didn't break. Between the partial cushion of my shoe and Georgia's hands as she reached for it, the platter's impact on the floor was lessened. It bounced a little end to end as it hit, gyrating and coming to rest like a basketball rimming a basket, rounding the painted steel, sinking silently through the net and into the leather of an opposing player's hands. In the quiet the dish sat there, unbroken, unchipped, the few suds remaining sizzling and popping like foam on a cherry coke.

"It's okay," said Georgia, picking it up and holding it out to me. I clasped it in my hands and smiled at her. Glen laughed a different laugh, a new laugh I'd never heard.

After several loads of dishes and a sink full of silt and grey cold water, I load up the trash, collecting the last paper plate, and venture out of the house to the curb and trash barrel. I'm sure not what day it is. A weekend I think, but I'd thought I could make class earlier, so I don't know. The trash will wait until the trashmen come for it. I can see paper plates through the thin black garbage bag as I sit it in the barrel. They look like little moons in the night. Glen had bought them for the birthday party, and for us, some at her house and some at mine, so I wouldn't have to do dishes, didn't need to try.

The silverware fills the sink. Halfway through picking rot from the tines of forks and stains from the business ends of spoons, I let Luke in for his evening feeding. He eats hungrily, his black fur shining like it is coated with glycerin. When he finishes I take a long break from the silverware, sit on the floor and cradle his head in my hands, rubbing his ears. Their insides are like fine-grain sandpaper, and I know I need to lather them up with some soap and smooth them with lotion. But that can wait. I want nothing to do with lotion or baby oil, taking me back to unmaking her water bed and smearing the bladder with oil, sliding around with each other like seals. Later, I would think of that often, after we'd quit having sex, quit mentioning the subject, though I was still sleeping there each night, trying to figure out how to reclaim what was lost. Watching her, knowing the investment was too big a risk, that she didn't dare let herself into bed with

me, the tension of sex and loss damp in the air. I began slipping into the bathroom and masturbating, my mind somewhere between the good of my body's automatic responses and guilt in the fact she was in the other room. Part of it was sexy, but more of it was empty. I would squeeze some of her lotion on my hand so I could finish. For a long time I just said it was for some relief, being manly in my mind about it. Now though, as I wash out the big blue salad bowl, I know that it was because in that instant of orgasm I could fuse the relentless empty present with some vestige from the past, make it almost like it was. Salvage something.

I get two more beers, cold now, drinking alternately from each one. I let Luke roam the house, looking for more to eat. He has a penchant for bugs in the Spring. Nothing like eating something live and ticklish, I guess, the dog version of calamari or escargot. I drink, letting the bottle sit on the counter beside the last unwashed coffee cup. The counters were clean, the sink drained and scoured, but I let the coffee cup sit there in all its glorious redness, the x's and o's splashed across it, nick-knacking like Morse Code scrawled by a desperate sender, one whose message will alter some version of history. How many times had it held black coffee in her kitchen after she'd given it to me, the two of us leaning against opposite counters, waking up with java, watching the steam rise against each other's faces in the weak light of a morning. Now it sits in my clean kitchen, a warning beacon to keep the other dishes in line, away from sentimentality, still dirty, and I decide maybe I'll flip a coin to see whether or not I smash it against the floor.

I wash the cup carefully, imagining the smooth hard curves of her hips in my hands, the beveled edges of her lips, the deep coffee color of her hair, the ceramic white of her irises, the hook handle she put in my chest, and the new clean look I believe for a time she gave me. I imagine it all again, sending it down into the hollow gun barrel of that red cup. Clean for a send-off. I examine it on all sides. Not a chip. Luke pads into the kitchen and sits a few paces away from me, cocking his head like the stereotypical commercial dog wondering about the sanity of its master. I should give the cup to him,

hook its handle in his teeth, send him out in the yard to bury it, as it is with all things dead.

I test its weight, heft it in my hand, then look into the top shelf for a place to put it. In front I would see it every time I open the cabinet, and the next woman I slept with would find it one morning and put her coffee in it. In the back it seems to have more weight than it should, a skeleton-in-the-closet weight, dusty but ready to fox-trot out as soon as the light hits it. Clean and in pieces scattered across the floor, swept up, put in a small sack, placed in the trash, snug against the paper plates is the course to stay.

I put it under the counter, in the drawer where the plates had been, far back in the left corner. I mean, if it is broken it's a waste of a good cup. Maybe I'll leave it when I move from here, let the next tenant find it and think *Hey, he forgot a perfectly good cup*. He or she will soap it up, drink their coffee from it, take it with them when they move, a find that became their favorite. Or maybe not. Maybe they'll put it back where they found it as a last gesture before leaving for another place, and it will stay there in that drawer for the next owner, waiting for coffee, water, coke, a cup of chicken soup for sickness, coin change, pens, weighting paper, or empty, so there is nothing inside it that could escape.

A Long Slow Roll into Darkness

(1993)

Copper Gale

Seventeen minutes. That's what it took. Seventeen minutes from Frederick Remington High School to the Labette County Jail. If you were speeding. I didn't. Just took my time.

"What do you think happened to him," asked Timberlake. He was riding "shotgun" -- what we'd called it back in high school. Ten years ago. We used to go cruise and drink beer. Doing nothing when we thought it was a lot. Now Jimmy had a beer in his hand and his foot out the window. For old times. That's what reunions were about, right? Ten years. And what am I doing? Bailing my older brother out of jail.

"You know Marcus as well as I do," I said. "He probably got into a fight with somebody who wasn't as big an asshole as he was. Wouldn't be the first time." Timberlake just shook his head.

I looked out the window at the old haunts. Becker's all-night grocery store. It was 24 hours before anybody else thought about it. Denny's, home of a late night burger and fries if we didn't get thrown out for acting crazy or being drunk. The Vision Drive-in. Vacant. Still with a broken marquee. The warehouse district. The old swinging signs had been taken down. Now there was a Wellman Corporation Bull's-eye on every building.

"It seems strange, doesn't it?"

"Yeah," said Timberlake, reading my thoughts. I pushed against the steering wheel. Scanned the panel.

"We need gas," I said.

"You filled up yesterday," said Timberlake.

"Yeah, but I've only got three-quarters of a tank."

"You're really pissed, huh?"

"Let him sweat it out a while," I said. "Maybe it'll do him good. Besides, O'Conner's is just up the road a mile."

Timberlake smiled. "Troll," he said.

Troll was head mechanic for O'Connor. He had spirit and Muscular Dystrophy. An arm terribly misshapen. Bent too far in at the elbow. That hand permanently clutched. Timberlake used to say it looked like the beak of a huge arthritic bird. The boy was a poet. Troll's left leg was crooked at the knee. He limped. His foot cocked inward. But he could work magic on cars. Timberlake and I would hang around the station some. Drink cokes just to watch Troll "lay on hands." He could make a diagnosis without even lifting the hood. Just listened with those hands. 97.5% success rate, so O'Connor said. Troll would juggle tools and keep them spotless. Sing every rock-and-roll song on the radio. Flawlessly. He hated pills for the pain. Hated the doctors. They were all "quacks." But he hated one thing above everything else. My brother.

"Lousy-fat-head-ego-maniac," Troll had raged. "Just because he was a big-shot quarterback he thinks that he's Evel Knievel, and he's going to jump out of a fucking airplane and make a sonic boom. And I'm Kareem Abdul Jabbar, man."

It was hot. Really hot that summer. Scramble-eggs-on-a-sidewalk hot. Melt-your-brain-in-fifteen-minutes hot. Miss Litzinger, the ancient junior high grammar grandma said it would be history in the making. Put Labette County on the map. Reverend Morovich prayed for my brother's safety . . . and the Television Networks that many believed would come. Even Little Soopers began running "Super-Sonic Specials." Put a life-size picture of my brother by their automatic doors. Old Man Laraby. The town drunk and county skeptic. He said the water tower would boom like a bass drum. Air conditioners would rattle for miles around.

"Looking back, I'd say nobody in our crowd really liked him," said Timberlake.

"Did anybody who had a brain?"

Timberlake laughed. "There were a lot of brainless people in town that summer. Lots of brainless girls, for sure. But it was the heat. Remember it. Like you were living in vegetable soup boiling over. But the sonic-suit," he said. "Now that was brainless."

"It's the Midwest, my friend. People tend to believe in a lot here, especially when it's hot. Coming back cements it. The Church. The President. The idea that a football player can jump out of an airplane and break the speed of sound in free fall. It had to have been the heat. If it's hot enough, people will believe anything. Anything so they can forget about crop failures. Anything for hope," I said.

"I see your point. Hope."

"I know it. We did the math, remember?"

"Yeah?" he said. Then pointed. "O'Conner's."

"Troll-baby, here we come."

Ten years ago, late in the summer, Skip McCollum would tell me the truth. Laugh, in fact. Say it was all a publicity stunt for Wellman. Now it was his Corporation. It owns a lot of the county. But then it didn't even have baby legs. He would tell me he needed my brother because Marcus was a wash-out. American Dream desperate. Desperate enough to believe in the sonic-suit. Against all reality. But the day he came to see my brother -- that day, he was all business. Mr. Reality.

They were sitting at the poker table in the basement of my parent's house. Skip had the gold pen out. It sealed the real big deals. Marcus took it and signed some documents. Skip gathered up his briefcase, said "hey" to me. Let himself out. My brother looked crazed.

"You are looking at the first test jumper of the Wellman Corporation's Sonic-Suit."

I ignored him. "Skip was using the gold pen," I said. "Dad would laugh."

"Well, Skip isn't any little loan officer for Dad now. He's one of Wellman's top executives." Marcus had looked over one detail that day. He was soon going to be a little loan officer. Missing the cut for the pro's. Soon to be married to pregnant Jennifer Morgan. He wasn't going anywhere but Dad's bank. But he wasn't believing any of that.

"The Sonic-Suit," he shouted. "It's a thermal suit. Specially designed. Heat pumps through it. It'll regulate my body temperature so I don't freeze that high up. It's coated with a polymer. It'll make me fall faster. There are even jets built into it to get me up to speed. At that altitude I'll breathe Oxygen -- pure O₂. Then over the side and into the stratosphere. I'll hold my body like a spear and be the first human to free fall faster than the speed of sound." He struck a pose. Some spear. It was the craziest thing I'd heard. I laughed.

He was on me. A quick punch to the face. I was on the floor. He was straddling me. His face red and screwed-up. "What are you laughin' at, little brother?"

I thought quick. "What does Jennifer think about this?"

"Who gives a good goddamn," he said. That got him off me. He vanished upstairs. I remember lying on the floor a while. Then the sofa with the TV on.

Later Timberlake and I did the physics. Even with a jet engine strapped to his ass it wouldn't work. No way. No Mach One. The shock alone would string his body parts all over the state. But I didn't even try to tell him.

O'Conner's feet were propped up. Reading the paper. Timberlake and I walked in. The aroma of his famous child-dogs. We were back in Labette for sure.

"Well, Copper Gale and Jimmy Timberlake." said O'Conner. He stood and shook. "Good to see you boys. A Chili-dog for old times?"

"Two for me," said Timberlake.

"Sure," I said. "Is Troll around?"

O'Conner heaped on the chili. "No," he said. "Troll hasn't worked here for years. It's been a while since you boys stopped in. He left, well, maybe four years ago."

"You're kidding," I said.

"No siree," said O'Conner. "Nebraska someplace.

"Did Toni . . ." I began. O'Conner was lost. "There was a girl he talked about then. Did she go with him?"

O'Conner laughed a little. "No girl left with Troll," said O'Conner. "But if you mean Toni Hensen, she left town even before Troll. Strange. I think maybe she was pregnant. Or just at loose ends." He handed the dogs over. I took a bite. Moved towards the glass door between the shop and the convenience store. Troll's domain. It was dark there, even in the daylight. I remembered the axle grease on his cheeks and hands.

July. There had been a parade. In honor of my brother and the jump. He was in the Sonic Suit. Erect on a flat-bed trailer provided by Wellman. He saluted the crowd. That night a street dance.

I remember Troll dressed up. Shaved. A hair-cut. Helping him pull the cowboy boot over his crippled foot. Timberlake was there. Dancing a lot with the preacher's daughter . . . Morovich. Sherry. There had been a blonde from out of town. She had smiled because I was Marcus's brother. Her name was Gloria. A dance. A kiss. She was coming to Frederick Remington High School next year. And Troll. Watching Toni Hensen. The new girl in town. A little older. Sitting alone. Dark-skinned. Indian or Italian maybe. Call for last dance and Troll waded through the tables. Chairs. Dancing couples. He took her hand. A slow song. Lights down and red gels from the stage. Toni faced him. She hooked her fingers in his belt loops. Her legs and hips were like separate beings, Timberlake had said later. A beautiful woman. Troll circled. The curve of her body into the curve of her dancing. A long slow roll into darkness. She sang softly. Troll said she knew all the words.

"Can I go into the shop a minute," I asked O'Conner. A long pause, then . . .

"Sure, why not." He turned on the lights. I opened the door. The tools shone. Like Troll was still wiping. Compulsive with a rag. Oil spills on the floor. Dried. The racks and the tire-leak water bin. A balancing machine.

A plastic suit carrier from his locker. *Try it on. I want to make sure it fits.* A tuxedo. It fit. *You're my driver, pal. I want you to take this envelope and drop it by Hardee's for Toni.* It read "Manager Toni Hensen" in Troll's scrawl. *Make sure you give it right to her. Then be here at eight sharp Saturday night in the tux.*

I was. There was a limo in the garage. *Don't wreck it is all I ask.* I was stunned. *Kirk at the mortuary owed me a favor. Drive to the lake. The gazebo on the pier.* Inside Troll had placed a table. Two candles. Red-and white checkered table cloth. *Great, huh.* Small stereo. Goblets, plates. A bottle of red wine on ice. *Go pick up Toni. Treat her like a Queen. Bring her out. to the pier. Then to Luigi's downtown. Bert has a dinner waiting to be picked up. Bring it back out and then pick us up at eleven.* He smiled. *Thanks, pal.*

At eleven they were still dancing. The candles from the table were in hurricane lamps then. Twinkling. They walked toward me. Glowing. We dropped Toni off. A kiss. Then he just stared ahead, smiling.

I still see him that way. Something beyond pain in his face.

"Well, we better go," Timberlake said. "Got a hot date with the bailiff." I looked at O'Conner. He smiled. Thought it was a joke, I guess. "Right," I said. One last bite of Chili dog.

"Can you go any slower?" asked Timberlake. Five miles under the speed limit. It was killing him. In a good way.

"Sure thing, brother." I let off the gas.

"Jennifer looked good."

"Out of a bad marriage with my brother would probably do anybody wonders," I said. "Strange that he called her for the bail," I said.

"Maybe not. Maybe he couldn't get a hold of anybody else. He had to know Jennifer wouldn't come, but figured she would find you. Family is obligated, you know. And she's not family anymore. Still, she looked fine."

"You thinking about my brother's ex?"

"Don't tell me you haven't . . . or didn't."

"Alright," I said, and left it at that. I'd never told anyone. Not even Timberlake. It wasn't the time to start. I'd seen a lot more of Jennifer than anybody knew. Shame kept me quiet. Or thrill.

That summer I had bought a hand-crank drill from True-Value hardware. I drilled a hole through the back of Marcus's closet. I watched. Him and Jennifer. Him and Diane Anderson. A real squealer. And Sally Rich. A girl I wanted. Marcus got her, though. I had imagined moonlit walks. String quartets. A night of soft touching. Slipping gently inside her. But Marcus got her. No soft words. No whispered kisses. Just their tan bodies and electric lust. When they finished she sat against the headboard. Her stomach damp. The sweat on her breasts shining. I was there for it all. Even when he did the woman who was going to be his wife. Their tight asses. It was disconnected from my brother and his fiance. I wanted that. Just that repetition. Just that bang, bang, bang. His lean cruel body. Man. Was he potent.

I'd never told anybody about the party either. Timberlake was there when Marcus planned it. We were in our garage. Working on the "Dog," Timberlake's perpetually broken-down car. Skip was over, finalizing details. He had brought a big sack. It was filled with shirts that read "Boom Town" in huge block letters on the front. My brother's name was on the back. The date and what he was to attempt. Skip gave Timberlake and me two apiece. *Publicize*, he said.

On the driveway was a chute pack. Three brightly colored parachutes were strung across our lawn. A blonde woman was with them. She was from the jump school in the city. I remember she was helping Marcus a lot. Including showing him how to pack the chute pack properly. Her legs were great in those shorts. My brother wasted no time.

"Me and Megan are going for some drinks. Come along, Skip?"

"No. I better beg out."

"A quick brewski here, then." Marcus reached into the old refrigerator where our Dad kept his beer. One to Skip. One to Timberlake. One to me.

"A toast," he said. "To the speed of sound. And the party we're going to throw before I do the deed."

I watched the blonde, Megan. Leaning up against the fender of her car. Watching Marcus.

"You like that, huh, little brother. How about I get you a date for our little party?"

"No," I said. "No thanks. I don't want your skanky seconds."

Marcus's face grew red. But his fists were in check. Didn't want to make an unnecessary scene. "Drink up, little brother. Maybe Jimmy wants a date. What'dya say, James."

"I'll pass. I've got something else to do that night anyway . . . other than drinking your parent's alcohol.

"They don't care. Share and share alike in this family. Besides, I'm the big brother. I watch out for you little punks. So Jimmy, too bad you can't come. But brother, I'll have a surprise for you. Right now . . . gotta go. Then to Skip. "Gotta bitch to blow."

He grinned. Pounded down his beer. The Camaro roared off. Skip said goodnight. That night I heard Marcus come in late. I imagined what it had been like. Those khaki's out the window on the ground. Her feet up against leather or glass. The rock and squeak of shock absorbers.

Two weeks later. My parents were gone. We drug cases of beer into the house. A restaurant catered. Champagne glasses and tea sandwiches. It seemed everybody we knew was in the house by eight o'clock. I stayed downstairs and ran the VCR, showing a couple of movies. There were a few people watching. The rest liked the dark basement. They were making out, then moving off. I watched Sally Rich undo her bra for her date. His hands were everywhere. Around midnight somebody turned off "Ferris Bueller's Day Off" and put in "Furry Blower's Get Off." Some laughed. All the guys and girls without a partner crowded in. Like it was love potion. I knew it was bad dialogue, what there was of it. Terrible music, too, but the sound was turned off. Huge dicks. Blow by blow action. Blonde hair and dildos. The best-looking one. On her knees taking it from behind. She twisted her head and threw her mane. I read her lips. *Faster. Faster.* He becomes a blur. *Faster. Pleasure. Faster. Pain. Faster.* He comes, shooting all over her back. She looks released. *Faster than the speed of sound.*

At midnight a bunch of people wanted cigarettes. I made the run. Mainly to drop off a six-pack at Timberlake's house. Future use. The drive home was quiet. The town dead. The bank clock read two-thirty. Back home the party had tapered off. Marcus found me. He led me to his bedroom door.

"She's in there, brother. This great-looking chick is waiting for you. It's all worked out. She wants you."

"No thanks," I said. He pushed me. Raised a fist. He was drunk. I knew I couldn't fight him and win. Ever. I moved to the door. He disappeared down the hall. I laid my hand on the cool knob. I twisted it quietly.

There she was, lying on the bed. Her naked back was to me. The light was dim. I couldn't recognize her yet. I moved towards her. Heavy breathing. I touched her back. She didn't move. I walked around the edge of the bed.

It was Toni. I stared at the hard, dark, gorgeous body in front of me. I shook her. No response. Again, harder. She moaned. Moved an arm. Passed out again. I tried

harder, but she couldn't come to. I looked her up and down. Long legs. Tan skin. I could smell her perfume. I reached out and touched her hair. The door opened.

"Like my party favor?" asked Marcus.

I didn't take my eyes off Toni.

"C'mon, brother. You want her don't you? She wants you, can't you tell? That's what she told me earlier. She told me she wanted you to take her."

"No."

"No, what? No, you don't want her? No, you don't believe me? No, because you're a little faggot piece of shit. No. No, what?"

"That's . . . rape . . ." I began

"No. That's how it works," he finished. Cool. Matter of fact. "Do you need help, little brother. Here, let me show you how it's done." He moved his hand to his belt. Took a step towards the bed.

I threw myself at him. He went down. I grabbed his hair, trying to slam his head into the floor. He flung me off and was on top of me. Three hits to the face. Black.

I was in my room then. Bloody nose and mouth. My head felt two-dimensional. I staggered off the bed and went to the closet. I put my eye up to the hole.

My brother was on top of Toni. His bare ass in the air. Her legs were spread. Limp. I could hear him saying something. With each thrust he was close to her ear. I couldn't make it out. I put my ear to the hole. "Troll . . ." he was saying. "It's Troll, baby . . . I'm Troll and this is so good . . . Troll . . . showing you how I love you . . . Troll . . . Troll . . . Troll."

I parked the car. Timberlake and I walked the block to the jail. Up the marble steps. Into the waiting room. The Sergeant behind the desk, Gifford, knew us.

"Copper Gale and Jimmy Timberlake. Sorry I'm missing the reunion."

"Everybody's got to work sometime," said Timberlake.

"Don't I know it. Come to bail your brother out?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Good. Keep an eye on him. This is the second time we've had him in tonight."

"The second time," said Timberlake.

"Yeah." Gifford laughed a little. "The main reason is he was beating the hell out of some guy's truck that was parked in his wife's driveway."

"Ex-wife," I said.

"Don't tell him that," said Gifford.

"What was the first offense?" asked Timberlake. The other cops behind the desk started laughing.

"You don't want to know, unless you can pry it out of him yourself. Let's just say he got tied up with a woman in a wrong way."

I breathed heavy. Air shot through me. A bullet. I said nothing.

"I'll take you down," said Gifford.

August first. Timberlake and I linked up early to get good seats. Troll said to save him one. He wanted to be front and center when Marcus took a nose dive into the football stadium. *No offense*, he said. Wellman had rented the stadium. A big target and lots of grandstands. They were packed. Plenty of publicity for Wellman on signs, banners, and balloons. A party. Hot dog and beer venders were selling. A TV camera roved over the crowd. Footballs. Frisbees. Kids and dogs. Picnic baskets. Marcus came in the silver suit, riding on the back of a black convertible Corvette. He had the wave down. The crowd cheered. The Corvette revved its engine. It made the rounds on the track twice. Marcus looked like the Tin Man as the Corvette left. A big-red bulls-eye, "Wellman" in the center, was painted on the field.

"Hope he looks like a squashed watermelon," Troll said, sitting down beside us.
"That would make my day. Shit -- my year."

"Where's Toni?" I asked. "I thought she was coming with you."

"Had some tests being run at the hospital. I don't know, really. Blood work, I think." He looked out over the field. "She's been weird somehow." He shielded his eyes from the sun. "Man, would you look at all the fucking people."

"Weird . . . like what?" asked Timberlake.

I pointed into the sky. The jet trail. "He's up," I said.

"And he's coming down," said Troll.

"Man, it's going to smart," said Timberlake. "One way or another."

"Yeah. Maybe he'll find out what real pain feels like," said Troll.

A loud speaker crackled. *Okay, folks. The clock is running. Right now I'm in direct contact with the Jumpmaster in the plane, and I'll be running you through the first stages of this historic event. The Jumpmaster says they've reached the designated altitude of 20,000 feet.*

The crowd cheered.

The computer that will be helping our hero find his landing pad is functional and has a lock on a descent pattern once the sound barrier has been broken . . . The chutes are ready . . . The propulsion engines have the green light. Our hero has given the thumbs up . . . and he's out the door and on the way down!

The loudspeaker went quiet. The crowd was still. I heard a baby cry. Static. I looked across the crowd. Eyes were up. Scanning. Some faces were turned towards the ground. Listening.

I looked at my watch. Two minutes. Suddenly I hoped he died. Then it was gone. Someone shouted. Three brightly colored dots were in the sky. There was a rush of noise in the crowd. Timberlake whispered "Nobody knows what to do. Boo, because

of no sonic boom. Cheer, because he was alive." He paused. "Clap because he was coming back from a place they'd never been." Cryptic.

Finally there was conversation in the crowd. They cheered when Marcus landed on the bull's-eye. He crumpled over. He looked like an alien in the silver suit and his old football helmet. He stood, and the chutes swallowed him.

Gifford opened the door. There he was. T- shirt. Shorts. His mouth bloody. Tired, but no mercy in his eyes. No thanks.

He stopped on his way out, in front of me. I realized I was blocking the door. The only thing I wanted to say was with my fist. Ruined this night. Ruined people's lives. Taken and taken. Suddenly I was gripped with hope. Hit him. They'd put us both back in that cell. He'd beat the hell out of me. I wouldn't fight back. Powerless. Cleansed in my own blood. Guiltless. Then I'd strangle him while he slept. I balled my fist.

"Hey, little brother," he said. Shouldered past me. Past Timberlake. Up the stairs and out the door. Laughter greeted him.

Timberlake looked at me strangely and I saw it. The night. How it would stretch out. We'd try to drop him off. But he'd have a case of cold ones. For old times. For family. We'd drink. The hours would slow. The party would be over. Too far across town anyway. He would boast. We wouldn't protest. No reality. Only boozy haze. All would be forgiven. A good laugh. Nothing would be forgiven. A cool hard dawn. Smoke in the mouth. A vow, a hope, not to let it go by . . . but first a final, limp slip into sleep.

Atlas

(1993)

Marcus Gale

The cop. The mother-fuckin' cop. He's laughing. He tells me I made a mistake. A mistake the minute I teed-off on that guy's windshield. He says I took it too far. A baseball bat. Big dents in a \$20,000 Chevy Truck. He laughs harder. Again he tells me - the other cops in the room -- he tells me what I said: *Goddamn cocksucking nigger. This is what you get for fucking my wife. I'm gonna kill you.* They all laugh. They're all mother-fuckers.

They put me in the same cell. The one I'd been in earlier tonight. It still reeks. At least this time I'm dry. My crotch isn't stinking. Not that it makes much different. The Harley rider is still here. Facing the wall. On the cot. The kind that fold out of the wall. Like the fuckin' movies. Showing me the crack of his ass above his thick belt and jeans. He's still got his tattoos -- the Mexican Cutie, snake, crossbones, the usual. He looked like the walls of the shop.

The cop near my cell at the desk keeps hollering. Up the stairs to the lobby. Making jokes. Gonna roast that pig. He's holding the bet money. The bet on whether I'll make it in a third time in one night. If I do, they're gonna give me the phone. Let me call as many people as I want. On his desk is the bag with the bat. I broke it on the fucker's tailgate. Next time I'll save that last swing for the cocksucker's face.

It's Clevage's fault. Always trying to get me over Jennifer. The bastard. We run and lift together. Three nights a week at Atlas. It's a new gym. All the latest equipment. Good track. Racquetball and Basketball. Nautilus and free. A big mural of the owner of the place, Resnik, flexing and holding the earth on his shoulder. It's Clevage's pick really. He's an old high school buddy. Tight End to my QB four years straight. His

hands got him named to All-State every year. His name is still in the cafeteria. On the record boards. He set those rushing records almost ten years ago. Sterling Van Cleve. The big man across the middle.

Or maybe it was Tiffany. Tough Tiff. Tough twat Tiff. She'd given him the paper. She was always giving us stuff to look at. Read. Some scholar. In school she read back braille. From leather back seats. Gearshifts. Steering wheels.

She asked if we'd seen the article on the gym. Clevage said he had, and it was true. A good thing for me. For months he'd been trying. *See some other women*, he'd say. Forget Jennifer. I told him I don't read the paper. Anymore.

"You gotta read this," said Clevage.

Tiffany handed the paper over the counter to Clevage. She was wearing Spandex. Tight to that tight body. Man, how I'd wanted that.

"Clevage, you oughta be doing her," I said. I smiled at Tiffany. "Beautiful thing like her. Shouldn't be without a man."

"Maybe I'm not without a man," said Tiffany. "Besides, Sterling's wife is serious about marriage."

"Read," said Clevage. "And so am I." He smiled at Tiffany.

"Gyms are the Latest Meat-Markets." An intriguing headline. There was a picture of the outside of Atlas. Resnik. The flex.

"It sounds like a review of the latest dance bar in town," said Clevage, "talking about the erotic quality of the weight-lifting machines, the tight outfits the women wear, the percentage of men who worked out 'shirtless,' flexing and complaining of the heat, while working to get a sheen of sweat on their chests. They even bring up the music that's played lightly over the running track for those, and I quote, 'who aren't playing hard-to-get by wearing Walkmans."

I laughed. But as we lifted, Cleavage pointed out stuff from the article. Tone legs. Tans. Sexy outfits. The smell of perfume on the track. Guys with no shirts. Sweat on naked skin. Tight bodies. Talk along with flex.

After I leave the gym, I follow her. Park down the block from her apartment. She was usually home. Dinner with Curtis. Tuesday and Thursday nights were school. Monday, Wednesday, and Friday she was usually home. Mainly I wanted to know about her. Make sure she was safe. Find out who she spent time with. If not in school, she was with friends. Downtown. Restaurants. Window-shopping.

It was just a matter of time. She'd be back. Get tired. She'd miss me. A fad. A long time to do without it. For me anyway.

So the night of the article. I chucked my old sweats and went shopping. New pants, new shirts, with Seattle printed on some of them. Everything "in" seemed to be there. I shaved a second time before Cleavage and I hit the weights. Started bare-chesting it once my abs were back. Their washboard look. The lines on my arms. The cut of my pecs. The thirty-rep pump running in my veins. I was out again. My charm. An old sheet of notebook paper. Cleavage's list. Between pages in my senior yearbook. Still on the page with Jennifer's picture. A long time ago. None of that mattered anymore. It wouldn't be like then. Wouldn't be like with Jennifer. It would get me started back in style.

The first one ran fast. A long body. White. Small nose. Wide mouth. She mentioned Seattle at the weights. I spoke up. The Cleve knew when to leave. Sheryl. I kept Cleavage up with us.

We saw a movie Saturday. Don't remember the title. Something with a woman and man. An ice pick. My hand on her knee when anybody went to bed with anybody

else. I could have just left it there. She liked it. Said she didn't own an ice pick. A nice goodnight kiss. I chuckled. Drove past Jennifer's. Her car in the drive. Lights off.

Roses. Cards. Pasta dinners. Out or at my place. Married? Divorced, I said. In a park at lunch a couple of times. Ice cream. Even bought her a dog. Stayed true to Cleve's list. Checked the little boxes. It felt good. I imagined my weight over hers. Her wetness and slickness.

When it was just right, I locked the dog out. We fucked like animals. I dumped her the next week.

Cleve couldn't believe it. "You keep me amused, Junior."

"How so?"

"You bitch about your wife and not having other women, then you get yourself one, work hard for her from the way it's sounded, and then you dump her right off."

"Yeah?"

"It's like revenge man. I'd hoped that was beneath you. And all that work."

"You made the work," I said. "I just added a new ending."

"I made the work?" asked Clevage.

"Sure. The list, man, the list. You were a genius."

"What list, man?" he asked.

"You know. The one you made for Jen. The Cyrano list. When we read that play."

"*Cyrano De Bergerac*?"

"The steps. You had them down. You old romantic. You don't remember?" He shook his head. "We read it in English. Or you did. Then we saw that movie. Somebody said it was a remake of Cyrano. We got blasted and you said you'd show us all how to get women. You made the list. Those were the days."

"Yeah, but . . ." Clevage shook his head. "This ain't sport man. It's not one, two, three, you're in. It's not about bases. Not about home plate.

"Sure it is."

"That was high school, man."

"It hasn't changed."

"It's not just about pussy."

"Sure it is," I said. "And if it ain't about pussy, I ain't interested. Just like the old days." I said it just like we used to say it.

Clevage seemed lost in thought. We finished our run. Got towels. "Tiffany," said Clevage. "You gotta take care of this guy."

"Yeah," I said. "We were just talking about pussy."

"I'd guess you were a dog person," said Tiffany, smiling.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I said.

"Those were the days," said Clevage, moving to the machines. "Those were the days."

Harley was waking his ass up. He shook his head. Ratty hair. Stretched. The crack of his ass above his jeans got wider. He eased his body around. Sat on the cot. He grinned. Still drunk. Unlike me.

I glanced over his tattoo's again. There was one I hadn't seen. Part of it was visible under his shirt. He smiled at me. Pulled back the material. It was a woman's head. Long hair. Tits. A thin waist. Over his heart.

"It's what God really meant," he said suddenly.

"What?"

"They're a sign of your soul. What's really there. Who you really are. How it should really be. It can't be just shit. It's art, man. Like the Sistine fuckin' Chapel."

He almost fell off his bunk. Stood. Moved to the bars. Yelled for the jailer. Coughed. Then he turned, pointing to the woman.

"It's what God put there that should be. It's like this one. This is Donna, man. Ain't she gorgeous. She posed right there in the shop for this. But the dude, the artist, he was a real pro. Didn't slobber or go for her or anything. God meant us always to be together, and here she is," he said. Then he looked sad and shut up.

My ass was beginning to hurt like she told me it would. Gifford said I should make a bail call. I thought of Dad. No. Jennifer wouldn't do it again. The first time tonight she'd only put up the money. Made me take a taxi. And after the job I did on the fucker's truck. She wouldn't even talk to me. I dialed the high school. Somebody would be in the office. They could get Copper from the reunion.

Clevage's hours changed. After my sets of weights, Tiffany waved me over. She had a paper in her hand.

"I was going to show this to you and Sterling. So here you go. You can read, right?" She smiled. I remember her in my business class in high school. Pert. Sweaters and straight hair. A knock-out body. Not a lot had changed. Except . . . we were near each other now. Not like high school. Same circles here at the gym. I knew I was going to nail her good.

"I can read. I can write," I said. "I've even got my own big pencil. I got an A in braille anatomy."

"I bet you did . . . stud. Prove it," she said, arching her back. Her tits came towards me. She pushed the paper across the counter of her station. "Read it," she said and walked away.

Right. I skimmed the article. It was in the same section as the meat-market story. It was about tattoos. How more women were getting them. There were more women tattoo artists. It interviewed an artist named Erika Ware. She said that women were coming to her and getting tattoos so they could reclaim their bodies. "For years we've dieted for men, pierced for men, dyed for men. These women don't tattoo for men. They

tattoo for themselves, because their bodies are their own. It's a way to make a statement about who owns them." This Erika was an "artist" at Art and Soul downtown on Fifth Street. Bunch of garbage.

I got Curtis. Two weekends a month. That was okay. Jennifer dropped him off. Gave us a chance to fight. I told her about my others. Graphic. She laughed. I asked her how she was. Better than being with me. I noticed the short haircut. The pierced ears. Five studs in her upper ear. Plus the one in her lobe.

"Nice ear job."

"You like?" she asked flatly.

"Not very adult for a married lady."

"I'm not a 'lady.' And I won't be married for long."

"So you say . . .well, knock yourself out, since you finally had the balls to ask for a divorce. Think you can get any more rings in them? Or are you going to move to your nose?"

"Whatever it takes," she said.

"To what? Keep your cannibal lover?"

She laughed. "You wouldn't understand."

"So how is 'he'?"

"There's no one but myself," Jennifer said.

"C'mon, Dad." I turned and saw Curtis with his baseball glove in hand, motioning me from the backyard.

"Right there," I yelled to Curtis. I turned, but Jennifer's car was already pulling away from the curb.

I had nobody new on the stringer. Curtis was asleep. I drove by Jennifer's house. No lights. No car. So I cruised for it. I found it in front of Grady's. I could see her

inside. Candlelight on the table. But just her friends. Maybe she's turning lezzie. They were laughing. Red wine on the table. In her glass. One of her friends checking out a guy at the bar. I parked and watched for a while. Her earrings caught the light. I looked around. Checked the watch. 8:30. The bottle shop on the corner closed at 9:00.

A pack of smokes. A bottle of Jim Beam. Back in the car I light up. Cleavage would kill me. Trying to get me to quit all this. And get back to women. Well, I've gotten back to women. And here I am. I slug twice out of the bottle. Watch my wife in the restaurant across the street.

An hour passes. She and her friends pay. Leave. Down the street. Walking. Laughing. They all seem to be centered on my wife. Money passes. What the hell? I tuck the Jim Beam under my sweat jacket. Lock the car. Shadow them on the opposite side of the street.

They stop in front of neon. Art and Soul Tattoo shop. Holy shit. Jennifer would never get a tattoo. She always thought it was stupid. Marking up your body. She was always worried. About what the undertaker would think. She was inside then.

I could make out the inside of the shop. It was long. A big long room. All along the walls were drawings. Stuff you could get tattooed. She and her friends looked for a while. They were pointing out things to her. No way. She'll chicken out. The tattoo artist comes out from behind a curtain. At the back of the shop. Asks if she can help. Right then Jennifer pulls something off the wall. And stretches her arms out. Like how you measure a fish.

She signs some papers at a desk. The money her friends gave her passes again. Over the counter. To the woman artist. She smiles. Takes Jennifer behind the curtain.

Around the other side of the building. A staircase. To an apartment. I climb it. No one's home. I can reach the roof. I slide the bottle up. Pull myself beside it. I moved across the roof quietly. Good. A skylight. Right over the back room.

Jennifer was bent over a table. The glass is frosted. But I can make out some stuff. Her panties are off. Her skirt is hiked above her waist. The woman is swabbing an area on her ass with something. Alcohol? Then it started. I could hear the needle through the glass.

I watched an hour. Through the frosted glass I could just make out. Color. Or movement. The tattoo woman working with the needle. Putting a pad on Jennifer's ass. Stopping the bleeding. A dark line down one side of her ass. Circles near it. Reaching in toward the crack.

Then the skirt was back down. The tattoo artist wrote on something. She gave it to Jennifer. Small. White. A card. Jennifer slipped it in her purse beside her wadded up panties. They shook hands. I stowed the bottle of Beam by the window. Moved across the roof. When Jennifer came out, she was limping a little.

The next night I got a blonde. Great ass. Grapefruit tits. I had seen her before. We talked. I spotted for her on the free weights. Curves and more curves. I scored the old way. No lists.

"Hey, I'm going to hit the showers," she said. "But how about I buy you a cup of coffee afterwards.

I stripped off my shirt. Said "sure." In the mirrors on the far wall I watched her give me a second look. We didn't make it for coffee.

When she went to get her purse from her car, I kissed her hard. She kissed back. Biting my lips. She stuck her tongue in my mouth. She whispered, "I'm Anne. Wait." I reached into the opened front passenger door. Unlocked the back. Pushed her in. In the back seat she smiled. Nervous. I began tearing off her clothing. Her mouth was shadowed. Lined at the edges.

"Tattoo?"

"No. No. . . no."

I was inside her. She clung to my back. Whining. I came. Pulled up my pants. Drove away. I never saw her again. Like it used to be.

My wife went back to Art and Soul. More work. From the frosted window I could make out more dark lines. Crawling over her ass. She left the second time. Another white slip. Another appointment. I sat on the roof. By the skylight. Sucked on the bottle. Slept a while. I woke up. Could barely hear any traffic. Through the frosted glass was red. A safety light. I smiled. Slipped the glass cutter I bought from my pocket. Went to work. Twenty minutes. I had a pinhole. Clear picture.

Two nights later I closed Atlas. Me and Tiff. The last ones there.

"Got a towel," I asked. "Going to hit the showers." The one she threw me smelled. Good. Fresh.

"Me, too," she said. "Then lock up."

"Need someone to wash your back? Or any other vital areas?" I kidded.

"Maybe," she said. I looked at her. Shit. My chance. I took it. Moved in. Kissed her hard. Her lips were as tight as her body.

She licked her lips.

"Mmmm. Sweat. But what if I want more than a kiss?"

"I'm your man," I said.

"I've heard talk." She drew me to her. Kissed me again. "I'm tired of just talk," she said. "Take off your shirt."

Tiffany ran her muscled hands over me. Pecs. Abs. Waist. Butt. On her knees. She kissed my stomach. Took off the shorts. The jock. Laid me back on the bench press. Stood over me.

Smiling, she removed her weight belt. Laid it on my stomach. Strapped me to the bench.

"Oh, my. They didn't lie. What a big boy you are." She reach down and grabbed my cock. "Bigger and bigger," she said. "The other girls. They said how you use this. Mmmmm," she said. "Do you like being tied up? More?"

She walked over to her counter. Two sets of handcuffs. A small tape deck. She licked her lips again as she locked my wrists. My ankles. Then she set the recorder down. Pressed play.

I could hear the tape grind in the small recorder. "Music?"

"Something to set the mood," she said.

Then I heard my voice. "How's the twat, Tiff. Need a tune-up? I bet I got the right tool."

Tiff started dancing to my voice. "You know, I heard you were a great lay back in high school. I could test you and see if anything's changed."

"Can you say 'Sexual Harassment?'"

"What?"

"Clevage," my voice said on the tape. "How about we do her together sometime." Clevage. "My black ass? Dawn would kill me. Married means something to me." I call him a pussy.

"What have you got to say now, Junior?" she asked. I felt a moment of panic. She smiled. Stroked me again. "It's okay big boy," she said. "This is going to feel real good."

She slowly slid the Spandex off. Tied it around my neck. Her body was all tan. Nude sunbather. Tight tits. Ass. I thought I would come right there. "I see you like what you see?" She straddled me. I could feel her heat.

"C'mon," I said. "Give it to me."

"You could make a dead man come," I sang on the tape.

"First your opinion," she said. She pointed to the mirrored wall behind her. "Like my tattoo?"

I looked at her heart-shaped ass. Up. Muscled back. Covered by green and black ink. A spread-winged dragon. Breathing fire. I felt something warm and wet. Covering my abdomen. My legs. I looked at Tiff's face. She pouted. "What a pisser," she said.

It cooled on my body. It pooled on the floor. My cock dropped. She got her purse. Walked over to the huge mirror. Put on lipstick. Wiped her crotch with a Kleenex. Slipped back into her Spandex suit. Walked back to me.

"You're a naughty boy. Look what you've done to the carpet."

"I'd like to give you the monster," my voice on the tape said. "Then piss on your tits."

She smiled. "Beat you to it."

She dialed 911. Said she wanted to file a complaint. Sexual Harassment. "Yes, she said. "I have proof. The perpetrator? He's a little tied up right now. C'mon down to Atlas. He should still be here."

She hung up. Dropped the keys to the handcuffs on my chest. "I should have called Sterling," she said. "But I thought the cops would have more fun. Besides, there may be some other charges forthcoming soon. I'll see what I can do for you."

She moved out of sight. I heard the Stairmaster. She was starting her workout.

I called Jennifer. She put up the money. Gave an extra five for a cab. The driver asked me if I needed some diapers. At my apartment I showered. I drove by her house. Dark. But I found her. Downtown. I climbed the roof. Downed the last of the Beam. Looked through my peephole.

It was a butterfly. A huge one. Covered her whole ass. The head peeked out the top of her crack. It's antenna just touched her waist. The woman worked on finishing touches. Jen's ass was beautiful. I was warm inside. Hard. I pulled out my cock. Rubbed it with my hand. It got bigger. I wanted to come. I could feel tears welling. "Stupid cunt," I whispered. "Tease Tiff. Bitch. All bitches."

I was soft. I put myself back in my pants. Laid on my back by the skylight. Jennifer was finished. I could hear her leave. A fucking butterfly.

Soon I was in the shop. I looked around the wall. Motorcycles. Girls. Crosses. A tiger with "Be a Tiger Man" in words underneath. Roses. Knights. Babies. Lizards. Dogs. Fruit.

"Can I help you?"

It was Erika. The one from the paper.

"Yeah, I need a tattoo."

"Need?"

"Want," I said.

"Okay. What would you like?"

I looked at the wall some more. "Is there something for men. You know. That all the guys get. Something small. For the girls."

Erika looked at me strangely.

"I don't know what to pick," I said.

"Maybe you should come back after you've thought about this, mister. These are permanent."

"Yeah," I said. "I want you to pick."

"Okay," she said. "Sign the releases. Then I'll give you what all the little frat boys get."

She finished and I checked it out in the mirror. It hurt worse than I thought. I paid her and went to Jennifer's. Thought I'd show her my tattoo. Maybe she'd reconsider. I had control of my body, too. But there was a truck in her driveway. A baseball bat in my back seat.

"Hey, there's blood on your shorts," said Harley. I was standing against the bars waiting for my brother.

"Yeah," I said. "My tattoo."

"Hey, let me see it. We're brothers."

"You a fag?" I asked. Point blank.

"The last guy who called me that got his balls put in his mouth," said Harley.

Suddenly he was up from the bunk. He reached out. I turned and pulled back my fist. He had me in a bear hug. Turned me around. Pressed me up against the bars. Pulled down the shorts.

"A little devil. What a pussy little tattoo," he said. "I oughta fuck you. You ain't no real man."

Harley sat back on the bunk. Spit in my direction. "Pussy," he said.

Copper and Timberlake bailed me out. I showered quick. Changed. Put a bandage on my ass. Then we did it up. The old times. Drinking beer in my apartment. Talking about women. Good ones. Skanks. Sports. Talked about calling some wenches. To soothe our souls. Towards dawn they passed out. Copper on the couch. Timberlake on the floor. I threw them some blankets. Drank the last three beers myself. My head was humming. My ass didn't hurt. I didn't tell them about Tiffany. Or Jennifer. Another bottle of Beam in the cabinet. Before I passed out.

Down by the River

(1978)

1 Copper Gale

I laid on the bed. Waiting for summer to begin. Waiting for Jimmy and his mom to pull in the drive. Waiting for the first waterfight. Waiting.

I opened my eyes. Scanned the room. *Star Wars*. My wall was a shrine to the greatest movie ever. I had all the stuff. The Official *Star Wars* Fan Club Poster. A calendar. Luke in his X-wing was up for June. A die-cast Millennium Falcon. The actual movie poster. Other posters from boxes of Cheer and Dawn detergents. The Story Album. The Novel (a story from *The Journal of the Whills*). The screenplay. Trading Cards. A mask of Chewbacca. And the best. A homemade lightsaber. Built from scratch. Modeled after the one Obi-Wan Kenobi used in the movie. Timberlake had one too. Modeled after Luke's.

I glanced across to the other side of the room. My brother's side. On his wall were Marine posters. A calendar of the Vietnam Memorial. One *Star Wars* poster. Darth Vader with a drawn lightsaber. Glowing red.

There was gunfire. From the family room. Marcus watching videotaped Vietnam footage. From the library in town. Twenty miles down the valley. It was the only reason he ever went to the library. Unless some hot chic worked behind the desk.

I picked up the Millennium Falcon model. I framed it with my hand. Imagined it flying over Cross Hatch mountain. Landing right in front of the Ranch. On the water. Then floating on the lake. Han and Chewie walking over on the water.

"Man, you are one sick person." It was Timberlake's voice. From the family room. Person. I laughed. He would usually say mother-fucker. His mom must still be in the house.

I opened my door. Timberlake looked at me.

"And you call him your brother?"

"Not by choice," I said. I looked at Marcus. Stretched over the armchair. Big Screen TV with war footage. He looked like what I guessed Jabba the Hut looked like. "It's a biological malfunction."

"I'll give you a malfunction," said Marcus. "You little pussy prick."

I breathed heavily. Giving him Vader: "Your breath is commentary enough, Tarkin."

From downstairs. Mom. "All commentary should be rated PG. I'm going out to help Sadie unload."

"I can help," offered Jimmy.

"No, we've got it," said Sadie. "We're tough, right Barbara?"

"Right."

"After that we're going to walk down to the lodge," said Sadie. "My legs are killing me from that car ride."

"Help your grandfather if he needs you," said Mom.

The door shut. I got up from my seat. Went to the open window overlooking the driveway. I could barely see the edge of the lake. Blue mountains in the near distance. I could hear their voices.

"We traded the heat of Oklahoma for high pines, clear rivers, cool air, free time, and so far, what do they do?" said Mom to Sadie. "They watch war footage from Vietnam and *Star Wars*."

"Don't you remember when you were that age?" asked Sadie.

Mom said "I try not to." They laughed. Their voices grew distant. Sadie was in flannels. She knew the mountains. Mom had a tennis sweater around her neck. Smart walk in shiny shoes. Cigarette in her finger.

"Oh, man! Would you look at that!" said Marcus.

On the TV. A soldier was down. Chest wound. A medic was over him. Blood everywhere. Then the camera shakes. Pans away. A grenade explodes in the distance.

"We were born too late," said Marcus. "This shit used to be on television at dinner time."

Jimmy took a seat. He looked at the screen. Then at Marcus. Then me.

"This shit makes me hungry," said Marcus. "Hey piss ant," he said to me. "Why don't you scare me up some grub."

"Go downstairs yourself," I said. "Just your face will scare up enough grub to feed your Marine buddies on the tube."

He waved me away. Jimmy grabbed his suitcase from the floor. "I'll unpack," he said.

"You know where it is," I said. He smiled. "I'll get us something to eat."

"Great," he said. "I'm starved."

In the kitchen I foraged. Chips. Dip. A tortilla. A healthy portion of cheese and salsa wrapped in it. Into the microwave. Presto. Mexican. Two hamburgers from last night from the freezer. Grandpa was a grill master. Barbecue sauce and grease on fire. Man, were those burgers great. I'd eaten three.

I looked out the picture window. Grandpa was looking away from the house. I went to the sink, grabbed the spray nozzle. Put a hand on the handle of the faucet. Stood ready as the tortilla heated up.

Grandpa was making something with wood. When I was smaller, Marcus and I used to watch him swing the axe. Early in the morning. Chopping enough to burn in the stove. Get the kitchen of the Ranch warm. He knew it had central heat and air, but was stubborn about it. He said "when I was your age, you were cold until you chopped the wood and stoked the fire yourself." I would carry in the wood while he stopped to rest. Now, I was up before Jimmy and Marcus. I'd say good morning to Jimmy's mom. She

was always in the kitchen with a coffee mug. She'd smile at me as I got two cups from the cupboard. Filled them up. Took one upstairs to Mom. Took one to Grandpa. Outside. I'd breathe the cool mountain air. Grandpa would chop. Insist on doing it all himself. Until he got enough wood. Then inside he would start breakfast. Eggs. Bacon. Fried potatoes and onions. I'd go upstairs. Wake my brother and Jimmy. This was my summer morning routine for the past few years.

Since Jimmy and I had become tight, my mom and his had gotten to be friends, and they started taking some summertime vacation. At our place. The Ranch. Beneath Cross Hatch Mountain. Grandpa was always free now. He'd retired. Said he wanted to be with "his boys," which included Jimmy. Grandpa's wife had died. Years ago. I hardly remembered anything about her. A hazy round face. The smell of something good cooking in the oven.

Dad stayed home. Not able to take time off. Except for a week to open up the Ranch. Turn on the water. Open the huge shutters on the windows. He took a week at the end of the summer. To close the Ranch down. Jimmy woke up slowly. He climbed out of his rack sleepily. I'd given up on Marcus. He'd brought his own car. After just turning sixteen. He was on the road. Back and forth. Several surrounding towns. Camping communities near ours. You name it. Screaming down the canyon in his old Trans Am. Jimmy and I had gone with him. A couple of times. Gone to the movies. Hung out. But mostly he was making it. With a girl. Or two. So we were uninvited. He wheeled his Camaro back to the condo late. Wasn't about to stagger out of bed. Until he was ready.

My mother said Marcus was lazy. Grandpa defended him. Saying how all those girls were draining his energy. Grandpa defended most of what we did. Especially manly stuff. Building stuff. Shooting the marmots in the fields. How stupid they are, he would say. We'd take pot shots with the .22. Bullets would whiz right by their heads. They would look around. Go back to chewing. Not taking cover. Not knowing that we

held lethal power. Aimed towards them. Or when we were working on the table or the dog house. The power saw in the garage. If we were building or killing, Grandpa was there for us. Providing blockage from "women-folk."

The microwave sounded. Its hum died. I turned down Tommy Shaw on my Walkman. Over bullets I heard Grandpa's axe. I listened for the footsteps. Hand on the spray nozzle. I was sure they would come. Under my breath -- "Luke, we're gonna have company." My brother would not let a chance like this escape. Jimmy would be helping him. After it starts it's every man for himself.

I heard the third step creak. I was putting the tortilla on a plate. The nozzle still in one hand. Moved my free hand to the faucet and let it fly. Marcus flew around the corner. A QT two-quart cup in his hands. I let him have it full. In the face. He was on me. Pouring the water down the back of my shirt. Jimmy was behind him. As soon as Marcus had me down, Jimmy turned. Poured his own cup of water over Marcus's head.

"You fucker," shouted Marcus. I still had the nozzle in my hand. I pulled the trigger. Hit him again in the face. Cold well water. He was up. Chasing after Jimmy, who had gone to the nearest bathroom. For a refill.

"Lookout, Jimmy, or he'll give you a swirly." I grabbed the small wastebasket and filled it up halfway. Was off after them.

In the bathroom. A stand-off. Jimmy with a cup filled from the sink. Marcus with water from the toilet. Scooped up with his cup.

"Always two against one," he said. "Well, you little ass-wipes couldn't beat me if I only had air to throw."

"You mean even if you have water to throw, we're gonna wipe your ass all over the air," I said. Jimmy was the only one who spoke reason.

"Look, I want it as bad as you do, but we're going to be screwed when they come back if the place isn't dried up."

"That's the only way you're going to get screwed, so you better enjoy it," said Marcus.

"Yeah, and I see you getting plenty," I said.

"Hay-rack ride tonight, little brother."

"And Heather, right?" I said.

"You called it."

"The only Heather you're gonna get is what is growing up the back of your ass," said Jimmy. He threw his water in Marcus's face. Cut for the doorway. Marcus growled. Caught my bucket of water full in the chest. I fell in behind Jimmy. We were both out the door. Into the yard. Strolling up to Grandpa. At the wood pile. I dropped the bucket. Jimmy drank imaginary water. From his cup. We were slicking back wet hair.

Marcus whipped out the door. Trash can from the bathroom slopping water onto the hard dirt around the stairs to the back door.

"The fish are calling," my grandfather said. "Gear up."

"All right!" Jimmy and I both shouted.

"We'll be frying them up tonight," Grandpa said. Thumped his axe into the chopping block. Pulled his shirt down. Over the loose brown leather of his back. "There's nothing like Colorado Brookies frying up at the end of dusk," he said. He painted twilight over the sky. With a wave of his hand. Jimmy and I ran for the garage. "But . . ." Grandpa began. "Help your brother clean up the water in the house first."

Jimmy laughed. We moved inside. Got rags and towels. Did what Grandpa asked. Marcus was pissed. "Wait until the river, you little shits. Wait until the river."

2
Marcus Gale

Little fuckers. River water is colder. Grandpa will be pissed. Say I'm scaring the fish away. It'll be worth it. Hold their head under water. I'll pound him now. Pound him

in that house. The one he says he'll buy. After his first million. Shit. He'll never make thirty grand. My brother. The loser.

There's water on the floor. "Get down and lick it up," I say.

"Suck off," says Copper.

"Yeah, that's what you'll be doing to me later," I tell him.

"You'd like it too much," he says.

"Boys, boys . . . let's be civil," says Jimmy. He smiles. Throws wet towels at us. "Gear up!" he yells. Goes to the garage.

Copper can finish. Up the stairs. I get my knife. Grandpa gave us all one. Mine is best. Biggest. He made us trade him a penny for them. So we wouldn't hurt ourselves. So they weren't a gift. I scraped the blade against my thumb. Sharp. I slid it back in its sheath. Thought of Heather. Her sheath tonight. Screaming. Hot love, baby. I undid my belt to slide the sheath on. No. I tucked it in the lip of my jeans. Up front.

Grandpa let me drive. To our spot on the river. He pitched me the keys to the Bronco. They felt good in my hand. "Okay," he said. "We got everything? List."

"Four rods and reels," said Timberlake.

"Flies and worms," said my brother.

"Yeah, we got Copper, the little worm," I said.

"Yeah, you wish you were as long as me," he said. "Spinners, too."

"Creels and a net."

"Life jackets and waders," said Timberlake.

"Licenses," said Grandpa. "Okay. Into the ride."

The ride. That's Grandpa. Always trying to stay cool. Almost making it. He tries. He's not like Dad. Dad is a laugh trying to talk like us."

The wheel in my hand. Felt better than the keys. It's a bumpy ride in the Bronco. Toward the river. The road gets worse. No hurry through the resort down the road from the Ranch. Lots to see.

"Oh, will you look at that," said Grandpa.

He's talking about the number in the short shorts. Red halter top. Nice apple ass. Titties out the wazoo. A little old, but still . . .

"A little young for you, Grandpa," said Copper.

"I get older, they get younger. It's the nature of things." He adjusts the review mirror. Get a look at the front side. Mother nature," he says. "In my day, women only wore that in the bedroom."

Four o'clock. Two hours on the river. Dinner. A quick shower. Hay ride starts at eight. Plenty of time. Heather said she'd meet me there. Man, I can't wait to get my hands on that ass of hers.

"So, Jimmy, what's up after the river?" said Copper.

"Oh, I don't know. Hey. Isn't there a hay ride tonight? I heard that was a good way to meet girls."

I don't know. Marcus, what do you think," said Copper. They laughed from the back seat. I'd show them.

"Laugh all you want. But I'm the one who'll be getting pussy."

Grandpa laughed. That shut them up. Out away from the condos. Onto the highway. I kicked it down. Grandpa looked out the window. I watched the road. Carefully. Waited for the turn. We hit it fast. Dirt flew. A cloud of dust all the way to the clearing. We parked. No other cars. Even though it was only two miles from the Ranch.

"Good driving, Marcus. Safe, but not overly cautious. My boy," said Grandpa. I liked it when he talked like that. Whenever. Especially to me. "Okay, boys. Let's split up today. Each fish a different part of the river. That way we can maximize on the holes. Copper, you stay closer to me. We've got a little more casting work to do."

"Okay," said Copper. "Jimmy, stick close a minute. I gotta tell you my idea."

I grabbed my rod. Grandpa's spare hat. Flies on its brim. A creel. Checked my watch. "Back by 5:30 with the most fish," I said. Sly. They were usually late. I had to be out of here by six. Can't keep the babes waiting.

"What's the matter, Marcus. Got a hot date?" said Copper. I was already upstream.

An hour later. I'd already caught five. Brook trout. They were jumping onto the bank. For me. I dug in the creel. Found the ham sandwich I'd stolen from the fridge. Eat it now, less fish later. Less time. If I was still hungry later, buy Heather a milk shake. Start the give and take. Early as possible.

She was really pretty. From the north. Like Wisconsin or Michigan. At the resort for just a week. Her parents didn't want her to go into town. She wouldn't either. That way she wouldn't see me. With any of my town chics. Her parents wanted to relax. She wanted to work on her tan. And take her clothes off. For me.

I thought about Jen. Shut that down quick. Concentrate on summer. Jen was winter. We were just getting started. She liked me wild. She knew my future. College football in two years. Full-ride scholarship. The Pros. Coach said I'd be starting QB by mid-season.

Finished the sandwich. Cast again. Two more fish. I'd be the winner. Out-fish my brother and Timberlake together. My brother. His crazy ideas. He'd told Timberlake his latest. Whoever of the three of us who gets the first million buys a house. A waterfight house. We vacation there. We can have waterfights with our family. Indoors even. Nobody will get in trouble for getting the indoors wet. Because we'll own it. Grow up.

I was thinking tonight. I'd have a bottle of Jack and a coke. Warm her up. Then a quiet spot after the ride. Maybe the tent outside their house. I was thinking how good she'd feel. I heard shouts. I started to reel in. More shouts. I pulled my lure. Gathered

my gear. It was Copper. Probably shouting about a big fish. He was like that. We'd all show up. With my fish, it'd put us on the road back earlier. All the better.

I reached the Bronco. More shouts. I put my gear in back. Jogged around the bend. The shouts were clearer. I couldn't see anybody. They were coming from the river. I saw them. Stripped off my shirt. Into the river.

Water was freezing. I was shaking. Copper. Yelling for me and Jimmy. Grandpa in the water. Head bobbing in the water. Copper holding him. Around the middle. I tried for pulse. My hand shaking. I can't tell. Pulse. I pulled his head. Up. His eyes. Focus. On my face. Blue lips. "Grandpa," Copper said. "We're here. Help me get him out of the water." Jimmy. Me. Lift. The shore.

I hear talk. My men. They're talking.

"Quiet!" I shouted. They're quiet.

"Where's the medic?" I said. "Medic! Medic!" Where's the goddamn medic." My men are talking.

"Marcus?"

"Shut the fuck up. Medic! Medic! Lay down some cover fire so he can get in here, goddamn it." I shoved the two shoulders nearest me. "Fire you assholes! MEDIC!"

3
Jimmy Timberlake

"Shut him up," I yell at Copper. I check for a pulse. It's there, but weak, thready.

"Marcus?"

"MEDIC!" Marcus yells. He's down on his hands and knees, genuflecting, screaming at the top of his lungs. Then he's over on his side, lying by Papa Gale, sobbing, repeating "medic, medic, medic."

"Your Grandpa needs help," said Jimmy. "You remember CPR?"

"Yeah," said Copper.

"He is in shock right now. We need warmth. There are blankets in the Bronco. I'll get them then go for help. You monitor his pulse. Give him CPR if his heart stops."

"What about Marcus?"

"Worry about him later."

"Yeah, okay," said Copper.

I dug the keys out of the mud where Marcus had thrown them and was gone, running up the bank, then through the underbrush.

I slid the key into the lock on the hatch of the Bronco, breathing hard, grabbed the the yellow and black blankets, pitched them to the dirt and slammed the hatch. The keys were warm in my hand and I thought briefly about taking the truck to the river but knew I'd never make it through the underbrush. It was faster to run. Or should I just rush the truck to town? A blanket under each arm, my feet made the decision for me and I was back to the river.

Early training for this year's cross-country season, I joked in my mind, steeling myself against Papa Gale lying on the the mud of the bank. He will be all right. It's just minor. Copper knows what to do. Even if it's bad we can keep him alive while the paramedics get here. Keep him warm and pumping and alive. God, Marcus really flipped out. Too many Vietnam films.

I left the trail where we pushed our way through the underbrush a little more than an hour ago, putting my elbows out to help tear through the trees and weeds. When I burst onto the bank my arms were bleeding. Just a little more. Fuck, I'm out of shape. Around the bend a little more and . . .

I moved in and covered Papa with the blankets, putting one all the way up to his neck. "Stay with him," I said. "Talk to him." Copper nodded.

Copper then Creels and rods and dead fish then the Bronco.

Pedal to the fucking pavement, I was hauling ass before I knew it, cutting the curves tight into the inside, crossing lanes and breaking every driving idea Mom had ever slipped to me. The attendant at the desk looked stupefied and I had to shout at him twice and was about to slug him in the face when he got the message and turned to the phone and called the paramedics.

"Is there a doctor here?" I shouted out to the shoppers in the little convenience store near the lodge. "I need a doctor."

"I'm a med student."

"C'mon" I say and we were down and out and rolling towards the river. He was white-knuckled on the dash and slower than me on feet to the river. Copper was still there, trying to restrain Marcus, who was pounding on Papa Gale's chest. "Medic!"

"My God," said the med student. "What are you doing?"

I pulled Copper away, then tackled Marcus, knocking him off Papa Gale and into the mud, holding him as he clutched at me, still screaming. The med student leaned down next to Papa Gale, checked for a pulse, looked at me, and started CPR.

I saw Papa Gale in the sunshine, earlier that week, cutting strips on the circular saw set up in the backyard of the condo. It wasn't much of a back yard, a little ten-yard by ten-yard plot of some hearty grass staked off from the forest, fighting the sage brush that threatened its borders from three sides, the house as the grass's only ally. No shirt, but his skin was tan and still tight, I marveled, just a little flab around the middle, and it was more just like a loose sack than fat, like it had just been stretched a little too far.

He was making a dog house, so that in the winter, when we came skiing, if I could come, I could bring Sisko, my black lab stray I'd had for a year. He said a dog would be an asset out here, maybe catch some mice, good company on a run, a guard while we were on the slopes. I thought it funny at the time that he was building a dog house for my dog, but I guess it was as much Copper's as it was mine. And we were helping him,

Copper and me, around suppertime, waiting for Marcus and his TA to show up from an afternoon in town with a different kind of T and A. Papa Gale's directions were clear, and he showed us the equipment, and talked to us, and for a minute I didn't think about my Dad and wonder what it might be like if he were here, with us, still with Mom. For that moment I was wrapped tight with the cherrywood and the measuring tape, wound up in the whine of the blade and the easy voice of Papa Gale, the air clear and the gathering twilight as bright as the blue sky had been earlier. Marcus showed up and the tenor changed, and Papa Gale wanted to know all about the girls and how the car was running. Copper was lost in the instructions then and the call came for dinner and it all moved inside, pasta and the homemade wine blurring into the clang and pull of covered dishes and bubbling red sauce as the paramedics strapped him down to the gurney, IV threaded and an oxygen mask on his face. At least they didn't go ahead and put the sheet over his head. Good show. A cop was holding a blanket around Marcus's shoulders, trying to calm him down. I could hear Copper, asking continually, if his grandpa was going to be all right, even though I knew he knew better. The blonde med student's name was Kevin, and as I watched him study the paramedics and lend a hand where he could, his casual slacks and oxford dirty from mud and blood. The paramedics disappeared through the brush and we followed, the ambulance disappearing in a skid of sirens and light.

"Where's your father or mother," the cop asked Copper.

"At the lodge. It's mother. Or maybe back at the house."

The cop looked at me. "Can you drive? I think these two should come with us."

"Yeah, I'll follow you."

"Okay. We'll see if we can't find their mother."

"Sure," I said.

Behind the wheel of the Bronco I could smell him. I knew he wouldn't live. I knew this first week of the summer would be burying him, either here or back in Oklahoma. I knew there would be some questions about Marcus. I knew I would wonder

about his pole, and where in the river it was, and whether that lure attracted those brook trout we were planning to eat that night. I could see it laid out in front of me like a mile of white paint and asphalt creeping out of a fog, how it might change what lay ahead.

10-Watts

(1989)

Copper Gale

byte # 1. I gas the car. Coffee up. Crank the radio and head for the mountains. The KATT. 100.5 Oklahoma City. Classic Rock that Really Rocks. *Jenny, Jenny, who do I turn to?* Outside of Labette. *So why don't your turn me loose, turn me loose, turn me loose?* The land is level. The sky double blue. Like nowhere else. Preset buttons. Cruise the stations. KNRX. KRXO. Tulsa's KMOD and KMYZ. Even KSPI out of Stillwater. Then back to KATT. The map is out. My route. Plotted by stations -- KKBS in the panhandle. KZRR in Albuquerque. Durango's KDUR. KDNK in Carbondale. After that my station. *Now everybody, have you heard?* My First gig. The engine revs onto I-70. The air is filled with music -- powered by JBL. A destination. A small station. Like The Dungeon. An escape. *Hey little sister, what have you done? Hey little sister who's the only one?*

byte #2. We called it the Dungeon. It wasn't bad for a high school station. We had a ten-watt transmitter. You could hear it in town or over the school's cable channel. We had a few albums. A lot of 45's. Hour shifts that ran just like a class. Some teachers even let you tune in while you did your homework in class.

byte #3. My parents hardly ever listened. Dad in the car. Elevator stations. Easy listening, KEZO, you know the type. Mom only Paul Harvey at noon while she was eating lunch, an apple and a quarter pack of Newports. My brother was listening to tapes then. I knew all his music. But tapes aren't the same as radio.

byte #4. Muzak. Fraud. Somebody's real music gutted. A synthesizer instead of vocals. Xylophones instead of lyrics. No guitars allowed. Must be over 90 to enter. Or my Dad. He said it cleared his mind. He said he was old. He said it was his house. Alone I was Tom Cruise. Underwear and 100-Watts per channel. Then there were headphones. Late in the night. In my mind the back seat of his Chrysler. Leather seats. Rock n' Roll low on the radio. The stretch of an erection. Her smile. The arch of her back. Tan. Sweat. Muzak could never be that.

byte #5. Glory was new my junior year. Everybody wanted to know. Who's the new girl. Knowledge was power. It was unlike me. A dare to myself, I guess. I just went up and talked to her. I'm getting asked at basketball practice if I'm getting and and if it's any good. I didn't say much. I wanted it to go either way.

byte #6. 1980. MTV. VJ's. Music Videos. Game shows. Guitar riffs. Big hair. Dynamite girls in next to nothing. We were all hooked. It was the new thing. Musef even made videos of air bands at the school. The Go-Gos. Def Leopard. He shot some footage in the Dungeon. Showed it at the Talent Show. I remember his dark basement. No light except MTV. For hours. Even when we partied at his house. We called him Tube-Brain. I'm studying, man, studying, he said. Then he grinned. The power of T and A.

byte #7. Timberlake had a hatchet-job of a dodge Omni. He said it ran like a dying moose with rabies. Still. Cruising on a Friday night. *With my hair combed just right. Suspended in the masquerade.* Between Jonesy and Troy. Military style. Letter jackets. Powered up. Looking at the girls. Rumbling around Hardee's parking lot. Running and gunning through. *American Graffiti* had nothing on us. Hallie on the

radio. Nothing more to be said. *Cruisin' and playin' the radio. No particular place to go.* Man did we waste some gas.

byte #8. Marcus couldn't pronounce Cooper. He was almost three. But it came out Copper. It stuck. But Hallie Shaw liked it the first night I called into the KATT. Thought it was original. Thought it made me worth more. I called her more when she was on air. The request line. Then there was janitorial job advertised in the paper. A job at the KATT meant a job with Hallie. I got the job. That was all I thought about for a while.

byte #9. We went to opening the Dungeon on Friday and Saturdays nights. Everybody cruised and listened. Requests. Dedications. *I wanna hear some Rock 'n Roll, man.* I did the late shift. I'd listen to my stuff until Hallie came on. I knew everybody shifted over. I'd put on an album. Before, Glory would come down. After all that, I'd wonder. About the shallows of the ocean floor. Big sucking fish with bulging eyes. Discovery Channel fish. Can they sense radio? I'll wonder about Voyager. Up in space. Wonder if some fifteen foot green guy is putting the needle to that gold disk. *I can't get no . . . satisfaction.*

byte #10. You're listening to Copper Gale on KFRH, 101.3. Just in from the AP Wire Service. Early this morning Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavie, the current Shah of Iran, was unseated in what may be an overthrow of the Irani government. For a number of years Iran's religious leaders have been hostile toward the Shah, largely for not honoring a council of the country's highest clergy to help determine the constitutionality of legislation. Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, believed to be the Twelfth Imam in the line of successors to the Prophet Muhammad, comes to power as a result of the Shah being deposed.

byte # 11. A one-way road trip. I stop for a Coke and a fill-up. back on the road. I lift my sunglasses. Let it blind me. *I don't know why, anymore?* KKBS out of Guymon. Small power. Static from the Big Rock in Amarillo. *I don't know how this whole business started?* I will miss Hallie's voice in the night. On air at the same time. Just different places. Different time zones. *Don't know what I'd do without you babe, don't know where I'd be?* I reach the panhandle. Now this is flat. Curves of hills come to mind. Curves of bodies. Man, cut out that crap. That's how wrecks happen. *Do you suppose it's old age coming?*

byte #12. Glory was a a beatnik chick. What they called a "granola" in Colorado. Long straight hair. Baggy clothes. Lots of flannels. Tan. Into health. Afterwards we didn't talk as much. It was only one time. Then she was like she always had been. I wasn't like myself. It got to me. I wanted her for keeps. She looked at me sadly. Then not at all. I kept tabs on her, you know. Who she was with. Rumors were more powerful then than truth.

byte #13. One story is he climbed the water tower in the middle of the night. Half-crooked. A paint can and a brush. Everybody in the Midwest does that. They use spray paint now. Anyway, he was short. So he stood on the railing to finish her name. The crazy drunk bastard fell off. Would have killed him if he hadn't hit the tree. There's debate. Did the branch shave his arm off clean? Or did it catch and rip? Dropped him on the ground like a bloody baby in the fields.

byte #14. Fileman Wirick. Through the keyhole of a locked door I saw him. In the corner of the top floor of the downtown building that was The KATT. In the dusk a ham radio set-up. A huge map of the world on the wall. Pins with different colored

heads stuck in it. I could hear the clicks of the key pad. Morse code. I watched him every chance I got. There was something eerie about it. Maybe it was the missing arm.

byte #15. Rick Spicer was my supervisor at The KATT. He was a drunk. A real boozier. Hip flask in the desk drawer type. He told me I was on probation. A janitor on probation. Not as strange as you think. Can you keep a secret, kid, he said. I thought gay. Closet queen. I told him sure, better than anybody else he could find. He told me he had a pint of Jack Daniels. In his filing cabinet. I told him I knew.

byte # 16. Fileman let me in on his secrets. He showed me his maps. All the pin marks and places he'd touched. He watched me. His frame an old man's. Skinny shoulders. Thin waist. Wasted legs. The right arm missing. Something vital gone. But that radio still connected him to the night. It was alive. I noticed the odd colored peg. Blue. Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Deep in the wide plains. I touched it. Fileman smiled. That's me, he said.

byte #17. Summers. Timberlake and his mom would help us rent a cabin at The Ranch. She was a teacher. Timberlake and I met when we were pretty young. He never said much about his dad. I remember. He'd find these stray dogs around. In town. Picking around the dump down the road from Wildwood resort. Winters back home, he'd always run with a dog. Loose. Never on a chain. When his dog was around he was different. Connected to another planet. The planet of the dogs.

byte #18. At night I'd bring Hallie Shaw into my room. That voice and mine in whispers. In the darkness she'd take me everywhere. Over the country. The Earth. On and on. Out past Voyager's terrain. Weaker but still perceptible. Somewhere. Still

going. The voice box boom of a stormy World. An invisible massage by a rock and roll masseuse.

byte #19. Glory was a year ahead of me. After she graduated she went to school in Montana. Ecology. She said the Earth had it bad. I barely knew I was on the planet. Maybe that was it. I saw her once when she came back home. I brought up The Dungeon. 106.9 FM, I said. I like to think she smiled. When I was in college, I'd think about her. Wonder how she was. Recreate it in my mind.

byte # 20. *Why not stay all night long?* I didn't make it by the white house. She isn't there, anyway. California I hear. *You want a piece of my heart?* College done, too. Those few women. Deborah. Broken hearts. Other places. *Don't know what it is, but I can't live without her.* Even Timberlake's Mom. *Would you take me in when I'm lonely in the dark?* Timberlake says there will be better women in Colorado. Fileman says this is a good first gig. Picking up KTAO. Taos. Solar -powered so they say.

byte #21. Midnight. Timberlake shook me awake. Hands fiddling with the dials of a clock radio like everybody had then. I could see his bare chest in the glow. His arms. Through the static . . . *It's the bitchin' hour and you're locked on to KOMA.* A lone low voice. . . *Hangman is comin' down from the gallows and I don't have very long . . .* A scream. The slam of power chords.

byte #22. The students brought in their own records. We hit the thrift stores in Tulsa for old stuff. *Saturday Night Fever.* The Bay City Rollers. Old stuff that was big once and then faded. We liked to play them. I found a lot of old Motown. Even blues. A dollar a pop for a vinyl. Vinyl full of long and low to the roots.

byte #23. Timberlake was always talking me into something. The Cross Country team. Man, I could've killed him. But if you got a letter for band you were a pussy. A fag. Nobody wanted that brand. So I stuck it out for a jacket. I would had nightmares that fall. Stumbling in the dirt. Jimmy way out in front.

byte #24. Besides the radio gig I did some theatre. Marcus called me a fag-hag. He does Shakespeare but won't shake his spear, he said. What are brothers for. But my last year I got the lead. *Children of a Lesser God*. It wasn't the Hurt/Matlee version. That sex was too hot. But I got to make out. Get prone. With Kathy Jameson. She was a pro. It's theatre, she said, and went for it. Marcus wasn't there to see it. But he heard.

byte #25. I guess we all had our marks. Timberlake finally made it with Cate Marrin. In the stockroom at the IGA. Hometown girl in the Hometown Store. Marcus had his pick. He liked to brag about our parents' bedroom. Or up against a urinal in McDonald's. And me? Glory in The Dungeon. A long-play feature of some old Sam Cooke I'd found. An obvious influence on the vocals of Journey's Steve Perry. She'd gotten out of her math class. She led me to the back room. Laid me out on the carpet. Did me hard and strong. I thought of Hallie's long hair. That voice. I wanted Glory to talk to me. Wanted to hear her say something. Wanted that voice. Sam Cooke just sang *You Send Me . . . Send Me*.

byte #26. Timberlake says we shared. The first one. Billy Beer. I don't remember it like he does. He relished it. I laughed at him. The I drank. Thought it was pretty bad. Beer from the brother of the President. How sanctioned can it get. We moved on. Michelob. Bud. Lowenbrau. Schafers. Timberlake even tried Guinness and Bass. Black and Tan in the bars. No more Billy Beer. Carter lost. They stopped brewing. Who'd want to look like Billy anyway.

byte #27. Marcus washed his car. It was religion. His buddies would come by and watch. Make fun. But Marcus just said hygiene. Smelling like Aqua Velva and cigarette smoke and leather. They all asked about Hallie. They all had their thoughts about her. I'd lie. Say she was the babe they all imagined. It was funny. She didn't look like what they imagined. She was just okay. But I still wanted her. Everybody has their qualities. That voice. I wanted to wrap myself up in it. Feel her breathe into me.

byte #28. At The Ranch in Colorado there was a crawl space. The first summer after Grandpa died I stole the key. Timby and I undid the padlock. Went down into the dark. Came up with two bottles Grandpa's Special. Homemade dandelion wine. Timberlake grinned. We'd re-cork them filled with water and yellow dye #5. Grandpa had been saving them. Ten years ago. I figured I'd be long gone by then. Have a laugh on the old man. But he left before I did. We got blasted in Timberlake's bedroom to the rattle of his clock radio.

byte #29. The KATT was panelled. Looked like a woodie station wagon turned inside out. Dark green shag carpet. Faded. Cigarette holes. The chair behind the console was padded. Ripped out. Padded. Duck-taped. Padded again. Whammo Bammo. Electric.

byte #30. The Kid. His parents came to The Ranch every summer. They drug him along. Sullen and silent. We tried once to get him out. On the river. Even fishing. He was glued to his game. Cramped up in the little back room at the resort store. Space Invaders. His initials are probably still there for high score. It was a trance. A psychic landscape. His fingers barely moving. Power to annihilate those little green creatures came right off his skin like sparks.

byte # 31. *Saw your face and what could I do?* KZRR, KLSK, KTMN. Power from Albuquerque. Strange name. *So, baby, what's a holdin' you back?* Shoulders pop with isometrics. Sun is going down. *Why ya got to give me a fight?* I can feel it. A tightness in my groin. New place. New face. *Oh, can't you see, you belong to me?*

byte #32. Marcus and his cronies in his Camaro. They would race us in Timberlake's Omni. *Want to race.* They'd laugh. Marcus would rev the engine. He'd look at me. That strange look. Almost sad, now that I think about it. Weird. The lights would turn. Somebody'd shout *In the hole, man, makes the whole man, baby.* They'd be gone. Marcus got plenty in those days. He used to say that pussy grew on trees. No originality. But the girls he went out with weren't looking for originality.

byte #33. First election. Reagan all the way. We sat at lunch and debated. I took them all on. Love the actor. Love the cowboy. Love the Monkey. Bonzo-baby. I had them convinced. Marcus egged me on. He thumbed down at the Democrats. The Wimp and the Woman. I pulled that lever. The curtains shut. I couldn't do it. Power of the vote. Mine was a straight ticket. Mondale. Ferraro. Every Democratic name on the ballot. Just goes to show you. Never know where the liberals will come from.

byte #34. Later I asked Timberlake how he got it. That signal. In the mountains? He smiled. When KOMA signs on at night from Texas, they fire up their 500,000 watt transmitter that's over the border in Mexico. They don't have any rules in Mexico, he said.

byte #35. Nicaragua. Grenada. One morning you're eating your Wheaties. Then there's fighting on the news. Overnight invasions. Covert operations. Finger-wagging

and NRA card carrying members. They treat it like it was Communism. Sandinista. A girl named Sandinista would have to be shockingly good-looking.

byte # 36. Nights when Spicer was passed out, I'd clean the booth. He told me never to clean there. His territory. But as he snoozed, I'd take his keys. Look through the offices. Not touching anything. Just looking. A coffee cup. Paperwork. Sound Carts. A long blonde hair from Hallie Shaw's high-backed chair.

byte #37. I remember staying over. Timberlake's house until late all the time. His mom was cool. Sometimes she was in bed. Other times out, maybe on a date. Marcus would drop by. It was always a toss-up. Where we all stood in relation to each other. Who held the balance of power. Brothers and a best friend. There were things unspoken. Sometimes it would be the three of us. Around the kitchen table. Some beer we'd copped. Talking. Late night talk. Waiting easily on a Red Baron Pepperoni pizza from the oven. There were other times, too.

byte # 38. We had a parent's night at The Dungeon. Open Station. We'd teach them how to spin some discs. Really old tunes. I love those old tunes now. Mom came. Brought Sinatra. Wore black jeans and a Bryan Adams concert T she lifted from my drawer. She was so cool that we let her run a full hour. Weird. Caught her smoking in the little back room. She exhaled smoke in my direction. She offered the cigarette. I waved it away. Good boy, she said. She dragged heavy and sorted the racks for another tune.

byte #39. Fileman's wife died. Before I left for college. She was something. Beauty. Brains. Something. Worth the loss of an arm. Fileman missed her more than he could say. Maybe that's why. He took me on. Disc Spinner of the future. Even Morse

code. But I couldn't replace her. They say the severed arm was hanging in a tree. Still clutching the paint can in rigor. The Midwest. The Heartland.

byte #40. At a roller rink at the edge of town. Glory and I went once. I fell down until I could barely walk. She thought it was sweet. I remember the carpet on the walls. Musty smells. The oiled floor. They gutted it a few years later. It stood empty. Then became a bottle shop. By then I was legal. I bought some Schafer's and drank it in my car in the parking lot. Dreamed about us taking off our skates. Kissed. Slow danced in a corner to the sound of Billy Joel. Cast rollers on wood.

byte #41. Dwight Stones. The Lanky Man. Mr. Olympics. Clark Kent Superman of the High Jump. No pole, just the bar. And the body. Up and over. Up and over. Timberlake loved him. He was one high point in '76. The other was *Star Wars*. Stones had finesse, Timberlake said. He didn't win. Warming up for the 80's. *Prime Time*. Then the boycott. We had moved on. High school. Timberlake was running now. Breaking records. But it was there. I saw it in his eyes. The power players. What a waste, Timberlake said. What a waste.

byte #42. Luke Skywalker in a war movie. *The Big Red One*. It was okay. Wasn't *The Guns of Navarone*. Hamill was good. I kept waiting for him to flip it out though. His lightsaber. Whip off some German heads. Then there was *Corvette Summer* and *The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia*. I heard he did *Elephant Man*. Off Broadway. Car wrecks and marriages. So much for the power of the Force. Luke Skywalker. Washed up.

byte #43. I'd have Timberlake drive me Rawlins Court. Every night we were out. The white house. Sometimes Glory's light would be on. Sometimes not. It didn't really make a difference. I guess. I just liked that her house was still there. I felt like there was a piece of me somewhere inside. Pressed between cool sheets. Clean.

byte #44. *Don't, don't you know what kind of man I am?* Durango. KDUR. For Lewis College. One rung above The Dungeon. *So you think I got an evil mind?* Maybe I can bury it all in the valley. No sound from other stations. KMIS won't reach out. My voice will stop at the edge of the valley. No skipping ridges and static. *Psych one, Psych two, what do you know?* I'll stop at a 7-11 for a refill. Coffee black. Stars are out. KDNK out of Carbondale. Weak but on the air. *Are you lonely just like me?*

Tilt-a-Whirl

(1994)

Fileman Wirick

I don't run the big rigs anymore. Not the Cyclotron. Not the Octopus. Not the Spinner, Periscope Up, not even the two-wheeled Ferris. I wonder why sometimes, but never bring it up. I ran what I wanted to when I had both arms, had clout, but these days I don't care that much. Maybe it's because to the younger ones I must seem old. They see their own sallow skin and faded tattoos in the one blue-veined hand I still have. Maybe it's liability. Insurance for Carnies, who would have thought. But they've got to feed their kids and pay the hospitals like the rest of us. It's business to some of them. Then again they may just figure me for a cripple, thinking a guy with two arms would be faster, be able to pull the lever back quicker, apply the brakes with twice the power, maybe able to reach his two good arms up into the night air and grab the cab of the Ferris wheel and drag it to a halt with bare hands, like somebody in a wheel-chair grabbing two fistfuls of spokes to keep it from skidding out of control. Anything that a one armed-man might not be able to do. I don't mind. I understand.

Now when they pull into Labette every year, they look me up. I see them haggard from a long night on the road, greasing up in the diner where I eat breakfast and take my coffee before the morning shift at the radio station, and one will come up, clad in his dirty Levi's and stoop-shouldered jean jacket and say "Hey, Tilt." Or those who've been around a while might say "Ring Toss," and smile. They knew me by either name. That's an invitation out, to whatever field they are setting up in, an invitation to swing a hammer and hoist a beam, an invitation to run the tamest of rides, but a ride none-the-less.

The Tilt-a-Whirl was the oldest ride the carnival had. Each year, while the kids are riding the newest death-defying, G force-pulling rides and the town sharks were

trying their luck at the games, I stood by the worn sloping wood floor, guarding the red, white, and blue bumpers that sat, lazy eyes, old southern style grand seats, or what the Queen in *Alice in Wonderland* would have died to have as a throne, guarding them as they sat in their grease- etched grooves, waiting to creak into long, lone circles, later in the night. A strange ride for a one-armed man to run. But I take their offer nonetheless. I know people, lots of the town folks. Some better than others. Copper Gale shows up now and then and we get drunk together and talk about the old times at the KATT in Oklahoma City. And tonight I watch Jimmy Timberlake, Copper's best friend, and a carnie named Debra come towards me, hand in hand. Jimmy lost his mother some weeks back so I hear, and stayed on in Labette after he buried her. He swings a hammer and thinks about finishing his PhD from some school in the West. I imagine he will, but I see that look in his eye, how he's feeling himself back into his own life and waiting for it to take hold. He buys two tickets and he and Debra climb aboard the Tilt-a-Whirl, not worrying about when I will start it or how long it will last. Just ready to hold hands and be whisked around for what it's worth.

When I came on board, 35 years ago, with two good arms, I wanted to be a carnie, see the world, live the tent-life, hear the screams, watch the eyes pop at the freak show and the free show, figure out how all the games could be won, watch the work-weary farmers and their families, after paying for butter and cloth and buying seed, make an extra stop for a night, buy some tickets, send their kids for a thrill on the Battleram or the Roller Coaster, kiss the Mrs. right in the Midway as that beefy carnie with the broken top-hat handed the great big pink bear over the sparkling belly-up-to-the-bar counter top, shouting "Step Right Up and Win Right Here!" Watch them go home on foot or in their cars, wearier than when they started, but with a dull spark that would sprinkle their sleep and wake them refreshed. At seventeen I was a dreamer. Thought I could see into men's souls. The life of a carnie, setting myself up as a fortune teller and wish maker at once.

My father wouldn't hear of it. "College, Law School, Inheritance," he said. I didn't want any of that, said I was going to do something meaningful. He was scared. It makes me laugh, how he was afraid of such a seventeen year-old punk like me. But my father made a mistake: he gave me money for high school graduation. Money that I could do whatever I would like with, provided I went to college. He thought cars, maybe a house in Lawrence to go to The University of Kansas. Lots of wine, women, and song. Instead, I took the money and put a down payment on the the biggest rig from a Carnival Ride Manufacturing Plant in New Jersey I had it shipped out to the City, the only two-loop roller coaster in the Midwest. I signed myself on as a regular. When the carnival left my hometown before dawn two weeks after commencement, I sat shotgun on the lead truck, not telling my father where I was going because I didn't know myself.

I became Ring Toss after the first three months with the carnival. I had spent my off time at that game, odd-sized rings a contestant threw at bottles of Coke stacked together in a wide grid. All the carnies knew there was no real secret to this game. It wasn't shaped oddly, or weighted to give the players the slip. There were no extra sturdy balloons here, no lead-lined milk cartons impossible to knock over with the hardest of fast balls. It was pure physics and practice, the one natural law game on the Midway. And I practiced. I practiced until I couldn't miss.

And one night, I became the spectacle. I left the Cyclotron in the hands of another carnie, an eager kid named Amos, and made my way to the ring-toss table. I bought a ticket and played my turn like an honest citizen. Like any denizen of a neighboring burg, I took my three rings from Daniel, an old hand, and tossed them. Then three more. Then three more. People began to gather. I tossed one in each hand. Then one from each hand simultaneously. Three rings at once. Off my feet. Spun off my nose. Backwards. Blindfolded. I couldn't miss. I still can't, though my days of throwing with two arms are over.

* * * * *

In buying my ride and becoming Ring Toss, I was shaking off the dust of my home town, what I believed was my past, revealing the first leg of my life -- wanting to see something of the world before I settled down to building a bonfire to light the place up. I was still a boy, really, hanging on the ropes with the other boys. Sure, there were some old hands, some real old-timer, die-hard carnies, tied to it because of drink or thrill or lack of school or the idea of quitting and doing something else never occurred to them. And then there were others, freaks they were called then, back before quotas and being PC. They had no place else to go. Now I see them running regular lives. I guess a one-armed man like myself might have been a freak in those days, of a tamer sort, anyway. But I have had my regular life as well. Zikes gave it to me.

Zikes was our bearded lady, even though Zikes was a man. It was the carnival, and illusion swung either way. Later, in college, when I finally did go, I took a human sexuality course and learned more about estrogen and testosterone and the hormones running amuck in the human body than I could ever put to good use, and I thought of Zikes. He was round and large and soft and I remember squeezing his flabby arm, feeling beneath his atrophied muscles and dermis that second layer of fat that most women possess. His features, actions, gestures and voice were that of a female. Blindfolded, no one could ever guess he was male, except for the course hair that sprouted from his face in the best tradition of Henry the Eighth. So we dressed him up in a large flouncing gown, gave him an extra snug pair of tights to smooth out his privates, and he became our bearded lady, leading our gallery of freaks. He hid his hands as best he could, for they were the one give away -- they were the hands of a workman. He was foreman then as well, the man in charge of making sure the big rigs were safe and sane, battened up and tied down. He carried the huge mallet we used for the Bell-Ring, and climbed each machine without a safety net, easing his huge frame like a glob of Elmer's over every

inch, checking from the spikes that set the rides in the ground to the pins that held each cart in place, each arm extended, each rotator cuff spinning and gyrating, rounding off into the neon glow of the carnival night. Zikes loved two things. He loved swinging that mallet over the work done by the other carnies, making sure it was a tight ship, and he loved Camilla.

There was something about Zikes, a sadness I guess, that made me do what I did, made me crazy one night, a little tight on Daniel's homemade hooch, the bloodlife of the carnies as he called it. Something about Zikes that made me howl at the moon the night I lost my arm, even though it was long in the coming.

Before all that though, Zikes started leaving the booth of the bearded lady a half-hour before the carnival shut down for the night. He took off his scarves, washed off the make-up, pulled on an old baseball cap, traded the gown for the oversized jeans of a carnie or farm worker, and made his way to the back row of the Tease Tent, as we called it then, to watch Camilla do her final dance of the night.

Or at least her final public dance. There was always some older man or young boy who was raptured by her beauty and charm, the silky touch of her scarves and veils, pulled in and pulled under by the gloss of those eyes. For someone who gave her that look, and a little extra, Camilla would leave her door open of a late night or early morning. Many an old man's fantasy came true in her trailer, many a young boy's initiation to greater things was given a robust start. And occasionally, for a lonely carnie, or one with golden hands of a night, she would weave her spells. I remember my night with her, after I was dubbed Ring Toss. She told me to bring my rings and to make her my playing field. I still remember how we laughed wild laughter, drunk on our lust and cheap wine, how we tossed those rings onto each others' bodies, how she gave me the prize of her warmth.

* * * * *

Weeks later I couldn't get Zikes out of my mind. I knew he, everybody, knew about my night with Camilla. It was only another in a long line of stories of the road, no details shared, but a hint to hold against the long nights shaking in the cold and the rough ride of a truck. But not for Zikes. He took it personally.

Every night he was there for Camilla's dance, shadowed in the back row, his eyes not quite cleaned of mascara and eye-liner. The men who shared the back row would shy away from his bulk, and I knew he was soon to be found out as our bearded lady, the man who was a freak but wasn't. This was long before I knew anything about androgyny, long before anyone could appreciate that idea, let alone bottle it and sell it on television. Calvin Klein and his "One" cologne -- what a capitalist. Many of those nights Zikes would make his way up to Camilla, smile a smile, half-hearted, torn, a lover and a worshipper and a sister all at once, and Camilla, though a carnie for life, a mixer in the strange and wonderful, never had room for Zikes, could never take him in with more than a smile and an eyeful. It worried me. I could feel Zikes' presence, his shadow outside, prowling the tents and trailers whenever Camilla took someone to her bed. His lust and jealousy had kindled, heating up and rolling around the Midway like a palpable thing, a lioness in heat wanting to be purged by a bloodbath. I lost sleep, waiting for the time when that strange concoction would overflow.

Instead, as it is in carnival life, something else happened. We rolled into Labette, Oklahoma, pitched the tents, hooked up the rides, greased ourselves at a hole-in-the-rain diner, and I met Marina and lost my head. . . and my arm.

She poured my coffee every morning and came to the Midway every night. She rode whatever ride I tended over and over again, cheered me as I did my ring-toss show for her. Let me ride with her and hold her hand, the other carnies shaking their heads, feeling the fabric of their coded life slipping just a little, making way for me to squeeze out, if it came to that.

The night before we were to leave Labette, I played the ring-toss for only rings and gave them all to Marina for bracelets which she wore up and down her arms, thick around her thin ankles, braided into her beautiful hair. I told her I loved her and would she come with us, swing aboard and let me hold her over the hot summer plains of Oklahoma. Zikes said I'd lost it, so he procured a cure -- Daniel's hooch -- and drank with me that night. A celebration of love, he called it. It was even him who leant me the can of paint and the brush.

I think Zikes was pretty sure if he could get me up on that water tower that I would manage to kill myself. How this would give him vindication for anything I don't know, don't think he knew. But looking back on it all I think he thought if he could help kill anybody who'd slept with his Camilla, it would just make him feel better.

"C'mon, lover-boy," said Zikes that night, looking like a hay-roll outside Camilla's tent.

"He ain't even got time to drink a little with us ole regulars anymore. Got to see his little lady," said Half-Empty, a midget most called H. E. for short. H.E. was a clown and a juggler, played the father of the Doll Family. He was a pessimist, a glass half-empty kind of man, and it always seemed he lived out of a sort of revenge for being short. Daniel was there too, silent as ever, his thick hand fisting the neck of a clear bottle of what he called his nitroglycerin.

"What do you say, lover-man? Drink a slug to your new love," said Zikes, smiling his toothy grin. Behind the mascara he still had on I couldn't see his eyes, but somehow I couldn't say no. We walked the streets of Labette, swilling out of Daniel's bottle, and when he finished that one he produced another . . . and another. I remember looking up at the stars in a field just a little ways from some big buildings -- what I thought was Labette's college.

"Know what that is?" said H. E. pointing to the buildings.

"Nope," I slurred.

"State Hospital," H. E. said. "State Hospital. The Nut House," he shouted. "The Loony Bin."

"Really," I said.

Zikes chimed in. "Right-your-ass-really. Them folks is crazy as dung-heap rats. You know they'll wet their pants on that damn big roller coaster of yours." He laughed. "You'll be cleaning their business outa them there seats."

"They come to the carnival?"

"Sure," said Zikes. "Some of'm stay, too. Why there was a guy that took up with us, just a few years back, scared as a fraidy cat, couldn't talk a whole sentence together at once, but he could play the piano by ear just so. If he could hear it once, he could play it. And he knew exactly what time it was, what day, at anytime. Wake him up in the middle of the night, no clock or watch, and he could tell you exactly, to the minute, what the time was. Couldn't feed himself or find his way to the Thomas H. Crapper, but he tinkled a mean set of ivories." He laughed again, took a swig. "Course they caught him. Took him back in that big black car, him screaming the time out over and over. See him up there now?" Zikes pointed to a lighted window, where there was a shadow. "Why I bet a fella could climb that there water tower and get a real good look at him, right down to his drool." My swimming head followed Zikes hand, and a water tower suddenly raised itself out there in the dark. I'd hadn't seen it when we'd walked up, though I should have seen two of them.

"Hey," said H.E. "What's that up there on that water tower?"

"Letters," said Daniel.

"Not just letters," said Zikes. "Love letters. Why I bet that girl of yours -- what's her name -- Marina, that's right. I'll bet Marina's name is all over the place up there."

"Shut your trap," I said.

"And if it ain't, it should be." He poked me in the ribs. "With your name right there under it."

"With a big LOVE between you'all," said H.E.

From where Daniel had produced all of his liquor, he produced a silver canister and a brush.

"How about it," said Zikes. "You two will be the talk of the town."

I was beginning to feel a little queasy in the stomach at the time. "No, I think . . ."

"You need some help over to the ladder?" said Zikes. "C'mon boys, let's get him up."

They grabbed me by the arms and pulled me like a sack of chains over to the ladder of the water tower. Daniel put the paint brush in my back pocket and Zikes put the handle of the paint can between my teeth. "Now Climb, boy, for love."

I mumbled a "no."

"CLIMB" shouted Zikes suddenly, into my face, his eyes almost glowing. I instinctively climbed a couple of rungs to get away from his frame. "Climb, you little bastard," he growled.

Soon I was up above them, climbing the dark wall of night. I guessed they would leave and I could come down, but I heard their shouts long after they should have ceased. Finally I reached the catwalk that surrounded the water tower's drum. And there was nothing up there. just clear clean silvery metal. It glittered almost, and I guessed it was new. One of the first water towers in the state to be built I found out later. Zikes was right. Talk of the town.

I pulled the top off the paint can and dipped the brush. After I painted "Fileman" as low as I could get it I looked out over the town. There were a few lights out there still on. One I was sure was Marina's, and I was right. She was up, writing a letter for me to take on the road, scenting it with her perfume, a thing young women did back then. A signature scent. Staring out at those lights, breathing the cool air, I realized this was it. My mark. My meaningful something. I didn't need to paint the words. They been voiced and were still out there on the air, humming around my head. I watched the pre-

dawn mist begin rising off the deep green fields before I jumped up on the railing to paint the rest of it. I remember just finishing the E in "loves" before I fell over the side into the darkness.

When I woke up two days later, Marina was by my bedside and the carnival was gone, packed up and moved on to the next town, the next show. Zikes had left me a note, telling me what he figured I wouldn't remember about the accident, and saying that they surely could find something for a one armed-man to do. Instead I asked Marina to marry me, bought a grain mill and a radio station in town, and sent the proof of purchase for my ride deeded over to Zikes. He died about the same time as Marina, his head and face bald from the chemotherapy.

These days I run the radio station in Labette, the town I settled in after I left the carnival, the town I came back to after college, and the town I've never left. It was in this town that I was Ring Toss, became Tilt, lived my regular life, and gave away much, my arm being the first to go.

My father died and he left me, his only child, hundreds of his play toys, racetracks to radio stations, horse ranches to honky-tonks. I sold most, kept the ones that interested me. Declared myself an inheritance-made millionaire and a self-made disc jockey. Today the radio still plays, and a number of those I schooled on the works of Sam Cooke to Sammy Hagar still pilot the air waves across the nation. Not too many days go by that I don't here from Sam Williams, Wince Jackson, or Copper himself. If I ever travel, I'll have familiar voices on the radio and warm bunks to slip into after hometown delivery pizza and imported beer. I am probably the only Morse Code user of the most loaded HAM radio the U.S. knows, but I still spin discs a couple of shifts a week, which was Marina's idea, shortly before she died a few years ago. Marina was my lovely wife, named after soothing water by her father, a fisherman. Marina said she always liked to

hear my voice coming over the radio, rattling through the old speakers in the gramophone, singeing its way around books of matches and Kerr jars of canned peaches in the sunny kitchen of our house. She said she trusted it like nothing else, roughing its way into her days and hours, the real me, the whole of what I was and have always been. She said she could hear that whole in my voice. Marina knew me like no one else.

In some ways it's right that I have the lever of this ride for lovers, this ride that is nearly broken down and certainly rusty, yet still keeps on going, still lurches those carts into a quiet round, the people inside being rushed together, then pulled back apart, rushed together again. When I pull the lever, I see things I know are real but aren't seen by anybody else. Zikes swims past in a cart, like a blink of an eye, and when the cart goes by again Camilla is there with him, knitted close together from the force of their spin. And in a single cart is Marina, alone, and I can picture myself there with her someday, sweeping like dancers over that smooth wooden floor. I watch Jimmy Timberlake and the carnie Debra and the others shout and hold each other as the carts twirl, and think how it's really something to feel when you ride in those carts, hands tight on the bar in your lap, the spin just enough to make it all hazy and green.

Country Western Love Music

(1994)

He moves through his mother's empty house to her bedroom, the funeral having come and passed a month ago or more. He doesn't count, the furniture gradually disappearing, sold to a store, given to friends of the family, her clothes to the Salvation Army and Goodwill. He stands before the closet for a moment, then reaches into the darkness. The barrel of the .22 is cool and the stock feels lighter than he remembers.

At the front of the house he hears the air conditioner thrumming and feels coolness again from the brushed brass knob before he opens the door. He steps onto the stoop, out into the heat, slips the key into the dead bolt and listens for it to lock. He cradles the .22 and moves across the front lawn, barely aware of the blue above him. Checking for the medicine tucked inside his baseball cap, he finds it, runs his hand over the front pocket of his work jeans and feels the two bullets there, lying close together, like lovers, ribbed in the darkness of the denim.

Jimmy Timberlake sat in the high leather-backed chair facing the Spanish Galleon desk in the wood-panelled, cigar-smoke-filled, pinhole office of Wright and Sons, listening to a sound he hadn't heard in years -- Merle Haggard singing "I Always Get Lucky With You." Mason Wright, the father in the law firm, passed Jimmy's two copies of his mother's Last Will and Testament across the expanse of the desk with a reach like a longshoreman. A scrawled X was marked beside the lines that waited for Jimmy's signature.

Glancing over the documents, Jimmy signed both copies. Merle's croon moved into something newer, a tune from one of the long-haired country stars he guessed were rejections from the rock scene. Travis Tritt, maybe. Mason Wright cleared his throat.

"There is one last item," he said. "I've made arrangements for the veterinarian. Your mother didn't stipulate anything about this matter in the will . . ."

"And this matter is," said Jimmy, his voice tired of Mason's rhetoric, but buttered, sweetened.

"Your mother's horse. Sugar, I believed she called it. It's out at Marrin's stables, where she kept it. It's sick."

"Sick," said Jimmy. "How sick?"

"Doc Girard said the tumor was over thirty pounds. Like I've said, I've arranged."

"Thanks, but you've done enough already." Jimmy stood to leave.

"Girard said it would be best to . . . put it down," said Mason.

Jimmy nodded, moved through the secretary's office into the noonday Oklahoma heat.

As he squints in the bright sunlight along the highway, he thinks about his sunglasses lying in on the desk in his old bedroom. The sounds of rubber and asphalt, smooth pistons and weak mufflers, tailpipes and backfires assault him. Pulling the brim of his cap lower, he moves off the shoulder into the bluegrass of the ravine that runs along this stretch of 177. It is lined with trash, cigarette butts and packs, cans of cheap beer kids in high school toss out after cruising, paper half drowned in mud -- "road lint" his mother used to call it. He doesn't look up, concentrates on each step, the .22 resting in the crook of his right arm; still, he can feel the prairie stretch out away from him, long and lean, from late in the morning on down to dusk. The skin of his neck crawls briefly. Every town in Oklahoma, even one the size of Labette, is only a wide spot in the hot summer steamroller of grass and land.

His shirt is damp. He lays the gun across the tracks, strips to the waist, knocking the ball cap into the dirt. His chest shines with a sweat sheen, and he wipes his hand across it, thinking of his brown skin, brown from just one month's work here, the

Choctaw blood in his heart and veins, that one small part of a past that makes his hair blacker than most, helps him get a good tan, might get his name on a tribal role someplace if he applied. He picks up his cap, tucking the vial of medicine back inside it, screwing it down over his drenched hair. He never would apply, though, looking too European against the full bloods in what used to be their territory.

The place was packed, mostly young kids. He'd forgotten that everybody in college in Oklahoma gets trashed on Thursday night so they can go home over the weekend, see their parents and their girl or boy back home, go to church on Sunday and pray for forgiveness for Thursday night. It seemed really foreign to him. If he'd remembered he would have taken a cab downtown to some quiet place, but he was here now, so he ordered something dark from the tap and sat at the bar, watching.

Lots of fraternity boys and hometown-turned-sorority girls on the floor, doing a line dance to what he figured was called the "Boot-Scoot Boogie." Tight jeans, creased by an iron, and ropers with no back pockets on the women, everything from band-collared collages of color to the plain black t-shirt up top. Cowboy hats dotted the rows and columns like crows on fence posts. Jimmy nursed his beer, feeling the bass beat vibrate in the hollow cavity of his chest. He looked down, and the new boots shone snakeskin against the sawdust on the floor.

When he looked up he saw an Indian at the edge of the dance floor, alone, missing about half the steps, but under the thick black-rimmed glasses, his smile stretched wide across his face. He was holding a beer bottle in each hand. The Indian's hair was black and shining, very clean, long and pulled back into a pony-tail. He had a barrel chest and a wide face and sported a black cowboy hat with a rattlesnake hat band, and three young girls were dancing around him. He was older than the others on the floor, and when the song ended, Jimmy watched him wander back over to a table where two other men sat, one with a woman on his lap. The Indian sat down, hard. A waitress came to the table

with a tray full of bottles, leaned over and kissed the second man. Jimmy smiled, pulled his beer from the bar and walked over.

"Troy Camplin," he said.

The blonde-haired man turned his eyes up. His face was sunburned, and grew redder when he saw Timberlake. His pupils hardened. "Well, Jimmy. Good to see you. Been awhile. I believe the last time was when I beat your ass into the ground."

"If I remember right, we never did fight, although you talked mighty big about it."

"I talked?"

"Yeah."

Camplin smiled. "I guess you were always the silent type. Studious."

"I'm impressed," said Jimmy. He nodded his head toward the waitress who had moved on to another table. "I guess she's taught you some civility. The Camplin I knew would have used the word nerd, with colorful adjectives added for flavor."

"I've got to consider my audience, professor. Or soon-to-be. Pull up a chair. I see they haven't schooled you out of drinking that dark shit yet."

Jimmy laughed. Troy called to Amy, the waitress, to get Jimmy another of "whatever-he-was-going-to-be-finishing-soon." Then he looked back, eyed Jimmy. The pupils grew wider, softened.

"Sorry to hear about your mom."

"Thanks," said Jimmy.

Troy introduced him around the table, to Matt and Nancy, the couple, and Marvin, the Indian, who reached over and clasped Jimmy's hand with his, burying it in his darker flesh, his eyes swimming in blood-shot glasses.

"Don't mind Marvin here," said Troy. "He works hard during the week and feels the need to unwind. We just don't let him operate the nail-gun on Mondays."

"Is he building?" asked Jimmy.

"With me," said Troy. "My company. Hey, if you're staying around and you need some work I could use the hands. As I remember you used to be pretty good with a hammer and nails. But I forget. The school bell tolls for thee."

"A master with the pun, now," said Jimmy. "So what makes you want to drive nails for a living."

"I like it," said Troy.

Jimmy looked away from him and out to the floor. It was a slow song, something about love being amazing, and Jimmy finished his bottle of beer and started on the second. A girl he once knew used to listen to country music whenever something bad in her life happened, especially the love songs, and Jimmy felt she wasn't as crazy as he thought she was then.

"Where are you working?" Jimmy asked quietly.

"The new addition off Franklin. Building homes, buddy."

"Now that the funeral's over, I've got some decisions to make. the house. You know. I could use the work. Maybe I'll drop out on Monday."

"Do that. We'll give you the nail gun," said Camplin.

Jimmy looked over at Marvin, who grinned big, gave him the peace sign.

When the railroad crosses the highway, he cuts away from the blacktop, remembering balancing on the same steel rails as a kid. The wooden slats are unevenly laid and his heels catch, the toes of his boots dipping into the fine dust beneath the tracks. The sounds of the highway begin to fade and he reaches the junction and takes the left fork, the soul of cicadas and grasshoppers knitting a finer hum in the hot afternoon. He focuses on the tracks for a while longer as he walks. A bird calls. He looks up and checks for trains. Funny, he thinks, what would they talk about if one hit him. *You hear? they'd say. Yeah. Jimmy Timberlake got run over by the afternoon northbound out of Tulsa. Made a mess out of him -- a bigger mess. Out there on the tracks with a .22*

rifle. Just suppose what he was doin' out there, hunting season still four months away.

He can feel the sweat running rivulets down his sides. Pulling the ball cap brim down further, level with his eyes, he looks out across the fields. Farm houses begin to appear in the distance -- barns, crop sheds, garages, silos. He is two miles out and still can't see the farm where Sugar is, back behind the barn in a pen, away from the Marrin's livestock and farm dogs. He thinks of that joke . . . what do you get if you play a country western song backwards? You get your truck back, your dog back, your bronc-riding belt buckles back, your girl . . . Timberlake laughs a little against the heat. He doesn't think about anything but his steps for a time.

Later that night, having parted company with Camplin when he'd drunk his two beers, he lay sweating in bed, the darkness of the house a living, choking being. After several hours of courting sleep, he gave in and let himself think about the women in his life. He rolled onto his back, stared towards the ceiling he could not see. He thought of the day. The truck unfixable. The house. The horse. Lunch from the new grill at O'Conner's. Pork Chops. *Pork Chops*, Glennis had told him. *Yesterday I was thinking that I wanted Pork Chops for dinner and he comes home from work, and I'm amazed, but he's got pork chops. He said he stopped by the store and got some for dinner tonight, that they had just sounded good to him all day.* Jimmy remembered the phone receiver, how light and breakable it was at that instant, how powerless he was to break it. *We just click*, he heard Glennis's voice, but it was far away, and her last word was like an order, a double meaning, and he wanted to follow it, wanted to hang up, but she went on and he mumbled "good for you. I'm glad," hating himself for having to wait until she hung up before he could set down the receiver.

Jimmy stood and looked out the window of the bedroom, over the lights of this big small town in the Midwest, hundreds of miles from where she was sleeping, no doubt curled up in the arms of Pork Chop Man, he thought. Jimmy entertained brief images of

"Pork Loin Tender" and how they might fry up after he cut them off, the look on her face, seeing her new main man maimed. Again lying on his back, he thought of Glennis as he always did in bed, nestled against his chest after they had made love, before they became just friends, his brain humming a wordless tune wailed out by a slide guitar he could hear in the distance.

He had taken the back right corner of the casket from the hearse, and along with Lou Fisher and several of his mother's colleagues from the college and Bill Fielding, the last man that seemed to have any significance to her, carried her coffin to the frame over an open hole in the cemetery. One of the morticians secured it. Jimmy didn't pay much attention to the biblical verses that were the standard fare or the piece about death that he knew his mother had liked from William Cullen Bryant. He'd asked the minister to read it. He was out past the cemetery, thinking of the miles of fields and flatlands that still startled him. When he came back to himself he thought about his father and the conversation they'd had over a steak and beer the night before, and how he seemed in good health and laughed when Jimmy asked him if he was seeing anybody. Jimmy's Dad had some vacation time built up, so they made plans to get together in the winter, in Colorado, for skiing over Christmas break. He had watched his father at the ceremony, across the crowd from him and solid in his dark suit, his hair whiter but not thinning. Jimmy knew they would not actually meet. The minister finished and the morticians lowered the casket into the ground. Jimmy dropped in the first handful of dirt, remembered his mother in smart suit, standing at the front of a classroom, one hand out and the other on her hip, her hair tied back, cracking a joke, moving through the room, all eyes focused, clear on her.

He remembered one night late, back in high school, sitting around the kitchen table with Copper, drinking some beer he procured -- probably from Spicer, the resident radio station drunk where Copper worked for a while in high school -- and eating leftover pizza. Jimmy's mom came home from a date, sat at the table with them, opened a beer

herself and reached into the cabinet for the air-tight coffee can. She took out the small sack of gourmet coffee, some filters, and reached in a last time and pulled out a pack of Camels Jimmy didn't know she had. She pulled out a cigarette and matched it up, dragging on it slowly, holding it, then breathing out through her nose like a dragon.

"I didn't know you smoked," said Copper.

"I don't."

Copper looked at Jimmy, who was pretty wide-eyed. "I didn't know either,"

Jimmy said.

She smiled. "I don't." When they didn't say anything she explained. "You've got to have something when things end, something to mark the space in time. So, the first drag here is for George, and the rest of the cigarette is for me without him."

"You broke up?" asked Jimmy.

"No. It just ended. Time to move on." She got up, walked into the living room and stared out the window, dragging on the cigarette until it was down to the nub, then came back, doused the butt in the sink, threw it in the wastebasket.

"See you two in the morning," she said and moved to the bedroom.

"I thought she thought George was great," said Copper.

"A Prince," said Jimmy.

He had never asked about George after that, but had thought about him a lot that year. He couldn't recall what her reasons were for leaving his Dad, either, except maybe for the things he had against school, one of which happened to be her going.

Jimmy rubbed his eyes. The last one. The one he didn't want to think about, but couldn't not think about coming back to this place. Cate. Cate Marrin. High school. They were good friends, lab partners, worked late as stockers at the IGA downtown. A girl he considered a pal, for a while, until there was more. Jimmy began to notice the way she moved, the way she spoke, a tiny dimple on only one side of her mouth when she gave that wry smile and said "Timberlake, you are full of shit." He grew towards her,

a gravitational pull. He began to wonder if Newton and the apple wasn't just self-aggrandizing propaganda. Then he lied.

He and friends got wasted one night. Copper. Copper's brother, Marcus. Others. They started swapping stories about who they'd made it with and how many times and where. To Jimmy's surprise, Cate came up in connection with him. They were all sure he'd done her, and though it turned his stomach then as it did now to think about it, he said sure, all the time, on the table in the breakroom of IGA. They all slapped him on the back, saluted, toasted him, before Marcus went on to another story of conquest.

Cate found out, of course, as Jimmy knew and feared she would. That was their second semester senior year. She didn't speak to him. Rearranged her schedule at the store. Didn't say goodbye when she left for college. Never wrote.

Now there was Sugar. He would do what men do -- walk up and put a bullet in the brain of an animal that was hurting, that was dying anyhow. He'd seen it in thousands of television shows, movies, heard of men speaking proudly of good animals that ended with dignity. No veterinarian would touch Sugar. "Put to sleep" was not a euphemism Jimmy cared for. It would be man and horse, the brave and the faithful, coming to an end in this, the closest place to the old west there was.

Jimmy could see himself. Pointing the rifle. The hole in the earth. The guitar he heard earlier fell silent, and he slept.

Later in the night a sound woke him. Jimmy let his mind reach out over the darkness, not hinging on anything. He rose to the window that looked out over the fields at the edge of town and noticed a string of headlights out on the highway. He could hear the rumble of them off in the distance. Large trucks, and something else in the wind as well. They neared, and then pulled off into the field just at the edge of town. Jimmy could see there was a regular pickup truck leading the large trucks, the driver opening a gate. Then he remembered that field and it wasn't a field at all, but a blacktop for the overflow parking for the Marina motors plant whose lights were blinking in the distance.

The large trucks pulled into a circle, and the engines shut down. Amidst the sounds of slamming doors and shouts, he could hear the muffled roar of lions.

Closer. He can barely see the Marrin farm from squinting in the afternoon sun, barely see the statue of Jesus on top of the silo. He remembers the statue being as tall as he was when they bought it and hoisted it up on top with the Tarlin Construction crane. It would light up at night then, maybe still does, and Cate told him once that it made her feel good and safe. Her parents had been at the funeral, but she wasn't. They didn't mention her when they offered condolences.

Another mile and he is there, letting himself into the gate. He knows Jack Marrin will be out in the fields for hours and his wife is in town, starting her shift at Wal-mart. When he unlatches the piece of fence that serves as a gate, Sugar rolls her head toward Jimmy and then steps backwards, until her flanks buckle against the barbed wire. The horse looks odd, thick, like a water heater with a head and tail, a weak spot on its side that is about to burst, ballooning out like a medicine ball. Mason said the tumor was over thirty pounds. Thirty pounds. Jimmy looks at it sticking out from Sugar's left side. He notices the horse's eyes, the left one cobalt blue with wear and age. There is anger. Fear. Jimmy takes a step toward Sugar. She bucks, lashing out with her front hooves, screaming a high-pitched sound like no other animal he's ever heard. He slips the bullets out of his pocket, pumps them into the rifle's magazine with sweaty fingers. He leans the gun against the fence and approaches again, hands up, palms toward the Sugar. She bucks. Jimmy steps back. She should run free a little, he thinks. Maybe it'll settle her. She should get to run before . . . at least. He moves over the the gate, opens it, moves back. Sugar eyes the wide-open field, moves slowly to the gate, then breaks.

"We need to get you drunk and laid," said Camplin as he and Amy walked out of the bar to the parking lot.

"Or better yet, a girlfriend," said Amy.

"Yeah," said Troy. "C'mon, everybody's doing it." Timberlake laughed.

"Marvin doesn't have one," Jimmy said.

"Marvin's got anybody and everybody," said Camplin. "Need a ride, Dominus? Or shall we help you find somebody to monk-ey around with," laughed Camplin, nearly stumbling.

"You think I'd ride with your drunk butt?" said Timberlake. "Thanks, but I'll walk."

Camplin unlocked his car. He threw the keys to Amy and she slid into the driver's seat. "That's how she got me, you know," said Camplin to Jimmy. "The working girl is always a safe ride home. And one night she took me to her place instead of mine."

Jimmy shook his head. "She seems great."

"Is, buddy . . . is." Then his face changed. "Good to have you on board. See you next week?"

"Yeah," said Jimmy. Amy pulled the car away and Timberlake watched them until they were out of sight. Then he turned and headed away from the bar and town, towards the highway.

That's how Glennis had gotten him. A week of passing him in the hallways and a drunken Friday night ending up in her bed. She sounded surprised when he'd called the next day, and the day after. It was easy, a first for Jimmy, something he thought he might stay with, and later knew he would.

Jimmy walks out over the field, following Sugar, who keeps fifty yards between them at all times, retreating as Jimmy advances. But it doesn't look like a retreat, thinks Jimmy. This horse has some attitude. Probably why her mother liked it -- she was the only one who would understand it, be able to ride it. He remembers a funny country song he'd heard that week, the clock radio in his room tuned to KVLE, about the relationship

between a woman and her horse. But Sugar is female. Still, his mom had been open-minded.

He examines the rifle, hoping the sights were still straight and his aim was as good as it was when he was a kid. She'd gone hunting with him once, and shot the only deer of the season with this rifle. After that he went with Mr. Anderson or Lou Fisher, and Copper sometimes. He didn't kill much. He remembers how he missed intentionally sometimes. Some frontiersman he was.

But he shoulders the rifle now, lips set firm, one eye closed, finger brushing the trigger guard, the slipping inside it, like it was a ring -- feeling the trigger. Then he stops. Maybe he should dig the hole first. But where. It would depend on where Sugar fell. Then he'd dig and throw her in. She stomped her feet, threw back her head. She was laughing at him.

He rubbed his sore back in front of the window of his bedroom and stared out at the lights of a Ferris Wheel and the other big rides. The summer carnival. Labette was part of their regular route, and they stayed about a month or so here, it being a good location for all the small towns around. Farmers and their families came in each weekend, spending part of the money they expected to make from the harvest in mid-July on cotton candy, rides for the kids, a look at elephants and lion-tamers, clowns and beautiful women and men swallowing swords, and to hear the strains of a country band, mom and pop thrilling the kids with a two-step to a love song, like the one that sizzled itself across the night to his ears now.

He had gone the night before with Camplin and crew, spent some money, won some prizes, watched them couple up and coo, the boys winning prizes for the girls. Sort of a favor to Troy, who wanted the whole crew to go, his treat for hard work and prosperity. Jimmy felt like he owed Troy a little for the time he was going to take off to deal with Sugar. When he got around to it. The horse occupied his mind that night as he

watched the kids run in the midway, watched the lights hold people up high and bring them down fast. He held the winnings of the others during the night as they rode, screaming at the top of their lungs, even when the ride hadn't begun or was ending. His mother would have laughed. She loved the carnival.

He moved away from the window and lit the candle he'd bought at the incense booth. It was rectangular, reminding him of a tower or a buttress on a castle. Its sides were made up of stained glass and some material that looked like concrete. The flame inside flickered and flashed colored geometric shapes on the walls. It smelled good. Sandalwood. His mother's favorite. Perhaps he would burn it in her empty room later. She would like it if any of her presence was still around. Country Western love music on the brain, the imagined head of Glennis's tousled hair again on his chest. Jimmy went to the bed, lay back and pulled a sheet up over his body. He decided to let the candle burn through until morning, and maybe the decision would come to him. His choices lay on the night table. The dull brown jar of pills or the bullets for the .22. He shook his head to try to clear his ears. The band had been loud. He would go to bed with country western shooting around in his head, an imagined head of tousled hair lying on his bare chest.

Jimmy looked around the room in the flickering light and saw the bear sitting on the director's chair in the corner. It was a light brown and white affair, looking like a cross between a panda and a brown bear half-crazed from honey and hibernation and running amuck in the mountains of Colorado. He'd won one before and left it on a certain porch before she left for college. Cate never mentioned it. Jimmy shook his head, focused on the bear. Its eyes looked back. His belly looked full. "What are you lookin' at," said Jimmy, pulling the sheet up to his chin.

Jimmy watches from the front steps of the Marrin porch as the Buick Le Sabre pulls into the driveway. Mrs. Marrin climbs out, not seeing him at first. He has been

sitting on the porch for the better part of two hours, finally tired of chasing Sugar around the pasture, coupled with the realization that he had a flaw in his plan.

"Hello, Mrs. Marrin," he calls.

"Well, Jimmy Timberlake," she says. "What brings you out here."

He doesn't answer at first. "Can I use your phone?"

"Why certainly. C'mon in."

Her key opens up a world of white pine walls and oak wood floors. It is country, but tasteful. She points the way to the phone although he knows where it is. At the raised kitchen table he takes a familiar seat, the one he would sit in with Cate as they wrote lab reports and munched on chips throughout an evening mixed with chemical reactions and television. He sees the radio that sits at the back of the table. He wonders what station it is on.

"Coffee?" she asks as he picks up the receiver.

"If it's no trouble."

Mrs. Marrin smiles, like she remembers a polite boy that is now buried inside the body of a man. "No trouble at all," she says.

He hears the electric sizzle of a bean grinder as he dials and waits for the pickup.

"Troy Camplin, please," he says into the receiver.

"So, you never answered my question," said Mrs. Marrin.

"Thanks, Mrs. Marrin" he said as she poured the dark liquid into a white mug. He liked the color of it against the polished oak table, like a white stone rising out of a murky sea. "Sugar. My mom's horse. I came . . . to put her down."

"Yes," she said. "Please, call me Donna."

"Sure."

"Well, did you put her down?"

"Not yet."

"I see," said Donna. "It makes me wonder."

"Wonder what?" said Jimmy.

"Well, your mother and I were casual friends, a little more than acquaintances, especially since she'd been out once a week to ride Sugar until she got sick. She'd come and have coffee after her ride sometimes and we'd talk. She always seemed so organized."

"Well, you should have seen her office," said Jimmy.

Donna Marrin smiled. "That's not what I mean exactly. She seemed to have all her affairs in order."

Jimmy wondered what Donna Marrin thought about her mother and the men in her life. He guessed she meant something different however.

"Yeah," he said. "She always knew how to keep order. Prioritize."

"Right," said Donna. "That's why I can't understand why Sugar wasn't provided for."

Jimmy sipped his coffee. "You're right. That is strange."

A horn sounded from the driveway.

"Your ride?"

"No . . . my helping hands." Jimmy looked moved from the table.

Outside, Camplin and Marvin were already climbing out of the rust brown van with a horse trailer in tow.

"A van?" asked Jimmy.

"Hey, killers can't be choosers," said Camplin. "Where's the horse? I know a guy at a glue factory down in Altus."

"No glue factory," said Jimmy. "Sugar is going into that field."

"And what backhoe are you going to use to dig the hole."

"Shovels," Jimmy said.

Camplin laughed. "You and what army. I mean Marvin and I will help, but do you know how long it's going to take to do that?"

Jimmy didn't answer, because he didn't really know. But that was how it was done. John Wayne would do it in the high heat of the desert to bury a horse of his, so it wouldn't be left for the buzzards, or taken to a glue factory.

"Where's the horse?" said Marvin. He was getting two lariat's out of the trailer. Jimmy pointed.

"Christ," said Camplin. He tipped his had to Mrs. Marrin. "Out in the field?"

"I thought I'd let her run a little."

"This isn't *Born Free* or *The Electric Horseman*," said Camplin. "Or some goddamn country song the chief over there listens to." He tipped his hat again to Mrs. Marrin.

"It's okay," she said. "You should hear my daughter." Jimmy glanced up at her. Donna was smiling at him.

Marvin shrugged. "He got up on the wrong side of the saddle this morning."

"I did not," said Camplin. Then he grinned. "Alright. So I'm a crotchety old bastard. Let's get on with it."

Out in the field Jimmy carried the .22 over his shoulder as the van rumbled and shimmied over dips and gullies, the trailer rocking back and forth like a sailboat in a hurricane, every joint squeaking and the hitch threatening to spring loose. Once she saw the trailer coming, Sugar had gone to the far fence, making sure not to get into a corner. Getting her in the trailer as planned would be difficult. Marvin and Camplin suggested roping her and then leading or forcing her into the trailer, where Jimmy would make the kill shot. Then after the hole was dug, they could back the trailer's rear tires nearly to the hole. Marvin would pick up the front end and Camplin and Jimmy could roll Sugar in. Jimmy thought how crazy he'd been, how senseless he'd been to think he could come out here like some cowboy and kill this horse by himself. John Wayne or not. The logistical problems were insurmountable for a single man. Camplin wanted it up close since

Jimmy only had the two shells. "I think I'll call you Keats from now on," said Camplin. "You old romantic."

When they got within 50 yards, they stopped the van. Marvin and Camplin piled out with the lariats. Camplin told Jimmy to get behind the steering wheel. Once they'd roped Sugar, he should drive the van up as close as he could, pointing the back end of the trailer at the horse. Jimmy said "sure" as he opened the van door. The radio was blaring. "Shit," said Marvin. "This is a great song, and I'm gonna miss it."

"What a groupie," said Camplin. "Mr. Country Western Love Music."

"I'll turn it up loud and roll down the windows," said Jimmy.

"Mighty white of you," said Marvin. He and Camplin moved off toward Sugar. Jimmy did as he promised. A twangy voice filled the cab.

Johnny's Daddy is takin' him fishin' when he was eight years old. Little girl came through the front gate, holdin' a fishin' pole. Jimmy watched Sugar rear her head, stomp her hooves. His Dad looked down and smiled, said, "We can't leave her behind. Camplin and Marvin readied their loops. Son, I know you don't want her to go, but someday you'll change your mind.

Sugar began to run down the fence away from the nearest corner. *Johnny said, "Take Jimmy Johnson, take Tommy Thompson. take my best friend Bo. Camplin threw his loop and it missed, snagging on a fence post. Jimmy could see him curse. Take anybody that you want as long as she don't go. Marvin laughed out loud, slapping the thighs of his work jeans, dust coming off them like moths. Take any boy in the world. Daddy, please, don't take the girl.*

Camplin moved down the fence line and got Sugar in between he and Marvin, walking slowly. Sugar kept intent on Camplin, backing up slowly, then moving out away from the fence. *Same old boy, same sweet girl, ten years down the road. Marvin was closing from the other side. He held her tight and kissed her lips in front of the picture show. Camplin rushed Sugar, yelling loudly enough that Jimmy could hear him over the*

music. The lariat hooked Sugar's nose and then slipped off, pitching Camplin into the dirt. This is not his day, thought Jimmy. *Stranger came and pulled a gun, grabbed her by the arm, said if you do what I tell you to, there won't be any harm.* Marvin was swift and better with the rope than Camplin. He hooked Sugar around a back leg. *Johnny said, "Take my money.* Sugar raged against the rope, throwing her hind quarters back and forth, tail twitching, looking like a hula girl in a grass skirt. *Take my wallet.* Marvin held on. *Take my credit cards.* Camplin raised himself out of the dirt. *Here's the watch that my grandpa gave me.* His lariat went around Sugar's neck. *Here's the key to my car.* Marvin managed to get his rope loose from Sugar's legs. *Mister, give it a whirl.* He added his lariat to Camplin's. *But please, don't take the girl.* Sugar was wild, her blue eye spinning, the tumor bouncing, sloshing.

Jimmy fired up the van. The radio was silent a moment while he hit the ignition, then came back full force. *Same old boy, same sweet girl, five years down the road.* He eased the van over the prairie grasses growing nearer Camplin and Marvin, who were still struggling to gain control of Sugar. *There's gonna be a little one, and she says it's time to go.* Jimmy was within ten yards. Sugar was still frantic, pulling on the ropes. Jimmy pulled the van to the right, lining up the trailer. *Doctor says the baby's fine, but you'll have to leave, cause his momma's fading fast, and Johnny it isn't easy.*

Jimmy hopped out of the van, grabbing the gun and turning to Sugar.

"What the hell," said Camplin.

Sugar was standing still and silent, watching Jimmy and the rifle. Jimmy looked back at him. He could still barely hear the radio, the song having captured him. He wanted to hear the end. *And there he prayed, "Take the very breath you gave me. Take my heart from my chest.* Camplin and Marvin tugged on the ropes, and Sugar came along with them easily.

I'll gladly take her place if you'll let me, make this my last request. They lined Sugar up with the trailer, and she backed in like a show horse, her white coat rough put clean, her

skin dark beneath it. The tumor almost touched the inside wall of the trailer. *Take me out of this world.* She whinnied. *God, please, don't take the girl.* Suddenly Jimmy knew he was seeing his mother's horse, the horse his mother saw. The blue eye was clearer, deeper up close. A long lock of mane fell unruly over Sugar's forehead. She was a beautiful animal.

"She's all yours," said Camplin quietly. He and Marvin moved back. Jimmy could hear the final strains of guitar. The song was over. That was it. He raised the rifle, placing its muzzle against Sugar's forehead, parting the strand of white mane like a person parts a curtain to look out a window in the early morning.

Then there was the voice, coming again over the radio. *Johnny's Daddy is takin' him fishin' when he was eight years old.*

Jimmy drew the .22 away from Sugar's head and turned. He fired two shots into the ground in front of him, set the gun down against the trailer, and walked back toward the Marrin farm. When he got there, Mrs. Marrin was standing on the front porch. "Hi," he said. "Do you have some peanut butter and a spoon I could borrow."

He knew Sugar didn't have much of a chance, but whatever chance she had was a real one. No romantic gestures. No heroic final words or heroic deaths. Just one horse, getting better or getting worse.

Jimmy instructed Camplin and Marvin to drive him and Sugar to Doc Girard's. Jimmy planned to tell him to remove the tumor, whatever amount of it he could. He would sell his mother's house. That would pay for the surgery, any medicines, a stable and enough hay for ten or fifteen years. He hoped Sugar lived even longer than that. He knew she wouldn't, but he liked the sentiment.

They dropped him off at the Marrin house and pulled to the end of the driveway. Mrs. Marrin greeted him on the porch. He handed her the spoon.

"Thanks."

"Certainly."

"Do I owe you anything for the stable space?"

"No, your mother paid for two months a week before she died." Donna smiled. "I owe you some money."

"Keep it," said Jimmy.

"No. I've worked it out. It's a little over a hundred dollars."

"I'm selling mom's house," said Jimmy. "And working for Camplin a while. I'll be fine."

Donna Marrin placed the money in Jimmy's hand, closed his fingers around it. "With all that work and stress you'll need a vacation. I hear Iron Mountain, Michigan, is beautiful in late fall. This is the price of a bus ticket and a few greasy hamburgers on the way. Take care, Jimmy." Camplin honked. Jimmy turned and waved. When he turned back to the porch, Mrs. Marrin was gone.

The bar is loud, lots of new faces, people from neighboring towns, carnival hands taking a break. He has showered and changed. He is sitting at a table alone, drinking his second beer as he sees her across the room, at a table of carnival hands. Her hair is hippie straight, simple, long plain earrings dangling, spinning dully in the smoky light. Garth Brook's latest slow song starts up.

When he reaches her table she is just finishing a cigarette. He watches her hand push the butt into the ashtray. Then she looks at him. He doesn't know what to say. But she smiles once and stands. He takes her hand, small and smooth in his, now callused, and leads her to the floor. He hasn't held a woman in his arms in months, never danced in all his time here with Camplin and the others. Jimmy places a hand on the small of her back and feels her arms go around his shoulders, her thin frame holding him close. He thinks of asking her name, but looks at her eyes -- they stare off into a distance, the next shift, the next ride, the next town, the next man. She is out away from him already.

He holds her a little closer as he turns to the beat, cutting a curve in the sawdust on the dance floor. He can feel her hard edges, but they don't cut or rub. Even though she is miles away, she feels alive in his hands -- real -- not a remembered head on his shoulder in the darkness of a solitary room. A strand of hair touches his hand as she sways. Jimmy takes it between his fingers, parts it, thinking of Sugar's mane. With this slow turn in boots over the hardwood dance floor when the lights are low, the soft edge of memory or fantasy recedes, and the bite of reality comes like a nudge, a lyric. The old pickup truck, a pair of faded jeans, a loose shirt, his hair now a little shaggy, nothing clean cut. After this dance he'll see the sunrise, hammer in hand, nails sweet in his mouth, singing as he pounds them into wood, setting a frame, squaring a corner, binding a rhythm, his hand then shading the sunlight for a moment before the brilliance again.

Ownership

(1986)

"I told you to move your fucking car."

Marcus Gale wheeled around to face the man a third time, beer can in one hand and a snarled balled fist of the other. The man took a slight double-take, but stood his ground. He was small, mouse-like, Marcus thought, small and old, peering out from behind gold wire-rimmed glasses. Marcus unrolled his fist and cupped his hand behind his ear, gesturing for more volume, as if he couldn't hear the man over the blasting music from the car stereo. The stereo in his new BMW parked on the lawn.

"Hey, we don't need profanity. We can work this out." Marcus smiled. He pointed to the car, then the ground. "It's easy. My car. My yard. None of your fucking business." He reached into the driver's side of the vehicle, a '92 Beamer with a Blau Punkt stereo system and twisted the volume dial. He smiled as the little man turned red in the face of Eddie Van Halen's guitar riffs. "Wanna beer?" said Marcus.

"What I want is you to move your car. If you look at the deeds, my property begins along this line." He pointed. "Your car is over the line. You will ruin my grass . . . not to mention my hearing," the man said.

Marcus looked out over the expanse that was the man's yard. Neatly manicured grass stretched far out to a tree-line that hid the street running through the neighborhood. The little man. *Had to piss around his fire hydrant. Let him piss.* Marcus was already making plans to play football with his buddies on this guy's yard. Wearing his cleats.

"I don't give a good goddamn about your grass. Unless we can smoke it. That's a deed I might be interested in."

Earlier in the day, before Marcus had moved the car around into the yard to show it off, Jennifer urged him to take a shower with Curtis. She liked the idea because it

wouldn't waste water and she could concentrate on other things than bathing the boy. Marcus finally relented, figuring it would get the boy ready for a locker room. It was a compromise, she thought, although Marcus wouldn't call it that.

Jen needed to run to town to buy supplies for the party. Some chips and dips. Already we have plenty to drink. A *TV Guide* in case the car and booze wasn't attraction enough. Marcus had said something about a game. *I told him this was not a good time, but does he listen? I've got too much to do to watch him get drunk and have our friends litter the house with beer cans and cigarettes. Just to show off the new extension of his manhood.* She smiled slightly, the quirky image of the BMW sliding up inside her slipping briefly into her mind in comic strip colors and caricature. *The boy's got to show his toy.* She remembered his first car. How he'd almost introduced her to it, like it was a person. And how he'd introduced her to the back seat and she'd introduced him to Curtis nine months later. Jennifer smiled at the memory's strange sweetness. But she had to get to the store and then the bank before its Saturday morning hours ended. No time for such thoughts. She yelled "I'm gone" and was out the door.

"Curt. Let's get in," Marcus yelled. "We gotta get clean before the old ball and chain makes it back." *The old ball and chain. She loved it when he called her that. Just like her daddy.*

Curtis bounded in, throwing his pajamas in every direction, climbing over the rim of the tub into the shower. He began singing. "Supercalifragoulisticexpialidocious." Marcus adjusted the water, a little cooler, then stripped down himself and climbed in. The cool water hit his body, calming the erection he'd had from earlier. He'd tried to interest Jennifer, but she said she had to get on the road if the party was going to go off. Marcus said okay and let her go, but Big Marker had been in an uproar all morning. *Maybe he'd sneak her off during the party.*

He handed the soap to Curtis, who was staring at him a little wide-eyed, suddenly silent. Or rather staring at his groin. Marcus was flaccid now, but clearly the boy had seen. *Great, Mr. Stiffy makes an entrance.* And Curtis was a little more body conscious these days. *Now I've got to explain.*

"Did that scare you," said Marcus. It was the first thing that came to his mind.

Curtis shook his head.

"Well, it shouldn't. It's . . . natural," said Marcus. "Yours will do that someday, too.

Curtis still looked stunned. "Why?" asked Curtis.

Goddamn. Not now. He's too young. "Just because," said Marcus. *What else. Can't just leave the kid hanging.* "Let's learn a song about it."

Curtis smiled. "Okay."

A song. Where the fuck had that come from. What song? He remembered a bar band that sang a song called "She Saw My Penis," but couldn't remember any of the lyrics.

"A song, Dad, a song!" Curtis was beaming.

"Okay, okay," said Marcus. He was digging deep. "Are you ready?" Curtis nodded. "Soap up," said Marcus, stalling. Curtis began. Then, there it was. Okay . . . Marcus held out his arm. *Thank God Jennifer liked Stanley Kubrick movies.* The helmet with "Born to Kill" on it flashed in his brain. He pointed to his arm. "This is my weapon," he chanted. Then pointing to his staff chanted "This is my gun." Then he ended. "One is for fightin', the other's for fun." Curtis rolled the soap around on his little belly. "Now together," said Marcus.

"This is my weapon and this is my gun." They pointed. "One is for fightin' the other's for fun." Curtis giggled a little.

"Don't giggle," said Marcus. "Wuss's giggle. Again. This is my weapon, this is my gun. One is for fightin' the other's for fun."

"Marcus, bud. He ain't worth it," said Jameson. "Let's take this party inside."

"Yeah," echoed some other guests.

"Forget it," said Marcus. "The line is drawn. The baseball glove is thrown down. What's he going to do, call the cops?"

"If you don't move your car," said the man, losing control again, "I'm going to beat the shit out of you and then call the cops."

Marcus tossed aside his still half-full beer. It foamed pitifully in the grass of the man's yard, gurgling itself out in spurts. "You and what army? Come on, little man. I'm going to tear off your head and shit down your neck."

The man laughed. "So original. But I bet your brain doesn't work too well even when it's not sopping with alcohol."

"Why . . ." Marcus swung, but his arm was stopped from behind by Sterling Van Cleave. The big black man smiled at the neighbor.

"He doesn't mean any harm," said Van Cleave as Marcus flailed to get out of his grip. "We'll just take him inside. Marcus," Van Cleave said slowly, almost cooing in Marcus's ear. "Dawn and I have to leave. Jennifer wants you inside to say goodbye to us. David will move the car while you, the gracious host, send us off with good tidings." Van Cleave started dragging Marcus to the house. Marcus shook him off. The neighbor stood his ground. "Dave," said Marcus, motioning to Jameson. "Move it for my cocksucking neighbor." Then he turned around and entered the house.

They had been searching for a car for three weeks. Even though they were both working, Marcus at the bank and she at the preschool, money was tight. Curtis had put a crimp in the budget and they were putting back some money for Jennifer to go to back to school. She had quit college when she got pregnant and had been working minimum wage jobs since, when she worked. *God, six years. A long time to be away from school.*

It didn't seem like that to her. It seemed shorter. But the curly hair on Curt's head and his growing body were testament enough. She'd stayed home that first year and a little longer, having heard her mother time and again say how important that first year was and that little children need their mother's then. Afterwards it was the preschool. She got started and then Curtis was old enough to come with her. She thought of those days as she made her way through City Market, gathering food and condiments. She'd get Marcus to grill some hot dogs and hamburgers. She put plastic plates and silverware into her cart. She could only find one package of forks. It read "1,000 Forks." *Well, we can use them for Curtis's graduation party. Or mine.* It would be good to see some of their friends. Talk about children and school . . . although most of them were already done with college. *Well, it was never too late to go back.* She'd be a Non-Trad. Jen decided she liked the sound of that. Non-Trad, Non-Trad, Non-Non-Non-Non-Trad, she sang lightly, as she checked out with the Visa, loaded the car and drove to Lincoln Federal. They needed new checks and some cash.

As they dried, Curtis was so excited about his new song, that he wanted more. *Maybe the kid will be an Opera star. As long as he didn't wear tights. But then, Joe Namath wore pantyhose. Another song, another song.*

"Okay," said Marcus. "Do you know Hey Ba-Ba-Ree-Ba?"

"Nope," said Curtis.

"Okay, it's like this." Marcus thought back to the week he'd spent at Oklahoma Boy's State. He'd gone down to Norman, a senior in high school, and spent a week with other guys from around the state. It was supposed to be some practice in running a government, but he figured it would just be a chance to fuck off. Instead, they had these leaders, from the American Legion or the Lions Club, who acted as drill sergeants. Up at the crack of dawn. Calisthenics. These groups to plan the mock government, then free time for football and later that night a political rally where they marched and sang these

songs. "Okay, you repeat after me. "Hey-Hey-Ba-Ba-Ree-Ba." Curtis sang. Marcus held out the Hey -- "Heey-Heeey-Ba-Ba-Ree-Ba." Curtis's little voice echoed. "I wish all the ladies," sang Marcus. It felt good. He remembered running during free time one day, off the campus and into town with a couple of guys, against the rules. Looking for girls. They saw some babes and were cat-called out by the time they made it back, their drill instructor waiting for them, acting tough, then asking them how was the pussy in town. He slapped them on the back and said "Shower up and then dinner."

Curtis echoed. "I wish all the ladies."

"Were holes in the road."

"Were holes in the road."

"And I was the dump truck."

"And I was the dump truck."

"I'd fill'em with my load."

"I'd fill'em with my load."

Then Marcus repeated the opening. They sang as many verses as he could remember, the one about the baker, then the mason, finally one about bats in a steeple. Curtis faithfully soaped and echoed. Marcus sending Curtis off to dress as he thought about how he and a couple of other guys had kidnapped the Lieutenant Governor of the mock State Legislature, stripped him down, gagged him, tied him to a chair and loaded him onto the elevator, lighting every button and laughing at his red face and shriveled dick.

The little man smirked and turned, walking off across his lawn. Marcus watched him go.

"Man, what a prick," said Hamilton. "You live by this guy?"

"Don't egg him on," said Sterling.

"C'mon," said Marcus. "Clevage, I need you. A little tackle football on his nice field. I've got some spray paint in the basement. We mark ourselves some yard lines. Go drop Dawn off and get your cleats. We'll tear a rug."

"Yeah," said Coles. "We'll do it so bad he'll have to lay astroturf."

Van Cleve shook his head. "Count me out. Bad knees you know." They all laughed. "C'mon, Host King The Man Marcus . . . give me a brew for the road. That way Dawn will drive me home and try to take advantage of me."

Van Cleve lead the way back through the door to the house, up the stairs to the kitchen. Marcus was last through, quiet, watching the door where his neighbor had disappeared. Then Jameson was back. He tossed the keys which Marcus caught, jingled, and pocketed.

"Hello, Jennifer. How's my daughter-in-law today?" Marcus's father's eyes were bright peering through the half-glasses over the well-groomed moustache and beard.

Marcus should grow a beard.

"Hi, Richard."

"Dad, please."

"Okay. Dad . . . I need some money, Dad," she said in a fake pleading voice, trying to sound like a young girl away from home."

"What can you put up?" He said.

"I have this husband . . ."

"No thanks, young lady." Richard laughed. "A loan?"

"Checks," she said to Richard. "And \$100 in cash."

Richard had one of the clerks bring him the paperwork and he began filling it out. Jennifer looked at his creased suit, the dark oak walls, the clean glass that separated her father-in-law's office from the rest of the expansive room. Green felt. Made-up women tellers. Polished glass office dividers.

"Now, which account," said Richard.

"You mean checking or savings?" said Jennifer.

"I just assumed checking," said Richard. "But do you want the checks for Marcus's account or the joint account?"

Jennifer stared at Richard for a moment. She felt her eyebrow twitch involuntarily. "Both," she said, smiling.

Jennifer was in the kitchen as Marcus ascended the stairs. She hugged Dawn and then Sterling.

"Man, the party's just starting," said Marcus, putting his hands on Dawn's shoulder's from behind. She smiled, placed her arms akimbo, grabbing Marcus's hands with hers and swung around, deftly deleting Marcus's hold. She kissed his cheek.

"Sorry, baby," Dawn said to Sterling. "Gotta do it. Tomorrow's a long day," Dawn said.

"Can't the big boy stay and play," Marcus said.

"You heard her," said Sterling. "Gotta go home and do it." He winked at Marcus, smiled at Dawn when she shot him a look.

"That's okay. There's plenty of party left here," said Marcus. He moved behind Jennifer and smoothed his hands down her sides and onto her ass.

"Honey," said Dawn to Jen. "I don't envy you." She laughed and took Sterling's hand. "Ready, baby?"

"Too ready," he whispered in Dawn's ear.

"Your not the only one," said Jennifer with a smile as Marcus bit her ear and she watched Dawn and Sterling leave.

"Somebody turn up the stereo," shouted Marcus.

* * * * *

From Lincoln Federal, Jennifer drove by the house on Terrace street, hoping to see the white Chrysler in the driveway. She rang the doorbell and Barbara answered, cigarette in hand. She smiled at Jennifer and pushed open the screen door.

Jennifer was silent as she walked into the kitchen took her usual seat at the table for four.

"Coffee?" asked Barbara.

"Sure," Jennifer said. She watched Barbara's slim form move to the counter. Barbara was on her lunch break from Blanton and Son's architectural firm, where she was secretary. Jennifer respected her for not working at the bank, where she guessed there was a ready-made position for Barbara, as there was for Marcus. It soothed Jennifer to watch her mother-in-law gracefully pour coffee and drag on the cigarette. In her simple black above-the-knee sleeveless dress, Jennifer could feel her suppleness fill the room, from the black pumps to the tastefully frosted dark blonde wave of hair.

"Social visit," said Barbara, "Or something on your mind?"

"You always get right to the point," said Jennifer, laughing easily.

"Well," smiled Barbara. "I've got fifteen minutes left for lunch. How are things going?"

"Who controls the money? Between you and Richard."

Barbara tapped the pack of Newports lying on the table. Jennifer waved the offer away. "Well, if you are a bank employee, you can have as many accounts for free as you want. We have three. One that is joint -- bills and the like. Then Richard and I both have separate accounts. Personal Spending. Money trouble?"

"Marcus had an account I didn't know about. The balance is pretty high."

"Well, he'll know you know soon enough."

"Yeah, I know. No secrets between Dad and Marcus."

"Don't be too sure. Men always have some secret -- even if they don't know what it is themselves."

Jennifer sipped her coffee, nodding. "Do you regret not going to college?" she asked Barbara.

"I didn't then," said Barbara. "I can't say that I do now. I don't consider myself "uneducated." I read. Life has taught me to think. I'm not given to idle prattle." Barbara pushed her cigarette into the ash tray like she was killing a bug. "But sometimes I wonder what might have been different. I wouldn't call it regret."

They sat in silence for a few moments. Jennifer finished her coffee and stood, moving toward the sink.

"It's okay. I'll get it tonight," said Barbara. "You okay?"

"Yeah," said Jennifer. "Are we still on for dinner tomorrow?"

"Here after church," said Barbara. "One o'clock or so."

Jennifer hugged her and said thanks. Barbara nodded and followed her out the door, locking it up. In her rearview mirror Jennifer saw the sedan pull out of the driveway and roar toward downtown.

"Where's Curtis," Marcus whispered in Jennifer's ear, still with his hands on her hips. *Man, she's got a good ass for a mom.*

"I'm not sure. Last I saw him he was outside."

"Mmm . . . c'mon."

"Marcus . . ."

He was already pushing her out of the kitchen, into the hall towards the boy's room.

"We've got guests . . ."

"So we can't use our bed. Coats and all."

"It's summer," Jennifer said.

"We can be quicker," said Marcus. "Less clothes." He was twisting the doorknob, opening into the room, darkness, and he was pushing her in, his head spinning

a little from the beer and shots. Then the voice. Humming. There was a glow from a small television set. Then words. "Wish all the ladies."

Marcus fumbled for the light switch.

"Were bricks in a pile."

"Curtis," said Jennifer.

"Hi, mom . . . and I was the mason."

Marcus found the switch. Curtis was sitting in the middle of his floor. He was staring at the television. Playing Nintendo.

"I'd lay'em all in style," he sang.

"Curt, buddy, how come the lights are off?" said Marcus. *Shit, oh Shit, man.*

"I can see the TV better."

"What were you singing?" asked Jennifer.

"My song. Want to hear the next verse. Hey-hey-ba-ba-ree-ba . . ."

"Where . . ." began Jennifer.

"That damned school!" shouted Marcus. "They're teaching him that crap. It's at school isn't it, Curt?" Curtis started to shake his head and Marcus cut him off. "I heard part of it the other day. We're spending our money to send him there and they're filling his head with such . . ." *I'm turning red, I can feel it. She can't know.* "Let me handle this. Curt, I don't want you to ever sing that song again."

"Okay, Daddy."

Jennifer looked at Marcus's face. He was wild-eyed as he turned on her. "And you want to go back to school? Where they just teach you that kind of shit."

"Daddy?"

"Marcus!" said Jennifer. "Language."

"Daddy?"

"What is it?" Marcus nearly shouted.

"What about the other song?"

"What other song, sweetie?" asked Jennifer.

"This is my weapon . . .

"More! I don't believe . . ." Marcus's voice shuddered to a stop.

". . . this is my gun."

Curtis was holding his crotch. Jennifer turned again to Marcus and looked at him.

"Stanley Kubrick in the Third Grade?"

"Hey, some of these parents let their kids watch anything. They're probably showing those films at school, too, by now."

Jennifer shook her head. She motioned Curtis to go on playing and he focused on the TV. She moved closer to Marcus, wrapped her arms around his waist.

"So big fella . . ." she whispered.

"We've got guests . . ." said Marcus.

"And you know what else," Jennifer said quietly. Then she moved her lips close to his ear. "You're pathetic," she said, turned, and left the room.

Jennifer rose from an empty bed in the dark. She had to pee. Moving slowly down the dark hall to the bathroom she kept her legs together, clenching her muscles, trying to keep Marcus's semen from running down her legs. God, how she hated that feeling. *Another kid? He wants another kid? Am I going to carry it in a papoose on my back to my classes?* She knew she was putting herself on. Another child meant her at home taking care of it. Another child meant no school.

She sat on the toilet in the darkness, urinating and letting Marcus's semen drip into the clean white water in the porcelain bowl. She rested her head in her hands. How bad had she wanted him tonight, she wondered. How bad did she want him anymore. She wasn't sure. Was she there with him? Was he there with her? Or was she just letting him pound away until he was done?

The image sent a spark through her, and once she was drained she finished herself off, sitting on the toilet, her back up against the lid. How long had it been since she'd had an orgasm with him inside her? Or that he'd made the effort with his lips? Jennifer felt like she could make herself come again, but did not. Suddenly she felt grimy, wanting a shower. Instead, she moved back into the dark of the air-conditioned bedroom.

She looked at the empty bed and listened. Downstairs? She was hearing something, but where? Moving to the air conditioner, she shut it down, listening to the gurgle of the seepage as it poured out the back of the unit and onto the roof, running down into the gutter and to the ground. She traced it in her mind and then listened. A grunting. From outside.

Jennifer moved to the sliding doors that led to the balcony and parted the curtains. The long expanse of their neighbor's perfectly manicured lawn rose up to greet her, faintly blue in the street lights that ran down the block. There he was, standing, bending. little white glows all around him.

The forks. Marcus was stabbing the forks into the lawn. They stood up like little sign posts, warning flags, surrender, truce. She watched him, spinning around and stabbing down, then digging his shoes, his cleats into the lawn and scraping up hunks of grass. He needed a jersey and a helmet. But he looked more like a bull than a linebacker. A bull fanning his dance against tiny white matadors hiding from the god of the bulls in the hills of Mexico. She laughed slightly. He was sweating, his face contorted, his dance speeding up in a blind frenzy.

Jennifer closed the curtain, restarted the air conditioner. She stretched out her fingertips to the cool air, examining their shape in the semi-darkness, their nails, wrinkles and rings. Monday. Church in the morning with Curtis. Confessional. Raising Marcus from his drunken sleep for dinner. Television. Sleep. Then, Monday morning. She had the hundred dollars she'd taken from the joint account when she'd ordered the checks. She could put it down to cash. Party expenses, she would write. He doesn't ever check

the credit card bills. One hundred dollars. A start. A seed. With it she'd open an account at Eureka Federal Savings, just around the corner from Lincoln Federal. Marcus and his father would be working when she did it. She looked at her fingers again, saw them writing the deposit slip, receiving the narrow book with the bumpy green cover. Getting her free gift -- a toaster, or a set of National Geographic books for Curtis. They would wait until Christmas. Marcus would be surprised. *Wasn't Eureka Federal selling those? Why, yes, remember, we started and account for Curtis,* she'd say, even though that money would pay her tuition. He'd nod, not remembering. *Started the account with a little we'd stashed away.* she'd add for good measure. Jennifer pulled the cool sheet over her naked body, deciding where she would keep her account book.

Shutters

(1987)

The kingfisher circled far above the tops of the pinon pines on the slope of Cross Hatch Mountain, over the sprawling expanse of the Ranch and its windows, overlooking the veranda, the dock, and the stone cool blue waters of the lake. It arced and banked, feathers like butter knives, looking for its breakfast -- a snake -- or a fish too inquisitive, too early venturous, ringing the surface of the lake for water bugs, sending wavy signals to everything in the scale-blue sky. Soaring up, the kingfisher scanned the perfectly flat span of water, the bare bald tops of boulders above timberline, the dirt track that led to a stone walkway to the house. Miles off was the highway, stretched and cold and harmless like a garter snake's skin. Ripples in the lake appeared on the far side and the bird began its long spin downward and around, ready to thrust its beak between the plain eyes of a lake trout.

One of the men was standing on the dock, stretching his back, hand over his eyes, looking out at the lake. Another was emerging from the house, sunglasses on his head and a large cooler in his arms. The first man dropped his hand and moved to take one side of the load from the other. They slung the cooler in the shade between the two pinon pines that supported a hammock. The kingfisher has little interest. He sails for the lake.

Marcus Gale opened the cooler and pulled a brown bottle from the ice within. He twisted the top with his hand, listened for the rush of air, took a long slow slide of beer. He reached in for a second bottle and held it out towards the other man.

"Brew, Dad?" he said. The other man turned and looked at Marcus. He was as tall as his son, but thinner and less tan, his eyes squinting in the sun. He looked at Marcus as if he hadn't heard him. "Dad," said Marcus again. "A little hair of the dog that bit you?" The older man nodded and the son whipped off the top of the second bottle and

handed it over. Marcus took another slug. "Here's to another two week summer vacation biting the dust," he said.

"Maybe we can wet a line this afternoon," said the father. "After we get the shutters put up and before we pack."

"Aw, the girls will pack, and besides, there's that Braves' game on," said Marcus. He touched the bottle to his lips again.

"I wonder where your brother is," said the father.

Marcus laughed. "He's never on time. If there's a job to do, it's up to men." Marcus watched his father. "He's fine."

"Yeah, I'm sure." The father smiled and punched Marcus in the shoulder, "Well, let's get the tools," he said and moved off to the concrete drive and disappeared into the deep garage. Marcus chugged the last of his beer, stowed the empty back in the cooler, twisted open another bottle and drank a reasonable amount before his father emerged with a tool box and two long poles.

"Here we go."

Marcus took one of the poles from his father and rummaged in the tool box for a hammer and a dozen or so guttering nails that he slipped into the back of his jeans pocket. "I'll take the north side," said Marcus, starting to move off with a hammer and the long pole in one hand and his beer in the other.

"I thought we could work together, today," said the father.

"We'll get it done quicker if we work separate," said Marcus. "Then maybe we can see that game."

"All right," said the father, taking his pole and the tool box. "I'm south then."

The two men moved apart from one another, taking separate sides of the ranch house, both slowly becoming adrift in the fine clear intoxication of mountain air and the slow wind of reverie, moving through the pines, quaking the aspen, ruffling the feathers of the kingfisher, who was now being watched from the

highway . . .

. . . Copper saw the kingfisher over lake now, looking for breakfast. It was his favorite thing about the Ranch -- the kingfishers his grandfather had imported to the valley, believing they were the noblest of birds, and would be a real estate novelty that would help develop the area. Everyone said they would not survive, but they did. The area hadn't developed much in the past three generations, and he was glad. He always liked to come back to the Ranch at this time, in the morning, after a plate of smoked honey ham and scrambled eggs covered with Tabasco in the little cafe on the other side of the pass, having driven all night and stoked himself on coffee that morning for the last haul. It was fresh this way, the way he remembered it as a child, with their grandfather, before his death.

At the bottom of the pass, not far from the mountain, Copper Gale shifted the red Miata into fifth, kicking it down to see what it could do. He was glad Hendricks, who had loaned him the car, was rich and didn't care what kind of miles were put onto it or how it was driven, knowing that he, Hendricks himself, would drive it harder than anyone and could always get another one when he blew the engine. Copper figured Hendricks drove a car until the pistons locked from unchanged oil, then started over again, a gold card alchemizing into gleaming silver and chrome.

Copper knew his father would be up already, knew it was closing up time. Marcus would be helping him, and maybe Jennifer, too. His mom would be out on the deck in the sun, drinking coffee and smoking Newports and looking for the last hummingbirds of the season, barking at the other birds to move over and give the hummers some room. Copper was looking forward to maybe sitting with her and drinking a little coffee, a newly acquired taste during this, his third year of college, and talk . . .

. . . talk was all Jennifer wanted to do these days, Marcus thought. He remembered that first time coming here with her , their honeymoon. They didn't talk at all it seemed. Nothing to talk about, just things to do, even though she was already pregnant, and he went through the honeymoon things in his mind, picturing the past because of the beer and the altitude, like water boiling faster in the mountains, as he began to close the shutters on the north side. Marcus reached up with the long pole, unhooking the latch that held the shutters up against the side of the house when occupied. As he unhooked the latch, he slid the end of the pole into the small hole right below the latch, keeping the shutter from swinging down against the outside window sill with a smash. Why these shutters closed form top to bottom instead of side to side he never could understand. Then he lowered it slowly, the hinges holding the shutter to the house creaking from years of use. Once the shutter covered the window, he found the holes on the ends of the shutter, drove the guttering nails home, secured the padlock on that window, then moved to the next. He figured he and the old man could take their time with this, then maybe tune into the game, claiming they needed rest, and maybe Jennifer would get tired of waiting for him and pack up. That is, he thought, unless his brother showed up and got her into a conversation. He was a talker, too. He would come and talk to them all about college, how great it was, still. The old man would hate his hair and his earrings and it would be the same thing all over again. Talk, talk, about what he should do, about the hair making him look like some fag . . .

. . . Robert had told Marcus, but he knew he didn't listen to his advice.. Marcus just didn't listen to authority, especially to his father. Well, maybe better in the end. Marcus was with a good woman now, safe, and Robert's grandson was handsome. The father latched his second padlock in place then returned to look out over the lake. He wished his grandson had come on this vacation with him. Strangely he thought it would be nice to spend a little more time with him growing up. He didn't remember much of his

own sons as boys, and he thought he could maybe recapture some of that in his grandson. Then his mind turned to thoughts of Copper, the weaker son, the wanderer, hoping he could plant himself, hoping he would appear soon, there were things he might be able to tell him yet, Robert thought. He felt that Copper had taken the death of grandfather Galen the hardest. Copper seemed more fragile. Marcus had held up strong, didn't grieve at all. He had been a man, tried to save his grandfather as a boy might, but had been a man after the death. The father suddenly wished he had more time, more time to come here, instead of shutting the place up for the winter, having to wait for the week at the beginning of the summer to open up the cabin and the week at the end to help close. He wished he could be more like Barbara, taking most of the summer here with Sadie Timberlake. Wives were so much more sociable with each other than husbands were. He remembers how Copper, Marcus, and Jimmy, Sadie's son, spent most of the summers here when they were growing up, in high school and such. He wished he could have some of that back. But now the boys were in college and there were other considerations. Robert looked out across the lake. The water glimmered softly in the mid-morning sun . .

. . . flip the visor down. Copper had left the top off and the cool mountain air blowing through his hair, rock and roll from Hendricks' souped-up hi-fi blowing his hair around as well. "Rock and Roll Gel" Hendricks' liked to call it. Cross Hatch Mountain appeared, sneaking into the path of the sun from behind the Maroon Bell range. He knew he would be there in another half an hour if he kept the Miata at eighty-five. He loved the feel of the mountains, was even looking forward to seeing his brother and his parents. Maybe it would go more smoothly than usual.

Copper pulled tight into the curves, remembering the summer when he and Jimmy had first started driving. Timberlake had bought an old white Omni that barely ran from some old junkman in town -- *along with all the spare parts you need while you're in the*

valley. *Of course you won't need any, this here is a top-notch fine-condition hatchback convertible machine, I say, maaaaachine* -- and spent their time cruising up and down the curves, seeing how fast they could take them. Copper figured he'd be dead now if that Omni could have done more than sixty-five miles an hour. He guessed his mom and Jimmy's mom had some discussions about that then, but Jimmy's mom must have won out with her laid-back attitude. They were only a few years apart in age, but from different generations somehow. Copper felt that Timberlake's mom leaving her husband had a lot to do with it. He could picture his mother still drinking coffee, the pack of Newports never far from her reach. Copper thought of the film class he'd had in spring semester, how cigarettes in film in the fifties and earlier denoted who had the power in the frame, and thus who had the power . . .

. . . down another beer time, thought Marcus. He made his way back to the cooler, keeping an eye out for his father, then stowing the empty and popping open a fresh one, the fizz of it lost in the shaking leaves of the Aspen trees that stood near the hammock. He moved back to the north side and finished the last two shutters as well as his beer, finally getting a little buzz. Then Marcus went back to the toolbox, pulled out a few more guttering nails for the east side of the house and got another beer. He eased himself back in the hammock to wait for this father. They would do the back and the front of the house together. The back first, starting on opposite ends, then the front of the veranda together, as it took two to handle the massive shutters that closed over the ceiling-high windows that overlooked the lake. He closed his eyes and moved his hips to get the hammock to sway, put the cold beer between his legs and put his hands behind his head. He barely . . .

. . . Robert saw Copper pull into the driveway. He had just come around the edge of the house, ready to get started on the back and the big windows if Marcus was ready.

Marcus pulled his head up, eyes still shaded by the sunglasses, beer between his legs. Then Copper was getting out of the car. String bean, thought Robert. He looked at Copper, the long hair still there, the earring, a week's worth of scruff, old faded jeans and a black T-shirt marked with some picture of a rock band. He watched Marcus stand, taller than Copper, heavier with muscle. Where Copper came from he had no idea. A stray gene in his wife's family line, he thought. Nice car though, thought the father. Maybe with the money the trust fund and that disc jockey thing together, Copper pays a little better attention . . .

"Check him out," said Copper, pointing. "The kingfisher is circling. Getting ready to dive. Mid-morning snack. "

"Hello, son," said the father.

"Hey, Dad," said Copper. "And my big brother. Tending bar, I see."

"You know me," said Marcus. "You want another, Dad." The father shook his head. "How about you, squirt. Too early in the day?"

Copper smiled at Marcus. "Never too early," he said. Marcus handed Copper a beer and he took a sip off the top. "Some coffee sounds better though."

"Coffee?" said his mother, coming along the veranda with a cup in her hand, Jennifer not far behind, careful not to let the screen door slam. "Since when did you drink coffee?" asked his mother.

"Hey, mom. Hi, Jennifer."

"It's good to see you, Copper," Jennifer said.

"How was the drive?" asked the father, glancing at the car.

"Good." said Copper. He indicated the car. "A loaner from a friend."

"Wish I had friends like that," said Marcus.

"So do I," said Jennifer. She laughed.

"Well, back in the old days . . . " begins Marcus.

"Listen to you, 'back in the old days,'" said the father. "No stories yet. You're not old enough to have glory days."

"Hey . . . " began Marcus.

". . . what is there to eat?" finished Copper.

"In the house," said the mother, "all of you. There's fruit and sandwiches."

"Shouldn't we finish up the shutters first?" asked Marcus.

"Yes. We were just getting ready to do the big shutters. We could use the help, Copper, " said Robert.

"I thought the back ones first. Like always," said Marcus.

"Well, why don't you do those, Marcus. Copper can help me with the ones in front until you're finished. Then we can all work together."

Copper looked at his brother. "Sure, Dad. I'll eat after."

"Okay, join you soon." Marcus manhandled his pole and moved off in silence to the east side of the house. Copper got the third pole from the garage and joined his father on the west side deck, overlooking the lake

. . . beautiful, thought Copper. Later he wanted to take a walk up the river that emptied here, go back to the spot, think about it, since he hadn't been here for a year. Too bad Timberlake and his mom weren't still here. His eyesight keened to the pines across the lake, the sunshine dazzling the air, sharpening the perception he felt, defining the arms and spires of those trees, the deep green over the warming blue. Man, what a place. I could live right here all year, he thought, and wondered why his father didn't. He had enough money. Copper looked up for the kingfisher, could see it still circling. Copper felt that there was less air to have to look through at the higher altitudes, so sight could travel farther, and a shout could carry for years, ringing itself into rivers and around cliffs . . .

. . . Marcus kept glancing at the car. The keys were still in the ignition. Nice little ride, he thought. I bet the women sure like whoever owns that car. Sure as hell ain't my little brother, he thought. He hated the way his father sucked up to him when he showed up. The long lost little brother. What shit. He thought back to college, how somebody on the team always had a hot ride, and how after a game they'd all shower up, and take that car out to the bars downtown. Regulations said they couldn't drink, but the coaches turned away, and Pappy at Marvin's always had a tap cleared for them and the booth way in the back, low lights or none. Some would drink beer, some would order coke and spike it with whatever they had, and then the wheels would run, baby run run . . .

. . . thin, thought Robert. Copper looked thin. And the long hair was straggly. He didn't like Copper's appearance at all, especially the earring. What he remembered of college was nothing like it was now, he supposed, even in the conservative Midwest. Copper had told a few stories, mostly of the radio station at the school, but of a few parties, too. Did the girls like all that hair and jewelry? wondered Robert . . .

"I love it here, Dad. When I'm out of school I want to find a gig here. The Voice of the Rockies." He glanced at this father, who was extending the pole to work on the big shutters. "It's good to see you, Dad," said Copper.

"It's good to see you too, son. Are you ready, here?"

"Yeah," said Copper. He put the pole up to the shutter, ready to stop its descent. Robert unlocked the latch and the shutter swung out, its hinges creaking. Copper caught it, and Robert reached the second pole up to the hole made for it. He then hoisted the shutter and Copper moved to its other end, slipping the pole into its designated place. Together they lowered the massive shutter down until it covered the large window. Robert took out a padlock, slipped it through the clasp, securing the window. Then guttering nails. They did the second. The third.

"In the winter. Ever thought about coming out here?" asked Copper. "You might not need to board this place so tight."

"Yes," said the father. "But there's really no time."

"Just because grandpa did it that way doesn't mean . . ."

"Yes, I know."

"Mom would probably love it," said Copper. "The snow. The deer. You could set out some salt licks. Build fires in the evening."

"You're right, she probably would."

"Marcus could keep an eye on the banking for a couple weeks."

. . . provided he could cut the drinking, thought Copper. His brother seemed to be hitting it harder and earlier than he had last year. Copper knew he couldn't say anything, as his beer was sitting on the railing of the dock, warming in the sun. But getting a whole cooler ready in the morning was something he'd never seen him do. Copper thought back to high school and how much Marcus drank, and he worried about what else Marcus did then and in college. He laughed a little. Hell, he thought. With the long hair they probably think I'm the one who's doing the 'real' drugs . . .

. . . last one. Now, my pretty little machine, let's see what you can do. Marcus slid behind the wheel of the Miata and turned it over. It fired "like Dobermans guarding the castle while the master was away and the damsel was undressed," he thought, something they used to say in college, something the nerd manager came up with that somebody else thought was cool. Marcus put the Miata in gear, listened to the thrum of the engine, ready for torque. He quietly eased the car out of the drive and backed it onto the grass by the hammock, turned it up the driveway towards the highway . . .

"Hell, no, I've watched this so many times I could do it blindfolded in my sleep with a crane in the middle of the lake. Let's just get it done. Your brother is still going to try to get me to pack all his stuff for him."

Copper laughed. "My brother is a piece of work. I don't know how you put up with him."

"I don't," said Jennifer. "Not anymore."

Copper looked her over quickly. She nodded. "Don't tell your father or mother. I've got my own place in town. Marcus and I are trying to mend our fences."

"Jesus, Jennifer. What happened."

"Everything that probably shouldn't have. The baby. Our marriage. Look, I know this is kind of sudden, but I wanted to tell somebody. Somebody who could maybe talk to Marcus. He's having a hard time with it. Denial."

They moved together, she catching the weight of the next to the last shutter as he unlatched it. They brought it down together. She drove the guttering nails and he locked the padlock.

"I don't know. We we never talked too well."

"Look, Marcus doesn't talk well. But maybe you could try."

"Yeah, sure Jennifer, I could try."

"It would mean a lot to me. Might even mean something to him. And it's not like it's totally over. But he needs to realize it could be."

"How have you managed out here?"

They dropped the final shutter, nailed it and padlocked it. "I let him drink himself into a stupor. He doesn't try anything when he's like that. He's been sleeping on the couch in my bedroom, and I get up early, shift him to the bed, and hide the blankets from the couch. You know your parents. They wouldn't ask even if they wanted to."

"Yeah," said Copper. "Look, I can take this stuff to the garage."

"I might as well help. Do the whole job, you know, or don't do it at all."

Copper shook his head. "You sound like Dad."

"Well, not all his ideas are bad." They turned the corner and went into the garage, placed the poles back on the racks. "Anyway," said Jennifer. "Thanks for trying to talk to him." She leaned over and embraced him in a sisterly hug.

... Copper had never thought about his father that way, that any of his things were bad. But he guessed he knew that. He knew his father didn't say what he felt most of the time. The strong, silent type. And Jennifer maybe meant Marcus. Maybe Marcus was a bad thing that my father had something to do with. Maybe she means me, he thought, but doubted that. Then he saw it. The car was gone, but could hear it's engine revving up, and it came back down the drive from the highway, Marcus behind the wheel ...

... my brother with my wife. I knew they'd be talking. Talk, talk. He's probably told her all about college and asked her to his graduation and -- holy shit, she's hugging him in the garage ...

Copper moved out of the darkness. "Just what the hell are you doing with my car?"

"It's not yours. And just what the hell are you doing with my wife?"

"She's not ..." began Copper.

"... your property," Jennifer finished. "Get that into your head, will you."

"Don't you talk to me like that," said Marcus, climbing out of the car. "and you stay away from her, little brother."

"And you stay away from that car. Man. I don't believe you Driving that car drunk off your ass."

"I don't believe either one of you. All of a sudden at each other's throats. And at what? An innocent hug between a brother and sister-in-law? A spin in a hot car that isn't yours. I can't wait until the finale. You guys are going to pull out your letter jackets and flex for me," said Jennifer. "Forget it. There are more interesting things to watch than the two of you primping." Jen pointed to the edge of the clearing just before the start of the forest. The kingfisher had landed. He had a flailing trout in his mouth. He walked a few careful steps, the fish arching, trying to get away. Then kingfisher dropped the trout on the ground. It picked it up by the very end of its tail and let it hang down from its beak. Then the kingfisher walked close to a tree, and swinging its head back and forth, began bashing the trout against the tree trunk to kill it. Marcus took a step towards Copper. Jen moved between them. "Leave it to the animals," she said, looked at them both, then headed indoors.

The Waterhouse

(1999)

Jimmy Timberlake

It still wakes me near dawn. At first it seems I am drowning, there is so much water. Then I see it is not a pool, or the ocean, but a shower. I can barely open my eyes because the force of the spray is so strong. I raise my hands, cutting holes in the torrent of water, my fingers splayed, moving forward, closer, to a shattered image at the end of the stream. I reach the source, topple onto it, and the world of sunshine breaks through. I am up above it then, looking down on the water and the fire. Then away from it, over the mountains and back between these sheets with Cate. Then I truly wake. I rise, go to the kitchen, begin making coffee, knowing that trying to go back to sleep would be more effort than getting up, beginning a day.

The day I left for the Waterhouse didn't begin with any dream, let alone the drowning dream, but with a wet tongue in my ear -- Luke's signal for his early morning constitutional. He padded through the yard and did what nature requires dogs do as I made coffee for Cate and me. She was sleepy, but nodded toward the coffee cup, snuggling it into her hands to warm them, holding with one and passing the other through the steam rising from the top of the mug. She took a sip. "Thanks."

"Sure," I said.

"So . . ."

"I'm going to take the convertible and leave the money for the plane ticket for you, if you decide to come."

"Okay," Cate said.

I watched Luke at the screen door, head tilted and ears cocked. "I've made a copy of the key." I dug in a drawer of the nightstand and pulled out out an orange

shoelace tied in a loop with a key threaded onto it. She bowed her head, smiling, and I hung it around her neck, noticing the way the teeth of the key hung just inside the V of the neck of one of my dress shirts she'd been wearing to bed lately.

“Jewelry, how thoughtful,” she said. “I’m not sure I want this key around my neck, however.”

“I hear you.” I took it back from her, spilled it onto the top of the nightstand and leaned in to kiss her. “I’ll miss you.”

“Yeah. Me, too.”

I looked at her, felt the usual waxy hot break in my chest. For a time it had scared me, realizing she was here, real and alive, in my bed and in my life, but lately it just glowed, waiting to fill in the fissures I would feel as we were apart for the day. She took another sip, looked quizzically at me, then grinned.

“What?” she said.

“A million dollars, my ass.”

The letter was simply an address near Cheyenne, Wyoming, a date, a thousand dollars in cash for air fare and the words “I’ve made a million -- You and yours are invited.” At the bottom of the envelope was a key. Immediately I knew what it opened, besides my memory.

It was a summer in Colorado. We were fifteen or sixteen -- Copper and Marcus Gale, and me. We'd been banished to the land around the Ranch, the summer house the Gale's owned near Cross Hatch mountain, as punishment for waterfighting inside. It happened every summer. Copper had used his weapon of choice, the spray nozzle attached to the sink, to shoot Marcus, soaking the kitchen walls and floors. Our mothers had come before we could dry everything out.

After floating the river in innertubes, we lounged bare-chested in the sun. I remember playing with a lady bug on my shin while Copper talked about *The Empire*

Strikes Back, which had come out in the Spring, and Marcus talked about these two girls he was seeing who lived in the town in the valley down the road ten miles from the Ranch. Listening to them, I had closed my eyes, tipped my head to the sun, watching the orange spreading over the inside of my eyelids.

“Hey. I’ve got a great idea,” said Copper.

“Let’s hear it, lame-brain brother,” said Marcus.

“First one to make a million bucks buys a house someplace. Maybe near here, in the mountains. A big house. We can all come and stay. Meet every year and water fight. Like for a week. Inside and outside. We never get in trouble because we own it. We can tear it up and leave it if we want. The millionaire can hire some workmen to come in and fix it all up after we’ve left.” He grinned, pointing to his head. “Genius, or what?”

“What,” said Marcus.

As wild as it sounded, I had thought it was cool. “Great idea,” I said.

“Then it’s a deal,” said Copper.

“Sure,” said Marcus. The three of us shook.

Luke sat beside me in the passenger seat of the convertible, lolling his head over top of the door, his long ears flapping in the wind, eyes half shut. Now and then he would snap at a bug flying by, although the further west we went the fewer insects there were. We were a day into our journey, cutting straight through Wisconsin, Minnesota, and South Dakota into the rich skies and hot days and cool evenings of late summer in Wyoming.

Cate had laid odds that the letter had come from Marcus Gale. How he had gotten a million dollars was unfathomable. When we were kids, he figured he'd be the first, signing at least a million-dollar-a-year contract to play professional football. However, an injury and his impregnation of and marriage to Jennifer Morgan had rerouted his plans

to working at the bank run by his and Copper's father, Robert Gale. Last I'd heard, he was a ways from a million dollars.

I figured Cate might be right, but held hope that the letter was from Copper. The handwriting wasn't his, but could easily have been his wife South's, or even his daughter Mercy's. I knew Copper didn't have a million bucks, but that wouldn't matter. He'd want to recall the deal we'd made, and the figure of a million dollars would be the trigger for the memory. I was hoping, even though he'd never hinted as to something like this in the works the last few time we'd talked on the phone.

"Whoever it is, it isn't me," I said to Luke. I didn't want a million dollars. I'd had enough dealing with the money from Mom's estate. Plus, I was thinking about teaching school come winter, high school, probably substituting, even though the principal had told me there might be a full-time opening in the English department. More money. I wasn't sure about teaching or money, only running and Cate. I knew about those two things. The rest would have to figure itself out.

I stopped for gas and directions, got on west 27 and was soon in the foothills. Luke barked as we passed condos, then range-land. Houses were sparse. I was about to turn back when I saw it. The sign. It was nailed into a post, its cardboard edges flapping in the wind. Painted on it were the words "Waterfighters this way."

"This is it, Luke," I said. Luke pulled his sad eyes away from the road and laid his head in the seat.

Three miles up the dirt lane was another sign. I followed it past a pond, onto a bridge over the river that fed it, through some dense pine and into a clearing where a mammoth house stood, girthed in front by a circle drive. Luke bounded out, barking at once. The door opened and a woman I'd never seen stepped onto the porch and awaited my arrival. I killed the engine. My boots ground the gravel in the driveway as I walked towards the house. "I got a bad feeling about this," I said to myself.

The woman's name was Carol. She told me to dump my bags upstairs and then join them for a drink. I found my room, name tag of the door and all. I opened the door, and set my bag down beside one of the newest water rifles on the market, "the Soaker." I hefted it. It was full. I pumped the handle, putting air pressure behind it. He was really serious, I thought. I then made my way to the Great Room just off the entry way. Carol was there all right, highball in her hand, snaked around the figure of Marcus Gale.

"Jimmy Timberlake," said Marcus, extending his hand. Jimmy shook it. "Glad you could make it. How was the flight? First class."

I smiled noncommittally, and looked around the room. A riverbed stone fireplace occupied one wall. There were large area rugs covering hardwood floors anchored by several stuffed chairs and a low cherrywood table. Windows took up another wall, opening out onto a deck. Mounted heads of deer and buffalo were above the bar.

"Can I get you something," said Marcus. I noticed the brandy snifter on the table, filled a little too full.

"Little early for me," I said. "Thanks."

"Whatever, buddy." Marcus clapped Jimmy on the shoulder and resumed his seat, lifting the brandy. "I see you met Carol." The woman smiled at me, moved to a chair across the room. Marcus looked out the windows. Checked his watch. "Well, everybody should be here soon," he said. "Then we can talk about old times."

"If you don't mind me asking," I said, "what on earth are you doing out here?"

"Waterfighting, of course."

"Okay . . . how did you get this place? Did you win a radio contest or sweepstakes?"

Marcus laughed. "No. Funny you should mention that, though." He knocked off his brandy and refilled the glass. "I bought it with some money I'd had. A corporation is interested in part of it. AMEX. They're . . ."

"Loggers, I know." This was all starting to turn my stomach. "So you're going to sell the land to clearcutters."

"You make it sound so . . . nasty," said Marcus. "It's like Reagan said. 'If you've seen one redwood, you've seen them all.'" Suddenly Carol was up, official greeter mode in gear.

"There's another car pulling in."

When he entered the room, the tension in Copper's face broke into a smile. "Timby," he said, the childhood appellation crisp and familiar in the mountain air. "You, too?" he said.

"Yeah," I said, then hugged him. Marcus was looking eager, like he had been standing in line for tickets for several hours in the winter. He was red in the face, the snifter full in his hand.

"God, it's good to see you." said Copper, breaking the hug and looking at me. "I thought maybe we were going to be here alone." He paused, like he was looking at his brother with eyes in the back of his head. Then he broke the stare.

"Yeah. I thought maybe all this was your way of saying 'hello,'" I said to Copper. I turned to Virginia, who came in behind Copper, and wrapped her in a hug. The last time I'd seen her was when she married Copper, three years ago.

"You look well," she said, a wry smile on her face.

"You too, South," I said. Then Mercy, South's daughter, was in my arms.

"Uncle Jimmy!" she cried.

"Hey, Mercy."

"Well, it's good to see we all know each other," said Marcus. Copper had turned back to him. Before Copper could speak, Carol re-entered the room, ringing a bell.

"Lunch is served," she said.

We ate, a five-course meal, consisting of Caesar Salad, Borscht, Fresh Grilled Kokanee Salmon in a white wine sauce with steamed vegetables, Chocolate Mousse, and

a healthy portion of tension, topped off with what seemed to be an unending source of champagne. I sat next to Mercy, watched Copper and South. Carol sat close to Marcus, who was at the head of the table, one of her hands continually on his thigh. The regular comments about good food seemed somehow flat. I could tell everybody was waiting.

Finally, before he touched his dessert, Marcus stood.

"Well, welcome to my humble abode. Our humble abode," he said. "You must wonder why you're all here."

"Why does this remind me of the scene in the Empire Strikes Back when Solo, Chewie, and Leia are double-crossed and end up having dinner with Darth Vader?" said Copper.

"Which one is Darth Vader?" said Mercy.

"The one at the head of the table," said South, quietly, but loud enough.

"Funny," said Marcus. "But all kidding aside, I'm glad you all could make it. Actually, before we start the festivities, we are expecting a couple of more guests. So I'm stalling with this speech here." Marcus glanced around the table, lingering on Carol, who seemed confused at his addition to the guest list.

"I wanted you all here today because you are my family. And this is your home. Copper, my blood brother, and his wife and daughter, related through marriage. Jimmy, like another brother. Carol, my woman. I wanted you all here to know that there has been a change in my life. Recently I have accepted Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior.

South started laughing. "Is this a Promise Keeper thing? Copper, you remember the postcards he sent from the meeting in Dallas. Marcus, you continually surpass my expectations."

"Thank you," he said.

"Marcus," said Copper. "It's not a compliment. All that PK stuff about no women at the events and taking control of your family. Is that what this is about?"

"Christ calls me to lead, to be a good example to my family, and to take my rightful place. I am the eldest brother, and since father . . . "

"Father isn't dead yet," said Copper. "How dare you assume that you can just. . . "

"He might as well be," said Marcus. "His part of the bank bought this place."

"What?" Copper was on his feet, moving forward, but he stopped as Marcus raised his hands.

"He deeded over his part of the bank to me, little brother. Now don't get upset. I wouldn't dream of not sharing it with my family. This is my first investment for us. A home for all of us. I will pay the bills, run the household, invite you all to stay at no responsibility. You won't need money. Just relax and enjoy. Besides, I've made a deal that will recoup the cost of investment and more."

A horn honked, punctuating Marcus's speech. Carol jumped up, but Marcus laid a hand on her shoulder. "It's okay, sweetie. This one can get itself."

Mercy, who had excused herself from the table after dinner, shouted from the front windows. "Wow. It's a stretch limousine."

A smile broke over Marcus's face. The door to the house opened and a voice called "Mister Chester?"

"In here," said Marcus. All heads turned to the entry way of the dining room. A woman and a young boy were standing there, bewildered looks on their faces.

"Holy shit," said Carol.

"Hello, Jennifer. You all know my wife. This is my son, Curtis," said Marcus.

"Well, now that we're all here, let the games begin."

Marcus reached down behind his seat and brought up a peach-colored water rifle. The first blast hit Copper square in the chest.

I was first out of the room, making sure that South was helping Copper up, as his chair had tipped over, spilling him to the floor. By now Carol had a purple water rifle

and was blasting away. She shot for Jennifer, but was short, hitting a vase of flowers on the table, columbine and chrysanthemums flying everywhere, water spraying across the long table, soaking into the table cloth.

"Yaaahaaaa! Curt, my boy," shouted Marcus, throwing his water rifle towards him. Curt just let it drop. Marcus grabbed a second rifle as I headed through the entry way, grabbing a stunned Jennifer and taking her up the stairs.

"What the hell is going on here?" she asked as we ran into my room. I grabbed the water rifle. A nice shade of orange.

"I was about to ask you the same thing."

"I thought I was here for a horseback riding vacation. I won a radio contest. I figured Curtis would love it . . . the mother fucker . . . he staged the whole thing."

I laughed. "You've got the mother fucker part right, if you mean Marcus. C'mon," I said. "There's gotta be one of these in your room." There was. Green. Jennifer grabbed it and pumped it full of pressure. "Man, these colors are awful," she said.

"Marcus never was one for taste."

"Or for truth. Well, the vacation explains why I'm here," she said. "What's your excuse?"

"Marcus never told you about our adolescent bet? About a house where you could waterfight inside."

"No," said Jennifer.

"Well, you know about it now."

Curtis was at the bottom of the stairs, water rifle in hand. But there was a look of confusion, even fear, across his face.

"Mom?"

"Get down," I yelled. Marcus was behind him, taking aim. Curtis dropped to the floor. Marcus spread his arms wide open. "I'm not even wet," he said.

"Yet . . ." said Jennifer, firing a stream of water at him. Marcus rolled and ducked into the next room. I heard a shouted "Shit," from what must have been the kitchen. It was Copper. Then I heard Marcus.

"Oh, Copper. Forgot to tell you. The spray nozzle on the sink doesn't work." Then another battle cry.

Jennifer was off down the stairs, Curtis in tow. I followed her. She was back in the Great Room, drawing a bead on Carol's back. She fired. I could see Carol's shoulders contract towards her spine from the cold water. She whirled.

"Just who the fuck do you think you are, you filthy bitch," said Carol.

"Hello to you too," said Jennifer.

"He's my man," said Carol.

"Am I sorry for you. Besides, you can have him, if you're that desperate or stupid."

"You . . ." Carol couldn't come up with a proper denigration, so she settled for throwing her water gun at Jennifer, who ducked. The gun caught me in the leg as I moved around the corner. It surprised me that it hurt. I accidentally squeezed the trigger of my water rifle, hitting Jennifer in the back.

"Hey, I'm on your side."

"We used to play every person for themselves," I said, wincing from the pain in my shin.

"This is not used to," Jennifer said.

"Yeah, I know." I yelled for Copper. It sounded like he was at the other end of the house. "C'mon," I said to Jennifer. "If we can reach Copper maybe we can straighten all this out."

I headed from the Great Room, through the kitchen, past several bedrooms, and then into a long wide hallway which doubled as a sitting room. Several hallways led away from the rugs and stuffed chairs that outlined the little parlor.

"This is one weird house. Tea, anyone?" asked Jennifer.

"You said it." I yelled. "Copper!"

I heard a voice, but it wasn't Copper's. It came from an intercom on the wall above one of the stuffed chairs.

"Intruder alert, section seven." It was Marcus. "Counter measures.

Holes opened in the floor, and sprinkler heads popped through them, shooting water in all directions. We ran for the door. I felt like Indiana Jones dodging poison darts.

"I've never been so wet in all my life," said Jennifer. "You all are crazy."

"Hey, you married him."

"You're right there. Curtis, you okay?" He nodded. "What now?"

"Well . . ." Then I heard Copper's voice. He was yelling my name and the word "outside."

"Outside," I said. "Perfect. If he wants us he'll have to come get us. We'll have the advantage."

"Sounds good," said Jennifer.

"We'll meet you," I yelled, and began searching for the first door to the outside we could find. It was a side door, one that let out beside the garage and onto the concrete parking area just off the circle drive. The sun was bright and the day was heating up. In the garage I grabbed a couple of buckets, found a faucet, filled.

"I can't tell if you all are for real," Jennifer said.

"We were as kids. But this feels weird at thirty-six," I said. "But mainly because of all that 'family' crap. The last time I had a civil word with Marcus was years ago."

"He's lost it," Jennifer said.

Three voices chorused our names. It was Copper, South, and Mercy.

"By the garage," I shouted.

The three of them came wheeling around the end of the house from the backyard. They were soaking.

"My brother is seriously deranged," said Copper.

South was laughing. "Yeah, but this is kind of fun."

We all looked at her and then broke up laughing. South was right. This was kind of fun. It started out really strange, but the adrenalin was pumping through all of us.

"You don't think he's trying to make peace, do you?" said Copper.

"With a water war. Maybe," I said. "That would suit his style."

"Well, what now," asked Copper.

"Get some more water . . . in anything that will carry it," said South.

We found a few squirt bottles. We refilled rifles, Jennifer's, Curtis's, mine, and one Copper had commandeered along the way. Then we found a place in the open and waited.

Finally Marcus showed himself around the far end of the house. Carol was nowhere in sight. He laughed, leaning his water rifle against the porch. He bent down on one knee, pulled the cover off a something buried in the earth, and began moving his arms.

"What is that?" Copper asked.

"Water box," I said. "Be ready to move."

Sprinklers shot up all around us and began to spray. I moved toward Marcus, readying my bucket. "C'mon," I shouted. The others followed and we ran. Marcus watched us closely. As I neared within thirty feet, he twisted something in the water box and ran towards me. He had taken three steps, when the shaking snake of a fire hose shot up beside him. It had been lying along the porch, unnoticed.

My bucket took the spray first, the powerful stream from the fire hose knocking it out of my hand and slinging it backward into Jennifer. Then the force of the water slammed into me. It hit me in the face, and blinded, I went down into a wet blackness.

I woke with a stinging pain in my head. I could feel blood when I touched the back of my head.

"Don't try to get up," a voice said. I rolled back over and groaned. Opening my eyes, I thought I was hallucinating. Luke was there, licking my hand. He was smart, but talking? Then the voice spoke again, louder. "I called the fire department!" The voice wasn't coming from Luke, but it was familiar.

"Cate?"

"Relax, lie still." Cate was kneeling beside me, cell phone in hand.

"Hey, honey," I said, rolling on my side just enough to see that the Waterhouse was on fire. Copper and Marcus were doing their best to douse the flames with the hose Marcus had shot me with. It was strange to see them, almost arm in arm, working for a common cause. Maybe Marcus was trying to make peace.

"What happened?" I said. Cate explained her flight. The taxi.

Jennifer's head loomed next to Cate's. "It was Carol. She set the place ablaze. *Really* pissed off, I guess. Marcus finally found someone who can match his destructive tendencies. Actually, her father owns the place. Marcus rented it for the little get-together. But she didn't know he'd invited me. So I guess since it didn't go like she planned, and she torched it."

Sirens sounded in the distance. Soon the fire department arrived and began finishing what Marcus and Copper had started. Paramedics were there, too. They took a look at my head and bandaged it, insisting that I ride with them to the hospital to have some X-rays to make sure I didn't have a concussion. They put me on a stretcher, and

began loading me into the back of the ambulance. Cate was already inside, waiting for me.

Then Copper was above me. "Well, meet you there, brother." Then he spoke to the paramedic. "What hospital?"

"Down in the valley," said the medic. "Mercy. You'll see the signs."

Copper leaned above me again. "Like the name."

"Yeah, me too."

There was smoke in the sky. As they were loading me in, I followed it with my eyes down to the smoldering left end of the Waterhouse. What a funny name for a place where this had happened, I thought. Water healed your wounds. Slaked your thirst. Sad that its original purpose could be so polluted; how we could ruin it and use it for ruin at the same time, turning its wet and lovely message inside out.

Marcus was standing in front of Carol, yelling. He was still holding the hose by the nozzle. Water was shooting up into the air like Old Faithful, the hose fishtailing and flailing like the body of a snake after its head has been severed. I managed to see Carol slap him, and him turn the water on her, bowling her over backwards. The look on his face was enough to tell me he was no brother of mine. Cate was in the ambulance, Luke beside her, ready to lick face again if need be. She held my hand.

"Home, James," I shouted to the driver.

Cate smiled. "Home."

No Lick-Spittle Proposition

(1998)

Marcus Gale

Journal -- May 14

. . . damn I wish I had some beer. But they say no way . . . I haven't tried to write this goddamned much since junior high . . . they say write down my feelings . . . the only thought I've got is that my throat is dry . . . that's what I'm feeling . . . they call it the journey, whatever the hell they mean by that . . . or the one guy . . . Bill . . . called it dialogue . . . open a conversation with God, he said . . . make a list . . . he said it may be long . . . but start it before the next session . . . a list . . .

The List

didn't make Jennifer stay . . .

was mean to my kid brother . . .

this . . .

is . . .

bullshit . . .

Postcard to Copper Gale -- May 14

Hey, little brother. Long time, no talk. You would like things here. Speakers very inspirational. They gave us postcards and stamps. There's a lot of stuff about making contact and all . . . no faggot stuff though. So . . . reach out and touch someone, right? Yo. Big Brother.

Letter to God -- May 15

God. You are the quarterback. Marcus.

Outside the Stadium -- May 14

Pickers. Women and a few men. Carrying signs. *Promise Keepers Go Home.*
Promise Keepers Promise Oppression. PK = Problem Khristians, Problem Kids.

Journal -- May 15

. . . a man hugged me today. It felt weird. I've been trying not to do this both days and then this dude, this big black dude . . . he did it. Just reached out. And there wasn't a Johnson in it . . . it wasn't a fag thing . . . he just grinned, said I was a brother . . . his chest was huge . . . man, not that I'm talking like a faggot . . .

Notes from Speeches -- May 14

Ephesians 5:23: "For the husband is the head of the wife, just as Christ is the head of the Church."

In the Stadium -- May 14 -- 1:20

WE LOVE JESUS, YES WE DO! WE LOVE JESUS, HOW 'BOUT YOU? Then from the other side of the stadium . . . WE LOVE JESUS, YES WE DO! WE LOVE JESUS, HOW 'BOUT YOU!?!

Tape Recording -- May 15 -- Speaker Eric Spalding

"Let me tell you about a man. A man named Billy. Sunday. Billy Sunday . . . that's right, men, a man with the holiest of last names. And you know what he knew? Do you know? I know it. I know it! And I'm going to tell it to you. This is what Billy Sunday knew. This is what Billy Sunday preached . . . that Jesus was "no dough-faced, lick-spittle proposition . . . but the greatest scrapper that ever lived!" Billy Sunday's Jesus! Our Jesus! Your Jesus! "Jesus Christ could go like a six-cylinder engine! I'd like to put my fist on the nose of the man who hasn't got grit enough to be a Christian!" A Scrapper! Sunday. Billy Sunday. You Too!

The Stadium -- May 15

50,000 strong. White. Black. Chink. Gook. All high-fiving each other. I can feel it. Strength in number. Power. *I am free to love you, Jesus.* The shouts go up. It comes into my chest. *I am free to love you, Jesus.* Say it. Say it, baby, say it. I shout it out. "I am free to love you, Jesus!"

On The Way In -- May 14

We've got the studly walk. I can see it. We all throw our legs out. To the side. On the balls of the feet. Your tools can hang free, that way. No chaffing. Gets the girls. Pumps

out that ass. That's what they like. Keep my head down. Don't want to look. No eyes.
No contact. I'm not scared goddamnit. Just walking, that's all. Just walking like a man.

TV -- May 14

There aren't any in our rooms. But the cameras are all here. Even a big screen for the
speakers. Like the fucking Superbowl. Or Guns N' Roses.

T-shirts bought -- May 14

A black one saying "Seven Promises From The Savior," on the front. On the back are the
seven. A pink one that says "Watch Out, I'm a Prayer Panther." It had the Pink Panther
struttin' his stuff, too. White that says "Go Against the Flow!" Another white with
"Jesus Christ" on the back like a Coca-Cola logo. It says "Your Designated Hitter. He
Went To Bat For Your Sins." Black that says

Yes, as a matter of fact, I AM

a wide-eyed

sanctified

blood bought

spirit taught

Bible totin'

scripture quotin'

Satan Bashin'

sin trashin'

Christ followin'

pride swallowin'

hard praying

truth conveying

faith walkin'

gospel talkin'

Bonafide BIG-TIME Believer

and proud of it.

And a green with "We are looking for a few good men . . . to follow Christ and lead their families."

Journal -- May 15

PK's. It now means promises. Keeping them. Before I thought it was Preacher's Kids. Ones that were wild. Wanted to do it in the Choir Loft. Susie . . . what's her name. Prime example.

Tape Recording -- May 15 -- Speaker Tony Eagleton

"They say that we believe men and women are inherently unequal in their roles in the family and in society. That's not what we're about. Their roles are different, however . . . biologically. Determined by a Great God who is the only one who knows the mysteries of his creation."

Ministry Booth -- May 14

She is blonde. She sits behind a cash register. Piled around her is merchandise. Books like *The Power of a Promise Kept*, *When Men Pray* and *What Makes a Man?* T-shirts and mugs. Tapes. Caps. Lapel Pins. Key Chains. I look over the stuff. Buy T-shirts and a cap. I hear her speak twice. It is the same line. "I have a husband and a son in the

stadium. I am happy to support anything that helps them grow in their walk with the Lord."

Postcard to Sterling Van Cleave -- May 14

Cleavage -- your brothers are here. And you would love it. You remember that time you told me that Jesus was "gonna get a hold of my ass"? Well, he's here. I'm puckered. Bring it on, Jesus. Bring it on. Be home day after next. The regular workout. The next one of these I come to, your ass is mine. It's coming with me. The rest of you better follow. Drink one for me, will ya.

Marcus.

Letter to Jennifer Gale -- May 14

Hi, honey. *Should I call her that?* Remember when you told me I ought to get some help. Well, here I am. I can even say it. I love you. Jesus is teaching me . . . *Aw, fuck it.*

Postcard to Jennifer Gale -- May 14 -- Picture of Texas Stadium in Dallas

Guess where I am. Guess. Guess who's here with me.

Journal -- May 15

I think I've still got some party invitations. From that bash for Carol. I could use those. Someplace out west. I'll get a house. Somehow. Maybe Dad. A loan. He might do it now, sick as he's been. Savings. Somehow. Send out invitations. Jimmy. Copper. Keys, maybe. No parents. A house for water fights.

The Stadium -- May 15 -- Speaker Eric Spalding

"The first thing you have to do is sit down with your wife and say something like this: "Honey, I've made a terrible mistake. I've given you my role. I gave up leading this family, and I forced you to take my place. Now I must reclaim my role.' Don't misunderstand what I'm saying here," continues Spalding. "I'm not suggesting that you ask for your role back, I'm urging you to take it back. If you simply ask for it, your wife is likely to refuse . . . Your wife's concerns may be justified. Unfortunately, however, there can be no compromise here . . . Be sensitive. Listen. Treat the lady gently but lovingly. But lead!"

Letter to Jennifer Gale -- May 15 -- PK Stationary and Mission Statement

Dear Jen,

How's it going? How's Curtis? How's the job working out? Or is it school? I've kind of lost track. We've been out of touch. But, hey. Understandable. We left on some bad terms. But not too bad, I hope. I don't mean . . . not that I want us back, exactly. But this weekend. This weekend put a perspective on stuff. I didn't do my job. You know . . . leading our family. Setting a good example. Being there for you. I wasn't a godly father. I wasn't a godly man. But this weekend. I'm in touch with Jesus. He's showing me things. I'd just like to talk. We could get together maybe. Or over the phone. Even letters if you like. I drove by your place the other day. It looks nice. A good place for you. For Curtis. But do you have a game plan? Are you seeing anybody? I'm sorry about that one guy. When was that. A while back. Anyway, I paid the damages. And

I've forgiven him. They're making me a family man here. I miss you. And the little man. Anyway. I thought you might want to know. They say lead. I should've done that. Taken my role. You couldn't have left me then. And I'm going to. Starting with my own life. Lead. Lead. Lead. Jesus is leading me. Jesus is leading me. Jesus.

Yours,

Marcus

Pumpkin Guts

(1998)

Copper Gale

I was sure I was going crazy. There he was -- right behind Mercy. Slobbering over the french bread. A tattered robe. Gas drool fogging right out of his mouth like the others. Licking long sticky fingers. I mean it was sick. Or I was.

"Mercy."

She didn't turn.

"Mercy, there's a big . . . "

"It's Mercedes," she said. Whirled. "Mercedes. Like the car." I could see her lips moving right through his chest. He looked at her, me, fingered a loaf, and floated towards checkout. Going to see if he'd made it yet in the National Enquirer.

"Sorry," I said. "There was a big ghost . . . "

"Not again," she said, humphing. God, what a little prima donna. "I want ham."

"At least that hasn't changed."

"What does that mean?" Mercy said with ten-year-old arrogance.

"Ask your mom," I said. "Get your ham."

While Mercy Oscar Meyer'ed it, I looked for the ghost. Nope. He wasn't gone like I hoped. At the front door, playing pocket pool with the electric eye. Okay, you're not crazy, Copper . . . it's been a long day . . . and this kid is on your nerves . . . and . . . pastrami, salami . . . we need some Dijon . . . why am I talking to myself?

"We need bread," said Mercy.

"I thought you'd picked a loaf?"

"No, I was waiting for the ghost. It's not polite to cut in line."

"Pick," I said.

She grabbed the loaf the ghost had fingered. "Not that one," I said. "Pick again. That one is . . . moldy."

Mercy gave me the stare, then picked a different loaf.

We checked out. Mercy walked right through him. He glowed and grinned. I paid. We went home and I whipped up a pastrami-salami-calamity for me, and a very plain ham sandwich for Miss Mercedes Priss. Maybe I was crazy. Maybe the ghost hadn't been wearing a robe. A dress? A ghost in drag? It would have to be. All my ghosts were guys.

October. Snow. In Oklahoma. I wasn't the only crazy thing around here. Mercy and I parked in the lot of the little cemetery. She put up a fight earlier, but was quiet now. I got out and ransacked the trunk for tools. Brush. Trowel. Then we walked together toward Fileman's grave.

"Watch the mud," I said. The snow was already melting. The ground a reddish mud. Snow never lasts more than a day here. One time, when I was a kid, we had snow for three days straight. It was a party. Maybe this year. Seems to be getting colder. Another ice age on the way, baby.

Mercy skipped and sang a little tune. Then she stopped, measured her steps, put the book back on her head. The little lady Mercedes in control again. No dancing on graves for her. I followed her as she strolled to the family stone that read Wirick.

"Copper? Do you really see ghosts?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Lewis, at school, he says ghosts are just made up by adults to keep kids out of trouble."

"What's Lewis know," I said.

I brushed last winter's grime off the big stone first. Troweled away the weeds. Then moved to the marker that read "Fileman Wirick. 1923-1995." Three years. Every time I do this one more year.

"Are you going to be here someday?" Mercy's brown eyes were dark. She was serious. A beautiful kid. Her mother's good looks.

"No. My body will probably be over there." I pointed to the family stone that said Gale. Probably. I still think I'm not going to die. "That's where my grandparents are. Where my Mom, Dad, and maybe my brother will be."

"But why aren't we cleaning off their headstones?"

"I do that on Memorial day. Then you're obligated. But this grave . . . this one is special. There's no one around to see to it except for me. This person . . . he was important to me."

"Like a Dad?"

"Sort of. Like a Step-Dad, I guess."

"Oh." Mercy looked around. "Where will Mom be?"

"I don't know," I said. "It's her decision. She could be in three places. She'll have to pick one."

"Why does she get to pick?"

"Well, people are usually buried with their families. Over there is my family, so I'll go there. Your mom has more families. Her family with her parents. Her family with your dad. Number three with me. It's complicated. If I was her, I'd go for cremation. You could just spread it around."

Mercy shoved her hands in her pockets. I could see her deciding that wasn't the look for Mercedes. She took them out. Hugged herself. She didn't ask the question that had me worried.

"C'mon. Rock Chalk time."

"Do we have to?" Followed by the Dirty Look.

"It's tradition."

"So."

"C'mon," I said, and started across the cemetery. The last row was full of wooden head stones. Fake teeth in some dead person's head. You couldn't make out the lettering on most of them. Names. Dates. All lost to the weather.

"I still wonder who is buried here," I said, half to myself. Mercy didn't answer. I leaned down and picked up a rock. "Halloween night. When I was about your age. My brother, me, and Jimmy Timberlake would come down here at midnight, braving the goblins and trolls to knock on a headstone and . . ."

"Make a wish," said Mercy. "I know all about that and letting the ghosts out for air and the old German costume and wishing on a star." She crossed her arms. Finished with that.

"It's German custom, not costume."

"I don't care. I'm not going to do it." Her face was brutal. Unbelieving. Suddenly I thought she meant it.

"Well, I'm going to." I took the stone I'd picked. Knocked twice. Carefully I put it on the uneven top of a wooden headstone. "Your turn."

"I said no."

"Humor your old man."

"Your not my old man."

"True," I said. "Fair enough." I turned and started back across the slush."

"Oh, all right," Mercy said suddenly. She grabbed a rock, hit a headstone, then threw the rock into the mud. "There," she said.

No respect flashed in my head. Let it go, Cop. Just turn and walk. Another year and guilt wouldn't do it. Mercy 1; Halloween 0. I could feel her behind me.

"I bet you didn't even have time for a wish."

"Yes I did," she said.

"For?"

"I can't tell you. If I do it won't come true."

"I bet it's about Craig at school. Yeah?"

"You'll never know," she said. A smile.

"C'mon," I said. "I'll race you to the car." I took off. I touched the cold metal first, my hands filled with tools. There was Mercedes, a long way back. Weaving through the headstones. Her back ramrod straight. Her steps like a Clydesdale. Who the hell was this kid?

"Mom's home!" Mercy shouted as I pulled into the drive. She hopped out, running. South opened the door and Mercy was in her arms. Like she hadn't been hugged in weeks. I could snap a photo and win the Pulitzer.

"Where have you two been?" asked South.

"Cemetery. Sybil and I were doing the yearly ritual." South grinned. Shook that beauty head of hers. "I thought we'd discussed that."

"You discussed it."

"Copper Gale, you've got a hard head. Wash your hands you two. Mario Puzo is coming to see us."

Godfather's Pizza blurred into an hour of television, conversation about a phone call and Mercy's father's mother arranging Mercy's Christmas visit, not acknowledging that Halloween and Thanksgiving come before December. Then *Little Town on The Prairie*. I read. Mercedes liked Nellie Olsen. Nightmare -- courtesy of Laura Ingalls Wilder. When she was asleep, I crawled in with South.

"Hey."

"Hey, Copper boy," she said sleepily. A kiss.

"How was work?"

"Same old grind," she said.

"Well, I've got a different grind in mind. If interested."

"You might just have a deal, Valentino. What did you and munchkin Mercy do today?"

"Mercy who?"

"Oh, sorry. Mercedes." South yawned.

"She would have sentenced you to the electric chair."

"So what did you two do?"

"Talked about ghosts. The cemetery thing."

South propped herself up against the headboard. "Last year she was scared out of her wits, Copper. Why not throw in werewolves and goblins while you're at it," South said. Her hands were out in front of her. The white sheet barely above her breasts. Like it was when I realized I loved her. We met at a mutual friend's house. Virginia, he called her. Before the night was over we were in bed and I was calling her South. It stuck. Just like us. After we got married, she got an advertising job for seventy grand a year. Couldn't pass it up. It took a little doing, but I cut back my air time at KATT and cleaned house and hung out with Mercy in the afternoons. A good gig. Until she changed.

"It was Mercy who was scared. I don't think 'Mercedes' would know scared, or fun, if it hit her in the butt."

South laughed. "She's the same kid, Copper. And all kids get scared. I don't know why you get her so wrapped up. Ghosts? Goblins? There's enough to fear out there without worrying about stuff that isn't real."

She looked at me. I was quiet.

"Okay. Without fearing something that most people recognize as not real," said South.

"But that's the whole spirit, no pun intended. Wearing masks and getting to be somebody else. It's magic."

"Magic is scary stuff to a child."

"Oh, c'mon, South. If she never feels any magic how will she learn not to be scared?"

South shook her head. "Round and round we go," she said as she lay back down and nestled against me.

"I guess we talked more about death than ghosts. Where you and I would be planted. Cleaned off Fileman's grave."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah," I said. "I think that's where I get it."

"What?"

"Halloween," I said. "Man how he loved it. Always dressed as somebody great who only had one arm. It was like in those costumes . . . he hadn't lost an arm. Captain Hook or his "I've-lost-the-wrong-limb" Captain Ahab. But Fileman was whole. He took the time to give that idea to me. So Halloween. . . it's my time now. And I want to give her what he gave me, I think."

"Your father never took the time. Fileman did. But did he give it to you, or did you learn it from him?"

"I know. I keep hoping. I mean last year I had fun, and I think Mercedes did. If I'm alone it makes me feel . . . temporary . . . transparent. No pun intended."

"You're not temporary, Copper, and don't give me that line about how I've been married once before. Things change. But some things you just know. And I know about you."

"I'm glad somebody around here does." I heard her laugh quietly.

"Seeing ghosts again, honey?" She kissed me, running her leg across mine. Tickling the hair.

"Everyday."

"You're the only one," she whispered, pulling me up close.

I'd only seen pictures. Pumped-up shoulders. Short-clipped hair. Neat moustache. Large nose. He looked at me and smiled. I could read the tabloids through his chest. In his shopping cart he had one pumpkin, candles, and a baseball. He glowed a little. Like ghosts do. Virginia's ex. Mercy's father.

I looked down into my cart. Okay, Copper. That is not real. I slowly went over my selections. Seven good pumpkins. Candles. A chomping skull for Joey Barker, the kid Mercy had drawn for the Halloween Carnival at school. A copy of *Verve*, with South's newest ads. A gallon of milk. Wait a minute. How could he be a ghost. He isn't even dead yet. I looked back up.

He was gone.

At home, I put the pumpkins on the hay bale I'd borrowed from a rancher friend. They'd be carved Halloween night. I let Bouncer out in the yard. Nervously I raked leaves. He was a Pusher, that ghost. I was still raking when Mercedes came home from school.

"Hey, pumpkin. How's the day?"

"Good."

"You ready to get a costume?"

"I thought Mom was going to take me." Disappointment.

"She's got to work late, so she asked if I would. That okay?" More Schizo-daughter-frightened-new-father bonding time.

"I guess," she said. "I know just what I want to be."

"Yeah? What?"

"I can't tell you," she taunted, smiling. She ran for the house and I chased her. Bouncer jumped into the leaf pile and barked. Mercedes squeezed through the back door to safety. Nothing would make her tell.

"You little devil," I said.

At the mall, she led me to The Halloween Warehouse. It took over a vacant store in October and made a killing. I followed her to a rack at the front of the store. She pulled a costume off its hanger.

"An angel?" I asked. "An angel for Halloween?"

She nodded her head. "Mercedes," I began. "Mercedes. Look at these spider woman outfits. They've even got webbed fingers and..."

The Look.

"An angel . . . all right. Just think. You can wear it at Christmas to your Dad's house. Be the holy ghost."

We checked out. She carried the angel costume close to her. She thinks I'm going to make it disappear. Magic. "It glows in the dark," she said. A selling point. She was a smart kid.

At the carnival South and I worked a booth. Kids bobbed for apples. Played scary games. Ate anything that was covered in caramel. The noise was deafening. I smiled. It was wilder than parties I went to in college. Mercedes' Angel, a Raggedy Ann, and Michaelangelo (the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle version) were a blur. Joey Barker around every corner with the clacking skull. Three hours. Then we took Mercedes home. In the car she was non-stop chatter.

"I can't wait to go trick or treat with Julie and Maria!"

"I thought we'd go together, like last year."

"But I . . ." Mercedes began.

"Well, I can settle this dispute," said South wearily. "I've got to go to a party for a client that evening, so Copper will have to give out candy, so you'll have to trick or treat with your friends."

"Good," said Mercedes beneath her breath.

"Why don't we just leave the porch light off," I said.

"Oh, I think she's old enough to go with her friends, don't you?"

That wasn't the point. But South was looking at me. A little weary but smiling. I could hear her say "that *was* the real point." South put Mercedes to bed and I could hear them talking.

"He's a little hard on you," said South quietly. "But I know he wants the best for you and I want you to know that too. We all get mixed up on what is best sometimes though, and it takes time to sort things out. If you'll remember that he's just as new at this as you are, that will help. People in a family have to play lots of roles, almost like being different people, and it's easy to hurt without meaning to. Copper loves you and wants the best for you. And so do I. And so it's okay to feel the way you're feeling, kind of squishy inside. We all feel that way sometimes. I bet it will be all gone in the morning." She turned out Mercy's light shortly after that and sat on the couch with me, nestling her head against my shoulder.

"She's a good kid," I said. "I'm sorry."

"No apology needed. You're just trying on a new hat and it doesn't fit, but it's raining like hell outside. Hang in there." She got up to go to bed. "Don't forget to turn the clocks back before you come in," said South through a yawn.

"That's right."

One o'clock. I turned off the television. Moved into the kitchen, got a fork. One of its tines was just right to reset the Microwave. I rolled the time back a few clicks. Put the fork in the sink.

Grandfather clock next. Favorite pumpkin clock in the hall. In the bathroom the clock radio we kept by the shower. Checked the medicine cabinet mirror. I needed a shave. There were circles under my eyes. Across from the medicine cabinet was a full length mirror, like we'd had in the house I grew up in. I used to dig standing between those two mirrors and seeing my reflection multiply. It did the same now. Like I was standing underneath a doorway, a thousand doorways. A thousand haggard faces staring back at me. Why did I come back here? Why this kid? Why Halloween? Faces and faces. I wondered which one was me. Maybe they were past lives. Different stories. Different names. Or were all the stories me, no matter what hat or face I wore, No matter what name I chose. Or was given. Cooper. Copper. Cop. Copper boy. Dad . . . Father. I shivered.

I drug my tired ass and past lives into the bedroom. Changed the the clock there. Tomorrow was planning for Halloween week special programming at the station. I would suggest making a couple of carts about All Saints Day and the traditions of ages past. How Halloween was meant to give evil a night to stretch its legs. Walk the streets. The manager would want something about how it wasn't satanism. I would laugh and make the spots. They could play all next week. No matter who was on the air. No matter who they thought they were.

The thirty-first was cold. South poured coffee that steamed like it had dry ice in it. The weather was gray. She was already dressed when I hit the shower.

"It's your day," she said.

"You ordered the gray for me, didn't you?"

"Special delivery," she said. She pulled lipstick from the cabinet. The color matched the scarf around her neck. Sexy. She painted the red on with style. Pouted her lips at me.

"No wonder you win clients," I said.

"I see you're Mr. Politically Correct this morning."

"Just for you, honey," I said.

"I've got to run. I'm late. Good day for you." She blew me a kiss. "Remember -- try to make it a good day for Mercedes, too."

"No sweat," I said. The shower was steaming. I stripped while South watched. "She'll come home. We'll eat. Carve pumpkins -- if she wants. Then she's off with friends . . . not a word."

South laughed. "Should I set up the video camera so we have proof?"

"Not necessary. I think they call it trust."

"Be good." She stuck her head around the shower curtain. A kiss. She was gone. Soap. Rinse. I climbed out of the shower. The towel was chilly. Mercedes and I had cereal together. She dressed. Caught the bus. I headed to the station to relieve the late-nighter, Reed. Cranked up the morning show with a ghostly laugh, a skeleton clack, a blood-curdling Happy Halloween. All without make-up or special effects -- just the Voice. Radio is the shit.

That afternoon I raked. Mercedes came home. She seemed quiet but excited. Lady-like of course. I smiled. Pretended not to notice. She was worried about her costume. Would it glow? I brought two lamps into her room. We light-bathed the angel costume on her bed. Twenty minutes. In the dark it had already started to glow. Mercedes seemed satisfied.

After dinner I mentioned pumpkins.

"I'm going to get out the knives," I said easily. "To carve some jack-o-lanterns. Would you like to help?" She didn't answer. She was reading on the couch. Her look said "no."

I spread newspaper. Laid out the pumpkins. Got a marker, a big spoon. The filet knife -- saved for two special occasions. One, filleting trout, and two, carving jack-o-

lanterns. The first two I would do freehand. The rest more complex faces. A gruesome gallery.

The filet knife made steely sliding noises as I sharpened it. Long gliding motions. It was rhythmic, hypnotic. Slice around the top of the first pumpkin -- a lid. That odor hit the air. I dug my hands inside. The meat gripped my fingers coolly. It felt good and I smiled. Pulled out a glob of seeds and orange slush. A plop on the newspaper.

"Pumpkin guts," said Mercedes, standing behind me.

I laughed. She was quiet. I kept on cutting. Then . . .

"Would you like to help?"

The Look. "No."

I pulled out the stops. It was my last shot.

"Would you like to do one of your own?" Her toes moved round and round on the kitchen tiles. I improvised.

"You can put anything on it you want."

She knew she had me. "Okay."

I sharpened the other knife. Gingerly handed it to her. South would kill me if this got out. I sat Mercedes at the table. "Your using this knife is our secret, okay?" She nodded. She put the pumpkin between her knees. Moving to the table she looked . . . like a hermit crab . . . carrying a medicine ball.

"Let's carve our names. You do one for Mom."

"Okay," I said. "Watch the knife. It's sharp."

She nodded. Too intent on the jack-o-lantern to speak. I grinned. There he was.

Standing outside. In the backyard. Framed by the kitchen window. Micheal-fucking-Myers. His mouth moved. The wriggling mustache got my attention. So did the cowboy hat. Chaps. A low-slung six-shooter. He smiled. He was holding the small pumpkin. The one I'd seen him buy at the store. He had no shirt on. His rippling pectorals seemed unnatural, impossible. He placed a candle inside his pumpkin. Lit it

with an invisible match. Three letters were carved. D-A-D. "You said we could put anything we wanted on it," he mouthed. He smiled at Mercedes. Reached for her head to turn it toward his pumpkin.

I shook it off. "How's it going?" I asked Mercedes.

"Fine," she said. "I'm done."

"Go put it out front. Then get your costume on." My voice was tense. She moved from the table. I looked up. He was gone. The doorbell rang.

I served the first trick-or-treaters. A Power Ranger and two trolls. Back in the kitchen I separated the seeds from the pulp. Rinsed them. Then to a cookie sheet and into the oven. I rolled up the newspapers. I noticed how fast my breathing was.

"What do you think?" said Mercedes. She flipped the lights off and spun around. All sides of her costume glowed -- even the halo. She looked bursting full and empty. Old and new.

"It's great," I said. "You're an angel."

"Thanks, Copper."

Julie and Maria arrived a few minutes later. "TRICK OR TREAT!"

I filled outstretched sacks with mini chocolate bars. Mercedes hugged me. Out the door, down the street, her glowing costume skipping towards . . . a lighted pumpkin . . . a bare chest. He waved her on. Grinning.

I put on my shoes. Dropped the oven's heat. Flipped out the porch light. Locked the door. He turned. I followed.

Long strides. Fast. He was The Night of the Living Dead on stilts and speed. This is crazy. I found myself almost running to keep up with him. Mercy, Julie, and Maria flitted from house to house. Into the next neighborhood. Sacks bulging with candy. I watched the darkness. Bushes. Trees. Older kids dressed up thinking toilet paper, eggs, and razor blades in apples. Next year Mercy was going to the mall.

He kept some distance from Mercy. Too close for me. I could see porch lights and jack-o-lanterns through his chest. Great. Two Dads. One see-through. One psychotic. The kid didn't have a chance.

He kept tabs on me, working his Linda Blair head. I could hear screams. Wails. Somebody had a Halloween tape full blast. Darth Vader answered at one house. Kids didn't wait for candy. Mercy and company rounded a corner. He walked straight through the walls of a house toward them. I pushed harder. Then around the corner.

I saw myself. Shadowy and thin. Transparent like him. I was approaching an old house. Dressed as a Prince. A girl's tiara on my head. Jimmy Timberlake was beside me. Captain Ahab. That's what you get having a well-read mother. I remember his limp was great. We held out grocery sacks. Then we walked away from the house. To the sidewalk. To my brother. Marcus wore a leather jacket. Shades. Maybe James Dean. Probably nothing at all. He dipped in our sacks. Took the best candy bars and walked us to the next house. He was transparent, too. I was off my nut.

Some house, girls Marcus knew handed out candy. Then he was on the porch. Once a kiss and a "back by midnight." Then he disappeared. It was me and Jimmy. Veering off the path. Out of the neighborhood. Towards the graveyard.

Mercy's father motioned me on. He followed the transparent Jimmy and me. Mercy and her friends were off in another direction. Toward houses. Toward lights. I followed him. As long as I stayed close, he couldn't get her.

Blocks without porch lights. Businesses dark. Big buildings. Looming. The park. Several more streets. The wrought-iron fence of the cemetery. He floated right through. Zig-zagged through stones. I opened the rusty gate. Kept up. The Wirick stone appeared. No grave for Fileman. What year was this? Little Jimmy and Copper were at the back. Kneeling in the grass, Looking for the right rock. He moved past them and slipped down. Into the ground. Pumpkin and pectorals and all.

Jimmy had found his rock. I could hear it hit the headstone. Jimmy's father appeared. Another ghost of the undead. Life-size. Transparent.

Then the little me. Rock. Tap. Him. Mercy's father -- the grinning ghoul version.

I made my way back to the row of wooden markers. The little Jimmy and Copper ran further back. Disappeared into the gloom. Now it was just flesh and blood me and the ghost of Mercy's father. Guns ready. High midnight. Crazy. He watched me closely. Pictures ran through my mind. Small muddy footprints. A thrown stone. Book on Mercy's head. Me. Letting out this ghost.

"Go ahead," I said. "If you're going to shoot, you're going to have to shoot me in the back."

I turned. Took a step. Then more. I could feel the ghosts itchy trigger finger. Scratching its way down my neck. I kept on walking past the stones. Through the gates. I stopped and turned. Looked back. Expecting he'd waited to shoot. The graveyard was dark. No unearthly light. Darkness. No ghost.

Past the dark buildings and into my own lighted neighborhood. At home I got matches and lighted our jack-o-lanterns. In between our faces were our names. Virginia. Mercedes. Copper. I read them softly aloud. They sounded right.

I moved inside, not wanting to seem suspect. Didn't want Mercedes to think she'd been followed. An uncool Dad-thing for sure. Didn't want to start anything else that seemed like tradition. Too many trappings already.

Mercedes came home half an hour later. The sack spilling over with candy. We ate some, inspecting for razor blades. Then I put her in the shower and tucked her into bed.

"A little Nellie Olsen," I said.

"No. Thanks though . . . Cop," she said.

"Sure thing . . . Merc," I said. She laughed and looked up at me. "Happy Halloween!" she said.

"And a happy one to you." I moved to catch the light. Then stopped. "Waffles in the morning?" I asked.

"What's a waffle, Cop?"

"Something I think you'll like. Or not. Merc."

She laughed again. "Okay." I could hear sleep in her voice. "Don't forget the ham." She trailed off. "Ghost," she purred as I put out the light. I leaned over her in the darkness. Kissed her forehead. Brushed back her hair. I whispered. "No ghost. No stone. Only you." And again. "No ghost. No stone. Only you."

Later I heard South's car pull in. Keys rattled in the door. We talked in bed for a few moments. Then she was out. Quietly I slipped out the front door and doused the candles. The street was empty. No people, solid or transparent. I was crazy alright. I looked back at the house. Crazy. Crazy about what was behind that doorway.

The One Who Both Feeds and Eats

(1996)

"Bailiff. Bail is posted for Cell three. James Timberlake. Bring him out."

Cate Marrin waits on the oak bench across the wide expanse of marble floor from the admitting desk and walkway to the cells of the City of Iron Mountain Courthouse and Jail. The night bailiff, a lumberjack for AMEX during the day, wears a wide grin as he leads a handcuffed Jimmy Timberlake from a cell. Cate moves to the admitting desk, pays the clerk, and the bailiff reluctantly releases the cuffs from Timberlake's hands.

"There you go, nature boy. Watch those trees that have these," says the bailiff, indicating the handcuffs. "They'll get you every time." He and the clerk laugh as Jimmy and Cate turn to walk out.

In the night air, her voice is crisp and clean. "That was so stupid," she says. Jimmy can hear the barely subdued anger in her voice.

"What? The . . ."

"The stunt with the tree. Don't you see, that is exactly the kind of hot-headed stuff we don't need. I can't believe you did it."

"But . . ."

"Now you're going to tell me that you thought I'd like it."

"Yeah. I thought you would," Jimmy gets in, indignant.

"Why are you here, Jimmy?" she asks. He doesn't answer. "Are you here for me? If so, you've got a funny way of showing it. Or do you think you're here for 'the cause' as you call it? Or is it that you just don't have anyplace else to go?"

"I've got plenty of places to go," said Jimmy.

"Why don't you pick one and go there. Find another 'cause.' This one doesn't need anymore of your antics. And as for me . . . if that's your reason? You don't know the first thing about me."

She is at her car door, inserting the key and unlocking it, gripping the handle. Jimmy grasps the top corner of the door, pulling it open for her.

"Such a romantic gesture," she spits at him. "Is that what you thought chaining yourself to that tree would be?"

"I don't know," he said. "Maybe."

"Well, maybe you should find another way home." She slams the door, locks it. Revving the engine she gives him a last look. Jimmy sees the anger there, red in her eyes, but there is something else behind it. Before he can identify what lies beneath the surface, her taillights flash brightly as she brakes before the corner and is gone.

Jimmy Timberlake stands for a moment, breathing in the night air of Iron Mountain. Michigan is cool this time of Spring. He decides a brisk run would be faster than trying to track down the single taxi driven by Nickel Croutz. Besides, Garrington's is only a few miles. Jimmy begins, picking up the pace quickly. Luke is sure to be hungry.

Two months ago he had packed his pick-up with all his belongings, hooked on the horse trailer, loaded Sugar, now his horse, and Luke, his dog, donned his sunglasses and drove from Labette, Oklahoma, to Iron Mountain, Michigan, for what had seemed like a good reason -- to carry out an unspoken dying wish of his mother's. Exactly what that wish was he was unsure, but seemingly it had something to do with Cate Marrin. His mother had left her sick horse, Sugar, at the Marrin farm after her death, forcing Jimmy to deal with it. The vets said "put it down," and Jimmy had gone to do just that. In the end, though, he elected not to shoot the horse. Instead, he had the vet operate on the tumor. Sugar recovered and thrived. But why his mother, an orderly woman, had not taken care

of the horse herself was a mystery to Jimmy, but didn't seem to be to Mrs. Marrin, who told him her daughter was living here, in Iron Mountain. Before leaving Oklahoma, Jimmy drove nails for another year with Camplin construction, sold his mother's house, brought himself, the horse, his dog, a new pick-up, an old horse trailer and fifty thousand dollars in cash with him to the north.

The rest filled itself out as he let it. He found someone advertising stable space, pasture, and all the grass a horse could eat. Jimmy met the owner, Rocco Samuelson, who wanted his pasture kept trim, but didn't own or ever want to own or operate a riding lawn mower. He was crotchety, but he liked Sugar, and Jimmy liked him. He stabled Sugar with Rocco, on the outskirts of town, with two other horses. Before he left Sugar the first time, he leaned on the lodgepole pine fence, and watched her whip the other two horses into shape. Sugar hadn't been ridden since his mother had died, and although she was less skittish around Jimmy, she still turned a wild eye to him often enough. He looked through the paper for a saddle, found one cheap, took it out to Rocco's and put it in the tack room where Sugar could see it. He wanted her to think about it first. He wanted to let her decide. This horse and his mother had had a special bond. That was not something he wanted to trespass upon.

After a week in a ramshackle hotel and eating at any one of the four greasy spoons that dotted the main street of Iron Mountain, attracting a few locals and tourists, but mainly the lumberjacks hired by AMEX, Jimmy learned several things: there was a group of environmental activists that really pissed the lumberjacks off, AMEX was doing everything legal and illegal to get its hands on Iron Mountain's forests, and a hotel was no place to live for very long. If he stayed on in Iron Mountain, he figured to buy a house with the money he'd opened an account with at Iron Mountain Federal Savings and Loan, but he wasn't ready for that. He looked for other alternatives and found one in Garrington's, a sort of bed and breakfast rooming house. For fifteen dollars a night he got a room of his own, a different breakfast every morning during the week, along with the

company of Brody Garrington. The other roomers were AMEX managers, the interim minister of a local church, and a wolf biologist. Most of them were gone during the day. Since Jimmy didn't have a job and wasn't really looking for one, Brody availed himself on Jimmy often throughout the day. He told Jimmy stories about his life as a bluesman, which Jimmy didn't believe, and offered sage wisdom, learned by a lifetime of hard knocks, one of the hardest being the only black man in the white blue collar town of Iron Mountain.

"How old do you think I am," Brody said, the first morning Jimmy was there as they sat out on the massive expanse of the front porch of Garrington House after breakfast.

"I have no idea," said Jimmy.

"Don't give me that. Everybody's got some idea about everything."

"Not me."

"Well you're a sorry excuse for a white man," he said, spreading a grin that was missing one front tooth. "And don't let these teeth fool you," said Brody. "Now how old. Guess if you got to."

Jimmy sat back and looked at Brody hard. "Alright," he said. "Sixty-Seven."

Brody slapped his thighs and cackled. "Eighty-five. And you know why you can't tell?"

"You're in good health. You take care of yourself."

Brody was really howling now. "No, no , no , no, no. It's because . . ." He paused for effect, running a hand down the side of his face and then pointing a crooked index finger at Jimmy. "It's because . . . black don't crack." He dipped his head and howled laughter again. Jimmy had to smile.

"So what you doin' in my roomin' house anyways," said Brody. "You ain't no lumberjack. You runnin' from the law?"

Jimmy smiled. What was he doing here? What could he tell Brody? "No," he said. "Just running."

"Running?"

Now I've got to explain, Jimmy thought. Make something up. That's what you get for saying the first thing that comes to mind. "Yeah. I'm a runner."

"Oh," said Brody. "Marathon Man."

"Yeah. Marathon Man." Jimmy liked the sound of that.

"I used to be a sprinter," said Brody. "Nearly made the Olympics."

What a liar, Jimmy thought. He figured Brody would give him some pointers on sprinting, but he just sat back, lost in his thoughts for a moment. "Where you going to go running?" he asked.

"Probably up the mountain. I'll take the road that follows the river." Jimmy said.

Brody smiled cryptically. "Watch out for the crows," he said.

The crows caught him at the end of his fourth mile. Jimmy wasn't focused on anything but the searing pain in his side, which always stayed with him before he passed through the wall into runner's high. When the first one whizzed at him, head-on. Jimmy kicked into gear, feeling the muscles in his legs bulge with the strain. He'd make a moving target at least. Two more came down and crossed, closer to his head, and he shouted at them. He waved his arms at the next group. They were coming in waves now. He could feel the high mountain air start to burn his lungs, red blood cells clamoring for oxygen which wasn't there. The crows kept swarming. Jimmy's body was goose flesh, and he realized he was sprinting as fast as he could. The pavement ended and turned to gravel, and he lost his footing, his shoes fishtailing for purchase and failing. He went down with a crash, gravel shooting up around him, his face in the dirt. The silence was broken only by the distant call of the crows. When he righted himself, Jimmy saw them

winging back into the cottonwoods along the road. He rose, realizing his hands were balled into fists and his face was flushed, burning.

Near the end of his third week in town, Jimmy saw a crowd gathered in the parking lot of the grocery store where he was buying milk and bread. The people were gathered near an older woman, with wild red curly hair barely contained by a beret-like cap, standing on a crate in jeans and Red Wing boots, shouting in a deep voice at the top of her lungs. "AMEX says they want to develop. We all know what that means. It means that AMEX wants to destroy. The forests and the lakes. Your forests and lakes. Are you going to stand for this? What? I can't hear you?" A resounding "NO" went up from the crowd. "And how can you fight AMEX?" She threw colorful flyers out into the crowd. "Be here tonight, and we'll show you how!" He stepped down and the crowd moved off. Jimmy made his way over to the red-haired woman.

"Hey," he said.

"What can I do for you?"

"Where's this meeting?" asked Jimmy.

"Courthouse. Seven o'clock. Can we count on you being there, brother woodsman?"

Jimmy thought about mentioning he was a carpenter as of late again, doing some odd work for Brody around Garrington's, but decided this might not be the time or place. He settled for "Sure. I'll be there."

As he suspected, Cate was there as well. Not much had changed. She was still tall and dark, fiery when she addressed the crowd, all level-head and logic, but somehow communicating passion throughout her message. Jimmy's heart still lodged in his throat. It had been a long time since high school. A long time since their falling out. Perhaps even long enough.

"Cate?"

She turned and recognized him instantly. "Jimmy Timberlake. What are you doing up here?"

"Well, I work for AMEX, and . . ." He couldn't help the smile that broke across his face.

"Those are fightin' words, son," she said, laughing with him.

"I remember those were the kind of words we last had. What few words we shared."

"That was a long time ago," she said. "Besides, I was less mad than I let on. I was probably a little pleased."

"Pleased about me telling a bunch of guys that we'd slept together? On the breakroom table at IGA, no less?"

"Well, women are confusing in high school."

"Just in high school?" said Jimmy.

"Okay . . . but the point is . . . I was angry, but also a little flattered. You just should have asked." She smiled an unabashed smile, the kind he remembered whenever he thought of her.

"Well, I'm asking now . . . if you'd like to have a cup of coffee."

"We can work up to the breakroom table," she said. "Let's go to Betty's."

Over coffee he felt the gravity take hold. He was drawn to her, the one dimple on her cheek like a beacon when she smiled. He couldn't help it. He knew she noticed. After that he didn't hide it. He found his world rich once again with her presence, the robust romance of Cate Marrin. It was like he had never learned anything from other women in his entire life.

He kicked himself as he fed Luke after being let out of jail. Luke was hungry alright, wolfing down the dog food and raw beef like an alligator on speed. Then he frisked around in the yard some, lunging at Jimmy playfully. But Jimmy was in no mood

to play. What had he done? he thought. Chaining himself to a tree to stop the lumberjacks from clear cutting the Choteu Forest was crazy enough -- crazy enough to get him thrown in the clink. Like the 60's. But he'd never thought Cate would take it like she did. What had she told him once? "You're all about macho," she had said, when he told her he was just trying to be a nice, unpretentious guy. He wasn't sure at the time what she meant, but he was now. In trying so hard to be a nice guy who'd had a past with women, he'd turned out to be self-pitying, but bearing that self-pity stoically, "like a man." In a few words, a kind of screwed-up macho.

He had become an important part of S.A.G.E. -- Save All Green Environments -- because he had time to donate and passion for it. He believed that he was becoming a steward of the earth. Cate and he had grown close, made good from his lie, without the table at IGA, but in her bed instead. He'd slowly given up his nights with Brody at Garrington's, and spent them with Cate in the woods, or downtown, walking main street after dark, making coffee in the morning after making love until they were core to core with each other. Raw with their intensity. Yet so romantic as well. In short, everything he'd ever wanted in a woman. Now to hear her tell him he hadn't known her at all? Ask him what he was doing here?

He rose the next day before Brody to go for his run. He loaded his fanny-pack with the eye-dropper, film canister of water, and the sardine can full of earth worms, a fork and two energy bars. He slung Brody's gift over his shoulder and was out the door, hoping to rise over last night in runner's high.

Brody's gift was an enigma. For one, it was all about pain. Brody said when he was sprinting, his coach gave him this to help him train. It was a jump rope. A jump rope made out of corded steel. It was like jump rope flagellation, thought Jimmy. You miss the rhythm and it brands you -- so you don't miss. Jimmy had welts on his legs and arms, but he was getting better with his rhythm. The jump rope was a real motivator.

The other items were for the baby crow.

Four miles into his run, a week ago, the crows had attacked as usual. Now he fended them off with the jump rope, flailing it in arcs around him. The crows had learned to steer a little clearer. Four days ago, in using the jump rope in this fashion, he'd tripped himself up, gone face first into the gravel again, and found himself staring at a crow hatchling. Obviously, it had fallen or been kicked out of a nest. Despite the protests of the crows, he picked up the bird and scanned for nests. The cottonwood tree near him was filled with them, and he climbed. He knew he wouldn't be able to place the "crawling" back in an occupied nest, but he was in luck. Several of the nests were deserted. He put the bird in one, and ran back the four miles he'd come. At a bait shop he bought worms, the other items at the drugstore. For four days now he'd been breaking up his run during the day, feeding the little crow with eyedroppers of water and worms mashed into a paste with a fork. He set his alarm clock for two times during the night, taking Luke and a flashlight with him, and feeding the crow. So far it was working. The bird was alive and growing slowly, and the other crows were leaving it alone. Just as long as it stayed warm at night, he thought the crow might have a chance. He'd put some old washcloths Brody had, rags really, in the nest in little balls that the crow could get under or press against for warmth. He thought about taking it back to a room in a box and caring for it, but he thought it might have a better chance in its natural environment. It was a crazy schedule, but Jimmy was determined to keep it. Ever since the argument with Cate, he'd been asking himself her question -- what was he doing here? Perhaps this baby crow was an answer.

Once he reached the tree, he filled the eye dropper with water and took out the sardine can, mashing up the few live worms inside with the fork. He added a little water from the film canister to them, making a paste, then he climbed the cottonwood. His little crow was still in the nest, waiting for him it seemed. It opened its mouth wide and made croaking sounds. He gave it a little water first, then like a mother regurgitating food, he

put some of the worm paste on his fingers and fed it to the crow. The sharp edges of its beak felt good to his callused fingers, pinching him a little. One time the beak actually drew a blood which the crow drunk. They were bonded. At that moment Jimmy realized this was real. This life was his responsibility.

The older crows had left him alone, tending to their young. Little crow heads peeked out of nearby nests. He wondered if his little crow had been a part of one of these families. The "black crow," he thought, and laughed to himself. He thought about his own family, his dead mother, his estranged father, and his somewhat surrogate family the Gales. Copper. Marcus. Their parents. He always wondered what held that family together, Robert a workaholic and Barbara seeming dissatisfied somehow. Papa Gale dead years now, but good to Jimmy. Marcus, an alcoholic and womanizer, had tried his hand at being a husband and a father and had crashed and burned. Copper seeming to finally find his place with South and Mercy, her daughter. Barbara always remembered Jimmy at his birthday and Christmas. They treated him like one of the family, and now he wondered why. Maybe because they could choose. Maybe real family was a choice.

He looked at the little bird, now snuggled between the rags and asleep. This was his family now. This bird. Part of a chosen family. Chosen by fate or luck or bad luck, but chosen. A decision he had made. A path to follow. This bird and Brody were his family, the old man a mentor, like a father. Ever since the argument with Cate, Brody hadn't tried to give him advice, but had put blues on the stereo until deep into the night. He said "Blues ain't nothing but a man feeling bad about the woman he once was with. It's about grief." It helped, the horns and piano, the bass, the lonesome wail of some ancient bluesman. It was like being thirsty in the middle of an ocean and drinking the salt water anyway. Purging your soul by embracing your misery. He thought it romantic in a way, but from the look on Brody's face when those albums played, it was totally real and serious medicine.

Jimmy glanced at the bird again. His family. This little bird, Brody and . . .

"Cate?"

"Hello, Jimmy," she said into the receiver.

"Look, I hate to call . . . "

"You mean you hate to talk about this over the phone," she said.

He laughed. "You're right. Can we get together and talk about it face to face."

"Sure. What took you so long?"

"I've been sort of busy. Wait, that is the wrong answer," said Jimmy.

"You're catching on, lover boy."

"I'll tell you all about it face to face. Saturday night Brody has some special dinner planned. Supposed to cheer me up since I haven't seen you. He always makes far too much. Would you come to dinner?"

"Sounds good."

"Seven at Garrington's."

"Depending on how it goes, I'll call it a date," she said.

"I'll see you then." He hung up the phone. Luke paced into the room, sat, and looked at him. Jimmy rubbed his ears.

"Wish me luck, ole buddy. Now, back to the yard. If Brody catches you in here he'll shoot us both. Remind me, I've got to fix that back screen door, so you can't get in on your own."

Luke looked up at him, eyes unconcerned.

"Oh," said Jimmy. "You're turning knobs these days I see."

Saturday morning he left for his early morning run, prepared with his tools to feed the crow. He felt good. The sun was just coming up, and his running like this during the day and night was building his body. He was no longer winded at the four-mile point, the wall of pain seeming to fade easily into runner's high as the endorphins flooding his

bloodstream. Maybe today he would stretch it out, see how far he could make it up the mountain. Maybe Brody's "Marathon Man" wasn't out of his reach.

He could hear the babbling of the river over his shoes hitting the pavement. It sounded good, clean, but it bothered him too, nagged at him. He'd been listening to it for weeks now but could never put a finger on what about it disconcerted him.

When he reached the tree, he dropped the jump rope, prepared water and worms, but as he climbed, crows from other nests began swooping in on him, screaming and flapping. They made his ascent difficult, and the tension in Jimmy rose at the unusual behavior. Something was wrong. When he finally reached the nest with his crow, it wasn't there. Not at first. He dug under the rags and there was its body, bloody and cold, wounds that could have only been made by the beaks of larger birds.

He scooped the nest out of the tree and nearly fell down its length, crows frenzied wild around him. He tripped on the last branch, falling to the gravel, dropping the nest and spilling its contents, the little dead crow landing amidst the rags. He leaned over the nest, put the nest back together and a crow hit him in the back.

He set the nest down and reached for the rope. He swung around, screaming. He flung the steel jump rope at the black mass around him and felt it connect. A crow went skidding through the air, landing in a flopping heap ten feet from Jimmy. He was on it instantly, slamming the jump rope down on it, beyond the point of the crow's death, until its body was just a mass of feathers and blood, pieces of it sticking to the jump rope. He was screaming in anger, flailing the jump rope around at the still swarming crows. Finally they winged back into their trees. Jimmy dropped the jump rope and looked around. The road was perfectly silent. The mountain had begun its rise, green up until timberline. He heard the river. He reached for the nest, stumbled through the dense underbrush off the side of the road toward the rushing water.

By the time he got to the edge of the river he was scratched and bloody from wading through the thicket. He cradled the nest with the dead crow in his hands, close to

his body, keeping care that it was not spilled again. What was he doing here? Here at the river? He leaned down at its edge, setting the nest beside him, and splashed water on his face. The coolness seemed to break something in his chest, and his eyes welled with their own water. He looked out across the river and it seemed familiar. He wondered why he seemed to have seen it before, when the image of a man fallen in the water and hanging on to a tree came to him. It was Papa Gale. This area of this river looked identical to the place where he'd died.

Papa Gale. Part of his family. Suddenly Jimmy remembered he and Copper and Papa Gale building a doghouse for Sisko, one of the first strays Jimmy ever picked up. It was in the summer, at the Ranch. That doghouse had never been finished. Papa Gale had died later that day. It had been years ago, yet that was what had been bothering him about the river for weeks.

He looked into the nest. He could see the crow. Without thinking about how it might look, Jimmy pulled the crow out and pressed his lips to its feathers. Then he moved from the bank onto a rock in the stream, set the nest in the current and let go. He'd never grieved for Papa Gale. Never for that family. Never for the loss of his father through divorce, not for the death of his mother. Not for pain Copper or Marcus had endured, or for the people who were pained by them. Had not grieved for himself, for being less than he thought he could be. He watched the nest float down the river until it was out of sight. He knew it would flood or capsize soon, and the bird would float to its bottom. With it he let some of his grief go.

When he reached the road again he saw the other dead crow, the one he'd killed, beaten to only a bloody hump. He stared at it, then exhausted, sat by its body and buried his head in his hands. Sobs shook him and then ceased. He found some tree bark and scooped up the larger crow, went back down to the water and repeated the ritual, thinking again of his crow and Papa Gale and his mother. Once the tree bark was out of sight, he slung the jump rope into the river. It sank in an instant, bound by natural law, by reality.

Cate looked beautiful. She came up the steps at Garrington's with the sway that seemed to beat a rhythm to Jimmy's clock, the one that still ticked in his chest and brain, the one that seemed to tick louder after his morning at the river. He had her favorite drink, a tequila sunrise, in his hand, and he offered it to her as she reached the porch.

"Hi," she said.

"Hey," he said. They moved to the porch swing and sat. "Brody's almost got dinner ready. He refused to let me help."

"But I bet he liked that you offered."

"Yeah," Jimmy said. "Maybe so."

"So busy boy, what's been keeping you from my doorstep?" said Cate. "You said you'd tell me face to face. "

Jimmy looked out, over the porch and into the night. He wasn't ready to recount the story of the crows yet. He would tell her that some other time. But there were words blooming in his chest.

"I had some things I had to let go of," he said. "I was trying to figure out what they were. Brody would call it grief. I had to let go of some . . . grief . . . and figure out what I didn't want to let go of as well."

"Sounds time-consuming," she said, sipped her drink.

"Can I ask you a question?" Jimmy said.

"Shoot."

"What are you doing here?"

Having dinner with you," Cate said, smiling.

He laughed. "No. What are you doing here, in Iron Mountain? How did you get here."

"Well, you know the old woman with the red hair that works for S.A.G.E.? She's my Baba."

"Your what?"

"My Baba," said Cate. "My grandmother. Baba is what I call her. And when I finished my grad studies in ecology, I didn't have a job, really no place to go. But she was here, and told me about AMEX, and it sounded like a place to start. 'Start something' might be the more appropriate language."

"And you were just waiting for some hothead like me to come along and tie himself to a tree."

"Not exactly."

"I ask your forgiveness," said Jimmy.

"I gave it to you days ago," said Cate. "Baba helped me see things straight. She's a wise woman."

"And loud. The first time I saw her she was preaching 'save the environment' from a large crate in a grocery store parking lot."

Cate's brow furrowed. "That's funny. She never speaks on behalf of S.A.G.E. She prefers to be behind the scenes."

"Well . . . "

"Dinner is served," said Brody.

The old black man bowed in the doorway, his chef's apron still a pristine white. Jimmy made way for Cate.

"Wow," she said. "What a spread."

"I am pleased," said Brody. "Compliments to the Chef from a beautiful lady are prized."

Jimmy looked at the table. Mounds of side dishes, corn, beans, salad, and homemade bread surrounded a center platter with a small bird on it. Jimmy's eyes grew wide.

"What's the matter, boy?" said Brody. "From your look you'd think you were eating crow. It's quail."

Jimmy laughed. "Maybe I'm eating a little crow anyway," he said, glancing at Cate.

"Quail is good enough," she said to him, then sat down at the table. Brody passed the dishes and each one served themselves. The old man raised his glass and made a toast. They drank. Cate picked up her her fork as if she were tuning some unseen instrument, spun it in her fingers easily, over her plate. Jimmy watched her closely. She smiled to herself as she moved the fork toward the quail.

Later, they would dance on the front porch while Brody brought out his saxophone and proved that he was truly a bluesman. Even later they would make love and fall to sleep in each other's arms in her loft. Jimmy knew things would go from there. But Cate, picking up that fork, was the most real thing he had ever seen in his life, and he guessed the most real thing he ever would see.

Epilogue

Hoops

(2005)

Jimmy Timberlake

We gather in the gym at the old Lutheran Church on New Year's Eve at noon. No shirts or skins, not even colored jerseys. We play twelve hours, or at least that's the idea, but we always run long, taking a break at midnight to toast the new year with champagne and sweat. In the boundaries between an old year and a new, we play a game with no boundaries, except the bright yellow rectangle that stretches lazy like a cat across the shining wood floor. Out of bounds is the only call anyone makes, as there is no referee. Out of bounds is what is most important throughout those hours -- what we know we are calling ourselves, year upon year, by the way we chose to live, work, play.

Who started it no one knows. Even old man Williston doesn't remember for sure. He says maybe the game of basketball was invented up here instead of in Springfield, Massachusetts, by James Naismith, as he rolls the ball around his large but tight waist and shoots from the free-throw line before the game begins. He says there were years and gaps and that the way we play it now is different from how it was played back then. Then it was only men, jerseys, high tops, only the best and they kept score. But he says his memory isn't the caged bear it used to be. That's okay. Most of us know it up to there and after. We quit keeping score three years ago.

Everybody plays. Williston, the president of the Iron Mountain Building and Loan, Plotter, the Fire Chief, Wilma Plotter, his wife, and their children when they come back for the holidays. O'Brien and Egatz, Wilson and Wesson, Myers and Stangle. Hertz, Busby, Grisom, Field, somebody we just call Elk. Johnson, Peace, Galler, Fuller, MacIver. Sonny, Bucky, Rocky, and Sherry. Even Copper, South and Mercy played one year when they came for a visit, sleeping like teenagers camping out. I know what you're

thinking. That's too many people for a couple of basketball teams. Well, we rotate.

Rotate better than the greased wheels of the world.

This year it's new for Cate and I. In years past we often tried to play together, on opposite teams, our arms swarming around each other's bodies, as I shoot a hoop shot, or as she deftly dribbles between her legs and goes up for the jump shot, ponytailed hair whipping out to the side like a horse dodging a dog, her midriff exposed and tight as brick, the cut of muscles creating a vertical line down the length of her belly. It's worth the play just to see that skill and beauty. I await it eagerly as we warm up. And this year there is Conner.

Ten months old now. Born March second, six pounds, seven ounces and eighteen inches long. Black hair, blacker eyes. A Native American child. Even though he's adopted, Cate says he is the spitting image of me, just because she and I both know he is the spitting image of us -- what we believe and more. We can have a child biologically. But we may not. Having Conner is something extra. A gift to the world. And it was unexpected, not knowing it could be this good. Hoping it would. Now here he is, an altogether separate being. An outward sign of an inner bonding.

At times, like today, a vestigial sense of ownership -- my wife, my child, my family -- wells up inside, and instead of shaking it off, the dominant man in me, I let it wash over, crash over, into something new, different, a reverence for life, for luck, almost a prayer for the way it is and the way in deep I hope it will stay. It's not possession. Not obsession. Recognition, maybe, if there is a word for what I feel.

We're seven hours in. Darkness is beginning to fall, always sooner in these mountains than anywhere else, the horizon is so high. The demand for food was so great last year that we opened up the kitchen and spread out the long tables, everybody bringing their specialty. Cate and I cooked together, both enjoying the luxury of time over the last two weeks, her taking vacation from the EPC -- Environmental Preservation Center -- and S.A.G.E. -- Save All Green Environments -- and me having a two week

reprieve from Romantic Poets and high school kids. We made bread pudding with a Jim Beam sauce and salsa with flatbread, both hits last year. I've played several rounds so far tonight, as has Cate, who is presently hot with her three-pointers. Conner and I watch as she makes the fake, rolls around Bettie Jean, shoots over Rusty, and gets nothing but net. The gathered crowd cheers her for her skill. Conner tries to clap his hand and makes the sound that will become "Mama."

The crowd grows and changes as the games move through the day and into the evening. The first year Cate and I joined in there were just a handful of people, maybe thirty, and we played until we couldn't play anymore, drank our champagne and went home and nursed our sore ankles, bruised shins, and rotator cuffs that ground around more like mortar and pestle than muscle and cartilage.

But tonight I have seen a number of families come and go, some players, some spectators, even a few who throw us off with a wave of their hand and go back home, drink a beer, and watch as "Dick Clark's New Year's Rockin' Eve" is beamed to their dishes from a satellite that knows no time, just the beat of its own orbit around the planet. The Smiths leave, the Jones' come, and the Whites disregard what they call "our project," saying we're just waiting for the TV cameras from Detroit to arrive. "Media dogs" they call us. After the lights and the glitz and our spot on "60 Minutes," everything will be back to normal. I watch little Dicky Mann, a stringbean 12-year old, sink it from the sideline, his grin telling me all I need to know about longevity, his teeth dirty as the picket fence Cate and I tore down to open up our yard to the neighborhood.

Still I worry. I have thought hard and worried much the last few years about the outside world I know, the one away from Iron Mountain. I scan the faces that come and go, waiting for him to show up and challenge us, me, this time of freedom from points and rules and wins and losses. This freedom from "the score." He is different people. He is my father, who my mother left because he saw the world only his way. Men worked. Women stayed home. Men brought in the money. Women raised the children.

There were certain things that women did not do, going to school being one of those. Before she died in '94, my mother was a very successful college professor, teaching English, specializing in Keats, Shelley, Byron, the Romantics. Sometimes I see a face in the crowd that looks so much like his that I shiver. Not that I wouldn't want to see him. He is a decent man, and we've grown to care about each other as I've become an adult. But I am afraid, and not afraid to admit my fear. Afraid that my father's capacity to understand what happens here in Iron Mountain on New Year's Eve would be nonexistent.

Other times he is another face, an angrier, more leering face. A face I still see in a haze of water, broken in its lust for power, control, as well as understanding and acceptance, not seeing that often those forces are mutually exclusive, like fire and ice. For me it is not an amorphous face, as it is for many, the face of big business or big game hunters, or criminals and cranks. For me it is a definitive face, the face of Marcus Gale, the brother of my friend Copper. Marcus was once my friend as well, and is not my enemy now. But what he represents is a danger for what I see before me -- men, women and children on the court, becoming individual, whole, healthy, and equal. It is a long process, and we are far from its completion, but it is a start. And the face of Marcus represents all that is antithetical to the glow of the court and the faces playing above it.

Marcus is a taker. He is a destroyer. Growing up I didn't understand this fully. He was just the star quarterback, the great baseball player, the kid who slid by in school on good looks and athletic prowess. The guy who got all the girls. In my vision of him, he stayed that way for a long time. An image of him as his youthful, athletic self still lives in my mind now, buried under a better understanding of him as he came to be so obviously later -- a violent person, taking power, taking sex, giving out waves of hate to all unlike him. The Marcus I know now has dehumanized and humiliated men, raped women, and somehow justified all this through his warped version of the world. I fear Marcus because this rite of basketball and New Year's Eve would not only confuse him, it

would enrage him on a deep level, and he could not let it rest. He would have to take it and strangle the life out of it, make it make sense to his mind, and whatever soul may be left to him. What is scarier, is that much of society, what most see as civilization, and some understand as patriarchy, often give him the justification that his own mind, and the minds of many others, needs to perpetuate his actions. He is not evil. But evil does emanate from him.

I see a third face as well, in some of the men here, as the face of Copper before he met South and Mercy and became a true father. You should see him tell about Halloween with his adopted daughter Mercy, South's from a first marriage. He lights up like a Jack-O-Lantern. But before them, he was lost, more unsure of himself. He was under the massive hands of his brother Marcus as they grew up, and he believed he was complicit in some of Marcus's crimes and destruction. He told me once of a breaking point he had, a chance to change things between he and Marcus, a leap into violence toward the violence Marcus had wrought. But he couldn't make the leap, couldn't hit his brother as we let him out of a jail cell one night almost ten years ago. It wasn't that Copper should be violent, or that any person should be, but it was that he was controlled somehow, softened to a point of inability to resist, good or bad. If it hadn't been for South, Mercy, and for Fileman Wirick, too, Copper would still be drifting with the flow, lost and drowning in a shallow river, where all he would have to do to save himself was to stand up. I see men and boys here tonight, who may never find their South and their Mercy in anyone, any place, time, or thing. They will know love and trust only thinly, experience passion only obliquely, often in its twisted form of violence.

An hour before midnight the Lumberjacks come in, a little boozed up from celebrating as the AMEX New Year's party at one of the big hotels built with logging money, a hotel built to house men who come from everywhere to earn a good wage by clearcutting the forests in the area. AMEX is world-wide, gutting rainforests and National Parks, cutting pine and fur and evergreen legally or illegally, covering it up with

a sham environmental policy and hundred-dollar-an-hour lawyers. Most of us who play here fight AMEX in our own ways. Cate fights with E.P.C. and S.A.G.E. and I fight through education, taking my kids to the mountains to read Wordsworth and Thoreau, trying to show them that living forests are much more valuable than cash in wallets and pocketbooks. It is an uphill battle, but one we are chained to as stewards of the earth, as stewards of a new way of seeing the world.

The lumberjacks play, showing off for one another, stripping down to the waist and posing as much as anything. When they find out we don't keep score they are less interested, and when they get outrun and outscored by Cate and some of the other women, they mix back into the woodwork. It is too bad. They could learn something from us, other than they are not as tough as they think they are and there are some terrific basketball players in this crowd. We try to send them the message, not only with the way we play, but how we conduct our everyday lives. But they see us as a threat to their way of life, unable to see that their way will self-destruct eventually, leaving only ruin. They can't see our way, a way of equality and preservation, of land, animals, men and women from all walks of race, religion, sexual-orientation, and diversity, is the only true way to building people who are truly human.

These are things we toast to at midnight, taking a break from the game. I hear that they can hear our cheer a mile away at the stroke of the clock, and secretly, I've heard people tell me that the lights from the gym grow brighter for a moment, electrified by the sound of our voices. It is nice to think about, whether it is true or not.

Cate and I each play another half-hour, having Misty Jameson watch over Conner. He is sleeping for most of that time, but wakes, cranky, wanting his parents. I take him in my arms and Cate kisses his forehead and we pass our good nights around the remaining crowd. There will be some still playing at dawn, a new day, the first of another new year.

Outside, as we begin the walk home, the air is cold and crisp. Our breathing rises into the night air, and I marvel how light it is, pointing up to the nearly full moon in the

sky. I marvel that over thirty years ago three men landed on the face of that rock, in a place called the Sea of Tranquility. A wonderful name. There Armstrong, Aldrin, and Collins touched down, making an important step in the history of humankind. That landing, shown on an old black and white television in the home of my parents, is my first visual memory from childhood. I think of that as we walk, not marvelling at what Armstrong and Aldrin must have felt as the first stepped foot and walked across the moon's surface, but knowing that Collins was in the capsule, monitoring them, testing the atmosphere, the soil, creating a baseline of what composed the moon and the moment in time. That first mission, Collins didn't walk on the moon, but made it possible for Aldrin and Armstrong to do so, taking humankind to a new place, in peace.

In a singular gesture, I lift Conner towards the moon, up above the lighted valley and the world. I smile at Cate and I know she knows, in her own way, that we pilot the capsule. I hold Conner high, planning on telling him the stories, these stories, of how we came to be where we are. Showing him through our actions and words that we will help him walk in new territory, help him be whole, teach him how to shoot a basket on a New Year's Eve not far from now, let him make a further step for all of us. The moon shines bright and I can see his face. He is awake now. He gurgles and claps his hands.

2

VITA

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