Cadillac and other stories

Frederick Brooke

The University of Montana

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CADILLAC AND OTHER STORIES

By

Frederick Brooke

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To Sarah Childs
Without the advice and support of Zan Bockes, Rick DeMarinis, Lee Evans, William Kittredge, Gennie Nord and David Sofield these stories could not have been written. Julie Codell, Earl Ganz and Lois Welch, my thesis committee, have been especially generous. I would also like to thank Terry and Heather Buck, and my parents.
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Twenty-eight Thousand Thorns
My goddess, he says, reaching across the table with his fingers, his eyes, you’re my goddess. He reaches between the bud vase and the lucite stand that shows drink specials. He takes out the dripping red short-stem rose and hands it to me. You’re my life and death, he says, everything I’ve felt before and everything I’ll ever feel.

—Please, I say, not goddess. I lay the rose on the tablecloth beside my knife. He still reaches, still longs to touch me, even though all that separates us now are his plate and my plate, so I give him my hand.

—Just a pregnant woman, I say, and his eyes wrinkle up as they would if he found a fly in his waterglass.

—Our future and all its mystery lies within you, he says.

This is how he explains my deification, but I am thinking of the first time I conceived a child, the first time he called me goddess, and the thing that made him stop.
If I am a goddess, I ask, what does that make you?
One that worships you, he says.
Love is not worship, I say, and I am thinking that there is a danger in worship. The person who worships must want to worship, must need to.

The first time I conceived a child I was still a child myself, and so I cancelled the pregnancy and he took me to Puerto Rico to recover.

Now you are really a woman, he said to me in a glass-bottomed boat. I looked down through the water at red-orange coral and spiny sea urchins. And a goddess, he said. You’re the goddess of vision because you see things nobody else can see. I looked into the water as he said this, and in the water saw coral and sea urchins.

Stop saying that, I said. I hate that word.
I was still a child then. I hated the word without knowing why. In his maddening predictable way he thought I just felt bad because of our baby, and he stopped.

Why a sheep? he asks.
He laughs when I tell him all this, even laughs at himself. He says it makes great sense, but he does not yet know what he is laughing at.
I tell him our suite is just one of many in our building, and our building is on a boulevard on which suites crowded with animals are stacked forty- and fifty-high, in a city made up of a grid of boulevards that stretches for miles in three directions. There are even bars that cater to animals, I say, where hound dogs stand out on the sidewalk, winter and summer, and bark things like, Ladies Night, Free Drinks for the Ladies Tonight.

Why a rooster? he asks.

He and I work at the same company, in the same suite. It is how I met him. I tell him our president's red goatee reminds me of a rooster's wattle. And our vice-president for the liquor account is a bull because of the way his basket bulges so visibly in his pants, and because every year we design a poster for the liquor client that shows a woman playing pool. Every year the cue stands upright in the woman's hands, and every year the white ball and the black ball lie against each other on the green felt.

He laughs at this.

So what're you, Carol? he asks. And why am I a sheep?

I do not have the heart to tell him that when a sheep hears food rattling in a metal pan it always comes running. All that really matters, I say, is that animals only have the capacity to produce their own particular barnyard
product. The same product for their whole lives, I tell him. Either this, or they are themselves the product; but either way, I say, sooner or later, they all go to the slaughterhouse.

I tell him it is a barnyard where we work, and him worshipping me is just like barnyard animals worshipping production and consumption. I tell him I am no longer able to tell certain things apart.

I tell him all this, and I tell him I want my child involved in other struggles, but not that one, and when I am finished of course he is no longer laughing. He calls me his misanthrope, and perhaps it is better than goddess, but neither of us laughs. He sees that I do not think I am his religion at all. I am saying something else is his religion, something common and dirty and ugly, and so when I am finished he says,

--What's the upshot of all this?

--The upshot, I say, is I am getting out of this ugly predictable city, and I am getting out alone.

He just looks at me, not knowing whether to believe me or not. Gradually he smiles. Either he thinks that such an outrageous thing could not be possible, that I could not really leave him, even as my body has just accepted his offering, or else he thinks he can stop me, but he cannot stop me.
Part of me is gone already the day I give my notice. News spreads like wildfire around the barnyard, and briefly I am the center of attention. Cow will take me to lunch one day, Rooster the next. Bull offers letters of introduction to our rivals in the city I say I might go to, other sales promotion companies. I transfer calls and type letters and open mail all morning, offering condolences on my own departure when my colleagues seek it. He stays away, back in his office.

Cow, our office manager, pees faster than any woman I have ever known. I think she must do it standing, like a man. I will miss the daily race to see who will let her back into the barnyard, me with my buzzer or her with her key.

She invites me into her office, asks me my plans. I tell her the story I have concocted for the barnyard: I am going back to school to study music. When Cow hired me I had a long list of awards and accomplishments in voice, all from college. I had no idea then that they would come in handy now.

—I just want you to have your ducks lined up, she smiles. That common expression reminds me that she is afraid in a way my child will never be, afraid of the slaughterhouse.
In the lull after lunch, one hen touches me lightly on the shoulder. Her face with all this makeup reminds me of the chalkboard in the presentation room. —We’ve got a hot bet, she says. Betty says you’re p.g. I say you’re not.

—How much you win? I ask, and she returns to her seat.

—I told you I’d sense it if she was. I would’ve known in a second. Five smackers, girl, right here.

I feel my skirt growing snugger every second, by degrees only I can perceive, and then he appears.

—Men’s, he says, holding out his slender hand, and I feel sorry for him that he has to say that, though he never seems to mind. I hand him the key and he goes.

He thinks I’m crazy, but if I were a man I might have to take my own life. If I were a man I would never have known this feeling of being a sort of living envelope or cocoon which shields and protects me, yet allows me to think and feel and to decide for myself that his calling me goddess makes him a sheep. Men have so little power over themselves. They always think they have power and so are constantly being disillusioned, driven one step closer to the slaughterhouse.

I watch him through the glass door. He is conferring with a mule who has gotten off the elevator with a crate on a hand-truck.

—Something has arrived for your collection, I tell
Rooster on the phone.

Rooster collects primitive art for the barnyard walls: statues, masks, weapons, from places like Sumatra. It comes via New York galleries, and Rooster often wonders aloud whether he has been shafted.

--We sure do hate to lose you, Rooster says. He stands in his silk-lined vest and jazzy striped tie, arms crossed over his thin chest, stroking his goatee and watching the unpacking with me. He shakes his head. Three years, he says.

They carry it inside. A wooden idol with garish red eyes, a blue-and-white-striped face, and thick teeth painted silver that look as if they would glow in the dark. The hair looks like barnyard straw someone has tied colored beads to.

--Airport art, Rooster says, disgusted.

--It's obscene, Cow says. The hens giggle in the background, angling for promotions.

--Fertility god from Cameroon, says Rooster in a false deep tone, reading from the invoice. Slaps his forehead, miming dismay, then turns and grins. Can't risk sending this one back, Rooster says, can we now?

--Cynics, he argues in bed, cynics are all just people
that used to be idealistic. In the meantime they've gotten hurt. How are you going to take it when someone steps on you real bad, like what you're doing to me?

He likes to speak of the real world, the world of families and children and family albums, of the trusts we will responsibly set up and the good colleges they will pay for. But all I see, hear, smell in all that is the slaughterhouse.

--You're a dreamer, he says. You're idealistic. When are you going to wake up?

--I am awake, I tell him.

--Why are you leaving really? he asks. Who ever heard of someone leaving because one day she woke up thinking she was unconventional? He sits up in bed and lights a cigarette.

--I will take myself to a sunny place, I tell him carefully, laying my palm on his smooth stomach, and my child will be raised by myself and others I trust.

--You mean Puerto Rico? he says. I'd visit you there.

--Stop asking where, I say.

--You see everything inside-out, he says. I've always loved that about you, but this is too important. It's too important for one person to decide, you see?

--It's too important for you, I say, and his stomach moves under my palm like my baby will. He laughs airily,
defensively.

—You think I’m just gonna let you walk out of here? he says. With your head in this condition? You’d probably get run over by a car.

I tell him my head is not in any condition.

—That’d sure wake you up, he laughs, waving the cigarette. You see, Carol, your whole problem is you’ve never been hurt. That’s how come you can live in this fairyland and criticize me just for doing honest work.

He laughs to think of me getting hurt. He says I have never been hurt, but he is forgetting about the first time I conceived a child with him. What I did then hurt me so much I said I would never do it again. Now I have conceived another child, and this time I will bring it into the world, and the power I have is to choose the world I will bring it into. But I am still searching for gentle words to contain this when he says,

—I won’t let you go, it’s that simple. I’ll lock you up if I have to. I’ll hurt you.

—You will name our baby, I say. That will be your right.

—Hey, he says snapping his fingers. If I hurt you myself maybe you’d see what a fairyland you’ve been living in, and you wouldn’t go. Yeah, he says. Maybe that’s the way.
Mornings in the barnyard can be combative. This morning already the liquor client has yelled at Bull about a lost shipment of plastic shot glasses. Bull yelled at Cow, and Cow passes it on down. There is a pecking order in the barnyard.

--Three weeks now, Cow says. You're not going to the john till you've traced those damned glasses!

The barnyard is so elemental. The lamp for his extension on my console has been lit for half an hour.

This is an "on-pack offer." He knows it floors me when he describes the absurd modern serpentining flow of goods and services on their way to consumers. But I know that these shot glasses will be shrink-wrapped to twenty-eight thousand bottles of whiskey, right over the twist-off cap.

I go and stand in his doorway with a sheaf of letters in my hand, on my way to the copy machine in the way-back.

--Yeah? he says all businesslike, covering the phone.

--Nothing, I say smiling. I just want to look at his eyes as he talks on the phone. But he turns to face the window and to ignore me. I am about to proceed to the way-back when I see, out the window, what he is looking at.

She is in a barnyard across the street, also on the fourth floor, and she is looking right at him. It is too far to see what color her eyes are, but I can see the
proportions of her face, and that her hair is straight and shoulder-length but still elegant, and that her shoulders are not too narrow. Naturally I would like to think of her as a barnyard cat, a really good mouser. But even through two dimming layers of glass and at this distance I can see she is not a cat at all, but a person.

The streetlight shines in our curtain like a stage moon.

--You're my one and only goddess, he whispers. I can't think of life without you, can't even think.

I say nothing, but we have been together three years, and so he should know what I am thinking. What I am thinking is that life is predictable enough already, and the barnyard makes it more predictable. To him every phone call, every deal, fight, or glance out the window is new and invigorating. Fighting and worship--and fighting for the right to worship--these, I see now, are the sources of his vitality.

But tonight he cannot read my thoughts.

--Who's going to fill this hot concavity when I don't? he asks moving his finger down there.

--Cut it out, I say. I will grant he knows me in some respects, but I know him too, and he cannot stop me from
leaving.

All week, when I saunter past his office on my way to the way-back, she is there, the dark-haired girl, in her window. Sometimes he faces her. Sometimes he faces me. He is always on the phone. Sometimes she too has a phone at her cheek.

I transfer calls by depressing a lever, waiting for a dial tone, and dialing the extension. If I stay on I can announce the caller. I get out by hitting the call release button. With his calls I stop hitting call release.

—Here's what I want you to do, Mike, he says one day. Have your people on the line cut off those thorns with wire-cutters.

—That ought to do it, Mike says. In the background is a bright unyielding high-pitched roar. Mike is at the whiskey bottling plant in Kentucky. Finally the shot glasses have arrived, but there is a new problem. On the bottom of each glass is a sharp plastic thorn that is tearing the shrink wrap when they put them on the bottles.

—What's she doing? one hen says behind me.

—One week left, the other says. You wouldn't catch me working, either.

I hit call release, hang up and don't look, and then
Cow is by my side.

--Don't listen to them, Cow says. But listen to this. I've talked to the others and we all agree. She mentions Rooster and Bull. We can't afford to lose you, Cow says. We're creating a new account position. You'll start with a raise of two thousand.

She expects me to demand five, and then we will compromise at three. But each increment would only bring the slaughterhouse more clearly into view.

--You called, she says. It's you, isn't it?
--Yeah, he says. This is my right hand I'm waving.
--Incredible, she says. I mean I feel like I really know you. What's with the funky statue behind you? Didja see me watching?
--I want to meet you, he says. Can you come over?
--Just tell me which company, she says. Which suite.

I tell myself he is testing me. Someone has told him how I listen, and he is baiting me, but I am leaving in a matter of days, and he cannot stop me.

I bless my mother and father. My mother would sit in the big chair with the faded floral print, in our living
room. The year I was born, my father became the owner of his truck. He would be gone ten days, then home, and the truck would stand on the street in front of our house, idling all day while he worked on it. My sisters and brothers are Robert, Stephen, Carol, John, Ann, and Peggy, and they live all over and are all married and have families of their own. I believe I can stay with them.

I used to think I would never know how to express love to my mother and father. But already I am imagining thousands of ways I can express it to my child. I think that wherever they are now, my mother and father will know what this means.

Her smile as she says his name to me is slightly detached. Her eyes are an unusual shape, vaguely Asian, and a deep inscrutable brown. He will melt before her height, her slender legs, her figure. She is wearing black slacks, a green cotton turtleneck and a silk print scarf.

--I'm sorry, I say, he's gone into a meeting.
--But I just talked to him, she says.
--It was an unscheduled meeting, I say.

He swings around the corner. The hens are chuckling at all this. His look as he escorts her back to his office is like icewater in my face. This then is supposed to be the
hurting, but he is wrong if he thinks I will change, if he thinks I could.

--I see what you're trying to do, I say.

--She's nice, he says. A friend. No more. Her name is Roxy. You might get to like her if you gave her a chance.

--Right, I say.

He brings her to dinner. They are in our kitchen making dinner while I sit in the window, looking out at the streetlight. This then is how it will be when I am gone, he and Roxy here, me and my baby there. When I call to tell him the sex of my baby and to ask him its name, she will answer the phone.

--So I understand you're expecting, Roxy says eating.

--Expecting is the way to the slaughterhouse, I tell her. I expect nothing.

--You'll have to excuse her, Rox, he says. She's running a little borderline these days.

They go out after dinner, not for a walk or to a movie but back to the barnyard. They have this idea. He has a red Radio Flyer wagon in the storage room. It was presented to one of our clients as an idea for a promotion, then rejected. She wants him to pull her at a run up and down
the boulevards. This is what they are doing.

--I've got two thousand teak salad sets that're two months late out of Thailand, a coupon offer that's got us in legal trouble, and a freelance artist that doesn't know how to use a t-square. I've got a boss jumping down my throat, he says, but last night was . . . was . . . .

--That's all right with me, Roxy says.

One day the three of us are walking home and he is carrying a brown box that shakes as if full of pennies. I ask him what is in that box. He smiles.

--Remember that deal with the shot glasses? he says. He tells me about the glasses having a thorn from the heat mold. It floors me that he still pretends I have not been listening in on his calls.

--Think of it, Roxy says. Twenty-eight thousand thorns.

What I am thinking of is that high-pitched roar in the background where Mike worked, at that bottling plant in Kentucky. I hear it again loud now, much louder than the accelerating buses and people shouting and taxis honking as they pass. I am thinking this roar is too loud to be just a
bottling plant. It is the agony of animals being ground up.

—Put it down, I say. Get rid of it.

—Pipe down, he says. We're right here.

—Those are your parents and grandparents in there, I say. All the people we know and don't know who have gone to the slaughterhouse. You've got to get rid of it!

—Stop stopping, he says angrily, and Roxy yanks me by the arm away from the city trash basket I am holding to.

Then we are in our apartment on the carpet, and he and Roxy are scooping up handfuls of clear plastic thorns and letting them fall through their fingers back into the box. They are like treasure hunters or children, and they are wondering what to do with the treasure.

—What's the matter with you? Roxy says. I sit in the corner watching them. She brings a handful of thorns closer, to show me. I shut my eyes and hold my breath as if I were going underwater.

—She's afraid of everything, he says, dismissing me. Her own mind, love, time, premonitions.

What I am afraid of now is that the existence of the slaughterhouse has been proved. I am thinking I would have been happier uncertain.

—You mean you're afraid of this? Roxy says, and when I open my eyes she is about to do something obscene. She is dropping thorns down the front of my blouse.
--I think I'd like it, Roxy says. A few of them drop down against my skin. I scream.

--Hey, catch her! he shouts. Too great!

I try to get out the door, but at the same time I am trying to untuck my blouse to get rid of the thorns. I have only two days left in the barnyard, and could run anywhere, but they catch me. They are too strong for me. Forcibly they lay me down on the carpet next to the brown box. Together they kneel on my arms and trickle thorns down onto my face.

Roxy is weak with laughter. --Her teeth, she says. Lookit how she grits her teeth! She reminds me of your fertility thing.

--It's a fake, I shout, a fake god, fake art!

--Remember, he says ignoring this and dropping thorns in fistfuls, when we talked about idealism? I still don't think you know what it means to be hurt. You think other people are animals, you think animals don't know the meaning of hurt.

I know what it means to hurt for another. I hurt for my child for the things I will not be able to answer her.

--Okay, Roxy says frowning, that's probably enough, Steve, don't you think?

--If you'd ever really been hurt before, he shouts, you wouldn't be trying to pull this stunt. Are you going to
stay?

When I open my mouth to scream, several thorns drop between my teeth and go down into my throat. I feel their hard dry points catching in my esophagus. They are the slaughterhouse and they are inside my body, but I tell myself they cannot touch the real me.

--I said stop it! Roxy says. What are you saying? You don’t want her to stay.

--I said are you going to stay?

My mouth is half full of thorns, and I can no longer scream. It hurts to breathe now, my breath sounds like the labored panting of an injured animal, and they look at me strangely. He has another fistful of thorns, but he is studying the situation. My face is hot and wet. I tell myself no thorns can touch the living envelope that shields my child and me. He and Roxy kneel on either side of me, having forgotten that their knees are crushing my arms. Their knees are making imprints on my arms that can never be effaced, but there is nothing more they can do, nothing else. They kneel on either side looking into my mouth, and I see that they are afraid.
Shadowman
Tracers on some dark backdrop in his brain, glitter at the edges of vision . . . or was it just candlelight reflecting off silver, off the knife handles and serving spoons and off the carved candlesticks themselves—was that all he saw? William closed his eyes, not because grace was being said, but to see if the unexpected rush was real.

"Lord," prayed Uncle Stan, "thank You for giving Brad and Irina the courage to join their lives . . . ."

Eyes closed, William still saw the mahogany table and all the Coxes seated around it, but his mother joined the scene—her plaster smile, her old lime chiffon dress. And he sat next to Irina, not Brad, the new bridegroom, this man who was blind without his tortoise shell glasses, and old as a Senator.

". . . for the safe arrival of all our family . . . ."

Two rehearsal dinners, two shots only a year apart—a double exposure. Deja vu. It was the second wedding eve for Irina Cox, though she had never married. As amens were
murmured, William stared: that glossy dark hair falling neatly between her shoulder blades. If only Lola would come down and see how smoothly it was going. "Irina's life ends tomorrow, Shadowman," Lola had pleaded upstairs, before dinner. "You're the one she loves. Marriage isn't a weaning process."

Uncle Stan glanced up as he began to carve. Stan was Mrs. Cox's brother. He wore a pink ascot. "So, William. Won't the little lady come down and eat?"

But it was Irina who spoke first. "Let her sulk. She can stay up there till Sunday morning, for all we care."

"Irina," said Brad, the new groom.

"I'll bring her up some dinner later," William said, meeting Stan's gaze. "Lola's not feeling too well, that's all."

He had learned that a well-timed lie, however blatant, kept things placid in this group. It enabled Dr. Cox to take a sip of water, allowed plates to be passed.

That step he'd been about to take, sitting beside Irina one year ago, would've been as easy as crossing the street—yet one stare across the table had made him doubt himself. Lola had still been a mystery then. She was younger than Irina. She could only be less calculating. Perhaps it wasn't far enough, this corner. Surely one more block wouldn't be beyond him...
He had snuck out of the enormous guest room and slept with Lola on the eve of his own wedding. In the morning, he had told Irina the wedding was off.

As the eating commenced, the hollow moment past, William watched the relatives of these two families—Brad’s and Irina’s—set to work listening to each other, accepting each other. Stan joking about Irina putting on weight . . . Mrs. Cox asking, with a practiced anxiety, if Brad had confirmed their plane reservations, since they were international . . .

Brad nodded his shiny forehead. As soon as he was gone they would say he was bland and weak—the comparison to Dr. Cox was inevitable—but Irina must have told him everything. Brad was just playing it straight till they got out of town.

"You think they’re in love?" asked Justine, to William’s right. "You know--love?"

You could see tomorrow’s weather, Lola had said once, in Justine’s eyes. Justine was a cousin of Irina and Lola’s who was twenty and had worked on a Greenpeace boat. Her eyes went from green to a very cool gray, the color of the Sound off the back lawn in November. Otherwise she was plain. William could hardly look at her in this formal cream dress and emerald necklace, though the stone brought out the green in her eyes. In the kitchen there was a picture of Justine wearing an Icelandic sweater and holding
up a thick coiled rope in both hands. That was the image he liked.

"Sure they are."

Justine crinkled her eyes in response, smiling. He had always respected her for her direct talk, but not now, at this cramped table with Mrs. Cox watching. Mrs. Cox sat at the other end, but her eyes kept darting in this direction.

"So what about you, William?"

He recognized the challenge in her smile. Justine had been a calming influence that crazy Saturday morning last year. All the guests arriving in their Lincolns and Mercedes, everyone still running around the house half-dressed and screaming at each other . . . Irina, clutching a pair of scissors, had had to be restrained for her own safety as much as Lola’s.

"I’m in love, yes," he said.

"With Lola?"

"Who else?"

Justine raised one eyebrow as she raised her wine. "Lola told me it was just a glance across the table. One glance, William? Come on. Look, I’ve got a little confession to make. I only came down this year to see what would happen."

Her whole body went rigid, though beneath the table he gripped only her wrist. "No more of that," he said low,
smiling. "Nothing's going to happen. You got it?"

"William, let go of me." Her green eyes flashed. He let go and fixed his eyes on his food.

He had questioned his judgment many times since that night. Lola was better for him than Irina--no doubt about that--but sometimes it felt like things were stagnating around here. Lola wouldn't discuss even the idea of anything permanent.

He had met Irina Cox in college. A small transaction, then another, and another. He had begun sleeping in her room during their junior year. Irina had been impressed that a man double-majoring still found time to market a complete line of pharmaceuticals campuswide. Before long she had started to express a certain fear of his meeting her mother--but this was not, to William's surprise, owing to his business.

"She's gorgeous," Irina used to say, those fuzzy nights before Christmas break junior year. They would spend hours talking about her home, her family; they never talked of his. "My mom reminds people of Brooke Shields. She's smarter than I am. She knows how to dress."

He had faced Mrs. Cox with a studied indifference that Christmas, and the following August, when he had spent two
weeks here. Mrs. Cox was hardly Brooke Shields.

He recalled Lola from those visits as just a wisp of a thing running around the big house in a nightgown, like a spirit. He had laughed to hear of their fights. Lola had had real dates from the day she started wearing a bra, as Irina put it.

Once, Lola had visited the college. Irina had had a suite with three other girls that year, each with her own room. He had come out to go to the bathroom one night and found Lola naked in the living room, smoking a tiny ivory pipe he had sold her, along with what was inside it. She had been looking out at the snow falling on the hill. He had turned away.

"Forget it," Irina had said, back in the bedroom. "That's just her. She's so out of it she probably won't even remember."

It was the night he'd asked Irina to marry him. In college. Winter of their senior year. He had known all along she'd say yes. I need time was just a thing her people learned to say from infancy.

William held the railing in one hand and a glass of wine for Lola in the other. He was flushed from dinner and the long sit, as if the glow of the candles had gotten under
his skin. As he reached the third floor he loosened his tie.

On these lonely back stairs, where there was nothing more to watch out for, he had a strange sensation. Irina was leaving him forever. For the first time, he felt fully absolved of that decision of a year ago. If Irina still loved him—as Lola insisted—that would be her problem. Maybe Brad was going to be a surrogate. That would be their problem.

Lola could think what she pleased about Irina still wanting him. To suggest that he could want Irina back—that belittled his commitment. Lola degraded everyone with her ideas.

If she didn't want the wine he could drink it himself. Back home, in Galesburg, Illinois, they hardly knew wine existed, let alone rehearsal dinners. In the weeks following the fiasco a year ago, his parents had talked more about flo-blue china and catering services than his broken engagement. Their only thought was that he had shot too high anyway; but still they thought the experience had been a gain, for all the luxuries he had known and seen here. Indeed his parents said it was amazing that he was still here, but all the Coxes needed him somehow—Dr. Cox, who'd never had a son . . . even Mrs. Cox. He supposed he gave her something to worry about. Through hard work, and great
care, he tended all their needs. Back home, weddings always took place in the Redeemer church on 3rd Street, and receptions in the church basement, with ham canapes, coffee, and paper napkins.

"Sleeping?"

"Mm, yeah." Lola raised up on one elbow as he pulled a chair to the bedside. She wore only her pale watermelon camisole and black panties. "So you came back."

"I went downstairs, I had dinner. Now I'm back."

Lola ran a finger across her blond bangs and smiled, but there was a weariness about it that recalled the scene before dinner, when he had tried to make her come downstairs. She had cried then, and for real.

"You've got to go find her," Lola said. "Stop the wedding, Shadowman. She doesn't want that old horned owl."

"You stop, Lola." His voice cracked. William looked away and breathed deep. Maybe, after all, he was edgy seeing Irina go through with it. But things couldn't happen any differently. Each moment was like a new mold you had just created for yourself, already hardening around you. All you could do was take a hard look at the troubles you'd had in the past, and try to avoid the same ones in the future. "Maybe you're right about her, Lola," he said.
"You're just dead wrong about me."

Lola's high, sharp laugh seemed to get swallowed by the pink muslin curtains across the room. "I know I'm right about her. I want you to do this for me, stupid, not you. The game ends tomorrow, and I'm the one who's going to have to live with it."

It was what she'd been saying for weeks. Irina was only marrying Brad to get back at her, to heap guilt upon Lola for the nasty thing that had happened a year ago.

Lola leaned back. Her cheekbones looked like knives that might cut through the skin any moment. "The only other possibility," she said, "is if Irina herself doesn't think it's going to come off."

"Doesn't think what?" came Irina's voice from the door. She still wore her black sequined dress and pearls, but the pumps were gone. She was alone. Irina padded across the carpet in her designer stockings, a pattern of tiny black squares over sheer. "If I think what's not going to come off?"

"Your wedding, mushroom-head."

Irina narrowed her eyes. "You little typhoid slut. If you think you're going to get within three hundred feet of Brad before noon tomorrow you've got another thing coming. He's sleeping with me, and we're going to make the paintings rattle on the living room walls."
"If he can stay awake long enough," Lola said. "Maybe you think you can bring on a heart attack or something, but I wouldn't flatter yourself. As for Brad, he probably can't tell uptown from downtown without those cretinous glasses."

"Brad," Irina said evenly, "unlike our everpresent little Shadowman, here, is legitimate."

Irina flipped her hair over her shoulder and turned away. As she vanished into the hall, William made a decision. When he had first arrived at college so many years ago, where no one had known him, he had become William. Now, this other pet name had to go the way of Bill. Shadowman, they both called him, because of this perpetual five o'clock shadow. He rubbed his chin. Somehow, it afflicted no one else he'd ever seen here.

Everything was set up on the east side of the house. The ceremony would take place in the gazebo, its white pillars carefully stripped of lattice so everyone could see. The guests would sit in folding chairs among the hedges and around the fountain. Professionals had been coaxing the roses and polishing the fountain for weeks.

It was warm out. William sat in the breakfast room having coffee with Lola and Justine, and looking out the leaded windows. Mrs. Cox had taken the minister and Brad's
parents out back to look across the Sound, then walked them through the giant yellow tent under which brunch would be served and the band would play. Dancing would begin at two-thirty. Irina and Brad had a flight to Rome out of Kennedy at ten tonight.

"Everything all right?" he asked. Lola was dressed already; even the pale blue ribbons were tied in her hair. Everything seemed a little too all right.

"We’re rocking now," Lola said, smiling behind her mug.

"Irina picked a nice dress," Justine said, feeling the blue material around Lola’s ruffled shoulder. "You’re so lucky you get to keep this."

Lola set down her coffee. "Irina had one reason for picking this dress. She knew it would make me look fat."

"Since when do you care?" William said.

"Stop staring at me," Lola said loudly. There was a noise under the table, and he realized she had tried to kick him but had instead kicked the metal table support.

As he studied her eyes, William saw it. Lola was looking out the window at the Sound. The sun was bright but her pupils were huge. Her pupils almost hid the blue irises.

"Lola, sweetheart," he said quietly, "how much did you take? You’ve got to tell how many hits."

"Oh, for God’s sake," said Justine.
Lola sat erect and smiled past him. The last time he had sold her acid was over a year ago; could she have hoarded? Small blue squares you stuck under your tongue—she had sold Irina some, too. But how many had he had in all? Forty hits? Sixty?

"Open up for the Shadowman." He tried to control the desperation in his voice.

"The paper's gone, William. Don't worry, it's just starting to kick in now."

"What is this?" Justine said. "Your sister's wedding and you drop acid? What's wrong with you?"

"Don't be looking at me," Lola said. William sighed and ignored Justine's gaze. "Have you still got the ring?" he asked.

Lola reached into the folds of her dress and brought out the gold band Irina would place on Brad's finger. She held it out far from her. "Hey—a pulse."

"Lola, just say how many," he said. "Ease my mind."

"Three or four, all right?"

He leaned back and laughed. Four hits of that batch would make the wedding look like cartoons—Saturday morning cartoons.

"I actually saved her ass," Lola said as she put the ring away. "You know where she had it hidden? A pack of Marlboros that was supposed to look unopened. The wrap was
back on and all. Do you believe she really thought that would fool Italian customs?" Lola smirked. "What a honeymoon that would’ve been."

Justine stood abruptly and walked away. William felt an alarm go off inside him. He should have taken Lola aside.

"What’s wrong with her?" Lola asked loudly.

Justine whirled in the doorway. "Nothing, dear, nothing at all." William felt more than saw Justine’s eyes turn on him. "In fact, it’s just what I came for."

It had been arranged that Justine should sit next to him in the second row, the row behind Dr. and Mrs. Cox, Stan, and the grandparents, just as she had sat beside him last night. Lola had looked fine coming down the aisle, escorted by the best man. She had swept along, chin down, eyes pointed straight ahead. She stood up there now in the neat curving row, back to the crowd, while Irina and Brad listened to the minister.

Irina’s voice was plainly audible: "I will."

At the same time, Lola’s pale blue form seemed to waver. As the minister turned to put the question to Brad, William saw a bouquet, half hidden by Lola’s body, drop to the gazebo floor. Justine took hold of his arm. Then it
looked as if Lola was stooping to pick up her flowers, but she stayed on her knees. Her torso rose and fell spasmodically.

"She's bombed," came a hushed voice from several rows back. Small noises rose elsewhere in the crowd.

"I will," Brad said almost defiantly. Then the minister and the bridal party all looked down at Lola. Even from where William sat it was clear that Lola was retching.

"What now?" asked Justine. Her tone was indignant. William froze at the thought that all the Coxes had heard her.

"Someone get the ring. The ring," Irina said loudly. When no one came unfrozen, she loosened her hand from Brad's and bent to do it herself. Lola lay on her side now, in the fetal position. She lay still. The elegant white dress crouched over the blue dress for a long time. Brad finally picked up the bridal train, which was becoming bunched at Irina's feet, so that when she stood again she wouldn't trample it.

"Do something, Bill," Justine said. "Get her out of there."

"Me? Why me?" he whispered, though now the noises in the crowd would have covered his voice. Standing up at this point was the last thing he wanted to do. It would be like stripping.
"Go," said Justine, and pushed him with surprising force.

By the time he had leapt up the three short gazebo steps, Irina stood facing him, one corsage-covered hand on her hip. Brad was holding a conference with the best man.

"Just get her out of here," Irina said. "I got the ring."

Lola's face as he picked her up was the color of the cracked lobster claws the caterers had set out on the buffet table under the tent. Her eyes were shut tight. Her breath was oven-hot.

"Lola, sweetheart," he said. He avoided all eyes as he passed in front of the row of Coxes. Justine held the tip of Lola's dress all the way into the living room, where he laid the tight, pent-up body on the couch.

"Exactly why did this happen, Bill?" Justine asked. "I want to know what's going on here."

He turned and held her eyes until she backed away. He had never hit a woman before, and never would, but Justine didn't have to know that. "Call an ambulance, bitch," he said. "Now."

As he climbed in under the flashing red, William realized it was the second time he had ridden with an
injured Lola. The first time, last winter in the Adirondacks, she had broken a leg skiing. She had rambled on about how this was the first pain she had ever known, and she was glad to feel it, even if it was only a superficial pain. This time, Lola's jaw had seized up.

He stood when Dr. Cox walked into the hospital waiting room twenty minutes later. Dr. Cox's face was screwed up in a pattern of triangles: the bunched lines in his forehead, his cheekbones and the small point of his chin. His bow tie wasn't straight. Right behind him strode Justine.

"An ambulance?" Dr. Cox said. "What can she possibly have?"

William glanced at Justine. Wisely she had feigned ignorance. Dr. Cox stood on tiptoe to hear him. "I don't want to shock you, Doctor. I'm afraid Lola took LSD."

Dr. Cox rocked back on his heels and looked wildly around. William looked with him at the messy magazine piles, the sick-looking plants, the orange vinyl furniture. Dr. Cox wanted to know where Lola could have gotten hold of such a thing; William said she had gotten it back in high school and had kept it all these years as a curiosity.

"I swear to you, Doctor. There's no excuse, but ... well, I never dreamed she'd actually take it."

As soon as Dr. Cox had gone into the emergency room, Justine said, "I was tempted to tell him what a crock you've
been feeding him, Bill. But I decided it wasn't the right
time."

They were sitting on one of the couches. William tried
to make his face look pained.

"Don't give me that."

"Whatever you say, Justine."

"You're a real low-life, aren't you, Bill. Not only do
you mooch off my aunt and uncle for years on end, not only
do you break both my cousins' hearts, you also give them
this crap Lola took. Pretty much on target, hey?"

It felt like there was another person sitting with
them. William had to keep reminding himself that Justine
was addressing him. "No," he said. "I wouldn't say so."

"Oh, you mean because my cousins were already a couple
of blackhearts even before you came along? If it wasn't you
bringing some excitement to this house, it'd just be someone
else? Is that what you're thinking, Bill?"

He stared at her. Just what was this bitch's game?

At seven o'clock they still waited; an invisible person
occupied the space between them on the orange couch. If
Lola died he would have to go back to Galesburg, where there
was a switching yard for the Milwaukee Railroad, a die cast
factory, and his parents. Start over again. Square one.
Outside the automatic doors, the sun was starting to set. Dr. Cox had not come out of the emergency room. He heard voices and then Irina was standing there, dressed in jeans and her sleeveless black top.

"What'd she do this time?"

William stood heavily, holding his tie in one hand. Brad and his best man, who was driving the newlyweds to the airport, stood joking about something. "Acid," William said. "It might help to know how much."

The meaning of his words brought an ugly expression to Irina's face. "She ate my stuff? But I hid it! I hid it where she could never find it." Irina brought a pack of Marlboros out of her purse and tore it open, tore the pack until all the cigarettes spilled to the floor, then threw the ripped pieces after. "Damn her brains."

"What is it, love?" asked Brad, stepping forward.

"How much did you have?" William asked.

"She replaced the goddamned pack," Irina said. "I hope she has to crawl into hell on her hands and knees. I hope she has to carry her insides around in a plastic bag. Twenty-four hits ought to do the job nicely."

"Shut up, Irina," said Justine.

Twenty-four hits. He knew a kid that had survived twenty-seven. But Lola being such a lightweight . . .

"What am I going to do?" Irina said. William noticed
red marks appearing on her arm where Brad was tugging. "You haven’t got any more, do you, Shadowman?"

"More what, darling?" asked Brad.

"Stay out of this." Irina planted her free hand in Brad’s chest. "You stand over there, love. We’ll go in a minute."

"No, Irina," William said. It was a whisper.

"Please, William, say you do. That was all I had. Christ, that was my something blue."

Justine took hold of Irina’s arms. She turned her around. "That’s right, Irina, you’re married now. Let your husband find you something blue. It’s what you married him for."

Irina left the hospital against her will, screaming at Lola, who lay somewhere deep inside the complex, no doubt unconscious. Lola would never have the last word, something like that. In one hand Irina clutched a thick roll of traveller’s checks. Brad and the best man dragged her from behind while Justine held her arms. When William finally turned away, two male orderlies were standing right behind him.


Four days later William sat in the breakfast room, drinking coffee. The tent had been taken away. The lawn
was clear again. Long Island Sound was as gray this morning as the raw steel that came to the die cast factory in Galesburg on railroad cars, but coffee—such a simple drug as this—made him glad to be alive.

Stan was still here; he was staying a while, just to be around in case Lola’s condition changed. But Lola could stay in the coma for months. They all went to see her every afternoon; it was the kind of sleep nothing would disturb.

"Hi, Bill," Justine said. She slid into the seat across from him. Her eyes were as gray as the Sound this morning. She held her coffee up without drinking it and looked out over the water.

He couldn’t see where, if they did decide to press it, they would have much of a case against him. Justine had been there while Lola boasted about stealing the acid from Irina. He had found the old cancelled check Irina had paid him with in her room upstairs. Maybe they could get him for dealing in general. But this stuff had been Irina’s. No one could hold him responsible if Lola died, because it would be a consequence of her own theft.

"William."

He looked up. It was Dr. Cox, and Mrs. Cox behind him. Dr. Cox cleared his throat. "We’re not going to press charges, William. We’ve thought about it a great deal, and we decided that wouldn’t help speed Lola’s recovery."
"But I want you out of here," Mrs. Cox said. Her voice quavered. She looked scared, as if he was some sort of hit man. "I want you out today, William."

He spread his arms and shrugged. Mrs. Cox gave a little gasp, and Dr. Cox followed her out of the room.

"I really fail to understand you," Justine said after a minute. "These are decent, forgiving people, here."

"You don’t forgive," William said. "You’re nothing but a little canine."

Justine smiled. "We’re talking murder, Bill. Irina’s and Lola’s. Oh sure, Irina. You think she’s going to survive with that milktoast? You bet I snitch on murderers. I don’t give it a second thought."

He went out on the back lawn. One last look at Long Island Sound, this time as murderer. Murderer! He was no murderer. If anything, Shadowman had been murdered, someone had murdered him. He ran his eyes over the Cox’s speedboat. Such beautiful lines. Probably all gassed up, ready to go. A thought formed, a way of avoiding Galesburg—-but no. Better not push them any further. This water—-that was their true luxury, living on the water, and they didn’t even realize it. It was the one luxury he really would miss. You couldn’t see across it. You couldn’t understand it; you could only bow down to it. But he felt no fear. The Sound had the power to diffuse everything, hope and despair alike,
any thought, swiftly as it came. Under the immoveable family dock, the water rose and fell with grace and power, like the body of a sleeping woman.
Rob Justi's the name. See for yourself in this morning's paper: "Three restaurants makes a chain for maverick, Rob Justi." It's not every day they give you a notice before your opening. I could get to like that word, maverick.

Anyhow, I'm pleased with the new place. All my restaurants have dining on three levels. The bastard I used to work for, Jack Gilligan, said people feel like it's entertainment when they can look out over folks, like something extra for the money. I figure what he really meant was people like to look down on each other.

"Give 'em something free," Jack used to say. "Just surprise 'em." So we bring it out before the appetizer, on the house-- small plate of crab fritters, mushrooms in puff pastry--things along these lines. We ask how they like it. Makes the guy look sharp in front of his girl.

Jack's always telling people he made me what I am. I just say Jack, pal, there's one thing you never had, and
that is a theme. I remember one night, six years ago, Jack suddenly got real quiet. He'd just walked into The Great American Car Company, my first place, over on Halsted. One look at my black '59 Eldorado Convertible, with the wheel skirts and all-original chrome, revolving once a minute in the middle of my dining room, and Jack lost his talker. We don't miss a day with the feather duster, so I'm thinking maybe, for a minute there, he was seeing his own reflection. '59 was the year of the double taillights, two cherry bullets under a fin. Hooked to a pipe in the floor of the rear seat we've got an antique copper fountain fanning breathlets of water over the whole plastic-covered Fleetwood interior.

I remember once back in '84 when Jack and I bumped into each other at the National Restaurant Show. He was with his top managers. While my group shook hands with his group I pretended to be chummy. I saved the bastard himself for last. Then I greeted him with the old "Payback Jack", just to watch him go purple.

By eleven a.m., my dining room's almost full. These are applicants, not customers. I'm just sitting in the wait station, watching them through the lattice. Barbara seats them one to a table, and she's bringing each applicant a
glass of my house red, because I want them to know right off what kind of place I run.

But what do I know? In walks Jack Gilligan's kid. Jack's kid! Somebody pinch me. I've seen the kid once in my life but I know him. Those high blond eyebrows and eyes bulging—he's tall now, like a waiter should be, but thin as a goddamned china plate. Scotty's his name. And Barbara doesn't know anything, so she gives him an application.

Now these kids, when they walk in here, they talk about their college, their college jobs. They don't know a thing about the real world. I never went to college; I worked for Jack Gilligan. Nine years I gave this man. So I figure all by himself Jack was my college, my college job, and the bastard that first taught me how the world can choke you.

I'm thinking Scotty's got real balls, walking in here.

"A man's only as good as his staff," Jack used to say. So here he sends his kid to get the dirt on my operation. Jack wants a peek at the books, see how I'm treating my managers. Or maybe he told Scotty to slip a cockroach in the salad, I don't know. With Jack you don't need to know.

I go take a seat at the kid's table. I reach across palm down, so he'll see my diamond. "Rob Justi," I say. "How's your pop these days, kid?" Scotty shakes hands all right, but looks around at other tables, wondering why him. "You don't remember me?" I ask.
When he shakes his head, you can almost hear things rattling around. Scotty's hands are all chapped and veiny, too, like he's never heard a thing about lotions.

"Well what about that car we built together," I say.

The year was '76; I was seventeen and bussing for Jack. Jack had signed the kid up for this race between homemade cars with no engines, and he knew I restored Cadillacs on the side.

"You," Scotty says, big smile now. "That Rob! Sure never thought I'd see you again."

I'm scanning his application, and then something catches my eye.

"Hey, I didn't open Seville Row till '86." He's made the mistake of claiming he waited table there in '85. I line it out. "You didn't know I owned the place?"

He bites his lip. "I didn't know you owned this one, Mr. Justi." Other tables are snickering. They think I've got him nailed, but what do they know? My cooks steal filets out of the walk-in, my barmaids pour free rounds, and I myself employ sixteen of Mexico's finest. What gets me is the sophistication of the kid's act. I'm starting to think maybe it's not an act.

"What's with Jack?" I ask. "How's his handicap these days?"

"I wouldn't know," he says, and can't look straight at
"Why don't you just work at one of your pop's places?"

The kid rolls his eyes. He's blushing to the tips of his ears. "My dad and I don't communicate very well, all right?"

I bring Scotty back to my office, weighing the pros and cons. "You're gonna be my ace on the floor," I tell him, "on one condition." His grin goes back where it came from. He wants to know the condition, so I ask him if he saw the concrete pedestal in the dining room, the one with the plumbing sticking out. "There's a Caddy gonna go on that," I say, "and a fountain, just like my other places, but the car's in Indiana. I need someone to ride down with me, but no one's here today."

"Today?"

I set a fifty on the desk between us. "Right now."

And what can he say? I make it my business to know what people want. All folks really want from eating out is reassurance that they still know how to pick a good restaurant. All Scotty, here, wants is respect. One thing I've learned--cash starts the healing. You do your homework, plain and simple, find out what the other fella wants, and make your offer.

When Jack loaned me that hundred grand so I could go out on my own, he hadn't done his homework. I told him I
was going to open a hamburger joint, not some nice place that would compete with his own operations. He believed me. Jack thought I would want to run a burger joint, coming from where I did, but he hadn’t trained me for it. To this day, I don’t know the least thing about moving burgers.

So it’s taking off, my Great American Car Company, I’m making my payments, then bam, Jack calls the loan. I said what do you mean sixty days, I’ve got three years to pay your lousy balance. I never saw the clause till some shyster, who collected a hundred bucks for the favor, pointed it out for me.

Jack counted on me going broke, but I didn’t go broke. He’d taught me too well for his own good, plus I had atmosphere. Men dream of eating in the shadow of Cadillacs, and men are the ones that pay the bill. I’ve got bankers bringing their wives to my places, and slicked-up union boys in borrowed suits in the next booth. My hostesses pay their rent selling the tables around my fountains. It killed me two years ago when Jack was quoted in a trade journal saying my places are "gaudy." I almost died laughing. I also thought maybe business would fall off, but nobody reads that trash. But that’s the thing about Payback Jack—you never know what he’ll try next.
So Scotty G. and I are headed south on the Chicago Skyway in my brand new Sedan deVille. And now the kid’s getting curious, because he knows I’ve got the goods on him.

"The car’s in Valpo?" he asks again. Valporaiso, Indiana, also happens to be where Jack lives. Jack’s got a field man that flies around the country keeping all his managers honest.

"This year, every Cadillac’s got a computer," I say. I point to my dash. "See? It gives your mpg every foot of the way." I’m creeping at sixty. I baby all my cars.

"I’m not going to see my dad, if that’s what you’re into," the kid says. He’s got his fingers on the door handle.

"What ever happened to that race-car we built?" I ask him.

"I don’t know. Maybe it’s out in the garage."

Let me just say this was the most useless piece of junk I’ve ever worked on: sort of a plywood hulk, all right angles, and gravity the sole means of propulsion. The steering wheel was the flywheel from an old boat engine. This connected to the front axle by two pulleys and a cable. The kid went to bed about ten, and at 3 a.m. Jack decided not to bother with brakes.

"I was thinking maybe I’d buy it from you," I say. "Maybe dangle it from the ceiling in one of my dining
rooms."

"That's the only way it'd be worth anything," Scotty says, and we laugh. He's looking out my tinted windows for a while, and then he says, 'You built that thing yourself, didn't you? I mean with no help from my dad?"

I see he wants a yes, so I nod. Besides, it's true. "Your daddy didn't lift a hand," I say. "I drilled. I sawed. I put in the steering."

"Yeah," Scotty says. "I always thought so." We get off the tollway, and pretty soon pass a sign that says Entering Valparaiso. "You want to come take a look at it?" he says. "I'm pretty sure it's still out there."

We cruise by the First National Bank. I'm thinking if the kid's trying to get me out to the house, Jack must be down at the country club playing golf.

"Listen, Scotty," I say. "As long as we're here I'd like to see Jack. I've got an outstanding debt with him."

He scrunches up in his seat. "No way Jose," he says. "Good luck making me come along."

In downtown Valpo, heat shimmers off the pavement like the world is one giant stove and the sky an exhaust fan. The juices are running in my own stomach now. Do I really want to see the old man, after all that's happened? Then I'm thinking Rob, buddy, pay back. Your turn.
Scotty tries to hop at a red light, but I've taken care of it. Of course I've locked the doors; I've also hit the switch that locks the switches around the car, a Cadillac feature that saves the lives of small children every year. The deVille also has no knobs. He starts to squawk.

"What've you got against Jack?" I say. "He's done a hell of a lot for you."

"Horse shit," he says, firing up. "I mean, take that old Soapbox car. If I ever had a son, which I doubt I will, I wouldn't leave a thing like that to the last minute. You take a couple of weeks on the project. Let your son do some of the work, let him fail so he'll get the knack of things. That's the only way he'll ever learn."

"For a know-nothing, you sure spout off."

"I hate his guts," Scotty says. "That's all I know."

He's using some really ripe language as we turn in the club driveway, so I tell him if he just shuts up maybe I'll let him go. For a while we sit halfway up the drive. I'm thinking with any luck, Jack'll be right out on the links.

"Ugh," the kid says. "I think I'm about to throw up."

I ignore this.

I'm looking at a red shirt of about Jack's shape, and turn down the cinder path meant for golf carts. "Get down if you want," I say. I'm thinking it'll be sharp if Jack
doesn’t see the kid right away.

I keep two wheels on the cinders at all times. I go so slow my speedometer doesn’t register movement, but different golfers are turning to look. A group of ladies waves from a fairway to our right.

"Help! He’s crazy!" Scotty screams, banging on the locked window with his fists. I crank up the air conditioning.

Red shirt turns out not to be Jack, but another guy that points his club from across a pond. We inch through a little forest and come out on another fairway, and then, right in front of us, nice as you please, there he is, just aiming a drive. Try calling it in this time, I’m thinking. Jack’s got nothing on me now. When the two men back of him say something, Jack turns, and the sight of my new Cadillac makes his mouth open wide enough for a golf ball to fly into.

"You flaming bastard," Scotty says. He’s doubled over in the seat. For once he’s practically at a loss.

Jack looks heavier now; he’s got more gray on his head. As I get out of the car, his hand comes up and knocks off the visor. He levels a suntanned finger at me. "I’m gonna have you thrown in the can, Rob. You’ll be lucky if you’re out in time to count your first month’s receipts." Jack’s talking about my upcoming grand opening at Home of Chrome,
but I just smile. I've still got my ace in the front seat.

"You like?" I ask. "The company gives me a free
deVille every year now. All the free P.R."

"Get that goddamned thing out of here."

"What is it, Jack, he's a fairy?" Jack always hated
fairies.

"Who?"

a poet? That it, Jack?" Jack used to rant about his wife
sending poems to the local paper, because she would always
get them printed under her real name.

"Rob, what in Christ are you talking about?" Jack's
got his three iron in both hands. "You listen," he says.
"If you don't get that car and your fat ass out of here by
the count of three, I'm gonna do something you'll regret."

Jack always believed in the power of vague threats.
Not knowing exactly what the retaliation would be, he said,
usually made people back off. He goes and stands by my
right front wheel, the polished hubcap sparkling in the sun.
Scotty could still be in college, for all he knows. He
gives my right headlight a couple taps with the smacking end
of his club.

"I'm warning you, Rob."

I'm thinking better my highway car than one of my mint
classics, on a Friday night, in a room full of paying
customers. There's a pop as the vacuum goes, and tinkling glass. I cup my hands and say "Payback Jack" as he does the other side. Jack's buddies stand looking amazed a few yards behind him. Jack almost looks like he's enjoying this, in an angry sort of way. But I'm enjoying it more. As Jack goes to work on my tinted windshield, there's a pair of eyes peeping out from the passenger side.

"My goddamned home course!" Jack shouts. He's raging because I chant Payback Jack! Payback Jack! each time he winds up. It reminds me of the time he caught a manager stealing. Jack chased the guy out of the office and into the kitchen, then hurled the adding machine clear across the room just as this manager guy ducked out the back door.

The three iron makes several vicious thunks in my windshield, and Jack's doing some real damage now.

"You know what you've done with your crackpot stunt?" he yells. "You've made me look like the goddamned--"

He stops in mid-swing, and I know what he's looking at. My windshield is half air, half safety glass hanging by its own fiber. The next blow would cave the whole thing in on the front seat, but Jack's looking his own legacy right in the eye.

"Hey, Jack," I say. "This the kind of example you want to set?" He drops the club and turns away, squeezing his neck. He pushes his country club pals back as Scotty jumps
"I couldn't stop him, Dad! He's crazy!"


Jack's eyes bulge. "You're working for him?" There's real wonder in his voice, and fear.

The kid squirms away from me. "Asshole. I never worked for you for a minute."

"Kid's got a mouth on him, Jack," I say then, right in front of his friends. "I'm running my own business now. I can't be doing your babysitting anymore."

The kid lets out enough filth to fill a barge. For a minute it's not even clear who he's so mad at—me or Jack. Jack's face is starting to go from anger to something else, and I'm thinking I've figured out a few things. Like, the reason Jack never got me and the kid together again was because he was so ashamed that I was the one that built the Soapbox car. Scotty had gone to bed early because Jack didn't want him to know the details. Worst of all for Jack, the kid came in dead last in his race.

We hear a bunch of people yelling "Four!" from up the fairway. Three golf carts are tearing up the path toward us, arms waving out the sides. What, I'm thinking, this looks like the vehicle of some criminal that would flee the
scene?

"Dad," Scotty says, "just don't listen to Rob. He's full of sixteen different kinds of shit." Scotty's explaining about wanting to find work on his own, this sort of thing. And Jack's listening. So now I'm thinking Jack's going to get sore again, but he surprises me. Seems like, after what he did to my car, he hasn't got much anger left.

"I treated you like a son," Jack says.

"Oh, that's real good," I say. "More like you did everything in your power to ruin me."

Jack spreads his arms, but still isn't angry. He's just talking like he usually does. "That was afterwards, when we became competitors. For Pete's sake, Rob, I'm a businessman. We both are."

"You almost did ruin me," I say, but my heart isn't in it anymore. That caved-in look on Jack's face--I can see I've whipped him with the personal stuff about Scotty. Maybe the kid really is a fairy.

Besides, it's true what Jack says. I am a businessman. I became one as soon as I accepted that loan from him. And the fact is, in business, you do whatever you've got to do to survive. If you lose your business, you lose the part of your life you spent building it up.

The golf carts are pulling up now, and security guards
jumping out, all shouting and tripping over each other. Jack and I turn to meet them, but before anyone can make a move I hear it. There's nothing quite like the sound of 273 cubic inches of new Cadillac engine leaping to life. I catch a glimpse of Scotty's face through the demolished windshield.

"Look out!" cries one of the security guards.

We all have to hop to one side to get out of the way. Everybody's shouting at once as the kid jerks by us. I can see he's having control trouble with my fingertip steering and calibrated gas pedal, especially on this soft turf. There's a horrible scraping as he sideswipes one of the golf carts. The cart falls slowly on its side, all the stuff falling out with a big clatter. More scraping as he backs up. I'm just standing there holding my head. When the kid finally pulls free he's actually got somebody's golf bag hooked on the rear bumper by a leather strap.

"Jack," says the course manager in a breathy voice. "Is this your son at the wheel?"

"Stop him," I say. "He lifted my keys!"

But all we can do is watch as the kid takes off across the open fairway, and then down across this wide, gentle valley. I'm sweating like a fry-cook. The golf bag still hangs off my rear bumper, and every so often another club slides out and does a couple hi-hat somersaults in the air.
in Scotty’s wake, flashing in the sun.

"I believe that’s called grand theft auto," I tell Jack as the car goes behind some trees.

Jack’s just laughing. He can’t control himself. Finally I give him a good solid punch on the arm. That straightens him up.

"So maybe he’ll drop the kidnapping charges, Rob."

There’s an old saw in the restaurant business:
Consider three things when you want to open a new place—location, location, and location. Jack used to say it, but this one never meant much to me. When you know you’re going to be in the heart of the city, with forty-story buildings full of white-collar professionals that commute from the suburbs stacked all around you, location pretty much just means put your happy hour on weekends and holidays.

Occasionally I think I’ve hit upon some great piece of wisdom all my own, something I’d like to share with the younger fellas, just starting out. OK, so just remember now: location, location, and location. But then something always happens that I can’t explain, that no one could ever explain.

Jack is all laughs driving me back up to Chicago. Frankly, I think he’s gone a bit soft. The shock of seeing
his son, these kinds of things. He keeps saying how glad he is to see Scotty showing initiative, even if he did take the game too far. Jack even offers to sponsor me for the Valpo Country Club.

I tell him I'm no country clubber.

"Ah, Rob," he says. "The income you must have! One of these days you're gonna find yourself a girl, have a family, and then you're gonna need a club. Take it from me. I give you five years on that."

He's acting so strange and friendly I finally do start thinking about those other things: finding a girl, for instance. I'm thirty-two years of age, and it seems like I never spent an hour of my life where I wasn't working. I'm thinking these kinds of things, but then I get nervous. What if I ended up with a shameless, foul-mouthed kid like Scotty Gilligan?

Anyhow, it's more than just cash registers ringing up sales, this business. For a while I just sit there, riding along, not even listening to Jack. I don't even look out the windows. I'm just watching how the Cadillac emblem moves around the glove compartment lid with the natural motion of Jack's car. Five years, I'm thinking. Five Cadillacs.
Morning Glory Lane

(in progress)
May Day of '69. They're home from Vaughn's Garden Supply with two trays' worth of pachysandra. For ten years, Edie has wanted pachysandra around the magnolia tree. Armed with trowels, they lay in the delicate roots by hand, with great care, tamping the soil after, and watering. And the year following: Edie taking cuttings of those original plants; nurturing them in water-filled styrofoam cups till she's collected enough to plant. Year upon year taking cuttings, always planting more, till at last the dream comes true: a wide swath of pachysandra bordering the whole backyard.

"Still with me, Dad?"

Louis Chambers looked away from the window and studied his son. TJ was broad-shouldered, neatly groomed in his sport shirt, jeans and loafers. From the backyard, through the kitchen window, Louis caught the simple song of a chickadee. Always the same two notes—first a higher, then a lower, completing note, pure and clear as water—like
someone calling his name. Louis smiled.

Two months since Edie’s passing, and now TJ was here. Elizabeth had stayed behind in Cleveland. No children to look after—Louis could almost understand it if Elizabeth had kids to look after. When his own father had died, he and Edie had brought a two-year-old TJ over to the old house on Morning Glory Lane. They had stayed a week with mother. But Elizabeth was an aerobics instructor. Couldn’t let the class down.

"Anything you want to do today, Dad?" TJ asked.

Louis looked for the chickadee that had accompanied him since he was in short pants. The bare magnolia tree, past its blooming for this year . . . the back fence . . . the elm tree, as yet unscathed by disease. At last he met TJ’s impatient, probing eyes.

"What am I going to do with this house?"

That night, Louis hears voices, and realizes he is awake. It is 1942 and his father is somewhere in the South Pacific, an epidemiologist for the United States Navy. The voices out on Morning Glory Lane are getting louder. He’s afraid to get up and shut the window. A shadow rises on the bedroom wall: a small crowd in silhouette, one or two tall ones hovering over the rest. Their feet scrape the gravel
of the lane, and they laugh loudly. The dark shadow quivers on the wall. Suddenly, like a newsreel burning in the projector, the shadow explodes onto the ceiling, then quickly passes into the diffuse moonlit space all around him. He feels the shadow pass over his face, and quickly draws the covers up.

Who could they be, this nighttime group? He knows everybody on Morning Glory Lane—all the kids meet every morning at the bus stop—but they are no one he knows.

Louis lay awake, eyes wide, and listened to the regular sounds of TJ's breathing. TJ slept here in the same room as if he, Louis, had become the child, had reverted to childish helplessness, now that Edie was gone. But it was TJ who was acting helpless. They had gone to a lot of trouble moving a twin bed in from the guest room, all at TJ's insistence.

Terri Paoli had been wild, but she can't have been one of them. He would have picked out her voice in a second, for Terri Paoli loved, more than anything, to scream. The Paolis lived in a two-story white house halfway up the lane towards Fox Road. It was whispered, during the years while his father was in the South Pacific, that the Paolis made wine in their basement by stamping on grapes with their bare feet.
He smiles at Terri.

Terri would come over on summer afternoons to play on the swingset in his backyard, because his was the first swingset on Morning Glory Lane. His father had liked building things himself, making them sturdy. He had built the biggest swingset anyone had ever seen just so he would have reason to dig holes in the backyard, pour concrete, and anchor it to the Earth as firmly as the very house on its foundation.

That swingset could withstand earthquakes, Louis thought, smiling at the buff wall beyond TJ's sleeping figure, but the whole backyard couldn't contain Terri Paoli. Plain brown hair, shoulder length. She was tall and slender, two years older than he. Most of all he remembered her eyes—small, light eyes, planted so high in her face that her wild, unpredictable laughter, and then even her screaming, somehow seemed natural.

They've been swinging quite a while now; he's tired and sweaty and happy. Now they're just sitting beside each other in their swings, looking out across the yard. Suddenly, she screams. Terri screams as high and loud and long as she can. A grackle Louis has been watching abruptly changes course.

"What? What's the matter?" He jumps off the swing and stares across the yard at the pond out back, imagining that
the periscope of a Nazi U-Boat has just broken the surface. But Terri Paoli only laughs. She takes a quick breath, shuts her eyes, and screams again. This time he stands close and watches her. He lets the awful sound pass through his thin body like wine squeezing out of a press.

When his mother runs out of the house in curlers, Terri Paoli is still screaming. His mother gives them both a lecture, and the next time it happens, another day, she tells Terri sternly that she can’t come over again till she learns to control herself. It is the first occasion he has in his life to take a side. Openly he hates his mother for banishing Terri Paoli, but by the fall, when he sees her once again each day at the bus stop, Terri is no longer a screamer anyway.

Louis slipped out of bed and tied the sash on his robe, watching TJ’s eyes. In the family room downstairs he sat in the blue armchair he and Edie had bought in Galena for twenty dollars, and drank a glass of Tab.

It is 1954. Pratt Dorm, room 326; now he sits cross-legged on the cool floor, studying the classifieds of the Chicago Tribune. He is a senior in college, and, like his roommate, Bill Johnson, is in the process of deciding his purpose in life. In eight weeks he will have his B.A. in
history, but the law seems so staid. Everyone and his brother is going on to law school. Louis has told his father that he will choose between the Army or advertising.

"You want to go to Korea?" his father says on the dorm telephone. "Be my guest. Only I didn't think I'd raised the kind of kid who'd want to use his college degree to go and freeze his legs off."

At graduation everybody in the class of '54 wears a white armband in memory of Art Lewis, Stanley Cooper, and Robert O'Harrara, who gave their lives this year in the service of their country.

Going home after college, to Morning Glory Lane, Louis sees the water on the lawn. Though it is almost June, the water still reaches halfway to the marten house. He laughs at the familiar, sweet smell of mud. Monday he starts work, but for now it is just like the old days. He walks out into the flood barefoot and stands shin deep in the water.

It was one of his father's few mistakes: the pond in the backyard. Their neighbor to the East had been Paul Schneider, a real estate man, and one day before Louis was born Mr. Schneider had been talking about how much he'd like to have a pond at the back of his property. He would stock it with bluegills and rock bass, and geese and ducks would come in the spring. Mr. Schneider had had five acres and the Chamberses three, and the large, wild field behind both
properties had always been soggy. Louis's father had thought it would be the finishing touch on his rural paradise, this pond, and had asked if half the pond could be on Schneider's property and half on his own.

"It was just what Schneider wanted me to say, the old bastard," Louis's father had said quietly one spring.

Schneider had hired a bulldozer to dig the hole, and by the end of the summer there had been a naturally-fed pond. It had seemed that the water trickling in was about equal to the amount that evaporated.

A beautiful pond, too. Louis, with his Bachelor of Arts degree securely under his belt, would even say sculpted. On his father's side, when the floodwaters receded, there was a peninsula you could fish from. And if you walked all the way around to the back side of the pond, there was a grove of willows whose branches used to hang so thick and flexible you could just grab a bunch in your hand and swing.

The problem is this flooding, he thinks, this serious young graduate with two geology courses on his transcript. Each year, once the ice is gone for good, the pond invariably overflows its banks. At first the water creeps up the lawn as far as the tree that was once split by lightning. In later years, the flood creeps closer and closer to the marten house. Each spring it rises higher,
and stays longer.

Perry Crothers would come over and they would go out and stand in the water and throw fistfuls of mud at each other. Once Perry had brought up a crayfish, and had splashed over and held it against Louis's arm till it pinched him. Louis had been so surprised to see Perry charging that he hadn't guessed what was happening. Another time, on land that was relatively dry, they had dug a hole in the bank which quickly filled up with soupy mud, and they had dipped cattails in there and thrown them at red-wind blackbirds for an entire afternoon.

"Lou," Edie said. "What're you doing up so late?"

"It's two o'clock in the morning," Louis said, checking his watch without thinking. He looked up, startled. Edie sat on the couch opposite, wearing what she had always called her "corn relish" dress. She had had her hair done. "Edie," he whispered. "What are you doing here?"

"Lou, you should go back to bed now."

He stood. Not without reverence, he bent to touch her—but it was the same upper arm, flabby as ever. Her makeup was perfect, same as if they had just come back from seeing a play in Chicago. He crouched on the carpet before her, holding her knees in his hands. She was smiling. She ran
her hand through his hair, gently squeezing his scalp in the old way.

"You need your rest, Lou," Edie said. "You’re going to Morning Glory Lane tomorrow."

"I’m going . . . you say I’m going to Morning Glory Lane?"

Edie nodded. "TJ’s going to take you, sweet. You’ll be doing a lot of walking. Now won’t you go back to bed? I mean it, Lou, you really want to get some rest tonight."

He couldn’t take his eyes off her—the pearl necklace her grandmother had given her, those sparkling brown eyes and immaculate auburn hair, never colored—and he didn’t look away, never for an instant, yet she was gone. He was crouched on the floor with his arms around a red throw pillow.

Louis stood and looked around. He shook his head. He laughed. Leaving his half-drunk Tab on the coffeetable, not caring about the ring it would make, he went back upstairs and got in bed without taking off his robe. Chilled, he snuggled in, pulling the covers up to his mouth. TJ was still asleep. The wind rustled through the leaves of the elm tree outside the window.

He crouches in the basement with his father and mother
during a tornado watch. The sky outside is the color of chicken soup. They have a transistor radio on the floor next to them, and it is playing Benny Goodman. The wind blows through the telephone wires so hard it sets up a moaning, like a deep-voiced horn of some kind backing Goodman's orchestra, rising and falling, rising and falling.

It is spingtime, and Louis is carefully putting a furry stick in the drainage ditch. The drainage ditch runs the length of Morning Glory Lane. All the driveways have a metal culvert under them through which the water flows. He walks beside his furry stick, waiting for it at the other end of each tunnel, helping it past logjams, portaging where necessary.

He follows it past Mr. Hart's—Mr. Hart, who says that because of the global food shortage we should kill all the useless songbirds and eat them—past the Hortons', where Mrs. Horton was taken away in an ambulance one day but is perfectly fine now, past the Caldwell's and the Mohlers' and the Macleans'. At the end of the lane, in the last house before the Dead End sign, live the people no one ever sees.

Forgetting his furry stick, which at any rate has been lost somewhere, Louis creeps up the driveway. It is gravel and deeply rutted, and winds through a grove of pine trees.
Big brown pine cones lie all over the driveway. His mother once made Christmas tree ornaments out of pine cones, spray-painting them gold when they were closed, then soaking them in water to make them open. All the pine cones on the ground are open. Suddenly, Louis throws down the one he is holding. What if it closed on his fingers?

He runs down the gravel driveway and back out to Morning Glory Lane. The house was dark blue. He saw it. He stands holding the metal Dead End sign in one hand. A path leads through the tall grass where the pavement ends, and the drainage ditch continues beside it. His father and he will ride bicycles six miles down this path, one day, all the way to Brookfield Zoo, but this day he has never yet been down it. He hears the sound of cars. He comes around a bend, and there is a highway with four lanes of traffic. The beating traffic echoes against the wooden supports of the bridge. The path leads under the bridge. In a giant logjam on the near side of the underpass, Louis finds his furry stick. He is positive it is the same one.

"If you don't mind, I want to drive over to Morning Glory Lane," Louis said in the morning. "Walk around a little in the place I grew up."

TJ looked up from the scrambled eggs he was cooking.
"How come, Dad?"

Louis looked out into the back yard, expecting Edie to speak to him, advise him. In his coffee Louis saw his own reflection, and only the frames of his eyeglasses at that.

"It's all different now," TJ said. "You know that. I just don't want you to be disappointed."

Louis half stood. He stole a piece of bacon from the paper napkin on the counter at his son's elbow, and sat again, chewing. "You don't have time?" he said. "No problem, I'll drive over myself."

"Dad, I've got all weekend. Hell, I've got all the time in the world. I mean I already feel bad for waiting so long before I came. I just don't see what you think you're going to find."

TJ drove. It was one of those perfect June mornings, the sky as blue as a pool, and Louis rolled down his window.

"What a day, huh, Dad?" TJ said. They passed the Old Plenger Mill, the Wolf Point Tavern. All his adult life Louis had lived such a short distance from Morning Glory Lane—why hadn't he done this more often? They passed, on the right, highrises full of condominiums that had gone up thirty years ago, Paul Schneider's work. Back then they had been apartments, of course. Louis remembered that Schneider had had three sons, and had given each a new Buick when he graduated from high school.
"I don’t believe I’ve ever asked you this," Louis said as they slowed for the turn. "Or, at least, not in this way. Are you and Liz ever going to have kids, Tom?"

He didn’t look at TJ’s face but at the spot where Knutson’s house used to stand, on the corner. Now there were three cramped houses, three driveways, three mailboxes. Everyone used to wait for the bus in Knutsons’ yard. The Knutsons had had rings hanging from the oak tree—at least the old tree was still here—and Kenny Knutson would do gymnastic exercises till the bus rolled up.

"Where do you think I should park, Dad?" TJ asked. Louis held up his hand and waved in the direction of the end of the lane. "The way I figure it," TJ said then, "we’ve got time. Liz is only thirty. She’s got a career, you know, Dad. It’s not as simple as it used to be."

"I know," Louis said. Career indeed. Elizabeth just didn’t want that precious body of hers to change.

"I don’t mean things were exactly easy when you were making those decisions," TJ added.

"I know what you mean," Louis said. He stared at all the new houses. TJ was driving nice and slow, but still it was a blur. Terri Paoli’s old house seemed to be gone altogether. Where the Piotrowskis used to live now stood least four houses. It was hard to tell where the line used to be between Piotrowskis’ and Chapmans’, because in place
of the Chapmans' old one-story ranch house, there were now three or four additional dwellings.

"Stop the car," Louis said. They came to a halt in front of where Chapmans' used to be. "What do you say we just walk from here?"

Sad was what it was: even most of the old trees were gone. He had known the houses might be gone, most of the old lots broken up. He'd thought at least they would've kept the lovely old oaks and maples that used to shade everyone's front yard. He had thought he'd be able to orient himself by the trees.

They walked slowly away from the car, and Louis noticed something. The pitch was familiar, the pitch of the lane. Here, in front of where Spannuths used to live—the Spannuths, who gave out popcorn balls at Halloween—a slight rise. Then down again, and in front of Schneiders', he saw, up ahead, another rise. But so much of the old vegetation was gone. Where had he found those furry sticks, once upon a time? Shadows on his wall, noisy groups menacing him in his sleep—these he could accept as the life's work of an imagination. Had he imagined the rest of it, too?

"I'm sorry Mom didn't get to have any grandchildren," TJ said.

"You were always a nice kid," Louis said. Once he had said them, he felt the impersonal quality of his words—
crude old advertising dog, he thought--and he reached out to rub TJ's back. "Tell me, how'd we ever get such a good kid?" Louis said. "How'd we ever get so lucky?"

"I know you miss her a lot, Dad," TJ said. He sounded serious now. "You know, I think about Elizabeth sometimes. I suppose, after a long time, I'd end up with someone else, but it's real hard to imagine. I mean, from where I sit now I can't really imagine it at all. You know what I'm saying, Dad?"

They were coming up on Schneiders'. One lot, at least, hadn't been broken up. Then it hit Louis. Schneider was responsible for all this. Schneider was the one who had broken up all the old lots--Spannuths', Chapmans', Piotrowskis', Paolis'--subdivided them and sold them at a profit, probably to young couples who imagined they were getting away from it all. He hugged himself against the revelation. He turned his face up to catch the sunlight full.

"Dad?"

He opened his eyes. TJ had one arm out, ready to catch him. Why did he feel so old? Fifty-seven was the peak of middle age. With company cutbacks, he could retire at any time, though two months ago he wouldn't even have considered it. Maybe he was just tired from last night. From seeing Edie--she had looked so real! Felt real. His glass of Tab
had still been on the coffeetable this morning.

"Listen, Tom," Louis said. "I want to ask a very big favor now. You see that house, there?" He pointed, and watched TJ to make sure he looked. "That's Paul Schneider's place, our old next door neighbor. I want to drop in on him. You mind?"

TJ shrugged and smiled. "What's the favor? How come you want to see this Schneider guy so bad?"

They were climbing a little now, and Louis slowed. TJ walked sideways, watching him. "I don't even know if he's still alive," Louis said. "He was older than my father. Let's see—that would make him, well, in his eighties, at least, if he's still with us at all. I'll tell you, though, I have a feeling about this."

Louis felt himself talking faster and faster as they stepped onto Schneider's porch. It all made sense to him now—why, ever since Edie's passing, he had been obsessed with the lane, and why he'd had to come. As they waited, he heard the familiar two-toned song of the chickadee. This area had been so wild, once upon a time—but of course, he had heard chickadees calling from parks in the city, too.

A young woman with shiny black hair, like a model's, opened the door.

"Yes?" she said.

Louis realized they probably looked like a couple of
religion salesmen anyway, and didn't bother to smile.

"I'm looking for Paul," he said. "Paul Schneider wouldn't be here, would he?"

"Sure he is," the black-haired woman said. "Can I tell him who's here? Oh, look--" the woman's eyes fluttered, and she smiled, embarrassed--"I don't know what I'm saying. Just come right on in, won't you?"

They remained standing in the living room while the black-haired woman walked back through the house calling, "Paul! Paul!" Louis took in the French chandelier, the Steinway grand, the opulent oil paintings. On the mantel he found pictures of Schneider's three sons, each with a wife and family. Thirteen grandchildren in all. Feeling guilty, he turned back to look at TJ, but his son's back was turned as he looked out the window at the front yard and the street.

"You hungry yet?" Louis asked. TJ just had time to turn and grin at their old joke--the growing boy is always hungry--before the sound of a quick step in the hall reached Louis's ears. But it was a man of about his own age who entered the room. The man wore a gray three-piece suit and marched forward with his hand outstretched.

"You're not the Paul I'm looking for," Louis said, "but I'm glad to meet you. Louis Chambers. This is my son, TJ."

"Paul Junior," the man said. "Chambers. Not one of
the Chambers people who lived—"

"You got it," Louis said.

"Sakes alive," Paul Junior said. "What do you know about that. Sit down, sit down. Can I get you something to drink? Something to eat? Scouting around the old neighborhood, eh?"

"Yes, things are a bit different around here," Louis said amiably, betraying nothing. "Not for me, thanks." He looked at TJ. TJ shook his head.

"You probably want to see my dad, then," Paul Junior said. "Listen, I'll just go get him. We've been trying to tear him away from that computer of his all morning. Life is just one big high-yield investment to him, that's all. But this ought to interest him. Wait a minute--be right back."

Louis looked at TJ as Paul Junior left the room. TJ looked tolerant underneath his polite expression.

"Hey, Tom?" Louis said. "I'm sorry for asking that, okay? It's none of my damn business."

"No, it's not, Dad," TJ said.

They looked away from each other. As TJ got up to inspect Schneider's book collection, Louis saw once again the small, light eyes of Terri Paoli. She throws her head back and screams bloody murder, and he's filled with that same old warmth.
No matter if Terri ended up being one of the original bunnies at the Playboy Club in Chicago. Anyway, those were the days when everything was still on the up and up. He and Edie had gone to the club for dinner back when they were first married. That was when he’d seen Terri again. A few times after that he’d bought a copy of the magazine, but he’d never seen her in its pages, and he was glad.

Paul Senior was still very much alive. He entered the living room under his own power, a cigarette dangling from his lip, his son walking close behind. Everyone shook hands. As soon as Schneider was safe in his chair, Paul Junior excused himself.

"It’d be fun to stick around, but I’ve got a million--"

"Go, go on," Schneider said. "We don’t want you bogging us down anyway." The old man smiled at Louis through a cloud of smoke. Schneider had a full head of snow-white hair and a pair of black horned rim glasses that made him look, Louis thought, like an old movie star. He remembered the man as stocky, and as having a crew cut. He didn’t remember the cigarettes.

"You must be proud," Louis said.

"Oh, he’s all right," Schneider said, blinking.

"They’re all all right. I was always in a rush myself."

"I meant your transformation of Morning Glory Lane," Louis said. Schneider stopped blinking for a moment and
sucked on his cigarette. "Where there used to be fifteen or sixteen properties," Louis continued, "there must be forty now. Maybe fifty. Lots of happy people, eh?"

Schneider sat so long smoking, and not responding, that Louis wondered if the identity of the developer was supposed to have been a secret. Anyway, he knew only by intuition. He glanced to his right at TJ, who gave him a quick smile. Finally Schneider took one last puff, and stubbed out the cigarette.

"I sense sarcasm in your words," the old man said.
"Why?"

"Who lives in the house next door these days?" Louis asked. "Is the pond still flooding every year?"
"I see, I see," Schneider said.
"Dad," TJ said. "That's old business. That was Grandpa's headache."

"Oh, not exactly," Schneider interrupted. The old man turned to Louis. "You lost a wife recently, am I right?"
Louis leaned back on the couch for the first time.
"Sure, I still read the local papers," Schneider said. "Plane crash, too--horrible way to go. I'm sorry I didn't send you a card."

"Spare us," Louis said.
"Dad, what is this?" TJ said.

Schneider went on as if he hadn't heard. "I remember
you when you were a little boy, Louis. Those were the days when I kept horses out back, for my boys. Anything coming to mind?"

Louis and his cousin Michael are climbing up the old wooden ladder. There's a loft, and bales of green, fragrant hay, and it seems they're doing a lot of giggling and whispering.

"Your father was way off in the South Pacific," Schneider went on. "So one afternoon when I found all my hay on the ground outside the barn I thought your mother probably had enough on her mind without me coming over. Twenty-three bales, Louis. Twenty-three bales I found dumped out there."

"My father hated you," Louis said quietly.

Schneider laughed. "No, he admired me. He admired me. Let me tell you something, Louis. I was very sorry to hear about your father. If there's anything a man hates, it's losing his admirers, one by one, and for no good reason at all."

They all sat for a moment. Half a minute ago TJ had been on the verge of laughing; now he looked serious again. Schneider lit another cigarette, and blew out a long jet of smoke. "Now your mother, I'd buy it if you said your mother hated me. She had no reason, but I could feel it whenever we ran into each other."
"In your opinion, then," Louis said, "do I take after my mother more, on the whole, or my father?"

Schneider laughed again, and seemed unafraid to laugh alone. Louis never looked away from him. At last the old man spread his hands. "It's just another shock, Louis. Life is a series of shocks, isn't it? When I came home from the office that day, and found all my hay all over the ground, let me tell you, I was madder than hell. I was out for blood. And such a little thing."

Schneider leaned forward, as if defending himself. "They're all little things, Louis. Or they become little things. Do you see what I mean?"

A short while later, Schneider added, "I speak to you as a friend, Louis."

"Now I see why you called that a favor," TJ said, once they were on the street again. "You might have told me you were going to take the old guy on. Hey, Dad. Where you going now?"

Louis headed in the direction of the Dead End sign, and the underpass. He didn't answer. He hoped TJ wouldn't follow but knew he would.

It was just loony. He stood where his father's mailbox used to be, looking down the hill, and where the old house
used to be now stood two houses. In the old backyard stood two more houses. Up they had sprung, as if Morning Glory Lane were no more than a Monopoly board. The marten house which had always stood halfway out to the pond was gone. All this in the last fifteen years. Crouching to gaze under the branches of a tree down the hill, he could just see the edge of the pond. What did those two low houses do when it flooded in the spring?

"Is this it, Dad?" TJ asked. "This the old haunts?"

"Hardly," Louis said, and walked on, stiff-legged.

"Dad," TJ called after a moment. "How much farther do you want to go?"

Next to Horton's old mailbox, which now bore three names, Louis found what he had been looking for. It was a furry stick bush. And it was just as he remembered it: no less than five minutes did it take to twist off one of the stubby green branches. He carried the precious thing across the street and set it on the moving water.

"I can't believe you're doing this," TJ said.

The furry stick turned around a couple of times, as if getting its bearings, then straightened and started to move. He clumped along beside it, beside the ditch, stumbling occasionally in the tall grass. He cleared tangles of bigger sticks out of the way as he walked, and bent to clear mini-logjams with his fingers before the furry stick
He sees Terri Paoli, throwing her head back and laughing as Edie's plane, flying too low and at a bizarre angle, strikes the ground. The home video footage, courtesy of an eyewitness, shows a wing tearing off and fuel bursting into flames. Benny Goodman is playing on the transistor radio, loud and tinny. Groups of people rise quickly, like shadows, out of the boiling cloud of inky black smoke, and they, too, scream, and then laugh.

"Dad, look out!"

A car came rocketing out of the driveway in front of Louis, bringing with it a cloud of dust. A young man, his dark hair combed wet, sat at the wheel, his head nodding to music so loud Louis could feel the beat in his chest. The car turned left and headed up toward Fox Road.

The furry stick was moving swiftly into a metal tunnel. Louis climbed heavily onto the asphalt driveway and over to the other side. He didn't look to see whose driveway it was supposed to be. He bent low, holding his creaking hips, peered into the dark tunnel, and waited. As far in as the eye could see, the way was unobstructed.