Dirty Work

Leo M. Fitzpatrick

The University of Montana

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DIRTY WORK

by

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B.A., Brown University, 1980

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA 1984

Approved by:

[Signature]
Chairman, Board of Examiners

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Dean, Graduate School

5/23/84
Date
To my family, for their constant faith and encouragement;
To my friends and teachers, especially Wynnifred Caldwell and Michael S. Harper, for their confidence and guidance.
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An earlier version of The Lawn Jockey was produced in Workshop at the University of Montana in December, 1983.
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Highbeams leap line by line
past fenced fields I dream
lead elsewhere, a place not yet
paid for: that pond
where I found a raccoon
half on the bank, half
in ice, claws curled.
He died climbing. The woman
I walk with could crack
ice, loose the racoon
back to life. She kicks
its black tongue, too thick
to speak, then smiles.
I want to shout, but my mouth
won't work. The raccoon winks,
says, You are going nowhere.
I need my ticket. The woman
grins; her teeth yellow,
brown, then crumble.
On my knees, I piece
together bits of teeth
and ticket.
Someone shouts
Everyone out!
Anchored by one bum leg
you pace the back porch prow
till Cutty Sark washes you out to sea.
Ice cubes clink in your compass.
Queequeg has four legs—
no longer a pup, the ancient bones
she rolls for forcast, her own.
But she knows.
She knows
the demon-driven engine,
harnessed six days a week to blueprints
by a street-fighter's arms,
still surfaces the depths
beneath Red Hook's docks,
knows you ride Saturday nights
lashed to a former life,
racing through alleys
flashing compass and T-square
against fistfuls of rolled nickels
and bicycle chain.
You say you only build bridges,
yet choke on your rage
for congruity as salt burns
your eyes, blinding you
to the orderly spume
that pulls you down. You drown
but don't die, spat onto the beach
each Sunday morning, determined
to take up your tools and design
another tomb for your beast.
At Rockaway Beach, buoyed above ripples by your hands and arms, biceps big as my trunks, my arms reached beyond the photo's frame as they reach once again.
Again I must learn to swim.

You would swim the bay at night.
Your wife learned the hard way not to expect you back, waited on the dark beach clutching a knot of clothes as your stroke dissolved beneath distant horns and fog.
You slept in boats, returned to her calm, eyes warm with dawn.

At the kitchen table after Cutty Sark, sunk in iced nostalgia, your knuckles still thick as rigger's knots, you traced where muscle and vein once filled your forearm broad enough for a three-masted tattoo.

What hull, cradled in the bay's palm, can rock away the sight of your arms crossed hard in that coffin's hold, knuckles shrunk to rosary beads—or rock away the day my son won't need to test his arm to mine?
I've carted your casket on my back expecting a muffled knock to ask that I unlock the dull brass latch: "When your dirt-caked hinges creak I'll lose this cheap stink of cut flowers, shocked rootless liars, and fill my room with tougher buds." I fool myself. There's no knock but spring, quick break of river ice flooding sudden runnels over banks carting debris past the far bend, bulbs muscling dirt, aching green. Old work to a victim of change: plant the dead, adorn the pain.
SHIP'S COOK

You peppered chow
with obscenity and abuse,
self-proclaimed stew-burner,
but taught me veloute,
bechamel and hollandaise,
served consomme
on North Sea swells
and southern curses,
sleight of hand
and showman's patter.
You danced the galley
ballet, elbowed my ribs:
This'll tickle
their tongues
when it comes
back up.

Nights in that bunk
you snored through storms,
a brined bull walrus
basked in a clutter of
candy bars and smut.
I struggled through
pitch, roll and yawl,
curled beneath your waking.
Up since dawn, your hands
were great loaves of dough,
knuckles and yeast nudged growth.

What happened, old man, and why?
You were experienced in ships
and careful. What voice
lured you to the rail and pushed
or pulled you over? Did you hear
the service on the bridge,
clumsy sailors with empty hands
quietly filing the ladders,
soles tolling a solemn rhythm?
I kept below to avoid the words,
the coughs, the awkward eyes,
and pounded dough. Six loaves,
you would have been proud,
sailed out the galley porthole
and floated that wake
till foam took them down.

Snoring startles my sleep.
From the crest of a wave
I watch you play in foam,
your palm slaps the surface
as you flop and kick
your wake.
Your great belly rolls.
we spelled it french, Affaire: slow fans curl scented smoke over low black hats, eyes avert. I called myself Cravate. You, Peignoir, put oranges by the bed on ice, a maze of moonlit limbs shadowed on whitewashed walls. Props.

I sleep in your house like a thief, afraid of the phone, his voice calls to our bed tears and guilt. You treat me like a whore, warm meat straddled. Morning coffee, from a shared mug, bitters. Nothing's better.

For this deceit, Intrigue is too subtle, Subterfuge too polite for cold wet sheets. We lie too easily, agents whose contact betrays arranged passwords. Who buys the oranges, you ask, eyes mysterious as ice.
All summer stagnant water that flooded
the banks of the Hockanum festered
behind our house, oozed algea, swampgrass
and frogspawn. When the sun sets, the Hock rises,
adults said, noses wrinkling in the fetid breeze.
Their webbed chairs and drinks in frosted glasses
creaked between cricket chirps and invisible croaks.
Under the sun, no matter how careful, my approach
through dry grass alarmed leathery frogs to leap
to black water from dust-laden logs and stumps.
They vanished in a gulp. I'd lean cautiously
over the ripples and search for them
beneath my trembling reflection. If their eyes
bulged the surface, I'd scoop, but quick
and only wrist deep. Out of reach
I'd lob rocks to scare them into the black.
Once, I leaned unaware into thick spawn.
A thousand eyes jigged and gelled around my hand.
I jerked free but lost balance, fell and
scrambled from the muck, prehistoric gums
that sucked me down. That night mighty
belches echoed out of the swamp, empty bellies
matted the lawn, ancient unblinking eyes
pressed the dark around me. In bed,
I clutched the sheet like a second skin,
a small creature crouched on a stump,
slime with sweat, ready to leap.
each June the expedition
began on the bus,
suitcase packed with excess
underwear, hyperactivity and
the promise to be good,
good as the brownstone
vestibule echo of Gra-ma!
running the long hall
to outstretched arms
greasy with exotic food.

Every summer I searched the cellar wall
for my father's secret hiding-stone,
explored Grandfather's tools,
wood handles worn smooth as palms.
I horded hunks of old coal
from the abandoned bin
to bury in the back yard
knowing they'd soon turn diamond.

I took the cellar soot
to turnstiles of foreign exchange
on subway adventures
through department store elevators
and revolving doors,
booty stashed in shopping bags;
took it on solo missions
to the corner store
for the Daily News and Italian ice,
ground it in every crack
defying the universe
to break my Mother's back.
After corned beef on Jewish rye, during soap operas and tea, I smacked Spauldeens for blocks and sprinted sewer-caps my Mother had roller-skated. I climbed the roof to pirate Tar Beach and defend the sky-light from alien antennae. I would sneak to the bathroom and scrub, later betrayed by black soap and dirty towels.

Twilight brought lawn chairs to the stoops. As shadows crossed the street, connecting the plots of proud row-home foliage, neighbors swept dust to the gutter, swapped shopping hints and commented how I'd grown. I, visiting price of suburbia enthroned with infinite riches, I ruled unaware that teabags were saved in spoons for second and third soakings.

And late nights when street-sounds and prayers fell unfinished, I slept for dreams, but never dreamed of summer's end, or the fall of a time when I'd return with eyes sensitive to dust. Grandma, the sidewalk needs sweeping now, and the sign in your window misleads: that which is owned cannot be sold.
DIRTY WORK

I had gone to Double Bubble with a load of whites. The place was packed with women. As I pulled my stuff from the washer, I heard, "Jesus, you've got a lot of underwear."

She was loud. Everyone must have heard. I didn't want to look up, to attract attention, but I knew she was talking to me.

"You sure need an awful lot of underwear, don't you, honey?"

The washers were lined up back to back, and she was at the one in front of me, looking over and down. She was a little older than me, maybe thirty-five, chewing gum and grinning.

I hoped if I answered her quietly, she'd leave me alone. "I sweat a lot."

She cocked her head back and laughed loudly. The big bra she held flapped like a flag and snapped cold water at me. Everyone watched.

As I put my whites into a basket, I heard her on the other side of the washers. "Sweat a lot. Jesus, what a scream."

I was bent over, my head in the mouth of a dryer, when she put her head in with me. She smelled like my seventh-grade science students, like Juicy Fruit gum.

"You don't have all that much underwear, kid," she whispered. "How about taking mine in with yours, since all the other dryers are full?" Her soft lips smiled back
over her teeth, inches from my face. The dryer was warm. Her breath slid down my neck.

I pulled out, scraping the top of my head on the rim. As I held the pain under my hand, she scruffed up my hair like a chili's, and said, "Oh, you poor thing." Then she shoved her clothes on top of mine, slapped the glass door shut, pushed a quarter down the slot, and all our clothes tumbled together. Bras, panties, and my underwear appeared at the door, momentarily suspended, then fell into the sliding heap at the bottom.

She leaned comfortably against the vibrating wall of hot dryers. "The next quarter is yours."

She wore a plaid flannel shirt over a maroon turtleneck. Her face was pretty when she wasn't laughing. Though her hips were wide, she had a nice shape, kind of motherly.

"You got pretty red over your underwear," she said. "You shy?"

My scalp itched. "No."

She laughed out loud again, and everyone looked. I felt hot.

She followed me to the t.v. room. The seats were yellow vinyl benches that squeezed air when you sat. There were only a couple of kids watching cartoons, so I didn't mind that she sat next to me.

I faced the t.v. but watched her. She pulled an empty gum wrapper from her shirt pocket, folded her chewed gum
into it, and dropped it into the ashtray. Out of the other pocket she took a pack of long cigarettes. She had big breasts. Her hair was thick down to her shoulders and the color of antique cherry-wood. It was loose.

She leaned back, closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. I looked closer. She had a broad face with high cheekbones, and blue make-up on her eyelids. The smoke veiled her like a late-night movie star.

She opened her eyes, and I turned to the t.v.
"You've got a helluva sense of humor, you know?"
"Thank you."
She held out her hand. "My name's Cloris."
"Derek." Her hand was strong and soft.
She laughed smoke in my face. "Like an oil rig, eh kid?"
She slapped my thigh. Her palm was warm and it stung me.
"Damn glad to know you, Derek."
She looked straight in my eyes and drew hard on her cigarette. Her lips pressed a wrinkled red ring around the white filter. "I think it's about time our clothes took another tumble, kid."

I was glad for a reason to leave. The cigarette smoke watered my eyes.
"Derek."
"Yes?"
"Come right back when you're done."
I did; and when she said to go to my apartment, we went.
I enjoyed the first night. She bought wine, and we drank it all. I didn't sleep, but figured that was because someone was in my bed. The streetlight through the window hurt my eyes and gave me a headache. I lay there, watching her torso heave and twitch.

I missed her after she left. Except for the low whir of the refrigerator, my apartment was quiet. My own small sounds echoed louder; already the silence seemed to say that something was missing.

I was glad she came again. More company, more wine. Her voice muted the clatter of dishes and silverware. But she made my apartment feel smaller, cramped. She opened and closed cabinets, pulling out dishes, flashing my kitchen knives and testing each blade on her thumb. She invaded every drawer in my desk. She examined every item, asking me questions and laughing out loud.

She kept coming. When I opened the door, she'd push over the threshold, swinging the same brand of white wine like an old school bell. She'd wrap her free arm around my neck and pull my mouth to hers. The apartment became loud with her noise.

We'd drink wine on the couch in the dark living room with the t.v. turned down low. Cloris talked to the t.v. and laughed at stupid things. I always feared the neighbors could listen.

At some point in every evening, I began to hate her. She never noticed. I'd answer her inane questions curtly,
and she'd throw back her head and howl, then slap her leg or mine. She'd tell me I was fun.

She'd finish her wine and bang the glass on the coffee table. This became a signal. I'd put my glass down quickly so it wouldn't spill when Cloris pressed on top of me and pushed her fat tongue into my mouth. She tasted dry and stale from wine.

Then it was bed. She'd have me on top, then on bottom. She'd have me on my knees like a pig rooting for truffles. I tried to enjoy myself, but I couldn't ignore how I hated her. I wouldn't get an erection, but she didn't seem to care. She didn't seem to notice.

I was afraid the police would come because of her noise, and I wouldn't hear the door. They'd break in to stop what sounded like murder, the neighbors would huddle in bathrobes at the doorjamb, and I'd be seen on my knees, naked. I was always listening for the door.

I never slept. I'd doze; then she'd drop her arm over me or snore, or I'd roll into her. I hated that she was comfortable in my bed, that the whole thing was out of control.

Once, I decided to wake her, to demand that she return my key and leave. I touched her shoulder. She smiled in her sleep, wrapped her heavy arm around my neck, and buried my face in her chest. I couldn't say a word.

I began leaving the bed, then the apartment. I'd go
to the all-night diner on Pine Street. The morning after the first night I came to the diner, Cloris was cooking breakfast when I returned. I had decided to tell her to leave, to return my apartment to me. When she saw me, she pulled my head to her neck. She stroked my hair and temples. "My poor baby," she cooed. "Restless baby. You're all right, aren't you?"

She poured me a cup of coffee. Although I'd had seven cups in the diner, I drank it. I told her that I'd done some work and had not wanted to disturb her. Every night after that I took a folder of student papers and told Cloris I had to correct them. This was a lie. The folder sat unopened on the diner's counter while I drank coffee and waited to go home.

Last night, while I nursed my third cup, a man pushed through the glass doors. He sat two stools down, on the squeaky one. The waitress poured his coffee and took his order. When she put the slip up, I heard the cook say, "Whole wheat. Jesus, one of those." He poked his heel through the window and burned it on the heat lamp. I wanted to laugh out loud.

I noticed the man's long black overcoat. I'd seen it in a second-hand store but didn't buy it because it wasn't good enough. I still didn't own a warm coat, but things take time.

His eggs came with burnt toast. He didn't even hesitate. As soon as the waitress put the plate in front of him, he
pushed it back. He had only three fingers on his left hand, but he didn't care; I could tell. He looked straight in her face, and spoke quietly and forcefully. "I'd like some whole wheat toast that isn't burned, please." And in a few minutes she brought him a plate of light-brown toast with extra jelly.

He stretched his arm toward the salt and pepper, and wiggled three fingers.

I handed him the shakers. I watched him eat, and imagined starting a conversation with him. I would begin casually. "That's a nice coat. Where'd you get it?" I'd expect him to lie, to tell me it was a family heirloom or something.

He'd look at me, then at the shoulder of his coat, like a bug was crawling up his back, then back to his eggs.


"Oh."

The man dropped the packets of jelly into his pocket.

I'd continue. "Say, what's your name."

He would look at his eggs as he spoke. "LaMay."

"Nice to meet you, LaMay. I'm Derek."

The man took a forkful of hashbrowns. His jawbone slid beneath dark cheeks, ruffling the stubble.

"So, LaMay. What are you doing here at four-thirty in the morning."

LaMay would not look up. "Eating."

"No, seriously. I'm curious."

The man drank his coffee.
"I got bank business at nine," LaMay would say, "before I leave town. Till then, I've got nothing but time."

That would be my opening. I'd approach him carefully. "Gee, that's too bad, LaMay." I'd lower my voice. "Listen. How'd you like a warm bed till nine?"

He'd stop chewing and stare at me.

"No, no," I'd assure him. "Don't misunderstand me. Listen. My apartment is down the street. I'm here because of this woman. She's not bad, but I can't stand her, and she keeps coming back. I can't get rid of her. But you could. You could show up with my key, say that I never mentioned her to you. She'd think I was a real scoundrel and leave. She'd get huffy for a bit, but you could make her leave. Then you'd have a bed till nine."

He'd turn back to his plate and chew, slowly. "A man does his own dirty work."

"Yeah, but I have a problem with that. That's why I'm here. But you could do it." I'd pull money from my pocket and count the creased bills. "I'll throw in thirteen dollars."

He ate silently, watching his food disappear. The waitress poured me another cup.

"It's all the cash I've got." I'd lean closer. "Listen. Thirteen dollars can help on the road."

"It won't get my rig anywhere," he'd say.

I forgot the waitress had filled my cup, and spilled coffee on my chin.

"It'll get you five of those breakfasts. And a bed for
the night. Listen, you can't lose."

"Someone always loses."

"But you can decide who. You can do it."

He pushed his plate away and stared into his coffee
cup.

LaMay would wait before answering, to torture me. This
wouldn't bother me. He was the type of man I needed.

"Any inside locks? I don't sleep well thinking I might
be surprised."

"Yeah, yeah. There's a chain and a deadbolt."

He'd slide his bill across the counter with three fingers.

"Pay it. I'll take the change. And leave a tip."

I'd write my address on a napkin. LaMay would shove it into
his pocket and push through the doors with my money and key.

I thought about the sleepless nights I'd spent in the
diner. At school I was cranky and haggard. I've taught
for eleven years and learned the most important defences
for a teacher are patience and tolerance. I was becoming
a clockwatcher like my students, anticipating the afternoons
when I could nap.

After LaMay, I would rearrange my furniture and return
things to where I wanted them. I would answer the door
without breaking into a sweat. It was Saturday, I could
sleep.

LaMay would enter the apartment as if he owned it.
Cloris might wake up, but she'd think it was me and wouldn't
say a word. LaMay would flip on the bedroom light, lean against the doorjamb, and wait. Cloris would stretch, expect me, and open her eyes to a dark stranger in a great black coat. Maybe she'd scream. Yes, she'd scream loudly, then become speechless. LaMay would stroll to the bed and calmly sit next to her. Cloris would clutch the covers and tremble. LaMay would lean over, pushing his dark stubbly jaw close to her face. He'd look her straight in the eye. Quietly and forcefully, he'd say, "Leave. And don't come back. Now." Cloris would scoop up her clothes and scramble out naked.

I laughed at this. The waitress looked up from her paper and I was embarrassed. I poured cream in my coffee and watched it swirl. The man's stool was empty. A couple of dollar bills lay on the check. His knife and fork were crossed over his yolk-smeared plate, and a balled-up napkin stretched out of his cup. I could have caught him in the parking lot. The waitress cleaned everything away and wiped down the counter.

I pretended LaMay had left to expel Cloris, and imagined knocking on my door at nine. I'd hear bootsteps, the deadbolt, the chain. LaMay would be dressed and quiet. He'd drop the key from three fingers to my palm and start to leave.

"How'd it go?" I'd want to hear everything as if I'd been there.
"Dirty work, that's all." His boots would echo down the hall and his coat would swing behind him.

"Someone's got to lose though, right buddy?"
He wouldn't look back. "You got it."

"How about some breakfast, buddy?" But he'd be gone.
I'd listen to the silence that replaced his bootfalls.
Through the open door I'd hear my refrigerator kick on.
That was LaMay's way, I'd figure. Do the job, then move on. I admire that.

Then I'd think about the coat, the things it could hide. Three fingers could be plenty. I'd rush inside to check my valuables. Television, stereo, aquarium—too big for a coat. My desk would be orderly. My microscope, slides and chemistry set would be there. Prints would be hung, book's shelved, my Grandma's antique candle stick would sit safely on the sill. Even my model dinosaurs would be untouched.

I'd swing open the bedroom door and stop. My hand would freeze on the knob. Cloris would be sitting up against the headboard, smoking. Twisted sheets would wreath her naked waist. The room would smell of smoke, sweat and perfume. I'd want to shut the door, to leave, but I wouldn't move.

She'd be calm. "Derek. You're home early this morning. Or does it just seem early?" She'd look at her watch, then tamp fallen ashes into my bedspread. "Don't just stand
there like a finicky orphan, Derek. My little oil rig. Get over here."

She'd stick out her arm and flap her hand from me to her. She'd squint through smoke, the cigarette dangling from her lips.

I'd sit on the edge of the bed and stare at the floor. The carpet would be unfamiliar. I'd look around the room, to my dresser and possessions. I'd recognize each item individually, but together they'd mean nothing. I'd sit on the bed's edge as an intruder.

"Derek."

"Yes."

She'd speak softly. "Come closer."

As I slid closer, she'd wrap her arm around my neck and pull me to her chest, squeezing so hard I'd think I might choke.

"Mr. LaMay is a nice man, Derek. We talked for a long time. We decided that you sent him here to keep me company, to comfort me. Even paid him for it. That was sweet, Derek. It's a comfort knowing I can always find company in this apartment." Smoke would drift from her nostrils. I'd fear sneezing on her chest. "And you know what, baby? That's just what I'm going to do."

The waitress poured more coffee. The creamer was empty, so I drank it black. In the morning, I went home and Cloris cooked breakfast.
I am on my fourth cup, now. There's a pile of uncorrected papers in front of me. Tomorrow I return again to face the writhing hormones and perverse thoughts of my students. The top paper belongs to Petra Merkel, a loud-mouthed snit who is politely called big-boned, and whom I'll flunk.

Cloris is in my bed. She is not alone. She and some loud man pushed into the apartment after dinner and began drinking wine. I was courteous, but they were already drunk and laughed whenever I spoke or offered them snacks. They didn't tell me to leave--they never said anything directly--but I knew they wanted privacy. And I have these papers to correct.

I don't know if Cloris knows what she's doing. It might be only a one-night fling. Maybe tomorrow she'll leave and never come back. I'll see. If she keeps coming, I'll have to do something drastic; I know I will. If this gets serious, I'll have to call the police or someone. I will.
SAFE PASSAGE

Fog reflected the deck lights and set a dull haze over the ship. I leaned over the rail and watched waves peel off the bow, curl into the dark. Oh-three-hundred. Another hour and Kevin would take the watch.

I had gone back to sea figuring the time apart would make Terri and me appreciate each other. She was working at the Providence Day-Care Center, and I had been working nights at Manny's Ringside Bar. We'd had Sundays together, but they were tense from trying to fit a week's worth of marriage into a day. We had tried talk, but the talk too often ended in hissing about our own pain; then silence jammed between us like a pry-bar. Each time one of us scraped a knife across a plate, the distance between us increased. I didn't want to leave, but figured if too little distance had split us, then enough distance might bring us together.

Personell had sent me a ticket to Houston, and Terri drove me to Logan. We'd be apart for two months. Fresh with her smell, the bath towel she'd used that morning was in my bag.

When I called from the shipyard in Houston, a man answered. Then the phone disconnected. I dialed again. No answer. That was just before we left for St. John's, five in the morning, her time.

I focused on one wave as it broke from the bow, followed
it with my ears into the fog, and imagined it rolling up Narraganset Bay. From the high rush of cut water it dwindled to a trickling curl swallowed by passing swells. I returned to the bow, chose another, and followed.

Kevin shuffled up to the watch-house, rubbing his eyes. He was young, a college kid who figured working on a ship would be fun, an adventure. I liked him.

"Hey, Deegan. What's the morning special?"

"Small craft. We're east of Rhode Island. Fishing grounds."

"Rhode Island..." He cocked his head and grinned. "Isn't that part of New York?"

"Piss off. And fix your shirt."

The buttons were in the wrong holes. He set his coffee on the anchor winch, fixed his shirt, and grabbed the cup before it vibrated to the deck.

"Pretty quick, kid. I see you're getting your legs."

He shook his head. "I don't know. I still can't get the hang of sleeping."

Lately, neither had I. "Like I said, you lie on your belly with your right side pressed to the bulkhead. Draw up your left leg so your shin is square against the outer edge of your rack. The same goes for your left forearm. You're good for thirty-footers. After that, we swim."

"But my shoulder cramps up."

"Now don't go turning into Goodrich on me, kid."
rich was the other deckhand, a scrawny old man who bragged about women and bitched about everything else; in Houston he'd shacked with a boatswain's wife.

I handed Kevin the glasses. "Don't drift off to your girlfriend. The least we can do for the poor slob we hit is bury him on the beach."

I moved aft along the rail, towards the house, the gut-thumping roar from the stacks. The lit fog on deck swirled through black angles of cable and strut, and the silhouettes of cranes rose like the necks of tortured beasts. I stopped for a smoke. The wind outside the rail caught the match at my fingertips and rushed it astern. I stepped into the dark between two cargo crates, my smoke mingling with the heavy smells of damp wood and grease. All anyone could have seen of me was the lighted cigarette tip which glowed brightly each time I drew, then diminished like a small marker-buoy flashing my position.

Since New Orleans, I wanted desperately to talk with Terri. But I was trapped. Sometimes I would stand at the rail, stare at the water, and consider swimming for the beach just to relieve the frustration, to move me closer.

I also spent too much down-time wide awake in my rack, playing out violent scenes. I imagined returning early and slipping into the apartment. I'd hear Terri's heated breath before I reached the room, then see her eyes deep in the pillow and wide at something she'd never felt before,
something I had not been able to give her. And I'd see the backside of the bastard sweating on top of her, his spine glistening beneath her white-knuckled grip. I'd slam him against the wall, then look him square in the eye to let him know who I was. When he begged, I'd laugh and toss him through the window, send him sailing bare-assed onto the pavement and scraps of glass. Or I'd catch him on the stairs as he was leaving her, their stink filling the hall. I'd introduce myself casually, then kick him into the basement. An hour later, I'd watch from the window as he crawled to the sidewalk, bloodied and broken.

I tossed the tail end of my smoke down over the rail and watched the passing swells extinguish the small red glow. I lit another and stepped back into the shadows.

Terri's towel was my pillow. I would lie in my rack, my head full of violence, and soon my heart thumped so hard my breath came quick and my body shook. For a spell it felt good to torture myself this way, as if I was hurting the pain. But I'd soon believe that while I was only playing out scenes in my head, Terri and her lover were playing the real scene and laughing at the poor slob who'd sent himself off to sea. I thought about tossing Terri's towel overboard. I'd twitch and turn all night, angry as a hooked eel.

Goodrich came on deck about oh-four-thirty. I kept in the shadows. He pulled a flask from his pocket. The metal
caught what little light there was, and flashed in front of his bony face.

When I stepped out of the dark, he jumped. I stood in front of him and took a slow drag off my smoke. It's not uncommon for a man to break the no-liquor law on ship, and most people look the other way so long as the man doesn't put the ship or anyone else in danger. I didn't care that I'd caught Goodrich drinking, only that I'd caught him. I stared quietly, waiting for him to squirm.

His eyes took on a cornered look, then narrowed to a dirty squint. He dangled the flask in front of me and leer ed. "Come on, buddy. Take a snort. Come on, take it."

I took the last drag off my smoke and tossed the butt over the rail.

He pushed the flask closer to my face. "Take it, buddy. Come on, take it."

I smacked his hand, knocking the flask to the deck. I had intended only to get it out of my face, but the sting in the back of my hand, the sudden clatter of metal on metal, and Goodrich's startled jerk magnified the move. Adrenaline surged, and my focus narrowed to exclude everything but Goodrich's pointy face.

When he saw his liquor spilling onto the deck, he loved for the flask. I kicked it overboard.

He jumped to the rail, stared, then turned on me, "You son of a bitch."
When he reached for the marlin spike at his belt, I hit him with my right and caught his throat. He staggered back into the rail. His hands, clawing the air above him, disappeared first. The ship's noise muffled his splash.

I stood stunned and confused, like a magician's victim who wonders if he ever saw what just vanished. My body twitched, ready to strike. But there was nothing. Where Goodrich had stood, in less than a second, was nothing but fog.

I ducked into the dark and pressed against the damp crates. My breath came hard, thick with fog and rancid oil. Maybe he'd stay up for the twenty minutes it would take to fish him out. I thought about the punch, his bulging eyes, his scrawny chest trying to suck air through a collapsed windpipe. I thought about pulling aboard his corpse.

The stacks roared and the ship's vibration weakened me. I choked on the wet fog that flooded my lungs, then tried to relax, to think of air, not water. I ignored what had happened, and concentrated on breathing, long quiet breaths to regain control. My hands rubbed the rough crates, taking splinters.

Fog buried the watch-house; Kevin couldn't have seen. The bridge was fogged in too. It had happened quickly. I grabbed hold of my breath. My heart slowed.

I ignored what I had done by concentrating on keeping
clean. They would miss Goodrich when Kevin shook him to take the watch. Three hours. Between the foredeck and my room I passed no one, and climbed into my rack.

I put Terri's towel over my face and breathed deeply, trying to relax. But the old scenes came back. I tried to force faces on the guy I beat—drunks from Manny's, friends, even Kevin—but always the guy who went through the window and down the stairs was Goodrich.

I had to convince myself that Goodrich over the rail was real and not my imagination. There would be questions from the Captain first, then the Coast Guard. I would need answers.

Kevin's knock didn't surprise me. "Hey Deegan," he said through the door. "Captain wants everyone on the mess deck." Then he whispered, "Goodrich is missing." There was excitement in his voice. Adventure.

I splashed water on my face and hung Terri's towel around my neck. I stepped from the ladder's narrow passage into the open mess, into the Captain's stare; it was one-way, like mirrored shades. I tried to look haggard and confused, half asleep. Kevin's knee bobbed like the catch-cog on a winch. I sat next to him, hoping his fidgeting would draw attention away from me.

"Who saw Goodrich last?" The Captain surveyed the mess.

Eyes shifted from face to face, then dropped to the deck. It was a question only I could answer, but I couldn't face
it. I looked away and listened to the engines.

"I saw him at eight o'clock," Kevin blurted, his knee locked. "I mean twenty-hundred. He took the watch." He stopped abruptly, the ship's hum loud in the silence.

The Captain nodded once. "Deegan."

Everyone turned on me. Blood drummed to my head. I wondered if my shirt was loose enough to hide my thumping chest. I wondered what anyone knew.

"Midnight," I said. "Took the watch from him." My voice felt weak. I concentrated on deep breaths that would pull air from the bottom of my lungs.

"You see anything after that?"

I shook my head. "Just fog." I wiped my eyes with her towel and forced myself to return his stare. This, I knew, would be the hardest time. If I could convince the Captain in close quarters, I could sail clear of anyone on the beach.

The Captain nodded, then moved to the next man. I turned my head towards him like everyone else, but stared at nothing.

The Coast Guard inquest, as a matter of routine, lasted a week. They stowed Goodrich in a drawer with hundreds of other unfinished files on missing sailors.

I returned to Providence, to Manny's. The drunks know my name and consider me their friend in the noisy way drunks consider the man who pours their liquor.

On my days off I drive. I head up to Massachusetts
where the maples arch over the back roads. I lean back into the seat and accelerate. Under the scarlet autumn leaves, tree trunks flash by like ribs.

Then I head back to Providence to pick up Terri. I smoke a cigarette with the car windows rolled up tight, and look out at the kids. They swell around her, gripping her fingers, pointing at the growing mound beneath her dress. They ask her when she will have a baby, and if she'll bring it for them to see.

At night the refrigerator kicks on and I wake up thinking I'm back on ship. The small hum becomes the persistent roar of diesel-electrics. I sit next to our bed with a cigarette. The smoke thickens and the red tip becomes a marker-buoy. Terri wakes and catches me staring.

There is nothing left for us to confess. When I first returned we fought. I would lower my voice and accuse, "I threw a man over the rail because of you."

"And I threw one out of bed because of you," she'd say. And when we made love I'd hold her tight and whisper, "Baby, I killed for you."

Her back would stiffen and she'd pull away. "No," she'd say. "You did not kill because of me."

I have thought about it as many ways as I can. Maybe Goodrich went over the rail because we were both unlucky, because his time had come and I happened to be there. Or maybe everything had been deliberate. Or some combination
of the two. I don't know. And after a while it didn't matter, because he is dead and I am not. This is not a reason. It is the way things are.
I knelt backwards on the broken easy-chair, looking out the picture window for the postman. Across the road, past five waist-high fence posts, long gold grass ruffled in the field; it concealed a swamp. A crumbling foundation foundered in the middle. Any fool should have known it was no spot to try a home.

From the dead-end direction of the road came a slow black figure bent over a stick. I could tell it was an old man by the amble, the kind old folks get when they're just short of stopping dead but determined not to. He poked through leaves and grass along the side. When he reached the first fence post, he stopped and leaned his stick against it.

His slick white hair, combed straight back, shone in the late morning sun. His clothes weren't black, but dark blue cover-alls like mechanics wear.

He pulled something small from his pocket and set it on top of the post. He was slow, but this he did slower, careful. His hand shook. He picked up his stick, ambled to the next post, did the same. He stopped at each one, then went on down the road. The whole ritual, five fence posts, took about twenty minutes.

When he was out of sight, I crossed the road. Pennies. On each post he'd put a plain old penny.

"You leave them 'lone, mister. They ain't yours."

I turned around to the neighbor brat holding his own at the property line. He held a ballpeen hammer in one hand,
and the other, shading his eyes against the sun, clutched a piece of two-by-four shot with bent nails. He sniffed hard to retrieve a string of snot, then licked his upper lip.

"I'll get my Ma on you."

I grinned at the brat's guts and danced across the road in a boxer's crouch. "I'll take on you and your Ma, come on."

The brat didn't budge; I quit, wishing I'd had his nerve at that age.

The postman drove between us, stopping at my box. Back to business. I filed through the bills for my unemployment check, then drove to town.

I returned with food and a six-pack to celebrate. Five weeks before, when Jenkins fired me from the diner, he had said it wasn't personal. So I'd gone back every week to check on my job. The new cook was working out, and Jenkins didn't like me coming around, I knew, but I kept at it. And this time he said his brother might need help at his garage. Car grease is blacker than cooking grease, but it's work. For five weeks I had checked want-ads, come up empty, gone back to my house and paced, feeling caged. The bills wouldn't stop—rent, phone, child support, nothing I could put off. Now I had hope. Jenkins said he'd see his brother that night, maybe the next, then give me a call. Jenkins said sit tight.

Before going into the house, I checked the fence. The pennies were gone. Someone picked them up for luck, I
I was waiting at the phone the next morning when the old man came past near ten. He put his pennies on the fence posts, then headed toward town.

I waited all day.

About three in the afternoon came the old man back from town with a rolled newspaper tucked under his arm. He ambled slow under the hot sun, but steady, bent over his stick. He'd stop every few steps, poke in the leaves, then move on.

He leaned his stick against the first post. Careful, he picked up the penny, examined it, and slipped it into his pocket. He stopped at each post, then headed toward what I figured was home. I decided he was harmless, no threat.

I smiled at the old man's task. He'd made a day of it, however silly, knowing that a man needs something each day to complete, to know if he doesn't do it, it won't get done.

I stayed in that night, expecting Jenkins' call. The summer breeze lifted the curtain from the wall and window, and carried in the neighborhood's noise. Kids played kick-ball down the dead-end; a lawnmower whined and lifted a thick cut-grass smell into the air. As the sun set, the neighborhood shut down, lulls broken by hollers for late-playing kids. My house got dark. Through the screens came the sound of the last door slammed shut, and the brat returned to his Ma's slap.

The six-pack put me to sleep in the broken easy-chair, and I woke with a bad back and fat head aching beneath the
the hot sun through the window. I watched the old man's ritual, the brat played in the dirt, and the postman brought more bills. My house was hot. In my underwear, I paced, watched and waited.

I called the diner at noon. Jenkins said he couldn't come to the phone, so I left a message and continued pacing. If I sat in the easy-chair, my skin, smothered against the vinyl, sweated.

I dove for the phone and said hello before the first ring died.

"You expecting a date?" It was Dara, my ex.

"I happen to be expecting an important phone call." I was tempted to let her think it was another woman, but couldn't. "About business."

"Good, 'cause you're going to need the extra money. Earle needs glasses."

"You know, Dara, there was a time when your phone calls meant good news."

"Yeah, and there was also a time when I lived with more than a roomful of furniture."

I looked around my empty living room in the silence, and shifted my weight on the easy-chair. I'd walked away from it all, no brave act.

"They tested his eyes at school and said he's got to see a doctor and get glasses."

"Dara, I can't afford glasses. Not now."
"He can't see the blackboard."
"Can't he sit in the front row?"
"Don't blame him for his eyes. You know which side of the family he got bad eyes from, don't you?"
"I'm not blaming the kid, Dara. He's got lousey timing, that's all."
"Yeah, that runs in the family too, doesn't it."
I let her have the last word, figuring she deserved it, then hung up. I dialed Jenkins.
"Snappy, kid. Whadda ya want?"
"The job, Mister Jenkins. I'm calling about the job."
"I fired you once, didn't I?"
"Your brother's garage. You said he might need help."
Jenkins said nothing, but I heard him breathe long and deep, like he did when a cook missed an order and the waitress complained.
"You remember don't you?"
"I remember." He sounded angry. "He doesn't need anyone. Tough break."
"You asked him? You really asked him?"
"You calling me a liar?"
"No, not at all, Mister Jenkins. It's just that people forget things all the time, just like me, I do it all the time, but I really need the job, that's all."
"Carl Jenkins is no liar. You keep that in mind when you're collecting your unemployment check, you hear?"
"But that's not what I meant, I just need the job bad, that's all. What about you, I don't need to cook, I can do anything..." I knew he'd hung up, but I kept talking anyway, one word dragging up the next. For two days I'd sat, waiting, five weeks out of work. I slammed down the receiver. He hadn't asked his brother. If I hadn't called, I'd still be waiting, still be the fool. My limbs ached and I punched the wall. Pain shot through my wrist. Clutching my hand, I stomped into the living room and kicked the easy-chair. I knew what I was doing, knew it was stupid, but did it hoping I'd feel better. I didn't. Outside the sun was still too hot, the postman brought more bills, and the brat wallowed in the dirt. I was sick of doing nothing.

I ran to the utility drawer, grabbed my hammer and a handful of nails. I pushed through the screen door into the bright heat and headed across the road. The pennies were so hot from sitting in the sun the first one burned my palm. I centered it on the post and drove a nail. Surrounded by dull copper, the nail's head gleened. I liked it. Moving fast enough not to think, I bent a few nails, but anchored each penny to it's post. The hollow echoes bounced from house to house, each one loosening the torque on my chest.

Back inside, I knelt backwards on the broken easy-chair. The old man seemed slower than ever. I shut the wooden door, closed the curtain, and scurried back to the chair like a kid pulling a prank. I was happy and my heart beat fast.
I peeked through the curtain as the old man reached the field. He stopped and leaned his stick against the post. His hand hovered a moment, fluttering in the light as he checked the silver center in his penny. He tried to pick it up. I laughed out loud and held my hand over my mouth.

The old man looked ahead to the next post. He picked up his stick, moved, stopped, and looked closely. He went to each post, and at each one I laughed again, though less and less.

He turned to the houses. I ducked and scraped my nose across the dusty window sill, watering my eyes and making me sneeze. When the dust settled, I noticed how quiet things were. The brat sat in the dirt watching the old man, the ballpeen hammer and two-by-four between his legs.

Then the old man threw up his arms and hollered, heading for the brat. The two faced off at the property line. The old man screamed accusations and stabbed the dirt with his stick, while the brat bounced on his toes, denying everything. He pointed at my house. I hid behind the curtain until I heard an aluminium door slam and their shouting stop. I peeked around the curtain.

The brat's Ma marched to the road in a flowered shift and sandals. She was scrawny, with a hot chisled face, a mound of hair wrapped in a pink scarf.

"What now," she demanded. "What's going on?"

The old man started shouting again, pointing to the
fence posts and jabbing the ground with his stick. The brat called him a liar, pointed to my house. I kept low. Neighbors drifted out of their houses and stared. Pretty soon all three were screaming; mostly it was the brat and his Ma getting the best of the old man, though he held his ground, shaking on his stick. I felt sorry for him. Five lousy pennies weren't much for anyone to get excited over, and the brat's Ma made this clear, but I knew they had purpose for the old man. I felt destructive, mean.

He finally retreated toward home, stopping every couple of steps to shake his stick and shout at the brat's Ma. She followed him along the road as far as the property line, hopping and screaming back what a foolish old fart he was playing with pennies and trying to bully young children and widows. Her fists shot up from her hips into the air, then back again, and the pile of hair wrapped in pink shook like a volcano set to blow. When the old man gave up shouting, she turned on the neighbors until they backed into their doorways.

Then I saw that the brat had turned, watching me in the window. I ducked behind the curtain, listening.

"And you," she screamed, "what are you doing picking on an old man?"

I thought she was yelling at me, and my heart quickened until I realized she had turned on the brat.

"I didn't do it," he insisted. Unlike with the old man,
the brat's voice was defensive, on the run.

"I've told you about lying to me," she said, and I heard a slap.

"I didn't do it," the brat shouted. "He did it." I pictured the brat's dirty arm pointing at my house.

"Don't you dare try making a fool of me, young man."

"I saw him. He's in there."

"Come on," she said. "We'll see who's making me a fool."

I crawled to the door and locked it just as their soles slapped onto the concrete steps. I slid down to the floor and kept quiet.

"God help you," she said, "if you're lying to me again. I'll beat the pants off you."

The door bell rang through my chest, then echoed off the walls. My heart pounded so hard I feared I'd groan and give myself away. I knew the brat stood silent, head bowed against the odds. I wondered how far she'd go.

"Well," she said. "Where's the invisible man?"

The bell rang again, loud and demanding. I flinched, almost punched the door to quiet it, to leave me alone. Things had gotten out of hand.

The brat's Ma slapped him again. "I said where is he?"

It was time to open the door and tell them it was a joke, to please go home and forget it.

"You take me for such a fool," she demanded, her voice shooting up to a sharp screech.
I stood up in front of the door, my fingertips touching the knob, when something suddenly crashed through the screen into the wood. I jumped back from the shock, and knew it was the brat's body. Through the cracks came the rattle of aluminium, muffled thuds and grunts, and the sharp smacks of beaten skin. I backed away from the cries and stared at the door shaking on its hinges, until the violence moved away.

I crawled to the window and peeked through the curtain, my cheek pressed against the hot pane. Her floral shift was liquid in the light as the brat's Ma dragged him across the yard. She had removed one sandal and it hovered over his head, a black scar in the sky.
Randy: Twenty-seven, wearing a sport shirt, clean blue-jeans, running shoes; his appearance is neat.

Della: Twenty-eight, fashionable summer clothes—sandals, skirt and blouse; top-siders, khakis and blouse.

Burke: Twenty-two, wearing tie-dyed tee-shirt, worn bell-bottom jeans, sneakers and Hendrix-style headband (though he doesn't need it); his appearance is disheveled, even sloppy, but not dirty.

Tom: Thirty-two, neat, slightly conservative appearance.

Laura: Thirty, also neat and slightly conservative.

Michael: Nineteen, wearing tight black tank-top, Army camouflage pants, high-top sneakers, crew cut, earring, Sony Walkman shared with Tina.

Tina: Eighteen, wearing black sleeveless teshirt, black pedal-pushers, black pumps, bleached-blond beehive hairdo, headphones plugged into Walkman.

The play takes place on the bottom floor of a lower-middle class home in suburban Connecticut, in the family room, in the present. The walls are panelled in knotty-pine or sheet panelling. Stairs, which lead up to the living room and front door, run the upstage wall from right-center to off-left. A homemade bar, panelled as the walls, is in front of the stairs; it has three bar-stools. A dartboard hangs on the upstage wall, stage right of the stairs; three darts are stuck in the bulls-eye. There are two beanbag chairs down-stage. The rest of the room is decorated tastefully within the economic limitations of the household; decorations should reflect a past era—the late fifties and early sixties—and are decorations the succeeding generation would not claim.

Besides the exit up the stairs, there is an exit stage right: sliding glass doors which lead to the back yard and, beyond that, "the swamp."

The house has been unoccupied for five years, but taken care of and cleaned periodically. Though not run-down, it is musty, and the furniture covered with sheets.
Early evening. RANDY, DELIA and BURKE enter from upstairs. RANDY carries a backpack; DELIA carries a stylish overnight bag; BURKE carries an Army duffle bag and a "box," a suitcase-sized cassette player which he sets on the bar and from which he plays 60's rock and roll. They are here to open up the house before going out to get food and drink for a small celebration. BURKE is speaking as they enter.

BURKE
...and the birdbaths! You could sanitize every pigeon in Boston. I've never seen so much lawn apparel, so much armature.

RANDY
You wanted to get out of the city...

BURKE
To a miniature golf course?

RANDY
Suburbia, Burke. I grew up in the set for "Father Knows Best." Wally and the Beaver live next door.

DELIA
Randy's first girlfriend was Gidget. He still whispers her name at night. Let's get some air in here.

(DELIA drops her bag on the bar, walks to and opens the sliding glass doors; she stands at them, surveying the back yard and cooling herself off.)

RANDY
Remind me to flog the maid.

BURKE
And what about those pink balls on pedestals? Are you supposed to see your suburban future in those, all pink and rosey?

(BURKE: drops duffle bag in center of room; begins to unpack a six-pack of Pepsi, a sleeping-bag and some clothes. ACT 4: BURKE: drinks Pepsi constantly, always running on a sugar-high. RANDY puts pack next to DELIA'S, surveyes familiar room, then goes to DELIA, wrapping arms around her from behind.)
DELIA
Come on, Burke; you're exaggerating. I didn't see any pink balls on pedistals.

BURKE
I'm very sensitive to middle-class kitsch. It offends my very existence.

RANDY
I grew up here, Burke.

BURKE
You escaped early. Before permanent damage was done. Before your soul suffered suburban havoc.

DELIA (To RANDY)
Lucky you.

BURKE
It's the jockeys that really break me up. All those little guys grinning insanely, shoving forth their little lanterns, searching for an honest man. In the suburbs? Ha! I'd go nuts, too.

DELIA
You have gone nuts, Burke.

BURKE
Let's give the little birdies in the neighborhood a sulphuric acid bath. What do you say, a little suburban safari?

DELIA
Randy's here to sell, not sabotage.

BURKE
You mean sell-brate, remember? When are you going to get some food.

DELIA
Relax, Burke, and give us old folks time to breathe.

RANDY (To DELIA)
One winter, the kid down the street and I hit the neighborhood with raw eggs and Christmas ornaments. Him first with the eggs, then me with the colored glass.

BURKE
Let's do it!
RANDY
You should have seen those houses glitter in the winter moonlight. Just like the northern lights.

DELIA
So young, but already a struggling artist.

RANDY
With anger as my only aesthetic. I just wanted to give grief to anyone who lived in this hell-hole. I hated them just for being here.

BURKE
Who wouldn't?

DELIA
Did you get caught?

RANDY
(Shakes head, "No.") Always. The neighbors knew I hated them. Whenever anything went wrong in the neighborhood--lumber stolen, pumpkins smashed, sugar in gas tanks...

BURKE
Villages burned...

RANDY
(Acknowledges BURKE) Villages burned. Little things like that, and they'd come knocking on our door. My old man hated that the most, being taken by surprise. Especially after Mom died.

BURKE
At least you had an old man.

RANDY
He said he'd defend us against anything, as long as we told him what we'd done beforehand. Of course we never told a thing, hoping to get away with it. Then the cops hit the doorstep.

DELIA
If I ever brought the police home, my parents would have been... (Mimics stern voice.) very disappointed in their young lady.

RANDY
My old man had a short fuse. The cops knew that as well as we did.
BURKE
Another victim of Gestapo wiretapping.

RANDY
No...experience. They learned to say what they had to, then get. The neighbors weren't as quick though...

BURKE
Jelly-brains from too much TV.

RANDY
I remember Kasavitch came pissing and moaning because I'd burned a peace sign into his front lawn...

BURKE
Brilliant! I love it!

RANDY
Brand new turf, too. Just put in.

BURKE
A genius! A child prodigy!

DELLA
A brat.

RANDY
Guilty on all counts. Anyway, Kasavitch kept holloring at my old man about what no-good kids we were, and that he'd sue us for everything we had.

BURKE
Bourgeois swine.

RANDY
I'd never seen my old man punch anyone before. Scared the hell out of me. Came right up from his hip, and knocked Kasavitch off the steps and onto his ass.

BURKE
Vive le proletariat!

RANDY
My old man jumped down, hoisted up Kasavitch, and told him that if he ever threatened his family or home again, it would be his last act on earth.

BURKE
A working-class hero is something to be!

RANDY
I sure caught hell that night.
DELIA

Sounds like he loved you a lot.

BURKE

At least he had the good taste not to defile his house with all that lawn crap.

RANDY

(Looking out back.)

It's not all that bad, Burke.

BURKE

Ha! I'll bet every house on the block's got a plaster Madonna in the back yard. You know...a little bathtub full of goldfish at her feet. Some plaster squirrels staring up in adoration...plaster birds chirping on her shoulder, dropping plaster turds down her back... (Swoons onto floor.)

Ah, sweet suburban serenity!

(RANDY gives BURKE an irritated look, which BURKE misses; RANDY exits to back.)

DELIA

(Begins folding a sheet.)

Give me a hand, Burke. (Reluctantly, he helps.)

You know, Burke, maybe you should lay off the neighborhood a bit. After all, it is Randy's home.

BURKE

He knows I'm kidding. Besides, he hates the middle class as much as I do. That's why we get along.

DELIA

The middle-class is one thing; home is another.

BURKE

He's always putting this place down. That's why he's so eager to dump it.

DELIA

I'm not so sure he is eager to "dump it." Have you heard him mock it since we left Boston?

BURKE

Yeah, sure. (Thinks.)

How about when he said... (Raises finger in pronunciation.)

"Middle-class creatures lack the guts to become individuals."
You said that.

BURKE

Oh, yeah. (Proudly.)
Pretty good line, don't you think? Listen, Dee, I work with
the guy every day. I eat lunch with him. Watch the Red Sox
with him. I know him like I know myself.

DELIA

Burke...

BURKE

Hear me out, now. I know him like I know myself. He puts
down this place constantly. He hates it. Ask him.

DELIA

Despite Randy's talk, he cares very much for this house and
for his family. Ever since he got the contract to sell, I've
had to tip-toe around the apartment. Actually, he's become
a pain in the butt.

BURKE

Are you going to leave him?

DELIA

Selling the house one grew up in, one's home, is much dif-
ferent than mocking it, or even running away from it. This
is final. Randy is going through a lot of changes, and he's
confused. We have to expect that.

BURKE

Are you going to leave him?

DELIA

No matter what Randy says, no matter how careless or cruel,
I know that he is temporarily confused. I know he genuinely
cares for his family and friends...and for me. I believe
this. And I love him for it, for his unselfish love. Just
as I couldn't love him without it.

BURKE

You didn't answer my question.

Yes, I did.

BURKE

Maybe you're the one who's taking a liking to this place...
feeling any pangs of domesticity?
(Randy enters carrying an old two-by-four.)

Randy

My last tree-fort is still out there. Here's the railing.

Burke

Ex-railing.

Randy

You want to see the rest of it? It's right out back...

Burke

(As pronouncement.)

"Memories are the manure of the soul." Karl Marx said that.

Delia

(Teasing Randy)

Why don't you just drag the whole thing in here?

Randy

(Seriously.)

I couldn't do that; the nails are still intact.

Burke

(An after-thought.)

Maybe Jim Morrison said it.

Randy

(To Delia)

Would you come see it?

Delia

Not now, Randy; I'm tired from the drive. (Takes up sheet.)

Give me a hand with this, will you?

(Irritated, Randy ignores her; gently places two-by-four in a safe spot, then stares out glass doors.)

Burke

(To Randy)

You're not going to pull out piles of photo albums, are you? (Boris Karloff voice.)

"I suppose you're wondering why I've asked you here..." Steel plates drop over the windows, all exits barred, then non-stop home-movies of Randy's childhood. Reel one: Baby MacNiel on the Bear-skin Rug...

(Burke dives onto sleeping bag and imitates cheesecake
What a horror show! pose; then covers eyes.)

RANDY (Noticing sleeping bag.)

There's plenty of beds upstairs, Burke.

BURKE Can't do it, man. Can't sleep on a bed. The orphanages never had 'em, so I never got used to 'em.

RANDY How could I forget about the orphanages. (To DELIA)

And you, m'lady? You won't abandon me, will you? Toss me to the wolves? Leave me to wither and die?

DELIA Not yet.

RANDY Good. I've made reservations for the master bedroom. It's a great place to start a family. (DELIA drops the sheet over RANDY'S head.)

Hey...some of my favorite people were conceived there.

DELIA Don't start, Randy. (She goes to board and be-throwing darts with force.)

BURKE I was lucky to sleep on a piece of cardboard.

RANDY (Turning on BURKE.) That's what you get for having bum parents.

BURKE Tell me about it, man. An American tragedy, that's what it is... (As if reading marquee.) Beautiful migrant farm worker, alone in fertile field under sweltering sun, meets handsome, fast-talking carnival man...

A geek.

RANDY What?
RANDY
You said he was a sideshow geek. (To DELIA)
Didn't Burke say that, Delia, that his father was a geek?

DELIA (Irritated, concentrating on darts.)
I don't know. I wasn't listening.

RANDY
Burke is our friend, Delia; you should be more attentive to people you care about. His story, as usual, is fascinating. It's about a birth.

BURKE
If I said he was a sideshow geek, then he was. (Resumes pronouncement.)
...meets fast talking ticket hawker and sideshow geek who, in between biting the heads off of live chickens for twenty-five cents a ticket, impregnates the young woman, then moves to the next small town full of unsuspecting yokels, leaving her with me, our hero.

(He bows.)

RANDY
A legend in his own mind.

BURKE
Hey, man; it wasn't easy. Even the orphanages were poor. We didn't have any beds, never mind "plenty upstairs."

RANDY
Isn't it amazing, Delia, that a poor orphan like Burke goes to such an expensive school like Hoyt? Tell us what you think of that, Delia. (DELIA ignores him.)

BURKE
Scholarship, man. The American Dream. When all the little orphans were fast asleep...

RANDY
On their cardboard.

BURKE
I read by candlelight. Just like ol' Honest Abe. When the admissions people heard my story...

RANDY
And what a story.
They couldn't refuse me. An American success story in the classic tradition. Up by my own bootstraps.

What is that smell?  
DELIA  
(She moves to glass doors. All sniff; RANDY laughs.)

"When the sun sets, the Hock rises."

What?
DELIA  
(Closes glass doors.)

The Hockenum River. That's what's back there.

Randy grew up in a box of kitty litter.

The water's black. Spring and early summer, the river floods and sits in the lowlands like a swamp. Cat-nine tails, turtles, frogs, water snakes, the whole nine yards.

Smells more like "Nine Lives."

The adults used to hang out in the back yard drinking beer or lemonade, talking about work or kids or the house or something dull and domestic. On hot nights with a breeze, the first stink of the evening would waft over the lawns around sunset.

Mother Nature strikes back.

Someone would shrug and say, "When the sun sets, the Hock rises." Then they'd all laugh, 'cause there was nothing else they could do, and go inside until the next day.

It's seeping through the windows! Help! A plague upon the middle class! Aaaaaggh!

(Swoons.)
I like it. I used to lie awake on those long summer nights when the sun was still up and wait for it to drive the adults away from outside my window. Then I'd sleep.

DELIA
I hated going to bed before the sun set. Especially when I could hear the older kids next door playing in their yard. Did you and Michael share the same room?

RANDY
That's why I moved out as soon as possible. Kid used to drive me up a wall, always following me around, never listening to a word I told him.

DELIA
Oh you were lucky, Randy, to have someone to lie awake with and talk to. I hated sleeping alone.

BURKE
Yeah, rich kids have it rough.

DELIA
We weren't rich, Burke. Comfortable, but not rich.

BURKE
Ohhh...comfortable. That means Mommy and Daddy packed you off to summer camp and bought you a nanny, right?

DELIA
Don't trespass, Burke. You can be very amusing, even charming at times, but don't push me.

RANDY
He's just being an angry orphan again.

DELIA
I know what he's doing. Burke, I don't apologize for my background to anyone, including myself.

BURKE
I wasn't trespassing; just wondering. You could have come from anywhere.

DELIA
I come from Silver Springs, Maryland. I grew up in a big house, had lots of toys, two parents, and a fine childhood.

RANDY
(To DELIA)
Maybe someday you'll pass on the experience.
Don't you push me either, Randy. Not about that.

(ROB and LAURA knock on closed glass doors.)

BURKE (Pointing)
Look! A young upwardly mobile couple! They've come, no doubt, to make sure their turf hasn't been invaded by Gypsies or Turks or—God forbid—"Nee-groes."

RANDY
Let's be civil, Burke.

BURKE
Why start now?

RANDY (Opens doors.)
Hi.

ROB
Hi, I'm Rob. And this is Laura. We live next door.

LAURA
We saw people and thought we'd stop by and say hello.

BURKE (Mocking LAURA'S last word, waving to them.)
Hello.

RANDY
Come on in. I'm Randy. And this is Delia. And Burke. (All but Burke may shake hands; Burke nods, if anything. Awkward silence.)

ROB
So...when are you moving in?

BURKE
When lawn flamingoes fly.

RANDY
I'm here to sell.

I grew up here. (Apologetically)

LAURA
That's great. This must have been a nice place to grow up.
DELIA

Try convincing Randy.

RANDY

It was okay, I guess. (BURKE coughs and gags.)

I split when I was eighteen. (Awkward silence. ROB remembers the loaf of homemade bread he's holding.)

ROB

Oh, here. We baked bread this morning. When we saw you arrive, we figured it would make a nice 'welcome to the neighborhood' gift...

LAURA

We wanted to get you before the Welcome Wagon scared you off with pot-holders and perfume samples.

ROB

So now you should take it as a 'congratulations on selling,' or something like that.

RANDY

That's really nice; thanks a lot.

BURKE

I believe a cup of sugar is customary in the suburbs. (ALL regard BURKE: RANDY and DELIA are embarrassed and angry; ROB AND LAURA are confused.)

DELIA

Burke is a bit overwhelmed by some of the lawn jockeys and things.

RANDY

Come on in and sit down.

LAURA (To BURKE)

Oh, so were we. It seems like half the neighborhood is stuck in the fifties.

ROB

Mostly it's the last generation. People with kids our age.

LAURA

There's a few other young couples on the street.
And more kids every week.

The people who sold us our house moved to Florida.

That would have been the Shaw’s, right?

They were okay people.

From lawn flamingoes to real flamingoes. What a stereotype.

I guess someone has to keep those old stereotypes alive.

This whole place is a stereotype.

We like it.

(Cutting off conflict.)

How long have you two lived here?

Two years in November.

Are we going to eat soon?

Relax, Burke. Dee and I will get some food later.

Can you stay? We're going to get a pizza, have a few drinks, nothing elaborate.

Thank you, but we've already made plans to eat with some friends.

Boy, it's getting mighty thick in here. I'm taking a walk. I need the fresh air.

You won't find any back there. (ALL laugh but BURKE.)
BURKE (To RANDY)
Pick me up a bottle of Southern Comfort, Pepsi and grenedine, will you?

RANDY
If you drink that, Burke, you will die.

BURKE
It brings me closer to life. (To ROE)
Prepare for the revolution. (Gives RANDY "Vulcan peace sign" from Star Trek.)

'Live long and prosper.'

RANDY (Embarrassed, returns sign half-heartedly.)
See you. (BURKE exits. Silence.)

LAURA
He certainly seems like a confused young man.

RANDY
You don't know half of it.

DELIA
Believe it or not, deep down inside, Burke is a sweetheart. He just has his intolerable moments.

ROB
I'm not surprised. It was hard enough to be a hippie in the sixties. I'll bet it's real tough to pull off in the eighties.

RANDY
The suburbs are a personally touchy subject for him.

LAURA
He shouldn't attack something he knows nothing about.

RANDY
Oh, he's not. He knows exactly what he's talking about. In fact...

DELIA (Cuts him off.)
Randy.

(He turns to her.)

He's your friend.
RANDY
I know he's my friend. But even friends do stupid things...
(Turns to LAURA)
Isn't that right?

LAURA
(Awkwardly)
I suppose anyone can do foolish things. I mean I haven't met a person yet who didn't do at least one or two things they regretted.

ROB
(Feigns surprise, then insult.)
You haven't? Well, then...neither have I.

LAURA
(Teasing)
Oh, I forgot, honey...you're special.

ROB
(To RANDY and LAURA)
that illusion was shattered when I found Rodney Vascout's clothes in your closet.

LAURA
(To ROE)
Oh, cut it out.

ROE
(Explaining to RANDY and DELIA.)
An old boyfriend.

ROE
The Calvin Klein of her heart.

LAURA
When we broke up, I had a couple of his sweaters. Twenty-two years old and his mother still sewed name tags on his clothes.

ROE
(Feigns pouting.)
And I thought I was special...

LAURA
You are, honey. Your Mom stopped sewing in name tags when you were eighteen.

ROE
Yeah, I grew up kind of fast, didn't I?

RANDY
Burke needs some quick growing up. Needs it bad.
DELIA
You don't help, the way you egg him on.

RANDY
I do not egg him on.

DELIA
Of course you do, and I think you do it willfully. You make some smart remark about your family, which you know will set him going, then you sit back and let him do your dirty work.

RANDY
I didn't say one word today.

DELIA
As far as he knows, today is just a continuation of yesterday.

RANDY
He'd say those things without me. You know he has his own ax to grind.

DELIA
You've had him ranting and raving about your father for weeks. All that crap about 'paternal tyranny.'

RANDY
Fascism. (Smiling to ROB and LAURA)
He called it 'paternal fascism.' (To DELIA)
Those were his words, not mine.

DELIA
You've been using him, Randy. It's unfair.

RANDY
Come on; it's a good line. It's funny. (To ROB and LAURA.)
What would you call a father who left his house to his sons with the stipulation that they couldn't sell it for at least five years?

DELIA
(The idea was that you might grow up to respect the house he worked hard for and loved.

RANDY
(The idea... (Angrily to DELIA)

(REmembers ROB and LAURA)
The idea, to be precise, was for Michael or I to become an accountant and move in here with some cow-eyed home-ec major
who'd begin popping out babies like bread from a toaster.

(RANDY grins at his joke;
ROB and LAURA smile politely;
DELIA explodes.)

DELIA
Babies do not 'pop out' of anywhere! And especially not from
household appliances!

(Awkward silence as DELIA
becomes aware of ROB and
LAURA.)

Excuse me.

(She exits, running upstairs.
Awkward silence.)

ROB
I told Rick and Lucy we'd be over early.

LAURA
Right. We should probably get going.

(To RANDY, rising.)

It was nice to meet you.

RANDY
Yeah, nice. Listen, I'm sorry things got kind of tense.
We're going to have a party later on. Things should loosen
up by then, don't you think?

ROB
Oh yeah, I'm sure they will.

LAURA
A little time, that's all.

RANDY
I want to have a good time.

(ROB and LAURA have been
edging toward glass doors.
RANDY looks to stairs, then
stops them.)

Wait. Why don't you stay a while. We can talk some more.
(Pause)

It's probably pretty tense upstairs. I recognize the symp-
toms.

(ROB and LAURA hesitate.)

Just for a while...please?

ROB
We've got a few minutes.
LAURA (To RANDY)
Sure.

(They return to seats, sit. Silence. RANDY watches stairs)

ROB So, Randy...what do you do for fun?

RANDY Huh? Oh...right now I work for the highway department in Massachusetts. But I've got a degree in Art.

ROB I've got a degree in Oriental Philosophy.

What do you do?

RANDY I'm a baker.

ROB We are what the IRS calls 'small businessmen.'

RANDY And I'm five-eleven.

ROB We own a bakery with Rick and Lucy, the friends we're seeing tonight.

LAURA (A confession.) Okay, okay...five-ten-and-three-quarters.

RANDY (To LAURA) Here in town?

LAURA The city. In the Mall.

RANDY (Distaste.) The Mall.

ROB Right between a record store and a racquetball shop. Between truant teenagers, fat businessmen and bored shoppers, we sell enough sugar to frost the city. You should stop by.
RANDY

How come you don't live in the city?

ROB

Got tired of paying for someone else's scroungy apartment. Mostly for the kid, though.

RANDY

You have a baby?

LAURA

About a year from now. Depending on how the bakery does.

ROB

It'll do fine as long as whole wheat stays chic.

RANDY

How long have you been married?

ROB

We're not.

ROB

Rob...

LAURA

I never said, "I do." Did you ever say, "I do?"

LAURA

(Ignores ROB; to RANDY)

Common Law. We've been living together for eleven years.

ROB

In August.

(Resumes teasing.)

But I don't know...I think they washed common law from the books. We're still living in sin, honey; I'm sure of it. At least that what your Mom keeps telling me.

RANDY

Common Law is seven years, right?

(LAURA nods.)

ROB

Of course we know your Mom is wrong. We're not living in sin; we're living in debt. Which is respectable.

LAURA

We're doing fine.

ROB

How come I'm still eating boxed macaroni and cheese?
LAURA
Because it's your favorite food.

ROB
Oh. Right.

RANDY
Dee and I have been together two years.

ROB
Ho-ho. Rough times ahead.

RANDY
Ho-ho...rough times already.

ROB
It'll get worse before it gets better.

LAURA
Rob, don't say that. You can't be sure.

ROB
Ha! Look who's talking. This woman exiled me for a year. Flipped me in the weeds. I almost died from lack of attention.

LAURA
What about all those dancing girls you mentioned?

ROB
Only ten or twenty. Well...almost.

RANDY
What happened?

LAURA
Remember the Rolling Stones' "Under My Thumb?" Mr. Cool, here, went through a Mick Jagger identity crises.

(ROB stretches back lower lip and covers upper lip with tongue to create illusion of big lips, hums and gyrates to rhythm of "Under My Thumb," trying to kiss LAURA. She pushes him away.)

Aaaaagh! Get those things away from me! Help!

(ROB returns to normal, sits in her lap; she speaks to RANDY.)

He still regresses every once in a while.

ROB
It's all that acid I ate waiting for God to show up. Which reminds me, we've got to go.
Right. (They rise. To RANDY)

This time we really do have to go. It was nice talking to you. I'm disappointed you won't be moving in.

RANDY (Sincerely)

Yeah, the more I think about it, so am I.

ROB

You can always visit though. (Pulls card from wallet.)
Here...stop into the bakery sometime. I'll give you a free sugar-rush.

RANDY

Thanks. Yeah, I'd like to visit. (THEY head toward glass doors. RANDY stops them.)

Wait. Come out this way. (Indicates stairs.)

ROB

Oh, that's okay. We'll just slip out the way we came.

RANDY

Don't be ridiculous. Let me be a decent host the one night I own this house. I insist.

LAURA

That's okay, really. (THEY have been edging towards glass doors. RANDY takes their wrists and gently pulls them.)

RANDY

No, please. Dee and I have to go out for food anyway. We'll walk you out the front door.

ROB

You're going to have to talk to her sooner or later.

RANDY

I'd prefer later. Please? (ROB and LAURA hesitate, exchange glances.)

ROB

Okay.
Thanks.

Are you sure you can't stay...It's going to be a quiet party, just the three of us, but it should be fun...some pizza, some beer...

(ALL exit upstairs.)

(As they exit, BURKE pops his head around glass door-jamb. He watches mischievously until they're gone, then calls after them, knowing they won't hear.)

Hey, guys...there's going to be a few more at the party. I invited some more neighbors. I knew you wouldn't mind. They're real party animals, I guarentee it.

Come on in, folks. Don't be shy.

(BURKE returns with an arm-load of lawn statues--flamingoes, squirrels, birds, etc.; religious statues, including a Madonna; and any other lawn statues. He populates the set with them, mocking the appearance of a cocktail party, setting them on bar-stools, the bar, chairs, etc. He makes a couple of trips, filling the room. NOTE: The Madonna should be set on a bar-stool or bar for the start of the next scene. During the set-up, BURKE performs the following monologue, plus any appropriate ad-libs.)

Boy will he get a kick out of this. This beats hell out of eggs and Christmas ornaments. The Young Freedom Fighter creeping from lawn to lawn, restoring decency and good taste to the sacred American home. Spread out boys and girls; make yourselves comfortable. I have liberated you from the tyranny of crabgrass and the shackles of dandelions. Never again shall you suffer debasement from stray dogs. Rise up! Here, have a drink, friend; on the house. My treat...

(Sets Pepsi cans in front of statues, on them when possible.)

But wait...there's more at the door...

(Singing from the Who's "Tommy.")

"There's more at the door, more at the door..."
Plenty of room for everyone, yes sir. What a crowd. Which one of you lovelies will be mine tonight? You, my dear? What can you tell me about truth and beauty? What can you do with ripe fruit and a power tool? And remember all of you: A power tool is not a toy. Although they make wonderful marital aids. That's what we need; and I have just the thing. Nobody move.

Just think of the possibilities! The gymnastics! No home should be without one. And lots of video equipment. Wait! Look! He's here! The guest of honor! Come in, come in. We've been waiting for so long...

Welcome! Welcome! Welcome! Stand back, folks; give the man some room. Seems like you've put on a few pounds since I last dragged you around. Lucky we didn't run into any picket fences. But now you've arrived, to the place of honor, sir, so rest easy. What? Yes! Some beverage, re- freshment, libation! A cocktail, even.

Give me that! Can't you see this man needs a drink? Philistine! Here you are, my friend. Quench your parched throat.

Are we ready...are we set? Then let the good times roll!

(B Burke)

Why don't you and I blow this joint and get to know each other?

What? Change water into wine? Why can't I just buy you a drink? Of course I can't walk on water. Sure, I know your
type—holding out for some kind of miracle man. 

I'm striking out again, man. 

(To RANDY)

RANDY

That's what you get for taking other people's property.

BURKE

After tomorrow, you'll never see these people again. Besides, I didn't steal them; I invited them to a party...

(acting this out, treating the statues as people.)

I crept around each back yard—which was a feat in itself, since they all look alike—and I whispered into every little ear, "Randy MacNiel is back in town to sell his old man's house. Big party. Tell your friends." And they all showed up.

DELIA

They are private property, Burke. (Inspecting one.)

No matter how ugly they are.

RANDY

Did you invite the cops, too?

BURKE

No sweat, man. No one catches T.H.E. Cat, the newest, sleekest member of the Impossible Mission Force. (BURKE hums them from "Mission Impossible" and moves like a stalking cat.)

Besides, all your neighbors were no doubt zoned out in front of their videos, sucking down tv dinners and cheap beer. (BURKE resumes theme and movement; RANDY regards cheap beer he's drinking, finishes it defiantly, gets another from birdbath.)

Besides, I knew my chance for romance would be pretty slim unless I boosted the odds. (Cuddles Madonna.)

Are you my angel?

DELIA

Don't sell yourself short, Burke. You can do better than these stiffs.

BURKE

(Moves toward her.)

Do you really mean that, Dee?
Absolutely. Whatever happened to that girl...the young one?

RANDY

She grew up.

BURKE

She said she wanted "to experiment."

RANDY

Burke was just another lab rat.

DELIA

You deserve better, Burke. (Directed at RANDY.)
Like the song says, some people don't appreciate what they've got until they lose it.

RANDY

Does that include defenseless children?

(DELIA reacts, but ignores this comment.)

BURKE

Do you really think I'm attractive, Dee?

DELIA

I know it. You've got rough edges, Burke—no more than most men—but you've got charm too.

BURKE

Figuring out what parts of me are charming is the hard part.

(RANDY speaks to BURKE as he grabs DELIA and forces her to dance.)

RANDY

Someday I'll give you lessons...from the Randy MacNeil School of Charm.

BURKE

(To Madonna.)

Did you hear that? Some day, with proper guidance and hard work, I too can be as suave and debonair...

(After wrestling, DELIA breaks away from RANDY.)

...as a bulldog in a burlap sack.

DELIA

Don't worry about a thing, Burke; you'll do fine.

(She pats jockey's butt, speaks seductively to it.)

Why don't you come to my room later and visit?
RANDY
You're replaceable too. Would you like to neck? (Grabs flamingo, dances.) (Bites neck.)

DELIA
Your neighbors are dull.

BURKE
That's the nature of the suburban beast, Dee. Especially in gatherings of two or more. It's not what you're made of...
(Imitates flamingo pose.)
it's how you stand. Isn't that right, Randolph?

RANDY
Don't ask me, I only own the place.

BURKE
Spoken like a true slumlord. What about brother Michael. He owns half the place.

RANDY
He'll sell. He wrote me a letter, and I got the contract. (Takes contract from pack; sticks it to dartboard with dart.)
He's putting his name right here. I'm sure of it.

BURKE
The universe is full of possibilities. He may take one look at the ol' homestead and unearth some latent suburban urge to become a landbaron.

RANDY
He'll sell. He wouldn't come all this way, then change his mind.

BURKE
Where's he coming from?

DELIA
(With distaste.)
New Jersey. Hoboken.
New Jersey. Hoboken.

BURKE
Hoboken!

RANDY
(Defensively.)
Yeah, Hoboken.
I thought Hoboken only existed on tv...as a joke.

I think you're right.

My grandmother lives in Hoboken. Michael was fourteen when my father died, so he went to live with her. He must like it; he's nineteen and hasn't left.

Not everyone runs away from home first chance they get.

They do when it's necessary.

Did you hear that? Hoboken!

Does he have the MacNeil charm too?

It's probably not as fine-tuned as mine, but I'm sure it's there. The last time I saw him was the funeral; he wasn't very talkative.

Hoboken. Good God.

You never visited him?

No.

Why didn't you visit him?

(Sings, acts out rhymes.)

Oh to be broken in Hoboken...

Because.

Because why?
I had no reason to, that's why.

Burke

Choking in Hoboken...

Delia

That's strange.

Randy

Why?

Burke

Croaking in Hoboken...

Delia

You're so concerned about having a family; maybe you should have paid more attention to the one you had.

Burke

Broken, choking and croaking in Hoboken!

Randy

(Explodes. To Burke)

Will you shut up! There's nothing wrong with Hoboken!

Burke

(Aside.)

Just joking.

Randy

(Turns to Delia)

And don't you, of all people, lecture me about family responsibility!

(Tense silence.)

Look. I've got nothing against my family. Those that are dead, did the best they could. Those that are still alive, I'm sure they're doing the best they can. I had things to do.

Burke

(To Delia)

Places to go.

Delia

(To Burke)

People to see.

Burke

He's an important man.

Delia

So I hear.
RANDY
Burke, you know what these towns are like.

BURKE
Only from pictures, man. I'm allergic to cut grass.

RANDY
Suburbs. Nothing, no character, no purple mountains' majesty, no amber waves of grain, no shining sea, not even a lonesome prairie.

BURKE
(To DELIA)
Vinyl gives me the hives.

RANDY
Just miles and miles of fast food and faceless lawns.

(Picks up and tosses statue)
Maybe that's what drives people to load up their yards with garbage.

(To DELIA)
I love my family, you know that; I've told you. I just needed to get out, to get away from all this junk, all this antiseptic kitsch...

BURKE
All this armature.

RANDY
Burke, you understand me, don't you?

BURKE
(Holds statue in front of face and speaks through it as "Curly" of Three Stooges)
Why certainly!

(To statues)
We all understand, don't we fellas?

(Drops statue and begins high-energy performance. Runs behind jockey; speaks in monotone.)
On behalf of the Suburban Homeowner's Association I am pleased to welcome you to this truly exciting neighborhood in which occur many truly exciting events, why just last week in the Lawn-Boy Invitational I captured first place in the Self-Propelled Rotary Mower Division, another truly exciting event in my truly exciting life---aaaaaagh!

(Screaming in frustration, breaks away to squirrel.)
Ho, bejeesus, pal, how yo doing? Nice to see a normal face in the crowd. Say, what's a regular guy do for kicks around here?
(Through squirrel, voice of heavy breather.)

Well...on hot sweaty nights...I like to creep on window sills...and peep in children's bedrooms...draped in clean white sheets...they sleep like little corpses...

Randy

Come on, Burke. You don't know what you're saying.

Burke

Sure I do! Why?

Because Randy MacNeil..."This is YOUR life!!!"
(Makes applause noise; DELIA claps; BURKE motions to statues as audience to hold applause.)

Now, Randy...let's see if you can recognize this voice...
(Puts cupped hand to ear, then runs to and speaks through a statue.)

Randy was such a scamp in school. Well, I suppose the correct word is bully. Especially towards the girls in class. He liked to punch them in the stomach, then run away...
(Interrupting himself, resumes Ralph.)

Okay, enough of that. Yes, Randy, those kind words came from Maud Mertz, your second-grade teacher. And hey, can you guess who this is...
(New statue.)

MacNeil was a good trooper. Always figured he'd make Eagle. He worked well with kids, you know. Then I caught him teaching personal hygiene to a cub scout. Bad news.
(Resumes Ralph.)

Fred Neckerchief, your old scout master. And here comes the big one, Randy...
(Back to jockey; male voice)

He was a good kid, especially around the house. Maybe I just expected too much from him...

Delia

(Ass as a warning to BURKE)

Danger.

Burke

(As before.)

You know, you want to see a kid make something of himself. And six years out of college is a long time...

Randy

Enough! You don't know what the hell you're talking about.
BURKE
Come on, man; admit it. I've got you pegged. Cub scouts, paper route, church picnics...

RANDY
You're talking about yourself. You don't know me.

BURKE
I know where you came from... (Pats jockey's head.) who your friends and neighbors are. (Imitates motion of man on riding lawnmower; laughing.) I can just picture you as a little lawn jockey, riding your daddy's power mower back and forth across your clean green lawn, dodging the dogshit...

DELIA (Trying to break tension.)
Don't miss that dandelion.

RANDY
I've got nothing to do with this. (Knocks over a statue.) This isn't me; it's you.

BURKE
The suburban hobo riding the rails—the handrail from the Romper Room to the refrigerator.

RANDY
How do you know so much?

BURKE
The backyard bohemian cruising the croquet court of life, whacking his little balls from wicket to wicket.

RANDY
I said how do you know so much?

DELIA
He's just joking, Randy.

RANDY (Grabs statue.)
Answer me!

BURKE
What's the matter, man; can't you take a joke?

RANDY
I'm sick of your jokes. And your bullshit... (RANDY jabs BURKE with the statue, eventually pushing him backwards and tripping through
room with the statue; it is a weapon. Throughout his retreat, BURKE topples most, if not all of the statues.)

You're no different from me. Except that you're a lying son of a bitch. And don't think I don't know it.

BURKE

I said I was only kidding, man.

DELIA

Randy, let him go.

RANDY

(To DELIA)

Shut up. I'm sick of this.

(To BURKE)

Kidding? Kidding about the orphanages? Kidding about your parents? That big sob-story is just kidding?

BURKE

No...I mean I was kidding about you and your house. I'm sorry, man.

RANDY

Never mind about me, Sorry. What about you, Mr. Revolutionary? Where'd you come from? Tell me that?

DELIA

Randy, he said he's sorry. Let him be.

RANDY

He's sorry all right. He's pathetic. Where'd you come from, poor boy? Where'd you learn all tv trivia? Those poor orphanages have big color consoles? Tell me you had to use old TV Guides for a pillow, poor boy. What about those perfect teeth? Those poor, poor orphanages spring for a mouthful of braces?

BURKE

What are you talking about? Leave me alone.

DELIA

Randy, stop it.

RANDY

(To DELIA)

Shut up!

(To BURKE)

Where are you from? What's your father do?
You're crazy...

I know what I am; who are you? What's your father do? (Jabbing BURKE)

I told you, man...

Bullshit! The truth!

I'm telling the truth...

No!

(Randy smashes the statue near BURKE'S head.)

Randy, don't!

The truth!

I said what does your old man do? (BURKE mumbles an answer.)

Louder!

Pediatrician. He's a doctor.

A pediatrician. A pediatrician? (Turns away, drops statue. Begins laughing.)

Oh, that's perfect. Just perfect. (Addresses jockey.)

Did you hear that? Mr. "Nobody never gave me nothing" has a daddy. And daddy is a kiddie doctor. (Grabs jockey's crotch.)

Turn your head and cough, please.
DELIA
You are hateful.

RANDY
He's been spitting on my home ever since we got here.

DELIA
Following your example. You've been spitting on this place since I've known you. Suddenly you're homesick and weepy-eyed.

RANDY
This is my house. I've a right to spit on it if I choose.

DELIA
That's what it's come to—you spit on anything or anyone, whenever it suits you.

RANDY
He's been living in a dreamworld long enough, Delia. It's time that someone shook him up.

DELIA
Is that the way a friend shakes you up? He's your friend, Randy.

RANDY
He can't keep shoving his illusions on me.

DELIA
His illusions! At least Burke has some idea what he'd like to be. You don't know who you are or what you'd like to be. At least Burke tried to create something for himself.

RANDY
I created something once. You might remember it. Or did they vacuum out your memory as well?

DELIA
Do you really believe a baby would solve your problems? You reason like a six-year old. Were you expecting a child or a sibling?

RANDY
Someone with as much heart as intellect would be a pleasant change.
DELIA

Someone you can make pamper you, like a spoiled child controlling his mommy?

RANDY

What do you know about motherhood? (Grabs Madonna and thrusts it at DELIA, who takes it.)

Here's what you know. Here's what you became when they vaccuumed out the life. (RANDY exits through glass doors. DELIA stares, stunned; sees she's cradling Madonna; violently pushes it away; when it shatters on floor, she clutches stomach as if hurt. BURKE enters from upstairs.)

BURKE

He's gone? (Angry, fearful)

DELIA

Are you leaving too?

BURKE

I'm not hanging out for High Noon. Let the son of a bitch rot in his stinking house.

DELIA

Don't leave me, Burke. (BURKE hesitates, then resumes packing.)

Randy didn't mean those things. He was drunk...

BURKE

You believe that? (DELIA doesn't reply.)

I heard what he said to you. That wasn't drunk. That was aimed for your guts.

DELIA

He says those things because he's confused. When one is in pain...

BURKE

Bullshit, Delia! That's bullshit! We're not talking about 'one.' We're talking about that lousy scum who's been dumping on both of us.
DELIA
He's not scum. He's confused.

BURKE
Fine. I'm leaving. You believe what you want. But you're a fool to stay.

DELIA
Burke, I know he hurt you...

BURKE
No! No, he didn't hurt me. He hurt himself, because I'm the one who's leaving. He can rot alone. Or with you, if you're stupid enough to stick around.

DELIA
No matter what nasty remark you've ever made, Burke, I've always believed that inside you are good. It's the same with Randy. He's going through changes, the same ones I went through, and the same ones you'll go through. He needs help. You've known Randy as long as I have...

BURKE
Certainly not as well.

DELIA
What does that mean?

BURKE
Why do you stay with him? After all he puts you through, why do you stay? What are you to him, his personal martyr? His nanny? Or is this some sort of social work for you—fucking for mental health?

(DELIA smacks him, then turns away. BURKE is still, then goes to her. He begins to touch her shoulder, hesitates, then pulls away.)

I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Dee. You don't deserve that. From me or him. You deserve better than both of us. I don't want to hurt you. I'm screwed up, I know. I don't know how you see things so clearly.

(Still turned from him, she shakes her head.)

You do. Compared to me, at least. I'm so screwed up it would be funny if it wasn't so pathetic.

DELIA (Turns to him.)
Everyone's confused, Burke. Believe me.
Everyone's not a liar and a fake.

You're not a fake, Burke. You're only protecting yourself. Everyone does that.

(She begins drawing closer; he responds in kind.)

You're a good person, Burke. I told you that before. I believe it. Deep down inside. You're important to me. I care about you...

(He breaks from her.)

I have to go.

You'll never solve anything by leaving.

I'm not hanging around to get my head bashed in.

That's ridiculous. He's your friend.

He tried to kill me.

He did not try to kill you. All he did was pull your pants down in public.

You can be very cute when you try.

I'm not trying to be cute. I'm trying to get past your goddam ego. Do you really believe Randy forced you to admit anything we didn't know already? Burke, listen to me. You'll never have a close friend in the world—never mind a lover—if you keep trying to deceive people. Randy and I know who you are. We've always known. It doesn't matter. That's all Randy was trying to tell you. In his confused way, he just wanted you to understand that he is your friend not because of some exciting background you pretend to have; he's your friend because he cares about you.

And you believe that?

Absolutely.
BURKE
What about you? The way he treats you?

DELIA
He thinks I ruined his chance for a family. Think about it, Burke. His mother died when he was eight; he left home and then his father died. Now he's selling the house he used to call home.

BURKE
He hates this place.

DELIA
He doesn't hate it. He doesn't hate it anymore than you hate your home. (BURKE looks away.)
The baby was never an issue until he got the contract to sell, a year after it happened. Randy wants a family. The sad part is that he lost the one he rejected before he could reclaim it.

BURKE
What about his brother?

DELIA
Except for the letters about selling the house, they haven't talked. Burke, Randy has treated me badly because his love, for his family and for me, has been temporarily twisted by this whole thing.

BURKE
You believe that?

DELIA
I wouldn't be here if I didn't. Tomorrow, when Michael comes, will be the proof. I'll see then whether he loves his family, and me, or whether he...doesn't.

BURKE
Let me know how it works out. (Starts to leave.)

DELIA
You have to learn to trust your friends, Burke. (He keeps going.)

BURKE
(She stops, turns.) You know what I said about my home?

BURKE
Sunnybrook Farm, wasn't it?
DELLA
Not really. When I was twelve, my father came home from a business trip and told us he had another family. Three kids. In California.

BURKE
No kidding? Bigamy?

DELLA
For ten years. The he decided to divorce my Mom and me because he liked them better. Loved them.

Is this for real?

DELLA
I remember in high school boys would cheat on me, or threaten to cheat on me, and expect me to be hurt. They didn't have a chance. I'm still afraid of being numb, of not feeling. I couldn't speak to my father for years, he hurt me so bad. When I was twenty-one I finally pulled together the nerve to talk to him, to tell him how I felt betrayed, cold. You know what he said? That he was cursed with too much emotion. That he'd had too much love to contain in one family. He was cursed. Burke, I won't have anything to do with a man who loves himself at the expense of his family.

BURKE
My family's okay...

DELLA
I made a hard decision not to have that baby. I want a family. But I won't allow any man to hurt my child the way my father hurt me.

BURKE
I don't think Randy gives a shit for his family.

DELLA
You didn't seem to care for yours either.

BURKE
You plan on getting him to sign a guarantee?

DELLA
Randy knows about my family, knows how I feel. I love him, Burke. I believe he could be a good husband and father. I've already denied him the chance to prove it; I owe him the benefit of the doubt.

BURKE
And how do you expect to have this holy belief confirmed?
I don't know. I'll see what happens with Michael. He's Randy's family. I'll see what happens.

(Begins to leave.)

Like I said, let me know how it turns out.

Please stay.

Come with me.

I can't run away. I believe that.

Martyrs aren't appreciated until they're dead. I believe that.

(Starts to leave.)

Burke.

(He stops, sighs, tired of the argument, then turns.)

What?

Am I attractive?

I know he doesn't mean to...I know he loves me...I believe everything I said...all of it...But sometimes...sometimes he makes me feel so ugly, Burke...I just get scared I'm not attractive.

(Listens to me. You are very attractive. It shouldn't even be a question. Do you understand? If you believe anything else, then you're believing a lie. Don't ever let anyone lie to you like that. Okay?

(She nods. He hugs her again, then starts to leave; stops on stairs, turns.)

Anyone.

(END OF ACT ONE)