

# CutBank

---

Volume 1  
Issue 78 *CutBank* 78

Article 15

---

Spring 2013

## Black Box

Charles Haverty

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

**Let us know how access to this document benefits you.**

---

### Recommended Citation

Haverty, Charles (2013) "Black Box," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 78 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss78/15>

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@mso.umt.edu](mailto:scholarworks@mso.umt.edu).

## BLACK BOX

Ford Arbeiter and I were assembling a model airplane, the de Havilland Mosquito, when he said I should know something about his origins. The word *origins* spoke to me of comic book beginnings—baby Superman rocketing out of doomed Krypton and coming down in a Kansas cornfield—but Ford didn't read comic books, he just talked this way. He would tell me once, he said, but I must promise never to mention it again. The morning he was born, two airliners left Los Angeles International within three minutes of each other, one bound for St. Louis, the other for Chicago. An hour and a half later, the planes collided over the Grand Canyon. No one survived. Ford's father was on the Chicago flight.

I realized, to my horror, that he was about to cry, the first of only two times I ever saw him close to tears, and was relieved when he returned to our model, his tapered fingers fitting the Mosquito's multi-paned canopy precisely into place. This was, in fact, my model. They were always my models, which we always built at my house and at my invitation, though we never spoke in those terms or of the fact that I'd never set foot in his house. Once, uninvited, I bicycled six and a half miles to the city, to Ford's neighborhood, but when I saw where he lived—one in a dreary block of run-down row houses—I turned back around. I never mentioned this to Ford, just as I never mentioned his father or the crash. I kept my promise.

Still, I couldn't stop thinking about what he'd told me, and soon I was poring over library-bound volumes of *Time*, *Life*, and *Newsweek*, ravenous for details. There was no "black box" aboard either aircraft in 1956, so the question of how a Douglas DC-7 Mainliner and a Lockheed Super Constellation crossed paths 21,000 feet above the Painted Desert without seeing each

other remained a mystery as insoluble as the assassinations of my childhood. Identification of the victims was largely impossible, and Ford's father's remains were buried along with those of twenty-eight fellow passengers in four coffins on the southern rim of the canyon. A decade after the crash—even now over half a century later—bits of wreckage would turn up among the cliffs. My imagination lingered longest over the more personal artifacts: a fork twisted into the shape of a pretzel, a dime and a penny fused in a lady's change purse, a man's wristwatch stopped at 10:32, the very instant of Ford's birth, or so I imagined.

Our models were mainly World War II fighters—Messerschmitts and Stukas, Spitfires and Lockheed Lightnings—and as with most things, Ford's engagement went deeper than mine, reaching into history and the specific role each played in the conduct and outcome of the war. But in the seriousness of purpose Ford brought to their assembly, I sensed something that transcended historical interest: a symbolic attempt to undo the crash and his father's death, to put things right, to reverse time.

His hands were what I first noticed about him, his long fingers carving words out of the air. My parents had pulled me out of public school and into Catholic high school, not because they were religious but because where we lived it was the closest thing to prep school, which better suited their conception of themselves. I was an especially larval thirteen and rarely spoke. One October afternoon, as we changed back into our clothes after gym class, a sophomore named Danny Wetzel called me "dummy," and though I didn't know Ford, he took Wetzel by the throat and pushed him up against the lockers. "You know I could kill you, don't you?" he said, as mildly as asking about the weather. Wetzel's face went purple. "*Don't* you?" Wetzel nodded, with popping, pleading eyes. A week later his neck was still striped with five long bruises.



Ford wasn't like other people; he wasn't like me. We were both only children and solitary by nature, but he was better at it than I was, smarter and stronger. He had a deep, honeyed voice and a rich vocabulary. He read real books and believed in the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, and the resurrection of the body. He never swore. Though our school imposed a dress code, there was wiggle room even within those constraints, but Ford's haircut and clothes looked leftover from the Eisenhower administration, as if, like that watch forever frozen at 10:32 A.M., June 30, 1956, he were stuck in the cultural moment of his father's death. His entire demeanor—fastidious, patrician, prudish—seemed transplanted from an earlier era. To my mind this lent him a surefire sense of tragedy and mystery, and when we turned our attention from model airplanes to the untouchable girls who moved among us in their regulation plaid skirts, it pained me that he did nothing to exploit this—though, of course, I didn't say so. We talked in terms of love, by which I meant sex. Ford really did mean love. He spoke of it like a mystic contemplating the nature of heaven, but without a single thought to, say, its infrastructure; whereas my approach was all about infrastructure, as if I were planning the most complicated of heists.

These were the early seventies, the last days of Nixon. Ford was staunchly conservative while I was fashionably liberal. Yet we never discussed politics—and by now you must realize that discretion was our *modus operandi*, the glue that held our friendship together. The single time I breached our code of silence we stopped talking. It was the night my parents hauled me away to college in Iowa—Ford stayed behind to attend the local community college—and in the course of a telephone conversation, I vented my righteous indignation over Nixon's pardon, granted that very morning by another Ford. Ford hung up on me. The phone still warm in my hand, I convinced myself that I'd out-

grown him, and twelve hours later I met Loretta.

We met in my first class, sociology, taught by a loose-breasted, barefoot radical feminist named Sally Tucker. Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday morning, Professor Tucker made the case against sex, deconstructing it, desexing it, stripping away the veneer to reveal the patriarchal underpinnings behind power and powerlessness, behind everything. Though her lectures on topics like "Our Sexist Language," "Organs and Orgasms," and "The Mask of Beauty" were meant to put us off sex, they worked the opposite effect on Loretta and me. Enflamed, we'd go back to her room, pack her gloomy roommate Margie off to the library, and have at each other. With all our talk, talk, talk, Ford and I had turned sex into a puzzle, but it wasn't metaphysics or even robbing Tiffany's. It was easy, and Loretta and I were easy together. Both of us basked in being seen for the first time, two virgins gorging ourselves on each other. I would marvel at the way her parts so precisely fit mine, at the incredible living fact of her, until she'd say, "It's just me, Larry."

But soon we began to argue over this and that, and then we seemed to do little *but* argue. Around Halloween she missed her period and refused to take a pregnancy test, afraid this would somehow "make it real" and force choices she wasn't ready or willing to make. I wanted to know, to clear up any doubts, and insisted there was really only one choice and the longer she waited the harder that choice would be. In her hesitation I sensed a sort of biological trap. We went home at Thanksgiving, and when we returned to school Loretta sat in the back of the lecture hall, as far from me as possible. Neither of us contacted the other and I prayed things would take care of themselves.

Gloomy Margie, her roommate, called before dawn a few days later. "Loretta's in the hospital," she said. "She lost the baby."

I stood in the dark, my hand cupped around the mouthpiece. I didn't say anything. I couldn't. "I think you better get over here," she said. "I think you better get over here now."

I took a taxi to the hospital. Sunrise flared through the windshield like the torches wielded by the ignorant, bloodthirsty villagers in some Frankenstein movie. I was the monster, clumsy, mute, misunderstood. Even the cabdriver's silence felt contemptuous. At the hospital, I went up the elevator, past a nurse's station. Margie had told me where to go. The nurse at the desk switched off a transistor radio and snapped to attention. "Excuse me, sir," she called after me. "Sir? Visiting hours aren't till—"

"I'm the father," I said, as if that explained everything, and she didn't argue.

The door was open. I saw Margie first. She sat in an orange chair with her feet up on the bed, covered by a thin beige blanket. Loretta lay propped up by pillows. They stopped talking when they saw me. Loretta usually wore contact lenses, but now she had on her big bulky glasses, which magnified the accusation in her eyes. In the short-sleeved hospital gown, her arms seemed more naked than when she had all her clothes off.

"Hey," I said and touched her stomach. It felt strangely warm and distended, even through the blanket.

Margie swung her feet down off the bed and pulled on her boots. "If you need me, I'll be downstairs in the cafeteria." She refused to look at me.

I listened to the swish of her nylon parka as she marched to the elevator. The doors whooshed open and shut. "If you need her?"

"Don't start," Loretta said. "Margie's been a saint. I don't know what I'd have done without her."

I asked what happened and she told me. The night before, she'd begun to ache and bleed and it got worse and worse until



finally she came to the emergency room. It was a cyst, she said, not a pregnancy but an ovarian cyst the size of a quarter. With the tip of her forefinger, she drew a tight circle in the air between us, and as she continued to speak, words returned to their normal weight and size and I understood that none of this had anything to do with me, that she'd have wound up in this bed in this room in this hospital whether our lives had collided or not.

"It hurt a *lot*, Larry. It still hurts." She flipped back the covers and there was a hot water bottle where I'd touched her. She asked me to empty the bottle and fill it up again. Before I reached the sink she said, "I need another favor. Margie'll need a ride back to campus."

The red rubber bottle had gone cold in my hands. "Are you telling me I took a cab over here at the crack of dawn because Margie needs a ride? Why doesn't she drive herself?"

"She can't. She hasn't got her license."

"You drove *yourself* here?"

"I told you: Margie came with."

"So why doesn't Margie take a cab?"

"I can't just leave my car here, Larry. It costs money."

I came closer. "Why'd she tell me you lost the baby?"

"Because I *did*."

"No, you didn't." I stood at the foot of the bed. "You can't lose something you never—"

"But I did lose a baby. I mean, I thought I was pregnant and then suddenly I wasn't. It's still a loss." I didn't know what to say to that and continued to stare down at her until she looked away. "Would you even have come if she *hadn't* said that?"

"Jesus, Loretta." I was practically shouting. "It was my baby, too."

She looked up at me through those colossal lenses. "What baby?" she asked softly, and I wanted to run, to get as far from her

as possible. We'd failed and we were embarrassed by our failure, by biology, by each other.

"Oh, Larry," she said, with a pained expression I'd never seen before. It was almost a smile.

"It hurts?"

"No," she said. "I mean yes, but that's not—"

A nurse came in, the one who'd tried to stop me earlier. "You really can't be in here," she said, ready for a fight, but this was just what I wanted to hear. I handed her the bottle, as if it contained all the poison between Loretta and me.

"So long, Larry," Loretta said. I was nearly out the door when she called my name again. "The car keys." Ill-used and unmanned, I fished through her purse while the nurse tended to her. I found the keys and dangled them between us. A thermometer jutted from the corner of her mouth and she waggled her eyebrows by way of goodbye.

The elevator opened onto the ground floor and I turned the corner to the cafeteria, the poison still fizzing in my blood. Though it wasn't yet nine, a mist of chicken noodle soup hung in the air, and I could see Margie at a table with her back to me. I knew I was the bad guy in her eyes, a monster of selfishness, and the prospect of sharing her company for the fifteen minutes it would take to drive to campus was more than I could bear. I turned around and walked through the lobby and out to the parking lot. It didn't take long to find Loretta's car, a robin's egg blue Chevy Vega. I drove out of the lot and through the city. Clouds curdled in the eastern sky. The Interstate opened up before me and I drove on, tucking Loretta, Margie, and their lies behind me. I wanted to go home, to go back in time, back to riding bikes and building model airplanes. But I'd been home less than two weeks earlier, and my parents hardly knew what to do with me then. My reappearance would be impossible to explain, yet it seemed just



as impossible to go back to Des Moines, so I kept driving, with no clue of where I was headed or what I might do when I got there.

It began to rain outside Iowa City, the temperature falling fast, and by the time I reached West Branch the windshield wipers were freezing up, so I decided to get lunch and wait out the weather. I took one wrong turn after another, until I found myself in the parking lot of a roadhouse called The Horned Toad. A sign out front, dripping with icicles, read, "FASHION SHOW 12 - 3."

The place was crowded with men, maybe a couple dozen, professional types, Elks and Rotarians in jackets and ties, each on the cusp of middle age, each at his own table. Three young women—one blonde, one redhead, and one mousy brunette—wandered from table to table in translucent lingerie and high heels, while between drinks the men tucked dollar bills into the models' panties, but there was no joy in it, none that I could see. These men seemed to breathe one collective sigh, just audible between the songs on the jukebox. The songs were sad, too, pathetic and full of yearning—"It's Only Make Believe" by Conway Twitty, "Bobby's Girl" by Marcie Blane, "Tears on My Pillow" by Little Anthony and the Imperials—each at least a dozen years old, each with a sob in its throat.

I was eating a BLT at a corner table when the brunette approached. She wore a mesh bra and matching G-string. Despite a mask of makeup, her face looked ghostly pale, almost incandescent in the dim light. A price tag dangled from the left cup of her bra. It read "\$30."

"What's your name, honey?"

I was afraid to give her my real name. "Ford," I said.

"No, honey, your first name."

"Ford *is* my first name."

"You're kidding," she said. "Mine's Randy." I couldn't look her in the face; I was that shy. "You don't like me, Ford?" She tilted

her pelvis toward me. Washington and Lincoln peered solemnly through the mesh.

"No," I said. "I mean, yes. Yes, I *do* like you."

"Then why don't you buy me a drink?"

"They let you drink on the job?" My voice wobbled.

"That *is* the job," she said. "Come on, Ford. Buy me a Tab?"

I handed her a five-dollar bill. She stashed it with the others, kept the change, and sat down next to me. She leaned closer, squinting. "Wow," she said. "You're just a kid. What do you need to come to a place like this for?"

"I don't need to," I said. "I was just hungry, is all."

"So you came here? To The Horned Toad?"

I looked around and imagined Loretta, Margie, and Professor Tucker, condemning me to death, if only for my disingenuousness. But I hadn't come here for sex; I'd come for lunch. "I'm just passing through."

Randy put her hand on my thigh and, with sudden urgency, asked, "You passing through Davenport?" My leg trembled under her fingers. "You going east on 80?"

I nodded.

"You want company?"

"Sure," I said, though I wasn't sure at all. She told me her shift was over in fifteen minutes and she'd meet me in the parking lot.

The sun was out but the air felt colder. One of the models, the redhead, stood at the entrance wrapped in a man's checkered sports jacket, scattering fistfuls of salt like a farm girl feeding the chickens. Loretta's car was lacquered with ice, and it took me a while to get the door open. I turned on the engine and scraped the windshield. The ice was like a second windshield bonded to the first, and it was hard to tell where the ice ended and the glass

began. Then Randy emerged, wearing glasses and a long black Cossack coat that trailed along the ground. She waved to me and started across the parking lot, haltingly, practically lurching, and I wondered if she had a clubfoot or had suffered some injury I'd somehow missed. Halfway to the car she stopped and just stood there. As I stepped toward her, she threw open her coat and a little girl emerged, as in some magic trick. The girl looked four or five years old, with orange hair, a pink down jacket a couple sizes too big, and a matching plastic purse. Randy made brisk introductions. "Ford, Chloe. Chloe, Ford." A cloud of sexual threat had lifted, and idiotically, gratefully, I offered my hand. Chloe shook it, then dove headlong into the backseat. Randy settled in on the passenger's side.

Before I'd put the car in gear, I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned around. Chloe thrust a small square of folded newspaper at me. I unfolded it gently—its creases were turning to lint—and there was a photograph of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

"It's the king," Chloe said matter-of-factly. "He's gonna get shot."

It had been six years since Dr. King was killed and I didn't know whether or how to say so. He stared out at me here in the future, his eyes heavy with foreknowledge and loss. I refolded the picture tenderly and handed it back to Chloe, who returned it to her purse, snapping it shut.

Randy guided me back to the interstate, while all around us wires and branches shed glittery husks of ice. Once we joined Route 80, a suffocating silence filled the car, and to break it I said, "I like your glasses," which were as big and clunky as Loretta's.

"Yeah?" she said. "They won't let me wear them while I'm working."



"There's always contacts."

"No way I'm gonna stick glass in my eyes. And then you gotta clean them and all."

"I had a girlfriend who used to clean hers in her mouth."

"That's not cleaning them," Randy said in a tone of dark disapproval. "The human mouth carries more germs than a dog's."

"I had no idea."

"Well, it does. The mouth's the dirtiest part of the body." Her hair was pulled back in a severe bun, her face as pale and porous as the moon. Chastened, I ran my tongue over my teeth. "Anyway, it's just as well they won't let me wear them," she said. "When I take them off, I disappear. That helps a lot."

She went silent again but I felt word-starved, desperate for talk. "Randy," I said. "Is that short for something or—"

"You steal this car, Ford?"

I glanced at Chloe in the rearview mirror, then past her out the back window. "Of course I didn't. Jesus, Randy. Why would you even ask me that?"

"'Cause this is a girl's car."

"Oh, yeah? And what makes you say that?"

"It just *is*."

"You're right," I said quickly, less afraid of her thinking I was a thief than that I would own an effeminate car. "It is a girl's car. But I didn't steal it."

"Then whose is it?"

"My girlfriend's."

"The one with the contact lenses?"

I nodded.

"Yeah?" she said. "Then why isn't she driving it?"

"She can't."

"Why not?" She turned the lunar pallor of her face on me like a spotlight. I felt stripped. "Why *not*, Ford?"

"Because she's—" I looked up again at the rearview mirror. "Because she's D-E-A-D."

Randy went still, her hands in her lap. "How?"

"She was flying home for Thanksgiving. See, we'd broken up and it had been weeks since we talked, and then—"

"And then *what*?"

"And then the plane C-R-A-S-H-E-D."

In the backseat, Chloe began to chant, "Mommy and Fordy sittin' in a tree K-I-S-S-I-N-G. First comes love—"

"All right, Chloe," Randy said. "Crazy Time's over now."

"Then comes marriage." Chloe leaned over the front seat, her face floating between ours. "Then comes Fordy in a baby—"

"Sit yourself down right this minute and quit acting crazy."

"I'm not *car-ray-zee*." Chloe rested her chin on my shoulder. Her breath smelled of chocolate milk. "Are you *car-ray-zee*, Fordy?"

"I said, sit *down*."

She sat back with such a solid thump that I was afraid she'd hurt herself. Then came the snap of her purse and the rustle of paper. "Yes, sir." She heaved a rueful sigh. "The king sure looks like he's gonna get shot."

"So, go on," Randy said. "Tell me what you were telling me."

"Well, it seemed the least I could do was drive her car to her mom and—"

"No." There was heat in her voice; she sounded keyed up, excited. "Tell me about the you-know-what," she said. "About the C-R-A-S-H."

So I gave her what she wanted, my very best Ford Arbeiter, an ecstatic's vision of hell transposed to the outskirts of Des Moines. In my version, the plane came down in a cornfield

shortly after take-off, the fuselage bursting like a piñata, spilling fuel and fire and suitcases and seat cushions. Long-stemmed orange flags marked the bodies and the parts of bodies. The flames rose higher than the plane's highest altitude—three times higher. I pulled out all the stops. I out-Arbeitered Arbeiter, and threw in the pretzel-shaped silverware, the fused dime and penny, and the wristwatch stopped at the moment of impact. I let no one survive.

Neither of us said anything for a mile or so. An almost post-coital calm had settled over us, an afterglow, and though I'd made it all up—or most of it—I felt variously guilty, ashamed. Not only had I killed off my girlfriend; I'd appropriated the defining tragedy of my best friend's life and turned it into entertainment, pornography, a lie.

"That's been happening a lot, hasn't it?" Randy said.

"What has?"

"*You* know." A note of intimacy had entered her voice, an easiness, as if there were something between us now, something we'd shared, and I felt guiltier and guiltier.

"Has it?"

"Sure, it has. Otis Redding, Jim Croce, that Watergate wife, Mrs. E. Howard What's-her-name, going down in the Everglades. Lots of people. Why do you suppose that is?"

I shrugged.

"Wanna know what I think, Ford? I think it's about doubt."

"Doubt?"

"Belief, disbelief. Faith, doubt. I mean, the whole idea of flying's already so crazy, isn't it? It's like driving." She swept her hand in front of her, in front of me. "Look at us barreling down this blacktop at—what?—seventy, eighty miles an hour, cars zooming toward us, in all directions, just inches away, just as fast, even faster. What if one of those drivers sneezed? Or had a heart



attack or a stroke or just wasn't paying attention?" She folded her hands in her lap. "Yeah, I think the whole thing's about faith. One leak and the whole Hoover Dam comes rushing in."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I said, and I didn't.

"It's like thinking about your own heartbeat. *Lub-dub, lub-dub*. Or breathing. Start thinking about breathing and you can't breathe."

"So what are you saying? That it was a self-conscious airplane? The Little DC-10 That Couldn't? An airplane's not a person, Randy. An airplane's not thinking about anything."

"All I'm saying is, it's a mystery," she said, and I remembered the plastic model parts spread across the table, the human debris littering the canyon, the tears welling in my friend's eyes, and in that moment I knew where I was going, where I'd been headed all along. I wasn't running away. I needed a witness, a confessor, someone who understood, who knew me. I needed to testify, to wash the lies of this day out of my system. I needed to see Ford.

"It's no mystery," I said. "It was a bolt."

"A bolt?"

"The pylon's connected to the engine and the engine's connected to the wing by a little bolt only so big." I traced its circumference in the air with my finger. "The portside engine fell off. No mystery."

"Well, that's one person's opinion."

"It's not opinion, Randy, it's—"

A sheet of ice, molded to the hood and thawed by the heat of the engine, flew up and slapped against the windshield with a loud, hard whack, exploding in a sparkling cloud. Randy screamed, then she laughed, and then we all laughed. "Do it again, Ford!" Chloe shouted from the backseat, jubilant, her

breath warm on my neck. "Do it again!"

It was near dark when I left Randy and Chloe in Davenport, and by the time I got to Ford's house three hours later the rain had started up again, turning the snow on the ground to slush. Ford's car was in the driveway, a '63 Impala lacy with rust, but when I rang the doorbell, no one answered. I knocked; still no one came. I'd traveled too far just to turn around and drive back, so I walked around to a lighted window at the rear of the house, where I found Ford hunched over the kitchen table with his back to me. I tapped on the glass. He glanced over his shoulder and quickly got up and walked out of the kitchen, switching off the overhead light on his way out. By the time I came around to the front porch, he was standing in the open door, dressed in a red cardigan sweater, a green plaid shirt, and brown corduroy pants, the wale worn thin in the knees.

"What are you doing here?" He seemed neither surprised nor pleased to see me.

"What do you *think* I'm doing here?" My voice cracked. "I haven't seen you in months. Do I need a reason?" He didn't answer. "For Christ's sake, Ford, I've just been to hell and back and needed to tell someone. Is that such a crime?" He held my stare for a moment, cast his eyes down one end of the block, then the other, and without another word ushered me inside.

The living room was shabby but clean, and lit by a single table lamp. I took off my coat, draped it over the back of a sofa, and sat down beside it. Ford sat across from me in a chair whose upholstery was as worn as his corduroy. There was a wire birdcage with no bird; a picture that might have been cut out of the parish calendar, showing the Sacred Heart of Jesus; and the print of a painting of a lamb lying in the snow with a collie standing over it, its head raised and its mouth open, as if baying to alert

the shepherd. The bookshelf behind Ford held a threadbare edition of the *Great Books of the Western World*, and at its midpoint, in the vicinity of Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift, sat a framed photograph, an old studio portrait in black and white. I pointed at it. "Is that—"

"Yes," he said without turning. "My father."

He wasn't what I'd imagined. I'd always envisioned a cross between Ford and Gregory Peck, but the father had none of the son's dark good looks, much less Gregory Peck's. All they seemed to share was their taste in clothing. He seemed impossibly young, with ears that stuck out from a terrible haircut, and wore a stupid smile, guileless and gullible.

"So tell me of your travels to hell and back," Ford said, two fingers laid alongside his nose, but now that I was here, I felt acutely self-conscious and didn't know how or where to begin. Steam knocked and hissed in invisible pipes. Water gurgled. Radiators rattled and ticked. My strategy had been to drop some intriguing detail into the conversational mix, something sure to pique Ford's interest, whereupon he would proceed to cross-question me, in the course of which the panorama of my experience with women and the world would unfold itself to his great envy and amazement. Instead, I took the basic facts and improvised, leaving out certain pieces—the pregnancy scare, the hospital, The Horned Toad. But without those pieces, my story held no shape, and the epic tale I'd travelled this great distance to deliver seemed a collection of banal facts leading to the most predictable consequences. No matter what angle I took or what fact I omitted, I couldn't seem to come out any kind of hero, and as I talked, my thoughts circled back, not to Loretta, but to Margie sitting at that Formica-topped table in that hospital cafeteria in her boots and parka, and somehow this made me sadder than anything else that had happened.



Ford listened, leaving me to twist slowly in the wind. An indulgent smile played on his lips, and I was about to reach for my coat, slumped beside me on the sofa like a third presence, when he asked, "Were you in love with her?"

"Of *course* I was in love with her," I said. "What do you think I'm talking about here? But once the toothpaste's out of the tube it's hard to get it back in."

"Ah, so now you're quoting H. R. Haldeman to me."

"Jesus, Ford, don't tell me you're still—"

"And she lent you her car?" His smile grew wider. "To come here?"

"What does that *matter*? It's complicated. I needed time to think, to heal."

"But you said it was over."

"It was, it is, but—" I looked down at my wet shoes. "It's still a loss." This wasn't going the way I'd planned, nothing was.

But then Ford became restless, as if my story, for all its artlessness, had stirred something in him. He shifted in his chair and cleared his throat. His fingers fiddled with the buttons on his sweater. Then he clasped his hands between his knees and leaned forward. He looked me straight in the eye. "Tell me, Larry—" I braced myself. "Do you believe in love at first sight?"

"Do I believe—" At first I thought he was mocking me, but from the pained expression on his face, I knew he was serious, that he sought my opinion as a man of the world, a veteran of love, a survivor. "Sure," I said. "Sure I do."

"You see, Larry, I met a woman." His wariness fell away and he talked openly. "Some fellows from school cajoled me into visiting a discothèque in Lake Geneva. Reluctantly, I accompanied them, out of anthropological curiosity as much as anything. There was a group of young women at an adjacent table and one of them—well, she and I got to talking. Before I knew it, we were

sitting together. At the same table." He spoke with increasing excitement, his hands shaping the space between us. "We hit it off, Larry, we struck sparks, and after talking for maybe half-an-hour I touched her foot with mine. Deliberately. I encountered no resistance. Our conversation continued, and after a while I touched her leg."

"Touched how?" I moved forward on the sofa, my elbows on my knees. This was important. "I mean, with what? Your foot? Your leg?"

"My hand," he said. "My right hand."

"Where exactly? What part of her leg?" I asked as if heaven and earth hung in the balance.

"Her knee. Her left knee." I nodded approvingly. "Again, I met no objection. We talked and talked—and all the while my hand was on her knee. Soon, it traveled to her thigh."

"Jesus," I said. "Then what happened?"

"I threw caution to the wind and asked her to dance." The notion of Ford Arbeiter tripping the light fantastic—at a disco, no less—was laughable, but I didn't laugh. "I took her hand, but as I led her to the dance floor I noticed that she walked with a limp, a pronounced limp. It was only then I realized—" He paused. "You see, Larry, she'd been in an accident, a dreadful accident, and her leg—the leg was prosthetic."

"Prosthetic? You mean—"

"It wasn't made of wood. That much I know. Perhaps some plastic or polymer."

I thought of Margie's legs propped up on the hospital bed that morning, the red rubber bladder cold in my hands. "The leg you—"

"The left leg, yes." He nodded grimly. "She explained as we danced. An intersection collision. The other driver blew a stoplight, wasn't paying attention." He closed his eyes. "Just

imagine that, Larry. Imagine the force of impact that could send a beautiful, blameless girl hurtling through tempered glass." He opened his eyes. "And here she'd landed—in my arms."

"So you danced?"

"One song. And notwithstanding that pulsating music, I could feel her heartbeat. I think I even heard it."

"And then?"

"And then we kissed—or I kissed her. And she kissed back. At least I think she did. No, no, I'm almost certain she did. But then her friends were leaving and she had to go, too, and everything was all higgledy-piggledy. Yet I had the presence of mind to ask for her number and she gave it to me."

"That's terrific," I said. "That's thinking on your feet."

"Yes, but when I rang her up the next morning I got an orthodontist's office in Waukegan."

"Well, you said it was a chaos, right? She must've written the number down wrong."

"You think so?"

"Sure I do."

"I'm not so sure." He'd talked himself into an agony, wringing his hands and rocking slightly in his chair. Tears gathered in his eyes. "You see, Larry, what I fear most—more than her finding me a threat or even a figure of fun—is that she mistook my shyness for—well, for revulsion. Perhaps that's why she gave me the bogus number."

"But you made her feel beautiful," I said. "In spite of the leg."

"It wasn't about the leg."

"I know that, I understand, but—"

"She *was* beautiful. She *is* beautiful. I couldn't give a rambling damn about the leg." He breathed a long serrated sigh.

"Don't you see, Larry? I loved her. I love her even now." His voice



broke; his face lost its balance.

I looked away; it killed me to see him cry. On the shelf behind him, his father looked on, positively beaming, not a doubt in his head. He just couldn't see it coming. I imagined him in the window seat reading *The Power of Positive Thinking* at the very instant the other plane hit. To add insult to injury, the photographer had tinted the picture, applying color to his cheeks, lips, and eyes, creating a sort of embalmed effect. I couldn't stand the sight of him and wished there were some graceful way I could turn the photo around. What was I supposed to do with all of this? What was I supposed to say? Still, I was Ford's friend, his best friend. I had to say something.

"You'd just met her, Ford. How could you possibly *love* her?"

He sat back in his chair and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. "You really don't know what the fuck I'm talking about, do you?"

The blunt force of that *fuck* hit me first—I'd never heard him talk this way, never heard him swear—though what hit me hardest was the realization that it wasn't spoken out of anger but pity, the same pity I'd seen magnified in Loretta's eyes that morning. An awkward silence set in. I wanted to leave, to flee, but I'd already fled once that day and this is where I'd come. Where could I go now?

A key scratched in the front lock. I sprang from the sofa, grateful for this interruption, this reprieve, and moved toward the door to greet Ford's mother—only it wasn't his mother. It was a man, a middle-aged man. He wore a shiny yellow raincoat and held a collapsed umbrella with a wooden handle shaped like a duck's head. His back was to us and he seemed lost in thought, kicking the slush from his galoshes. He carefully removed them and set them on a dark brass radiator grate built into the hard-

wood floor. When he turned around and saw me, his face lit up, greatly pleased to find me there, as if I were some long lost friend, and the effect was complete. Here was the face in the photo, Ford's father.

We stood face to face in the passage between the living room and the kitchen. I couldn't put one word after another and stuck out my hand. He took it in both of his—graceful hands, Ford's hands—and shook it warmly but said nothing. We stood like this for what seemed a long time, while Ford watched from his chair. The refrigerator purred behind us. His father glanced from my face to Ford's, then let go of my hand and gestured excitedly, specifically, to Ford, who signed back, less excitedly.

"This is my father," Ford said with no trace of embarrassment, as if I'd disqualified myself from such considerations. This was followed by another burst of gesticulation. "But he would prefer that you call him Herman." His father punctuated the invitation with a brisk nod of his head. I looked at Ford helplessly; it seemed bad form to talk. "You're allowed to speak, old scout. Just because he can't doesn't mean you can't."

"Your father," I said through ventriloquist's lips. "Herman. You're saying he can't—"

"Neither can—pater nor mater." Their fingers stitched the air. "My father wants to know if you'll stay for dinner." Before I could say anything, Ford said, "Have no fear. I conveyed your regrets. Your parents are expecting you. In fact, you're already late."

Ford's father took a step into the kitchen, switching on the light, and in the scatter of plastic pieces strewn across the table I recognized the component parts of the Boeing B-17, the Flying Fortress. He hung his raincoat on the chair I'd seen Ford sitting in earlier and laid the umbrella across the sink. Indicating the mess on the table, he gave me a resigned but cheerful shrug,

which I translated as, "Boys will be boys." Then his expression changed, as if something had just occurred to him. He returned to the sink, and with a hopeful glow in his eyes, offered me the umbrella.

I smiled and shook my head, mouthing, "No, thank you," wordlessly protesting that I couldn't possibly. This prompted him to perform a brief pantomime of standing in the rain, shivering and hugging his arms to his chest, and then he thrust the umbrella at me, still smiling that big, broad smile, his eyes shuttling back and forth between Ford and me, father and son's fingers aflutter with illegible signs and symbols, as I stood by, mute.

"He insists," Ford said from his chair in the lamplight. "He says it's raining pedigreed animals out there."

"But I'm going far away," I said. "Very far." His father stood clutching the umbrella in both hands. "Tell him that."

"He says the umbrella is insurance," Ford said. But his eyes were no longer on his father; they were on me and wouldn't leave me. "It guarantees you'll return to us soon." His father nodded enthusiastically and pressed the duck's head into my palm, closing my fingers around it. He walked me to the door. I touched the doorknob, then pulled back and tried once more to change his mind. "He says you got yourself a good Catholic education," Ford said, though his father's arms hung at his sides. "So he knows we can always count on your guilty conscience." Ford raised two fingers in a papal blessing. Then his father shook my hand one last time and sent me back into the dark.