Reader's digest for the dammed | Three stories and a chapter

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Readers' Digest for the Damned

Three stories and a Chapter by
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B.A., Cornell University, 1992

Presented in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
University of Montana
1994

Approved by
Chair

Dean, Graduate School

May 3, 1994
Date
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The Case

New Orleans City Park. Across the street from the museum pet dogs would sometimes get eaten by alligators. Like tarantulas or constrictors, pet gators demand cost and care more like babies than monsters. The novelty wears off. At night the owner slides the lizard into a park lagoon, though it’s illegal because alligators are bulletproof and still need their meat. The worried dog owner makes his way through the palms at water’s edge and finds only the frisbee.

Hank and Ronaldo, 10, were down there looking for alligators to catch. All they found was a small suitcase. It was plastic basketry, a pearly cream.

“My mom wants the case,” Ronaldo said, “You can have what’s in it.”

The girl clothes inside smelled like flowers, a teenaged smell. Ronaldo lifted away pink underwear, three bras knotted together, and a light blue, dirty Alligator shirt. In the corner was a long set of silver scissors with a trigger. Hank had heard scissors like that
close behind his ear at the barber's. This set was covered in dried red spots.

"Murder!" Hank whispered.

"I think it's fingernail polish," Ronaldo said. He put the clothes back and closed the case. "Let's go."

Hank looked out over the green water and saw how she was killed. He was in a zipperless, stiff rubber suit of her body, looking out from behind her face, his feet at her knees and his hands at her elbows. She was lying at the front of one of the rental rowboats. The man at the other end of the boat wore a thick gold chain. He was short and almost bald, and his pin-striped shirt was open too low—probably he was divorced. He reached for her with his little alligator forearms and the scissors, and on either side of his head she saw a line of white clouds. Hank was too small to move the teenaged limbs. A scream filled the air, and music that went REE! REE! REE!

At the Park's entrance was what they called the Gas Intersection, because so many cars went by that you always smelled and saw gas fumes there. On a concrete island in the center was a short marble pedestal under a green statue of P.G.T.
Beauregard pointing at the North with his binoculars in his hand, and his horse has a leg up like a pointing dog too. In front of the statue was a hill with a giant clock in it. It had dead flowers for Roman numerals and had read four o'clock for as long as Hank could tell time.

Ronaldo's father was a policeman, and Hank assumed that was why Ronaldo did whatever he wanted. He handed the case to Hank, ran through honking traffic, and jumped on the clock's face. He giggled and with both hands spun the ten foot minute hand, jumping over it when it came around. Hank put the case down outside the clock and joined him. Drivers blared their horns as they passed. Ronaldo turned to them, held his hands limp in the air, rolled his eyes back in his head, and shook his butt. The booty dance!

Hank stood by the hour hand laughing until a car stopped. A woman with dyed-black hair and a burst blood vessel in her eye leaned out the passenger window.

"FUCKING KIDS!"

Hank watched the man in the truck behind the woman scream at her as he swerved around and hit the gas. Above them P.G.T.'s green arm pointed for the boys to get lost over the Bayou.
Every time they crossed Bayou Bridge Hank reminded Ronaldo that a mysterious wave had lifted Marie Leveau the Voodoo Queen from the Bayou's waters, and there were candles burning at her head and hands. "I saw it on TV," he said.

Sunday morning Hank saw the case in the garbage outside Ronaldo's house. "My Mom said it has germs." Ronaldo stood in the front door and looked at the case distastefully. "I told her we found it and she said take it right out."

"Everything's still in it?" Hank asked.

"Yeah." Ronaldo looked at the sky. He had a cool, embarrassed smile. "My Dad took me to the office last night..."

That meant dirty magazines. They crawled under the neighbor's house. Ronaldo's parents were divorced. Saturdays his father spent time with him. Usually they'd go see a movie, early but R rated, and then his dad would let Ronaldo stay up as late as he wanted while his dad was out with the new girlfriend. Before or instead of the movie they might go to the office. When his Dad wasn't looking, Ronaldo buzzed over desks and in drawers. The first time he had gotten a Shotgun News and two Hustlers.
Hank watched Ronaldo eagerly unzip his overnight bag. Underneath yesterday's clothes was the magazine. Hank had never seen one like this. "Holy shit, look at his dick!"

"You're not supposed to look at his dick," Ronaldo said, "What are you gay?"

They looked at his dick. It was huge. They realized what was happening and Ronaldo tossed the magazine aside. He reached into the bag again. "I don't know what this is, I just grabbed it."

The book was bigger than the magazine and had a plain black cover that creaked open.

Hank had never seen anything like this. Pages and pages and pages of babies and children lying naked on stainless steel tables. Underneath each were typed dates of birth or discovery and some numbers. Broken lips; cigarettes and pliers taken to mucous membranes. The faces had black bars over their eyes, like in the ads in Hustler.

"Sick!" Ronaldo hissed. "Look at that one!"

Hank felt a dull ball in his stomach and his ears were numb. He had felt this way when he was five, watching the teenage swimming teacher with the sandy hair smile and pull his upper arm
slowly into the deep water.

Hank hid the suitcase beneath his front porch. The pictures of the babies made Hank want to do something about the scissor killer. He still felt sick, and in his head he saw flies on a hot, white wall. Like in the Amityville Horror.

"I've seen evil before." It made him feel better to say so. He remembered the trees in that old cemetery on Valence Street after the hurricane: on the trunks, pigeons flattened by the wind with two pigeon feet sticking out; up in the limbs, yellow human bones, arms and ribcages, mostly. Ronaldo had started to climb up to get a finger, but Hank had assured him that he would be haunted. Hank knew every haunted house in the city, and he had peeked in the window of 710 Royal Street, where Mini Canal hanged herself and her white poodle.

The last time Hank talked to a priest was when he'd asked to be exorcised. He was nine years old and had said "Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary" into the dark bathroom mirror until his face dissolved. The priest had told Hank that Bloody Mary had not possessed him, but he would hear a confession.
Boring.

Now he would confess, the priest would tell the police about the scissors, the balding murderer with the alligator arms would be caught. The baby pictures would leave him alone. Hank had wanted a priest as an ally ever since he'd seen *The Exorcist*. He could see himself flinging holy water on a vomitting, sandy-haired girl.

"Bless me father for I have sinned." Hank heard cloth rustle on the other side of the screen. "It has been two years since my last confession. Since then I have lied, cursed, taken the Lord's name in vain, played around on stuff I wasn't supposed to, looked at dirty pictures my friend stole from the police that I knew he stole, looked at pictures of cut up babies my friend stole, and I have murder evidence at my house."

There was a long pause. "Are you truly sorry?" The other side asked tenderly. Hank heard the smile in his voice.

"Yes--" Hank saw the shadow pressing two fingers gently to the screen.

"In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit I absolve you of your sins, go in peace," the confessor said. Like all parish priests, he was used to atrocity and murder from the boys.
"And you want to work on the lying."

Hank had seen the zoo people catch that dog eating gator. With a calm smile it had whipped a big man's legs out so he landed flat and couldn't breathe. The only times Hank had seen Ronaldo cry was during his parents' divorce. Ronaldo screamed and slammed doors. Hank heard the parents screaming at each other in the living room while Ronaldo cried with his head under an orange blanket.

After confession Hank read the newspaper for the first time in his life, and learned there were things worse than alligators and divorce. He hoped for a headline: TEENAGE GIRL STILL MISSING; POLICE BAFFLED.

In Monday's paper a missing boy floated sadly down a canal beside Gretna traffic. On Tuesday two homosexuals in California took drugs, wrapped their Nutrition professor in a rug, and ate Ring Dings as he smothered. Hank knew now why the baby pictures bothered him. It wasn't the gore; he had seen The Exorcist. The babies just didn't make sense. At 710 Royal, hanged Mini Canal had slapped a child because she had said Mini's hanged poodle looked like a bunch of rags. But what could a baby do to make you slash its
buttocks with a razor? In the police book and the newspaper there were no rules. No garlic and silver bullet heroics. A maze of dark motel rooms, wrists bound with masking tape, the police followed a four month trail of room receipts. The man had raped the two boys the whole time. The ten year old was shaking naked in a tub of warm water. He couldn't speak. That was Wednesday.

On Thursday a woman with two bleeding human bites on her arm waved down the City Park police. On Friday they caught the Swamp Thing. He was credited with 56 murders across the Gulf Coast. It could be as many as 212, Louisiana State Police said; again and again the Thing answered, "I don't know. Probably."

Hank wondered how he had lived to be 10.

He'd been a selfish child, going to confession. It gave Alligator Arms time. Police were in the newspaper, not priests.

On Saturday afternoon Hank waited with Ronaldo for his father. They sat on the floor of the dark living room and watched a movie called Ssss..., about a guy who very slowly turns into a giant snake. Hank heard the front door slam, and there was Officer Tuminello. He was in uniform and breathing hard. He took long, careful steps to
his ex-wife's bedroom, and slammed that door too.

"Hmph." Ronaldo scowled and turned back to the TV.

Through the door Hank heard Ronaldo's mom's voice yelling, then it slowly softened like his dad's, and then both were quiet. He walked to the door and knocked softly. "Officer Tuminello, there's--"

"Don't!" Ronaldo whispered.

The door flew open. Officer Tuminello stood there with his shirt untucked and handcuffs in his hand. He snapped one loop closed around Hank's right wrist. Ronaldo ran toward his room but he wasn't fast enough. The other loop got his left.

"Next time you get my size 13 boot up your ass!" Officer Tuminello said. He staggered back to the bedroom.

Hank and Ronaldo looked at the cuffs on their wrists. They pulled back and forth. You really couldn't get out. They walked to the sofa and sat down and watched the movie. The snake guy's limbs ended at elbows and knees now.

"Hope you know it's your fault." Ronaldo said.

"I had to tell him about the murder case," Hank whined.

"That stupid suitcase? And besides"--Ronaldo jerked Hank off
the sofa when he got up to change the channel--"My dad's a cop. Don't you think I know if it's murder?"

"Just because your dad's a cop doesn't mean you know anything."

Hank jerked back for revenge, but Ronaldo kept his balance.

"Oh yeah well I hope you know that a murderer would've thrown the scissors in the water unless he was stupid and wanted to get caught and besides where's the body?" Hank couldn't answer.

Ronaldo sat down and tried to fold his arms and end the argument. His fingers brushed Hank's.

They watched wrestling. Hank's voice rose: "At least I care that there's murderers!"

"At least I'm not gay!" Ronaldo said. "At least I didn't look at his dick!" They pulled against the chain to get their hands further apart.

Hank could see the body in his head, blinking on and off with the babies. So far under the green water that her sandy blonde hair looked black and her skin very white and blurred. She swayed when alligators or rowboats paddled above. She pushed her breasts up with her hands like in Hustler.
“She’s haunting me,” Hank said aloud. “I’m being haunted.” He felt a chill up and down his spine, and smiled.

A haunting he could deal with. He just had to put her spirit to rest. He and Ronaldo weren’t speaking, so Hank went to the park alone on Sunday afternoon. He had the suitcase, and he was happy. If he threw the suitcase in the water and the haunting stopped, then there had been a murder. Hank would be right. Ronaldo would be wrong. The police book would be wrong, saying pain left only a boy’s fingers smashed with a hammer. The newspaper would be wrong, saying death left only a pair of pink bobbysocks sticking from a ditch. Freed from the mud at the bottom of the lagoon, her soul in a nightgown would smile and nod at Hank as it flew through a hole in the clouds.

God made the priest not believe me so I would do this instead, Hank decided. He looked skyward.

Across the street from the museum, by the lagoon’s edge, Hank saw the killer.

He didn’t look exactly the same. He was tall and had long arms. But he had a gold chain and was probably divorced. He wore alligator skin boots.
He was with a black teenage girl. You never see a white man in New Orleans with a black girl. That's how Hank knew for sure there was something wrong. The girl's eyelids were painted gold. She had a dirty red duffle bag by her side and wore a blue t-shirt. The man blew smoke into her mouth.

Once he realized he was walking closer, Hank stopped.

The man turned from the lagoon and blew more smoke into her, then they started kissing. He pulled her onto his lap. Her head fell back.

Hank wasn't going to let the police or the newspaper be right about her, either. He thought about using the scissors to save her but pictured the blood of them going in. He put down the suitcase and picked up a rock instead. His ears were numb.

She opened her eyes and started when she saw him there, a kid sneaking up with numb ears and a rock in his hand. Her eyes were bloodshot. "Go home, boy."

The killer gave Hank a slow, silly smile. He seemed about to say something, but his tongue wouldn't work.

"Go home, boy!" Hank could tell by the way she talked that she wasn't from around here. She talked like the Black people on TV.
Hank backed away. The killer took three bites up her neck and Hank knew she was next.

"Let's go under there," he said, pointing under the bridge. She protested. "Let's go under there, baby." She picked up her bag as he pulled her down there. Hank watched her go.

He stood on the concrete bridge. They were underneath him. He had been about to cry for her, but now he was embarrassed. His ears were red. "Hope you know there's nothing but mud down there," he said, not loud enough to hear.

*Go home, boy.* She wanted to be under there.

He flung the suitcase over the railing. "I hope you're happy in heaven," he said weakly. The suitcase made a light splash and floated over to the bank.

He walked down to go get it. It didn't sink because the sandy haired girl had wanted to get killed too.

Or maybe there hadn't been a murder. He looked over at the bridge. There was no sound coming from beneath. He opened the suitcase. "She wanted to get killed and he wanted to get caught." He threw the scissors into the lagoon. "Hope you're happy in heaven anyway."
It didn't feel like there was a ghost in a nightgown anywhere near. He didn't want Ronaldo to win, but what did happen to the body? He swamped the suitcase with black water and put in stones pulled from the mud. Only a few feet from the bank the case disappeared.
In the breast pockets of his black vinyl motorcycle jacket Meadow carried his works, like the junky he wanted to be. The jacket had quarter-inch dog spikes around the shoulders and Meadow had hair like a Marine's. He didn't wear shirts. Floyd, like most people at M.U., wore long bangs and a big, colorful bead on a thong around his neck. He was from the east coast and liked the '60's and cocaine. "And I know who you are," he had said when he met Meadow's dad, and pumped his hand in both of his. Meadow's dad showed them how to put wet towels under the door so the R.A. wouldn't know they were smoking. In a week Floyd had told the whole freshman class.

Meadow liked boxing and hallucinogens. On an index card taped above his bed he had written, FLOWER CHILDREN DO WHAT THEY WANT. BOXERS DO WHAT THEY HAVE TO. He had boxed for a month when he was 12, at a gym in Oakland. The other white kid hated him the most. All of them hit Meadow harder than they did each other. They rode the bus home and Meadow ducked in the seat when his dad drove by bus stops.
As far as Meadow was concerned, the only good thing about the ’60’s was that Ali wasn’t braindead yet. He made Floyd watch the Foreman-Morrison fight, and said that boxing and drugs were very similar.

“What,” Floyd said as he blasted a bong hit at the TV, “They both make you stupid?”

“Who got you through physics, dumbass,” Meadow snapped.

Meadow meant that for normal people boxing and drugs were dangerous. People who did them knew that they were dangerous and fun and so easy. Watch Foreman slip punches while picking his jockstrap, Meadow thought. Look at his smile. Meadow made a tape called Horse’s Hits: a Mix to Fix By. Before graduation he wanted to do heroin.

“During graduation,” he said when he gave Floyd his copy. “By then I want to be hooked so I know what I’m doing for a career.”

Floyd had come a long way, Meadow thought. He had done nothing but study before he got to college. Now he studied and did everything Meadow turned him on to, which wasn’t hard. Floyd liked most drugs, and Meadow dared him into the ones he feared. Floyd didn’t say anything when he took the tape. That meant he feared
heroin.

"I'm calling you out, boy!" Meadow said.

Meadow had a respect for Floyd. He had wrestled all through high school. Before tough matches he used to eat bulbs of raw garlic so he'd stink. But because he still wanted to be a surgeon, Floyd was ashamed he'd ever started drugs and wouldn't buy his own. This duplicity annoyed Meadow, because best friends should be honest.

Saturday night, Floyd stumbled into Meadow's living room while Meadow watched MTV. Floyd wore an ironed, dark green shirt. He fixed his baseball hat with both hands and said, "We have been drinking soo hard! Can we bum some pot?" A girl in the doorway smirked around a cigarette.

"What are friends for," Meadow said. His bong was covered in Slayer and NRA stickers to keep the Deadheads away. He held the base between his feet and loaded from the bag on the coffee table. Floyd sat next to her on the floor. He said, "We named this bong Calvin, because we're its imaginary friends--"

"I named it," Meadow said.

"--and with Calvin we used to curl up in little balls. 'Going fetal,' we called it."
"I called it," Meadow said. Meadow handed Calvin to Floyd. She intercepted and started the bowl. On each finger of her left hand she wore a different colored glass eye set in a black leather socket. Her hand looked like a white spider looking back at Meadow cockeyed. After two rounds Floyd leaned over to the stereo and put on Pink Floyd.

And now, Meadow thought, staring hard at Floyd, say something really stoned.

"Dude, I am really stoned," Floyd said. He stretched out on the carpet, closer to the girl. He pulled his hat over his face and held it there. She lit a cigarette and looked down at him. Floyd put his hat on his chest. "I wonder if there's someplace we could get something to eat right now?" he said, "I wonder what if there was a Wendy's there and a Pizza Hut here --" he stood up and pointed to the wall over Meadow's head--"but what if you had these special masks that fit perfect--"

"Jesus, you are stoned," she said, "That was about the most ridiculously baked comment I ever heard in my entire life. You sounded like a goddamn outpatient."

Floyd walked in tight circle. "I know!" he said, "You think I don't
know that? I know that.” He fell to the floor and put his hat over his face. He was closer to her, and snaked one arm around her bottom. She moved away from it.

What a bitchy thing to say, Meadow thought. “With those rings, I bet you’re all grunge-y” he said. He leaned forward with his hands on his knees and made his face starstruck. “Did you get them in Seattle?”

She blew smoke out the corner of her mouth. “I’m Laura,” she said. She offered her hand with a false smile. He shook and introduced himself.

“Wow, were your parents hippies?” she asked.

“Are you kidding?” Floyd said. He rolled over slowly and pointed to a pillar of CD’s by the stereo. “All those are his dad.”

“Oh. You’re that Meadow.” She crushed out her cigarette. “My dad was in Vietnam,” she offered, “He’s a little guy, but for a while when he got back he would start fights in bars because he still felt like he had all this equipment and bullets on him.”

“Maybe your dad wore a necklace made of human ears,” Meadow said.

“Maybe your dad spat on my dad in the airport,” she answered.
Meadow sized her up. "You're a bitter wiseass," he said, "I like that."

"That'd be cool if these could see?" Floyd said. He grabbed her left hand and stared into its eyes.

"Don't start again. Please." She pulled her hand away.

She wore a safety pin and a gold hoop earring in her right ear. Meadow was pretty gone himself, and he could see that ear in the dull light of a beach fire. She's tired. The ship is anchored in the distance.

"This is the best high there is," Floyd said through his hat, "How could anyone want more than this."

"You're a lot higher than I am," Laura sighed.

"I'm close to getting the brown, Floyd," Meadow said, "I'm real close."

Floyd sat up and leaned close to him. "What, I forgot," he said, and then mouthed SHUT UP! and jerked his eyes toward her.

But Meadow was thinking of the clipper ship again and blurred, "Horse--I almost got it."

"You guys want to try heroin?" she asked. She made a face like the thought smelled bad.
"Oh, is that what horse is?" Floyd asked.

"Haven't you ever been to New York?" she asked. "Why would you want to try heroin?" She looked at Meadow and said, "I'd have to be really hating life."

The bottom fell out of his stomach. So he pulled the syringe from his jacket and jumped to his feet with his legs wide and sang into the needle, "TINY HOOFPRINTS ON MY ARM, SPREAD OUT IN A LINE...."

Laura looked at him, then at Floyd, and got to her feet. "Thanks a lot, guys," she said.

Floyd was on his knees, reaching after her. "Hang out! He'll stop in a minute...."

Meadow had the same kind of voice his dad did: terrible. "UNDER THE BRIDGE DOWNTOWN I THREW MY LIFE AWAYYY...!" His voice rose to a piercing whine. He heard Floyd call after her from the front porch, "Wait, I'll walk you home--!" He slammed the door. "Why, Meadow?" he pleaded, "Why?"

"Now you know I can't let you get laid," Meadow said, "You wouldn't be the same old Floyd."

"Asshole!" Floyd hissed. He slumped onto the sofa with his chin
on his chest. Meadow used the remote to turn up the stereo and find a black and white movie.

"Oh well, she didn't seem too into me anyway," Floyd said, "You got any wippits?"

Meadow needed the coolest drug. Only cool people could take it; and if you were uncool and took it, it made you cool. The coolest drug would be called Blink. Take a shiny black capsule, blink—and then you're in a strange, real city, anywhere on earth, walking to a party full of arrogant strangers. When the party's over you have to find your way home. Only cool people could survive being alone like that. Meadow saw himself drinking beer on a porch with other Blink users. Blink users would take pictures of these afternoons and keep them in albums.

Meadow had loved one girl, a Deadhead. That was two years ago now. What he most loved about her was her right ear. At night he curled around her and whispered his ideas into it. Ideas he had never told anyone, like about Blink. And more private things.

After a month she said, "I don't care who your dad is, you're a druggie and a slob and if you try to get me to pay rent I'll say I
signed the lease while intoxicated, on drugs you gave me."

Meadow had started to cry. "But you seemed so groovy!" he said to hurt her back.

"And I thought you might want more than just someone to whine to," she said.

After smoking breakfast, Meadow emptied an old Rolling Rock bottle into the ashtray with Laura's butts. He stirred it up with his finger and drew some into the syringe. "I may be a slob, but I know physics," he said, "After graduation I'm going to work for the Department of Defense." He squirted a stream at the wall.

For lunch he bought a pint of Wavy Gravy ice cream, and with the spoon from his works he ate it on the curb outside a gas station. A red Jeep Cherokee with Dead stickers on the windows pulled up. The driver was a blonde guy with a round head, sunglasses and a Raiders hat and no shirt. He told Meadow to get in.

"I am, like, so high right now, dude." The guy made it sound debauched. "Our '70's party's this weekend, can you get us some blow?"

Meadow took a spoon of ice cream. "Well, first of all," he said,
"who are you."

"I'm Brian, from Floyd's house. We've met."

"Brian, you’re intoxicated and driving" -- Brian stiffened-- "and you pick me up on the street and ask me for more drugs like this is the Summer of Love. Do I have hair down to my butt? Am I Crystal Gayle to you, Brian? How do you think that makes me feel? What about my needs, Brian?"

Brian smiled. "No," he said.

"Do you know who Wavy Gravy is? My dad knows him." Meadow rubbed his eyes so they were red and squinted like Brian. "Wavy Gravy was like, this dude? Who in the '60's, used to dress up like this clown? And he'd go around on this bus giving people LSD without their consent."

Brian said, "The party's Saturday...."

"What if I shoveled some angel dust up your nose without your knowing it. You think Ben and Jerry would name a flavor after me?" Meadow turned back to his ice cream. "So how much do you want, an eight ball? Pull over."

Brian pulled over and stared at the street with his hands neatly on the wheel. "I want blow--"
"Right, an eight ball. You are having a party."

"Uh yeah," Brian said, nodding. He dropped one hand to the stick shift. "An eight ball of blow should be enough." He offered his hand. "I knew you'd come through, man."

Meadow shook with the hand sticky with ice cream. Jesus, he thought, he calls it blow and doesn't even know what an eight ball is. There ought to be a written test. And you get coke for an '80's party.

In high school Meadow had read an article about chaos theory and fractal patterns. It bothered him very much that all the universe boiled down to infinite tie-dyes. Like his dad's concerts. Like the '60's were right. He wrote an essay about how the thought of it kept him from sleeping. He wrote and rewrote and rewrote that essay, and it got him in school here.

At the lawn party for his third comeback interview in Rolling Stone, his dad had pulled Meadow to his side. Meadow's dad found it easiest to speak to him when there were a lot of other people listening. He wore his hair combed straight down over his forehead and a pair of irridescent, wraparound sunglasses.
"Now son, I want you to always remember one thing: everything I have ever achieved in my life has been the result of total luck."

People laughed until his dad turned on them. "It's true! How much longer are they going to buy this rock shit? I still can't believe they bought it the first time!"

Meadow knew that his dad was right. On his most private tapes, Meadow put only pieces of songs. That was all he could stand. But what else was there?

Saturday evening Meadow ate a tab and a half and walked across Old Campus with his hands around the coke in his pockets. I'm not ready for a blow weekend, he thought, I'm not ready to see people beg and lie. He had gotten a little for himself to keep his head above water, but with coke it was never enough.

On the fraternity steps a bunch of big guys stood around shirtless, drinking beer and listening to the Dead. One of them led Meadow inside. The guy had steroid zits on his back. He hit a door twice with his fist. Brian opened it, holding a bong in his other hand. He smiled when he saw Meadow. "The blow is here!" he called over his shoulder.
They were playing the Dead too. A stick of incense hung from the
disc drive. Four guys slumped on futons and pillows. Against the
back wall Laura sat smoking a cigarette.

"It's two fifty," Meadow said to Brian.

"Two hundred and fifty?"

"You wanted an eight ball."

For an instant Brian looked horribly old. He asked the room if
anyone could spot him some cash. No, each of them answered. He
left to go to the cash machine. Meadow stumbled over their legs to
go sit by Laura. "Hey there, little flower child," he said, "Hey there
little war pig."

"You're not going to start singing again, are you?" She looked
wary.

"That was an accident," he said, and made a dismissing motion
with his right hand, "I was high."

She smiled at him. "Oh, like I haven't heard that one before."

"It worked for the Manson Family," he said.

"No it didn't."

Some guy leaned across her and offered Meadow his hand. There
was a 1968 picture of Meadow's dad on his shirt. "I'm Alex," he said.
Meadow took his hand and beamed: "Alex? Alex Asskiss?"

Brian was out of breath when he returned. He passed a small roll of bills to Meadow, and Meadow passed the eight ball back. Brian smiled and said, "Holy shit!" when he saw how it filled his palm. He pulled a shard of mirror from a drawer and began cutting lines.

"Meadow, what were you telling me the other day about some clown your dad knew who used to dose people on a bus?"

"You knew one of the Merry Pranksters?" Alex asked. "That must have been pretty wild, what was he like?"

"An asshole," Meadow said. Everyone laughed and Alex looked more hurt. The acid was kicking in and things in the room flattened. Brian did two lines and passed the mirror. When it got to Laura she asked if Meadow could have some.

Brian was watching each line go. He hesitated.

"Then I don't want any," Meadow said, shaking his head slowly.

"Never heard that one before," Laura said. He didn't smile back. Meadow took the mirror from her and passed it on. When everyone but Meadow was sniffing, Brian put on an Ice Cube CD. He turned his Raiders hat backwards and said, "Yo', 'sup nigga?" as he high fived another guy. The two of them danced with one hand on their
nuts. As Meadow walked out Brian shook his hand.

Meadow rushed across Old Campus. "What can you do when fake people offer their hands," he said to the setting sun and realized he was in the end of a bad, sad movie. "I am not having a bad trip," he muttered, right beneath one of the big gargoyles. He pulled himself up by the stone mouth and crouched behind its wings. It would fly away with him holding its horns to a lonely, washed out factory.

"I am having a bad trip," he admitted. He pulled out his coke to stop his soul from swelling. Coke was far from the coolest, but it would do in a pinch. He took a pinch on the left. Oh yes, it would definitely do. He always forgot exactly how well it did.

Floyd answered his front door in boxer shorts. When he saw Meadow's grin he turned around and walked back into his bedroom. Meadow closed the door and followed.

Floyd sat in his swivel chair with his arms folded. Meadow shrieked and threw the open book from the desk and watched it flap against the far wall. "Jesus Floyd! It's fucking Saturday!"

"What's going on," Floyd said. His face was blank and composed.

"What's going on is that we are going out." He reached into the closet and threw a shirt at Floyd's head. "Wear this. Maybe you'll
Floyd rocked in his chair and sighed. He smiled at the floor, looked up, and said, "Meadow, I can't."

Meadow took a step toward him. "You can get laid, Floyd." He turned away. "What are you studying for, anyway?" He asked. The book sat on the floor like a moth. Meadow picked it up. "The Medical College Aptitude Test," he read carefully. He ruffled the pages. "You are going to read this whole book? This book is long. This is like a phone book. This book is a fucking tome..." He put the book in Floyd's lap.

Floyd sighed and put his face in his hands and leaned back.

"What's wrong with you?" Meadow asked. He threw the book on the bed. "You look like somebody told you I died."

Floyd lowered his hands and stared at him. "If you were dead right now," he said, "I would be totally and absolutely psyched."

Meadow waited for him to laugh. "I understand that you're under a lot of stress," he said. He sat down on the bed and reached in his jacket pocket. "So that's why you need a little pick-me-up."

"I don't have any money," Floyd said.

Meadow looked up in shock. "You're my best friend and you think..."
of me like that?” Meadow reached past him and took a square of mirror and a razor from the desk drawer.

“Oh,” Floyd said, “I’m your best friend.” He bounced one heel fast on the floor.

Meadow looked up from the cocaine. “And you’re going to med school,” instead of the bead around Floyd’s neck he saw the saddest stethoscope ever. “—that’s why you shouldn’t think of this as peer pressure, because I’m not your peer.”

“You haven’t used that one before.” Floyd walked to the stereo. He put the shirt on. “Look, I don’t need it right now and I don’t want to need it,” he said. He turned his back to Meadow and began opening and closing CD’s. “I’ll go have one beer with you and that’s it.”

Meadow watched him pretend to read liner notes. “Okay.” He was watching the beginning of a sad film of Floyd. “That’s okay.” He cut some lines and rolled up a dollar. He made a lot of noise doing them. “Snnngk—Wow! Whew! Wow, man!” He pushed past Floyd and found the Cocaine Mutiny tape they had made together and cranked it up.

Meadow’s dad had once said at a party, “I’m going to open a school for rock stars.” People giggled. “I am!” he laughed back. “How do you know when to fall to your knees? When to scream?” Floyd
had told Meadow it must be genetic, because Meadow could impersonate any white person on MTV perfectly. It wasn't genetic, Meadow said, you just act extremely arrogant and without self-respect at the same time. That's why coke never hurt.

Meadow jumped on the bed and played air guitar and waved at the crowd. When he saw Floyd was sitting at his desk and laughing he hopped down and scraped together what was left on the mirror. "Floyd," he whined, "Take a break. That's what college is all about." He rolled the dollar up again. Floyd raised a hand and turned his face away.

"The airplane is coming in to the hangar," Meadow sang and piloted the tube at his nose. Floyd grabbed his wrist.

"Stop," he said. He took the dollar from Meadow's fingers. "I can't sit here and watch you embarrass yourself." Floyd smiled at the lines as he fell on them. He threw his head back to get all of each.

"That's how parrots drink," Meadow said.

Meadow was tripping and they were both drunk and wired and chewing tobacco when they got to the party. A mirrored ball hung in
the dance room and everyone was coked up. "Disco Inferno" stopped when Meadow entered. The big guy with the zitty back lifted Meadow to his shoulder and carried him around the room as the brothers sang a greeting song with his name in it. He was placed on the keg and Laura put her arms around his neck and kissed him.

Floyd tugged on Meadow's jacket sleeve.

"Need a pick-me-up," Floyd said as he locked the bathroom door.

Meadow gave him the bag. "Laura kissed me," he said. His cheeks were still warm.

"Coked up chicks love to get fucked, dude," Floyd said as he did a little. He spat brown juice in the sink and perfected his collar.

"Just don't get coke dick." He watched himself leave in the mirror.

Meadow played with his reflection for a while. He walked into the party smiling and waving his arms but this time no one cheered. Laura pressed herself to his left side. She was wearing a brushed denim pantsuit and cork platforms. "You're not the '70's," she shouted over the music.

"I was born in 1972," Meadow screamed. He flipped up his collar. "I lived the 1970's. I AM THE 1970'S!"

"You know what?" she said. Her breath smelled like malt liquor.
She looked away and gathered her thoughts. "You're really full of yourself."

"I am?" Meadow asked.

She leaned closer: "That means you have more coke." She stepped back and said something with her hand on her chest. "What?"
Meadow said, turning his ear to her.

"I said I'm full of myself too...Do you have any more?" She turned her ear to his lips.

"At my place," he lied.

They sat on the sofa and fired up Calvin. Laura smirked when he pulled the coke out of his pocket. "Drink," he said, and handed her the mirror.

There was a long, quiet moment. "I wonder what physicists do," Meadow said. He looked at the the ceiling and then at her. "You know, Laura, I don't hate my life."

"Well...good for you," she said. She chewed her lips. "I don't hate mine either."

"You said I hated my life because I wanted to do heroin. You can live for years on heroin look at Keith Richards the only thing that's
going to be alive after a nuclear war are cockroaches and Keith Richards--"

"Okay! Jesus Christ, Okay!" She scurried away from him, wide eyed and breathing fast.

Meadow heard the blood in his ears. The coke horrors. He didn't mean to freak her out. "Hey, that's cool!" he said, "That's cool like everything!" He put his hands up where she could see them. They looked at each other from opposite ends of the sofa. Her hands were on her knees, and he was still tripping enough for the left hand to wink at him. She leaned forward and kissed him. Wow, he thought, they do love to get fucked.

Meadow got coke dick. More coke for each of them did not make it better. He rolled off her and draped an arm over his eyes. She put a hand on his chest. He felt the bed move when she got up, and heard her pantsuit sliding back on.

"Do you know what John Belushi's last words were?" he asked, "I don't want to be alone right now."

"Fuck, if you want me to stay, just say so."

Meadow rolled over and looked at her in the dark. "What do you mean."
She looked down at him over her shoulder and sat very straight in the red vinyl easy chair by the window. Meadow could see only half her body in the light from outside. "I'm drunk, stoned, and I've done more coke than I ever have in my life," she said, "I know it's bad to be wasted with nobody to talk to but I can't just lie there and I'm not in the mood for any bullshit."

"Like what," he said. He felt cornered.

"Like that!" she shouted. Her hand clutched the armrest and wasn't winking at him anymore. They were just glass eyes.

"Maybe I should walk you home," he said. They each did a line and he did one on the other side when he got back, and put on his private copy of the coke mix loud, and sat in front of the TV changing channels with the songs and spitting tobacco juice into the Rolling Rock bottle and tapping both feet. The inside of his head felt like a rubber ball. When the front door opened he did a whirling leap and stood poised to throw the remote control at the intruder.

"I hate this!" Floyd screamed. He held his fists up. "I hate it! Let's do it all so we don't have to do any more!"

Meadow woke up at four the next day. His nose broke open and
ran down his face when he sat up, and he felt his way to the bathroom with his head tilted back. He angled his face so the blood dripped freely into the sink. His brain was beating.

Kids in his junior high used to write on the desks, 69-714-2112. 69 for sex. 714 for Quaaludes, or any drugs. And 2112 for the Rush album, or all rock n' roll.

"All I have left is 714," he said to his reflection. He looked like a boxer with that blood on his face.

He remembered being a boy and hiding underneath the hors d'oeuvres table at a party to spy on the thin man in black leather. The man sprawled over a chair like a black starfish. He didn't move even when the naked dancing couple fell on him. This was Keith Richards on junk.

He knew it right then in front the mirror: junk was the coolest drug. The rush was forty times as intense as an orgasm. Floyd would come around after a taste of that. Meadow imagined them nodding out in a bare room, spread out as still as their chairs, gone fetal. Heroin would be like living at the bottom of a blue aquarium in a fancy restaurant, and watching Brian and the other cokehead patrons eat each other alive.
The phone rang. Meadow wedged paper into his nostrils and answered. It was here. In his heart Meadow knew the heroin was here now because he had finally decided to leave everything else behind.

He sat on the sofa and looked at the foil packet on the table. Wouldn't you know it, he thought, wouldn't you know that once I had it I'd be too scared. The packet was small and powerful and he could feel its force through the wall when he went to lie down. He wrapped his face in a pillow.

Let's be honest, he thought. I will never hold a job because I don't have to and I enjoy nothing more than getting really, really gone. What have I got to lose.

Meadow a few days dead on the sofa, dried white vomit on his chest and the needle angled out his arm. Would it hurt?

Let's be honest. He had no choice. Floyd said that Meadow's four basic food groups were pot, acid, mushrooms, and beer. His eyes were already too clear. Next would come an open, honest face with nothing underneath. He had seen that face on his dad's old friends and pitied them. Better to die than to show up at Dr. Floyd's house
ten years from now without knowing where he was or why.

Let's be honest. If Floyd had never met Meadow he would have wondered his whole life why people kill for cocaine. He would watch the news and wonder what could ever feel that good. The best he would ever really feel was when he was coming together with his wife. They would love each other and go fetal afterward and next day the news is on. His son goes to M.U. and does lines through the money Floyd gives him, and spends the money on more lines and '90's music. One orgasm at a time, slower and slower until husband or wife leaves or dies. The other feels sorry for him or herself for months. All I risk is feeling better than anyone alive.

Besides, it was time to leave that recreational kid stuff. He sat on the sofa with the packet in his hand and saw himself in a boxing ring under lights, wearing red gear. The crowd roars.

One night when he was 15 he decided that there really was not a clown smoking a bowl with his dad and the band around the kitchen table. He walked in the side door and greeted everyone but the clown politely.

"Son," his dad asked, "are you on acid?"
Finally I'm busted, Meadow thought. His heart didn't beat any faster. This felt like it should happen. "Yes," he answered.

"Do you have any more?" his dad asked.

The clown gave Meadow a warm, indulgent smile. He propped his bowlered head on one hand and stared. Meadow saw wrinkles under the greasepaint. He felt his hands shaking. Without saying anything he opened the door to the basement and went down the steps. He picked an aluminum softball bat from a shelf and swung it against his heavy bag. A white flash came off the bag that hurt his ears. He kept beating it until it sounded off gunshots, then he swept some cymbals from a shelf to the floor. It sounded like the end of a song.

He went back upstairs with the bat in one hand and pushed the door open with the other. His dad's band and the clown were huddled together and staring on the other side of the counter.

Meadow's dad stepped slowly toward him and took the bat away. "It's okay, son," he said.

"It's okay as long as you don't hurt anyone else," the clown said.

"What's urgent," Floyd mumbled as he slouched in. His face was yellow.
Meadow sat on the sofa with his hands folded in his lap, wearing only a pair of cut offs. On the coffee table was a squat, pink candle, a coiled piece of surgical tubing, four cotton balls, the spoon, and the syringe. With a private, satisfied smile he hit play on the stereo's remote. It was his private tape, just a snip of the song: "Herrr-oh-in," he sang along, "will be the death of me." He showed Floyd the packet in his palm.

"Let me see," Floyd said. He wouldn't take it, so Meadow opened it carefully like a silver flower. Floyd leaned forward and looked down his nose. "That's dirt. Quit fucking around," he said. He sat on the floor cross-legged.

Meadow broke the packet and spooned some out. He surrounded the pile with six beads of water like he'd seen in Rush. He boiled it over the flame and drew the liquid from a cotton ball like in Drugstore Cowboy. The shot was warm in his hand and he was afraid. "Let's split the first one," he said.

Floyd sighed and ground his knuckles into his eyes. He rolled onto his back. Meadow saw toilet paper up his nose. "Einstein was on junk when he recieved the Nobel Prize," he said.

"He was?" Floyd didn't sound interested.
"No, but he would've been if he'd tried it," Meadow said. "Sit up. Let's go."

Floyd sat up and looked at him. "That's not dirt," he said.

Meadow threw the tubing into Floyd's lap. He stuck out his right arm and said, "Fix me."

"I'm not going to fucking fix me, why the fuck should I fix you?" Floyd chuckled and put the tubing on the table.

It seemed to Meadow that he stared at Floyd a long time, and from further and further away. He picked up the tubing and whipped his arm with it. "Are you going to make me do this alone, Floyd?" he asked.

Floyd leaned over the table and jammed a thumb at his chest. "Look, I got other concerns." The candle flame winced at each word.

"You don't think I have a lot to lose, Floyd? You don't think I'm worried about my career as physicist for the defense department?"

"Wait," Meadow said, "Floyd, wait." Floyd stopped with his hand on the knob. Meadow went to his freezer and to the dresser and the coffee table. "Here, I don't need these anymore," he said, offering Floyd the plastic bags.

Floyd looked at Meadow's hand: a bag of pot, twelve tabs of acid
with Bart Simpson's head on them. Meadow rolled his palm to reveal the little bit that was left of the cocaine. Floyd drew a slight breath. Meadow put the bags on the table and grabbed Floyd by the collar and pulled his hand from the knob by the wrist. "Get your ass on the sofa, chickenshit!" Meadow smiled. He pushed him there like a cop.

Floyd spun and twisted and Meadow found himself bent over with one arm locked behind his back. He barely caught himself with his fingertips on the coffee table. Floyd held him there.

"You...meathead!" Meadow sputtered.

Floyd let go. "Fuck you, Meadow," he said as he backed out the door.

Meadow sat down and winced as he rolled his shoulder around.

He heard Floyd's heavy footsteps on the porch. Fucking cokehead, he thought, he'd crawl through shit for a line. The door flew open and Floyd stood there, his face red.

Meadow held the coke in his left palm and offered the tubing with his right. "Fuck me then!" he laughed.

Floyd marched forward, snatched the coke from his hand, and left without shutting the door.
Meadow stood up and stared at the open door. He closed it and looked around the living room as if he'd lost something, then eased down on the sofa and closed his eyes for a moment. He tied off his left arm. The syringe was cold now. It's only natural to be scared, he thought.

He remembered Mohammed Ali's book signing at Cody's in Berkeley. Ali sat behind a table, his eyes cocked and glazed. After long applause he noticed the crowd and slowly, slowly smiled.

"He should have died in the ring," Meadow said to the needle.
Story for the Urban Folk

Judy Mean was on her way to pick up the babysitter when the family's Doberman Pincer trotted up with the neighbor's rabbit in its mouth.

"Shit! Drop it!"

The dog had been expensively trained in obedience and attack, and left the rabbit at her feet. The dog hadn't torn at it, just gotten it a little dirty, but it was dead. She wrapped it in newspaper and put it in the refrigerator to deal with later.

Lisa the teenage babysitter was wearing a tie-dye and sunglasses. "I just got my eyes dilated," she said.

"You got your eyes dilated on Saturday morning? Who did it?" Judy asked.

"My mom got it on special, or something."

Mr. Mean waved with his briefcase as Judy went inside with Lisa and gave her instructions. Little Judith was still asleep in her crib.

Judy figured she should buy a rabbit replacement as soon as possible, as the neighbor was sue-happy. As she was getting out in the mall parking lot, a rancid, stinking bag lady singled her out.
Judy tried to walk quickly away but the woman actually ran after her.

"Ma'am," she crooned, "will you hold this for me while I go inside I need the toilet."

Judy was mortified. The old woman pushed a string-handled bag at her. It was from Macy's. Otherwise Judy would have never taken it. The woman shuffled away quickly.

The bag was heavy. The old hag probably stole it. Judy put it in her car, thinking that she would turn it in to the store later, at the same time aware that she would probably "forget."

The pet store in the mall only had runty rabbits. In a dark, squat cage nearby was some warty, squinting, hairless thing with a tail. They wanted almost a hundred dollars for it.

"Care to take him home, ma'am," the clerk said.

"What in God's name is it?" Judy asked.

The clerk looked astonished. "Why, it's a Mexican rabbit," he said, "They don't have so much fur because they're an equatorial animal. They're getting to be all the rage, like pot-bellied pigs were a while back."

Judy looked at the rabbits. Even runty, they were more
attractive than the Mexican model. But pot-bellied pigs had been hideous little things, like headless dogs clicking around on hooves. Their neighbor was trendy enough to think this thing lovely.

She put it on her card. Then she remembered: she hadn’t told Lisa about the rabbit. How embarrassing if she unwrapped it! At a payphone in the food court she called home.

"Lisa, don’t open that thing in the refrigerator. It’s the neighbor’s bunny, the dog got it," Judy said, "How’s Judith."

"Judith."

"Yes, the baby you’re supposed to be watching."

"Everything is just A-okay here, I am having a good time and everything here. Can you believe this?"

"Lisa, are you okay?"

"Oh yeah!" Lisa said. "I’m fine! And you know what--I hope you don’t mind--but I put in a turkey you guys had. Dinner will be waiting!"

Judy was looking with cautious disgust through the air holes in the box. "Lisa, that’s so sweet," she said. She hung up.

On the way to the car Judy remembered that there could be no turkey. Mr. Mean would eat only red meat, "like my father, and his
father before him." What was Lisa talking about? And why had she been acting so strange?

She was starting to worry and decided to head home. When she turned on the car a report came over the radio: Police report that an escaped killer with a stainless steel hook for a right hand has escaped from the state asylum. He was last seen driving a red pickup truck--

Just what I need to hear, she thought. She turned off the radio. The old woman's stolen bag was in the seat next to her. It looked like it held a stole or a fur hat--

It was a dead cat! Judy screamed! And in the rear view mirror was a red pickup truck! Judy screamed! She started the car and peeled off--what was that sound, like tearing lettuce? No time to think now, because the red truck was following her! He was flashing his high beams! It was some kind of sick, murderer's joke! How did he drive so well with that hook? Judy screamed!

She made into her driveway, and the truck pulled in right behind her, high beams blazing! A hulking figure in a madman's cowboy hat ran toward her side of the car with inhuman speed! Judy screamed! The man opened the door to the back seat and pulled out another
man hiding back there, with a loop of wire in his hands. The cowboy beat him senseless.

"Did I scare you ma'am?" He said, touching his brim, "I saw this wire-strangling pervert get in your backseat. Everytime he was about to get that wire around your neck, I flashed the brights. Assumed he would show the photophobic tendencies of some paranoid schizophrenics...crazy long shot, but it worked.

"And look here--" he walked around to the passenger side and held a stainless steel prosthetic hook dripping meat from the stump hole. "I guess the wire pervert was in cahoots with that hook pervert what escaped."

"The baby!" Judy said. She ran inside. The dog was in the foyer, choking! Judy screamed!

"Don't fret, ma'am," the cowboy at her elbow said. "It just so happens I'm a vet."

Judith wasn't in her crib, and Lisa wasn't answering! Judy's heart was racing as she raced downstairs!

The cowboy said, "Look, if this don't beat all. Your dog was choking on fingers"--he held up three bloody fingers--"human fingers. And one of them has this hippy ring on it."
Judy screamed! She was getting hoarse! She scoured the house again. In the bathroom closet she found Lisa, huddling with one hand clamped over where her fingers had been. Her pupil was as dark as big as the missing lense of her sunglasses.

"You’re in shock!" Judy said. She gave Lisa four vigorous backhands.

"Hey!" Lisa said, "Mellow! Mellow!"

"Where’s the baby, Lisa? Lisa, where’s the baby?"

Mrs. Mean was just totally starting to freak her out. "TURKEY’S IN THE OVEN!!" she shrieked.

Judy ran downstairs and threw open the oven door. There, with stuffing coming out her butt, was little Judith, just starting to brown at the fingers and toes. Judy passed out before she could scream.

In the closet Lisa took a deep breath and looked at the blood dripping on her shirt. She had to pick this day to do a little more acid and few more bong hits before coming over. And then the dog bit her. That had really bummed her. She started her bad-trip remedy technique again: remember the good things you’ve done.
Well, I put the turkey in without being asked. And I put the rabbit back next door, so the owner will think it just died of old age.

Mr. Mean came home to find his house surrounded by flashing police cars and cops trying to get a two-fingered baby sitter out of a tree. "My god!" he screamed! His neighbor--Ben Average--grabbed his arm as he ran to the house.

"Mean! I'm gonna sue your ass"

"What this time, Ben? Look, you've come at a bad--"

"What for? WHAT FOR? My Bun-bun died of leukemia and your babysitter digs her up and puts her back in the cage? Is that your idea of a joke?!"

Mr. Mean jerked his arm away and ran inside. The kitchen was filled with cops and his wife was being fanned by a cowboy with his hat. But the worst thing was in the oven.

"Look!" He screamed! and pointed at his basted infant daughter. There was some gray thing gnawing her toe!

The hardened investigating detective said, "Hey, a Mexican rabbit--"

"That's no rabbit!" the cowboy cried, "That's a Tijuana sewer
rat! Crooked pet school clerks have been conning people into buying them!"

"Never in all my years on the force have I seen a case as bizarre as this one," the detective said!

"Actually, Officer," the vet said, "The exact same thing happened to my sister's neighbor's brother in law, who lives in Philly..."
Chapter One
(Excerpt from novel-in-progress)

Henry would be $140,000 in debt when he finished at Loyola Medical School at New Orleans. He looked at the figures he'd penciled and said, "Human life means that to me."

Ronaldo had a good job for him. Ronaldo had been his best friend at North American Martyrs' High, and was now a mortician's apprentice. While Ronaldo drove the deceased to the funeral, Henry's job would be to protect deceased's house, because robbers browsed through the obituaries for empty houses. Ronaldo said that all the big funeral parlors were getting guards now.

Henry had moved back to New Orleans only a week before classes started, and it was now the Wednesday of the first week. No matter how much he studied, he felt forgotten tissue layers sneaking to strangle him. He had been too busy to see Ronaldo.

He was waiting on the balcony of his apartment on Bienville Street. His building was three hundred years old. Ronaldo was late. He wanted to show Henry the funeral home. Henry didn't trust the old sagging balcony but he made himself sit out there and eat an
apple with his feet on the railing. He should have been studying. But you need friends too, he thought.

They hadn't seen each other since high school; they were both twenty-two now. Henry had gone to UC Berkeley, one of a handful of non-California residents to get a Regent's Scholarship. His mother and father had moved to Pensacola when he left home. That's where he had gone for winter breaks, though for personal reasons he didn't care much for his parents. He had spent his summers in laboratories.

He and Ronaldo had mailed to each other regularly without saying much, or even signing their names or return addresses. Ronaldo had gone to Delgado Community College for a year, but quit because he liked making money more. He had worked as a lawn mower, juke-box deliveryman, cashier, bingo-caller, and drug dealer. The funny thing was that someone he met dealing had found him the mortician's apprenticeship, which would lead to a respectable job.

Bienville met Rampart Avenue at the corner. Across Rampart was a low income housing project named after a Catholic saint. The Saint Vitus Municipal housing project, or something. Henry watched
a black man, a black woman, and a small black boy wade across
Rampart's four lanes. The woman held the boy's hand. She saw
Henry watching and said something to the man, who didn't look up.
The man hopped the high wooden fence of an auto body shop on the
corner and threw over five new tires. The adults carried two and
the boy rolled his before him.

The auto body shop had broken the law: it is illegal in New
Orleans to store tires outside, as tiger mosquitoes breed in caught
rainwater. They spread yellow fever. Your eyes turn yellow and your
tongue turns black; talk at noon, dead by three.

The black family had broken the law: they stole the tires, and
slow and easy at daytime.

White Henry had watched from a rotten balcony in air that
smelled of brown water with calliope music and said nothing. He
would do nothing.

I am in New Orleans again, he thought. Disgusting.

A hearse came down Bienville toward the housing project. It
wasn't a proper hearse, but a Bronco painted silver, with no
windows in the back and a metal integral sign where they should
have been. It looked like a car with hydrocephalus. An advanced
hydrocephalic's skull sat in a trophy case at school, taking up the space of three shelves. The bone was solid from teeth to eye sockets. From there it spread thinner than an eggshell. After the eggshell only scalp would have held the head together. After scalp, Hank imagined, only hair. After hair would come vacuum. The skull was big enough to hold two basketballs. "I bet you were smart," Henry had said to it with a smile.

Ridiculous, he knew. He had looked up "hydrocephalus" in his medical dictionary. You weren't smart. Your brain was thinned by fluid. You were bedridden and now you were dead.

Ronaldo had left the hearse running in the middle of the street with the hazard lights blinking. He stood on the sidewalk in plain black shoes, black fifty-fifty pants, a thin black tie, and a white, short sleeve shirt. He had a thick neck and a belly on its way to spreading buttons. The last time Henry had seen him, neither needed yet to shave.

"Look how big you got on me!" Ronaldo said.

He was right. Henry had an inch on him. Henry's fingers went wonderously to the new flesh above Ronaldo's temple. "You're going
Ronaldo rolled his eyes up and looked at the fingers pasted where hair had been. Henry got embarrassed and took his hand back. Henry had let his hair grow for the last year, and it came down almost over his eyes. It was blonde and stuck to his forehead in the heat.

They hadn’t seen each other in four years and now they were driving across town in a hearse, with no radio to break up the heavy air. They had nothing to say for a while.

“So, Hank,” Ronaldo said, “So let me get this straight—you spent the summer after you graduated beating off frogs?”

“Yeah, and they paid me for it,” Henry said. The most exciting part of this last summer’s lab work had been whacking bullfrogs heads against the lab bench to stun them and drawing sperm from their cloacas with a syringe. “Can you believe that? I would’ve done it for free.”

They took the Interstate to a plain, flat subdivision right by the lake in Metairie. At least the yards were big. Ronaldo pulled down an unpaved back alley and into somebody’s covered carport and killed the engine. In the little dark space the hearse felt big enough
to swallow the house. Henry figured Ronaldo was joking, but he was climbing out.

"This is it?" Henry said.

"Chickenshit, isn't it," Ronaldo said, "One day I'm going to run a parlor with columns on the front."

Henry had been picturing something like that, with a flotilla of hunched black hearses. This funeral home had once been somebody's home, and a small one. But it had real, blue-painted wood, not siding like the houses all around.

Ronaldo had explained that the watchman job for him would pay Henry $100 to study and eat. The only drawback was that someone young or with only a few friends had to die.

"Everybody who knew a dead kid goes to the funeral," Ronaldo explained, "and these freaks with no friends--or maybe they're just old--all two of their friends are at the service. So in these cases they have nobody to watch for them."

Ronaldo hadn't taken him inside. They were standing in the carport, looking at the trailer park across the street. Ronaldo rocked on his heels with his hands in his pockets. "All a sad comment on the human condition," he sighed, "as I spackle up a bullet hole!"
think the same thing."

"This kid shot himself, then?" Hank asked. The address was in a white neighborhood. White kids shot themselves, they didn't get shot.

"Though who am I to comment on the human condition," Ronaldo said, "I have a jar of used gold fillings hidden away inside."

Hank nodded to the trailer park. "And I guess those are for the big and tall stiffs, then?"

"You catch on fast," Ronaldo said, "You're on your way to employee of the month."

Ronaldo unlocked the back door of the house. The door was heavy steel and a metal ramp had been installed to roll things outside into the car port. Henry looked down at the ramp and felt very exposed, aware of his back. The inside of the house had been scraped out and restuffed. Henry could tell, because no one would build a house with just one long hallway from front to rear, and then paint that hallway white. Henry couldn't tell what the house had been restuffed with. Ronaldo walked ahead of him past plain doors with round knobs without opening any of them. The house seemed at once bigger and more claustrophobic than it appeared
outside. A trick of all those closed doors, Henry thought.

Ronaldo unlocked the door to an entrance foyer, opening to an office on the left. Customers would never see the artificial hallway. The office contained an expansive brown desk that matched the paneling. Ronaldo sat behind the desk in the bloated black leather chair and put his hands behind his head. "So, did this job involve people or what?" he said.

Henry was looking out the picture window. Ronaldo's wreck was parked out front. This was probably once a dining room. He could see into the neat dining rooms in the houses across the street. Was it legal to embalm people in neighborhoods? "No," he answered, "Just me and the frogs."

He knew what Ronaldo was getting at. Ronaldo knew he needed coaching.

"Dress professional, but not too nice," Ronaldo said, "You don't want to show the family up. Dress like me."

Henry sat across the boss's desk from him in a soft chair with no arms. He knew that clients in this chair would feel so exposed they would spend whatever the boss suggested, just to get away. He smiled. "Ronaldo, you dress like an armed robber."
Henry was immediately sorry. More than anything, Ronaldo wanted to be a policeman, like his father, and his father before him. But about a year ago, he had gotten busted dealing Ecstasy in French Quarter dance clubs. His father had gotten him off. And his father would make sure he was never a policeman, either.

Ronaldo put his head down and studied a spot on the desk. He put his fingertips together in a parody of a crime boss. "You'll be on time. And for Christ's sake, be sympathetic. Someone in their family will be dead, Hank," he said, "And no guns."

Ronaldo took Hank home in the hearse. "Company gas," he said.

Henry's admission's interviewer was a general surgeon. He told Hank, "I believe surgeons are born, not made." Before the funeral Hank told himself that he was born to protect dead people's houses. This seemed to him like a real job, and he had never had a real job before. He was worried he would mess up. He walked to Holmes and bought clothes like Ronaldo's for $40.

The funeral was on Saturday and he didn't have to miss class. Ronaldo showed up forty-five minutes early. "Hurry up and get dressed, I'm in somebody's driveway."
“Why are you so early?” Henry asked.

“I’m late. Hurry up!”

“It’s only two o’clock.” Henry left him in the kitchen and loaded his book bag in the bedroom.

“The kid’s out in the truck,” Ronaldo called after him. “He was supposed to be in front the altar twenty minutes ago.”

Henry came back buttoning his shirt. “He’s going to be late for his own funeral.”

“It’s so like him,” Ronaldo said.

But Ronaldo wasn’t kidding. The hydrocephalic hearse was really parked across the street, and inside Henry opened a white curtain and saw a green metal coffin, looking like a square American car from the 1970’s and big enough for more people.

“I can’t believe you,” Hank said.

Ronaldo started the engine. “Niggers won’t fuck with a hearse,” he said, “You can park anywhere. They’re not afraid of the police but they’re scared of ghosts.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Hank said.

Though there was a dead teenager in it the hearse moved like it always had. But it seemed to Hank that on the Interstate the other
drivers yielded for them, and when they were passed they looked away.

"They act like we're cops," Hank said."

"That's cause I got the lights on," Ronaldo said.

They got off the interstate near City Park, and Ronaldo pulled over near an arched, two lane bridge with fluted lamp posts over a canal. They got out the hearse and walked up the levee. The canal was high with inky, smooth water. The sky was perfect in it.

"You got the address?" Ronaldo asked. "It's on the first street on the other side. We can't see it because of the levee. The house is about right there." He pointed at an angle into the canal.

"I have to walk?" Henry said.

"Yeah, you think I'm going to drop you off in that?" he nodded to the hearse. "They're having a wake after, in the hall by the church. I'll pick you up on the corner when it's over and they're home." He hurried down the levee.

"I'm not going over there this early," Henry called after him.

"Kill some time," Ronaldo said.

At the top of the bridge Henry stopped and looked into the canal. When he looked up motorists were staring at him.
Thank God it was so cloudy, it was hot enough without sun. He stopped in a Time-Saver convenience store to look at magazines with his bag on the floor beside him. He looked at a gun magazine and moved his bag between his feet. A boy about ten years old listlessly moved the joystick on the videogame by the doors.

"You want to play?" Henry said. He put the magazine back and moved with his bag to the game. The boy watched the quarter go from Hank's pocket to the slot.

"It's fifty cents," the boy said.

Henry thought this pretty rude. But he had been worse, and he sometimes still was, so he put in another quarter. The boy pushed past him to the controls. Henry smiled and stepped back but the boy said to his reflection in the dark screen, "You're playing too."

Henry jumped forward. "What do I do?" he said.

"Pick the guy you want to be," the boy said. There were faces on the screen to choose from. Henry hit some buttons.

An old, bearded Chinese man sat fanning himself on a dragon throne. In front of him were two guys who looked absolutely real, like moving photographs. One had a white kung-fu suit and eyes glowing silver from under a yellow Chinese cone hat. The other
wore black tights and slippers, no shirt, and a black, wide brimmed hat. He looks gay, Henry thought.

The shirtless guy kicked the kung-fu guy in the head.

"Hey!" Henry said, "What do I do?"

By moving the stick Henry determined that he was the kung-fu guy who was getting his ass kicked by the guy in tights. Chunks of bloody gristle flew from his body when he got hit. When he was staggering senseless, a voice, rich and lazy with centuries of power, said, "Finish him."

The boy made some frantic hand movements and the guy in tights took off his hat with a dancer's flourish and the sharp steel brim sliced a red line down the center of Henry's guy. The body fell in halves to the floor, with broken rib-ends sticking from red innards.

"Your parents must be so proud," Henry said. The boy looked very pleased with himself.

Outside Henry felt the heavy air close around his body. One of the best things about humidity is that the air cradles you, he thought. Maybe it would rain. They would feel the funeral was more authentic then.
In the Winn-Dixie next door he looked at the corn dogs and the tripe and a high school girl bagging groceries. The high school boy at the register saw him. He turned back to the conveyor belt, shaking his head slowly. Not in judgement or disbelief. Like he was sad about something.

"Fuck you, peach fuzz," Henry muttered. He was blushing. But to leave now would admit defeat so he went to the magazine rack and picked up some teenage girl magazine. There was a page of anonymous embarrassing moments:

"My pills fell out of my purse at the prom. My boyfriend's parents were chaperoning and they saw it. Everyone saw it. I was real casual bending down to get it but when I did a tampon fell out my purse too. My period was supposed to come that night! And everyone saw it! I was so embarrassed I started crying and made my boyfriend take me home."

He walked out laughing and hoped the register kid saw him.

If he took his time walking he would be only a little early. The neighborhood was in the corner formed by an overpass and the canal. The streets were canopied by oak trees, but this wasn't uptown. The one-story houses sagged with either yellowish or red
fake brick. This was like a suburb that had been cut off from its body. Toys bleached on a lawn.

He got in the mood to make smalltalk with a pained, understanding smile. The funeral family had red brick and a small lawn that was a little overgrown. The man who answered the bell said, "We don't have time."

He looked wrong, like this house was wrong. A suicide's father would be an old, large businessman, Henry thought, in a house with white French doors. This man had the right exhausted eyes, but he was handsome and short like a movie star in real life. His dark suit fit him well and his hair went beyond the collar. He made a movement with his mouth and started to close the door.

"I'm from the funeral parlor," Henry said. He winced inside. He hadn't wanted to say "funeral."

The man looked him up and down. "I thought you were a Mormon." He smiled and opened the door.

"I don't have a bike," Henry said as he stepped in.

"What?"

"Nothing."

To the left of the front door was an empty table and four high-
backed chairs around it. Two more chairs stood against the wall. A curtain of white curtain was pulled across the room to the right. It swayed when the front door closed.

A slight woman in a plain blue dress peeked from a hallway and came forward. She looked younger than the man but had long, straight silver hair. She was also taller. “You’re early,” she said, and touched Henry’s arm.

“I thought he was a Mormon,” the man explained.

“It’s this shirt and tie, I’m afraid,” Henry said.

She reached a hand towards him and said, “Ooh!” and laughed. The man smiled with his hands in his pockets. Henry laughed but by then they had stopped. They started again so he wouldn’t be alone but then all three of them saw it was pointless.

“Why don’t I show you the house,” she said, “That goes to the bedroom and the bath”—the man moved down the dark hall she indicated—“The living room’s there. This is the kitchen. There’s plenty to eat, if you’re hungry.” She was standing in the open refrigerator, full to the top with Tupperware and plates covered in aluminum foil. “We have lots of food,” she confessed.

She shut away all the food and moved quickly to show him
where the dishes were. She didn't sound like she was from New Orleans, or even like a mother. She had the slow, sure voice of a professor. "We only ask that you rinse your plate and put it in the dishwasher. That's not too much to ask, I hope."

"No, ma'am," Henry said, pleased with himself, because he had forgotten the family's name and ma'am was even better.

"Don't call me, ma'am," she chided, "That makes me feel even older."

"Yes," Henry said.

She managed a slight smile at that. "So you're a medical student," she said.

"Yes. Just starting."

"Well before you know it you'll be saving lives...helping people."

"Doctors don't keep kids from killing themselves."

These awful things just came out. Hank's face and ears burned. That part of her that could smile fell away. He saw the haggard, betrayed face of her insides.

His hand moved to her shoulder but he stopped it. It looked like he was waving at her. She excused herself and went down the hall.

She came back out with her daughter. She was about fourteen and
distracted by how good she looked in her short black dress and polished combat boots. Hank had a dirty thing for girls like this, whose faces weren't developed yet so they looked like monkeys.

The combat boots meant this: from this day on the girl would wear whatever she wanted. She would stay out later and sleep with boys in the house, because her parents would think, what have we got to lose. Years from now she would feel guilty about enjoying her brother's death like this. She would accuse her parents of not caring about her. We trusted you, they would answer. They still expected that to be enough. The three of them stood by the front door. To the right was the table with four chairs. The truth of the combat boots was unspeakable but this time Hank kept his mouth shut.

"This might be the best place for you to study," the father said, pointing at the dining room table.

"I'll take care of things here," Hank said. He watched the door close and heard the deadbolt. The plastic curtain rippled.

His paper's were very loud coming out of his bag. He had never been in a house so quiet. He studied anatomy with his palms on his forehead.
He had been looking at the page a long time and listening to the silence when he just went ahead and said it. "Somebody died in this house."

He dug around in his backpack for the revolver. An automatic with these clothes would have been just too Secret Service. The stainless .38 Smith and Wesson snubbie thrown on the table as careless as another paper and he was just a private dick getting his work done.

In a house where a kid shot himself.

He closed off everything but his notes. It had been a week and already he had as many pages as a small phonebook.

Behind the white curtain ahead of him was a room. He leaned back and looked at the curtain. The top half was in shadow. It was only about three o'clock but all the houses in this neighborhood had to be dark, under the overpass, the levee, and the trees. He had the light on over the table.

If I stare at that curtain long enough, Hank thought, I will convince myself that it hides something awful.

He shook his head and smiled.

Three months ago he had studied for an exam. Four months
before that he had studied for an exam. Now he was studying for an exam. A week from now he would be studying for an exam. He leafed through the lab handouts. He had never seen so much boldface type.

He opened the revolver and spun the cylinder. It spun as quiet as the house.

Was the curtain moving?

Maybe a vent had come on but he hadn't heard it. He was cold anyway. He took careful, quiet steps to the curtain, and when he saw his left hand reaching to throw it aside, and his right hand holding a steady gun, he smiled because he was in a movie. He threw the curtain aside.

Annoyed, he flicked on the light with the gun barrel. It was just a workroom. The father worked in here and shut himself off from the house with the curtain. Along the walls were spools of naked wire and wooden bins with circuit boards stood up neatly as files. With a fax machine and a screwdriver this guy could assemble and sell computers. Instead he had a soldering iron and assembled earrings. On the wall hung a bulbous hubcap with wavy sun rays cut from circuit board around the edge. This art no doubt had some cryptic, important title—"Untitled."
A heavy table like a chopping block held a tiny jigsaw and templates for circuit board animal shapes, smiley faces, skulls. The skulls, like the hubcap sun, were guy things and that’s how he could tell it was the man who worked in here. The stuck on silver trim and a safety pin and the skulls and crosses became corny badges.

Henry did like the resistor necklace, hanging from the lamp over the work table. Colored bands that encoded Ohmage made the resistors painted, even beads. He had never seen them as that, and Looping each to the next must have taken a long time. There was a box of 16 fire extinguishers under the table but seven of them were gone.

When the phone rang his skin prickled up, like every time he got discovered. He ran and picked up the white kitchen phone. “Hello?” he said. The other end hung up.

He hurried back to the work room. The gun was on the work table. Leaving it there embarrassed him. He put the gun back in his bag and studied with his hands cupped around his face. Outside the picture window to his right was a short concrete wall holding back the levee holding back tons of rain water.
They had called the house to see if it was empty. He closed the blinds on the levee and took the gun out. He spun the cylinder.

The living room was off the kitchen. The television had been manufactured in stained wood with artificial drawers to make it look antique. It was an antique. But the picture was good and they had cable, with the remote on top of the box. There was a sofa and coffee table with a closed Asics shoe box on it. Everything in this house was neat like a hotel. The pictures might have been bolted to the wall. He turned on the television with the remote from a foot away and watched Charles in Charge. Behind the sofa was room for someone to sneak up and stand over him, and a doorway that connected to the bedroom hallway.

There were photographs in the shoe box, still in the developer's envelopes. It was like this family had just moved, or was about to. The pictures were developed by a drugstore chain that existed only in California. The family had lived in Berkeley; Henry had walked where the pictures were taken. Here was the boy who was getting buried right now. He looked maybe fourteen. Or maybe that wasn't him. On Telegraph Avenue he posed with his skateboard like a cane between two police women in riot gear. The cops looked patient.
The boy smiled. Hank used to be so jealous of good looking kids like that.

There was a whole roll from a day at the beach, maybe in Santa Cruz. There were individual shots of each family member in profile at sunset on the beach. Like the sun was talking to them. Corny. The boy wore an old "Possessed to Skate" Suicidal Tendencies shirt. Then a shot of the daughter, younger and very monkey-looking, hugging her parents. The boy had taken this picture and Hank was seeing what he saw through the viewfinder.

After that picture, Henry sat with his gun beside him and his back against the turned-on television screen. He held the pictures high so he could see that space behind the sofa. Pictures of old people and the children; the parents younger on a wooden deck with beers in their hands and men and women in t-shirts talking in the background. A red bearded man pointing at something in the trees and smiling. The father with hair hanging down his back dropping sliced tomatoes into a pot. The kids were out of the picture a lot of the time. The family pictures were in albums on a closet shelf in the master bedroom, Henry decided.

The boy had been good looking and happy in California. When he
was at school there Henry sometimes felt that way himself.

Further down in the box the boy got younger, more or less, but the whole time Henry could tell he smoked a lot of dope. No pictures of New Orleans. There was nothing for them in New Orleans because they were refugees from California. This would explain the family’s preternatural beauty and the father’s jewelry making. The boy couldn’t take the meanness of kids down here or sweating all the time. That’s what happens when you leave California for a real place.

He put the pictures away and stuck the gun in his pants to look around the kitchen. The gun knocked against the countertop when he looked in the cabinets. Two health food cookbooks. None of the pages were stained. An older book of home remedies. None of the pages were stained. There was about half a cooked cow in the refrigerator. He stood in the refrigerator door with a plate in his hand. Holding meat gifts from strangers, the Tupperware was stacked high as a dead teenage boy.

“I’m out of here,” Henry said.

He said it like a joke, but the back door wouldn’t open. He jerked on the knob. He kicked the door He felt the refrigerator
behind him and was cursing rather loudly when he saw the deadbolt was locked.

He stumbled to the center of a small, square yard with a low chain link fence. He needed a cigarette. He didn’t smoke, that gives you cancer. But it seemed like the right thing to do in a situation like this. He was sweating. He let the gun fall into his hand and straighten his arm like a plumb weight.

The back door was open. The last, loudest word he had yelled while beating the door was, “Please.” He was talking to the boy in the refrigerator.

He had a hard time with ghosts when he was little. He had told his mother they were in his room when she wasn’t there. She had too much clothes for her closet, and stored the extra in his room. She thought her clothes hanging there in a row looked like people to him in the dark. She turned on the light and ran a hand over the hangers with a harmless smile.

She was so dense sometimes. He knew they were clothes. The ghosts were in the fabric. The ghosts were in toys left out on the floor. Ghosts weren’t dead people until he got older and learned that. The pressure he felt from empty chairs was an invisible dead
person sitting there, by nature of its ghostliness jealous and evil. He had been scared of alligators too.

After alligators and ghosts had come child rapers and body choppers. Child rapers lived in sallow, thin, bearded, divorced men. They were not necessarily karate teachers--do not be fooled. He got his first lesson in guns and molesters in one lesson, watching the news when he was ten. The karate instructor in cuffs, walking between two cops. The molested boy's father in a baseball cap spun away from a pay phone and put a bullet in the molester's head.

"A goddamn .45!" Ronaldo had said in P.E.

"No way, shit breath. A .38," some pale kid had answered.

"Up yours, anus hand. They don't make .38 automatics."

Body choppers lurked out in the highway ditches in the swamp, working with machetes and woodsaws. They were so crazy they thought it was just littering.

And now Henry was 22. On Monday afternoon he, two other men, and a woman had cut open a black man's back to get at the nerve processes. He didn't worry about ghosts in anatomy lab. And is college girlfriend--his only girlfriend, ever--had been raped by her stepfather, and she loved the man. Henry had met him. Despite
himself, Henry thought he was one of the funniest people he had ever met.

He was sitting down cross-legged in the grass now. Putting his fears in order made him feel better, and always sad like this. I'm 22 years old and guarding the house of some kid who shot himself from people who would take advantage of that. That's not scary, he thought. It's just sad.

He went back into the house and closed the door. He looked through the big window behind the TV at where he had just been.

He might as well look in the kid's room.

There were three doors in the hallway. One door was plain. The next, a collage of "You mean he LIKES me?" lines cut from magazines mixed in with skinny girl models hugging each other. At the end of the hall, by the bathroom, was a door with a Grateful Dead poster.

He opened the Grateful Dead door. Two rectangular windows high on one wall like this room was in a basement. Sun would get in here only when it was going down. There was a mattress on a boxspring against one wall, and hand-drawn ivy creeping up the wall in black marker. His artist dad had allowed this, Henry
thought. For flowers the ivy had a peace sign, a pentagram binding a
goose’s head, and a right hand giving the finger. The peace sign was
lopsided, the goat looked like a dog and the hand like Mickey
Mouse’s. But the dead kid hadn’t been bad at roses. He gave up on the
harder fruit for them. Henry imagined a New Orleans picture for the
shoe box on the living room table: the boy shirtless on the bed, his
tongue stuck out the corner of his mouth. He is frozen copying the
rose from the cover of *American Beauty*.

There was no closet door. The boy had been partial to sturdy,
pastel surfer clothes. The shirts in particular had ghosts in them.
But the most haunted was the motorcycle jacket. From the pictures
of the boy Hank guessed the jacket had been way too big for him.
But in the mirror he had filled it.

Henry’s motorcycle jacket hadn’t really fit him until he was 20.
When he was 16 in his jacket he wanted nothing else from the
world, though he had slouched around all pissed off all the time.

The boy’s parents had done a terrible thing. If they knew their
son at all they would have buried him in it.

On the closet floor were plastic crates of t-shirts, black
Converse high tops, very clean Air Jordans, and red Doc Martens. At
the foot of the bed sat a small stereo and a crate of tapes out of their cases.

The boy had given his skateboard to a friend when they moved. New Orleans would be a backward place, friendly but xenophobic. Black people in white t-shirts could walk only on one side of the narrow streets. Storefront porches, old polyester white men playing washboards and accordions. He needed a more somber, less confrontational persona so as not to upset the natives, but one still different enough to fascinate them. So he quit being a skater and became a clean Deadhead.

Henry saw him at McMain Magnet School in a lavender shirt and leather jacket. At lunch a zitty skater in cut-offs shoves him:

"Fuckin California-purple-shirt- wearing faggot!"

The skater in him never died. That was the skater’s pentagram on the wall, his Slayer tapes mixed in with the Dead. But in New Orleans it was too late to switch back to what he was before.

This boy was not a boy. Where were his stroke mags? You can’t stop beating off just because you’re a Deadhead. Henry checked under the mattress. He checked under the boxspring. It was impossible that this kid had nothing to hide.
He was just especially shy. There was something heavy inside the boxspring, bulging against the cobweb-stuff stapled to the frame. He pulled the bed away from the wall and felt for the slit. When he felt what was inside he felt his insides sink.

He put his face in the sheets. "You dumb asshole," he said.

He pulled out the freezer bag of cash, plump with small bills. He hated this evil, green throw pillow. The bagful of money meant this: the kid had been a drug dealer. Henry knew because Ronaldo used to have similar bags hidden around his room. And at Berkeley, Henry had small bills stashed away as well. He used to buy sheets of LSD cheap, send them home to Ronaldo, and Ronaldo would send back a cut of the profits in empty tape cases. To avoid being traced, their letters hadn't said much.

An alarm bell rang. He leaped into a corner and held the money at the door. The gun was on the bed.

"Oh, shit. Oh."

He ran a hand through his hair and put the money and the bed back. It was the doorbell. He trotted into the dining room and dug around for the bullets in his bag. "Just a minute!" he hollered. His fingers were shaking. You're loading a goddamn gun, he thought,
you're going to kill somebody.

He adjusted his grip and put the chain on the door. He opened the door with his left hand and kept his left foot against the door's bottom. The gun was in his right hand, hidden behind the door. He peered out with his left eye.

"Domino's!"

Some stringy white guy with a red square mitten for pizza boxes. He looked exasperated.

Henry cocked the hammer, slow so the guy wouldn't hear. This was not fair. It was not fair for this to happen to him. He pressed the barrel against the inside of the door. He would blast through the wood if he had to.

"I didn't order any pizza," he said.

The man studied a slip of yellow paper "My mistake," he said. He turned and started walking.

"Wait," Hank said. "Wait a minute."

The man looked back over his shoulder. He turned and faced Henry with his feet neatly together. The gun followed him behind the door.

"Let me see the pizza," Henry said.
"You didn't order it. Order if you want a pizza to look at." The man started walking.

"If you work for Domino's, where's your uniform."

The man stood sideways on the walk. "Uniform's dirty."

"Where's your car. I don't see any Domino's cars out there."

The man put the pizza mitten under his arm, light and easy like it was a book. He gave Hank a dry smile. "I guess the car's dirty too." He walked toward a yellow van with a busted tail light parked across and down the street.

Henry closed the door. He pointed the gun at the floor, turned his face away, eased the hammer down. His eyelids fluttered. He hated loaded guns. He was very afraid of them. It was embarrassing good sense.

Standing over his book bag he opened the cylinder to unload it. If he lifted the gun he could see his open notes through the square in the frame. They had been there waiting all this time. Which did he hate more?

He gently pushed the loaded cylinder back into the frame. The gun is loaded. The door of this castle opens only to let you in.

He stuck the gun in the the front of his pants and pulled his
shirt out to hide the butt. He went out front and was relieved to see the van was gone, climbed up the cement wall and the levee. The sun was lower. Light in the boy's room soon. In the canal was still a backwards-green, upside down sky. He hadn't felt so desperate in a long while.

Back inside the house he unloaded the gun and zipped the bullets into the pencil pocket, then buried the gun in the bottom of the bag. He flipped four pages of notes, then went back to the boy's room. He pulled the bed from the wall and got the money.

In the little girl's room there was a purple bookbag on the floor and a high bed with a white down comforter. She had drawn a rainbow on her wall. Her brother had made fun of it; he only spoke to her to make fun. On her dresser was a stack of the magazine with tearful tampon stories. He took one from the middle.

The parent's room had a double bed and two nightstands and a dresser. Henry was so sure there was weed and rolling papers stashed in a cigar box in the nightstand drawer on the right that he didn't even need to check there. The room was anonymous, except for the two boxes stacked in the corner. The one on top was the size of a shoebox for one shoe. It was half full of Zippo lighters
with fake ivory etchings of two men fishing in a stream. The bottom box was a case of Jack Daniel's whiskey. There were no photo albums in the closet.

He put the money and the magazine into his bookbag with the gun. If the kid were dealing acid, his inventory would be in the freezer. Inside there were some lumps in white paper, empty ice-cube trays, and an open pack of corn dogs. He felt along the inside of the box for the foil envelope. Inside were about five hundred-thirty tabs—quite a bit!—marked by a spade with a skull inside.

"Motorhead acid!" He said, "Kids these days..."

They came home a little after five and found him studying at the table, with his backpack sitting closed in the chair to his left. They had brought home an enormous, red man. In the shoebox pictures he had an orange beard and pointed at trees.

"Normally I'm a vegetarian," the red man said. He went into the kitchen and Henry heard the refrigerator open and Tupperware come out. "Moo Moo Moo," the red man said.

Henry looked at the mother, father, and girl. The girl chewed the inside of her cheek. She had felt ashamed of her clothes at the funeral, he decided. She wanted to go to her room but was scared to
be alone right now. The mother and father were smiling at the Red Man for Henry. Their eyes were very red but they weren’t done crying. The Red Man embarrassed them to make them smile. After Henry left he would be even sillier, but the mother and father would start really blaming themselves tonight.

Henry held his binder under his arm and slung the backpack to one shoulder. The pack felt obscenely bloated. His binder wasn’t even in it. They had to wonder. He backed toward the door.

"You’re not hungry?" The father asked.

"I’m stuffed," Henry said. He felt behind him for the knob and opened the door.

"We have plenty of food."

"No, really, my ride’s coming."

The father’s lips were parted. He moved toward him. "It wouldn’t be any trouble--"

"No." Henry backed to the edge of the lawn. He smiled to be polite. "My ride is coming."

He waited on the corner for the hearse. He rode with the backpack between his feet and wondered why he had filled it with cash, drugs, a gun, and teenage girls.
"You okay?" Ronaldo asked.

"Yes."

Ronaldo looked at him, then back at the road. The hearse had no radio and the ride seemed awfully long.

"I can find someone else if this job freaks you out," Ronaldo said. "I think that's natural."

"It doesn't."

"I couldn't do that, sit where someone dead lived. I like dead people where I can see them. But I'm glad you're doing it. I can trust you."

For some reason Ronaldo didn't take him home, but back to the funeral parlor. Henry said nothing when they got inside. Ronaldo talked at him and sat behind his boss's desk. Ronaldo asked what the hell was wrong with him?

Henry placed the acid and the cash on the desk in front Ronaldo. Ronaldo glanced at it, then gave Henry a pleading look.

"How would you like to go back into business?" He said.