This is Normal for People Like Us

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THIS IS NORMAL FOR PEOPLE LIKE US

by Ben Fowlkes

B.A. San Diego State University, 2003

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

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Dean, Graduate School

5-30-06

Date
An Unstoppable Force, An Immovable Object

From the first time we saw the wrestlers on TV, my brother Wayne and I always knew what we wanted to be. Back then we had heroes. They’re all gone now.

El Gigante, of course, died of a heart attack not long after retiring. And Scary Sonny Bam, and Kendo the Samurai, they’re gone too. And I heard that Ludwig Mannix died of an overdose, but then I heard that he was alive and in rehab, so who really knows. There was Country Ray Robinson, who quit wrestling to become a motivational speaker. And Gustav Von Klaus, who did some jail time for missed child support payments. And of course there was Kid Pegasus, the heavyweight champion of the world, who we once thought might save us.

Wayne was thirteen the year I turned ten. He knew all the wrestling moves, even knew how to pull them off without crippling the other guy, the way they looked like they should have. He knew that the key to a good piledriver was timing, that the
German suplex was all about weight distribution. When we practiced in the backyard he would hold me in the air above his head, stretching out the neck of my L.A. Lakers sweatshirt, before bringing me down flat on my back in the grass.

If my reaction didn’t satisfy him he’d pull me up and insist on doing it again.

“You have to hold your back like you’re really hurt,” he’d say as I hitched up my jeans and prepared myself. “We’re going to keep doing this until you learn to sell the move.”

Both of us wanted to be just like Kid Pegasus. We’d try and imitate the way he strutted across the ring, the way he performed his signature move, a flying dropkick called The Hammer of the Gods. On TV we’d study him as he held his championship belt up with one hand, working the crowd into a frenzy. For those few minutes every Saturday, he was perfect, the kind of wrestler we knew we’d be some day. Mornings before school, I used to stand in front of the bathroom mirror and try to imitate his voice.

“Let me tell you something, Jerry Blackwell.” I’d start. I could never think of much to say past that.

Sometimes my brother and I made up our own wrestling moves, or performed slight variations on the old ones. When he wanted to, Wayne could make them hurt.

One afternoon I watched him body slam Arnold Telligman, who lived across the street, so hard that he bounced off his own front lawn. Arnold had made the mistake of telling Wayne and I that we would never be pro wrestlers, that, statistically, the odds were against it. He said it like he thought he was doing us a favor. He didn’t even get to finish the sentence before Wayne had a hold of him.
The slam was perfect, a model of execution. I added an elbow drop after the kid was already on the ground.

“What do the odds say now, genius?” Wayne said, standing above him with his arms raised. I looked over and saw Arnold’s mother come rushing out of the house, her eyes shot wide open in panic.

“What did you do to him?” she shrieked.

She knelt down to where her son was rolling on the ground with his arms crossed over his chest. Wayne looked her right in the eye, his fists still held above his head.

“He called down the thunder.” Wayne said.

I danced around my brother and pointed at his flexed biceps.

“This man is the real deal, people,” I said.

The mother lifted up her son’s head like they do with dying soldiers in the movies. Arnold gulped for enough air to cry as his mother looked up at us and shook her head.

“What is the catastrophe with you two?” she said.

This would have been an easy question for us to answer, but we didn’t say anything. The whole neighborhood already knew by then about our mother, who, two months earlier had packed her things into a free gift duffel bag from Robinson’s-May and left. She did it one day while we were at school. When we got home there was a new pair of dress shoes sitting at the foot of both of our beds, separate hand-written notes resting on top.

*I thought you could use these,* my note said.
I slipped them on and found that they were about a size and a half too big. My feet were lost inside of them. When I walked it was like trying to move through thick mud. It was the first pair of dress shoes I'd ever owned. Wayne just stood next to his bed and looked down at his shoes without touching them. He wouldn't tell me what his note said.

That night Dad sat us down in the kitchen and said that he wasn't sure why she left, but that it wasn't our fault. Wayne and I looked at each other.

"Why would it be our fault?" Wayne said. "What did we do?"

"Nothing. It wouldn't be your fault. That's what I'm saying."

"But then why would you even need to say that?" I asked.

Dad rubbed his eyes as though he were trying to smear them all over his face. I could see the muscles in his neck tightening into thick strings.

"Jesus Christ, I don't know," he said. "I thought it was something you were supposed to tell kids. Forget I said anything."

Our mother had worked a part time job as a stylist at a trendy hair salon downtown. Every couple of weeks she used to make me sit on a stool in the kitchen so she could cut my hair. Afterwards she examined the length, her eyes looking right past me, measuring with the black comb. After she left I started getting my hair cut at the barber shop my dad went to, a place where when they asked how you wanted it cut, they were just being polite.

All that was left of Mom was some makeup she didn’t see fit to take and a half empty pack of Marlboro Lights, which Wayne swiped right away.
Dad told us later that if she couldn’t see how good we all had it, then we didn’t need her around anyway. For the most part, this was as much as he was willing to say on the subject. But Wayne claimed to know exactly why our mother had left: Dad was a loser.

As we stood in our backyard after school one day, he explained it to me as he practiced smoking one of Mom’s Marlboro’s, a new thing he had taken up. He had to work on his technique, he said, before he could smoke in front of the ninth graders. I watched as he tried to gesture loosely with his cigarette hand, teaching himself a disrespect for fire.

“Think about it,” he said, watching the smoke slip from his own mouth and into the air. “Dad isn’t exactly Mr. Excitement. He isn’t Mr. Anything.”

I watched as my brother sucked at the cigarette from the side of his mouth, like some vague criminal. It seemed to give him a new confidence in the things he said.

“But they didn’t even argue. It wouldn’t make sense for her to just leave,” I said.

Wayne gave me a look like I was the biggest idiot he had ever seen.

“A lot of things don’t make sense,” he said. “I read in a book about a guy who was struck by lightning while he was sitting inside a movie theater. Does that make sense?”

“When were you reading a book?” I demanded. “What book?”

“I don’t know. I forget the name of it,” he said, bending down to grind the cigarette out on the bottom of his sneaker. “But you see my point.”
Back then our Dad was the manager of a supermarket near the high school. Sometimes Wayne and I went in there on summer afternoons to wander through the dull drone of the air conditioning and watch the old ladies jump back as the automatic sprinklers came on to mist the vegetables. Without really meaning to we always saw our Dad. He’d be wearing his not-so-white dress shirt and red tie, dark hair slicked down to his head, saying sir and ma’am to all the nobody yahoos of our town.

“It’s called customer service,” he liked to tell us. “And it’s what puts food in your stomachs, so maybe you should pay attention.”

He spent his weekends in the garage trying to restore old typewriters that he found at garage sales. This started when he read something in the newspaper about a man up in San Francisco who made a fortune refurbishing printing presses. He was sure he was on to something, though to my knowledge he never successfully put one back together. Every time I went into the garage all I saw were pieces of typewriters strewn across a work bench, like he was hoping that if he left them like that long enough they might find their own way back together.

“Loser.” Wayne would mouth silently to me when our Dad emerged near the close of a Saturday afternoon, his hands smelling of damp metal and grease.

Wayne told me that our mom did the right thing. He said that as soon as he was old enough, he would leave to join the pro wrestling circuit. When I asked what I was supposed to do if he left me there alone with Dad, he winced and clapped his hand on my shoulder as if he were about to convey a wisdom so profound it pained him.

“Tough titty,” he said. “That’s the way it goes.”
They called it *Ultimate Destruction,* and announcer Jerry Blackwell promised it would be “the pinnacle of pain, the summit of submission.” We first saw it advertised on the Saturday afternoon wrestling show, and for the next month it was all we could think about.

Each week they announced new matches: the clean-cut, all American Erickson brothers against the hated Moscow Connection; Country Ray Robinson in a steel cage match against Scary Sonny Bam; the heartless Gustav von Klaus against Dan E. Dangerously, to settle their long and bitter rivalry. But the main event, the match we’d known was inevitable, featured our hero Kid Pegasus against the dreaded Colossus.

It wasn’t that we didn’t have faith in the Kid. In the time we’d been fans, we’d seen him do some amazing things. He once beat both Erickson brothers in a handicap match that lasted over an hour. He escaped from Kendo the Samurai’s Bonzai sleeper hold – a feat never before accomplished.

But Colossus was no ordinary wrestler. He was like a force of nature.

Colossus came down to the ring each Saturday wearing plain black tights, no expression on his broad face. He stood nearly seven feet tall and moved like a pillar of stone. He fought without joy, sometimes beating on his opponents long after the match had ended, until they had to be carried away on a stretcher. Even our Dad would stop and watch when he passed through the room and Colossus was on.

“That is one big son of a bitch.” he’d say, and then continue on his way back to the garage.
Wayne and I both knew that this would be Kid Pegasus’ toughest test yet. *Ultimate Destruction* was the event of a lifetime, one that no true fan could miss. The problem was they didn’t give away that kind of action for free. It was $29.95 on pay-per-view, something our Dad didn’t take well to.

“Let me get this straight,” he said that night, leaning over his microwave dinner. “You want me to pay thirty dollars to see some fruits run around in tights and pretend to fight each other?”

“What’s a fruit?” I said.

“You know what I mean, smart guy. A queer, a fag.”

Wayne slumped down in his chair. I watched as his face grew dark.

“They aren’t fags,” he said. “They’re athletes.”

“Sure they are,” said Dad. “I’ll bet they’re all great athletes. they just enjoy running around like queers for fun.”

Wayne jammed his fork down into his congealed mashed potatoes. The plastic TV dinner tray made a cracking noise.

“You’re a queer.” Wayne said. It was the best he could come up with. Dad turned his eyes toward the ceiling like he was praying for some divine patience.

“You’re worse than a queer,” Wayne continued. “You’re a loser.”

Dad glared at him.

“This is where you want to be careful what you say,” he told Wayne in a low voice. “This is where you want to be very careful so you don’t find yourself in a whole lot of trouble.”
Wayne turned and shot me a look across the table, one that begged me to say something, to back him up. I didn’t even open my mouth. Wayne dropped his fork into his vegetable side dish and pushed away from the table. Once he had Dad and I sat alone together in silence. We didn’t look at each other. I tried to think of something to say, but nothing came. Our Dad wasn’t a bad man, just unlucky. He was the kind of man who might have been all right if he had been a different person altogether.

When I gave up on finding any words I got up to leave the table. He reached out and grabbed me by the arm.

“I’m doing the best I can,” he almost whispered. “You can see that, right? Tell me you can see it.”

“I can see it.”

He loosened his grip and I started to ease away.

“You’re a good boy,” he said as I left. “You’ve always been a good boy.”

The week of *Ultimate Destruction*, Wayne and I shuffled around in a haze. As the wrestling event of a lifetime grew nearer all hope that we might get to see it drained away. We’d tried to pool our resources, only to find that they amounted to a total of $12.35. At school the other boys were talking about it, making plans. Even Arnold Telligman was getting it, or so we heard. Wayne suggested we go over there one afternoon and ask if we could watch it at his house.

Arnold was standing in his driveway throwing a tennis ball against his garage door, and when he saw us walking up he froze and glanced over his shoulder at the
living room window. Wayne tried to explain what we wanted, and what we were willing to give for it.

“We want to be your friends,” he said. “We’ll make sure no one messes with you.”

Arnold tore at the yellow fuzz of the tennis ball, his eyes darting between the two of us.

“You were the only ones who ever messed with me,” he said.

“Well, we won’t anymore,” I offered.

He turned and looked back at his house again. Somewhere inside was his mother, doing motherly things. He seemed to be considering the offer.

“I couldn’t.” he said. “My Mom wouldn’t let me. She says you guys are troubled.”

“Troubled?” I said. What the hell was that supposed to mean? I waited for Wayne to say something, to tell him what he could do with troubled, but he just turned and headed back across the street to our house. I stood there with Arnold watching him. Then I grabbed Arnold in a belly-to-belly slam and drove him into the grass beside his driveway. When we hit the ground, me on top of him, I could feel everything drain right out of him. It surprised me that I didn’t feel any better afterwards.

Then it was the day of the event. We spent the afternoon lying around the house, draped over the furniture in various poses of despair. When our Dad passed
through the room on his way in or out of the garage we made hopeless pleas to his back. He told us to go outside and play.

“Don’t kids play baseball anymore?” he said. “Or am I going crazy here?”

I followed my brother out into the backyard where he smoked the last of Mom’s leftover Marlboros. He didn’t seem to have any fear that Dad would smell it and come out there. He puffed on it until it had burned down to the filter. We exchanged looks through the smoke, confirming what I suspected: this was the worst day of our lives.

About an hour before it started, they showed an advertisement for it on the TV. Colossus was standing in the locker room, already dressed in his black tights, pointing at the camera with a gigantic, gnarled finger. Dad was coming out of the garage at the same time, and he stopped in the doorway when he saw us fixed on the television.

“What will happen,” announcer Jerry Blackwell’s voice boomed on the voice over. “When the unstoppable force meets the immovable object?”

I followed Dad into the kitchen, watched him as he collapsed into a chair by the window. Then I went over and sat down next to him, but he wouldn’t look at me.

“That big bastard is going to kill the blonde guy you two like so much,” he said. This was the first time he’d ever let on that he knew anything about wrestling.

“Maybe not,” I said. “You don’t know.”

“No, I do. He’s going to roll right over him.”

He turned and looked at the window. Outside were all the little houses of our neighborhood, all the miniature lives spinning away from one another.
“What am I supposed to do here? I tell you I really don’t know. How did we end up like this?” he said, sounding like he just wanted to hear what the words would sound like out loud.

“We’re troubled.” I said. “That’s how.”

“Troubled?” he said. A small smile pushed up on the corner of his lip.

“Where’d you hear that?”

I told him about Arnold, about his mother. I told him what we’d done to Arnold, what I’d done even when I knew I shouldn’t have, and then I watched as his face went flat and the smile disappeared.

“Well,” he said. “Maybe they can all kiss our ass. How about that?”

_Ultimate Destruction_ started right on time. Dad sat on the middle of the couch, with Wayne and I laid out on the carpet in front of the screen. Over the course of the next three hours I kept waiting for Dad to make one of his usual remarks about wrestling, maybe asking why no one ever got bruised or bloodied after they punched each other in the face all night, but he didn’t.

What I remember now about that event was how everything seemed so perfect. Each match had its own highs and lows, its own climax. You could feel it building.

I remember Gustav von Klaus sneaking outside the ring to grab a steel chair when the referee wasn’t looking, which he never seemed to be when it mattered, and then hitting Dan E. Dangerously with it so that the smack filled the arena and knocked Dan out cold. After the match, when Jerry Blackwell asked von Klaus if he
was concerned for Dangerously's health after such a vicious attack, the big German responded, “Let no man enter ze ring with me, who valuez hiz own life.”

I remember Ludwig Mannix, even after his manager, Ernesto, tried to interfere on his behalf. Finally submitting to the figure-four leg lock of Scary Sonny Bam. I remember the steel cage match between Kendo the Samurai and Country Ray Robinson, where Robinson was choked out by the Bonzai sleeper, but then somehow came to in time to prevent Kendo from leaving the cage and winning the match. I remember the Erickson brothers winning a surprise victory over the Moscow Connection, with a little outside help from the very patriotic Corporal Punishment.

“This is unbelievable,” Wayne said to me.

Then the main event started and we fell silent. They played the Viking horn blast of Kid Pegasus’ theme music as he headed for the ring. Colossus came out in his slow walk, swinging his giant arms.

“It could be a rough night against a giant like that,” Dad said, speaking his first words since the event had started. Wayne snapped his head around.

“Kid Pegasus is the best in the business,” he said. “No one can beat him.”

“Sure,” Dad said. “But that guy could probably crush Kid Pegasus’ head with one hand if he wanted to. I don’t care how good he is.”

The match started off badly for Kid Pegasus. As soon as the bell sounded Colossus came across the ring and grabbed him by the throat, lifting him off his feet and tossing him into a corner. The camera moved in to a tight shot of the Kid’s face as he lay against the ropes, and his eyes betrayed the first hint of self-doubt. Colossus
laughed, smacking his hands together as if to dust them off. Kid Pegasus pulled himself together and charged at the big man.

“That’s right,” I yelled at the television. “Kill him!”

Kid Pegasus flailed away at Colossus, pounding his body with both fists, but it seemed to make no difference. With one backhanded smack Colossus swept him out of the way and off his feet again. The crowd moaned.

“I hate to say it, wrestling fans,” Jerry Blackwell said into his ringside microphone. “But it’s hard to see how Kid Pegasus might win this match.”

But just then the Kid seemed to figure it out. This time when he attacked, he moved in quickly, jumping up to punch Colossus squarely on the jaw, then flying out of the way of any counter attack. The crowd rose to its feet, cheering on this new strategy, and Kid Pegasus danced around the behemoth with dizzying strikes.

The match went on like that, back and forth, until both men’s chests were heaving and bright with sweat beneath the arena lights. Things threatened to take a terrible turn when Colossus lifted Kid Pegasus over his head, holding him there as though he were a child, and then threw him out of the ring. On the TV we could hear the wet smacking sound of the Kid’s back hitting the floor.

“It’s over for him now,” Dad said when Colossus dragged him back into the ring.

On TV Colossus had Kid Pegasus flat on his back in the center of the ring, and he was preparing to land his trademark elbow drop to the Kid’s chin. Colossus bounced himself off the ropes, the usual setup, but just before he landed it he stopped and gave
an evil smile to the camera. He shook his head no, still smiling, and went back to bouncing off the ropes, picking up momentum.

“What is he doing?” said Dad. “He has him beat, why doesn’t he finish him?”

But Colossus kept bouncing off the ropes, twice, three times, and then on the fourth he moved in for the elbow drop, only to have the Kid roll away at the last second. Wayne and I jumped to our feet, slapping each other five, and the audience went crazy in the aisles.

“Never in my life have I seen a match like this one.” shouted Jerry Blackwell.

Dad crossed his arms in front of his chest and lowered his chin. Wayne pumped his fist in the air. Colossus began to rise to his feet, and Kid Pegasus tried to stomp him back down, but it didn’t help. Pretty soon he was all the way up, and the Kid flung himself off the ropes, flying through the air with his feet raised for the dropkick, the Hammer of the Gods. This was it. The finishing move to end all finishing moves. It drilled Colossus in the chest, only he didn’t go down. He staggered back a few steps, then regained himself. We watched as he grabbed the Kid by the throat and lifted him off his feet.

“Oh, God,” Wayne said, all in his throat.

When Colossus went to slam him it seemed to take forever. this slow falling down to the mat. The arena was oddly quiet when he hit, making a deep thump like someone dropping heavy rocks into a lake. One look at Kid Pegasus lying still on the canvas, and we knew it was over. Colossus put one hand on his chest while the referee finished the count. Wayne and I stood there in the living room long after it was over.
“Sorry, guys,” Dad said from the couch. “He’ll probably win it back next week.”

But I knew he wouldn’t. Even if he did, it wouldn’t matter. Wayne and I didn’t say anything to each other that night as we lay in our beds across the room from each other. Through the door we could hear Dad shuffling off to his room alone. Somewhere outside a dog barked and another answered. In his bed Wayne was a dark lump, unmoving. We were all hurtling fast towards something, but I couldn’t say what.
The Center

After lunch Carla goes to Group. There, if she’s lucky, it will be the Good Doctor presiding over the session. He’s the one who leans his jaw into the triangle of his thumb and forefinger, threatening to tell the same joke about the piece of rope that walks into a bar if no one volunteers to speak first. If she’s not lucky it will be the Other Doctor, the one who crosses his legs and taps his pen against the hard sole of his shoe when he wants you to stop talking so he can tell you exactly what your problem is. Carla’s problem, the Other Doctor says, is her inability to admit to her addiction. When talking to Carla about her weight problem, the Other Doctor loves to use the word addiction. He spits the word at her, balling it up like a fist to hit her with.

“I just like to eat,” Carla says. She says, “Doesn’t everyone?”
She looks around at the other patients in Group, mostly anorexics who stare back at her with skulls like hollow bowling bowls. This really gets to the Other Doctor. It makes him turn his head up to the ceiling and fill his cheeks with air.

“All right,” he says, like he’s writing her off forever.

But not the Good Doctor. The Good Doctor eats it up. Carla has seen the way he has to bend his face into his palm to hide his smile. He is a man who appreciates a good joke at the expense of others, especially when the others are the skeletons who make up the majority of the patients in residency at The Center.

Carla’s been in the Center for almost three weeks now. In that time she’s lost only eleven pounds, but losing weight isn’t so much the point of The Center. The point is to get to the root of the problem, to dig it out. That’s why she’s here. To dig out her problem and find the skinny person who is lurking underneath it, the one who’s been there all her life, hidden under the enormity of that problem.

“The key is discipline,” says Carla’s roommate, a nervous girl with stringy blonde hair. She sits cross-legged on the bed across from Carla’s and chews on the tips of her fingers. Carla sits very still and tries not to stare at the bones poking out of the girl’s shoulders.

“Some people say you have to think about something else and take your mind off it,” the girl says, “but I don’t do that. I focus on it. I tell myself. You are not eating today, and that’s that.”

Carla nods her head like she’s taking all this in. Like this is actually useful advice.

“If you’ve got such discipline,” Carla says, “then why are you here?”
The girl leans back on her palms, her elbows looking like they might snap at any moment, even under the nothing weight of her Auschwitz-survivor frame.

“I’ve got too much discipline for my own good,” she says. “My discipline is killing me, so they say.”

Carla nods and tries to look sympathetic. Whoever paired them together as roommates must be really pleased with themselves right about now.

There are four others like Carla in The Center. Fatties, she calls them privately. Every patient in The Center is either a Fatty or a Skinny, all of them trying to change places to some degree, though no one seems to appreciate the irony. One of the Fatties is a man named Warren who Carla met her first week in. He told her he was somewhere in the neighborhood of five hundred pounds, though he didn’t keep an exact total because it fluctuated depending on the season.

“This place is it for me.” Warren had told her. “The last stop before I have to have the surgery, the one where they slice your stomach down to a teacup.”

He rubbed his hands over his knees and nodded to himself. Carla pictured him stretched out in a room of his own. There weren’t any male Skinnies to keep him up at night pacing floor, telling him how he could go about starving himself almost to death. Warren asked her if she had any questions about how to get along in the place, her being new and all. She thought hard but couldn’t come up with anything.

“Sorry,” she said to him.

“It’s probably just as well,” he sighed. “I don’t think I could have come up with any convincing answers anyway.”
For dinner Carla eats steamed vegetables with wild rice and a small sliver of something that was probably once fish. She eats it in the cafeteria off a plastic plate and thinks about the best moments of her life and how they’re all connected to food. It’s an exercise the Good Doctor suggested to her during a one-on-one session last week.

First to come to her mind is a Fourth of July barbeque her parents had when she was twelve. She remembers the sweat on the back of her thighs, making her stick to the plastic chaise lounge. She remembers hot dogs and the buttery sweetness of corn-on-the-cob. She remembers her uncle, a big man with a deep laugh, sidling up to her father at the grill with his plate out, saying he was about one hamburger away from happiness.

“Well, I don’t want to stand in your way then,” her father said with a worried smile burned into his face. Even then he could see that Carla took after that side of the family. The Fat Gene, they called it with a wistful horror.

Later, when it got dark, her father walked with her up the small hill in back of their house so they could watch the fireworks being set off at the high school. He hugged her close as they sat together and told her that she shouldn’t worry about what anyone said, he thought she was as beautiful as they came.

What surprises her now is that at the time she didn’t realize how strange it was. They hadn’t been talking about beauty. She hadn’t been aware of anyone saying anything about her in the first place. What was he talking about? She considers using the payphone in the Common Area to call her father and ask him,
remember that Fourth of July? What the hell was that all about? But it would only lead to questions about how she’s doing there, how much weight she’s lost.

When the meal ends she’s still as hungry as when she sat down and she can’t remember for the life of her what the point of that exercise was supposed to be besides to making her feel like something stuck under the bottom of someone’s refrigerator.

In their room alone at night, the lights off, Carla’s roommate asks her what she wanted to be when she was little. Carla stares at the pale shadows on the white ceiling. Her stomach is empty and rumbling.

“I don’t know,” she says. “What kind of question is that?”

It just comes out that way and she can’t stop it. Afterwards it’s quiet and she can hear the girl breathing. She considers apologizing, but doesn’t.

“I wanted to be a ballerina,” the girl says. “I saw them once on a school field trip. I thought it looked like the perfect life.”

The girl waits for Carla to say something, who knows what. In places like this, Carla has learned, people perfect the art of acting like they’re listening when they’re really thinking about what to say next. It’s how you can spot these people out in the real world, the way they make statements that sound like questions. The girl waits for Carla to throw something in there so she can keep talking, but when Carla doesn’t oblige she goes on anyway, picking up the slack.

“I thought, looking at those ballerinas, that they had everything. I thought, if I can just get there, you know? But I guess it’s easy for someone else’s life to look that way, isn’t it?”
“Maybe.” Carla sighs. “But let me tell you, it’s easy for it to look pretty damn bad, too.”

At Group the next day it’s the Good Doctor, saying that the key is to locate a goal, something to drive towards. He says that this is how you arrive at recovery.

“Carla,” the Good Doctor says, fixing his eyes on her. “What’s your goal? What do you want to do when you leave?”

She takes a moment to look around the room. The dull, sunken faces. Twenty-something girls who put their own hair in their mouths and look at the floor. They couldn’t care less how she answers the question. But the Good Doctor, he’s waiting. He really seems to want to know.

Through the window Carla can see an airplane leaving a thin white line behind it as it cruises through the sky. She concentrates on it, avoiding the Good Doctor’s eyes and everyone else’s too, though she knows they’re all looking at her now. She imagines the pilot of the plane – a man – taking off and landing each day, leaving and then coming home to his wife. She imagines that she is that wife, watching him in the sky all afternoon, watching that thin white line to make sure he’s safe. As if it matters that she watches. As if she could do anything about it.

“What I want to do,” she says finally, “is to be the kind of person who never would have come here in the first place.”

“Oh, Carla,” says the Good Doctor, all in his throat. The disappointment is all over his face, the last of the true believers.

“I want to be the kind of person who leaves and doesn’t feel bad,” she says.
It's only after she's said this that she realizes how much she really means it.

Out the window the white line has disappeared behind the plane, sucked back into the blue. If she hurries, maybe she can get outside in time to see the last of it before it fades away. It's surprising how fast it can happen.
Dell watched his son from the kitchen doorway and tried to figure the odds that the boy might not be his. He knew it wasn’t something he should be thinking about, but he couldn’t help it. Connor sat slouched in the recliner, staring at the TV. The blue lights flashed across his eyes, a numb look all through his face. He was twelve years old and on these weekends they spent together in Dell’s new place outside of Pasadena, he was always a million miles away. Is this what he’d been like at that age. Dell wondered. Wouldn’t he have been outside right then, playing sports, getting into some minor trouble? Wasn’t he at least a little bit reckless?

Dell had read an article about this kind of thing once. Something like thirty percent of men were unknowingly raising children who weren’t theirs. Not that he had any specific reason to suspect Andrea, at least not when they were still living in the same house, but thirty percent. It happened, was the point.
They had been separated for four months by then. The actual divorce was coming, or else it wasn’t. The whole thing was still unclear. Dell felt pretty sure that she didn’t want to go through with it, that she was just trying to scare him. That weekend, when she’d brought Connor over to stay with him, he could see it in her face. She looked tired, like she was wearing down. She told him not to let Connor sit around all weekend and her voice sounded like it was running out of gas.

Just say so, Dell thought, and we can forget all of this. But she didn’t.

“Have him back by seven on Sunday,” she said, and then left. He’d watched her go and wondered if there was anything so totally unforgivable between the two of them. The only thing he could come up with was Connor, who didn’t resemble him in any way. It still seemed impossible that he wasn’t really Dell’s. But then that’s probably what those thirty percent thought, too.

He tried to put it out of his mind. It was Sunday afternoon. He walked over behind the recliner and reached down to grab Connor’s ear, twisting it gently.

“Quit it,” Connor said.

“What are you watching?” Dell said.

“Some cop show.”

“Sounds like you’re really into it.”

“I think this guy’s about to confess.”

On the screen a man in a dress shirt and loosened tie looked close to tears. He stared down at his folded hands in his lap and Dell couldn’t hear what he was saying.

“Let’s go do something outside,” Dell said out of nowhere. “Get out of the house a little and play some ball before you have to go back to your mother’s.”
“Or we could not do that,” said Connor.

“One quick game, then I’ll leave you alone.”

“Is there any chance of you leaving me alone anyway?”

“No,” said Dell.

Connor looked up at him and then back at the TV. “That’s disappointing to hear,” he said.

“Get your shoes on and let’s go,” Dell said.

The hoop was a fiberglass thing attached to a plastic base that Dell kept at the edge of the driveway. He’d bought it back when he first moved to his own place, hoping it would entice Connor to come over more. If it had ever worked, he couldn’t tell. The two of them took turns shooting jumpshots from various points in the driveway until Dell suggested they go one-on-one. Connor didn’t complain, which Dell took to be a good sign. He was starting to feel good about the whole thing, and he even let Connor go by him for the first two baskets before he got serious.

The third time Connor drove to the hoop and Dell jumped up to block his shot. He deflected it just enough to make it bounce off the rim and when he came down with the rebound he reached back and smashed Connor’s nose with his elbow. The boy dropped straight to the pavement, covering his nose as the blood dripped down his arms.

“Damn,” Dell whispered to himself between breaths.

Connor moaned loudly into his hands and rolled onto his back. Dell turned him over so the blood wouldn’t drip down his throat. He hadn’t meant to hit him at all, hadn’t even seen him there. It had happened so fast and he knew how hard it
must have been because he could feel a slight ache in his elbow. He tried to get
Connor to move his hands so he could see how bad it was. The blood was
everywhere, dark spots of it on the concrete.

“That might be broken,” Dell said, though with one look he could tell there
was no maybe about it. Connor’s nose had practically been relocated to the other side
of his face. This was bad. Hospital emergency room kind of bad. He went inside
and wrapped some ice cubes in a hand towel. Connor was kneeling on the pavement
and swearing to himself when Dell came back outside and pressed the towel to his
face.


Dell didn’t know he ever used these words, but of course he did. The boy
didn’t exactly live in a church colony.

“It’s all right,” Dell told him as he helped him up and into the car.

“Fuck, goddammit,” Connor said, crying.

In the emergency room they had to wait nearly forty-five minutes, which,
when Dell got up to tell it to a nurse, he changed to an hour. They gave him more
forms to fill out, probably only to keep him occupied. They wanted all the
information they could get, though they’d never need to know half of it to fix a
broken nose. He put down what he knew of Connor’s medical history, which wasn’t
much. Andrea usually handled those things. He wrote down her address for their
permanent residence. Force of habit.

Connor sat in the plastic chair with blood all down the front of his shirt and
Dell didn’t know how much more he could stand. A woman who had come in after
them, holding her elbow like it was at worst a sprain, had gone before them. It was a joke.

When they finally called Connor’s name the two of them followed a nurse to a curtained off area of a large white room. She told Connor to sit on the gurney there and then pulled the thin blue curtain shut behind them. The doctor was a tall, lanky kid probably just out of med school. Dell could see he was the nervous type, the kind who smiled at you even when there wasn’t anything to smile about. When he pushed Connor’s nose back into place it made a sick clicking sound. Connor made a noise all in his throat and afterwards Dell felt weak, like his knees might buckle if he had to keep standing there looking at his son with blood all down his shirt.

“That was a bad one, all right,” said the doctor. Then, quietly to Dell, “How’d he manage to do that?”

“We were playing basketball.” Dell said, hoping at first he wouldn’t have to keep talking, but then realizing how stupid it sounded in the way of an explanation for a broken nose. The kid doctor stared at him.

“I caught him with an elbow on accident.” he said.

“An elbow?” the doctor said.

“It got him pretty good.”

The doctor looked over at Connor, sitting on a gurney and holding a plastic disposable ice pack to his nose, staring off at nothing. What was so unbelievable about a kid getting his nose broken by an elbow? The doctor had his lips pressed together in a tight circle, like he was trying to do long division in his head.

“Go ahead and ask him if you don’t believe me,” Dell said.
The kid doctor snapped his head back toward him.

“I didn’t say I didn’t believe you,” he said.

“When you look at someone that way you don’t need to say it,” Dell said, then he turned to Connor. “Tell him what happened to your nose.”

“What?” Connor said, his voice sounding strange with the ice pack covering his swollen nose, like he had the world’s worst cold. “What are you saying?”

The doctor picked up a clipboard and made some marks with his pen. He mumbled something about the nurse at the front desk, and then he was gone. Dell watched him walk away and thought about following him so he could let the guy know just what he thought about his less than subtle implications. But that wouldn’t help anything. Connor jumped off the gurney and Dell watched him examine the specks of blood on his shoes.

They walked out the long hallway that smelled of bleach and sterilized equipment, and he wondered what the hell he was going to tell Andrea when he brought the boy back covered in blood. It was the kind of thing that might land them in another conversation he didn’t want to have. Andrea had made known her belief that Dell was about as responsible as a coffee table. It was one of her many points when they separated, right up there with his inability to have a conversation like a normal human being and his loose interpretations of monogamy there at the end. He couldn’t really argue with her on most issues. He had regrets, like everyone. But he didn’t look forward to walking Connor up to her door with that swollen nose. Just once it would be nice not to be the one who everyone agrees is the fuck-up of the group.
At the front desk the nurse was an older black woman with dark red lipstick that glowed against her face. She looked over Connor’s sheet and then stared up at Dell. Her lips started to move before any words came out.

“What is it?” Dell said.

“How did your son break his nose again?” the nurse asked.

“I explained this already. You really want me to go over it again?”

“We’d like some clarification of the issue,” said the nurse. Dell knew by the tone she took on that this had suddenly become something different. There were procedures happening in her voice now, clinical sentences that didn’t betray too much. They would probably want to get the child protective services involved in this if they thought he’d been beating up on his own kid, and the whole situation was just stupid enough for them to misunderstand everything and make a big deal of it. They could mess with him in a million different ways if they wanted to.

“I think I’ve made it pretty clear what happened,” Dell said. “So why don’t you just tell me how much I owe so we can get out of here.”

The black nurse looked around. Something in her face said that she didn’t have this in her right now. She wanted some help.

“Maybe we could just have your son talk to us about it for a moment first,” she said. She motioned to another one of the nurses, a large woman with a hard, serious face, who started over.

“No,” Dell said. “We’re done here.”

“I’m afraid,” the nurse started.
"I don’t care what you’re afraid of. We got what we came for, and now we’re leaving."

He turned and put a hand on Connor’s shoulder, guiding him toward the door. Behind him he could hear the black nurse calling him.

"Sir?" she said, and he noticed Connor turning to look at her, trying to put it all together.

He kept moving. He kept his hand on Connor’s shoulder to keep him moving.

"Sir?" she said again, that biting tone. He could feel the other people in the waiting room looking at him. Connor was looking at him, too. Worried and waiting for answers, but Dell didn’t know what to say to him.

"Keep walking," he muttered.

"What does she want?" Connor said in his comic, swollen nose voice.

"Don’t worry about it," Dell said.

In the car Connor leaned his head against the window as they drove. He’d let the disposable ice pack drop down into his lap. Dell looked over at him for so long it felt like he might have an accident. He was constantly amazed by how Connor could look so much like a child still, balled up in the passenger seat, but with the thin outline of a man somewhere in there.

"Where are we going?" Connor said in a distant voice. He could see they were heading the wrong way on the 210, not back to his mother’s house like he expected.

"We’ve got to get you cleaned up," Dell said.

"I just want to go home, all right. I can get cleaned up at Mom’s."
“We’ve got to get your stuff, anyways. All your clothes and your backpack for school are at my place. It won’t take long.”

“Did we leave without paying them or something?” Connor said. “Is that why we had to run out of there?”

“We didn’t run,” said Dell. “We walked, and it’s fine.”

“It didn’t seem fine.”

“Can we let it go, or do you want to talk about it all night?”

Connor made an animal groaning noise and Dell felt an irrational anger warming in his gut. He didn’t know what else to say. They were trying to put the screws to him, and just because he didn’t want to sit there for it didn’t make him the bad guy. He knew he hadn’t done anything wrong. They were playing basketball. for Christ sake.

By the time they got to Dell’s it was dark outside and the house seemed as though it had been cold for years. Even with all his things in there it felt strange to him. He came through the front door and watched Connor shuffle towards the spare bedroom to change clothes, and he was struck by the emptiness of this place. The leather recliner he’d brought over when he moved out, a pea-green couch from a second-hand store in Arcadia, a coffee table with the finish scratched and chipped on one end, plastic plants from the craft store, a plain-looking Goodwill bookcase he’d meant to paint but hadn’t.

Was this supposed to be his home? There was no bachelor charm, like he’d imagined there would be when Andrea asked him to go. back when he was still telling himself it was a good idea. Now all he had to look forward to was having Connor for
the weekends, but he’d even managed to mess that one up. He went back to the spare bedroom where Connor was pulling a clean T-shirt over his head. All his clothes were stuffed in a backpack that he never bothered to unpack when he was there for the weekend. Dell watched him wrestle his arms into the shirt and thought about how he’d felt at the hospital, when the doctor set Connor’s nose. If he could feel like that, then he must be his real father. Only a father could feel that way, he was sure of it.

Connor picked up his bag and looked at Dell watching him.

“What?” he said.

“Nothing,” Dell said. “You almost ready to go?”

“I’ve been ready,” he said.

Dell nodded his head. There wasn’t any sense in putting it off.

They drove back toward Andrea’s place without saying anything. It was full night now and the headlights of the cars on the freeway gave Dell a slight headache. He was almost two hours late in getting the boy home. Connor jabbed at the buttons on the radio, flipping from one station to the next without stopping long enough to figure out what anything was.

When he got to Andrea’s street, the first thing he noticed was the cop car sitting out in front of her house. Right away he remembered putting Andrea’s address down on the hospital forms and then he knew why it was there.

He slowed the car to give himself more time to think. Connor was still playing with the radio and hadn’t noticed it yet. They crept past the house and Dell tried to see inside, but couldn’t make out anything.
“Where are you going?” Connor said when he realized they had passed the house.

“Just relax for a minute,” Dell said.

Connor looked over his shoulder and Dell knew he was looking at the police car, putting it all together. He didn’t know how he’d explain this one. He imagined Connor years from now, telling this story to some high school friends who would think it was hilarious. The day his father took him along while hiding from the cops. He could remember when he was that age hearing those kinds of stories, how they seemed exciting and interesting but you still knew you didn’t want to trade places with that kid. Now that he was that dad he realized the injustice of it all, the way circumstances can pile up.

He circled the block very slowly, and he could feel Connor’s eyes on him. He kept waiting for him to say something, some smart-ass remark, but he didn’t. As they drove the street lights glowed through the windshield. The longer he left Andrea alone in there with that cop, the worse this thing could get. At the end of the block he turned again and headed back to her house. He parked behind the cop car and sat there for a moment, trying to get himself together.

“You did something, didn’t you?” Connor said.

Dell turned to face him. His nose was so swollen now that it seemed to stretch out across his entire face, almost like he was nothing but nose. It made Dell’s insides feel like they were overflowing with something he couldn’t name.

“I don’t know,” he told him. “Maybe I did, but I didn’t mean to.”
Connor sat there in the passenger seat, just looking at him. Dell was almost glad that he didn’t know what the boy was thinking. There wasn’t anything he could say now to try and fix this. He wouldn’t even have known where to start.

“I’m going to go inside now,” Connor said.

“All right.”

“You coming?”

Dell looked past him at the house. The lights were on in all the downstairs rooms, making it look so full, so much more like a life than he’d ever realized when he still lived there.

“Just give me a minute,” he said. “You can go on ahead.”

Connor took one last look at him, like he was taking it all in, then he opened the door and got out. Dell watched him all the way inside. He imagined Andrea’s voice when she heard him come in, her and the cop coming out of the kitchen with coffee mugs held close to their bodies. Even if the cop had only been there five minutes, she would have charmed him by now. He’d be ready to do whatever she wanted. Dell remembered that feeling well enough.

He sat in the car for a little while longer, waiting for someone to come out to him. When no one did he started the car up. He didn’t know how it would look to Connor or to Andrea, him just taking off like this, but he couldn’t seem to get himself to do anything else. He pulled away from the house in a quick jolt before he could change his mind and he headed down the street, accelerating all the way, even though he had no idea where he was going.
Imperial Beach

We got robbed one day in the middle of the afternoon. This was on a Friday, honestly the worst day for something like that to happen. I came home from work and found Mary standing by the kitchen sink, drinking tap water out of a plastic cup. The way her hands were trembling made some of the water slip down the sides of her mouth, pooling on the front of her shirt. I was busy checking out our living room behind her, which looked strange even though I couldn’t say why at first. It took a second for me to realize that it was because our entertainment center was gone, along with my TV and stereo inside of it.

“I think we’ve been robbed,” Mary said when she swallowed the last of the water. She was breathing hard from drinking it so fast. I went into the living room and stood in the spot where our entertainment center used to be. The carpet there looked clean and new. I rubbed at it with my toe and watched the fibers darken.
“That’s quite an assessment,” I said, trying not to get mad. “What would make you think that?”

“Don’t.” Mary said. “This is not the time for you to be an asshole.”

I looked around on the floor to see if my CD’s were still around. They weren’t. Neither was Mary’s ten-speed. Our leather sofa looked like it had been picked up and moved a couple of feet before being set back down again. I walked over to the sliding glass door that led out to the balcony, trying to figure how they got in. Nothing seemed broken or jimmyed open. The thought of some guys coming in there and putting their hands all over our things made me want to beat on them until my arms hurt. The anger warmed my gut and I briefly considered putting my fist through the glass door, just to do something, but I decided against it.

When I turned around Mary was staring at me, the empty plastic cup in her hand.

“I’m not even going to ask if you remembered to lock the door when you left this morning,” I said to her.

“That’s good,” she said. “I’m glad you’re not going to ask me that, because that’s exactly the kind of thing that might really piss me off right now.”

“Does that mean yes or does that mean no?” I said.

“Oh, you fucker,” she said, giving me that squint-eyed look like she wanted to say something genuinely mean, but couldn’t find the words. We stood there watching one another. Her hair was up in a ponytail, and there was nothing kind about the way she was looking at me. In an odd way, this was just the way I liked her: hard and merciless and beautiful, like she could tear your chest open and feast on your heart.
I didn’t press her on the issue of locking the door. Not that I believed she’d done it, because I didn’t, but it wasn’t anything I wanted to get into.

We’d been living together for nearly a year in a little beach town just this side of the border. Our apartment was in a complex right across the street from the beach, so we had the Pacific Ocean for a backyard. Not bad, except that we were so close to Mexico I could have backstroked to Tijuana. It was the only way we could afford to live on the water. In a town that far south there is something strange that happens where it’s as if all of America had been picked up and shaken so that whatever was loose fell down to the bottom. Most people don’t realize it; they think southern California, especially on the water, is all a sun-baked TV kind of life. They don’t know about places like Imperial Beach, where you can hear the guys down at the pizza joint talking about rehab like it’s a vacation resort they frequent a few times each year. They don’t know about the billboards all in Spanish or the leering motorcycle gangs cruising the boardwalk or the afternoon break-ins where people lose everything they’ve got.

Like most people there, I’d come from somewhere else. Oregon, to be specific, and it wasn’t as if things like this didn’t happen there, but they had never happened to me. Mary had spent her whole life in San Diego. She grew up speaking Spanish half the time, and it got her a pretty good job interviewing immigrant felons for the Justice Bureau. She was usually the last gringo they spoke to before being deported or imprisoned, and they didn’t have too many nice things to say to her.

“It’s a shame,” she used to tell me, “that more people don’t take advantage of that right to remain silent.”
I started wondering if the robbery might have been directed at her, payback from some disgruntled interviewees she’d come across, but I wasn’t stupid enough to say that out loud.

After looking around for a while I started to make a mental list of what we’d lost. The list included my TV, stereo, the entertainment center, our CD’s, Mary’s bike, our vacuum cleaner, microwave, digital camera with our photos still stored on it, a Gatorade bottle filled with probably fifty dollars in spare change, the ancient computer that we never used, our nicer steak knives, and our cordless telephone with built-in answering machine.

This last one really had an effect on me. I didn’t realize it was even missing until I asked Mary why she hadn’t called the cops as soon as she got home and she pointed at the empty space on the wall. This is too much, I thought. What kind of people would want our phone and answering machine? Who were we dealing with?

I went back and checked out our bedroom. Mary hadn’t wanted to look by herself. Apparently she’d been standing around waiting for me to get home, too scared to move from the kitchen.

She followed me down the hallway. I looked around casually for clues, though I didn’t know what they might be or what I’d do with them if I found them. When I flung open the door to the bedroom and saw the wreckage inside, I felt everything inside me sink. Mary made a little noise in her throat, like she’d just dropped a crystal vase and was waiting for it to hit the floor. Our clothes were strewn across the floor, along with our shoes and underwear and books and a million little things we’d forgotten that we had. A little tube of Krazy Glue, an empty Scotch tape
dispenser, a giveaway duffel bag from a Padres game. It looked as if they’d gone through the room in a frantic tear.

I tried to sort through it all at first, then gave up and sat down on the bed. Next to my feet, buried under one of Mary’s sweaters, was an old baseball glove that I hadn’t seen since we moved in. It was from a night softball league I used to play in, back before I even met Mary. I’d almost forgotten about it entirely. I picked up the glove and pressed it to my face, breathing it in. It smelled like every old baseball glove in the world, that mixture of dirt and grass and smooth leather. A goddamn wonderful smell.

It occurred to me that the only reason I was smelling this was because the thieves didn’t take it. Whoever robbed us went through that room, picked up the glove and then tossed it aside. When I thought about it, this seemed almost worse than if they had taken it, though I couldn’t exactly put my finger on why.

The nearest payphone was at the supermarket a few blocks away. I decided to drive down there and call the police. Mary insisted on coming with me. Nothing I could say, she told me, would convince her to stay there alone. She waited in the car while I made the call, which turned out to be an utterly useless idea. The woman answering the phones at the police station told me that she could send someone by in a few hours to fill out a report.

“A few hours?” I said.

“It’s a pretty standard response time for this sort of thing,” the woman said.
"Are they walking here from the police station?" I said. "Do they have to take the bus? What happened to those cars with the lights on top that I'm always seeing around town?"

"Yours is not an emergency situation," the woman replied. "We have to prioritize our calls by importance."

It was four-thirty in the afternoon. I took the phone away from my ear to listen for police sirens rushing off to stop murderers and rapists and counterfeiters, but I didn't hear anything. I said so to the operator.

"We'll get to you as soon as we can, sir," she sighed.

The people in this town, I thought as I slammed the phone down. Even the cops were bums.

Back in the car I squeezed the steering wheel in my hands and stared straight ahead.

"What'd they say?" Mary asked.

"They told us to get fucked," I said.

"You're telling me that those were their exact words?" Mary said.

"They might as well have been," I said.

"Let's start this conversation over," said Mary.

I leaned down and pressed my forehead against the steering wheel. Mary was in the passenger seat, staring at me and waiting for answers. I didn't have any.

Things were starting to pile up. I began to wonder which of us had lost more in the robbery. The leather sofa was hers, and that was still around. The TV, the stereo, the
entertainment center as a whole, those were all mine, all gone. And again I thought of the door, which I just knew she hadn’t locked.

We sat in the car in the parking lot of the supermarket. People just getting off work were pushing shopping carts around in their work clothes. It could have been a nice afternoon. The sun was just starting to slip down toward the ocean.

“What do you think they did with our stuff?” I said to Mary.

“Be serious,” she said.

“I am serious,” I said. “You think they took it home with them, put it in storage somewhere, what?”

“I don’t have any idea where you’re going with this,” she said.

I imagined these robbers, some Mexicans, driving around town in a van loaded with our things, my TV rattling around on the bare metal floor. I knew they probably weren’t taking our stuff home with them to furnish their own apartments. Odds are, they’d want to get rid of stolen property as quick as they could, sell it and get whatever cash they could. I thought of our stuff sitting in one of the crowded little pawn shops that lined the main streets of the town beside convenience stores and Mexican dance halls. Just thinking about it made me mad. You couldn’t just do that to people, come into their home and steal their things. Who did that? Who got up in the morning with that as their goal? Did they kiss their wife and kids on the way out the door, make jokes about being late for the office?

I’ll bet they did. I’ll bet they thought it was real funny. The bastards.

I suggested to Mary that we go have a look in a few of the pawn shops around town. We could see if we could pick out our stuff.
“That’s a terrible idea,” Mary said.

“I don’t think so,” I said. “It sounds better than sitting around and complaining.”

“That’s got to be the worst idea you’ve ever had,” she said. “We need to think realistically here about what we’re going to do.”

But I was in no mood to think realistically about anything. Usually, that meant doing nothing, which I just couldn’t accept right then. I started the car up. It may have been a long shot, but it couldn’t hurt. Worst case scenario, I thought, we go in there and they don’t have our stuff, or at least they don’t have it yet. One thing Imperial Beach wasn’t short on was pawn shops, and they all required some kind of identification to sell things. Maybe they could give us an idea who robbed us. Maybe I could find these people and let them know what I thought of their career choice.

The first place we went was out by the freeway, and it was no help. The large, bearded man who ran the place told me that he didn’t buy any stolen property. I said maybe he’d misunderstood me. I wasn’t accusing him of anything. The guy smiled and leaned across the counter. He looked like John Goodman, only meaner.

“Should I repeat myself?” he said. “Because I thought I was pretty clear the first time.”

The next place went the same way, only this time with two Arabs who laughed uncomfortably at everything I said, like their English wasn’t good enough to recognize a joke and they didn’t want to take a chance at missing one and seeming
hostile. When I came out of there Mary was leaning back in the passenger seat with her eyes closed.

“T’m tired,” she said when I got in the car.

“I realize that,” I said.

“This isn’t helping anything,” she said. “I know you’re just trying to figure out something to do, and I can appreciate that, but this isn’t the right something.”

“What do you want to do?” I said. “Go home?”

“Why not? We’re going to have to go back eventually. There are things to do in this situation, like talk to the police, for instance,” said Mary.

“I just don’t know if that’s safe,” I said. “I mean, if they got in without breaking anything, and if you’re sure that you remembered to lock the door, then we have to consider the possibility that they have a copy of our key.”

“I can’t believe you,” Mary said. “Again with the goddamned door.”

“I’m just saying,” I said.

“Yeah,” she said. “I get it. Why don’t you just drop me off, all right?”

I took her back to our apartment. We didn’t talk, just drove on past all the little houses and shops of that town. They all looked like they had been cleaned up just for the afternoon, scrubbed down in a hurry to try and fool people who didn’t know better. From down the street I could see our patio. When we got closer I could even see in through the sliding glass door, and it almost surprised me how empty it looked in there, though it shouldn’t have. I pulled into our parking space and kept the engine running.

“You’re not coming inside?” Mary said.
"There's one more place I want to check out," I said.

She stared at me for a long time. I wasn't sure what she was thinking.

"I know you want to find someone to blame for this," she said after we had sat there for a long time in silence. "But this isn't my fault."

"I'm not saying it is," I told her.

"Eventually we are going to have to deal with things," she said. "There's just no way around that, as much as you'd like there to be."

I didn't know what to say to that. I sat there looking straight out the window at the stucco wall in front of our parking space. I knew if I waited long enough. Mary would give up and get out of the car, which she did. She got out and slammed the door so hard that I could hear the glass in the window rattling around. I pulled away as she started up the stairs and I headed for a little place I'd driven past dozens of times without going inside.

I.B. Pawn & Key, said the sign out front. It seemed like a strange combination, or at least it would have been anywhere else.

Inside the place was a cluttered mess. There were huge amplifiers stacked on top of one another, along with keyboards and bass guitars. Against the far wall was a rack of old leather coats. Along the opposite wall was a shelf full of TV's and VCR's. They all looked the same. I weaved my way through the maze of it all and walked up to the front where an old man in a jean jacket was standing with his hands folded on the countertop.

When he asked what he could do for me I told him about the robbery. He winced and shook his head.
"That is a son of a bitch, all right," he said. His hair was dark with bits of gray sneaking into it above his ears. He reached up and ran his hand through it, still shaking his head.

"I got robbed a couple years back," he said. "It was a mess."

"I've been going around looking to see if they tried to sell any of my stuff," I explained.

"Any luck?" he asked.

"Not so far."

He looked down at the countertop and made a face like he was thinking very hard. I looked around at the wall behind him, which was covered in autographed photos of old celebrities. There was nobody too big, mostly old TV stars, but it still seemed strange for a pawn shop. When I asked him about it he smiled.

"Don't think anyone famous would ever come into a place like this, right?" he said.

"I didn't mean that," I said.

"No, I'm just kidding. I used to run a deli, and that's what the pictures are from. See?" He pointed to a photo of one of the A-Team guys whose name I didn't know, and I could see where the guy had written something about the best sandwiches in town.

"So I guess you'd like to know if I bought anything today that might be yours," said the old man.

I told him that's exactly what I wanted to know. He nodded and rubbed a hand through his hair again. The old guy had a kind look to him, like he knew more
than all of us and so could never get angry about our lack of understanding, like he
could never really feel anything worse than pity.

"Suppose I did," he said. "And suppose I told you what it was and who I
bought it from. What would you do then?"

"First I think I’d want my stuff back," I said.

"Bingo. Then what?"

"Then I’d want to find who robbed me," I said. "Maybe pay them back."

The old man smiled and put his hands out in front of him.

"So you see my problem," he said. "However the transaction goes, I’m going
to lose in one way or another. and probably you’ll just wind up getting yourself in
trouble. Knowing that, how could I tell you, even if I did know anything?"

I took a step back and looked at him. That old anger was rising up in my
stomach again, and I had to fight the urge to reach across the counter and grab him by
that denim jacket. He was just an old man, but I couldn’t stand the thought of him
just shutting me down like that. I turned and walked over to the shelf of TV’s. I
looked around at all of them, trying to spot mine. I wasn’t sure what brand it was, but
I knew it was there. I scanned the TV’s and then I closed my eyes. I could feel it all
piling up and it was getting to be too much. When I opened them I saw the medium-
sized grey Sanyo.

"That’s my TV," I told the old man.

"I’m afraid that’s where you’re wrong," he said. "I’ve had that one for
weeks."
“No, you haven’t.” I said. “You haven’t had it for weeks because it’s mine and it was stolen today.”

I reached up and pulled it off the shelf. It was heavy, the way TV’s are always heavier than you think they should be, but I cradled it in my arms and stepped back with it.

“If you’re saying you’d like to purchase that TV. I’m going to need one hundred and thirty dollars,” the old man said.

I acted like I didn’t hear him and started walking toward the door. There was no way I was going to pay for my own TV. Not when the guy wouldn’t even be straight with me about it. If it wasn’t for people like him buying stuff they knew was stolen, I wouldn’t have to worry about people breaking into my apartment.

The old man called after me and told me I was making a mistake. I got to the door and tried to push it open with my shoulder but it wouldn’t go.

“I can’t let you take that TV,” the old man said. He had his hand under the counter and I realized then that he probably had a lock switch under there for just this kind of occasion.

“Open the door,” I told him. I could feel my face getting hot and red.

“There are a number of ways this thing can go,” he said. “What you want to do is put the TV down, then I’ll open it and you can go.”

Another day I might have done it. Probably any other day.

What I did instead was heave the thing as hard as I could through the glass in the front window. It was easier than I expected. The glass shattered with a loud crack and fell like rain all around. The old man shouted and swore at me. I took one
last look at him before I stepped out and picked up the TV. I didn’t even notice how bad it was broken until I got it into the car. There was a deep scrape on the side and the screen had popped loose in one corner. I threw it into the passenger seat and started up the car.

The old man had come to the window and was shouting something as he looked at it, then looked at me. I could tell he was trying to remember my license plate number. What a mess. He stood out there watching me when I pulled away.

By the time I got back to our apartment it was dark and I could only see the white froth of the waves glowing out in the ocean. I pulled into our parking spot and shut the engine off. For just a moment I wanted to enjoy the quiet. The TV was in bad shape next to me, and I reached over and ran my hand along the battered side. There didn’t seem to be anything left to do but carry it inside. I told myself this over and over. I couldn’t seem to move.
Harris’ father took him on the two hour drive out to the country where they walked around with their shotguns all afternoon and didn’t see so much as a suggestion of quail. It had rained the night before and the meadows they walked through were still soaked with water. It seeped into Harris’ boots and made his toes feel like they were wrapped in mud every time he took a step, but he didn’t say anything. It was the first time his father had brought him along. He got to carry his father’s old Remington over-under twelve gauge, the one with a deep scar in the stock right where his palm rested on it. He didn’t think he could possibly go home without getting to fire it at something. It would be the worst kind of waste.

He followed his father along a row of trees that bordered a small gully. He tried to stay ready. His father had told him how at any time the quail could come fluttering out, dipping and flying in all different directions. They walked carefully
along the tree line but no quail came out. His father straightened up and took off his cap. He was sweating pretty good under there.

"Looks like that rain may have washed out all our quail," his father said, trying to smile. Harris didn’t say anything. He wasn’t in the mood for this.

"Why don’t you walk on down a little ways and see if you can’t flush something out," his father said. "I’ll follow behind you in a minute."

Harris made a small noise of agreement and turned to go. The day was good and hot now and with his father sweating so much Harris could smell the stale alcohol from last night coming through his pores.

When he got to the end of the tree line alone he was one hundred percent sure there were no quail out there. Not even one. Not even a quail that was lost or sick or dead. He rested his shotgun against his shoulder and when he looked up in the sky he saw a single, solitary bird flying. It wasn’t a quail, wasn’t even a bird anybody hunted. It was too small, probably some type of meadow lark. Without thinking he raised his shotgun and fired at it. The bird fell in a slow arc, making little circles in the sky like an old fighter plane getting shot down in the movies. Tailspin. He thought that was the word for it. He couldn’t believe he’d hit it. The whole thing seemed like a mistake.

The bird took a long time to hit the ground. When it did it made the lightest thump in the wet grass a few feet away.

"What are you shooting at?" his father shouted from further down the tree line.
Harris didn’t answer him. He tried to motion for his father to stay there, that it
was nothing, but he was already coming over. Harris went and looked at the tiny
bird. He could see the red specks on its breast where the shot had hit it. Shooting
straight up like that, it probably hadn’t had much force, but it was enough. The bird
was still alive. He could see its chest rising and falling in quick, panicked breaths.

“What the hell is this?” his father said, coming up next to him. “You shoot
this thing?”

“Yes.” Harris said.

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I just did.”

They both looked at the bird, a tiny thing. It was still breathing.

“That was a dumb thing to do,” Harris’ father said. “You know that?”

“I guess.”

“You guess. That’s a great answer, isn’t it?”

His father seemed to be waiting for him to say something else. When Harris
didn’t say anything his father lifted up his boot and stepped on the bird, crushing it.

“Come on,” he said, and started walking back towards the car. Harris
followed behind him. He knew their day was over, and it was his fault. Still, he
didn’t deserve all the blame. It was his father who’d driven them out here where
there were no quail, had them walking around all afternoon like idiots. He was the
one who wanted to pretend like he knew what he was doing out here, wandering all
over like he was a real hunter when there weren’t even any quail. Harris’ feet were
wet and he’d only wanted a chance to shoot at something.
And then a terrible thought occurred to him. If he wanted to, he realized, he could shoot his father in the back of the head and kill him. It wasn’t a thought he could control. It just jumped into his head and wouldn’t leave. He could kill his own father right where he stood. There was nothing stopping him. It was the worst possible thing for him to do and he could do it. He almost felt as if he might do it if he couldn’t stop himself from thinking about it. He pushed the safety in just to make sure he wouldn’t and then he kept his hand over it. When that didn’t seem like enough he stopped and broke open the stock, dumping the unused shell along with the spent one on the ground.

When they reached the car his father opened the trunk and took the shotgun from Harris. He unloaded his own first, then went to do the same with Harris’ and stopped. Harris couldn’t look at him.

“Did you fire one shot or two?” his father said.

“One.” Harris said.

“Then where’s the other one? And where’s the empty?”

He couldn’t think of a good answer.

“I dumped them both out.” he said.

“Both of them?”

His father looked out toward the field, then back at the shotgun. Harris was sure he knew. He knew how awful he was, the things he was capable of. Harris stood and watched as his father put the shotguns away neatly in the trunk, waiting for him to say something, but he didn’t. They got in the car without a word and started it up.
Harris felt like he might get sick except there wasn’t anything inside of him to come up. His father turned and looked at the side of his face as he drove.

“I didn’t mean to yell at you like that back there,” his father said once they were on the highway. Harris stared at the dashboard in front of him.

“I got a little upset,” his father said. “Do you know why?”

“Yes.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure,” he said, though he knew he wasn’t even close to being sure.

“Good, then we can leave it alone now,” his father said.

Harris didn’t say anything during the long ride home. He leaned his face into the glass of the window and the cold surprised him. His father flipped through commercials on the radio as Harris looked out the window at the fading light of the afternoon and knew that he would never be any good to anyone.
We were drinking vodka tonics in an alley bar down by the harbor, waiting for a certain guy to come in so we could beat him up. This was Cruise’s idea. He’d picked me up that night and driven me to this bar, a dimly lit shithole full of cracked vinyl booths and surly, unemployed types. The guy we were waiting for had cracked Cruise’s windshield with a beer bottle the week before. We were going to give him some of the old payback that people always talk about. The revenge beating. A lost art these days. I was along mostly for identification purposes. Cruise had been so drunk the night of the windshield incident he couldn’t exactly remember what the guy looked like. I was slightly less drunk that night, and so my primary job was to point out the guy when he came in. I was only partially confident that I remembered him well enough. I was hoping the guy would have some kind of air about him when he came through the door, the look of a man who deserves a good beating.
While we waited for him we ordered more vodka tonics and drank them down like it was some sort of contest. They tasted vaguely of rust, like water from the garden hose. After every drink Cruise got up to put more money into the jukebox. It had a great selection, complete with CD’s the bartender or waitress or someone had made at home, but you never knew what it would play once you put your money in there. Cruise kept trying it, feeding the thing dollar bills. He’d try for Minor Threat and get Prince or The Steve Miller Band. I told him to give up. I told him we should try this some other night, that we should light out for another place, one with women, girls in dark makeup drinking on fake ID’s down in Pacific Beach. Cruise wouldn’t do it. We were going to sit there and drink our drinks, he said, until the guy we were waiting on came through that door.

“Then what?” I said.

“Then we beat him until I’m satisfied,” he said.

“Both of us?”

Cruise shrugged. “Why not? He’ll probably have some friends anyway. You just have to keep them off me. No problem.”

“It sounds like there are a lot of potential problems here.” I said.

“You’re thinking about it too much,” Cruise said. “You always think things through too far. Then you can only see the bad. Don’t do that. It doesn’t help.”

“Okay, but coming up with half-assed plans for retribution, that helps?” I said.

Cruise took a big gulp of his vodka and looked away, ignoring me. The plan was sounding worse the more I heard of it, which is how it was with Cruise. You
never knew how things would be, but you knew they wouldn’t be like he said. I always went along because at the very least it was something to do.

Also, I had a girlfriend at home, named Jess, who I was avoiding. Ours was a slowly sinking ship that was taking months to finally go down for good. I’d begun staying out as late as I could every night in the hopes of making her mad enough to leave me. I kept thinking that one night I’d come home and she’d just be gone, sparing us the whole breakup scene, the crying and shouting and the terrible things we’d been waiting to say to each other. So far it hadn’t worked, but it was a solid plan, so I was sticking to it.

Cruise kept an eye on the door, swiveling his head every time someone came out of the bathroom, then swiveling back to the door. It looked like he was watching a tennis match that couldn’t get going. We ordered more drinks and downed them. We didn’t talk. At the bar was a girl, a blonde with long, pale legs. When a song she liked came on the jukebox she moved absently to it, her hips shifting in a way that made me sorry for every awful thing I’d ever thought about women in general. She seemed to accomplish this without even trying, was the thing.

“Do you know that girl?” I asked Cruise. I was hoping maybe somehow he could provide me with an in. If I could only go home with her tonight, I thought, things might start to turn around.

“What?” he said. “What girl? What are you talking about?”

“Forget it,” I said.

“Hey,” he said, leaning over the table to point his long, skinny finger at me. “I need you to stay focused here. You’re my eyes and ears on this thing.”
“Ten-four,” I said. “Loud and clear, Captain.”

“Oh, you fucker,” said Cruise.

He’d been in the Marines before, but he didn’t like to be reminded of it. It was my understanding that the entirety of his service was spent in North Carolina somewhere. maybe a month or two in Guam. When it ended he ran aground in San Diego like all the rest of them and then just stayed here out of the lack of a desire to move.

I looked at the empty glasses in front of us, the limes floating in a pulpy mess of melted ice. We’d been waiting for almost two hours. I told Cruise that it didn’t look like the guy was coming. Nobody hung out in the same bar every night except maybe for the true degenerates, the last of the scumbag believers.

“Oh, he’s coming,” said Cruise. “I can feel it. Can’t you feel it?”

But he wasn’t coming. Even Cruise must have known that, but he wouldn’t give up. He ordered more vodka tonics for us and then went into the bathroom and ripped the paper towel dispenser off the wall and brought it back to our table with him. No one seemed to notice. That’s the kind of place it was.

When I couldn’t stand it anymore I went over to the girl at the bar.

“Don’t I know you from somewhere?” I said.

She turned to look at me, chewing on her straw.

“What am I supposed to say to that?” she said.

She narrowed her eyes at me and I could see how mean she was. She had the air of a woman who showed up pissed off to places like this and only got worse from there.
“Am I supposed to say yes, you know me, and then what?” she said. “Have you even thought that far?”

“I wasn’t trying to pick you up,” I said.

“Right. Of course not.”

“Do you talk this way to everyone?” I said. “Is that why you’ve been standing here alone all night, because everyone else knows how you are?”

She laughed to herself, looking at her own reflection in the mirror behind the bar. I turned and looked at Cruise. He was sitting at our table and staring at the empty glasses. The paper towel dispenser was in the empty chair next to him.

“You’ve been watching me pretty close for someone who isn’t trying to pick me up,” the girl said.

“I watch people,” I told her. “I go to bars and watch people I don’t know. That’s what I do. Now let’s have a drink together.”

The girl smiled her mean-faced smile. I could tell she hated me, but I didn’t care. She shook her head very slowly like she was coming out of a dream.

“You know,” she said, looking over my shoulder. “This is starting to get pretty sad. Do you realize that?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact I do,” I said, not believing it. Really I wanted to tell her that she was wrong. Sad was a few miles back. We’d passed sad and were well on the way to hopeless. I felt an urge to grab her by her hair, some caveman gesture. I knew it wouldn’t help anything, but that only made me want to do it more. She looked away from me and took a sip of her drink. When she turned back towards me she made a face like she was surprised to see me still there.
“You have beautiful hair,” I said to the girl.

She leaned into the bar and let all the air drain out of her lungs.

“Hair?” she said. “Really? Has it come to that already?”

From the corner of the room I saw a big, square-looking kid get up out of his seat and come towards us. He watched me out of the tops of his eyes as he walked, like he thought he was sneaking up on us. He looked just old enough to be in the bar, and he was built like one of those old air conditioners. Shoulders so wide he might have to turn sideways to fit through the door. The rugby player, budding date rapist type.

He walked up close and stood next to the blonde like he knew her.

“Everything all right?” he said, looking from me to her.

“Fine.” I told him. “But we could use a couple more drinks if you’re buying. Vodka tonic for me, and for the lady?”

I gestured to the blonde like I’d seen in the movies. She gave me a confused look, her mouth hanging open just slightly.

“I’m not asking you,” the rugby player said. “I’m asking her.”

“I’m too tired for this,” the blonde said. “Do you have any idea how tired I am?”

“See that?” I said to the rugby player. “You’re bothering us. If you could just get those drinks and then fuck off, that’d be great.”

He took a step back. The blonde moaned quietly to herself.

“I don’t think so,” the rugby player said.
I knew the guy was waiting for me to make the first move. He had me with my back to the bar, and if I swung he was going to rush me and pin me down there. I figured he outweighed me by a good forty pounds at least. Over at our table I saw Cruise looking at me. I made eye contact with him and pointed at the rugby player.

"It's him." I said. "This is the guy."

"What?" said the rugby player.

Cruise jumped up out of his seat and started over. The rugby player watched him and didn't move. Cruise was no monster, physically. But he moved in a way that let you know he'd been in hundreds of these. Scarred hands and eyes that never seemed to blink. The rugby player froze. Cruise crossed over to him in two easy strides and landed a right cross on his nose. Everyone in the place could hear the snap. The guy dropped to a knee and ducked his head behind his hands as I hammered him one on the temple.

I knew then that this was the moment we'd been waiting for all night, for more than just that night. You hear that sound, one man punching another, the flat smack of flesh, and you know what's happening. Nothing else sounds like that. Every man in the place was instantly on his feet.

Yes, they seemed to be saying. *You don't know how much we needed this.*

The fight moved like a miniature cartoon whirlwind all over the floor of the bar. Someone hit me behind the ear and I reached back and grabbed them into a headlock. I saw Cruise lift one of the fat bouncers off his feet with a wild uppercut. Things stopped making sense. People swung at everything around them. The sound of men shouting without being aware they were doing it filled the place. I got
knocked down and scrambled back to my feet. I punched someone hard in the back of the head and felt something in my knuckle crack.

I pushed open the back door and we ran outside, the night air stinging our lungs as we took deep, hurried breaths. I made a break for the car and Cruise was behind me. Both of us fleeing the scene. My heart thumped so fast I worried it might wear itself out. Cruise gunned the engine and we were off.

He shouted as he drove us south along the coast and I rolled down the window to get some air. My hand throbbed. I tried opening and closing my fist. The knuckle felt like it was loose and floating around on its own in there. When we stopped at a light I could hear the ocean, that low rumbling that the people who lived there couldn’t even hear anymore. This sad, soft life.

After a few blocks Cruise pulled into a cul-de-sac that ended in a stone staircase leading down to the beach. His headlights pointed out at the ocean, illuminating nothing.

He shut off the car and turned to me, still breathing hard.

“That’s how you whip ass,” he said. “Right?”

I didn’t say anything.

“I mean, that’s what you do so people will know not to fuck with you. You roll them up like that, and word gets around.”

“I guess,” I said.

“What’s wrong with your hand?” he said.

“Nothing. I think I hurt my knuckle on someone’s head.”
“Hey, that’s still the better end of that deal. Am I right? I bet the son of a bitch you hit is feeling a whole lot worse right now.”

He was talking in that fast, excited way like people who have just been in a serious car wreck but somehow escaped injury. He couldn’t sit still and eventually he jumped out the car and paced around in front of the headlights.

I knew I should tell him that we’d beaten the wrong guy, but I couldn’t make the words come out. If I was any kind of man, I told myself as we sat there in the car, I’d just tell him and get it over with. But I couldn’t. He probably knew anyway and just didn’t care. We sat there for a long time not saying anything to each other, and then Cruise got out and paced around in front of the car.

“Let’s go swimming,” he said. “Right now.”

“I don’t want to go swimming,” I said.

“Sure you do.” He started taking off his shirt. The thought of going out into the ocean at night terrified me. For some reason I’ve always more afraid of the ocean than of anything else. I told him to stop.

“I have to tell you something,” I said. “That wasn’t the guy.”

He stopped with his shirt half off, one sleeve still around his arm.

“What do you mean?”

“That wasn’t him, the guy who cracked your windshield.”

“Who was it then?” he said.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Some guy. I’ve never seen him before.”
Cruise looked at me and then turned his head away. His face had gone blank and serious. He was frozen right there, and I could see him making up his mind before he pulled his shirt the rest of the way off.

“No.” he said. “That was him.”

“I’m telling you, it wasn’t,” I said.

Cruise kicked off his shoes and unbuckled his pants. He wouldn’t look at me.

“It was him.” he said. “Don’t worry about it.”

He turned and went walking down the sand toward the water. The headlights cast a long shadow out in front of him. I thought about following him but I didn’t move. I stayed there holding my injured hand in my lap until he came back, dripping wet and freezing a few minutes later. He dried off with his T-shirt and got in the car. He sat with his hands on the steering wheel for a while before starting it up.

“It was a good fight, anyway.” he said.

“It was pretty good.” I agreed.

“I don’t care who it was we beat. It was a good beating.”

“The guy probably had it coming anyway.” I said.

“Right,” Cruise said. “Most of us do.”

“I guess.”

“Wonder when we’ll get ours?” he said.

We drove home without saying another word. I leaned my head against the passenger window as we passed by the rows of lit up palm trees on the way on to the freeway. The world outside Cruise’s car seemed miles away and sealed off tight, like we could never get to it no matter how fast we went. Cruise took me home and I got
out of the car slowly. My place was dark, but I knew Jess would be in there waiting for me. I went to shut the door but Cruise drove away before I could.

Inside Jess was lying on the couch, watching TV. I didn’t know if she was still up, or if she’d gotten up to wait for me. The lights from the screen flashed across her face. I stood in the doorway to the kitchen as she got up and came towards me. Except for the light from the TV, the place was all dark and when I looked at her face her eyes disappeared. A trick of the light.

“You’re home,” Jess said.

“I’m home,” I said.

She started to say something else but I moved toward her and put my arms around her, squeezing her tight against my chest. I could feel her breathing, and we stayed just like that as I leaned close to her ear and started to tell her everything that had happened and everything I was capable of.
Spencer woke up to the coyotes some time after dawn. He could hear them yipping and calling to one another and it sounded as if they were right outside the cabin. He lay very still and held his breath as he listened for their feet crunching in the snow, but he didn’t hear it so he knew they were still a ways off. They always sounded closer than they were, especially that early. The kids were always scared of them, no matter how tough they tried to be about it, but he didn’t worry about the coyotes. They were skinny dogs that feared everything, humans most of all. But there was something about that sound. Like a high-pitched crying, only worse. He looked around the cabin to see if it had woken any of the kids up, and that’s when he saw the empty bunk directly across from his. At first he told himself it was his eyes still adjusting to the early blue light just coming through the windows, but when he slid out of his sleeping bag and walked over to check, he knew it was empty.
ORDONEZ, read the tag taped to the steel frame bunk. Number 14159. One of the new ones they brought up last week.

“No way,” Spencer whispered to himself. His first thought was he should check the bathroom, even though he didn’t want to go out trudging through the snow if he didn’t have to. But then he noticed that the kid’s pack was gone too and then there was no question about it.

He pulled on his jeans and long-sleeved shirt before calling it in on the radio. The heat hadn’t come on in the cabin yet and it was probably in the single digits outside.

He’d been working at the camp for nearly six months by then and had never had one of the kids get away from him, especially not right out from under his nose. They were all delinquents, as the Captain liked to call them. Sent up to there by some juvenile court judge who thought a few months in the mountain camp would somehow set them straight. None of them was older than fifteen, busted mostly for drugs or minor assaults, the occasional grand theft auto that got knocked down to attempted joy-riding. Barrio kids who had never believed snow existed in the entire state of California before coming up there. Thugs in training.

Still, Spencer thought, you’d think even they would know better than to try and take off in the middle of winter when they were thirty miles from anything.

He called in the alert on the radio and waited for one of the other officers to come and relieve him. The Captain would not be pleased. Spencer imagined him listening to the call on the radio, a one-fifteen in cabin twelve, empty bunk, and leaning back in his ancient office chair with a cup of coffee. The chair would squeak
under his weight as he closed his eyes very slowly, the way he did when somebody
had fucked up and he wanted them to know it. It gave the impression that the amount
of incompetence he had to deal with was an enormous weight on his chest and
sometimes it was too much even for him.

Spencer had been trying to avoid that look every day since he got hired on as a
new officer. Now there was no hope of escaping it. The job was his last stop on the
way to he didn’t know what. All he knew was that he was twenty-three and going
nowhere, and this was the only job he could get that paid him enough to feel like he
was somewhere near becoming a real adult, even if it meant he had to live in a cabin
full of criminal kids five nights a week. What would happen if he lost even the small
comfort of a shitty job, he didn’t want to think about. He just had to do whatever was
needed, do the next thing that came, and not worry about anything else until he had
to.

At breakfast all the officers gathered at the far end of the dining hall while the
kids ate. Spencer could hear the clicking of their plastic silverware on plastic plates
and it made his stomach feel like it was crumpling in on itself he was so hungry. The
other officers talked quietly to one another and looked over at him without trying to
hide it. No one was feeling good about the situation, and he couldn’t blame them.

Winfield came and stood next to him, the closest thing he had to a friend.

“You didn’t hear anything?” he asked Spencer. “Not a sound?”

“No.” Spencer said.
“So, like, he unlocked the door and opened it and then shut it again and you slept through it all?”

“Thanks for putting it like that. I feel much better now.”

“This isn’t good,” Winfield said.

“I know that already.” Spencer said, trying not to get angry. He couldn’t afford to alienate the one friend he might still have when this was all over.

The Captain came in doing his hurried walk. He told them all to bring it in tight and shut up. Spencer caught his eye as the Captain took his spot in the small circle of men. He knew from that look that they would talk about this later, but for now the Captain was all business as he smoothed his green Department of Corrections dress shirt into his jeans.

“I assume we all understand the situation by now,” the Captain said in his low voice.

“We understand, but we’re not happy,” said Henry, one of the older officers who had been there longer than almost anyone. He glared over at Spencer when he said it.

“I didn’t ask if you were happy about it,” the Captain said. “Your happiness is not exactly chief among my concerns at this point. What I’m focused on is finding this kid Ordonez and hauling him back in, sooner the better.”

The men murmured in agreement. Spencer kept his eyes focused on the Captain. He didn’t want to concern himself with how the rest of the guys felt about him right then. It wasn’t as if he’d let the kid go on purpose. He was sleeping. It could have happened to any of them.
“What we’re going to do is pair up and search the entire mountain if we have to,” said the Captain. “And we’re not going to stop until we find him. Have we all got that?”

The men nodded their heads. Outside it had started snowing again. Spencer knew this meant their job just got a lot more difficult, since the tracks Ordonez made in the night would be covered up by the time they got out there. The Captain took out his role sheet and read off the search pairs and where they were supposed to look.

Spencer was grateful when he heard his name called along with Winfield’s. They got the south ridge, which was an all uphill walk in the opposite direction of the road. But at least he wouldn’t have to go stomping around in the cold with someone who hated him.

When the Captain broke the meeting, Winfield came up to him.

“It could be worse,” he said to Spencer. “You could be unemployed right now.”

Spencer tried to fake a smile but didn’t come up with much. He wasn’t totally sure that he might not be headed toward unemployment anyway if they didn’t get this kid back quick. Even then, people would remember this. Probably for a long time.

On their way out of the dining hall he walked over toward the kitchen hoping to see Robin, one of the cooks. They’d started a thing a few weeks earlier. On Fridays when they got off for the weekend he usually went with her to her place on the other side of mountain, just outside Big Bear. They drove to the road-side bar with the big wooden grizzly out front and drank all night and played shuffleboard. He liked the place all right, but didn’t like how the old men stared at her ass when she
bent over the shuffleboard table. Still, he was the one who went home with her, and though she was no beauty she was a good woman and always gave him what he wanted.

He didn’t know if she had heard yet that it was his kid who got away, but probably she had. He saw her across the floor of the kitchen and she gave him a sympathetic smile. She knew. He waved slyly to her before heading out into the snow. The warm pancake smell that he associated with her disappeared as soon as the door shut behind him.

It took them a half hour to get out of the sight of the camp. Winfield kept slipping in the snow and going uphill was no easy job for either of them. Spencer figured there was probably two and a half feet. The kid had to be a total moron to think he could make a run for it in this. Where did he think he would go in the middle of the night? Even if he made it somewhere, the locals would take one look at this Mexican kid in his green jumpsuit and know exactly what the deal was. Spencer made sure his radio was turned up loud so he and Winfield could head in as soon as someone found him, which wouldn’t be long.

They walked on a little ways until they were both out of breath. Spencer stopped to let Winfield catch up, which he did in slow, clumsy steps, the snow creaking as he pried his feet out of the deep holes his boots made.

“How far you think we’re going to have to go?” Winfield said, struggling for the air to get the words out.

“I guess we’ll walk until we get word that somebody’s found him.”
“What if no one does?”

“What if no one does?”

Spencer watched him think about this as his breathing slowed. The snow was falling in heavy clumps now, sticking to their faces. He couldn’t think of anything besides how much he’d like to get back inside with Robin and have some breakfast.

“You think anyone’s ever lost a kid for good up here?” Winfield said.

“I don’t know,” Spencer said. “I doubt it.”

“You could be the first.”

“This is not exactly what I need right now.”

“I’m just saying. What if he got away, got to the road? Both of you would go down in corrections camp history.”

Winfield shot him a wolfish smile, letting him know that he was just breaking his balls. Spencer told him to go to hell and they started walking again. It was only after they crossed the crest of the next hell and started a short descent that they spotted the kid, or at least what Spencer thought had to be the kid.

He saw it first as a dull shape at the edge of his vision, and when he moved his head to get a better look at it he felt like he was moving underwater. He was sitting down under a tree, leaning his back into it. Spencer could see the green of his jumpsuit in among the snow that had blown over him. He might have been out there all night the way he looked. His eyes were closed and his skin was so pale it was almost translucent. For a moment Spencer told himself that it couldn’t be the kid they were looking for. The kid they were looking for was a Mexican. But it was a stupid
way to think. He was the only kid missing. It was stupid to think it might be someone else out here.

“Oh, no,” Winfield said when he saw the kid. He’d been a few steps behind and only stopped when Spencer stopped in front of him. “No, man. This is bad. Shit,” he said to himself.

Spencer didn’t say anything at first. He breathed in and out and listened to the soft tapping of his heart.

“What are we supposed to do?” Winfield said. “Should we try CPR?”

His voice was shaking and Spencer could hear the panic starting. He didn’t feel close to panic at all. He felt fine. Almost serene.

Winfield stumbled over to the kid and stopped a few feet away. He moved around, like he was trying to find a way in, and then looked back at Spencer.

“What are you, asleep?” he said. “We’ve got to do something fast.”

Spencer shook his head.

“He’s dead,” he said.

“How do you know? You just look at someone and say they’re dead? You must be one hell of a doctor or something to be able to do that.”

“Look at him,” Spencer said. He walked over to the kid, right past Winfield, and put his hand on the kid’s shoulder. He shook him gently, then harder. He couldn’t believe he was doing it. It was as if his brain had stopped sending signals to his body, it was just moving on its own impulses. The kid was frozen to the tree.

“Oh, God,” Winfield said when he saw. “Stop it. Stop trying to move him.”
“See? Dead,” Spencer said. He could hear his own voice and it sounded hollow. He didn’t know what was wrong with him.


“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t even know how to start answering that question, man.” Winfield said.

Spencer looked down at the kid’s frozen body. He had an urge to try and pry him loose, but he fought it. There was something he was supposed to feel here, he knew that much, but it seemed just out of his reach. He tried to calm himself down, thinking maybe he was too worked up to let the feeling catch up to him just yet, but he realized he was already calm. He was calmer now than he’d been in a long time.

Winfield took his radio off his belt and made the call. They had to wait nearly an hour for someone to get a sled up there so they could bring the kid’s body back. While they waited Winfield stood with his back to the kid and wouldn’t look at him. Spencer waited over by the tree and tried to think of something else. When he looked up he saw Henry and one of the younger guys pulling the empty sled. Henry was smiling.

“You’re fucked now,” he said and shook his head at Spencer.

“Maybe,” Spencer said.

“No maybe. You’re gone, gone. They’ll have your papers ready before we get back to camp.”

“Great,” said Spencer. “Why don’t you help me load him onto the sled and we can get it over with then.”

Nobody moved. He looked up at Winfield, who was making a face.
“I don’t really want to touch it,” he said.

“What?”


“Go to hell.” Spencer said. He turned and looked at the kid. His eyes were frozen shut and he could see the veins in them. He’d had no idea it could happen that easily.

“We aren’t touching him,” Henry said, and motioned with his head at the younger guy with him.

“He’s stuck to the tree,” Spencer said. “I need help getting him off.”

“Then I guess you better get to work,” Henry said.

Spencer hit him only once, but it was a good one, a right that landed squarely. He could feel the full force of the blow through his glove as Henry staggered back and went down in the snow. He sat there holding his mouth where it had hit him. Spencer looked at him and tried to get himself to feel something about the whole thing, but nothing came.

“Now you’re really gone,” Henry said, reaching for something.

“I already was and you know it. Now help me get him off the tree.”

They pulled the body back to camp in a slow march. Several times they had to stop and reset him to keep him from pitching off the sled and into the snow. It seemed to take all day and when they got back Spencer could feel the cold all the way inside of him. No one quite knew what to do with the dead kid once they got him
back to camp, so they set him inside a storage shed and put a blanket over him. It seemed like the dumbest of all possible ideas somehow.

The Captain was waiting in his office when Spencer came in. They looked at each other for a long time without saying anything.

"First thing I want you to know is it’s not your fault, it’s his," the Captain said. "He’s the one who didn’t have more sense than to run off into a snowstorm."

"I know," said Spencer.

"Second thing I want you to know is I have to let you go anyway."

"I know that, too."

"Do you? Well, then you should do well for yourself. You already know everything there is to know."

Spencer looked down at his hands and nodded. He didn’t know what else to say. The last thing the Captain said to him was not to carry this around with him, to let it go. Spencer nodded like he understood but really he wasn’t carrying any of it with him, because he’d never felt any of it to begin with. He couldn’t say why, but it was the truth.

He went back to his cabin and packed all his things. He didn’t try to say goodbye to any of the guys. It didn’t matter. The only thing he did was stop by the kitchen to say something to Robin, who may or may not have heard already. When he got there he didn’t see her and didn’t bother to look for her, because he didn’t know what he would have said to her anyway.
We went to visit Jordan in prison, a three hour drive.

"Please," mom said on the way up. "Call him dad. It will cheer him up."

She was always trying to get me to think of him as a father, though he wasn’t even a blood relative. I told her I couldn’t promise anything. When we got in there and sat down with him at the little metal table I could see he’d gotten some new ink done on his forearm, a topless woman dancing as a snake prepared to devour her.

"Hey Jordan," I said. "Nice tattoo."

He nodded back to me and mom let out a heavy sigh, as though finally something had been resolved. All around us were convicts with their pathetic families. A huge black man at the next table appeared to be getting a handjob from a much younger woman. I pointed it out and mom told me to mind my own business.

"Looks like he doesn’t mind," I said.
“I mind.” she hissed. “And I won’t let you ruin another visit.”

Jordan looked away and smoothed down his ponytail. It was the day before Christmas. Mom had brought him cookies in the shape of Santa and his reindeer. I’d spent the ride up snapping the heads off the reindeer and quietly eating them. Mom hadn’t noticed, but then as soon as she slid the plate across the table to him Jordan took out a decapitated reindeer and held it up. Mom smacked her hand down on the table, making the bracelets on her wrist rattle. They both stared at me, waiting for me to say something, an apology maybe. I stayed quiet. Jordan put the rest of the cookie in his mouth and we all listened to him chew. Next to us the black guy let out a low groan as the girl finished him off.

“Are you seeing this?” I said to no one in particular.

Jordan said I should probably look away, and I told him to stuff another cookie in his face. He wasn’t going to tell me what to do.

“Can’t we just pretend to be a normal family on Christmas?” Mom said.

“Can’t we pull that off for an hour or two, at least?”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. I asked her where she had pulled a word like normal. When had we ever been normal, like some TV family hanging stockings by the chimney with care? Mom started crying and Jordan put his hand over hers.

“Baby, knock it off, all right?” he said, his mouth full of cookie.

The black guy at the next table was zipping himself up and looking over at us. Even the girl with him had taken an interest in what was happening at our table.

That’s what a train wreck we are, I thought as I waved back at them like someone
riding in a fourth of July parade. Mom wiped her eyes with her forearms and said she
was sorry for crying, but sometimes all this made her want to drown herself.

"I know exactly how you feel," I said.

She turned very slowly to look at me. Jordan reached across and grabbed me
by the forearm, squeezing. Mom told him to let me go, but he didn’t. I felt him
tighten like he wanted to squeeze everything right out of me, but couldn’t. Christmas
was coming on fast and we were as helpless as ever to do anything about it.
We had a guy who died that year in practice, nobody important. His name was Svoboda and they said he just collapsed. I have to confess here, I didn’t actually see it. I was busy with the tailback streaking up the middle on a seam route, then the whistle blew and there was Svoboda. He was a big mass of flesh, a scout team guard, crumpled face down on the field. I hoped that he would get up, but he didn’t. The head trainer went out to see about him, reaching in and touching certain places on his neck. Then he gave Coach Maynard a serious look and made a call on the walkie-talkie.

Coach Maynard paced the field with his clipboard pressed to his chest.

“We do not have time for this,” he muttered.
The thing is he was right. We had a game against State that week, and this was the season when we were undefeated in early November. There was talk of us going to a bowl game, maybe even one of the good ones.

I'm pretty sure that's what most of us thought about as we all stood around and looked at him lying there. Nobody said anything. What was there to say? Svoboda was just a scout team offensive lineman, which is basically one step above a punching bag, only without the personality.

I went and stood by Simms, my roommate and our star kick returner. He had his thumbs hooked under the straps of his shoulder pads, an empty look on his face.

"This is an interesting development," Simms said when he saw the ambulance drive down onto the practice field.

The medics picked Svoboda up like two men moving someone else's couch. They didn't secure anything or bring out any expensive looking equipment. They just loaded him up in a way that confirmed what we already knew. Svoboda was dead.

Coach Maynard threw his clipboard down and then gave it a good kick.

"Damn it all," he said through his teeth. "Everyone head on in."

In the locker room we undressed and avoided each other's eyes. I wouldn't call the mood somber, but it was definitely something. Wojohowski broke the silence by suggesting that we all have a group prayer for Svoboda, only he said his name wrong. It came out like Sobovoda and everyone just looked at him.

"What the hell is he saying we should pray for?" Simms said, sitting next to me and examining the condition of his cleats. "I mean, that dude's dead. We realize that, don't we?"
I realized it. I didn’t feel bad either, not until that night when I went to see Olivia. She was the one who told me I should. Even then, I only felt bad for not feeling bad.

“He was your teammate,” she said to me. “He didn’t deserve to die.”

“Who said anything about deserve?” I asked her.

She made a face like she was watching a dog run out into traffic, and I didn’t say anything to try and console her. Olivia was the most beautiful woman to ever let me into her bedroom. The problem with her was that she was a Mormon. As far as I could tell, what the Mormons did was send their boys off to sell religion door to door and their girls off to college where they work on frustrating normal guys. It might not have been so bad if I hadn’t lived with Simms, the campus celebrity who managed to find new girls to bring home every week. He had newspaper clippings about himself on the wall above his bed. He liked to show them to the girls. It was foreplay.

Sometimes the girl he brought home would have a friend, but I didn’t participate. I was holding out hope for Olivia. I figured it would be worth it. Still, lying in the dark and listening to Simms with those girls, you begin to have needs.

It wasn’t until breakfast the next morning that rumors started to filter out about Svoboda. I was eating cereal in the dining hall and Simms was with me, soaking his scrambled eggs in ketchup.

“The doctors said his heart exploded,” said John Dillon, our starting cornerback. “He died instantly, right on the field.”

“How’s his heart just going to explode?” I asked. “From what?”
"I don’t know. Maybe a family medical condition. Maybe he was juicing and his heart couldn’t take it."

"Steroids?" Simms said. "Did you ever see Svoboda? The son of a bitch was made of pudding. They would have to be some piss poor steroids."

These theories were everywhere. Determining the cause of death seemed essential, like it might accomplish something.

"I heard it was a brain aneurism," said Brooks, our all-Conference linebacker who was never actually convicted of domestic battery. "That aneurism shit can get you anytime."

"Brooks, do you know what a brain aneurism is?" I asked. "I mean, honestly, do you know what the words mean?"

He looked up at me, a tangle of hash browns clinging to his fork in mid-scoop.

"Are you saying that if I don’t know what the words ‘nuclear bomb’ mean, then I’ll be safe when they drop the fucker?"

"Fine," I said. "Whatever."

"Cancer of the lungs and throat," Brooks said, shrugging his shoulders. "Hey, I don’t know what that means. I must be completely immune to it."

"Jesus H. Christ," I said.

Everyone was talking about Svoboda. The local paper wrote a whole article about the dangers of football. Our school got some national attention because of it. Even Olivia wouldn’t leave it alone. This made my daily attempts in her dorm room more difficult.
“I heard he died because somebody stepped on his throat, is that true?” she said.

“Of course it’s not true,” I said. “The guy just died. It happens.”

“No it doesn’t. People don’t just drop dead out of nowhere.”

“Apparently they do,” I said.

I put my arm around her waist and eased her down onto the bed, working my hand up underneath her sweater.

“What are you doing?” she said.

“You can’t tell?”

“One minute we’re talking about your teammate dying and the next you’re trying to feel me up?”

“That sounds more or less accurate,” I said.

“Doesn’t that seem a little creepy? I mean, it could have been you.”

“All the more reason.”

She sat up and pulled her sweater back down, adjusting her bra from where I’d worked up underneath it.

“You have to trust me on this,” she said. “I can’t explain.”

This was the start of a conversation we’d had before. By this point I’d been to church with her, talked to the men in white collared shirts, listened to all the stories about fishermen and prophets. The stories were metaphors, they told me. Metaphors for what, I wasn’t really sure. They gave me their book and I even flipped through it a few times. Not great reading. I could say I did these things because I wanted to make her happy, but really I thought it might get me laid.
When I pressed the issue, Olivia told me I didn’t understand. Then she put some distance between us on her bed. I left not long after that and walked back to my place with a familiar deadness in my groin.

It should be mentioned here that Simms played no small part in the unbeaten season we had going. Technically, he was a wide receiver, but what he really did was return kicks. Only he didn’t just return them. He performed them. The guy returned every kick he could get his hands on. I don’t think he’d ever called for a fair catch in his life. The newspapers said he was the best they’d ever seen and Simms agreed with them.

“I am something even I don’t understand,” he told me once. “I was born with this. It’s nothing short of miraculous.”

Back then there was talk of Simms returning kicks in the pros someday. He was that good.

For most of us, and even for the really good ones who made All-Conference, there was no such hope. We got a glimpse of our future each season when they had Alumni Night. That’s when they bring back all the old has-beens who played at our school and trot them out on the field before the game. They were usually in their forties or fifties, bald men who sold insurance and hated their wives.

I never liked Alumni Night.

What I did on this team was play strong safety. Maybe I wasn’t striking fear into anybody’s heart out there, but I wasn’t a weak spot either. To play that position, so they used to say, you’d better have speed or a good head on your shoulders. I did
not have speed. I started every game of that season, though, and that has to count for something.

People sometimes ask what we did after Svoboda died, if we shut down practices. These are the people who have never played a down in their lives. What we did was have practice as usual. What else could we do? We suited up like any other day and then Coach Maynard called us all together in the center of the field.

“Svoboda is gone,” he told us. “Life is uncertain. It is, much like football, a constant struggle. Do you know what I’m saying? A struggle.”

He paused and surveyed our faces. I was holding my helmet in my hands, looking up at the sky where the clouds stretched out in a thin, broken sheet. It was the kind of November day where you wouldn’t mind tasting someone else’s blood.

“What we need today,” Coach Maynard continued, “is a little of that struggle.”

There was a murmur of assent among the team. I nodded my head and looked around to make sure that other people were nodding too. They were.

“Let’s get after it,” Coach Maynard said. “For Svoboda.”

That practice was like watching a riot on television. We didn’t even do the usual stuff, the things to hone specific skills. We went straight to team offense. I watched from the sideline as the scout team defense was torn to shreds.

Doyle, our fullback, came crashing through the line on the first play and very nearly buried one of the freshman linebackers where he stood. The kid had to be helped off the field and Doyle shouted obscenities at him as he went. A few plays
later they ran a screen and the entire offensive line got downfield unrestrained and started trampling the bodies of defensive backs like weeds.

The starting center had blood all over his pants but it wasn't his. The weak side tackle appeared to be choking a downed teammate. The kid’s face went white.

“Now is a good time to be anybody other than that guy,” Simms said, standing on the sideline and turning a football over in his hands. He was the superstar, so they never called on him to do much in practice. If he got hurt, then what?

When it was time for the first string defense to take the field, we snapped on our helmets and sprinted out there to get a piece of the action. On the first play I hammered a tight end coming over the middle and felt his chest sink inward. Everyone slapped my helmet. I stood up and pounded my chest with one fist, yelling things that weren’t words. There is nothing, and I mean absolutely nothing, like a really good stick.

It didn’t take long before we were disregarding the whistle altogether. We’d tackle the ball carrier and then collectively pummel him with fists and cleats as he lay exposed on the ground. Brooks laid a forearm to the head of the scout team quarterback, who we weren’t even supposed to touch, and nobody said anything. Coach Maynard put his whistle in his pocket. I had reason to believe he was loving this.

For one thing, he made the scout team tailback run the same dive play four times in a row. By the third time nobody was bothering to block for him anymore. By the fourth time the kid wouldn’t accept the handoff. The quarterback forced the ball into his hands and then got the hell out of the way.
These were the things we did to our own teammates, guys we ate our meals with. I took this to mean that what we would do to State that Saturday would be downright criminal.

The night before the game there was a memorial service for Svoboda. They held it in the university chapel, a huge stone building that resembled an opera house more than a church. Almost the entire school went to the service. Everyone on the team wore their jerseys. They had a podium up in the front and behind that a poster sized photograph of the deceased, smiling at us beneath a mop of blond hair.

“That’s Svoboda?” Simms said.

“Yeah, who did you think it was?” I said.

“I don’t know, but I didn’t make that connection. I don’t believe I’ve ever seen that guy before.”

Coach Maynard stepped up to the podium and told us all how Svoboda was like a son to him. Then our quarterback got up there and called Svoboda a gentle giant, even though we all knew he was no giant and you could only say gentle if you meant soft and weak, which maybe he did. I turned to Simms to see if he was buying any of this and saw that he was trying to make a suggestive kind of eye contact with the blonde across the aisle.

“Who’s that?” I asked him.

“I can’t remember her name,” he said. “But I think we did it once up in that balcony.”

“You had sex with her in this chapel?”
“Sure. I’ve brought lots of girls here before,” he said. “They leave it unlocked at night and there’s usually nobody here. You should try it with that chick of yours. She’s religious, isn’t she?”

I looked over at where Olivia was sitting with the few other Mormon girls at our school. She looked beautiful and had this untouched look about her. I used to spend hours thinking about ways to be the one to finally touch her. I thought about it the way I imagine a man in a wheelchair might think about the view from Mount Everest. I’d once told Olivia that I would marry her, though I knew even then that I didn’t mean it.

“We couldn’t get married,” she said to me. “Or at least we couldn’t have a temple wedding.”

“Why the hell not?” I said.

“They wouldn’t let you inside. You’re not temple worthy.”

Those were the words she used: temple worthy.

“Wasn’t Jesus all about loving everyone?” I said. “Didn’t he hang out with a prostitute?”

She just sighed and closed her eyes. Praying maybe, who knows.

I thought about this while I looked at her and the other Mormons during the service. Those people with their rules and judgments. I was a member of an undefeated college football team. Who were they?

Up at the podium there was a minister talking. He was saying something about the mercy of the Lord. I took one look at that guy and could tell he’d never strapped on a football helmet in his whole life. He couldn’t help us.
After the service I found Olivia outside and told her I would walk her to her
dorm. It was a cold November night and we shuffled through the leaves as we
walked. Olivia had her hands in her pockets. She kept her eyes focused on the
ground.

“Do you think I’m going to hell?” I asked her.

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said.

“Yes you do. Based on what you believe in, am I headed straight for hell?”

She looked at me like she was trying not to hurt my feelings.

“It’s not that simple,” she said.

“Why are you with me?” I asked her. “I mean, it doesn’t get much worse than
hell. If that’s what you think someone deserves, why would you date them?”

“God has a plan for everyone,” she said. “Even for you. Give it time.”

“Time is running out,” I said.

We stopped in front of her dorm. I could see the blank shapes of people in the
windows looking down at us.

“I’m not worried about you,” she said, smiling. “There’s plenty of time.”

“No,” I said. “There isn’t.”

On Saturday before we took the field Coach Maynard gave us one of his
speeches. He stood before us in the locker room. The huge photo of Svoboda from
the memorial service was now up on the wall behind him.

“It would be better for you to have died as small children than to lose this
game,” Coach Maynard said to us. “Do you understand what I’m saying?”
We jumped up and down, made loud whooping noises, banged our heads together. We understood. This felt true. When we ran out on to the field our fans were screaming for us. There was that wet grass smell rising up into my nostrils. The sound of the band thumped in the night air. These are the kinds of things that never leave you. These are the things that you remember in your dreams so many years later.

State was on the opposite sideline, waiting for us.

What I remember most about that football game is the general sense of damage being done. Our guys would collide with theirs and when they got up you could see them both feeling their bodies with their hands, trying to figure out where they were broken. They scored on a half-assed dive in the second quarter and we answered with rollout pass to the back of the end zone to tie it.

Brooks stood next to me on the sideline saying, “That a baby! Way to work.”

Simms bobbed his head to an imaginary rhythm. They kicked the ball away from him every time. His uniform was dry and clean.

In the locker room at halftime Coach Maynard tapped on his chest with one finger and said, “We need to tear their hearts out. They think they’re going to come in here and fuck your old lady on the kitchen table while you watch! We have no choice.”

Guys screamed and slapped themselves in the face. Brooks used his helmet to bludgeon someone else’s locker.

In the third quarter I speared one of the State receivers in the back near their sideline. When I got up they were howling for my death. In the fourth our fullback
was tackled for a loss and had his eye gouged by a thumb. No one even considered the possibility that it could have been an accident.

The game was tied with less than two minutes left to play. State had the ball near midfield and Brooks was spitting all over everyone as he spoke in the huddle.

“This is it,” he said. “We’re going to stop them here. We’re going to fuck them until they bleed!”

Their first two plays were runs up the middle, hoping to play it conservative and avoid a turnover. We brought down the ball carrier after a minimal gain both times. In the pile on the ground I had my hand on the running back’s throat and I squeezed. I could see Brooks twisting the guy’s ankle like it was a wet towel and he was trying to wring it out.

After an incomplete pass on third down I looked over at their coach and he was talking to the punter. He held the kid by the facemask and I knew exactly what he was saying: Get that ball out of bounds and away from Simms.

But that’s not what happened. What happened was he kicked the ball a mile into the air and it came down in Simms’ hands. I ran to block, watching him the whole way.

The first guy was in his face before I could get down there and Simms faked him almost out of his socks. Beautiful. The second guy was just in front of me and I watched as Simms spun out of his arms.

When I finally turned around to block I saw the big defensive end charging right at me. I could hear him grunting as he ran and I stepped up to block him. This
guy was salivating. He looked right past me. The way he went through my block
almost convinced me that I wasn’t even there.

Simms’ feet came to a stop as the guy lowered his head and drove into him.
The lights glimmered off their helmets and I had an urge to shout out a useless
warning.

That hit was something for a highlight film. The ball popped right out and I
could see Simms’ eyes grow big and white as he saw the thing float up in the air and
then land on the ground in front of him. He was on his back when he reached his
hand out for it like a desperate mother, begging for it to come back to him. For a
moment the ball was alone on the turf. It rolled a few feet and then just sat there,
waiting to be claimed.

Of course I saw it, that wasn’t the problem. The problem was my feet weren’t
moving. It lasted about the time it takes to flip a light switch. I waited only that long
and when I lunged for it my body felt slow and heavy, churning.

I got to it just in time to watch a State cornerback scoop it up and jog into the
end zone all by himself. He pumped his fist as he went, screaming.

I turned and looked up at the huge screen above the scoreboard to see the
replay. The State players were running onto the field with their helmets held above
their heads. Coach Maynard kneeled down on the sideline and tore at the grass. The
crowd shuffled out toward their cars.

In the locker room afterwards Simms sat in front of his locker and whispered.
“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” to himself. A reporter interviewed me and asked what I attributed
the loss to. He asked if I thought it was the death of our teammate, if that had hurt our focus. I could have said that it did, that it cost us the game. It would have been a lie, but I could have said it. People would have believed it.

Instead I pointed at Simms.

“He fumbled the ball,” I said.

I didn’t mention my missed block. It was Simms who was supposed to be our savior, after all. He was the one who was supposed to protect us all from our futures, from the dismal knowledge that we were not destined for greatness.

We had three more games that season and we lost them all. A lot of people were surprised, but I wasn’t. We were broken. Brooks snapped his collarbone on a blitz in the next game. Simms started calling for a fair catch on every kick, even when there was no one close to him.

The newspapers forgot about him. He took his clippings off the wall.

After the season ended I took Olivia out one night to the University chapel. It was December, cold with dead trees looming in the shadows. I held her by the hand and walked her up to the balcony.

“What are we doing here?” she asked.

“Sit down,” I said.

She did and I started kissing her. She tried to pull away and say something but each time she did I covered her mouth with mine so that no words came out. I held her tight, allowing no space between us. She tried to push on my chest. It didn’t do anything. I worked her down to the floor and moved my hand up her skirt. She made a noise that I couldn’t interpret. I leaned close and whispered that I loved her.
that I would marry her. I whispered that I would do whatever I had to so I could be worthy.

"We can't," she said. "You don't understand."

Her wrists were smooth and frail in my hands.

"Don't," she said. "Please. I mean it."

"I understand," I told her. "We have to."

She was trembling as I pushed my head close to hers so I could hear all those frantic, urgent sounds she made. I knew she didn't understand, but time was running out. I could feel it. There was nobody else in the chapel that night and only a pale light crept in through the windows. Both of us lay there on the floor, struggling.