Visible means of support| Seven chapters of a novel

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VISIBLE MEANS OF SUPPORT,
seven chapters of a novel

by
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PART ONE

Chapter One
May 1988

The verb 'bail' wouldn't stay still in Ginger's mind. Did it mean fiscal arrangements, like she'd made, or bucketing water from a sinking boat, or diving headfirst out of a plane in flames? With no more precision than that in language, how was she to know how to behave?

The phone woke her up. Nothing new there.

"I love you, Mom," he'd begun saying in his dead voice at the end of each call. What difference could that make?

During the second ring, she mentally traced to futility one last boat-bail scenario: phone for a substitute, pack, dress, race to the San Francisco Airport, catch a flight to Dallas-Fort Worth, drive some rental car 150 miles, and
arrive in Texarkana before the end of visiting hours. Hold his hand, tousle his hair, then fly back.

She picked up the receiver, held it in both hands, closed her eyes, and waited through the usual plea: "Collect call for anyone from Adam Fiske?"

Just say it. "No," she breathed, following the word down the spiral cord, out the line under the eaves, through the loops between poles, over the ridge, and into some void. Even now it would be spilling back through a wall phone, and Adam would have to camouflage his shock. Well, James would have said, that was not her problem.

Still she held the receiver to her cheek. The line was what people called 'dead.' A high whine was sounding, a sound designed to encourage the callee to hang up. She noticed that the yellow receiver was coated with a grayish film. Well, so was the whole old rotary phone, even the cord.

She set the handle part back in its cradle. What a word.

Unread Gatsby essays still on James's old pillow, she rolled out of bed, pulled wool socks onto her feet and a sweatshirt over her flannel gown, and groped her way through the dark hall, down the stairs, and into the kitchen. Standing at the sink in the semi-dark, she pondered the spot on the ridge opposite her house where the pines parted to let the phone lines through.
During the second or third call last night, he'd finally said the word: suicide. Surely the Federal Bureau of Prisons had thought of it first, thought of it and guarded against it.

She checked for impulses. There were two. Have a beer. Clean the phone. Beer would be unseemly at 4:20 A.M., and First Period might smell it on her breath. But she cracked open a can anyway and took a first cold swig. Medicinal.

Decisive, that's what she'd be. She filled a pan with hot water and ammonia and returned upstairs, knelt, pulled the phone under the bedside lamp, and began to scrub the receiver. The task, she soon realized, would require the kind of patience more typical of James. She took another gulp of beer.

No, on second thought, James would have replaced this one, which had come with the house, with a lightweight Japanese model whose base dangled in midair whenever you picked up its receiver. She liked the solidity of this squat steady one.

The spiral cord was even grimier. She submersed it a section at a time. This phone had almost quit ringing in the last year and a half. No more calls for James, or from him. There were now only the usual pleas from the Berkeley Rep, Planned Parenthood, the Stanford Alumni, a few others. The Oakland Police Officers' Association had called last week, soliciting for their annual circus. She'd kept herself from
saying she was not obliged to give, now that her household had become part of the criminal element. No need to be rude.

Calls for her, though, had just about stopped. Two or three breathy ones from Adam's Christie in the last six weeks, that was about all. Plus, of course, these relentless calls from him. And, every Sunday, Alice's.

With the hem of her nightgown, she patted the cord dry, and surveyed the effect. The yellow had faded almost to white in the spots where she'd rubbed too hard. But the smoothness of it, the heft, felt good under her fingers. Tipping her head back, she drained down the rest of the beer.

Maybe a clean phone would help sustain Adam's cover story, at least from his grandmother.

Her predawn libation seemed almost to enhance First and Second Period's discussion.

"Daisy's wearing a hat, Ms. Fiske? What year is this book anyway?" Tenisha of the one-inch nails.

As if she hadn't told them two dozen times over the last three weeks. "The Roaring 20's, remember? Prohibition?"

"Were you alive then?" Tenisha's flashing nails hid her smile.

"Thanks a lot. No, not quite. But my mother was a flapper."

"You know that dance, though, I hear."

First Period had told them about her performance, then.

"What's it called, the Charleston?"

She only pretended reluctance. If they started by quarter after, they'd get the reading discussed. So she faced her wooden chair into the middle of the classroom and held onto its back, the way her mother had first shown her. Though when Alice had positioned two dining room chairs near the Victrola, Ginger had felt admitted to some rite, mysterious and pungent.

"Charles. . .ton, Charles. . .ton . . ."

Already their eyes were alight.

"Ya, da, da, da, dah, da. . ." she sang. Shoving the chair out of the way, she splayed her hands outward, kicked her feet, twirled, and swept her palms across her knees. Within a minute, her breathing was ragged.

By now even the coolest boys were guffawing. And afterwards, as had First Period, they tucked into the intricacies of Chapter Eight.

But by Third Period, it was back to bailing for her life. Johnel Banks careened in, athletic shoes squealing, a calculated half minute after the tardy bell. He folded his long frame into the desk nearest the door, slumped low in his seat, and basked in the usual adoration.

At her desk, she forced a smile as she took roll, winning what converts she could while he rested. He did have charm -- that liveliness in his dark eyes.

She paused at the front of each row to collect last night's essays. Johnel, as usual, had none. She still took
his resistance as her personal defeat: surely, in spite of his bluster, he was smart enough to realize it wasn't her fault he was repeating English III.

In all fairness, which student could keep his head with suited recruiters escorting one to class? Recent word in the faculty room was that Johnel was blowing off not only English III, but also Government and possibly English IV. Coach Schwenk went around with his shoulders sagged, head bowed. "The basketball player of my career."

She stacked the homework in a folder and picked up her copy of the paperback. "Let's resume on page 147. Nick Carraway has learned that Daisy drove the hit-and-run vehicle, and so he's regained his sympathy for Jay Gatsby."

"Mrs. . . . What's her name again? Mrs. Fiske? You didn't get mine." Johnel's long arm waved a paper.

Titter. Even Ibrahim and Ronald assumed audience position.

Her smile was a pasted one. "Too late. It must be completed before class begins. You know that, Johnel."

He tilted his close-cropped head to one side. "But I worked so hard on it."

More audience delight.

If he got to arguing with her, the whole class would have difficult reading tonight. "Top of page 147." She had the words nearly memorized: "' . . . Gatsby was leaning against a table in the hall, heavy with dejection or sleep.
'Nothing happened. . .I waited, and about four o'clock she came to the window.'"

"You won't accept my work?" His legs reached clear across the aisle. She wondered where his mother found jeans that long -- even Adam had been hard to fit.

"Certainly, Johnel." Her temper felt warm and clean. "Hand it to me. Please."

The room grew too quiet. As she had suspected, his pencilled script covered less than half a page. She should simply add the paper to the class pile and let him think he'd won.

But instead she jerked open her top drawer, savoring the bouncy noise its rulers and pencils made. She found a functioning red marker and wrote at the top "LATE. NO CREDIT." She held up, crumpled, then dropped the paper into the metal wastebasket.

Exaggerating her casual pose on the edge of her desk, she read, temples pounding, "'. . .and then turned out the light. His house had never seemed so enormous to me as it did that night.'"

Johnel lunged out of his seat, crossed to the wastebasket, knelt, and plucked out the wadded paper. She was awed by his grace, his physical perfection. "I'm showing Miz Easton." He turned to the class. "Listen to this," he said. "'Gatsby's crimes were made necessary by a bad federal law: prohibition. We're making the same mistake now with our so-called illegal drug laws.'"
Self-indulgent adolescent rhetoric. Well, after he turned 18, maybe he'd enjoy rooming with Adam at the FCI.

Even when she stood, he loomed almost a foot above her. "You're out of line, Johnel. Sit down, please." Too late she realized she'd left him no way to save face.

"What. . ." he boomed, his eyes huge, his arms wild, "the fuck." He leaned hard on the last word. A thrilled gasp came from some girls towards the back.

He was already returning to his desk. "Go ahead," he said, packing his books. "Write me up."

"My very thought." More lost minutes. She grabbed a blank discipline referral and wrote, furious: "Argumentative and defiant. Does no work, in class or out." It sounded vague. She checked his row in her gradebook, strung with F's. "Seems determined to flunk English III. Again."

"ACTION DESIRED," the slip asked. "Suspend from class for two days." The words seemed to take forever to write down.

Johnel, meanwhile, had time to fill. His back to her, he chatted up a few of the hipper males on his side of the room. ". . .You guys go last night? Two kegs. . .what a blast. . ."

She dated and signed the form.

"It was hellabad. . . .Lots of blow, too. . . "

A few glanced her way. Was he just trying to impress the juniors? Cocaine was so expensive. She was no doubt
supposed to report this to someone, Coach Schwenk, maybe. But what difference, finally, would that make?

She handed Johnel the slip. He grabbed it, glowered back at her, and headed for the door.

The defeat was one too many. She'd lost him for two more days, had lost Third Period's good will, at least for a while. Blindly she searched for the passage she'd been reading. From someplace underneath her tight throat, words forced their way up and out. "You guys? Remember me? Remember school?"

Even Ibrahim and Ronald were looking down, the way they always did when a lecture was hatching.

"I want you to learn to think. Look at Jay Gatz, face down in a swimming pool because he couldn't own his reality. Don't you see what these drugs do to people?"

A sick pit of silence stretched back to before Adam's arrest. The tears right behind her eyes were a wall. "My only son..." Her heart pounded, trying to warn her. "My son is in prison from dealing these filthy drugs."

It was only then that Johnel closed the classroom door and pivoted into the world with her secret, leaving her locked inside with her latest mistake.
Chapter Two

"No. No, I understand." He wasn't forming the words real clear. That didn't matter, of course, since the line was dead. "Yeah. I'll... I'll call back. Bye."

But when he risked checking his back, he saw that for the first time in the whole 47 days, nobody was in line.

"What's that?" he asked nobody, keeping his head down, pretending to listen, working, meanwhile, on the panic about to swallow him like the curl of a breaker. He held the receiver with his shoulder and crossed his arms so he could dig his fingernails into his sides, dig them in so hard that even through the rough workshirt he could feel the hurt.

"Hmmm." He thought words and sent them back. Fine. Abandon me here to these maniacs and perverts. Go ahead, have a life, have one on me. There's others who'll take my calls.

Christie, he could call her, but not till this afternoon, of course, after her parents were gone. Dad, too, at the office, but that would mean going through at least one secretary. Dad would be too busy to talk, anyway. And what was there, after all, to say?

"Yeah?" He felt stupid, talking to himself like this. His eyes were itchy, his skin was stretched too taut across his body, even his hair prickled. This silence, with everyone else at breakfast, was almost worse than the usual echoing chaos of E Wing.
'No?' Maybe the operator had gotten her number wrong. But it had been his mother's voice, quiet, a little sad. Maybe she had some guy there with her. Nah, not her.

Maybe it was because he'd brought up offing himself. But, hey, at least when you were dead, you could rest. He couldn't sleep worth shit. His bowels were running, hands clammy. And there was no rest from it, no rest anywhere he could find.

He had to plan, to have somewhere to be. Breakfast was out of the question, he was too late now, and besides he'd never be able to stomach those fake eggs, never mind Mosher or those others moonheads with their "leftcoast Commie niggerloving" mouths.

He'd work out again instead, till it was time to hit the kitchen at 11 for set-up. "Thanks again," For fucking nothing. Hanging up even a dead phone shallowed down his breathing, made it harder to draw in a full lungfull of air.

On the way to the cell, he focused on a pretend callus on his palm, in case he might lose the fight he was having with his mouth, whose corners kept veering downwards. But there was nobody in the dayroom, just one or two in the head, nobody in the double row of cells. The place reeked of stale cigarette smoke, you could almost see it hanging there like a dirty fog.

Anderson was gone, Les too, their blankets taut across their bunks. He changed into his shorts, got his towel out
of his locker, set his mouth, and headed back down E Wing, then left into the echoing gym.

Nobody in here but a couple of Muslim brothers minding their business. He did his stretches in one corner of the big room. When it was this empty, you could almost think you were at Norman's in Oakland, Webster and 13th. The smoke, even, was thinner here.

The last guy to use this press must have been a big mother: there was 310 pounds on there. After stretching, he took off everything but a 45 on each side, and then lay back down. Starting this light would make the routine last longer. The cool of the plastic meeting his sore bare shoulders felt almost like an offer of comfort, and he started to choke up again.

He did twelve at 135. **Inhale as you lower, Fiske,** he heard Norman coach. **Don't think weight, think breath.** Maybe Norman would take a call. This afternoon, if it got bad again and Christie wasn't home.

His own fucking mother. Used to be, her words would crash into each other like too many gonzo dudes plowing the surf. **Was he getting used to the food? What could she send him? Was he doing any reading?** Now, slam. Hosed. He wouldn't call any more, he wouldn't beg.

Too light. He got up and added two tens on each side, the clangs creating loud echoes. He checked the room again. A couple more -- slit-mouthed Indian guys -- but no skinheads. Two sets of ten each with these: 175 pounds.
Probably about what he weighed now. He'd weighed 186, the same as Dad, on the outside. The two of them had talked about it the morning of his sentencing, April 4. "You're meatier than I was at your age, Adam," Dad had said at the San Diego Denny's, feeling his shoulder. "Finish your omelet, now." He'd even rested his hand on that shoulder for a while.

Nine. Ten. Slot the weights and pause for a slow ten count. Then a second set.

Forty seven plus 80 served last year in San Diego was 126, subtracted from 365 times five years was 1,825 days left, minus time off... Time was standing on its head, frozen perfectly still. Christie wouldn't wait. Nothing in life would wait for him. Not even his mother. Pills would be the way, but for them you'd have to have some serious connections inside population.

On his right, a skinhead loomed over him, one from D Wing, his black tanktop stretched over deltoids the size of grapefruits, the whole expanse covered with swirling tattoos. "White Pride -- World Wide," it said on his left pec. These guys were friggin insane.

He lost his count at six, and slotted the weights, fast, his head starting to pound. He lay still, working to steady what was left of his nerves. He hadn't tangled with this guy yet, but these fuckers hung tighter than snarled ropes.

The guy started stringing weights onto that bar like they were bagels. Without being obvious about it, he
counted: 180 to start with. Moonheads, he called these
Aryans. Just to himself, of course, and to Anderson. From
the back, their heads looked like butt-halves. From the
front, though, they were sicky-mean. Not long on brains,
which made them defensive. But, as long as that dumber-than-
dirt Wilson Franch didn't turn up in here, he could probably
finish the workout.

He adjusted the weights to total 205, lay back down,
then tensed and held, almost able to feel the blood flood
into his chest. Then he lifted the bar into place and began
the reps. Three sets of ten each at 205. Slow and steady.
Make it last. Breathe. Think heart and lungs.

Virginia Fiske, always so worried about what people
would think. He and Geoff used to imitate her, her hands
flying around, her brown eyes opening too wide, embarrassing
you with their stare. When you told her things she didn't
want to hear, those eyes grew the red lines that on normal
people meant weed.

Weed. The first time he'd gotten really high was in the
seventh grade, one night at Montclair Park with Geoff and a
couple of girls. He'd hitched home really late. His
mother's bedroom door had been closed, meaning she and James
were up there screwing. Whatever. Starving, he'd shaped up
a big old half-pound of hamburger meat, set it to frying, and
lain down on the living room couch.

James had pulled him to his feet and into a gray fog of
peppery smoke. Had shaken him, hard, dishing out a bunch of
crap about the house almost burning down. Tried to make a hero of himself for buying that obnoxious smoke detector.


Actually, James was pretty funny when he wanted to be. He'd lightened Ginger up for a few years there, got her mind off Mt. Rushmore Face, Benjamin Fiske. And off himself. Still, she should never have divorced his dad. They...they looked good together, the dark of her, the pale of him.

"Dad married his job, Adam," she'd say. "'The law is a jealous mistress.' That's what he used to tell me. Doesn't he tell you that?"

She was right, of course, about that, anyway. Whenever Dad wasn't asleep, he worked. Those two years of Sunday visitations at the office were probably the most concentrated times they'd ever spent together, his dad and him.

"Be done pretty soon, son," he'd say, opening one of the legal files stacked everywhere on his desk, the carpet, and all the chairs. "Then we'll get you a hamburger and some fries at the HofBrau."

Second set.

He'd drive his Tonka dump truck between the stacks, out the door, down the hall. Stand on a chair in the workroom and copy the truck, some pencils, his face, hands. Watch the fish in the big tank in the waiting room. Make hot cocoa for himself with the packets in the secretaries' lounge.
But there was usually trouble. When he was maybe six, he'd emptied almost a whole box of fish flakes into the tank by accident. The fish, near as he could tell, were practically wriggling their thanks.

"God damn it, son, too much food'll kill them." His big hand in the water had frightened those fish.

Five. Six. Sweat was draining into his eyes and hair and onto the bench.

"God damn it, son." It seemed the main thing Dad had ever had to say to him. But then he'd met Phoebe and moved to Oregon, pretty much solving that problem.

He lost the count at eight, his strength draining off like sweat, and he almost missed the slot. The weights crashed into place, and his head was suddenly way too light. He felt Moonhead next door cut him a look.

He sat up too fast, then, pivoting sideways with his back to Moon, waiting for his breathing to slow and his blood to resume its coursing. As the colors in the room came back, he saw that almost every bench was now occupied.

He'd do one last set, then shower and get ready for his detail. He could call Christie right at 3, they'd have maybe 20 minutes before she left for Nordstrom's. Her mother'd be at Cal Fed. Dickhead Grant was on the road this week, so Christie was breathing easier. Maybe the April phone bill would arrive today, and she could write a check before Dickhead got back. Still, the lech would eventually start wondering what happened to the bill. Of course.
He took off the 10's and added another pair of 25's. This was as much as he'd tried to press inside. At Norman's he'd been up to 270. Yesterday he'd stalled at 225. He was finally getting hungry now, which felt good. Sweating and hunger and pain -- at least they made you know you were alive.

He lay back down. The crush of the weights hanging above his chest, inches from catastrophe, matched the way his life felt now. No room for slip-ups.

His last slip-up had been a motherfucker, for certain sure. He tensed for a count of 20, untensed, then heaved the weights from their slots for the count:

Somewhere in him, he'd known it was bogus. "No big deal," Terry had said. "Back the same day." They'd travel in Terry's private plane, and he'd get a look at those San Diego breakers. Well, as it worked out, he'd gotten more than his fill of those breakers through a skinny jail window.

One.

He should have gone with Terry to the warehouse. He'd felt trapped from the moment he and Derek hit the San Clemente Sheraton, its marbled front desk, their stale room. They'd been afraid to open the curtains.

Two.

Derek smoked one cigarette after another, even knowing how he hated cigarette smoke.

Three.
Sealed in there with that cash was like waiting to die. He'd turn the TV down, Derek would turn it back up. He did push ups on the floor next to his bed. Checked the bathroom mirror, popped the zits on his back.

Four.

When the phone finally rang, almost two hours later, it sounded like a fire alarm. His blood pounded so hard in his head he could hardly hear Terry's directions.

Five.

It was like replaying a video of yourself jumping off a tall building. If he'd let Derek carry the Adidas bag, he'd have been given probably half his current sentence. Derek and that leather briefcase probably made them both look more suspicious. Well, being black, Derek looked suspicious just being in San Clemente.

Six.

Why hadn't he seen then how dangerous it was? Terry and he had had to talk Derek out of bringing his piece. But it had almost worked, and, if it had, he could have quit after he'd sold his share, could have set Christie up in style in Danville like she wanted. Sent himself through college, even. Wouldn't have had to crawl to Dad ever again for a stinking dollar.

Seven.

The whole thing had exploded like a huge infected pimple, there on that sidewalk in the Southern California sunshine. "Freeze!" some guy's voice had ordered behind him.
Just for a heartbeat he'd figured it was Derek joking around, but Derek never joked.

He'd almost pissed on himself. Had a little, actually.

Eight.

Down, a hair at a time, till the bar just creased his chest, and then up, gradually, with control. A little farther, to full extension.

Nine. Now. If on the inhale he could control the descent, and on the exhale power the bar back up, then reach slightly backwards to slot the fucking thing, that would mean, he told himself, he might live through this new long day.

His body screamed with the effort. Every new inch was an achievement, his torso working with his pecs and delts to resist the temptation to let the thing just fall and crush his chest. He eased it all the way down until the cold of the center bar touched him.

Up, now, a fraction of an inch at a time, his eyes closed, his teeth bared. His arms and shoulders screamed with the pain of it.

And then, finally, over and slot. Weightless now, his arms dropped onto his chest like dead things. He wanted to get a blanket, curl like a baby under it on the bench, and never get up. But lifting even the corner of a blanket was beyond him right now.

An older, dark Moonhead with tattooed arms loomed behind his head. His pumping heart almost quit, it seemed like he
was getting arrested all over again. The guy just stood there, they spoke mostly to each other, except for the filth they dished the brothers. But, still, at least this wasn't the one who'd already been in his own personal face, that freak Franch from D Wing, the one who'd called him a "nigger-fucking homo" because it had gotten around population that his co-defendant was a blood. Derek, serving three years in Michigan. Shorter sentence than his, since Derek was only 19. Well, and because of that fucking Adidas bag Derek ended up not holding, that athletic bag with money from, what, fifteen sources? Sixteen? That dentist in Alamo, and Geoff McLaren, and Christie's cousin. Couple of realtor friends of Terry's, and then, of course, Derek's "folks." Plus Terry's money, and his own.

"I'm done." Even moving his mouth was too hard. "Just gotta rest a minute."

Moon Two's slitted eyes held his and wouldn't let go. Adam tried to sit up, but his arms were too wasted to lift him. The fucker's dark sweatshirt was fading to white on him. "You've got all day."

He heard Moonhead One slot his weights. The guy's voice slid over like a switchblade. "You're from Oakland, right? Word is, your mother fucks coons. My friend Mose here needs that bench."

The adrenalin started pumping, and it didn't feel all bad. "Just hold onto your dongs."
One stood then, and Two moved left and grabbed Adam's left wrist, twisting it up and back until he was upright, then standing, and the tearing pain was all there was in the world. The surroundings pitching in rhythm to the seasick pulses in his head, he stumbled past One and out of the gym, down the long corridor, and on to his cell.

Anderson was on his bunk, his back to the wall, reading Hustler. Old Les was in place under Al, his head on his pillow, his nose in one of his endless paperbacks.

He massaged his left shoulder. Pulled muscles, minimum. "I'm gonna tear those moonheads apart, I swear to God."

"I told you," Al muttered.

He tried to rotate the arm, but it wouldn't go backwards past his side or forwards past his chin. Probably torn cartilage.

Even now Al didn't look over. "Let 'em work out on the coons."

Al's kitchen buddy slunk in, carrying two sweet rolls on a brown paper towel. He set them next to Al.

"Don't drip on the fucking blanket!"

At the smell of the cinnamon, Adam's stomach gaped open. Al would never eat both. "Shit, now I'm starvin' like Marvin. What was for breakfast?"

"Cardboard. Right, Les?"

"Pancakes. I've had worse."
"What'd you pull, Fiske?" You could see Anderson's jaw muscles move when he chewed.

"Lunch KP. What're they having?"

"Looked like melted cheese sandwiches." The guy licked his fingers, one by one.

"I can't eat cheese." Adam sat down on his bunk and rubbed his shoulder. "Too much cholesterol."

"You know, Fiske, you complain a lot." Al's pale blue eyes looked like they'd never been afraid. "Anyone ever tell you that?"

Leaning on one elbow, old Les picked the top book off the pile behind his head. "Want to borrow this, Fiske?" His voice was quiet, and sort of deep for such a small guy.

"Nah. I hate reading. Takes too long."

"Yeah?" The old guy's eyes weren't brown, or green either. They made him kind of nervous, the way they looked full at him over those little half glasses. Beneath that narrow dark moustache, his mouth barely moved. "We got time."

Was the fucker screwing with him? He checked the face again, but Les was back into his book, whatever it was.

In front of his locker, he dipped a stale Ritz into his peanut butter jar, then stuffed the pieces into his mouth. Another. And another. He was so hungry his hands were shaking. He'd have to write his mother for another money order. At least ten days before it would get here, even if he mailed it right away. He couldn't miss any more meals.
"Les? You got any paper and envelopes?" The guy couldn't weigh more than 150. Bald, just a fringe of dark around the edges. Dad's hair was getting that way now. His own would, too, probably, if he lived long enough.

Les looked at him steady. "Get 'em yourself, Adam. Top shelf. Need a stamp?"

"I do, actually. Pay you back." Adam. The sound of the name made him nervous.

"Don't worry about it."

He felt funny opening Les's locker. Paperbacks were stacked on the guy's few clothes. On the top shelf were a stack of spiral ring binders, a box with envelopes, pens, very sharp pencils, and stamps. No pictures on the inside of the door. He felt a little bad for the guy. He would borrow a book from him sometime.

"I don't see any paper, Les. Sorry."

"Tear some sheets out of the back of that top notebook."

He sat on his bunk, using the notebook as a desk.

Dear Mom,
Sorry, guess I woke you up. Daylight Savings must of started.
Sorry to have to ask you, but could you send me another money order for $50, be sure to put my number after my name.
Don't worry about me. Love you Mom,
Adam

The letter looked sort of puny on that whole sheet of paper. His mother's letters to him were two pages, anyway, and they'd been coming every day or two. Well, she had a life, he didn't. He folded it into fourths, and then, when
it still wouldn't fit, folded it again, shoved it in, and addressed, stamped and sealed the envelope.

He was almost to the drop slot when he remembered: no sealed mail. He crumpled up the thing up and threw it the length of the corridor. If he'd been anywhere else in the world, he'd have screamed "Shit shit shit shit shit" and punched the wall.

But since he was in here, he picked it back up and returned to the cell. The crackers and the lumps of peanut butter seemed stuck in his throat as he asked from the doorway, "Les? Got another one? I ruined that one."

The guy put his book down on his chest and his hands behind his head. He looked at Adam for too, too long. But at least he didn't smile. "No sweat," was all he said.

He repeated his old address. Home. What a word. He tore the first stamp off and returned it to Les's box. Then he balled up the ruined envelope and tossed it at the wastebasket. It missed.

"Fucking shit!"

"You're gettin' on my nerves, Fiske," Al sighed, the second sweet roll wasting next to him.

He met the cool blue eyes. "I can't do this. You've lived through thirteen months? I'm gonna fucking kill myself."

Al hardly looked up from the magazine. "Here," he tossed him the roll, "sweeten up."
He sat on his bed to eat. Even the center was cold now, and there were too many raisins. He licked his fingers the way Al had.

The guy was never going to finish that magazine. He'd sure paid full attention to Christie's modelling portraits -- her platinum hair against that black silk dress. Called her "a full-out 10." 'Course.

Well, he'd drop the letter off, then go shower.

But when he was in the corridor just opposite the head, around the corner came the two gym moonfaces. His shoulder began throbbing and his mouth dried up further.

"Got there, big guy?" Moon One.

"Fucking letter." The skin on his neck prickled. He swallowed, willing himself not to look away.

"To your nigger ho?" Moon Two. Mose.

"None of your fucking business." He'd promised Christie he wouldn't fight in here. "Adolf." He said it under his breath.

Mose grabbed the envelope from him. "Tell her how you've switched to boys?" He unfolded the notepaper. "'Dear Mom,'" he read, his voice high, his disgusting lips pooched out.

Adam's fist curled, cocked, and fired before his mind engaged. His knuckles connected with something that felt like a slab of redwood. He aimed next for the fleshy mouth in the swarth of the guy's ignorant face. But instead, a fist landed in the roil in his belly of peanut butter and
cinnamon. He doubled over, wondering whether to vomit or breathe. Then, arms around his chest -- Al's, maybe -- pulled him backwards, and he opened his eyes long enough to see that One was trying to hold Mose around the middle.

They hadn't been quick enough, though. The worst guard, that oily Murdoch, was already running their way, opening the cuffs as he came. Behind him were the backups. Guys in nearby cells were slouching in their doorways to watch. Some were smiling.

Murdoch stretched his sore left pectoral until his eyes filled up. The cold cuffs double clicked as they locked. He kept his head down. Then Les was there, on his right. He stood very close, and spoke low so nobody else could hear. "I'll see your letter gets mailed, Fiske. Here." He tucked something under Adam's arm. "Probably see you in thirty."
Ben had never before phoned her at school. After Fifth Period was underway, she returned his call from the airless alcove in the empty faculty room.

"Ginger?" As usual, the voice was bunched to rain on his parade of choice. "Thanks for returning my call."

Thanks?

"I have some very bad news."

His favorite kind.

"Adam is in jail."
Was he gloating? She slumped against the alcove wall. Half a dozen cafeteria ladies bustled a few feet away, washing pots, storing food. "Why?"

Of course he wasn't gloating. His voice sounded almost awed, as if he were speaking under his breath at a funeral. "Major cocaine bust. He and two other men were arrested in San Clemente yesterday trying to buy almost a hundred kilos of cocaine from an agent."

The worst had happened, then. Finally. The showy gifts, the surfing trips to Baja, the vague non-answers. She could form no words, nor think of any. Then her shoulders began to tremble.

"Ginger? Are you there?"

If she opened her mouth, she was thinking, a long hideous scream might come out, a scream like a tapeworm, a scream that would pull out with it her entire insides.

"Virginia?"

"Did...did he call you?" Her teeth were either chattering or locking.

"His lawyer called. She said the arrest involved over a dozen agents." Was he blaming this on her?

Just then, the faculty room door opened. She felt pinned, as if during the commission of a crime. It was Mr. Schneider, Marv, probably checking to see which of his new staff were in here gossiping during their conference periods.

Maybe he'd think she was phoning a parent. He let the door close behind him, scanned the room, paused to read a
headline, and then proceeded towards her, probably heading to
the men's room. The pounding of her pulses was overwhelming
Ben's distant voice. She made herself catch Schneider's eye
as he passed, and returned to her something close to a smile.

"Sorry," she said into the phone, "I missed that." She
felt splayed out between these two, who, she suddenly
realized, shared righteousness like Eagle badges they'd both
earned in Scouts.

Schneider receded down the hall. His dark hair looked,
as always, so combed.

"He's hired Pamela Curtis, in Oakland."

"Oh?"

"I'm flying down to meet with her tomorrow morning at
eleven. She'd like you there too."

"Of course." That must mean Adam wasn't dead, which was
something good, then. Wasn't it?

"There'll be a bail hearing in San Diego federal court,
she says, maybe as soon as Friday." Was he saying that she
should be there too? That she might see her son in just
three days?

"Is he okay?" It came out a whisper.

An image surfaced, a framed snapshot still hanging in
her kitchen: Adam's face down, his white blond hair in his
eyes, his small hands gripping a trike's handlebars. She had
to clear her throat and ask again. Making words into sounds
was so hard. "Is he okay, then? Ben?"
He hesitated for too long before he answered. "Yes. He wasn't hurt."

"Well, that's one good thing, then." Ben could probably hear the clatter of her teeth. "He must be... be terrified."

"Yes. I would be, anyway."

How lucky that Ben had taken the call, that she wasn't completely alone in this.

But then he returned to brusque. "Well, obviously, I'd never have gotten myself in this mess."

Her heart moved further back in its corner. Was that supposed to mean that she, for example, would? "Why didn't the lawyer call me? I live right here."

"Adam didn't want us to know, either of us. But Curtis wouldn't take his case until she finally got his permission to call me."

Schneider was coming back her way. At least she was wearing one of her newer dresses, her heeled pumps. She straightened her shoulders.

"I'm defying him by telling you." Ben sounded now as if he had the situation somehow under control.

"I see."

Schneider, maybe sensing her discomfort, picked up his pace and disappeared out the door into the winter sunshine.

"Ginger? Are you there?"

"Yes. It's just that... the principal was passing through. He's gone now."
"The lawyer warned me that we'll likely be asked to proffer residences for bail purposes."
"Residences? You mean, my house?"
"Yours and mine."
"But I only own half."
"And to sign a large appearance bond."
She couldn't pay attention to the legal jargon. Probably this female attorney would be better at translating for her.
"Oh, one more thing. Don't tell a soul."
"My God! Who would I tell?" Except, of course, James.
"I can tell James, can't I?"
"As little as possible. Please. It's important."
"Shall I meet your plane? I'll have a whole day sub."
"No. I'll rent a car, meet with a co-counsel in San Francisco in the afternoon. Medical malpractice thing."
"Ben?" She must not cry. "What might happen?"
His laugh was the bitter one. "Maybe we'll find out tomorrow."

This windowless room smelled of hot dogs boiled too long, bad French fries, Lysol, and ash trays. It was hard to summon enough air to push out more words. "I'll see you at eleven, then."

"Curtis and Stevens. Broadway at Twelfth. Two blocks from my old office."

"Thanks. Ben." She hung up with great care.
Grabbing her purse and books, she hurried, head down, out the faculty room, down the long, sunny science corridor to the office. She scribbled a note about a sudden emergency, and left it with her room keys on Marian Easton's desk. She contained her tears, just barely, until she hit her Toyota and sanctuary.

James was on the edge of their bed, changing into his gray sweats. "Why are you home so...?" Then he looked at her and stood, fast. "Ginger! What's wrong?"

She crumpled onto the bed, drew her knees up to her chest, and, holding them with her arms, vomited up long, slow sobs.

James removed her shoes and got a blanket, then lay curled around her, his arm over hers.

As she could, she told him what she knew, still facing away.

He held her, and stroked her hair, and rubbed her back. When her trembling still didn't subside, he turned on the electric blanket and the floor furnace, then got her out of her dress, into her nightgown, and under the covers. He got in next to her, working his legs between and over hers to help warm her.

Still she could not face him, could not bury her face in the space between his neck and shoulder. He'd been predicting trouble like this for Adam since they'd first met.
Finally he went downstairs and brought back tea and milk for her, a mug of instant coffee for himself. Sitting up, she took one scorching sip.

He spoke quietly. "Start over, now. One piece at a time. How did Ben reach you? I'd have guessed he didn't even know which high school."

"I wondered about that, too. His secretary must have found the number, maybe through Central Office."

"How is Adam?"

She glanced into his face to check. Did he hope Adam had been hurt, to help him learn some lesson? Of course not.

They went back over Ben's words together. As she spilled the contamination into their bedroom, she wondered fleetingly if she'd ever be able to sleep in here again. Or make love.

"My son a 'drug lord'? Maybe we should move to the living room, James. Build a fire?"

He kissed her hair, stood, and left. "Stay warm."

In a few minutes, she heard the fireplace start to crackle, slipped into her robe, and joined him downstairs. "Let's sit on the rug like we used to."

He brought in White Zinfandel and glasses, setting the bottle out of range of the fire's heat. Minutes passed while they watched the flames and sipped. Her eyes were being scalded, but she tried not to look away; this heat felt like a character test. "Tell me what you think, James."
"This is hard for me to talk about." He spoke slowly. "Adam has put us through so much, especially before we kicked him out. I love you, you know. I even love Adam, hard as that sometimes is to believe. But... he was going to get caught. You read the papers. It had to end this way, or else by his dying."

Those stories in the newspaper, those were ghetto kids. Some of her students, maybe. Not the children of college graduates.

He was quiet for a while. "I've always thought Adam manipulated you, from the time I first met him. I've never understood why... ."

She quit listening. It's what everyone would think. The ultimate parenting failure.

"You'd set down a rule, then forget it." He refilled his glass and drank it down in three gulps.

"Rules?" Her temples were pounding. "Christ! My whole job's enforcing rules." She made her voice stay quiet, but the words came out in a kind of hiss. "What do you think I do all day? Tardy policy, homework policy, dress code, restroom pass, nurse pass. Criteria for deficiencies. At State, I guess, it's different -- your students just quietly drop out, slip away. High school is nothing but rules." These men. Motherhood looked so easy to these big-voiced men.

His mouth got its set look. "I've said this before. Adam's like a lot of my lower division students. They buy
the books, make it to the first few classes, then can't sustain it."

She should warn him to stop.

"Same with Adam. Wouldn't be on the Little League team if he couldn't pitch. Good speed in the 440, but couldn't weather the practices. No patience for anything -- electric guitar, chess, tennis." He stood, moved the screen aside, and added a pine log to the fire.

If young Jared turned out okay, it would be thanks to Janice, not to James Garrett, absentee father.

"Then along comes this Christie. Christ. A matched pair. World class consumers."

Maybe her silence was making him nervous.

He faced her, his eyes desperate. "You didn't want him to die, did you?"

"Of course not! But that's like comforting a paraplegic that he's got functioning arms." Her throat ached. "I threw myself into motherhood like it was graduate school. Read the books, chose creative toys, limited TV, Hardly ever got a sitter. Nurtured his friendships."

"Nobody's saying you haven't been a good mother, Ginger."

"Even after Ben and I split, I hiked with him, biked, swam, played catch, read to him. We were so close." Under her words, other niggling truths burbled: the Berkeley post doc, the clinical psychologist.
Till you, she wanted to add. She studied his dark eyebrows and serious blue eyes, his long straight nose and the marks where his glasses rested, his dark beard, silvering now in two wide streaks.

He refilled his glass. Holding hers to her forehead, she watched the new log catch. "It's not right to blame Christie, either. He chose her, after all."

"Maybe if Ben hadn't moved away," he offered.

"But Ben's always been too busy." While she watched, the smoke licked into sputtering white flame. "I just won't tell anyone, anyone but you." She picked up his right hand. "How can I? That he's a potential felon."

He slipped his hand from hers, kissed the insides of both wrists, and stood. "Feel like a little dinner?" He'd always been jealous of Adam. "I could reheat the Mexican chicken from last night."

"I certainly can't tell people at school, that gossip mill. Thank God it happened 500 miles from here. Marvin Schneider can't find out, not ever." The image of his straight back flared. His biggest shame had probably been, what? A soiled collar? A pet's accident on the rug? "When asked, I'll just say, maybe, 'Adam's away at school.' Don't you think?"

"Mmmm."

Her stomach clutched. "My God!" Her white-haired mother had floated to mind, long legs crossed on her couch,
Scotch and water in one hand, a Pall Mall in the other.  
"What about Alice?"

"Oh, you and your imperious mother. Don't go worrying about her. She's four states away. We'll figure this out."

He was tired of the subject already. Well, it wasn't his son.

"If you're not hungry," he said from behind her, "then I have another idea. I'll bring in that French bread and some Gouda. We can have that and more wine right here."

"Sounds good," she lied. She wanted to call Ben and go back over the facts. No, Phoebe would be there, in full gloat, like her own colleagues would be if they ever learned of this.

"And, then, afterwards, if you'd be interested." His voice got quiet, and the skin on her arms prickled. "We could lie here in front of this fire and, you know. Snuggle. Might make you feel better."

'Better?' It would be like making love at a funeral. He'd be penetrating a dead person, and she'd feel like a body for hire. But one thing was absolutely true: she needed James Garrett.

"Sure," she said, hoping her limp tone would convey her aversion, and he'd give up that idea. "That'd be. . . that'd be nice."
Ignominy. Ignominy was watching Adam's two sleazy co-defendants stride out on bail within 72 hours, and then, minutes later, sitting in your best charcoal wool suit, hearing a grave judge deny your own son bail. Hearing Benjamin Fiske, under oath, state that he would put up neither his home nor his law practice; no, he wouldn't sign the appearance bond; and, finally, no, your honor, I don't necessarily believe that my son would not flee prior to sentencing.

When James came back from tennis and found her in the kitchen late that Thursday, her nerves felt like the gummy steel wool she was using to scour her Revereware.

"He's still not here? I thought you said around dinnertime."

Was that why he'd arranged to play under the lights with Don? So he'd miss the worst of her gushing?

He set his sweaty wristlets by the sink, a habit which had always irritated her, and picked his mail off the counter.

"How's Don?"

"Fine. Don't change the subject." The way he was scowling at her set off a small thrill of fear. "I told you
we should have met his plane. It's already past his curfew, if I'm not mistaken."

*Gee, James, I hadn't noticed,* she wanted to scream. Instead, she washed a muffin pan, sponging each of the twelve molds in turn. I should make a batch of corn muffins.

No, James would regard that as more positive reinforcement of a wrong.

He filled a Mexican goblet with Chablis. "Want some?" But instead of waiting for her answer, he carried his, and his mail, to the kitchen table and sat down, heavily.

"You know how Adam is." She knelt to restack the baking pans on the shelf, partly so her words would be muffled by the cupboard door. "He wanted Christie to be the one. They've been apart almost three months."

James let out a deep sigh. "His choice. He made the decisions which got him locked up."

What defense was there? Since Ben's call, she had felt sometimes as if Adam might be better off dead. His life, his mistakes -- and hers -- were now pinned like dead butterflies for all the world to study.

"I have a bad feeling about this. Already he's not keeping his word. Tell me again, what did the lawyer say happens if he. . . " He began whispering. ". . .if he skips out?"

Crouched on her knees, she froze. "Don't even say that. He'll be right along." Feeling as if she were acting in a play, she stood, carrying a crusty cast iron skillet to the
sink. "You know, I think she really loves the guy." She even sounded like Christie, all breath. "She called yesterday to ask me what to wear to the airport."

"I'm really quite touched." He ripped open an envelope. She'd never heard him this sarcastic. "Back off, for Christ's sake, James. Are you maybe jealous? Of him making love with her?" Adam and that ditzy girl were probably in her new Nissan, south of Tijuana by now, heading for Cabo San Lucas.

James responded by refilling his goblet. He'd be drunk soon, and unpredictable.

The skillet was heavy and awkward. As she dried it, she found herself wondering how it would sound meeting Adam's cranium from above. She might have to stand on the kitchen stool for added height.

"Do you suppose he just missed the plane? How was he going to get to the airport from the jail?"

She glanced at him. How kind. He looked tired tonight, slumped over the bills, his shoulders drooped. She tried a smile. "Remember when you and I missed the plane to Colorado Springs that Christmas?" But the phone rang just then, and, limp with relief, she hurried to answer.

It was Ben. "Where the Goddamned hell is Adam? He was to call me by noon." Ben almost never swore.

"I haven't heard from him yet either, I'm afraid."

"You don't suppose he's up and gone to Mexico, do you?"
She coughed out a small laugh. "Of course not." Adam had once told her the Baja rollers could reach fifteen feet.

"Well, Phoebe's predicting we'll lose the condo. And she may be right."

One of their six? What about her and James? Because Ben Fiske would not stand behind his son, the dear rumpled man in her kitchen had had to pledge his half a house, and on an income one-tenth, maybe one twentieth, of Ben's.

"I even wired him money for a plane ticket."

"He's most likely with Christie, Ben. They've probably checked into a motel somewhere." Don't you remember? You and I did that once just before we got engaged.

He was quiet, so she added, "We should be grateful for her. She's a reason not to jump bail, don't you see?" Jump bail? Could these comic book phrases be coming from her mouth?

"Well, I'm going to call United Airlines."

He didn't even say goodbye. He had the luxury of blaming as much of this on her as he chose. His own erratic fatherhood was, at least in his mind, evidently irrelevant.

She put the skillet away, and dumped into the soapy water the contents of the flatwear drawer. The stainless ware made a huge, lingering clatter. James looked up, and, just for a moment, he looked really scared.

How would the appearance bond work? The feds would attach both their wages except for a modest allowance, until
a million and a half dollars had been paid back. If they paid $800 a month between them, it would take, what?

She got her pocket calculator out of the drawer. $9,600 a year. $1,500,000 divided by $9,600: They'd have the feds paid back in 156.25 years.

But, meanwhile, they would also have lost this house, would have nowhere to live. While Adam Fiske screwed and surfed. Very funny, son.

She should have calculated this before she signed that bond. Well, James should have too.

The shrilling phone sounded like a police whistle.

"It's ambiguous," Ben sighed. "They checked back through all the flights which left San Diego midday for anywhere in the Bay Area, and found one likely name, 'H. Fiske.' An H. Fiske boarded at 2:05, deplaned in San Francisco at 3:40. But why the Goddamned hell hasn't he called?"

Her face had gone numb. "I guess I could try Christie's house."

"My God, I thought you'd done that already. Do it now, then call me." Would you do it, Ben? Christie's stepdad might at least be a little afraid of you.

James was writing out checks, and sighing, and sipping. She looked in the phone book for a Grant in Danville. But the phone rang again. Thank God!

"Adam?"

"Virginia? Dear, it's me. Hello?"
She sat down, hard, her whole body leaden with something like guilt, or maybe extreme old age. "Mother?"

"Dear? I got the robe. It's beautiful."

Her heart was flopping around like a perch on a pier. What robe?

"You thought I was Adam? Is he still in love with the girl at Nordstrom's?"

"Yes. Yes, he is, Mother." The black velour robe she'd bought at the mall. "Nice girl. Christie." Find some other subject. "Do you have a Nordy's in Colorado Springs?"

"No, but we have a Dillard's. Lovely salespeople. Did this Christie help you choose my birthday robe?" Her lighter clicked, and there was a pause while she inhaled.

"No, no. She works in men's shoes. I'm. . .I'm glad you liked it, Mother. Does it fit?"

"Perfectly. I've lost a little weight, but I still take a medium, same's you."

"Keep you warm there in the mountains. Mother, I hate to cut this short, but I am expecting a couple of calls from. . .parents. It's deficiency time." Those notices wouldn't go out for four more weeks, probably. Lies were flowing out of her mouth like blood from a fresh cut.

"Isn't it rather late to be phoning parents?" She was the very sharpest at the most inopportune times.

"Well, I put in some calls earlier, and left my home number."
Alice inhaled audibly, and, taking her time, exhaled into the phone. "You shouldn't do that. Many of those students already sound like incipient criminals."

*Mostly misdemeanors, Mother, unlike our own . . .*

"I'll call you back tomorrow after work. Okay? I absolutely have to hang up."

"Well, my bridge group's tomorrow. Every Friday, you know. I can't decide what to serve them."

James set his glass on the counter and left the kitchen. Alice drove him crazy.

"I thought I'd buy one of those cakes with the whipped cream and the curls of chocolate on top."

"Hmmm."

"But that might miff them. They hate me for being so thin."

She hung on to the phone receiver with both hands, and all of a sudden her breath had turned into shallow pants, and her throat felt full and achey. *Mother, she wanted to say, I have something to tell you. I need your help. "After your bridge party, then?"

"Perfect. Friday night. They're with their husbands then, and I miss your father the worst. Ruth's in Florida again, visiting Paul and the grandkids." There went her cough again. Even watching her husband strangle from emphysema had not curtailed her habit.

"Tomorrow night, then." Her voice sounded choked.

"Virginia? Are you okay?"
"Talk to you tomorrow." With her index finger she pushed down the button to disconnect her mother. Then, easing her throat with a swig from James's glass, she dialled Christie's number, fast. Her head was already light. She shouldn't drink when she was this tired.

A woman's sleepy voice answered.

"May I please speak to Christie?"

"Hmm? What time is it? Who's calling?"

"I'm sorry to have to call so late. My name is... Alice Haughter." She tried to sound imperious, like her mother would. "It's 10:55."

"Christie is out. What's this regarding? Why are you calling so late?"

All she could think to do was to hang up, which she did. Her heart hammered.

James, in his faded blue robe and slippers, stood suddenly right in front of her. "Who was that?"

"I can't talk to you right now. I have to call Ben."

"Hold on. It's my house that's on the line -- my half. It's my signature on that bond. Talk to me." Even in his frayed robe, he appeared taller. "I'm feeling like John Dean, caught in some damage control for an administration I no longer support."

But she began dialling. Ben answered on the first ring. "It's me. Christie's mother said she isn't home tonight. There's nothing else to do but wait. Is there?"
"That Goddamned kid. I went over this with him repeatedly. The conditions: phone me the minute he hit a public phone outside that jail, and from the San Diego Airport, and when he arrived in Northern California."

Parenthood by fiat.

"Then phone every morning to my office. Be at your place every evening no later than 10."

Ben's lists were the same verbal boilerplate he used in practice. But now, for once, the length of this list had its peculiar comfort: as it long it took for Ben to recite it, she did not have to face James.

When he wound down, she had to say something. "Ben? Adam may be trying to phone one of us, so let's stay off the line. I'll call back the minute I hear anything. Okay?"

She hung up, and keeping her back to James, who'd leaned against the far wall, she picked up a handful of flatwear, rinsed, and dried it, and began replacing the pieces in their drawer.

His glass was in his hand. "You have time to talk to everyone but me." His voice was too quiet.

She pivoted, facing him. "You're right. I'm sorry, James." She met his look. "Maybe Adam and Christie fell asleep in some motel nearby."

He drank down his glass, and was quiet as he refilled it. That he considered this even plausible heartened her. She loved his thoughtful looks, when his eyes looked down and
she could almost see his mind work. "Whose car would they be in?"

"Well, Christie's parents have given her a Nissan sedan, evidently. Although, from what she told me, the car was a bribe to get her to break contact with Adam."

"Gave her a Nissan?" He scowled. "A new car?"

She felt accused. "I think so. You know, James, giving your child a gift is not a crime. The Grants seem to have lots of money. Buying her things probably brings them pleasure. My father bought me a used '57 Chevvy convertible when I was in college. Didn't do me any permanent harm."

"But these gifts are why kids today have no values."

God, the man could be preachy! "I agree with you, in some cases."

"Jesus. What's it going to be like with him living here, with a start like this?"

Did that mean James still thought Adam was coming home? She'd pretty much abandoned hope.

She had sprayed the oven with cleaner and was scouring the broiling pan when the doorbell finally sounded. Smoothing her hair, she unlocked the front door with shaking hands. The oven clock read 11:47.

Grinning, big as life, Adam stood there, dressed in a bright plaid shirt and a dark sweater. A willow of a Christie, all in black, stood beside him.
She pulled them both inside, closed the door, and embraced the bulk of him, half expecting him to vaporize. But, no, he hugged her back with those big arms, and she let her tears spill onto his sweater. Maybe if everything could still be all right.

"Thanks, Mom, for putting up your house," he said into her ear. "And for signing the bond. I haven't earned that kind of trust, and I know it. But I will, you won't regret it." He held her away from himself, and looked into her eyes, and his were full of tears.

She held his face between her hands, studying him as if he were back from the dead. "Adam," she said, "welcome home."

James came down the stairs, his face hard to read. Adam stuck out his hand. "Thanks, James, for putting up your half of the house, for signing that bond. I wouldn't have done it, if I'd been you."

Was this more manipulation? Or had the bail vigil taught him something?

James, to his credit, gave Adam a stiff hug. "Sorry this happened, Adam. You must have been pretty scared."

Her tears welled again. She turned to Christie, whose long white blond hair radiated under the hall light, and who stuck out her small hand in almost a parody of good manners. Ginger drew the girl's tiny torso into her arms and hugged her.
In the bright kitchen, Adam and Christie leaned against the counter, his arm around her waist. James poured Chardonnay for her and Christie, refilled his glass, and opened a bottle of beer for Adam. Ginger offered a toast, then sat at the table across from James.

"That's the darlingest maple table." Christie's green eyes were huge, her teeth white, her peach mouth hypnotic.

"It's Gramma Alice's, isn't it?"

So it fell to her to shatter the scene. She drained her glass. "Where in the name of God have you been? I'm done in from the waiting. Christie, I had to wake your mother up, finally. I can't believe you'd let us hang like this."

"Sorry, Mom."

Her feet hurt, her head hurt, her heart hurt. "I hate that word. It slides out of your mouth, son, like spit."

"Christ, Mom." He drained his beer and set the empty on the counter. "I'm home two minutes, and you're on my case." He kissed the top of Christie's head.

"Listen, Adam." James's mouth was a thin slit. He'd had far too much wine. "Your mother and I have to go to work in the morning. You're almost twelve hours late checking in. We were worried for our house, for the bond. Your father evidently called the airlines."

"I didn't call here because I wanted to surprise you. I called Dad from a pay phone."

Could that be true? Foolish, but true? The sight of Adam in that doorway had, in truth, filled her heart as
nothing had in years. She felt guilty he'd had to ring the bell, that he no longer had his own key.

But he was such a good liar. "How long ago did you call Dad?"

"What, Christie? Maybe 20, 25 minutes?"

Ben hadn't had the decency to call her? She resented his possible slight as much as Adam's cavalier attitude. "I guess I'm just tired. Somewhere in me, I wasn't sure you wouldn't just head for Mexico."

"Be serious." His eyes were steady, and he looked a great deal older under this strong light. "I'd never do that to you, either one of you. Or to Dad."

James was staring into his half empty glass. "Your father didn't have quite as much at stake here as your mother and I, Adam." He was furious, and he was right.

Adam smiled down at Christie. "I thought about it, of course. A lot. But I wouldn't actually do it."

Christie smiled back, then looked at the floor.

She tried the words James was probably thinking. "How can we three live in peace here together, when even the first day you didn't meet bail conditions?" Then she grew angry at James for not speaking for himself.

James stood up. "I'm cashing it in. Good night, all."

She read his shoulders as a pout.

"James, hey, thanks for everything. Thanks for signing. You won't regret it."

He didn't even turn around.
She'd been bone tired herself two hours ago, but now she was so riled up she'd probably never get to sleep. The three of them listened to James's tread on the stairs.

When the bedroom door closed, Adam moved to the refrigerator. "What's to eat?" Christie stood behind him, her small hand stroking his hair. "I'm starvin' like Marvin." He pulled out the roasted chicken, then bent to rummage further.

Had Christie gotten the idea she could stay here?

But the girl got her keys from her pocket. "I've gotta get going, my mother thinks I was at my friend Gloria's." She stuck the hand out.

Ginger stood and embraced her, chastened by her slightness. Of course Mrs. Grant would be frantic over her involvement with a felon, a potential felon. She watched Adam walk her out the door and to her car.

Even from behind, even in the darkness outside, where they were lit only by her porch light, they could be an advertisement for engagement rings, for more life insurance, for safe tires.

She sliced off some chicken. She got eggs out, and whole wheat bread for toast, and put orange juice on the table, anticipating the deep comfort which would follow, that of feeding her son, and of having him safe, at least for the night, under her roof.

But as she cracked eggs into a bowl, she realized that the person with whom she felt the greatest kinship right now
was not Adam, nor James, nor Alice, nor Ben, nor even Christie. It was a stranger, a woman she'd awakened from sleep, a woman whose worst enemy was her only son, and to whom, less than an hour ago, she had not had the courage to give her real name.
Living there was sometimes worse than jail had been. His mother stared at him as if he had AIDS, as if she didn't even know him. James, his skinny shoulders drooping, sighing a lot, sort of lay in wait.

His whole biweekly check from Long's Drugs came to less than one trade, and, as if that weren't bad enough, taxes took about a fourth. Terrific -- a lay-away plan for his upcoming lodging.

He drove the Porsche by Christie's place just after 4 a.m., slowed down, and went on past. Then he hung a U, went by again, pulled up half a block down the street -- as far away from any streetlight as he could get -- turned the motor off, and rolled down the window. It was hot out here, even at this hour. A whole cheering section of crickets, and one dog barking, nervous. Maybe Buttons, maybe not.

He opened the door and sat behind the wheel, waiting. Her house, lit from the streetlight, was long and low, landscaped like a frigging park. Beyond her window was a smaller one, her bathroom, then the entryway, then, at the other end of the house, Dickhead's and her mother's bedroom. Everything was dark. He'd only been in the house once. Ridiculous. Everything white, with one of those living rooms that might as well be roped off. In the driveway was the fucker's maroon BMW. He hoped that guy was a heavy sleeper.
Christie, her long hair gleaming, leaned out her window and waved. She'd be smiling, he knew that without seeing her face. Out came her big suitcase, which she let fall into the plants below her. Then, after a long pause, a big old tote bag of some kind. After that her huge silly purse.

His heart was doing pushups. They'd be screwed if Richard Grant woke up. But she'd said to wait in the car. It seemed like at least ten more minutes went by. Where was she? Some dog started going crazy, and it sure sounded like Buttons.

He couldn't just sit here. He sprinted to her window and grabbed the suitcase, tote, and purse, then stashed the big piece under his bag in the undersized trunk. It barely fit, and she'd have to keep the tote on the floor by her feet.

He should have talked her out of using this car. Last night he'd had to leave his Rabbit in Geoff's garage, gas this one up, check the oil and tires, and run it through a car wash.

There were very good reasons not to be making this trip at all, of course, since bail stipulated not leaving the county, but the reasons were even better not to travel in this particular automobile. He'd let the insurance lapse. Besides, he attracted too much attention, with or without Christie, in this cafe au lait Porsche, this car of cars.
But this was what she wanted. He'd just have to drive real carefully, then never get this car out of Geoff's garage again until after this mess was...was over.

He waited another four minutes, at least, then crept back to the side of her house. Her bed was made, and the hall beyond was dark too, and completely quiet. Maybe it hadn't been Buttons barking.

A figure appeared in her doorway. He'd be visible from inside. He quit breathing for a few beats, but it was Christie, in shorts and a halter top, carrying a grocery bag. When she saw him, she smiled, stuck her tongue out, and started giggling.

"SHHHHH!" He was way too jumpy. He helped her out, pulled her window closed, and they took off.

As he drove towards 680, she held up the stuff in the bag: bran muffins, pineapple-guava juice, crockery mugs, real glasses, a thermos of coffee, a jar of half and half, even cloth napkins. "To tide us over till breakfast in Salinas," she said, wriggling her nose up in that way she had that made him turn off his head and floor the pedal on his heart.

Starting back up Route 101 Sunday after breakfast was probably the hardest thing he'd ever done. It was like a huge magnet was pulling him, and Christie too, further away, not back.

"You want to drive up Hiway One?" he asked when they got past San Luis Obispo.
"You decide, honey," she sighed.

He chose the coast. The Pacific was brooding, glowering almost. It matched his mood, and Christie's too, it seemed. They said almost nothing else the whole way. He returned the Porsche to Geoff's garage, drove her home in the Rabbit, and then, just after 8, drove up Colton to his mother's.

While he was parking, old Louella Sims walked by with her beagle, Lilly, on a leash. She hugged him around his waist, her white head under his chin. "How's school?" Her quaver about the same.

"Fine." The lie was automatic. "Just fine." He knelt to pet the dog, and she slobbered all over his hand. Dogs, shit, he loved dogs.

When he unlocked the front door, James and Mom were at their stations, his mother washing dishes, James drying. They had matching wine goblets and were both in navy sweats, like they were a team or something.

His mother faced him with a mouth that was a straight thin line. "Long's called, Adam." Her voice was hyper-quiet. "You missed one complete shift." She turned back to the dishes. "Dad called twice a day for three days. Mrs. Grant called, too, yesterday. Then she called Dad in Oregon." She whirled around, and her hands, soap bubbles still stuck to them, started making diagrams in the air. "Then Dad called here again. And then Mr. Grant, Richard, called Dad and threatened -- I don't know what -- to sue, or something."
"I didn't realize Christie was only 19. Then Dad called back and started in again about how I'm the reason you're in this trouble in the first place."

She threw the sponge onto the floor. "And the second place." She grabbed James's towel, wiped her hands, and threw it after the sponge.

"And the third place." She sort of collapsed onto the floor then, her back against the cupboards, her head on her knees, her arms around them. And she began to cry, sobs that seemed to start at her feet and take a long time to get all the way up. "I give up." She looked like her bones had suddenly quit on her.

"Mom, my trouble," he said, fast, his mind in overdrive, "has nothing to do with you. Or Dad. We've talked about this before. This trip, I should have told you about it, I suppose. But Long's...There must have been..." Steve had said sure, no problem. I switched shifts with Steve Ruiz." The manager had said just last week, Fiske, you'd be cashier for sure if you weren't...leaving so soon. The guy'd even volunteered to write a letter to the judge.

"What exactly did you think you were doing, not coming home?" This came from James. There seemed to be real hate in his voice. He took his glasses off and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"Mom, I covered for myself at Long's. Christie and I drove to Santa Barbara." He could just wheel around and speed off again. Stay with Geoff, maybe, till the
sentencing. Six more weeks? The delays could drag it out, though, and what was the point anyway? Of these delays, of any of it? He was pleading guilty, wasn't he? It's not over til the fat lady sings, Penny'd said. Yeah, it was over, all right.

Geoff wouldn't be able to handle six weeks, no way. Besides, he owed Geoff too many favors.

"Dad, he gets that way. It's just he's so disappointed in me. You should have quit answering the phone. Gone out, let it ring, taken it off the hook. It's only a machine."

James drank down his wine in one gulp. "That's it!" He picked the dish towel off the kitchen floor and twisted it into a rope. "Jesus H. Goddamned Christ Almighty!" He knotted up the towel and then threw it down again, with force. "I cannot believe what I'm hearing." He faced away, towards the table, almost as if he didn't trust his own hands. "You are the most selfish," he pounded his fist into the maple surface, "self-centered," then again, "self-satisfied" then again, "son of a bitch I've ever met in my whole Goddamned life." He picked up the towel and gave it another knot. "Don't you realize what you're doing to your mother, and to your father, and to me?"

He'd never heard James yell. His mother, sure, but not James.

"Not answer the phone?" The guy went over and lifted it off the wall receiver, leaving it to dangle in midair, like to prove a fucking point. "Adam, your mother and I paced
around here Friday and all weekend, looking at this house as if we might not live here any longer."

His mother just stayed piled on the floor like limp clothes, looking straight ahead.

James was still yelling. "We thought, I don’t know, that the Federal Government would bring over a van, and agents would comb through here looking for clues." Now he was pacing around the kitchen, opening cupboards, and each one he opened he left opened. "They’d wait while we got our belongings together, and watch while we walked out that front door, and then they’d change the locks, and that would be that." All of the kitchen cupboards now gaped at the three of them.

James actually looked towards the front door, as if it was really happening. His voice was almost a cry. "Except then, of course, for the appearance bond." He rubbed both eyes. "I finally calculated up what it would cost us to meet that bond. We’d have been paying the rest of our lives, plus an additional lifetime each, while you were cavorting around Mazatlan, or Cuernavaca, or wherever the Goddamned hell you were going."

"I was in fucking Santa Barbara. I wouldn’t leave my family hanging. You know that. It’s just that..." The tears behind his face felt as deep as water behind a dam. "It’s just that..." His mouth turned down, and tears spilled down his face, and he felt hot with the shame of them. But if his mother had thought for one minute that he’d
do that to her, well, then, something was seriously wrong. "It's just that Christie and I wanted to make one weekend trip together before I...before I go in."

Still she didn't move. She picked up the sponge, which was still dripping, and seemed to study it. "You realize, of course, that Christie also missed two shifts? Mr. Grant said that Nordstrom's would probably fire her for not calling in."

"She did not, he's making that up. Mom, whatever else in the whole world happens, never trust that pervert. He lives in a nice house, but Christie's told me stuff about him you wouldn't believe. He's a sleazeball and a lech."

"They didn't realize you two were still seeing each other."

"'Course they didn't."

"Is Christie home now?"

"She got home an hour ago."

Silence filled the kitchen like a kind of smoke.

His throat was aching with, with what? With the effort to make it clear what this was like. "It was tough, I'll tell you, coming home today. I don't want to go to...to prison."

"Then, my friend," James's mouth had turned mean, "you should have been running your life differently."

His own jaw got tight, and his fists clenched, and he, too, wanted to throw something. Slam those cupboards closed, one at a time, loud. Break a few, listen to the wood splinter.
Christie was right. They shouldn’t have come home. They could have kept going. He'd had $2,500 cash, and she'd sure brought enough clothes. Mexico. Or else Canada. She'd prefer Canada. Canada had big cities, they could have been to Canada in two days, taking turns, three max. He'd been dreaming about it some nights.

But they hadn't, and it was because of his mother, mostly: her up on that witness stand during the first bail hearing, giving her "young man" speech to that fucking DA.

"So, isn't it true, Mrs. Fiske, that if your son is let out on bail, . . ." Dakin Manning III, strutting, his little hands behind his back. ". . .you won't know Adam's whereabouts during the seven and one half hours of your employment? Or for even longer periods when you're in meetings?"

Her back had gone rigid. "Of course I won't know where he is," she hissed. "I told you that already." She stared at the guy like she was about to give him a bad grade.

"Then," the little ratface had pressed, "how is the government to be assured that he won't run off?"

"Adam would not do that to me. He's made some mistakes, I'm not denying that. But we love each other."

Manning had gloated. "In spite of the fact that you will be working and out of contact with him most of every day?"

He'd almost felt sorry for Manning right then. She practically rose up out of the witness chair. "Young man,
you aren't listening to me." She made the 'young man' sound more insulting than 'cocksucker.' "I've done nothing wrong, and I've already signed your bond. You're harassing me here."

Even the judge had smiled. "We get the idea, Mr. Manning," he said. "You may step down, Mrs. Fiske."

"I'm sorry you worried. I should have left a note, I guess, or something. But I thought you'd be grateful I came back at all."

James lost it then. His voice went all funny. "Well, that's it. I'm through here. I haven't slept a full night in nine months. Your mother's losing her mind. I wake up and find her crying, and we talk it over some more, and I try to sympathize. But, frankly, I just thank God you're not my real son."

There was hate coming out of his eyes. "You and your fancy girlfriend and your fancy Santa Barbara. Your mother and I can't afford to go there. You dash down for the weekend like a couple of movie stars. I want out."

He was now standing in the doorway. "I know my signature's still on that bond. I don't know what to do about that."

He wished she'd tell the guy what a chickenshit he was. She let James push her around, quoted him like he was some authority on life or something.

"Ginger," James went over, then, to where she was still sitting on the floor, put his hands on her shoulders, tipped
up her chin, and looked her in the face, "I love you. But I can't follow you down this path another step."

He wished he wasn't watching this.

"I'll... I don't know, I'll drive up the coast or something, see my brother Ed in Eureka, maybe take Jared with me. Till State starts up, maybe. Then maybe get a studio apartment near campus." He leaned over, kissed her on the forehead, turned, left the kitchen, and climbed the stairs quickly.

While he was up there, his mother did not move a muscle, and neither did he. It was sort of like a 'freeze' on the VCR. Once in awhile, a floorboard from above would squeak a little.

After a few minutes, he went over to the sink and lifted his mother up from the floor and led her to her chair. She didn't resist, but she sat at the table like a rag doll. He picked up the sponge, wiped up the puddle it had made, and finished the few dishes.

James came back down with an overnight bag, his tennis rackets, a few sports coats and slacks over his arm. Without looking back, he opened the front door and then closed it quietly behind himself.

_Good riddance_, he tried to tell himself. He couldn't stay in here with his pathetic mother, so he got the Rabbit's keys out. Six more weeks until October 5th, maybe longer with the motion Pamela was making on the 31st. For the first
time, he hoped it wasn't longer. This waiting was motherfucking hard.

She was still there at the table in a huddle. He put an arm around her narrow shoulders. "I'll be back by 10."
She already wanted another cigarette so badly that she was having trouble undoing the clasp on her suit skirt. These visits set her on edge. Always. And, to make matters worse, Ginger was going to wonder why she wasn't wearing the gift robe, and she could not tell her about the round hateful burn on its lapel. She changed into her new pegnoir set from Dillard's, $150 worth of camouflage.

She lit a Pall Mall right there in the bathroom, dragged deeply, and settled it into her travel ashtray. Ginger didn't like her to smoke in the house at all. Her own mother.

"Two more dresses than days," she said as she crossed the hall to Adam's room. She'd be breezy. She began unpacking her things onto the hangers in Adam's closet. "Like I used to tell your father."

"Mmmm," Ginger murmured from the bed where she sat, watching.

Among his clothes she noticed a charcoal cardigan. "Did I buy Adam this?" She held it up. "I can't remember."

"I think he bought it, Mother, or maybe Christie." Her voice was limp. Was her daughter entering menopause? At 45? "Lovely. Feels like lambs' wool." The sweater was huge, an extra-large. Where in the world had the little tow-head gone, the "small-fry," as John had called him?

"Yes, he inherited your taste, Mother, that's for sure."
Now, that sounded like a criticism. The girl could be so prickly. Lambs' wool would last forever, of course.

Change the subject. "I'm glad you've started touching up your hair, dear. You look younger." Her shoes, though, were still that sensible kind. "How are you? Really? You seem tired. Is the...the divorce under way?"

Ginger's hand brushed the air. "It's not such a big deal, the second time, same lawyer. Don't worry about it. You look wonderful in that pearl gray."

Uh-oh. Was that her way of asking why she wasn't wearing the velour? "It's not too young for me?"

"Of course not. You're so slender, so...erect." Her brown eyes looked away, her long hands smoothing the chenille spread.

She took a second drag. "Well, I thought I'd need a lighter-weight robe for Oakland." Secrets, secrets. And she'd also promised Ruth she'd talk to Ginger about what the doctor had said. But not yet. "Nobody sees what I wear at night any more, except you, of course, and Ruth."

She stored the two suitcases, one nearly full of gifts, in the closet, carried her ashtray over, and sat down on the bed. All evening she'd been wanting to touch the girl. She picked up Ginger's left hand. "You have your dad's hands, you know." Even saying it made her longing start up, and she dragged instead on the cigarette.
"I guess." Ginger almost jerked her hand away. "Well, I've given up on polish, Mother, school's too hard on my nails."

So touchy. She'd meant it as a compliment. "Your hair looks simply terrific. Without the gray, you look more like you did before that darned James." Now, that was a mistake, she'd probably defend him. So she pressed on, voicing the impression she'd been holding since the airport. "But don't you think it's a shade too dark?"

"I don't care any more. Really, I just don't."

Her daughter had lost all her oomph. She wanted to shake her by the shoulders. "Of course you care! It's him, isn't it? That darned James." She wanted to brush the dark hair off her daughter's face, to nestle her head on her shoulder. But that would alarm her. "Well, I sure know how it feels to miss a man."

The girl sighed. "It's funny, just like in the ads. People say, 'Ginger, you look ten years younger.' But I hate it. I've simply quit looking in the mirror."

Stick with the hair, then. "You know, dear, salons can 'highlight,' I think they call it, to finesse the 'bottle-dye' look."

Ginger looked into her face, maybe for the first time since she'd stepped off the plane. "Really? I actually went back to get her to take the dye out, but she said it would make it look worse."
"It looks fine. Really." Should she offer? Most times, it backfired. The girl was so proud. "But shall I treat you, while I'm here? A different salon, maybe. I. Magnin's, downtown?"

Ginger put her hand to her hair and ran her fingers through it. She closed her eyes and put her head in her hands. Then she cupped her chin in her hands and rubbed her jaw. Then she spoke. "Yes, Mother. Thanks, I'd appreciate that. This hair is haunting me. I feel like an imposter."

"Good. That's settled, then." She took a final deep drag from the one cigarette, and lit another. "You know, dear," she said as she inhaled, "Adam seems different, looks a little thin, or something."

"Oh?" She darted her a look which had about it a peculiar edge, maybe even a kind of fear. Then she sighed, deeply. "Maybe so. He's got some stuff on his mind, Mother. I don't know too much about it, really." She sounded like she might be coming down with a cold. She stood and smoothed down the skirt on her green corduroy jumper. "How about some eggnog?"

Ah. Enough of that subject, then, too. "Why, yes, dear. That'd be nice. With some rum and nutmeg. A nightcap."

The next three days filled themselves up with Ginger's hair appointment and rounds of shopping, wrapping, and cooking. Ginger's hair did look more natural, afterwards,
though the girl seemed only to tolerate the process and its outcome.

They rode BART to San Francisco on the 23rd. She wore the same royal blue suit she'd worn on the plane. Ginger had a new suit, a charcoal wool. "Handsome, dear," she said as they sat, facing backwards, scanning the bright East Bay hills from the big windows. "Is that from Nordstrom's?"

Ginger glanced down. "I've decided, Mother, that I want to apply for department chair next year. And this new principal is very conservative. Christie helped me choose the suit. I'm working on my image."

Now if only this girlfriend of Adam's would help Ginger with some better shoes. "I'm going to like this girl, I know."

They walked up from Market and through Magnin's, Macy's, and Neiman Marcus. The crowds were intense, the excitement ordinarily contagious, but Ginger's distraction coated them both like wax. Most likely it was the combination of losing James and facing the midlife change.

By the time they reached the St. Francis Hotel, she was famished, and her feet hurt. She wished for her mink stole, because many women in the hotel lobby wore full length furs, and the men's suits exuded taste, exuded money. How reassuring this old hotel was -- the mix of languages, the towering tree. Some things abide, the place seemed to say. John had brought her here for their 25th anniversary, back when little Adam was in primary school.
Soon after she and Ginger were seated, the waiter brought tea in silver pots, and tiny sandwiches, petit fours, chocolates, and slivers of two kinds of cake.

Her own spirits lifted. She and Ginger had always both loved Christmas, and this place seemed its ideal staging, lovelier in its way than even the Broadmoor. The girl finally consented to champagne. They'd just toasted the holiday when a neighborhood church group entered, chins up, and filled the marble lobby with glorious song. Lost in the sound, they ate every morsel of food, and finished the bottle.

"What was that society Daddy used to belong to?" Ginger's face had softened under the champagne. "He'd tell us every Christmas?"

She could still see John's sly grin as he carved the turkey. "The S.P.P.P.M.P."

"The Society for..." Ginger's eyes filled.

"The Society for the Prevention of Putting Parsley on Mashed Potatoes." Even here, right across from her own daughter, and fifteen years after his death, aloneness shot through her like an icy wind.

In Ginger's dining room stood a huge tree at the ready. "Well, Christie and Adam and I... we were out together one evening, and, I don't know, I just got carried away." Her old smile flashed, but then she returned to pensive.
"It's delightful. Why, here's the cowboy I got when we were in Germany and the rocking horse from Quebec City." She looked further. "Dear, I believe every year's ornament is here." She felt for the first time as if maybe her daughter had wanted her to come.

"Of course, Mother. Christmas seems...seems more important to Adam this year. Did you bring him a new one?"

"I felt sort of silly, at his age. But I did, a fat old Santa on a surfboard."

There were fewer gifts under the tree than usual, probably because of James's absence. And the phone and doorbell were nearly silent. The widowed neighbor, Louella Simms, dropped by one afternoon with a fruitcake, but because her dog was with her, even she would not come in.

Since cooking seemed to be the most comfortable way to spend time together, they even made cranberry sauce from scratch, and worked together on the creamed onions. Christmas Eve Day, while the fragrance of the roasting turkey filled the air with promise, she busied herself polishing Ginger's silver, placing tall red candles in the triple Sterling candlesticks, and preparing the pumpkin pie.

The turkey came out at 5, but Adam didn't pull up for almost another hour and a half. He was in a bright yellow Nissan with the famous Christie.

"It's hers, Mother." Ginger said as they stood at the door, watching. Adam was in the handsome charcoal sweater
she'd seen in his closet. The girl was wearing a narrow black coat and dress which looked like silk, and four-inch black heels. A string of pearls, probably real, circled her neck, and clasping back her radiant hair was a floppy black velvet bow.

"Mrs. Haughter? How nice to meet you." The girl's smile spoke orthodontia.

Adam just grinned and took Christie's coat.

"Did you get those navy shoes at Nordstrom's?" Her voice was too fully of breath. "They look like the Baroness line we carry."

"No, dear, I. . . ."

Ginger interrupted. "Adam, fix yourself and Christie something to drink, okay? Your grandmother and I are having highballs. The turkey's gotten pretty cold, I'm afraid."

She watched while Christie set small packages under the tree. She was small and graceful. "I love the ornaments you've bought him, Mrs. Haughter. My grandmother used to do that for me, my mother's mother."

They moved into the kitchen, where Ginger put a Christmas apron over her green wool pants and sweater. She appeared a little frazzled. "I'm sorry to say we're going to have to eat right now." She ran her hand through her new hairdo. "Adam tells me Christie can't stay too long." Her daughter was already draining the gravy from the old Dutch oven into the newly-polished silver gravy boat.

How very peculiar.
Adam poured himself and Christie each a glass of rosé, then set to carving the turkey. Christie went upstairs to start the Mormon Tabernacle Choir music. "Dish up the potatoes, Mother?" Ginger asked, even edgier now that the young people were here. So she began ladling mashed potatoes into their preheated silver bowl.

The phone rang, and Adam answered. "Yes. No." He cleared his throat. "I think she's probably still at Nordy's, but...but I haven't seen her in quite a while."

Just then from upstairs the choir broke into 'O Come All Ye Faithful.'

"Why, of course he'd seen her.

Ginger, clutching a tray of dinner rolls, almost pushed her to the table, where green salads lay wilting. The door closed on Adam, still on the kitchen phone, still carving on the turkey, Christie at his side.

Ginger opened the champagne, and poured it into all four goblets. "Mother, why don't you and I just start on our salads? Those two...those two will be along."

"All right, dear. But..."

"Isn't she adorable? So sweet, too. I think I told you, she's been helping me with my...my grooming." She picked at her lettuce.

"You don't need help with your grooming. You're perfectly beautiful." She took a bite of salad. "I just think you should spend more money on yourself, especially your shoes. Well, here's to a Merry Christmas, dear." They
clinked glasses and took matching swallows. "I saw several businessmen in the airport simply stare at you."

The door from the kitchen pushed open just then, and in the girl walked with her huge purse, Adam holding her coat. "This is very embarrassing," she whispered. "I'm going to have to. . ." Her voice caught. "To dash home. I'm so sorry, Mrs. Fiske, Mrs. Haughter."

"Call me Alice. Whatever's wrong?"

"Oh. Oh, nothing. My mother needs my help out there."

"But you haven't eaten, dear."

Ginger took charge. "You go on, then, please, Christie. We understand. Don't make yourself a moment later. This is a time for family to be together. I'll walk out with you two."

How perfectly rude. All that trouble! The tree lights, the gifts, the fire in the fireplace, the candles, the silver polishing, the cooking -- all poof!

She watched them from her chair. Ginger got Christie's gifts from under the tree while Adam helped her into her coat, then put his arm around her shoulders. When Ginger opened the front door for them, the damp air off San Francisco Bay poured in like a fog.

Just then the phone rang again, so she carried her champagne into the kitchen and answered it.

"Ginger?" It was a male voice. "I miss you."

"This is Virginia's mother, Alice Haughter. Merry Christmas. Who's speaking?"
"Oh. Merry Christmas, Alice. It's me. James."

"James! Oh, my goodness. James." She wanted to give him a big, bold piece of her mind: You never did deserve my daughter, and I wish someone around here would admit that I was the first to realize it. And now your absence has turned this house into an undertaker's parlor. "Why, James. Are you with Jared tonight?"

"Tomorrow. I'm alone now. Who's over there?"

"Virginia and I and Adam and his girl. Well, actually, Christie's just leaving."

"I thought her parents . . ." His voice trailed off.

Ginger returned to the kitchen. 'Who is it?' she Pantomimed.

She ignored her.

Adam returned too, his shoulders drooping, his face closed and locked. He picked up the carving knife and made a few more slashes at the once-golden turkey, fully cooled now, almost entirely dismembered.

James continued. "You mean, Ginger still hasn't told you about Adam's . . .?" He sounded a little drunk.

Adam began peeling off strips of white meat and stuffing them into his mouth. Next to him, on the sink, the fat from her daughter's imperfect gravy had congealed along the edges of the polished silver gravy boat.

"Told me what, James?"
"Mother, I insist that you give me the phone." Ginger's classroom voice cut through the sounds from the choir upstairs. She relinquished it.

"James?" Ginger clutched the phone as if she wished to wring its neck. "You're drunk."

"Let me talk to him, Mom." Adam's voice sounded way too husky. "I want to apologize."

"Not now. James, I'll talk to you tomorrow. Our dinner is in ruins. Do you understand?" She slammed down the receiver.

"Apologize for what, dear?"

"Ah, never mind." Her grandson had always had a way of looking sadder than anyone else she'd ever known. She wanted to give him a hug, try to console him over Christie's absence. But, in a big hurry to get them all back to the table, he carried in the carefully-polished platter, littered with his hackings.

They sat down to face cold, greasy food. Wordlessly, they passed the polished serving dishes.

"Light the candles, Adam, won't you?" his mother asked. And afterwards, "Adam, do you feel like saying a little grace?"

They bowed their heads. The Mormons were on "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing!" When Adam finally spoke, his voice again had that darkness to it. "Dear Lord. Thank you for our many blessings, and for allowing us to be together as a family. Amen."
For some reason, this made her eyes brim. She reached over and squeezed his hand. "That was lovely. Thank you."

His smile had tears in it, and she was shocked and suddenly quite scared.

The Mormons began "Silent Night," whose hush made it hard for her to breathe, and she couldn't for the life of her explain why this was so. "Adam," she said, looking only at the candle flames so he wouldn't see, "would you mind turning the music off till dinner's over?"

And so he hurried upstairs and cut them off at "love's pure light."

"James still loves you, Virginia," she tried over the funereal dinner table. "Why, what..."

Returning to his seat, Adam interrupted. "Don't worry about it. He's just mad at me. He drinks too much, anyway. Forget him. He's a pri..."

Ginger glowered at her son, and waved her napkin from her lap to remind him of his.

"A jerk, anyway." Still his napkin stayed on the table. He had a quart bottle of peach-raspberry juice next to his place, from which he refilled his glass.

"For a formal meal like this, you should really decant that juice into a pretty pitcher," she fussed.

"Mom deserves much better than old James." He looked across the table at his mother then, and for some reason she grew embarrassed.
"Tell me about school, dear. I'm so glad you've started back. You're taking the English, and what else? Have you chosen a major?"

"Gram, I... I'm too upset about Christie right now. And everything. Later, okay?"

"Why, certainly, dear. I just want you to know how proud I am of you."

"Thanks." He wouldn't look at her. "It's not just Christie, I feel bad about James not being here. I really do, Mom. Even though I don't think he ever treated you well enough."

"Well, I must say, Virginia, I agree with Adam about that." She pushed her food around on her plate, but, with all this upset, she ate almost nothing. Neither did her daughter. Meanwhile, they took turns refilling their champagne glasses. Christie's place, her napkin folded perfectly, pulsated at them like a recently-pulled tooth.

"Actually," she began, thinking a different subject might be less painful. "I never have understood why you divorced Ben, dear. You two were so much in love at the beginning."

Ginger excused herself, and returned in a moment with a beer, still in the can. She popped it open and drank down fully half in one continuous swallow.

"'The perfect Stanford couple,' Ruth and Uncle Harry used to comment to your father and me," she continued. "And so handsome together. Adam, you look exactly like your
father did when he met your mother. Except, of course, you have my dear John's brown eyes."

The silence on both sides coated the table like thick paint.

John would have known how to redeem this meal. He'd have worn his red vest, and told a long, gentle joke, and nudged his grandson in the ribs, and teased his daughter about her cooking, and pecked her on the cheek between courses.

Ginger finished her beer, cleared the table, brought in the pumpkin pie, and cut three huge, unappetizing triangles.

Adam didn't touch his. "Sorry, I never eat desserts. Too much cholesterol. Looks good, though."

She ate only one bite of her piece. The pie needed possibly a touch more salt, but the crust pleased her. She'd have the rest tomorrow for lunch, just before they left for the airport. Maybe on the way to the plane she could get up the nerve to tell her daughter about the test the doctor wanted her to have.

Ginger, who'd eaten two mouthfuls of salad and almost nothing off her dinner plate, helped herself to a second can of beer. Silently she alternated between a swallow of beer, then a bite of pie, first from her own plate and then from her son's. When she had cleaned both plates, she said one more thing: "Good pie, Mother."
Chapter Seven

The stillness in the room reminded her of the one four years before, following the all-school announcement of Christa McAuliffe's space shuttle's explosion. The students looked only at their books.

Could she run down the hall, lure Johnel back, and tear up the referral? Too late. He'd be in the office by now, spreading her secret among secretaries like free lottery tickets.

"Read the rest of Chapter Eight to yourselves, please," she said, dropping into her chair.

She'd failed as a wife, mother, and now, teacher. Most people would probably say that. Well, they wouldn't have
known about the mother part. But, after keeping his secret for almost a year and a half, she'd used her son to arm and fire a loose student cannon, Johnel Banks.

But the clock was ticking, and she had damage to control:

Class, can we keep this just between us? And when you see Johnel, who will ask him, please, to not.

Guys, in making my point, I exaggerated. My son spent a night in jail for marijuana possess.

I know you'll probably want to talk about all this among yourselves, but don't say anything around the other tea.

The District office would know of it by lunch time. All district employees luxuriated in others' troubles. Mentally she toured the school, following the path of her news, ranking those who would most savor her shame. Her rival Freida, the English chair Elwin Rutledge, most of the Special Ed Department, every coach. Marv Schneider.

She chanced a look around the room. Ibrahim, dark and bespectacled, appeared sunk in his text. So did his upbeat sidekick Ronald. Natasha, LaShonda, Tran -- well, the whole class was, in spite of everything, attempting to read.

And Chapter Eight was so hard. Was it clear to them that Gatsby'd been murdered? That they kept focusing on the words, and turning pages, affected her like so many offered bouquets, and the tears, which had been building, brimmed and spilled.
She had seven tranquilizers in her purse, seven of the twelve from last year's legal proceedings. Could she swallow one in class without being observed? And, if observed, could she simply explain, *these are legal, my family doctor.*

. . .? Giggles backed up behind her tears, miles and miles of them.

Even if she could hide the taking of the pill behind her gradebook or a trip to the chalkboard, even if she could get the pill past the giggles, and then wait the twenty minutes or so before it could do its work, even then, she feared, these giggles would have nowhere to go but up and out.

She concentrated on simply breathing until she felt she could trust her voice. "Tran? Can I see you a minute?"

Only a few looked up.

The compact girl came forward, pretending not to notice her flushed face.

"Fill this at the drinking fountain for me, please?"

She scowled at her empty coffee mug to fight back the hysteria. "I have to take a pill."

She drank all the water to hurry the pill's effects, and, until the bell rang, pretended, along with the rest of the class, to be reading the impenetrable words.

During the noon hour she locked the door, turned out the lights, and sat huddled behind her desk, her shoes off, hugging her knees. She was hungry, but retrieving her lunch sack from the faculty room was unthinkable. Which colleagues
were already down there, whispering about Adam over the salad bar?

She found some old saltines in her bottom drawer and nibbled on those. The pill would hold her some until about 4 o'clock, when she could make a dash for her car.

She felt as adrift as The Scarlet Letter's Hester Prynne. No, more like her guilt-soaked lover, Reverend Dimmesdale. Except that after his confession, Dimmesdale had been able to die on the spot.

Maybe Pamela Curtis could reassure her about the FCI's routine precautions against suicide attempts. At least to Pamela she didn't have to lie.

Someone knocked, a sound which made her jump, made her heart pound dangerously. Was some colleague looking for her? To offer some -- God forbid -- condolence? Or was it some student banging on random doors to feel alive?

The knocking persisted. She went to the door in her stocking feet. "Who is it?"

"Natasha, Mrs. Fiske. May I talk to you a moment? It's important."

Natasha Ruiz, from Johnel's class. She opened the door, and, as Natasha brushed by her, there in the hallway was the steadying presence of the kids. Students in circles kicked their hacky sacks, laughing easily. Clumps sat cross-legged, girls mostly, sharing cafeteria fries, comparing homework, passing snapshots. She closed the door.
The heavyset girl, clutching her books, leaned against a desk in the front row. "I'm sorry to bother you. I just wanted. . ." She was trembling.

"Natasha! What's wrong?"

"I just felt so bad this morning. You know, a lot of his own teammates don't get along with Johnel. And you were right, of course. He just copied from LaShonda, like he always does." She set her textbooks down on a desk. "He's borrowed about eight pencils from me, never returned one. All's I'm saying. . ."

The pile of heavy books tumbled onto the floor.

"Please," Natasha said, stooping to pick them up, "don't ever tell him I told you." The girl was so nervous!

Ginger knelt to help stack the books.

"It was. . .it was much better in our class before he transferred in."

"Thanks, Natasha." Crouching on the floor, she felt hugely better, felt defended. She couldn't look into the girl's eyes, though. "I lost my temper, I hate it when I do that."

Natasha stood up, restacking the books on the desk.

"That's nothing. Teachers do that all the time. But that's not why I came in."

She leaned against the desk again, and looked only at the floor. "It's because of your son. I just wanted to say . . .my father's in prison too. I know how you feel. I've
never told anybody here at school." The girl's hands came up to her face, and she was sobbing.

The first bell for Fifth Period would ring in three minutes. Ginger got a handful of tissues from her desk and tucked them into Natasha's hand, then put her arm around her, her shoulders feeling warm and solid. She leaned against Natasha's desk, and it began sliding out from behind them, and they were suddenly falling backwards.

They both laughed. "Isn't this a world? You poor girl, your poor mother. I had absolutely no idea." Natasha had a part time job in a mall dress shop for oversized women, and kept a cheerful, steady face during class. Low C, possibly even a D, first semester: she'd accepted it without a flinch.

Natasha left, clutching her tissue, and in poured the next round of juniors. Daisy and Tom Buchanan and their murderous superiority covered for her all afternoon. Those familiar fictions, and her pill.

"That's cold, Miz Fiske. You mean Daisy just let Wilson think Gatsby offed his wife?" It was Ryan Jamieson, today, for some reason, paying near-perfect attention.

Sixth Period, too. "He dead? That red in the water? Why didn't they let us see him fire the shots, like in 'The Exterminator'?"

Snicker. Guffaw. She'd never gotten used to their laughing response to carnage. But, she guessed, they were mourning Jay Gatsby the only way they knew. They'd been with
him for almost a month now. In their way, they loved the guy.

Nobody said a thing about her son; they didn't even seem to be looking at her differently. Had they not heard? Maybe the news was less compelling than some fist fight, some friend's romantic breakup. Or, just possibly, they had the kind of manners that would have impressed even Alice Caldwell Haughter.

She lurked in her classroom until the parking lot would clear, readying the Open House displays. She took down their *Scarlet Letter* drawings, which now seemed to mock her: Geraldine's crude Hester Prynne, pilloried with the illegitimate Pearl. Alphonso's rendering of Dimmesdale's back, the scars red and crusty.

In their place, she stapled the Honors essays on *Huck Finn*. Even these now seemed directed at her plight: Erica's "Twain's Scams, the King and the Duke" could have been written about Johnel and Adam.

Just before 4, she dashed to her car, her tote bag full of the same *Gatsby* essays she'd taken home last night. Her car key was in the door when a male voice called out, "Ginger? Wait."

Her hands went clammy. Pretending not to hear, she set the bag on the pavement, her purse on the hood, and dug around for her dark glasses. Footsteps approached as she jammed them on her hot face. She got a smile ready.
"Do you always stay this late?" It was the principal. His dark wool suit looked incongruous in this warm weather, his starched shirt somehow unwilted.

She hadn't applied lipstick in probably twelve hours. "Oh, hi. I was just...catching up on some papers." Of course he'd heard about Adam by now. "See if you can even lift these -- this is what's facing me tonight." It was her better tote bag, luckily, and it gave her somewhere to look besides at him.

He felt their heft, murmuring, "Mmmm."
She wasn't fooling him.

"That's what I like in my teachers. Martyrdom." he said it straight faced.

Say something, anything. "You're here late too. Do you just fold a cot down in your office somewhere?" Defense by verbiage.

"I've thought about it," he sighed, and it was a surprisingly deep sigh. Many on the faculty didn't think he even liked the students, not Oakland High's kind. His own kids attended Catholic schools, tended by a full-time mother who ferried them to soccer, gymnastics, music lessons.

His cool blue eyes met hers. "I had my secretary put a note in your box. I was going to talk to you tomorrow." His face was serious. "But someone's canceled for the next Impact Training, and I was hoping you could...".

The drug and alcohol education training. He had heard. She leaned against her car for support.
"...your schedule." His voice betrayed nothing. "It begins next Monday, and means being off campus for a week. We've paid for four spaces. We don't want the slot to go to waste."

There was no choice. He was probably lying about the cancellation, but that didn't change anything.

"Let me think." Her mouth was losing its fixed smile.

"If you can break loose, that is -- you'll be training with Matt Miller, Janie Grisham, and myself. Several dozen staff are already trained."

Rude was better than hysterical. She turned and unlocked the door. "Sure. Gotta go now, though. Got an appointment in..." She pretended to glance at her car clock, which hadn't worked in five years, "fifteen minutes. I'll call for a sub."

When she got home, she got a spoon, stood in front of the refrigerator, and ate, right out of its container, most of a quart of cheap vanilla ice cream. Then, her face still hot, her belly preparing to be sore, she changed into her sweats.

Now she was too cold from the ice cream, so she got Adam's dark gray sweater out of his closet, the one he'd taken off after his sentencing and given over into her care.

"Keep these for me, will you?" he'd said, the bailiff two steps away, taking off his sweater, and handing it to her along with his wallet and watch. "And don't worry, okay?"
She took his chin in both hands. "I was proud of you up there, what you said about being blinded by the money. It sounded honest."

"Thanks." His voice was murky. "Love you, Mom."

The bailiff, who broke up these scenes for a living, tapped him on the shoulder. "Have to take you back, Fiske."

"Love you, Adam. See you in . . . in a little while."

She needed something to say which would be for him a kind of keel. But instead, out came the kind of snobbery her mother might have mouthed. "When you're in there, just remember. Remember who you are."

She wrapped herself in it. In its pocket she found a lipstick and a pocket comb. She set those on his desk next to his camera, then changed her mind and put them in his desk drawer, empty except for his watch and wallet. The drawer felt to her suddenly like a kind of morgue.

She hurried outside into the late afternoon sun. She weeded for awhile, then grew too hot and tossed the sweater onto the picnic table. She got trash bags, clippers, and the rake, and collected the faded camellia blossoms from under the huge old shrubs, grateful for the camouflage of their dark green canopy.

Meanwhile, she traced the implications of next week's training. She'd be with two of the staff who already made her shrink inside her skin. Schneider, whom many were calling a 'hatchet man': he'd, in fact, already delivered
three unsatisfactory teacher evaluations. Paranoia hovered over the faculty room at lunch now like cigarette smoke.

And Matt Miller. As she clipped dead branches off the white camellia bush and stuffed them into the trash bag, she wondered about the likelihood of his wanting the chair's job, since he was getting his administrative degree at night. If he went for it, Schneider'd probably go with him, what with his swim coaching and his dazzling white shirts.

She heard a few commuters drive by up her hill, and then, for many minutes, nothing. Everyone seemed home for the night. Under her largest camellia bush, a variegated pink which last spring had gushed blossoms, she used her fingers to rake up the blooms. Blossoms she'd never even noted on their bush as she walked to and from her car. Fragile pink-and-white wonders, now just detritus to dump in a bag.

"Beautiful evening, isn't it, Ginger?"

The speaker might as well have said, "F.B.I." Her pulses raced, and, as she crawled backwards out from under the bush, she wondered if something were going wrong with her eyesight. The world was too dark, and the speaker, though obviously close, was not yet visible to her.

"Louella? Is that you?"

The little woman advanced down another step. Her silhouette was now lit from behind by the streetlight, her narrow shoulders hunched, tethered as usual to her little dog. She kept her back to the older woman, but, to her
dismay, Louella allowed Lilly to pull her the rest of the way onto the deck. "Your Shasta daisies are huge. How long've they been in?" Louella could be rather pesky.

"Three weeks." She wiped her face on her arm, and turned around, still crouched. Maybe in the dark her swollen face wouldn't be obvious. Or, with any luck, old Louella's sight was going.

The woman had picked up Adam's sweater. "What beautiful wool. Did your mother knit this, dear? Oh, no, I see the label." She held it out wide, and even in the fading light it was possible to picture Adam in it. "Isn't this rather large for you?"

That did it. Crumpled in the pile of decaying blossoms, she began to cry.

"Ginger! What's the matter? Look, Lilly, our Ginger's crying." The dog trotted over and licked her face, Louella right behind. "Sit down on this bench, dear. Tell me what's wrong."

"Nothing. Really. Early menopause," she tried to cover with a laugh, but it came out a choking cough, and the crying got worse.

"Don't joke, tell me." The frail woman led her over to the picnic bench, her cold hands trembling slightly.

"I...had a bad scene with a student today, is all."

"That job." Louella sat next to her, put her arm around her, and handed her a tissue. "Good gosh, it's killing you. I thought you'd moved in at that school."
The woman should mind her own business.

"Here, put your sweater on." She held it open for her. Exhausted, she complied. But the act of wrapping herself in Adam's sweater, which had probably cost more than anything in her own closet, made her suddenly, hugely angry. She blurted, "It's Adam's sweater."

The pill had worn off, the ice cream was stuck partway down her, and, it seemed to her, her life was ready for a trash bag of its own.

"Handsome, just like he is. Real wool. Haven't seen Adam since Christmas, I don't think. Where is he?"

"He's in school. . . working and going to. . ."

She looked into the woman's face, and found that she lacked the resources to finish the lie. "No, Louella, he's not in school. He's in prison."

Louella's face went even paler, and her mouth and shoulders dropped. "Oh, my heavens! You can't mean it."

She dropped her head as if in prayer, and was quiet for a very long time. "Well, dear," she said quietly, "of course you must mean it. Why ever in this world?"

The words came out in all their filth. "Conspiracy to deal cocaine."

The woman looked down at the worn stones of the patio. She spoke almost under her breath. "I'm so terribly sorry. What you both must be have been going through."

A long, long moment passed. Lilly curled up and lay down between their feet.
"When will he be out?"

"Five years." The corners of her mouth turned down and stayed down.

"Five years? In that place?" Lilly looked up at Louella and began scratching. "How long have you been dealing with this, Ginger?"

'Dealing.' Wrong word. "All my life, it seems." She realized that she was shuddering.

"Come over to my place. Let's have a brandy. Have you had your dinner? My poor Adam. My poor, poor Ginger."

They sat on her worn brown corduroy couch, and Louella placed a bright afghan over her knees, and brought in the brandy and some crackers and cheese. She put a tissue box in front of them, and out the story poured, like pus. Lilly, smelling of flea powder, worried their feet.

"You're the first person who knows, actually. I mean, besides Adam and me." Though she'd been over the words so often in private, that the telling had been easy, a relief. She poured herself more brandy.

"I am? Doesn't your. . ."

"Well, that is, you would have been, except that I lost my temper today in fourth period, and blurted it out. By now, the Superintendent probably knows, and I've never even met the man." She used the snifter to cool her forehead, then her cheeks.
Louella's eyes were on her dog. "I had no idea in the world. Adam and I had a couple of long talks, while he was back living with you. Working at Long's, he said. He was charming to me, as always."

"Too charming for his own good." Would she ever get over being this angry?

"So now your colleagues know?"

"Yep. I hadn't thought I could feel any worse, but this is worse." She pictured the coaches at lunch, their voices low and excited, one leaning over to someone at the science table. A wildfire catching and spreading. "Adam made me promise I wouldn't tell."

"Well, that sounds next to impossible, for him to just disappear."

This was true. But so were the facts: next to impossible. She spoke through clenched teeth. "You should hear the way my colleagues talk about suspected student drug dealers. 'This one carries a beeper.' As if it were a gun, as if they were SS thugs. Every faculty meeting, it's a topic."

"Mmmm. I thought President Reagan said the other day that we're winning the war on drugs."

That hateful phrase. Temples pounding, she finished her brandy. "Well, maybe we are." The memory -- of the dozen or more agents and their briefcases in the San Diego courtroom -- swept her. She stood. "My family, I'm proud to say, is doing its part."
Louella stared at her face for a very long time. When she spoke, her head was down. "I'm so sorry. That came out all wrong."

She felt her arms flailing. "This asinine 'war on drugs' -- I believed in it too, pretty much. But now that Adam's the 'enemy,' it leaves me not knowing who I am, or what I believe."

"I didn't mean that the way it sounded.".

"Well, you're speaking for everyone I know, I'm sure. 'If I hadn't sold to them, Mom, someone else would have.' Adam told me that. How can anyone defend that kind of self-justification?" She wanted escape from this over-furnished, overcozy room, Frank's Yosemite studies lining the walls. She started for the front door, and Lilly preceded her.

"Do you have a church?" Louella asked from behind her.

"No." That made her even more unredeemable, probably, to someone like Louella. "Not since I started college."

"Well, that might be some comfort. Why don't you and I. .."

"Thanks, Louella, not just now." She put her hand on the knob.

"Where's James, by the way? I've been meaning to ask you all evening. I haven't seen him in the longest time."

She was hit with such a pang of longing that for a moment she could not draw breath. "Oh. Oh, Louella. That's another whole night's tears. He moved out last summer. Over Adam."
"He seemed like quite a nice man."

"Yes, he was. The very nicest man. Just not quite right for me." The 'me' was a little whimper. "Not while I have a son." Her whole body ached, as if she'd jogged a very long way.

Lilly had curled up and fallen asleep by Louella's feet, there by the front door. The old dog let out a deep sigh.

"Me too, Lilly." She turned the knob.

"Such a silly girl." Louella patted her. "By the way, how's your mother handling this?"

"She's not." Her voice was an angry bark. "She's not going to. Adam and I are united on that. It would kill her."

She was going to have a headache in the morning for sure. Friday. Maybe she'd phone for a sub. Yes, that way she could avoid Marv Schneider and the knowing hoards for almost ten days.

"You always have your Heavenly Father, dear," Louella offered, placing her veined hand on her arm.

When she opened the front door, the porch light illuminated one of Frank's enlargements of Yosemite Falls, hanging by the door in the darkened hall.

That reminded her: "Louella, Adam left with me an expensive camera."

"Oh?" Louella might believed the camera belonged in police hands.

"Nikon, I believe. Nikon F3."
"Ah. We bought an F3 the year before Frank died. I think of him every time I look through the lens."

That's what she wanted, too. "Would you show me..."

"How to use it? Sure. This weekend, if you like. Now, Ginger, stay strong. There's a larger plan in this. At least, that's how I try to reconcile myself to Frank's death."

Easy for her to say. What kind of Lord could think up a festering mess like hers?