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The Summer of the Sad Cars

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That summer seemed like a mad drive toward some distant place, a city bathed in neon, but later he realized the shimmering vision was a mirage, that he had not got anywhere, and that all that driving had left a trail of cars scattered along roads like the leaves of fall.

His father's Lincoln Zephyr went first, wounded within. Then his Buick, dying in the heat from old age. The 1935 Ford sedan, the Oldsmobile with its primitive Hydra-Matic, a Studebaker coupe, a 1938 Ford, a 1936 Chevrolet—they stretched in a row like the final result of a long assembly line, windshields winking as they waited for the scrapper.

Why had he wasted them? they wanted to know. Why had they failed him? he wanted to know.

The Lincoln was a huge boat of a car, black paint faded and chipped, but his father thought it had class—meaning the twin spotlights, the underseat heaters, the push-button doors. It's the kind of car an executive would drive, his father might have said. But to Chris' hot rage the car had no power. The original V-12 engine gulped gas to produce its own smokescreen, and so his father replaced it with a V-8. Overweight and underpowered, it would barely get out of its own way. Like everything else, Chris thought, it limped along.

He drove it everywhere, sitting behind the wheel like an owner. School had ended in May, when his father came home sick, and Chris went to work in the service station. It was to be a couple of days, then a week, but time stretched into the beautiful weather of June and when school had officially ended he was still pumping gas, doing oil changes and lube jobs, the grime etched into the lines of his hands. By then he had already wasted three cars.

One night he picked up his father's medicine at the Rexall, and when he came out Buzz was beside the fender with two girls. He heard the laughter, saw the cigarette's glow, and then Buzz whispered that they were hot to trot, and did he want to drive to The Point? Chris looked at the medicine in his hand and then at the two girls—thin shadows beside the car—and, heart racing, said, "Why not?" They got in, a girl beside each boy, and as he started the car, pulling away from Loaner's Corner, she said: "Whatcher name? I'm Sally."

"I'm Chris," he said. The name sounded strange—was that who he was? In the dark countryside they had come to he wondered where he was going, what he was going to be. Sally's leg was against his, her perfume choked the air. Her presence, the way she lit her
cigarette excited him and he wanted to think about anything except the service station.

“Yer in school?” she asked, exhaling thin streams from her nose.

“I’m out,” he said, as if he had already graduated; as if this long black Lincoln gliding through the night on fat whitewall tires were his.

“Yar,” she said. “Me too—I’m car-hopping at Merhars.”

The road turned, inclined toward the blinking lights of the radio station high on Mt. Scott, and at its base was The Point. Chris stepped the gas to the floor, heard the carburetor’s gasp. They sped upward, the city unfolding beneath them in a carpet of lights; the carb sucked, gasped, they climbed into thinner air and headlights clipped off the white headstones of the cemetery.

“Yer cute, y’know it?” Sally said, moving closer; his arm was draped around her back and waist, and with one hand he guided the Lincoln’s great white wheel, steering upward. In the mirror he saw Buzz kiss his girl, and Chris wasn’t sure he would know how to kiss—he had never had to—but he would try, for the pressure of warm lips was what he wanted.

As the road inclined sharply the car grew weary, slowed. Chris reached with his free hand to shift to second, felt the back end bounce, the fat tires accept the new gear. Under the wide expanse of hood, the engine whined, straining.

“Oh don’tcha just love it up here?” Sally said, leaning back, her breasts catching the highlights from the dash. She was agreeable to anything, he thought, and as the car began to buck, slow, he shifted into low and cursed.

“This crate gonna make it?” Buzz wondered.

The car began the final mile of hill and halfway up, engine screaming, the speedometer needle dropping to the small numbers. Half a mile separated them from the top when the Lincoln bucked to a stop.

“Wait,” Chris said. “I’ll try again.”

He coasted down in reverse, half-turned with his leg firmly against Sally, her eager warmth entering him. He coasted back to the final turn, gunned the engine, popped the clutch, and the heavy car lunged into the night. He left it in low, his foot to the floor all the way, lights clipping the grave markers with rapid flashes. Then the car stuttered, and a thin whisper of steam traced from under the broad hood—and again it bucked, shuddered, clicked metallic through the drive train, the rear wheels, and all power dissolved.

“Oh shit,” Sally said.

“Let’s walk it,” Buzz said.

“No,” Chris said, for it was a matter of pride, this being his very first date with a girl. “I’ll try it in reverse.”

Again he backed down the hill, and at the first curve turned the car around. Engine now cool, he gunned it, popped clutch and hanging
from the door he guided the big car through the night in reverse. The giant wheel rocked in his hands, steering the dancing swaths of red, the tail lights an echo of the radio tower lights high over The Point. It was difficult, speeding in reverse into darkness—he wished that his father had let him clip a red and chrome squirrel-knob on the wide white wheel.

The gas pedal mushed underfoot, the carb gasped, balked; all power turned to jello within the chromehard cylinder walls—the rear wheels turned slower, began to hop against the road in excited convulsions as the grade steepened. In desperation Chris popped the clutch in and out, the engine racing wide throttle for a second then fading into the driving wheels. Suddenly he felt the clutch pedal fall to the floor, dead—something within had broken, like a bone slipped from its socket—and slowly the car began to coast downhill, into the city.

Looking across the Buick's hood Chris watched the traffic on Sandy Boulevard—the bright chrome and paint, cars which moved as smoothly as the owners' lives. Almost every one he could identify by make, model, year. Occasionally he would see a hybrid, a sleek custom job easing along, lowered hip-high, skirts, dual exhausts, everything he dreamed of.

His father came from the clinic, went down the steps carefully, and walked with exaggerated slowness across the parking lot. His hat brim was tipped across his forehead, and his leather jacket was scuffed into light and dark patterns. When he got to the car it seemed that he took forever getting the door open and with infinite patience he stepped on the runningboard, sat down slowly, then pulled in his feet. Finally he shut the door.

"Uuhhh," he said, "that lug thinks I'm a pincushion."

Chris had the engine running, and the big Buick moved across the lot and into the street. The differential had the bearing howl common to GM cars, but Chris had poked a hole in the muffler and the rumble of exhaust covered all other noises. He had bought it for ten dollars, replaced the timing chain, and had intended to sell it; now, however, he had nothing else to drive. In moments of wild fantasy he thought about putting four Strombergs on it, milling the head, and splitting the exhaust manifold. It would make a good tow car, if he ever decided to race the roadster.

"Let's get a cone," his father said.

"Sure," he said, stopping at Miller's 33 Flavors; these drives were like going on a picnic, he thought. A hot breeze bounced off the asphalt but inside it was cool; the girl behind the counter wore a fuschia-colored uniform and he could see through it to the lines of her underwear. He wished that his hands were not so dirty. He ordered a double dip chocolate cone for his father and a rocky road for himself, and they sat in the car eating them. This stop had be-
come a ritual in their weekly drive to the clinic, and Chris wondered whether his father did it as a reward for Chris or because he enjoyed breaking the doctor's strict diet.

“Well, that sawbones says I can go back to work.” He had a thin line of ice cream along the line of his mustache.

“Great,” Chris said, thinking about his roadster spread in a million pieces in the basement of the garage. If he had, say, a hundred dollars and two weeks uninterrupted time he believed he could have that car back on the road.

The following Monday his father rode with him in the Buick, their lunchpails together on the seat between them. Chris trembled with excitement as he drove down the clean rain-swept streets. Traffic was light and he drove smoothly as Woodstock curved into the plush Reed campus and around the golf course; as they followed the river south his excitement mounted, and he wondered at his heart pounding.

At the garage he put out the displays, unlocked the pumps, opened the wide doors while his father looked around the office. By nine, before the day became hot, he was ready to duck downstairs to work on his car. He was studying the situation when his father came to the top of the stairs and called him. “Chris, fellow wants his oil checked.”

He came up the stairs wiping his hands on a rag and walked past his father to the pump island. The car was a new Olds 88, and now that he had come all the way out here Chris did not mind opening the hood, to get a look at that engine. “Doc says I wasn't supposed to lift anything heavy,” his father explained to the driver, leaning toward the window. “That means hoods too. I'm not supposed to put my hands above my head.”

Jeezus christ, thought Chris, shutting it, nodding to the driver that the oil level was fine. If he can't lift a hood I'll be up here all the time. His father got the money and rang it up, walking around the car with a terrible slowness. Chris looked down the street, and admired a bright maroon Ford convertible that rumbled past; he hated the kid who drive it, top down, toward the swimming area of the lake.

Most of the morning Chris was in the lube room or on the island. His father disappeared from time to time, emerging later from that grimy green cubicle they called a bathroom. “I keep having to pee,” he said, trying to laugh, “but nothing happens.” They ate lunch together in the office; Chris was finished while his father still nibbled on a sandwich, chewing with the same slowness that characterized his walk. Chris latched his lunchbucket, got a drink of water from the yellowed fountain outside, and rested against the doorjamb.

“Say Chris,” his father said, “Maxie will buy the front spring off that '37 Ford if we take it off—says he'll come by before five.”
Albert Drake

Chris looked at the clock and said, "Guess I better go now." He got a tray of tools, a floor jack, and went down the hill to the field behind the garage. A dozen cars sat in the high grass, overgrown by blackberry vines; his father had hauled them there one at a time, and although the city council was trying to stop him he was junking the cars for parts. Chris jacked up the front end of the coupe, blocked the axle, and crawled under. The grass was hot and dusty, but the shade below the front fender was cool. He wire-brushed the spring shackles, squirted them with Liquid Wrench, and waited: black and yellow bees big as his thumb droned through the berry vines, and the odor of sun-baked paint, engine oil, dusty grass saturated everything. Lying on his back he could see the blue sky beyond the bumper—what if he had his car together? he wondered. What if his father hadn't been—wasn't—sick? Last summer had been a dream: he had worked on his car in the warm sun, reading magazines and drinking lemonade in the hammock when it got too hot. He and Horace went downtown, went to the Yeager Theater on Friday nights, had mock battles as a dreamy dusk fell around the neighborhood.

He squirted the shackles again, then pounded them to break the rust's grip; he got the nuts off one side but a shackle bolt on the other side stripped. He began to chisel it off when his father called. He got out from under, dust and grass chaff irritating his skin, and ran down the hill. "He wants his oil checked." With exaggerated speed Chris opened the hood, checked the oil, closed it, and ran back down the hill. He chiseled the nut off but couldn't get the shackle free of the spring; he jacked and blocked, trying to ease the spring's tension, but the shackles were frozen. He lay in the hot grass, sweating, dirt impressed into his cheek, and then with all his strength he swung the hammer; the shackle didn't budge. He swung again, and as the hammer head deflected his knuckles hit the frame horn, peeling back the skin.

His father called again, and Chris came to the top, sweaty and dusty. "Listen," he said, motioning with his thumb, "I can't keep running up and down the hill. It's all loose, you get it off." He went to the island and checked the oil in Bartegan's old Hudson; it was down the usual quart and he also sold her a pint of clutch fluid, knowing that it too would be down. When Bartegan left Chris walked into the road and looked at where the grass was flattened beneath the '37 Ford. Then he saw the door of the Buick was open and from it stretched a pair of legs; when he walked over to it he saw his father sleeping in the back seat, hat tipped over his face against the sun.

Chris bought a bottle of Coke and squatted near the door, enjoying the small breeze that drifted through the shade beneath the wooden canopy. Shit, he thought without anger, this wasn't the way he figured it would be.
His father didn’t come back again, and for the rest of the summer Chris drove to work alone, ate lunch in the office alone; each evening he headed toward home, another day done.

A week later the Buick quit; he was halfway up the steep grade above Reed College when the car slowed, then began to coast backward, the engine racing. An axle? he wondered; transmission? clutch? He left it angled into the curb—a rat gray sedan with a crumpled fender and a hood he had never quite got on correctly—and it sat in that posh neighborhood for weeks until he finally got it hauled home.

He hitchhiked to the station the next day, arriving at noon. Between customers he carried a battery and a can of gas down the hill and picked out a car from the junkers: a 1935 Ford sedan, trunk model. It was solid, with fair upholstery, and complete; only after he got it running and started up the hill did he realize that the clutch slipped badly. He gave it a quick wash, hung on license plates from the Buick, and parked it across the street. He studied it, imagining a nice green paint job, whitewalls, skirts; it began to look better and better.

The next week, when he drove his father to the clinic, he said: I think we can fix it up, don’t you? We got those mufflers, we could put on duals. Lower it.” Because he was getting sick of the garage, of days passing in the grime of the lube rack; because he wanted to be free on the streets with his friends, he tried to believe that this car could be made not only beautiful but perfect. “What do you think?”

“I think it needs a new clutch,” his father said.

His father sat stiffly beside the door, looking straight ahead. He looked smaller, shrinking into his clothes, and his skin seemed yellowish. That was due to a lack of sunshine, Chris assumed. His father hardly went out of the house; he spent the day sleeping or sitting in a chair in the frontroom, reading westerns and mysteries. Chris’ mother gave the shots, bathed him, gave alcohol rubs and watched his diet. The one thing she couldn’t do was to make him stop smoking; he smoked Luckies constantly and when they were gone he rolled his own or took out a pipe.

“We’ll stick in a new clutch,” Chris said.

“There’s a reason,” his father said, breathing heavily. “Probably cause the rear main leaks.” The words came with effort, but he kept his voice level as if he were a teacher. “Wouldn’t do no good to put in a new disc and pressure plate. Have to put in a new lower end. This had babbitted rods—”

“Okay!” Chris said, stepping on the gas in anger; the clutch slipped and the engine overrevved wildly until he let up.

“That don’t do it no good.”


“Gee, I wish you hadn’t broken the Lincoln.”
At the clinic Chris waited in the car, studying its dashboard and interior; he hated the clinic, with its overpowering medicinal smells and the rows of crippled and sick arranged along the walls. In the car he could watch traffic and dream, floating within a cloud that promised only good things.

Eventually his father came out the door, looked around, and used the handrail to help himself down the stairs. He walked more slowly than ever, and when he got to the door he said: “Why didn’tcha park closer?”

“Can’t see the road,” Chris said, hitting the starter button even before his father was seated. The starter growled and almost immediately the solonoid clicked against the firewall. Either the battery was dead or a terminal was loose; Chris got out, raised the hood side and tapped the connection with a wrench while his father stood, half in and half out, waiting. He tried the starter button again but nothing happened. “We got to push it, I guess,” he said, trying to see which direction was at least level if not downhill; everything looked upward to him, as if they had parked over a water drain. “Hells bells.” He put the gear lever in neutral, then went to the back. “Well let’s try to go that way.”

His father looked at the car and the direction in which Chris had gestured; he took a deep breath, as if reaching a decision. “Don’t think I can,” he said. “I can’t.”

Chris waited, palms against the hot metal, looking at his father; he sure as hell couldn’t push it alone. But the choice was to try or sit there for hours or to call a tow truck. “Well, shoot,” he said, “maybe you could at least steer it toward that driveway.” He could see through the rear window as his father got in, slid across the seat, and as Chris leaned against the trunk anger shot adrenalin through his system. Feet braced, he pushed with his shoulder and the car inched forward picking up speed; when it surged down the driveway the V-8 staggered to life, missed, then caught. Chris ran ahead and as his father slid across the seat he got behind the wheel, foot on the pedal; he was breathing heavily and had to wait until his heart quit pounding.

“Gonna stop for a cone?” his father said. “Leave the car running while you go in.”

“No time,” he said. He did have to be back to work, but there was time to stop. He had said that because he was angry about the car.

“Oh come on,” his father said. “It won’t take long. Please.”

He stepped on the gas, listened to the engine wind up without moving them any faster, shifted quickly into second gear; oil smoke pumped through the holes in the firewall, enveloping them in a bluish cloud. When they got to Miller’s 33 Flavors he pulled up to the curb, angled the back tire against it, and ran inside with the engine running. As the girl dipped into the bins he recalled that his father
had said please—Chris felt a kind of power, as if he were the head of the family.

But he didn't want power or responsibility—he wanted simple things, he wanted his car running and to be free to run around nights with Hop and Buzz and the others, and to not be so damn tired that all he could do was crawl into bed, falling into a dreamless sleep. There had to be more than days passing, like leaves falling from a calendar or a colorless column moving past his eyes, one day exactly like the others. He wanted to find those girls again, and to try to get to The Point.

Saturday night Murphy, Hop, Buzz, and Bill stopped in front of his house. He had just finished dinner when the horn honked and he went to the window, to see a bright yellow convertible at the curb. Buzz yelled, "C'mon out." He quickly slipped into levis and a blue shirt, and was heading out the door when his parents came into the frontroom, his mother supporting his father. "I'll be back soon," he said.

He came down the steps and walked around the convertible. It was bright yellow, with brown leather upholstery. "Hey man, where'd you get this?"

"Traded the Merc in," Murphy said. "You like it?"

"You bet," Chris said, imagining himself cruising Forster Road in this. He would have even settled for Murphy's old Mercury, which had a leopardskin headliner that drove girls wild.

"Well let's go," Buzz said.

"Where to?" Chris asked, hitching up his pants, opening the convertible's door and sitting in the rich leather; the door sill just fitted under his arm.

"Who knows?" Murphy said, lighting a cigarette. "Let's see what's shaking."

That suited Chris, and what happened was that they cruised the main streets, the top down, the wind sweeping their heads; Chris loved the way people looked at them, envied them—the garage was forgotten, he was moving into a whole new world. Girls waved, eager to be seen. They cruised until it got dark, then went to the 82nd Street Drive-In; Murphy played his spotlight across the empty screen, and when the film started they sat in the open, under the stars, watching the figures on the big screen, watching lovers in other cars, talking and horsing around, eating popcorn and drinking Cokes. Chris remembered that last year they had come here in Buzz's father's pickup, hiding in the back behind large cardboard boxes until they were inside the fence and then bursting out to sit on the hood and fenders. Chris felt older this summer, and couldn't imagine acting that way.

After the films they joined the long line of cars and cruised slowly down 82nd, toward Merhar's. Chris felt terribly conspicuous and
even important as they cruised through and pulled into an empty space; everyone was looking at them. Murphy left his lights on until a car-hop came across the parking lot, hips swinging. "Hiya, doll," Murphy said, making his eyes thin; he talked around his cigarette, trying to look like Dean Martin. "Well, what'll it be men?"

They all got coffee and fries, and Murphy ordered a hamburger. He had quit school two years before and had a good job in a warehouse; he could afford convertibles, cigarettes, and hamburgers. "Yeah," he said, slapping the steering wheel, looking along the row of cars beside them, "I'll probably keep this car until next spring, then trade it in on a new one. I'll come out okay that way."

Chris looked around to see if Sally was working. He thought about coming out okay: quitting school, getting a good job, buying a new car. He was not getting paid anything for his work at the station, and he needed money.

Later they cruised up and down 82nd, shouting at girls, laughing. By two, when traffic had thinned, Buzz tried to get things stirred up by betting Murphy that he wouldn't run a red light; Murphy jammed the cigarette to the side of his mouth and took the bet. He slowed down and went through just as the light turned green. "Sheeet," Buzz said, "that wasn't red." "Okay, wise guy," Murphy said, and he proceeded to run every red light on 82nd. At each intersection, as they approached the light, Chris felt his stomach tighten, felt the tension grow like a solid element; there was excitement in the danger.

They came through Loaner's Corner as a false dawn blossomed over the rooftops. Chris, Buzz, and Bill sat on the top of the backseat, high in the sweet morning air, and they were singing like a barbershop trio the single word: Sonsabitch! They shouted it in chorus, harmonizing, drawing out its syllables. Laughing, Chris stood on the backseat as Murphy floorboarded the gas and they sailed through the last intersection without stopping, their song ringing over the empty streets like a joyous challenge: Sonsabitch!

The following day, Sunday, the station was closed. Chris slept late, woke slowly, and ate breakfast at noon. He thumbed through old copies of Hot Rod, thought about going to Bill's house, thought about going to a movie at the Yeager. He made a feeble attempt to clean up his room, picked up a pile of dirty clothes and made his bed, and then went into the garage to look for something to do there. Outside the sky darkened and a heavy rain began to fall; he enjoyed being alone in the garage, sitting on a stack of old tires, hearing the rain on the roof.

His sister spent the afternoon with a girl friend so there were only three for supper: he and his mother at the table, and his father in the frontroom. Perhaps it was his sister's absence that accounted for the
subdued atmosphere. Chris worked his way through the Sunday paper while he ate, and listened to the programs that came from the floor-model radio beside his father's chair: Fred Allen, The Jack Benny Show, The Whistler. Across from him his mother broke a cracker into her soup, scooped what crumbs fell to the table into her palm and put them into the bowl—nothing wasted, that was her motto. Chris suddenly realized she looked older, her face drawn; for almost two months she had been mother, wife, and nurse, and she showed the strain.

The whole house had changed, he thought, going into the front-room: it had aged, grown worn, and in spite of the warm weather the room seemed chilly. He saw with new clarity the thread patterns of the rug where the weave showed, the cracked plaster, scuffed furniture. The radio's finger-smoothed knobs and cracked glass dial, the books in the case, the chipped ashtray—familiar things whose shoddiness he had never noticed before.

The chair in which his father sat was growing shapeless. His bathrobe was faded, the ties frayed and knotted; the slippers were cracked at the sides, heels runover, and the material conformed to the lumpy shape of his bone structure. As Chris handed him the main section of the paper he saw that the fine lines around his eyes had deepened and the eyes seemed drawn below the skin; the steely blue pupils were glazed, the whites yellowed. Above Fred Allen's voice and the radio laughter Chris could hear the sound of breathing, like a file pulled against wood. And yet, to his dismay, even now Chris watched his father's fingers nimbly roll a cigarette and light it, saw the flame rise brightly and die in the cloud of smoke. He gave a short cough, picked a fleck of tobacco from his lower lip, and drew in more smoke. How innocent that gesture once seemed: he could remember sitting on his father's lap, and laughing with delight as he blew a trail of smoke rings.

"Rub my ankles, willya?"

Chris pretended to not hear; instead he turned to the classifieds and began to study the fine print, as if he intended to buy another car. His father asked again, and when he asked a third time Chris finally looked up, glancing away immediately. "Naw," he said, "I don't want to." He felt that rubbing his father's ankles was somehow demeaning, perhaps even obscene.

"Oh c'mon, Chris," he said, shifting his body in the chair; he had had so many shots during the past two months that it was terribly painful to remain in the same position for very long. Then, unwillingly, Chris slid across the floor to the hassock which supported his father's feet. The ankles were thick and swollen, the tissue so filled with fluid that the slippers bowed outward; his father kicked off the slippers and Chris began to rub the puffy flesh, hating the fatty tissue which rolled under his skin.
"Ahhhhh, that's better."

Chris sat on the worn rug massaging the ugly flesh—the ankles seemed to belong to someone else, for his father was thin as an axle—and he had the feeling that everything was falling apart.

Later he got in the old Ford and drove alone through his neighborhood; he went down Forster, then drove on side streets, and finally down the roads behind Horace's house which were little better than twin ruts leading nowhere. He drove to a point above Indian Rock and looked out into the darkness. Sunday nights had always depressed him and tonight, as he drove through the rain, things seemed especially gloomy. He saw no one walking, saw few cars; it was as if he had travelled past the edge of an invisible boundary and had set himself adrift in the darkness. That he could see people moving in their houses only made his desperation more acute; they walked through cheerful yellow kitchens with bright curtains, happy and healthy. It seemed to him that their house had been like that only a few months before, and he was amazed how quickly the situation had changed. He drove over the familiar roads feeling terribly depressed and lonely, feeling most of all a self-pity which brought tears to his eyes, not knowing what to do or which way to turn until, as the gas gauge neared empty, he finally turned back toward his home.

In the morning he found his life changed, his childish dreams diminished like the stars which faded into the aluminum sky of dawn: this was another level, and someday he would see that life had unfolded like accordion stairs, a series of staggered plateaus that one had to follow upward; there was no going back. He woke to the darkened room, dawn screened behind the curtains; before he heard his mother's voice he heard the sharp, insistent cry of birds and knew by the clarity of their notes that they flew through the thin air of early morning. His mother called again. Now he was awake, his mind racing past sleep as he slipped into his pants—oh god no, he thought—and in the house the tableau that would forever be burnt into his memory: his mother by the window, silhouetted against the faint light; his sister, awakened by the cries, leaned on a chair, the confusion of the room reflected in her eyes; neither cried nor turned her head from the figure seen through the door's oblique opening.

"He wanted to go to the bathroom," his mother said.

His father was lying on the bedroom floor, face down, one leg bent halfway under as if he were frozen in the position of trying to rise. Chris kneeled beside him, trying to imagine what he could do to reverse this, not allowing himself to think that his father was dead. "No, listen," he said, and as he rolled his father over a thin rattle came from the throat; the noise repeated itself, and then the room was silent. He laid the limp head back, trying to think what to do:
his father had got out of bed headed for the bathroom, and with his wife's help had got this far—that was it, Chris suddenly realized, it was all over, and he was amazed later to recall that he had not panicked in the face of this revelation. In fact he didn't even speak after that short phrase of hope—there was nothing to say. He laid the head back, noticed the short black stubble along his father's chin, the dried spittle in the corner of his mouth like a layer of salt; his eyes were closed but his mouth seemed to be open in the shape of an unsaid word, and the whitish tongue was pushed past teeth. He closed the open pajama fly and left the room, left his father who seemed to be sleeping on the floor. He heard the clicking noise of the telephone as his mother insistently dialed a number.

It was over that fast—a doctor came, the ambulance took away his father's body, and he noticed that the sun was barely over the serrated ridge of pines to the east. Most mornings he would still be asleep at this hour. He asked his mother if she thought he should go to work. She said no.

*I'm not crying,* he thought. *No one is crying.*

Later, he was able to know the intensity of the stunned confusion when he would recall absurd things he did or said during those days. At the funeral home he and his sister wandered into an adjoining room, where they saw a luxurious coffin; attracted by its beauty they tiptoed to the plush lining and looked inside, to jump back in horror at the sight of the pale, balding corpse. Or the time when they were driving home from the funeral home and he had remarked that his father had had a good life, that he had not suffered. "I mean," he said, as if he knew anything about life, "he never had his tonsils out or anything like that." An uncle he had seen only once made the supreme gesture and let Chris drive his new car; as they shot down the road the uncle tried to give Chris a pep talk about the meaning of life. The day of the funeral Chris brought in some photos of cars to show to people; was his excitement genuine or feigned? he wondered. After the funeral, when most of the relatives had gone, Chris and another uncle went to a drive-in movie in the old Ford which, at the end of the films, refused to start; they had to wait until the crowd had left, and push it around the empty theater. With an amazement born of the ridiculous or the remarkable that was the tone of the week, a collage of events that seemed marked by extreme clarity but which quickly blurred: later he was to ask whether they had really happened.

For instance, he had the impression that a neighbor had gone with him on the day that his father had died and that they had towed the old Buick home; it had sat in that posh neighborhood for almost three weeks, and no sooner was it home than he and Buzz had taken a sledge hammer to it. The fenders refused to yield to the hammer at
first, the thick steel ringing in triumph, but slowly they beat the metal back until it folded against tires and body panels. Were they crazy? he wondered, swinging that ten pound hammer with all his strength, as if working off anger and sorrow.

After everyone was gone, he remembered, the three who were now the family joined to make a final gesture: they flew a kite. This playfulness was somewhat out of character for the mother, yet it must have been her idea. Certainly neither Chris nor his sister cared about kites; but then where had it come from? The fragile blue and yellow simplicity of paper and balsa, lettered with store advertising, was already assembled by someone, and they carried it to the vacant lot across the street. The mother knew nothing of the mechanics of flight, yet she took the first run; she held the string and her feet and skirt stammered as she galloped across the field to the far edge and back to where Chris and his sister waited, the kite cartwheeling like an enraged beast. Then Chris took a turn, although he felt gawky and odd running across the high grass; the kite teasing with a slight ascent before it dropped into the skirt of grass.

The tail was too short; no stability. There was no breeze. Or, most likely, the spirit of kiting was absent.

The sister was too young, her legs too short, so all three grabbed handholds and ran furiously, the child and the kite being dragged along. The kite lifted to telephone wire height and they moved back slowly; they watched the hovering blue and yellow diamond, as delicate as a moth, and they turned to one another to share this success.

While Chris felt a cold satisfaction at this accomplishment, he was startled when the mother began to laugh wildly; his sister giggled, then also laughed until she had to hold her side with one hand.

Then the breeze lessened and the kite shot down at an abrupt plane, the product of a medieval catapult. They were at the field's edge and in mild panic each moved in a separate direction, each trying to jerk the string and break the kite's descent; then, confused, they moved together again, to mill in a lumbering circle dance. The shadow of the kite darkened them as it passed like a premonition; they were a crowd of arms and legs at all angles as the loops of string fell, and they were hopelessly bound together by the snarl of cord as the kite smashed with puny finality at their feet.

That was in some ways only a prelude to the summer: he burned off the rest of the Ford's clutch lining and when that car refused to move he abandoned it. He took the battery and license plates and put them on a 1938 Olds tudor which he got from the field behind the station; that lasted less than a week, when its primitive Hydra-Matic went out. A Studebaker Commander coupe blew an engine the second day; a 1938 Ford threw a rod through the side of the block; a Chevrolet coupe scattered its transmission along Forster when, in
sadness and anger, he tried to speed shift to second. He drove with increasing frenzy, wasting cars one after the other, until it was difficult for him to drive down a road without seeing a car that he had left behind. It surprised him that he had no regrets.

He thought that he had learned something about the impermanence of metal and flesh, but he hadn't—not until years later could he even begin to know what his father knew as he fell through that fragile membrane. What the death meant to Chris was the absence of his father: the empty chair at the table, the missing voice when he wanted someone to talk with, the problem of what to do with the father's razor, underwear, neckties. He missed the man's presence. He would recall their stops at the ice-cream store: in a hovering image he would come out with cones and see his father through the car window, his face dark against the glass like a cameo, and he would suddenly be saddened to think that the ice-cream cone had become his father's single pleasure. Remembering specific moments, he would regret not having put an arm around his father, not having told him that he loved him: that was the material of dreams, where he would meet his father in stores, on the street, at the homes of friends, and they would talk about all the things that they had never had a chance to discuss.

Not until years later could he begin to understand what his father must have felt: betrayed by his body, pounding heart, softening muscles. What had it cost him to ask others to do his work? Doc said I wasn't supposed to lift anything heavy, he had said, and I keep having to pee, he had said—these weren't complaints, they were cries of explanation, an appeal that others understand what he could not understand. The bitter moment when he stood beside the old Ford saying I can't I can't push it: how could Chris hope to know the panic his father knew when he found his body disobeying, when he suddenly found he was too weak to do the work he had done all his life—and it was terrifying because this weakness was translated into failure. If you don't work, he had always said, you don't eat.

Those lessons came later; if he learned anything from the death at the time it was to recognize his own mortality. It terrified him to realize that his father was only slightly more than twice Chris' age when he died, and he tried to project a span of years equal to the number he had lived; he felt that he had hardly begun to live and, as he listened to his heart beating against ribs, he thought that a lifetime was awfully brief.