2000

Emergency Broadcast Haywire

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The University of Montana

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Emergency Broadcast Haywire

by

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Granny invested in rolls of Bermuda grass and built a three-hole putting course in the backyard complete with dogleg, sand traps and a water hazard. She maintained the course everyday, even paying the Chem-Lawn people to come out and fertilize once a week. She played mostly with Kim, her grandson, and in this manner, tried to be the father in his life. After she won a hole, granny would menace Kim with her putter, jabbing at him and the air, holding the putter like a fencing sword and sheathing it quickly at her side the way Chi Chi Rodriguez, her hero, did on the television.

When Kim looked like he might win a hole she had tried to distract him by asking questions about puberty. “You got any pubic hair, yet?” she’d say in a tone she imagined as fatherly, “Thirteen year old boy’s going to start getting hairy.” But this tactic had gotten old, and granny began giving strategically long advice in an effort to divert Kim’s attention. Sometimes it involved golf, but often it didn’t. “Imparting the wisdom” she called it.

“Let me impart some wisdom, Kim,” she’d say, and Kim would have to wait until she finished to begin lining up his approach. “Whenever you’re standing around, idle say, nothing’s going wrong, that’s when you need to look up, look around and watch out. There is a lot of junk orbiting around up there just waiting to re-enter and smash, flaming, into your unsuspecting skull. You wouldn’t believe what’s floating around up there.
Dogleg

Sheets of aluminum, tiny nuts and bolts, folding chairs, medical equipment, pianos. You could be sitting on the street corner, licking an ice-cream cone, and a flaming piano could fly out of nowhere and smash into you and you’d be a sticky, discordant mess.” Then granny stepped back and let Kim putt.

Kim and granny were out back, finishing a close round, when mom came out the screen door followed by a man. Mom started using her maiden name earlier that summer. She had moped around the house in her bedclothes clutching a romance novel for years. Granny, who had an even tan from working on the lawn and playing golf all the time, looked like mom’s older, well-dressed sister. Mom introduced the man, and granny and Kim both pinched their mouths together in the same way. The man looked at each of the ladies, back and forth, noting the similarities in their clothing. Granny always wore pantsuits with gold piping, even on the golf course, and could only putt with her calico sunglasses pushed up on her frosted white hair she had done regularly at the salon. Mom, trying to get back in form, had started to imitate grandma’s style, only without the sunglasses and the gold piping. After they all shook hands, granny suggested a game of doubles, but the man declined.

“Don’t like golf?” granny said, and refastened the Velcro on her glove. “What kind of man don’t like golf?” she asked.

Mom sat with the man at the picnic table, drank sun tea, and watched from the shade under the huge pine next to the house.
Granny tried an angle shot off the fence but hit it too hard, and the ball bounced into the water hazard. "Son of a Bitch," she mumbled. Kim played it safe. He putt for accuracy and left the ball right at the bend which gave him a straight ten-yard shot. Granny took the penalty and putt aggressively for the hole. The ball jumped from her putter, and it rolled fast up to the hole and lipped the back of the cup, launching the orange Top-Flight ten feet into the air where it clanked into the gutter lining the roof and bounced around on the aluminum. There was quiet laughter from the gallery.

Granny couldn’t go into one of her wisdom imparting distraction speeches with the company watching. With no pressure, Kim sunk the putt, which rolled up slowly before falling in. Kim had won a round of golf for the first time in his life, but Granny walked to the middle of the yard without congratulating him.

"Nice shooting," the man at the picnic table said.

Kim shyly replied, "Thanks," but the man and his mother were looking past him. Granny was still in the middle of the lawn, both hands working the grip of her putter.

Granny raised the putter, stepped to the picnic table and feigned throwing it at the man and Kim’s mom, who ducked wildly. Then she swung it straight down like an axe, a frustrated grunt peeling from her clenched teeth, and buried the head of her it into the Bermuda grass. She quick-marched back into the house, leaving the putter there, shaking stiffly.

The first man mom brought to the house that summer never came back.
Kim didn’t share his grandmother’s passion for golf. He wanted to be a doctor, a doctor with facial hair, like on TV, and get all the blonde-haired nurses on a gurney.

The only person close to Kim’s age at the end of his block was a girl named Shannon Parker who was a year ahead of him at school. Shannon wore tight jeans so new the gold stitching and dark blue fabric caught and held light. She wore mascara and lip-gloss. The other kids were always off at some camp or vacationing, so Shannon and Kim found each other early that summer.

Two weeks after granny ran the man off, Kim went over to Shannon’s house. Her dad was lying on the couch, watching the news, so they spent the day in her room making colored popcorn in a hot-air popper she had on her dresser. The kernels were different colors—green, red, blue—and when they popped it looked like regular popcorn except the hard, colored kernels in the middle. They ate popcorn and listened to 45’s on a portable record player. Shannon made Kim play “Wild Fire” over and over while she fixed the popcorn. Kim liked the song until he understood it was just a song about a girl losing her horse. When they ran out of popcorn Shannon went to her door and locked it, bounced on her bed and suggested they play a game.

“What kind of game?” Kim asked.

“I’ll let you choose,” she said.

Kim sat on the bed next to her, thinking it over, and finally said to her, “How about Doctor’s Office?”
Smiling first, then thinking about it, Shannon said, "Only if you let me be the doctor, and you’re the patient."

Shannon’s glossy smile persuaded Kim quickly. “OK, Dr. Parker. I’m not sure what my problem is,” Kim said.

“To reach a diagnosis I am going to need you to take all of your clothes off and come up here on the bed.”

The reluctance in Kim’s face was clear to Shannon, but she played a good doctor. Having sensed the fear in the patient’s eyes, she made proper procedure and took her clothes off first. “Now strip and come up here,” she told him.

Kim had never seen a live girl naked and it puzzled him. Her skin looked white and doughy, and Kim wanted to squish her, stick his finger in her thin belly button, so he stripped down and crawled on to the bed.

She told him to lie on his back and remain still. When Kim moved, she sternly admonished him, saying he must remain perfectly still.

“I don’t seem to be able to find the problem,” she finally said, “but there’s definitely something wrong with you.”

She walked to the dresser and Kim watched as she rooted around in a drawer and came back with a small clear container of orange Tic-Tacs. “These will work, but you have to take them a special way,” she said.

“Special way?” Kim said.

“They’re suppositories,” she said, sitting down and crossing a leg over his.
“What’s a suppository?”

Shannon explained to him and gave him the Tic-Tacs to take home and made Kim promise to take one every hour until they were gone. Kim agreed, but with the stipulation that he would be the doctor next time.

At home, granny lay in her room and Kim noticed her as he walked by.

“Want to putt a round?” Kim asked with a mouthful of orange candy mints.

“No thanks,” granny said.

Kim held up the Tic-Tacs to grandma. “Suppository?” he asked her.

“No thanks.”

Kim sat down next to her on her bed. “What’s wrong, granny?” he asked.

“Your mother is down stairs with another suitor,” she said without looking at him.

“I don’t like all these men coming around, granny,” Kim said.

Granny sat up in her bed and ran her hand through Kim’s thin, short hair and craned over to look him hard in the eye. “Me neither,” she said and slumped back down in her bed. “She wants to find you another father.”

Kim stood up and looked at granny’s feet poking out from under the covers. She had her golf shoes on. “Not for long,” Kim said and headed for the stairs.

Leftover food still sat on the burners on the stove and Kim saw the two sitting outside through the kitchen window over the sink. Kim pushed the screen door open and walked over to his mother and the new man sitting in metal folding chairs in the middle
of the putting course, overlooking the water hazard. They held clear drinks with pieces of lime in them and there were bottles and ice sitting in a deep plastic serving tray resting in the water at their feet.

The man had a mustache that looked familiar, and the effect lulled Kim into shaking hands with the man as his mother introduced them.

Kim pulled his hand quickly from the man’s grip. Kim’s had it now: The man looked like the Shakey’s Pizza man. He looked exactly like the Shakey’s Pizza man. This was getting confusing for Kim. He loved Shakey’s Pizza and had subconscious concomitant feelings for the Shakey’s Pizza man. But Kim wasn’t going to allow anyone, even the Shakey’s Pizza man, to go on a date with his mother and come home to replace his grandma as his father.

“You can’t be granny, Shakey’s Pizza man,” Kim said.

Kim’s mom and the man both leaned back.

“What did you say?” Kim’s mother finally asked.

Kim pointed at the man who was trying to hold onto a drunken smile.

Kim told him slowly, “Your mustache looks like a vagina blew up in your face.”

“Kim!” his mother yelled and fell out of her folding chair trying to stand up. The Shakey’s Pizza man lunged to grab Kim and slipped in the water hazard chasing after the boy.

Mom went to help the man but he shrugged her off.
Kim ran to the screen door and turned around, but all he could think to say was, "Your kitchen is a mess!"

His mom came in by herself while Kim was halfway through with the dishes. She was breathing hard and her face was wet and puffy. She told the boy that she hated him and that he was a little shit, like his father, but she had to suck air to catch her breath and she had her head down on the red cloth of the dining table. He felt even sorrier for her. Kim was grounded for the rest of the month of June.

Another man, a guy who laughed at everything Kim said, came by the weekend Kim was supposed to be ungrounded. He picked up Kim’s mom to go to a movie and asked to bring Kim along, too. She was reluctant, but agreed when Kim promised to be good. But at the movie theater they wanted to see a lawyer movie and Kim wanted to see *Fox and the Hound*. The man convinced Kim’s mother that this would be all right, the kid was a big boy and could handle himself, Ha-Ha-Ha. He gave Kim a wink. But *Fox and the Hound* ended a full hour before the lawyer movie, and when they met Kim at laughing boy’s BMW, Kim had stolen all of the chrome valve caps and let all of the air out of the tires.

"It was like that when I got here," Kim said.

Mom started crying again and tried to spank Kim in the parking lot with a bunch of other people from the lawyer movie watching them. She only hit him once then she started whining about Kim breaking all of the blood vessels in her hand.
“See? It’s turning blue!” she said to her date, who hadn’t laughed for a full minute for the first time Kim had been in his presence. Kim never saw this man again either. And now he was grounded for the rest of the summer.

The rest of the summer Kim followed a new routine: get up early and do the chores outlined by mom the night before, lunch, and then putt a few rounds with granny until cartoons came on.

Kim and granny were in the middle of a close round when the Chem-Lawn guy made an unscheduled appearance. Not the regular Chem-Lawn guy, but the Chem-Lawn guy. He let himself in the back gate and started his introduction by saying that they were such good clients he decided he had to come and visit. Granny called mom out back and she brought some tea and they sat at the picnic table. Mom and the Chem-Lawn man took to each other right away. His name was Sam Jenkins and Kim and granny listened carefully when he told the story of how he saved his business. An anesthesiologist had messed up and given him the wrong amount of something and he almost died. He sank all of the settlement money into revamping the image of Chem-Lawn. All of the trucks he had painted in brilliant green and white, and he paid an advertising firm to come up with a new logo, which he painted on the trucks, too. The new professional image tripled his clientele in one month, he told them. Then he shook everyone’s hand again and left the way he came. He and mom began calling each other. Kim and Granny didn’t seem to mind. Sure, the guy looked a lot older than mom, but not older in a bad way—just older.
But what really won Kim and granny over happened when Sam came over for his first official date. Sam asked mom to get dressed up because he had a surprise, and mom was more than a little worried. She wanted to just meet Sam at his place, but he insisted. When he arrived he told mom that they were going downtown to see an opera. An opera! But that wasn’t the surprise. He brought a couple of gifts for Kim and granny. To Kim he gave a bona-fide stethoscope and to granny a pair of spiked golf sandals. They were impressed. Kim and granny looked to each other, both aware of the bribe, but all they could do was try not to grin. The bribe worked. When mom and Sam got home from the opera, Sam didn’t come in. Mom said he kissed her hand at the door and left. Said they were going to see more of each other. Toward the end of summer Kim and granny started seeing more of him, too. Sam came by before mom got home from work, and he joined Kim and granny on the putting green and drank tea with them at the picnic table.

Once, Sam came over unexpectedly during lunch. Granny had made some enchiladas and after Kim finished his plate she made a deal with him. Kim could go across the street to visit Shannon Parker if he promised not to tell his mom. Granny asked Kim if he had learned his lesson in regards to his mother’s dates. Kim told her he had. He said he liked Sam Jenkins. Sam said to Kim, “Be back in time for your cartoons, OK doc?”

Kim called Shannon to make sure she was home. Her folks were both at work and she said, “Come over.”
Kim went upstairs, grabbed his stethoscope, and ran all the way to Shannon's house. She answered the door and bent over to inspect the stethoscope hanging around Kim's neck. "Emergency house call," he said and followed her inside.

Summer was almost over but Kim didn't care. His doctor career had taken off and he thought he was in love for the first time. Mom and Sam saw each other practically every day, and granny played golf once a week, on a real course, with Sam. Granny let Kim out of the house as long as he returned before mom got home. The late, light evenings of summer were ending.

Kim went over to Shannon's house to give her another surprise house call, but no one answered the door. He stayed on her lawn for a while, but he didn't want anyone to see him sitting there with a stethoscope around his neck, and he didn't feel like going home to granny and Sam, so he headed for the ditch. The ditch was strictly off-limits, even if he weren't grounded. Real trouble happened at the ditch: kids got bloodied in rock fights and BB gun wars; kids raided and demolished forts made from earth and stolen lumber for illicit contraband—warm beers, weathered porno-magazines. But nothing special was going on when Kim got there. He caught a baby turtle in a small pond under a leaky storm sewer pipe, and ran home to put it in the water hazard. In his backyard, no one was on the course, so he slipped the turtle into the clear water and watched it until it came out of it's shell and swam, just beneath the surface. He walked into the house and Sam and grandma were sitting on the couch watching TV.
“I found a turtle in the water hazard!” Kim told them.

They got up quickly and Sam said, “Well, let’s go have a look.”

“Look at that,” Sam said to grandma, “There’s a little red-eared turtle in the water hazard.”

“We’ll try not to bother him,” said granny, and she went to get a couple of putters for her and Sam. Kim ran back inside and slid in front of the TV. When mom got home she sat down next to him.

“Do you think you would be OK with just grandma this weekend?” she asked.

“Why?”

“I’ve got something planned for me and Sam this weekend. I thought you and grandma could take care of things.”

“Sounds great,” said Kim. He might get to get out of the house on a weekend with mom gone.

Sam took mom out to eat at El Imperial, and granny and Kim did a little night putting. They both shot par for the round and stood at the dogleg behind the garage when Kim told granny about mom’s plans for the weekend.

“Your mother has got some timing,” she said. “Sam is supposed to take me to the Great 18 this weekend.” The Great 18 was a golf course that had replicated the top eighteen holes in the world on one course.
Granny and Kim putted all night. Kim won back-to-back rounds on the three-hole course. Granny didn’t seem to care or even notice. They just played into the night. After they finished their last round, granny got a pitching wedge out of her bag on the porch and teed up a ball in the middle of the yard. She took a few practice strokes before she swung and hit the ball over the back fence, over the house that was their backdoor neighbor. They watched and listened but no sound came from over the fence or the house. Granny looked at Kim looking over the backyard fence.

Inside, mom watched the last of the ten o’clock news.

“Where’s Sam?” asked granny.

“He just dropped me off,” mom said.

When the news was over granny and mom both walked to their rooms, not bothering to say good night to Kim.

Kim was usually up first on Saturdays, on account of his cartoons, but Mom was up, wearing a yellow sundress, and granny was making breakfast. Kim ate a waffle with purple boysenberry syrup and watched cartoons all morning while mom did busywork around the house and grandma tended the lawn.

Around noon, Kim’s cartoons were over when he noticed mom and granny weren’t around. He found them sitting on the wooden bench next to the crepe myrtle, blooming coral pink and white, in the front yard. He sat down between them. A dark brown Cadillac rolled quietly down their cul-de-sac. The car was washed and waxed, and
the lustrous brown color and black tinted windows made Kim feel like he was watching a huge piano on tires slowly pull up to the curb in front of them.

Sam walked up to them with his hands in his pockets.

Standing in front of them, looking down at Kim’s mother, Sam said, “Need to talk to you.” He turned to Kim. “I need to talk to your mother.” Kim was used to grown-ups not wanting to talk while he was around, so he wasn’t upset, just curious.

“Go upstairs and get the suitcase on my bed,” his mom whispered into his ear.

Kim came back outside with the suitcase and everyone was standing. Sam held mom by her shoulders. Kim walked up to them, slowly, and grandma took an envelope out of her purse and said to Kim’s mom, “I was going to leave this for you, maybe you should read it now,” and handed it to her. Mom opened the envelope and read. Kim stood next to her, and grandma and Sam went inside.

“What is it?” Kim asked.

Mom read quickly with her mouth open.

Grandma came out with a suitcase of her own and Sam following, carrying her bag of clubs. Mom let the letter fall to the ground and ran into Sam, their shoulders hitting sharply, as she went back into the wood, two-story house. Kim picked up the letter. It didn’t make much sense, so he scanned down it, going straight for the signature: Love, Miriam. Kim had never thought of his grandmother like that before. A Miriam.

Kim rushed over to the Cadillac that had begun to drive away and opened the back door and got in. The car stopped.
“What are you doing?” granny asked Kim from the front seat.

“I’m going with you,” Kim said.

Granny looked over to Sam and Sam let out a big sigh. “Well, don’t forget your stethoscope, Kim. You might not get a chance to get it again.”

Kim ran to get the stethoscope, but when he got back, the Cadillac was gone.

Mom sat on the couch, staring at the TV, but it was turned off. Kim put the earpieces in and held the heavy disc of the stethoscope up to the glass screen of the television and listened for a pulse. He pursed his lips and nodded a few times, but his mother didn’t seem to notice him at all, so Kim took the stethoscope off, walked to the kitchen, and put it in a drawer with all the pens, loose change and old batteries.

There was still one week of summer left and Kim’s mom enrolled him in a daycare called La Petite. Kim was the oldest kid there. The first day she left him there, she was late to pick him up and Kim wondered if she’d ever show. When she arrived, all of the other kids were gone, and Kim ran out to meet her.

“What’s wrong? What is it?” Kim kept asking his mom.

She put her arms around him and said, “Nothing’s wrong, Kim.”

They stood on the hot concrete driveway of La Petite holding each other. It was Kim’s thirteenth birthday. A summer rain started, common in Houston, and Kim’s mom drove him to the Galynne 3 to see an R rated movie. 10 was showing. Sitting together alone on the balcony, Kim’s mom put her hands over his eyes whenever Bo Derrick
appeared naked on the big-screen. Kim could easily see through her fingers, and out of the corner of his eye he noticed that his mother really didn’t care; she was watching, too.

The first week of school Shannon, now in eighth grade, ignored Kim in the hallways. Kim went by her house to find out what the problem was. At her front door her mom answered and she seemed glad enough to see Kim, but when Shannon came out, it was the same thing as at school. Cold shoulder.

"Hey, Shannon," Kim said, "I’ve got something to show you."

"What," she said.

Kim said, "It’s a surprise, just for you. Come with me."

She rolled her eyes, said OK, and followed him.

When they got to Kim’s house she said, "I’ve seen your house, Kim."

He persuaded her to go into the backyard, and he walked her up to the water hazard. He hoped that seeing the tiny red-eared turtle might somehow touch her in some way. He couldn’t find it.

"Is this what you wanted me to see?" Shannon asked, her voice rising, "because if it is, I’m going home."

"I didn’t bring you here to show you anything, I brought you here to tell you something that’s very important," he told Shannon, trying to remain calm. She was looking straight at Kim, unconvinced. She was a good two inches taller than him.

“You’ve been diagnosed with cancer,” he told her, “and you’ve only got three months to
live.” Kim looked past Shannon and counted the windows on the back of the house. There were eight including the one to the attic, a window he’d never noticed before. “I don’t want to say that there isn’t a chance you could pull through, because there is. It’s just a very slim chance. I want to be completely honest with you.”

When she left, Kim sat down on the Bermuda grass, which had already grown brown and splotchy in places, looked up, and recounted the windows on the back of the house to make sure.
I left the bar early, trying to do right for Michelle, but the key wouldn’t turn over the ignition. I was drunk, sure, but what the hell? Then I realized I was in someone else’s car. A car like mine, but someone else’s. Which was strange because how many people own a ’70 Nova with a front bench-seat and painted Aztec Gold? But there I was, and I noticed a few things that definitely made it someone else’s car: air freshener around the rearview mirror, empty packs of Merits everywhere (not my smoke), and a kid’s torn up safety chair in back. Outside I noticed, too, that the rims were different, both aftermarket, but different. It might have been just an excuse to go back into Molly’s and get another drink, but I honestly wanted to know who drove a car almost exactly like mine. I walked back inside and sat down on a stool and waited for Anne to catch a lull behind the bar. Anne’s this great girl who dresses like the most extreme punk rock chick you could ever imagine: Face pierced like a pincushion, sailor-tattoos, dyed black hair. And what’s equally remarkable is she’s, without a doubt, one of the fattest women I have ever known. When I see her I think of a line I read somewhere: “We are all thin men, you are all fat women,” and I feel good for both of us, for everyone.

“How ‘bout one more,” I said.

“That was quick.” She said this with a smile, but with aloof, half-lidded eyes that never change.
"You know anyone in here that drives a '70 Nova, you know, besides me?"

She leant on the bar after I asked her, absorbing the question. "I know everybody in here and what they drive and wished they drove. Probably her," she said and nodded to my right, indicating a woman at the end of the bar.

I leaned back, gave the girl a quick sizing up, in order: SHOES—flip-flops; LEGS—skinny in tight faded jeans; ASS—OK from the side; CHEST—none, I mean really flat, flat chested. But here she accentuated what little she had with a tight orange tank-top with navy border around the arms and neck; FACE—tan, no make-up; HAIR—long, dirty blonde, one length. Unkempt, in a way I like. I took my drink and sat at the empty bar stool next to her.

"You got an old Nova?" I asked her.

She looked a little put out, sized me up, then focused her eyes at mine. "Yeah, I got an old Nova," she said.

My wife of almost a year, I should say now, had turned into a completely different person. We used to drink rum and fix steaks on the porch and then get into the pool naked at midnight. But now she wouldn’t drink at all, would tell me not to go out, that we should start thinking about a family, start thinking about having a kid. Kids scare fear into me. They’re small and they are smart. I think we teach them to be dumb. Even Anne’s kid, crazy Down’s Syndrome kid that’s always at the bar, will say something to you like, "Why’s that drink in your hand more important than fooseball?" Brrr. That shit scares me. The kid’s right. Plus, and I know it’s used, but who unselfishly wants to
bring another human being into this world? We should concentrate on getting the people right who are here now. I just want a good time, want everyone to have a good time—we could all use a little more of that. And I could tell, after hanging out a while longer, that a good time might happen that night with the dirty-blond haired woman wearing flip-flops.

We drank a few rounds and tried to out guess each other at the video-trivia you play using remote control boxes, staring at TVs up high in all the corners of the bar. We were guessing pretty good, so I got a box for us to play on together, us against the rest of the bar. I suggested we put “Nova kids” down as our name, but I think she misheard me. She typed in “BeerandPot,” and the name showed up in white electronic lettering up on the blue TV screens.

BeerandPot’s score got pretty good. On one of the rounds we even got the highest score on the last question and the whole bar collectively groaned when the screen flashed “WAY TO GO BEERANDPOT.” We were getting close to sloppy. We grinned into our drinks a lot, looking at each other when one of us knew the answer, and we were doing a lot of “accidental touching.” Oops! Sorry I brushed my hand on your thigh! Let me just get a cocktail onion there and Whoops! Sorry about getting my nose in your ear. I turned to the girl in the flip-flops, put an arm around her and asked, “Can I drive that car of yours?”

She smiled, the really good smile, and said, “If I can drive yours.”
Nova Kid

I said to myself, "Hot Damn." And we got go cups from Anne, and I followed her out into the parking lot, the asphalt slick looking in the man-made light.

Pulled up next to each other in the parking lot she told me to follow her, and out on the street it felt great, like a two-car Chevy Nova convention. She took me to an upper-lower class apartment complex where three black kids, one shirtless, scaled the fenceline off to the side of the front gate as she swiped her entrance card through the code box.

In her place we didn’t waste any time. We opened two beers and set them on the coffee table and never had a sip of either one. She led me to her bedroom and I thought I’d try to be a little stylish, show her that I was willing to be a little experimental in the bedroom. She had the flattest chest I had ever seen. She was at least four or five years older than me, but all she had were these hard little pencil-eraser like nipples. That turned me on quite a bit. I grabbed her from behind and picked her up and entered her standing, her flat little tits pressed up against the bedroom wall. I lost my balance, and we landed on her bed, where I got on her missionary style and came too quickly. I tried thinking about baseball stats and the home run race. I heard that helped from someone. Would Houston finally beat the Braves? But it was no use. With eyes clenched I pictured Bagwell homering in the bottom of the ninth to take the ‘Stro’s to the World Series for the first time ever, and the condom filled up with applause and white caramel confetti.
We were sitting back in the living room, sipping on the beers we’d left there, smoking cigarettes, when someone knocked at her door. She looked more than a little surprised, and that got my ears up. She leaned into the peephole on the door. Then she stood up straight as could be, as if to muster some strength, exhaled loudly, and shook her head, looking at me as she went for the door. She opened it just enough for her, but where I couldn’t see out.

“What you want Darrel?” she said.

A low voice said, “Let me in. What, you got visitors?” and then a short man, roughly her age, forced his way in, pushing the girl I’d just had relations with back two uneasy steps. He just stood in the living room eyeing me on the couch as his woman held the door open.

“So Steph, what’s this? Got a friend over?” He walked over to me and said, “Name’s Darrel.” He stuck out his hand. I stood up and went to shake and realized I was about two feet taller than the guy. He pulled his hand back when I offered mine. He looked up at me with vivid hatred. Like he hated me for more than being with his girl. Like he hated me personally, hated me physically.

“Why don’t you call for you come over Darrel?” Stephanie said.

“I should of called. If I knew you had company I would been a little more in the socializing way. Why don’t I come back with a little something to help us all break the ice.” Darrel said this looking all around, like he might have been talking to a sympathetic audience. I was getting tight in the stomach thinking about options. Then Darrel started
laughing. He laughed, a tired laugh, and then he said to Stephanie and then me, “You kids just go back to your business. Wait right here. I got the perfect icebreaker for us.” He walked to the door. Before he left he looked up at me and said, “You don’t go anywhere, boy.”

Stephanie shut the door and sat down next to me. “You’d probably better go,” she said, shaking her head, looking at the dirty carpet.

“Yeah, I guess it’s probably best,” I said. But, I couldn’t find my keys. We looked everywhere: under the couch, all over the living room, the bedroom, the kitchen. In a panic, we searched too quickly, not seeing anything.

“Damn,” I said. “My car.” And, sure enough, my keys hung from the ignition of my locked car out in front of her apartment. One time I lock my car I leave the keys in it. Figures. “I can get it open with a coat-hanger,” I told her. In her bedroom she had just handed me a coat hanger when the same knock at the door came. We both tried not to look scared, but before we could react we heard the door open.

I expected the worst. Darrel’s midget ass wielding a shotgun, a blowtorch, a chainsaw. I blocked Stephanie off to get between her and him and walked into the livingroom. Darrel stood there, smiling, face full of teeth, his hand on the shoulder of a boy who couldn’t have been more than five years old.

“Hey, boy,” he said, looking at me and giving the kid a pat on the head, “Meet DJ. Meet Darrel Junior.” The kid looked tired and confused. I breathed a sigh of anguish. “You get to know your mama’s new friend DJ,” said Darrel, squatting down to his son.
“I’m going to go home and get some sleep.” When Darrel left, Stephanie followed after him, hotly. Never get involved in a boy and girl fight, I though and turned on the TV, popped open another beer, and sat on the couch.

“Follow baseball any, DJ?” I asked, not knowing what else to say to a five year-old kid dropped off in the middle of the night at his mother’s apartment, his mom with another man. I waited on the couch until the 11 o’clock news was over. DJ entertained himself on the linoleum floor under the bright kitchen lights with a couple beat up Hot-Wheels. Goddamn, I used to love Hot-Wheels. I had just gotten up, turned the TV off, and was walking towards the kitchen to talk Hot-Wheels with DJ when his mom popped the door open.

She went directly to her bedroom, and I know she wanted someone to follow her in there, so I went to the kitchen thinking I would get her kid for her. But I sat down with him on the linoleum floor instead. He didn’t look at me.

“What’s a matter kid?” I asked him.

No response.

I got down a little lower on the floor and looked up at him, smiling my friendliest.

“What’s a matter kid? You want your mama?” He smiled a little. “You got some more of those Hot Wheels?” I asked. No more smile. But now he looked at me. “You go in there and give your mama a big hug and I’ll get you as many Hot Wheels as you can handle. Brand new Hot Wheels, classic Hot Wheels, every model ever was. You got that?” He was smiling and looking at me now. “You go in there and give your mother a
hug and tell her you love her, if you can speak, and I’ll get you a Hot Wheels car-lot. A mother-fucking Hot Wheels metropolitan museum.”

When the kid took off I grabbed my beer and the coat hanger off the coffee table and closed the front door behind me.

* * *

On the road I got to thinking. I wasn’t trying to make the kid’s mom happy, although it felt like it at the time. I was trying to make the kid happy. Had he been my kid, I really would have bought him every Hot Wheel in the world.

When I got home it wasn’t that late. Not any later than usual. Michelle was in the living room watching something on TV when I came in.

“You want to have a kid?” I asked. I asked her this like it were something she’d been wanting to hear for a long time. “You want to have a kid right now, tonight?”

Michelle sat up and turned the TV off. She didn’t ask me if I was serious, she wouldn’t give me the chance. She took my shirt off and kissed me like the only thing that would keep her alive was to get her saliva all over my face, to get her tongue down to my cock through my throat. My wife is a good-looking lady. Believe me, though, the way she’s been acting lately would make you forget she’s put together so good. She don’t look too much different than the way she looked back in jr. high, when we first started going out. People thought we were crazy for staying together for so long. But
when we got married, the tune changed considerably. "It's true love!" they said. "Once in a lifetime." I'm not sure why she took me, but I'll tell you this, I couldn't build a better woman out of clay and breathe life into her. No one could. She can be crazy, hits me in the face with the phone book when I'm stoned, passed out on the couch, but it evens out.

That night taught me what it's really about. When a woman gets it in her she's going to have a kid, and you're the man, watch out. Pull the shades down and turn the lights on. You and anyone else is going to want to see that. Whereas I used to come too soon, that night I held on: I'd read that the contractions of the female orgasm aid in conception. They take the flow of the semen in like a hundred oars slapping at the ocean to get the load somewhere quick. I wasn't doing much, just hard as bone and all of me up in her, touching her deep, when she dug her nails into my neck and started bucking like she wanted me off of her. She was staring at me, sex mad, yelling at me to come in her. Sort of scared me.

Outside on the porch where me and Michelle used to drink rum together and cook steaks and get in the pool naked at midnight, I smoked a cigarette and watched the green pool lights fly away on the concrete walls of the apartment complex. I stood there at my fence, looking over with nothing on but a towel wrapped around me. It was a little bit after midnight, and Michelle came out with nothing on, the nipples of her chiseled chest looking up at me, and she said, "Come into bed and let's do it again and go to sleep." She kissed me gently on my forehead to help tow me in. But I sat down, lit another
cigarette and thought about what happened earlier, before I got home. I also thought of Anne's crazy kid, and DJ, and all the other kids I'd seen in the world. If I am going to be a father, I figured, I wouldn't be the worst one in the world.

And I wondered if it weren't true.
Emergency Broadcast Haywire

Beer can between his legs and arm on the cooler riding next to him, Clay passes under the amber light signaling the only intersection down the road to Sam’s place. He goes a couple more miles, then slows down, and his truck shakes electrically when he drives over the cattle guard entrance to Sam’s. Sam’s youngest sits on an overturned bucket next to the gate. He gets up when Clay slows to stop.

“Five bucks, Clay,” says the boy.

“Yeah, I know the story. I’m here to pick someone up and I’m gone,” Clay says.

“Still five bucks.”

“Here,” Clay says and tosses a beer to the kid.

Clay drives around a pack of dogs barking at him and parks his truck at the end of a long row of dirty cars lining the pasture in front of the barn. He pulls out the cooler, stops a second to look up. The moon’s half full, but he couldn’t tell you if it’s coming or going.

In the makeshift ring inside the barn two local boys fight without gloves.

Practically the entire town’s paid five dollars a carload to bring their beer to Sam’s barn, again.

Clay sets his cooler down next to a thick support post. The ring’s against a wall so you look at it from one side—like at the movies. Clay sits on the cooler with his back against the post and his knees up to his chest. Blood flecks the fighter’s clothes—work
boots, jeans, T-shirts. They both have cloth, rags, wrapped around their fists. For three
minutes anyone can fight—for bragging rights, some money on the side, a beer from
everyone in the place. But it’s real work, ducking and throwing punches, and when they
begin to tire the crowd goads them on with flying bottles and cans, beer spinning around
in the lights.

Clay’s already bored. In his peripheral vision he sees a cicada shell nose level
with him, perched on the face of the wooden post he’s sitting against. He pulls it off and
its legs stick to the post. He looks into the split and sees it’s still inside—Fucker could
come screeching out of its shell, for your throat or into one of your ears, but it’s dead like
dirt in there. While staring into it, trying to see where it went wrong, a bottle flies by,
hits the hay under the ring and rolls to Clay’s feet. In one motion he grabs and throws it
the direction it came from—only it nails the guy sitting behind him. The bottle ricochets
off the boy’s face and he falls back into an old lady’s enormous arms. When the boy
scrambles up, he’s got a C shaped slit like someone took a cookie cutter and stamped his
doughy white forehead with it. Blood pours steadily from the gash.

“Clay!” the boy yells, holding up his hands up to his face.

“Goddamn I didn’t mean to!” Clay tells him while a herd of old ladies rush the
boy off. Clay gets the urge to get out, get some fresh air. But outside it smells the same:
smoke and hay and horse shit.
Around the side of the barn, the old timers who won’t pay to get in stand on the other side of a fence drinking Pearl light. June bugs and mosquitoes loom thick in the floodlights. The old men have beef jerky faces, all of them.

“Hey, Clay” says one, “you look like you’ve been shot at, missed, and shit at and hit.” Low, sedimentary laughs settle around them. “You gotta problem you’d like to get off your chest, son?”

“Sure,” Clay says and turns to walk off.

The oldest man lowers his brow and slurs, “You know, son... You don’t have to be Jesus Christ to be wrongly accused and nailed to the fucking cross... But it helps,” and his eyes brighten in a brotherly way. The old-timers nod, laughing, then spit and turn to each other ignoring Clay.

Clay walks the length of the barn, around back.

He’s pulling on his fly and notices an old mongrel by the fence line, his head halfway in a red sack choking down the contents. It’s a bag of fire ant killer and the dog has yellow, maggot-like grains stuck in the saliva all around his jowls. The old mutt doesn’t even notice Clay. Sharp, wooden noises come from the opening in the back of the barn, and Clay leans over to see in as he works his fly. They’re breaking down the ring as Sam fills up the mud pit underneath from a green water hose.

Clay’s staring at the side of the barn, trying to piss, when a girl he once knew, Darla or Dianne, steps out back and sees him. “Let me do that for ya,” she says.

She reaches down and gives Clay a hard squeeze and raises her lips to him. He cranes down to meet her but she pulls back, yanks once on his cock like it's the cord to a Captain's bell and says, "Pee."

Clay starts to dribble and after a second of feeling uncomfortable for each other she says, "Are you gonna drip or you gonna fall?" Clay waters the side of the barn pretty good then.

"So, I thought you were leaving, Clay? You never came by and got your going away present."

Clay has lied so much to every person in town he doesn't know what this means at all.

"You can give it to me now." he says.

"I'd like to give it to you now," she says and leaves him there with his pants loose. Clay sees her tight black jeans don't have back pockets.

Two women who answer phones at the warehouse where Clay works wrestle in the mud pit. Looks like they're having more fun than wrestling. White teeth and eyes stand out in contrast with their dirty faces, even their hair is caked, and their bodies look bright with mud. There is laughter, cheering, loud conversation. Clay walks around inside the barn where the pens have been converted into party rooms with picnic tables. The walls are covered with photographs and graffiti. Written in blue-ink beside a Polaroid of a fishing boat named Child Support it says: You must change your life! But
the L has been changed to a W, so it reads, You must change your wife! and Clay decides to do so, though he has no wife.

After intruding on a few separate parties, Clay stands behind the chairs overlooking the mud pit when Debby or Darla—Clay’s still not sure—finds him.

“Why don’t we meet out back,” she says.

“Unfinished business?” Clay asks.

She flashes Clay an encouraging grin and says, “Let me talk to some people so they won’t be lookin’ and I’ll meet you out back.” She kisses his neck and punctuates it with a bite.

Clay fetches his cooler and carries it behind the barn. He dusts the ice off a beer and punctures the bottom of the can with a key off his chain. Pops the top and sucks the life out of that beer in one breath. Belches up a mouthful of foam, spits, and repeats the process. He’s at an angle, belching shortly, swallowing foam, when the girl he thinks name is Darla comes out and stands before him, legs wide, cradling her arms. Then three heavily tattooed men, all wearing horned rimmed glasses, Polo shirts tucked into blue jeans, and combat boots, walk out behind her.

She steps laterally, like she’s presenting them.

All three strike simultaneously and Clay hits the ground retching, releasing the cold beer. A boot slaps his temple and everything turns blue. Clay tries to look around but he’s out; for a moment he’s happily drunk at a Bar-B-Q in another county, but this is just in his mind. He’s passed out in the dirt getting kicked in his smiling face.
He regains consciousness just in time to see Darla—that’s definitely her name—gloating over him. She says something in slow motion but all Clay hears is ringing, more like droning—THIS IS THE EMERGENCY BROADCAST SYSTEM gone haywire. Then she wipes some cowshit off her boot on his ear and balances on his head with one foot. Clay just lies there. Not because he’s afraid of the unholy Buddy Holly Trinity, but because it’s all he can do… feel the free and easy joy you get after being whipped, knowing it’s all over, nothing to do. When Clay opens his eyes they’re gone. He pulls himself up onto the cooler, shakes his head, and laughs at what he sees. Before him is the old mongrel, still wolfing down fire ant killer, only a little slower, more deliberately.

Clay can’t decide if he wants another beer.

Then, the dog turns his head to Clay, licks some of the poison out of his teeth, and says, “I the Lord cannot change,” in a voice a lot like Clay’s. Clay smiles. And when the dog goes back to work on the fire ant killer, Clay decides to join him and flips open his cooler. It is clear out. Clay finds the Milky Way, the backbone of somebody else’s world, and it feels like he could just get up and go anywhere—tonight, tomorrow night, or maybe the next.
Employee of the Month

Your truck died halfway between Oakridge and Astroworld, and when you turned her over again the gears in the starter spun faster and at a higher pitch: broken timing chain. The tow-truck guy placed her under the largest tree so you can pull the engine out yourself using a limb and a come-along. It’s close enough to the trailer to run a few extension cords out there for the timing light.

The tow-truck guy, you learned, has two businesses. Tow-truck and Locksmith. Same truck for each. You asked a few questions on the way home, and now, standing outside the truck together, you pay him, and he hands you an envelope containing information on a locksmithing correspondence class. You thank him and fold it away. The sun is going down and insects razz you from the trees. Pink clouds reflect off the top of the aluminum trailer giving it the appearance of a neglected, neon-framed diner. And there’s a car out front you don’t recognize.

The trailer door is locked. You try the key, but it’s locked from the inside. After you knock, no answer. The brochure in your back pocket comes to mind. As you stand on a cinderblock looking through a window, the door rattles and opens.

“What you doing home?” Carissa says.

“Truck broke down. Need to use yours to go to HI-Lo and get some things. Company?”

“Friend from work’s here. We’re going out. But we’re having a few drinks first.”
Inside, candlelight ripples on the corkboard walls and a plastic bottle of whiskey and a two-liter bottle of diet Coke stand on the coffee table.

Her friend shakes your hand and you realize she and Carissa are dressed alike: tight evening dresses in hypnotic prints. Carissa has some lipstick smeared on her teeth but you keep quiet. You drink one with them before you head to Hi-Lo. You work late until all's left is to adjust the timing with the gun. They aren't back yet, so you fix yourself a drink you don't finish and fall asleep on the bed with your clothes on. You wake up thirsty. In the living room Carissa and her friend are naked, their pale skin whiter in the dull light, and they're locked together in a way you're not sure who's who. Wow! This is something you've always wanted to see. Always said you and your girl should have similar interests. Right on. But it's not like that. It's bumming you out. You go back to finish working on the truck. While the timing gun flicks a green laser strobe, this word sticks in your head: complacency.

You take the truck for a test drive and it goes so well you keep going. You're way out in southwest Houston and it's starting to get hot. Your folks got property with a warehouse on it where they plan to open an antique store when the place gets filled up with enough junk. It takes a minute to find the right keys to the gate and then to the door of the warehouse. Everything seems cracked with weeds spilling out—the cement drive, the wood fence, the base of the tin warehouse itself. Inside you use the old toilet. Good
pressure. You walk into the large warehouse and look around. Boxes everywhere and a canoe hanging from the ceiling. Back in the office you lay on the couch, empty your pockets on the floor beside you and read the envelope. You read this part twice: “I am a Locksmith. But I also must be part psychologist. Often, when you call me, you have had some sort of trouble. Security is not often on your mind until you have had a problem. It is not easy to deal with people when they are upset. I can make you feel better. I have been trained to secure and protect your home, your business, your property... and yes, even your life. I know that many hardware stores sell locks cheaper than I can. I know that in some towns police will open your locked car at no charge. But I will be there for you when the cheap imported lock breaks. And I will be there for you when the police damage your car with their “free” service. I am a Locksmith. I take my profession very seriously. I can open doors others can’t, and give you assurance that is real and made in America.” Wow! That gets you thinking. But at the end of the letter it says it costs two hundred dollars to become a licensed Locksmith.

After a short nap you drive to Astroworld. In the employee locker room you change into uniform: bright yellow polo shirt with matching shorts, a change-smock that is two different shades of pink, a neon blue back brace, and white Reeboks. Reeboks, Jesus! Only an avowed homosexual or an independent taco-vendor would willingly wear that get-up. Plus, they make you buy it. And rent a locker and pay a laundry fee. The park itself should have been named “Assholeworld” or “Afroworld.” Between the
tourists, the dopey suburban kids, and the legions of surly urbanites--plus the uniform—it all gets profoundly depressing. You’re in the arcade at the Alpine Village, haven’t even gotten to “Paradise City” on the jukebox, on your third ball of Funhouse pinball, when the station manager taps your shoulder.

“Acton. You’re wanted down in administration,” says the fat white teenager, your superior.

“What’s the problem?”

“You.”

You haven’t been in the administration building since they hired you.

When you get there you’re immediately led to an office past a row of seated people. Potential employees. What they don’t know, you think.

You’re asked to sit in an office with a sweaty guy in a suit who looks like he has no eyebrows. He keeps dabbing his eyes with a handkerchief.

“Acton Svatek?”

“Yeah.”

“Have any idea why you were called here?”

“Employee of the Month?”

“We believe you’re stealing from Six Flags, Inc.”

“Bullshit. What’d I steal?”

“You tell us.”

“Tell you? OK. I’ll tell you.” Pause. “This place should be called Assholeworld.”
The sweaty guy’s mouth opens, gawking at you, but his eyes are smiling.

“Don’t even imagine yourself applying for a job at Six Flags Incorporated again!” he says as you walk out. “Don’t even dream about it!”

Back in the locker room you remember your moneybag and decide to turn accusations into truth. Make everything right. You take the bills, leave the change in the bag, and throw it and the Astroworld clothes into the trash. You walk out of the park one last time, smiling at the black kids spitting at you from a gondola slowly rising over your head.

You haven’t visited the Alabama Icehouse in months. Outside, two dogs pull on the pantlegs of a Mexican on his back, mellow smile on his face, sobbing “Aaaaiii!” Welcome back. You round the place hoping not to see Jaron but he’s right where you left him— in a horseshoe game, off to the side of the icehouse. You get a Busch tall-boy wrapped in a white napkin and watch, standing, amongst a crowd of bleach blonde biker women eating hotdogs by the grill. He throws a perfect single flip that rings off the metal stake. The sound, the ping in the air, is consistent, signaling everyone’s attention. After he wins, the barmaid, a gal you and Jaron used to talk nasty about, brings him a beer.

“Talk to you later,” he says and pats her on the ass. “Action Svatek, where you been?” Something’s different about him.

“Damn, Jaron. What you sticking yer chest all out for?”

“How ‘bout a game of horseshoes,” he says to you.
At the horseshoe pit, Jaron’s killing you, something that’s never happened.
You’re doing OK, but Jaron’s hitting the stake like ringing a service bell. About halfway through he says to you, under his breath, “Wanna get a good game going, then dump this one. Lose big.” He nods over his shoulder indicating an older man, his right sleeve hanging loose, armless, and what looks like a Mexican dwarf. The sight persuades you into doing as you’re told, and after you dump the game the one-arm man walks to Jaron and drawls, “Jay, how about a little doubles?”
Jaron says, “Sure, twenty bucks a head?”

“Why not twenty-five,” says the Mexican and you’re in a hundred dollar horseshoe game before you’ve finished your first beer.

You pair up with the dwarf and trade off a point or two every round. But when your partners throw, it’s something else, it starts to draw a crowd. They’re covering each other up, ringer on top of ringer—no points. The score gets down to the last throw—one-point lead in their favor, and the toss is on Jaron and the one-armed man. You don’t want them to cover each other up and put it back on you, because the midget’s hot right now and your arm is killing you.

“Hey Lefty,” you yell, “Why don’t we double it?”

The crowd gathered is watching the game like it’s a baby about to blow up on real-life TV. The one arm man smiles and throws another ringer. Guess that means yes. Jaron throws another perfect one-flip pitch and it strikes the pin like a hammer and covers up the previous throw. Then, hope against hope, the old man chokes, pulls it short. Jaron
nails another ringer and you win by two points. The crowd disperses while the Mexican pays you.

“Keep it,” Jaron says as you hand him his share, “last time we played you beat me so bad I almost beat the shit out of you. But, I decided instead to be a better horseshoe player. Thanks.”

You remember the barmaid and Jaron’s new posture.

Jaron doesn’t even look that ugly anymore. Doing something and doing it well, you think, has cleared up Jaron’s acne. You walk to the bar to get another beer but you keep walking until you get to your parked truck. It’s gotten dark and the streetlights barely filter through the trees making the road look like a tunnel. And someone is coming. Fast. You crane your head over and squint your eyes. There’s a gang of people coming, looks like they’re running at you. Then a tall, bald-headed man wearing a purple-sequined dress zips past you on white roller skates. And then another. Different colored dress, but they’re going for the same effect, you can tell. Down the street homosexuals in dresses skate from curb to curb. You’re in the thick of them, and you see a black stretch limousine approaching, surrounded by skaters. It drives by with two women on top sitting through a sunroof, dressed like they’re getting married. One is the bride in white. The other has her hair slicked back, a thin painted on mustache, and wears a tuxedo. They wave at you, and you wave back and yell “Congratulations!” One of the slower guys bringing up the rear skates up to you. His mascara is running and he’s too big for the strapless number he’s picked out for the night. He takes your hand, clears
his throat and says, “Wisdom calls aloud in the streets. How long will you simple ones love your simple ways? Tremble, you complacent women! For the waywardness of the simple can kill and the complacency of fools will destroy you!” He looks at you and skates off to catch up with the others.

You think about driving back to Carissa’s but go to your parents’ warehouse instead. You sit on the couch and reread the brochure. *I am a locksmith*... Between the money you won and stole you’ve got exactly two hundred dollars. You turn off the light and lie down on the couch, but you can’t sleep because you’re mind is crowded with the company of locked doors all trying to get your attention.
Signs For Sale and Free

It was a week before the Fourth of July and fireworks could be heard at all times of the day throughout Jerry’s subdivision, Meadowcreek.

Jerry Gipson stood in his driveway holding drink in a tall plastic cup and shooting one-handed baskets at the basketball goal hung over the garage. Jeanna, his wife, was out getting groceries, running errands, and his son, William, had just left on his bike to his weekly karate lesson.

That morning Jerry found another dead cat. It was stiff, with its tongue sticking out and its eyes wide open. Jerry suspected the next-door neighbor’s kid had put out some anti-freeze in a bowl somewhere. Even though Jerry was fiercely allergic, Jeanna brought home stray cats like they ran a feline soup kitchen. Some stayed and some went. He put the cat in the trash and didn’t tell Jeanna. There were many more: Egg, Mama Littlefoot, Broken Ear, Tom-Jack, Lowell-Berry, Scout, Smokey—Some without names, some with names he did not know—the list was long. Jerry’s principal worries were becoming a long list, also. First of all, Jerry was let go as property manager for the Marathon oil building downtown. He made more money in one year there than in five as a teacher. But he was laid off in September and couldn’t get a job teaching until the next school year. He had been substituting. Babysitting, as he called it. Jeanna couldn’t quit her job as a special
education teacher as planned. She had one kid that could die at any moment. The kid would literally die in her classroom and she would have to administer the medication and revive him. This had happened twice. Stressful. The neighborhood they had moved into was going to shit. Everyone they had known the past six years they lived there had moved away. The house across the street was empty and the lawn looked like it had been shelled. The man that moved in next door, Heath Cox, was suspected of dealing drugs and was trying to run a used car lot out on his front lawn. He felt guilty just by living next door. There were two cars, parked on the lawn, with FOR SALE written on the windshields in shoe polish. His wife, Madison, worked at a message parlor, and Greg, their son, was being “home-schooled.” Apparently home schooling meant tossing cigarette butts over the fence into his yard and killing neighborhood cats.

Last week William came home from his karate lesson wanting to quit. He had been paired up with a twenty-something lady in a sparring match and she kicked his son in the balls. The karate lessons were meant to teach William how to fight for himself, something he wouldn’t do at school, and subsequently got viciously teased by his peers at school. His son was turning inward, not talking, not laughing, and becoming morose at age eleven. So he made him go back to the karate instructor, determined to give his son at least one tool to help give him some confidence. William had looked up to the karate instructor, talked highly of him, and never thought of missing a lesson. Until the college girl dropped him with a front kick to the groin. He bought William a cup, told him to box
her in the tits next time, and waited in the front yard until he had ridden his bike out of
sight. The Century 21 sign declaring the house for sale in the front yard was another
thing. It had been there over half a year. He thought the whole family could use a fresh
start.

Jerry made another drink. There was very little ice left. Back on the driveway
shooting one-handed baskets, loud music started up from the neighbor’s backyard. Jerry
walked over with his drink and hoped that he might see Madison through a knothole in
the wooden fence. He had seen her many times before: swimming in the pool naked,
watering the hibiscus with nothing but her shoes on, sunbathing naked, but when he
peeked through it was Heath with his hair freshly dyed blonde, wearing a white Speedo,
alternately trying to sing to the music and shouting at his dog, a large, brown Chow. I
wish I had a lawn dart to lob over there, Jerry, thought. Or a hand grenade. Heath was
obviously stoned off something and he was taunting the dog with a stick and yelling “Bad
Company! Bad Company!” and “Fuck you, Bitch!” after which he would laugh loudly to
himself. The large Chow was barking and rearing up on its hind legs, even after Heath
went back inside. Jerry finished his drink and went back to make another one. No ice. In
the bar in the house he kept a 10-gauge single shot goose gun. He made a warm drink and
put a shell in his pocket and carried the gun out into the back yard. He set his drink on a
post of the fence and peeked through the knothole. The dog sensed him and came up to
the fence and started growling. No sight of Heath. He popped the shell into the chamber
and closed the breach of the old shotgun and looked back through the hole: Dog still
growling, loud music still coming out of hidden speakers. Jerry aimed the shotgun straight up and peeked through the knothole again.

"Here boy, you blue-tongued baby eater," Jerry whispered. Then he aimed up into the sky and squeezed the trigger. The report was so loud it made his eyes water. He looked back through the knothole and the dog was running into a doghouse on the other side of their lawn. Then it started raining next door. It sounded more like hail. A short, concentrated hailstorm rattled against the Cox's roof. It was the goose shot. Jerry smiled. Heath poked his head out of the back door to the garage.

"Whoops! Hey! Sorry, neighbor!" Jerry said, his head barely looking over the fence.

Heath walked out to the pool and looked suspiciously at the head peeking over the fence. "What the fuck was that?"

"Old goose gun. Just getting ready for the Fourth."

Heath wiped his nose and then his son came out wearing jeans that looked ten sizes too big and a baseball cap pulled down over his eyes, "What the fuck was that?" he said to his father.

"You watch your language! The neighbor just fired off an old shotgun. Go back inside and play your video games. You're still grounded." The kid went back inside reluctantly. Heath wiped his nose again and sniffed deeply, then said, "You better save that shit for the Fourth, I don't want any cops coming around here asking about shotgun blasts."
Jerry said, "Fair enough," and reached for his drink. "Say, you don’t have any ice, do you?"

Heath looked startled. This was the first time his neighbors had asked anything neighborly since Jeanna asked if they could keep their son from mowing into their lawn and cutting down the young pine trees she had put up as an indicator of the division between their two front yards.

"Sure," Heath said, adjusting the front of his Speedo, eyes darting around, "Come around back."

Jerry walked out his backyard gate and met Heath at his. "Sit next to the pool and I’ll get a bucket." Heath said, his movements hurried, as if he didn’t want to lose an opportunity.

As quick as he left, Heath came back with a bucket of ice, a bottle, and a glass of his own.

The Chow came over and growled at Jerry, and Heath quickly grabbed it by its collar and dragged it to the door and put it in the garage.

"That dog was Madison’s idea," Heath said.

"How’s she doing?" Jerry asked.

Heath looked around, sniffed a few times and wiped his nose. "You know, Jerry," he began, "I’ve always envied you," he said. Jerry’s eyes widened. Heath had only lived next door less than a year, and they had never sat down and talked together. "Nice family, nice house, nice job. Until you got shit-canned that is. That’s all I ever wanted. Right now
I'm living the dream.” He held his glass up to Jerry. Jerry touched his glass to Heath’s and they drank. “The dream might not be firing on all cylinders right now, but I know, in the long run, as long as I have my family and a house over my head…” he didn’t finish his sentence. Jerry tried not to look right at Heath because his eyes darted so quickly from one thing to another.

Jerry said, “Thanks for the ice. I have to pick up my son.” He lied.

“Anytime. Maybe your boy can come by. My son’s grounded right now and he’s driving me a little crazy.” Heath’s boy, Greg, was exactly the opposite of William. In fact, he was the kind of boy who was teasing William at school. Greg had so many problems at the Jr. High he was recommended for home schooling. He already had hair on his face. He had a roach clip and a bottle opener on his house key. This was what he wanted to protect his son from. William made good grades and still let his mother dress him.

“Sure,” Jerry said. “I’ll send him over sometime.” He lied again. But Heath was so pleased at the possibility that his son might make a new good friend that he let Jerry leave with a pleasant smile and a wave. It was the first time Heath looked directly at Jerry, and his gaze was steady and serene.

In his back yard Jerry finished his drink and retrieved the shotgun leaning against the fence. Now, more than ever, he regretted buying the house he lived in.
In the kitchen, standing in front of the opened refrigerator, letting all of the cold air out, was William, home early. Jerry put the shotgun back in the bar and made another drink with no ice. Will was still standing in front of the fridge when he returned.

“Will. What are you doing home so early?” his father asked.

“The karate instructor,” he said, ducking into the fridge to grab a lime-soda, “Is not giving anymore lessons.”

Jerry stood there and looked at his boy, still in his all-white karate uniform. His yellow belt had a little green stripe at each end. “Explain to me what you mean, Will,” Jerry said.

William explained that his karate instructor, Barry, stopped the day’s lesson short and announced that he was leaving town, that he wasn’t coming back, and that the days lesson would be the last.

“That’s it? What else?” Jerry asked. But Will shook his head and shrugged, trying to look let down. Jerry thought he might be lying.

“Let’s go,” Jerry said and grabbed his keys off a counter top. “Get in the car.”

The karate instructor had set up shop in a strip center right across from their subdivision and they caught the karate instructor, in his street clothes, locking the door as they drove up. Jerry rolled down the electric window on the Suburban and called out to him.

“Hey, buddy—Got a minute?” Jerry asked.
The karate instructor looked a little dodgy, like a stray cat caught in the garage, and he said, “Nope. Sorry. Got somewhere to be.”

Jerry got out of the suburban quickly and walked up to him. The karate instructor was a short man, wiry, with a bad haircut. Short in front and long in the back. Back in college Jerry and his friends called this a ‘Kentucky Waterfall.’ Jerry walked up to him closely, to emphasize his height advantage.

“I think you got a little more explaining to do,” said Jerry. “Why you’re closing up shop here. You said you’d teach my boy to be a black belt and to give him confidence to stand up for himself.” Jerry looked back at the suburban to where his son sat in the passenger’s seat and then back to karate instructor. “And that hasn’t happened, yet. So, if you’re quitting on us, I want to know why.”

The short man’s sheepishness turned quickly to anger. “That’s none of your business.”

Jerry backed up and made a mock smile. “None of my business? I’ve been paying you fifty bucks a week for over six months now. You made Will buy a karate suit and gloves, gloves for his feet even, and those were expensive. You even made us buy a thirty-dollar karate book that’s in Korean. Sounds like it is my business, buddy.”

The karate instructor’s demeanor turned again from anger to resignation. “Come on in then, but let’s make this quick. I’ve got to go,” he said and unlocked the door.

Jerry turned the ignition off in the Suburban and locked it and told Will to come with him.
A little bell above the door chimed as Jerry entered with his son. Inside the lights were all off and there are a dozen or so boxes stacked next to the doorway.

“I’ve got to leave today, and I’m not coming back,” the karate instructor said.

“That I know, but why,” Jerry said.

The karate instructor looked at Will and back to his father and said, “Why don’t you come in my office.”

“No, damnit. Whatever you have to say you can say to me and my son here. Tell your punctual and loyal student and his benefactor why is it you’re shutting down and leaving like a crook.”

“Watch what you say, mister,” the karate instructor said.

Jerry was more than a little drunk, but the thought of someone just picking up and leaving, with no good reason, really pissed him off. He wanted to find out. Plus, the guy was a midget with a haircut like a lady softball player.

“You’re not leaving until I get an explanation.”

“I leave whenever I want.”

“Dad,” Will said to his father, sensing a bad situation.

“Come on, mister karate instructor, just between us. Come clean.”

The karate instructor looked again at the boy and let out a big sigh, then looked up at the ceiling. “I’m leaving with my girlfriend.”

“Why.”

“Because she’s married.”
There was a pause in the discussion.

"Go stand outside," Jerry finally said to his son.

"We love each other and I’m leaving with her because when her husband finds out... He’s pretty unstable."

Jerry imagined it: The karate instructor on top of his wife, or on top of Madison Cox, or both on him. Jerry clenched his fists and stepped to the karate instructor but before he could throw a punch the instructor open handed him in the stomach and then took him down with a leg sweep and pressed him to the floor by the neck using one of his feet. The bell at the door chimed again and a lady was standing in the doorway wearing tight jeans and lifting her sunglasses to get a better view.

"Sandy," the karate instructor said and let Jerry up and went over and gave her a gentle kiss. Jerry started vomiting on the dark red carpet. He turned his head away from his son and expelled all of the warm alcohol in two long retches.

The karate instructor rearranged the boxes next to the door until he found the one he was looking for while Jerry wiped his mouth on his shirt; he handed it to her and told her he’d meet her at the car. Then he fished some keys out of his pocket and worked one off of the ring and handed it to Will, who was standing next to a punching bag by the front window. He squatted down next to Will and told him something Jerry couldn’t hear, then he shook his head at Jerry sympathetically and walked out.
Jerry felt like running after the guy and hitting him from behind. He felt like suing him, having him put in jail for assault. His throat throbbed and his chest hurt, but, most importantly, he felt his face flush with pure embarrassment. He remembered how a flush face often was the signal that his own father was going to launch into a horrible, insane rage. He took a few breaths.

"Are you OK?" Will asked his father still on the floor.

Jerry got up. He breathed out again. "Sure," he said. "What did the guy tell you?"

"I'd understand."

Jerry laughed, got up and straightened his clothes. "What?" he asked.

"That's what he said. He said. 'When you get older, I'm sure you will understand.' Then he told me to lock up." Will looked at the boxes. "Said I could have whatever I want."

Jerry opened a few boxes. They mostly contained trophies and karate equipment. He pulled out a large trophy that had a person doing a sidekick on top of it. It was engraved *AKA Full Contact—Men's Division 1978 1st Place San Diego*. Jerry felt like he deserved something. He took it with them.

Jerry patted his stomach. "He was a good karate instructor," he told his son, who didn’t seem to notice.

Outside, Will locked the door and dropped the key into the mail slot.

Jerry said, "I need to get some ice," and they walked to the Gerland's next to the now abandoned Karate part of the strip mall. Jerry paid for the ice and outside, next to the
large ice locker was a lady in a folding chair next to a cardboard box labeled FREE KITTENS. Inside there are five different colored kittens, making noise and looking up like hungry birds. He handed the ice and the karate trophy to his son and they talked to the lady for a moment. Jerry left carrying the box.

The ride home nothing was said. Jerry parked the Suburban in his driveway but left it there, running.

Will, still sitting in the passenger seat, holding the trophy, made a noise like he wanted to speak, but stopped. “What is it son?” Jerry said. The kittens were in the back still making noise.

“That lady. The lady that ran off with my karate instructor—she was my teacher. In second grade.”

Jerry stifled a sneeze. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah, my math teacher. Mrs. Hoffgarten.”

The boy was silent, thinking. “Want to shoot some baskets?” Jerry asked.

“Sure,” Will said.

“Take the ice inside and get changed. Oh, and make me a drink.” Jerry looked at his boy. “You know how to make a drink?” The boy shook his head.

“Take a glass and fill it with ice. Then get the bottle of vodka and pour it into the glass until it’s halfway full. No less. Maybe a little more. Then top it off with the yellow bottle labeled Tonic Water. You got that?” Will looked at his father a little excitedly; in a
way he hadn’t seen him look in a long time. “Meet me out here,” Jerry said and Will got out of the car and ran to the house, a bag of ice in one hand and the trophy in the other.

The car was still running. He sat back and adjusted the air conditioner and thought. The house would sell. It was a gorgeous house and he had paid a lot of money for it. He’d take a loss, but it would sell. He already had a job teaching as soon as August came around. And he wondered if what his son had seen that day wouldn’t be a good thing. He thought back to when he was eleven. Every boy should know that their father could get their ass kicked, their teachers could be unfaithful, and their idols could get up and quit on them at any time. He sneezed three times in a row and thought about the new kittens and his wife.

A car drove into the driveway behind the Suburban. It was Jeanna.

He got out and met her at her car door and gave her a hug and a kiss. She looked at him funny. Then he told her to go look in the back of the Suburban. Will came out and gave him his drink. It was way too weak, and Jerry smiled and told him it was perfect. Then he told him to go next door and get the Cox boy, Greg, and see if he wanted to shoot around, too. His wife was totally absorbed with the kittens in the box. He unloaded all of the groceries by himself.
Songs I Used To Listen To

The summer after high school I had a job I liked and a girlfriend I loved. My folks wanted me to go to college, but I didn’t see what the use was. I lived with my parents and worked at a really good independent rock-n-roll record store, back when really good independent record stores weren’t as rare as they are now. My boss, Chuck Roast, played in a variety of noise and experimental, avant-garde bands. At Christmas time we’d put up Satanta Claus with his horns and jolly beard in the front window giving the satanic salute and mark down all the heavy metal 30%. The caption over his head cut from red and green colored poster paper read, HAVE A HELL OF A CHRISTMAS!!! It was that kind of store. The employees were always invited to his parties, where we’d get to smoke his dope, do nitrous out of a crystal whipped cream dispenser and bang on the guts of a piano standing upright in the living room—the entire back wall of which was papered with a huge baby fetus in full glossy color. Like a giant photograph. The money I had saved to go to college I could use to get started, put down on some deposits, and I could get my own place and work at the record store all my life. The other thing I was sure about was Lorraine, my girlfriend, my high-school sweetheart. She was going to go to North Houston community college, commonly referred to as North Houston High, which was real close to Vinyl Solution records where I worked. I wanted to ask her to marry me. Lorraine loved the ocean. Maps of the world and oceanic charts lined her bedroom. She even enjoyed fishing, which was great, because I liked to fish, too. My grandfather had a
beach-house where I’d spent many summers catching hard-head and gafftop-sail catfish off the dock. He had an old shrimpboat he kept suspended in the air on padded cables in the dry-dock underneath the second story of the beach-house. The beach-house was on a canal off of east Galveston Bay, and the water went right up under the house, like a watery driveway into a ship’s garage. Inside the dry-dock the water was black, and sharp barnacles and oyster shells encrusted around the pilings and the thin cement catwalk border. Silverfish--sea-bugs--scurried everywhere with any new movement. We used to eat shrimp and blue crabs we’d caught out in the bay in the long green nets of the boat. Inside the beach-house trophy fish, pictures of sailors and seaports painted by friends, and beer signs lined the walls. The chandelier was made from an old boat wheel. There was a huge deck out front that overlooked the canal and the other beach-houses that lined the other side, every house up on huge wooden pilings, but some three-story or four, all painted different gaudy colors and decorated uniquely. It, I thought, would be the perfect place to ask Loraine to marry me.

I asked my father if he would mind me going up to the beach-house one weekend at the end of the summer. The Grandparents actually lived in Vidor and it would be good to have someone go down there and look after the place, I reasoned. He told me that he was sorry, but I shouldn’t go down there because the Grandparents were in the process of selling the place! I was heartbroken! Selling the place? How long have they been trying to sell the place, I asked.

“Oh, not long,” my father said.
Although it was only late June, I decided to get Lorraine down there soon, that weekend in fact, to ask her to marry me at the beach-house, before it was no longer available. I told my folks me and some friends were going on a camping trip up in Austin next Saturday, and Lorraine told her folks the same thing. We had actually gone on a camping trip to Ink’s Lake outside of Austin as soon as school had let out, so this was a pretty good lie. When Saturday morning came, I got up bright and early and met Lorraine at a 24-hour supermarket we were familiar with, and I parked my car there and we took her old Volvo to the beach because she had a tape player that worked. I didn’t have a ring or anything, I was just going to casually ask her if she wanted to get married. If she could imagine spending the rest of her life with me and having kids and drinking beer and fishing and listening to rock-n-roll and, Would you marry me? We crossed over the Galveston Island Bridge around ten o’clock in the morning and there wasn’t a cloud in the sky. We had our windows rolled down and the salty air smelled laced with the odor of shrimp and gasoline. The beach-house was on the Bolivar Peninsula, not on the island itself, so we had to take a ferry once we got to the end of the island. We smoked half a joint waiting in line to get on the ferry, but the wait wasn’t too long. Once aboard, we got out of the car and Lorraine looked over the side of the boat with me behind her, my arms wrapped around her holding her hands in front of her. The water was gray and choppy, not particularly beautiful, but the sunlight and the occasional school of porpoise rising, racing along side of us intensified the moment. We both loved the ocean and couldn’t wait to be around it, in it forever. An abandoned lighthouse marked the road to the beach-
house. It once might have been black, but was now turning a rust colored brown. When we turned down the road I had one of those moments where your heart sinks into your stomach. I thought about a cartoon where Yosemite Sam jumps out of a plane, but when he goes to pull his 'chute, out comes a bunch of camping gear: pots, pans, long underwear.

At my Grandparent’s beach-house we were pleasantly surprised. Nothing had been changed. The garage was full of fishing equipment. The workbench was still a mess, the icebox had bait and filets in it, and the old fridge in garage was full of Black Label beer! We cheered! I found the extra key in a coffee can on the workbench and we went upstairs. Again, nothing had changed. The walls were still covered with paintings of sailors and mounted trophy fish. The bed in the guestroom was made, but the bed in the main bedroom was not. The dishes were all done, but a couple of watery drink glasses were left out. I checked the cabinet. Vodka and Canadian whiskey, half full. I made us a couple of vodka colas (I didn’t know any better) and we sat out on the front deck.

“This is great,” said Lorraine. She had her hair up and was wearing these Jackie O style oversized sunglasses.

“The beach only a quarter mile away. You want to do some fishing on the beach?” I asked.

She brightened up, sat up a little bit and turned to me. “Yes! Hell, yes!” she said.

“Let’s finish these and I’ll get a couple of surfcasting rods and some bait out of the garage while you fill a cooler up with beer.”
“It’s a deal,” she said.

We packed her car with the cooler and the reels and made the short trip to Crystal Beach. When we drove onto the beach Lorraine said, “Where the hell is everyone?”

“That’s what’s so great about having a beach house on Bolivar Peninsula, no-one comes to the beaches here. Everyone’s on the Island.” And it’s true. We only saw one other car parked on the beach and it was in the middle of summer, on a Saturday. She left the doors to the Volvo open so we could hear the tape deck, and she laid out a blanket for us to lie on as I put some frozen squid on my hook. I went out into the surf about ten feet, getting my ankles wet and cast the large oval weight and huge hook with the squid on it out past the breakers. Surf casting rods are long rods, designed to cast far, and with a large sinker you can cast over 50 yards easily. I walked the rod back before setting the line and the drag and rested the pole in one of the two pieces of PVC pipe I’d driven into the sand for rod holders. I cracked open a beer and sat down on the blanket. Lorraine was wearing the bikini I had bought her for Christmas. But she was only wearing the top part. It was a string bikini of the Texas flag made out of slick material. The bottom part of the Texas bikini she wouldn’t wear she said, because it went up her ass too much. So she had on a black bikini bottom from another suit. I let her bait her own hook, because the first time I baited her hook she got pissed off. “You don’t think I can do that?” she said, “You’re supposed to hook a live shrimp under the horn anyways, you dumb ass.” I wasn’t too upset. I calmly told her that if you hook it through the tail, it’ll live longer the action you’ll get is more realistic. “I never heard of that,” she said, like I had made it up.
She walked out to the surf and made a long, long cast. When she came back and sat down next to me a Dead Boys song we both liked blared out the doors of her car. I tossed her a beer. She caught it and opened the can aiming it towards me and the spray coated the palms of my outstretched hands and the side of my face. I gave her a kiss. She kissed me back and the beer had made her tongue cold. Her cold tongue, the weak, salty breeze, the warmth of the sun—It reminds me of how some songs you never get tired of, you could listen to them twenty times in a row every day of your life. We got burned under the sun making out for so long.

“We forgot to get sunblock,” she said, our noses just about touching.

I stood up and stretched. “Probably some back at the beach-house. Check the bait on our lines, and I’ll walk back and get some sunblock.”

“Don’t get lost,” she told me.

I was humming the Kink’s “Victoria Station” when I saw the car I didn’t recognize parked in the driveway to my Grandparent’s beach-house. I was surprised, and a little pissed off. Who the hell could it be? I kept walking, walked past the car to the driveway of the next-door neighbors, the Svabodas, old friends of the family, and I hid behind a deck chair on the concrete slab of the shaded first floor porch. A man walked down the steps of my grandparents’ beach house with a small girl. The girl was acting strange, like the cross between a dog and a monkey. She got around like a monkey, using her hands while she hopped around, but she barked like a dog. I knew who it was! My cousin Sarah had a child three years ago with her first husband; a black guy that liked to
dress like a cowboy named Ray. The kid was beautiful. Never saw such a beautiful girl. But after a while it became apparent something was wrong with the kid. By the time she was three years old she still couldn’t walk and still didn’t utter a word. She walked around like a monkey and whenever she tried to communicate it came out like the yelps of a dog. Ray left Sarah for another woman he knew from work. He refused to pay his child support. Told her he never wanted to see her or the kid again. I was thinking about how great it was that Sarah had another boyfriend to look after her and Kylie. Kylie, I thought (My name is Kyle). I thought back to when we were young how Sarah and me used to sneak off together and fool around all the time. Whenever I saw her lately, she was always too kind and politely Texan to me in the extreme. She even told me Lorraine was beautiful, and that I had done very good for myself. I hoped right then that she had done good for herself, too, when the guy opened the side door to the dry dock. He called Kylie over there and made a gesture for her to look in. Showing her the boat I figured. Cute. When Kylie looked in, the guy, and I couldn’t tell if he did it on purpose or not, bumped her through the door with his hip. I knew directly through the door was not solid ground, but a ladder that dropped close to ten feet down into about five feet of dark salty water. I stood up and then crouched back down when the guy closed the door and lit a cigarette. Jesus, what the hell was happening, I thought. I stood up again, I was just about to run over to help the kid, when Sarah walked out onto the deck and then down the stairs to the guy smoking the cigarette. They exchanged a few words and I crouched back down. Then they hugged and walked upstairs together. After the sliding door closed
behind them, I ran across the grass lawn between the two beach houses and onto the concrete foundation and up to the door leading into the dry-dock. I opened the door and looked down into the dark water. Kylie was submerged facedown, making short circles in the current of the agitated water. I climbed down the ladder quietly and stood on the thin concrete border. Silverfish ran like cockroaches in a kitchen caught by the light after midnight. I slowly got into the warm water and noticed a huge, throbbing jellyfish between Kylie and me. The water level was lower than normal. It came up to my chest. I waded around the white, brain-like jellyfish, held my breath and scooped Kylie into my arms. At the surface I wiped the water from my eyes and rolled her over. Her brown eyes were open. She was dead. I felt relieved. I’m not saying I thought what had happened was right. No, sir. But at that moment I wanted to believe Kylie was somewhere better, you know? I didn’t want to make any noise that would draw attention to me, so instead of going back up the way we’d came in, I swam out, staying close to the concrete border of the canal. I swam in the direction of the beach. I’d swum under one dock, so I knew I was far enough away to get out without being seen. When I got to a second dock, I used the wooden ladder connected to it. On the dock there was a young girl, maybe a little older than Kylie, sitting in a folding chair holding a mini fishing rod. I looked at her, then at the bobber in the water, then back at her. She wore a white captain’s hat and a pink bikini with white flowers all over it. I decided to act casual.

“Having any luck?” I asked.

She shook her head. I looked around.
“When’s the last time you checked your bait?”

She looked at my wet Converse low tops for a moment and then started to reel her line in. When the bobber got all the way up to the last eye of the reel she held it up high. No bait.

“There’s your problem. Too much line after your bobber. You’re just feeding the crabs. You want be labeled a crab feeder? You want kids to start calling you ‘Crab feeder! Crab feeder!’”

“Nuh-ooh,” she said to me. Her voice jolted me. It felt so alive and child-like.

“Here,” I said, “adjust the bobber like this.” I showed her how by pushing the little red button on top of the bobber it lets you move the bobber up and down the line. But I didn’t adjust it; I just moved it back in place. She pushed the button down and moved the bobber down to the hook.

“No, no. Leave about two feet of line.” She estimated two feet pretty good. “Now put another one of those shrimps on the hook, and don’t worry about where, just hook it real good so it stays on.”

She took one of the pink shrimp out of a white box that had melted a wet spot onto the bright wood of the dock. She carefully hooked it.

“Now don’t even cast it out. Just drop it off the side of the dock.” I grabbed the brim of her hat and raised it up and down on her head a couple of times making her smile. “Fish like shade, too.”
She dropped the line in the water and I walked off. I wasn’t even out of the yard when the kid started screaming. Her tiny rod was doubled over. I ran.

I ran down the road to the beach, but when I got there I sat down behind the line of dunes and to catch my breath and to think. Should I tell anyone what I saw? I saw what amounts to murder. Even if my fat cousin wanted her unhinged child killed don’t make it right. Maybe the new guy in her life coerced her. Didn’t like the little monkey-dog girl drooling on his NASCAR T-shirt, interrupting Home Improvement, and reminding him of Sarah with a big, black dick in her mouth. Shit. These people were from Vidor. Vidor, home of road signs like YOU CAN GET AWAY WITH MURDER HERE and WELCOME TO WHITE AMERICA—PAID FOR BY THE VIDOR KNIGHTS OF THE Ku Klux Klan. I’ve seen white robes and hoods for sale in gas stations there. This could get ugly. My life, and my family’s, was going to change if I started spouting off about this. I thought I’d give myself one good night to think about it.

Lorraine was sitting in the car with the doors open drinking a beer.

“I told you not to get lost,” she said.

“I didn’t get any sunscreen.”

“Well I’m already burnt anyways.” She had a Budweiser towel draped over her shoulders. “Let’s go back to the beach-house and have a cool drink and watch some TV. Boil some shrimp.”

“Well. There’s a problem there.”

“What?”
“Someone’s looking at the house.”

“Right now?”

“Yeah.”

“Why are you all wet?”

“It’s hot, baby. I jumped in the canal to cool off before walking back.”

Lorraine looked sideways at me. “Well, what are we going to do?”

“I say we go to Galveston and get a nice hotel room for the night.”

Lorraine forgot about the beach-house, forgot about me being wet. “Really? The Galvez? The San Luis?”

“They’re both booked.” I had a credit card my parents gave me that I was only supposed to use for emergencies. This felt like an emergency.

The Galvez was booked. No vacancies at the San Luis either. Then we got desperate. The Holiday Inn, the Best Western, the Hotel 6 even, were all filled up. Driving up and down the seawall we came to an old two-story hotel that looked out over the gulf: The Seahorse Inn. It had a vacancy sign on. One of the S’s on the stucco wall of the office was gone so it read Seahor.e Inn.

“What do you think,” I barely asked.

“Looks like every room faces the ocean and has a porch. Take me out for a nice dinner, though.”

I put my hand down softly on her sunburned leg. “I was going to do that anyway.”
The room wasn’t as cheap as we expected, but the room itself turned out like we imagined. Yellow walls and a showerhead that wouldn’t move. We drank beers and smoked cigarettes and joints on our second story porch alternating the new Descendants cassette and Black Sabbath Vol. IV on a portable deck plugged into an outlet in the room and resting in the doorway. The AC was cool, and we made our own breeze. I had effectively put Kylie out of my mind by thinking, What’s done is done, and It’s best for everyone if I just forget what I saw, combined with about a dozen Black Label beers. But getting hammered played against me, too, and every once in a while Lorraine caught me thinking, or sometimes I just said, “I don’t fucking believe it” out loud, talking to myself, and Lorraine would ask, “What the hell’s wrong with you?” and I would have to make something up. By time the sun started going down I could tell she was getting truly suspicious.

“Time to eat!” I said to her.

“Let me change first,” she said.

I could tell she was hinting at some four-star dining because she put a long black skirt on and a matching tight cottony long sleeve shirt. I have to admit she looked pretty good. I wasn’t quite so prepared so I changed into some jeans but kept my “Drinking is Believing” T-shirt on—a hand-me-down from my dad. The Pier 61 hotel is another one of the fancy places that had no vacancies that night, but the resturaunt there not only has some of the finest seafood in Galveston, it’s actually at the end of a huge pier that extends almost a quarter of a mile out into the bay. We got a seat outside right next to the wood
railing where we could see down into the water. Lorraine ordered the Captain’s Crab Platter, and I had a steak.

“And bring us a couple of Corana’s” I asked our waitress.

“OK. I’ll need to see your ID’s” she asked us. You could tell she thought we weren’t going to produce. We both had fake ID’s we’d got at the Mexican Trader’s Market.

“Hmmm. OK. What are you kids doing all the way down here from Iowa?” she asked.

“I think this is the closest beach,” I asked the waitress and then looked to Lorraine, “Isn’t it, Sugar?”

Lorraine laughed. Kind of just breathed a laugh out.

“Well. You ain’t Johnny Law, not with these things here. What does it say your name is on this thing, Peter North? Well, Peter, I’ll bring you one to go with your meal, but that’s all. And you better tip me.

We split the Corona and our meals were huge, so I got sober pretty fast. The sunset on the ocean was long gone while we smoked a cigarette, and we both looked out at the lights of oil platforms miles away in the gulf like lonely stars on the water. I pictured Kylie out there, floating around, then swimming like a seal, surfaced, clapping and barking like a dog.

“Kyle, what the hell’s the matter with you? Seriously.”

“You want to jump in?” I asked.
“What?”

“You want to jump in? In the ocean?” I got up and stood at the railing and looked over.

“You wouldn’t jump in,” Lorraine said, daring me.

I climbed over the railing and found a little footing on about a foot of protruding steel girder.

“Kyle, really. You’ll drown out there.” The people at the tables around us had stopped eating.

“Here I go!” I said, and sat down on the girder and held on to the railing. It might have been fifty, sixty feet down. The moonlight reflected green on the calm black water and imagined that’s exactly how far it must have looked for Kylie. Something grabbed my arm at the shoulder making me lose my balance, and I almost fell. A balding man with a big brown mustache had me and pulled over the railing like a wet towel out of a washing machine.

“Are you fucking crazy, kid? You’re spoiling me and my wife’s dinner! Get your ass back in that seat and stay there.”

“I wasn’t going to jump, mister. Man.”

I left the waitress a nice tip on my parents’ credit card. On the way out, walking on red carpet, Lorraine put her arm around my waist and pulled herself close to me. She said, “You are an idiot and I want to marry you,” with her head against my arm.

“Yeah?” I said. “I was going to ask you the same thing.”
She pulled away from me. “Really? You got a ring?”

“No. But I think it’s a good idea. How about we say we’re engaged to be engaged?”

“Engaged to be engaged?”

“Sure.”

She grabbed my arm and pulled her head close to me again. “Engaged to be engaged,” she said.

Back at the Seahorse Inn we turned the TV on, had sex, and then watched Carson until we fell asleep. Lorraine fell asleep first, but I kept seeing our kids looking like Kylie, acting like Kylie, drowning to death like Kylie. Not drowning because one of us pushed her in the drink on purpose, but drowning non-the-less. Or being born with no arms. Choking to death on a Lego. Spontaneously combusting on the foldaway couch. That happens. I smoked another cigarette, decided I was going to tell my father what I had seen, and that thought, that I was going to come clean, put me to sleep.

In the morning we went to one of the pay-to-get-in beaches, West Beach, to look for shark’s teeth. I couldn’t muster the concentration it takes to find any, but Lorraine found over twenty, a few as big as your thumbnail. We were exhausted by noon, and we got Big Gulps and gas at the 7-11 and headed home. Lorraine dropped me off at my car at the 24-hour supermarket and I drove back to my house. I was sunburned and bleary eyed.
“How was the camping trip?” my dad asked me, standing in front of the fridge with the door open, holding a quart of milk.

“I need to talk with you, dad,” I said.

“What? What is it? What’s wrong.”

I looked at my mother in the living room looking back at me. “Outside?” I said, and my father followed me outside. It was right at noon and the sun was coming down hard. I walked into the shade of a huge, knotted oak at the side of our back yard.

“What is it son?” my father asked me as we stood in the shade together. The shade didn’t do us any good. We were only outside for less than a minute and my father had a line of sweat starting down the middle of his shirt.

I sighed and said, “I didn’t go camping this weekend.”

“Oh? Well where’d you go?

“Galveston. With Lorraine.”

“Where did you stay? You didn’t go to the beach-house did you? I told you not to go there.” My father looked very concerned at me.

I stammered a bit. My father was looking at me fiercely “We stayed at the Seahorse Inn,” was what I finally said.

My father straightened up a little bit, and then smiled an easy, knowing smile.

“You did, did ya? Hmm. Well. I’m glad you told me the truth, son. I think that’s awful grown-up of you.”

I started to say, Wait, there’s more. But I was too shocked.
“We’ll just keep this our little secret, OK?” my father said, and he gave me a wink and a nudge and followed me back inside.

On Monday at work Chuck asked me how my weekend went.

“I got engaged and witnessed a murder,” I told him.

“Congratulations,” he said.

It ended like this: Kylie’s death was ruled accidental. Lorraine broke up with me a year later, in 1983, to start dating a friend of mine in a local punk rock band. I had introduced them. She eventually left Houston to work on a fish processing boat in Alaska. I think she lives in Seattle now. I still work at the record store. There are not many independent record stores anymore so we have a steady clientele and we do OK. When I think about them—Lorraine and Kylie—they seem to me like old songs I no longer listen to. And sitting in this store everyday, it’s apparent to me, and has been for some time now, that the music’s not getting any better.
Key to the Highway

A young man wearing a worn out jacket and carrying a duffelbag got off the 7:15 at the Houston bus station downtown and was greeted by swirling heat. The sun was no longer up, but it was still light out, and he walked through the terminal surveying the place with disgust. Trash on the floors, rows of worn out chairs colored babyshit brown, babyshit yellow, babyshit orange. When he stepped out into the city streets a man who looked like he hadn’t shaved or bathed in years asked him to spare some change. The man wearing the jacket in the Houston springtime air turned around and looked up at the large red, white, and blue lights of the bus terminal sign and turned back to the white bearded man who had just hit him up for change.

“I just got off a bus,” he said to the old man.

“I see.”

He looked into the bum’s eyes. “Do you think if I had any money I’d be taking the bus?” he said, “because I wouldn’t. Nobody would.”

The old man craned over, as if he weren’t hearing straight.

“If I had any money at all I’d take the plane. You need to be at the airport, where the people with money are, not the bus station you fucking idiot.”

The old man started to raise his voice and spun around looking for imaginary witnesses. He was pointing at the man in the jacket and stuttering.
“Alright, alright old-man, hold on. Come here I’ve got something for you.” The man in the jacket walked to the side of the bus station and put his duffel bag down next to the brick wall. He reached inside his jacket and the bum came over, his demeanor back to normal.

“Here you go you old coot,” said the man in the jacket as he put his left hand on the bum’s right shoulder, “Here’s something for you.” He pulled out a revolver and jammed the hard barrel in the old man’s ribcage, pulling him into the pistol with his left hand.

“You’re a useless old piece of shit. Anyone going to miss you?”

The man in the jacket looked right into the old man’s eyes again and repeated the question. The old man started to turn red. The man in the jacket pocketed the revolver and pushed the old man away by the face.

“People don’t ride the bus ‘cause they like it,” he said.

The man in the jacket picked up his duffel bag and walked across the street without waiting for the pedestrian light.

The old man grumbled and walked around in a tiny circle like a penguin. He approached the next person who came out of the bus station, but they quickly avoided him.

Across the street the man in the jacket walked into a bar that had For Sale written in the window with shoe polish. A Texas-shaped neon sign pulsed gently red as the man in the jacket walked into the Lone Star Saloon.
A woman in her late thirties sat on a stool at the Formica island in the middle of
the kitchen and talked on a cordless phone and tried to light a cigarette, but she kept
interrupting herself

"Why can't I go the baseball game, Jerry?" She said holding a lit lighter.

"I just got invited. It was spur of the moment. Rose-Ellen, please. It's opening
night of the ballpark downtown."

She lit the lighter again and said, "Just go, Jerry. I should just get used to you
leaving me here on Friday nights. Just have fun with the boys, or whoever it is you're
with." Rose-Ellen dipped her head to the lighter.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

Rose-Ellen jerked her unlit cigarette from the flame, "Whoever it is you're with,
Jerry! I don't know who your out with, I'm never there! I have to take your word!"

"What happened to all of your friends Rose? What happened to Lisa?"

"Yeah, I'll go out with Lisa tonight, that sounds great."

"I'm going to get a drink after the game..."

"Get a drink, Jerry. Drown yourself. I think I'll do the same."

blame me for not wanting to spend any time with a..."
Rose-Ellen hung up and finally lit her cigarette. She immediately dialed again.

“What’s the matter, Rose?”

“You got any plans on a Friday night, Lisa?”

“We were going to go pack up the kids and go to the condo tomorrow.”

“Oh, yeah. So you’re staying in tonight, huh?”

“Yeah, Rosie. What’s the matter?”

Rose-Ellen exhaled a stream of smoke into the phone, “Oh, it’s Jerry still. I think we’ve finally run our course.”

“Don’t say that, Rosie.”

“Would you mind if I came around tomorrow? I’d really like to get out of this house.”

“Well, it’s your place, Rose.” Rose listened and waited. She exhaled again into the receiver. “Of course you can come by.”

“I won’t stay long, I just need some time away from the house.”

“Sure, Rosie. We’re getting up early, and we’ll probably be out all day, so pop in any time. We’ll leave a message we’re we’ll be.”

“Thanks, Lisa.” Yeah, leave a message for me, she thought.

Rose-Ellen hung up the phone, lit another cigarette and walked to the bedroom. In the hallway she stopped at both of the extra rooms. One was a study that was never used. The other was a guestroom that was rarely used. They weren’t meant to be a study and a guestroom, but there they were. In the hallway was a picture of Jerry at a Corvette
Convention in Tulsa where a brief affair was started. How many other times? Rose-Ellen wondered. How many other times were there that she didn’t know about? She walked into the bedroom and changed into dress she hadn’t put on in a long time, but still looked good in. She looked at her self in the standing mirror in the bedroom. The room was suddenly cold. She crossed her arms at her chest and rubbed her arms and thought about where she was going to go.

A tall woman with a lot of baby fat sat slumped over on a couch with a bowl of popcorn at her stomach watching the news. The sun was still up, but the apartment was a cave. No lights save the TV were on, and the blinds were all pulled down over the windows. On the television the Hispanic news anchor announced that all HISD employees, including busdrivers, were going to be getting a decent raise next year.

“Give me a break!” she bellowed, her face pulled back in double chins. She tossed the bowl in the direction of the TV, but it veered right and punched a hole in the sheetrock and fell to the floor. The huge framed poster of the Dali Llama over the TV fell off the wall knocked over a dozen half-empty glasses and cans spilling warm liquid into the corners of the coffee table.

She groaned. She took her head out of her hands and looked at the ceiling. She clenched her teeth and said out loud:
“Why is this happening to me? Dear God, why is this happening to me? What is this? If something good doesn’t happen now, and I mean now, then you’re a lie, a joke, a fraud.”

She waited. “Come on, God. You owe it to me... Come on!” She stretched out on the couch and cried. She didn’t sob or whine or lose her composure in any way. She just stared at the ceiling and tears flowed out of her eyes down her smooth, round face. The tears blurred her vision, and she wiped them away finally with her substantial forearm and left it there on her face and went to sleep.

The phone woke her up a couple of hours later. Her shirt stuck to her back with sweat. She couldn’t afford to run the air conditioner.

Who could it be? Her ex wanting her back? The school board director wanting to give her her job back? Her attorney telling her the charges are dropped? She got off the couch and walked to the phone on the kitchen. Wait. It could be the attorney with bad news. It could be worse. It could be her parents, anyone. She waited for the answering machine to pick up.

“Hey, Donna?”

Who the hell?

“Donna, if you’re there, pick up. It’s Wayne.”

Wayne?

“I’m back in town for the night and could really use a place to stay”

Could it be?
“I know it’s been a while, but you see, I’ve got a few problems and I could really use a place to stay.”

Donna picked up the phone.

“Problems? What do you mean, problems?”

“Donna! Hey, good looking, what’s happening?”

“What’s up with you, Wayne? Where the hell have you been?”

“Donna, you don’t know how good it is to hear your voice. Do me a favor. Let’s save the catching up for later. Why don’t you come down to the Lone Star Saloon and me and you have a few beers.”

“The Lone Star? I don’t know. I’d have to take a taxi.”

“Whatever, just get down here and let’s talk old times.”

Wayne hung up the payphone receiver and walked back to the vinyl stool that had the characteristic sag left in the seat from the ghost of old regulars. It was just Wayne in the bar on a Friday night. He ordered another can of beer and waited, resting a little easier that he had finally found someone that might be an avenue of hope.

Rose-Ellen walked into Warren’s Inn and looked around. Not a single woman better looking than her. Good. She found an open space at the bar between two men in suits and ordered a Cosmopolitan.
After drinking a couple alone the men around her built up the confidence to talk.

"Waiting for someone?" said the man on her right. He had taken off his tie but his
dress shirt was still buttoned at the top. One side of his head was combed over the bald
spot in the middle to the other side of his head.

Rose-Ellen indicated she was waiting for someone with a politic, if not impolite
nod.

"If they don’t show up then I’ll be right here," he said, and pointed to his crotch.
Rose-Ellen didn’t respond and thought she heard the man mumble something
about her as he turned away.

Soon after that the man on her left put his arm around her. He looked at her like
he was trying to use perverted mental telepathy.

"What’s your name, pretty lady?" he said. He had a dense mass of curly brown
hair that looked like he had backed out of a perm halfway though the process. But, other
than that, he was good looking. Looked like he had a nice job. Looked like every man in
the place: Suit, nice watch, clean shave, over-ambitious hair.

In the instant before she answered, she realized why she had come to Warren’s
Inn. It wasn’t to have a good time, it was because she thought she might find Jerry there.
He used to take her there all the time, back before the gentrification of downtown, when
Warren’s Inn was a lonely, beautiful place. Now there was a dimly lit bar filled with
antique furniture serving expensive drinks on every street downtown. If she wanted to
find a good time, she’d have to look somewhere else.
She held her wedding ring up and her hand eclipsed the man’s face and all Rose could see was his perm. She brought her hand back down and the man’s smile had dimmed, concealing his teeth. She finished her drink and stood up. The man watched her as she walked out but she didn’t turn back. Outside she pulled the ring off of her finger and put it in her purse and walked up the street past oncoming couples and a black man playing mediocre saxophone. Around the corner a cop on a horse talked to a well-dressed couple arm in arm. The man gave the cop a friendly salute and then the couple walked into the building. Not the place I’m looking for, she thought. She walked back to her car and drove down the same street she had been walking on.

She drove until there weren’t any restaurants or newly built antique bars anywhere around. Only daytime businesses with their steel garage doors pulled down over them, office buildings with an occasional light on way up high and a curious bar with neon sign in the shape of Texas.

“I can’t let you stay with me, Wayne.” Donna drank from her can of beer and the jukebox started skipping on a Billy Joel song. “I’ve got too much to worry about.”

“I won’t be anything to worry about, I just need a place to stay. First place they’ll look for me is at a relative’s”
Wayne kept pleading his case, but Donna, even though she was looking right at him was elsewhere.

She had been driving by her ex boyfriend’s street all night, waiting for him to get back, drinking a pint of schnapps. She had just finished the bottle and was making her last pass when she saw it. His car. He was there. She must have just missed him. She rammed her car into the back of his and the bumpers locked and she couldn’t back out. When the police arrived they made her do her ABC’s and she sang them.

“That’s how I learned them!” she protested when the cop put the cuffs on her. Her ex bailed her out of jail but wasn’t there when she got out. There was banging in her head.

The bartender kicked the jukebox with a boot heel in an effort to get it to play right. Wayne was looking at her, wanting a reaction.

“It’s good to hear from you Wayne, but I’ve got too much to sort out and you at my place wouldn’t be any help.”

“Well piss on you, then. I was glad to leave you in the first place.”

“How long’s it been? Six years? Seven years? You don’t just call someone up and expect them to bend over for you, you know?”

The bartender walked away to help a lady in an evening dress that came in and sat down at the end of the bar.

“I’m at the end of my rope, Donna,” he said.

Donna held up her beer can and Wayne gave her a feeble 'Cheers'.
Rose-Ellen liked the Lone Star Saloon. It reminded her of the bars she might have gone to when she was first old enough to drink. There were pool tables and a video dartboard. She took her can of beer and looked at the selections on the jukebox and got much the same feeling. I’ve been here before, she thought.

When she took her seat at the end of the bar she held up her can of beer and declared, “This rounds on me!”

The bartender smiled and looked around. After serving all the patrons another can of beer the bartender told her, “That’s four fifty even.”

“‘I’m sorry?” Donna said.

“Four fifty. For the round.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Four fifty? She handed him a twenty. “Keep ‘em coming until this runs out,” she told the bartender.

The bartender returned with the change.

Down the bar a couple held up their cans of beer to her. She held up hers.

The novelty of the bar began to wear out close to closing time. It’s been a long time since I’ve been drunk off of beer, she thought. She was tired but she didn’t want to go home. She pushed herself away from the bar and collected her change leaving the
bartender a tip. Before she left she waved to the couple at the opposite end of the bar who hesitated before waving back.

The humid night air felt neither cool nor warm to her. She rested her head on the steering wheel and tried to imagine where she’d like to go.

“Could you call a cab for me?” Donna asked the bartender.

“Where the hell am I supposed to go?”

“I don’t know, but I’m sure you’ll do fine.”

“I don’t have any money, I don’t have any place to go, I only have you.”

“Well,” Donna began, “Looks like,” then she noticed the lady at the end of the bar waving to them. They hesitated and then waved back. “Looks like you’re out of luck.”

Wayne finished his beer quickly. He wiped his chin on his coatsleeve and said to Donna before he left, “I think you’re the one who’s shit out of luck. Have fun on your cab ride home to the rest of your life.” Then he walked quickly to the door.
Rose-Ellen had her head down, dreaming, imagining herself in the place she most
wanted to go when the passenger door opened and a man wearing a winter coat sat next
to her and pointed a revolver at her face.

"Give me the keys and get out of the car."

It happened so suddenly she thought she still might be imagining it.

"Give me the keys and get out of the car and leave your purse."

Rose-Ellen handed him her keys and started to get out of the car. But she closed
her door firmly.

"You want to go to New Orleans?"

Wayne let the pistol down a bit. "What?"

"New Orleans? You ever been there?"

"No, No, I haven't. Now please get the fuck out of the car." Wayne pointed the
gun back at her face.

"Listen, this is perfect," Rose-Ellen sounded sincere, excited. "Why steal my car?
Why steal my money? You can have them both. Just take me to New Orleans."

Wayne brought the gun all the way down. "New Orleans?" He made a confused
smile and whistled through his teeth. He looked back at the bar.

He closed the passenger door and handed Rose-Ellen the keys. "You drive."

A yellow cab pulled up as Rose-Ellen turned the large luxury car around out of
the parking lot. Donna had just come outside.

"Pull up there, pull up to her," Wayne said pointing at Donna with the pistol.
Rose-Ellen pulled next to the cab in front of the bar. Wayne leaned out the window with the gun still in his hand. “You want to go to New Orleans?” he said in a sly manner.

“For how long?” Donna said.

“For how long?” Wayne asked Rose.

“For good,” she said.

Wayne tilted his head out the window again, and Donna stepped up to the car.

“Get in,” he said.

I-10 eastbound, and they had just left the city. Donna was in the back seat looking through the rear window at the glowing city lights. Wayne sat in the passenger seat still holding the pistol, and Rose-Ellen drove a couple miles per hour over the speed limit in the far-left lane of the five-lane freeway. She had put her hair up and rolled her window down, even though the luxury car had a climate control system that was designed to keep the atmosphere perfect. Wayne rolled his down, too and rested his arm on the door. The two open windows in front made a violent draft in the back seat, but when Donna rolled down both the windows in the back, the wind settled. Only a calm breeze floated through the car speeding down the highway, and they all inwardly celebrated in much the same way.