Five stories

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FIVE STORIES

By

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James was still in bed when he heard the door at street level open and shut. The footsteps on the stairs were brisk at first, then finally slow and accompanied by loud breathing, echoing in the stairwell, between the third and fourth floors. Casey, the team's manager, rushed pink-faced into the room.

"Weatherman's crazy!" he said, grinning. He put a paper bag on the tiny table and plugged in James' hotplate. "I told you not to worry. Lot of clouds out there, but it's not gonna--where's your skillet?--and it's about sixty-five now, which means by one it should be seventy-five or so." He wiped out the skillet with a paper towel from the bag and poured a little vegetable oil into it. From the bag he took eggs, a can of V-8 juice, a paper plate, and a small steak wrapped in plastic. He dropped the steak into the skillet and put it over the glowing coil of the hotplate. "Get up and eat," he said. He pulled open a drawer and threw some socks and underwear onto the bed. He took a shirt and pair of pants from the closet. "These all right?" he asked.

James lowered his legs over the side of the bed and reached for the underwear. "You talk to Oxblood yesterday?"

"Yeah. He said to tell you the guy who listed 4:08 as his best time ran that last year. This year he has a 4:14 so far, so no sweat today." Casey set a place at the table. James buttoned the last shirt button and reached for his socks. "Hey, wait," Casey said. He knelt by the bed and rested James' foot on his fat leg. His pink fingers gently pushed the skin around the ankle. "Still a little swollen from last week. Shouldn't have pushed it so hard, you had that race going away."
He began to knead rhythmically, working from the achilles' tendon to the front. Then he put his left hand under James' heel and lifted, his right hand against the ball of the foot. "Push." James pushed against Casey's right hand. "Two, three, off. Push, two, three, off." Ten times, and Casey began on James' other foot.

"Did Oxblood tell you to remind me to run easy today?"

"Should he?" Casey said. "You're no fool. Push, two, three, off."

When they were done, Casey said, "Toe raisers, only fifty today."

James stood with his back against the door and stretched as high on his tip-toes as he could, fifty times. Casey forked the steak onto the plate, added more oil to the skillet, and broke three eggs into it. Then he covered the skillet and poured steak sauce over the meat.

James cut the steak into small pieces and chewed each one thoroughly before he washed it down with juice. When he finished, Casey slid the eggs onto the plate and sprinkled salt on them.

Today James would run a three-minute fifty-eight-second mile. Next week he would run the special mile in the Kansas Relays, nationally-televised this year, and two runners would be there who had broken his best time, three-fifty-eight and six-tenths.

He needed a fifty-seven to fifty-eight first quarter, then a fifty-nine on his second quarter--no faster than sixty on his third or he would fade later--and then just hold on for a sixty-one final quarter and he'd have it. His ankles would hold. The strain at last week's meet hadn't been as serious as it had looked to Oxblood and Higgins. They were paranoid about his ankles. If he let Higgins wrap them before he ran, and if he exercised, they were dependable.
When Casey returned from washing the dishes in the restroon down the hall, James was tying his shoes. "You're not going to class today, are you?" Casey asked.

"No, but I don't want to sit around here all day. I'll go to the Student Union or something."

Casey put everything he'd brought back into the bag. "Okay, let's go," he said. He was puffing hard when they reached the bottom of the stairs. They started toward campus, but Casey stopped after a few steps. "I forgot," he said. "I have to pick up your track suit at the cleaners."

"I'll just go on, then."

Casey shuffled off.

James rested for a long time in the Student Union. It was important that he rest. He thought of nothing. His muscles were slack.

After a while he opened his eyes and focused on the wall clock. Four minutes to ten. He watched the second hand go around, and around, and around again, past the ten and eleven, and at the instant it touched the dot below the twelve, his feet touched the floor.

Someone called his name as he walked down the hill toward the locker room. Casey was jogging down after him. James stood with his hands in his pockets until Casey, puffing and damp, jarred to a stop next to him. They walked down the hill.

The locker room had cement walls three feet thick. They were instantly cooler when they passed the doorway, and the cement hall they walked through was dark and smelled dusty.
James sat on the wooden bench in front of his locker and untied his shoes while Casey twirled the dial on the lock. None of the other team members had come in yet. James handed his shoes to Casey, who put them in the bottom of the locker. Then his shirt, pants, socks, and shorts, and he walked naked down the aisle between rows of lockers to the showers.

When the water was adjusted, he bowed under the showerhead; water poured through his short, curly hair, down his face and neck. He worked lather from a bar of white soap and lathered himself from his face to his feet, then rinsed, watching the foam wash down the limed grate. He stood for a while under the cool rush, wrists crossed in front of his stomach, eyes closed.

He stepped into a large cement-floored drying area. Casey tossed him a towel. James rubbed his head in quick jerks until his hair was only slightly damp and the brown curls stood in groups away from his scalp. He pressed the towel hard against his skin as he dried, sitting on a bench to gently and thoroughly dry his soles and ankles. On the way to his locker, he threw the towel into a canvas hamper.

Casey handed him a jock strap from a plastic cleaner's bag, and he stepped into it, snapping the waist strap and bouncing a little on his toes as he reached for the white silk trunks Casey offered him.

"Tenderness in the ankles?" Casey asked.

"No."

"None at all? Good." He handed James the blue thin-strapped silk shirt. "We can take Oxblood's car. He's going on the bus."

James tucked the shirttails into his trunks. "Higgins in?"
"Yeah."

He walked down the aisle to the hallway and turned toward the trainer's rooms. The locker slammed shut and James waited at Higgins' door for Casey, who came carrying James' meet shoes and sweatsuit.

Higgins was short and thick. "Get on the table," he said, and lumbered out. There was an X-shaped scar on the back of his head, not hidden by his butch.

Casey set the clothes he carried on a chair and knelt to massage James' ankles. As he pressed and rolled the skin, he said, "You know, Davis or Krueger or both could cross the line ahead of you and it wouldn't matter. Long as we get the points. And you could breeze a 4:15 or so--just an easy workout for next week, really."

"Forget it." James leaned back on his elbows. "I won't hurt my ankles." He lifted the other foot for Casey to work on.

"We got the first three places sewn up either way, man, so why chance it? Krueger and Davis--"

Higgins pushed into the room, growling. "You gonna run today?"

"Yeah."

The trainer poked his stubby hand into a drawer and pulled out a roll of wide white tape and a spray can. Casey moved to a chair and Higgins knelt where he had been. His hands were like branched potatoes, but they were sure and gentle on James' ankles. "That hurt?"

"No."

"That?"

"No. They feel fine."

"They're as swollen as they were yesterday."
"They look okay to me."

"You don't even know what end to put on the toilet, who cares how they look to you." He felt the other foot. "Swollen." He shook the spray can. James smiled as the cool tickling tuf-skin covered him from calf to sole.

Oxblood walked past in the hall, carrying a clipboard. He walked on his toes, his back straight. They heard him at the drinking fountain outside, and then he stood in the doorway, watching Higgins. "How do they look?" he said.

"If he don't take it easy today he won't be going to Kansas," Higgins said. "Won't even be going to the john unless somebody carries him." He sat back on his heels while the tuf-skin dried, scowling at James' bare legs.

"You go light today, McAllen," Oxblood said.

"I need a good time. Psychological advantage."

He sneered. "Don't tell me about psychological advantages. It's too big a gamble."

"They feel fine."

"If you go down two weeks in a row, you've got a psychological disadvantage next week, if you can run at all. Better just to stride it out today and let the field think you've had two weeks rest."

"Or that I hurt so bad today I choked. Hey, are you gonna tape my ankles?"

"Well wait just a damn minute!" Higgins barked. He touched James' foot lightly, grumbling.
"Okay then," Oxblood said, "don't run at all. I'll pull your name and you can jog around some today, hit the weights--"

"Look, if I feel wobbly I'll back off."

"If you feel wobbly you've already set yourself back three or four days recovery time."

"All right. Like you say, it's a gamble."

The coach frowned and tapped the door with the side of his fist. Higgins began to wrap James' left foot and ankle with tape, wrapping in one unbroken piece directly from the roll. He wrapped slowly, under the high arch, over the instep, behind the achilles. An even pressure formed around the ankle.

"Okay, McAlle..." Oxblood said. "Casey told you, Higgins told you, and I told you. If you blow it you just might be through for the season, 'cause I won't run you if I think there's a chance of permanent injury to your ankles." He turned around, then looked back at Casey. "Be careful with my car. And if you're going to let those two knotheads load the bus, you make sure they get all the equipment on. If they blow it, it's your fault." He flipped a key at Casey and walked away.

They sat in silence, except for Higgins' grunts, while the right ankle was gently taped. "Now get out of here," Higgins said when he was finished, turning his back and fumbling with medicine bottles and bandages on a little table. James raised one foot and touched the tape; it was firm. He jumped lightly down. Casey followed him out, carrying the shoes and sweats.

Casey stopped the car in front of the main entrance of the coliseum and James got out, wearing his sweatpants. As Casey drove off to park,
James walked through the long tunnel and came into the dim sunlight again high in the bleachers. He went down the steps to field level, trying to feel any weakness or pain in either ankle as they accepted his weight on the stairs. There was none.

He crossed the gritty ash track to the cool grass of the football field. He sprang on his toes, feet together, arms dangling loosely, trying to relax everything not necessary to his repeated jumps. He sat then, and with his left leg straight in front and his right tucked back along itself, he leaned again and again into a hurdler's position, pushing each time until the muscles and ligaments behind his left knee were tight and a little painful. When Casey came shuffling across the track, James was up with feet spread wide, leaning deeply to first one side and then the other, stretching and loosening the muscles and tendons of his groin.

"It's not gonna rain," Casey said, sprawling contentedly. "Those clouds have been trying to break up all day. Never believe a weatherman." James' sweatshirt and shoes were by his side.

James moved quickly through a few alternate toe-touches, and when his muscles were limber and relaxed, he jogged to the concrete track rail and began around, on the grass just inside. His steps were short. The grass was soft on the sides of his feet. A few maintenance men were applying the last track markings and positioning equipment for field events. He let his arms dangle, then raised them and shook his wrists jerkily, hands dancing. There was smog; even the far side of the coliseum was a bit hazy, but he could breathe deeply with little difficulty.

As he was passing Casey on his third time around, the first of his teammates who had taken the bus walked onto the track carrying their gear.
Casey's two assistant managers stumbled out carrying the giant flannel blanket the team called "Susie," big enough for the whole team to lie on at once. James jogged once more around, and Casey and his boys had spread Susie in the center of the football field and gone back for the rest of the equipment when he stopped by his sweats. He walked in a small circle, hands on hips, until his breathing returned to normal.

He took his sweatshirt and shoes to the blanket, and sat, hugging his knees. There were probably fifty men in blue-and-white uniforms on the track and the grass, jogging, sprinting, jumping, practicing hand-offs, loosening up. Casey came back onto the track with one of his assistants, carrying poles for the vaulters. James straightened his legs and lay back into Susie. There was a movement high in the bleachers, and he recognized Higgins and Oxblood, looking over the field and pointing. He threw a sleeve of his sweatshirt over his eyes.

In a few minutes someone said, "Here they come." James sat up. Men in the maroon and gold of Arizona State were pouring onto the track from one of the tunnels. James stood and walked slowly across the grass and track to the home team locker room. There were only a few others inside; he lay on a bench. It was eleven-thirty when he put his feet up, folded his hands across his chest, and closed his eyes. The bench was wide enough that he balanced easily.

Someone tapped his foot. "Time to walk around a little. Just called for the hammer." The voice was Casey's. James sat up easily and rubbed his eyes and hair. "May have some rain soon after all," Casey said. "Here." He handed James the sweatshirt. "It's getting cold."
All patches of blue sky were gone when they stepped outside. James pulled the sweatshirt's hood up and put his hands in the pouch. Many of the spectators had umbrellas or raincoats.

There was too much activity around the track to jog laps, so James ran along the sidelines of the football field. Even though he'd been relaxing, his muscles had tightened slightly, and after one hundred yards he stopped to jump and stretch before he went on. Tiny raindrops sprinkled on him as he ran, leaving dark spots on his sweatshirt. After a few minutes it stopped. The meet announcer blew into his microphone, cleared his throat, and announced, "Last call for the pole vault and long jump. Competitors in the pole vault and long jump, please check in with the head judge in your event. Last call for the pole vault and long jump."

When he had loosened as much as he could, he jogged over to Susie and lay on his back.

One of the maroon-and-gold men came smiling across the grass. "You're McAllen, right?" he said, standing just off the blanket. James sat up.

"Yeah."

"I'm Bill Peterson. We ran against each other last year in that tri-meet with UC Davis. I came in third." He sat next to James.

"Oh, yeah."

Bill Peterson laughed. "Nobody was near you, man! That's the only race I been in where anybody went under four minutes." He held out his hand. James shook it once and lay back, eyes closed.

"Hey, I heard you hurt your ankles last week," Bill Peterson said. "I hope they're okay."
"Fine."

"I get shin splints when we run on dirt or clay, but that's about it. I'm okay on ash, and most tracks are ash now. Rubber's good too. We just got one of those outdoor rubber tracks. But I still don't have my time down anywhere near what I had last year. How're you doin'? In relation, I mean?" James said nothing. "How're you doin' so far?" Bill Peterson said again.

"Fine," James said.

"Yeah." He scratched his nose. "Well I got to get ready for the race. See you later." He tapped James on the shoulder, but James didn't open his eyes.

"First call for the shot put and javelin. First call for the shot put and javelin."

There was nothing James needed to do but relax. Use no energy. There was no one to bother him now.

He began with his feet, letting them lie as gravity pulled them, letting each muscle go limp. The relaxation moved up his leg at his direction, and with it a falling sensation. But the safety of his position was the key; relax every muscle, because the earth will hold you up. And he believed it, and began on the muscles of his lower back and belly. All tension and nervousness drained slowly away.

"First call for the 440 relay. First call for the 440 relay."

His arms were difficult because his hands often made nervous movements; this time his right thumb and forefinger were rubbing each other. Only by conscious effort could he achieve relaxation there. And his eyes—when they were closed, the lids jerked unless he forced relaxation. So great
was the effort that it sometimes defeated his purpose; it used energy.

With all muscles relaxed, there was still that fluttering emptiness somewhere under his diaphragm that meant excitement. It would grow, unless he stopped it now, until it gave his limbs and facial muscles small fits of trembling. He began to breathe slowly, deliberately, easily, concentrating on the rhythm and depth of his breath. The fluttering began to subside.

"Last call for the 440 relay. Runners in the 440 relay, please report to the clerk of the course. Last call for the 440 relay. Spectators and competitors, please clear the track. The first running event is about to begin."

Just when he thought the fluttering was gone, he felt a little trembling in his shoulders, and then the jerking of his eyelids. Slow and easy breathing, slow and easy. Fall into the earth; the earth will bear you up. The trembling stopped.

"First call for the mile." A surge of mighty shaking caught him in the chest. His back almost left the blanket. "First call for the mile."

And now to let the adrenalin pump. He let the trembling go, sat up and opened his eyes. The sky threatened with clouds. Movement and color—jumpers flying high and far in maroon, gold, blue, white. Shot puts thudded. Javelins arced and descended, skittering in the grass. The wind blew cool and gusty on his shivering. The crowd cheered simultaneous and unrelated events. He crossed his arms over his chest and they trembled with it; his teeth chattered.

Casey came across the field and sat beside him. He handed James a dixie cup of water. James' hand trembled as he held it to his mouth,
but he took only a little and let it wash around his cheeks and palate, which were dry. He drank the rest in four small sips, each washing down slow, soaking in. He handed the cup to Casey and put his shoes on, pulling the laces to just the right tension over the instep, firmly in place but not uncomfortable. Muscles a little tight. He stretched—-toe touches, groin stretchers. And the looseness returned and he jogged down the field to the goal posts and back to the other goal. Then back again, striding out, arms in rhythm, gliding. And once more, at the pace he would use on the first lap. His ankles felt strong. The gun went off for the 440 relay.

He went back to Casey. As he stood, Casey explored with his fingers the wrappings on each ankle and the tightness of the shoes. "Seem all right," Casey said. "How about pain?"

"None."

Casey shook his head. "Any weakness at all, you back off. What time you tryin' for?"

"Three fifty-eight."

"Three--" Casey sputtered, "God, you're out of your head! It's only been a week--"

"Three fifty-eight," James said. He lay down again, forcing himself to lie still until the trembling and nervousness almost burst out of him. Slow and easy breathing. But his shaking body called for air until he almost gasped. Now. Hyperventilate. And he breathed deeply, slowly--once, twice, again and again, storing up oxygen in his muscles.

"Last call for the mile. Runners in the mile, please report to the clerk of the course. Last call for the mile."
He sat up, breathing deeply, trembling violently now. He took off his sweatshirt and stood. A little light-headed. He stopped hyperventilating and walked back and forth slowly for a moment. Then he walked to the starting line.

Bill Peterson smiled at him; James looked away. The clerk of the course looked at the runners, then at his clipboard. "Everyone here?" He called their names. "Okay. McAllen, lane one. Peterson, lane two. Davis..." He positioned all eight of them at the starting line, and stepped back. The starter came onto the track in front of them. "The race is one mile, four times around the track. Three places will score for team points. It will be a scratch start; each runner will start from where this curved line crosses his lane; you may break for the pole immediately. Make sure that you have a lead of one full running stride before you cut in or you may be disqualified. The beginning of the last lap will be signalled by a shot from the starting pistol. The starting orders will be: runners, to your marks—set—and then the gun. Are there any questions? The race will start in one minute."

James pulled off his sweatpants, handed them to Casey, and began stepping in place, trembling. The starter talked to the timers and judges and then faced the track. "I will now give the starting orders. Runners, to your marks."

James stepped up to the line.

"Set."

He crouched.

Silence...

Gunshot.

(WHITE SPACE)
James sprang lightly from his crouch. He exaggerated his arm movements, pumping, to throw himself into his pace as soon as he could without overworking his ankles so early. All his movements light and quick. Within ten yards, he had found the pace he wanted for the first lap, and settled into the steady pump of legs, the rhythmic grainy crunch of cleats on track. The trembling had left him at the first movement he'd made, and a looseness returned. His arms were holding too high; he lowered them and let his hands flap with each stride.

Bill Peterson went out too fast, at an 880 pace, and Krueger went out with him, afraid to let him get too large a lead. James was third around the first curve. He knew the pace he needed and he kept it, striding, striding. He set his feet carefully, ball and heel landing together, weight centered. One slight wobble could throw his ankle out and end the race for him. He moved into the second curve with concentration. The curves forced him to set his weight slightly on the outside of his left foot, and uneven pressure was the biggest hazard.

At the quarter, he trailed Bill Peterson by five yards, but the timer read, "...fifty-six, fifty-seven, fifty-eight..." as he passed the line, and Casey yelled, "Fifty-seven four!"

Fine. Cleats were crunching close behind him, but let them pass. He had his pace and would not change it. The crowd gave a great cheer for a performance in a field event somewhere. The noise came from far away; it did not touch him like the dampness under his arms, or the air now passing cold through his throat. Going into the first curve again he slowed his pace slightly—fifty-nine to sixty this lap. Feet set carefully. The crowd noise was as dissociated from James as if it were a television reaction and James were the television performer, one who
couldn't have seen his audience if he'd wanted, hearing their applause through a cable.

He caught Krueger coming out of the turn. "Pass," he said softly. Krueger stayed in the inside lane. "Pass," he said again, but as he spoke he moved into the second lane, knowing Krueger wouldn't move to let him go by.

Before the second curve, he went by the long jump pit. A jumper sprang from the board and ran through the air to the sand. He's the one who broke his leg last year, James thought, and his mind worked the words in rhythm with his pace, He's the one who broke his leg, he's the one who broke his leg.

Before the half he passed Bill Peterson, who was breathing hard already and running unevenly. The maroon-and-gold runner looked up and managed an apologetic grimace as James passed. "Go, Jimmy," he gasped, "do it big."

Casey stood at the line. "One fifty-six eight!"

Good. But before he went into the first curve again he felt a little weakness in the ankles, especially the left one. Harder now to put them down evenly. On the curve he realized that the left ankle was not as tightly wrapped as the right, and without the artificial support it was weakening. Straightening into the backstretch, he knew he was off his pace.

If he picked it up too much he would burn out on the last lap. He quickened slightly, then held, even though he felt he was holding back. The risk was less than burning out. His eyes began to burn, and in one quick motion he wiped the sweat from his face with his palm.
He checked for tension and found his hands clenched. He dropped his arms and shook them loosely, then held them even lower than on the first lap. Worse, though, was the tightness in his gut and the beginning of cottonmouth. He rolled his tongue and sucked his cheeks for saliva, but he could only hold his mouth closed for seconds at a time before he had to gasp for air, and he let the cottonmouth go to keep his oxygen intake high. As he began to breathe deep and steady, the tightness in his gut subsided a little.

He's the one who broke his leg. Was he slowing on the curve? He's the one who broke his leg. He's the one who broke his leg.

He knew his pace was off again as he neared the mass of officials and coaches along the inside of the rail, but he held it till he could find out his time.

"Two fifty-nine three," Casey yelled. "You've got 'em. Come in easy, babe." James wondered why he'd never before noticed how high and girlish Casey's voice was. His lips tightened in sudden disgust.

Oxblood pushed to the rail. "Slack off, McAllen. You're wobbly."

A shot signalled the gun lap.

Two-and-a-half seconds off. James picked up his pace. Broke leg broke leg broke leg. He needed a fifty-eight last lap, four seconds faster than the one he'd just run.

Each suck of air brought cold pain to his raw throat and lungs, but he found the pace he needed and held it in spite of the weakness he felt in his ankles. He was pushing. On the first curve the left ankle's tape felt even more loose; the bones jarred with each step, a thin, sweet pain. But he kept the pace.
Coming into the backstretch he saw Bill Peterson collapsed on the grass just inside the rail, propped on one skinny elbow, head thrown back, mouth open in pain, beside a puddle of his own vomit. The pain in James' chest was worse, and cottonmouth almost gagged each breath. Half lap half lap half lap. The pace was right.

The first uneven step around the second curve brought a jab of pain from the left ankle, sharper now, and to preserve the little resistance left there he pushed more strongly with the right, hoping he wasn't losing his speed. Cold rain black cloud cold rain black cloud. Bearing everlastingly to the left, even by relying on the right leg, the pain grew. A deep cry from over the grass, Oxblood—"Ease off!" Ease off ease off ease off, favoring the left, knowing he had lost his pace.

Out of the curve. He had only one hope—to go now into a hard kick. He could place his feet evenly on the straightaway; that might preserve his ankles.

But even running straight, the left ankle would not hold his weight. "Ease off, McAllen!" Ease off, ease off, ease off. Twenty-five yards. The tape was across the track, chest high. On the other end of the cable the crowd yelled. There was cold fire in his throat.

Ten yards from the tape his left ankle snapped to the outside. The change in support buckled his knee. He almost went down, but he recovered with his right and crossed the tape, limping heavily, teeth clenched. He would have fallen onto the track if Casey hadn't run out to hold him. Oxblood hurried from the grass to take his right side, and as they helped him to a bench, Casey glanced at his stopwatch and said, "Four-oh-one nine."
"Higgins!" Oxblood yelled. Then, low, "McAllen, you're a damn fool."

They lowered him onto a bench. Higgins knelt, muttering, and gently untied James' shoes. James locked his fingers on top of his head to support his shoulders and gasped for breath. Casey offered him water. He tried to drink, but choked and spit, and water dribbled down his chin. Oxblood held a small ice pack against James' ankle while Higgins, swearing, wrapped it firmly in place with an ace bandage.

And the rain came, slow at first, random, in great cool drops. There was thunder. Casey tried to slip the sweatshirt over James' head, but James pushed him away. "Hey," Casey said, "you want to catch pneumonia?"

"Hot," James said, and his throat tightened in agony as he sucked the air.

Casey rubbed James' hair, wet with sweat and rain. "You're gettin' cooled off too fast, man."

"Feels good." He tilted up his face for it, open-mouthed, and the water began to bead on him, and it trickled with his sweat down his neck and chest.

Higgins frowned up at him, finished with the ankle. "Gonna keep ice on there for a week. Maybe we can save 'em, but I ain't makin' no promises." He stood. "Ought to cut 'em off and give 'em to somebody appreciates ankles. And put on the damn sweatshirt. What the hell you got for brains, mashed potatoes?" He and Oxblood turned their backs and stood mumbling to each other, their collars up against the rain.

Casey wiped James' shoulders with the sweatshirt. "Let's get out of this," he said.

"Wait a minute."
"No, come on, I want to get you where it's dry."

With his left arm around Casey's shoulders, barely touching his left foot to the ground, James hopped across the rain-spotted track. Behind him a pack of runners rushed past, the stab of their cleats on the ash an uneven but precise patter, like the sound of metal horses.
When Eddie Fitzgerald moved in next door, I was going into second grade and my brother Tony was going into sixth. A moving van brought all of their stuff in the morning and Tony and me went out to sit in the dirt and watch. We didn't have any grass yet. Some of the families that moved in before us had already planted seeds in their yards and had string stretched around on sticks, with pieces of some old ripped-up pillowcase on it, to keep people out. After lunch my sister Beth came out. She was going into fifth grade. My name's Andy and our last name is Fenton.

We picked pieces of tar out of the dirt and chewed them. There's always a lot of tar and chunks of cement and nails and pieces of wood and stuff in the dirt when you first move in, that the men who built your house left there for you to kill yourself on. Your mother will tell you not to chew the tar, but we must have chewed a ton of it and it never hurt us. It's a lot like chewing gum except your teeth stick to it more and it makes more noise. It has a good strong taste to it.

Late in the afternoon Mrs. Fitzgerald drove up with Eddie and Gloria. First Gloria got out. She wore glasses and looked like she was in about fourth grade. Then Eddie got out.

"Wow," I said. "He must be in high school."

Tony had been sitting cross-legged, pouring dirt over his knees. When he saw Eddie he stood up. "Naw," he said, "that's no high school face."

"And high school boys don't dress like that," Beth said.

When my dad got home they were still bringing in some of the chairs and boxes and stuff, so he went over there to help out and meet the
people. Mom had supper on the table when he got back. "While we were
eating, Beth said, "How old is that new boy next door?"

My dad smiled. "Guess."

"Oh," Beth said, "about ninth grade, I think. That would make him--
fourteen or fifteen."

Dad looked at Tony. Tony nodded and said, "Yeah, about that. Maybe
eighth grade."

Then Dad looked at me but I just shrugged my shoulders, so he said,
"Looks like you've got a new friend, Tony. That kid's the same age as
you."

Man, that really shocked us. He was going into sixth grade, same
as Tony. That's all we could talk about for the rest of the night.
We didn't even remember to ask about the girl until the next morning.
For a couple of days that drove us screwy every time we thought about
it--how big that guy was, I mean. It was really crazy to think of him
and Tony as the same age, or even the same anything, they were so dif-
f erent. Tony is sort of small and thin and dark--like my dad, who's
half Italian. On his mother's side, in case you're wondering why our
last name isn't Cacciatore or Ravioli or something like that. Eddie
was the biggest kid I'd ever seen who could still be called a kid. All
of the rest of the guys his age had to stand on their tiptoes to be
five feet tall, and he was almost six feet. And I bet he weighed two
hundred pounds.

Later on, when he wasn't around, we called him "the walrus."
Actually, he looked more like a huge baby, with his hands and face
so soft and pink and fat. He was just shaped like a baby all over,
so fat and out of proportion. I saw a picture of him in a bathing
suit, and if he hadn't been standing next to a car so you could see how big he was, I would have sworn he was two months old. His nose was turned up and his nostrils were big, and he had little squinty eyes.

That first night, at supper, after we all settled down, my dad looked over at my mom and said, "I bet that kid has some kind of gland trouble."

"Oh, he's probably just big for his age," my mom said.

But my dad said, "No, it's gland trouble, I bet," and from then on he was convinced Eddie had something wrong with him. He was always telling people about Eddie and saying, "Gland trouble, probably." Have you ever noticed how people do that? They get some idea and they never get tired of telling people about it. And they use the same words each time, almost, so you can just about say it along with them. Every time anybody came over or anything, my dad would tell them about Eddie next door and say, "Gland trouble, probably," really serious.

After he'd lived there a few months, I found out he liked my sister. That was kind of funny. For one thing, she was a grade below him in school. And for another, it was funny that Eddie should like Beth when I knew she thought he was a creep. Besides, she always liked George Fleming. But I guess Eddie didn't care, because he was always asking questions about her. Stuff like did she ever talk about him, what kind of things did she like to do, did she get many phone calls from boys, stuff like that. If a bunch of guys were going down to fly kites at the vacant lot and I was tagging along, Eddie would get me aside and tell me I should ask Beth to come along, maybe she would like it. But I'd just say who wants girls around all the time, and he would laugh and say right, who needs them.
Once when they were all in eighth or ninth grade Eddie asked me if I could get him a picture of Beth. He said he was making a scrapbook of all the kids in the neighborhood. I asked him if he needed pictures of me and Tony too and he said sure, but not to worry about getting them right away because he was doing it in two sections, girls and boys, and he was doing the girls first to get them out of the way. He said not to tell anybody because he wanted to keep it a secret until it was all finished.

I didn't know how I could get a picture without her knowing. If I just asked her for one she'd know something was up, because what would I want with a picture of my own sister. So one day I got a big box that we kept a lot of old pictures in down from the hall closet. I just sat looking through them until I found one of Beth when she was in third grade. She had been digging around in the dirt, and her hair was all messed up and she was muddy and dirty, and all she had on was a pair of shorts.

He was a little disappointed that I hadn't been able to get a newer one, but he took it and was happy with it. I never heard any more about the scrapbook, but by that time I knew what he really wanted.

He always used to sneak looks at Beth while he was trying to look like he was doing something else. Like one time we were at their house for dinner and all of us kids were in the living room. Eddie and Tony were talking about what a dope their teacher was. Eddie kept looking over toward the kitchen, like he was trying to see how soon dinner would be ready. He had to look right past Beth to look at the kitchen, and if she wasn't looking in his direction he knew it was safe to look at her. I could see his eyes, and I knew he wasn't looking at the kitchen.
First he would look at her face, and he would just stare at it for a long time, like he was real thirsty and looking at a nice cold glass of water. Then he would look down her neck, real slow, past her shoulders and stomach and down to her waist. Then his eyes would move along her legs, past the end of her dress, out to her knees, and along her calves to her feet. Then all the way along her body to her face again. Then he would turn back toward Tony and go on talking.

If he looked toward her and she was looking his way, he just looked back toward Tony again. Once while he was looking at her like that I looked at Tony to see if he had noticed what Eddie was doing, but he was just talking away about his dumb teacher. Even if he'd noticed it he wouldn't have thought anything about it, because it was just too ridiculous to think that old fat Eddie, old pink clumsy baby-face Eddie, should like any girl—but especially Beth, who already had a lot of guys that liked her. It even took me a long time after he started asking me questions about her and doing stuff like that to figure out that he liked her. And I was the only person that knew. Everybody else would have laughed if I'd even mentioned it.

To tell you the truth, I thought he was crazy when he looked up and down her like that. Of course I was only in fourth grade then, and he was in eighth. By the time I got to be in eighth grade I knew what he'd been doing.

There was a lady across the street from us named Mrs. Murphy who was divorced. She had a boy named Brian Murphy, the same age as Tony and Eddie, and he was always in trouble with the police or somebody. One time he went in the Johnson's back yard while they were gone and scooped all of the goldfish out of their fishpond. That's the kind
of guy he was. When the Johnsons got home they found all these dead fish laying on the cement.

Anyway, Mrs. Murphy was always drinking, and sometimes she'd do crazy things. George Fleming said one night his dad was coming home and saw her sound asleep in the middle of her front yard with just her underwear on. He thought she was dead or something, but he shook her and she woke up. Sometimes we'd hear screams and things breaking over there at night, but we just figured she was drunk again.

One night we heard a lot of noise, voices and stuff, and in a few minutes we saw a flashing red light through our front curtains. It stopped right in front. We all went out to see. Most of the people on the block were already out, standing in groups on the sidewalk all up and down the street, talking real quiet. Little kids in pajamas and robes were running back and forth across the street. A police car was in front of the Murphys' house. It was really eerie out there in the dark, with that red light going around and around and all the people standing there.

An ambulance pulled up a minute later. My dad went across the street to find out what was going on. It was just my mom and Tony and Beth and me out there in front of our house. Eddie was in front of his house with his family, but he came down toward us to get a better look. My dad came back across the street.

"Well?" my mom said.

"Well, it seems Mrs. Murphy had been drinking--"

"So what else is new?" Tony said, and snickered.

"Shut up!" Dad was really serious. "You won't think it's so funny when you hear the rest of it. She hung herself."
Some men rolled a stretcher out of the house with something on it covered with a white sheet.

"Wow," Tony said, "is that her?"

I really felt strange standing there in the cold, thinking that somebody I knew had killed herself. It was spooky. It made me shiver. But it wasn't such a bad feeling. I guess this is a terrible thing to say, but in a way, it was exciting, like something on television, but really happening. I think most everybody out there felt the same.

Eddie was still standing there, so I walked over and said, "Did you hear what happened?"

"No."

"Brian's mom hung herself."

His mouth dropped open and he sucked a big gulp of air in, like girls do when they're surprised. "What?" he said.

"She hung herself. She's dead."

He slapped his fingers up over his mouth, just like a girl. Then he just stood there, staring. Maybe it was because of the red lights or the streetlights, but he looked sort of pasty and washed out.

"You okay?" I said. But he just ran inside.

The thing was, he felt sorry for her. He couldn't bear to think of anybody so miserable that they had to kill themselves. He was tender-hearted. Or maybe he just had a weak stomach, I don't know. But that's how he was, and then he changed.

By the time Eddie got to be in ninth grade, his first year at the high school, he was six-foot-five and weighed two-eighty. At least that's how big everybody said he was, and he sure looked it. Tony went
out for football and baseball that year, on the freshman teams. He
used to come home after practice and tell us how the coaches used to
joke about being broken-hearted over having a freshman at the school
that big, but so uncoordinated he couldn't even tie his own shoelaces
without a diagram and a little help from his friends. So of course
Eddie never went out for any sports.

One day along about then I was out in the back yard climbing up
our elm tree. I used to go up there sometimes and hide up in the top
branches, in the spring and summer when there were plenty of leaves.
I heard some music coming from the Fitzgeralds' house. It was pop music,
top forty stuff, so I knew it had to be either Eddie or Gloria listening
to it. I didn't think much of it until I heard Eddie's voice. I couldn't
make out what he was saying, but he was puffing and panting like he
was tired. He was talking to someone, it sounded like, except I couldn't
hear anybody answering, and after a while I crawled out on a long branch
where I could see over to the back of Eddie's house.

He was there, okay. He was in the living room, and it was dark
in there compared to outside, but I could still see him. I couldn't
believe it. He was dancing! Or at least trying to. It looked more
like he had been shot and was trying to fall down. He was throwing
his arms and legs around in all directions, and none of them seemed
to care what the other ones were doing. Eddie dancing! I was too shocked
to laugh.

I still couldn't quite make out what he was saying, so I dropped
out of the tree, watched over the fence until his back was turned, and
scrambled over and hid behind the corner of the house. It took me a
while before I could really believe he was saying what he was saying.
He was puffing and gasping after every few words, but I made it out okay.

"Hey, Beth—you're a good—dancer.—No, I haven't been—dancing long. Thank you.—You want to what?—No, not here, not in—front of all these—people. Wait—till we're alone.—You want to—come to my place after?—Good."

I tried to get closer so I could see if there wasn't somebody else in there, maybe talking in sign language or something, but Eddie saw me. He just froze where he was, arms and legs sticking out at weird angles, and his mouth hanging open. He looked pretty funny, but I didn't laugh. Then he stomped over to the sliding glass door and said, "Get in here!" He sounded pretty mean, but I walked in and stood there by the door, with my arms folded, trying not to have any expression on my face.

He waddled over and shut off the record player, and turned around and glared at me. "What gives you the right to go around spying on people?" I just shrugged. I wasn't afraid, I just couldn't think of anything to say. Then he said, "Who said you could go in our back yard?"

He waited, so I knew I had to say something. "Well, I heard the music. I was up in our tree." He was still waiting. "Well, you have to admit, I've never seen you dance before, so—"

"Any reason you should get any particular enjoyment out of watching me learn to dance?"

"I didn't laugh."

"'Laugh?' I didn't say anything about laughing, I said enjoyment. What made you say 'laugh?' Did you feel like laughing?"
"Aw, come on, Eddie. If you saw me driving a car down the street, wouldn't you come out to see what was going on?"

"That's because you can't drive a car. Who says I can't dance?"

I stared at the floor. "I just never saw you do it before, that's all."

He'd cooled off pretty much by then, and he came over and sat in a chair. "You won't tell anybody, will you?"

"Not if you don't want me to."

"I'm keeping it for a secret," he said. "There's a dance coming up, and I thought I might ask Beth. Do you think she'll go with me?"

I knew she wouldn't, but I said, "I don't know. She might, if she doesn't go with old Jack Peterson."

He rubbed his eyes with his fingers. "Yeah, I know she's been going out with him a lot. I better ask her pretty soon."

We sat for a while. He breathed in and out real deep a few times, to help get his breath. He was still puffing, and there were streams of sweat running down his pink face.

I stood up. "Well, good luck. I hope you get it down in time."

"I still got a couple of weeks," he said. I opened the glass door and stepped out. "Hey," he said. I turned around. He had his head back, staring up at the ceiling. "Thanks for keeping your mouth shut. You're a pal."

"It's okay." I said. I shut the door, walked over to the fence, and hopped over. I took a look back over at him. He was still flopped back in the chair. I climbed up to the top of the tree again and sat there, where the only things I could see were leaves and sky. After
a few minutes I heard the music start up again.

About a week before the dance we were all sitting at dinner, nobody saying anything much. The reason all of our family discussions take place at dinner is because that's the only time we're all together, but it's probably the same way in your family too. All of a sudden Beth said, "Eddie, uh—asked me to go to the dance with him today."

I could tell she'd been working up to say that for a long time. Tony busted out laughing so hard he almost fell out of his chair. He only stopped long enough to say, "Eddie Fitzgerald? Next door?" and split his face laughing again when Beth scowled at him.

"Anthony, you stop that!" my mother said. But he went right on, and Mom said to Beth, "What did you say?"

"I told him I was going with Jack."

"Has Jack—stop laughing at that poor boy, Anthony! Has Jack asked you yet?"

"He will."

My dad leaned forward and said, slowly, "Then suppose you go over to Eddie's house right now and tell him that you'll—"

Mom interrupted him. "Oh, Honey, she doesn't have to if she doesn't want to." She turned back to Beth. "But you should have told him the truth, dear."

"How could I tell him I didn't want to go with him because he's a perfect klutz?"

"Beth!" Mom said. "He isn't either, and you shouldn't even think things like that. He has his strong points, just like anybody else." And on and on, but we'd heard it before. "Now, Tony, don't you say
a word about this to anybody. Or you either, Andy." Tony just smiled.

A couple of days later Jack asked Beth to go with him, so it looked like the whole thing was over. I felt sort of sorry for old Eddie. It didn't seem to me that it would have hurt Beth to have gone to one dance with him.

The night of the dance Beth and Jack doubled with Tony and some girl, because Tony had just turned sixteen and could drive. They were supposed to be home by twelve, but at ten-thirty, we were all in the living room, and the car pulled up and Beth and Tony came in the front door. Beth was crying, and she walked straight through the living room, down the hall, and into her room and shut the door. Tony looked sort of amused. Mom gave us all a funny look and asked Tony what had happened, but she was gone down the hall after Beth before he could say anything.

"Well," Dad said, "what did happen? Did Jack try something funny?"

Tony shook his head, still smiling. He smiled the whole time he talked to us, but he didn't laugh. Maybe he was worried about Beth, but more likely he was all laughed out. "No. Jack's out in the car, and Karen too. It was Eddie. He showed up stag. All he did at first was stand around the punch table by himself. Then before one dance he all of a sudden walks up to Beth and asks if she'll dance with him. He can hardly talk, he's so nervous. You can tell she doesn't want to, but what can she say in front of all those people? Jack should have said something, but he didn't. I guess he wanted to see Eddie dance. Anyway, they start dancing, and I mean I have never seen anything like that before in my whole life! He looks like he's got ants in his clothes. We're all just sort of standing around, laughing a
little. Beth looks like she's going to cry, but it's her own fault. She could have turned him down. Anyway, when he sees everybody laughing at him, he really gets red and nervous, and he's twice as bad as before, even. And just when it seems like there's no way he can get any worse, whoosh! Both his legs go out from under him at the same time, and down he goes!" Tony was acting all of this out for us, of course. He was quite a ham. "The only trouble is, he falls right into Beth, and goes down right on top of her. She lets out this big hairy scream, and so do fifty million other girls in there, and teachers are running all over and trying to get him off her and everything. It was really wild. They had to carry her off the floor. They thought she was hurt. Eddie just stayed face-down on the floor for a long time, and then all of a sudden he got up and rumbled out of there in that funny run of his, blubberin' away." And he shuffled around the coffee table like Eddie did when he ran, stiff-legged, like his feet never left the ground. As if we'd never seen Eddie run before. "So a few minutes later Mr. Philips came out and said Beth wanted to go home and would I take her. So here we are. Can I go back out? I told Karen I'd take her for a hamburger, and I've got to take Jack home."

Dad just waved him out, and we could hear them laughing in the car as they pulled out of the driveway. He just sat in his chair like he was thinking. I got the feeling he didn't think too much of Eddie at that minute. We could hear Beth down in her room.

I thought that probably after a mess like that Eddie would give up on Beth. Of course everybody called him Fred Astaire and stuff like that. And it wasn't any big secret that after having that elephant
fall on her like that Beth would rather kiss a pig than be in the same state with him. Actually, after she'd cooled off, she really didn't hold it against him too much. Even if he was ugly, I guess she was a little flattered that he liked her, and besides, she's a pretty nice girl, you know? For a sister, she's really gentle and good. A lot of guys have it a lot worse.

Anyway, the whole thing kind of died down. George Fleming got arrested for drunk driving, and Tony said some girl had to drop out of school because she was pregnant, and so everybody forgot about Eddie Fitzgerald's dancing debut. Except Eddie. He must have thought about it a lot, because that's when he changed. He just started hanging around by himself all the time. I mean, before that, he was never the most popular guy in the world, but usually the guys wouldn't mind if he tagged along when they walked down to the store or went to the movies. But after that mess at the dance, he just didn't seem to want to be around anybody. If somebody wanted him to do something, he would always make some excuse. He'd come home from school and go inside and that was about it.

It was like he was real sad, or real tired or something. He never got mad and punched anybody, and he never shouted. Sometimes when I was up in my tree I'd see him sitting in his back yard, in an old aluminum patio chair. He'd just sit there, with his eyes open but not looking at anything, like an old dog or something.

And another thing that got me was that he still seemed to like Beth okay. One time she said he even tried to apologize to her about the dance. She said she just turned around and walked away and he had to shout out to her as she was going that he was sorry.
When he never snapped out of it, we all just about forgot he was even alive. Nobody mentioned him. The school year ended and summer came, and even then he didn't do anything, all summer long. When school started again it was the same thing all over—go to school, come home, go inside, and that's it. In fact, that was it for three years. Once in a while somebody would make a joke about him because he was so big, but that was all. That was the only thing he gave them to joke about, and he couldn't help that.

By the time he and Tony were seniors and Beth was a junior, a lot of things were different. Tony was more serious, had a job and everything. And Beth had been going out with a guy named Mark Browning for about a year, and everybody figured it was for keeps. Eddie wasn't too different, though. He was still keeping to himself.

It was near the end of the school year that I had the first hint something was going to happen. I was up in my tree, and all of a sudden I heard music coming from the direction of Eddie's house. No big deal, right? Could have been a million different things. But then I heard old Eddie again, talking to himself and puffing and panting, just like before. I didn't hop down or even look over to see. I knew what it was.

He kept it up for an hour or so, until it was time for his mother to come home. After that I could hear him out there about every day. And when I heard my sister and mom talking about dresses and stuff for the junior-senior prom, I figured out what was going on. Old Eddie was going to make one more try.

I guess he could have been practicing so he could take some other girl, but somehow that never occurred to me. As long as I'd known him,
he'd liked Beth and nobody else. Anyway, I was right. I sure wish now I'd been wrong.

About three weeks or so before the prom, I was walking home from school and I saw Eddie standing in his front yard, looking off toward our house. I hadn't even talked to him in a long time—like a year or two. But I figured I ought to find out what was going on and maybe stop some trouble before it started. So I stopped and said, "Hi, Eddie. How's it goin'?" I always tried to talk like the high school guys talked to each other, even though they still talked to me like I was a kid.

He turned around real quick, sort of startled. I guess he hadn't heard me walk up. When he saw who it was he just looked back over at my house for a second, and then said, "Do you think your sister'll go to the prom with me?"

Man, I really didn't expect him just to come out with it like that. Always before he'd kind of beat around the bush, but this time he just spit it right out. I stood there like I was stupid, and then I said, "What?"

"I'm going to ask her when she gets home."

I knew she wouldn't, and this time I figured it'd be better to tell him. "Are you kidding?" I said. He squinted his eyes down at me. "I mean, after what happened at that other dance?" He didn't move. "She likes you okay. I mean, she doesn't hate you. But she came home cryin' and everything. She'd be afraid you'd—you know."

He knew. He got red and started to sound kind of mad. "It wasn't my fault," he said.

"I know. You can't help it you're so big."
"That's got nothing to do with it!" He was almost shouting. His eyes opened real wide so you could see the whites all around, and his face twitched and shivered all over. He stooped to get a stick off the ground, and started breaking it up. He didn't say anything for a while. He looked like he was thinking.

Finally I said, "Okay, but--"

"You shut up!" he said. He was quieter, but he still sounded mean. "Beth knows it wasn't my fault, and she'll go if I ask her. She said so." I knew she hadn't said anything like that. He was really weird. "Now you go home. Soon as she gets there, I'm comin' over to talk to her, and you stay out of the way."

He turned away like that was the end of it, and I scooted off as fast as I could. When he got mad, he was scary. I went inside and closed the door and hoped Beth wouldn't get home until my dad was there.

A few minutes later, though, the car of girls she always rode home in pulled up in front, and then drove off after Beth was out. She came inside and said, "Hi, Squirt." She dropped her books on the coffee table and flopped down on the couch. She never flopped like that when her friends were around, only when it was just family. If one of her boyfriends had been in that room she would have walked in real graceful, shut the door quiet-like, set her books down, and sat with her skirt tucked under her and her back straight and her hands folded in her lap. And then after a minute or two she would have leaned back and crossed her legs. But it was just me, and she flopped. Not that it made any difference to me.

"Eddie's comin' over in a minute," I said.

She made a face. "What does he want?"
From where I was I could see Eddie coming across our yard. He turned up the driveway. "Here he comes," I said. "He wants to ask you to go to the prom with him."

Her mouth fell open and her eyes got real big. "You're kidding!" she said. Just then he knocked on the door. "Oh--rats!" She sat up straight then. Even for Eddie she sat up straight.

He came in and shut the door behind him. He saw me sitting there, but he just ignored me. "Hi, Beth," he said.

"Hello, Eddie." That was just like her. She smiled and acted real friendly. Not flirt-friendly, but--you know, just nice-friendy.

Eddie sat down in the chair by the door. "How was school?"

"Awful, like always." She kind of laughed. "What can I do for you?" I thought that was funny. "What can I do for you?" Like she was working in a store or something.

"Oh, nothing in particular. Just wanted to talk." He crossed his legs and tried to act like it was no big deal, but his hands were shaking and so was his voice. "You have Michaels fifth period, don't you?"

"Yes."

"How'd you do on that test?"

"He didn't hand ours back yet."

"Oh." He looked disappointed. "I got a C." He fiddled with his fingers. They sat for a long time, neither one looking at the other. I guess the stupid test was the only thing he'd thought up to talk about. Beth looked like she felt sorry for him, but she didn't have anything to talk to him about, either. Finally Eddie took a deep breath, held it, and let it out. "Beth--" He looked up at her. She was looking
at him. He lowered his eyes, then raised them again. "Would you like to go to the prom with me?"

Since I'd already told her what he was there for, it didn't come as any great shock to her. "Oh, Eddie." She sounded sad. I guess it was because she had to hurt his feelings. I knew she wouldn't say yes in a million years.

He said, "It really wasn't my fault about that last time." You could really see on his face how desperate he was for her to go with him. He was leaning forward in his chair, moving his hands a lot. I didn't like his voice; it reminded me of out in the yard just before. "It wouldn't be like that."

Beth nodded. "They'd all be just waiting."

"But I been practicing."

"I can just hear them."

"What am I, some kind of clown?" His voice kept getting louder, and his eyes were all screwed up. His face was twitching again. He looked crazy.

Beth felt really sorry for him. Her lip was trembling. "Don't you remember?"

He gave a kind of weird laugh, up high like a girl, and leaned back. "Oh, boy, that's good. Do I remember. I've remembered every day for three years. You think I'd take a chance on that happening again? You're crazy! I been practicing, I tell you!" He kind of quieted down then. "I can handle it now. We'll have a good time. Go someplace nice to eat first. The Mill, if you want. Will you come?"

"I've been planning on going with Mark."

"Has he asked you yet?"
That wasn't too good of a thing for him to ask. Beth got kind of mad then. I guess Mark hadn't asked her.

"That's none of your business. I've been going out with Mark for over a year, and I like him, and if I want to go to the Prom with him, that's my choice, and--it's just not your business."

"But it is too!" He got up then, and started waddling back and forth in front of the couch. "You've only known him a little while. He probably likes you okay, but he's just liked you a year or two. Beth, I've--" All of a sudden he stopped and stood still. I guess he realized what he was saying. But he must have figured that since he'd already started, and since this was his last chance, he'd better go on. He faced her. "I've always liked you. Since you were little. I always figured that when you got old enough to want somebody you'd remember how I'd always been your friend--"

"Eddie, I have lots of friends. Lots of good friends, lots of people who've been my friends a long time--"

"I know that--"

"...And you're my friend too, Eddie! But just a friend, that's all."

It was like everything she said seemed to push him further. When she said he was just a friend, wow, that really drove him wild. He'd been whining before, but now his face looked like he was crying. You know how sometimes just before somebody starts to cry, before the tears come out, how their face looks like they're crying already? Well, that's how his was. He looked all around the room, like he was looking for something that would help him. "I could lose a lot of weight," he said.

"If you could, I'd be happy for you, but you'd still be just a friend."
"I could dye my hair!"

"Eddie--"

He made this sound then, way down in him somewhere, like a growl or a moan, but real loud, and he lifted up that huge old foot of his and wham! stomped it down on the floor. He yelled "No!" as loud as he could, and held it out like a scream while he pounded on his forehead with his fists. He jumped forward, tripped on the coffee table, knocked it over and broke off two of the legs, and fell with his head and shoulders on the couch beside Beth.

Man, that really scared me. This whole thing had been getting creepier and creepier, and when he crashed down across that table I about jumped out of my skin. I didn't know what to do. Beth either. She let out this scream and was up and clear across the room before her feet hit the floor. She just stood there looking back and forth from me to Eddie, with her hands over her mouth and her eyes all white and starey. And Eddie just laid there, blubbing and making these funny sounds like he was trying to talk but you couldn't understand what he was trying to say, it was so garbled up. And all the time these little high-pitched squeals kept coming out of him. I've never heard anybody make sounds like that. And he kept slamming his hands down on the couch cushions, beating the heck out of them, probably breaking the springs. He was really ruined.

I really didn't know what to do. What I wanted to do was beat it, but it wouldn't have been right to leave Beth there alone to get rid of him. So I just sat there, and Beth stood there, and pretty soon Eddie stopped beating the couch to death and just laid there all sprawled out, sobbing and squealing, rocking back and forth a little bit.
About then Beth went into the kitchen and came out with a glass of water. I guess she figured he needed something, and she was so rattled the only thing she could think of to get him was a glass of water. Anyway, she went across to him, real slow, and when she got to the end of the couch where he was she held out the glass and said, "Here. Drink this. It'll make you feel better."

When he heard her voice, he shut up. Just like that. He lifted his head and looked at her, and for about a second he was still. Then whap! He brought that big old hand around and grabbed her arm, and that glass went sailing across the room, spilling water all over the place, and smashed against the wall. Beth screeched a real short one, but she was too scared to do any more than that.

And then he got this really weird look on his face, which was all wet and red and twisted up enough to scare you to death anyway. But he got this look like a little smile on his mouth, like everything was okay all of a sudden. And then, in the middle of all that silence, he said, "You love me."

Just as plain as day he said that. And he wasn't asking either, he was saying it like it was something everybody already knew about. Bringing him a glass of water didn't mean she loved him. But he said it again, in this weirdly joyful voice, "Oh, you love me!"

She sure wasn't acting like she loved him, though. She was leaning back away, pushing with her feet against the couch, trying to get loose. "Eddie, no!" she said. Wow, was she scared! I mean, I've never seen anybody so scared. And I don't mean I wasn't scared, too. I almost wet my pants.
"Yes, you do, you love me!" he said. And he got up to his knees and yanked her over to him. Even on his knees, he was almost as tall as she was. He wrapped an arm around her and squeezed her with this really happy look on his face.

Beth started pounding on his head with her fists, and kicking as much as she could, and yelling, "Let go of me! Let go!" She got away somehow, and started to run, but he reached out and got her. He grabbed the top of her skirt with one hand, and then jammed the other one against her back and shoved really hard. Man, that skirt just ripped off her like paper and she went flying across the room like she was a pillow or something. She turned a little bit, and smashed with her back against the wall. She was still on her feet when she hit the wall, but then she slid down until she was sitting on the floor.

It was a warm day, and with her skirt ripped off all she had on was her underwear and blouse. She'd even lost her shoes somewhere in the mess, or maybe she'd taken them off when she first came in, I hadn't noticed. But I noticed her long bare legs. And then, you know, for the first time, I really saw how pretty she was. I mean her figure. I knew she was pretty before, but--well, like her legs. I'd seen them before, like at the beach and around the house and stuff, but then I really saw how pretty they were. They were slender, but not skinny like those women's legs in magazines. They were slender but curved and rounded, and tan, and just really nice. They were pretty. It made you feel good to look at them.

She looked up at me then, and her face was just one mass of confusion. It was like she just didn't know what was happening, and there was nothing she could do. And Eddie got up, threw down what was left of her skirt,
and started walking over to her, still with that same weird smile. I was plenty scared, but I jumped up and leaped on his back and started hitting him on the head and face and trying anything I could think of to hurt him so he would leave her alone. He just reached back and pulled me off like I was some bird or insect and tossed me over on top of the wrecked table. I hurt my knee, but I grabbed one of the broken table legs and went back over and whacked him in the side. He just grabbed the thing away from me and tossed it into the kitchen, and shoved me back down on the floor. He made it over to her then and picked her up.

She looked like she was being picked up by the abominable snowman or something. Everywhere he touched her, she tried to draw back from him, like she was being burned. And he started off carrying her down the hall. And all the time he kept saying stuff like, "It's all right. Everything's all right." And she kept mumbling in this really confused voice. Man, it really tore me up to hear her talk in that voice. My own sister's voice saying those things like that, so sad.

He stopped at the door to my parents' room and said to her, "Your mom and your dad sleep in this room. I've seen them, some nights, through the window, through the crack in the drapes. I've heard them talk—did you know that? I've seen what they do..." and so on like that. She didn't hear him I don't think. She just kept saying, "No, no, no..." But that really got to me. All those years he had been peeping around. I never told my dad about it. I don't think he'd like to know.

He took her into the room then and closed the door. My parents had put a lock on the door so they could have some privacy when they wanted to. The lock clicked.
I could hear some rustling and springs squeaking, and she kept saying, "No, no, no..." in that voice, sometimes louder and quicker than other times, sometimes with a little shiver in it. I tried to open the door, but it was locked okay.

I'd never had any trouble like that before. I never thought of the police. In fact, the only thing I could think of was my dad. He would know what to do. But I didn't know the telephone number. I guess I could have called information and gotten the number, but, man, when you're scared like that, you can't think of nothing! I knew where he worked. It was about a mile away. You know, I didn't even think of taking my bike. I just ran out of that house and off down the street.

I ran for a long ways before I poopced out. I was more than halfway there, though. So I walked along as fast as I could, and all of a sudden I realized that the wind was still blowing, kind of cool, the white clouds were up in the sky still, and kids were going by on bikes, laughing and messing around. It really seemed strange that everything was still going on like normal, while my sister was stuck in a room with a crazy man. The kids on the bikes looked at me funny, and it was because I was crying. I might have been crying all through the whole thing, I don't know. I hadn't cried in years, and then not to even know when I was doing it was spooky. But then I thought about Beth locked in there with that big ape, and I started running again. I noticed I was limping. My knee really hurt where it got smashed against that dumb table.

My dad works in a plant, and when I ran into the front office crying like that, the lady knew I meant business. I told her who my dad was and she called on the telephone and in a minute or so he came
in. I said we had to go home, but I couldn't tell him why. I
couldn't even say it. We ran out and jumped into the car and on the
way back I managed to say Eddie was nuts and he was there with Beth.
Man, he drove like crazy. We were home in about a minute.

We screeched into the driveway and he said, "Where?" and I said,
"Your room." We went tearing down the hall and when he found out the
door was locked he kicked it down. Took him about three tries, but he
got it down. He stepped inside and just stopped dead. I peered in
around him and man, it was awful in there. All the covers were ripped
off the bed and the mattresses were shoved off to one side and the frame
was collapsed. The dresser was tipped over and stuff was laying all
over the floor. The window was broken.

Beth was laying on the mattresses, and she didn't have any clothes
on. She was just laying there on her back, with her eyes open, staring
straight ahead. She didn't hear us come in, I don't think. She didn't
even look like she was alive.

Eddie was crouched beside the mattress. He must have been getting
dressed. He had his pants on, and was picking up his shoes and socks.
He stood up, looked at us, and giggled in that crazy high voice.

Dad jumped in and grabbed a blanket and tossed it over Beth to
cover her. Then he came at Eddie screaming. I've seen him mad before,
but nothing like that. I couldn't understand what he was saying any
more than I could understand Eddie a while before. He whacked that
guy a couple of good ones, but old Eddie just shoved him down and took
off down the hall in that fat run of his.

Dad started out after him, but stopped in the living room and
called the police. Then he called my mother at work and told her to
get home, and then he came back down to help Beth. But all he could do was cover her up good and warm, and sit there by her. She still didn't know what was going on. My dad didn't touch her.

The police came in a few minutes and took down Eddie's description and everything and looked all around. My mom got home, and cried and cried and hugged Beth and tried to comfort her, but Beth still just laid there. Our doctor came and made us all leave except for my mom for a while. Then he came out and told the police that Beth had been sexually assaulted. He and my dad went in, wrapped the blanket all around her, and carried her into her own room and put her in her own bed. They came out and closed the door with my mom inside and the doctor said for us all to stay out and nobody except my mother could go in. Then he left.

My dad and the police asked me a lot of questions about what had happened, and it took me a long time to tell everything. Then they left, too.

Tony came home before dark. When my dad told him what had happened, he got as mad as my dad. He kept saying, "I'll kill him. I'll kill that guy first chance I get, I swear."

The police called late that night and said they'd found Eddie in a drainage pipe under a road. He was crying by then, and they'd just led him to the police car.

About midnight we were sitting in the living room, Mom, Dad, and Tony and me, with the television on, and all of a sudden this scream came from Beth's room. I guess she finally realized what had happened to her. My mom ran in to her, and Beth cried in a soft, hopeless, sad, sad way for a couple of hours until she fell asleep.
They took Eddie away and I don't know where. A couple of weeks after that I saw a picture of him in a newspaper. He had handcuffs on, and a bunch of police were leading him out of a big building with barred windows. He was looking right at the camera, and his face was pretty calm. Actually there were two pictures. In the other one he was getting into the back of a police car. His head was turned away.

I haven't seen or heard anything since. I wonder if he's in a prison somewhere. I wonder if he still likes Beth. I bet he does.
SOMEBODY STOLE THE GIDEON BILL

At first he thought it was a rock just beside the road, or an old rusty car fender, but the rock stood up and raised a piece of cardboard with "L.A." crayoned on it, and Timothy tapped off his brights. Long hair, grubby clothes, sleeping bag—some hippie-type on his way across country, he thought. What a place to get dumped! Then he noticed the full hips, and the slender waist. He braked gently.

Sage and creosote and wild smells burst in with the cool night air, and the girl sat into the car. "Hey, thanks," she said. "Thought I was gonna have to spend the night out here. Probably would have been eaten by a coyote. Where you goin'?" She arranged her sleeping bag and a paper shopping bag with rolled top by her feet. Timothy stepped on the gas. They were on the old Amboy Highway, not far south of Highway 40, and driving toward Palm Springs.

"Santa Barbara. I have to be there tomorrow. Do you live in L.A.?)"

"No. Just never been there. Why Santa Barbara?"

"I have a meeting there. I'm a company representative, of sorts." He put on a little grin. He felt stiff and nervous, like with a new customer. "Where do you live?"

"Maybe L.A."

Out of the corner of his eye he could see that she watched his face all the time they were talking. He kept his grin and looked across at her. She smiled with her mouth, but her eyes didn't change, and her smile was cynical. He wanted to say something, but he wasn't sure what. He cleared his throat. "Cool night," he said, and his voice was thin and sticky and he cleared his throat again.
She settled into her seat with a short, confident wiggle and looked around her. "You must make a lot of money selling whatever it is you sell." She stroked the leather dash.

"Actually, it's a company car. But no one else drives it." She was looking at him again. He could sense her concentration. Was she trying to size him up or what? He glanced at her. "Would you like a smoke?"

"Yeah, thanks." Still that cynical smile. He reached and opened the glove compartment, and when she saw the cigarettes inside she said, "That's okay. I'll get it."

She was wearing moccasins and faded boys' jeans, too big for her. The Indian-print shirt was about threadbare—no bra. He felt a sharp excitement as he followed with his eyes the gentle curves of her breast, swelling out to the nipples, sharply defined behind the thin fabric, erect after her exposure to the cold. He even thought he could make out the dark pigmentation through the shirt, but it was hard to tell with that print. The shirt was open down to about the level of her nipples anyway. If she were to lean forward—he was suddenly aware that she was looking at him. His face and ears turned hot, and he looked up at her face. She was not embarrassed. She made no move to cover herself. Her only expression was amusement, and a sort of satisfaction. Still that slight smile. He looked back to the road, dry-mouthed, wanting to say something witty and sophisticated.

"Do you want one too?" she asked.

"What?"

"A smoke."
"Oh--yeah." She leaned across the seat and put one to his lips. She took the other in her own mouth and pushed in the lighter.

"You ever had any of those imported ones that come in different colors?" she asked.

He tried to look interested. "No," he said, his voice muffled by the cigarette, "I never have."

"They come in a little hard box and you open it up and the cigarettes are all different colors--yellow, blue, all light colors. Just tobacco, but they're really strong, and they're expensive too."

"I'll have to try some of those. Where do you buy them?" he asked, but she just smiled at him. He looked back at the road.

Sometimes there were dim lights set well back from the road, from the windows of shabby vacation cabins of people who lived in San Bernardino or Lakewood. There were many more cabins than just the lighted ones, Timothy knew, but most of them were the abandoned one-room homesteader's shacks that cover the Southern California desert like rusted tanks from some forgotten war. On a cloudy night, and especially to eyes adjusted to the brightness of a headlight beam, they were invisible, but they were there, on both sides of the road, all across this flat valley to Twentynine Palms, and from there to Palm Springs.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

"Always."

"Me too. I was just hoping for a cafe or something. When we find one I'll buy you some food, if you'd like."

"Thanks." That direct gaze again.

The lighter popped out and he reached for it. Her hand was there first, and his fingers landed softly on hers for a moment. Not until
he lifted his hand back toward the steering wheel did she pull the lighter out and hold it up to his cigarette. As she leaned, he felt her breast against his elbow. She must realize what she's doing. It can't all be an accident.

"Got it?" she asked.

"Yeah. Thanks."

For a couple of miles they rode in silence. He was beginning to feel loose and good. It occurred to him for the first time that if he were reading the signals right, this could turn out to be more than just another hitchhiker. He was barely over thirty, conservatively but expensively dressed, and he always carried a lot of cash on these trips. His build and coloring and face were not at all memorable, but still she seemed interested. The real question was whether he should. He'd not been unfaithful in ten years of marriage. But there was no way Norma could ever find out. No possible way. He tapped his wedding ring lightly against the steering wheel and considered slipping it into his pocket. Suppose this girl had some disease? He thought of his healthy four-and-a-half-year-old daughter.

"What's the 'N' for?" the girl asked.

"What 'N'?"

"On your briefcase here. 'T.N.P.' Your initials, right? What's the 'N' for?"

The woman is sitting on the bed, the curtains are drawn. "How many times do I have to tell you?" she whispers, holding the boy by the shoulders.

The boy's lip quivers. "I won't do it anymore."
"That should be obvious." The girl looked at him blankly. "I mean, you can imagine what my nickname would be if my initials were just T.P."

"All right," she said, "point to you. Now what's it stand for?"

The woman's face is dim, her hair is put up in a net, in the loose V of her robe front her breasts swell out from each side and catch the light. "You've said that before. But you don't mind."

The tears start. "Don't shout at me," he begs, and turns his face away, into shadow.

She turns him full toward her; his head drops, he whimpers. Then: "Tim-o-thy!" she shouts as loud as she can, "Tim-o-thy Nic-o-de-mus Pritch-ard!" He covers his ears with his hands against this worst of punishments, this bold and undeniable accusation of his existence. He falls into her lap, but she pulls his hands away. "Tim-o-thy Nic-o-de-mus Pritch-ard!" she screams, and he pushes his head between her legs and, quietly, fearfully, he weeps.

"Nicodemus," she said, as they entered the cafe. "Nicodemus. God."

"Quiet," he whispered. "You said you could keep a secret. Call me Tim."

"Why would anybody name their kid that?" she said, awed. They slid into a booth along the side wall and Timothy opened a menu. "Timothy Nicodemus Pritchard," she said.

"Hey," he said, "Look, I'm sorry I told you." He read every item on the menu, though he knew he would order a roast beef sandwich.

"You know," she said, "I got your history figured out just by your name."
Timothy grinned. "You're probably right, too." He could hear a man and a woman arguing in the kitchen, and wondered if the waitress knew she had customers.

"I bet anything your old man was a preacher," the girl said, "and your old lady was probably a Sunday School teacher. Or missionaries in Africa."

"Is that so? How do you know so much about preachers?"

The waitress sauntered to their table and stood with one hip thrust toward Timothy. She was about 30, with long red hair in a pony tail, wearing a white short-short waffle-weave nylon dress and white tennis shoes. There was a bruise on her cheekbone and her mascara was smeared.

"I want a cheeseburger," the girl said, "with everything but onions, and french fries, and you serve wine?"

Something passed between the woman and the girl. There was a hard look and Timothy thought, they know each other. Then it was gone.

"Gimme a coke then. And I also want a side order of two fried eggs."

"I'll have coffee and a roast beef sandwich," Timothy said. He watched the woman's dress flip around her skinny bottom as she walked away, the dark tops of her nylons showing a good inch below her dress.

"Was I right?" the girl asked.

"About what?"

"Your parents. Holy roller kind that healed and screamed and all that."

"Nothing that bad."

"What then?"

"Missionary Alliance."
"I knew it," she said. The woman brought their drinks.

He said, "If I knew your name, I could probably tell a lot about you, too."

"So?"

"So what's your name?"

She looked at him silently for a long time before saying "Suzanne," and Timothy knew she was lying, and he wished he hadn't told her his real name.

She looked straight at him for a long time. He wanted to turn his eyes away from hers after a few seconds, and he was angry at himself for that. When he began to fidget, her mouth smiled. He said, "Would you like me to read your palm?"

She snorted. "Don't give me that crap."

He laughed nervously. "It's only a game."

"You sure play a lot of games."

"Don't you ever?"

She sucked her cheeks in, let her eyelids drop halfway, and turned away from him. "They don't interest me."

"Well, let me try anyway," he said, and reached for her hand. She jerked it away, then hesitated, looking at him, and put her hand gently in his.

"Why not?" she said. "But don't give me my future, even if your name is Nick—whatever."

Her hand was cool and soft and dry, and Timothy wished his own weren't so warm and moist. He traced the lines of her palm with his index finger. Her skin was so tender, like a baby's. "I see that you come from a large family," he said.
"Wrong so far." She drew her feet up onto the seat.

She's about fifteen. She's run away from home. "Your father is a rich businessman."

She laughed without humor. "You're doin' just great."

He rubbed her wrist with his thumb, and the feel of her sin moved him. There was something in his mind about her that pricked his skin under his clothes and that made his stomach loose and moved in his loins. And behind that there was something else.

The waitress carried their plates out from the kitchen, and Timothy patted the girl's dry palm twice with his fingers and let her hand go. "My specialty is futures," he said, "so I guess that's about all I can do."

The woman left a check and sauntered away, tapping the tables she passed with her fingertips. The girl stuffed a handful of french fries into her mouth immediately, then poured ketchup over the rest and started in on the burger.

"You were really hungry." Timothy said. She nodded, but didn't look up. Her skin was clear for a girl her age, but pale, and her hair was a rich brown but suffered from not being washed and brushed often. He took a bite of his roast beef, and then sprinkled salt over it, and a little pepper, more from habit than for taste. He liked the movement of her shoulders under her thin shirt as she set down the half-eaten burger to drink her coke; they were small, and weak, like a child's, and her arms were thin and graceful. As she put more fries into her mouth he saw the white, slightly crooked teeth, the tongue reaching, the red moistness. In a few minutes she was finished, and only then did she look up.
"You don't want that I'll eat it," she said. He looked at the barely started sandwich on his plate, and while he automatically cut off another piece, he called to the woman with the bruise and ordered another burger for the girl. He forced himself to eat. Before he'd picked her up he'd been nauseatingly hungry, but now the excitement of being with her had crowded his hunger out. He kept his eyes on his plate, but he was conscious of her, and soon she had finished the second burger and was idly sliding her empty coke glass in a pool of condensation.

"You been driving all day?" she asked.

"Yeah. Since early this morning. I'm pretty tired, to tell you the truth. I was just thinking about staying here tonight, but I'd hate to just desert you. You wouldn't have much chance of getting a ride out there at night." She grinned. "Not many cars, I mean."

"I know. Well--you don't have to."

It was hard to pretend to be calm. His insides felt vacant and his breathing was loud in his ears. "What do you mean?"

Pause. Quick smile. "I have to sleep too, you know. I'll stay here with you."

He wiped his mouth with his napkin. The movement was natural, he hoped. "I can only afford one room."

"I bet. But that's all right." Still that smile. He was sure he must look nervous and tight, but she seemed bored if anything, leaning forward, resting her forearms on the table, shoulders a little slouched. "You don't have to do this," he said.

She laughed then. "It's cold outside, and it's warm inside. I like to be warm. Besides, I'm sleepy," and she yawned.
He raises himself on one elbow and begins to kiss her face. She is almost asleep, but smiles at his first kisses. When his kisses grow fierce, she frowns and draws back.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

"I'm so sleepy. Can't we just go to sleep?"

"I want something" He touches her breast. She shrinks from him, and at her movement his anger jumps.

"I don't want to do that."

He lets his breath out loudly. His need is strong. "That's what you said before we were married. Things are a little different now."

"Yes they are," she says, and then she is quiet.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Well why not?"

"I just don't like to when my stomach's so big," she whines.

He touches her ripening belly, huge and accusing under his fingers.

"You aren't due for two months."

"Well I don't like to feel it there between us when we do that. There's a little baby."

He lies quietly, angry. It will not hurt her, she has no active part. He slaps the mattress hard. She jumps.

"Why did you do that?" she says.

"You want me to wait for two months?—more than two months?"

"I can't help it," and she cries.

She crossed her arms in front of her chest as they walked from the car and hugged herself, hunching slightly. "You don't even have a coat or anything, do you?"
She shook her head.

"Well--" He opened his free arm and took her in. She came soft against him, but he got a feeling of resistance, a closed feeling.

Maybe she's not as unconcerned as she looks. Maybe she'll chicken out. She shivered against him. She was so small.

He set his case down in front of the door and took the key from his shirt pocket, still holding her tight with his left arm. Her head rested against his chest. The door swung open and he pushed her gently ahead of him, and searched for the light switch. His arm brushed a lampshade, and after a few seconds of fumbling his fingers found the pull cord.

The room was tiny and old, with mis-matched furniture. "The lap of luxury," Timothy said. Something in the room had been painted not long before, and the smell was still strong. Dust was thick on every­thing, and enough had been raised by his turning on the light to give him a slight urge to sneeze.

He opened his arm and she moved away. "I'm really beat," she said. She sat on the bed, moved her hand across the bedspread with a rodeo cowboy on a bucking horse, and slumped over on her side, looking up at him.

"Hey, would you like some wine?" he said. "I could go buy some. Or whatever you want."

"Save your strength. You see anyplace open?"

"Just some bars, I guess."

"Well I don't want to get up."

He was disappointed. Some wine would have helped things along. "We'll get some in the morning." He took off his coat, unbuttoned his
shirt, and then stood still, facing the curtained front window. He would have to go slow. He crossed to the bed and sat beside her head. She was still watching him, and she smiled up at him beside her, her face upside down on the bronco bedspread.

"You look funny," she said.

"You look pretty." He touched her hair where it fell across her forehead.

She smiled that cynical smile and shook her head. "No, I mean because you're upside down and way up there." She chuckled. "I can see right up your nose."

He hesitated, then said, "Well, then, I guess I'll come down there." He leaned to her upside-down face and kissed her mouth, which opened without passion. In a few seconds she turned away from him. "Let's get into bed," she said. "I'm really tired."

His hands trembled as he took off his shirt and laid it over the back of a frayed chair. The bed squeaked behind him and he turned as the girl disappeared into the bathroom and shut the door. He sat down to take off his shoes and noticed with surprise that his knees were weak, and he fumbled with his shoelaces for a long time before he got them undone. He took his toilet kit out of his suitcase and stood up just as the bathroom door opened and the girl came out. She was naked.

She tossed her clothes onto the floor next to the bed, pulled the covers back, and hopped in. She pulled the covers up to her waist. "Come on," she said.

He shut his mouth and tried to force himself to move, but it was a few seconds before he could manage it. He moved towards the bathroom, never taking his eyes from her small firm breasts and brown stomach,
and tried to say something, but he found himself behind the bathroom door without remembering how he got there, and only then, when he couldn't see her, did he say, "I'll just be a minute." He heard her mutter, "Jesus!"

He tried to freeze in his mind the picture of her coming out of the bathroom, her skin light brown all over, the curve outward of her hips, the smooth jiggling as she had stepped. Compared to Norma's frowziness and middle-aged sag, this girl was like a starlet in a movie.

He wiped his mouth on his wrist.

"Hurry up," she said. He jerked slightly and took his toothbrush and toothpaste from the kit, still running his mind over the curves of her body. When he was done he took off his watch and emptied his pockets and set everything on the back of the toilet. He took his pants off and stood in his underwear, looking at himself in the mirror. His skin was chalky white, and on it the sparse black hair looked obscene. He was beginning to sag around the middle, and his chest was sunken.

He remembered what Norma always said, and straightened his backbone and jerked his shoulders backward. Better.

"Are you coming or not?" she called.

"Just a second," he said. He ducked his head and smelled his armpits. They were sour. He washed quickly with the disposable washcloth and motel soap by the sink. Then he dried, tucked his pants over his arm, and stepped back into the motel room.

She was on her side, her back turned to him. "You must be beautiful after all that," she said. She rolled toward him, again revealing herself from the hips up. "Well," she said. She considered him, standing in his underwear, a silly, nervous smile on his face. "You'll do."
He forced a chuckle. "Oh, thanks." He set his pants on the chair. "Well, I said it before and I'll say it again, you're very pretty."

He approached the bed.

"Hit the light," she said.

"In a minute."

"Oh, come on, I'm sleepy." She rubbed her eyes as proof.

"I want to look at you," he said. "Don't you want me to look at you?"

"Look, take off your shorts and let's get this over with. I been out on that road a long time, and I'm tired, man!"

He sat on the bed. "Okay." But he lifted the covers in his right hand and peered under at her nakedness.

She is tiny and pink, and sits naked on her pajamas, bouncing. He touches his forehead, it is damp—maybe a fever. He suggests a title.

"I don't like that one."

"You haven't heard it in a long time." There is only one lamp; the baby throws a strange and horrible shadow on the wall behind the bed.

"I don't like it."

"'Joby and the Magic Goose.' How about that?"

"No. I want 'Pokey Puppy.'"

She didn't flinch. He put his left hand on the soft brown stomach. "You're beautiful," he said. "So soft. I've never seen a woman shaped as pretty as you." He rubbed. Her skin gave beneath his fingers; the tiny white hairs made a glow in the pale light, and Timothy was aware of softness. There was a drive in him to touch and know every part.
of her body, every inch of skin, but there was also a hesitation. He
wanted to crawl into the sheets with her, but he stayed on the bedspread.

"Jesus," she said. "I'm tired."

He took his hand from her skin.

"You heard 'Pokey Puppy' last night." So bold in her body, as
she flings her arms and legs.

"I want 'Pokey Puppy.'"

"All right, 'Pokey Puppy.' Put on your jammies and get under the
covers. Did Mommy brush your teeth?"

"Yes."

He helps her, parting the legs with cloth, covering the boldness.

"Now get under the covers. Okay. 'Once there was---'"

"No, you come up here so I can see the pictures."

Easing onto the mattress; she snuggles. "Okay. How's that?"

"Let me under your arm."

The softness, the movement. "There. All set?"

"Yes."

"All right." His eyes burn; it is too dark. 'Once--'

"Stop tickling me!"

His arm jerks away. "I wasn't tickling."

"Yes you were!"

"It wasn't me, it must have been somebody else."

"It was you!"

Making it into a game, in that dark room, to the white happy teeth.

"Maybe it was a little fairy. Maybe the tooth fairy came to see--"

"Ow! Stop that! It's you! Now you read me the story and don't
tickle."
"Man, I just don't believe you! First you drag me in here—"

"You're the one that wanted a place to stay." He was sitting in the chair across the room from the bed. He drew long on his cigarette, then held it up and examined it. "Some things just don't help anybody. It's wrong to do something that--"  

She laughed, but it was just one syllable, spat like bile, and it left a sneer. "Are you serious? This isn't a church you brought me to, and we sure didn't come here to pray. And anyway you can split anytime."

He blew smoke out through his nose and snubbed the butt impatiently. "I guess I will." He stood, feeling weak and young and silly. "There must be something you think of as wrong."

"Oh God, here it comes. I didn't expect the message so early in the service. Hey, one thing you forgot." She yanked open the drawer of the nightstand beside the bed and pulled out a maroon book. She started to toss it to him, but stopped and looked at it closely. "Book of Mormon." She heaved it across the room at the wastebasket, but it hit the wall open and fell face-down on the floor. She reached into the drawer again, and then slammed it shut and looked strangely at him. "Somebody stole the Bible." She laughed, loud and gravelly, like a man, and she kept laughing. "Oh my God, somebody stole the Gideon Bible." Her shoulders jerked, but the small dry breasts made no movement, no jiggle or bounce.

He stood by the window, lifting the curtain to see the night. In the shadow his body made on the windowpane he could see the runty plants of the desert across the dark highway, and far off a few black hills and mountains, becoming larger to the west until they became the
San Bernardino Mountains, to his left. He saw a few stars, only
those bright enough to survive the silver moonlight that poured out
from behind the edge of the building where the moon was hidden. Beside
the shadow of his head he saw her reflection against the night, glaring
at the wall.

"I'm going to leave now," he said. He took a twenty and a five
from his wallet and put them on the lamp table. "Here's bus fare to
Los Angeles."

It took him only five minutes to gather his things and pack them
and finish dressing. She kept her head turned to the opposite wall,
arms folded across her chest. She sat stone still, but Timothy thought
once that he saw her wipe her cheek. He picked up his bag and stood
in front of the door. "There's enough there for food tomorrow and
probably a place to stay tomorrow night. You'd better call Greyhound
first thing in the morning. I doubt if they have more than one bus a
day through here." She didn't look at him or acknowledge that she heard
him. He set his bag down and took out a ten and put it with the other
money. "Good luck to you," he said.

Things came at him with a rush outside the door. There was the
smell of sage and of sand and dryness, and of hot oil from the engine
block of one of the cars that sat in a row in front of him, cracking
and popping as it cooled, and the breeze was cool and of an open land,
and stepping away from the building, he stepped into a bath of moonlight,
and without really seeing it Timothy realized that the moon was there,
shining and high.

He drove onto the highway and in seconds he was away from buildin-
gs and signs and on the flats of the California desert. He drummed his
fingers impatiently on the steering wheel. He would have to call Norma
tonight, he thought. He would stop in Palm Springs and make the long-
distance call East. A snake raced across the road in his headlight
beam and disappeared into the low bushes that moved mysteriously in
the wind. Under the moon the flat land was uncovered, and the wheel
was cold in his hands, and hard, and definite, and he thought of how
the girl's hips had jiggled as she'd gone to the bed, and he brought
his hand to his mouth and bit it, and then thrust it away, startled
and hurt by the smell of wet skin. "Damn," he muttered.

He saw the jagged peaks of Joshua Tree stark and plain to the South.
And straight ahead, sillhouetted against the moonlit sky, shining
whitely as if covered with snow, was the tall, lone peak of San
Gorgonio. Timothy rolled down his window to the cool rush of wind,
and filled his lungs with it, and his foot accelerated to make the
mountains while the moon was high.
FROM AN ANCIENT SCROLL

We have taken refuge above the rocks where the last of Balak's army is making its stand against the Israelites, but of course there is no hope. What I prophesied on Mount Peor is coming to pass. Just now a spear crackled through dry leaves near me, and I hear cries of battle below, mostly Hebrew. The voices have been getting louder.

The sun beats on us unmercifully here, like a judgment, and for shade we have only these thin branches with stiff, withered leaves. I too am stiff, crouching my old bones under these pathetic bushes, afraid even to raise my head lest some Hebrew sling a stone through my temple. I have thought of myself as a joker, but this is no time for lightness. Or perhaps it is the time for nothing else. What plagues me now is that I will be murdered in righteous anger by the same Israelites I have three times blessed, and after I am dead, even after these mountains crumble into the desert, I will be known as a villain. In some future time men will speak of the way of Balaam, and the error of Balaam, and the evil counsel of Balaam. I will become doctrine, and holy men will speak my name with distaste. And this I do not understand. I am not an evil man. Perhaps God misunderstood my actions, for it was He who turned from me, not I from Him. I have often been misunderstood.

It was as we returned from that unfortunate prophecy on Mount Peor, that last of the three I performed that day at Balak's request—for which I will become infamous, even though I acted in God's behalf—that my donkey said to me, "There is something missing in you, Balaam. You are a prophet indeed, for you predict events and they come to pass, and you call on God and God answers. But that is where you are lacking. When God answers, you do not understand."
"I do what God instructs," I replied coldly, "and my words are His."

"No more," the beast said. "From this day forward, no more."

"Are you now the prophet?" I snorted. "Besides, I have no need to converse with an ass. Keep to the middle of the road and walk smoothly."

It was a hot afternoon, but I was comfortable, having dressed lightly that morning—I am always aware of things. We plodded along in silence, vineyards just past harvest on either side of the roadway. And when I thought I was going to be left in peace, the beast looked over his shoulder and said, "There is no mystery in you, Balaam. That is your problem. Every part of you can be touched by any other man."

No mystery indeed. As if mystery were a valuable article, rather than something to be dispelled, and as if the dispelling of mystery were not the work of a prophet. I had better things on my mind than the vague ramblings of an ass, but how could I concentrate with that Prattling? It has been that way since the Angel of the Lord opened the animal's mouth—no peace. A prophet needs a gentle climate. And there was a time when my patience was not so sorely tried.

Before all of this began, I lived as a holy recluse in a small hut by a remote well in the desert, consulted often and accorded awed respect by princes and peasants from near and far. And then Balak summoned me, and since then I have not returned to that hut. I wish now that I were there, even to die; I would be in peace. Here the sun is baking me, and the weeping of the women is pain enough in the ears to drive a man to madness, and we all wait for a violent end.

I was summoned twice from my hut in the desert by Balak, king of Moab, and when I had received beyond a doubt the Lord's specific command to go, I set out on my donkey, who was silent then, not yet given speech,
and reasonably cooperative for an ass. But without warning, the animal bolted from the road and into the vineyard. I nearly fell off and was badly frightened. "God damn you!" I cried, then quickly amended it to "A pox on you for a season!" We prophets must be careful of our oaths; they have an unpredictable power. The dry and sticking vines whipped across my eyes and tore my new white robe. I slapped the animal's flanks with a leather thong, and managed to guide him onto a path with a wall on either side.

"Behave or I'll make you drink from the Jordan," I said, and for a few seconds the animal walked on peacefully, until again he bolted, this time madly turning in the pathway back the way we'd come, and in the process crushing my foot against the wall. "Wretched beast!" I shouted, and whipped him again on both sides as he galloped down the path. My provisions were being shaken off and scattered, and I was most uncomfortable. "Stop, before I command that you be turned to salt!"

Just as we approached a very narrow part of the path, the beast fell to his knees and skidded to a stop. I was thrown in an undignified fashion and lost skin against one of the walls. I was up quickly. "Murderous, mad, demonic creature," I screamed, and grabbed my good stout staff and began to beat him on both sides and on his neck and head.

It was then that he first spoke. "Stop this!" he said. "Why are you beating me? I saved your life."

"Saved my life?" I shouted, too angry to be surprised. "If I had a sword in my hand you'd be dead this minute."

"Think, Balaam," he said. " Haven't you ridden on me peacefully from the day you bought me until this day? And have I ever behaved
like this before?"

"Never," I said, raising my staff high, "and you never will again."

But before I could swing, a great light came flooding from behind me, and there was a sound like many voices singing, but in no tongue that I knew, and I turned in fear and surprise. In the narrow place stood the great Angel of the Lord, sword drawn. I fell flat on my face, and my body was overcome with trembling.

The Angel said to me, "Why have you smitten this beast, Balaam? I came to do battle with you because you are a perverse man. Your ass saw me and turned away three times when your blindness kept you from even knowing I was there. If he hadn't seen me and turned aside, this beast would surely be rid of a cruel master."

I raised my head and tried to look at the Angel. Because of the brightness I could not look long, and there was a certain variability and haziness about him. He seemed at times to be a mighty man of war, and at others to have parts about him like a lion, and like a lamb, and like an ox, and like an eagle. But I was sure he was an angel because of his great wings. I dropped my face into the dust again.

"Forgive me, Lord," I said, "I have sinned. It is not for me to understand your ways." I was very sure, though, that I understood one thing. God was acting out of some anger; He was not behaving rationally. He had given me a command, and as I obeyed, sent His Angel to destroy me. I resolved to be on my guard. "If it displeases you that I go to Balak--" My concentration was broken by a strange drama unfolding a mere hand's breadth from my eyes. An ant was trying to crawl out of an ant lion's sand funnel, and sand was spurring from the pit's bottom, the lion trying to secure his prey. But no sooner had the ant
tumbled to the bottom and the barbed pincers closed around his middle
than the scene of the murder erupted in sand, and the tiny bright head
of a sand snake emerged with both ant and lion in his black-and-red
jaws. He stretched on the sand and swallowed them together. It was
undoubtedly a vision of great import granted me by the Almighty, but
I am afraid that at that moment all that crossed my mind was the simi­
larity between the snake's expression and that of Balak as it is imprinted
on all the coins of the realm—the crafty eyes, the smirking, self-satis­
fied mouth, the weak forehead and chin that indicate he will be unable
to carry out the devilish plan he is just that moment devising. And
despite the snake's apparent confidence—it made no move to burrow safely
into the sand—I could have destroyed it with one blow of a fist; and
Balak too was in my power, since I was acting as representative of the
one true and mighty God. I thought to wrap the snake in my headcloth,
and, later, when Balak on his knees would plead with me to intercede
for him with God, to toss the animal in his face and exclaim, "Behold
thyself, 0 King, in all thy glory and power!" Then would Balak crawl!
And before I could catch myself, a chuckle escaped my lips, then a snort
of laughter and then a mighty howl. But I rubbed sand in my hair and
face, and shed tears, and molded my howling to resemble grief and sub­
jection. My ruse was successful; the Angel stood quietly until I had
overcome my apparent tantrum of penitence. Such action was necessary.
Angels are known to be impatient and less than merciful with mortals
who slight their mission. In time I continued. "If it displeases you
that I go to Balak, I will return to my house and serve you as I have
always done, faithfully and in humility."
"Go to Balak," the Angel answered. His voice was magnificent and nearly deafened me. Even though I saw that my life was to be spared, I was filled with fear at his presence and the sound of his voice. "But remember—speak only the word that I shall speak to you." The sound of singing left me, and when I looked up again the Angel was gone. I had again been commanded to aid Balak, king of Moab. Even so I was uneasy.

Two delegations had come from Balak to begin with, one after the other. The second came early one morning, and I had just lit the incense in the golden bowl and was about to light the candle for my worship and meditation when I heard their horses. I realize that it is customary to engage a servant to perform such tasks, but I preferred at that time to live alone, aware always of any infringement upon my privacy, and of the slightest criticism in the attitude of anyone around me. Passing strangers on the street, for instance, when I first forsook the desert following my prophecy from Peor, I was not fooled by their blank, averted faces if they said inwardly, "What a ragged and foolish old man, he is unwashed, he stinks of the wilderness!" May I say that they to me smelled as rank as the Jordan because of the stagnation of their souls, ignorant as they were of such things as God's will and law, and the place of man, and because of their unfounded pride, the pride of a dung heap that believes itself greater than the temple of the Lord!

Oh, I was righteous in those days! Soon I looked and felt no different than any other dweller in the cities of men, but when first I came—clothed in skins, unshaven, eyes like bright stone, riding an ass—then I was proud indeed! But that pride drains quickly in the city. I became too comfortable, too pampered, too well honored. And
of course I was no longer able to contact God, but that power I lost with my final and most magnificent prophecy, the last true one. It was not life in the city that stole God from me, He had absented Himself before I came. While I still lived in the desert I made prophecies on everything from rain to warfare and love, and each time I consulted God, He answered, and my prophecies were holy and right. Since Peor, as the donkey predicted, all is changed.

I digress. Balak's second delegation came, and I was not pleased. Not three days before a delegation had come, explaining that Balak desired my services for the cursing of Israel, and I had spent the night seeking God's answer.

"Who are these men?" God had said.

"Balak, king of Moab, has sent these men to me, saying, 'The house of Jacob is come out of Egypt to take our land from us. Come and curse them, so that my armies can drive them out.'"

"Do not go with them," God said to me. "I have blessed the children of Israel, and you shall not curse them."

The next morning I told them what God had answered, and they challenged me. I am a prophet of the Lord, unaccustomed to having to explain and defend my position. If Balak did not believe in my integrity, why did he send for me in his time of trouble? And if he did, why did he send scurrilous knaves who question the Lord's commands? It was imposition enough that I had been forced to feed and shelter them for the night, not an easy undertaking for a man without servants who does not care for menial tasks. I was not pleased, and on that morning when the second delegation arrived just as I was preparing to begin my morning worship, I was not well-disposed toward them. I considered feigning
a deep trance, thinking they would not dare to disturb one in the act of communion with God, but then decided that if Balak had sent the same knaves as before they would probably douse me with cold water or set fire to my beard to bring me out of it. I tossed the incense I had just lit into the chamberpot and went out to meet them.

Balak had this time sent a princely caravan indeed, elegant and mannerly, and they dismounted and bowed before me. They set handsome gifts at my feet, and the chief among them said, "These are the words of Balak, king of Moab: 'Let nothing hinder you from coming to me, for I will promote you to great honor, and anything you ask of me shall be done, if you will curse the house of Jacob.'"

I shook my head. "Even if Balak were to fill his castle with silver and gold and give it to me, I cannot do less or more than I am commanded by the Lord my God. I am but a servant." They were downcast, but I again asked them to stay the night, at no small bother to myself— for one thing, any possibility of continuing my worship was ruined— saying I would again seek out the Lord, for his further instructions.

I am not without human weakness. I cannot say that the thought of having the wealth and power of Moab at my beck and call was not attractive. But I am aware of the power of the Lord, and I am not foolish.

But God came to me again that night, and gave me a specific command: "If these men have come to call thee to Balak," He said, "rise up, and go with them. But you are to say no other words than those I myself put in your mouth."

I must say that I was surprised, the character of God being what it is, that He would reverse His position and allow me to go to Balak. But then who can know the mind of God? I was in a position to effect
great personal gain without offending the Lord. And the important thing is this: He not only was allowing me to go, He commanded me to go. "Rise up," He said, "and go with them." A direct command.

Which I suppose is the cause of my confusion at the way things turned out. I was acting at God's command. Why then was the Angel of the Lord sent to destroy or at least threaten me? Why have I not been able to talk with the Lord since my prophecy from Mount Peor? In fact the only creature who will speak to me is that animal, and his comments are foolishness. I have no doubt that I am considered to be in trespass against the Lord, but where is that trespass? Of what am I guilty? I was acting as the Lord's prophet, speaking His words to man. I was in His service, and He talked with me and sent His Spirit to me. But of course that Spirit comes no more, and God talks to me no more, and as a prophet I am left to my own devices. A good thing, in a way. While I spoke for the Lord, I was in constant danger; His commandments are not welcome among men because they inhibit the natural inclinations. But my prophecies now are whatever Balak really wants to hear. I must say that for such prophecies I am given better pay and more honor than I used to be for the true words of God. Balak was angry enough to kill me several times when I spoke the Lord's words. He could have sent assassins just because I refused to come when bidden. And though he once commanded me to flee from him or be killed, we now work together amicably. He does not know that I no longer have divine sources.

Not long ago he said to me, "The children of Jacob grow in strength and in numbers, and they are winning the battles. What must we do to break their strength and defeat them?"
We sat in Balak's evening chambers, attended by his choicest wives. "Does this mean that the power of your kingdom is waning, King?" I said. "Are you unable of your own power to drive the Israelites out?" I accepted into my mouth a stuffed date from the fingers of an enchanting girl dressed in a little gauze and a tiny bit of silk so that even my old heart was aroused.

Balak hung his head. "Do you have an answer, prophet?"

I reluctantly motioned away several sweet creatures who had been caressing my limbs, and sat back on a satin cushion and stared straight ahead, saying nothing. Presently I rolled my eyes upward and began to moan softly, as if in a trance, and then collapsed completely, imitating a man I once knew who was given to fits. When I sat upright again I said, "Hear the words of Balaam, who has seen a vision of the Almighty, and talked with God. Harlots."

"Harlots?" Balak asked.

"Harlots," I said. "You must send harlots among the Israelites, and when the warriors go in to those harlots, God will be displeased, and will not protect them anymore."

"Where will we get those harlots?"

I held my arms out for the young wives and they returned, smiling and bright, jangling gold rings on their arms and bare ankles. "How many are there in the city, for the benefit of your soldiers?" I asked Balak.

Balak shrugged. "What commerce have I with harlots?"

"What commerce indeed? What commerce can one have with such a creature? One in which you get out with much less than you had when you entered." The wives tittered as they stroked my dry, wrinkled thighs.
"About fifty."

"Fifty." I sipped from a silver cup held lovingly to my lips. "Hmm. And you have how many wives?"

"Two-hundred and twenty-seven," he answered proudly.

"So," I said. "Well. Then from among your wives and the town harlots you must send one-hundred and fifty of the finest into the Israelite camp." Many pairs of dark soft eyes flashed gratefully at me.

"One-hundred and fifty?" he gasped. "My wives?"

"You will need an army of them. Take a poll among your captains and soldiers, asking them to name the best."

"What do my captains and soldiers know of my wives?"

I sucked a peeled grape. "One thing more: God will be displeased if the house of Israel eats meat sacrificed to idols. After the sacrifices to Baal each day, select merchants to take that meat to the Israelite camp and offer it at a good price."

"We'll give it to them free."

"No, they would think it was tainted. But they cannot refuse a bargain." Those tactics, of course, did not come from God; they were my own. And Balak did as I suggested, and it worked well, and God was angry with His people—for a time. I had not counted on His mercy.

Judging from the growing nearness of the yell and crash of the battle, and from the number of dead Moabites I have seen in the past two days since this final assault began, I must say that God has forgiven His people, in spite of the great hurt that they have done Him. But for that He has only Himself to blame, for turning from me and cutting me off after I had served Him faithfully. Balak has called up for the last group of his wives; a few wounded and dispirited soldiers are
gathering them now. He has been offering a few of them to the Israel­
ites every hour or so, in the hope the Jews will be pleased and cease
the battle. The wives are joyful; they go to join the winning side,
and believe they will be treated fairly. But I am sorry; these young
ladies are trained for service, and they have been ministering to the
needs of this uncomfortable old body here under the twigs and thorns.
Cool young hands are indeed a blessing—my last, I don't doubt, and
now it is gone.

And Balak is foolish to think that will stop the Israelites. It
is not the power of their army, or the power of any man, that keeps
them coming so strongly against us, so how can women deter them? But
he is foolish in many things. I knew it when first I saw him. After
his delegations had called me from my home, and my donkey spoke and
I saw the Angel of the Lord, Balak and his princes took me to the high
places of Baal, for the cursing of Israel. We set up seven altars and
offered on them seven oxen and seven rams, and I went aside, to a high
rocky place nearby, to meet with the Lord. I stood quietly, head bowed,
waiting. Suddenly there was a power and fear and brightness all around
me that I knew as the presence of the Lord, and I fell on my face before
it. "Return unto Balak, and speak these words," God said, and my mouth
was filled with a burning message, though it was not the message for
which Balak had hoped. I walked quietly down. Without looking at Balak,
I went to the center altar and stood at the head of it, and in front
of me the cliff fell away to the great valley below, and there a part
of the people of Israel were encamped. Their tents were pitched in
a fine order up against the Dead Sea, and their camp followed the stink­
ing Jordan to where it disappeared behind the bare stony mountains.
rising black against the dim sky. It was early morning, and only the clouds were touched by the sun.

The Princes of Moab stood at the head of their altars, and Balak stood at his, to my right. I lifted by arms toward heaven. And when I opened my mouth, my voice was mighty, and filled the open spaces.

"I am here because Balak, king of Moab, has brought me here. 'Come,' Balak said to me, 'Curse for me the house of Jacob.' But how shall I curse whom God has not cursed? How shall I defy whom God has blessed?"

Out of the corner of my eye I could see Balak begin to pale and fidget, and doubt showed on his face. I continued. "From the top of this mountain I can see the Lord God of Israel, and from these rocks I know His name. His people shall dwell alone, and let their name not be spoken among the names of other nations; they have been chosen for the blessing of the Lord." Balak's shoulders slumped. "They will be mighty in war, and their number shall be as the sands of the sea. And their nation will not disappear from the earth forever." I bowed my head.

For a moment there was silence. Then Balak said, in a softness born of horror, "What have you done? I brought you here to curse my enemies, and you have blessed them and cursed me."

"I am a servant of the Lord," I said. "Did I not tell you that I would speak only that which the Lord put in my mouth?"

Balak turned his back on me for some time. I expected to die, but when he faced me again his eyes were bright and he had the same crafty look the sand snake had had with the ant lion in its mouth, and I disguised a giggle as a cough. "From here," he said, "you can see but
one-fourth of their camp. Let us go to the top of Mount Pisgah, where we can see more of them, and there you may see fit to curse such a mighty army of invaders."

From Mount Pisgah, which was even higher, I looked down on fully half of the nation of Israel, and it was indeed a mighty army and without number. We piled up stones for seven altars, and on each offered up a bullock. "Wait here while these offerings burn," I said to Balak and the Princes of Moab. "I will go and learn the will of the Lord." So I went off a little way and knelt and closed my eyes, and called upon the Lord, and shortly a brightness covered me, and my mouth was full of words.

When I stood, Balak came to me and whispered, "What has God said? Tell me quietly before you shout it all over." I smiled and strode with great authority to the central altar. I raised my arms, and faced the mighty nation spread out below me, and Balak took his place before his altar.

"Rise up, Balak, and hear," I shouted. "God is not a man, that He should repent. He has blessed Israel, and now you expect Him to change. I cannot reverse the commandment of the Lord." Balak's mouth dropped open and his face twisted with horror and disbelief. His fists clenched, but such is the effect of a prophet of the Lord in action that Balak could not force himself to move against me. It was humorous, actually, to see the mighty brought so low, which was unfortunate, as it turned out.

"There is no iniquity in the children of Jacob; their sound is the shout of a mighty king. No magic can stand against that house. It shall rise up as a lion, and that lion shall not lie down until he has
drunk the blood of the slain." I was forced to stop. Balak had turned red and was gnashing his teeth, reduced to impotency by a meek and lowly prophet, and I was overcome by a fit of giggling. I doubled over and giggled audibly, but when Balak turned toward me I was able to disguise the giggles as moans, such as befit a prophet in a divine trance. Finally I was able to continue.

"The children of Jacob--(hee hee)." I pretended to go back into a trance. After the magnificence of my prophecy, the silence was appalling, and I felt sure that all eyes were on me, and that Balak might be suspicious. "The children of Jacob," I went on, "the children--HEE HEE HEE." I could no longer maintain my dignity. My amusement broke forth in a splatter of saliva and I fell on my side before the altar of the Lord and gave myself over to laughter.

"Enough!" Balak cried, when he saw that I was done. He held a white-knuckled, shaking fist to my face. "Do not curse, and do not bless. Do not say a word! Every time you open your mouth I am damned."

I could not answer. Balak pulled his sword, then sheathed it again. He looked down on the nation of Israel and fumed. After a while I was able to sit up. "Did I not tell you, Balak," I said, patting the dust from my sleeves, "that I would speak only that which the Lord--"

"Do not speak to me of the Lord!" he sneered, and the princes of Moab came to him and they stood apart from me and talked quietly. There was a shuffle, and that animal stood over me.

"You are in big trouble, Balacm," he said. "If you had stayed at home when the Lord told you to stay at home you'd be sitting down to dinner right now."
I must say that the thought of a hot meal in my own home was appealing, but I was in the right and I knew it, and it is not fitting that one of the Lord's chosen prophets should be chastised by an ass. I stood. "I am here at the Lord's directions," I said. "Any hardships or dangers I am willing to bear. The Lord told me to come, and I am acting as His emissary."

"First He told you to stay home and not have anything to do with Balak. You should have listened to Him then." He tugged at a small tuft of dry grass.

"Is it my fault that the Lord cannot make up His mind?" I grumbled.

Balak returned. "We cannot believe that if you see the immensity of this invading force you will not curse them to protect an innocent people. They are a mighty host, with the strength of the evil one. Let us go to the top of Peor, and from there you can see the whole of them."

Peor is the tallest mountain in this land, and when we got to the top of it the day was half gone, but though the sun shone on the eastern valley below us, there was no light at the top of Peor, for high above that stony peak there is always a shield of cloud, thick and black, that cuts off the sun. The wind blew, and we clutched our robes around us and shivered.

In the light, below us, were the plains of Moab, with the Jordan running south down the middle and into the Dead Sea. And on the other side of the Jordan was the mightiest gathering the world has known, or will ever know, and certainly the greatest force existing in the civilized world. They are without number, dwelling with order and great beauty in their tents. They cover the valley floor from the Jordan.
to the mountains of Canaan, and south to the Dead Sea, and to the north, I could not be sure that I saw the limit of their ranks. They seemed to change their aspect the further they were from me, and they were dim in the distance. These were indeed the people chosen of the Lord.

"Prepare me here seven altars, and offer on each a bullock and a ram," I said to Balak.

I saw no reason to again ask the Lord what He wanted me to say. A definite pattern had formed in His commands. And besides, I had learned that God does not like to be bothered by questions over and over. So I stood again at the head of the altar, and faced the tents of Israel, and lifted my arms toward heaven.

And the clouds broke above me and the sun was sudden and bright in my face, and there was a presence with me, and around me, and I could feel the pressure of a mighty wind, building and building. And to my horror, I was raised into the air! I was kept from falling by the pressure of the wind beneath, and kept from rising by its pressure above. I was held in a certain place.

In all my days of prophecy this had never happened. I was not in control. I was frightened, and squeezed my eyes shut against the unbearable brightness. How long the wind howled in my ears I do not know, but suddenly it was lifted from me, and I fell into the dust.

I opened my eyes and saw below me the nation of Israel, and realized that again my mouth was full of words. "Hear the words of Balaam," I said, "who has seen a vision of the Almighty, and talked with God: Israel, your tents and your tabernacles have made this poor valley into a garden. You have made even the Jordan beautiful, as if it were planted with cedars and aloe trees, and the scent of your goodness comes to
me like the perfume of acacias. From your people shall come a mighty
king, higher even than Agag, who shall eat up his enemies, and break
their bones, and pierce them with arrows. Blessed is he that blesses
you, Jacob, and let he who curses you be himself accursed."

My mouth was dry, and I tried to stand, but could not move. I
heard a strange sound, and it was Balak beating his head with his hands.
He sat weakly in the dust beside his altar. When he spoke, his voice
was a whisper. "I called you to curse my enemies, and instead you have
blessed them three times. Three times." He sat in silence, and when
at last he stood, he came toward me slowly, his eyes cold and frightening.
"Flee, Balaam," he said. "Go back to your own land. I meant to pro-
mote you to honor, but all I want now is to kill you. Go while you

"When your messengers came to me, did I not say to them, 'Even
if Balak would give me his own castle full of silver and gold, I cannot
speak anything other...'

"You did. Go from here, Balaam..."

"Hear the words of Balaam," I said, "who has seen a vision of the
Almighty, and talked with God." Balak leaped frantically beside me
and waved his sword over his head, but I knew he could not make himself
act against a prophet of Almighty God. "There shall come a Star out
of Jacob, who shall utterly crush every corner of Moab." Balak and
the princes of Moab began to weep. "And Israel shall wage valiant war,
and Edom shall fall and become a possession, and Seir, and Amalek."
All of these places were visible from our mountain, and as I called
off each name Balak turned numbly in that direction, as if envisioning
the coming destruction. "And the Kenites shall fall, and Asshur, and
Eber. And woe unto those who are alive when God does these things."

Balak stood dejectedly, head bowed, sword dangling in his hand. I found that I could move, and I got up and walked shakily to my donkey, who had been drawing further and further away as Balak's anger had risen. I did not know then that I would return with Balak to his palace and serve him there, that in his desperation he would pay for even such help as I could give.

"Cowardly beast," I said. "Why did you not gallop up and bear me safely out of harm's way?"

"Because Balak would have lopped off my head," the beast answered, as I mounted. "Besides, you were in no danger—as you well knew, or you wouldn't have gone on with it."

"Keep silent," I said, "or I will call upon the Lord and He will take away your tongue."

"God's mind is His own, and He alone decides His actions. It is you who are His servant, and not He yours."

And thus it has since been, between that animal and me. I notice that he has tried to escape with the rest of us, and is standing now a short distance from me, unharmed though stones and arrows fly round him, gazing unconcernedly on my discomfort. At least he is sparing me his sermons. Balak and his soldiers have crept into the brush in defeat, those who were able, and I think we are surrounded by the Hebrews. At least their shouts seem to come from all sides, discussing probably how best to drive us from the brush or end us here, but there can be little doubt of the most effective means. Already I hear the crackling of dry branches in flame.
SHINE

Sparrows hopped and fluttered in the tiny parking lot, and in the cool transparent morning was hung the faint barking of sea lions from the seal pool at Knott's Berry Farm, a half-mile away. When the old Plymouth chugged down the alley and into the lot, the sparrows flew up and were gone, and the noise from the car, because the muffler was rusted and cracked, drowned out the sea lions' barking. Then the engine was shut off and the driver stepped out, Claude Williams, his soft face set this morning, and his eyes stern. He had just lectured his son about laziness and courtesy and what was expected of him. "I bring you down here to work," he had said. "It's only one day a week. I don't know why you can't yank your tail out of that chair once in a while and see if somebody wants a shine. Reason your brother used to make some money at this job is because he used to hustle, and the customer likes that. Half the shines you get, the men have to ask you."

And Nathan, his son, had sat on the passenger's side of the seat, holding his lunch in his lap, and had not answered. Too damn meek and quiet, Claude thought. He rattled his keys noisily as he worked on opening the stubborn back door of the barber shop.

And Nathan hefted the battered shine stand out of the back of the Plymouth. Some of the cans of polish clattered onto the asphalt. He crouched and put them back into the stand, then pretended to examine things while he looked into the pale sky and watched the rustling of the great pepper trees in backyards along the alley, not wanting to go inside while the cool hazy morning was on him. He savored the smell of the trees and of hot car oil and, from somewhere he could not see, of water on freshly-turned ground. He wondered if his father had smelled
them, and decided it was not likely. His father was a man who talked, but he hadn't said anything about it. Sometimes he said he liked the perfume Nathan's mother was wearing, or dinner smelled good, but those were the only odors Nathan could remember his father noticing.

"What you waitin' for?" his father called from inside. "Time to open and you got to make coffee yet."

Nathan lifted the stand with one hand and pushed it ahead of him with his knee, scuffing across the tiny parking lot. He stopped for a moment at the door to watch a sparrow hopping along the edge of a garage roof across the alley, and then stepped from the morning into the dim close air of the shop.

His father, a man with no sharp angles in his body or face, no squareness, with nothing that jumped out to compete with other men when they met, had taken off his jacket and shirt and was zipping up his white nylon smock. "You want to get the lights?" he said. He was standing behind a wooden partition that separated the closet and cupboards and coffee stand and bathroom door from the front of the shop where the barber chairs were. All day long the tiny space behind the partition, like a closet, was dim and still and set-apart. The partition on that side was bare wood, but the other side was papered in lively 1890 scenes. Beyond were blue chairs for waiting customers along one wall, a neon sign in the window that flickered to life when Nathan flipped the light switches, and a wall of mirrors above the yellow sinks that reflected every action and made the room seem twice as big and twice as lively. Nathan began idly straightening the customers' chairs, pushing them into place with his knee.
"Why don't you sweep the sidewalk?" his father said, at his sink checking to see which of his array of bartering notions Nathan would need to refill.

"I'm doin' this."

"When you're done." His face looked out sternly at Nathan from the mirror.

It was a heavy industrial broom, the stick taller than Nathan, but he was shorter than most other fifth-graders. The broomstick was always coming out of the head. It was supposed to screw in, but the threads were stripped. He rearranged the piece of cardboard in the hole, as his father had shown him, and jammed the stick into it until it seemed like it would hold. He shuffled to the front door and pushed out into the wide morning again.

He pulled the dirt away from the building in even rows, pulling in short, brisk strokes until there was room for him between the pile of dirt and the building, then stepping behind and pushing the dirt with the same rhythm across the wide sidewalk into the street. He let the broom slide across the concrete with only its own weight, so that the walk would have to be swept twice before he went back inside. He was in the shadow of the row of downtown buildings whose sidewalk he swept, a hodgepodge of unrelated angles and exposed water pipes, their heavy, smooth-stuccoed faces painted in pastels. The sun was reflected, painfully bright, from the window of a laundry across the street.

He pushed a load of dirt into the dry gutter. There were few cars on the highway, and those that came by came slowly, their tires grinding loose gravel into the street, their drivers using one hand to rub sleepy eyes as they passed. When there were no cars, Nathan heard a buzzing
in the telephone lines, and sparrows in the parking lot of McDonald's Hamburgers, and, faintly, sea lions barking.

Behind him his father turned the sign around in the window so that it said "Yes! We're OPEN" instead of "Sorry! We're CLOSED." The gold-and-black old-fashioned letters on the window read GRAND AVE. BARBER SHOP, even though the name of the street had been changed to Beach Boulevard. "Everybody knows Grand Avenue Barber Shop," Claude had said. "Why change the name?" It was bad enough that the street name had been changed. Claude was used to it, and besides, "Beach Boulevard" reminded him of what he liked least about the location of the shop—the constant stream of traffic on warm days and all summer to and from the ocean, right in front of the shop, the noise, the atmosphere of discomfort and suffocation and impatience as the cars backed up waiting for signals to change. And of that bunch, the suburban escapees, none ever stopped for haircuts. There were families on outings and teenagers on dates, and those longhaired surfers. Any more no one stopped at this old down-town section. It was the shopping centers, all bright lights and plastic, that got the business. People just drove through on their way to the beach and drove through on their way home. It had not always been that way. But now the only customers he had left were other downtown businessmen, and in return Claude went to them for his needs, a network of business, and they managed to give each other a meager living. Sometimes in the shop they would talk together of the way things were changing, and then they would be angry and their faces would be hard, and they would damn the city planners and chain-store advertising and big money. But mostly they laughed and talked about sports and politics and women while they were getting their haircuts. Claude stopped his
white-handled razor, intent and sure, slapping it in rapid, steady rhythm across one of the straps that hung from the back of the high barber chair. There was a rattle, and the first customer came in, a neighbor who had sold Claude insurance. Nathan followed him in, carrying the broom.

"Mornin', lyle!" Claude yelled.

"Mornin'. Hot dog, won't even have to wait." Smiling, the two ambled past the first barber chair. That was Connors', the other barber. He had called Claude this morning, sick he had said. Claude knew that he was looking for another job, at a shop more people came to. Probably he would go to the shopping centers.

Claude slapped the rear chair once with his chair-cloth to clear it of hair, even though Lyle was the first customer. When Claude had secured the chair-cloth and tissue around the man's neck with a little chrome clip, "Nathan strolled up to the chair and said quietly, "Shine Sir?"

"Aw, hell," the man said, looking down at his feet. "I shoulda worn my good shoes. These are just the things I wear around the house, you couldn't do no good with these. I'll catch you next time."

"Okay." Nathan said, not quite looking. He went back to his chair without making any noise while the men began talking loudly again. In the chair he was warm. Nothing was expected of him.

He finished a Donald Duck comic book, one that he'd read each of the three previous Saturdays, and went through Superman, Archie, and Casper the Friendly Ghost. When he looked up, his father was spreading hot lather above and in front of the man's ears. It was this part that Nathan liked best when his own hair was being cut. He shut his eyes
and could feel that hot wet lather, the warmth of his father's fingers against his ear and cheek, and the sharp precision of the razor. He wished he were in the chair. It was a sudden feeling, and quickly gone, but for that short time Nathan hated the man in the chair, and wished that man would go away, and that his father would cut Nathan's hair and smooth hot lather around Nathan's ears. Claude pushed a lever on the chair and turned it so that Lyle faced two men in the mirror, one in a chair smiling, one over the other's shoulder in white nylon.

Lyle laughed and went out, smelling of bay rum. Other men came in occasionally. Sometimes Nathan would shuffle uneasily up to them in the bright chairs and whisper, "Shine sir?" And none of the men that morning wanted a shine, to Nathan's great relief. Sometimes the men would have on tennis shoes or sandals. Sometimes men had leather shoes but Nathan wouldn't ask if they wanted shines. He would sit with his magazine and not look up, because he knew his father would be glancing angrily at him.

He read a two-month-old Look, lingering shyly over the colored photos of scanty new swimsuit fashions, of pink-limbed women in the sand and the water and draped across rocks on which surf broke viciously. He tipped the magazine back toward him so the men couldn't see.

When the last of the morning's customers had gone, Nathan's father eased up into the big chair. He tapped his foot on the chrome footrest in time to the song playing softly on the radio and whistled absently along, still gazing out the front window, pressing his fingertips together in front of his chest. "Lunchtime pretty quick," he said. "You better eat yours now so you'll be ready for the lunch hour rush."
And hey." He looked sternly at Nathan. "Somebody has hard shoes you ask him if he wants a shine. They expect it. You get your nose out of those comic books and pretend you're alive, and I don't want to have to tell you again. I tell you about that little nigger boy givin' shines at the Center?"

Nathan nodded. He had heard more times than he thought necessary about the little nigger boy.

"Well you remember. Charges same as you and he's anxious to work. You may be sendin' some of my business over to the Center barbers just so they can get a shine."

Sitting on the floor behind the partition, Nathan ate bacon-and-tomato sandwiches his mother had packed. The bacon, its grease cooled white, was pressed into the mayonnaise between slices of bread. Tomato slices, the yellow seeds escaped around them, were separate, wrapped in tin foil so they wouldn't soak the bread. He lifted the slices onto the bread with his fingers, pleased first at the colors, then at the dull crunch of the bacon between his teeth, and the sweet juice. He chewed slowly, with his eyes closed. There was jello in a tupperware cup and a red apple that he ate last.

Nathan had heard so much about the black shoeshine boy at the Center he felt like they were brothers. They charged the same amount, were the same size, both gave good shines—he was afraid someday they would meet and someone would suggest a contest to see once and for all who was the best shoeshine boy. He could see bright lights and banners and a crowd, and in the middle, two boys working at two immense pairs of shoes, one boy pale and bent, his face hidden, the other black and lively, grinning, dancing, clapping his hands.
Street noise of tires and engines and gas stations broke in briefly. "Howdy, Claude!" someone called, and Nathan heard the chair-cloth snap across the vinyl of the barber chair.

"Howdy, Henry! Just in time."

After a few minutes Nathan slipped around the partition. Henry had on tennis shoes. He sat in his chair and picked up another issue of Look, one with Marilyn Monroe on the cover peering over the rim of a swimming pool. "Marilyn's Skinny Dip," the caption on the cover read.

Other men came in, one after another, until there were four waiting in blue chairs. They were loud and jovial. And each time a man came in, or anyone moved, someone in the long mirror moved too—closing a door, combing hair, hanging up a coat. It always seemed to Nathan that movements in the mirror were more public, more uncovered and blameful, than the flesh-and-blood movements they reflected. Movements made with your body could be hidden, or explained, but movements in the mirror were there for anyone to see, and the reflections could not excuse themselves. When the men in the shop laughed, the men in the mirror opened their mouths and their eyes were bright, but no sound came from that direction.

One more time the door in the mirror swung open, and Peter Caine swept in, a big red-headed man. "Hey, what's goin' on here?" he shouted, laughing, but the sound did not come from the mirror.

"Little tea party, Pete!" someone answered.

"We're trying to get haircuts, but Claude's so damn slow we're all gonna lose our jobs for sittin' here." Everyone laughed.

"Where's Connors?" Pete asked.

"Oh, he's fakin' sick today," Nathan's father said, "but I'll get
to all of you before quittin' time."

"Maybe I'll take my business elsewhere."

"Yeah. What kind of a shop is this?"

Nathan looked up once and grinned, but he was not involved in it, and he was glad. Their loudness made him nervous.

"Hey, Nathan!" Caine shouted, coming back in long, heavy strides. "Got a little present for you!" He held out a small paper sack, with the top folded over. Nathan stood up, smiling sheepishly, his hands in his pockets. All of the men were watching, grinning. "Well here, boy, take it!" Caine laughed, thrusting it at him.

There was a violent scurry in the bag as Nathan reached for it, and he drew back his hand, startled. The men laughed. "Watch it now," one of them said. Nathan pinched the top of the bag firmly and Caine released his grip. The top was folded over twice and creased, a lunch sack wrinkled from previous use. It scurried again. Slowly, anxiously, Nathan began unfolding the bag's top.

"That thing gonna jump out at you, boy!" Caine said. Nathan felt all the men's eyes on him. His father had stopped cutting.

"Don't you even want to know what it is before you open it up?" one man said, sitting in the barber chair.

"He gonna find out real quick, John," another said, and they all laughed. Nathan pulled open one tiny corner of the bag's mouth and peered in. There was no movement; he could see nothing.

"Well, what is it?" his father said, gleefully.

Nathan opened the crack a tiny bit more, his hand trembling slightly. The paper crackled. He didn't know if it was a joke or if there was really something there, hiding just below where his hand clenched the
"Jesus, boy!" Caine exploded. He grabbed for the bag with his huge, rough hands, saying, "You got to let it out before it dies in there!" and ripped the bag open inches from Nathan's face.

Something small and quick jumped up like it was flying, too close for Nathan's eyes to focus on, and he put up his hands and cried out and stepped back, but there was a quick scurrying in his hair and he tried to brush it off but then it was under his collar in back and scratching and brittle and tiny, and Nathan jumped and danced across the floor and cried out, "Get it off! Get it off!" reaching for the back of his neck, and then tiny claws scampered down his back and under his arm and across his chest and his hand trapped it over his heart.

He was backed against the rear wall, gasping, and the men in the shop were laughing, doubled over, tears in their eyes. Whatever his hand was pressing under his shirt was still, but Nathan thought he felt a tiny heart beating rapidly in fright. The corners of his mouth jerked uncontrollably. His throat tightened. His eyes were wet.

"Oh, come on, Nathan," his father said, between jerks of laughter, "you aren't hurt."

"Don't tell me a brave stud like you's afraid of a little ol' lizard," Caine said, collapsed now into a chair, wiping his eyes on his shirt sleeve.

Nathan sniffled and walked behind the partition. One short sob choked out as he was just out of sight of the men. Their laughter died in a few chuckles, and then there was silence, broken only by Nathan's sniffles and the snipping of his father's scissors. He flopped onto the floor next to the closet and sat still, while his fright and
emoarrassment drained away. He would like to put a lizard under that Caine's shirt just once. He would like to find a mean two-foot alligator lizard with sharp teeth and stick it down the neck of Caine's shirt some Saturday when he came to the shop and watch him jump and scream and cry when that lizard started biting him under his shirt. He hoped Caine would run out into the street screaming and get hit by a diesel truck. Or fall down on the floor in front of the barber chair and die right there, his face twisted with pain and terror. People died of fright all the time, his brother said. Nathan knew if he'd died right then, those men would really be sorry. "He was a good boy," they'd say, gathered round his still form on the floor. "He gave the best shines of anybody in the world." "He was a good student," his father would say, sobbing, "a genius. He had the highest IQ of anybody in the world." He wished he had died.

He wiped his eyes with his free hand and unbuttoned his shirt to his belly, pulling it back from the scurrying thing. A thin and scaly tail lay across his white skin. The scales, some gray and some white, occasionally flecked with blue and gold, had a thin keel down the middle of each.

He followed the tail with his fingers, the scale-keels rough and sticking, to where it disappeared under the shirt, then slowly raised his trapping hand to allow his free hand under. In a flash the lizard was struggling, and Nathan quickly pressed his hand back down and was still for a moment, his heart beating rapidly, before he began to move slowly up the lizard's body again. When he'd grasped the lizard firmly behind its head with his thumb and forefinger, he threw open his shirt front and saw it exposed on his skin.
It was a bluebelly lizard, like he always saw on the brick fence in his backyard. Its body was about three inches long, the tail a little longer. Its dark gray head was cocked up at his face, the tiny black eye lifted up to him steadily from under the scaly lid. He lifted it away from his naked chest. The claws grabbed him, dug in, and drew handfuls of skin out from his chest—until their grasp failed and one by one the feet, the long, incredibly thin scaly toes, swung frantically in the air. The lizard twisted his body rapidly and with surprising power, but could not escape. The eye looked straight into Nathan's, unblinking. He moved his hand slowly from side to side, but the lizard didn't look away, moving its neck to keep the side of its head cocked toward Nathan's face, the dark eye accusing and angry. Its underbelly was a deep and brilliant blue along both sides and at the neck, pure white between. Nathan marvelled at the color. He put his fingertip an inch from the lizard's nose. It still didn't look away. He touched its face. Still its expression didn't change; it didn't even open its mouth. He put it back against his chest and pulled it away several times, enjoying the delicious sensation of the claws pricking and pulling his skin, moving on him.

"Hey!" came Caine's voice from the other side of the partition. "Where's that shoeshine boy? I need a shine!"

Nathan clenched his teeth, but he got up and stepped into the bright and lively front of the shop, the lizard in his hand. His white skin still shone between the loose, flowing sides of his blue shirt. The paper bag was on the chair he'd been sitting on.

"Look at the horrible condition of my shoes," Caine grinned, holding up his feet to show the dull oxfords. "You reckon you can do anything
with them?" Nathan nodded and put the lizard back into the bag, careful
to fold the top and crease it tightly, and went into the back again.
He set the lizard's bag on the floor of the closet and knelt by the
shine stand.

The stand, wooden and dark-stained, had been built to accomodate
customers in barber chairs, who wouldn't be able to reach a low stand.
It was over two feet high. The body of it was the size of an orange
crate, sturdy, with two shelves for his supplies. Fixed on top of that
was an old cigar box with holes cut in the lid to hold the jars and
brushes he happened to be using. It already held his supplies for black
shoes. Ten inches above the body of the stand, held in place by a neck
of thin board, was a sole-shaped wooden platform, tilted for the
customer's comfort. Nathan checked in the bottom of the stand for the
black buffing rag and brush, hoisted the stand against his leg and hobbled
into the light with it. He set the stand against the chrome footrest
and lifted Caine's foot onto the sole-shaped platform.

"I haven't brought those in for you to do for a couple of months,"
Caine yelled. "I hope you can save 'em." Nathan hunched over his work.

First he brushed the dust from the shoe with his buffing brush.
He unscrewed the wide-mouthed jar of cleaner and dipped into it a round
stiff brush, its bristles hard and matted because he hadn't cleaned
his equipment that week. He stirred the cleaner with the brush and
pressed its bristles against the side of the round jar until they were
soft, and then lifted the wet brush to the shoe and wet the leather
all around with the black liquid to make sure there was no mud or spilled
coffee or anything else that didn't belong. He wiped the shoe dry with
a piece of old T-shirt. He stood up straight to put his hand into his
pants pocket, but he looked toward the front of the shop, out the window, careful not to let his eyes meet Caine's. Only nickels would open the cans of Angelus Shoe Polish; dimes and quarters were too thin. He pried the lid from the can and dropped the nickel back into his pocket. He rubbed his fingers into the black wax until there was a good amount of it on them and began smearing it onto the shoe, working it into one small area at a time, renewing his fingers' supply of wax with little quick slaps at the can, which he held in his left hand only inches from the shoe. He started at the toe and slowly worked to the heel, first back one side and then the other. When the whole surface was covered he rubbed another coat into the toe and the heel and the arch, the parts that get gouged and scuffed most. Most people would not take so much trouble for the arch, he knew, because you can't even see it unless you take the shoes off and turn them over in your hands and look at the bottom. He smiled to himself. It pleased him that he went to extra trouble.

In rhythmic strokes, with real effort in each swing of his arm, he brought the soft bristles of his buffing brush across the toe of the shoe, watching the stiff dull polish take on a shine in steps, a little brighter at the finish of each intense up-down stroke. He worked back along the sides and heel until the shine was uniform. The brush left a grain that he could take out with the soft buffing rag, but he left it.

He poked a discolored toothbrush into the mouth of the tall bottle of heel-and-sole dressing, loosening the stiff bristles against the side as he'd done with the cleaner brush. Then he brushed the black dye carefully around the side and top of the sole, coloring it right
up to the leather, around both sides, making sure the thick heel was covered across the back. And then he stopped. The shoe that had been dull and dirty was shiny and clean, a deep, glistening black, every visible part refinished. It was hardly recognizable as the mate of the dusty shoe still on the footrest of the barter chair. But he was not finished.

He began to slap polish on the leather for a second coat, working as carefully and with as much effort as he had for the first coat, pushing the polish into the leather until his fingers no longer slid on the surface but skipped and squeaked and bucked. And again he brushed, up-down up-down up-down, until each stroke made the leather shine no brighter, altering only the direction of the grain. And this time he unrolled the buffing rag, a strip of cloth five inches wide and two feet long, velvety and smooth. He gripped it at each end and held it poised above the toe of the shoe for just a second, then dropped it onto the leather and rapidly drew it from side to side over the toe, with a good deal of pressure at first, then easier and easier, without slacking his speed, until on some strokes it snapped loosely in the air without even touching leather. Then he hooked the rag behind the heel and dragged it back and forth again, buffing the heel and the sides. He finished with a couple of light taps on the toe, making a difference only he could see, and the shoe was finished. He straightened slowly, his hand against his backbone, wincing at the pain that had been growing and growing in his lower back.

"You ought to do a little dance when you snap that rag," Caine shouted. "They got a damn colored boy working the Buena Park Center does a little dance and smiles and snaps that rag around—" He jerked
his body from side to side in the chair and snapped an imaginary rag and laughed, and Nathan's father, his long comb and scissors held up just a few inches from the bristly, bobbing head, chuckled too. "Man, that's really something," Caine said. He turned his right shoe under the fluorescent lights of the shop. "That's one helluva shine, boy! You do that good on the other shoe I'm gonna dance outa here myself!"
Nathan grinned at the floor.

One of the men waiting laughed and said, "You'll be a regular Fred Astaire, Pete!"

"Yeah!" Caine yelled. "You gimme Ginger Rogers and I'll dance like Fred Astaire!" They laughed again.

By the time he'd finished and lugged his shine stand to the back, Caine and his father had gone to the cash register. Nathan stood a little apart from the two men. Caine handed him a dollar bill. Nathan fished in his pocket for seventy-five cents change.

"Hell no, boy, you keep it all! This is one helluva shine! And listen now." He put his huge hand on Nathan's head. "You don't have to keep that lizard if you don't want to. You can just let him loose or whatever you want to, I just caught him 'cause he got in my car somehow and I was gonna kill him till I thought you might want him, but you do what you want." He tapped the back of Nathan's head—too hard—and sauntered out with a shouted, "You fellas take care!"

Nathan shined three other pairs of shoes that afternoon, and when he sat back into his chair after the last his hands were hot and uncomfortable and discolored from black and brown and cordovan wax. The fingers of his right hand were dark up to the second knuckle, and tacky so that they stuck to whatever he touched. It would take fifteen minutes
of work and lots of Ajax before he'd be able to eat dinner, and even then the color would be there, and would wear off only after three or four days.

There were no shadows outside the front window; the light was dim and fading. His father sat in the front chair, looking at his fingernails. "You want to go down and get some cokes?" he said.

"Sure."

His father's hands were warm and soft and clean as Nathan scooped the quarters out of the palm. "I'll have some hot chocolate, you get whatever you want."

The air was instantly cool on his bare arms, pleasant after the warm, still shop, and a little breeze ruffled his hair. He turned south, toward the ocean, the dim red clouds of the fading sunset to his right, just visible above the buildings across the street. The shop windows showed him walking, jumping and darting from one window to the next, sometimes in two or three of the windows at once. He watched himself move in them, pleased at his slim self, feeling vaguely that it was not right to look.

It was almost six o'clock. At seven his father would turn the sign around in the window and Nathan would sweep the hair from the floor one last time and lug his shine stand out to the car and the lights would blink out behind him and they would go home. Nathan ached for seven o'clock. He had read every magazine and comic book, swept the floor and the sidewalk as many times as he could find excuse for—he might even welcome a shine now, as something to pass the time. He would like to spend the time in the back, playing with the lizard, but he had tried that once and his father had gotten angry and said to get
back out to the front. He walked slowly, grateful to be doing some-
thing.

Claude twisted the radio dial, annoyed by the too-quick tempo of
the music, finally settled on the original station, and went out to
stand by the window with his hands behind his back. Some of the passing
cars had their lights on. There was no one on the sidewalks; the tiny
orange dates that fell from the palm trees lining the boulevard were
most of them whole; there were no shoes to crush them. Once there had
been many pairs of shoes each day. Now just the cars, that went on
through and never stopped, except for red lights. Two weeks before
a car had hit a little girl—seven, maybe, surely no older—in the cross-
walk right in front of the shop. She had been thrown through the air.
Claude had seen her arch above the cafe curtains that covered the lower
half of the window; then she had disappeared, and he had heard the crack
and tear as she hit the asphalt, and had felt the grit, the skin parting
on his scalp and shoulders. She had been right in the crosswalk. Nathan
used that crosswalk.

Claude felt a hair in his finger, and went to one of the drawers
behind his chair and pulled out a pair of tweezers. Tiny hairs from
his customers' heads were somehow able to drill into his fingers like
wire, and then they were as uncomfortable as splinters. He worked at
it over his sink, where the light was good. In the long mirror another
man worked over another sink at something in his hand, with an identical
pair of tweezers.

Nathan was too quiet, kept to himself too much. How much was shy-
ness and how much laziness Claude didn't know, but it wasn't good either
way. If a person wasn't able to make friends, to have a good time with
people, to give people what they wanted—in his business, for instance, he had to know exactly how each of the men wanted their hair, had to remember from one week to the next so all that the men had to do was come sit in his chair and they could be confident of getting exactly what they wanted. That's what they paid for, that's what kept them coming back. And he had to remember what they liked to talk about, whether they were serious or liked to joke, and whether they liked bay rum, and should he offer a scalp massage, should he turn on the television, get them a magazine. Claude had learned to know those things, but it seemed to him that something in Nathan rebelled against that. He was too self-centered; he did things the way he liked, not because he was independent or defiant, but because it never occurred to him that someone else might want things done another way unless you yelled at him or swatted him, and then he was weak and quick to change. He was always lost in that blank-eyed book world. Of course he was only a boy. Claude liked books as well as the next man, but he preferred to talk to people, and besides, he had a service to sell.

He put the tweezers into the drawer and stepped back to the window. A stranger walked by; Claude smiled, but the man looked away.

Nathan was a little like his mother, Claude thought. She had been such a lonesome-looking girl when he had met her, always by herself, always with that look in her eyes like Nathan. She was all right now, though. She had even offered to go to work several times since their marriage, and though he did not let her, it showed she had her feet on the ground and her priorities straightened out.

The owner of the camera store a few doors down came in after he closed, and Claude was cutting his hair when Nathan stepped back into
the brightness. "Shine Sir?" Nathan whispered, standing by the chair. But the man didn't want a shine, and Nathan took his root beer behind the partition and sipped it. He heard his father say, "All righty!" and the snapping of the chair-cloth as he shook it to get the hair off, and the men's footsteps as they crossed to the cash register. Then his father's voice, "Hey, what--damn it! Nathan, come get your lizard!"

Nathan looked at the bag in the closet. The top was still folded, though it had loosened. He went out front, into the brightness.

The men were standing by the cash register, looking at the floor. Between them the lizard lay, separated from its tail, its feet drawn under its belly. The dead tail writhed and jumped, moving further and further from the slightly-quivering body. Little pink muscle-ends, four of them, stood out in soft wetness from the short stump where the tail had attached.

"He come right out from under the chair here," his father said, angry. "Stepped on him before I could stop, blasted thing!"

Nathan crouched. He lifted the lizard in his palm. The eye looked up at him, occasionally blinking slowly. There was no blood, no broken skin except where the tail had snapped.

"Well come on! Move it out of there, I've got to ring this up."

Nathan picked up the tail in his other hand and carried them to the back. He put the tail, still writhing, and the lizard back into the sack. The lizard cocked its head up, keeping its eye still on Nathan's face. Its feet, front and rear, were still tucked under the body. One elbow and shoulder jerked convulsively. The eye blinked once, and then its gaze lowered until Nathan could see only the gray plates on
top of the lizard's head. The jerking went on. He folded the top of
the sack.

There were no more customers that day. Nathan's father slurped
his hot chocolate down and settled into his barber chair. Nathan sat,
watching darkness fall outside, nursing his root beer along, until five
to seven. Then he swept the last bit of hair from the floor and washed
out the coffee pot, and when he was done his father was unzipping his
white smock. "You didn't make much today," he said sternly.

"Two dollars."

"Could have made more if you'd asked somebody if he wanted a shine
instead of sitting there with Donald Duck." He buttoned his shirt.
"Get your stand and let's go. I'm hungry." He sounded disgusted.

Nathan heaved the rattling shine stand through the back door of
the car while his father locked the shop. He sat quietly on the pas­
enger side of the front seat, staring at the paper sack on his lap,
until his father got in beside him and started the car. He shook the
bag slightly. There was no movement.

His father drove down Beach. Through the pepper trees of Knott's
Berry Farm, Nathan could see the bright streetcar moving slowly and
heard its bell clang, turning his head to watch it as the car moved
away.

"I don't like the way that Mr. Caine calls me 'boy' all the time,"
Nathan said.

His father snorted. "Long as he tips you seventy-five cents--"
He raised two fingers in greeting to the driver of the patrol car coming
the other way. His eyes flicking to the rear-view mirror the instant
the two cars passed. "Long as he tips you seventy-five cents he can call you anything he darn well pleases."

"I don't care." Nathan cradled the bag in his hands. "I don't like it." They passed the Euena Park Center in silence.