Flotsam, jetsam, lagan| Poems, stories, drama and essays

Craig Brian Rayle
The University of Montana

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/2377

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.
Permission is granted by the author to reproduce this material in its entirety, provided that this material is used for scholarly purposes and is properly cited in published works and reports.

** Please check "Yes" or "No" and provide signature**

Yes, I grant permission  
No, I do not grant permission

Author's Signature ____________________________

Date: 7/12/94

Any copying for commercial purposes or financial gain may be undertaken with the minor's explicit consent.
FLOTSAM • JETSAM • LAGAN
POEMS, STORIES, DRAMA AND ESSAYS

by

Craig Brian Rayle

B.A., Utah State University--Logan, 1985

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Masters of Fine Arts, Creative Writing
University of Montana

1993

Approved by:

[signature]
Chairman, Graduate Committee

[signature]
Dean, Graduate School

[signature]
Date July 13, 1994
Table of Contents:

- Bedrock  Page 1
- Butternut  Page 3
- Prom Night  Page 9
- Buford's Wife  Page 10
- Crooked Lake Delton  Page 35
- Killing  Page 68
- All of Hemingway's Children  Page 125
We drove, not saying anything that memory could hold. Not on the ride from the airport across the mancos shales, not as we switchbacked down the Flint Trail, not crossing the empty redness of Standing Rocks.

I remember now mostly Jasper Canyon. Trying to show you something that I loved, that you could not love better. Leading your once-heroic legs, legs that had kicked the winning points, legs now shaking, stumbling down the crevassed pitch.

We knew in that moment that Park Service greens made me more fit than you, here without your Marlboro lit professional luncheons. Time had finally turned in my favor, As hand in hand I pulled you down, through geology. Moving between narrow walls, measured by hundred-foot falls, finding eventually-small, crumbled ledges. Prince's plume, cliffrose, beard tongue, datura. Black varnish everywhere on the stone. Water, forced by a million small, now-gone rains.

In the bottom, it is always-cool, shaded, silent. Trees, older than our now dead grandfathers, hug for moisture, search for rare soil. We stoop beneath these grandfather limbs, push past willow, pinyon, single-leaf ash, negotiate our way around boulders larger than the room we shared as children.

A route forced by drainage, young waters forced to the surface. Still more ancient unmoving rocks lie below here, beneath this cool, silent always desert-carving water.
In time, side canyons fall together. Trees no longer remain in a wash so many times ripped by flood, flood gathered from country that cannot take rain as fast as it falls. Only litter. Leaves, husks, bark. Seeds maybe, Dammed behind an occasional root.

We walk as we must, in full sunlight, the water stolen now. Then we walk again-deeper, trapped again in the cut stone of a now-dead sea you and I; sand, mud, clay. Finally, reaching bedrock, water is forced again, small, beautiful, tentative over the fluted lime, over a final cliff, crashing into one last pool of its own making.

And then only sand, one last pinyon, the boulders smaller, finally ground down, brought here, I am sure, by the torrents of this terrible, unreliable stream in which we now together stand.

In the morning, I try to make my way over the edge, to some river which I only know is there. But you are still afraid, still watching me, still stopping me. And I am still obedient, cinching down my load, following your tired legs as they lead us out but not home over a route we both now know.
Our family, we found this cat. It was nice enough, but it had been a stray, so it was all screwed up. It was very skittish, and you had to approach it real slow. You couldn't just pet it. You had to cajole it into liking you, or it would run and hide under the couch or something. And about once a week, one of my friends, who didn't know any better, would try to grab kitty, just to pet her I mean, and the crazy thing would bite the hell out of him.

When that happened, you'd best hope that Mom wasn't around. When she saw that, she was all over you. First she would apologize--profusely. "Oh no! I'm sooorrrry." she would say "I hope he didn't hurt you. Oh my, look at your hand. What a thing." Then she would lie for the cat. "She didn't mean to hurt you. She's really a very nice cat." Next it was the big-time worrying. "Oh, we had better get that cleaned up. Right away. I know! Let's you and I go wash that out with some nice clean soap." She would grab my friends by their little arms and leverage them into the guest bathroom, talking the whole way. "Cat bites are the worst," she'd say. "Oh, ... you didn't know that? Yes. The dirtiest bites you can ever get. When you look at the
infection rate, cats are worse than rattlesnakes. But don't worry," she'd sing. "We'll scrub and scrub and scrub until all those germs are gone."

That's what I remember. Mom in the bathroom, scrubbing my friends to death, meaning to be helpful the whole time. "All better?" she would say when she was done. It was like a command and a question combined. "All better!" And that was the end of the visit. My friends always went home after that ordeal. And there I'd be, left alone on the couch with my feet up so the damn cat couldn't get to me.

Mom, of course, would come back into the living room and look at me, her face flushed, her eyes watery, prepared to deliver her recurring moral lesson. She did it all with questions: "Why honey? Has Butternut ever done anything to deserve this? Don't you think if you were nicer to her she would be nicer to you?"

Then she would fish around under the couch. It didn't matter that she was putting runs in her nylons or that the shag rug was leaving indentations in her face or even that her skirt was riding halfway up her butt. All that mattered was kitty. "Butternut? Butternut?" She would stop for a moment and poke her head back out from under the couch. "You and your friends should be ashamed of yourselves." Then she'd fish some more. "Come here kitty. No one's going to hurt you ever again."
God, I hated that cat. Poor little pathological Butternut. I hated her so much that after six months I hung her. Now don't jump to conclusions. I mean, I was only eight years old. And I didn't do the actual hanging, I just helped. Les Farrance did the hanging. And it wasn't even a hanging by the neck until dead or any of that. And it wasn't even really pre-meditated. Not really.

We, Les and I, were doing something in the driveway. Shooting baskets maybe, I don't remember. I do remember when Les first noticed Butternut laying on the still-warm hood of my father's Cadillac.

"I bet I can sneak up on her," he said. "You're full of shit," I said. Shit was a big word that year and I used it for all it was worth—SHIT. After that, Les had to go through with it. His plan was to sneak to the middle of the garage between the Cadillac and the Olds, then drop under the Caddy, belly his way up to the very front, pop up and grab Butternut.

It was a good plan, but it wasn't gonna work. Screwed up as Butternut was psychologically, she could hear almost anything. She could hear the electric can opener opening her cat food from three rooms away. She could hear mice. So when Les started shimmying around under the Caddy, Butternut simply got up and retreated to the roof of the car. It really upset Les, and for a minute I thought he was
going to throw something and scratch up the Caddy, but he didn't. In fact, before either Butternut or I knew what was happening, Les worked his way over, reached in the window of the Caddy and punched the garage door opener.

Les was brilliant that way, always throwing a curve in the middle of whatever he was doing. We'd only had the garage door for a few weeks, and when Butternut heard its foreign rumblings, she froze in a stiffened crouch there on top of the Caddy. Then we heard a voice come through the living room wall. "You kids quit playing with the garage door."

That's about how I remember my dad in those days, a voice coming from another room. I knew he wouldn't get out of his chair just yet, but if we pushed him, if he did have to get up, he'd mean business. Maybe we should stop I said to Les. "Chickenshit," he said. I told myself that there was something honorable in letting Les go on with the dare, but the truth was that I was more afraid of losing Les's friendship then I was of facing my father. So I shut up and waited.

It was obvious that Les didn't have a real plan, but like I've said, that is when he did his best work. He started by trying to corner Butternut, first by the lockers and then by the workbench, but when that didn't work, he let Butternut trap herself. It took some time, but Les was
patient. First Butternut tried to hide beneath the Olds, so
Les started jamming my dad’s shop broom at her. Whenever he
stopped jamming, you could hear a cold growl and see the
dust from Butternut’s now-thumping tail.

If she had gotten her teeth into Les just then it would
have been the worst cat bite of all time. But mad as she
was, Butternut was still losing ground, and soon she made
the mistake Les had been waiting for. She made a run for it
between the snowblower and the bikes, and she set up in that
metal cave, her tail slowly pounding and claws ready.

"Get a rope," Les said. He stood planted squarely in
front of the cat’s lair and looked at me. "I said get a
rope you dink." I looked at Les and then at Butternut,
growling in her nest. I looked at the long back wall of the
garage, the wall behind which my father sat, watching the
evening news. Not a rope in sight.

"Get that rubber thing," Les said. "That will do."
I handed the shock cord to Les with some relief, thinking
that even he couldn’t pull this one off, make a noose and
snare a cat with an awkward four-foot piece of rubber.

I underestimated. With special grace, Les dropped his
makeshift noose over Butternut, yanked her out of her spoked
den and then stood there struggling with her. One of
Butternut’s front legs was caught in the noose with her
head, but the other three legs were scratching away. Les
backed away from the bikes, half dragging and half lifting Butternut. She kept clawing away, but Les would not let up on the tension, and when he got to the garage door, he made one last valiant lift and hooked the free end of the shock cord over a crossright half-way up the door.

"Punch the button or she'll get away." I looked and what Les was saying was true. Butternut was boinging wildly off the garage door now, and with each bounce she was slipping a bit further out of the noose. "Punch the button you dink." I knew that if I punched the button my dad would be up and out of his Lazyboy with Mom right behind him. I knew what my mother would say when they got Butternut out of the shock cord and everything had settled back down. She'd say: "You ought to be ashamed of yourselves!" I punched the button.
PROM NIGHT

High school was never so sophisticated.
Rented red carpet unrolled between our lockers
catered hors d'oeuvres stuffed in our pockets between sets
on trips to the car with Pete and Pam, all drinking sloe gin
gin spelled like it started out the night drunk
bought by a friend of a friend in another town
being careful not to spill the red adult liquid
on you, on the dress worn only once, not caring
my tux not due back till morning.

Afterwards, Pete's at Pam's. Alone now, wanting this
excitement to become something I can touch, feel, leave,
take home on my skin for the first time. Pulling down
the wooded lane behind your house, wanting you
and more sloe gin, finding only a little, sticky
on your lipstick, tongues died red, rouge smeared
face to face, my feelings beneath your dress, you
breathing drunken words: no and don't and please stop.

Words pulling on me, please and no, don't stop
pulling violently on panty-hose, as strong as spider's web
easily torn and brushed aside, while hoping
to find love here, now, or ever in this slurred red pain.
BUFORD'S WIFE

Helen stirred the potatoes and turned the chicken in the iron skillet. She wondered why Buford was late this time. Maybe he'd sheared a pin or broken a tine. Maybe he'd even misjudged the fall mud and gotten stuck.

"Stupid old fool!"

She mashed the potatoes, adding milk and butter and pepper, and picked the chicken out of the grease and set it on a sheet of newspaper. Then she set the whole works on the edge of the wood stove.

"Son of a bitch," Helen said. "Late. All the time, late." She looked at the red plastic clock above the sink. Helen didn't like many folks. And on nights like tonight, when Buford let her down, she didn't like that either.

Helen looked out the window at the river and then at the cliffs it had once carved rising to the west and north beyond the pasture. The sediments looked soft in the fading light, like the blankets on a winter bed, the red and tan sandstones lying quietly between the gray shales.

Five more minutes passed on the clock. "Forty-seven years," Helen said. "Son of a bitch." Then she put on her coat and drove out the sandy lane in the '67 Bel Air.
When Helen saw headlights shining up out of the wash, she knew something was wrong. At first, she couldn't find Buford. She found only the brown quilt coat he used to pad the metal tractor seat. He's been thrown clear, she thought. But on the second trip she found him. The plow had fallen over on his legs and dragged him along until the engine stalled. There was blood drying in one corner of his mouth. She felt his cold cheek. She laid the quilt coat over his chest in hopes of warming him. Then she took off her own coat, made a pillow and placed it under his head.

She remembered cursing him to the red clock. "I'm sorry," she said. "Buford?"

Helen went back to the house and called Arlie, the only one of Buford's friends she was comfortable around. She spoke without letting him answer: "This is Helen. Buford's stuck under his tractor, and I want you to come and take care of him because there is nothing I can do." Helen unplugged the phone. Then she went to the stove, took the plate of food and the metal pan lid which covered it and set them both on the middle shelf of the refrigerator, between Buford's cold bottle water and the pie he was having for dinner.

* * * * *
Three days later, when Arlie drove out to pick Helen up and take her to the funeral, she wasn't ready. She wasn't going.

"He's your husband," Arlie said.

"You just keep quiet about Buford," Helen replied.

"Go on and get ready," Arlie said. "It'll be okay." Helen looked at him suspiciously. "We'll take your car."

Arlie drove, and Helen stared out the window. After a dozen silent miles, they turned onto the pavement and passed through the truck stops and cafes of Green River.

"Highway whores," Helen said. Normally she'd elaborate, say something about how those Green River whores would sell anything to anyone. But today Helen just looked out the window during the 50-mile ride, only occasionally breaking the silence. "Tourist whores," she said when they passed a billboard for Arches National Park. "Energy whores," she said as they passed the uranium mill outside Moab. "River whores," she said when they made it to the rafting companies on main street.

The Moab cemetery was crowded by the time Helen and Arlie got there. Reverend Vance rushed through the small crowd to meet them.

"We're running awfully late," he said.

"Who invited all these people, Arlie?" Helen demanded. "I should have never come." The Reverend was speechless.
He'd heard about Helen but had never met her. Arlie took over. He reassured Helen, promised her that it would only take a few minutes.

"Give me the keys," Helen said. The Reverend looked nervously at the waiting crowd and then at Arlie. Arlie nodded and gave Helen the keys, and then he helped her through the mourners to the canopy by Buford's coffin.

Buford had always been the one to have friends. Whenever he had gone into town to trade or bank or buy groceries, Helen had stayed out on the farm, alone. And her absence had bred mystery and then gossip. First she was the strange new bride, then the crazy wife, now the mean old widow. But Buford had known better. He'd seen the meanness in Helen for what it was, a wound that she'd gotten early on, long before she'd had any say in life. And he knew how much Helen loved him.

But now Buford was in a box and his many friends stood, surrounding Helen, smiling awkward, insincere smiles. Helen felt their eyes on her, and she hated them. She was certain that there was nothing to smile about. So she didn't look back at them. She looked down into the hole. But when Reverend Vance picked up his first handful of dirt, Helen couldn't take it. She looked away, looked straight at Arlie, and spoke, loudly enough to get her point across.
"Don't you dare try to stop me Arlie." Then she walked through the crowd and drove away.

* * * * *

Helen parked on Main street and began to walk. Son of a bitch! He had let her down. She'd counted on him, and he had finally and horribly let her down. Loss chiseled a painful kind of hatred all over her features, and the few people who wanted to offer sympathy thought better of it once they'd seen her face.

Helen walked on. She walked all the way to Woody's, her eyes on the sidewalk. And there, sitting at the bench in front of the bar, she saw a pair of plain, well-worn cowboy boots. Buford had farmed in such boots all his life. She heard a slow voice.

"Can you give me a ride?"

Helen looked up. An old Indian was connected to the boots—a Navaho she thought, judging by his broad features. He wore a work shirt, a wool coat and a baseball cap. He was horribly burned; his eyes were closed. The lids were the only part of his face that was not scarred. She looked at the Indian.

"What are you doing here?" she asked. She meant it in the largest sense. She meant, how dare you sit here wasting your life when Buford and I have got so much trouble.

"I'm just sitting," the Indian said honestly.
"I can see that," Helen said. "What do you take me for, a fool?" The Indian stared blankly at the sound of Helen's voice. "What's wrong with your eyes?" Helen asked. Her voice was cold and sad. The Indian sat still and cautious. "I said, what's wrong with your eyes?"

"Who are you?" the Indian finally asked.

"I'm Helen Owens if it's any of your business."

"Buford," the Indian said. A tentative smile broke across his broad face. Helen's tone softened but stayed tense, carefully seeking any word about Buford.

"What about Buford? You know Buford?"

The Indian nodded, "I like Buford."

Helen clenched her fists in excitement. An incomplete but certain idea crystallized in her head. This Indian knows Buford.

"Can you give me a ride?" he asked.

* * * * *

On the way out of town, Helen did two things she had never done before. She stopped at the state liquor store, and she bought a fifth of Jim Beam.

"I got this for you," Helen said, awkwardly, when she got back in the car. The Indian held the bottle in his hands, and then he smiled. When he didn't say thanks, Helen grew nervous in the silence. She started the car. Then she asked the Indian what his name was.
"Most people call me the Chief." He cracked the seal on the Jim Beam. "Where are we going?" he asked after a few swallows.

"Just for a little ride," Helen said. The Chief took another swallow. He looked satisfied.

Helen began to question the Chief in a forced, careful tone. "Just how long have you known Buford?" Helen glanced from the road to the Chief's face. A strange expression came over the blind features.

"Awhile," was all the Indian said.

"When did you see him last?" The strange expression returned, and the Chief turned his face toward Helen this time.

"About a month ago."

Helen listened carefully to the Chief's use of tense, waiting for more. But he just took another swallow. Then he asked, "You sure you're Buford's wife?"

"Of course I'm Buford's wife. Why wouldn't I be Buford's wife?"

"You sound kind of funny is all."

Helen's breathing was shallow, her old hands pink and white, clenching the steering wheel. She thought maybe she had been found out. She took a deep breath. She'd sit tight, let him get good and drunk, drive him all the way out to the farm for the night. Then they'd have all day
tomorrow to talk about Buford. After all, a drunk doesn't exactly have anything better to do.

They drove another mile or two, and the Chief took another swallow. "I have to be back at the Community Center at dark," he said.

"Oh sure, the Community Center," Helen said carefully.

"They fix my meals there."

By the time they reached Nine Mile Canyon, Helen had regained her composure. She knew she had to lie to the Chief, to drive slow and keep him drinking. She decided to make conversation.

"You never told me what happened to your eyes."

"Long, sad story." the Chief said.

"I'm all ears."

"No, I quit telling that story." The Chief took another swallow. "I'm all ears. That's a good one. Me too," he said. He turned his face towards Helen. "See?" Then he laughed.

Helen waited and waited and drove. She kept looking over at the Indian as most sighted people would, thinking maybe he really could see or thinking maybe he could read her mind somehow. That's foolish, she thought.

"Have you ever been married?"

"Once," the Chief said. And that was all.

Helen's breathing quickened again. It was all crazy.
Buford, her plan, this clairvoyant Indian. She tried to settle herself, breathing deeply, looking at the many-layered sandstone. But it was no good. It brought her right back into the beginning of the loop again. Buford. It was just how it it had always been on Helen's rare trips to town, Burford and her alone. Just like this, quiet, watching the land.

"You don't talk very damn much." Without looking over, the Indian took a drink. Then he let out a satisfying ahhh, put the cap on the bottle and turned Helen's way.

"So, what do you want to talk about. History? Art? Tribal politics?"

He sat and he waited.

"Never mind," Helen finally said.


Helen was going to lay into him. What's he mean by that? Goddamn pushy, clairvoyant Indian. But she looked down at the bottle, it was half gone, and if he didn't want to talk, well, then that was okay.

"I gotta pee," the Chief said, in a thick voice. Helen found a dirt road, hidden from the highway. "Don't watch," the Chief said, walking a few feet from the car, feeling the ground with his feet as he went.

When he returned, he found the Jim Beam with his hands, uncapped it and took a swig. Then he felt around the dash
and located the radio. He found KOAL in Price and began singing along with the country songs in a thick, slurred baritone. He hummed the words he didn't remember or made up his own. At the end of every song, he took a swallow or two.

By the time they reached the river bottom, the Chief was leaning against the passenger door, nearly passed out. Helen helped him out. The air coming off the river was cool and moist. "Is it dark?" the Chief asked.

Helen told the truth. "Not quite." Helen helped the Chief along the sandstone walk, past her flower beds, past the woodpile and into the house through the low door that entered the kitchen right next to the wood stove. She set him down at the kitchen table and got him a glass. She built a fire. The Chief drank a long swig from the bottle.

"Where am I?" he asked.

"Buford's farm," she answered.

The Chief smiled and laid his head down. His arm knocked over the bottle. He stirred, but only vaguely. Helen sponged up what had spilled on the table and poured the rest down the sink. It was gone now. She helped the Chief up, and promising him they would leave soon, led him into the bedroom. Everything was going just fine. But to be on the safe side, Helen headed out to the barn.
The tractor that Arlie and the Sheriff had pulled out of the wash and parked by the barn now stood in her path. She went around it, swearing under her breath. She brought some broken bailing twine, some tools and two big wood screws back to the house. She held one of the screws up to the molding, tapped it with the hammer to get it started and then twisted it in with the ratchet. Then quickly she wrapped the twine around the screw and the door knob, tying the door shut. She took a deep breath and stuck her ear to the door. Nothing. She untied the door and looked in on the Indian. He was sleeping soundly, with a half-snoring rasp. But Helen knew you never could be too careful, so she put in the other screw in next to the first, for reinforcement, then re-tied the door.

Helen took some wood from the pile out back and stoked the fire. Then she sat down at the kitchen table, took off her shoes and rubbed the back of her neck for a few moments. Finally she got to her feet, took a pillow and comforter out of the cedar chest and went to sleep on the couch, alone.

* * * * *

When Helen woke up and peeked in on the Chief, he looked paler under his scars. She figured he was hungover, but she didn't really know what to look for. Buford never
drank this much. She decided a good breakfast was all he needed. She made him potatoes and eggs and toasted a heel of bread on the stove plate.

When she took the food into the room, she smelled vomit and saw it, small spots on the bed and on the floor. "No one told you to go vomit in Buford's bed," she said. "I shouldn't even feed you." But when the Chief looked at her voice with his scarred face, she handed him the food. He ate only a few bites, and then he gave her the plate back.

"Where am I?" he asked.

"You're at Buford's place."

"Buford's dead," he said.

Helen looked into the Indian's face, but the scars didn't move and the blank eyes stayed focused on her voice.

"He's not dead," she said. "You're still drunk. He'll be back any time now."

"Why did you bring me here?" the Chief asked.

Helen was breathing quickly. She said the first thing that came to mind.

"Because you're a no-good bar whore, and I won't have that. Not in my house." Then Helen waited.

"You're crazy," the Chief finally said. He tried to get to his feet but started vomiting. Helen brought a roasting pan from the kitchen.
"You're gonna use this," she said, shoving it under his face. He retched into the pan but little more came up. "Look at you, you're so hungover you don't even know what you're saying." The Chief threw the roasting pan at Helen's voice.

Helen quickly backed out of the room and tied off the twine. Then she looked down at her dress. It was the same plain dress she'd worn to the funeral. She hadn't changed. It didn't matter. That wasn't a special occasion, and neither was this. She wiped the few spots of vomit off with a dish rag, then she yelled through the door.

"Buford's not dead yet. Not by a long shot. And you can just stay in there if that's what you think." Helen waited for a reply. She heard crashing noises. She heard their things being thrown and tipped over, and she worried. The sounds only stopped when she heard the Chief retching and coughing. Goddamn bar whore, she thought. She waited for silence and then yelled through the door again. "It's ten miles to the nearest neighbor so you might just stop all this." It was a half an hour before Helen heard anything more. Finally the Chief asked for some water.

Helen brought a saucepan and a plastic cup to the door. "OK, now I ain't bringing this in until you sit on the bed and make the springs squeak." Helen heard the springs, and when she was satisfied it was safe, she went in. She
pulled the big dresser back upright, slid it in front of the only window, and then set the pan and cup by the bedside, telling the Chief where they were. She stood cautiously by the door and watched his hands search for the water.

"Are you gonna keep this up? Because, if you are, I can just stop bringing you in anything." The Chief shook his head. Helen straightened up the room and wiped up the vomit.

By the late afternoon, Helen figured the Chief might be able to hold some food down. This time she made something gentler, well-done toast with some warm milk to dip it in. Sick food, she used to call it when she made it for Buford. She made the Chief squeak the springs of the bed and then took it in to him. He looked weaker, and he had begun to shake, hard shakes that made the bed posts rattle on the floor.

"When are you taking me back?"

"I told you before, when you're fit to go back." She pulled the covers up around him and then offered to feed him. But he wouldn't open his mouth for the food.

Just how long you been drinking," she asked. But the Chief wouldn't say a word. "Well ain't that a damn shame," Helen said.

She tied off the twine and went back to her knitting, but she had lost track of her stitches and had to recount.
She tried to blot the Chief out of her mind. It wasn't her fault if he wouldn't eat or talk. She was doing everything she could, but some things were up to him. She tried to think of something else. Her chickens. She had been feeding them, but she hadn't gathered eggs in days.

Helen put on her apron and coat, walked out to the coop and emerged a few minutes later with the apron over-full, holding it by the corners. She stopped in front of the silent tractor.

"See what you've made me do!" she told it. "You damned fool, why didn't you look where you were going?" She walked over closer to the tractor, looking at the murderous plow and the giant left tire. "How am I going to get along now?" she asked it.

In the kitchen, Helen washed the eggs and set them out on a towel to dry. Then she looked in on the Chief again. He was sleeping a cold, half-sleep. She took a quilt from the closet and laid it over his shaking figure. She looked at his scars. They were deep, following the lines made by the muscles in his face. Only the lids had been spared, and they looked sadly beautiful, framed by the scars. She wondered what could have done that, burned all but the lids. Then she wondered how he saw things, how she appeared to him behind those beautiful lids.
When Helen returned to the kitchen, she stoked the fire, wedging in extra wood. Then she got her sewing scissors and cut the twine from the door molding.

* * * *

Early that night, Helen heard bottles knocking against each another and found the Chief standing by the sink. The cupboards were open. His hand was holding a bottle of Parson's Ammonia and shaking hard. His face looked when he heard the linoleum creak.

"There ain't no use in that," Helen said. "Buford never kept anything to drink out here." The Chief didn't believe her. He uncapped the ammonia and brought it to his mouth. When the fumes gagged him, he dropped that bottle and his blind hands reached down, probing for another.

Helen charged, knocking a bottle of furniture polish from the Chief's hand and pushing him backwards. He reached out to get his balance, but his hand came down on the hot stove, and when he yanked it away, he fell.

She helped him to his feet. "That was a damn stupid thing to do," she said. The Chief held his burnt hand close to his stomach, but he didn't quit shaking. Helen took him to the sink and started to rinse his burn in cold water.

"I need a drink," he said. When Helen tried leading him back to the bedroom, he pushed her away. "You're crazy!" he said. He started groping at the kitchen walls.
Helen moved in front of the door that led outside. She had never expected it to be this bad. "Oh, Buford!" she said aloud.

The Chief continued to grope for a door. "Buford's dead. He's dead, and you know it." Without thinking, Helen slapped the Chief, hard, then stepped aside, so he couldn't locate her. The Chief stopped groping and started yelling.

"He's dead! Dead, you hear?" He shook even harder and went back to his panicky search for a door. Helen slapped at him again and again, until the Chief began to cower from her and speak in agitated Navaho.

Helen studied his face. His unseeing eyes were red and watery. The scars looked deeper, tightened by the muscles in his face. He was breathing hard and shivering violently now. Helen spoke as sternly as she could.

"Sit down. Sit down, and I'll help you back to your room." The Chief sat. Helen took his unburnt hand from the table's edge, and it locked onto hers with surprising strength. She braced herself, prepared to strike him again or run, wondering what she could count on from this one, from this person. She helped him back to the bed and pulled the coverings around him.

When the Chief finally settled down some, Helen brought a chair into the bedroom and tuned in a late-night talk show.
on the radio. She sat and listened to other people's problems, and she watched the Chief. It doesn't matter she thought. Buford's in the ground now. And this Indian, whatever his name is, he sure doesn't have anything worth living for. It doesn't matter. Everything is over. But she didn't leave and when the Chief stirred, she wiped his face or brought him some water.

** *** ***

At 2 a.m. the talk show ended, and KOAL in Price signed off. Helen fooled with the dial, but she knew before she started that the signals from Denver and Albuquerque and L.A. wouldn't make it down into the bottom. She turned the radio off. In the unsettling silence, the Chief began to stir again.

"Wilma?"

"No it's me, Helen."

"Wilma," the Chief insisted.

"I'm Helen, I'm Buford's wife."

"Buford's dead."

"Yes," Helen said.

He began to shake and cough and speak in agitated Navaho again. Helen looked at him and knew what an awful mistake she'd made.

"It's okay," Helen said. "It's me."

"Wilma?" he asked.
"Yes."

He clutched at her, pulling her down to the bed. Helen didn't dare move. She closed her eyes and listened to his voice. It spoke to her, in Navaho, like a high mass, in powerful, reverent tones, in words she had never heard. Through the long night, Helen lay next to the Chief—she didn't disagree or scold or curse. She hummed country songs to him. And she talked about Buford.

* * * * *

At dawn, the Chief's shakes were less frequent and less violent. He still thought Helen was Wilma and he still wanted a drink. But as morning drifted toward noon, he was speaking more in English. Helen could tell that he thought they were on the reservation, near Round Rock, and that he wanted to go catch the ponies. "We'll go soon," Helen promised him. "When it gets warm out."

She made him breakfast. She poached the eggs this time, staying away from the grease. She wanted to be sure he'd eat this time, so she lied him into it. "It's me Wilma," she said. "Here's some eggs. Yes, that's oatmeal, just the way you like it." He didn't eat much, but he could hold it down.

When he finished, the Chief wanted a bath. He always got a bath at the Community Center. "You're gonna just have to wait till I get the dishes redd up," Helen replied. It
was the wrong answer, and it sent the Chief into a new round of shakes, certain that Wilma was going to leave him again. He began to scratch at himself, trying to get the dirt off, violently enough that Helen had to give in. The Chief smiled as Helen led him down the hall.

"Warren," he said. "Warren Merryboy. That's my name. That's what people called me before I went blind."

"Well, then that's still your name," Helen said.

Warren Merryboy sat on the toilet lid, waiting for the tub to fill. He talked on and on, slipping in and out of past and present. He told Helen that they used to call him Hank at the Bureau of Indian Affairs school in Gallup, because he knew so many country songs. He wondered whether his truck would start that morning. He told Helen that Wilma had been a good wife and that he didn't blame her for leaving him. Bad luck, he said.

Helen grew confused. She didn't know how to take this new talkativeness. She'd always been uncomfortable around open, jabbering types, but she didn't dare tell him to keep quiet.

When she gave him a soapy cloth, Warren washed at himself, weakly and forgetfully, while Helen kept herself from looking. His ramblings went from nicknames to livestock. He worried to Wilma about the sheep they'd left on the winter range near Dennehotso.
His chatter lulled Helen into lowering her guard. She began watching him as he skipped a leg or went over and over the same area of his stomach. It wouldn't do any harm to look. No one would ever know. Besides, his privates were all but hidden under the now-soapy water.

Then, Warren mentioned Buford. "He was a good man," Warren said. He sat up higher in the tub, looking more intently at Helen, as if he were about to say something important, and when he did, the water dropped a few inches. "He used to buy me drinks once in a while—and there were never any games, no questions. It's too bad he's gone." Helen looked away.

* * * * *

On the third day, Helen guessed that Warren was nearly back to normal. He talked off and on all that day in between napping and listening to the radio. During lunch, Helen offered him a ride back into town.

"You cook better than the women at the Community Center," he said. "Besides, I'm not too thirsty today." That was all he said.

The rest of the afternoon, Warren talked more about his past. He began teasing Helen, pulling her leg the way Arlie and Buford had sometimes done.
But about five o’clock, Warren Merryboy asked the kind of question Helen hated the most, the kind that made you own up. "Why did you bring me here anyway?" he asked her.

Helen’s throat tightened, and the fear of people that had followed her around all her life began to well up behind the knot. She looked into the scarred face she’d once mistaken for empty. Her mind raced through images: Warren’s soapy privates, the dirt sifting through Reverend Vance’s hand, blood in the corner of Buford’s mouth. Buford was gone. There was no denying that anymore. And Helen’s reasons for taking the Chief were all blurred now. But she wasn’t about to confess that. So she told him it was none of his damn business.

A smile grew on Warren Merryboy’s face. It grew, contorted and burnt, until it began to scare Helen. Then it burst into loud laughter.

"Stop it," Helen said. "You stop laughing at my husband."

"Your husband is dead!" Warren said. "Your husband is dead, so you kidnap me, and then you tell me it’s none of my business." He looked at Helen with his burnt smile. "That’s pretty funny, don’t you think? None of my damn business!"

Helen looked at the face. It wasn’t quiet any more. It was boring right through her.
"Well, I had my reasons," she said.

"And are your reasons satisfied now?"

Helen changed the subject: "It's time for dinner. Now are you going to stay out here laughing, or will you be wanting some food?"

"You're the boss," Warren replied, giggling as she led him to the kitchen.

Warren was unusually quiet during dinner, but the smile never left his face. At the end of the meal, he got up from the table and slowly felt his way toward the living room. Helen got up to help him. "No," he said to her. "I can manage now."

When he cleared the threshold to the living room, Warren turned and said "You know, you've had pretty good luck in life, living out here and being married to Buford." The words worked like a small rivulet, seeping in, eroding the last piece of some delicate block inside her.

When Helen finished the dishes and came into the living room, there were tears on her face that the Indian couldn't see.

"Well, you're gonna spoil if we don't get you some fresh air," she said.

Helen was scared as they put on their coats and headed out the door. He's just a blind old drunk, she told
herself. You'll be taking him back to town soon enough. She took a deep breath.

She led him down the road in the pale light.

"If you promise not to make fun of me, there's something I want you to see."

"I'm all eyes," he said.

On the first pass, they missed the scar in the road berm where Arlie had driven the tractor out of the wash. The October night was coming on fast, and Helen could hardly see. She began shaking, nearly crying.

"Never mind," she said. "This was a fool idea anyway." Warren Merryboy wouldn't let her call it off. He told her he could see just as well in the dark as in the daylight. He took her by the hand and made her backtrack, and then the fool started gabbing.

"It was on the Interstate, you know."

"What?" Helen said, confused.

"Where I lost my eyes. I was working a road crew, one of them old tar heaters that blew up sometimes. Almost killed me. They tell me I was on fire for a minute or two there."

When they found the tractor track, Warren stopped them. "Don't be afraid," he said. Then he led her down in the darkness, feeling the way with his feet, until the track
stopped. They crouched down in the sand. Warren placed his hands next to Helen's.

"This is the spot," Helen said. She thought she saw Warren Merryboy nod.
CROOKED LAKE DELTON

My strongest childhood memory is always of a rowboat in the middle of Crooked Lake Delton. It begins in the Oldsmobile my father purchased when his office machine business had begun to succeed. We are headed across Kalamazoo towards Delton. I am seven in that memory. My butch haircut just barely bobs above the passenger side window. My father, who is beginning to lose his thick black curls, smokes Viceroy's and whistles as he drives. Our dog, Jody, who is not much more than a puppy, sits between us. Brad, my brother, who used to go with us, is not there. I have erased him.

There is a store at the lake run by a man named Bob, which sits atop a hill, piled up by a long-ago glacier. We get out of the car at the store, and I scan the lake intently—a little, butch-headed voyageur, looking clear across two miles of open water to the weed-choked inlet on the far side of the lake.

"Whatcha think Bunny Rabbit?" my father asks.

I answer with "The fish are just waiting for somebody as smart as us," or "Just the right time of day for a bass to start dinner." They are lines I have learned from my father, the master. I am an earnest little study.
Inside Crooked Lake Store, we buy worms and whatever else we might need. Simple stuff like hooks and sinkers; my father is a simple fisherman. The only fancy thing we buy is a crawler harness to replace the one lost in the weeds last trip. It looks like a jewel, lying on Bob's smudged-up counter top, the bright plastic beads and shiny spinners exposed. I am not yet old enough for crawler harnesses. But my day will come. I have that on good word from my father.

Bob hands us the bag, and my father starts for the door. But I don't move, I know they are forgetting the best part again. When my father reaches the door, he spins and winks at Bob and says, "I feel like there must be something else, Bob." They milk that for all it is worth, my dad scratching his head, Bob holding his chin in his hand. "I don't know what it could be Bill." Finally the tension of such withholding is killing me, and I blurt out, "Dr. Pepper, Dad, you forgot the Dr. Pepper." And Bob completes the ritual, laughing as he grabs a six pack, and then my Dad laughs, and then I finally smile, embarrassed, but happy, and we are out the door.

On the first trip, we take the three or four poles we've brought and the tackle box, and head down the long stairs and set the gear on the dock out back. My father repeats the number of the boat that Bob has rented us.
"Number 2," he says. "Remember. On the front left side." Then he tells Jody to stay with me and returns to get the motor out of the trunk and lock up. I find Number 2 and stay by its side, a sentinel bent on protecting our craft from the elements.

Number 2 is swaying in the nearly-quiet water, bumping against the tire casings that adorn each steel upright on Bob's dock. But a truly good mate won't allow such damage to his ship. So I kneel down on the dock, grasp the boat by the gunwales and push back against the lake with all my might. Throughout this procedure, Jody is standing beside me on the dock wagging her tail. I can tell that she wants to get in Number 2. "No!" I tell her. There will be no coming aboard without the captain's orders.

That's how my dad always finds me in my memory. Kneeling down, watching over his dog and his boat. The motor he is carrying is small, a three horse, but it's a long hill, and the Viceroys were starting to take their toll, even then. By the time he gets to the level dock, Dad is puffing, his face red, a serious look in his eyes. When I see that face, I move out of the way, Dad steps heavily into the boat, hoists the motor into place and tightens it down on the transom.
"You ready Bunny Rabbit?" he would say between breaths. I was never scared of him when he gasped at me this way. But I knew something was wrong.

* * * * *

The motor was old and worn out, but we didn't need much and Dad had a way with motors—the same knack that I imagine all farmboys have. He would fool with the choke and the throttle until the motor started, and then he would adjust the mixture as we started across the lake.

For the first few minutes, my father would be catching his breath, a Viceroy in one hand, the motor tiller in the other. He wouldn't want to talk, so I would daydream about the fish we were about to catch. One way I dreamt was to lean way out over the bow, over the slowly passing water. Looking down, I could turn weeds into fish and fish into bigger fish. And another way I dreamt was to find the Honey Hole by using the landmarks on shore the way Dad had taught me. It was right off the only peninsula on the lake, across from the green shingled house on the one side and the log cabin with the fieldstone front porch on the other. Once I found the Honey Hole, I practiced another trick. I would lick my finger and then hold it up, trying to see which way the wind would make us drift that day. I didn't always remember whether the wind was coming from the cold or warm
side of my extended finger, but that didn't matter, since the Mercury was pushing us steadily forward at four miles an hour.

About half way to the peninsula, my father would start to sing. It was the only time in my life that I can recall him singing. And he only knew two songs. As he ran the motor, he usually sang *Buffalo Gals* in a rich bass that blended in with the droning of the engine. They made a beautiful duet, the Mercury and my dad, and when I looked back at him, he would smile or wink. That was the moment—a happy man, and a son, and moving slowly over the water.

When we made it to the Honey Hole, we would put out the anchor and Dad would rig up our poles. I only had one pole, an old cheap Zebco, and usually used a bobber set about seven foot deep. But sometimes, Dad would take off the bobber, put on extra weight and let my line sink down, ten or fifteen feet, until the slack was all out. Then he would reel in a few cranks and hand me my pole. "Not too bad," he'd say. "You're right on bottom now, Bunny Rabbit." At seven, it seemed like another piece of the magic that my father knew how to perform. Finding the bottom. Often, I would look down into the water for my worm. I would follow the line down into the warm, algae-rich lake, and then the line would disappear.
Poles set, we would each open a Dr. Pepper and then we would wait. We waited in silence mostly, or my father whistled. But it was a good sort of silence, a peaceful and easy silence. Often as not, we would wait without catching fish, even at the Honey Hole. And then we would pull up anchor and drift. My father saved his second song until we were drifting. It seemed like motion brought out the music and he would sing, without the motor this time, that shy bass finding an audience:

Oh the bulldog on the bank and the bullfrog in the pool. The bulldog called the bullfrog, a dirty old water fool. Singin' tra la la la lee. Singin' tra la la la loo. The bulldog called the bullfrog a dirty old water fool.

That's what we were out there. Dirty old water fools. That's what it felt like, simple and happy. Tra la la la lee.

Sometimes we would drift for hours, waiting to get into fish. We would drift all the way across the small lake, and then we would motor back across and drift again, the song changing back to Buffalo Gals when the motor started up. I don't ever remember the catching of fish—even though we would often bring home full stingers to clean in the kitchen late at night. The drifting is what I remember.

And when our drifting was done, it would be chilly and nearly dark, and there would be a stringer of fish we hadn't caught lying in the bottom of the boat, and I would be in
the back, sitting between my father's legs, leaning back into him for warmth. And Jody would be at our feet. And my father would be smoking a Viceroy and singing with the motor:

"Won't you come out tonight and dance by the light of the moon?"

* * * * *

Our dog, Jody, wasn't really a beagle. She was coal black with white feet and a white, irregular star on her chest. We had picked her up on a farm, south of Kalamazoo. My dad had wanted a hound, a dog that might become a first-rate rabbit hunter, the hound's natural destiny. The owner of the pups promised us that Jody's blood was pure, even if her markings were not, even if she was devoid of the normal third color, tan.

He showed us her purebred, three-toned mother as a kind of assurance that Jody was also pure. But my dad was smarter than that. He knew that a dog in heat led to polygamy, that there was no telling how many different males had helped sire the batch of pups before us. The only three-toned pups in the litter were two males, but my father wanted a girl--a girl to name Jody, after the daughter he'd never had.

When I think about it, I realize that the owner's assurances were of no matter. My father, the farm boy,
thought little of breeding back then. He'd hunted with mutts his entire life. Mutts were smart and humble; a purebred dog was the equivalent of an educated idiot. So when the kennel owner told us that he was charging ten dollars for this purebred, near Beagle, my father gladly paid, and she was ours.

Dad hunted with Jody, mostly for rabbits for a few years after that, but I can only remember him taking me along once, not long after my memory of Crooked Lake Delton was first cast. We went with a friend of my father's named Larry Fields. It was on a Saturday. We went put-and-take hunting at the Allegan Game Ranch, which was misnamed, because it was too small to be anything more than a farm, and the only game you could hunt was pheasant. They should have called it the Pheasant Farm, but of course, stripped of adventure, that name would have rung with a little too much truth.

Larry was a insurance salesman who had married rich and grown up to be full of shit. He was second-rate as an insurance salesman, but nonetheless he had moved, with his rich wife, Grace, the symphony cellist, moved to an exclusive neighborhood on Gull Lake.

Larry Fields belonged to everything. The Gull Lake Country Club, the American Association of Insurance Agents,
the Rotary, the Kiwanis, the Michigan State University Alumni.

On that Saturday when we picked him up, I saw that he was also a member of just about every sportsman's group. Ducks Unlimited, Trout Unlimited, Bass Unlimited and, of course, Pheasant Unlimited and the Upland Game Conservatory. He had the plaques to prove it on the wall in his garage, next to the locker where he kept all of his hunting stuff. And, although I was too young to notice at the time, I'm sure that they all had Larry listed as donor or sponsor or patron—Larry Fields was never merely a member of anything.

My dad helped Larry get his guns out of the locker and we loaded them into Larry's four-wheel drive Toyota International. The guns were very expensive, foreign-made shotguns, and Larry made that clear to us as he handed us the full-grain leather cases and told us to be careful.

I remember they seemed better somehow than my father's plain-stocked 16-gauge Ithaca Pump. And to my young eyes, Larry's International, which looked just like the ones that they used on Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom, had a certain mystery and magnificence not to be found in our Oldsmobile. But I know now that Larry's material goods could not make him special. I know that poor, kept, second-rate, full of shit Larry Fields, who, when all was said and done, pushed pencils for Mutual of Omaha, needed those guns and that
International like he needed all the plaques on his various walls. Maybe even like he needed a wife who played the cello.

After we got the guns loaded in the back of the International, we loaded Larry's high-priced hunting dog into the cage that Larry kept in back. The dog was a Brittany spaniel sired from one of the finest kennels in Michigan, in the world for that matter. Larry let us know that as he led the spaniel into the cage. He was a skittish dog, bursting with energy, and I remember how he cowered as Larry yelled and jerked and kicked the neurotic, inbred masterpiece through the space between the wall of plaques and the International, toward the transport cage. I think Larry's dog's name was Bo. It might also have been Soldier or Buck. But it wouldn't have been anything more creative than that.

When Larry finally had Bo in the cage he pulled down the canvas hood and turned to me. "Boey's a nice dog Craig," he said. "But I don't ever want to see you petting him. Hunting dogs are made to work, and you'll ruin him if you pamper him that way." He spoke it like a true insurance salesman, like a guy that loved children.

But I still didn't know what to make of it, Larry Fields treating a dog in a way that would have usually made my father mad. I assumed that this was a part of the world
I didn't know about yet and that I had better pay attention. I looked to my father for a signal, and all he did was smile the same sort of weak smile that he smiled when my mother instructed me in a certain way to behave.

We put Dad's Ithaca in next to Larry's guns and then we put Jody in the way back, next to Bo. It was a pretty tight space for two fair-sized dogs, and right away Jody started sniffing at the cage cover, and Bo started growling. "This isn't going to work, Bill," Larry said. "This is going to get Bo all agitated." My dad nodded, and they decided that I would hold Jody in the back seat.

It was some fifty miles from Gull Lake to The Allegan Game Ranch. During the trip, I remember looking occasionally out the window as the countryside passed by. I also remember practicing being stern with Jody. She would lean over against my leg or try licking me or getting onto my lap like she had always done before in the car. I would push her back over and make her sit. "No, Jody," I'd say, whispering in my new, authoritative voice. "Bad girl," I was going to make a hunter out of Jody.

I don't remember much of what happened in the front seat. I'm sure that Larry Fields talked the whole time, but I don't remember a word of it. I do remember the one thing that my father said to me.
As the miles passed, I had grown bolder with Jody's new training, sometimes shoving her back over and sometimes raising my voice. Jody was getting confused. She was doing her best to please me, but before pleasing me had always included affection. Whenever I set her over on her side, she would obey from a distance, her brown, liquid eyes watching me for approval. I would nod my head and smile from my side of the seat, but as soon as I quit reassuring her that she was being a good girl, she would creep over on her front legs and nestle against me for further reassurance.

Finally, near Otsego, on the last leg of the drive, she crept over once more and began pawing at my arm. Something tyrannical in me snapped. I grabbed her roughly and pushed her over. Then I started hitting her. First I hit her in the haunches and said, "Bad Girl," loudly enough for Dad and Larry to hear me exercising my authority. But my voice didn't work on Jody. Thinking she had done something wrong, she crept still closer, burying her head in my lap. I began hitting her head, trying to get it out of my lap, and then my father spoke.

"Stop it, Craig," he said. I began to interrupt.

"But Larry said ..."

"I don't care what Larry said. Don't hit her again." Larry looked over at my father, silently, but not for long.
"Dogs and kids," he finally said, trying to make a joke. Then he started up again, gabbing to fill up the space. I watched my father's face. He let it all pass and continued easily along listening and responding whenever Larry had run out of steam. I was off the hook, but I knew that if I hit Jody again, it would be trouble. So for the rest of the trip, I was satisfied to hold her at a distance. With one hand I held her by the collar, on her side of the seat and with the other I petted her head, so that she wouldn't feel abandoned.

The hunting was fun at first. I had never seen a dog work a field before, and I watched Bo moving back and forth across the brush with Jody trailing behind. Bo was a good dog all right, in spite of Jody, and I began to see why. Whenever Bo would get out too far or begin running a bird, Larry would call him back in with his whistle and shake the dog or hit it and swear at it. Then, when he was done with the beating, Larry would say in a reassuring voice, "Now go on, Boey. I know you're better than that. Go get the bird." By lunch, Larry and Dad had gotten two birds. Larry had gotten the first one. In spite of all his bullshit, Larry was a good hunter. The pheasant fell like a rock, with one shot. Then a rooster came up on my father's side. He shot three times before the bird finally came down and
started running through the grain. Bo was right on it and soon headed toward Larry, the bird fluttering in his gentle mouth.

Jody had been growing more and more excited from the firing and the scent of birds and the running. As Bo ran the bird in, Jody ran alongside snapping at the long tail feathers and licking the blood. And when Bo finally dropped the bird at Larry's feet, Jody grabbed it and took off.

Larry's boot caught Jody on the way by, and then he started yelling and running after her.

"Goddamnit Jody, you little bitch," he said. He paused for a minute, shooting his pump twice into the air, which frightened Jody even more and sent Bo into a nervous scampering, back and forth between Jody, who had stolen his bird, and Larry who was yelling threats injudiciously at both dogs by that point. Finally, Larry gave up the chase and looked over his shoulder at my father, puffing from the Viceroy's, trailing behind. "Bill, do something about your goddamn dog."

My father kept puffing along after Jody, talking to her in a gentle voice, trying to calm her down, until she finally stopped. When he approached her she continued chewing, wagging her tail nervously. My father reached down and pried the bird from her mouth. He didn't hit her, and he didn't swear.
Larry was furious when he came over to inspect the damage. You could see it in the veins which stood out from his neck, the energy of his arms and his clenched fists. They both looked at the badly chewed pheasant. "We're going to have to keep that dog of yours from ruining our birds." Larry said.

"I'll take care of it, Larry," my father said. "You leave it up to me." I could tell my father was angry too. But not at the dogs.

After lunch, my father kept Jody close to him by calling out a nearly constant stream of commands at her. Larry's masterpiece, Boey, grew confused. He thought some of Jody's orders were meant for him, and when he lost a scent or came over towards us or ran too far ahead, Larry would dole out his beatings.

It was a long afternoon, watching my father command Jody and Larry beat Bo. Larry did all the shooting and managed to get two more birds. He wanted to stay out and get all six. But I think that my father had had enough of yelling at Jody and watching me trail along, worried and a little frightened.

The ride home was quiet. Everyone was tired out, Bo and Jody and Dad and I. Even Larry was tired. The only thing I remember him talking about on the way home was where the
other two birds he had paid for might have gone. Maybe they ran into the woods away. The corn. I bet they were in that corn on the other side of the ditch.

***

I only know a few things about my father's life before he left the farm and put on business suits and wanted to drive Cadillacs. I know that, in 1856, William Henry Rayle, my father's namesake, first settled Belmore Ridge in northeast Ohio, country not known for its ridges. I know that Clyde and Bessie Rayle, Dad's parents, lost their ground in the thirties, and that they and their six children, Elinor, Dick, Doris, Pete, Carol and William Henry, the youngest, were sharecroppers from that day on. I know that when he was seventeen, my father, the asthmatic, watched his father, the asthmatic, choke to death in a grain truck while they were shoveling wheat.

I then know that my father, the son of a dead sharecropper, didn't really know what to do with himself until he met my mother, Marilyn Hook, the county commissioner's daughter, in the Blue Moon Tavern off the road between Belmore and Leipsic. And that Hurley and Cora Hook, the teetotalers, would have been ashamed had they ever known that their daughter had met her future husband in a bar. And I can only extrapolate from there, imagining that my father, the poor farm child, who had made it through so
much hardship on so little affection, had finally found
something outside of himself to live his life for.

I am certain that my father thought more of Christ than
he did Dale Carnegie, but soon after he married, Dad became
Dale's disciple, because he knew Dale's teachings contained
a more pragmatic approach to supporting a wife and family.
I know that my father and his bride, Marilyn, left the
farmlands in 1950 and that my father became a salesman for
Remington Rand and put himself through night school, earning
mediocre grades, and that in the picture, in which my father
is wearing his gown and mortar board, I am three years old.
And finally, I know that in 1960, Remington Rand told my
father he had to move up, to a regional post in New York, or
move out, and that Bill Rayle, against his wife's wishes,
quit Remington and moved his family north to Kalamazoo, away
from his teetotaling in-laws, where the economy was strong
and the fishing was good. And he opened Rayle Business
Machines.

That is about all I know of my father's early life, the
life which occurred before I had the capacity for memory. I
know the basics: the who, the what, the when, the where, the
how. But I don't know for sure about the why. The why is
something that my dad never really talks about. So I am
left looking at these occurrences, these events of my
family's life, from a great distance, like points of light
in a constellation, points of awareness, though each star is perhaps further away from the next than I am away from the whole. I search in these occurrences for the seeds of what went wrong.

* * * * *

All seemed well enough at first. My mother did the books for Rayle Business Machines; my father smiled and shook hands, dressed, according to Dale's productive gospel, in a dark suit and tie, shoes always shined. The business, like most, lost money those first years, and things were tight, and both my parents worked long, hard hours. But my father was building a name for himself, building trust in the business community.

The only night he was ever away from home was Wednesday, the night the church board met. And on Sundays we all went to church, my mother and I singing in the choirs, and my baritone father and tone-deaf brother manning the pew, seeing to the collection plate.

Then everything began to change. Looking back, it seems like it had something to do with Larry Fields. As the business began to grow, my father, like Larry, began to join things. First it was the Rotary, then the Kiwanis and then the Chamber of Commerce. The meetings kept my father away from the house at night one or two additional nights a week.
They were innocent enough meetings, held over dinner or hors d’oeuvres. But there would always be alcohol, lots of alcohol. One of the good businessman’s primary negotiating tools. One of the things that Dale Carnegie left out. My father started coming home drunk. He was amiably drunk and always home by the late news. He still left Wednesdays open for church board and attended on Sundays. But nonetheless he was drunk.

Dad’s drinking accelerated when he joined the Elks Lodge. It was a nice club with a respectable 18-hole golf course, a swimming pool and a bowling alley. It was cheaper than the more upscale Kalamazoo Country Club and much cheaper than the Gull River Country Club where Larry, the second-rate insurance salesman, and his rich, musical wife belonged. "It’ll be good for business Marilyn. They’re more our kind of people." I’m sure those are the lines he used on my mother, the big-boned farm girl who didn’t bowl or golf, and who didn’t look particularly good in a bathing suit.

We joined, and our family started drifting farther and farther apart. And over the course of the next few years things began to happen in rapid succession. My father began to play more golf, drink more gin and tonic, and make more deals. His main watering hole was the Stag Bar at the Elks. A private bar that didn’t allow women or blacks. A
gregarious place where you could drink as much as you cared and bet quarter a point on gin rummy. A bar where the wife could only get through on the phone if you nodded to the bartender.

Dad was making it in life. And so was Rayle Business Equipment. My mom was replaced by a secretary/bookkeeper and took a job teaching school. She taught business courses at the high school; she taught young girls accounting, typing and stenography. And she taught them the larger lessons of her gender at that time--how to serve others, how to keep everything under control.

By then, I must have been nine or maybe ten. The days of joy and peace and companionship at Crooked Lake were past now. But I didn't yet have any clear sense that something was going wrong. As far as I knew, my father was good old honest Bill. Straight as an arrow. True to his word. That's the impression I got time and time again, nearly every time our family went out to dinner or out on Saturday morning to Uncle Ernie's Pancake House. Some guy--it was always a man--would run into us. Dad and the guy would always shake hands, and the guy would almost always say the same thing. Something like "Good looking boys you've got there Bill," or "Quite a husband you've got there Marilyn." The client and my dad would exchange some inside joke and that can-do! smile that young businessmen all have. Yet it
never seemed false to me at that time. Good old Bill Rayle, larger than life.

But my brother Brad knew. Brad never told me what was going on, but when I now look back at something Brad and his friends and I did to Jody in our garage one afternoon, I know that Brad the Invisible knew.

** ** **

It was a Saturday. It must have been, because there were about a dozen of us playing, and our group never grew to such proportions in the few short hours after a normal school day. I remember it was the Farrance boys, all three of them, and Brian Cleeland and his brother Brent. We had already played football in the back yard. So that would put the time of the execution around mid-afternoon. Dad must have been playing golf at the Lodge that afternoon.

We all had blank guns, not cap guns, blank guns. Blank guns by comparison had a bigger kick, made a louder noise. They were revolvers, some like an old western Colt, long-barreled, and some short-barreled, like police service revolvers. The blanks came in plastic strips, and the shooter would place a blank in the chamber and tear it off of the rest of the strip. They were the latest thing. I think every son in America must have owned one in that year.

Brian was the oldest. He had a Colt revolver, and it was his idea, but my brother quickly agreed. Brad and Brian
looked through my father's workbench for a blindfold while
Les Farrance and I went to find Jody. She always hid
whenever we started playing with the blank guns. We'd
succeeded in making Jody, the retired huntress, gun shy.

We found her in the back yard, hidden in the bushes and
brought her around. Brian and my brother put two tied-
together old oil rags around her eyes. They cinched them
tightly so she could not paw the blindfold away and then led
her into the back of the garage. Lee Farrance was the
youngest. He didn't want to shoot, but he didn't want to be
left out, so to save face they let him do a drum roll on top
of the workbench.

Les used my father's wrenches, and when he finished we
opened fire. When she heard the noise, Jody lurched
backward into the woodpile. The shots continued echoing in
the garage, and she began to paw helplessly at the tightened
down rags. The slow shooters continued while the faster
boys, the older ones, reloaded and started firing again.
Jody stopped pawing and began trying to find a way out of
the garage. She got lost in the noise, spinning around and
slamming into things. She threw her head into the
snowblower and then ran into the woodpile again. Finally
she crawled under my mother's Chevy.

Mom opened the door that led from the garage into the
family room. We all knew we were in trouble. The Farrance
boys, Brent Cleeland and the others started backing out the
driveway, already on their way home. I moved to the far
side of the garage, away from the door where my mother was
standing. Only Brad and Brian held their place. They knew
they were in charge.

"What's going on out here?" Mom said to Brad. As soon
as Jody heard the voice she came out from under the car,
blindfold still in place. She ran, shaking, past my mother
and into a chair in the family room. My mother went after
her, and we could hear her in the family room trying to calm
Jody down. "It's OK, Jody. No one is going to hurt you."
Brian Cleeland said he had to be going and ran down the
drive to his waiting brother, Brent.

My brother and I knew that our day of playing was over,
that we had better go in. I remember wondering what we
should do with our guns—we wanted to hide the weapons. So
we put them on my father's workbench behind his tall boxes.

"Why would you do such a thing?" That's the only thing
my mother wanted to know. I let my brother take the heat.
"I don't know Mom," he said. "We were just playing."

"Well, I think you had better just go to your rooms and
think about it until your father comes home," she said.

I waited in fear, alone in my room, knowing that my
father placed transgression against dogs on a par with the
other commandments. I came out for a silent dinner, and
when we had finished the dishes, Brad and I were once again sent to wait in our rooms. But Dad didn’t come that night, or if he did, it was long after our our bed time. I worried all the next day, wondering when we would get our spanking. But nothing ever came of it. And then I wondered why. Why someone who seemed to have never hit a dog in his life would let his own kids do that. But Brad the Invisible knew.

* * * * *

Our family’s life continued to decline, as Dad steadily headed toward what Alcoholics Anonymous mythically terms the "bottom". First Dad made the mistake common to new businessmen. He tried to make Rayle Business Machines grow too fast, until his operating capital was gone. He could have cut his expenses down by coming home, instead of playing cards and drinking gin and tonics, but he didn’t. Instead he borrowed money from my mother’s father, the teetotaler. He borrowed fifty thousand—a lot of money for back then. My mother’s parents weren’t rich, but they had that much. They had earned it in tomatoes. They hadn’t canned them or marketed them. They’d grown them. I can only imagine how much it hurt my father to be, in a certain manner, sharecropping again. He must have felt more and more like Larry Fields, who was full of shit, living off his wife.
One of the things that my father had done to get himself in trouble was to go into partnership with Bill Haas, who had a Remington dealership thirty miles to the east in Battle Creek. And within a year, that other Bill, good-old, honest, straight-as-an-arrow Bill Haas, had a meeting with Remington Rand officials behind some closed door. There was really only room for one Remington dealer in southwest Michigan, he argued. And Bill Haas became that one dealer, leaving Bill Rayle very high and very dry, though increasingly drunk.

Shortly thereafter, another Bill, Bill Harbeck, my father's accountant, advised him to file for bankruptcy. But Dad was above that sort of thing. He stuck it out, holding his business together and making his rounds as a salesman during the day, drowning out his problems as many nights a week as he needed to in the bar where no one could reach him.

The last and worst thing, the thing that I think knocked the last hope out of my father's heart, happened at a Wednesday night church board meeting. My father had a favorite minister, yet another Bill, Bill Langely, whom Dad had always seen eye-to-eye with. One Wednesday, the church board fired Bill Langely. I don't think the firing bothered my dad as much as the way the firing was done. Reverend Langely, the good, conservative minister, was in the
hospital with a heart illness. He would be back. That wasn’t the problem. The problem was that Bill Langely just wasn’t cut from the same cloth as the mostly liberal members of the church board. So they arranged for his replacement with the regional church authorities. I don’t know who took Bill Langely’s pink slip down to the hospital. Just like I wasn’t yet aware that my father was now spending all his Wednesday church board nights at the Elks. But the problem was obvious now, though not yet in the open for the world to see. I was twelve, and my brother was 15, nearly ready to get his driver’s license. Dad was drinking at the Elks four, maybe five, nights a week. And he was coming home later too—now it was 1 or 2 am.

Our family played our roles well. Mom and I were faithful. While Jody slept in Dad’s chair waiting for her master’s voice, Mom and I would sit together on the couch, watching TV until until the evening news came on, and it was clear that this was one of what my mother optimistically called the "bad" nights. Time would push away Mom’s hope, and when the news ended at eleven thirty, she would begin asking me the questions. It was insoluble script that she must have been constantly rehearsing in her own mind.

"What should I do Craig?" she would ask, as if an emotionally broken sixth grader could know. "Should we leave him Honey?" "How would I have enough money to send
you kids to college?" Then she would solicit the betrayal that I could not yet fathom: "Will you come with me?" she would ask. I would always take my father's side. That's how I was faithful. "He'll be home soon I would say." And then, wanting to be true to both my parents, I would add a reassurance. "Don't worry Mom," hugging her. And then through her tears she would chant the central mystery of alcoholism. "How can he do this when he loves us so much?"

The only one who was never there was Brad. Like Bill Haas and the church board, he did things discreetly. Behind closed doors, he kept secret council with my mother. "I'll go with you if you leave, Mom," he'd tell her. "Dad's a lost cause. I can put myself through college."

* * * * *

Those were the bearing points of my father's alcoholism: the uninventoried stress of Rayle Business Machines, the failed hope of the Methodist church, the private camaraderie of the Elks Lodge, the other Bills who haunted him in his most pivotal year. It continued for five more years, the entropy of destiny. My father was--to use an oxymoron--a functioning alcoholic. In his own, prouder terminology, he was an affluent drunk. He brought Rayle Business back from the brink of bankruptcy. The Elks prospered, lengthening the back nine. But on one of those many nights, Dad walked away from another totaled Cadillac,
and like most everyone in those pre-DUI days, he walked away with only a traffic citation. And beneath the veneer of midwestern success, our home continued in decline, growing further and further from our emotions, complicitous in denial.

Mom edited all our interactions, allowing us to mention only the idealized version of the lives she hoped we were leading. Brad patterned his success after Father, pulling good grades, starting on the varsity football and baseball teams (and selling LSD and pot and whatever after school and on weekends). And I began a rebellion at and withdrawal from the world that I am only now understanding.

It would have been clear to any outsider what was happening at the Rayles', but it took a few more years for the given facts of my father's existence to form any pattern that would help guide him out of his problems. Eventually, finally, it added up for him. The calculator salesman, the adept businessman, finally finished his inventory, figured his costs and his margin and changed his own life. But by then, I was gone, working out West as a wilderness guide and ranger, 90 miles from the nearest hamlet, far, I thought, from where any of their voices might reach me.

* * * * *

At night, after a day of guiding, I would sit alone by the fire looking at other heavens. The portion of the sky I
knew best began appearing on the long side of winter, early in the guiding season, when I still had the energy to stay up late into the night, letting my eyes drift back and forth across the stars.

Cepheus, the king, was gone by then, though his wife, Cassiopeia, was always there. Far across the sky from her, the twins, Castor and Pollux, were standing tall and young and together, like Bill's boys might have. And retreating across the sky into the western horizon was the hunter, Orion, with his jeweled belt and his shield and his club—speaking only to his dog, Canis.

* * * * *

Sometimes by that fire I would think about my father and remember our trips to Crooked Lake Delton, all the same except for one. I always remember that one as the last trip. And I remember clearly that Brad really wasn't with us that time.

On the other side of the road from Bob's grocery and bait store, on top of the same pile of glacial debris, there was a bar. It was nothing fancy. A mirror and rows of bottles, five or six bar stools and a couple of small tables. There was also a pool table. It appeared to be the only form of recreation. I don't think they even had darts.

And on the night of that last trip, my father and I went into the bar for a Dr. Pepper. (It must have been on
one of those long days in the middle of summer, because there was still a hint of light in the sky, but Bob's was already closed.) It was good fishing that night, or at least that's the way I want to remember it. I want to remember sitting at the Honey Hole for hours on end with our lines clearly on the bottom and the anchor down. I can't think of any other reason why we would have just been getting off the lake that late.

I think it must have been a weeknight too, because I remember it being only Dad, me and the bartender. When we decided to play pool, we had the table all to ourselves. I worked hard at talking Dad into it. I was seven by then, or maybe even eight, and my friend Paul Wilson had been teaching me how to play for the last few months. Our family did not own a table, and to my knowledge, my father had never played pool before, so, naturally, I was overly proud of my new skills.

My father seemed quite impressed and acted unsure of himself as he racked the balls. He laid the balls in the rack any old way, not the way Paul Wilson had showed me by alternating solids and strips. So I thought it would be an easy game. I thought I would have the chance finally to show my father how good I was.

I made the first few balls. And though it took me a long time, my father, as I had suspected, didn't know a
thing about pool. After I made the third stripe, my father said that maybe we should bet on the game. He said it in a real low-key, off-handed way. I was way ahead. I was all for it.

"How much do you think we ought to bet?" my father asked. I didn't know the first thing about betting, and my father didn't seem to either. So we asked the bartender. He told us that the standard house bet was a dollar a ball and five bucks for the eight. Looking back, I can see that the guy must have known what was going on--just like Bob, my father's accomplice in withholding my Dr. Pepper. But that night, all I was thinking is that I was three balls ahead, and I wanted to show my father just who was the boss. And, of course, I was good enough at math to realize I had a chance of winning nine dollars.

My father shot next. As he rose from our table, I remember his attitude and posture changing clearly, dramatically. He smiled at me and chalked up his cue tip, a thing I had to explain to him the first time. He chalked it up a special way, holding the chalk in his hands and using his feet to rotate the cue. It was another of his magic tricks, and it increased my nervousness over our bet. Then my father shook talcum powder on his hands and ran it along the cue. It was a thing that I had seen Paul Wilson do, but
Paul always spilled powder in the process. He didn't do it cleanly and quickly like my father.

It seems like it only took him one shot to clear the table. I might have shot again, but I don't think so. And if I close my eyes now, I still hear the crack of the cue making contact, then the pause, and then the sound of ball after ball dropping and running down through the table. And when I open them, I see my father dancing around the table to a seductive rhythm set by the game. When he was done, my father looked at me and shrugged his shoulders.

"Boy, that was a lucky one Bunny Rabbit," he said. "Maybe we should play double or nothing?" I thought for a moment. The idea that I had been hustled by my own father had not yet sunk in. But the idea of paying up on nine dollars had. I don't think nine dollars had passed through my hands during my whole life at that point. But I was hurt in some way, frustrated at the denied admittance into my father's league. It is a deep hurt that I have seen now many times on the faces of young boys. I was ready to do anything for another chance. I convinced myself that it must have been luck and agreed to a rematch. My father started laughing, once was enough he told me. On the way out, he bought two Dr. Peppers for the road.

On the way home, he told me about the night job he had held while he was in the Army. He played pool, both on and
off the base. That was in late 1945, just after he’d gotten out of boot camp. America had just won the war with Hitler. The nation was in a good mood. It was easy to get people to part with their money.

That is the last day I remember at Crooked Lake Delton. And I remember it in a way that my father would never have meant it. I remember it like a parable of warning. In it my father, the sharecropper’s son, who was on the verge of becoming a successful businessman, a Cadillac owner, and an alcoholic, is telling me that life is not all it’s cracked up to be. That there are things out there that will get you. That the people you love and trust are going to let you down, they are going to deceive you somehow.

And then I think back to my memories of that last good catch and to my hundred other memories of the lake, and it all seems spoiled. I wonder if we ever did find the bottom, I wonder if we really did have a full stringer. Or if that night was, in fact, spent like most of the rest of my life has been—searching, drifting, trying to find a home. Trying to find some place, some group of people, to which I might finally and safely anchor my heart.
KILLING

BIOGRAPHY

Cast of Characters

Craig, about thirty-five.
Bill, Craig's father.
John, Craig's therapist.

The Set

Act One:

Front right, opening toward the audience, there is a couch, a small table and a chair. Center stage there are some bushes, five feet high and six feet around, large enough for someone to easily hide in. A crescent-shaped "ridgeline" of stairs begins front left and ascends to a height of eight feet, rear right. The side of the stairs are painted in camouflage, with an entrance/exit in the center of the crescent.

Act Two:

The stairs from Act One are converted to a bar in Act Two. Two sets of triangular step units are removable. The rectangular base then serves as the bar. A black cloth covers the camouflage set paint. Three stools are placed in front of the bar, and a deck of cards and some ashtrays are on the top of it. The back of the top set of stairs, which provide an exit in Act One, are turned around in Act Two and placed behind the bar, providing the frame for a bar mirror and a shelf of glasses. An elk head is also affixed to the wall, and a round emblem of the B.P.O.E.--Benevolent, Protective Order of Elks--is affixed next to the head. All other parts of the set from Act One are removed.
ACT ONE

(The stage is lit, the curtain up, as the audience enters. Three men enter, the first, a forty-five year old (JOHN), is clearly leading the way. A sixty-five year old man (BILL) follows him with an air of well-practiced but false confidence. He is dressed like a Florida retiree. A thirty-five year old (CRAIG) comes on last. He is nearly cowering behind the oldest man. BILL sits first, and then CRAIG sits as far away as possible. JOHN looks first at CRAIG then BILL.

JOHN
Okaaay ... Let's begin at the beginning. What was it like?

(Pauses, rethinks the question.)

Bill, how old did your father live to be?

BILL
Mmmm. Fifty-seven I think, ... yeah, 1950.

JOHN
How old were you when he died?

BILL
Probably ... that's been forty-two years. I don't know, probably thirty, no, twenty-eight.

JOHN
So ... did he have an opinion about your life?

BILL
(Flatly.) I don't think so. Not particularly.

JOHN
What was he like as a father?

BILL
(Stalling.) Huh?
JOHN
What was he like as a father?

BILL
What was he like as a father? Well, he was a very kind, considerate man. Uh, ... not an extreme ... he wouldn't in front of you give an extreme show of love. (Pause.) When I was smaller, I was around him a lot. He happened to be a farmer, and I was on the farm, tagged around him so ... he didn’t do anything.

(Pauses, looks at CRAIG then addresses JOHN.)

Most of the time with my career I was away from the family all day long or for long periods.

JOHN
How did you know that you were loved?

(The lights begin to fade. It is pitch black by the end of the speech.)

BILL
How did I know I was loved?

JOHN
Yeah.

BILL
I’m not sure. I don’t know to what degree I was loved, John. I guess I don’t know.

JOHN
I heard you say you were loved by you father. I just was wondering how.

BILL
I don’t know to what degree I was loved. I guess I just felt loved is all, there wasn’t any ... He never loved you and said I love you or anything like that.

(Lights out. A spot rises on JOHN. His professional air is overlain by something mischievous, something like the court magician.)
JOHN

I roll these teeth in my palm, the thumb turning them over, caressing them in a way. Molars, their dimensions are nearly equal, nearly square. I watch the gentle white faces turn, begin to know their separateness. I shake them in my hand like one would shake dice. (Pause.) Actually, to call them teeth or molars is inaccurate; technically they are tusks. Elk tusks, taken from the upper jaw, right about here.

(Slides the tusks into place in his mouth, like wax teeth, growls at the audience, removes the teeth.)

They are indeed made of ivory, but they are too small to be tusks, really. When I think of tusks, I think of Johnny Wiesmiller and that quaint yodel piercing the mist along the Congo. I think of a herd of African elephants plowing their way through the rain forest, Cheeta swaying comically on the back of the lead bull. I think of calling down the forces of the jungle to vanquish the intruders of Eden.

(Advances towards the audience.)

I sure don't think of these quaint remnants.

(Holds the tusks for display, between the thumb and forefinger of each hand.)

You can make key chains out of these little dental jewels, maybe even a pendant for the woman in your life. But if you're looking for tusks, you have to look in a Time-Life picture book. Drop back a half a dozen ice ages before your jewels shriveled up. Imagine yourself a bigger than a Clydesdale, out of your mind with testosterone, circled up with a harem of cows, a spike or two and maybe a rag-horn bull.

(Begins backing up against the stairs.)

Imagine two bears the size of Buick Rivieras circling your herd, trying to push you into a corner or, better yet, hoping your panic, make a break for it, so they can cull out a young one or an old dry cow.

(Reaches the corner created by the crescent of the stairs.)

Or maybe even trap you, the monarch. Stinking of urine, hoarse from bugling, exhausted by romance. Then, when you're right there, then you got tusks, six, eight-inch daggers, bigger maybe. Big as a dream. Big enough to save you.
(Begins shaking the dice.)
But these little baubles, these aren't weapons. These are a memory, these aren't gonna help you at all any more.
(He rolls them onto the stage and the lights fade.)
(The lights rise again on JOHN and BILL, and on CRAIG who is pacing nervously as he begins his speech.)

CRAIG
(With reticence.) I don't know. Maybe the fact that I ended up being the different one in the family, maybe that has in some ways ... weighed on my feelings ...

BILL
Different? Different how?

CRAIG
I'm the one that's out West. I am the one that isn't working ... There is Brad, and then there's me. It's really only an on switch and an off switch you know. (To JOHN.) Brad has a permanent job and he had set his sights on that permanent job since he was maybe a junior in college. (To BILL.) He knew what he was going to do, and that is what he has gone and done, and I haven't. So like I said, it's an on and off switch, you got a corporate lawyer, and then you got me. And in some ways, I am judged by that. I am. (Sits.)

BILL
Wait. Whoa whoa whoa whoa. Who judges you?

CRAIG
I think you have. I think Mom has ... and people all ...

BILL
(Interrupts.) Way back yeah, certainly. I thinks that's true. But recently? Have you been judged lately?

JOHN
(Holds his hand up indicating that CRAIG should wait to respond.)
Bill, when you make the statement ... (slowly) and I am going to say this because I want you to hear somebody besides Craig. When I hear the words, "I think you are
wasting your life," that sounds like a judgment. Now, I agree with you that the power those words have given is not your responsibility necessarily...

BILL
(Interrupts.) No, I think that he is wasting his life. I think that there is a terrible waste here, John.

JOHN
Wait a minute. Time out. Can you hear that as a judgment?

BILL
That's not a judgement, no.

JOHN
What do you call that?

BILL
It... it's my opinion. I am not judging him when I say it, I really am not. You and him may think I am. (To CRAIG.) But I am not judging you when I say that, Craig.

JOHN
What does the word "wasting" mean to you?

BILL
Huh?

JOHN
Wasting. What does the word wasting mean to you?

BILL
(Growing more agitated.) It means that he could be doing so much for humanity and other people, if nothing else. (To CRAIG.) Do it without pay or whatever you want to do. Contribute in some way.

JOHN
You see him as non-contributing?

BILL
There are a lot of ways you can contribute, Craig. (To JOHN.) He contributes to other people. In my own way, I did, too.

JOHN
But you see him as non-contributing?
BILL
I don't see him as making much of a contribution for the intelligence he has or the abilities he has. I don't think he's making a contribution really. Maybe I'm wrong. (To CRAIG.) Maybe you're making one I don't see. (Pause.) Again, I'm a loner and I'm an independent person and all that, but nevertheless I still do things with and for other human people. I am a human. That, to me, separates us from the rest of the world. (To JOHN.) A guy falls over a cliff and another guy reaches over and grabs him and pulls him back up. But when a dog falls over a cliff, the rest of them will stand there and pant and look at him fall. That's the difference ... and again I'm not sure that we are all rushing towards this great wonderful world that we are building ... (To CRAIG.) And hey, I don't say that you have to join the technological battle or anything else. You don't have to do that. I chose that ... but that's my thing. (To JOHN.) To go back to what your conversation was, if I may. Can I digress at this point? (The lights fade.)

(A spot comes back up on CRAIG. He is sitting on the bottom step of the staircase, front left.)

CRAIG
I have been a landscaper, a uranium miner, a day laborer, and a night manager at the Circle K. I've been an environmentalist, a date rapist, and a playwright. I have worked as a park ranger, a river guide, a teacher, and a Governor's assistant. I've given blood, taken food stamps, stolen cars and cared for the elderly. (Begins counting off on his fingers.)

I have been liar, a bureaucrat, a Christian, a good Samaritan, a babysitter, a right-fielder, an Eagle scout, a husband. (Pause.) I have never been good enough for my father. (Stands.) In the fall of my thirty-sixth year I became, for the first time, a big game hunter. (A separate spot comes up on BILL. A rifle is laying across his lap.)

The rifle I used was, of course, given to me by my father. (Points to the rifle, BILL and JOHN remain motionless.)

I would like to say it was an heirloom, maybe an old Stevens, passed down from William Henry to James to Clyde to Bill to me. But it was not. (Pause.) A century of
farmers had little use for a gun that could reach past the beans and tomatoes and sugar beets in a single shot. They needed a gun that could blow a swath through the corn to the shadow of a buck hiding there among the rows. (Walks to BILL.) This gun was purchased by my father from a sporting goods dealer, or, more likely, Dad had traded a typewriter, a smile and a handshake. My father was a typewriter dealer in those days; he was also an alcoholic, an asthmatic and an emphysemic.

(Walks to front right.)

In his attempt to make good in life—to support his family, to rise above his roots—he had fallen prey to the occupational hazards of a farm boy come to the city. (Pause.) That's how I used to see my father ... as the self-sacrificing hero.

(Walks to front left.)

But more and more I see him as a tragic character, the protagonist in a decline that began the day he started to forsake his origins. Like Sister Carrie, his life became soiled. But fiction is always simpler than life.

(Sighs, begins walking back toward the rifle again.)

The rifle I received from my father was an act of love. I know that much at least. But the words that accompanied the gift have faded; perhaps there were no words at all. I do remember that it was on or near my eighteenth birthday. I don't remember wrapping paper or "thanks" or "I love you." If the weapon was not an heirloom, the silence was. It was part of that larger tradition of silence between men.

(Looks for a long moment at BILL who remains frozen.)

Fathers point to that silence as a sort of excuse or redemption. "Hey that's the way guys are." (Pause.) And sons wait, hoping that the silence will be broken, hoping that the muffled noises they have heard for so long might turn out to be love, finally spoken, loud and strong and clear.

(Looks away from BILL.)

Silence. That is what William Henry and James and Clyde gave to Bill. That is what Bill gave to me. But in our family, the silence was of the deepest sort. It was a silence enforced by years of shame ... a stupor, if you will. By the time I turned eighteen, both my father and I were getting blind drunk most of the nights of each week.

(Picks up the rifle from BILL's lap. BILL'S body remains frozen, only his head turns up, as he looks sadly
Unfortunately, drinking was another thing that we never did together.

But hey, I got a gun.

A Winchester 30.06, a common rifle, but a great rifle. A Chevrolet of sorts, shot after shot, an inch high at fifty yards, dead on at a hundred, a foot low if you are aiming at the Zysloth's place down the road.

Still, it is nearly worthless in the corn.

But don’t worry. We’re way out West now.

BILL

You think I don’t know my son? I know my son. I know what’s best for him. I know the mistakes he is making. Hunting! Jesus, just another means of procrastination.

I know all about hunting.

When I was young I used to run a trap line in Ohio. What (Pause.) Yeah, I ran a trap line down along the ditch banks and in the swampy land there below Belmore ridge.

I would check my traps everyday with my dog, Spud. He was a real mutt. (laughs.) He had one black eye. He looked mean as hell, but that was just looks.

What? What is it? Am I missing something here?

BILL

You think I don’t know my son? I know my son. I know what’s best for him. I know the mistakes he is making. Hunting! Jesus, just another means of procrastination.

I know all about hunting.

When I was young I used to run a trap line in Ohio. What (Pause.) Yeah, I ran a trap line down along the ditch banks and in the swampy land there below Belmore ridge.

I would check my traps everyday with my dog, Spud. He was a real mutt. (laughs.) He had one black eye. He looked mean as hell, but that was just looks.

What? What is it? Am I missing something here?

BILL

You think I don’t know my son? I know my son. I know what’s best for him. I know the mistakes he is making. Hunting! Jesus, just another means of procrastination.

I know all about hunting.

When I was young I used to run a trap line in Ohio. What (Pause.) Yeah, I ran a trap line down along the ditch banks and in the swampy land there below Belmore ridge.

I would check my traps everyday with my dog, Spud. He was a real mutt. (laughs.) He had one black eye. He looked mean as hell, but that was just looks.

What? What is it? Am I missing something here?
Yeah. I know about hunting, and I ran a trap line, and I grew up on a farm, and we were dirt poor. My father was a sharecropper, in fact. There were eight of us and we never owned our ground. In fact we never owned anything. Is there something wrong with that?

(Sits down on the stage and starts to put on a pair of slopping boots or irrigating boots.)

That a little too hokey for you?

(Leans back against his hands on the stage, feet spread, looking comfortable and somehow younger.)

Huh! I remember once, when Craig was about eighteen, he came home with this book, Foxfire. Oh yeah, there is really a book named Foxfire. Foxfire, Foxfire II, Foxfire III, there is a whole string of them. All this back to nature crap. Tanning hides, making your own soap, the proper use of horseshit. (Shakes his head.) Craig looked like hell. He had a beard, and his clothes were full of holes. He was crazy. Young and dumb and full of cum. And he actually believed all that saving the world shit. (Stands up.) Saving the world. From what? People like me? (Pause, then sarcastically.) People like you? (Slowly, emphatically.) YOU CAN'T SAVE THE DAMNED. That's what I told him.

(Spot comes up on CRAIG who, with JOHN, sits motionless.)

You can't save the damned, and you can't rape the willing.

(Sighs, looks back toward audience.)

Anyway, he was reading this stupid book, and all of the sudden he had all the answers. That back to nature stuff is no big deal. I let him know that in no uncertain terms.

(Looks back toward CRAIG.)

You want to make soap? You want to butcher pigs? You want to tan hides? And just how are you going to do that, get an endowment? I hope so, because you sure as hell aren't going to make a living by going backwards, I can tell you that much.

(To AUDIENCE. Puts his thumbs in the bib overalls, then dramatically.)

But aaaaawwww shucks. What do I know? I'm just a dumb hick.

(The lights fade and BILL walks back to JOHN and CRAIG. sits, then the lights rise again.)
BILL
Okay. I'll tell you. I was born in 1927 in a totally different world. (To JOHN.) I came through the depression. My father was a sharecropper, you know? Just about like a Tobacco Road type thing. Six kids on a farm. We had lots of food and nothing else and frankly my childhood was the same way.

JOHN
What way?

BILL
Hey ... I ... I was truly looked down on in my childhood, I think, because we moved every two or three years from farm to farm, and we would rent a farm, and then we would move again. And I would move into this nice cozy little school district with Jimmy so and so, and Johnny so and so, and Frank so and so, and Gordon and Dickie. You know, the guys. The first time wasn't so bad because I was a part of it. And the next time, it was the third grade. And these guys had been together since the first grade, and here is the newcomer, you know. Maybe the second or third year I got a little acceptance, and then I'm gone and it starts all over. (Pause.) And when I'm an eighth grader, I move into a community where everybody played baseball, and hell, I've never seen a baseball in my life. I didn't know a baseball from a muskmelon.

JOHN
How did that feel?

BILL
Huh?

JOHN
What was that experience like?

BILL
Well ... it's really down-grading, you know?

JOHN
How did you learn to protect yourself from that hurt.

BILL
(BILL delivers these lines in a confused, falsely-confident manner.)
Well, I guess I had a shell ... you know ... again ...
(Looks at CRAIG.) he ... asked me last night if I was ever
lonely, and I said I was alone a lot, but I'm not lonely.
Hell no, I was, I was alone all my life. I learned not ...

JOHN

Not to feel it?

BILL
(Grows more agitated as this
speech progresses.)

Not to be lonely. (Laughs.) But again ... in the eighth
grade I asked my dad for a catcher's mitt ... and I really
put a burden on him, to spend all that money to buy me a
catcher's mitt. Something like $4.95 or $3.95 or whatever.
But then we moved again to still another farm, and here are
guys that had been together for ten years, all come up
through the same school. And they were popular and they had
their own little cliques, and hey I was ...

(Turns suddenly to CRAIG.)
I was never a part of it, Craig. It's ... that's life.
That's the way it is. And so the only way I could develop--
and I did--I developed total independence from the whole
world, and this is exactly I think what I told you there
before. I don't ... really need ...

(Realizes his intensity,
pauses and turns back to
JOHN.)

It became a way of life, John. I have no idea what it was
like. I really don't need acceptance from anyone.
(Laughs.) And I guess it's ...

(Glances briefly at CRAIG,
then back at JOHN.)

That's not a hundred percent true, but I'm probably as close
to it as most people could be. I care not what you think
of me. I don't care what any of my neighbors think of me.
I do what I want in my life, and I do it. I try and be a
trained, sincere person. I try not to do anything to screw
up their lives or to encroach upon their liberties and
things like this. But again, I want to go do my thing when
I want to, and I really have a little problem with that in
my own marriage. Because I really don't expect anything
from Marilyn, from my own wife. (Laughs.) And yet she
wants to manage my whole life. I listen very attentively,
and then I go and do as I damn please most of the time.

JOHN

That reminds me of your son.
BILL

(Laughs.) And again, in my lifetime, I also developed, and in career ways I did the same thing.

JOHN

What are you hearing, Craig?

CRAIG

(Cautiously, to JOHN.) I am hearing, and I am evaluating at the same time. I am hearing, I think ...

BILL

Just cut the shit, would you? Just say what you're gonna say.

CRAIG

(Sighs, to BILL.) One of the things that I am hearing is that it involved a process of shutting yourself off from other people—to not be susceptible to their opinions or their ... To not need them meant shutting yourself off from them.

BILL

(To JOHN, proudly, ignoring CRAIG.)

In doing so, I do intimidate people. I am aware of this. Everybody tells me that I intimidate them. I don't know how the hell I intimidate them. (To CRAIG.) I don't get up in the morning and say, "Hey I am going to intimidate you, Craig. God-damnit, if you come in here, I am going to intimidate you. I am going to come to Missoula and intimidate you." (To JOHN.) I didn't come out here to intimidate him. It's automatic. I don't know what the heck it is.

JOHN

(To CRAIG, ignoring BILL.)

I notice something about him right away. He doesn't need anybody.

BILL

Huh?

JOHN

I get the distinct feeling that you really don't need anybody ... to exist.
BILL
Not a whole bunch of it, no I don't. I don't know if that's good or bad, but I think you're right.

JOHN
I'm not judging it. I am just saying that that looks like the way life has been for you. You've learned not to have a need.

BILL
I've had ... yeah ... I've been out there on my own so long that I don't have a lot of needs of anybody. I might need your efforts. (Laughter.) I might want to hire your talents or whatever, but so far as really needing you ...

JOHN
(Begins talking BILL into a trap, playing along with his false bravado.)

Needing somebody's approval or validation or ...

BILL
No. No, not any of that.

JOHN
Or acknowledgment of you.

BILL
I've run a business for thirty years, you know.

JOHN
I would guess that you might not even need their affection.

BILL
Huh?

JOHN
Their affection. My guess is you've maybe even learned to live without love.

BILL
Well, I don't know about that. That's not always ... that's not altogether true. But I guess if I didn't have it ... yeah, if I ... maybe it would be ... maybe so.

(The lights fade. The rifle, a daypack, topographic map, binoculars, food, and elk hide are placed on the bottom steps
of the staircase. BILL moves to the front of the stage and the lights rise.)

BILL

I have never really hunted big game. Sure, there were rabbits and pheasant in Ohio, and maybe I even shot a deer or two. But that was a long time ago. And we didn't have big game, really. Not big like big in Montana. Christ, they have it all still. Bear, grizzlies, mule-deer, sheep, goats. You name it. No, I've never hunted big game, but I can tell you just how it's done. It's done like everything else you do in life. You just take and do it. You learn something so well that you know it better than anyone else, and then you can do it on your own, without anyone interfering. It's the same for everything, hunting included. You got to pay the price and you've got to call the shots.

(Moves to the staircase, front, left.)

So you might as well not screw around doing something second rate.

(BILL reaches down on the steps and pulls out the elk hide and make up kit.)

In Montana that means elk.

(He tosses the kit and and hide on the floor, between him and the audience.)

The first thing you do is go to the library or the map store and start looking at topos.

(Takes a map from the stairs, unrolls it and starts to scan it, slowly.)

Topographic maps. You're looking for a place that is remote and high with a good mix of timber and open, grassy slopes. If you can find water, too, then so much the better, but the big thing is picking a place that no one in their right mind is going to be hunting. Ahhh. There.

(Points to the spot on the map.)

Remember, if it's worth doing, then you sure as hell don't need anyone's interference.

(Reaches down to get the gun. Puts on the binoculars and day pack as he talks.)
The next thing you are going to need to do is sight this thing in. You shouldn't be any more than an inch off at 100 yards. You keep shooting and shooting until you have it down.

(Sets gun on the hide.)

Then you're going to need some good binoculars.

(Starts scanning the audience.)

You let your retinas do the walking. And they're gonna cover some ground. Two or three miles in a basin, six or seven basins a day. (Stops scanning.) You can't kill what you don't see, now can you?

(Slides off the daypack and looks in it.)

Then you're gonna need some matches and a headlamp and a knife and a bone saw and some rope. And unless you're some kind of fool, you're gonna need about a days worth of food, some extra clothes and an emergency blanket. Because the day will surely come when you get lost or distracted enough that you won't be coming back to your car that night. This ain't no summer camp.

(Sets daypack and binoculars down on the pile.)

And finally, finally ... you are going to have to learn about your quarry.

(Begins to undress, placing his clothes in the shelf behind the stairs as he goes.)

And there is no better quarry on the face of the earth than the Rocky Mountain Elk. They are more elusive and mysterious than the unicorn. And if you don't believe me, then just take a walk in the mountains tomorrow morning and tell me how many herds you see. Herds? Herds! Hell, you'll be lucky if you see anything, including fresh tracks. (Finishes undressing. He is wearing only boxer shorts and a ribbed, sleeveless undershirt.)

There are 125,000 elk in Montana. But you sure as hell won't see them if you're walking around out there stupid. So the best way for a greenhorn like you—or my son—to start seeing them isn't to just stumble around the woods. You start reading. You focus. You will learn that the bulls urinate on themselves to attract the cows, so it will smell like a barnyard anywhere downwind of a herd during the rut.

(Puts on the hide.)

You learn that the rack may weigh a hundred pounds and that the last four inches of the antlers are polished and shiny from thrashing at the earth, and maybe, just maybe, if you
are moving slow enough and looking hard enough, you'll see a sliver of sunlight reflected off that rack back out through the dog-hair lodgepole. (Applies camouflage to face.)

You learn that elk are ruminants, and that they feed best at dawn and dusk, and then they blend back into the earth, moving into the timber or onto a hidden knoll where they sit watching and working back over their last meal. (Moves toward back right, beds down behind bushes. CRAIG begins entrance.)

To hunt elk you've got to become elk.

(In near darkness, CRAIG enters back left, and he stalks along the stairs to front left. He finds the binoculars, gun and backpack where BILL has left them.)

CRAIG

I have never hunted before, but I have been in the woods through my life. It is my sanctuary, my private world. (Looks around.) When things in the real world became too confusing or too painful, I always ended up here. (Picks up the backpack.)

And things have always eventually gone sour there. You see, I never have been good enough. (Puts on the backpack.)

This time it was graduate school. I had lined up all my ducks. Bing. Bing. Bing. I was a real charmer. A real flesh pumper. (Acts like he's handshaking.)

I built my resume by writing half-time for a magazine in Salt Lake, teaching English half-time at a school for delinquents, and running my own technical writing business half-time. Let's see. (Counts on his fingers silently, one, two, three.)

Yeah, I was giving a hundred and fifty percent. Just like old dad likes it. My application for admission was accepted, of course. And my brief and glorious career as an academic took off. I was given a teaching assistantship. Then I was made a creative writing fellow. Ooooh, I liked the sound of that. One of the fellows. I became the assistant editor of the literary magazine, the fiction coordinator of the university writer's association. I even received a minor grant from a foundation. But nothing was quite good enough. In here.
(Indicates his heart with his fist.)

(Pause.) I got straight As, of course. But then that was my plan. I would stay up half the night worrying that my latest essay or poem or critical paper or story wasn't good enough. I was terrified of a B, because Bs are only good, and I needed to be excellent. I was trying to erase my past.

(Puts on binoculars and starts scanning the crowd.)

I thought I was finally beginning to become a somebody. I thought was on the right track. "It's about time, you're not getting any younger."

(Looks around the air for imaginary voices, then lets the binoculars fall to his chest.)

Ha. But my plan was flawed. For you see, I was attempting the impossible. I wasn't trying to erase my past. I was trying to erase my soul, trying to become someone else. The someone I should have been. I was trying to fill the hole in my heart with the type of guy my father could love. Mr. Success.

(Picks up the rifle.)

Words. Hah. Listen.

(There is a long pause so that the audience can hear the silence.)

Lonely, huh? Kind of nerve-racking? I know, I know. (Sarcastically.) You thought maybe there would be birds chirping? Brooks babbling? Wolves howling maybe, or Bambi and Thumper? (Another long pause.) I love that silence. It's not easy though. Some say love is simple. But that's wishful thinking. It is cold out here, it is big and empty and unforgiving. I could die, you know. (Pause.) No, I mean it. Happens to a couple people every hunting season. I would break my leg crossing some blowdown trees and slowly run out of food and water, and then all you would hear is the sound of one hunter dying, my shots going off one round at time into the blackness of the woods. And that would be that.

(Pauses, slings the gun onto his shoulder.)

Did you know that everyday four children in this country are killed by someone they love? (Pause.) What did you hear that time?

(There is another, slightly shorter pause.)
I remember as a child, in my own house, around my own family, being so lonely, so scared. So I would come to the woods. (Applies make-up.) It can take days for it to happen. But if I wait long enough and listen hard enough to the nothing, all the voices go away except one. And it speaks to me gently, bringing me back, out of my fear, back into the world. I used to think maybe it was God. (Closes eyes, drinks in another silence.)


(There is silence again, and then BILL rises and begins feeding, moving away from the bushes.)

(To AUDIENCE.) What's that? Did you hear that?

(CRAIG moves part of the way up the stairs and looks over, he sees BILL and raises the gun. A spot comes up on JOHN, front right. He is dressed like a hunting guide—camouflage shirt, a cowboy hat, an oversized sheath knife, binoculars.)

JOHN

(Addressing CRAIG but looking at audience.)

By the way, Craig, are you an alcoholic?

(BILL looks at JOHN, nervously, stops feeding.)

CRAIG

(Confused, lowers gun.) What? What kind of question is that?

(BILL first sees CRAIG, sees the gun and moves back into the bushes out of Craig's sight, but listens.)

JOHN

Are you a drunk? Have you ever talked to your Dad about your own drinking problem?

CRAIG

What? What are you trying to do? This isn't about me. This is about him! (Points to BILL.)
BILL
(Peering out from the bushes.)
Well, I'm waiting. Are you an alcoholic, just like dear old dad?

CRAIG
Yes. Sure, I guess so. (Flustered.) Okay. I am an alcoholic. (Angrily.) I've passed out at parties, I've passed out in the men's room at the bar. I've passed out in my truck. I've thrown up in the arm rest. I've thrown up on campfires. I've thrown up on my friends, I've thrown up on myself. I've driven places and can't even remember being behind the wheel the next day. I've even had sex and can't remember who it was with. Is that what you wanted to hear?

BILL
(Cynically.) Well, sounds like you got a problem Craig, maybe you ought to do something about it.

CRAIG
I don't drink anymore. I don't have any problem any more.

Good. Glad to hear it.

BILL
(Non-plussed.) Wait a minute! I just told you something that I ... that I consider to be ... It wasn't easy telling you that. Is that it? Is that all you have to say?

BILL
Should I worry about it? (Pause.) Huh?

CRAIG

JOHN
Bill, how about just saying 'I hear you.'

BILL
I hear him. Shoot ... I mean ... lately that's all I ...

CRAIG
(To JOHN.) I'm so tired. I feel like there is always ... (to BILL.) In some ways, whenever I talk to you I get this feeling that there is a chip on your shoulder. If I say something intimate, if I say something real about myself,
you say, "Well that's your problem. Big Deal. Who gives a shit? I could care less." And I start to get mad ... and it's like ... well ... then, fuck ... Why the hell do I even try talking to you?

BILL
Go on. Get mad if you want. I don't care.

CRAIG
(Imitating.) I don't care. I don't care. Fuck you. Why should I be intimate with you? Why should I reach out to you? And if I don't need you as a parent, and we can't be intimate and honest with each other, then what kind of a relationship are we going to have? Why the hell should I keep climbing out on a limb to try and reach you?

BILL
Which is it, Craig? Do you need me or do you want me to need you? You can't have everything both ways.

CRAIG
I mean do you want me?

BILL
Sure, I want you. Why would I not want you?

CRAIG
In what way? As someone that I can be real with and that is open with me and isn't guarded and doesn't put me down and isn't full of judgment about the life I lead?

BILL
Have I put you down? When have I put you down?

CRAIG
Oh Jesus. Yes. (To JOHN.) This isn't getting us anywhere.

JOHN
You're the one with the gun.

CRAIG
(Clenches his fist. The arm with the gun begins shaking.) You still pass your goddamn judgments about the life I am choosing to live. (BILL begins laughing.) And your fucking laugh. You laugh whenever anything get too close to you.
BILL
(Steps out from behind the bushes.)
Craig, that's ridiculous. (Laughs.)

CRAIG
You laugh at my life. You laugh at what I bring up.

BILL
Craig, that's ridiculous what you are telling me.

CRAIG
Why? Is it true?

BILL
No, it's not true.

CRAIG
What part is not true?

BILL
You ... you ... you ... Craig, I'm in life, OK?

CRAIG
I am too, yeah, go on.

(Lights begin to fade.)

BILL
And I can walk through life one of two ways. I can think that everybody in the world is looking at every move I make, and God I better be on this great road ... or else I'll just walk through life and enjoy it and do it.

JOHN
Bill, what did your son just ask you?

BILL
Huh?

JOHN
What did Craig just ask you?

(Bills begin to fade.
Dialogue continues.)

BILL
About what?
JOHN
About your relationship with him and his with you. He asked you a question. Did you hear the question? He asked you if you wanted him. Did you hear that?

BILL
Do it again. What did you ask me?

(Lights out.)

(A spot comes up. JOHN and CRAIG are leaning against backpacks sitting by a fire. CRAIG is finishing eating and is surprised when JOHN speaks, realizing that BILL is listening from the shadows.)

JOHN
So Bill, has Craig ever told you what it was like for him growing up in your family?

BILL
(Pause.) Not much. No. Not really.

JOHN
Would you give him a few minutes here, Bill?

BILL
Sure.

CRAIG
I don't know. (Sighs.) Okay. I remember feeling really loved till I was about six or seven, and then my memories are that I wasn't really in the family. That we didn't really have a family anymore.

BILL
Why? Can I ask?

CRAIG
Maybe because Mom was so worried about you all the time that your problems became kind of the central theme of our family. The only thing we had time for.

BILL
Was Mom worrying?
CRAIG
(Agitated. Clearly can't see BILL.)

Dad, you were gone all the time!

BILL

Yeah.

CRAIG
(Looks disbelievingly toward BILL's voice, then at JOHN, seeking some kind of cue. JOHN only shrugs.)

Do you know what the first thing I remember is, what my first memory in life is?

BILL

No, what?

CRAIG
I remember being thrown up in the air by you. (To JOHN.) He really used to give me a heave. And I remember the thrill of being launched into the sky and then slowing down and (to BILL) falling back towards your big, open hands. And you would always look right at me as you caught me. (Closes his eyes and looks towards audience.)

And your whole face is lit up, and I know that you are never going to drop me.

(Opens his eyes, pauses, looks at BILL who is now at the edge of shadows.)

I know that you loved me then, right then, that was the moment. (Stirs fire with a stick.)

And I remember Crooked Lake, and you would sing while we fished, and we would stay out till the sun was all the way off the water. But I was just a kid then.

BILL

Yeah?

CRAIG
Everything changed after that.

BILL

Changed how? What do you mean?
CRAIG
All the innocence left our family, Dad. It wasn't just me growing up. The good times, the peaceful times, they were gone too. I don't know exactly how or when, but everything got real complicated.

(Tosses stick in the fire.)
All the energy of the family ended up being spent on problems. Money or business or drinking, and I don't remember anything much left for me. Sure, financial things, I had enough. But I don't remember ever having my life be the center. It was always something else. I was so isolated. It was crazy. Would you come out of the dark for christsakes?

(BILL moves a step or two closer.)
It just got to be real nutty. There were times when Mom would sit on the couch and cry and go into these hysterics, and it was because you weren't there, and there I was, a twelve year old kid that just wanted to plug my ears and say, "Shut, we do this three times a week. I am not into this. What do you need from me, Mom?" Someone said do my parents love me. I would say "Oh yeah, they love me", but I don't remember feeling that way. I don't know. Does that make sense? It's like there wasn't a time and a place for me to really be loved.

BILL
Were there ever ... Did you ever have any actions that showed you that we didn't love you? We never beat you or anything did we? (To JOHN.) I might have spanked them for something they did now and then. (To CRAIG.) But that was way back, wasn't it?

CRAIG
I'm not talking about being beaten. I'm talking about not being loved. Love wasn't there, Dad. You weren't there. God, why weren't you there?

BILL
Okay. Okay.
(There is a very long pause.)
Can I talk to John a second about my alcohol?

JOHN
(To CRAIG.) Is there something else you want to say?

BILL
Do you want to say more?
CRAIG
Yeah. You know, you're not the only one that grew up isolated. When we changed houses all those times I felt just as isolated as you did. And then when we moved to Amberly Street, and you really started to drink, that seemed like the beginning of a larger feeling like I wasn't really part of a family anymore, like I wasn't a part of anything. And Brad and I were never very close either. I always wanted a brother. But I know I can't trust Brad.

BILL
(Upset, shaming.) Can't trust Brad, your own brother? Maybe we ought to just leave Brad out of it.

CRAIG
No. Brad is a part of it. (To JOHN.) He's my only sibling. And you know the only thing I can ever remember him saying to me? "You are hurting Mom and Dad." (To BILL.) That's what I got from Brad. And more lately it's been, "Why don't you just leave the past behind? How come you keep bringing all that up? Look how much you are hurting Mom and Dad." So every time I go to Brad with the things that matter to me in my heart I'm told, "You shouldn't feel that way. Look how much you are hurting Mom and Dad." So now I don't even have a brother.

BILL
Maybe he's right. Maybe that's not such bad advice.

CRAIG
Great. Is that it? Is that what you want? Just shut up and pretend that I'm part of this nice rosy family that never really existed. No thanks. I know enough about that, I mean almost all my friends grew up in alcoholic families.

BILL
Maybe you ought to be more careful about the people you associate with.

CRAIG
No. My relatives are my problem. (Long pause.)

JOHN
Let's not get off the track. Craig, you were talking about alcoholic families.

CRAIG
He ought to know, he's the one that drank for twenty years.
JOHN
Well, maybe he doesn't, maybe you can tell him now.

CRAIG
The family always ends up protecting itself. They learn to protect the alcoholic because it's just too big of a problem. And it is, it's an impossible problem to admit within the confines of a family. It really is almost impossible to say ...

BILL
That's true. So much true that your mother didn't want anybody to know that I went to Alcoholics Anonymous.

CRAIG
She still doesn't. (Laughter.) She always says, "I never want any of our friends in Florida to know that your dad drank." And I think, Mom, when Dad goes to a restaurant and says "I don't think I'll have a drink because of my misspent youth," I think that Dad in his own humorous way is saying tell the whole goddamn world, "Allright, I am an alcoholic, so sue me." But Mom still has this tremendous shame around it. Brad inherited that. He won't even talk about it. Maybe he is like Mom. Maybe he inherited that shame.

BILL
(To JOHN.) Unfortunately what Craig's mother doesn't realize is everybody in the world knew I was drunk so what the hell, what's wrong with telling them I am sober? I mean she is ...

JOHN
Bill, I need to interrupt you because Marilyn isn't here now, so let's just keep the focus on the two of you. (This shuts BILL down for a moment.)

BILL
Okay, if that's how you want it. Sure. (Pause, to CRAIG.) Well then, do you know what my alcoholism was? Can you tell me what it was? Why I did it?

CRAIG
Me?

BILL
Yeah.
CRAIG
The thing that comes to my mind. I will just tell you what
my emotional reaction was to it.

BILL
(Impatient.) Just talk, Okay?

CRAIG
I am talking. This is how I talk, Jesus! (Pause.)

JOHN
Go on.

CRAIG
I guess the way I feel is that it must have just been easier
to stay out all night than it was to come home.

BILL
All right, well, yeah.

CRAIG
(Pause.) That's how I felt. ... In a lot of ways I would
have to agree with you, it sure wasn't easy sitting on the
couch with Mom. And, um ... It was something that robbed
you away from me. It was something that made me worry.

BILL
It did rob everyone of a lot of things. Again, it's not a
forgivable thing.

CRAIG
Oh, it's forgivable Dad. Don't start in with the forgivable
trip, Dad.

BILL
Me, my alcohol ...

CRAIG
I was really pissed at you a year ago. I was just so pissed
at you a year ago, and I have been pissed at you for maybe
six or seven months. (To JOHN.) And lately, its like I'm
not as pissed at him as I was. I'm really not.

BILL
As I was saying. (To JOHN.) What my alcoholism to me was, it was

JOHN
Talk to Craig.
BILL
Two or three times a week I'd go out, and I would get stone drunk, I did really.

CRAIG
Uh huh.

BILL
(To JOHN.) I never had a drink in the morning. I never had a drink before lunch. But if I entertained somebody I ... I was gone. I couldn't quit drinking at lunch or something like that. I never ... It was never a financial burden to my family, we didn't miss a thing basically because of my alcoholism. That is, we didn't go without because I spent all my money on drinks or things of that nature. (Proudly.) I was probably an affluent alcoholic, really.

JOHN
And what do you think the impact was on your family?

BILL
The impact on my family was my wife reacted violently to it. And you've met my wife. But you have not met her in the ... she has a lot of fears of insecurity and overreaction to anything of any nature. Like if I don't wear a seat belt or fasten my seat belt in the car at the same time she does, there is something wrong with it, really. I mean there is a real reaction to it.

JOHN
Uh huh.

BILL
I intimidate her consta ... this ... her favorite word is I intimidate her. I guess I do intimidate people. I know I intimidate people, but ...

JOHN
I think we are getting off the track again. Go back to the question for a minute.

BILL
OK, again to alcoholism and what ...

JOHN
What was the impact on the family.
BILL
The impact on the family was ... (To JOHN.) Obviously, it impacted Craig greatly by the way his mother overreacted to it.

JOHN
Bill.

BILL
No. I think her overreaction to it ... alcohol, ... (To CRAIG.) The alcoholism was a basic problem, I grant you this, and again I am not trying to cop out on it. I hear you. And I'm sorry, but I am not going to go back over the last fifteen years, it's behind me. (To JOHN.) But his mother's reaction to it I think is what probably ... this isn't today's conversation that is coming up. Her reaction to it was so violent, and you know ... Sometimes the degree of my drunkenness was not that much, but when I walked in the door, boy, it was just like shooting off a cannon. The war was ready to start and it did. (To CRAIG.) And you had to hear all of that. And she was stressing the whole thing to you 'til I got home. I am sure she was. From what I hear, I am sure she was, and I think that this is your vivid imagination of what your childhood was like.

JOHN
What was that about imagination?

BILL
That's what his vivid imagination of what his childhood was. What his mother was stressing to him is what he imagined was happening. And again she ... he was being programmed into the thing.

JOHN
It doesn't sound like imagination. It sounds like reality. It sounds like a memory.

BILL
Well, Okay.

JOHN
When I think of imagination, I think of things that aren't real.

BILL
Okay. Some of it wasn't quite real John. (Laughing.) I'm going to tell you that. (More laughter.)
JOHN
Well, believe me, I grew up in an alcoholic family and remember it being pretty surrealistic at times. Unbelievable is what I call it. But it happened, Bill, it all happened to me. It all happened to Craig.

(Lights begin to fade.)

BILL
Right ... yeah. But again it's ... those are the things that probably ... well, maybe it might not have happened the way he remembers it. You know?

(Lights out.)

(The light is very faint but growing slowly. The sun is rising, and BILL is feeding in the meadow. JOHN and CRAIG enter, front left.) JOHN is dressed as a decoy, with a deer robe with a rack on.)

JOHN
(Whispering.) Are you willing to try one more thing?

CRAIG
(Pessimistic, dejected.) Yeah, sure. I don't know.

JOHN
Okay, come along then? (Craig nods.) And be careful with that thing.

(BILL sees JOHN and starts to run for cover in the growing light.)

Bill. Bill! Just a minute. Let's try a little truce here. (BILL stops and then comes over cautiously. CRAIG and JOHN sit in the "office" setting, front right. BILL remains standing cautiously, ready to run.)

Craig. With maybe about twenty minutes or so left in the session, what do you notice about this? I am wanting to meter the time so you can get the chance to get the most of what you want out this. From me, as your therapist, at least.
CRAIG
Well, what I'm ... I feel kind of like, well, like there isn't going to be any kind of conclusion to this.

JOHN
(Starts laughing.) Well, I hope not ...
(CRAIG looks with fear at JOHN not understanding what is so funny.)
I'm sorry. What I should say is that I would be surprised if it felt like that.

CRAIG
Okay. (Pause.) One other thing that I'm noticing--and it's worth the money just for this--(to BILL) is that this is probably more than I have heard about you and your feelings than I have in my entire life. And that is really important to me, because ... because ... you never showed me your emotions. Very rarely. When you were sick in Rochester maybe five minutes of your emotions. We didn't know if you were going to live or die, and I still only got five minutes worth. (To JOHN.) I'm at a real deficit because I am this person that is emotional. I am an emotional person. I'm open. (To BILL.) And if I talk with you, I don't feel like you are. I don't get ... I don't get your emotions. So I feel susceptible, and I don't feel like you are being susceptible at all. And so it is real uneven. It's unequal. I wish you would sit down at least.

BILL
Okay. (Sits tentatively.)

JOHN
( Coaching CRAIG.) And what I want is ...

CRAIG
I'd like you to tell me about your feelings. There are all sorts of things that have happened, and it hasn't been easy ... (To JOHN.) Our family isn't a nightmare. We aren't really a terrible family. But there has certainly been some pretty heavy shit happen.

BILL
(Disbelievingly.) Like what?

CRAIG
(Surprised.) What! Oh, Jesus, here we go again. Well, I almost died in a car wreck. You almost died from alcohol. You almost died from asthma. You totaled two cars. Should I go on?
BILL

If you want.

CRAIG

No, no that's enough.

JOHN

(To CRAIG.) What are you trying to convince him of right now?

CRAIG

Part of me ... well ... maybe I'm trying to convince him that it isn't one-sided.

BILL

You can't take half of mother. I am going to tell you that right now.

CRAIG

Oh, Jesus Christ. Fuck. How did Mom get back in here? This isn't about Mom.

BILL

You've got to take all of mother. We can't take half of you. And we don't try to.

CRAIG

You don't take all of me, Dad. You only accept the part that pleases you.

JOHN

(To CRAIG.) What are you trying to convince him of?

BILL

We are still taking it, though.

CRAIG

(To JOHN.) I just feel like that he won't let me finish. He won't let me talk.

JOHN

Talk to me then. I asked you the question.

CRAIG

(To JOHN.) I am trying to convince him that it's a two-way street. (To BILL.) It's a two-way thing. That this didn't start today. That is isn't just that Craig lost his temper
and ruined your trip out West. (To JOHN.) All this started along time ago, and it keeps blowing up. But it isn’t my fault.

JOHN
Yeah. And why do you want to convince him of that?

CRAIG
Maybe so he will see me as a human being instead of this person that causes trouble with his wife.

JOHN
And why do you need to persuade him to that viewpoint instead of just being who you are?

CRAIG
I guess that if I just be who I am, maybe we won’t have a relationship at all.

JOHN
Well, do you think you offer a valuable relationship?

CRAIG
Yeah. (Pause.) Yes.

JOHN
What is it that you have to bring to this relationship with your father?

CRAIG
One thing is that we can just sit around and play cards and have fun together, and that’s a real thing.

JOHN
What else do you bring to a relationship with him? (Aside to BILL.) I am going to restrict Craig to talking about you Bill because you refused to let your wife come in today, so the only thing we can deal with in here today is between the two of you.

CRAIG
We had ... I had a great time just walking in the hills yesterday and looking at deer. And I thought maybe you did.

BILL
I did. (Belligerently.) That’s fine. Great. So what?
JOHN
Well. (Pause.) I tell you what. I am going to ask you, each of you, to write up a bill of goods, and I’m going to have you present them to each other.

BILL
(Looking very startled, starts to get up.)
John, I’m not into this type of thing at all.

JOHN
(Ignores BILL’s comment.) Because verbally you keep going in lots of circles. Here’s one for you Bill, I’ll get you a pen. What I would like to have you do ... because every time you guys open your mouths you keep cornering each other. I sit back, and I hear you have a lot to offer your son, and you have a lot to offer your father, and yet somehow you guys can’t get agreement on anything. So I would like each of you to write down what it is you can bring to this relationship.

BILL
(Begins walking out.) Aghh. It’s been nice, John.

JOHN
Well, that’s your choice, Bill. If you want to give up this relationship, it’s your choice to walk out.

BILL
I am walking out.

JOHN
(Follows BILL as he is exiting.)
As long as you’re clear you are the one making the choice.

BILL
Hey, quit following me. I walked away, all right.

JOHN
You’re the one making the choice.

BILL
(Confused.) Hey, I’m gone now, so leave it lay. It’s not me. You are the one making the choice. This crazy therapy shit. (To JOHN.) You are just like his mother. (To CRAIG.) He’s brainwashing you, Craig. You’re the one making the choice. I’m not telling you to leave the family.
CRAIG
What family, Dad? We haven't had a family for a long time.
(BILL starts to say more then looks at JOHN, then CRAIG and exits.)

(JOHN and CRAIG freeze in place. The lights remain on for several moments then slowly start to fade to a low-level nearing that found late in the afternoon.)

JOHN
(Places a hide on, turning into a decoy. Then, whispering.)
I want you to listen to something from this guy. You have to hear this.
(BILL begins emerging from the bushes, unaware of JOHN and CRAIG.)

Bill.
(BILL is frightened, freezes. JOHN moves in slowly, seductively, begins feeding. BILL calms down, starts to feed, then JOHN continues, nonchalantly, without looking up.)

Bill, I want you to tell Craig something very important. I think you need to tell him very clearly that you do not need him to take care of your feelings at all.

That's true.

BILL

JOHN
Bill, I think you need to tell him to quit trying to protect you. You need to tell him that you are not as vulnerable as he has been led to believe. Tell him that you are strong. That you can damn well stand up for yourself. That he can quit worrying about how you feel.

BILL
(Reticent.) Well, I ...

JOHN
Go on. Tell him.
BILL
Yeah, I am. I’m strong, Craig. He’s right. I don’t need you to do all that for me, in the first place. In the second place, hell, you can’t protect me if you wanted to.

CRAIG
How do you see me as protecting you?

BILL
Huh?

(Looks to JOHN for the answer, JOHN ignores him, keeps feeding.)

Well again, you’re trying to protect an alcoholic in the family. Don’t, if that’s what this whole problem is about, then be open about it. I don’t care what you tell people about me. I could care less.

CRAIG
That sounds like a wall again.

BILL
Not really. Hey, I’m sincere when I tell you that. Those are not just words, Craig. Believe me, they are not just words.

CRAIG
OK. Maybe I don’t want to care less.

BILL
(Sarcastically.) You don’t? All right, that’s fine. That’s permitted.

CRAIG
Save your permission. (Pause.) You really don’t get it, do you? Don’t you think I have tried pretending that I don’t really give a damn, that I could care less. But it isn’t true. I care what my family thinks ... I care what you think of me.

BILL
You really can’t care less, Craig, what your family and other people think of you, but don’t let it become your key in life. I think maybe ... I probably care what people think of me, but it’s ...

CRAIG
Do you care what I think of you?
BILL
Not a whole lot ... Yeah, I care, but not a whole lot. I wouldn't lose any sleep about what you think of me, Craig. No, maybe that's wrong. That could be wrong. (To JOHN.) John, I don't know if I am coming across that way, and it doesn't make any difference to me how I am coming across ... The point being, I've been through the cure of alcoholism. Hey, I really believe the creed--If you can do something about something, do it. If I can't do something about it, it's not significant. ... I hit the pillow at night, and it takes me two minutes to go to sleep.

JOHN
(Notices the painful impact this last comment has on CRAIG. Indicates with his hand that CRAIG should start ascending the ridge.)

Craig, can you ...

BILL
(Interrupts JOHN.) If I get fifteen minutes during the day, I'll lay down and take a nap.

JOHN
Just a second, Bill. Craig, have you ever been told that something you are doing was going to kill you father.

CRAIG
(Stops his ascent.) Yeah. I have been told that talking to my father is going to kill him.

Are you kidding me?

JOHN

CRAIG
No. I was told that if I said anything about the past or about alcohol, that his asthma would be triggered, and he would end up in the hospital.

BILL
I never told you that. (To JOHN.) It was his mother again. (To Craig.) I did tell you there are certain subjects I won't discuss with you so what the hell, go ahead and talk to me all you want to.

CRAIG
I don't believe you. You're lost in a fog.
JOHN
(Laughing) We're headed around in circles again.
(Motions for CRAIG to continue his ascent.)

BILL
(Upset.) I really don't want to discuss the details of alcoholism with him. And I guess he has a lot of questions that he wants to ask me about it. (To CRAIG.) Do you?

JOHN
About alcoholism or about your life?
(Begins stalking closer to BILL.)

BILL
About my life as an alcoholic. What led me into it. Why I did it. Hell, I didn't do it. I was in the army, and I started drinking beer. From that point on, I started drinking other things and it's ... I never went out ...

CRAIG
(Interrupts strongly, from the top of the stairs.

What I want from you.

BILL
Okay.

CRAIG
... is to be intimate, to not be judged by you and for you to respect me as a person, as an adult. And I could go back through and enumerate the things I have accomplished since I left that house on Amberly street.

BILL
I'm not judging you, Craig. You think I judge your every move, and I don't.

CRAIG
No. I don't think you judge my every move ...

JOHN
Guys, you're circling.

CRAIG
Yeah. I think I am pretty clear about this. This is present tense.
BILL

Yeah, Okay.

CRAIG

If we are going to have a relationship, then what is it going to be? I want you to respect me, for you to be intimate with me. I even wrote down some things.

BILL

(Laughing.) You wrote some things down. Hah! I don't think that is going to be possible, but go ahead.

CRAIG

Why are you always so fucking mean? You don't believe in anything, do you? You don't believe in a goddamn thing. No man is an island, except the great Bill Rayle. Why don't you let me in, just once maybe?

BILL

I don't like what you are doing. I don't like the way you are doing it. But I don't have to like it. You don't need my acceptance, Craig, hell go do your life. I didn't have anybody's acceptance.

CRAIG

Did you want it?

BILL

It would ... yeah ... it would have been wonderful to have some acceptance somewhere in the world, I guess. But I still didn't need it. And you don't need it. You ... you ... you. Craig, you have my accept ... I'm accepting what you're doing. It ain't what I would have you do, but I am accepting what you are doing. Can you relate to that a little bit?

CRAIG

(Weakly.) I don't know. I can't believe you really accept me.

BILL

Why? Is it impossible for me to feel that way? Huh?

CRAIG

(Still weakly.) I don't know.
BILL
I'm not trying to manage you? He's the one trying to manage you (Indicates JOHN.) Why don't you take a good look at what he's up to?

JOHN
(Moving steadily closer to BILL.)
Bill, you're circling.

BILL
(To JOHN.) He keeps looking over his shoulder. (To CRAIG.) You're looking for me to say something, pat you on your back and say great job Craig or something like that. But hey keep it in mind, you don't need that from me.

JOHN
How do you know that?

(BILL moves a further away from BILL who follows him further, nearing the edge of the cover.)

BILL
I'll give it to you. Hell, I don't care.

JOHN
(Moves out another step.)
How do you know that?

(BILL moves out of the cover, then looks nervously back and forth between CRAIG and JOHNS.)

BILL
I'll give it to you, and I have given it to you.

CRAIG
Stop it. Just stop it. Just everybody stop it.

(Aims the rifle at JOHN. BILL looks up. BILL looks at JOHN, who continues to taunt and verbally pressure BILL and draw him further into the open.)

JOHN
How do you know that, Bill?
BILL

Huh?

CRAIG

Stop it, please!

JOHN

How do you know he doesn't need that, doesn't need your acceptance?

BILL

(Looking to CRAIG.) He can survive without it! He can get on with his damn life and make something of himself.

(JOHN moves yet another step out and BILL follows.)

JOHN

How do you know he can survive without your acceptance?

BILL

He can because I survived without it. I didn't have anybody.

(BILL looks up at CRAIG and the rifle which is still trained on JOHN. CRAIG is crying, shaking.)

Don't you see what he is doing? He's the one destroying your life. (With great rage.) Go on, shoot. He's the one that is destroying our family. You know damn well I'm right. Don't you. Don't you. (Long pause.) Oh, Jesus. Look at you. You're gutless. (To JOHN.) That's always been his problem.

(CRAIG swings the gun towards BILL while he is not looking.)

He's always been a chicken-shit ... plain and simple. Nothing but ...

(CRAIG fires. BILL is hit in the chest, staggers. JOHN spins and looks at CRAIG who trains the gun on JOHN.)

JOHN

(Looks up, shrugs.) You got four shots left.
BILL
(Starts to exit, dragging his foot.)
How could you do this, after all I've done for you? You were my whole life. What went so wrong with you?

CRAIG
(CRAIG swings the gun at BILL once more and fires, emptying the chamber. BILL stumbles noticeably as he heads off the stage.)

Bullshit. Fucking all bullshit. The whole goddamn father fucking knows best mess.

(CRAIG rushes down the ridge.)

Stop it. Stop running. You're always running.

(CRAIG is crying now and starts to go after BILL.)

JOHN
Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa ... whoa.

(CRAIG stops. JOHN shakes for a moment.)

Whew! You really had me going there for a minute. I wasn't sure how many tags you were planning to fill today.

CRAIG
(Still shaking.) Quit making jokes, okay. I've had enough jokes to last my whole goddamn lifetime.

Relax.

JOHN
Oh yeah, relax. Like nothing at all just happened.

CRAIG
(Playfully.) Oh? Do I detect a little honest to goodness anger? (CRAIG looks away.) Good. It's about time you got a little pissed off. I was beginning to wonder how much of this you were going to take before you finally pulled the trigger.

(JOHN sits, pleased with himself.)

If you're gonna make an omelet, you gotta break some eggs.

CRAIG
I'm going. I've got to go.
JOHN
Take it easy. Take a nerve pill now. Sit down. If you hit him bad enough, he'll hole up in the first safe spot, and if you didn't, you'll never catch him anyway.

CRAIG
(Sighs, looks at JOHN, then sits on stairs.)
Okay. (Pause.) Oh Jesus. Oh man. Shit.
(Looks mournfully at JOHN.)

JOHN
Good shooting.

CRAIG
Don't make jokes, Okay? (Pause.) How can you joke about something like this.

JOHN
That's my job. (Long pause.) Did I ever tell you what John told me.

CRAIG
John who? You're John. (Pause.) I don't need any parables right now.

JOHN
No? (Long pause.)

CRAIG
John who?

JOHN
Hummm?

CRAIG
What did John say?

JOHN
(Suddenly serious.) He said that you can never go back and have a happy childhood.

CRAIG
(Angrily.) Thanks. Jesus Christ, thanks a lot. Is that all the wisdom you have for now? Can I go now?

JOHN
The session seems to be over. You can go anytime you'd like. Whenever you think you're ready.
CRAIG

Good. (Gets up, starts to leave.)

JOHN

You won't need the gun anymore. (CRAIG glares at JOHN who walks over to him.)

But you might need this. (CRAIG hands JOHN the gun and slowly takes the knife.)

You can't get your childhood back, but you might finally claim yourself.

(The lights fade for set changes. End Act One.)
ACT TWO

(The lights rise very slowly. CRAIG enters rubs his eyes which are adjusting to the dimness, then he looks slowly around at the room, first noticing the elk head on the wall and then the large insignia at the back which reads B.P.O.E.--Benevolent Protective Order of Elks. Finally, as the lights continue to rise, he sees the bar where BILL is seated. JOHN is tending bar, seated behind it. BILL is cutting a deck of cards and talking to JOHN.)

BILL

(Ignoring CRAIG.) So I told him, If you’re so damn sick of me then just shoot. Shoot, I said, Shoot, you cowardly son of a bitch, and you know what he did?

JOHN

(Looks up noticing CRAIG, but not recognizing him.)

Can I help you?

John?

CRAIG

That’s what they call me. What can I do for you?

JOHN

What’s going on, John?

CRAIG

(JOHN looks confused, obviously unaware of who CRAIG is.)

BILL

Same ole, same ole. I drink, therefore, I am! (BILL raises his glass and laughs to himself.)
CRAIG
(Asking JOHN.) Is this place called the Stag Bar?

JOHN
Yep. You made it.

BILL
(Turning toward CRAIG.) None but. Always has been. Always will be. Best damn bar in Kalamazoo. Hell, best damn bar in the whole midwest. You can live your whole life out in this place if you want to. That is, if you don't mind beer nuts and pickled eggs.

BILL picks up a handful of nuts, rattles them in his hand and pops them in his mouth.
JOHN gets up from his chair with his bar towel.

What can I get you?

CRAIG
(Still staring around at the surroundings.)

Huh?

BILL
Yeah, how 'bout joining me in a little afternoon nip there young man! (Raises his glass.)

CRAIG
(Looks suspiciously at BILL, then orders from JOHN.)

Do you have any caffeine-free diet Coke?

JOHN
I got anything you want here. Anything at all.

(JOHN gets a napkin and then sets it and the sheath knife from the previous scene in front of CRAIG, then turns to get the diet Coke. CRAIG looks at the knife, then at BILL and then back towards JOHN's turned back. Then he cautiously picks up the knife and examines it.)
(Looks over at CRAIG.) Caffeine-free diet Coke! Is that what this god-damned country is coming too? What in the hell kind of drink is that? You take anything else out of a drink like that, and you might as well be drinking water.

(Takes a swig off his drink and gets up from his stool and starts making his way toward CRAIG.)

Hey, Johnny, hold that order. Let's get this young buck something with a little more vision to it.

(JOHN spins and looks to CRAIG. BILL takes his wallet from his pants.)

(To BILL.) No, that's fine. Just a diet Coke. And could you go light on the ice?

Light as a feather.

BILL

Suit yourself then, but don't say I didn't offer. Let no man ever accuse me of selfishness.

(Continues standing next to CRAIG.)

So what brings a nice clean-cut youth like you to a dingy old parlor like this?

CRAIG

My father.

BILL

(Looks around.) Johnny, you never told me you had a fine son like this.

JOHN

(Playing along with BILL.) I never knew myself till just now. I guess a man never knows what all he's created on this earth.

(JOHN sets diet Coke down in front of CRAIG. CRAIG puts down the knife.)

CRAIG

(Very seriously.) My father used to do all his drinking in here.
BILL
Oh, I’m sorry. You know, I never speak ill of the dead. You ask Johnny there. Never let a man accuse me of speaking ill of the dead.

JOHN
(Without looking up.) That’s right. The living are the only ones I’ve ever heard you speak ill of Bill.

BILL
Don’t pay any attention at all to him. It just encourages him.

(Eats another handful of beer nuts.)
Just how long has your dear old dad been gone anyway.

CRAIG
He’s not gone. He’s not dead.

BILL
(Looks at CRAIG, then JOHN, then BACK at CRAIG.)
Did I miss something here, Johnny? (Takes a drink.)

JOHN
A steel trap mind like that miss something? Naw. Never happen.

CRAIG
He quit drinking.

BILL
(Looks quickly at JOHN, finishes his drink.)
Then what exactly is the problem here. Hey Johnny, hit me again over here.

(Taps his glass against the bar top.)

CRAIG
(Picks up BILL’s empty glass examines it, then looks at BILL.)
You wouldn’t understand it.
BILL
You ought not ever underestimate a drunk. You just ask our resident expert there.

JOHN
Truer words were never spoken, Bill. (Confidentially to CRAIG.) I dare say that drunks have more potential per capita than any other segment of our society.

CRAIG
(Eyeing BILL suspiciously but answering JOHN.)

Yeah, sure. Whatever you say.

BILL
(Rolls his eyes toward the ceiling.)
Ah, shit. Fathers and sons. What the hell can you ever know for sure about that? Well I've had both now.

(CRAIG looks over cautiously.)

Oh, yeah. That surprise you? You think that old drunks just generate spontaneously or something?

CRAIG
No, I didn't mean to stare. I've had a long day. Let's just leave it at that.

BILL
Long day. Long life. Hell, the whole goddamn world is tired. That is what my father's problem was. No money. No prospects.

(Pauses, looking for beer nuts in the empty package.)
Married a fine and fertile woman though. Eight kids. Spent all his time working. That is, when his asthma wasn't acting up too bad. (Looks to CRAIG.) Hey, you want another one of those dreadful empty concoctions?

CRAIG
No. No, that's fine. I have still got some more of this one.

BILL
Johnny, where is that drink? And get my young friend here another one of those new-age sodas. That is, if he will allow me to show him a little local hospitality for an absent brother's son. (To CRAIG.) You never can be too ready for a drought.
(JOHN pops the tab on the diet Coke.)

CRAIG

Thanks, but no thanks.

BILL

(Bluntly.) You need some lessons in grace son. Bring that damn thing over here, John.

(JOHN sets the ice and the can in front of BILL.)

Yes sir, this young man is a real charmer.

(BILL pours the pop, sets it in front of CRAIG.)

Now there, that is hospitality. And if it bothers you too much, you can buy the next round.

CRAIG

If you've got something to say, just say it.

BILL

Hum, okay. Now just where was I, Johnny.

JOHN

Where were you when?

BILL

Before we got so interrupted here.

JOHN

(Responds as he is bringing BILL's drink.)

Um, ... You told him to shoot. You said, shoot you cowardly son of a bitch.

BILL

No.

JOHN

(Setting Bill's drink down.) Drought.

BILL

(Loudly.) No! (Pause.) No. No. No.

(Bumps his drink and spills a little.)

Jesus Christ, Johnny, look what you made me do now. Get me napkin for Christ's sake.
Coming right up, boss.

BILL

What the hell was I thinking? (To CRAIG.) Help me out here. What the heck were we talking about?

My father?

BILL

No.

JOHN

(Sets the napkin.) Would you like a bib to go with that?

Asthma?

BILL

Bingo. Yeah. Do you know what it is like for a farmer to have asthma. That's what killed him, you know. His last attack came on while we were shoveling grain. We were right there, side by side, standing in that same wagon. You know what I tell people about that day?

(Cautiously.) No, what?

CRAIG

BILL

I tell them that my dad died right there in my arms in that grain wagon. But that isn't how it played out. (BILL gets serious.) I pulled him out of that wagon. I pulled him out and he lay there on the ground wheezing. Clawing at me, asking me to help him. So I gave him one of his shots, and then I ran down the lane to the house as fast as I could run. But you can never run fast enough. I called the hospital, and then they came and took him off in the ambulance.

I'm sorry.

CRAIG

BILL

(Almost angrily.) No, no that's not the end of the story. I followed them to the hospital. I drove like I was glued to the bumper of that ambulance. And when the driver got
out and opened the back, all it took was one look, and I knew that he was dead. Oh sure, they waited for the doctor to make the official pronouncement, but I knew.

CRAIG

I'm sorry.

BILL

Yeah. (Pause.) Do you know what that's like? Following your father like that? Having him die before you can reach him?

CRAIG

I think so. Yes. I think so.

JOHN

(Moves out from behind the bar with a small bell and then hits it eleven times.)

My brothers, you have heard the tolling of eleven strokes. This is to remind us that with Elks the hour of eleven has a tender significance. Wherever an Elk may roam, whatever his lot in life may be, when this hour falls upon the dial of night, the great heart of Elks swell and throbs. It is the golden hour of recollection, the homecoming of those who wander, the mystic roll call of those who will come no more. Living or dead, an Elk is never forgotten, never forsaken. Morning and noon may pass him by, the light of day may sink heedlessly in the west, but ere the shadows of midnight shall fall, the chimes of memory will be pealing for the friendly message: "To our absent brothers."

(JOHN returns to the bar. CRAIG and BILL are deeply moved and after a moment, BILL addresses CRAIG.)

BILL

(Slowly, deliberately.) What do you want, young man? What do you want, son?

CRAIG

Just stay out of my business, okay? I let you buy me a soda, I listened to your story, and I've even put up with your drunkeness. So lets leave it at that. I've had enough of that shit to last a life time, so just stay out of my business.
BILL
Is that what you think this is about, Booze? Is that all? Well, hell, we can fix that.
(Dumps his drink out on the table. And when he does his demeanor turns more sober.)

There is that any better? Am I any more human now?
(Dumps the other drink. He is now completely sober.)

How about now? Am I any more real now, any more a man, more of a father? Does that make you more of a son?
(He offers CRAIG the knife.)

CRAIG
(Picks up the knife and holds it out like a warning.)

Just leave me alone! Do you hear me?

BILL
(Raises his hands, momentarily slips back into drunkenness.)

Hey, my mistake. I didn't mean a thing. I didn't mean a goddamn thing.

(BILL snaps out of drunkenness, grabs CRAIG's arm by the wrist, which he slowly twists during the next speech.)

Is that what you think it's about? Drunk people and sober people. An adult child of an alcoholic? A father and a son? Do you think it is as simple as right and wrong? Huh, is that it! Who hurt whom once upon a time, way back when?

CRAIG
(His arm is shaking.) Let go of me. Let go.

BILL
(Holding tight.) There is only one God in the heavens, boy. And that God is not your father. It can't be that way. Your dad is a good man. I'm telling you, here and now, drunk or sober, he is one of the best I've ever known. But he is, nonetheless, still made out of mud. Just like you.
(Pause.) Just like me.

(CRAIG drops the knife. BILL looks at it and nods his head toward JOHN, who comes over and removes the knife. Still grasping CRAIG's arm, BILL continues.)
Mud! Not gold or marble, or shiny white alabaster.
(Pulling CRAIG close, looking into his eyes.)

What do you want?

CRAIG
I want to know my father. (Begins to cry.) I want to know.
I want my father.

BILL
(Holds CRAIG close.) I know. And he wants you too. He wants you more than almost anything. He has always wanted you.

(CRAIG is sobbing. BILL holds him firmly, without moving. BILL's face is towards the audience, tears begin welling up in his eyes.)

But wanting something and knowing how to get it are two different things. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I didn't know how to be that man you wanted.

(He fights the tears, then, after a long pause, addresses JOHN.)

My tab, Johnny.

JOHN
(Astonished, playful.) Wonder of wonders. Leaving before closing time, BILL?

BILL
Change is the only constant, John. You should know that by now. And bring me two diet Cokes, too. (To CRAIG.) Would you like to join me?

CRAIG
Me?

BILL
Yes, you. Don't say no.

CRAIG
(Looks at JOHN, who shrugs.)
I don't know. Everything's changed, I don't know.

BILL
What are you saying, the man you were longing for no longer exists? I could of told you that. You've got me and you've got Johnny, and Johnny's closing up soon.
CRAIG
I don't even know you. I've never gotten to know you.

(JOHN hands BILL his tab and the two diet cokes.)

BILL
Ah, that is one of the advantages of alcohol, sharing your most intimate self with a complete stranger.

(Slips the Diet cokes in his pocket.)
But we can try it clean and sober from here on out if you'd rather.

JOHN
(Interupts.) A courageous act if I have ever seen one.

CRAIG
Just what do you have in mind. What would we do this time of night?

BILL
I don't know. I'm a typewriter salesman, not a fortune teller. Maybe a walk in the park, and then we'll do whatever seems to be the next thing after that.

JOHN
(To CRAIG.) Simple question. Yes or no.

CRAIG
Okay.

(CRAIG stands, BILL helps him to the door. CRAIG looks up at BILL and delivers his last line.)

I once read that asthma is the way that some men cry.

BILL
Yeah. I'd believe that. That makes sense.

(BILL and CRAIG exit. The lights fade. Only a spot on JOHN remains. During the next speech he is polishing glasses with a towel, spitting in them occasionally for dramatic effect.)
You know, it is ugly work this killing. (Pause.) I have been on many hunts now, and I can tell you that it usually gets even messier than this. You wouldn't think that within the confines of family such a thing was necessary. (Gets up.) But the sad truth is that we are not a symbiotic society. Parents, many parents, parents like Bill, prey on their own children. In a world of too many demands and too little love, some parents are forced to store up their loneliness and their pain like so much toxic waste. And, sometimes, the only safe place to let it be seen is in front of those who will never fail to love them.

I have seen dozens of sons go through the same ordeal. And I have seen dozens of fathers begging their sons to shoot. To leave them behind. To get on with a new, better life. In those poisoned families, it is the largest act of love that can be performed. Sometimes it is the only act of real love. (Pause.) And I have seen elk and fathers with more lead in them than you can imagine continue to run and run and run, seemingly forever.

But in reality, they have hidden themselves again, maybe in the thick brush along the creek, or in the deep lonely silence of the dog-hair lodgepole.

Some are never found.

And then again some are.

(Curtain)
All of Hemingway's Children

I do not know all of Hemingway's children.
But I know something about the boys.

I am told they once went crazy
and haven't been home since.
It may have been Dad.

Dear brilliant Papa, our grand Papa
who loved the sound of guns and his own voice
and sometimes made the boys dress like girls
and maybe even beat them when they were slow.

I don't want you to get the idea that we are friends
or anything.
I wouldn't know them from Cain and Abel.
Couldn't pick them from a police line-up

In fact, I know only one story,
told in a confidence that should never have been,
One day, one of them, showed up at the spa for aerobics,
like everyone else (with makeup on, and leotards beneath his dress).
And the only thing to do was call the hospital people,
who once again, showed up
too late to do any real good.

I think they still live here sometimes,
across the divide from once sacred Idaho.
In a place town where all movement can stop,
depending on the weather.

I am glad I don't know for sure.
The ignorance protects me.
The mystery excites me.

But I can't help looking for them,
between the train tracks and the pawn shops.
In the eyes of men my father's age
who talk only to themselves
on one of several streets named after trees.