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Groundwork [Short stories]

Joseph Dwyer
The University of Montana

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GROUNDWORK

By

Joseph Dwyer

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Approved by

Chairman, Thesis Committee

Dean, Graduate School

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The Cardsharp

The storm had made the house quake. He woke briefly hearing the wind and rain bang against the window, the water being sucked down the drainpipes. He imagined the whole reservation being ravaged by the storm's fury, and fell back under his blankets. As he slept a woman in the corner of his room stared out into the night. She offered only her profile, her dark skin against the blacker dark, and kept pulling a shawl over her head, gathering it at her chin. Another rush of wind and rain assaulted the house, rousing him—he could not tell if she was there anymore.

In the morning, waking, he lay still. When the fire clicked off under the water heater, he threw back the covers and leaped onto the hallway runner. In the kitchen he hunkered on the woven rug in front of the sink listening for some stirring in the house. His parents were dead to the world in their front bedroom. His sister slept on in her deafened nook right off the bathroom.

His father worked for Public Health Service and would come home at all hours, sometimes at midnight, sometimes at dawn. The boy always woke hearing him come in. He woke again when his mother, who also worked at the clinic, left for work at six-thirty; and he woke again when Nelly came
at seven to fix breakfast, get him ready for school, and
look after his sister.

Once she was in the house Nelly would never let him
stay in bed. She banged on his door with a spoon, and if he
was not up and dressed within a minute, she came in and
stared at him until he got up and stood shivering by the
bed in his underwear. Filling the doorway she was almost as
wide as she was tall. Her English was barely understand­
able, but it didn't seem to inhibit her. He had never known
a Navajo to talk so much, scolding him, teaching him things
in Navajo, then shoving him out the door to school.

The house, the town, the entire reservation was quiet
this morning. He opened the back door and gave the screen a
push, giving it another when it came to. The soaked wood
creaked softly. Looking up at Blue Mountain he breathed in
the scent of sage and piñon the rain had woken.

Nelly would not come today, Saturday. She had told him
where he could find pottery; now he grew restless thinking
of last night's storm cutting away the compacted earth and
exposing more pottery.

He went to his room and dressed quickly. Then he took
out his canvas bag and filled it with a few shards from a
wooden box he kept hidden back in the closet. Nelly didn't
want his mother to know she had told him about the pottery
mound. She had warned him severely that he should not tell
his mother. The pottery mound was across the highway and
his mother would be very upset. Looking into his eyes she had made him promise not to tell, her eyes like black pools that engulfed him.

He tied the pouch to his waist then looped the strings around his belt. Today he would head off by himself. He remembered the first time he had taken his sister with him. That morning he had stolen into her windowless room--it had been a utility room and still smelled faintly of cleanser--and watched her eyelids quivering in the halflight, listening to her ravenously suck her fingers. She sounded like a chirring cricket. Reaching down, he wrenched her fingers from her mouth. That woke her. She lay staring straight ahead, not focusing on anything. Her suckled fingers looked like frogskin; dried saliva cracked around her mouth like a duplicate pair of lips. Her nostrils were clotted with hardened mucus, and she was able to inhale only small breaths. He would push her, push at her, and keep pushing and then she would moan and croon, and he pushed, gently then forcibly, until she said his name: Gerald Gerald again and again. Then he would stop. Race he said, and tore off the covers to let the cold air at her warmth. He ran to his room and threw on his clothes. He always won, arriving back in her room twisting the clasps of his fleece-lined tattered coat while she clumsily fiddled with the tiny buckles on her patent leather shoes. She pouted furiously at losing to
him, and did not detect his condescension when he sighed and helped her with the other shoe.

Today he would head across the highway to the pottery site without her. That one Saturday he had taken her, she was a hindrance before they had even left the house. In the kitchen he had filled his knapsack with carrots and celery, and she had wanted to choose too, just as he did, but she'd named something that would crumble or be crushed in the bottom of a knapsack, cookies or crackers. And so they had quarreled a little and finally he gave in. She looked up at him, her eyes deep blue, almost turquoise, yet she had one wild eye that looked askance. As they headed out the backdoor, he told her to wait, then went into his room and got bandannas and a rope. He tied the red bandanna around her neck and the yellow one around his. Then he looped the rope from his elbow to his thumb, the way he had seen older boys do, and carried it coiled on his shoulder.

Then they set off across the garden their parents had planted, a withered section protected by chicken wire that had completely fallen down. Beyond it lay the foothills, all of it their backyard, a vast untended playground, islands that had sprung from the earth. The pebbled streambeds were their pathway. She trailed him where he led her, content to be following: he stopped and scouted the terrain ahead, ignoring her. He fixed on one spot on the
mountain, not its crest, but one place that seemed to beckon him.

He pushed on and she began lagging behind. He glanced over his shoulder, and behind her small half-bent figure, parts of the town were visible: the clinic, the school. He climbed higher focusing on the mountain, then realized she was no longer behind him. Turning he saw her sitting back in the crevice of the hill running her hands over the pebbles. He adjusted the coil of rope realizing that the higher he climbed the more the school came into view; and the more he saw it the harder he wanted to push on, keep climbing into the heart of the mountain itself. He remembered last spring when three Navajo boys came into the classroom during recess and found him going through the teacher's desk. She had taken his steelie marbles—it was against the rules to play marbles with steelies—and he was searching the bottom drawer where she kept all confiscated items. He was taking back what she had taken from him. All three had looked at him with scorn in their eyes, as only Navajos could look at a person; now he was beneath them. He knew they would never tell the teacher—what did it matter if white people took things from each other—but he was undone by the triumphant contempt in their eyes. Two of the boys had raced outside to tell the others, but the third, Raymond Tso, stayed longer, smirking; he called Gerald
Coyote—deceiver!—and said some things in Navajo he didn't understand.

He had stayed home for a week, feigning illness. Nelly had taken care of him, not knowing what it was. When school ended he was no better, and that false sickness had stayed with him over the summer. Now fall, back at school, smelling the woodsmoke on the Navajo children, he felt his stomach grow queasy, and that shame return.

He looked farther into Blue Mountain, up to its peak where he had never been. Shifting the rope on his shoulder he turned and looked at his sister; she had squatted down, making small dams with twigs and pebbles. He stared at her with all the power he could muster. She seemed to sense that he had lost all patience with her. Letting the pebbles fall through her fingers she finally glanced up, one eye looking at him, the other veering off at a crazy angle. He knew she was confused by his stern look—he let that confusion grow as the anger gathered in his chest and lungs.

Grandfather, he said, and she looked down, instantly afraid. Slowly she let her legs splay under her; she sprawled there in the streambed. Leveling her earthworks she began sucking her fingers. She stared into the ground as if she knew what was coming.

Grandfather with a beard like a billygoat, he said. He was looking at the school now, remembering that day Raymond Tso called him Coyote. He looked down at her and
felt his anger and shame surround him. He told her that the Grandfather of the Naschitti Man had thousands of sheep hidden back in the canyons. He always stole little girls to herd them and he liked little white girls the best because they cried the most and the sheep would follow them as they cried. He was very mean and he would make her his little girl. She would no longer have her own name but the one he gave her, Little Sheep Dip. He only talked Navajo and so she would have to forget how to talk and only talk Navajo. She had to do everything he said, most of all making fry bread all day, dipping her fingers in the scalding lard oil. He would make her sweep his hogan and she would have to make a fire with sticks. At midnight he would jump on his pony and gallop through the canyon yelling names of people who had died, and that's when the Na'aladdockshii came down from the mountains snarling because he was so mean even they hated and feared him. They would claw at his hogan trying to get her, their yellow eyes shining between the logs. At sunrise the Grandfather of the Naschitti Man would come back on his pony. He would kiss her good morning burning her with his mouth.

As he stood there hearing the words come out of him, he felt as if he were growing outward, as if he had put on wings that now started flapping, moving the air for the first time. He watched her, the heaves in her gaining momentum, and this urged him on. When he stopped talking
she looked at him, sucking her fingers, gasping quietly for air.

Bilagaana, he finally said, casting an accusing glance at her, she was bilagaana, what the Navajos called the white people who lived in the town. It sent her over the edge; she became hysterical, her screams echoing against the hills. She cried as if she had been robbed, something precious and safe he had taken, turned inside out, given back to her, monstrous. He had done this to her with his terrifying story. She took a breath, a string of spittle falling out of her mouth, and began her shrill wail again. He looked beyond her to the town, and beyond that where Nelly lived in her hogan. Hearing her piercing lament he felt his anger quiet.

After she had cried for a few minutes he walked down to her. Slipping off his knapsack he knelt beside her. He took out a celery stalk and bit off pieces with his front teeth then chewed one large piece into pulp; spitting it into his hand, he gave it to her. She took it, chewing and swallowing.

Watching her eat, the tears drying on her face, he wanted to tell her what had happened at school. But she was still little more than a baby: It seemed that she had always been three and a half years old, while he had gone on, First, now Second grade, his sense of apprehension
increasing. He fed her the chewed pieces of celery, knowing
she was oblivious to who he was.

He stood and wiped her face with his bandanna, spitting on an end of it and washing away her tear tracks. Dropping the coil of rope he spliced its frayed end to her bandanna. He tested the knot, giving her neck room to move around. She smiled up at him showing her tiny bottom teeth.

He uncoiled the rope then sent her down to the streambed, going home. From the crest of the hill he watched her and shook the rope if she even glanced at some flower or rock; he shook the rope, and she turned and smiled up at him. At one point he reined her in. He stuck the rope in his teeth and undid his zipper. He aimed his piss down on her splashing a few feet short, and she giggled, a repetitious giggle like a squeal. And he laughed at her. One-handed he waggled the rope and his arcing stream, waggled them across each other, both his piss and the rope making waves. She smacked her palms together and laughed.

Watching her he grew quiet. He kept up a gentle beat on the rope, then gave it a brisk slap. Okay, he said. Rachel.

They went home, the foothills diminishing. He took up the slack in the rope and coiled it around his shoulder. Just before they reached the garden he unknotted her bandanna, setting her free. She ran all the way to the backporch kicking down the barren tomato stakes.
Remembering that day he realized they had not even gotten halfway to the pottery mound. He should have known she wouldn't keep up. It wasn't important to her that he had had a destination in mind. To her their climb in the hills was a purposeless adventure. Now he was quiet leaving the house, careful not to wake her.

He slipped out the back door and headed quickly down a rarely used dirt road that skirted the back of town. Then he left the road and drifted down through the scrub piñon, looking eagerly for the black strip of highway.

A blinding flash momentarily confused him. Looking around he saw against the hill a small trailer: silver and tin like an airplane whose only cargo was a bomb. The trailer looked like a bomb with its rounded corners gleaming against the blue sky. It had been backed far into a clump of trees, as if someone was trying to hide it and finally gave up.

He kept walking, half expecting a dog to come lunging at him from under the trailer. Whoever the people were, they had arrived during the night in the midst of the heavy rain. There were a pair of deep ruts ending where the trailer sat, and a fresher pair belonging to the truck that had pulled it heading back to the highway. Gerald stopped wondering about them. White people moved in and out of the town with regularity; only the Navajos stayed. He gave one last look at the trailer then moved down to the highway.
Again a flash of light cut across his eyes. He turned and saw up on an adjacent hill a boy aiming the sun on him from a small mirror. When it caught the sun just right he had to shut his eyes.

"Hey you, come here," the boy called. He kept flashing his mirror and Gerald put his hand up against the dazzling light.

"What are you doing that for," Gerald called back. The boy ran down the hill and stood in front of him. He had a full grown face, a head too big for his wiry body, but like a boy's his eyes lit sporadically from one thing to another as he angled the mirror into the sky.

"I'm signalling the mountain with it," the boy said. He wedged the shard of mirror in his palm and shone it by waving his hand around. "My five brothers are up in there hunting cougar. I'm telling them I need some help down here."

He turned and flashed it up on the mountain working it back and forth. Quickly he wrapped the mirror in a piece of cloth and stuck it in his back pocket.

"You know how to play poker cards?" he said. "I got some if you want to know how. I won't cheat you either. I play honest cards."

He started for the trailer; Gerald followed, not sure he chose to, but not heading off to the highway either. He wanted the boy to show him something about honest, to make
him more sure in his own mind what honest was. He kept following, looking at the boy's thin neck and arms. His skin was reddish with white freckles across it like corned beef hash.

When he reached the trailer the boy yanked a piece of plywood from under the tires. It was covered with pocks of dirt from the rain-spattered ground, and he dusted it with his hand, then laid it flat. He leaped to the top step of the trailer and disappeared inside, a few seconds later standing on the threshold above Gerald, a look of supreme confidence on his face. He tossed the checkered packet onto the plywood. "Break 'er open," he said, jumping down. They sat cross-legged in the dirt facing each other.

"House rules," the boy said. Then he looked at Gerald. "You live in a house, don't you."

Gerald nodded.

"I knew that," he said.

The boy began shuffling, mesmerizing Gerald, who couldn't take his eyes off the boy's stubbed fingers. He shuffled by rotating the cards as fast as his hands would allow.

"You never told me how old you are," he said.

"Seven and a half," Gerald said.

"And a half." The boy snorted. "Ten," he said boastfully. "Ten years old." He stopped shuffling and wrote
10 in the dirt with his finger. Then he looked past Gerald back toward the highway.

"We came here from Bloomfield. Before that, Moab. Mostly Olson does hard-rock mining. He works the big rigs too, oil and gas. I remember everything that's ever happened to me."

He started shuffling, the cards spinning around his cracked thumbs. He stopped and pointed at the canvas bag Gerald had looped to his belt.

"Show us what you're carrying there."

Gerald lifted the bag up then let it fall against his leg. "Pottery. That's where I was going." He stood and unlooped the bag and gave it to the boy, who hefted it, peering inside. Gerald took the bag and dumped the pieces onto the plywood.

"We can play for these," he said. "I can get more."

Picking through the shards the boy said, "Look here. This one's got a arrowhead on it."

Gerald nodded. "I saw it before. Are those important?"

"Hell yes," the boy said. "Worth a whole pile of these pottery." He considered the shards for a long moment. "Go on and take off all that pottery. We don't have to play for nothing. I told you before I won't cheat you, and I won't."

He began shuffling the cards, quiet in himself, watching his fingers, shuffling and shuffling, his head
down, his shoulders caved in. The deck was like a fluttering bird in his hands.

"The best you can ever be is dealing casino," he said to Gerald. "Olson told me about one time when he was in Vegas on his winning streak. After a while he was losing, and that's when he started mouthing off the dealer. Finally he said God-damn-you, mister, and walked off, and that casino dealer put bad luck on him forever. Olson didn't tell the last part but I figured it out for myself. Nobody talks against a casino dealer."

Gerald glanced up at a face in the trailer window—an older boy's face that didn't seem to understand what it was seeing. He had the same features as the dealer, only harder and sharper. He let the curtains fall together when he saw Gerald looking back at him.

"Who's that," Gerald asked.

"Just nobody," the dealer said.

The older boy kicked open the door slamming it against the trailer. Standing in the threshold, he glared down at his brother working the cards. He looked to be twelve or so, and his thin gangly body seemed to be outgrowing itself. Knobby bones came out of him everywhere. He jumped to the ground in a spindle-legged jump and swaggered in front of his younger brother.

"What in hell are you doing."
The boy kept shuffling. "Showing him how to play poker cards."

"And wrecking the cards, little pecker."

"Olson gave them to me. They're my cards."

"It was a joke he played on you. He told me you had shit for brains and would spend a day wondering why all those pictures of people was upside down."

He stood looking at his brother as the boy kept shuffling the cards.

"You hear what I said?"

"Yeah, Lon," he said softly.

Gerald began putting the shards into his canvas pouch. He looked at the standing brother and said, "I found this piece of pottery," holding out the arrowhead shard.

Lon ignored him. "What is it," he asked his brother.

"Just like he told you, it's pottery." The boy tossed one of the pieces in his hand. "He found all of it. It used to belong to those Indians a long time ago."

"You just stay away from it," Lon said.

"I got permission," Gerald said then added "Anybody can go just pick it off the ground."

Lon kept looking at his brother, not paying attention to Gerald. "It's their goddamn property!" he shouted. He went over and slapped the cards out of his brother's hands.

Gerald scooped more of the shards and furtively
slipped them into the canvas bag. He sat quietly watching
the older brother work his jaw.

"I'll nail your ass, pecker," Lon said, "just like
Olson told me to."

He jumped up into the trailer and looked down at his
brother. "No Marleen to go running to no more, is there.
There's just me. And when I come back you better be done
with those poker cards."

The dealer collected the scattered deck and began
shuffling, his fingers knowing what to do. He stared into
the center of the moving deck, his face appearing as if he
was remembering and forgetting all at once, everything
getting mixed up in the blur of cards. Gerald looked up
above the piñons where the sun was now climbing.

"Who's Marleen," he asked.

The boy didn't answer, and Gerald thought that he
wouldn't, when he murmured "Just somebody." He kept
shuffling and then said flatly, "It was a woman who used to
come stay with us." He held the cards for a moment. "She
was with us the longest."

"We have somebody like that," Gerald said.

"She was the only one Olson didn't lay into," the
dealer said. "Sometimes me and her played checkers. I could
see through her dress."

"Nelly goes home on the weekends," Gerald said.
The boy put the deck in front of Gerald. "Cut those cards." When Gerald continued to look at him he said, "You don't know nothing about poker cards, do you." Gerald shook his head and the boy picked up the deck and started shuffling again. His fingers looked like tiny thumbs.

"When I was little I went to Vegas with Olson. He says I don't remember it but I do. I'll be back there soon as I learn casino."

Lon appeared in the doorway, startling Gerald. He sprang over their heads, hitting the ground off balance, skidding face first into the dirt. He rose up as if he didn't know where he was. The trees, the hills, the mountains in the distance, the town beyond: Gerald saw that bewilderment in him, as if he couldn't place any of it. Only when he looked down at his brother did he seem to find himself.

"Quit that god damn playing," he said slapping the cards out of the dealer's hands. "It was a joke Olson played on you, giving you those cards, and you're still doing it."

The boy gathered the cards, wiped off the dirt, and went back shuffling. Lon glared at him.

"You ain't no casino dealer. You ain't even played. You don't even know any poker games. You're a liar telling people what you know."

He went over and rammed his knee into the boy's back.
"Lying dog."

"It don't make no difference now," the dealer said. "Vegas is where I'll be someday."

"Like hell you will. You'll be here 'til you're old doing what me and Olson tell you to."

"It's the best you can be, dealing casino," the boy said.

"You ain't even one of us. When you was one day old Olson gave you a can of dog food and you ate it. You licked it off his fingers like a goddamn dog. Olson told me no boy of his would eat dog food. I was there. I saw the whole thing."

"I never knew no better," the boy said.

"You ain't any boy of his."

"I ain't," the dealer said. "I knew that."

He lowered his head and kept shuffling, tucking his body around the cards. Gerald watched as Lon stood back against the reflecting ripple skin of the trailer, rubbing his wrists as if they hurt.

"I'm giving you one more time on those poker cards," Lon said and went up into the trailer.

The boy kept his face turned down, looking into the cards he was shuffling. He stayed rooted where he was, unwilling to be moved. Gerald looked up into the dark interior of the trailer searching for some outline of Lon, for any indication of his next sudden appearance on the
threshold. It was the look Lon gave his brother that reminded Gerald of Nelly: He would be sitting on the floor of his room arranging his soldiers around a separation in the rug. Glancing up he would see her standing in the hallway, a look of reproach on her face. Finally she would mutter something in English or Navajo, he couldn't tell which. As she held her eyes on him he would want to sneak off, slink away like coyote into the underbrush.

Lon came to the doorway, and giving a piercing scream, sprang from the trailer. The dealer came out of his reverie, dropped his cards, and began running. He dodged his brother around a clump of yucca, then they both disappeared down a hill.

Gerald stood up and listened. There was no sound of a scuffle, no cry of capture or escape. The harder he listened the deeper the quiet became. He lifted up the canvas bag letting the shards clatter against his leg.

Finally they came walking up the hill, Lon in front, without anger or triumph, his face blank and serene, the brother behind, impassively following. Before he went into the trailer Lon scattered the cards with a kick. The boy came up and collected them tucking them into the packet, then nudged the plywood under the trailer with his foot. When he turned, Gerald saw a lump distending over his eye.

"I let you off easy today," he said. "I could of won all those pottery." He went up into the trailer and looked
back at Gerald. "Go on, now," he said softly and pulled the door shut.

Walking home Gerald decided to ask the boy to go with him the next time he went to the pottery mound. But his Saturday excursions took him back into the mountains, farther than he had ever been, up into the pines. He had climbed until his lungs ached and his eyes teared. Just when he was about to turn to go down, he found a corral jammed back in the rocks, protected by tall juniper pillars no marauding animal could climb. The corral was filled with dozens of milling sheep—he threw rocks against the pillars, making them stampede, and their bleating was like a thousand frantic voices.

It was just before the first snowfall when he returned to the trailer, cautiously advancing, searching the trees for its metallic glint. They had left, with only deep ruts leading to the highway.

end
Albuquerque New Mexico, Ninth Street and Mountain Road, the Four Square Mission: As he climbed the stairs to the third landing Justin Leary heard a man's body crash against the floor far below him in the house. He kept climbing, pulling himself up the white-painted bannister, focusing on the next battered steps he had to go up. Usually he waited for Ernie in the Dodge under the cottonwoods on Ninth Street. Remembering how he had described it, Justin was amazed that the Mission still resembled the elegant house it used to be. Another shuddering fall, two more in quick succession: downstairs sounded like a wrestling match on Sunday morning TV. It wasn't Ernie laid out on the hardwood, that much Justin knew. It couldn't be Ernie the Reverend was beating to a pulp, not his right-arm man, his scrawny-muscled worker who could turn a hang-over into ten hours of push, but one of the other Vietnam Vets, some drunk who needed to be thrown out on the street. He entered the small toilet and put his hands on his hips. The cubicle was so narrow he could span it with his elbows. A shout rose from far below, a shout like pleading. He leaned back and pushed the door closed with his head, then momentarily left it tipped back like that, as if sunlight illuminated his face. He flipped
up the toilet seat with the snub of his boot, tripped the ivory handle with his instep. The roar of water rushing down through the house calmed the distress that churned deep in his body. He closed his eyes and hummed. This was a solid Midwestern house: three levels, a pitched roof, landing windows, humid too, its clapboards were humid, mildew grew within. Half of downtown Albuquerque was built of this kind of house, and Justin was content that he was finally in one, noticing how it was put together. Up there he strained to hear its joints crack in the late August heat. A light bulb hung from the rafters making everything glare and shadow. He lifted his face. The warmth was like sunlight.

His foot went up again for the handle and oxidized water. The seat fell and bounced three times. He opened his eyes to see it back down, noticing what he hadn't: large as a horsecollar, black and chipped. No old man ever crouched there. From the crusty bowl came an overpowering sweet smell like cherry soda. He shifted his weight and stepped on the handle.

What has happened to me this summer? he thought. Something shuts down when I'm on the job. I'll be cleaning my trowels, thinking about the pour, and my insides clench up. When the truck comes I'm back in the hedge watering the Missus' daisies. White water. What's wrong with the kidney?
Maybe the intestine's dammed and won't send downstream. The knees are good. Inside is where the trouble is.

Justin kicked up the seat, meaning it this time. He squeezed his shoulders and concentrated. Painful tears sprang from his eyes. His instep wanted to trip the ivory handle once more to make the water come.

Steady, he thought, and leaned back against the door.

My problem started this May when Brian walked off the job. Little brother quit the family and now I'm doing my own kind of penance. You're closest to him, Justin, Leary kept telling me. Go see what's wrong. The morning I finished forming up Biscayne I decided to go talk to him. I threw my tools in the back of the Dodge and went out for coffee. From a corner booth I watched the sun lift over the Sandias. I drank three pots, staring out the plate glass, wondering what I'd say to him. At nine-twenty I headed down Menaul to Twin Towers. That's when my guts abandoned ship. I could barely hold my own riding the elevator with the paralegals. When I finally found him my ears were ringing. "Bobby," I said, "I got to piss like a racehorse."

He was reading that goddamn microfilm. He looked up at me like I had interrupted him from the movie of his life. I went over to the window and raised the blinds. I stood there looking out over Albuquerque, my legs clamped together. From fourteen stories up I could see the subdivisions spinning out across the desert like spiraling
galaxies, like pinwheels. Up against the mountains a little
corridor of homes ran toward Santa Fe. It won't last
forever, Leary kept telling us. There's reservation land
not too far north, Santo Domingo or whatever the hell it
is. That'll put an end to the growth. Get a piece of it,
boys. It's getting late.

Brian hadn't said a word to me. When I turned he had
the reader covered with plastic. He was the best framer in
the city and here he was reading microfilm for minimum. I
wanted to give him a couple of backhand slaps, wake him up.

He locked the door, tried the knob. I followed him
across the floor of the biggest investment and property
management company in the state. I had to admit I liked the
way it was arranged. Accountant's nests were clustered in
hexagons around power columns. It sparked in me that we
Learys could use for ourselves the principles of the
pinwheel: the little welcoming fingers that together
channel wind into its heart. But first we would have to
modify the heart.

When we were alone in the restroom I said:

"Little brother, Dad sent me. He told me, Justin, go
patch it up with Brian. Get him in on this. A big job on
Luthy Circle, the one we've been waiting for. A nice
paycheck for us. Fifty-four yards. Seven trucks. You, me,
Rory, Leary--the two sad sacks Ernie and Carl. We'll hire a
couple of wetbacks to wheel in."
"Leary and me took the bid day before yesterday. The guy wants concrete. He's building an addition to his garage. You can't fuck up footing. Then a patio he wants tripled, a serpentine sidewalk going out to his vegetables. In front he wants more drive pad to park his Winnebago on. Leary was punching numbers into his calculator. A vacant lot next door so the trucks can pull in. If we got any closer we'd be dumping mud inside the living room. And Bobby: everything's at grade. Leary and me were doing hoochee dances on the lawn when the guy went in to get the deposit. It's a piece of cake, Dad said; I told him, It's our goddamn turn, that's what it is."

Brian stood at the basins staring into the floor. I kept watching him in the mirror. He was blank in his eyes—nothing I said was getting through. I shook myself and zipped up, turned to face him. He went over and started batting a stall door back and forth with his fingertips. He'd walked out on the family just like Kevin had, only Kevin could blame it on Vietnam. We hadn't seen him for six years. Rumor was, he still lived in Albuquerque. The war did it to him. Brian didn't have any excuses.

I turned on the water and let it run, raising my voice over the faucet.

"I'll say something right now, Bobby. I take the blame for Euclid. Dad always said, Get the groundwork right, how many goddamn times. It was my fuckup and we worked like
dogs. **Redouble the calculation and divide**, the first thing he taught us. I owe you one, I owe Leary one, Rory one. We're all long overdue."

Hitting the soap dispenser for all it could give I went to the next one and pumped it down, lathering my face and neck. I stopped up the sink and let the water fill half way. Then I cupped my hands and flooded my face.

Blindly I cranked off some paper towel and looped it over my shoulder. Two rivers met at my chin, coursed down my neck and soaked into the workshirt. I began drying my face and arms, scruffing the hair against the grain. The paper heaped on the floor.

"Bobby," I said trying to get him to stop the door. I hadn't seen him since that day on Euclid. He was still in shape, all muscle. His dorsals twisted like angry coils as he slapped the door back and forth with his fingers.

"Euclid, Bobby. It was a disaster. Leary kept telling us: **You're losing it, boys.** I was on my knee board in the middle of the slab. I knew it would go down as my fuckup. **You don't have time. You got to move. Hit it once and move.** A hot breeze kicked up. The sun was a bastard. When we lost it you walked. I was floating the rock down when I heard your truck cranking over. Leary threw his tool bucket into his LUV. **Forget it, Justin. It's gone.** Rory and Carl were hosing down the driveway and loading up. Leary talked to the man, told him we'd have to re-pour, then took off. Rory
looked at me on the pad. I felt like I was on the ocean, bobbing on a gray sea, crests and troughs. He stood there. Nice going, bro, he said. Then he took off with Carl in the flatbed. The man came out and started harping at Ernie. I don't want you leaving any concrete, pointing at his driveway. I stayed where I was out on the slab, hitting it with the float, back and forth, it was all grit. I looked out at the West Mesa: the horizon joined with the sun making one humpbacked line. A minute later it was twilight. For some reason I started thinking about the family, how as kids we would have stuck by each other and never taken off. The Valley was dark. The evening star came on over the volcanoes like a sapphire, unreal. It was just me and Ernie. He was shoveling the extra ready-mix into the Dodge. The fucker had done more work than I had. I was so tired Bobby I was afraid to quit working so I kept scrubbing the pad trying to get the rock down. Ernie called to me, We got to dump this concrete. I sat back on my heels watching Venus. It was too bright: a star in a Walt Disney movie. Justin, Ernie said. This concrete's going. We got to dump it. I came in off the slab, tip-toeing across like it was still wet. I looked back: in the dark it didn't look so bad.

"We never made it to the landfill. Me and Ernie wrecked the Dodge. I was driving. I was so tired I couldn't see straight. I went up on the median near Indian School
and we broke the axle. The bed was setting up. We had the tamper and the bullfloat and all our tools hardening into it. I didn't think of it until later I was so tired. Ernie was worse tired but I made him hoof it to go call a tow truck. He had a curfew, ten o'clock back at the Mission he wasn't going to make. I stretched across the seat, my head on the armrest. I felt like I was dead, the muscles in my back stiffening. My knees were open wounds. I lay there listening to the traffic roar past. A full moon rose over the Sandias filling half the sky. It looked like the sun had come up again and was burning down on me."

I stopped talking and looked at Brian. He was leaning against the basin, staring at nothing, opening and closing his fists. It wasn't what happened that day on Euclid, I saw that now. There was something else wrong. Executives kept coming in: they took one look at us then went out. I wanted to tell him to get his ass back to work, but he'd stopped hearing me. His eyes were blank. The same thing had happened with Kevin. We hadn't seen him since 1975. The war did it to him. I looked across the restroom at Brian--his forearms were pumped up like five-inch steel pipe. Nothing I said would make a difference. Bobby. Remember the day I named you Bobby. Mom took us over to the A pool. I was five, you were four. I was scared to death of going in the water. I wouldn't even look at the other kids splashing
around. Nadine kept talking to me, trying to reason away my fears. I was standing there getting more afraid, the anxiety building up. Then I turned around and saw you in the deep end, treading water like a crazy fucker, bobbing up and down, not saying a word. You had this look on your face: *Come on in, everything's okay.* That afternoon I gave you a nickname. Bobby. My Bobby.

We grew up knowing things about each other. Kevin and Deirdre and Rory, they were older, doing adult things. Being a year apart we always relied on each other. After we graduated high school we drifted for a couple of years not knowing what we wanted to do. There was always construction to fall back on, pick-and-shovel jobs, *jubs* we called them, something to keep us going. One afternoon you came home and told me about a real estate investor you'd met in the express line at Safeway, a Jewish guy from Long Island who needed a couple of workers to fix up trashed homes so he could put them back on the market. His name was Roy Shapiro and he lived out in Rio Rancho.

We started working for him. Our first house was down on Copper in the university ghetto, a little two bedroom place. After a week we moved in. We threw our sleeping bags in the living room, some towels, a change of clothes. We stocked up a couple of ice chests, one for food, one for beer. All the cooking we did on a little barbeque on the
front step. Starting and quitting work when we wanted. Shapiro didn't care. He was as laid back as they come. Manana, he told us. **Whenever.** The longer we took the more the house sold for when we finished.

As soon as we got the two-man jobs out of the way, we split up. We liked working alone. You'd be in the front bedroom tearing out the sheetrock and I'd be cutting trim on the band saw we set up in the den. Then we'd come together when we needed to measure carpet or throw up some cabinets in the kitchen. We had the place wired with speakers; around midmorning you turned on the music, cassettes of Wagner and Vaughn Williams, 'Greensleeves' at ninety decibels. Mormon mood music. That little house rocked with sound. People on the sidewalk would stop and gape.

We were six months on our next house, a rathole up on Chama. The ceiling was collapsing so we jacked it up and threw in a few supports. Shapiro was impressed. He gave us an open account at Allwoods and talked about going partners in a couple of years.

Eleven hour days we put in. At quitting time we walked through the house commenting on each other's work, that Mormon side of us kicking in. If we were down to a six-pack we'd make a run to Liquor Warehouse for another case. We'd see these average day workers in line buying their bottle of chablis, eight-hour weenies you called them. We walked
in with our tool belts on and they'd give us a look: get away. You could tell they hated their jobs, and they didn't want anybody near them that smelled of a good day's sweat. We had this pride, working hard, working with our hands. We couldn't understand people who had office jobs.

Back at the house we threw some ribs on the grill. Sitting on the floor in the living room, eating off paper plates, throwing the bones in a trash pile in the kitchen; later on we slouched against the wall, drinking beer and passing the hash pipe back and forth. We left the lights off, and in the dark our voices echoed through the house. The soft moon coming in the uncurtained windows.

Those nights we talked about the family, putting it together, what was wrong. It was as if we'd been infected with some kind of germ and now we were trying to get well. Night after night, getting stoned, we kept talking--it was Leary we always came back to. His number one nightmare was that he wouldn't get a piece of Albuquerque. It was boom time and he about went crazy buying in. He got into advertising, insurance, office supplies, rental brokerage, one after another. The family lived on a shoestring while he invested in another scheme. He'd spread a map across the dining table and circle shopping centers like he was a field marshall taking over the city. Always talking about his projects. It never lasted--he'd have an argument with a partner or file for bankruptcy, always salvaging just
enough to buy into something else, back to square one, ground floor. It was a hardship for us but as kids we never saw what was going on. Nadine never said anything. The family was in disarray pretending nothing was wrong.

There were always rumors he had another family stashed away somewhere. We'd hear it out on the playground. Some snot-nosed little bastard would run up and tell us what his momma had heard. We didn't know what to believe. Maybe there was a woman living down in Atrisco with a couple of Mexican-Irish kids with black eyes and red hair. He seemed to spend a lot of time in Santa Fe, maybe it was a hippie girl he kept busy changing diapers. Every year he went fishing in the Mogollon with his cronies--maybe he had some mountain woman he'd get pregnant every summer. Leary was raised by Franciscans, an orphanage in south Boston, but he thought he was Brigham Young with his business empires and families all over the state. Nadine being the good mormon wife she was would have let him have his women. It was when Leary kept us on starvation wages with households all over, that was what broke her, broke the back of the family.

He started using us in his businesses, pulling us in after school and on weekends. First Kevin then Rory then you and me. We all put in our time. Sitting there talking those nights we promised that we'd never go back to working for him. We had this job with Shapiro and that's all we
needed. We didn't want to have anything to do with the family. For the first time in our lives we had something going for us. Finally we saw what Leary'd done—the truth and rumors were both the same, and we'd grown up believing nothing, nothing at all mattered.

The next morning we were up before dawn working on the house. That was one thing we'd come to believe: there was a right way and a wrong way to do your life, and we'd found it, every day a little more, watching the place take shape. About the first or second of the month Shapiro would drop by to give us our checks and see how things were going. He'd want to take us out for lunch but we didn't like leaving the house, even for an hour. We talked to him for a while then said we had to get back to work.

We were in the house on Walter almost a year. It was a rundown block, mostly Mexicans who worked for the State. At first they shunned us, giving us strange looks, thinking we were homos living together, but when they found out we were brothers they warmed up to us. One of the mamacitas brought us some posole one time, then her teenage son and his cousin down the street started hanging around wanting to help us. We began noticing the daughters, two next door, three on down the block, some across the street--word got out we were single. Sometimes they'd come over with a little brother wanting to borrow something, a drill, a crescent wrench. Their perfume would about knock us over.
Fifteen, sixteen years old, a sullen chaste beauty on them, cheekbones that wouldn't quit. Best of all they were just what the doctor ordered—we knew they'd stay with us no matter what. When we went outside they always seemed to be around, jabbering in Spanish on the porch, giving us the eye then looking away. It was too much for us so we started talking shit about them. Stay away from it, we told each other. No telling what diseases they had; everybody knew Mexican girls loved to fuck. Women make you soft, we knew that well enough. They were probably so tight we'd have to use a router on them. Who in hell would want it anyway. They were probably virgins. Who'd want that grief.

It was Leary in the back of our minds, Leary who'd knocked up our lives with his germ. And both of us had decided to go the other way: We'd stick with one job, something you could do by yourself with your own hands. No empire. No women, no family. Just us working together.

We quit noticing them, quit playing cat-and-mouse with glances. We knew we'd never love anybody, so we tore into the house. If anybody came to the door we kept working. High fences make good neighbors. We finished Walter, and Shapiro gave us more, Constitution, Snowheights. We moved in, kept turning them over, one house after another, the Leary brothers working together on the job. Every day a little more, our own groundwork. We were proving Leary wrong.
Then we ran out of work. The market got tight and Shapiro bailed out of real estate. We split up, both of us looking for spot jobs. We told each other it was temporary, that we'd be back working together before too long. It was just a little bump in the economy. This was what working construction was all about. Lean times, fat times. You had to get used to it. After a month looking for something steady I started hanging out at the university playing pool and running errands for Leary. You spent the afternoons drinking coffee at Denny's. That's where you met Dominic McCarthy, an old subcontractor who'd come down from Denver. I need me a right-arm, he said looking at you hard. Somebody dependable. You know anybody like that? There was something about McCarthy, something that Leary never gave us, that you needed to have.

He had you doing grunt work the first year. Altogether you put in four years with him with the understanding that you were buying shares of the business with your extra labor. Every time he gave the crew a raise he left you out. He'd cry poor, saying he couldn't afford to pay a man with your abilities. Forget it, Dom, you told him. I'm learning something, that's the important thing. On payday he'd hand you an envelope of cash. I don't keep records on my top men, he'd say; the old man keeps track of these things, tapping his skull.
Framing a house he'd tell you the virtues of apprenticeship. What was wrong with the goddamn country was nobody was willing to learn a trade piece by piece, and the result was shoddy workmanship. He'd stand there with a hammer in his hand and name the foremen who tried to fuck him, then look at you and say **But now I've found me a winner**. You didn't say anything, hearing the nails change pitch as you drove them into the studs. He'd take you around the job site showing you tricks he used to get past the inspectors. His brashness always made you smile. **We're the same kind, you and me, he'd say. They think we're just a couple of potato-head micks. We'll show the sons of bitches.** At quitting time McCarthy would grab his back and say, **Brian, the old man's got to think about retirement.** He was always dangling the business in front of you.

Sometimes he'd invite you home for spaghetti dinner. He made houses for a living but he himself lived in a converted tool shed in Corrales. It had electricity and a propane furnace, not much else. But McCarthy didn't need much.

He loved to talk and you loved to listen. He pulled out a cutting board and minced garlic for half an hour. Twirling the paring knife in his fingers he'd tell you how he came up carrying hod for fourteen hours at a stretch. This was the late Thirties when two dozen people were wanting your job, when being a union man meant risking life
and limb. He kept adding water to the bubbling sauce, then went on talking. You sat there not saying a word. He wouldn't get dinner made for a couple of hours, but it didn't matter. The windows steamed up, the kitchen clouded over; McCarthy threw in his spices, added more water and kept on talking.

Listening to him you realized he had it figured out. Just enough, that was his way of thinking. Out-working the whole goddamn crew and letting them know it. Best of all he didn't have a family. He knew things about himself, knew he'd be better off for all concerned without one. Women weren't much a part of his life. There was somebody he saw every couple of weeks. He'd stop hammering and say Brian, I think I'll go visit Madeline tonight then finish the nail. Mostly he kept to himself.

You understood that: it was true, you and McCarthy were the same kind. Being good at what you did, being damn good, that was the answer you'd been looking for. Every so often you'd stop by the house and drink some beer with me, telling me how you and McCarthy were getting on. I saw how you changed. I was twenty-six, living at home, working for Leary, getting pudgy; you were out on your own, your own apartment, foreman with a construction company.

Dominic McCarthy. This salty bastard had changed you, I saw that. This sixty-three year old man who had more energy than a twenty year old kid. Stump-legged, barrel-
chested, he strutted around the worksite like a banty rooster. He taught you everything: from surveying the site and pouring foundation to glazing the windows. He'd given you a complete education.

One day finishing up a house he mentioned out of the blue that you didn't have your license. It was a little comment but it stuck in your head. A couple days later he brought it up again. You knew something was up. I've learned from one of the best, you said, what do I need a piece of paper for? He didn't say anything, so you added, Hey Dom, no sweat, I'll get it before you retire. Three weeks later he signed the business over to his lesbo niece who had come down from Wyoming, and moved to Arizona where he bought a palace in Paradise Valley. She laid you off and now is building condos in Rio Rancho for childless East Coast couples.

When you found out, you erupted: on a site near Tramway. Plumbers and pipefitters, mavericks who knew the ingrained dishonesty of the business, sat in the shade slowly chewing their sandwiches and scanned you for a hidden weapon. I bought shares of this goddamn business with my sweat, you shouted at him. It isn't the money. You can't pay me enough for what I put in. My work. My shares. McCarthy wouldn't look you in the eye. I didn't promise anything, he said staring off at the mountains. You wouldn't let him alone--now you were the one talking, and
McCarthy the one not saying a word. You kept reminding him of the Friday nights you stayed on helping him check blueprints; showing up on the site Monday morning hours before the crew rolled in hung-over. I don't know anything about that, he said looking at the men sitting against the earth-moving equipment, as if they were his jury.

When I told Leary what McCarthy had done he said, Only Irish do that to other Irish. A few days later he called me and Rory together to tell us his latest business scheme. You working construction had reminded him of his freedom days bouncing around the west without a wife and kids, out on his own finishing cement. The more he thought about it the more ready-mix trucks he seemed to notice barreling down Montgomery out to the subdivisions. We're going into concrete, boys, he told us. We'd start small, then expand, luring the good finishers with high wages and a piece of the action. In a couple of years we'd be the biggest outfit in town. Rory and me, we'd heard these big plans before. But this time was different. You knew concrete backwards and forwards, and Leary wanted you running it.

Leary had me tell you. I dropped by your place and we talked for a few hours. There was something about you, some fearful look you'd give me. Every time I mentioned us working together again you'd start rehashing what had happened with McCarthy. I figured once you were back to work you'd be okay. It was just being unemployed that made
you a little jittery. You kept bringing up the good old days with Shapiro, that promise we'd made not to go back working for Leary. It's different this time, Bobby, I told you. You were the difference. You knew concrete top to bottom. You were the one who'd make it happen.

And so we started pouring concrete. You me Rory Leary. For the first time in our lives we weren't looking to Leary to make it work. It was you, the little baby brother of the family.

We did a couple of jobs, General Nimitz, Valverde, smooth sailing the whole way. Then we lost Euclid. There was something going on in your head, something I didn't know about. It wasn't that I'd fucked up the groundwork. You were thinking that things would never change. Leary and McCarthy, they were the same kind. Leary kept his sons like beggars with his illegitimate families and misbegotten businesses, and McCarthy paid his foremen dirt wages while he was building a fat retirement. When Euclid blew up you couldn't keep it straight anymore: McCarthy and Leary and work shares and snapping on your tool belt; it was all the same and wouldn't ever stop. You were gone.

Nadine was the one tracked you down: Indexing microfilm for a corporation. That's your job.

We have to work the mud, Bobby, down on our knees before the slab, humbled in labor, communicating in sweat:
working up the cream, pushing down the rock. We have to keep doing it no matter what. Only work will save us.

* * * * *

What Justin had said and had thought of saying to his brother became inseparable in his mind; now six weeks later, up in the water closet at Four Square Mission, he remembered only that Brian had heard nothing: he had leaned against the basins, staring at his hands opening and closing. And Justin, his final effort, went over and grabbed his fists.

"Is your truck running? Dad sent me. We got fifty-four yards coming down the chute tomorrow morning. You have to quit here, now, today. Ride the elevator with me to the ground floor. Leary says you're one hell of a darby man."

* * * * *

Justin came slowly down the stairs, stopping on each floor where the walls were ripped out to make space for the rows of beds, where support trusses and I-beams connected the floors. The fight downstairs had stopped. There was only the sound of talking, one voice, not angry or loud. He reached the bottom step and saw Ernie in the doorway of the
TV room. He was leaning against the door frame wildly drumming his fingers on the woodwork.

Justin didn't know how old houses were laid out and couldn't say what was the original purpose of the room near the front door, a room long and narrow, windows facing the street. Perhaps it had served as a dining room. It seemed too long for a parlor. The men sat on four ratty couches that had been pushed together; against the opposite wall was a large walnut TV console, its screen heavily coated with dust. On top of it sat a small portable TV. It was on but the sound was turned low. The men were watching it or pretending to read newspapers.

Justin brushed by Ernie and walked into the room. In the front corner behind the door the Reverend was down on one knee immobilizing a man in a headlock. All Justin could see was their backs, both of them frozen in one wrenching posture. The Reverend's back was exaggerated and musclebound as if he were posing for a picture. His upper arms were like stiff hams and his enormous buttocks balanced him like a pendulum. The man in the headlock was soaked in his clothes and a foul, wet stench of old sweat and alcohol drifted over. His hair was whipped up like a bird's nest. And something else Justin noticed: the man's heel twittered back and forth like a handkerchief, truce-like. He was giving up, but the Reverend was increasing his leverage.
Justin wanted to do something. It didn't seem right: Somehow it should have gone the other way, the Reverend flat on his back gulping air. Justin looked at the other men, who were minding their own business, then at the Reverend paralyzing the man every time he tried to move.

The Reverend tightened his grip. Ernie kept up his drumbeat on the door.

"Enough," the man grunted. The Reverend released his hold. He stood and helped the man up from his pool of water.

"Keep in touch with us," the Reverend said. "Drop us a card and let us know how you are."

The man bent over, his labored breathing filling the room. The Reverend patted him on the shoulder, then asked one of the other men, "Do we have his things?" The other man pointed at a bag out in the hall.

The Reverend clutched the man around the shoulder and they went out onto the porch; he paused and pulled the door closed behind him. The windowpane persistently rattled in its frame. Justin went over to the window watching them take the stairs in unison and walking down the street.

Those long afternoons they graded dirt and pounded stakes Justin had needed talk to make the work go easier, and so he'd tried to get Ernie to tell him about Vietnam. He wouldn't, so Justin had him tell about the Mission, the day-to-day of what went on in the house. It wasn't named
right, Ernie had said, it's not Four Square, more like One Square. One square meal, supper. The Reverend preached how hungry the Lord was for their souls while the men sat with their chests caved in waiting for the food. He ran it with a closed fist, no two ways about it. You could live there as long as you liked. Check-out time was when you smelled of it or were caught with it. No drinks was okay: one drink was too many. Ernie didn't think the Reverend was really a reverend, but then maybe he was.

Justin liked hearing how the whole thing operated. Every day something else happened, but it wasn't ever a surprise to the person it happened to. Rules and curfews, that was what kept the house together.

He turned and saw the man's wallet in the pool of water. He went over and picked it up, not knowing what to do with it. He turned and looked at the men sitting on the couches. He shook off the water and looked through it finding it empty except for three Social Security cards, all with different names, and an expired Phillips Petroleum card in a woman's name, Mrs Somebody Somebody. Standing there he could feel the resentment of the men on the couches, their heat building in the room, their rustling newspapers, the tv turned down to an irritating whisper. Justin watched a Vet come down toward him, one of the men who had been standing at the narrow window at the other end of the room. He had a blonde over-grown fu manchu mous-
tache, and a small knit stocking cap pulled down over his ears. Justin thought he looked like he'd seen combat and then some.

"Give it to me," he said, snapping his fingers, then took the wallet. He carefully handled the soggy piece of leather, turning it, choosing what he wanted to say. "I knew him from a long time ago," he said, "that time I found him sleeping on the plaza. I told him about this place and he came back with me." He looked up at Justin, his eyes flaring hard, a network of lines scored around his eyes, puffy broken blood vessels working across his cheeks: to Justin he looked like he'd lived a couple of lifetimes more than everybody else, but concurrent lifetimes that kept interfering with each other. He held the smelly wallet lovingly, opened it up, worked its hinges, remembering the man it belonged to. "Things went against him, that's all. It was somebody's hideout stash, a little jimmy of hootch somebody stuck back in the bricks. That's all it ever takes. He was in the showers trying to get sober when goddamn sky pilot catches him. Now tell me the justice of that."

He put the wallet in his shirt pocket and looked away. Farther down on the couches a man in his early forties stood up and started yelling something at Justin in an unintelligible quavery voice, socking the air. They turned and watched until he got quiet and sat down. Then the
Vietnam Vet turned back to Justin, his pupils like dots squeezed to nothing.

"Nobody even tried to help him," Justin said. "Didn't you want to do something, pull the Reverend off?"

"Don't tell me my job," he said raising his voice, warning in it, keeping Justin back. "That's not my part. I go find them and goddamn preacher throws them out." He walked away, stopping in front of a window. "Goddamn preacher man," he said looking out at the street.

Justin went across the room and looked at a yellowed Remington print thumbtacked on the wall—men on horseback floating in a cloud of dust.

An ojo de dios, god's eye, on the adjacent wall captured his attention, its bright colors framed in unfinished wood. The spiders had gotten to it, and neither was it crafted all that well, for you could see where the thread started and stopped, tiny knots here and there. But that didn't matter to Justin, who saw only its continuous pattern. A pinwheel, he thought. Colors following the sculpted corners down into the center where the final strand began.

This thing of yarn reminded him: The Learys were like a pinwheel caught in its motion. Brian had not come back to work; and now, late August, Justin and Rory had split the jobs between them, bidding against each other.
Some afternoons Justin would go looking for Kevin. It would be so hot he and Ernie couldn't work, so he'd call it a day and drop Ernie off at the Mission. He headed down to the river where the coolness beckoned him, where he supposed it beckoned Kevin. He took Tingley Drive down to Barelas Bridge then crossed over and took Sunset back to the Old Town and crossed the river again. Sometimes he might drive through the residential streets because he liked the promise of their names, Fairhaven, Jeanette, cruising this pocket of dank air. Playing a hunch he'd go down to Rio Bravo and cross there or up to Corrales and take Rio Grande back downtown. The sun hung fat in the sky, barely moving, and Justin would take his time. And if his brother were there, Justin knew his eyes would find him.

He turned to Ernie who was still standing in the doorway staring at the puddle of water. "Let's go to work," he said. They went through the narrow pantry out the back door to the Dodge sitting under the shedding cottonwoods.
A Friend to the Family

Mark was twelve when his brother went to Vietnam. Barry was twenty, had enlisted after a couple of pointless years in college. To Mark his brother had always been an adult, but when he came home for a month's leave before shipping overseas, Barry seemed like a person Mark had never known. Everything about him boasted that he was no longer Barry. He was Airborne.

Mark also sensed a change in his father that month Barry was home. Every afternoon the two of them would shut down the kitchen and argue. His father would take a position and Barry would take the opposite, and raising their voices, they would stab the kitchen dinette with their forefingers, neither of them giving an inch. Then they would change the subject and go at it again. It was almost impossible for Mark to get them to move their chairs aside so he could squeeze through to the bread box and the peanut butter. You're talking through your hat, Barry, his father would snort; Mark, his back to them, chewing, staring into the screw eyes of the cabinet, could tell his
father loved it when Barry said the same thing back to him. It was as if he gave his son the right to disagree now that he was finally leaving home.

The morning Barry left for the war the Caughey family arose in the dark. The bus station was frigid and smelled of cheap port. They huddled together near the mechanics' pit. The idling bus drowned out most of their conversation, and so they gave up trying to talk and stood looking at Barry, almost a shadow in his dress paratrooper uniform and black spit-shined boots. Mark scanned his brother's face for some useful expression before he headed off to combat; his parents, looking like brother and sister, appeared exhausted in their apprehension; and Pam, a senior in high school, kept turning and looking back at the terminal waiting room, sniffling and drying her eyes on her wrists. Barry stood with them a few more minutes then boarded the bus. They looked up into the dark windows searching for him, but he had not taken a window seat. Mark's father numbly maneuvered the car home. As the sun rose over the Sandias, he told them, pulling into the driveway, that he wanted to embrace his son, but something, maybe it was the uniform, stopped him.

Barry's high school friend Les had let the family see its son off alone. The two friends said goodbye the night before. During dinner a week later Les described to them how he and Barry had gone out for beer and pool at Okie
Joe's. Leaning over his pool shot Barry had suddenly stood; without warning he put Les in a chokehold, making him promise to look after the family. Les told them how, gasping for air, he had agreed. Then Barry had downed a slug of beer and knocked in three solids before scratching. Now chuckling, Les repeated his promise to Barry.

To Mark's parents Les was another version of Barry. Les was the son who stayed in school using his student deferment and working towards his degree. While their son had chosen to risk his life patrolling the jungles of Southeast Asia, Les, a year into his nursing internship, sacrificed too, committing himself to work and school. Mark's parents had remarked on how college had pushed the two boys onto different paths.

One Saturday, a clear spring morning, Les parked his glistening black Firebird on the street under the neighbor's shade elm just as Mark pushed the lawnmower down the driveway. He was kicking pea gravel at every step.

Les hopped out of the car and slipped his sunglasses back on his head. He raised his eyebrows at Mark's scowl. Mark ran the mower up onto the lawn and shoved the grips forward. It fell flat, the blades wildly spinning.

"He gave me a list that'll take me all day to do," Mark said indicating the house with his head. "And tomorrow
I'm supposed to serve two Masses since one of the other altar boys can't make it. Some weekend, huh?"

Les patted him on the shoulder, walked up to the porch, rapped a couple of times on the screen door, and let himself in. Mark spun the mower around on one wheel and kicked the carriage flush. He began cutting irregular swaths and left hackles of grass. He cut the left side of the lawn then backed up and ran it into the hedge. Green sprigs flew into his face.

"I've fixed it for you," Les called pushing open the screendoor. "I'll give you a hand and we'll be done by lunch. Where should we start?"

He spit into his palms and rubbed them together.

"Noon," he said. "We can do it, Mark."

And they did, Les coming around the corner to the storage shed, snapping the clipper blades closed just as Mark swept a pile of dirt over the threshold.

"I'm done," Les said. "What can I help you with."

"Nothing," Mark said throwing the broom down and smiling broadly.

"Well then, let's have some lunch. Your Mom is making us tuna sandwiches. Then I thought we'd do a little shooting. What do you say?"

Mark didn't know what to say. He had never gone shooting with anyone before. There was only one rifle in the family, and when Barry wanted to be by himself, he took
it and hiked back into the Jemez. Mark had his own favorite haunt. His father drove him out past Las Lunas Hill and stayed in the car reading Newsweek and dozing while Mark tramped across the dunes taking potshots at sparrows.

"You've got a rifle?" he asked.

"Just an old carbine my uncle gave me," Les said. "It doesn't have a scope or anything."

"Mine's a single shot .22."

"Let's go," Les said.

The insurance had lapsed on Barry's Willy's jeep, but they cajoled Mark's mother into letting them take it on this one outing. It sat cabless at the end of the driveway under the wisteria canopy, and pods and bright purple flowers filled the interior. Les wiped down the seats and steering wheel with a cloth then started it and let it warm up for a few minutes.

At fifty the jeep sounded like it was still in first gear. Les stayed in the right lane on the Interstate. He and Mark grinned at each other's windblown face. Two girls in a Mustang yelled something and waved; Mark scooped a handful of the small flowers from the floor and threw it to them.

They took Coors Road exit north and kept driving until Les found a dirt road that looked promising, one that headed straight for the volcanoes sticking up over the horizon. Bouncing over a couple of washes they stopped in
the mouth of a ravine. Les let the engine pound for a few minutes before switching it off.

They grabbed their rifles and walked along the base of a mesa, squinting up at its steep sides. Mark shifted his rifle from one cradling arm to the other, watching Les out of the corner of his eye. He liked how they walked side by side like two gunslingers sauntering into a cowtown. Nobody better mess with us, Mark thought. He cast another sidelong glance at Les. He had on a new, dark blue windbreaker, and his suede desert boots looked as if he had given them a stiff brushing that morning. There wasn't anything threatening about Les.

Mark remembered the few times he and Barry had gone shooting. Barry had always forged ahead, his waffle boots digging in and twisting. His crushed imprint read: This is me: I've been here; and Mark, not getting any traction with his tennis shoes, had to run to keep up. Watching Les now Mark noticed that his footprints hardly disturbed the soil.

They followed the mesa then turned their backs on the city and headed up a wash. Mark thought how his brother might be out on patrol this very second: Barry, taking point, walking across a rice paddy, scanning the countryside just like he himself was doing. Mark knew Barry would volunteer for point: he always wanted to be the first. Mark glanced at Les walking above him on the bank. He had his rifle slung over his shoulder like a tired buffalo hunter.
They left the wash when its sides grew weak and faced north, walking parallel to the river ten miles away. Mark turned and looked back over his shoulder. Albuquerque lay spread out over the Rio Grande valley, and the curve of the earth swallowed its skyline. He looked out across the mesa endlessly dotted with sagebrush.

They advanced through the sagebrush and scared up nothing. Then Les nearly stepped on a jackrabbit that ran like a hamstrung grayhound. It loped between the bushes, stopped and turned an ear. Mark squeezed off a shot. Les fired three times, the shells spitting past his elbow. The jackrabbit bounded into the air—its only burst of energy—and disappeared.

Les waded through the brush to Mark.

"That was pathetic," he said.

Mark nodded. "I wasn't ready."

"I wasn't concentrating," Les said. "I was walking along daydreaming. We should have knocked the tar out of that old buck. Did you see how old he was? He had arthritis so bad he was begging to die. 'I'm old. I'm senile. Please kill me.' And we just let him live."

Mark laughed. He ejected the shell, reloaded, and slammed the bolt down.

"It's a gorgeous afternoon," Les said, "and I'm just glad we could get out here, but come on, let's get serious about this thing."
He took off his sunglasses and pocketed them.

"We've got to change our plan of attack," he said.

Mark nodded and looked back the way they had come. High thin clouds were beginning to drift over the western horizon.

They separated. Mark stayed two hundred yards forward and to the left, acting as decoy. Les walked a few yards from the edge of the mesa ready to pick off anything that came his way. The sagebrush became thicker. Mark heard two pops and saw Les charge into a gully. His heart sank when Les reappeared and waved his rifle back and forth, signaling failure.

Then Mark saw a jackrabbit not fifteen feet away, hunched under a bush with its ears flat against its head. He stared at it until it blinked; slowly he brought the stock to his shoulder. Sighting on its head he closed his eyes and squeezed the trigger. The rabbit was still staring at him. He loaded the reserve shell he kept in the creases of his fist, and halfway expected the rabbit to be gone when he looked up. He aimed and fired high, splintering a branch. Panicking he went into his pocket for another shell, all the while cursing his single-shot .22. His next shot hit the ground in front of it. When the dust settled Mark saw tiny clumps of dirt adhering to its eyes. He approached and jabbed the barrel at it. His first rabbit, he thought, and it had died of fright watching him bungle
shot after shot. He looked up to see Les making his way over. He couldn't face Les with an unbloodied rabbit. Just before he fired a round into its belly he noticed a small neat hole just below its ear. He nudged it with his tennis shoe: its brains were strung out on the sage's spindly branches.

Mark threw back his head and a deep laugh came up from the bottom of his chest. He looked across the mesa at Les, now standing still. Holding the rifle by its stock Mark swirled it around his head then fired into the air. "God-damnit!" he shouted. and began laughing again. He felt lightheaded watching Les coming through the brush toward him: with every step Les took, it appeared as if he were backing up, drifting farther away. Blinking away his tears Mark saw Les a hundred, two hundred, now three hundred yards away getting smaller and smaller. He nudged the jackrabbit with his toe. "Son of a god-damn bitch," he said, then felt himself start to laugh. He picked it up by its hind legs, dangled it for Les to see, and whooped it into the air.

"My first rabbit!" Mark shouted as Les got closer. He held it by the legs again.

"Here," Les said making him put it down. "It might have plague."

"I don't care," Mark said. "It was worth it. If I get the plague it was worth it."
Les took out a pocket handkerchief and wrapped it around his hand. "It's healthy," he said. "A doe—it's clean." Looking up at Mark he said, "I thought you were having hand-to-hand combat over here. I couldn't figure out what was going on."

Mark caught his breath. "You know what it was, Les? I plugged it with my first shot and didn't even know it. Like a ninny I shut my eyes."

He looked guardedly at Les. "You know what else I was going to do? I was going to gut-shoot it because I didn't want you to think I'd scared my first rabbit to death."

Les shook the handkerchief. Mark kept watching him for a response.

"I wanted you to know that," Mark said. "It didn't happen the way you thought it did."

Hunkering down Les began unloading the magazine of his rifle. He didn't say anything until he had taken the last shell out.

"You didn't have to tell me you missed the rabbit," he said. "It means a lot to me that you did. It means you trust me enough to tell me. But you didn't have to tell me." He looked at Mark. "You don't have to live up to my expectations."

He kneeled letting the rifle lean against his shoulder. He took from his pocket the small box the shells
had come in. Unhurried, he slipped every other shell nose down into the box.

"When I heard all those shots I wondered," Les said quietly, "but in my mind I saw you blasting Christmas out of that rabbit. That's all that's really important." He suddenly looked at Mark, his dark brown eyes serene and reassuring. He put the box of shells into his windbreaker pocket and stood.

Mark looked back across the West Mesa. He was thinking how he wanted Barry out here to see him kill his first rabbit, but he knew it would have been different with his brother--Barry would have cuffed him, first for missing the rabbit, wasting ammunition, then a second time for admitting his mistake. Les was more sensible and tolerant; He was the kind of brother Mark always wanted to have: a brother who knew what to do and say.

They stood looking at the box-shaped clouds piling in from the west, then turned and began their long walk to the jeep.

The last Saturday in May began a long summer of barbeques on the Caughey back patio. At six o'clock Mark hosed down the cinder-block then swept off the excess water with a pushbroom. His father nailed up the blinds saying, "Let's have a civil sun for this barbeque, can't we?" Then he wheeled the barbeque in from the storage shed and unstrung
cubwebs from the grill with a paint paddle. Mark pulled the butterfly chairs onto the patio again. He collapsed into one as a warm breeze swept in out of the west, laying his head back to watch the tetherball coil around the pole: a reminder of his cousin Carla's six week visit last summer. She was an obnoxious nine, and champion of her school, she didn't relent until Mark and his father found a tetherball pole and sank it in concrete. She was unmerciful and quick to call foul if he even appeared to touch any part of the rope. Now the pole leaned; the ball, a shrunken yellow grape, bobbed slowly in the breeze.

At this first barbeque Les brought a girl he had recently met, a transcriber at Lovelace Clinic. Her name was Karen and she wore a tangerine sundress with white sandals. Mark got up out of the butterfly chair when Les introduced her then fell back into it, looping his leg over the side. When Karen looked as if she wanted to talk to him, he began examining the canvas stitching.

Then the evening was rocked by open blasts coming up the front street. "Jimmy's dune buggy," Mark's father explained; Mark's mother came to the back screen. "Pam's boyfriend," she said. Working a hamburger patty from palm to palm she rolled her eyes heavenward and went back into the kitchen.

athletic tee shirt, faded cutoffs and sandals made from old tires. He slouched against the picnic table and refused to look at Mark's mother when she brought out a platter of the hamburger patties. Karen went into the kitchen and came back with the silverware and began setting the table. Les brought out the potato salad and the ice bucket. Mark noticed how Les seemed always to be around Karen, saying things, touching her on the shoulder as he brushed past her. Mark's father stood near the barbeque poking the coals with the spatula. Jimmy smoked a cigarette and then he and Pam left for a movie. The thin cloud of Jimmy's smoke swirled over the patio and dispersed. Karen brought out napkins and plates and glasses and Les helped her set them around the table. Mark watched his father who seemed entranced with the coals. The warm breezes blew warmer still, sweeping in off the desert. Les handed Mark's father a beer and they stood at the grill talking, his father turning the patties, touching their edges with the spatula. Through a crack in the blind Mark watched the sun bubble into the horizon. The restless tetherball became more dark than light. His father served up the hamburgers; his mother brought him his hamburger, both mayonnaise and ketchup spread on the bun, no pickles, his tomato on the side, potato salad with pepper, his can of Nehi orange. Les and Karen faced Mark's parents across the redwood picnic table. Either of his parents would occasionally call across the
half shadows, "How are things over there, Mark," and he would take a swallow of his soda and call back, "Just fine." Karen stood and said she had to go to work at the Clinic, apologizing, thanking everyone. Les arose to drive her, promising to be right back. Mark's mother called over asking Mark if he wanted the last hamburger withering on the edge of the grill, and when he said he didn't, his father got up and raised the firepan. Les returned with a fifth of Johnny Walker Red. Mark's parents sat in their lounge chairs while Les sat at the picnic bench sideways, hugging his knees. Mark listened to their voices gradually descend and couldn't say, perhaps it was suddenly, when he heard the bamboo wind chimes drown out their conversation. Every third or fourth word drifted over to Mark: **Highlands and Airborne and One Hundred and First then Kontum and Pleiku and Qui Nhon.** And in low steady voices, having used up all their vocabulary, they began every sentence with **He,** as if the dark night now ended with Barry's unspoken name. They talked quietly. Mark heard his father say, "Sharon, come now."

"God's retribution must be paid," she said. "Barry is in danger because of how we live our lives." Looking at Les she said, "His family has put him in danger."

"You've had too much to drink," his father said.

"I can't help what my mind feels," she said.
"That has nothing to do with it," his father said draining his glass. "It's a hard time for us all."

Les said, "Mrs Caughey, I want to tell you about that son of yours. When I was trainer for the high school football team, I used to see our biggest meanest guys go down in a heap, out for the season. Barry had a knack for staying on his toes, but he had something more than that. He was just plain blessed. Coach used to tell me: What Caughey lacks in talent he makes up in luck. That's Barry all over. And that's why he's going to be sitting here next summer chowing down hamburgers."

Mark's mother began to cry. His father reached across and patted her knee. Mark looked out into the night sky. The sycamores rustled in the warm maddening breeze, their motion like stiff blankets, their leaves twisting face out. The hot night opened up onto her grief. The night was a black rose that bloomed over all of them, gripping them with its petals. In the brilliant kitchen his father put the condiments and dressings into the refrigerator as Les stood at the sink rinsing the plates and stacking them on the drainboard. Mark's mother turned from the counter and her tears had dissolved her face, her face hollow and long. Mark was the only one who would look at her. Then he could no longer do it. He looked down at the earthen crock of potato salad and saw a fly with its wings plastered to a wedge of potato, its legs madly working like black needles.
Mark stood on the utility porch. He heard the drain sucking the dishwater down.

"I need you to understand, Les," Mark heard his mother say. "I need your strength, more than anyone else right now."

"I'm here for you, Les said. Mark turned around and saw him holding her hands in his own. "I believe in this family. Whatever I can do in this difficult time, I'll do."

Her face was turned away. She was crying. His father came up and put his arm around her.

"You are the son we need right now," she said. "Don't you know that?"

"Yes," Les said reaching again for her hands. "I will."

Barry sent Mark a ceremonial Chinese sword for his thirteenth birthday. His card said that he was in Taiwan on R&R; he told Mark that the sword wasn't a play thing, and he didn't want him taking it out of its wooden scabbard and waving it around.

Barry also sent a reel of tape to his parents with a note explaining that he had picked up a small tape recorder in Taipei. Because he was so bad at writing home, he said, from now on would send his letters on tape.

That afternoon Les bought a tape recorder and donated it to the family. Mark's parents and Pam sat on the couch.
as Les threaded the empty spool. He motioned with the cord
and Mark slid off the rocker and plugged it in. Then Barry
came on, his mother and Pam closing their eyes at the sound
of his voice. There was a lot of background noise, generals
giving orders, jeeps going by every three seconds. Mark
imagined Barry kicked back in a chair, his feet up on the
desk. Barry described the weather, his CO, daily routines.
He made it seem like the only thing he did was play cards,
eat and sleep. Not once did he say that he went on any
patrols or made any jumps. Then he signed off. They sat
there for half a minute listening to the silence, not
believing the tape was over. Barry came on again, was in
Taipei and had just bought the tape recorder. He had
advanced the reel too far, told them how the tape was about
to run out, and so rushed on describing how strange and
green the mountains were, not anything like New Mexico.
When the tape cut off his mother started crying, and then
Pam did, both of them saying it was good to hear his voice.

Les wanted to send a tape off that day. He and Mark
bought a package of blank reels at Value House and drove
back to his apartment, about a mile from the university.
The first thing Mark saw walking in were Les's nursing
textbooks, sprung open with notes and jammed into a tall
oak bookcase. Les tossed his keys on the couch and disap­
peared into the small kitchen to whip up something cold to
drink. Mark sat down, glancing around the living room. In
front of him spread across the small glass coffee table were the latest issues of *Esquire*. He leafed through one then sat back scanning the rest of the apartment. In one corner, aimed at the ceiling, was a floor lamp with a wide metal shade like a cymbal. Two chairs of sculpted steel sat side by side at the far end of the room. An Oriental rug covered a good part of the wooden floor. Les was saying something from the kitchen; but Mark wasn't listening and swept the apartment with his eyes. The furniture with all its diffuse decoration didn't seem to go together, but somehow it did. On the far wall was a print he had seen in a book but couldn't name—a weird modern painting of a girl who looked straight ahead and in profile at the same time. Mark realized that the living room was supposed to look like a bachelor pad from *Esquire*.

He turned and noticed something thumbtacked to the near wall, another piece of abstract art. Then he recognized it—the map shaped like a cobra getting ready to strike. He read the legend: INDO-CHINA. The borders separating the countries had been accentuated with a heavy black marker. In the southeast, near the sea, pins were connected with brightly colored thread.

He didn't understand. He stood and studied the map a long time. When Les came around the corner with lemonade, Mark asked him.

"I'm keeping track of Barry and his outfit," he said.
They sat on the couch. Les ripped open the package of tapes and threaded the small reel. Holding the square plastic microphone he said, "This is Les Porter speaking. Today I'm interviewing Mark Caughey who attends Thomas Jefferson Junior High and will soon be thirteen. His brother is Barry Caughey who is currently serving in Vietnam. And now some thoughts from Mark."

Les extended the microphone; Mark stared into it and swallowed.

"Could you elaborate a little more," Les said. "For instance, what's it like being an Altar boy? What do you like about serving Mass?"

Mark was silent.

"Well, what don't you like about it?"

Mark looked up at Les holding out the microphone.

"I don't like how I'm expected to be there every Sunday sticking out the plate trying to catch the host that never fell yet."

Mark coughed into his hand, amazed at what he had just blurted out.

"The younger priests are okay," he said slowly, "but Father Duffy is the one I always get. He always wants me on the left because he's blind in one eye. Then I go behind him and he gets mad. He bumps into me almost spilling the wine."
Mark drank the lemonade down almost in one gulp. Les gave the cord a couple of shakes then looked down at the microphone. Mark put his glass on the coffeetable then sat back watching Les who seemed to be meditating. He gave the cord a shake.

"You know, Mark, there's something I haven't told many people, but I'll tell you now because I think you can appreciate it. I had a great uncle who had Parkinson's disease. He died when I was about eleven or twelve. You probably know a couple of old people who always have the shakes. That's what he had. I loved this old guy so much that I decided to find out everything I could about his affliction—thinking I could be of some help. I read every book I could get my hands on. I won't say I understood everything. But Mark, that's how I got into nursing. I'm wondering if there isn't something in your life that needs examining. In any event, I'd like you to consider your future."

Mark looked at him holding out the microphone. "Sure, Les," he said.

Les cleared his throat and said, "This concludes today's interview. Thank you Mark Caughey for your insightful comments and observations."

As Les rewound the tape and erased it Mark looked around the ornately furnished apartment, then up at the map again, Les's attention to the detail of Barry's life. He
wondered why Les and Barry were friends. Barry would never live in an apartment like this: why was he friends with somebody who did? Barry would never make a map of where Les was; and Les would always have that map, adding to it—wherever Barry went, there would be another pin and more colored thread. Mark remembered Les's patience that day out on the West Mesa, his coming to the house and comforting his mother, the way he touched Karen. Barry would never do those things; and that difference between the two had begun to bother Mark.

Les took a pocket notebook from his desk and came back to the couch. He propped the tape recorder beside him and opened the notebook, writing with what looked like a gold-plated ballpoint pen. His handwriting was precise. His fingernails were clipped and clean.

Watching, Mark realized that Les looked upon the Caughey family like he had his sick great-uncle. Even today—the interview—Les had given him a pep talk about serving Mass, the thing Mark hated most of all. It was as if Les had found his purpose in life, taking care of the Caughey family.

With a heavy sigh Les turned on the tape recorder.

"Barry, it's four-thirty, a hot Saturday afternoon. It's been an unseasonable July—we're all ready for some cooler weather, those August rains to keep the heat down.
Your folks are having a barbeque later on tonight over at the house."

He closed his eyes, his fingers pressed to his forehead.

"Barry, you're in our thoughts and prayers. I've started attending Mass with your folks and kid brother and Pam. In a sense we all have a duty to perform."

Mark looked up at the map then at Les, who had closed his eyes, thinking. A part of the tape stuck up through the empty reel like an exacto knife blade. One reel was spinning faster than the other. Mark sat spellbound watching the sliver of tape pirouette. Les was making a tape to Barry, and Mark felt as if he were a million miles away with no reason to be there.

In September Mark turned thirteen and began school. It was also the month Barry was wounded. While he was in the hospital he wrote them telling how his platoon was surprised, and in the firefight that followed, he was creased, nicked really, in the side of the head. Despite the superficial wound he had bled heavily, but after a week recovering he was returning to his unit.

The briefness of the letter astounded his mother. She held the page as if it were some kind of flimsy puzzle, staring through the blue tissue to her damp hand.
Les came by the next week before his night class. He politely refused to have a plate of lasagna with them and nervously jingled his keys. Finally he said, "Barry sent me a tape last Saturday."

Mark, sitting at the far end of the dining table, watched his mother stiffen at this fresh news. Both Pam and his father turned to Les. Mark kept eating, spearing more crusted pasta onto his plate from the serving pan and scooping out the cottage cheese. Chewing, he watched Les, who exhaled slowly getting ready to say what he had to in one breath.

"He's extending his tour three months."

There were a few moments of utter quiet in the house. Then Mark lay aside his fork and looked at Les, at his lambswool sweater and the small knot in his tie, his pressed slacks, the polished tasseled loafers; he knew there was something very wrong.

Mark's father seemed both bewildered and angry, but said nothing. He stared in front of him as if he were trying to focus his anger. His mother whispered, "Why on earth would he want to stay, Les? You must tell us. If it kills us you must tell us."

Les looked at her: the same pained expression on her face was on his. She said something inaudible to him, her voice rising at the end. He jingled the keys in his pocket then paused. "He doesn't want to let down his buddies."
Mark knew that none of this was right. Sitting there watching Les, he understood what his parents and even Les did not. Barry had extended his tour because he was tired of being a son. Mark was thirteen and Barry was twenty-one, and both of them were the same, but not because they were brothers. It was because Mark was tired of serving Mass and Barry was tired of having to fight the war and then come home and start again where he had left off, skipping classes and drinking beer. Mark realized all this looking at Les, seeing how standing straight and forthright like some model son.

His father abruptly rose from the table, stuffed his cigarettes into his shirt pocket and went out the back door. Les looked at his watch said he had to be going. Mark slipped noiselessly through the back door into the dusk. His father stood at the far end of the backyard near the cinderblock wall, his lit cigarette giving him away. Mark heard the front door shut then Les get into his Firebird. He listened for the car to start. There was nothing, only the sound of whisking leaves. Les came effortlessly in and out of their lives. He was always there shouldering their burden, but it was something he did for himself, not for the family. Mark turned and looked for his father in the dark. He had hunkered down in the iris like a baseball catcher, his arms resting on his thighs. His cigarette burned in front of him as if he were offering it to some
ravenous garden animal that might come take it out of his fingers.

That winter Mark saw an abrupt change in the family. It was as if they had given up hope that they would see his Barry again. Barry again extended his tour, and again Les told them. His father began putting in ten and twelve hour days at school. His mother volunteered at St Vincent de Paul on nights and weekends. Pam moved into an apartment with two other girls. Mark read these events as signs that they had lost their vigilance. Walking to school he would scrutinize himself, just to make sure his mind didn't wander from Barry. His watchfulness alone kept Barry safe.

It was an early Sunday afternoon in April and already the light had begun to soften. Mark and Les were in the back yard locked in their second game of croquet. Mark's father sat in his lounge chair on the patio reading the paper while his mother pruned the rosebushes back in the yard. Ordinarily each of them would stop and say something--his father reading something from the paper, his mother commenting on how much the roses had grown--but today they seemed absorbed with what they were doing.

The first game Mark had won easily and still celebrated by making a bugle of his fist and blaring three raucous notes. Les couldn't make a wicket, and Mark kept knocking his ball into the azaleas. He could sense Les's
growing irritation and kept up his antics which threw Les even more off his game. Finally Mark's father asked them to wrap up their game. Mark, still ecstatic, tossed his mallet aside, picked up Les's ball and tucked it against his ribs. Les sensing his intention, crouched and spread his arms like a line-backer. Mark double-faked and sprinted to the end of the lawn. He spun around, his face flushed, to face Les, who was picking himself up off the ground and examining a dark grass stain in the knee of his white slacks. Mark's reaction was immediate: "Les, you're a jerk, you know that."

His parents simultaneously voiced their disapproval. Les brushed at the stain.

"Really Mark, that was not very nice," his mother said.

Mark tossed the wooden ball onto the lawn, and its bright colors wobbled across the grass. He looked at Les who seemed not to be affected by his remark.

"Even in kidding, Mark," his father said.

Mark went around pulling up the stakes and wickets. He booted his ball across the lawn and it smacked against the end stake.

"I think an apology is in order," his mother said.

Mark ran his hands over the wickets. Suddenly he looked at Les and said, "Les, I didn't mean saying what I did."
Les nodded faintly. "I know that, Mark. No hard feelings."

Mark slotted their mallets and wheeled the cart to the patio. Les kept looking at the knee of his slacks. Finally he excused himself, saying he wanted to get the stain out before it set in. Mrs Caughey offered to get some spot remover, but he declined—he could just as well sponge it out.

"I think he was really hurt by that, Mark," his mother said. "You should go say something to him."

"It's already forgotten," his father said, folding his paper and picking up another section. "Leave it be."

Mark put the croquet set in the storage shed then went into the house. He felt strangely elated. Les was in the bathroom with the door closed. Mark imagined him standing at the sink in his boxer shorts—his legs sprouting wild hair, his kneecaps popped out—wearing sandals with white socks: working the stain like a washerwoman.

Mark went into the dining room and took the tape recorder from the hutch. In a nearby drawer he found the last tape Barry had sent. Going to his room he closed the door then sat on his bed and threaded the tape. He listened to Barry's voice among all the other sounds. A helicopter came in from a long ways off and drowned out Barry's voice; and through it all Barry kept talking: He kept talking while the helicopter landed and its rotors stopped turning
and finally quit altogether; Barry's voice still strong, oblivious to what was going on around him. Finally he gave a deep sigh and said, "But Charlie has to fight the monsoon too." Then he signed off.

Hearing his brother Mark knew he'd be coming home. Barry was impervious: he could never get killed. He had a way about him of always surprising everybody just when things seemed their blackest.

Mark felt lightheaded thinking about it. Barry wouldn't come home like everybody else. He was Airborne: He could do whatever he wanted. He'd parachute home. Barry would make friends with the pilot that flew him home—he was always making friends with the person who ran things—and the pilot would make a pass over the Northeast Heights and Barry would bail out. He'd pinpoint the house, skillfully working the shrouds; his silk would cover the neighborhood. Traffic would have to be rerouted.

Drop in, Barry, why don't you drop in sometime.
If you're in the neighborhood, just drop on in.
Barry, why don't you drop in on me.

Mark grew giddy thinking about it. He burst out laughing, and couldn't stop laughing. Barry would be coming home.
Mark had wanted to say to Les: Why are you playing croquet in white slacks while Barry is getting shot?

He rewound the tape, watching it spin around itself. When Barry came home Mark would tell him what had happened today—how he had faked Les out; how Les had soiled his spotless white slacks. And Mark calling Les a jerk—Barry would understand that most of all. And most of all Barry would respect him for coming to that conclusion on his own.

Barry came home after nearly two years in Vietnam. The plane taxied up and sat for twenty minutes while the family stood in the terminal reception room, watching the airplane windows for movement.

His homecoming was joyous and brief. He brought everyone presents from Japan—crystal for his parents, a silk kimono for Pam, another ceremonial sword for Mark's collection. Les's gift was a wrist watch; Barry shook Les's hand, staring at him with a lazy, self-confident grin.

Barry stayed at the house for a week before renting a basement room near the university. He still ate at home, but to Mark it was as if he just missed seeing his brother—a smokecure smell in the kitchen, the skillet in the sink, a curl of bacon fat floating in the greasy water. It almost seemed like Barry had sensed him coming and had cleared out.
That fall Mark became a freshman at the high school and Barry enrolled at the university. One afternoon as Mark cut through campus on his ten speed he saw his brother sitting outside the student union having coffee with some other students. He stopped to say hi; Barry chewed him out for speeding through campus. Mark listened with one ear and looked at his companions: distracted men in their early twenties wearing camouflage jackets with ripped-out name patches.

Then Barry said that if Mark mowed his landlady's lawn and raked the yard, he'd take him up into the Gila Wilderness. They'd camp out, teach each other to fish, something neither of them had done. If his teachers needed a note, he'd write it.

The next afternoon Mark went over to Barry's room. He knocked at the back door and Barry answered with a towel clutched around him and led Mark downstairs to his room. Tossing the towel on the bed he went into the shower, leaving the bathroom door open. Clouds of steam poured into the room. Mark looked up through the small ground-level window where sunlight filtered in.

Barry was twenty minutes in the shower. He finally came out drying himself.

"Hey listen," he said. "About camping. I've had time to think about it. It's a definite No Go." He toweled his hair and neck, then wadded it and threw it against the
pillows. "I've had enough camping to last me a lifetime. I knew you'd understand."

Mark pushed the damp towel away from him and sat back on the bed.

"But I want to at least buy you lunch for doing the yard," Barry said. He went over to his pants heaped on the floor and pulled out his wallet. "Will two bucks cover it?"

"Les used to take me camping all the time," Mark lied.

"Great. Call him." Barry looked around the room as if he didn't recognize it. "Les," he said.

"Are you still friends?" Mark asked.

"You bet." Barry laughed his booming laugh. "Have you seen my smokes? There," he said pointing to the dusty sill. "Les. He thought it was going to be just like high school when I got back."

He dragged on the cigarette, held it in, spoke in a small voice as the puffs of smoke exploded in front of him.

"Well, things have changed since those days."

Another drag and the cigarette was almost smoked up. Mark said, "He wanted all three of us to get together when you got back." Mark didn't know if he wanted that to happen, but felt a little wistful thinking about it. He remembered Les's immaculate apartment and the map of Vietnam where he had kept track of Barry.

"Forget Les, okay?" Barry said. "He's out of the picture. I was too nice to him before I left for the Big
Nam." He went into the bathroom and stubbed out his cigarette in the sink. "I was too goddamn nice. Well things have changed."

Mark was quiet for a moment then said, "Did he know you were with his girlfriend, that time at Frontier Restaurant."

"What?"

"Karen, Les's girlfriend. That time you waved to me through the window."

"His girlfriend? Do you know what you're saying? They never slept together."

Barry looked at Mark, a look of utter disbelief burned into his face.

"He didn't do anything with her," he said. "His girlfriend," he said shaking his head. "What in hell do you know about the world, altar boy?"

Barry kept staring at Mark.

A door upstairs creaked open. A woman called down: "Mr Caughey? Are you there?"

Clearing his throat Barry said, "Mrs Dozier, yes." He looked toward the stairs as if daring her to come down. "Landlady," he said to Mark.

"Mr Caughey, I've reached the end with you. The agreement was that you would do the yardwork in exchange for a reduction in rent. I won't be put off any longer, Mr Caughey. If the yardwork is not done by tomorrow, I'll have
a boy do it for twenty dollars and add it to your rent. Am I clear, Mr Caughey?"

"Mrs Dozier, I hear you." He stood there glaring at the stairs until she closed the door. He went over to the bureau and put on underwear. He turned and looked up through the grimy window.

He lit another cigarette. Mark wanted his brother to say something that would make everything right. Instead, Barry filled the dim room with his smoke, blowing it through his nose and lips. Mark remembered that day when Les had told him about his uncle with Parkinson's disease, and how Les had done everything he could to help him. Mark had realized that he wanted to do the same for Barry. He had imagined his brother coming home from the war with a leg gone. Standing there on crutches Barry would have a look on his face that said: Hey buddy. And Mark would give up everything to help him; he'd quit school, work any job to take care of Barry.

Now as his brother filled the room with smoke Mark saw that vision again: The two of them crouched around a campfire or on stools in a quiet, dimly lit coffeeshop--Barry leaning on his crutches telling about the war, Mark listening with his heart.