I want you | [Short stories]

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I Want You

by

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for the degree of

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Approved by:

Chairperson

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"Come on, shyboy," she said, taking his hand and pulling him through the doorway. "Tell me about getting stung. Tell me about the shots."

Danny stood trembling before the girl, blushing, struck dumb, lost. His hand in her hand, her dark eyes reading his (a girl's eyes, a girl's hand)—he was shaking like a sissy, like a little kid. She released him and he staggered backwards recalling that a response, something, was expected of him. His lips parted, closed, parted. Nothing. Oh God, he was stammering and she was staring and he turned away unable to counter her steady gaze. He grasped at every pink detail of the forbidden room: pink tiles, sinks, stall dividers, his own gaping mouth in the row of mirrors. When he could again look at her, she smiled easily, as though there was nothing off about dragging a stranger into a girls' bathroom.

"Tell me," she said. She pressed closer and he cowered against the wall. She was the rattiest girl he'd ever seen. Sickbed pale, stringy black hair, black trench coat sagging over dark shirts and pants. He'd already forgotten her name. He was pretty sure she didn't go to his school.

"What?" He coughed and cleared his throat. "I balloned up. I couldn't breathe. After that, I don't remember."

"Shit," she said. "That'd be worth seeing." She studied him as though she could see it—his throat constricting, dark rashes flaring across his face. The room swelled with labored breathing.
He asked her, is this class dumb or what?

She sighed heavily and he stared down at the floor tiles between them.

_Idiot_. Of course the class was dumb—two mindless hours talking about their allergens. Hers was alcohol, he remembered that much. She'd been watching him, making faces all through the first deathly hour. She must have followed him at the break because she'd been waiting for him outside the bathroom door. He bent low to search out any legs in the stalls. Nothing.

She studied him, arms folded, smiling. He tried to mirror her grin.

"What about you?" he asked her.

"Fuck about me." She closed on him. "Tell me about the shots. You got one?"

"Un-unh," he said, and touched the strap of his daypack. He always had his shot with him now. There could be bees, wasps, hornets anywhere. They'd nearly killed him three months before. Pulling weeds at the Ericsons', pulling back ivy, he'd felt sudden fiery stings on his thigh and neck and he pulled away with a frenzied coil of hornets swarming over him. A frantic backwards scramble, arms thrashing wild—gasping breaths already coming short as he realized he'd left his adrenaline shot at home. He'd woken up in the hospital. Two months later came a letter: mandatory allergy seminar for teens or you will lose your insurance coverage. Of course the class was on the first day of cross-country practice. Of course his mom made him go anyway.

"Bullshit," the rat girl said. "You wouldn't go to this bullshit without your shot." She traced a probing finger across his chest and slid the daypack off his shoulder. The pack dropped to the floor and she picked through it to come up with the carrying case. She tripped the latch and the hypodermic rolled into her hand. "Holy shit," she said. "Adrenaline, huh? I've heard
about this shit." She turned the needle over and around. "When you get stung, how does it work?"

"Ah," he stammered. Natalie—that was her name. The teacher (call me Ted) kept having to call her out for making snotty comments. She'd only mocked him more—called him peanut, his allergic in to the group.

Wide-eyed, she cooed, "I'm just interested is all."

He thought, you're not half as pretty as you think you are. He said, "It's easy. Just uncap the end and stick it in your thigh. Then push the plunger."

"Fuck." She grinned at him. "Have you done it?"

"No," he said, and she came at him. She palmed his chest, pushed him flat against the wall. Her fingers brushed his cheek and she came to him and kissed him. Her lips soft against his still mouth, he closed his eyes and he was kissing her back. He tasted her tongue and pressed his own out to her but she was gone. His eyes rolled open and she was bent low before him. He felt his leg gripped firm and then the quick jab of the needle. He tried to pull away but she pinned him to the wall. Then she slid back grinning, her thumb on the half-way depressed plunger.

She breathed a deep holy shit and stabbed her own leg, finishing off the dose. The adrenaline rushed his heart and his head throbbed and again she kissed him. Their shuddering bodies joined and they were kissing and their lips were shivering off and against each other. There was a distant, hollow pop—the syringe hitting the floor—and then the crack as her boot shattered the plastic. He pulled away but she took his hands and raised them to her breasts. He froze, rigid, stunned, and then her hands pressed over his so he was squeezing her, her breasts in his hands, and he felt her fingers slide down his belly to his crotch. He staggered into her and she was gone, her laughter echoing off the tiled walls and out the door.
He stood with his hands cupped before him. He considered them for a blank moment and let them fall to his sides. A couple minutes he just stood there. His hand pressed to his trembling heart; this sweaty sickness that made him reach behind for the wall. He wet some paper towels and washed his face and chest. He picked up the plastic shards and dropped them into the trash. When he remembered he was in a girls' bathroom, he cursed and ran out into the hallway.

Danny brooded on the girl that night as he lay on the couch trying to read. He bore down on the page but within a few sentences he was in the bathroom watching her make a fool of him. He should have walked out when she asked about the shot. He should have got her naked. Her ratty eyes and lips closing in and he cringed. God, she'd played him, laughed at him, left him. And then having to watch her for the rest of class, sweating through his shirt, puking almost, and she looking everywhere but at him. Only once had she glanced over, her eyes showing nothing, and then she'd turned back to watch Ted ramble on and on.

"I can't sign this," Ted had told him after class, withholding the insurance form. "You seemed distracted after the break." He smiled to soften the blow. "You too, Natalie. Let's try easing up on the sarcasm. Two weeks, we'll try again."

"OK, Peanut," she'd said, and walked out the door.

His mom sat in her easy chair watching TV, lost in the folds of her shapeless mu-mu. Her stubborn smile plumped out the sacks of her cheeks but the eyes were too intent to just be watching her program. Still pissed about driving across town for nothing. He shifted in place, trying to read. His thigh throbbed where Natalie had stabbed him, the steady pain keeping her close.
She was laughing at him, pushing him against the wall. *Come on,* she was saying, drawing his hands to her chest.

He watched his fingers curl and relax, kneading the air. He slid lower into the couch. *Breasts,* he thought. *Breasts.* Hiding under her shirt. They'd felt bigger than they looked. *Harder.* He was getting hard. *Oh, God.* He grabbed his book and made to go upstairs.

"Wait up, Danny," his mom said.

"Yeah?" He stared down at his book.

"Look at me."

He looked at her. She leaned forward in her chair and he knew the look in her eyes and shuddered.

"Why are you shutting me out, Danny?"

"What?" He shook his head. "Mom, I'm not. I've got things on my mind."


He looked past her out the window—darkness, street lights, cars passing in the street.

"I know this isn't easy, Danny, but I really feel that sharing your feelings would help burn off this anger energy you're holding."

He contemplated his mother. *I hate you,* he decided. *You're the dumbest old biddy in the world.* His stomach churned with disgust and he realized his hands were clenching. He forced a deep breath, relaxed his fingers.

She saw nothing, understood nothing. "I just worry that you don't get enough peer interaction since Andrew moved away."

"I know, Ma," he sighed. "That's why I wanted to go to cross-country. It's OK. I'll get over it."

"You know if you need someone to talk to, we'll find a way to afford it."
"I know, Ma. Thanks."

Halfway up the stairs, he decided he was adopted. He pushed into his room and locked the door. Safe at last. Jesus, she was pathetic. Her stupid self-help books, pamphlets, videos—anything she could check out from the library: *Am I normal? Ready for Sex?* Unreal. He hoped he was adopted. Lights out, he undressed and crawled into bed.

In his room, in the dark, the girl was much changed. Darker, softer, beautiful. *Come on,* she was saying, all big kind eyes and full red lips. *Come here,* she whispered, her gaze lowering, shy, unbuttoning. Nine hours in his room, alone, safe at last.

The next day was cross-country practice and he was ready. Three months he'd been hiding out since Andrew moved away. A wasted summer, wallowing alone, pining to find someone half as cool. Impossible! Best friends since first grade, best friends forever! Except now Andrew was gone—time to grow up, move on.

But practice was nothing like how Andrew described his team in California. For one thing, here they separated the girls from the boys. And then, instead of tooling through the countryside, they just ran laps around the practice field shoving one another and ignoring the cries of *queers!* and worse from the football team. The crush of bodies, of footfalls all around, Coach Stump yelling as they passed, the jostle and push in the showers, fag jokes, more fag jokes. After practice he was the first one out of the locker room.

The next day, every day, was the same. At first he'd try to pull ahead but the pack wouldn't let him go. It was tough running in there, all panting and gasping, tripping over each others' feet, so he'd slow down and let them pull
ahead. He'd start to relax, his thoughts beginning to flow, and then someone would be passing or yelling at him. He plodded on, consumed by visions of quitting. He'd think of Andrew running in Cali. and keep going 'til Coach blew his whistle.

And he couldn't help thinking about that Natalie girl. She wouldn't take any of this crap. *Fuck off,* she'd say. *Run your own goddamn laps.* Natalie, he'd think. It's too bad you aren't cuter. He couldn't imagine people seeing them together. People were assholes that way. People were assholes. But he couldn't help it, he thought of her and wondered. He began counting down 'til the next allergy class.

The day of allergy class he wore his black t-shirt and torn-up jeans. It was OK because his mom made him ride his bike. There was the same room, same Ted, same bullshit on the chalkboard. Class started and he wasn't worried--it was just like her to be late. Ten minutes in, he was getting nervous. Twenty, she wasn't coming. He sat there and made himself listen to the same crap as before. He got his note signed.

He was on the couch thinking about her, about the girls on cross-country, about anyone else he might have overlooked. It'd been a week since her no-show. He didn't really want her. She'd seemed possible was all.

His body throbbed, dog-tired from practice, but he was considering putting in a few more miles. Tomorrow he'd be useless but he wanted to think and it was too early to go to bed.

The phone rang and his mom answered. He sat up to go change clothes. "Why yes, he is." She turned to watch him. "It's a girl," she whispered. He took the receiver and turned away.

"Did you miss me?"
That voice, that sneer. "Natalie," he said.

"Did you miss me?"

"Sure. What happened?"

A high, jeering laugh. "You see, I couldn't face Ted after he tried to molest me and all." More laughter. "God, it kicks ass being a girl sometimes. Was that your mom?"

"Yeah."

"OK, look. There's this dance at my school. Saturday night."

"Yeah?"

"I wanted to know if you'd go with me. To the dance."


"It's a costume thing."

"Costume?"

"Wear whatever you want. So, where do you live, Tiger?"

She laughed when he asked how she got his number. She said she'd be there around 3:00. She wanted to go to the city first--have dinner, buy Russian cigarettes and shit.

He skipped practice Friday to hit the thrift stores and put a costume together. His mom preached her preggers spiel and made him sit through three safe sex videos. He found a couple new pamphlets on his pillow.

Saturday, at last. When Natalie finally knocked at the front door, he was on the couch dressed in his cowboy duds, sitting beside his mom, watching another video. This blond, flat-chested girl, impossibly pregnant, was weeping frantically--her heaving, tear-streaked face flooding the screen.
"Remember," said the narrator, "You may think it's safe to have unprotected sex and during intimate moments you will want to think it's safe. Just remember Tammy. She thought it was safe, too." There was the knock at the door and he bolted upright. He grabbed the remote, hit stop and started for the hall.

"You wait," his mom said. "I'll get her."

He sat down and sprawled his boots out before him. Her footsteps pounded the hall and the front door squealed open. He grabbed his cowboy hat and tipped it back on his head. There was some garbled talk he couldn't make out and then his mom came into the room and she wasn't smiling. Natalie, following her, was definitely smiling. She'd squeezed somehow into a yellow and black striped tube top and now her breasts were seriously there. Yellow and black striped shorts? undies? and a frilly yellow tu-tu. Yellow gauze wings. Bobbing antennae on her head.

He stood up, said hi.

"Hey, cowboy," she said.

"Now, where did you two meet?" his mom was saying. She knew where they'd met.

"Oh," Natalie said, "at that allergy thing. Danny was very nice."

His mom's smile had never looked so cold. "That's a nice costume," she said.

Danny thought they'd never get out of the house. He wanted to grab Natalie and run for the door. He wanted to run upstairs alone. His voice cracked every time he spoke. He wanted to curl up on the floor.

"Well," said his mom at last. "You two go on and have a good time."

He was sweating so much he could smell himself. He heard, "Midnight, Danny. No later," as the door shut behind them. He turned and followed those
swinging, striped, surprising hips down to the blue Skylark parked at the curb.

"Shit," she said, sliding into the driver's seat. "I thought your mom was going to deck me."

"Yeah," he admitted. "I kind of thought so too."

She pulled the car into traffic and he tried to think of something to say as he watched her drive. She looked over and he shrugged and turned away. He kept sneaking glances at her—at her plain face and her hair blowing loose in the wind. The muscles of her thighs as she worked the pedals, the cut of her tight shorts. Her bare arms and shoulders and the rises of her breasts showing more even than in the house. I'll never ever, he told himself, believe a first impression again.

After a while he realized she wasn't heading for the interstate. Instead of south toward Portland they were moving west, already approaching the last discount stores on the edge of town.

"Where we going?" he asked.

"A surprise. Here." She reached under the seat and handed over a pint bottle. Canadian Club, he read. Whiskey. Jesus, he thought, you're allergic. He looked over and she was waiting for him, eyebrows raised, grinning. He said nothing. The seal popped and he took a swig and coughed. He handed her the bottle and she took a big hit, then another.

They were outside of town now, almost to where the river came into view and the road came to parallel it out to the ocean. She braked and took a gravel road to the left and down onto the flats past the slough. This smile coming over her as she turned right onto a smaller dirt track and they passed through stands of glistening cottonwoods, leaves and gravel crackling and popping under the tires. Then the track gave out and they were pushing
through tall grass and the trees and clouds floated by. There was no way of seeing out before them—there could be logs, rocks, anything anywhere and they wouldn't know until they'd hit.

"Roll up your window," she told him. He watched her crank up hers so he did the same. They slowed as they closed in on the tree line at the fields end. They were moving at just a crawl, a couple miles an hour, and he turned and asked her what the hell.

He didn't see the boxes until they were right on top of them but it was too late. They looked like filing cabinets, white and squat, maybe three feet high stacked one on top of the other—the top one set back now at an angle. She put the car in reverse, backed up, then forward again. The top box tapped farther back. Small dark shapes were shooting out of the boxes and circling the car. Bees were gathering on the windshield, on the glass next to Danny's face, and she was laughing at him.

"What are you doing?" he yelled.

She squealed and threw it into reverse and then slammed forward. Again. Again. Bees were pouring out of the boxes now, bouncing off the windows, skittering across the glass and off one another. Their buzzing snarled over the rumbling V8 as she shifted into first. They lurched forward and the top box slid off and onto the ground. The air exploded with bees. Their bodies massed the air and tangled up in cross-streams as they descended on the car. He clutched at his door handle and had to stop himself from getting out and running for it. She rocked back and forth as she hit first gear, peering low, squinting to see through the teeming windshield. Then the terrible crack of wood splintering. They rolled back and she turned to him, her face fevered, radiant. She tilted her head to the side and with the same flick of the wrist,
killed the engine. The angry roar of the swarm crashed down on them, pressing him lower in his seat. He reached over and locked his door.

"OK," he said. "Let's go."

She slid across the bench seat and nuzzled up to him. He felt her teeth nibble on his ear and he didn't move and then she handed him the pint bottle. He drank, tasting nothing. Inside the car it was dark, false dusk, the windows clouded so that only pinholes of daylight could filter through. She took the bottle and gulped mouthfuls.

"Please," he whispered. "Let's just go."

She smiled and leaned back against her door, this writhing mass a glass's width behind her. "They won't hurt you," she said. She glanced down over her costume. "I'm their queen." A scarlet blotch was flaring across the left side of her jaw. It darkened even as she raised the bottle to her lips.

"Natalie. Please."

She slipped the bottle between her legs and smoothed her hands up the length of her belly, her sides, and then she hooked her fingers over the fringe of her top. Slowly, slowly she pulled down, watching him, grinning as the rises of her breasts were exposed and then came the pink starts of the nipples and her breasts came free. His throat swelled with gathering spit, the swarm's roar pounding through his head. She slid over close and pulled him to the center of the bench seat. She hooked a leg around and straddled him, kissed him roughly, her tongue forcing into his mouth. He felt his hands taken and lifted to her breasts. He held them there, the soft weights in his hands, these perfect shapes, and he remembered the last time and started kneading, feeling the hard points of the nipples against his palms. She bore down on him with her hips and then she pulled back and he felt her working
at the fly of his jeans. She found him and sparks flared behind his eyes and he gasped.

"Whoa," she said, loosening her hold. "Slow down, now." She took his face and leveled it toward the side window. "Look at those fuckers," she said. "What do you think they'll do to you if they get in?"

The windows were an orange and yellow and black smear. He tried to focus but her breasts were in his hands--rising and falling against him with each heaving breath. He turned again to her flushed, stained face and she kissed him, the buzzing outside static to his throbbing head. Slowly she started to stroke him. A sharp metallic click sounded. He looked over--her finger curled around the raised door lock knob, lazily circling the chrome end. She pressed it down, then up again.

"Don't," he said.

"What?" She looked puzzled and then tightened her grip on his dick. He moaned. The lock clicked again.

Then they were in the back seat, both of them naked except for her tube top around her belly and her wings low against her back. She'd just handed him the rubber and he fumbled with it trying to figure which end to put on and not wanting to take his eyes away from her body as she crouched over him. Then she twisted away and sprawled across the top of the front seat. "Oh shit shit shit!" she was yelling. "The fucking vents!" He sat up and she was slapping at the dashboard, closing the air vents and checking the floorboards for holes. His heart pumped wild spasms, certain death, and he readied himself to fight off the coming swarm but there was nothing. She sighed heavily and slumped over the seat. "Jesus," she said. "That was sheer fucking luck. The vents were open the whole time."
He was trembling still but there was her ass and he could see everything. He had the rubber on now. "Don't move," he said, drawing his hands to her hips.

"Danny," she giggled, casting back a shining eye. "I had no idea."

Afterwards, he watched the bees massed above him. The pulse of their bodies propelled them in tight circles across the window, their stingers bared, pumping the glass, trying to get the thing that had destroyed their kingdom. He was suddenly aware of their enraged droning. He sat up, stretching his arms and legs. She was digging through a bag she'd stashed under the seat.

"What are you doing?" he asked. The rash on her face had flushed purple and a second one marked her shoulder. Her breasts swayed as she dug through the bag. She'd taken off her tube top. Her wings were crushed and bent on the floorboard next to his flattened hat.

"Changing," she said. "I'm not going out like that."

That night, lying in bed, he stared into the darkness unable to sleep. Everything had happened way too fast or far too slowly, a blur. Driving around and around, drinking, and now nothing. He wasn't a virgin anymore. He'd worried about it for so long but nothing had changed. Maybe one less name he could be called. And Natalie was still a complete mystery.

They'd gone to Portland and ate at some noisy food court. She didn't say much. He didn't know what to say either. She'd bought her cigarettes and smoked them as they walked around Pioneer Square. They'd driven out to the ocean, taking the long way home. It was all so weird--the way she kept playing the same Ramones tapes so loud it was useless talking.

She tried to shoulder-tap beer in Astoria and got a couple no's before an old man said he was going to call the cops. They drove out to a pier and before
he knew it they were having sex again and then they were headed home. He could only sit there switching glances between her and the passing darkness. It was strange, having just, um, made love. He thought there'd be more to it—that he'd know her, that she'd want to know about him. He kept getting madder and madder but he couldn't think what to say either. They skipped the dance completely and he was home by eleven. It was OK, he told his mom. Nothing great.

There was just the one thing, after they'd had sex the second time. She'd just climbed off him and had fallen away laughing. She was shaking the last drops of whiskey into her mouth and he watched the glint of the bottle against the distant whitecaps. She rolled down her window and tossed the bottle into the darkness. The sounds of the crashing waves and of his subsiding breaths and hers all came together into a slow, yearning rhythm. He was shivering but he didn't want to reach for his clothes or make any sound at all. After a while, she said, "I heard about your boyfriend leaving. I'm sorry."

Now, at home, he could see he'd lost it. "What?" he'd yelled, and she laughed and said she knew someone who had a theory about him. About him and Andrew. She wouldn't say who.

"I'm not gay," he'd said.

"OK, you're not gay." She leaned close and rested a hand on his thigh. "You know," she whispered. "You can tell me. I won't tell anyone," she nudged his ear with her lips, "about our secret."

He reached for her hip. Her hand pressed onto his and he nuzzled his face into her neck, his lips to the soft skin.

"Tell me," she said, "and I'll tell you."

"I'm not gay."

She snorted, pushed him away.
"What?" he said. "I'm sorry." He watched her gather up her clothes. "You'll tell me what?" He had to look away. "You're, um..."

"Bisexual? Completely."

"OK," he said at last. "That's OK."

"Gee, thanks." He couldn't see her face but the voice was enough. "It's hot for girls but don't worry, the boy's not a fag." She drew a cigarette from her pack. "Christ, you're even lamer than I thought."

"Jesus. I can't help it I'm not gay."


He started taking up his clothes. "How do you figure?"

She stared at him. "Because of this, Danny." She reached over and took his dick in her fingers. "This is what you care about. This and sticking me with it." She wiped her hand on his thigh. "It's the fucking grave of decency."

Now that he was home he could see how stupid he'd been. He'd said some things and so had she and they'd dressed and driven off in silence.

As they drove on though he found himself watching her. Her faint profile in the dark cabin remote and tight-lipped and scrolling luminous with street lights as they'd pass through small towns. Two, three times along the way he watched her features light up, slant-eyed and brooding, then returned to shadow, staring into the highway pouring before them.

Once, she caught him looking. "What?" she'd said.

"Nothing. Thanks for taking me to such a super great dance."

She rolled her eyes but she was smiling. She didn't say much as she drove on but he wasn't much of a talker either. There were other ways of speaking. They'd made love, twice. Everything else was crap.
Now, at home, he stretched out his body and wrapped his arms around his pillow and around himself. It was stupid having sex and then sleeping alone.

Every night was the same, thinking of her, wondering about her. Wondering when she'd be home when he called, when she'd call him back. During the day, he'd see her face when he was supposed to be studying, when he was supposed to be doing anything. There was nobody to talk to. His mom was always home.

He was lying on the couch reading, not reading. His eyes closed and her neck grazed his lips, her hip swelling against his own and he followed the curve to her belly. He was trying to read. The page clouded even as he mouthed the words and she engulfed him. He reread the page. She came to him, lay beside him. His mom shifted in her chair. He turned a page, then stood up to go to the bathroom. No one had more boners than him.

He was in the locker room after practice and heard laughter coming from the showers. A couple seniors were pissing on a freshman. The kid heard the laughter and turned around into the streams of piss and fell back hard onto the tiled floor. Danny watched his nose gather up against the tears as everyone circled around laughing. The kid looked around for help and settled on Danny. Danny turned away. He tied his shoes and walked out and he was done with them all.

He lay there wondering what Natalie would have done.

He'd been dreaming about her. They were in allergy class and she was fumbling for an answer and he whispered the answer to her and she passed. She smiled up at him and took his face in her hands right there in class and brought her lips to his and he didn't care who saw and it was the strain of his
jaw working that woke him. He lay there not moving, trying to summon her back. His head careening and his breath coming hard and the mattress was falling away from under him. He had this hollow lurch in his stomach and he knew he'd feel better if he sat up but he didn't want to. He could feel the blood coursing through his heart and his limbs and the stiff weight of an erection. For once, he ignored it.

"Mom," he said. "I'd like to borrow the car."

"Really?" She eased back into her chair.

"Yes," he said. "Please." When he said Natalie, she frowned and he saw the look she took on whenever she was going to explain something. A movie, a dance--it didn't matter. She didn't trust that girl.

He forced a deep, even breath. "You said you were worried I don't have any friends."

"You don't need friends like that."

"That's what you said about Andrew until he moved away."

"Trust me, Danny. That girl's completely dysfunctional. She's a disaster waiting to happen."

"You don't even know her. You only met her once."

"And she just about flooded the house with her violent, negative energy. I had to burn two bundles of sage after she left."

He turned and fled upstairs. She called after him and he poured into his room and threw himself on the bed.

She stood in his doorway explaining. He stared at the wall as she went on and on and after a while he rolled over to watch her.
"Why should I allow this, Danny? I don't think I like the fact that you only come to me when you want something. You haven't just talked with me for months."

He waited for her to finish. If Natalie had to deal with this, what would she do? Work it, she'd say. Tell her what she wants to hear. He stood up, crossed over to her and looked right through her. "Because other than you," he said, "Natalie's my only peer bridgehead against loneliness." I'm talking to you, he thought. I'm smiling and showing you that I think you are a worthwhile person to talk to. "It's hard talking about my feelings, Mom, to face my fear of intimacy." I am alert to your intrinsic worth. "I'm trying to be true to my feelings, to accept responsibility for my feelings for Natalie but I never get to see her." He sighed. I trust you. I accept you. "You may be right, mom, but these are feelings I have to explore for myself." A few stutters for sincerity. "I want to be responsibly intimate with her."

"Oh, Danny," she embraced him. "Thank you for letting me in. Thank you so much."

When he finally got her on the phone, she said she didn't know. She had things to do. He told her he had a surprise. What surprise? You'll see, he'd said. He had a spare adrenaline shot and a six-pack he'd scored from a kid down the street.

They met at the park. Natalie didn't want him coming round her house. My dad, she'd said. He'd give you the talk. My mom would have a million questions. We'd end up watching videos with them. OK, he thought. That's not what I have in mind either.

He pulled up to the curb and she stood and walked over to the car. "Hey," she said, getting in.
"Hey." He leaned over for a kiss but she was already looking out the side window. He pulled out onto West Side Highway. "There's beers under the seat," he said. She reached below and came up with a bottle of Rainer. She twisted it open and put it to her lips. He waited for her to swallow. "So," he looked over, giving her his best direct eyes, "How are you, Natalie?"

She looked over at him, grinning. "Very well," she said. "Daniel." She reached over and hit play on the tape deck.

It took everything he had not to kill the music, not to throw the tape out the window. Jesus, he told himself, just relax. We're both a little nervous here. He watched her drinking beer, staring ahead. She lowered the bottle from her lips and passed it over. He sipped, passed it back. He smiled and turned back to the road.

They passed the last intersection and followed the road out of town. You know where we're going, he thought. You know. The river came into view, its flat sheen murky through the leaf-bared trees. He turned at the gravel road and followed it to the dirt track, the bumps and ruts making his trembling look almost natural. As they entered the tall grass he saw something parked at the far end of the field. Her expression was unchanged. The thing formed to a pickup truck, black, as they came on. He slowed but kept coming. When they came within thirty feet of the truck, a pale figure stepped around the cab. Danny saw the puffy clothing, the hat with netting draped over the shoulders, and he yanked the wheel to the left and circled around and out the way they'd come. She was smirking when he glanced over and then she laughed outright. He cackled, wanting in on the joke, but it sounded wrong and he let it settle. He laughed again. She was quiet now and he looked and she was smiling to herself. He smiled too. He remembered the beekeeper and hit the gas. The bare trees, the clouds, floated by.
The adrenaline was in the backseat. There were more beers. He'd find a pull-out where they could be alone. He looked over to her as they gained the highway, her head resting against the window, bottle pressed to her temple. She was beautiful, in her way. As the first rash stained her cheek, she was still beautiful, she was more beautiful. He watched the rashes blossom on her cheek and on her neck and he envisioned more stains flaring under clothes where he couldn't see but where, in time, he would own her.

"Have another beer," he said. He believed he could wait this out.
In the Garden

When David received the letter it was plain to him that God had at last granted him a worthy trial. *Help me,* he'd read, straining to understand the gnarled, rough-scrawled handwriting. *They've taken my Bible.* *I'm barred from worship services.* *They are heathens in this place, hardened against the words of the Lord.* David had trouble deciphering much of the letter, which rambled on for nearly twelve pages, but the writer apologized for this in one lucid half-page, explaining that he was being kept on certain drugs against his will, that he was being held against his will in darkness away from where the light of the Father could reach him. The signature at the close of the last page was totally illegible. The return address was Chesley Hospital, the V.A. facility in the mint fields outside of town.

Lord, he prayed, stooping to his knees, the letter tight in his hand. I'm sorry. I've failed You more often than I can ever know. He hesitated to go on. God, of course, already knew the particulars. Pride. Coldness. Lack of feeling. Only two years in and already at times this seemed just a profession. A certain income, a pension. I'm sorry. He saw himself as God might: well-meaning, weak, embarrassed at the more literal particulars of the faith. He was aware of the letter in his hand, of its author, in a certain sense, of God, reaching out to him. I'll try, he swore. I will reach out to him, to all of them. I will. He sensed that he was closer than all the times before, that this time he would get it.
He was kneeling in his office. He recognized the stale voice within praising his sincerity, his gaining compassion. Stop it, he said. You're on your knees in an office. He clenched the letter. *Help me.* He saw himself in a gloried light, reaching out, helping. Stop it. He knew well enough there would be no sudden, miraculous change. Not for him, not for anyone. The vet was probably a mental case. David knew better than to allow the queasiness he felt at the term but there it was. He, God's representative. Comfort the sick and the afflicted, the imprisoned. All of them, every day--the need will never end. When he could offer himself without reservation, he would be happy.

He stood and stretched and reached for the coffee pot. He poured out a last bitter cup and returned the empty carafe to its place atop the file cabinet. The cup warming his hands, he allowed himself a moments rest to savor the warmth and to stare out the fogged window across the church parking lot. The first flakes of the season were hazing the chill air, hovering suspended and then driven sideways by sudden, stiff gusts that would soon claim the gray Winter skies. He hoped nothing would accumulate before his drive home. He remembered a time he would have prayed for it.

A silver Buick pulled into the lot and he shied back from the window. Elder Vollman come for his mid-week check-in. Damnit, said David. Go away. I'm trying to like you people. Had he known that preaching here would mean kissing up to this bitter reactionary he would have never answered the call. He could have gone to Grand Junction, to Cheyenne. He could have gone to Bali or the Philippines. He often imagined sleeping under grass roofs, clearing back jungle. Tropical floods, poisonous serpents, malaria were at least nakedly malicious. He settled in behind his desk, spread his Bible before him.

Vollman was in a mood. Doors slammed as he worked toward the back office. Then his face souring the doorway.
"Jacob," David said, smiling, standing from his chair. "How are you?"

Vollman had never once answered this question. "Young man," he said. "How is our young pastor today?"

"Fine, Jacob. Just fine." He extended his hand. The old man pretended to study a framed print of the Lord's Prayer. David sat, breathing steadily, waiting.

Vollman's mouth puckered in prayer and David imagined which verses the old man focused on, which he readily glossed over. He closed his eyes as he mouthed the words, his loose wattle trembling. "The children need us," he announced.

David waited for the rest. He cleared his mind of the strong desire to be anywhere else. "What?" he said.

"The schools," Vollman said. "The Lord needs us in the schools."

David was not about to laugh. *This is God's child,* he told himself. *God's child.* "OK," he said. "Tell me more. For example, how to bypass the vexing separation of church and state."

"Did you know that children are shown films describing the conjugal relations between men and wives?"

"Sure," David said. "I remember a few disappointing moments from high school. I think I managed all right."

Vollman scowled. "The filth! The filth those children have to endure. You have kids, Son. Are you going to put them through *that?*

"Parents have the right to pull their children."

"We have to stop this! We have to get God back in the classroom. Imagine all the lost souls. Imagine God's anger growing." His breath caught up at the thought of it. "You're a preacher, aren't you?"

David nearly answered him.
"Well, aren't you?"
He stared at the old man. "Yes, Vollman," he said. "I'm a preacher."
"Then why am I having to push you to act like one?"
"I guess we have different ideas of what preaching means."
Vollman snorted. "Don't give me your sarcasm, boy. Where's your fire? Where's your love of the Lord?"
David realized he was glaring at the old man. "My love of the Lord," he said, "is most evident in what I'm not doing right now."
"Are you threatening me, boy?"
"No," David said, pacing himself. "I'm doing the exact opposite of threatening you. I'm exercising patience. I'm trying to be compassionate."
Vollman seemed ready to spit on the floor. "Save it for someone who needs it, boy. I'm sick of hearing about compassion when there's so much filth undermining the righteous." He shuddered, anger lighting his features.
"Besides, what do you do that's so great with compassion?"
David closed his eyes. "Vollman, what can I do for you?"
"Don't give me that. What do you do for anyone that's so special?"
David thought of all the weddings he'd performed, the funerals. All the struggling couples he'd counseled, the sick and dying in their hospital beds, Vollman's own failing wife. "Jacob," he said. "I put in more than sixty hours a week here. I do everything I can for our people."
The old man shook his head. "Don't tell me about punching the clock. I'm talking about them out there." "How are you reaching out to the lost?"
David knew he had answers to the question but found his mind empty. What had he done? There was the youth group—he always told the kids to invite their friends, his sermons were broadcast weekly on cable access. There was more, he knew—he looked around the room for clues. Photos of
mission groups, his seminary diploma, the V.A. letter on the desk before him. "Well, there's always little things like that," he said, nodding to the envelope.

Vollman took up the letter, his face wrinkling as he read. "Some lunatic. Don't waste your time."

"He's a veteran," David said, careful not to smile. Vollman had a thing for veterans. "He's been hurt defending his country. I don't know anything more than he needs God. Maybe I can help. Maybe not. Sometimes," he added, "I do help."

Vollman's lips curved up in the dry, fearsome grin that always reminded David of a snake. "You may yet manage to save yourself in this house."

David relaxed to the same, fierce glare. Now at least it was in the open. For months there'd been rumors--Vollman was telling the parishioners their preacher lacked vigor, that he was a lightweight. Pretty Boy Harkin, they were calling him. Attendance was down, offerings were way down, two weeks ago the secretary had to drop hours to part-time.

"All right, young man," said Vollman. He turned for the door and paused, sniffing at the air. He reached for the thermostat, dialed it lower and slammed the door behind him.

David found himself breathing slowly, hands unclenching. Jesus, he said. He truly had no understanding for that dried-up old crank. No sympathy or love or sense of communion. He knew this wasn't good enough.

He waited five minutes before turning the thermostat back up to 62. Outside the snow was coming thick and steady; the lot and the roads already lost in white. He called the V.A. hospital for visiting hours.

26
David waited until after dinner to show his wife, Janey, the letter. He asked instead after her day and the days of their daughters and listened to their litany of concerns, great and small. They chattered on about the falling snow and the odds of school cancellations and of Christmas shopping. He loved these moments--checking in with his girls, watching their fresh innocence, his own love swelling in response. Their selfish purity gave him hope. He wondered if it was the same with God.

After the girls had cleaned their plates and battled through washing the dishes, he drew the letter from his jacket and laid it before Janey.

"What is this?" she frowned, trying to translate the terrible scrawl. She looked up struggling to show interest.

"This," he told her, "is my wake-up call." He reached for her hand. "This is going to raise my work, our work, to the next level."

She didn't grip him back; she didn't move away--her expression the same. Her eyes drew to the ceiling, the girls running upstairs, to the t.v., gunshots.

"Dave," she said. "I've been thinking." Her gaze switching between him and the t.v. "It's time I was going back to school. The girls are older now. There's daycare after school. We're going to need another income to afford their college tuitions."

David felt each facial muscle forming a smile. "You have been thinking."

"It's just..." She gripped his hand now. "I'm no good at this--being a preacher's wife. In seminary you could have a conversation with people. But here... I don't even like them anymore."

David had to grin. "I know," he said. "It's OK. Neither do I half the time. But--" And both smiled.
"Yeah," she said, glancing upward.

David knew he'd feel guilty later. But just this collusion was more warmth than they'd known for a long time. It was weeks since they'd made love. Tonight maybe they could start over, find each other again.

"I don't think," Janey said, "I can be so active at First Baptist anymore." She rolled his hand in her own—hard enough not to know if he was returning her squeeze. His face though, his mouth and eyes, told everything.

"They take too much from this family," she said. "I need my own thing."

She was right. Of course she was right but his heart sank. You knew this coming in. Now that it isn't fun, isn't easy, I have to explain to these people why my wife isn't helping anymore. "I won't ask you to do anything you don't want to," he said.

"I know you won't." She pressed his hand in both of hers.

David felt like an ass. She watched him so kindly but he couldn't help wondering whether in gratitude or pity. Is this how it starts? The first physical distancing? He thought, I'm being eased down gently.

"Dave," she said. "I love you so much."

They leaned across, kissed. He wanted her. He wanted to get away.

"I'll see you upstairs," he said. He picked up the girls' favorite Bible book from the bookshelf, Stepping Stones. His girls had saved him so many times. He padded upstairs, savoring each step, coming to them, his girls. Janey, seeing them clustered around the book, would remember the power of his calling, of all God's works. She would see how much he gave, how he needed her help. He paused at the top step, then approached the girls' bedroom.

"Get out, Satan!" he heard. "Out! Get out!" Miranda's shrill voice falling to a steady chant. Under his older daughter's commands, he heard Ruth, his six
year old, hiss and moan and giggle. The floorboards creaked under her flailing little body and then he heard a sharp crack and Ruth shrieked in real terror.

He opened the door to find Miranda raining down blows on her sister with the stick end of a hobby horse. "Out Satan!" she cried, eyes glazing. "Satan, get thee out!"

David had a passing intimation his daughter was speaking to him. She'd stopped hitting her sister and stood staring at him. He recognized the lock of her jaw against him--mustered up courage. David standing before Goliath. She lowered the stick and turned it right side up.

"Daddy," she said, drawing the horse between her knees.

"What's going on here?" He was conscious of the weakness in his voice. It occurred to him that this rhetorical approach wasn't going to work much longer.

"We're playing, daddy," said Ruth, still shaking on the floor, whether from getting caught or the beating itself, he couldn't tell. He found himself reassured as he watched her tremble.

"There's a devil inside her," Miranda announced.

David studied his older daughter. She stared back more fierce than any child of eight years. "The offices of the church aren't play things for little girls," he told her. "You know better, Miranda Shane." He stared her down only she wouldn't look away. He stepped forward, willing his greater weight through his eyes and down upon her and only when he reached for her arm did she glance down. She turned to her sister and helped her stand between them.

"It's OK," Miranda said. "It's gone. It was just a little devil." Her hands laid upon her sister's shoulders. Ruth rubbed at her jaw.
He repeated himself to them about exorcism and the offices of the church. Ruth nodded, his little puppy, eager to please. Miranda though, resisted. He could see her hard blue eyes measuring his rebuke against other words she'd put to memory. He guessed Mrs. Geary's scare stories from Sunday school. The old battle ax--she hated him too. He felt exhausted suddenly, weak, and this more than anything convinced him they should be spanked.

"Here," he commanded. "Over my knee." Miranda stepped forward, chin and chest puffed out, martyrs and lions in her eyes. She refused to cry and he beat down upon her backside in a gaining fury until she broke finally, gasping and crying and he took her in his arms nearly in tears himself. Ruth stared at him in terror, eyes and nose streaming a pasty sheen.

"Clean up, darling," he told Miranda. She fled into the hallway and to the bathroom. Ruth leaned across his knee but he lifted her up into his arms. "Baby," he told her. "I know you're sorry. Daddy knows." She clung to him gasping tears and he held her. "I know, baby. I know.

"Be a good girl and tell your sister to get ready for bed." He pried her arms from around him and watched her run. Passing into the hall, he heard them weeping in the bathroom. He walked on to the master bedroom to find Janey slumped on the bed, head in hands.

"That was great, Dave." She didn't look up.

He knew better than to touch her now. What had she heard? Did she think he'd beaten the girls? Had he? "Well," he said. "Most Baptists don't even know we perform exorcisms."

"Maybe we should put them in public school," she said.

That would not happen. Imagine what Vollman would say. Later, when she calmed down, he'd tell her.
"Maybe they should stay out of Sunday school for a while." She looked up, daring him to argue. Then she stood, walked past him to the bathroom and closed the door.

"You're holding back," Vollman growled, as David readied himself for the Sunday service. "This is the Lord and you're holding back on him. Take Isaiah 33, verse 10: Now will I rise, saith the Lord; now will I be exalted; now will I lift up myself. We don't have time to waste. He's losing patience."

David slid into his suit coat and settled it right on his shoulders. He checked his tie in the mirror. He couldn't recall exactly when Vollman had stopped addressing him as Pastor. "I waited patiently for the Lord: and he inclined unto me, and heard my cry. Psalms 40, verse one," he recited, drawing a comb through his hair.

He peered through the cracked door at the gathering congregation. They shuffled wearily to their pews nodding to one another with closed countenances. He was losing them. What other church would have him if he failed here? From behind, Vollman still talking. David fingered the VA letter in his pocket. How was the veteran spending his Sunday? How many were gathered right now in churches around the world? How many weren't? David closed his eyes and beheld Jesus in the garden. Jesus stricken with doubt and fear, sweating blood. He'd been here before David, facing more than he need ever face, His death, and persisting on through his fear and so saving all humanity. Jesus was always there to show the way, light the depths. A force was charging in David, a power from above, power to show his enemies the waste of hate.

He turned to stand before Vollman. He put his hand on the old man's narrow shoulder. "Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an
enemy are deceitful. Proverbs 27:6. You're a true friend, Jacob." He strode out to the pulpit.

The Lord was with him that day. He felt the spirit coming over him as the scattered crowd sang their weak hymns and growing stronger as he led them through the opening prayer and when he again opened his eyes he saw God in every face in the room.

"We take," he said, shuffling his notes, "our text from Job, chapter 22, verses 7 to 17 and Acts 8:22. Wickedness and God's punishment of the wicked." He looked out across the church—the front row, his family, Janey, eyes elsewhere, the girls squirming. Beyond them the docile faces of the congregation stared back at him. He thought, Wake up. Today we all wake up. Still farther back, Vollman stiff in his pew, his wife's place empty.

"As we look around us," he began, "at this troubled, selfish world, the question we must ask is how we, how God, responds to all this wickedness?"

The question, the deceptively carefree timing, the build-up, the set-up. It had come to this. Vollman, he thought, I hope you're happy. He turned to scripture: "Wherefore do the wicked live, become old, yea, are mighty in power?" He hesitated, letting the tension build. This power—don't judge it from the outside, from what passes for respectability in this world. Don't be afraid. Try it on. Find them and hold them fast and take them with you.

"We know in our hearts what is wicked, and in our minds, but our hearts and minds can be deceived by this world. The world wants to deceive us, distract us, seduce us with its passing pleasures. I tell you, friends, the world is no friend to you. The world is beautiful, yes, and the world can cost you your soul.

"It's confusing, isn't it? All this beauty. All this danger. Where does the difference lie? How can we know?" He looked out across them, waiting.
"Isn't it fortunate then that we all have a greater mind to rely on? Who am I talking about? It's God. God's good word and counsel." He was conscious of his voice—positive and absolute, overflowing with a spirit that was beyond him and that was channeling through him. He proclaimed the text, drawing out references and hidden meanings and fusing his own words with the greater Word and Glory. He'd left his prepared sermon far behind.

"Who here has never sinned? Who here has never cheated, lusted, lied, denied God's place in his heart? Who here hasn't fallen before the false gods of pride and vanity, hasn't imagined himself master of his own fate, his own false god?"

He paused, their faces turning inward. "Who indeed hasn't failed God? None of us. Not one. You, me, all of us. All of us. The difference, the sole, crucial difference that we know, that we must know if we are to be saved, is that we have Jesus looking out for us, if only we'll let him.

"Can we save ourselves?" he asked. Silence. A couple people mouthed, no.

"Can we save ourselves?" he cried. A few scattered no's.

"Can our neighbors save us?" No's.

"Can our families save us? They can point us in the right direction maybe but can our husbands and wives and children do the job, in themselves?" More no's, louder.

"Can I save you?" Silence. "No, of course I can't. Of course I can't. God saves. Can the government save you? Can television? Movies? Whoever's selling the most records this week?"

"No!" they cried out.
"No, they can't. These things, these people, are of the world. They are of the world and they are passing. Look for them tomorrow, they're long gone. By God's own definition they are fallen.

"So who's going to save us?" he demanded.

"Jesus!" they cried. His Name had never sounded so beautiful.

"Who?"

"Jesus!"

He was shouting, no the Lord was shouting, gaining through him to greater purpose than his pitiful self. He cried out all the louder in pure joy. "Tell the people He's coming!"

"He's coming!" they called back.

"Oh, He's coming," David roared. "And what's He going to find?"

"Preach it!" someone cried. "Glory!" cried another.

"We live in a time where everyone wants to turn you away from God. They don't know it, but they do. They've lost sight of the eternal. Don't let them fool you. Don't let them fool you!" He paused to let the people cry out and then settle. Tension rising, faces screwed up in anticipation--delicious. He looked up as if to God Himself and then lowered his scorching gaze upon them. "Jesus is going to ask, 'Are you with Me or are you with the world?' I suggest that you have an answer."

There were scattered laughs. He glared them to silence.

"What are you going to say when you're asked? Are you with God or man?"

"God!" they cried. "God!" Crying out like he'd always dreamed. Because of him, his words, they were crying and laughing--their faces finding the grace within. They were with him.

"The question," he called out, "is who loves their God?"
The people cried every form of affirmative.
"The question is who loves their God?" More shouts, louder.
"Who do you worship—man or God?"
"God!"
"Man or God?"
"God!"

He prowled the stage, crying and ranting God's name and the Glory and he was sweating and the people were sweating and he called on them in the coming week to worship God alone and he slammed his text down on the lectern and collapsed on his bench spent. The people sang the closing hymn loud as a group twice, three times their number and after the service they grasped his hands, watching him with new eyes. Vollman stayed away.

That afternoon it was all David could do to keep his hands off Janey. He watched her with gaining agitation as she cooked supper, as she worked with the children on the advent log, as they sat on the girls' twin beds reading Bible stories. She glowed as she read, looking between him and the girls, alive to the stories and to him and she was beautiful. How could there not be a God?

They put the girls to bed and hurried down the hallway. He turned out the light as she joined him in bed and he reached for her under her night gown. She called out for him as never before.

"Let's make a baby," he whispered. "Let's make a son."

The next morning David sang along with the Christian station as he drove the fifteen miles to the V.A. hospital. The snow had quit overnight and the sun limned the waning clouds, casting the passing trees and fields in divine brilliance. He thought of the letter in his coat pocket, the poor soul before him, nothing's impossible. He turned up the radio.
The hospital was larger than he'd expected, a great complex of brick buildings sprawling amidst snow-mantled oaks and hedges and the mint fields beyond. David stood from his car and couldn't help feeling small and weak before the entranceway. Lord Jesus, he whispered, give me strength. He locked his door and came on.

The desk clerk wouldn't even glance up at him. David repeated himself, louder. When the man finally did look up, David wasn't sure he'd been understood—the man gave no sign of recognition. He only sighed and stared through David with all the weariness in creation. A brown man in white clothes. What now, Whitey? He thought of brothers Ruiz and Tran and reached across the desk to shake the man's reluctant hand. He unfolded the letter flat across a magazine.

The clerk glared at the scrawl and then a gaining smile overcame him. "Wait up a minute," he said, reaching for a phone, nodding to a row of chairs.

David sat watching the clerk hunched over his magazine. No one else passed through. The air smelled the same way--stale, uncirculated. The Newsweeks all at least a year old. I can do this, he thought. Jesus help me do this. Ten minutes, fifteen. He settled into a magazine.

The voice cleared, deep and so settled that David merely looked up to the big man standing before him, great muscular arms folded across his chest.

"Well, come on then," the man said.

David introduced himself and the man said his name was Roberto. David followed his massive back past the desk to the elevator. A series of loud, grating clanks as the elevator descended. They stepped into the grimy, ancient car. The door closed and Roberto pulled a key chain from his belt, inserted a key into the control panel. They lurched upward and David studied the collage of filth, scrubbed and fresh, on the walls and ceiling. He guessed
blood, feces, lipstick. Smells of urine and bleach. The clangers were much louder inside the car and he found himself recalling passages from Revelations.

Roberto turned to consider him. "You ever been in a nuthouse before, Preacher?"

David registered a distant rise of indignation then, considering the walls, the feeling passed. "No," he said.

"It's much like you'd expect. Only dirtier."

The elevator ground to a stop. They stepped out of the car into bedlam. A crush of babbling men engulfed them and David almost went down amidst the jostling, circling swarm. The inmates swore and argued with themselves, lurching convulsively and fondling their baby blue pajamas. Their howls were echoed by older voices from benches lining the great room. David recognized Latin coming from across the crowd, the gruff voice speaking of demons and slaughter. He was relieved to see a watch desk to his right—two burly orderlies overseeing the groaning crowd.

"Come on," Roberto said.

David dodged a drooling inmate and ignored the wail the man set up after. There were four hallways extending from the central area and he followed Roberto to the left and down a long, shining passageway. The gibbering cries followed them, echoing off the tiled floors and ceilings. Glancing back, he was surprised to see only a dozen or so men comprising the lunatic crowd. The sharp smell of ammonia raised tears but there were other, earthier smells that made him glad for the disinfectant. They passed a gaunt skeleton of a man at least seven feet tall steadily tapping his head again the white wall. Just beyond him sat two men in intense, hushed conversation, forehead pressed to forehead. David watched as one of the men extended his
tongue and licked a wide circle around the margin of the other's face. He
turned to Roberto, who shrugged.

"Happiest guys in here," he said.

They walked to the end of the hall and to an opened door. David
hesitated as Roberto passed inside.

"Hey, J.C." Roberto called out. "You got a visitor."

David edged inside the room to see the attendant's head shake with
laughter. The room was sparse, anxious with fluorescent and window light. A
dresser in the corner, the single bed stripped to the mattress. Perched in the
window sill a hunched-up figure shrouded in white. The man lifted his head
from his chest to consider them. Grinning, he hopped down to the floor to
stand before them.

"Easy now, J.C." said Roberto.

The patient was dressed in sheets draped over his head and body as
flowing robes. He came forward, ignoring Roberto, searching out David with
wild, gentle eyes.

"You'd best have those sheets back on the bed before Dr. Bohlrich sees," said Roberto, retreating to the hallway.

David started after him. "Hey," he said, but too late. He turned to face
the lunatic and extended his hand.

"Go ahead, Child," the man said.

"Excuse me?"

"I can see your mind gathering. Go ahead. Tempt me to prove myself."

David turned away, examining the room. A surveillance camera
hovered from the opposite corner. He smiled and again offered J.C. his hand.
"I don't know what you mean," he said. "I came to bring you God's word."
The man stared back without recognition. David held the letter before him. "Didn't you write this? Don't you want to hear the Good Word?"

"I am the Word!" the man howled. "I am the Word and the Light and you, Sticky, don't tempt me with your mammon."

David froze, closed his eyes, resisted a great urge to run. He could be safe in his car, on the road, in five minutes. He wished he'd brought someone for support. For the briefest of moments he even imagined Vollman standing beside him and he shuddered as though tasting the man's breath. No, he thought. I can do this. Lord, he prayed to himself. Give me strength.

The lunatic visibly relaxed. "There," he said. "Doesn't that feel better?"

"What?" asked David. "What feels better?"

"Prayer. Believe me, it works both ways."

"You think...." But he couldn't say it.

J.C. adopted a saintly pose, eyes downcast, hands spread to reveal inked-in stigmata.

David slumped, body and soul. "Oh, man," he said.

"And why not?" J.C.'s eyes were suddenly rational, sad. His face shining with benevolent, transparent holiness.

David stared at the madman. He was young, roughly his own age, a lost cause. What horrors, he wondered, could do this to a man. The Gulf War? Somalia maybe? He reached into his coat pocket to touch the face of his Bible. "Forgive me for saying so but I don't believe my Savior dwells in a mental institution."

J.C.'s voice was all kindness: "We both know that's not true. Where else could I be in this age, in this country?"
David wouldn't argue. Not with a raving headcase, it wouldn't be fair. He saw that he was sweating. He took off his coat and laid it across the bare mattress. "No," he said. "That doesn't make you Jesus."

"Yes. Deny me. I knew you would. You have the look of the dead in you. You haven't known real faith for a long time have you, Child?"

David didn't even have to think. "I've never believed more in my life." "You want your Savior dead, where he's safe. You wouldn't want to have to actually do anything, would you?"

David said nothing. He wouldn't argue with this sad case. "I can taste your soul," J.C. said. "It's bitter. It's hard and it's timid. The only light within you is vanity. People look to you. That's what you love."

He's insane, David reminded himself. Help him, God. Help me help him. "You do love your family, but only because they're yours."

David felt the start of rage at the mention of his family. He breathed in, breathed out. It seemed there should be some way to talk to the poor fool. "Why did you write me?" he asked.


David glanced at the surveillance camera. "Is that all right?" He felt compromised that he'd asked this nut any question at all. "Of course," J.C. said. "Social time lasts until dinner."

They passed along hallways, past countless pleading eyes, J.C. pointing out the rooms of the damned and the saved, points where he'd performed varying miracles, the shower room where he'd resisted the temptations of Satan. David tried out verses on him, modesty, humility, the meek shall inherit..., but J.C. only agreed, glanced downward, took shorter, gentler strides. Don't give up, David thought. The Lord will see us through. He realized after a time that J.C. was pacing them up and down the same corridor. Every time they
came to the far end, J.C. would interject, "Reverend," or "Pastor," in a sudden piercing voice.

They were walking the hallway for the eighth or ninth time when David felt his free arm taken, a second man dressed in sheets walking beside them. David looked at the man's face, saw that his cheeks had been penned with dark ink in some semblance of a beard. A mutilated vine, torn from a house plant, crudely wrapped around his brow. David sighed aloud as he recognized the crown of thorns.

"My child," the man said.

"Beware," J.C. advised David, "of false prophets. The Horned One is strong in this hallway."

"He is when you're here," sneered the second Jesus.

J.C. snorted and whispered in David's ear: "We've tried everything--holy water, exorcisms in every known tongue. Best just give him the cold ear chow-chow."

"Blessed are the sugar ants," the second man said. "Hard-working, sweet-tempered, yeasty. I love them. Blessed are the purifying night skies and little girls and the supper plates that speak of the Father. Come on, I'll show you the next page of my book." He yanked on David's arm and they came to a stop--the three of them suspended in the hallway, linked arm to arm to arm. They pulled with gaining violence. J.C. began hopping up and down, the second man's head jerking wildly.

"Crandal! McHale!" An orderly appeared at the end of the hallway.

"Don't make me separate you two." They released David, smiling and waving.

"Sir," the orderly called. "Are you all right?"

David smiled weakly. "Yes," he said, meaning no.
The orderly watched them another few moments, then returned to his station.

"I hate to brag," the second one, McHale, said. "But this morning I turned oatmeal to chocolate and cast out four demons."

J.C. clucked his tongue. "My poor son. The Gospels are clear on the subject of chocolate. Idolaters alone crave the dark mallow."

"Caw!" shrieked McHale. "Caw! Caw!" His fingers curled to talons, he began flapping his arms. "I can't see you! I'm flying! Father, I'm coming home!" He leaped high against the walls, shrieking and glaring at them. Then his wings settled again to mere arms and he took David by the hand.

David shivered but made himself return the grasp. Help him, God, he prayed. Help us all.

"Lo, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death," J.C. whispered. He craned forward to stare at McHale, "I will fear no evil."

"Reminds me of that Golgotha," McHale replied. "A lot like you. Only less bristles."

"Fiend," sneered J.C. "You wouldn't last an hour on the cross. You don't have the principles."

McHale flung himself against the wall, arms spread, toes pointed to the floor. He stared at them with eyes that were alternately woeful, expectant, triumphant.

"Come on, hissed J.C. "He'll suck you down to Hell itself."

David felt himself pulled along the corridor, heard squeaks following close behind. He glanced back, McHale scuttling along the wall, arms spread in his full pose, toes shuffling to keep pace.

"Run!" cried J.C. but David tried to pull away and then McHale returned from his torment to take his other arm and they staggered first one direction
and then the other. J.C. was stronger and so they lurched at last into the common room, into the swirling, babbling throng.

"Boys," David screeched. "Boys!" Someone stepped on his foot and he sprawled to the ground. McHale and J.C. hoisted him up and spinning. An orderly rose from his seat, put a whistle to his lips. J.C. nudged McHale and they pulled David to the edge of the crowd. The orderly stared at them. Their hands dropped away from him. He started for the elevator.

"Rollo!" called J.C.

"Rollo!" shouted McHale. They caught up with David and propelled him to the opposite hallway and down to the very end. They pushed through a closed door and past an ancient man snoring in his bed.

"Sit!" they commanded. David saw their expressions and lowered himself to the floor.

"I wanna go first," McHale whined.

"Go ahead," said J.C.

"I'm going first!"

"All right." J.C. sat beside David.

McHale paced before them, glancing upward then glaring at J.C.

It was, David gathered, some sort of preach-off. McHale went first. He assumed his crucifixion and stared mournfully at them. "Caw!" he screamed. "Caw!" J.C. snorted and turned his back on him. "Meow," McHale lilted, quieter now. "Ribbit ribbit. Baaa. Gobble gobble. Woof woof." He whinnied once like a horse and then puckered his lips and David guessed, fish. The fish turned to an owl and the owl to a wiggling snake, his voice trailing away in a long, declining hiss. He clapped a few times for himself, smiling, immensely pleased. He sat next to David.

David reached over and patted his shoulder. "Nice job," he said.
J.C. stood before them. He looked down smiling but said nothing. His eyes closed. He seemed to be inhaling something other than ammonia.

"I have traveled," he said, "a long road to be here with you." He frowned, considering the travails of his journey. "Coming down from Heaven is not a trip to be taken lightly. It's a hard road, friend, I assure you. A great fall from Heaven. A great fall." He looked up as though to his Father and the face he lowered to again consider them was one of peace and radiance and benevolence. "But although this was a great fall, I chose that fall, fell that fall, and would fall again if only to speak to you now.

"Fall, fall, fall, fall, fall, fall," he said, his voice rising, arms spread wide as though plummeting to earth and then he'd landed apparently because his gaze returned to David. "You," he said.

David felt his throat roll. His cheeks flushed. He felt stupid.

J.C.'s face began to tremble, tears welling, and again he looked to the Heavens and the tremblings ceased. "I came," he said, "for you. I came to save you. To love you. To perfect you. I came to bring you home, to dwell in peace with my Father." He smiled a grave, pure smile and it took David a long moment to place that smile. He realized in disgust he was reminded of Janey.

"I'm getting tired," J.C. said. "Weary. So weary." His hand raised to brow, his head shook in sorrow. "But," and here his smile returned, "I'm preparing to go home." His eyes closed and his palms gathered to his chest and then he spread them wide to the Heavens. "Who's coming with me?"

Silence. David wasn't about to say anything and neither, he supposed, was McHale. J.C. was unfazed. His eyes opened as he took a head count, hearing cries from his own people.

"Who's," he called, "coming?" Again, a pause. "Who's brave enough to admit their weakness. Who's brave enough to admit their love? Who's wise
enough? Strong enough? Clear enough? Who's got enough sugar to join the
good path, to follow the peace angels home to salvation?"

As he watched J.C. preach, David realized with growing discomfort he
was seeing his own sermon of the day before. The words were different, the
words made less sense as J.C. continued but that mattered less, he saw, than the
rising and falling pitch of the preacher's voice. What mattered was passion.
Total, unreserved passion, which this man possessed completely. He believed,
he wanted you to believe, you had to believe. He kept going, belief propelling
him from highlight to highlight, lunacy to prayer to inspiration. David
watched him prowl and rant and he saw himself. He turned away. This man,
under different circumstances, with the right training, would have made a
hell of a preacher.

This, he realized with horror, was God showing him himself. The con
man he could become, the caricature. God was squelching the easy answer.
An easy, crooked path falling away.

From behind there was a slap, something hitting the floor. He turned to
see the doorway full of patients. Several had fallen to the floor, bowing low
before J.C. Behind them doctors, orderlies, more patients.

He felt their eyes on him. Blank eyes. Drugged eyes. Eyes clouded with
pain, confusion, paranoia. Lost. All watching him, God's man, to see what was
right. He considered the balance of one soul against many.

"No," he said, standing, blocking their view of J.C. "Get out of here," he
called. "This isn't right. Go on."

No one moved. The patients looked at him in raw confusion or outright
terror, the doctors and orderlies studying him. He turned away, found himself
staring at J.C.
The kindest thing possible, he thought, would be to put you out of your misery. You are utterly beyond hope. You'll only take others down with you. In Bible times, they would have stoned the shit out of you. He imagined it with warming satisfaction. Then he gasped at himself, Jesus no.

It was time to go. McHale grabbed his hand. He shook loose and then pushed the wacko to the floor when he tried to stand. He turned for the door. J.C. called his name. "I haven't frightened you, have I, Preacher?"

"No," David said, turning back to face him one last time. "I have to go. I have to go comfort a dying man."

J.C. stared, David saw the lie in himself. J.C. broke down in sudden great tears. "I've failed you my Son. Why?" His face sagged with tears and grief and pity.

David realized this was hatred. "You were awful," he said. "Pathetic. I never heard a worse sermon in all my life. There were gasps from the patients. J.C. crumpled to the floor. Thick, choking sobs. David stood over him watching his victory fail to pity. He looked from the sobbing figure to the crazies and still he knew he was right. This was duty, not his choice. This was serious. This was God. Still, somehow he knew he'd failed, was failing.

"But you believe," he told the whimpering impostor. "And faith matters more than anything."

"Will you come back?" J.C. asked, tears shining.

"Yes." David smiled. "Of course."

J.C. studied him and David stepped backwards as he saw the strain building in his features. "Liar!" he screamed. "Pharisee!"

David pushed through the crowd, staggered into the hall.
"Pharisee!" The agonized voice followed him down the hallway, past the grinning attendants, down a stairwell and out to a courtyard. "You're nothing but a goddamn Pharisee!"

David found a sidewalk and followed it around the building to his car. He sat shivering, his breath fogging the windows. He moaned—his coat and hat. On the bare mattress in that sorry room, Janey had made the hat for him, the coat was a graduation present. Back inside the inmates were probably already doing unspeakable things to his clothing. He had to go back in there; he couldn't move. It seemed to him that God should this once show him gratitude and make his things appear, unsoiled, on the seat beside him. He overflowed with shame.

He staggered out of the car and dropped to his knees. Ice and gravel ground into his flesh and he leaned forward to bring the pain deeper. Jesus was watching him even now. He knew all that had happened and why and He would forgive him if he asked, and he supposed this was what he was doing. He looked all around—old, beaten cars scattered across the lot. He thought of the drive before him and wished the drive was longer. He would see Vollman's wretched smirk as he drove, and the other congregationalists. They'd be glad when he was gone. He would lose the church—he never was a natural preacher. Janey wouldn't really mind—wouldn't she? His children, Miranda and Ruth and the son he was certain he'd planted in his wife's belly wouldn't understand. He thought of all these people and then he left them and thought only of Jesus, knowing with Him alone would he find forgiveness. He looked up at the sky and of course it was beautiful and of course God was there somewhere if only he had the eyes to see. He lowered his gaze to the hospital and he thought that of course God was there also, down those slick, ammonia-fouled halls, in the lonely eyes of those lost souls. He thought then of his
church, of God, suffusing his enemies, suffusing Vollman even, and he thought it should be no different than seeing God's presence in the radiant skies. He wished it was so. He was weak in himself. Only God could save him.

He heard footsteps approach. He closed his eyes and thought of God wrapping him up in great, loving arms. The steps scraped close by. A car door opened and slammed shut. An engine started, tires crunched gravel, he listened to the car pull away. All was quiet. His eyes clenched tight. His knees ached and he clenched his eyes tight. His lips moved in quick, hopeful prayer. 

Save me, Jesus. I'm nothing without You. He repeated this over and over. Somewhere in this fallen world there was a place for him.

He opened his eyes and stood. His lips forming silent, ceaseless prayer. His hands opened and he was overflowing and he knew Jesus was with him. Together they walked into the hospital.
Optimism follows

I say if you make a promise, keep it. Have a job, show up on time. Say, "I do," then stick it out no matter what happens. Maybe it's not always easy but I happen to believe there's more to life than convenience. What about honor? Whatever happened to integrity? Is there anything more important in life than having some purpose? But that's just me. I say keep it simple and you can't go wrong. Sometimes I think I'm the only person in the world who believes this.

Laura, my wife, my estranged wife, still requires convincing. Two weeks of martial arts classes, half a semester of community college, eight years with me. Sticking has never been a strong point with her.

Oh, there's always some excuse: pulled groin, dyslexia, growing apart. There's probably excuses not to get out of bed in the morning if you want to look at it that way. Now, in our twice-monthly phone conversations, it's Wendy has ballet in fifteen minutes, Justin's stamp club is having some kind of fund-raiser. Keeping her on the phone anymore for more than five minutes is a major triumph. How am I supposed to raise a serious subject like getting back together in under five minutes? I try but, you guessed it, there's always some reason why not.

For example, last week she told me I'd changed too much.

"Of course I've changed," I said. "Eight years. I hope to God I've grown some."
She sighed. Every time we talk she's great with sighs. "OK," she said. "Fine. Congratulations on your personal growth, Romeo. I don't even know why we're talking." She was obviously distracted, likely watching some crime drama on t.v. Her telephone voice, all I get of her these days, allows me a cool, almost scientific, level of analysis.

"We're talking," I said, "because we have issues to work through."

"All right," she sighed, simultaneously conveying boredom, exasperation, guilt and grief. "We were fine until I kissed Robert Shell. I'm sorry. It was a party but I'm truly sorry. Had I known what it would do to you, I would have never said anything."


"Phil. I'm still ashamed. I'm ashamed of my part in what you're doing to yourself."

"It's OK," I said. "I forgive you. God forgives you."

"Well, I don't," she said. "And I don't forgive you either."

"Jesus forgives me," I said. "He forgives us both."

"OK, Phil. What's with the Jesus routine?"

"It's no routine." I told her how I'm regularly attending services at First Baptist. How I'm learning about suffering in the context of God's Plan, about becoming a better man. Then I trotted out my big guns: "I've quit playing golf. Laura. I've wasted enough time following a little white ball."

"Jeez," she said. "Now I know you're losing it." She hung up and I still have another week to figure out what that meant.
I was playing golf the day Laura left me. I've been playing for all but five of my 38 years. It would be impossible to condense all the game has taught me into the sort of tidy package people seem to require these days. It's a life, a philosophy, a code. I wish everyone could find that special something that pushes the rest of the sordid world away.

There's a definite mystical connection between my golf game and the world around me. If I'm burning it up on the links, I know I'd better call my broker: _Buy!_ If I'm sucking: _Sell! Sell!_ The day Laura left me though was the end of golf for me.

I sliced my first shot over to the fourth green and I knew then I should just pack it up and go home. Except that I'd already paid my greens fee and I already told you how I feel about seeing things through. Let's just say this wasn't my strongest game. Hooks, slices, shanks, missing balls.... I was missing two foot puts! That's just unacceptable! Time to work on the fundamentals.

Focus, isolate, execute. The solution to every problem. My short game was giving me hell so I worked on that--chipping back and across the fifth green, getting a little extra practice out of Beechwood's lousy nine holes. Then, coming down the fairway, these four loudmouth charmers. _Hey, move it! Hey, asshole!_ I ignored them--focus, isolate, execute. I was approaching wisdom. I wanted to understand the convergence of swing, club, ball. The thing itself--the absolute everlasting beauty of pure motion.

I came close a few times but no luck, so I'd pitch my ball back into the trap and start over. Balls were sailing past now and these guys were stomping up the fairway and all the sudden this big linebacker type has his sodden face in mine and it's, _What the hell's your problem? and Get the fuck out of the way!_ Such anger. I said nothing. I pitied them--drunken half-wits unable to
recognize or honor a commitment to self-improvement. Cretins! I stood between them and the green holding my seven iron like a divine extension of my will. They circled around me smelling of malt liquor and I realized the situation was getting out of hand.

"Guys, I'm sorry," I said, letting my club drop to the turf. "I'm having sort of a family crisis." Except I didn't say it like that. I couldn't go two words without gasping, sniffing, tears coming from God knows where. It wasn't true, so far as I knew, about there being a problem at home. But it worked. That one always works. People do have hearts if you go low enough. Never forget that, they do have hearts. The next thing I know, one of them's offering me a beer, asking do I want to join their party?

Look, I try to be good, realistic about what sort of behavior is kind or morally plausible, but I also know that exceptional people do exceptional things. Marvels await if we'll only believe in ourselves. The line between what's good and timid or bad and strong blurs real fast in the real world. I do tend to lie a lot. But only rarely, almost never, for personal reasons. For example, I think lying to avoid violence is probably a virtue. My primary rule is I don't lie to people. I loathe anyone who can't own up to their personal difficulties. I only lie to people as materialists, as agents of items—players, business adversaries, meter maids. If anything I'm too honest to people as people. All the old cliché's about honesty leading to personal difficulties apply, believe me.

So, the house was empty when I got home. Laura had taken everything. At the time I thought, OK. I mean, it was real sad but it was also a relief, you know? A resolution established, a decision made, no more waiting around for what's inevitable anyway. I can't say I was entirely surprised—we'd been
having difficulties for years. At least I had the comfort of knowing I wasn't the one who'd run away.

OK, the house wasn't empty. She'd left my things and the furniture and all the memorabilia of eight years of marriage. Most everything in the kids' rooms was still there. They'd left me, taking only a couple suitcases' worth of clothes and toiletries. Wendy's dolls were still piled across her bed. Justin's football waited forlorn under his desk. Laura's latest romance novel lay half finished on our bedside table. I was a bachelor again. Free. I walked from room to room to room to the liquor cabinet. I was well-stocked. Found a nudie pic on late night cable and didn't have to worry about the volume. I turned it up so loud the neighbors called, asking could we keep it down. I compensated with more Cuervo, beer chasers, woke up on the couch.

Do you know how it is to be almost continuously happy and then you see something a certain way, whatever it takes for you, and you realize how natural sadness is, how hard you've had to work to maintain that cheer? Tomorrow you'll feel better, a new day, sunshine and wildflowers, and you'll move on without thinking about it too much. Both mindsets are honest at the time. Both emotions reflect an honest reaction. For example, tomorrow you'll be horny again. Nature reasserts itself, optimism follows.

The next morning at the office, I made calls and checked messages and waited for call backs. I thought Laura might call and was relieved she didn't. It was a quiet day, peaceful. I was grateful. That night at home I brought my clubs in from the garage and practiced putting into a water glass in the living room. I ordered pizza and had the delivery guy pick up a case of Red Hook on the way. He had a quick beer and a slice then said he had to get going.

"Work," he said.

"Believe me," I said. "I know."
Long hours at the office, home, TV, work. Saturday, secular day of rest. The house was quiet for a change. In a sad way it was beautiful. I hadn't known how much I'd missed simple quiet. Amazing, isn't it—how you can go so long without an essential emotional condition and then realize how necessary quiet can be for your well-being? I sat in the front room soaking it in, the quiet den, the peaceful patio. Ah, quiet. I went to the mall and caught a movie. After that there was this poster advertising another film. It looked good so I saw the second film. It turned out not to be so good, more of a romance than I'd been led to believe—not that romances aren't fine when you're in the mood, but come on. My wife had just left me.

After the films and after dinner and drinks, I remembered, fight night! I drove downtown and screamed my lungs raw, saw some great contests that night—two knockouts, two split decisions and a t.k.o. Afterwards, I went out for drinks then decided to call it a night. I remember one moment from the drive home, headlights glaring off windows papered with crude children's drawings, and I realized I'd parked in front of my kids' school. I got out to look for Justin and Wendy's artwork but it was impossible, kids' handwriting is so terrible these days. Besides, I had no idea which were my kids' classrooms. I checked out every last one of those paintings until the blues and oranges and yellows blurred into terrible patterns of childish malice and I had to step away from the window. I remember stumbling to my car, sitting, gazing into those paintings, then nothing.

I slept in, cleaned house and went out for a late breakfast. Caught another flick. The answering machine was flashing when I got home but it was only my mom. I went out jogging—how long since I'd last ran? God, I was wheezing like some wretched asthmatic and my beer gut (where did that come from?) was seriously impeding any forward progress. Three miles—a flipping
eternity! Definitely time to get back in shape. When I finally got home there was another message. It was Carrie, which was against our rules, even if she had heard that Laura had left me. I didn't call back. I figured it was time to enjoy my quiet for a while before I let someone else mess everything up again.

I called Laura's mom. She wasn't happy to hear from me.

"Barbara," I said. "I know this is hard. I just want to know they're all right."

"They're fine."

"Can I talk to them, Barbara?"

"They're fine. They're getting up in the morning and doing what needs to be done. One foot in front of the other," she said. "You do the same." She hung up. I had to assume that Laura had told her about my affair. Who knows what else? Maybe that I was going to leave her for Carrie, which was never true, was laughable, really. I just needed a little more than I was getting emotionally and otherwise around the house. It hurt though that Barbara had written me off like that. I know she had to side with her daughter but we'd always got along so well. We were family, you know?

I wished my Granddaddy was still around to call. I still do. Of course, he'd just tell me to shut up about it already and get something accomplished for myself. He'd be right, too. Sometimes you need to hear that kind of tough love. Most people just won't be that honest with you.

The summer I was ten years old I stayed with my Grandparents out at Green Lake and I learned all I know about strength and self-reliance. "You can't trust nobody," Grandpa would say every time Grandma left the room. "Let's go get ice cream." We'd hop in the car and drive into town and he'd drop me off at a gas station 10 miles from the cabin. "Don't trust no strangers," he'd hiss, pushing me out the door. "Dinner's at 5:30 sharp. Don't make your
Grandma wait." Or, "Grab your fishing rod, we're taking the boat out." And he'd leave me on an island overnight.

I remember the first night I spent on the island--no fire, no sleeping bag, just a windbreaker pulled over my knees. Huddled up against a tree. The lapping sound of the waves began to form terrifying, bloodsucking voices in my soft child's head. The hissing and growling inched ever closer and I climbed high up in the tree to escape the slimy tentacles coming for me. I didn't sleep all night for fear of monsters and of falling. At first light I was amazed to be alive. I swore to hide when my grandpa came for me. But that afternoon when I saw his boat coming, I slid down the trunk and stood wailing at the water's edge. By Summer's end, I couldn't wait to return to the soft, soothing world of my parents. But it was never the same gentle place after that Summer. I'd become too strong. I had a new, higher vantage point over the world. Only later did I realize I'd learned to believe in myself out there. Pretty soon my kids'll be old enough to learn the same lesson.

Well, Granddaddy's long gone, so I called up Mom. I knew it was going to be a mistake just then, but I try to be a good son so I listened to her complain about Oprah and my Dad and the weather for something like two hours. Didn't say a word about Laura, just listened. It helped hearing her go on and on, but in the opposite way than she would have thought. Reminded me of how good I had it being a bachelor again.

Laura would kill me for saying so, but she snores louder than an outboard motor. I'd taped her once, just to prove it to her--evidence. I'd invested in a top of the line Sony s-series voice-activated recorder with anti-hiss control and digital sound. Spent the better part of a night hovering over her as she massacred logs and the sound quality was exceptional. I found the tape in my desk drawer and dropped that sucker in the sound system, speakers
in the living room, dining room, den, kitchen and master bedroom, turned the sound way up, auto reverse. I guess you get used to certain things over the years, however obnoxious. Playing that tape put me in mind of some old family videos—birthdays, baseball games, Christmases. I watched one of Justin's school plays Laura had taped while I was at a trade show in Fort Worth. Amazing! My son!—playing a lion and he was so good chasing this other kid dressed up like a mouse around the stage and then befriending the mouse, etc. I was so proud I had to call Barbara's house again to pump the little guy up.

Laura answered. "I miss you," I told her. I wanted to make it easier for her, like I was hurting too. "Come home," I said. "I'm sorry. Please just come home." I knew what she was going to say.

"No way," she said. "No way in hell. I make one mistake and you start chasing after everything in a skirt. I'm done." She told me I was the worst husband, the worst father, she could imagine. She told me I was unstable and a liar and emotionally out of control.

"Laura," I said. "This is crazy. I love you."

"Tell it to your girlfriend," she said.

She hung up. I called her back and I hung up. I went to the fridge for a beer. Looked like I was going to be a bachelor for a while. Good thing I'm a strong person--strong and patient.

Another Saturday night at home. Peace, quiet, relaxation. I'd been good all week--work and home, a little tequila and Sports Center. I didn't feel like cooking so I went out for Thai and then three or four bars downtown and woke up the next morning parked in front of Barbara's house. No answer at the door. I must have knocked for three minutes before I remembered it was Sunday and Barbara's house rules applied. For the life of me I couldn't remember how to find that church. On the way home I counted mile markers
and turned up Laura's snore tape as loud as the bass control on my system could take. That drive was easily the longest hour of my life. What a hangover! Twice I had to pull over to puke. It was obviously time to cut back on the drinking.

Carrie wasn't home when I called so I left a message confirming an exterminator's appointment, then drove across town to my favorite strip club. The place was closed so I went out for brunch and Carrie still wasn't home so I drove back to the club. Turned out the girls don't even show up 'til 6pm on Sundays, so I was on my own until then. I went home and showered and drove around town. I don't know why but I got this random urge and checked into a motel: The Tropic. I was up all night flipping through channels, listening to voices coming through the walls. There was something familiar about the voices from the next room. I turned down the t.v.--I could have sworn it was Laura and the kids. I put my ear to the wall and then I knew! It was them! I ran into the hall, pounded on their door, and the hefty, red-faced woman who answered was probably somebody's wife, but thank God she wasn't mine. I checked out the next morning, went to work.

Not a fun day at the old salt mines. Had trouble focusing to say the least. Barbara wasn't answering her phone and the school secretary wouldn't put me through to my own freaking kids. She told me that if I showed up at the school, they'd have to call the police. The Police! Me! She said it was standard policy in divorce cases, to prevent abduction, etc.

I said, *who said anything about a divorce?* I guess I raised my voice because everyone was looking at me funny and I knew I had to do something pretty forward to get back my appetite.

I called Carrie's to leave an urgent message and she answered! "Carrie!" I cried. "Carrie!"

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"I just got back from St. Louis," she said. "What a clusterfuck. It'll take weeks to get their system up and running again. Unfuckingbelievable."

"I thought you'd dumped me," I admitted. "When can we meet?"

"You're not getting weird, are you?"

"No," I said. "I've missed you is all."

"Drinks," she said, and named our favorite bar. I took my first real breath that day. I was back on track mentally and finished up my projects early and was out of there by 4:30. I was already four drinks in by the time she showed up. She looked good. She walked across the room and by God she looked good.

"Christ," she said. "What a day. Get me a Jack and Coke, will you?"

I took her hand. "You're so beautiful," I told her. It was true. I'd never seen her looking so silkenly edible. "Do you know how lovely you are? I want to carry you off to a desert isle."

Her hand pulled free of mine. "You're weirding me out," she said, lips pouting the way I love so much. "What have you been doing to yourself? You're look worse than some crack whores I've seen."

I was relentless. "Tell me you want me. Tell me what you want to do to me."

"Do I need to order this drink myself?"

I walked over to the bar. Deep breath, deep breath. Focus, isolate, execute. I got her drink and strolled across the room to her. I sat down and laid my arm around her shoulder. "Baby," I said. "I'm just a guy who's beauteous girlfriend just got back into town. Drink your drink, but make no mistake. Tonight, you're mine."

We went to The Tropic and ended up two floors above the room I'd rented the night before. I remember thinking this could be some kind of good-
natured game, like tic tac toe. I remember making a late night run to the liquor store. There was something about me weeping in her lap. After that, nothing.

I woke up alone, had to bust it hard to make work by 9:00. Apparently I did or said something offensive because Carrie wouldn't return my calls, which had never happened before. My parents weren't answering or Barbara, and my secretary didn't want to go out for drinks, so after work I just went home. No messages, no letters. OK. Time to wind down, dry out, relax. I took a long shower. When I got out there was a message from Carrie: _I think we should cool off for a while—until you figure things out with Laura. I don't want to be a distraction. Besides, you were acting way too serious last night. Don't think I'd leave Robert in a million years because I won't. Call me when you're married again._

She was right, of course. I'm the kind of guy who takes things too serious. It's my nature, I can't help it. I try to be light, to act casual like everyone else—but somewhere along the line my earnestness takes over and I wind up frightening people. Too strong, I guess.

I watched TV for a while and then practiced my putting stroke until that got boring. I set up more water glasses. That was definitely more interesting—learning the run of different carpets, linoleum and hardwood floors. I ran to the store for more glasses and pretty soon I'd set up an 18-hole course that ran through the bedrooms and down the stairs and through the dining and living rooms and finishing with the killer hole—around the kitchen table and into the center of the linoleum floor. With Laura's snore tape playing as a meditative breath-control device, I worked steadily until I got my score down to a personal record of 43.
Barbara must have gotten caller ID because no one would pick up my calls. I left a message. I told the kids to be good for their mother. I told them to do their homework and to brush their teeth and to help Grandma with household chores. I told them, it's OK to be confused right now. We're all suffering, but the important thing is that we love each other. Then I told the kids to mind their new daddy, no matter what they thought of him personally or how much they wanted to be home with their real daddy. I told them that even if their Mom kept bringing home an endless string of new daddies, they should obey these strangers and trust their Mother's judgment, even though she'd crushed their real Daddy's heart under her cold-blooded heel. That was stupid of me to say and I admitted as much. Sorry, I said. That just came out, I don't know why. But then I went on in a way that convinced me I was still being affected by the alcohol from the night before. I closed saying maybe we could all get together for dinner, maybe we could work it out.

I waited for a call back and phoned a few more times to see if they'd just gotten home and hadn't had time to respond, and then I drove around town and eventually over to this bar where I'd heard you could find prostitutes. That turned out not to be the case. After a couple brief conversations I was asked to leave. I picked up a weekly paper with those ads in the back pages and called for an in-call exotic massage. Her name was Shayla. She was a gift from the vaults of heaven. I invited her into my house and she was so beautiful, I couldn't help remembering first loving Laura. I made her dinner (Thai curry--my specialty) and by then I'd used up my hour so I ended up booking her for the whole night. We watched a movie, cozying up on the couch, and I couldn't stop looking at her. It was stupid, I know, but I kept seeing Laura in her features. When we finally went upstairs I could tell that this was a special night for her, too.
Everything was beautiful until she rolled out of bed and stepped on a putting glass. She went down screaming, a nasty cut on her right foot. I took her to the emergency room and she was cursing me out the whole time--this unreal filth coming out of her mouth. In the waiting room she ignored me. She seemed to know the doctor and I tried not to think about the possible implications of that. I paid the bill and gave her an extra hundred besides her all-night fee. Not a good-bye kiss, not even a good-bye.

I realized after several encounters with these prostitutes that there's no experience more empty than paying money for sex. I realized that was why I kept calling them back. That solitary feeling you get just after coming inside a stranger is the most honest experience a man can know. It's a feeling of strength, an affirmation of self in opposition to certain crushing facts of existence. This is how we think when we forget about God. After a couple weeks, I started cruising the avenues where the girls stand around in short skirts leaning into cars. Those street girls were truly nasty, cold-blooded agents and I began to see myself as an existential soldier of fortune, an elemental force of will power. I started working out at the gym. I cut back on nonessentials, soft clothing and cooked foods, to concentrate solely on the imponderables. I bought this beautiful Luger automatic pistol and a Remington 30.6 with a sniper scope and burned through ammo at the firing range until I was satisfied with my hits/fired ratio. My performance at work was unrivaled except that I found conversation with co-workers difficult, strained. I began to see through the whores' sentimental tactics.

I recall one night sitting out behind Barbara's house watching my family eat dinner. I tightened the focus on the scope until I could see the chip on my wife's front tooth. "Boo!" I said, shifting aim Barbara's head. "Boo!" My kids, "Boo, hoo." I returned to Laura and studied them each in turn. I watched
Justin say something--it must have been funny or cute because they all started laughing. I knew they were mocking, laughing at me. I clicked off the safety.

"Bang," I said, "bang, bang bang." The motion, centering on one and then the next and the next and the next was hypnotic. Absolute pure beautiful motion. Action--reaction. "Bang, bang, bang, bang."

I sighted the cross hairs on Justin. He was absolutely scarfing down Barbara's crappy meatloaf. Scarfing! The stupid kid couldn't get enough of this wretched garbage that shouldn't be fed to starving animals. I watched chunks of meat drop out of his greedy little mouth. I couldn't stand it any more. I aimed at Wendy, my little girl. She couldn't have been chewing any slower and you could see by her clenched expression that she was fighting, hating every nasty bite. I thought, stupid, ungrateful little girl! Eat your goddamn meatloaf! There's little girls in Somalia who'd kill to eat that rancid crap! "Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang." I shifted aim around the table faster and faster until my hands ached and I was gasping for breath. Total focus. Total, complete, absolute focus--all irrelevancies cleared away, leaving only the starkest, cleanest truth. That's when I realized the genius of it all, of my son loving and my daughter hating the same, identical thing. Until that moment, I hadn't known the little nippers had grown into their souls. I watched my family around the dinner table and I thought, finish dinner kids. Daddy's here. No one's bothering you tonight. They finished in peace. I went home comforted that my kids were dreaming dreams I could never begin to imagine. I couldn't close my eyes for imagining their dreaming. I went out to cruise streetwalkers but there was nothing special offering itself so I just drove into the woods and shot up this skinny little sugar elm until it toppled over to the forest floor.
Talk about bringing oneself low to prepare the way for wisdom! I knew something bad would happen if I kept seeing whores so it was lucky for me that one afternoon strolling downtown, I was stopped by this really nice looking couple handing out brochures. I don't know why but I was just instantly snared by what these people had to say. Their names were Carl and Jamee and they were really intense about telling me about God. They bought me a cup of coffee and a donut and talked about God.

What made the most sense to me is the only thing that matters is your personal relationship to Jesus. You can't earn salvation no matter what you do, how hard you try. It's not about the world, about other people in the world. It's about you, about what's inside you. It's about Jesus, about having the strength to maintain faith in the midst of a skeptical world, despite what any one else says. Having a personal relationship with Jesus is more than anything about being true to yourself. Every Saturday I go out with Carl and Jamee and talk with people about this.

Anyway, that day in the donut shop they talked straight to me—which is all I require. It was like hearing my own better judgment assert itself. They were nice also and both were good looking although, objectively speaking, I can say that Carl had gotten lucky marrying Jamee. I told them I had to go to an appointment but I wanted to hear more. I was definitely interested in getting saved. I told them I wanted to meet again before committing to going to church. I offered a time I knew from our conversation that Carl had to work.

Jamee met me for a coffee date and we talked about Jesus and cried about my impending divorce. We met again and I kissed her once and then I got a teary phone call. She did, however, set me up with another gal from her
church and although that didn't work out, there's still plenty of single, attractive girls lined up in the pews.

Not that I've given up on Laura. I have hope but it's going to be a while, if ever. I'm here if she'll have me and she knows it. But trust doesn't just miraculously return with a few tears and sorries.

Sometimes I wonder what my life would be like if she'd never kissed Robert Shell. I think of our life before and I can't imagine what was missing. Sometimes I find myself wishing that she'd take me back and then smooch some guy at a party so that I could prove how much I've changed. I believe in God, in the Family. The time I used to spend on the links, now I'm in a church basement drinking coffee, studying my Bible. I'm moving into an apartment so that Laura and the kids can have the house. I have to trust this is all part of God's Plan.

I still see Carrie and try to help her. I tell her about Jesus but all she responds to is some of the old fun. It's a little empty, I suppose, but I'm strong enough with the rest of my life so I don't have to worry about taking meaning from every little experience.

Look. We're all alone in this fallen world. I mean, it's not that other people are without meaning but in the end, we die and what we carry inside is what determines whether eternity's gonna be harps or pitchforks. There's only you in your head. Only you know when you're thirsty. I mean, you've got to figure it all out for yourself and then commit to something. What do you want? How are you going to get it? You've got to make yourself happy before you can ever hope to make anyone else happy. Otherwise you're just guessing, acting. Being alone is the only way back to people.
Every Saturday I stand on that street corner handing out brochures and I watch you people walking by terrified and flabby and thinking what you care about means anything. I see you and think, God you people need me.
Northlake

Three AM at the gas pumps, stinking. Jim reeled between the pump and the car dragging with the same sluggish languor he'd cruised around town since last call. It was the first t-shirt night of the season--cool dark air scrubbed the bar room reek from his bare arms and neck. He reclined against the side of the Impala watching the life drain out of his bank account. Eight, nine, ten gallons and climbing--Christ, already more than seventeen dollars. The fluorescents overhead, the street lights groping the mourning avenue. Semis shuddered the freeway behind him and disappeared into the vast dark quiet.

Any thought of his apartment terrified him. The empty turn of the lock, the narrow hall, navigating by touch because he never switched on the lights when he'd come in late. Sleep never came soon enough these nights. Awake, alone, regret. The pump clicked. He sauntered around the back of the car waiting to know where now. Driving around was stupid and going home was worse. Everything he could imagine involved drinking.

"Fucking small towns," he said. "Fucking Montana."

He slouched low in the drivers seat spilling a bag of corn nuts across a road atlas opened to New Mexico. He reached for the half-empty Pabst on the dash, draped the atlas across the wheel, flipping through states: Arizona, Utah, Idaho, falling north with diminishing ambition. Monday, work, shit. He
sighed, Montana then. If he stared at the map long enough some town, some river would call to him.

When he heard the vehicle coming he knew it wasn't a cop by the sound. A tired old engine, gears grinding down, massive tires squealing—the bus pulled into the lot alongside the pumps opposite. NORTHLAKE LUTHERAN CHURCH--BUTTE, MT, printed across the side. He stowed his beer on the floor.

The bus' door swung in. A shapeless length of a woman stood yawning in the doorway, rubbing her eyes with the back of her wrist.

"Look out!" she cried. "The pilgrims have landed!"

Her long skirt and sweater were puffed out, twisted sideways, obscuring any sense of the body beneath. She dropped to the pavement, sifting fingers through long blond hair. Passing the car she saw him. She stared back and he recognized the pointed look of the pissed off.

He saw now that only half of her long blond hair was long. The left half of her head had been shorn nearly bald. Her round face lengthened with a grim, concentrated frown. She approached looking over her drooping clothes with apparent despair.

"Don't you go," she told him, then stalked off to the shadows.

She disappeared around the corner of the outbuilding and he tried to think—did he know her somehow? He’d been to Butte often enough but he would have remembered her. That hair, and anyway he didn’t know anyone who admitted going to church. He decided she was a stranger but then he reminded himself he was probably drunk.

A well-pressed man sporting natty slacks and a dress shirt emerged beaming out into the dark. Jim suffered a seizure of recognition. The infuriating grin, the pert, congenial eyes, Jim yanked around in his seat the
better to see him. The man hopped to the ground and Jim watched him pass along the bus, swipe his credit card and set the handle pumping.

As he passed before the Impala, Jim remembered. Coach Dowling, candyass skipper of his old high school baseball team. No no, it wasn't him. This guy had hair, otherwise the resemblance was eerie. Even after ten years, Dowling still symbolized all Jim hated about sunny American adulthood.

Even their resolute gaits were the same, Jim noted, as the man high-stepped across the lot. More travelers stumbled after him, weary men in suits, women trailing baffled chains of children, one girl dragging along unable to open her eyes. Two teenage boys, shirt tails out, scuffled gravel, pretending to smoke cigarettes. All in turn tried the small outbuilding looking for the bathrooms. When they figured out there were none, the men gathered in the shadows to one side, the women to the other.

Jim stepped out to check the oil although he'd added half a quart just five minutes before. He read the level twice, checked the air filter and still he couldn't figure the woman. Had they met some lost night he couldn't recall? Was this yet another sloppy pass to answer for? Maybe she just wanted to convert him. He tinkered with the carburetor, the idle speed, then gave up and sat waiting in the car.

The women returned in a dense flock, his half-shorn girl lost among them. The men came after, walking fast until they were hard upon the women, casting suspicious glances his way. He waved. They hurried on to the bus, crowding the doorway, others lingering outside to stretch and talk. The two delinquents strayed off beyond the reach of light, flashes of white sleeves pitching rocks into the dark.

Jim's mouth tasted of dust but he thought better of reaching for his beer. People all over, hard to track. And the girl—Don't you go. Here I am, he
thought. Where are you? He studied the line of windows, trying to place her among the dark shapes sitting, standing, shifting in their seats.

Then the lone figure working toward the front exit. It was her, pale hair shining under the fluorescents, bag over her shoulder, bundle to her chest. She came around the car, touched her palm to the buckled hood. Satisfied, she laid the bundle down and began unwrapping.

It was a child, he saw. A fat, hairless infant's head, limbs akimbo. She stripped away the last layer, a well-soiled diaper--its legs kicked with a start, tiny back arching, and set up a mewing howl that made Jim turn away. The baby's cries were echoed by rising whines from the bus, movements between seats, soothing voices. A sudden white flash, damp thud, the balled-up diaper slapped off the side of the bus, spilling its contents across the pavement. Outraged faces in the windows.

But the girl focused only on the prone form beneath her. She smiled, cooed, lullabies--the baby screamed louder. Only when she'd wrapped it again in clothes and blankets did it settle to whimpers. She shook her fingers loose, frowning at the mess on them.

She crossed to the squeegee bucket and plunged her hands inside. She scrubbed and dried off on a wad of paper towels. Forcing a false little smile, she approached the car door. She tried the handle and rapped on the window.

"Lemme in," she called, her eyes deadly earnest. An old man gaped behind her in the window. She raised her hand, knocked again.

Jim nodded to the bundle on the hood. "Your baby," he said.

Whatever she said in reply, he couldn't make out. She motioned, roll down the window.

He looked between the baby and the girl and her people in the bus. He cracked the window.
"Let me in," she hissed, her voice high and taut. "These people are killing me."

"Connie?" A voice from the bus. "Connie, are you all right?"

She pressed to the window. Fleshy palms, lips kissing through the narrow gap of glass and steel. "Help me," she whispered. "Please."

Jim could hardly understand her. It hurt just to watch. He cranked the handle. Her thin arm shoved through and unlocked the door. She jumped inside.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." Jim looked between her and the watching faces.

"What are you doing?" A stench of window cleaner filled the car.

"Phew," she gasped. "Thanks." She eased into the seat, noticed the atlas.

"You going someplace?" Then she saw the page was opened to Montana and sighed.

"What else you got?" she asked, peering into the back seat. She reached behind and liberated a Pabst. She finished it in two tries, grabbed another. Sipping now, she offered him some.

"No thanks," he said. She was about his own age, he guessed, maybe 25. Cute, but her halved hair made it hard to stare too long. He read RANK tattooed across the knuckles of her left hand, BITCH spelled out on the right.

"What's going on here?" he asked.

She held the can up to her nose and inhaled. "What I need," she said, "is a breath. What I need is silence. These people... You have no idea the shit I've been through the last couple days." She sipped from her beer. He watched, envying, but refrained taking up his own can.

"Three days," she said. "Sleeping on church floors. Listening to assholes wax poetic about Jesus on the cross. From a medical perspective."
shuddered. "I thought I could hang but goddamn. I'm never ever going to
Spokane again. Fucking we were supposed to be home four hours ago."

The baby shifted on the hood. Murmuring voices from the bus. He
wondered what charges could be brought against him. "Aren't your people--"

"All I need's a minute," she said. "You have any tapes? Anything that
isn't gospel?"

He tried staring her down but she would only look at the tape deck.

"Sure," he turned the key halfway. The radio lit up, the cabin enveloped with
The Stooges, Fun House.

"Huh," she said, just tolerating. She hit rewind, nudged the volume up.
The first song started, Down on the Street—her eyes closed—beautiful, secular,
dirty sweet punk.

A broad hulk of a woman hustled past. Before Jim could ask, what? the
girl was out the door. The fat lady strained toward the hood reaching for the
baby.

"No you don't!" The girl leapt, shoved the woman back onto her spacious
ass. Shouts from the bus. The girl stood huffing over the lady, then turned to
collect her child. She slammed and locked the door behind her. The soursweet
smell of baby mixed with window cleaner.

"That bitch has been after my Nicky all weekend," she said, breaking a
great satisfied smile.

Two men helped the fallen woman regain her feet. She glowered at Jim
and the laughing girl. The men pulled her, yelling, spitting, back to the bus.
Their shadowed forms sat her down, arms waving in argument.

"You got a smoke?" the girl asked.

"Nah. I quit."

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She took a long pull from her beer. "Me too," she said. "But these people make me want to take up every vice known to man." She shrugged and picked up the bag of corn nuts.

The baby struggled, fussing in her arms. Jim turned down the music. Jesus, he thought. What a mess. But he couldn't help looking at her. If she didn't have that baby, if this was a bar, this would be on. She looked like she could break him. "All right," he said. "So, what's going on?"

She stared down at the muted radio. "Right. Sorry." She reached for his hand. "I'm Connie," she said. "This is Nicky." She touched the baby's cheek and tightened the hood around his face. "We're up to our ears in shit."

Jim gawked at her, a sure geek.

"As you may have noticed, Nicky's a baby." She raised him up, proof. "We're broke," she said. "No job, no daddy--so, my dear Aunt, who shall remain forever nameless, has taken us in under conditions that are becoming fucking intolerable. Little did I know... Ah shit," she said, nodding at the rear view.

Jim spotted the look-alike coming toward them, righting his suit coat on his shoulders. He bent low to Connie's window, smiling kindly.

"Here it comes," Connie said.

"Hello," he called through the glass. "What are we doing here, Connie?"

She turned away from the window but raised an extended middle finger to his face. His smile quivered, then righted--all patience. "Talk to me, Connie. Tell me what's wrong."

She said nothing. Her middle finger swayed in singsong rhythm.

"Connie," his voice sharpened. "Come on out now. We've got a lot of tired people who need to get home. Let's not cause your Aunt Patricia any more worry."
Connie's finger, which had begun to slacken, stiffened again. He looked past Connie to Jim, who shrugged.

The man walked back and around the car. Jim's first thought was, *slam the door shut, roll up the window.*

"Fuck," Connie said. "Don't even talk to him."

But Jim stood out of the car and advanced on him, taking the ready hand offered. It was eerie how this guy inhabited Coach Dowling's smile, his affected, too-firm handshake. For years Jim had regretted just quitting the team. He'd dreamed of picking fights, of taunting Dowling with vile obscenities, then crushing the perky bastard.

The man grinned vastly, pumping his hand, not letting go. "Call me Pastor Henry," he said.

Jim said that his name was Jim.

"Now what," Henry asked, "are you getting yourself into, son?"

"You know," Jim said, returning the fierce grip. "I have no idea. But I think this girl needs a rest from you all. No offense."

The pastor sniffed, let go of Jim's hand. "What are you doing, son? Drinking? Driving around, risking every life on the road." His face sadder, more sincere, than Jim would have credited a Dowling type. "You're going to find yourself in a world of trouble."

Jim, against every instinct of decency and self preservation, found himself breaking a ridiculous smile. "Oh, absolutely," he said. "Let's not mess around with the social pleasantries."

Henry, smiling. "Be serious, Son. Drinking and picking up girls is not going to fill the void in your life."

"Oh, I believe you," Jim said.

"Leave him alone, Jackass!" cried Connie.
Henry shook his head. "This girl has problems."

"You're my problem!" screamed Connie. "You and your whole fucking carnie sideshow!" The baby shrieked after its mother. Both men stared at the ground, listening to her soothe the wailing child.

Jim drew the preacher away. "OK," he admitted. "Maybe she has problems."

"Take a good look," said Henry. "An unwed mother, alone in the world, taking any drugs she can find." He stared hard at Jim. "Please tell me she's not going to find any drugs in your car."

Jim had to smile. "I don't do drugs."

"Have you seen what drugs do to children?" Henry asked. "God, but I fear for that child."

The car door slammed and the stereo concussed the night air, battering his chintzy speakers, trembling the glass.

"Shit," Jim ran over to find his door locked. He clenched the handle, a sudden urge to smash glass. He spun away, his car, fuck, then peered back inside. Connie ignored him.


"Look," said Jim. "I don't think she'll open up with you near by. Maybe you should--"

"Everyone in the bus!" Henry yelled.

Jim watched her eyes follow them inside. Every window crammed with staring faces.

She slid across to the driver's side. Her fingers stroked the wheel, slid to the ignition. She yelled something, lost in the throbbing music. The baby's arms and legs jerked, frantic. Her wrist turned and the engine rumbled to life.
A couple fat bursts of gas. Jim jumped away cursing. She waved bye, revving the engine higher and higher. Then, sighing, she reached for the door lock.

Jim opened the door. Brutal noise poured out. He reached inside, cut the engine, killing the music. The baby's screams godawful piercing.

"Oh shit," Connie said, taking up the child. "Oh, Nicky. Oh baby, I'm sorry." The baby wailed unconsolled. She soothed him, rocking him back and forth, until finally he dropped into a sudden, exhausted slumber.

"I was just kidding," she said at last. "I wasn't going to steal your car."

Jim watched her caress the child. "I know."

She glared at him. "What do you know about me, asshole?"

He took a drink in place of responding. The beer poured down his throat, suggesting kinder words. "Well, I just figured you for too much of a good church-goer."

"Hah," she said, trying a smile.

Jim looked down at his beer.

"Look," she said. "I'm sorry. I guess I lost it there a moment. I guess I've been losing it for days."

"Forget it. You've got a lot going on."

She looked over at the bus and stuck out her tongue, then turned back, weary. She stared down at Nicky. Her expression lifted. Her smile and her eyes shined beyond adoration, despite herself. She looked like a mother. "Do you want to hold him?" she asked.

Jim looked at the baby and at the beer in his hand. A dense surge of fear. "Really?" he said.

She nodded, serious. He couldn't think how to say no. He set the Pabst aside and reached across. She gathered the blankets under the child, laid him in Jim's arms. The tiny body against his forearm, his hand cradled the limp
head. The boy settled into his arms, vulnerable, at his mercy. Jim held absolutely still. Easy, he thought.

The boy's features settled in frowning repose, spittle on his lips, paste on the chin. Jim stared at the mess and then at the mother. He licked his thumb, cleaned off the white crust. He studied Connie trying to see her features in him. There was the same roundness but otherwise he was too fresh. Jim suffered a moments wrath, the missing father, but looking at the boy found he couldn't sustain anger. His breathing fell into sync with the child's.

"He's beautiful," he said.

She smiled wearily and he supposed she'd heard this too many times.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"I don't know. I guess we're fucked."

Jim considered the child. "What's his name again?"

"Nicky," she said.

"Nicky," he told the boy. "No way are you fucked." Watching him, he sensed the hapless weight of a life, the softness, the precariousness. Nicky, he thought. What's going to happen to you? He could go any number of ways. Considering the mother, maybe not so well. But anything could happen. She might change in time or the father might return or some other person could emerge to help him grow up. Some day he would hold his own child. It was a blessing he'd have no memory of this night.

Jim watched the sleeping boy with a swelling growth of heart unlike any he'd yet known. The child was small, weak, voracious. The child would outlive him. He watched with gaining hope, the future, life, and then he saw his own life and sorely felt its meanness. He looked up at Connie stricken by a sudden terrible longing. She'd taken off her sweater, was wearing some punk
t-shirt. Her arms were long and shapely. He smiled to her, expressing, he
hoped, a vast capacity for love and tenderness and hope.

"Oh no," she said, edging away. "No way. Everyone wants either my
body or my soul. Why don't you try and surprise me by bringing something
different?"

Jim looked away, stung clean through. The life drained right out of the
night. What now? He wanted to ask her questions, to draw her out, but the
moment was poisoned. He held Nicky close. There was something right about
how the boy felt against him. He realized he didn't want to give back the child.

The preacher waved from the bus. What? he mouthed.

Jim waited until Connie closed her eyes, then shrugged. Henry
frowned, pulled away from the window.

"I can't believe this is my life," Connie said, staring at the headliner.
"This wasn't supposed to happen to me. I'm one of those women."

Jim pulled Nicky closer. With a sure sense of dread he asked, "What do
you mean?"

"Look at me. I'm the woman in all those dirty jokes."

Jim opened then shut his mouth. He remembered an ex-girlfriend, Jen,
her parting shot. Don't just try to solve my problems. I want to talk. The idea
had haunted him for years--the gulf dividing men and women. Besides being
self-absorbing, talking just to talk had always seemed to perpetuate the
problem. Now it made perfect sense.

"I don't think you're any type of woman."

"Uh-huh." Nodding, get this over with.

"Really," he said. "I really don't. I mean, I don't know you but I hear
that and it just doesn't match up."
"Wow, that's really helpful," she said. "Believe what you want, but that doesn't change shit. What I am is smart enough to be a single mom."

Jim watched Nicky sleeping. A bubble of spit gurgled up from the boy's lips, then collapsed. "He's beautiful," he said.

Connie stared at him, incredulous.

"You're lucky," he said. "He's a beautiful boy."

Her lips screwed up to say some awful thing but then she didn't. She watched him. Her expression opened up to an unwilling grin.

"Yeah, maybe," she said at last. "But he does fill a mean diaper."

Jim wanted only to slide next to her. He could see her now: softening, laughter, blunt promise. Her arms were lovely. He was getting used to the hair. They could just sit there, saying nothing. She would lean into him, rest against him, let him share her burdens. They could do anything—he could see sharing a house, moving to New Mexico. Maybe this was the moment where everything changes. Blue eyes watching him over her raised beer can.

Footsteps from behind. They turned to see Pastor Henry coming, a half dozen men besides. Jim closed, locked his door. The men surrounded the car, staring inside. Connie and Jim pulled closer. She reached over, clutched Nicky to her breast.

"Connie," Henry said. "Come on out of that car."

She yawned massively. Her eyes closed and she curled up in her seat. Her shirt settled over Nicky. Jim pulled the fabric away from the tiny mouth.

"Connie. I understand. Let's just go home and we can talk about it later. But I'm not leaving you here. And I'm sure not leaving that boy."

Connie smiled as though savoring some beautiful dream. Her breath heavy, Jim laid his hand on her head—long hair flowing against his palm, the shorn ends prickling his fingers.
Outside, distant, "I'm trying to help you, Connie. I'm trying to understand, but you are not taking that poor child down with you." His hands pressed to the window. The men leaned closer, nodding, staring. The fat woman watching over their shoulders.

Connie snuggled deeper around Nicky's struggling form.

Henry threw up his hands, walked over beside Jim. "Son," he said, rapping on the glass.

"Don't," Connie warned, her eyes still closed.

Henry stroked her head, then cracked the window an inch. Staring up at the pastor, he recalled Coach Dowling pulling him aside. *Jim, look, I've been hearing rumors. I hear you've been drinking at parties. I've hear you've been smoking marijuana.*

Jim could just see the pastor in a baseball hat. "How are you?" he asked.

"I've missed our chats."

Henry forced a smile. "What's it going to be?"

Jim remembered lying to Dowling, seething at a world that forced him to misrepresent himself to that pecker. He'd been ripped at the time.

Now, staring at Henry, he was still ripped. "I guess," he said, "that depends on Connie."

Henry threw up his hands, fuming at the hopelessness of it all. "Well, Connie. What do you say?"

She opened her eyes, sat up to ponder the question. She held Nicky up to consider the faces crowding the windows. Then she put his face to her ear and nodded as though in consultation.

"It's not that we don't believe in God," she explained. "But he's definitely not hanging out with these assholes."
Henry's face twisted up in anger. The fat lady started for the car. Henry held her back. He steadied himself, kneeled low to the window.

"How about you, Son?" he asked. "Do you believe in God at all?"

Jim had to think about it. "Yeah," he admitted. "I often think I do and then I meet fine folks like yourselves and I'm OK again."

Henry chuckled, grim. "Fine," he said. "Open the door."

"Um. No."

"I'm taking that child," Henry said. "I don't want to hurt you but I'm taking that child."

Jim shrugged. "Don't make me do this," he heard. Connie grasped his arm, nudged her chin to his shoulder.

"Don't make me do this."

Jim settled around Connie, resting his cheek on her head.

"Don't make me do this."

Jim raised his hand to the pastor, flipped him off.

Henry grasped the open window and pulled. One of the men touched his shoulder, saying Pastor, no. Henry shook the man off, staring in at Jim. His face strained a taut grim purple and Connie screamed at Jim to roll up the window, cut off the fucker's fingers. The glass bowed against its metal frame. Jim cringed back into Connie as she reached for the handle.

"Roll it up!" she shrieked. "Roll it up!"

Henry wrenched on the groaning glass, his face clenched in terrible, grinning rictus. The glass moaned. Jim wrapped himself around Connie and Nicky, tensed against the shards he knew would slice through him, cut through the mother and child. The thought of a bleeding, screaming Nicky was more than he could bear.
He grabbed for the ignition. The window shattered. He jerked away from the crash trembling, but found he wasn't cut. Connie and Nicky weren't cut. He turned to see Henry peeling back the starred, wrinkled safety glass.

The door was thrown open. He felt himself taken roughly by the shoulders. He yelled, twisted, lashing out. The men grappling with him cursed—Connie and Nicky screaming hysterical. She clawed at the men and as Jim landed on the pavement she slammed the door on an arm. The man howled, the door bounced open, the men reached inside. Jim was dragged back, thrown against a pump. Three men held him down, pinning his arms, his chest until he yielded.

Henry backed out of the car, handed Nicky to the fat woman, who fled for the bus. Connie howled, crying Nicky! crying, Motherfuckers! She was dragged out of the car flopping, kicking, her shirt coming up over her belly and pulled over her face. She was lifted off the ground and over to the bus, into the darkness within.

"Nicky!" she screamed. "Jim!" Children screaming, voices yelling shut up! She wailed on, was muffled in mid-curse. Kids screaming.

Jim felt himself released. He stared up at the men. They backed away, switching glances between him and their torn suits. The eldest man reached inside the car, came away with the keys, hurled them into the shadows. They walked away rolling their shoulders and wiping their hands on their pants.

They stepped onto the bus. The big engine started. Jim watched for some sign of her but there was just the pink line of faces falling away as they pulled out onto the avenue. The bus turned the corner for the on-ramp and was gone.

The lot was vast and dark and he was a long time finding his keys. He stumbled through the shadows, grabbing at bottle caps and broken glass.
Every second Connie and Nicky drawing farther away. He sliced his hand on a broken bottle and hurled the shards into the darkness. When he finally held the keys in his palm, it took him a moment to remember what they were good for.

The hundred miles to Butte was straight and flat and hilly and curving. Shivering, broken window, craving cigarettes. He watched the sun rise over the hills, grateful for the beauty, to be doing something. He drove the wakening streets of downtown Butte until he found a decrepit department store. He was the day's first customer. He bought a new gray suit, dress shoes, a bright red tie, putting it all on credit.

He sat in the small waiting room in Alterations staring at the phone book. Northlake Lutheran, quarter page ad: the Reverend Clifford Henry, senior pastor. He wrote down the address and set the book aside. Magazines and newspapers in the rack beside him. He couldn't imagine reading.

A couple shuffled into the room: ancient, gray, stooping. The lady, a head taller than the withered man, offered him the last padded chair. She sat down beaming, first to her husband, then the room, then Jim. Her smile failed as she considered his torn, dirty clothes, his messy hair. She watched him awhile, then asked, how was his morning, what was his business. Her husband scowled and buried his face in a magazine.

Jim told her he was waiting on a suit.

"Ah," she said. "Won't that be nice?" She turned to her husband, patted his knee. "Won't he be handsome in a suit, Harold?" The old man glared at her hand and batted it away. The woman sighed, then considered Jim. "I think," she lilted, "we have a young lover in our midst." Harold hunched lower behind his magazine.

"Allow me," she said, "to give you a word of advice."
Harold sighed, "Here we go."

"Do you love her?" she asked. "Everything depends on if you love her."

"I don't know," Jim said. "I guess I'll find out."

"Because if you love her, don't let anything stop you. Harold chased me," and again she grasped his knee, "for eight months before I'd consent to attend even one dance with him. But he knew I was the one."

Slowly, deliberately, Harold plucked her hand from his leg and placed it back on her own. She stared down at it, her jaw sagging, quivering. For a moment Jim thought she would break down. But she held in her tears and forced a smile to Harold, who'd already taken cover behind his magazine.

She turned to Jim. "Buy her all the candy and roses you can afford, and take her dancing every Saturday night, even if you hate to dance. That's your job when you're in love—all the little things to show her she's the one. But the one big thing, the life thing, has nothing to do with candies and flowers and sweet words."

The old man flopped the magazine down on his lap. "Would you please just shut up already? The boy plainly thinks you're a fool."

She waved him off. "Just be there for her," she told Jim. "Be there every moment and stay with her no matter what happens. We have, and I tell you true we're the happiest people alive."

"Pttth!" Harold said. "Two years ago she was saying the day we met was the low point of her life. You're senile is what you are," he told her. "You don't even know what day it is, do you?"

She laughed and laughed. "You're not fooling anyone, you know. You sweet old stinker." Again she rested her hand on his leg. "Now, what can I do to bring back that old smile?"

Harold said nothing. The room listed with their labored breathing.
Jim's whole body ached. He stared at the wellworn door willing the tailor to appear with his suit. The fluorescents fouled the bare walls, his cut hands, the blood caked on his torn left knee. His legs hurt. His chest hurt. His head hurt. The old man watching. Some day he'd always hurt like this. If he didn't watch himself, he'd wind up bitter like that old fuck. Those sour, shrewd eyes--watching, mocking. For the first time Jim understood that some day he'd be old.

Tomorrow was Sunday morning. He had a day to think this through, to find the words. We can do this, Connie. We can have a life. He could see her smartass grin, that impossible hair, her eyes in love as she cradled her son. He could imagine never seeing her again, always wondering. Days at work, nights the apartment, watching t.v. Mornings, work again. Maybe she could love him, maybe she'd come to hate him. He realized he didn't care. If he decided, he decided. I'm going to do this. Connie, tomorrow, Sunday morning--I'm coming for you.

The old man coughed and cleared his throat to speak: "Do you think it's going to change you, boy? I mean, for the better?"

"Yeah," Jim said. "I really do."
Sometime between Lunch and Happy Hour

Jimmy Sands has been tending bar since before the dawn of man. Before the Age of Reason, before the glaciers retreated to the wilds of Canada, Jimmy’s been rooted to the business side of O’Brien’s, Fourth and Main, downtown. Here converge the burdens of the ages: thirst, servitude, privation, hangovers. Each shift an eternity pissed away one drink at a time. Wait long enough, they’ll return—the glaciers. Walk in, Jimmy’ll be chipping ice into glasses, humping it hard, still no tip.

He’d opened at eight that morning, won’t close ’til two tonight—leave the counters and floors for tomorrow, kill the lights, lock up, go on home. Double-shifts alone, three days running. The other two bartenders walked last week and he hasn’t seen direct sunlight since. The outside world falls away. There is no other world.

Jimmy sips scotch, reads, considers the chores he neglects. Dirty glasses, lemons and limes left uncut, ashtrays overflowing. This place. He turns the page of his book, his fingers reek of whiskey. He wonders, what part of being smart is just not settling? He wonders what else he could do. What exciting minimum-wage job awaits me now? The thought makes him reach for his glass. The old men spit tobacco into ashtrays.

Every time daylight wedges through the front door, flooding the dark room with day, Jimmy scowls, bracing for insult. Give me. Serve me. He
squints, moves to hide his drink then raises the glass to his lips. He should be applying to colleges. He should be sleeping.

Daylight wedges through the room. Jimmy pulls away from his book seething. A woman stands in the doorway, hesitating, stooped over. She steadies herself against the opened door. At least seventy, he guesses; lost. She stares blankly into the darkness and starts forward, shuffling careful, slow, until the door closes behind her taking the last of her sunlight. She stiffens, clutches her purse with thin arms and starts yelling, "Goddamn motherfucker shitass shitheel...." Eyes wide open and straining, she curses at nothing that Jimmy can fathom and he looks to Stiles across the bar but he's watching this, too. What little conversation there was in the room cuts dead. Every face cranes toward the gray-haired, wrinkled-up source of these profanities.

Jimmy waits for the lady to finish but she's still barking obscenities and this is not what he needs just now. Why does this shit always go down on his shifts? When he's on the verge of a complete breakdown? "Ma'am!" he calls over to her. "Ma'am. Are you all right?"

She stops mid-curse and turns a long, powdered face toward him. Her swollen eyes list in their sockets, then lock onto the dim lights and mirrors behind the bar. She starts tentatively forward. Her hands reach out before her--tiny step, tiny step--until at last her outstretched fingers grasp the countertop.

"Pardon?" her voice cracks, unfocused.

"Are you all right there?"

"Sure, sure," she says, only now placing him. "Can't see a thing with the damn lights so low." She feels for a stool, sets her purse on the counter and hoists herself up. Still gasping, settling herself, she presses against the edge
of the counter. "Either my eyes are finally giving out or there's some funny business going on in here.

"A little of both, I suspect," she mutters. "Now, what can I get in here?"

She orders a beer, one of those fancy new beers, and watches the bartender step to it. Her eyes have adjusted enough to the gloom to note his white collared shirt and that the black mass on his face must be a beard. Her gaze shifts to the mirror, bottles stacked high, and she sees her own face emerging between what she recognizes as bottles of vodka. Horsey old bitch, she thinks. When did those bags get so big? Even with her hair pulled back, the smart neckline of her favorite New Year's dress, she looks old, old.

She notices the poster off to the right of the shelved liquor--two girls in swimsuits clinging to an oversized bottle of beer. Her eyes massively roll. She says, "I guess you don't get so many seniors in here."

"Oh," Jimmy says, watching the swirling brown ale curl to the rim of the glass. "I wouldn't say that." He knocks the tap shut, combs the head into the drain, refingers the tap and coaxes the glass full. He towels the glass dry and sets it before her.

"OK," she says, "I bet you don't get many old ladies in here." She sips at her glass, rolls the beer through her mouth, takes a bigger swallow.

"Well. You may have me there."

She smiles. Too much, Jimmy thinks. He can see her later on, telling her old lady friends how she raised hell in a real dive bar. She's half-turned in her seat, culling details, inspecting the room first one way and then the other.

Ugh, she's thinking. To either side of her a middle-aged man slumps over the counter and over ashtrays. A couple guys at a table, two others alone in booths. A short hallway leading to what must be frightening bathrooms. At
the far end of the bar a TV with the sound off—sweating fans in the upper decks, a pitcher warming up in the bullpen. She's grinning as she turns back to him. "This sure is some dump," she says.

He shrugs, OK. *What am I supposed to do about it?* Besides, look at her, what's he going to say?

"Don't mind me," she says. Her hands flutter before her and settle to her glass. "You know. I'm old and crotchety."

Jimmy assumes her smile. "Sure," he says. "No worries." He stands, collects a few empties from the counter and loads the dishwasher. He trades out clean ashtrays for Stiles and Jake. Finding she's still watching him, he dries his hand on a towel and extends it. "Jimmy Sands."

She takes his hand. "Nice to meet you, Jimmy. I'm Lavonna Williams." He's young, she decides. Twenties, early thirties. Thin chest and thin arms that don't begin to fill out his modest button-down shirt. Only his thick, black beard provides him any substance. His dark eyes shine as he puts a finger to his hairy chin.

"So," she says, propping her elbows on the countertop, "Who are you, Jimmy?"

He can't help but look away. Jake and Stiles are watching. He looks across the room, at the TV, his brow furrowed and then smoothing. "I," he says—"I'm your faithful server."

She gives him a look, sour, and he returns an asshole's grin. "OK," he says. He knows but it takes a moment to put into words. "I'm saving up money to go back to school." He hasn't spoken of this for months.

"And what will you study?"

He raises his book to her: *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich.*

"History," he says. "The hope and beauty of human progress."
"Yes," she says. "I've heard of that."

The table of two calls for another round and she smiles indulgently as Jimmy reaches for a pitcher. He finds he's pouring fast to return to her. He sets the pitcher on the counter and takes their money, no tip. He sits. He tells her about school, two years of good grades, a term of not so good grades, his reasons for quitting. She's interested. She asks questions. He reaches for his glass of scotch, then thinks better and pushes the glass behind the lip of the counter. He realizes she reminds him of his grandmother.

"You know," she says, "I used to come to this place all the time."

Jimmy looks up from his glass. "Is that a fact?"

"Oh, yeah," she says. "Of course, then it was called the Virginia Cafe. We used to be regulars, my husband and me."

Jimmy sees Fat George lean across his table, listening. His weak eyes drop as Jimmy glares at him. No. Stay away from her. "The Virginia Cafe," he says. "I never heard that before." She's looking all around--smiling, hazy-eyed. He can't help seeing her young and pretty, on the arm of a grinning soldier, nostalgic tones of black and white photographs. He asks, "What was it like then?"

Her lips purse and her eyes shine as she thinks back. "It was brighter," she says. "Much, much brighter." She sips from her beer. Her lips come away from the glass frowning and Jimmy's suddenly afraid that she's seeing more than she wants to.

"The main thing was there were pictures of everyone who ever came in the place," she says. "Every inch, every last inch of wall, had someone you knew tacked up there and they were starting across the ceiling by the time we stopped coming. It made you smile just walking through the door because you always knew you'd be among friends."
"No kidding?" Jimmy considers the stale walls, Jake and Stiles, Fat George sulking at his table.

"Oh, we had a good crew. We had everyone: dock workers and businessmen and sales girls—it didn't matter. All we cared about was being friendly and having a good time."

Jimmy wants to tell her it's still the same. Come in nights, weekends--you'll see--good times, fun people. Except if she did come, she'd only find more of the same. "Where was your picture?" he asks.

"You know, I've been trying to figure that out since I walked in. The whole place's turned around. The bar's right, I guess, but the room used to be maybe twice as big. Seems like there were more booths." She leaves off, trying to square her memories to the room, takes another sip from her beer. "I'd say we were a few booths from the back and halfway up to the ceiling. It was a good picture, too. Wallace, my husband, and me.

"Wallace was always so handsome and I wasn't bad either, if you can believe that, and they caught me planting this huge kiss on his cheek. My nose was squished back and there was this crazed alcoholic look in the one eye you could see. He looked fine, utterly normal, except for the maniac attached to his face. All these empties on the table before us. It was a great picture; strangers would recognize us on the street. We loved to sit where we could see ourselves. Christ, listen to me go on. Can you tell I haven't been out in a while?"

"No, no," he says. "Go on."

She watches him close, he is listening. "It was a place you belonged to. Not," and now she squints up at the swimsuit poster, "a bunch of crap on the walls telling you what kind of beer to buy."
"Huh." Jimmy can see it—faded photographs, grinning old-timers lined up against the counter holding mugs, the bartender in the background, watching over them, steady. "I guess I feel kind of cheated."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry. It was a long, long time ago." This look comes over her. "I'm probably so senile I don't even know how much I'm exaggerating."

Jimmy says no, no and Lavonna nods, yeah, it's true, and they smile and Jimmy reaches under the bar for his glass of scotch. This isn't so bad, he thinks. I'm getting paid for this.

The front door swings open and everyone flinches at the daylight. "Jimmy!" calls this raucous voice. The room ebbs to darkness and even from across the way Lavonna can see there's something wrong with the man's face. A lumpen knot of scars deforms his cheeks and jaw—squinting blue eyes daring anyone to look. She feigns interest in the TV.

Jimmy sighs, reaches for a pint glass. "Hey, Shultz," he says.

Schultz takes the seat next to Lavonna, grinning wide. "Any good ass being sold in here today?" He snorts and slaps a twenty on the bar. "Now you hold onto that," he tells Jimmy, waving away the bill. "Go get yourself some nice trim. Har, har."

Jimmy sets a beer before him, pours out a shot of Jameson. Then Jake is motioning for another and then Stiles wants another. Stiles bitches because his tab's maxed and he counts out loud each quarter, dime and nickel to pay his dollar, twenty-five cents for the glass of Olympia. "Jesus," he says, cradling his beer close. "Everything's got to be so fucking hard."

"Anyone else want to make an easy twenty?" Shultz yells.

Jimmy turns, find Fat George standing before him, his empty glass on the counter. "Could I get another one, please?" he asks.
Jimmy nods, reaches for a fresh tumbler and behind for a bottle of gin. He adds tonic and then finds he's out of limes. He plods back to the walk-in cooler.

Lavonna watches him disappear and she's aware of men's shoulders, of men, surrounding her. They smell of sweat, cigarettes, fried foods. The one standing beside her hefts a stout arm to the bar and smiles. "Good afternoon," he says. "I hope you don't mind my interrupting."

"Hey! Fat George!" Shultz calls over her shoulder.

George lifts his chin to him but says nothing.

"Good afternoon," she replies, glancing between them. She gestures to the empty stool between them. "Have a seat."

"Actually," he says, "We might be more comfortable at my table. I know I'll be."

She stares at him. Soft, she decides. Soft cheeks and watery blue eyes and a sloping paunch that belies the youngish, soft complexion and full head of blond hair. Harmless. Like FDR as a chump. "Well, then." She grips the bar rail and slides delicately to her feet. She thrusts her hand to him. "Lavonna Williams."

"George Fischer." A slight bow. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Yes," she agrees. "I imagine it must be."

Jimmy returns from the cooler to hear the high, false laugh and watches George lead her to his table. Christ! he flares. Fat George—you fucking bloodsucker. George helps her sit then returns for his drink. He lays down three dollar bills and doesn't wait for his fifty-cents change. Flees with his drink.

Shultz whistles low. "Damn," he says. "You gotta act fast if you want to pick up a little action around here."
Jimmy can't even begin to respond.

"Well." Schultz stands from his stool. "Nothing personal, Jimmy. But I feel like taking me a booth today." His face contracts to a sort of wink and he crosses over to the booth next to George and Lavonna.

Jimmy stands awestruck before all this human shit. Shultz, Fat George, Stiles, Jake. What incredible lowlifes. What am I doing here? He can't believe he let George get to her. It's Shultz—that asshole still flusters him. He knows it, too. He likes it—the way people flinch away from him, they way they're drawn to the money he throws around. He tips like a king but it's still not worth this grief.

Jimmy watches George fold up his newspaper, inked-up classifieds on top, sympathy details, the old scam—just down on my luck right now, if you could spare just a little.... Jimmy never believes it's going to work but it does work. Enough to keep George working at it, anyway. He watches George talking, talking and sees her beginning to warm up to him. After a few minutes they laugh and raise their drinks for a toast. Christ, Jimmy thinks, reaching for his scotch. What am I doing here?

Lavonna finishes the last of her beer and from across the table comes the slurp of straw and air.

"I don't think," George says, "that I'm comfortable toasting with tired-out drinks. Allow me to buy us another round."

She sets her empty down with a flourish. "I'd be honored."

He stands. "What'll you have?"

"That gin and tonic you had looked fine."

"Gin and tonic it is." He collects their glasses and verges off across the bar. He sets the empties down on the counter and reaches for his wallet, peers inside, then returns and sits heavily in the booth.
"Lavonna," he winces, looks away. "I'm embarrassed to say this. I don't happen to have enough money on hand for our round. I wasn't planning on staying so long."

"Don't be silly." She reaches across and takes his hand. "When you get to be my age, this sort of thing happens all the time." She looks over and Jimmy's waiting. "Jimmy! Could you bring over two gin and tonics?"

"Sure thing," he mutters. He has to pause as he reaches for fresh glasses. Jesus, George. This is embarrassing, it's goddamn demeaning is what it is. If it wasn't for the lady.... For all she knows she's having a nice conversation.

And George, Jesus. What a bummer. He'd watched George become Fat George. Inside of two years, he'd gone from a couple drinks after work to a couple at lunch and more after work to no work at all—just drawing unemployment and whatever he can cadge off strangers. Sometimes they talk and Jimmy starts to feel like George is the only one he can relate to, historical allusions, complete sentences, and then he'll ask for a little money or try to weasel a drink on the house. Amazing. Depressing. George is a fucking cautionary tale.

Jimmy brings their drinks and Lavonna gazes up beaming at him, George turns away. She watches him go then looks again to George, who just seems a little shy around other men.

"So, tell me," he says, "Mrs. Lavonna Williams, how you came to be drinking in O'Brien's on a Tuesday afternoon."

"Well," and she pauses. She looks down at the glass in her hands. "I was going someplace and then I changed my mind." She clears her throat. "I thought of this old place and decided to see if it was still here." She turns up to him again. "And here I am."
George switches subjects to himself—out of work, divorced, something about moving out of his house and into an apartment. Someplace not so expensive. He tells her how exciting it is living in a building with so many people, of going out and meeting all sorts of interesting people. "People like yourself," he says. "I just knew you'd be interesting."

"Har!" Schultz cackles.

She starts to object but he cuts her off. "No, I can tell. There's just something about the people of your generation. You had the Depression and then the war to fight and this great spirit through it all we don't have anymore. I look at you and that's exactly what I see: too much character to get bogged down worrying about yourself."

Jimmy bristles at the comment. George picked that one up from him, from a conversation with an old marine, and now he has to sit here listening to his own words turned around to swindle an old lady. The rest though is classic Fat George. God, I admire you, and, How do you stay so strong? Jimmy's about to walk over there but it looks like maybe she's onto him. She's studying his slumping features like he's left her far behind.

The soft young man is going on and on and it's getting more than a little embarrassing. "George," she says. "I think maybe you read too many books."

George sighs and tells her she's just being modest.

"No, George," she says. "I'm not. If you saw me any other day you'd, well, you wouldn't think I was anyone to admire. People see me in the grocery store and turn away. Some days I don't make it out of my pajamas."

George looks skeptical.

"Most of the time it looks like pieces are falling off me. This," and she tugs at the fabric of her sleeve, points to her make-up, "I do maybe twice a month."
George smiles and shakes his head, says nothing.

She opens her mouth and then frowns, waiting. Her face tightens, wrinkles deepen. "I came downtown today to visit my husband and, and I couldn't go through with it." She stares off across the room. "There's your goddamn strength for you."

"Lavonna, I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault."

There's a long silence before he asks, "Hospital?"

"Nursing home. He had a stroke three years ago. He hasn't woken up since."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault." She sips her drink to the rocks. "You want another?"

"Sure."

"Jimmy!"

Brilliant, a professor had once written on his term paper. He's making drinks. This is his job. This is what's expected of him. But once he'd been brilliant, inspired. He drops lime slices into their drinks and ferries them across the room. He returns, adds two charges to her tab. How many drinks has he poured? How many hangovers?

Brilliant, the professor had written. With some work, condensing, clarifying, bolstering, I believe we could publish this paper in the university journal. Jimmy had started the revision but soon became resentful. It was already there. The language was too inspired to mess with. He met a girl, a great run of bands were playing in town. He lost interest in school and
dropped out the next semester. Tomorrow maybe he could take another swing at the paper. He still had it filed away somewhere.

Two drinks later and she's still talking about the rest home. She can't believe how much she needs this, to talk. The worst part of visiting Wallace, she says, is the long hallway to his room. All of the residents wandering, tottering, crying. So many people, so many staring eyes. She's been grabbed by the sleeve and held there to stare into shuddering lips mouthing questions and complaints until a bemused attendant would rescue her. They've lost something, those people, and still they need so much. It terrifies her that she might end up the same way. That nauseating weakness right there for all to see. Or else too far gone—blank looks, sad groups placed around TV sets, sloppy clothes from being dressed by somebody else. She dresses up *sharp* when she visits. She's a visitor. She is entirely different from those people.

"Yes," George tells her. "You've still got it."

She's staring into the folds of her hands. "Wallace would hate it there, if he had any idea. The smell—skin creams and old, dying flesh. Piss and ammonia. Anyone would hate it. I hate it." She's rocking forward, her face clenching up, and then she's sliding to the edge of the bench. "Sorry," she says. "Sorry." She's hobbles across to the dirty hallway.

Jimmy watches Fat George's mouth drop. He slumps forward and folds his hands over his face.

"You getting lucky tonight, George?" Shultz is craned around the booth divider.

"Jesus Christ," George says. "Shut up."

"Cause that is some sexy talk going on over there. Bedsores, nursing homes, all kinds of cremes."
George slides his drink from hand to hand. Jimmy leans across the bar, grinning even though it's Schultz talking. He thinks, *give it to him.*

"You going to take off her Depends first or just--"

"Shut up."

Shultz smiles, he looks even worse when he smiles. "It's just," he says, "I don't ever see you talking to broads. I always figured you for a fag."

"I think," George huffs, "it's possible you're even uglier inside than that nightmare you call a face."

"That's probably true," Shultz says. "But I pay for my own liquor."

George flinches, Jimmy smiles, Shultz homes in. "And I don't have this reputation for conning money off people. And definitely not off old ladies."

"Oh, fuck you, Shultz."

Shultz leans back in his booth but his hacking voice bellows across the room. "People are getting sick of your shit, asshole. You owe money to people and you're going to get hurt if--"

"Gentlemen!" Jimmy yells. "Keep it civil or get the hell out of my bar."

"Your bar," Shultz mutters low. "Shit."

George looks at Jimmy and shrugs. He nods over to Shultz's booth and gestures with upturned hands. *What can I do?*

Jimmy stares until the fat schmuck lowers his eyes. These people, he thinks. My life. His world has shrunk to six square blocks. From home to work to bar to bar to bar. Six blocks. Sometimes another couple blocks to the library. Sometimes this girl in the West Hills. Maybe two miles.

Lavonna's staring at herself in the filthiest bathroom she's ever seen. Tears well up against all her will and she has to brace herself against the wall. She's rocking back and forth against the sink. "Oh shit, Wallace," she says.
"Oh, no. Oh, no." She repeats his name: Wallace, Wallace. She sees him lying slack-mouthed in his bed, gray, drooling, sour smelling. She's ashamed--she's ashamed for him. She doesn't want to see him, to go to that place ever again. I'm so sorry, she says. I'm so sorry. The whole of fifty-three years flooding over her--Wallace so young and handsome, shy, asking her name, his shocked look the first time she began undressing him even though they weren't married. His face filling out, sagging as they aged, as they watched their children grow and leave the house. Now this fading shell laid out on a nursing-home bed. The terrible charade of visiting, talking to him. I wish you could just die, she says. I'm so sorry. I wish you would die.

She sits on the toilet until it passes. She has no idea how long she's been there. Cramps seize the undersides of her thighs and again she notices the obscenities scrawled across the walls, the peeling paint. She rolls up some toilet paper and dabs at her eyes, blows her nose. Her hands a smear of lipstick and powder, and she has to smile. She stands before the speckled mirror to take in the waterlogged wreck of her face. Jesus, she cries out. I'm melting. She giggles. Maybe you aren't so tough after all.

She rolls out some paper towel, wets it under the faucet and starts to scrub away what's left of the mascara. The blush and foundation and lipstick come next; she watches the pale skin and deep lines laid bare. She rinses her face, gasps at the cold water and then cups more to her skin. She raises her dripping face to the mirror. Agh, you're the one little kids can't help staring at in the market. She smirks--that sad sack in the bar--to think I could help him. She raises a paper towel to her face.

She unbolts the door and returns to find George scribbling on a napkin. "Are you ok?" he asks, as she eases into the booth.
She sees his scared face and thinks, why he's just a little boy. "Yes, George. Thank you, I'm fine. I guess I was in there for a while. You must have thought I'd fallen in."

His tries to smile but doesn't make it. He asks again, "Are you ok?"

"I'm fine, George. I had this-- It's been a long time since I've really talked about Wallace. About how terrible it is having to pretend he's ok. You're wonderful to listen."

He still looks frightened and she reaches across for his hands. "You're a good man, George. Thank you." He nods, but says nothing and then he's rubbing at his eyes. He excuses himself and starts for the bathroom.

Lavonna watches him go and gestures to Jimmy.

"Another round?"

"Doubles, please." She notices the inked-up napkin on the table. She sees dollar signs, figures added and subtracted, and she turns away, not wanting to pry. *If a man wants to talk about money, he'll brag about it.* Jimmy approaches, sets two glasses down before her, and asks how she's doing.

"Wonderful." She smiles. "I'm so glad I stopped by. That George has me chattering like a damn chipmunk."

"I'm glad."

"Of course," she adds, "the drinks you keep sending over might have something to do with it."

"Well, be careful," he says.

"No," she says. "This is just what I needed."

He opens his mouth, pauses before adding, "Let me know if you need anything."

"Of course. Thank you, Jimmy."
Jimmy leaves, George returns. George and Lavonna sit quietly across from one another, sipping their cocktails. The room is silent except for glasses scraping across wood, a cough, someone muttering to himself.

"I was wondering," George says at last, "whatever happened to all those old pictures on the walls?"

Her eyes go soft as she thinks back. "You know, I have no idea."

"I was wondering also why you guys stopped coming in here."

"That's easy," she laughs. "I got knocked up with my firstborn and we moved out to Multnomah."

He asks, so she tells him about her kids and she warms to the telling. Two sons, Michael and David. She tells all the stories, their wild youths and easygoing reformations, wives and careers, grandchildren. Soon enough, she tells him, there'll be great-grandchildren.

"How often do you get to see them?"

"Holidays." She's staring through him now. "Holidays."

"You must have plenty of friends, though. You must keep pretty busy."

"Nope. Everyone's dead or moved out to Arizona. Now it's just me and the church ladies." She starts laughing. "You want some fruitcake?"

George laughs his high, false laugh. Jimmy scowls. He reaches for his bottle, pours another glass.

Lavonna's hands cup before her mouth. "Let me warn you, George. When you lose your husband, look out 'cause you're in danger of becoming somebody's project, and they're probably going to mention God--a lot."

George returns her smile and she asks him, does he watch the news?

"Sometimes."

"I do." She leans closer, whispering. "If I ran the world, George, I tell you what. I'd set it up so people had to fornicate with folks with other
religions. That way, in a couple generations nobody'd know who they were anymore and we'd have one less thing to fight over."

George nods hopefully to her.

"Did I just say, 'fornicate?" she asks, before breaking into chittering laughter. "Those church ladies are sneakier than I thought."

"Must be something in the fruitcake," George says.

"Hah," Lavonna says. "Must be. I knew those old gals couldn't be as stupid as they pretend."

George laughs with her. *Bastard's getting cocky,* Jimmy thinks. He tries to catch George's eye—no! the finger drawing across the throat—but he won't look up. Jimmy stands, he's going over there, then he stops. It's a lost cause—he doesn't care. He's done. He pours his whiskey down the sink. He looks up to see Stiles and Jake watching him, horrified. He's embarrassed at himself, at the gesture. No more drinking. He knows what they're thinking—*so dramatic.* But isn't this how things get done? Isn't that what people do to change themselves? He sets his glass in the sink and already he feels sober. The break has been made. He can move on—tomorrow he can start applying to colleges. No drinking until he's accepted someplace, until classes start. I'm going back to school, he realizes.

Finish up smart, he tells himself. You can do this. He checks his dispensers and tubs and sees he's low on olives and pepperoncinis. He walks to the back room. Already the place looks different—passing... that time before.

Jimmy returns from the back room to find Shultz peering over the panel at George, his tongue flickering obscenely as he leers down over Lavonna. George is trying to ignore him but Jimmy can see he's terrified. She chatters on, oblivious.

"Shultz!" Jimmy yells. "Can I get something for you?"
Shultz grins, caught. He lowers himself to his seat. "Yeah," he says.

"Why don't you send over another round?"

Jimmy pours a beer and a shot and comes around to Shultz's table. There's a twenty on the table. "Keep it," Shultz says.

"Thanks," Jimmy says. Lavonna's the only voice in the room, talking still about the church ladies. Jimmy peers around the divider to watch George. His fat throat rolling with the words, the hangdog look in his eyes—waiting for a pause, to ask. Jimmy hurries back behind the counter.

"You know," Lavonna asks, "What the worst part about the god squad is, other than all the bitching and sermonizing?"

George says he can't guess.

"The damn impersonality of it all." She looks at the last of her drink but doesn't touch it. "Even though in their pious little hearts they're trying to save me."

"They're trying," George says.

"You know what?" she says. "After a while you just want to talk to someone who doesn't have to 'cause they're after your soul or because they're your grandson or who doesn't want anything from you other than your company."

"I know what you mean."

"Oh, don't look so sad." She reaches for his hand. "I've had a good life. I forget that sometimes but I really have. And meeting you today, talking to you.... I really want to thank you, George. You've done more for me today than anyone has in months, years." She grips his hand and he looks hopeful again.

This, Jimmy thinks, is the lowest moment of my life. The absolute bottoming out of my life. Remember this. This will always be on you.

George leans forward, his throat rolling, hands cringing.
"Well," Lavonna says at last. "I guess I'll be leaving before they have to carry me out." She releases his hand and reaches for her purse. "Do you want another before I settle up."

George looks at her then down at his empty hands. His breath comes fast, his shoulders tense. His mouth opens. "No," he says. "I've had enough."

"Well," she says. "It's been a pleasure." She offers her hand and holds him in her grasp a long time. "You're a good man, George. I hope we meet again."

"I do too."

"Fine," she says. She stares as though marking him. Then she gains her feet and weaves across the room to Jimmy. "Barkeep," she nods, then laughs. She steadies herself against the counter as he totals her bill. She pays, leaving him ten dollars besides. He tries to refuse the money but she pushes it across the counter. "Here," she says to him. "Come here."

He leans close and for a moment he thinks she's going to kiss him, but she only whispers in his ear. "You know, Jimmy," she says. "You remind me of Mr. Robert Earl Montgomery. Now, he was a bartender." Her breath smells of peppermint and gin. Her hand closes over his. "Robby watched out for us and we loved him. Or I did anyway." She pulls away grinning and there's a blush to her cheeks, then she glances away. She folds her change into her purse and looks once more around the room and then turns to leave.

Jimmy watches her weave across the floor and into the door before pushing it open. "Jesus," she says, raising her free hand to shield her eyes from the sudden light. Her shoulders heave with a deep breath taken and then she steps onto the sidewalk and the door closes behind her.

The dishwasher rumbles to a stop. Jimmy bends down and takes a rack of steaming glasses and sets it on the counter to dry. He checks his watch,
starts restocking the napkin and straw dispensers. He slices up lemons and limes and considers the room. Everyone looks fine--faces conserving themselves, nursing drinks, and he looks to the back corner where George sits hunched over his table, his head in his hands. Schultz is craned around the divider mocking him.

"What the hell was that?" Shultz is saying. "You're the saddest-ass con man I ever heard of."

Jimmy takes two fresh glasses in hand and reaches behind for a bottle of gin, a double shot of Scotch. He passes around the bar, touches Schultz on the shoulder and says, "Ease up a minute." He moves to the next table and sets down George's drink. George looks up with tired eyes and Jimmy raises his glass before him. George stares at his drink a moment and then he picks it up and they clink glasses. They raise them high, watching the rims rise to their brows and the liquor rush into their mouths. The drinks taste good. They hold their glasses high an extra moment, rolling their tongues and swishing the liquor through their mouths before letting it ease down their throats. They lower their glasses and stare at the drinks in their hands. They both know better than to say anything. There's a cough from the bar. The click of a lighter. It's hazy in there as at dusk. The front door swings open and there's a flash of light and the crash of traffic and the first faces of the afterwork crowd file in. It's almost happy hour.