Last Light We Failed to Put Out| A collection

Joseph A. Smalley

The University of Montana

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

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation
Smalley, Joseph A., "Last Light We Failed to Put Out| A collection" (1994). Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers, 2813.
https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/2813

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

** Please check “Yes” or “No” and provide signature**

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

Author’s Signature ____________________________

Date: April 29, 1994

Any copying for commercial purposes or financial gain may be undertaken only with the author’s explicit consent.
THE LAST LIGHT WE FAILED TO PUT OUT.

A Collection

by

Joseph A. Smalley

B.A., Southern Methodist University, 1988

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts Creative Writing

University of Montana

1994

Approved by:

Chairman, Board of Examiners

Dean, Graduate School

May 3, 1994

Date
CONTENTS

STORIES

THE LAST LIGHT WE FAILED TO PUT OUT 1
BUILDINGS 26
SOMETHING LIKE HUNGER 52

ESSAYS

NUHOMA 74
I AM DRIVING, while Brynn tells me again about her fiance, Ray. It seems he manages and owns the plastic container store over on Mockingbird, his arms are as big as tree trunks, and they do it twelve, fifteen times a day. She forgets I met him once, at a pool party, but it all sounds true. Ray raises dogs for the spending money, these wrinkly Chinese dogs with a funny name I can never remember. Christ, they're ugly, though: you can't tell one end from the other. They follow him wherever he goes, even the bedroom. Brynn says Ray carries a pistol, too, and once shot himself in the leg while fooling around and damn near bled to death because he refused to go to Parkland Memorial. I watch Brynn's frosted hair drift over her eyes and her mouth suck in on a cigarette between the words. The smoke trails out the open window.

"Goddamn," Jean says from the backseat. "Men."

I wish Jean would mind her own business. Ever since her divorce came through, she has made us her cause. Jean thinks Ray is bad news, claims he beats Brynn. Jean no longer believes in marriage, but when she gets drunk, she subscribes to the course
of true love. I would like to fill Jean in on some hard facts of life in these United States. One, Ray owns a North Dallas split-level house with a half-moon drive; his redneck oilman father left him swimming in money. Two, Brynn, having put the trust fund up her nose, relies on Ray for the ex-SMU cheerleader lifestyle: Neiman Marcus account, nights at the Stark Club, spring on the Yucatan P. Three, I am merely blanco trasho. Somehow, Brynn and I met anyway, at Richmond Community College night school, where Jean teaches poetry. But that's pretty far from the course of true love.

"I get sick of hanging out with Ray and his buddies watching ESPN every night," Brynn is saying. "They sit around doing high fives and say 'Hey hon, can you get me another beer?' like they never seen a fridge in their fucking lives." But she can't fool me -- she's slumming, and we both know it.

Rico, my oldest and only friend, makes a bored fourth in the backseat. He's heard all this before. Lately, he's been referring to Brynn and me as the "slowest romance in the Southwest" and has threatened to write the Guinness Book of World Records.

We end up at the Winedale Tavern on Lower Greenville, as we have every Friday night this summer. It's narrow, has dark hardboard floors and doesn't serve mixed drinks, so most people
go elsewhere. The owner, O.T. McCall, has saved us the front table -- no big deal, the place is virtually empty. But I like him. "Hey, Old Testament," I say, and plonk down two dollars, which gets me four glasses of watery beer. He likes us because we dance; he shakes a leg every now and then and pretends he's twenty or thirty years younger. Brynn is his favorite partner, but he's danced with each of us and I got to admit he's pretty good.

O.T.'s also an accomplished liar. We sometimes call him "The Story of His Life," because he's still working on it. Tonight, he tells us about running a laundromat in Leakey, way down in the Texas Hill Country. He claims his wife Nola -- marriage number four -- tried to burn his face off with a steamline. "That's how I lost most of my good looks and all my hair," he says, winking at us.

"Is that the wife you shot?" Brynn asks.

"No," O.T. says, "I loved her. This one, she run off in '56 with a two-bit El Paso rodeo star. They met down by the river in Kerrville, and he charmed her lace pants off. Fancy feller, wore hand-stitched shirts with mother-of-pearl buttons and boots with mirrors on 'em. You can guess how he used them mirrors. Anyway, she come to a bad end. His mother poisoned her."
"Awww, shit," Rico says and goes over to the pool table. We know O.T. hails from Delaware and came to Texas for The Great Society. Nobody talks quite like he does.

Brynn and Jean get up and dance to Patsy Cline. Although Brynn's a foot shorter, she leads. "Ten years ago, two women danced together in my place I would've called the police," O.T. says. He relights half a Winston, blows smoke everywhere and looks at me. "You're in love with that little girl. I can tell."

I don't know what to do with this. "Don't let Jean hear you talk about little girls, O.T. She's a radical feminist poet with a prison record."

He shrugs his shoulders and laughs. "Hell, I'm too old to know what you kids are talking about half the time. But I know what my heart tells me. You two are in love."

I watch him stub his cigarette out. "Maybe I'm in love with her, but she's in love with being in love." I can see this doesn't mean anything to him. "I'm no good."

O.T. turns serious and folds his beer towel into a triangle. "None of us are any good you know," he says. "But some of us are better at it than others."

We talk about that for awhile, but it doesn't get us
anywhere.

THE MORE JEAN drinks, the more I realize she's got a heart like a drop of acid. She comes from the panhandle, somewhere north of Plainview and south of Happy, and doesn't let anyone ever forget it. "Where I come from," Jean says, "we get everything out on the table." She calls it "catharsis," but I had no idea it was supposed to be so enjoyable, repeatable or competitive. Jean's got her arm around Brynn, and she's doing her standby routine: "If only you knew what I know about men." She just needs to put it to music and sing it.

They cover all the old familiar territory. Jean's ex-husband, Jerry, was too lazy to get up at night, so he pissed in beer cans and left them by the bed. Ray doesn't allow Brynn to touch the Bang & Olufsen hi-fi because she's "thick as pig shit." Jerry told Jerry Junior he wasn't his father. Ray calls Brynn "cunt" in public: he thinks it's a term of endearment. Jerry busted two of Jean's teeth, then sent her to a bad dentist. Ray broke Brynn's wrist during sex. Jerry forced Jean to have an abortion. Brynn caught Ray with her fourteen-year-old cousin. Jerry raped Jean with a carrot.

"Jesus," Rico says.
"Ray is no good for you, no good," Jean says to Brynn. No kidding. They keep hugging each other and looking at me. What am I supposed to say: "Goddamn ... Men?"

Brynn excuses herself and heads for the toilet. Jean leans over and grabs my shirt collar with both hands. "You kids better dance, and then you kiss her tonight or I'll never forgive you," she says. I would like to be in control, just for once, but do as I'm told, head for the jukebox and play Dusty Springfield's "The Look of Love" with all the change I got. When Brynn returns, we slow dance until O.T. reluctantly turns us out at one in the morning.

Jean and Rico are nowhere to be found, so I drive Brynn back to the college. I drive in a stupor, wishing I could make bright talk, but what's to say. We pull into the parking lot, stare at the right turn indicator blinking and listen. "Click, click, click," it goes. Brynn takes my hand and starts tracing between my big, scarred fingers with her little ones.

"You should climb off your moral high horse and move out of her parents' house," she says. "Get out more often. Take me to a motel now and then."

"Yeah, well Arlene thinks you're awfully swell," I tell her.
"Saw you fanning yourself at the Young Republican barbecue. Admired your lack of underclothes."

Brynn shoots me the look she's been perfecting for years. "You're not doing anybody any good, you know, and you're sure as hell not getting any younger."

"I guess that's what I like about Rico. He pretty much keeps to himself."

Brynn says nothing and starts fiddling with the radio. It's no Bang & Olufsen, maybe that's the attraction, but I know when to quit.

"You better go." I am thinking of Ray and his pistol.

"Walk me to my truck," she says.

I cannot find the moon in the sky, so I look at Brynn instead. She looks pretty celestial, fumbling in her smart, black purse for her keys.

"Ray is no good for you," I say, sounding like Jean.

"Kiss me, you fool," she says, so I do. "Not that way," she says, pulling away, "I'm sick of men trying to stick their tongues down my throat." She licks her lips again and kisses me with her mouth closed, and I swear to God she bends one of her legs at the knees, just like they used to do in the movies. Then she gets into
the truck, starts it up and drives away. The license plate says "RAY2."

ARLENE ALWAYS waits up for me. She says the dogs would just tear the house apart if she didn't. When Jack calls it quits after Leno, she puts a casserole in the oven on low and gets down to it on the sofa in the front room. She loves Love Connection, and she's got every episode on tape: you can watch it six times a day through the cable affiliates. At midnight, she stops the tape to catch Chuck doing his thing again on our local, Channel 8. She swears they're all different.

The dogs tell her when I'm coming up the flagstone sidewalk, and whenever I open the front door, she's standing in the hall, with swirls of Pond's on her cheeks, and some Ronco device on her head that pulls her hair tight, to keep it straight. She kisses me in that mother-in-law way, pushes me toward the kitchen and says, "See you in the morning."

Tonight is no different. I divide the casserole evenly for Chips and Scruffy and dig around in the big sideboard, among old bottles of Angostura bitters and Bols Apricot brandy, for another fifth of Ancient Age. Someone has tacked up a series of photos to
the inside of the door, partially covering a chart entitled: "How To Throw A Successful Drinks Party Every Time." It says you need a lot of booze.

The snapshots show Jack and Arlene's backyard, full of people standing around the mosaic-tiled pool, holding tall glasses with brightly-colored polka dots on them. You can tell the cartoon figures on the chart are bombed, because lines of tiny bubbles fly out of the tops of their heads. But the people in the photographs have the same kind of smiles and gestures and loosened ties and cocktail dresses.

There's a note taped to the bottle: "Mow the goddamn lawn." It's in Jack's hand-writing. I get a plain white lowball glass from the dishwasher, sit at the marble counter and drink the bourbon with shaved ice, occasionally smoking one of Jack's Philip Morris Commander cigarettes. Soon, the dogs snore at my feet and the two A's on the bottle start to meld into one. I try not to think of anything overly unpleasant. A couple more hours drift by and the big hazy A has turned into Willie Shakespeare wearing dark sunglasses. I get up and tiptoe though the double doors from the pantry into the game room. There's a portrait of my wife on the
wall, overlooking Jack's pool table. The artist didn't capture her face quite right, but he got her long, curling autumnal hair and how it caught all the light in the world. I'd like to say something to her, but all that comes to mind is that I didn't kill anybody last night.

That's about the only thing to like, these days.

RICO'S OLD MAN owns Stoneleigh Antiques and Books. He sends us out on odd jobs, mainly estate sales. He gets these phone calls from people who are convinced they're suddenly sitting on a goldmine after a death in the family. Before their relative gets turned into a rubber doll and planted in the ground, these people are rushing around, rubbing their fat hands together and seeing big figures in their heads. Rico and I steal from them every chance we get, mostly furniture. They're in such a hurry to see it turned into cash, they never notice.

Rico prefers the weird postwar houses below Lover's Lane. Me, I like the rambling monstrosities on Swiss Avenue. The yard sales there are best, especially with the Highland Park society women. They pile out of their Mercedes sedans, pass the usual junk in the front and head straight for the house, convinced the
"good stuff" — Limoges, Louis XV, Late Impressionists — is kept inside. Once they find out the door is locked, they want to know about the deceased. Rico can't keep a straight face, so he sends them to me. I lay it on thick with the ancient history and then let something slip about an open casket viewing on the property in the afternoon. I have caught a few of them later trying to crawl through the side windows.

Today's address doesn't sound so promising. It's out in West Dallas, a pretty run-down old neighborhood. Rico's father, a small, nervous man with a high voice and a penchant for stories, fills us in on Alvin and Archie. Archie, it seems, was a hot-shot corporate and personal finances lawyer in the 60s: old family name, Dartmouth, big house in Oak Cliff and a shirt-lifter.

"About four years ago, he got him a young hustler, and this guy runs through the fortune. After that, he goes off writing a string of bad checks from here to Pensacola. Archie starts stealing money from clients to make good. Now he's doing time in Huntsville, dying of you know what. Nobody can find the hustler, of course."

"'You know what,' huh?" Rico says, drinking a beer. "Where does Alvin fit into this?"
"Oh, Alvin hung around and kept house for Archie. He's the old girlfriend, been with him for thirty years or so. They ended up in this rented dump near Love Field."

"What do we pick up?"

"Just books. The IRS get the rest. I don't expect much."

It's a shithole, all right. The books are stored in the garage, and everything is so dirty and dusty that I have to tie my shirt around my face as we load them into cardboard boxes. Alvin introduces himself three or four times, and then comes and goes, shuffling around, muttering. All over the walls of the garage are these certificates for Archie's law practice. Civic awards. Charity work. Framed pictures of Archie, Alvin says, shaking hands with LBJ, John Connally, Billy Porterfield, Blackie Sherrod. Archie was also a Mensa nut, superhuman IQ, member of the inner circle. All that good stuff.

"My father is an idiot," Rico says, disgusted. "The old fart's marked up his books." We start looking through the volumes still on the shelves. The guy has underlined every single passage that ever interested him and made copious notes in the backs to boot. Rico thinks writing in a book is akin to tattooing your name on
Marilyn Monroe's ass. But the notes can't be counted like dollar bills; they're all that's left of the real Archie. The rest of this is a sham, a husk, something that's already dead. I think about my father taking off: he didn't leave a note or single printed word.

After we finish loading, Rico watches for Alvin while I hunt around the house for something to steal. The closets are packed full of "health and fitness" mags, circa late 60s and early 70s -- pretty tame. The place smells of medicine cabinets and cereal boxes and ether; I feel faint in the afternoon heat but keep looking. At the bottom of one pile, I find a red velvet box. Inside sits an eternity ring, with green and white stones. Probably a present for the young hustler. I toss the box and pocket the ring.

Standing in the small hallway, I hear, and then see, a couple of bluebottles buzzing around the smudged back window, striking a pane of glass every now and then. I imagine Alvin and Archie, sitting in ratty bathrobes at the Formica kitchen table, eating oatmeal. There are boxes of oatmeal everywhere. We used to eat a lot of it when I was a kid. I hate the stuff. In fact, this kitchen looks a lot like ours did, or does it? Maybe the windows are the same. Maybe it's the floor. We had a lot of flies. Somewhere in the house, a phone starts ringing, a distant tinny sound. I realize I'm
not really connected with anything here. I'm imagining things. I don't belong.

Alvin catches us in the drive on our way out. "Oh, it's so sad," he says, "it's so sad, boys." Tears are streaming down his face, running through light make-up, and channeling down a turkey-wattled neck. He is holding his hand through the open window, palm up, as though he wants me to touch him. I start fumbling around in my pocket for the ring. I want to give it to him, but Rico quickly reverses the car. I look back, just once, to see Alvin standing in the middle of the street. A good hard wind would blow him away.

EVERY DAY when the first light hits the top of the backyard fence, I roust Chips and Scruffy for a walk. If I'm still drunk, I recall the advice of an eighty-two-year old Swiss man who had lived in the Alps his entire life. "Walk with little steps when going uphill," he told National Geographic.

We go along a wide patch of green, resembling a golf fairway, behind the fenced houses that line Jack and Arlene's street. Smack in the middle, every hundred yards or so, is another electricity pylon with sixteen humming power lines, eight on each
wing. Thirty years ago, the developers moved in and built houses on both sides, planted Bermuda in the middle and called it a park. Most people in the neighborhood forget it exists until Thursday, when they put their garbage along the fence for collection. Other than the dogs, I've never seen another living thing out here: no birds, no squirrels, nothing.

About a quarter mile up, we do a dogleg to the right, before the walk dead ends at Morningside Drive. But the pylons keep going. Across the street is Walt Whitman Elementary. On our side, there's a sub-switching power station, fenced in. It looks like the inside of a radio set, filled with enormous transformers, metal V's, giant concrete blocks and ziggurats made out of opaque industrial glass. There's several dozen laminated signs from Dallas Power and Light, each one with a skull and crossbones being split by a red lightning bolt. Underneath, in impersonal block letters, it says: "Danger. Keep Out."

Chips and Scruffy like the taller grass growing around here. The city mowers stay well away from the metal fences. I always lean against one, feel it give way a bit and then push back against me, while the dogs go about their business.
I GIVE ARCHIE'S ring to Brynn, telling her it was my mother's and that my father wants her to have it. Why I tell lies like this, I have no idea.

"Tell me again about your father's ranch," Brynn says. She's pointing her tiny feet toward the July moon, stretching her legs. We are on top of the firetrap warehouse Rico calls home; the roof has a great view of downtown Dallas, all lit up. You can see the State Fair from here, the Ferris wheel appearing and disappearing in green argon flashes next to the Cotton Bowl. The occasional 727 flies over, dropping its wheels on the descent for Love Field. Earlier today, I dragged a mattress up the fire escape. Brynn doesn't like Rico's floor anyway, says the stolen furniture smells of old people.

"On a night like tonight, you wouldn't be able to see anything. Just the stars," I tell her. "You lie in your bed and listen for the sound of a single car or truck coming from miles away. Sometimes, it's so quiet you can hear the sound of your own heart."

"Sounds lonely," Brynn says. She lights a cigarette. "How often do you go back?"

"Not very. It's kind of painful."
"Why not?"

I can sense her interest through the mattress, and it scares me. I take her cigarette and steal a few drags. "Why don't you leave Ray?"

"I suppose you think that wouldn't be painful."

"Not after listening to you and Jean, no."

Brynn sits up and hugs her bare knees to her chin. "Okay, it's like this. Before Ray, it was Eddie. Before Eddie, it was Pete. Before Pete, it was Dave. I can't really remember when it was no one."

"Of course you can," I tell her, but she's shaking her head.

That pretty much kills another romantic evening, and Brynn starts getting her clothes together. "Ray's beginning to ask questions," she says. She stops and looks at me, her eyes are hard glittering points. "Don't make me into something I'm not."

I watch her get dressed and try to figure out what she is, so that I can stop making her into something else.

I AM STANDING outside the Centennial liquor store overlooking Central Expressway. It's my least favorite place in town, but that's never stopped me from coming here before. Rico has gone inside
with some famous woman. She's a big hit on the Home Shopping Network and can't stop talking about it. She's wearing hot pink lipstick, a dress to match and has one of those salon tans that makes you damn near invisible in the dark. It makes for one hell of a sight when the sun goes down.

She claims we rescued her from a blind date at Mitchie's Bar. The way I remember it, she walked over to our table at the Winedale, sat down and said, "I really like you guys." Rico said that under the circumstances, it didn't make much difference.

I hop up on the hood of my old car and watch the evening traffic: white lights moving out, red ones headed downtown. Directly across from me is the service road where it happened. For old time's sake, I go over the accident with Tex. He's always there, next to my favorite parking spot.

"The best part," I tell him, "is when they strap me into the stretcher, and then I hear this cop say, 'There's not enough left of that motorcycle to bury.'"

Tex, of course, doesn't say anything. Tex is the strong, silent type, and he wears the uniform, too: boots, blue jeans, a big hat and frilly gloves with stars. He's got eyes you could take a bath in,
big white teeth and a toothpick. I've decided over the past two years that if you have to crash and burn and lose someone, there's no better place than right here, under the ever watchful eyes of old Tex.

"You'd make a swell pal," I tell him, "if you weren't 90 feet tall and lined with neon." Tex just keeps waving at the traffic, in fifteen-second intervals.

Eventually, Rico comes out, looking like it's going to be a long night, with two large paper sacks and a carton of cigarettes. I ask him what happened to Pinkie.

"She passed out in the back of the store. I propped her up in a corner with a bottle of Taboo under one arm and Mirage under the other. She looked good."

We get into the car and shotgun a couple of beers that I cut into with a crummy Mexican switchblade. I ask him if he thinks old Tex is waving hello or goodbye.

"You're fucking up again," Rico says.

JEAN AND I go to a party, at Ray's house. Jean says Brynn wants us there. We are met at the door by a guy in a white dinner jacket and plaid boxer shorts. It's that kind of party. We've been here
before, we tell him, but he insists on leading us through the house and into the backyard, where we see Brynn surrounded by a throng of people. She's wearing a shiny, two-piece black bikini, and there's something wrong with her eyes. I don't need two guesses to figure out what. She's also waving Ray's pistola around.

Jean and I stand in the corner out of the firing line and start eating greasy quesadillas. I can't believe the amount of food, it's obscene. The caterers have piled it high in shapes on silver platters and put them everywhere, like ornamental statues. They've filled the little wading pool with ice and beer.

Somebody has bullshitted someone, it seems, but it's hard to tell. The crowd makes for one big, indistinguishable roar. Some woman is daring Brynn to shoot Ray, at least that's what it looks like. Brynn starts shooting the pool instead, the pistol making hard little snaps. The bullets hit the water with a zipping sound, which makes everybody laugh. Nobody seems alarmed that she's out of her tree and spilling shells all over the place in an effort to reload. Ray sits nearby in a lawn chair, flanked by four of the Chinese dogs. He's wearing a luxurious white robe and seems unconcerned by the whole situation. He feeds the dogs bits of fajita meat from time to time. They seem to prefer the chicken over the beef.
I try to catch Brynn's eye from my corner, but it's no good. She's obsessed with pulling the trigger, working out something on her own. This isn't the real world but, then again, neither is Brynn and me.

Finally I can't stand it anymore and start cutting through the crowd to get the hell out of there. I make it to a white brick archway for a graceful exit when I run into Ray. "It's like you to run off without saying goodbye," he says.

"Nice to see Brynn in such good shape," I tell him. "Guess you had to pay for it this week." I expect him to punch me at least, but he just gives my face a nice little caress with an oily hand reeking of Bain de Soleil.

"You must miss your wife," he says. "Come by anytime."

LATER ON, we hear from Jean that Brynn has gone to Minnesota for a while, to some place with a pleasant double-barrelled name and rolling lawns of winter wheat and a big metal fence. Minnesota, the land of ten thousand lakes – a strange place to dry out. At least, that's what everybody thinks the problem is. Her father and stepmother are meeting Ray halfway on the bill.
One night, after a few in the Winedale, I wait outside the plastic container store on Mockingbird with a baseball bat. Around midnight, I ask myself: "What am I doing here?" I don't rightly know. Maybe I want to talk to Ray, and there are things that have to be said. Maybe this bat is a pretense; maybe it's an afterthought. Maybe I am going to smash his head in. My father gave me this bat, a size twenty-six Louisville Slugger, red. It's the only thing he ever gave me, beyond the debts which eventually finished our ranch. I remember trying out for T-ball to impress him, but I was so fucking clumsy I couldn't even hit a ball the size of a grapefruit off the plastic tee.

This, however, is it. Inside the store, the ceiling lights go off, one by one, and people start filtering out. I have seen the way Ray moves, all hard man in one rippling motion. He handed me a beer once, and I bet he could take this kid's bat away from me with less exertion. But we'll see. Who knows?

The employees are moving around in the darkened parking lot as though they are blind, feeling their way through the night for their cars. I guess it's my lucky night, because Ray isn't one of them.
RICO gets a card, postmarked St. Paul, the front smeared black with finger paint. It's for you, he says. I try to make myself laugh by passing it off as occupational therapy, but there's the other side. "When I get out, do me the big favor," it reads. "Take me for a ride on a motorcycle. B." I guess this looks innocent enough and gets past the censor. I guess they probably make her write this shit and then call it catharsis. I guess Brynn saved the best shot for last.

I crush the card and drop it out Rico's window, watch it fall into the parking lot. It looks small and distant and ridiculous lying on the asphalt. I suppose Jean would say that's what my heart looks like: a small, dark thing.

MY FATHER used to tell me he wanted to find a small place. I never understood what he was talking about. We only had 70 or 80 acres anyway. But he kept going on and on and wouldn't stop. We'd be out counting cattle, flattening feed sacks and wrapping used baling wire into tight coils. He'd look at me and say, "God, I need a small place."

By the time I get home, Arlene has gone to bed, which is strange. I wrestle a bit on the floor with Chips and Scruffy,
breathing in their faces and laughing at their expressions. Then, they get the casserole. Looks like lamb. There's a new note on the bottle. It's my day for correspondence.

"Honey," it goes. "Jack and I were talking about you this afternoon. We were saying that we never see you anymore. Jack's taking a couple of weeks off from his practice in August, and we thought it would be nice if we all went together on a trip somewhere. If you're up early in the morning, leave us a note. Love, Arlene." She's drawn three lines under "anymore."

I put the fifth back in the sideboard and take down one of the old photos. A younger version of my wife sleeps in a lawn chair. She's wearing a school uniform. A much sleeker Chips has his head in her lap. I slide it into my left shirt pocket.

Having run out of snappy things to say or think, I snap Scruffy's leash instead. We're going out tonight, boys," I tell them. "This has got to be done at night."

Don't know how far my old car will go, but I'm going to find out.

I dig a piece of paper out of the stationery drawer and start a note. "You are good people," I begin, "and you deserved better."
That's as far as I can get. I have to slap myself hard a few times and the dogs look worried, so I crumple it up and quit.

"That's what I like about you guys," I say to the dogs. I go down to the guest room and they follow. They watch me throwing clothes into a battered American Tourister suitcase. They look at me expectantly, panting, with a light I still recognize in their eyes. A little line of saliva trails from Chip's lower jaw to the floor. Scruffy leaps around in circles, wheeling on his butt, using his front legs like pogo sticks.

"Yep," I say them. "You're the only ones who don't know."
BUILDINGS

MY MOTHER, swallowed up by my father's faded army greatcoat, stands by the side of our house in eight inches of day-old snow. Her breath and mine mix in the morning air. Twenty-two degrees, the weatherman had said. Mother wears the triumphant, if weary, expression of a TV detective wrapping things up. She points with one long white finger at a pyramid of cigarette butts, covered in frost, clinging together next to our firewood. Somebody went to some trouble, it seems. Somebody was neat. She picks one up, smooths it out, so that I can see the brand in tiny gold letters. It's not hers. "I bet he stands up there," she says, indicating a small, brick ledge above the woodpile.

I look at my mother, at her sticky black hair wrapped in a mufti scarf, at the red throbbing veins around her nose, and try to work out what sort of nonsense she's up to now. First, she heard people in the house at night, and I had to quit college and come home. That was three years ago. Then she decided a checker at the Park Lane Winn Dixie was her cousin Claire, who had disappeared back in the Sixties. Yeah, the woman looked like the old photographs, but she was also on antipsychotics and ended up
living with us until we agreed to pay her psychiatry bill. Last year, mother went blind for nine months: dark glasses, white cane, the whole routine. The doctors couldn't explain it, but they couldn't prove she was faking, either.

Now this, a peeper who leaves evidence behind.

"I'll call the police," I tell her.

"Oh no, you can't do that," she says, dropping the butt and scrubbing her hands in the hard-packed snow. "It won't work. He'll claim he's looking for his dog. 'Here, Scruffy,' he'll say, and the police won't do a thing. Even if he's got his hands stuck in his pants. You know, doing it. They'll have to let him go."

"Jesus, mother, what are you on to now?"

"It's him, that's what I'm telling you. It's that Heitman over the road. I told you. You never listen. What are you going to do about it?"

Why anyone would want to stand up there in the cold and stare through a small plate glass window into our garage is beyond me. But my mother's expression says that civilization has turned somewhere, gone wrong, and she won't let go. I tell her we don't know who it is, that they're not hurting anyone, that there's nothing to see, anyway. But she's not listening, she's somewhere
else. "You're the man of the house, now," she says, quietly, and turns to go back inside, coat tail dragging in the snow. Her words surprises me: she has never before acknowledged that the original model might not be coming back.

WE LIVE on Tinkerbell Court. My mother told me some Dallas planner got rat-assed before naming streets out past Inwood. She ought to know, she's the expert. We're surrounded by Captain Hook Place and Peter Pan Lane and so on for miles along the Northwest Expressway. The streets only run for a block or two and dead-end into a fifteen-foot wooden fence. More storybook neighborhoods lie on the other side. Behind us is Alice In Wonderland Drive. Mother calls the whole thing a cruel joke.

There are four houses around our cul-de-sac. Two like ours -- three or four thousand square feet, one-storied, with colonial façades and garages you might be tempted to squeeze two cars in. But Heitman's house is different. Big, with thin layers of dark glass and white concrete, lots of sharp edges. He built it back when nobody lived out here, in the middle of nowhere. All of his decks and balconies overlook our street. Mother could never understand
why he put them there, but she said architects were funny that way.

In the summer, Heitman sits up there drinking iced tea and saluting people who do a 'U' on Tinkerbell to change directions on the expressway. But you don't see him in the winter, just his house that seems to grow out of all this snow. I cross the road and poke around in his mailbox, a waist-high white obelisk with a large square hole in the center that I've never seen the postman use. Nothing. I'll have to think of something more original than: "Hello, I've brought you your mail."

Heitman's front door lies off to the right of the house, hidden in a recess. You can't see it from the street. I wipe my feet on the map and read the bronze plaque by the doorbell for the first time: "Design of the Year -- 1960, W.C.H." Somebody in the neighborhood told my mother that the house had featured in Better Homes and Gardens. That a hotel he worked on in the Fifties had fallen down. That his wife and son were killed overseas. That he was famous once. The bell sounds loud in my head, and I wonder what I'm going to say.

HE PLAYS CHESS. I opt for black, he opens with King's pawn,
Bobby Fischer's favorite. I am waiting for him to say something incriminating, to give himself away. But he doesn't. He just plays and talks, talking the whole time about this thing and that, just like my mother. I get to hear about some little stick town in Nebraska, four bulldogs named Pete, and a night spent with a four hundred pound whore in Oklahoma City. He's been talking since I walked in the door. I guess that's all you're good for when you get old.

It seems he's not well, something about his kidneys, an infection. The antibiotics aren't working, he says. His piano wire-fine white hair has traces of black in it, but he must be pushing seventy. There are no ashtrays, but he and the room smell of nicotine. He's also short of breath, with a voice like an East Texas windmill pumping rusty water. I can't imagine someone in his condition standing in the snow for even five minutes, but stranger things have happened in our neighborhood. "I don't get many visitors these days," he is saying. I am wondering if anything good is going to come of this, wondering what I am going to tell my mother.

Heitman kicks off one slipper and puts it on the table, lights a cigarette and starts dropping ashes into the plaid instep. It's
1944 and he's going to war. "They parachuted me in a week before Normandy," he says. "I was younger than you. Hurt my left arm coming down, couldn't use it. Slept in a forest near a bridge with my good arm resting on a circuit box. I was supposed to blow it if the Germans put any armor across. Lucky for me, the tanks never came."

I've already noticed the medals in a glass, velvet-lined mahogany case on the wall. Heitman hardly seems the war hero type, but he must have done something. You don't get a purple heart and silver star with two oak leaf clusters for scratching yourself with your own bayonet. I wonder how Bobby Fischer would handle this: handsome and in his prime, long slender fingers fidgeting with the big, black tie with the white zeros on it, playing chess with a killer of men. Mister Heitman, I could say, it's you, isn't it? You're the one.

"I want you to know everything," he says.

I look at him, really look for once, at his shaky hand rolling a captured pawn around his unshaven chin. He talks about playing the drinking game in Kyoto, about praying for luck, so that the teakwood die comes up with a musical note stamped on it, instead
of designs which match palaces painted on different-sized bowls.

"Then you get to sing a song instead of drinking that goddamned sake' out of a bowl the size of a bathtub. Then you're really lucky," he says, in a voice that says luck ain't worth shit. Maybe he's really wishing that a Japanese infantryman could have been a little sharper in the shooting department, and I put that down to the collapsed hotel. So maybe he takes a look in our windows, now and then, so what? Everybody I know around here wants to know what's happening next door.

We are twenty-two moves in, and I am lining up for the kill. I make a queen sacrifice, something Capablanca says you should never do unless absolutely sure of your position. Meanwhile, Heitman's skipped at least a decade and is waiting to be rescued from a giant ship, ablaze and adrift in the Arabian sea. He talks about two women running a strange race on the listing decks, their long hair on fire. 'Stop,' he had yelled at them, 'Stop!' They did not listen, could not understand, he says. As he looks at his queen, useless at QB six, I wonder what he wants to tell me, what he's trying to say. "I want to show you something," he says.

It is late, and I would like to go home, anywhere but here. "Mister Heitman," I begin. He cuts me off with a wave. "Walter," he
says. "Call me Walter," and we're walking down a long, yellowed hallway toward some stairs. I study him from behind; he's different close up, smaller somehow from his deck days. I wonder what he's going to show me, as we glide past small, silver-framed photographs of famous buildings: Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier and others I don't recognize.

In the basement is the biggest goddamned 00 railway set-up I've ever seen, the size of a swimming pool, twenty yards at least. Heitman is talking about how a house like this can disorient you, while I take in the scenic vistas on the floor, from deserts and mountains, to little towns and prairies, to a river city at the other end, connected by twin rails of gleaming steel. He's got all the trains: Great Western, Rock Island, Union Pacific -- sitting there motionless, just waiting for something to happen. It must have taken him years. A carpentry table sits in the corner, with a circular saw and model knives, their razor sharpness nicking the light, neatly lined up in a stand next to paint pots of every conceivable color. "I made it all for Chuck," Heitman says. "I made it for my son."

"Make it go," I tell him, and he reaches out and flicks a switch. On the floor, the trains start to warm up, an electric
humming I can feel through my shoes. A multitude of switch-lights change at different intervals, from red to white, white to green. Tracks start to shift, signal arms drop and a tiny hand waves goodbye from a caboose window. Some of the trains are on the move, like long dark snakes. Their diesel locomotives send small, black plumes of smoke into the air: they even sound real as they pick up speed. A red and silver Sante Fé freight cuts a streak through the desert and rips into a tunnel. In town, a grain elevator empties into container cars, which move past like a funeral procession; in a far-off city, a crane loads automobiles from a river barge onto a flatbed. It's like a dream.

And then I see them, a pair of bunny-covered feet past the city, past the edge, in the right corner of the room. The feet belong to a wooden dummy sitting at a round, wooden table, and I realize my mother was right. He's spying on us. Her cheeks are done up crudely with rouge, a blue-black wig perches on her head. There's a cigarette jammed in her mouth, a drink in one hand, cards in the other.

"How long did it take you to make her, Walter?"

"That's Aunt Emma," Heitman says. "She's playing 'Oh Hell'."
"I don't think so," I say, because I'm sure now. She's wearing a horrible shiny black acrylic robe, with red and white stripes around the neck, cuffs and hem. I ought to know, I see one like it every day.

But Heitman's not listening. "You know," he says, "I'm glad you're here. Old Doc Brashear, he died six months ago. The new one doesn't understand. He wants to put me into Parkland Memorial, where I'll die of some hospital disease. I wanted somebody to see this. Someone needed to see it."

I don't know what he wants me to see, my mother or a bunch of trains. But he leaves his cigarettes behind. He leaves them by our woodpile. That's okay, I can live with that. I can even live with my mother on a tear for three weeks, telling me to sort him out. After all, what's three weeks compared to most of twenty-five years? But he's painted up her lips like a goddamned clown, and she didn't always look that way. I have photos to prove it: mother on a striped beach chair somewhere, straw hat and a smile, waving at the camera, fooling around. She didn't always drink, either, or smoke or lounge about in that seedy robe, shooting her mouth off like this old man.

Heitman's hand is on my arm, like a small pile of wet leaves.
"You don't say much, do you?" he says. "I can remember when your family moved in. Your mother told me how quiet you were. She called you the good baby. I'm glad it's you. I wanted somebody to see this. I made it for my son."

I'd like to ask him if he's made a Chuck out of wood as well and whether he keeps him upstairs. Perhaps he's taking his afternoon nap, or maybe he's been bad and sent up without any supper. I picture Heitman sitting down here, playing cards with the two of them, watching the trains go round and round.

"Really," Heitman says, "what do you think?"

"I think you'll always be lonely," I tell him.

AT BREAKFAST, mother's looking back over the happiest days of her life, past the plate of toast and burnt scrambled eggs, past the ashtray overflowing with Carltons, past me, even. I've heard it all before: the little gray cottage on the other side of town, a blue Volkswagen beetle, the struggle to put my father through law school. To make ends meet, she taught world history at North Dallas High. I try to imagine her, normal and wearing a dress, in front of a classroom full of students, teaching them about the Holy Roman Empire.
"We had the most beautiful roses," mother is saying. "They crept up the front, on the latticework." I rode my bike by the place once, over on Royal Crest, to see if I could isolate the source of her happiness. A retired insurance salesman stopped pushing an old Lawn Boy in the yard, answered a few questions and then told me to fuck off.

Two years after I was born, we moved here, this house. "More suitable for a practicing attorney," mother always says. My father worked late nights, and mother would put me to bed long before he came home, so that I wouldn't hear them fighting. On weekends, he'd take us to a park downtown for a picnic, a tartan blanket and fried chicken sort of affair. Nobody would say much beyond grace and pass the potato salad. He moved on when I turned five. "A trial separation," mother calls it. She's used the line for twenty years, and nobody much cares, so why change. Mother got to keep the house, the bank account, and the bed they once shared, a burnished hardwood effort with a scrolled headboard and a mattress like stone. My father got an executive suite in Turtle Creek with 24-hour maid service and his senior law partner, Betty or Brenda or something. I saw her once, which
pretty much explained everything.

"I wish you could cook," mother says, lighting another cigarette.

"Well, mother, you taught me all I know."

She shakes her head and exhales. "Oh no, not everything."

The snow has started up again, big thick wet flakes which drift down and get caught in the updrafts. I wonder if any of it ever hits the ground. The electric clock on the stove makes a steady, humming noise.

"Do you remember?" mother says, "you were younger and the weather was bad and we used to move your father's stuff around?"

"I remember," I tell her, thinking of the yellow and green Mayflower boxes that litter the house, the contents labels left blank. My father had saved his clients from jail or the taxman; in return, they would hand over cash or, more often, the remnants of their dreams: kiln-loads of bad pottery, limp cowboy boots, damp paperbacks, busted TVs and radios, rusty handguns -- the list goes on and on and my father never wanted any of it. When I was twelve, thirteen, my mother and I used to shift some of the boxes into a room, unload them and pretend we were somebody else.
"What did you do over there with Mister Peeping Tom?"

She would laugh at what we'd make, at who we would become, but it was never funny. She would laugh until her wine-stained lips practically turned inside out, tears streaming down her face, and often I could not get her to stop.

"I said, what did you and Heitman do when you were over there?"

"We talked, mother. He's a war hero. He slept with a big whore in Oklahoma."

She laughs and then coughs. "Fancy that. My son, talking."

I remember that mother had our little house guest, Claire the checker, doing it too. They would sit around all day in the TV room, making something out of what my father had no use for, could no longer bear, the two of them alternately giggling and weeping and drinking and smoking. For the longest time, I tried to pretend they weren't hurting anyone. Then I noticed the bluish needle marks between mother's toes, the empty Haldol bottles in the trash.

"Why didn't you ask him to turn off his lights at night. They keep me up, those lights. What do you reckon his electric bill is?"

Claire had denied everything, of course. I phoned my father
and explained the whole situation. "Pay her off," he said, and hung up.

"You know, he told the postman he'd gone out with me. Boy, was I flattered."

Back then, I had seen it like my father called it. But maybe they understood each other, mother and Claire, in a way I never will. Maybe I don't belong here, and maybe she would never have fallen so far, gone so wrong, if I hadn't come home in the first place. The blind thing sold me, and after she regained her sight, I made a decision. I wrote a girl I had known at North Texas State. She was living in Taos and had plenty of room, she said. I started stealing a little money every month from the checking account; I started keeping the change from the grocery, the cleaners, the liquor store.

"Do you remember?" mother is saying.

I am still waiting for the right moment.

HE KEEPS CALLING our house. The phone never stops ringing. How he got our unlisted number I have no idea. His windmill voice is getting weaker and weaker. He says I have to come over; he says
it's almost time. I tell him to go to hell and hang up. He just calls back. Mother won't let me unplug the phone, but she's convinced that we're speaking in code, cooking up some plot to get rid of her. Southwestern Bell is doing the best it can: "Call back in a week," I get told.

"I have to tell you everything," Heitman says.

"This is a bad time. Please leave us alone."

"No, you don't understand."

"You're right," I tell him. "I don't."

Meanwhile, mother has started in on something else. I have to give her high marks for originality. She claims Heitman doesn't live alone; she's seen another person looking out his windows. "You know who it is," she screams at me. "You're all in league together." She's taken to carrying around a big old Webley hammerless, its brass ring tied to her wrist with a piece of leather, so that she won't forget it in the bathroom or someplace. She won't let me get anywhere near her, but she hardly lets me out of her sight. "He says he wants you," she says. "But I'm not letting you go, not ever." I only hope the gun's not loaded; it'd probably blow up in her hand.

Heitman keeps talking about the past, but the medication
has him all mixed up. He goes on and on about deep water, long silences and how much he admires our family. In the background, mother reads ten years of my school reports. "Can't you hear her?" I say into the receiver. "You're responsible for this."

"There's nothing wrong with her," Heitman says. "Just listen."

"Fuck you," I tell him.

If I don't answer the phone, she does. "It's for you," she says. She's dug out the letters I wrote her from summer camps and crammed them into the pockets of her robe. She reads a dozen after every phone call, and they all sound the same. "Listen to this one," she says, and I see a line of hearts badly drawn on the back, with the faintest remains of pink glitter dust inside their borders. They look pathetic and sad and I cannot remember ever making them with these hands, for this woman. "Go on, answer it," she says, pointing the pistol in my direction.

"We haven't spoken since 1958," Heitman says, as I pull the phone out of the wall.

I TAKE REFUGE in my bedroom, under the covers. But it doesn't last, no peace in this house ever does. "They came for him this morning," mother says. She sways in the pale yellow light of the
hallway. "Didn't notice, did you? My little sleeping beauty."

"I'm not asleep now, mother. It's been rather tense around here lately, don't you think, and how many times have I told you to stay out of my bedroom?"

"This is my house," she says, and sits on the edge of the bed. "Well, what'd you dream about? Anything good?"

"What'd you do, take a bath in it?"

"You sleep," she says. "I drink."

We stare at each other for a little while. I watch a chess mobile gently turn above her head, the wooden pieces suspended from fishing line: the horses, the bishops rising and falling. I made it years ago. Nothing in this room has really changed since I was a boy.

"It's him," she finally says, gesturing across the street with her chin. "Your friend, Mister Peeper. They came for him. His face was blue. You should have seen it. Big red ambulance. Stretcher. Quite a show. The whole neighborhood turned out to watch."

"He's not my friend, mother. But he thought the world of you."

"I don't think he's going to make it, your friend. I really
don't." She's spilling her drink, the liquid hitting the carpet like a big dog pissing. I lean forward and try to steady her wrist, but she jerks her hand away. "Don't touch my drink."

"Listen," I tell her. "It's over now. Things can go back to normal again."

"Oh, of course. It's over," she says. "Don't you think I know the look on your face? Don't you think I've seen it before? Fooling me, turning it into a little game. Guess who used to do that? I bet you know. Go on, guess."

"Why don't you go and sleep it off. You don't know what you're talking about and you never have."

"I know enough," she says. I know you think you're clever. Packing your stuff up, bit by bit. Keeping money from me. Writing letters to New Mexico. Well, when you get ready to leave, just go. Don't make a speech like your father did. It's the speechmaking that makes me sick."

I reach again for her drink in the bad light and see her other arm come up, as though she's going to embrace me. Instead, the sharp edge of something flicks the side of my face. I sit there for a minute, not knowing if it was an accident, feeling a warmth trickle down my cheek. Someone must have filed down that pistol
sight in the name of accuracy before I was born. That's history, I guess, something distant you weren't even aware of, which eventually catches up and hurts you all the same. Years ago, she would have let me take her drink away.

"I suppose you think I deserved that," I tell her, and lie back and close my eyes. There is nothing left to say; the idea is to pretend to be asleep until she goes away. But she starts up again and keeps talking and talking and talking.

A NOISE WAKES me in the middle of the night, a heavy, hammering sound. I lie there, trying to figure out what my mother's doing now, then realize it's coming from outside. I get up and look through the window to see a figure in front of Heitman's house, bundled up, muffler and hat. Whoever he is, he's trying to drive a sign into the frozen earth. His balance is terrible, and once he practically falls over. I watch him kick the ground, lay the sledgehammer and the sign in the snow, and go around to the left side of the house. He returns with a running garden hose and starts watering a patch to soften it up. I slip on a coat and grab my boots.

By the time I get across the street, he's ready to try again,
but he doesn't have the strength. I tell him that I'm looking for my dog and ask if I can help.

"Help yourself," he says, and hands me the hammer. The sign says, "For Sale." They don't waste any time these days. I hear him fumbling around in his coat.

"Were you related?" I ask, placing the sign. The man lights a cigarette with gloved hands and tosses the match into the snow, where it hisses slightly.

"No," he says, blowing a plume of smoke from the folds of his muffler.

I slowly drive the sign into the ground, trying to work out who he is. It's a bit late at night for the Century 21 rep to come sniffing around. "It's a beautiful house," I tell him.

"Do you think so," he says. "I hate it." As he raises the cigarette to his lips, the muffler slips and the glow helps illuminate a large part of his face. He's been burned badly sometime in his life, his cheek covered with scar tissue, pale white like the inside belly of a fish, stretched tight, the creases smoothed away by flame or heat. He could be any age, and my mother is right, I'm not so clever after all. I hand him the
sledgehammer; he says thanks and good night, and starts walking around the right side of the house, headed for the hidden door.

"Chuck," I say.

"Please go home," he says, and I hear the door open and close.

I stand in the snow, dark and light, here and there, in the shadows of the house and its several dozen lighted windows, wondering how the neighborhood got it wrong, wondering why I never noticed it before. The shape of the house, the goddamn house, with upper decks and everything, layers of glass and smooth white concrete narrowing into a point like a great prow. The whole thing looks like it's straining at its foundations, ready to take off, sail into the night.

Then the lights start going out, one by one, starting downstairs as Heitman's son moves room to room. The house gradually disappears into night, one deck after another, until all I can see is the bluish light of a TV at the top.

IN THE MORNING, I get up early and go outside. The sun barely touches the upper edge of the big wooden fence, the "For Sale" sign is still there, it wasn't a dream. I see a large aluminum can on
the corner. Heitman's son has chopped up Aunt Emma and stuck her in there, torso first. I can see her head and shoulders; her two legs shoot back past her ears, as though she had spryly accomplished some impossible gymnastic feat. Her spectacles ride askew, her wig is gone.

I walk around the side of the house and hoist myself up on the ledge above the woodpile. I am looking for something, I guess, through the plate glass window into our garage. I have never looked through it before. The far wall is covered with my father's tools, each resting neatly in their special places, outlined in orange paint, each numbered with bits of masking tape. I see his ledger on the workbench, in which he'd written the name and number of the tool, when and where purchased, when loaned, when returned, in what condition. I stand and look for something new and then see, really for the first time, the four pieces of rectangular, coated orange tile, evenly spaced out on the floor. Hanging from the garage door opener is a ping pong ball on a piece of string, suspended in midair. There's a bit of green felt stuck on it. I recall my mother's Buick Electra 225, the last car she ever owned, the one my father left her. There was a bit of green tape stuck on its front windshield, dead center, and I'd bet my life
that when she lined up the tape with the felt, the Buick's tires would rest on those orange tiles. I think about this and about how ordered my father's life must have been and how my mother and I had not fit into it.

Soon, I hear the snow-dulled sounds of a garbage truck coming down our street, the shuffling of cans and men's voices.

INSIDE OUR HOUSE, mother reclines on the sofa in the den, twisted at a strange angle in her worn black robe with the red and white stripes. The edges are frayed, the material has spawned little balls of fur, her lap is covered with ashes. A bottle has fallen over somewhere, spilling its contents out onto the parquet floor, channeling around trays of spare watch parts. The room smells of Bal á Versailles and bourbon and oily metal. The TV is going, but her leg's on the remote control and it's flipping the channels over and over, zipping along like the years of our lives.

In the flickering half-light, I see her eyelids twitching. She's having some kind of dream, and I realize that it has not occurred to me in a long, long time that my mother ever dreams, has anything left to dream about. I wonder if she's dreaming of my
father, or a classroom full of North Dallas kids, or someplace she's never been, far away from Tinkerbell Court.

I sit down next to her on the sofa and hold her hand. I am surprised by its smallness, by its warmth. The leather strap has left a red line around her wrist. I wonder if there is something I could say to make it all right between us; if I should tell her what I saw through the garage window, or in Heitman's front yard, or on the back of a letter I wrote all those years ago, tiny pink shapes like so many promises gone bad. But this is our life now and not what's going on over the road or in the past or anywhere else but right here, in this house.

"Mother?" I say softly. "Mother."

"You don't know what it's like," she finally says. "You used to fit on my lap. Can you remember that?" She traces an image of me in the air. "I don't think I can forget."

"Mother," I say. "We can't go on like this."

"Does she have small hands?" mother asks. She twists a thick band of gold from her index finger and presses it into my hand. I have never seen it before. "I hope she has small hands like mine," mother says, tucking her own under her arms and curling up on the other end of the sofa.
"I can't remember," I tell her, and that's true. I can't.

"Tell me how it's going to end," mother says.

I don't know. But I wish she could see how it started, in this circlet of gold lying in the palm of my hand. I toss it into a nearby tray filled with metal wheels and bits of concave-cut glass. It bounces off some yellow velvet without a sound, and I don't see where it goes. "We could be anyone," I say, "yet here we are." Somehow this room no longer seems real, along with the steady flow of tears running down her face, the half-packed trunk under my bed and the girl with or without small hands who lives in another state. And maybe this is how it ends, within these moments, like embraces made long ago, which go on endlessly.
S O M E T H I N G L I K E H U N G E R

NIGHTS, DeeGee studies food management at Oscar Rose Junior College. At work, he tries to impress me with what he's learned there. He claims Brazilian cannibals threw the first barbecue party. Men over forty-two, it seems, make the best chefs. And the lemon is not a fruit at all, but an emblem of love.

I have listened to DeeGee patiently, mainly to improve my limited vocabulary of food. You never know when it might come in handy. But lately, they've been in that motivational phase, the how-to-sell-yourself stuff, and he can't stop talking about it.

"Listen," he says, "the guy explained everything. He said you got to be more proactive, see. You got to make things happen. Only then can you give meaning to what you want to do in life, to who you truly want to be."

"DeeGee," I say. "Does the word destiny mean anything to you?"

We are preparing the line before Casa Bonita opens for business. We roll silverware in heavy cloth napkins, stack color-coded platters, empty bags of grated cheese and lettuce into trays. We wear transparent gloves, hairnets, and these surplus polyester
gowns that get Cloroxed daily but will never be clean. Somebody has stitched “Gretchen” in fancy curlicues on mine. DeeGee is “Mable.” Above us, huge extractor fans take the steam and the smoke and the odors of cooking outside. By mid-afternoon, you can smell chili rellenos and chicken tamales clear to the I-35 overpass, which runs right through the heart of Oklahoma City.

“Someday, I’m going to own a chain of tapas bars across the South,” DeeGee says. “We’re going to blow this old shithole out of the water.” He plunges a long wooden spoon into one of the vats, making a huge sucking noise. “Look at this,” he says. “They think you sprinkle on a little paprika and hey, it’s Spanish rice.” DeeGee thinks his talents are wasted, that working the line is beneath him, and maybe he’s right. For the rest of the day, he’ll wrap burritos and ladle cheese sauce on enchiladas every time his computer monitor plays “La Cucaraucha.” He’s also authorized to talk to customers as they stream past. He gets to say, “Careful, plate’s hot,” all day long.

In the background, we can hear the personnel supervisor argue with another waitperson. “Now, don’t take this personally,” he is saying. “I just don’t think you have the mechanics for waiting tables.”
“Look,” she says, “I had to take half a Xanex this morning, and I really can’t cope with this shit right now.”

DeeGee shakes his head. He makes a sweeping gesture, his arms appearing to take in everything: the half-moon coves of spray-on stucco, the artificially-aged bullfight posters, the horse blankets from Ciudad Juarez. “Geez, the work that went into this place,” he says. “You know, atmosphere. But they didn’t put any windows in, and that just kills it.”

I’d like DeeGee to see things the way they are. But I don’t know how to say it in a way that will hold meaning for him. Instead, I tell him about my higher education, a summer of art history in an underground room, nothing but slide shows and the instructor’s voice coming at us out of the darkness. “Get this. Last class, she breaks down, starts crying and says there’ll come a time in our lives when the weather won’t mean anything at all. The weather, DeeGee. We thought she was talking about death.”

“You’re a smart kid,” DeeGee says. He starts filling up squeeze bottles with salsa. I go around the corner to fry some sopapillas, and hear the waitperson say, “Yeah, I know what punctuality means. I’m not stupid, you know.” When I come back,
DeeGee bares his teeth and thrusts them right in front of my face. "Had some bridge work done twenty years ago. How's it holding up?" I have trouble deciding what's worse, his breath, his teeth or how he sounds when he talks through them. I lie anyway, tell him they look wonderful.

"Yeah, maybe," he says. "Got to look my best, though. Don't ever let them say Don Gene Russell was a loser. I'm on the comeback trail. Stick with me."

"DeeGee, I'm twenty-four years old and wear a monkey suit and dance in a Mexican restaurant."

"Hey," DeeGee says, "don't let regret become routine in your life." But for once, he looks sad, really put out, and even I can see that this, at least, did not come from any textbook.

THEY KEEP a recruitment poster up by the cash register. It lists, among other things, enhanced communication skills as one of the perks of an exciting career in the food service sector. But the floor manager has forbidden the dancers to talk while in uniform. "Casa Bonita is a magical, magical, magical place," he likes to say. "Please, don't do anything to destroy that illusion." He's the only one around here who takes his job seriously. He wears a crushed
velvet sombrero with little mirrors on it, a Zapata moustache, and
a black tux jacket with deedleballs hanging from the lapels, cuffs
and hem. His nametag says, “Señor Richard Wakely.”

He thinks it’s funny when we call him Dick.

There are two of us. I’m the pink shaggy one with big ears.
The other guy, Buddy Dietrich, is much older, fifty at least. He
wears a conspicuous two-tone number of blue and green. DeeGee
thinks it ought to have stripes, says Buddy did twelve years at
McAlester for second degree something or other. “I know you got
to work with that guy,” he tells me. “But nothing says you got to
talk to him.”

Mornings, Buddy works janitorial, cleans the toilets, scrubs
the floors, whatever. Every day at eleven, he puts away his mop, I
say goodbye to DeeGee and the line, and then it’s that same old
dressing room routine. Buddy strips down to his socks, smokes
Camels, drinks a few cups of coffee, then coats his body with Ben
Gay. I take a handful of Dramamine and try to count Buddy’s
faded prison tattoos before he puts on the gray leotard he wears
under his monkey suit. I’ve never made it past nineteen. Most are
what you’d expect, a “Mom” here and there, ecumenical crosses,
blue-black hearts breaking in two. Some mean nothing to me:
“Killer Joe Piro,” “Satan Takes A Holiday” and “Tain’t No Sin To Dance Around In Your Bones.” Others are impossible to read, particularly where Buddy’s muscles have sagged appreciably. His legs, however, have stayed rock hard. We don’t talk much, but he’s told me about going to the Arturo Garza Studio of Dance as a young boy. “I was on a jazz tap team once,” he said, an unmistakable note of pride creeping into his voice.

When Buddy gets decent, I bang on the wall twice with my shoe, to signal the all clear to Cagley. Today, she’s wearing green Levis, a Bundswehr tank top and lots of silver jewellery, mainly bracelets riding up and down her skinny, white arms. “Hey look you putz,” she says to me, and bends her head down, exposing the flat top of her crewcut, in which somebody’s shaved a pretty good likeness of Jesus. “What do you think?” she says. I look at Buddy. He’s looking at her, a sadness riding across his face. I can’t imagine what he must be thinking of, a man his age falling for someone like her. You’d have to be blind not to notice, but Cagley has never mentioned it. She quickly dons her peasant fortune teller’s robe and wig of long, straight black hair. When she puts on the wig, I fall in love. It happens every time, and I tell her this often, mainly
to see Buddy flinch.

"It's not me you love," she says. "It's the wig."

As we finish getting into our gear, the floor manager shows up and smoozes us with the usual pep talk. "Remember, you're our main attraction," he says, zipping up our costumes. "The Denver branch has got a platform diver. And I know they've got the magic show. But here, you guys are the stars."

Cagley waggles her eyebrows at me: it's all part of the fun for her. But Buddy slowly nods his head and even looks sincere, without pretence or wanting. I don't know. I would like to be angry with him for the way he accepts everything, this life. But, in a strange sense, I am afraid of Buddy, so unlike Señor Richard and DeeGee with their endless streams of words and scenarios. Maybe Buddy has no dream. Maybe Buddy believes in what he is.

As Señor Richard continues to talk, he lifts the monkey's head by its big ears and places it over my head. He adjusts it carefully, checking it from every angle, and when he's satisfied he raps the nose once, making a hollow, plastic sound. "The kids are here for you," he says loudly, as if I can no longer hear him.

I would like to believe that I am still young.
I SOMETIMES WONDER if Señor Richard has any idea what 'here' is like. The music’s piped, eighty-six songs played back-to-back. It took me a year and a half to tell them apart. I still haven’t got the rooms down. The Casa has thirty-two small areas for what DeeGee likes to call “that intimate dining atmosphere,” and each of them have at least three exits which snake into passages lined by papier-mâché boulders and little waterfalls. If you want to get lost, you’ve come to the right place. It’s dark and each dancing monkey ambles alone through different rooms, doing pirouettes, continually chased by a mariachi doppler effect.

And let’s not forget the kids, because we’re here for them. Some just want a little hug or their parents found or directions to the bathroom. But most wait around the corner, getting ready to scream ambush. They come back every week, because their folks have limited imaginations when it comes to family outings. The kids have studied the outfit, too, and know all the vulnerable spots. Basically anything but the huge fake belly goes. After a week on the job, I got wise and put fine chickenwire just inside my eyeslots, but nothing can stop them from headbutting me in the crotch. “Let’s kill the fat bastard,” the kids say, and stab me with forks. Their parents aren’t much better. Couple pitchers of
frozen margaritas, they start getting surly. "Who the hell's in there?" they ask. "Hey, it won't talk. C'mon say something." A lot of men want their wives to pose with me. "I don't want to," the women say, but the men already have the cameras out. "Sit on the ape's lap," they growl.

Still, we dance. It's a living. After a while, one grotto looks like the next and we don't know where we are anymore and we don't care. We keep moving, to the sounds of slide trombones and castanets and sad, low-voiced Julios on acoustic guitar. In every room, we are greeted by people who talk through mouthfuls of frijoles and chili con carne, asking questions like: "Is Freddy Fender going to sing 'Feliz Navidad' again?"

THE DAY I STARTED working here, a little girl had a birthday party. There must have been thirty, forty guests; her parents reserved an extra table for the presents. Somebody gave her a graphite tennis racket. She got a CD player, a set of kid-sized leather luggage, and a huge bottle of Joy, the real thing, not the toilet water. There was even a miniature oven that you could bake cakes with, in special star-shaped tins. But the little girl didn't
give a shit, didn't even open her own presents. She sat at the head of the table, a pair of plastic binoculars in her little white hands. She studied the guests through them, one by one, as though they were insects.

I saw her again later, in the bend of a long, elbow-shaped corridor. The rest of her friends were playing hide and seek. She wore an ivory party frock and white tights and white sandals with pinprick-sized holes in them. Her mother had brushed her smooth brown hair back; the tiny pendants in her ears resembled drops of blood. She was so clean and perfect, and I knew she had never been deprived of anything. She was looking at me through the toy binoculars, and only lowered them as I approached.

I keep them in my car. Black, pebble-grained plastic that's coarse to the touch, with "KID-VUE" in raised white letters on the underside. They were not right for her, those binoculars. They were cheap. I had wanted her to scream and shout, because no one would believe her. I could always say I'd found them. I remember looking back, just once, at her still standing there, arms outstretched, mouth wide open. She didn't say a word. I wish I could visit a mausoleum of her face.

I keep them in my car. I use them to watch everyone leave
work in the evening. You’d be surprised by what you can see, the whole world reduced to two small ovals of light. They were wrong for her. As I dance, I keep thinking about how right they are for me.

IN THE NEAR DARKNESS of the Enigma Grotto, I run into Cagley. She’s selling these hollow plastic chains filled with fluorescent stuff, has them draped around her neck, wrists and waist. She blends right in with the huge question marks painted in glowing acrylic along the walls of the cave. Together, we remove the massive monkey’s head and smoke a joint.

“Got a letter from Katz,” Cagley says, exhaling. Katz, her little boy, is growing up far north somewhere, Canada perhaps. Cagley’s not sure. Her ex runs a traveling puppet show; they move around a lot. She brought in a picture of Katz six months ago, and I can still see his face, cold and white and indistinct in all that snow. “Makes you feel kind of sad, doesn’t it?” Cagley had said. But what I really remember feeling were tiny indentations on the photo’s edges, outlines of butterfly-shaped magnets.

“What did the postmark say?”

“Couldn’t look,” Cagley says, and brushes her lips against
mine. "Don't say anything."

I put my arms around her, close my eyes and press against her as hard as she can stand. I don't know what she wants or gets out of this, what with all the layers of padding and plastic and material between us, and I have never felt comfortable enough to ask.

As I hold her, I am thinking nobody knows about us. I sometimes wonder, what if we were found dead like this? What would they surmise? Cagley wants to keep it a secret. "You tell anyone," she once said, "you'll be found with a burrito stuffed in your mouth." I don't take her seriously. True, Señor Richard frowns on staff relationships. For a while, a busboy was meeting serenading guitar players in the space behind the cascading Waterfall of Mucho Pleasures. "There'll be no fucking on or off these premises," Dick had said during an emergency staff meeting. "Between employees, I mean. The Casa is a family restaurant."

We were amazed that he used the F-word, but nobody got fired.

"Listen," I say, "let's get together after the shift."

"No," Cagley says. "It won't work."
“What about this?”

“Oh this,” she says, pulling back. “This is just for fun.”

“If it’s the suit you want, I can wear it anywhere.”

Cagley just shakes her head. “Everything seems possible here,” she says.

If I thought my heart could take it, I’d get down on my knees and beg. Instead, I grab her by the hand. “I know where you live,” I tell her.

“I know you do,” she says. “You’re a strange boy.” She runs a finger down my paw in the darkness and then slips away. I watch the flowing coils of light that encircle her disappear around a corner. Somewhere behind me, I hear the shuffle of furry feet. They are not mine.

I HAVE SEEN “J. CAGLEY” on the timeclock, punched out on adhesive strip. I wonder if I should have learned her first name, if that could have made a difference.

I hardly ever run into Buddy. At first, I thought it would be inevitable. You know, two guys with limited vision, a contained area. It didn’t make sense. I must see DeeGee a dozen times every day while I make my rounds. He always gives me a big smile and
the thumbs-up, as if things are running according to some plan, like he's soon going to own the place. But not Buddy.

You set out to play a part in someone's life: make it happen, like DeeGee says. She needs something else. As a result, it seems I'm now part of Buddy's. Nobody gets what they want.

I imagine him waiting for me in the dressing room, smoking a cigarette. When I walk in, he'll stub his Camel out, taking his time. Then, without warning, he'll pick up the heavy ashtray and hurl it against the lockers, glass spraying everywhere.

"What is it you think you know, Buddy?"

"I know enough," he'll say, and then beat me senseless.

I guess I don't understand love. Two years ago, my one and only date since high school ended in disaster. The woman threatened me with a gun. She whipped it out of her purse and stuck it in my ribs. "You know what I want, give it to me," she screamed. I wrecked her Buick. The gun was plastic. At night, in a strange car, everything seems real.

Last month, it was these women in the Plaza de Amor, a little adobe hut built for two. They had a bottle of Bacardi under the table. I could smell it. One of them, a blonde in a Taft High School jersey, kept giving me shit. "Must be creepy looking out
them eye slits all day,” she said. “Bet you feel like you’re in one of them slasher movies.” She stabbed the air with an invisible knife and laughed hysterically.

“Come here,” the other one said, “I want you to hear this.”

She had been crying, was putting on more pancake make-up, using a tortoise shell compact. I remember thinking that she was far too old to be all dressed up in black. But there she was, hanging out on the edge, still trying to make it.

“You got eyes like Bambi,” she said, and broke down again.

I watched her tear out a blank check. She folded it up into a thin flute and slipped it in my mouth slot. The Taft girl looked at us in disgust. “It won’t work, you bitch,” she said.

The woman in black looked at me. “Call me,” she said. “Even though I know you won’t.”

AFTER A WHILE, the Dramamine wears off and Casa Bonita becomes a blur and you only notice the things that don’t change. I have been keeping an eye on this guy in the main dining room. He’s been there for three hours, and he’s still eating. When he wants more, he raises a small flag made of heavy fabric up this
little pole, and somebody comes around. At first, he stuck to hard shell beef tacos, but he's moved on now, to black bean enchiladas. You get all this for seven ninety-five, which, as DeeGee points out, really says something about the food.

The man has a fantasy novel propped up in front of him, but his eyes are elsewhere. The one thing he won't look at is me. He's afraid I'll come over, make a scene, draw attention his way. In this sense, I feel connected to him. He reminds me of the men I see in the park on Saturdays and Sundays. They have dogs instead of books. Maybe I should get one, too.

I've been taking the monkey suit home after work. At first, I stuffed it with newspapers and hung it in the closet on a hook. It didn't do much for me. Then one night I caught the last five minutes of Costeau on the Discovery Channel. Jacques was talking about "dip sea diving and zee decompression shamber." I started wearing the suit while watching TV, drinking beer through a straw. This went on for some time, before it seemed like a natural progression to go outside in it, during the small hours of the morning. I avoided people for a while, but I soon realized they didn't see me. They don't want to see me, so they don't.

Lately, I've been wondering if I could drive my car.
AT THE END OF THE SHIFT, I find DeeGee in the dressing room instead of Buddy. I'm trying to sing along to "Guantanamera." You have to make up your own words or you go crazy, so I sing "one ton of melons" instead. DeeGee is looking at himself in the mirror.

"Make every day count," he says. "Have to write something down for class." He looks at me suspiciously. "What did you accomplish today?"

"I ate lunch here without getting sick."

"I'm serious," he says. "You got to bleed to succeed."

Once, I followed DeeGee to Oscar Rose after work, hanging back in traffic so he wouldn't spot my old Montego. The college, which looks more like an office park, lies nestled between a golf course and Tinker AFB. DeeGee took the service road near a sign that says, aptly enough, "Welcome to Moore." I pulled over on the expressway's wide shoulder and watched his green Pinto shoot under a brick arch and another sign, "Preparing For The Future." There was a smiling cartoonish trio on it: man, woman and baby. The woman had a beautiful smile.

"Listen," DeeGee says, "are you in some kind of trouble?"

I happen to be stuffing the monkey suit into a bag. But when I look up, DeeGee appears to be obsessed with his hair,
combing the part on the left and then the right. "No," I tell him. "Not exactly."

"Cause you and I got a good thing going here. I know you would tell me if something bad was going to happen. Say, like if that old con was looking for you. You'd tell me, wouldn't you?"

I watch him wipe his comb on a piece of toilet paper. It leaves streaks like axle grease in its wake, the residue of cooking and sweat and black hair dye. And just for a moment, I'd like to stick that comb in his mouth, make him taste it, his life.

Maybe I don't care what happens next. Maybe I actually want Buddy to beat me until I piss blood. Maybe I want to feel the extent of someone's desire. I would like to explain this to DeeGee, but it doesn't quite fit into his win-win/lose-lose jargon or any of the other theories taught at Oscar Rose Junior College.

"What do you think he wants?" DeeGee finally says.

I've been wanting to say it all my life, and now I can. "It's about a woman," I tell him.

"I doubt it," DeeGee says.

BUDDY'S OLD MUSTANG waits outside the front door of the
restaurant. He sits in the driver's seat, smoking a cigarette, gunning the engine every now and then. When he sees me standing there, he honks the horn. "Get in," he says.

It's funny. You spend a year and a half working with somebody. Then one day, for no good reason, you find yourself in their car, being driven across town. I don't know what he wants, and Buddy doesn't say, just fiddles with the radio. Nothing seems to please him. In the end, he opts for KKNG, the easy listening station. We get a xylophone version of Ronstadt's "Baby, You're No Good" and then an ad: "Mexico. It's everything you ever dreamed of."

"Where we going, Buddy?" I ask. "Bar?"

"I want to show you something," he says.

We drive through the downtown and along NW19th, headed away from Meridian. We pass the State Capitol and the motels on Lincoln Boulevard and the working girls. I feel sleepy and start to doze in the bucket seat. Buddy drives aggressively, whipping back and forth around slower cars on the city streets, and there's something infinitely comforting in the sensation of speed without control and the dull roar of his Mustang.

I wake with a start to the smell of burning, something acrid
and sickly sweet. “Hospital incinerators,” Buddy says, rolling up his window. I realize we are somewhere down by the medical strip. He pulls onto a dirt road with no sign. The houses out here are clapboard and look ready to collapse. We stop in front of the only one with a fence.

“Welcome,” Buddy says and turns off the engine.

The first thing I notice are the pit bulls, fifteen at least, all staked out across the front yard. And they know Buddy’s home. “Follow me, step by step,” he says above the din. “You won’t get bit.” I do exactly what he says, cause there’s at least one two inches away the whole long walk to the door, such ugly fuckers, straining at their collars and chains, saliva running down the sides of their mouths.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Buddy says. “I don’t raise them dogs for fights.”

Once inside, I see what he means. The house is packed with tall glass display cases, filled with black and white photos, bits of old hair attached to card, bone-handled buttonhooks, wool combs, silverware, china. Buddy tosses me a beer. He shows me the good stuff: a van de Velde tea service from the turn of the century, a Duplessis bust of someone famous and French. He explains to me
the differences between Staffordshire, Sèvres and the elder Wedgwood. "No 'e' in the middle," Buddy says. I have never touched things as old as these, each flawed in small ways and yet perfect, and I am amazed that they were the end result of somebody's work.

"Man needs a hobby," Buddy says. He polishes a small porcelain figurine of a sailor with pigtails and gently puts it back into a case.

"I don't know what you want me to say," I tell him.

"Hey, talking is only words," Buddy says. "I'm going to show you the real love of my life." He gets up and puts on an old record on one of those portable Califone turntables -- the way they used to make them, with the speaker in the lid. Then, he crosses the room, bows and takes me by the hand.

At first, it feels creepy, you know, dancing with another man. But he's respectful, he keeps his distance and his hands aren't sweaty, not like you'd expect. We keep dancing as it gets later and darker, and he teaches me with infinite patience the Hesitation Waltz, the Varsouvianna, the Leadville Glide, the Chapanecas. "I knew you'd be a natural," Buddy says. We drink
more beer and dance to Al Goodman, Byron Wolfe, and Harley Luse and His Orchestra. I notice, for the first time really, the thick lines around Buddy’s gray eyes, his missing teeth and the star tattoo on his left ear. And as we continue to dance, it occurs to me that this may be one of the few empowering moments in my life, the kind DeeGee keeps talking about, even with the sounds of the pit bulls continually rotating on their chains outside, and the smell of burning death in the night air, and Buddy’s whole life on display behind glass, as we whirl around one more time.
NUHOMA

LAST WEEKEND, my sister beat up her boyfriend at the mall, the place where all things that should happen at home and never do get put on display. He works part-time at The Gap, was in the middle of a pitch, selling a pair of jeans to some kid, when my sister spun him around and whaled on him. His co-workers didn't even try to get between them, just stood by, denim garments and electronic inventory guns hanging slack in their hands. They were too shocked to call the cops. My sister only had to hit her boyfriend three times: twice in the stomach, once on the chin to finish the job. She saved the tears for the drive home. That's the way we do things in our family, rehearse the appropriate response later, when it doesn't count anymore, when no one will notice.

My sister beat the hell out of her boyfriend at the mall. It seems his diary's depiction of their relationship left something to be desired. "Son of a bitch deserved it," she said. "He never loved me, not really, not the way I want to be loved." She cannot fully elaborate on what she means by this, but knows the facts. He wanted to go back to his old girlfriend in Virginia, to the only
person who ever truly understood him, because Sarah certainly didn’t. “I feel like I’m a slave in this relationship,” he wrote. “My life is one sorry mess. I hate this town.” I have no doubt that he’s more sorry now. I have seen my sister, sitting on the sofa, stroking her kitten with one hand, doing long, slow curls with the other, coiling and uncoiling thirty pounds of weight on a bar. Her neck is almost as big as my thigh: she armwrestles for beers at Archie’s Tap Room every now and then, and she does not pull her punches. Her boyfriend’s name is Ian. I have talked to him on the phone: a soft-spoken, sensitive twenty-three-year old who goes in for bird-watching, collects chinaware and alternates between Emerson, Lake & Palmer and Mozart.

He’s right, he’s in the wrong fucking place.

On Thursday, Sarah called me. She had been waiting in her apartment for four days. “I want to go out and get some food for the cat,” she said, “but I don’t want to miss Ian.”

“Sarah,” I said, “I don’t think he’s coming back.”

“What about his things?” she said. I pictured a telescope on its metal stand and Ian’s albums in plastic covers. I imagined the Audubon books, the white porcelain Byng & Grøndahl plates and saucers, the dainty Darbyware cups, neatly stacked in a corner. I
thought about my possessions and what they must say about me and whether I could abandon them under certain circumstances.

"Sarah," I said — all too aware that our family stories inevitably begin like this, with somebody hurting someone because they love them.

THERE WAS A TIME I thought Sarah’s anger radiated from her ex, the army vet, a Harley-riding, shotgun-loving zoology dropout from the University of Oklahoma. His life, she told me, made our life seem insignificant. I always assumed that he was just another stage in hers, not unlike one of those booster rockets from the Apollo shots which would fall away, leaving my sister intact, to become once again that shy, thumb-sucking girl I remember from photographs. I used to wonder what the two of them found to talk about, the great bear of a man from Vietnam and his high school inamorata. “We like the same things,” he once said. “You know, stuff.”

Then, after a disastrous first year at college, I spent a summer with them, back in my hometown, Norman, Oklahoma. I had not set foot in the state for ten years, and was appalled to
discover that Sarah had gone native. She lacked an eyetooth, wore black Noconas with silver toe caps and heels and spoke once again in that drawl used by Midwesterners who are in no particular hurry to finish anything. At the time, it seemed like such a waste after the British finishing schools and elocution lessons and horsey clubs, to find her back where she started and then some. The first thing she said to me as I walked out the gate at Will Rogers Airport was, “Shit, Joe, let’s get drunk tonight.”

Tonight started in the airport parking lot, where her boyfriend, who loved ambushes, sprang out of a full-sized flatbed, anointed me with warm Pabst Blue Ribbon and then there was a beery kiss I can still taste after all these years. “Now don’t call me Randy,” he said. “It’s Randall. But you can call me Dennis.” I soon learned that Dennis and Sarah no longer had an apartment to share, having been evicted for threatening the landlord with a baseball bat, but Dennis said that was behind them now: they had a sweet deal going at the Nuhoma Park Motel. He was the new caretaker. It was owned by distant relations of his, along with the chicken fried steak joint across the street and the funeral home next door, a proximity which lent itself to endless jokes with an eat, fuck and die punchline. I heard them all as the truck roared
down I-35, headed for Norman.

Even now, it scares the hell out me. Dennis knew. You can meet people like him everywhere, but mainly in bus stations and bars and darkened riversides where loners go to sigh and smoke cigarettes. People like Dennis have special antennae, and not only do they know what you want in your heart of hearts, they give it to you. My sister wanted nothing more than a family who ate at the same table, at the same time, and said “I love you” now and then. She ran motel reception and interference like an angel, soothing angry people who didn’t get a sanitary wrapper around the toilet seat, and fielding calls from Dennis’ family: why didn’t people stay longer, they wanted to know, why were profits going down in such a spectacular fashion?

Meanwhile, Dennis and I took drugs and watched soap operas. “This is the way real people live,” Dennis said. I could never work out whether he was referring to the daytime antics of Tad and Gabrielle and Duncan or the two of us. Sometimes, Dennis went political, professing the belief that his hero, Lorne Greene, was going to come out of Alpo retirement and teach uppity people a lesson. But there were working class characters in the soaps, they just didn’t do very much. I think Dennis took no small
amount of secret comfort from this. For me, the soap characters transacted the everyday business of their lives to make connections. You could read their motives; they always played their hands out; they were dependable. The experience was also reminiscent of the oldest and best memory I have of my mother, holding me, when we were both still young and loved each other, while watching The Guiding Light. And even though the shows were shit and badly-acted and often I said, “if only they could see me like this in Putney now,” I took them, along with Dennis murdering Arlo Guthrie songs on his guitar and spinning out the biggest load of bull about the Tet Offensive and taking the last plane out of Saigon. Every evening, Sarah, grinning like Tom Sawyer with her missing tooth, brushed Dennis’ magnificent hair after dinner until you could appreciate each lustrous strand, then she would pull it back into a massive pony tail and fasten it with a fat rubber band. We were stupid, but we were happy. It was a happy kind of stupid. At last, here was a man who was willing to take care of us, even if he was totally incapable of it.

Dennis even managed to learn some of the secret Anglicized language my sister and I reserved for ourselves. “You’re a couple
of phonies,” he once said. “She’s not so hard, and you, you’re just
an Okie wearing clothes from Marks & Sparks.” Pretty soon, I was
painting the motel, white with green stripes, and falling in love
with the smell of toluene and sweat and turpentine. I loved the
specks of emulsion in my hair and on my clothes; I loved the way
my hands ached from holding rollers and brushes. I, too, was in
the remaking. This was our home.

It couldn’t last, of course. It wasn’t his lies or our lies. It
wasn’t the ideological black holes created by drugs or the
implications of As The World Turns. It wasn’t even Dennis
insisting on doing the cooking and taking us off meat, because he
didn’t like the way it made us smell, and frying aubergine omelets
in margarine that I swear to God made me cry while he ate Jimmy
Dean sausages. It was the awful inertia of time. Somewhere in
August, I realized that I would never finish painting that motel,
there were too many edges and corners and carports. Sarah, while
determined as ever to hold everything together, her first big love,
soon tired of making up the rooms to her usual high standards.
Instead of letting things slide gradually, she just stopped. Dennis
knew something was dying among us, it was in the air and in our
eyes. One night he donned a rubber dog mask, stood in the red
light coming from the bathroom, and said, quite solemnly, “Shake your bootie. Shake your bootie. Shake it, all night long.” And when we did not laugh, he turned the heat lamp off, but we could still see the outline of the mask in the darkness, the bulbous nose, the big floppy ears. “I love you so much,” Dennis said. “So much.”

Even in silence, Dennis knew nuance when he heard it. Nights, I no longer needed the pair of unwieldy ear protectors favored by shooters: Dennis no longer sang, no longer made love to my sister, no longer snored because he did not sleep. That week, he made a last-ditch attempt to win us back, by stealing a real dog from a nearby farm. It was tan in color and had extremely bad breath and the most watery yellow eyes I have ever encountered. They looked non-existent at times and registered absolutely nothing. Upon entering the motel room, its first act was to baptize the carpet with a long, sporadic piss. “Ah, the simple pleasures of the poor,” my sister said, and we were happy again. Sarah and I spent the rest of the day luring the animal into situations designed to prove its lack of intelligence, and the dog, thick as pig shit, gladly complied. We named it “Funk” for a variety of reasons, much to Dennis’ annoyance.

I believe that little dog might have saved us. Somehow, its
strange and endless desire to please tempered by a total lack of
grace and beauty cemented our resolve to stay together. It was
one of us, and we knew it. But it was not meant to be. That very
night, Funk escaped. Sensing perhaps the impending madness of a
lost cause as only dogs can, it dug a three foot hole underneath the
chain link fence outside, ran into the middle of the road, and was
promptly hit by a car or truck.

Sarah and I chose to regard this death as an omen. Feeling
cursed, Dennis became more despondent and depressed. He
started taking trips on his motorcycle, but never rode very far.
Like Funk, Dennis was no good at running away. Before long, we
received postcards with captions like, “The only real biker’s bar in
Midwest City.” Midwest City is 22 miles from Norman. With a ball-
point, Dennis would make an “X” in the gravel pictured outside, to
show where the Harley had been. “I’m not coming back this time,”
he wrote. “I just can’t.”

Maybe part of me was sorry to see him go; after all, he had
survived combat of some kind, even if it was only in his mind.
Who else was better suited to deal with people like us? But part of
me knew that it could not go on, that it would end badly, that
somebody would get killed.

Still, we waited for him to come back. We stayed in front of the TV, surrounded by a floor covered with diet Coke cans, some of them overflowing with ashes. There was an aisle through them just big enough for us to get to the little kitchen. Finally, the family attorney came round and started asking questions. We were no longer welcome, he said.

Standing across the street from the Nuhoma with our belongings, we tried to work out who to call on the pay phone. We had seventy-five cents between us, but no numbers. "It's that father of ours all over again," Sarah said, philosophical to the last. "I'm afraid every male in my life will leave me."

I wanted to say to her, we didn't really know him. I wanted to say, do you remember father coming home from the senate, how he took the two of us to the same hamburger place every time because he could not bear the thought of eating with our mother. I wanted to say, do you remember the night he shot himself, we were eight and six respectively, and were watching a double bill of *Butch Cassidy & The Sundance Kid* and *Vanishing Point* at the Rancho Drive-In, and that has to mean something, doesn't it? I wanted her to remember our mother, inside the main
dining room of the Palace Hotel in St. Moritz, too drunk even for the liking of her dinner companion, a phlegmatic businessman from Lucerne. "You little fuckers," my mother had said. "I'm trying to teach you how to live."

"Sarah," I had wanted to say, but I said nothing. I did not know what to say.

"I can't explain what we've lost," Sarah said. "I only know how we've lived since then."