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Last Lives

Roger Lee Holt

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LAST LIVES

by

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Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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Trapped Hunter

When the moose rips up the riverbed
you mistake the spray—green roots, surface current—
for an early fall thrill of continuation.
But his stagger is the stagger
of any Hereford ringing the barnplanks
as the maul cracks off its skull.
This bull's eyes blaze with no hammer hanging,
your uncocked rifle a flimsy .30-.30
slung for an afternoon of stinging foxes wild-eyed
as liquored loggers, so hot for water they danced
around this bull's rack, nipped his ear, and in time
got a one-ton partner flopping his wayward jaws,
ready to take on the trees beside you.

You weren't born for this waltz,
trapped by a rabid moose,
where granite weeps down your back.
An icy creek limbers through poplar, keeping your teeth
locked as sprung steel.
It is here you can forget,
forget the price of all animals,
this one a grand more than any neighbor you shot
watching fog crawl your pasture.
Now you forget that skinny girl
home dragging the savage consequence
of good times, gauging her life
by plywood and plastic trinkets,
casting your role in screams clattering off portraits
before the face went tough.

Here, you give it all up as off track,
settle for the heated hide of a raging moose
and the long run for paradise.
Stone Ground

I

Bent wire, old man
you whipped rocks into the Carrabassett,
cleared a rock dump for strawberries.
Folks claimed there's enough loam to pot a gernamium.
They heard wind-drafts blown through old ears.
You lowered an acre three feet, crowbarred boulders,
paid the village tough one nugget of Idaho
fool's gold to roll them into the stream.
Parnell told you home runs in Boston,
muttered a bad pitch,
gave your dream garden to the rain.
Mud kept you cooped as a fryer for days
grew only beer cans and Twinkie wrappers.
You, old man, studied the breeze for dust.
When the earth wouldn't suck at a boot
you toured the village robbing hogs,
coffee grounds, brown peels, and empty eggs
gone cob-white. The wheelbarrow rolled
one hundred steps each time heavy,
the last of cows dead before their barn fell.

II

Weeds strain, roots lift a single stone,
strain to glimpse the owls,
their hurtle onto mice picked off hay,
hay piles and dung pounded deep to rot.
Morning mist crawls the streambank
settling low over ground.
This man wades that acre like sunlight
smokes early flies away and works
the devil in a starling's eye. Hair gray glints,
water buckets tipped those times in the sun,
full of dust that flies on his touch.
He drags fallen leaves, pours bags of white powder
treading the acre to snow. It is time for a gun.
III

Below Skunk Hollow no rifle fired, no buck fell.
The crack: his hand on a smart daughter's face years ago.
The crack: last year's rake giving out.
The crack: a tired brain ripped free
of lips never believed.
Given the gaze, last minute genius,
this man pondered longer moments,
floundered in one garden gone wrong
blind to each thing borne,
eyes lost remembering, remembering the feel—
broken alder where he tucked back last.

IV

The earth turns once more, stares
silver birch gold, sunlight to blue shadows
and the black creek, the final run,
out eighty years believing no God,
to the life you never had: This is not as I believe.
You are hacked apart, long winter and coy-dog hunger,
the man lives on who is never seen dead
and his stone-free acre comes up rich in summer hay.
BIG SKY
"I think you are an enormous talent. Possibly a genius."

Charles looks at Connie, groans and turns away into the patch of sunlight on his side of the bed. In a few moments she hears his breathing, deep and rhythmical again, as though the morning had failed to begin. She has been telling him the same thing each morning for several weeks in an attempt to inspire him to work. Her mother suggested it when Connie told her the marriage was rocky. Connie is not sure it is working. Nothing has worked in the past six months and maybe nothing will work. The sun shines through the skylight of their bedroom warming part of the bed and the log wall next to it. Connie hears birds singing, thinks she could almost hold that sky, and imagines one beautiful day. She is not the type to give up hope. Besides, she skis and she is learning to like the west.

Connie gets out of bed and throws on her robe, the black silk one her dad sent as an apology for not making the wedding. She looks at the sawed-off twelve gauge riot gun hanging over the headboard. Charles bought it for fifty dollars from a cop friend. He keeps it loaded with three shells. Charles told her she could cut through any door in the house with it in case she locked
herself in. She thinks it is silly that Charles keeps that thing over their bed. She goes to the kitchen and puts water on for coffee. The red light marked "power" on the stereo receiver still glows from last night. She turns it off and remembers listening to the PBS broadcast about the divorce problem in this country while she sat up waiting for Charles to come home from Castle Peak. The program said that young people today do not deal with problems like the ones their parents faced, they simply split.

She doesn't know what is wrong with her marriage, but she knows everything will be fine if she can just get Charles to the typewriter every day. He has not worked in months. They have plenty of money, that is not it. He sold several pieces of short fiction, one of which has been placed in a collection of prize stories. He has not lost his touch, he is simply not working.

Charles Reiner is forty-five and has not had an erection in eight months.

Connie is depressed thinking about the program, the way things have been for a while, about that famous women's lib announcer taking undisguised pleasure in the misery of thousands. She decides to take a walk before breakfast. A walk in the early spring coolness, the crisp mountain air, with her Golden Lab retriever will
surely cheer her. And, as she hears Charles stirring, she will be able to avoid his ugly hangover sarcasm that each morning lasts until whiskey-laden coffee makes him human again.

Connie pulls on her jean jumpsuit, tucks her robe inside it and steps out into the chill mist that is rising off the mountain as the early sun warms the ground and trees. She heads down the gravel road from the cabin and shivers as the mist sweeps by her. She turns and looks back at the cabin set into the trees and slightly obscured by the rising mist. She is quite sure she hears a horse whinny behind the cabin. It has been a long time since she has seen Charles ride Ghost Dance. She sees the dog watching her from down the road and wishes Les Peters would stop by one of these days. Things are always better when Charles spends more time with men. Connie lights a cigarette, the smoke blowing over her shoulder as she walks. She is positive she hears the horse pacing along the fence.

Next month Connie will have her twenty-fifth birthday. She will fly back to Hartford for the family celebration alone, Charles' nastiest comments fresh in her mind, wishing she had the courage not to return until he begged many times long-distance. She will have twenty-five thousand dollars added to her trust fund, a thousand...
for each year as in every other year, and there will be offers of cars, trips, vacation homes, etc. The family will go to dinner in the city, drink a good deal of champagne, and never once mention playwright Charles Reiner. Thinking all this depresses Connie more and she doesn't hear the BMW as it rolls to a halt next to her.

"Hey Chicken!" Charles says from the car. "Wanna piece of candy? Get into my fancy new car and I'll give you a piece of candy." He laughs.

He is smiling at her but his voice is strained and he looks tired and pale as though he just arose from a bout with the flu. His gray hair is dull and the wrinkles around his eyes are pronounced. He is bundled in his sheepskin and has on a new feathered Stetson.

"A peppermint stick?" she asks.

"You name it," he says. "This here's your candy-wagon."

Connie runs around the front of the BMW, flipping her long blonde hair from side to side. Charles starts the engine and she climbs in the passenger's seat. They take off with a roar, scattering gravel. She takes out a pack of Salems, can't get her cigarette lit and throws it and the crumpled pack out the window.

"Nervous again, Chicken?"

Charles thinks he is a race driver and delights in
speed. Connie thinks he is lucky and is terrified because she knows one of these times something will happen that nobody can do anything about. It strikes her that it is not him she is worried about, she never thinks about it when she is not in the car though he drives like this all the time, drunk or sober. He is driving so fast the weeds along the road seem to bend like the wind was blowing in the ditch.

"We ought to get some breakfast," he says as they slide through a curve on the dirt road. "Castle Peak?"

"Sure," she says. She hates that place. It is the only place Charles likes to eat. The food is uninspiring, sometimes cold, and the conversation is old-hippie. Charles says it is where you get the pulse of this valley, where he gets the best ideas for his work. Connie thinks Charles secretly hates all the people at Castle Peak, that he likes to be there because it is one of the few places where he can feel superior to everyone. Connie notices the Gallatin is up at least a foot since she drove this way to meet Juan Carlos over a month ago.

They pull into Castle Peak's gravel lot and Charles drives all around it, finally parking next to a shiny black semi with gleaming chrome wheels. The truck says KENWORTH in heavy chrome letters on the hood and has ANITA in yellow script just beneath it. There is a load
of steel girders on the trailer.

"Every time I see one of those babies," Charles says, "It takes me right back to the B-61 Mack I drove as a kid."

He has told her this many times. She smiles wanly. "They must be building more up at Big Sky," she says.

"Some of the best times I remember were spent rolling the highway in a big rig like that."

Connie thinks this is very sad. She also thinks this is a lie. It seems to her that Charles remembers a great deal of the best times and they are never less than twenty years ago. Connie remembers very little from twenty years ago. She remembers the move the Pierce family made from the Manhattan apartment to West Hartford. She thought they had moved to a park because their new home had such a large yard she could not see the neighboring houses. She was petrified of the horses from the start, something about their smell, petrified when her father shot their spirited stallion after it kicked her older brother to death. She gets a nervous feeling thinking about those times: her doctor making her recall the color of her brother's shirt that day, what it sounded like when the horse's hoof hit his head; and she would scream again but she is calmed by thinking about how many years are between Charles and herself. She thinks
of the big mistakes in her life and remembers her father, her doctor, everyone telling her that in this life as long as you live your mistakes live with you.

"Charles, wasn't Anita the name of the drag queen in your play?"

Charles says nothing and they enter Castle Peak. He says "howdy" to everyone who looks their way, and says to the waitress, "The usual, Janie." Connie doesn't recognize anybody. Willie Nelson is singing a cry-in-your-beer tune on the jukebox and everyone is staring into their coffee in response to the music.

After a moment, Charles says, "I think we should have a talk, Chicken."

"So do I." Connie skins her loose hair back and with one hand holds it in a knot at the back of her head.

"I mean serious talk."

"You mean pink pills that change sex," she says. Connie is on a new brand of the Pill.

Charles is getting agitated. He is fidgeting, flipping a quarter over and over with his fingertips.

"I'm hungover."

"What's new?" she says.

"What it means to be out here," he says suddenly, "out west with all these phony hippies and young part-timers is, it means you are not known by anybody as any-
thing but what you say. It means everybody knows you as you know yourself or nobody knows you at all."

Janie brings their coffee and Charles smiles at her and winks. Connie can't help staring at the turquoise on Janie's left hand, at her perfect light pink fingernails. She's wondering what Charles just did to the waitress.

She thinks of jewelry and automatically twists the back of the diamond stud in her ear.

"If you can't break free of the proper family thing," Charles says, "if you can't even get out of the very garments they insist on you, you remain another slightly favored object different from a favorite painting only in that you never need dusting." He stares into his coffee.

"Did you say something?" Janie asks.

"Hell of a life," Charles says, still studying his coffee.

"Sure is," she says leaving the counter.

Connie rests her hands on Charles' arm. "Drink your coffee," she says lifting her own cup. "Why does family matter? This marriage is just you and me."

There are a couple of moments of silence as the jukebox dies out and Connie cannot recall Charles talking like this except when he comes home late, very drunk and is angry that she has waited up. She looks at the guns mounted on the wall behind the bar. Charles collects
guns and he has started collecting knives.

"How do you feel?" she asks.

"You have to find somebody who forces you to live up to your promise," he says. He reaches for the sugar container and pours sugar into his coffee until the coffee spills out onto the counter. Connie gives him her coffee and takes his away along with the sugar container. He grabs her wrist.

"Did I say promise or promises?" he asks.

"Promise," she tells him.

"Both," he says.

Janie brings breakfast, a small steak, two pancakes, two eggs, and hash browns. Connie doesn't eat much, doesn't seem to notice how dry the pancakes are, that the potatoes are scorched. Charles stabs the steak with his fork and spins it in the plate.

"Has it ever occurred to you that all our questions are the same one? That nothing loses its insistence through repetition?"

"Of course," Connie says. "That's the standard thinking of..." She stops picking at her plate and sees that Charles is sweating, that his eyes have a high shine. He begins to laugh.

"Then it makes sense," he says, chuckling, "that the shortest distance between two points has no bearing on
human nature."

Connie looks around the restaurant. Charles is giggling now, his beer-belly jumping up and down, his gray head in both hands. People are beginning to watch them, are beginning to examine closely the labels of catsup bottles. Connie realizes one of the things they are noticing is her bathrobe bunched up beneath her jumpsuit. She reaches into a pocket and pulls out a ten-dollar bill. Charles is laughing uncontrollably. She throws the money onto the counter, takes Charles' arm and shakes him gently.

"Let's go home."

"I can't do you a bit of good there," he says, wiping his eyes.


Charles gets up and they go outside and head back toward the car. The semi is gone from beside the BMW.

"I'm O.K.," Charles says, "it was just terribly funny."

"It was," she agrees. "Can I drive?"

"Sure," he says, handing her the keys, "but no race car shit."

"Right. No race car shit." She has never once complained about his driving.

They get into the car and she adjusts the seat.
"Make sure you can't bend those voluptuous elbows as you hold the wheel," he tells her.

"Right," she says and starts the engine.

"Adjust the mirrors!" he says and rolls down his window placing one hand on the racing mirror, the other on her thigh. "O.K.?

"Fine," she says, removing his hand from her leg.

"Oil pressure?"

"For Christ's sake, Charles!" she says.

"Just tell me. What is it? We've got to do this right."

"It's sixty!" she snaps. "Why don't you get a tape out?"

Charles pulls the box of cassettes out from under his seat as they leave the parking lot. He rattles plastic for a while and then sticks a tape into the machine in the dash. The third movement of the Brandenburg blasts on at nearly full volume. Charles looks at Connie and grins.

"How's that?" he yells over the music.

Connie twists the volume knob. "Real fine."

"That was Bach's way of going crazy," he tells her. "One person bearing the burden of the world's wisdom. It's that simple."

"Pretty nice way to go nuts," Connie says.
"Relative," he says, "And that was only half of it."
"What was the other half?"
"A bunch of kids," he says.

They ride along without talking, absorbed in the music, until they come to Clear Creek. Connie swings the BMW onto the dirt road. She thinks that kids are making a comeback.

"You always drive way too slow on dirt roads," Charles says.

Connie looks over at him. She notices that he has stopped sweating, that his complexion is pale once again. For a while she says nothing. Then she says:

"I have something to tell you."

"Shoot," Charles says. "Let 'er rip. It's certainly your turn."

"I was pregnant."

Charles says nothing. He studies the passing landscape out his window.

"Did you hear me?" she asks.

Charles does not look around. "Sadness drives us all to work. I haven't seen a period in weeks."

"No Charles," she says. "I'd like to be serious for a minute."

"So what have you got to tell me? That you took the cure? How serious is that?" He rolls down his window,
lets the roar of cold air join the music. He sticks his head out the window.

"Know why we won't have kids?" he yells. "Because I was cut long ago. The horse and I, we've got similar problems. Besides, I can't stand your toes. Who would want kids with those toes?" He is laughing very hard.

*

Connie wakes with a start. It is late morning, the sun shining on the entire bed from the skylight in the slant of the cabin roof, and she is alone. She tries to remember if Charles made it home last night. She cannot remember and listens to the drone of an airplane fade into the distance. She decides he couldn't have made it home because she is always first up, even when he is working because he works at night. He begins work when she goes to bed.

This is not where she belongs. Connie is sure she hears someone singing. It is an April morning, the sun keeps disappearing behind clouds, there is wind and it will surely rain. She reaches one arm over the edge of the bed for her gown. Then she knows Charles is typing in the library downstairs.

Connie stands in front of the mirror and brushes her hair. Her loosely wrapped gown slips down one shoulder.
She is being very quiet, listening to the tapping of Charles' machine that carries from the library. The whirr whenever he stops typing makes her think how he wastes electricity. Watching herself in the mirror, Connie slowly draws an arm across her silk-swathed breast and rips the strap off her gown.

"Charles," she calls as she starts down the stairs. "Charles," again at the door to the library. "Oh, you're working."

Charles does not look up. His machine whirrs and buzzes.

"Your exciting new play," she says. He doesn't say anything and she goes to make coffee. Breakfast always consists of this. But this morning Charles is working. Connie stares out the back window. She feels a chill as she watches the mountain creek crash down across the hill behind the cabin. She knows if she were smart enough, if she could just concentrate, she could get Charles to stop working. Maybe she ought to polish the silver today.

When she was a little girl the help did things like that. With the hem of her black silk gown Connie dabs polish with a delicate touch onto the Grand Baroque handle of one spoon. The smell of silver polish reminds her of Charles when he has gone days without a shower, trying to
be a cowboy. She hates that smell. All she can hear is Charles typing, and, somewhere, singing.

It is April though and there are birds. There is sun streaked across the breakfast table, but Connie does not dare to take Charles his coffee. She thinks about Juan Carlos and the head he just sculpted. The head that takes a great deal of imagination to be a head. Juan Carlos prefers to be called J.C.

Charles has not spoken of Juan Carlos in weeks. The dark-eyed, practically emaciated man told Charles his problems in order were: that he drank too much, was too old and fat, and all his work sucked. Charles was drunk and had asked Carlos, whom he refused to call J.C., why things were going wrong. Carlos was whittling a cedar bookmark for Connie. He stopped whittling and stroked the thin, smooth piece of cedar and then was as blunt as he could be. Charles threw him off the porch, four pine railings splintering and Carlos's nose bleeding all over the fresh snow. That was four months ago and Connie imagines they have not made up because men can be slow that way. She stares out the window, watches two mountain bluebirds flutter wildly around, one trying to mount the other as wings beat furiously. She is fascinated. Charles refuses to speak to J.C. who would never come here uninvited.
She picks up an ebony candlestick J.C. carved for her and presses her finger into the depression at the top. She has torn all her fingernails with her teeth and there is a thin red line of dried blood around the cuticle of one finger. She rubs the carved wood hard with her thumb. Charles yells for his coffee. Constance Pierce has not been touched for weeks, and now she hears typing or the electric whirr of Charles' machine, and beyond that, far beyond in this house she hears singing. She pours Charles' coffee and looks up just as the paired birds fly off.

*

Juan Carlos is drinking coffee at the kitchen table when Connie comes out from her shower. Connie has nothing on because for several weeks she has been going to the shower naked thinking she might get Charles' attention that way. Her slender, fair-skinned nakedness definitely has Juan Carlos's attention.

"Oh, hi J.C.," she says. "Sorry, I didn't know you would be here."

"That's O.K.," he says. Connie knows he means that because he has seen her before and it is no big deal. She goes up the stairs to get dressed.

She knows J.C. from college. They are the same age,
though J.C. finished a year later than Connie because he dropped out of the comparative literature program when he discovered he was an artist. College was boring after that. J.C. quickly made friends with Charles.

"I didn't expect to see you here until you and Charles were on good terms again," she calls down to him.

"Yeah. I was driving by and I saw the BMW was gone."

"Les Peters borrowed it for the day. I think he's bringing it back tonight."


"Come on, J.C., Les is a nice guy. Rancers are a little tough on artists because they don't see art as real work."

"He's not very tough on Charles," J.C. says.

"Charles used to be a logger and a trucker," she says. "Les can relate to that."

"Yeah, to that and guns and knives and any other kind of macho bullshit."

Connie comes back downstairs. She has on her tight faded Levis and a sheer cotton shirt made in India. Her blonde hair is still wet on her shoulders because she lets it air dry. An article in Cosmo said it's very bad to blow-dry your hair.

"Look," she says to J.C. "Charles is out in the
studio. I think he's cooling out after working very hard. Why don't you make a move for you guys to become friends again? I kind of miss having you here."

J.C. doesn't answer. He takes a small wood-carving set from his shirt pocket, removes a fine gouge from it and begins cleaning his nails.

"As far as I'm concerned," he says, "This may be the last time I'll see you here. I don't need Mr. Macho one minute half killing me, the next crying on my shoulder. He can't handle honest criticism from a friend, and I can't handle that."

"He was drunk that time, J.C.," Connie says.

"Sure he was drunk that time and he's drunk every other time. Drunk you got an excuse to do anything. Or nothing."

Connie pours herself coffee. "I don't know what to do about any of that. Really, I mean his drinking, his work. Every time I try to give him hell I feel like I'm giving my father hell or something."

J.C. takes a thin piece of teak from the carving set. He slips his wallet from his hip pocket, pulls out some rolling papers, a Mastercharge card, and a small square of number 300 emery cloth.

"What are you making?" Connie asks.

"Thought you might like a butter knife. Got any
"A butter knife, great. What kind of oil?"


"Lots," Connie says and she gets up from the table and goes to the counter by the kitchen sink. She picks up a long-necked cruet of olive oil and, as she places it in front of J.C., Les Peters comes through the kitchen door.

"Hi Les."


Juan Carlos doesn't answer. Les picks up the olive oil and smells it.

"No dope in this, Jew-ann," he tells Juan Carlos. "Them little white uppers, they make your eyes big and your asshole small every time, huh Jew-ann. But tell you what, you slug down, say, three tablespoons of this stuff and I cry before your God and mine you'll shit like your monkey was in Morocco."

Juan Carlos studies the piece of teak, turning it again and again in his hands.

"You know where Morocco is?" Les asks.

Juan Carlos turns and takes the cruet from Les.

"It's in Connecticut, Jew-ann," Les says. "Or one of them faggot states back east."
Juan Carlos puts a drop of oil on the teak and begins to rub the emery cloth over it.

"Don't start no fires now Jew-ann," Les says. "Tell me, Connie where's the man to this place?"

"Out in the studio," Connie says. "He worked this morning. I think he's trying to get over it."

"Ha!" Les says. "He ain't worked a day since he parked his last rig."

Connie sits down next to J.C. She is very interested in the butter knife and the fact that J.C. can grind the teak so hard with such a tiny cloth. Les leaves the kitchen and Connie thinks he sometimes picks bad times to show up.

"I could say plenty of things about his name," J.C. says. "Like, how can your family go on if there's Les Peters? It's not exactly high wit."

"Which is why you won't bother," Connie tells him, resting her hand on his arm, feeling his stringy muscle as his fingers work the emery cloth over the teak. "He's just joking. You shouldn't take it so badly."

"Cock-show," J.C. says. "It's cock-show. I know the gig and so does every ten year old kid in the world. I answer him back then he gets physical. Then he wants to do it to me. I've taken on much tougher guys than Les Peters without having to play cock-show."
"So don't play the game," Connie says. "This might be a good time to see Charles."

J.C. looks up quickly and glances at his watch. "You think?"

"Sure. Charles is always in a better mood when Les is around. Why don't you give it a try. I'll go too." Charles won't do anything weird if I'm there."

As they walk from the cabin to the studio Connie tells J.C.: "Between you and me, Charles has mentioned several times how much he's missed you."

When Connie and Juan Carlos enter the studio Les and Charles are sitting by the wood stove. There is a coffee pot on the stove and a newly opened bottle of Black Velvet on the floor between the two men. The walls of the timbered log cabin are covered with guns, mostly carbine and pistol matchups of the old west, and the common weapons of the major wars: Colts, Remingtons, Springfields, Enfields and Mausers. Les is holding a samurai sword Charles bought recently in San Francisco.

"Better put that away," Charles says to Les, "the children are here." He reaches down and picks up the bottle of whiskey and pours his coffee mug full. "A touch?"

"Just a spot," Les says. Charles pours whiskey into Les's mug until it runs over onto the floor.
"Hey, Black Velvet lady," Charles says. "Open that door a minute."
Connie looks from J.C. to Les to Charles.
"They ain't sure who's the lady," Les says.
Connie finally opens the door and Charles picks the cap to the whiskey bottle off the floor and throws it out of the cabin. He laughs and turns to Les.
"Now we got to see that the stuff don't go bad on us." He turns to Connie and Juan Carlos. "Me and Les, we're getting tighter every minute. What are you kiddies up to?"
Connie takes a Salem pack out of her pants pocket, shakes out a cigarette, lights it and offers the pack to J.C. She blows the smoke at Charles.
"We just thought we'd socialize."
"Well Chicken," Charles says, "this here is a full-bore anti-society scene. It is loaded, as you can see, with historical evidence that would suggest not one column-inch of the society page originated here. Furthermore, if you insist on sucking on that fag in here, we can go for either balls or brains." Les lets out a hoot.
"That is," Charles continues, "watch where you drop your ashes. There's enough black powder in here to send this little studio cabin express to Seattle." Les laughs
again.

"Pretty stupid," Juan Carlos says, "to have that stuff near even a wood stove."

"Kid can think," Les says to Charles. "Comes from staying in out of the sun." He leans forward, opens the stove and rakes the burning wood with a poker. Sparks fly out around the stove. A cinder lands on Juan Carlos's boot and goes out. Les looks at him and raps his boot where the cinder landed with the poker. Juan Carlos grimaces, but does not move or say anything. Les puts the poker down next to the stove. He takes a package of Big Red tobacco out and stuffs a huge wad into his cheek.

Connie crushes her cigarette into a dirty shot glass, watches the ash. She hears the bluebirds nesting under eaves. The birds flap against roof beams, shuffling like cards. She thinks how J.C. used to play guitar and she'd sing. They'd practice sitting side by side in this chair.

It ain't really fire we worry about, Jew-ann," Les says, handing the bag of tobacco to Charles. "It's just that tobacco wasn't never meant to be burned. Least not by men. Why, they're finding that you burn tobacco, it takes your beard away. Then your voice changes. Next thing you know, you sit down to piss. Ain't that right, Chuck?"
"A fact," Charles says.

"Maybe Jew-ann," Les says, "you best have a sit by the stove here. Maybe you'll learn something you should ought to know." He grabs a rickety straightback chair and swings it at Juan Carlos.

"Get the kid a glass," Les tells Connie as Juan Carlos straddles the chair back-to. "If he runs with the elk, he don't shit with no bears. Ain't that how it goes?"

"If he flies with the eagles he don't sit with no crows," Charles replies. "Anyway, it's close."

Connie is startled; Les puts his hand, full-palm, on her arm. She gets up and goes to get a glass and Charles picks the whiskey bottle up and hands it to Juan Carlos. "No telling how long she'll take," he says. "She might decide to make a glass. A guy could die of thirst."

Juan Carlos takes a long pull on the whiskey.

"Don't be shy," Les says. "You know, what we need is a table. Can't do no discussing without no table." He goes to the corner of the studio and rolls a large butt-cut of bull pine toward the stove. Charles moves his chair and Les drops the heavy wood in front of Juan Carlos.

"The one that cut this measured by his knee," Les
says, "Just perfect height. Must of been somebody smart. If we had us some cards, a six-gun or two, things would be right huh, Jew-ann?"

"I suppose so," Juan Carlos says. He stares at Les for a moment and then says, "You might try my real name for a change, Les."

Les looks over at Charles and laughs. "You don't like what I call you boy, maybe you should try earning yourself another name." He picks up his coffee mug, drinks off the whiskey and shakes the last drops into Juan Carlos's lap."

"Only reason I see your name that way," Les says, "is I hear tell you don't know which side of the bed is yours. Ain't that it, Chuck?"

Charles and Juan Carlos are gazing at each other. The thin man's eyes are very dark. Charles snatches the whiskey bottle from Juan Carlos and without looking away pours Les's mug full again. He pours some into his own mug and sets the bottle in the middle of the round of wood. He picks up his mug. "That's it," he says to his friend. "A man without a father will find one somewhere. Nobody goes without. Friends will do."

Les glances at Charles and sits back in his chair. He rubs his high unshaven cheeks and reaches down and picks up the sword again. Scraping his thumb across the
edge, he gets a singing sound running up and down the blade.

"You see, Jew-ann," he says, "if we knowed for sure you wasn't halfway queer, then we might even teach you to hunt. But your very own friend here has told me in so many words what really is."

Juan Carlos studies Charles who is picking something out of his whiskey.

"Well then," he says, "I should tell you a few things, Les Peters."

Charles grabs the whiskey bottle and puts it between his legs. His face is bright, he is sweating, and he does not look at Juan Carlos. "My mother had her ways," he says, "But you needn't think I was much affected."

"I will tell you," Juan Carlos says. "that his mother affected him a great deal."

"She was crazy!" Charles shouts. "She was absolutely boogie!"

"Well Charles," Juan Carlos says, "what do you think spanking little boys in San Francisco with a samurai sword is, if it's not a little boogie?"

"That poor woman," Charles says, covering his mouth with his hand. "She had a hard life. When baby brother Lee was killed in Nam, she gave up." Charles is gagging.

Les goes to Charles.
"Imagine it, Les," Juan Carlos says. "Mr. former-pug, former-logger, former-marine. Mr. run-them-down, shoot-em-dead on Polk Street whacking some little boy's hairless bumpty with the flat of that tool you're holding. Isn't it truly dear?"

Les smiles weakly at Juan Carlos, watches Charles now pouring more whiskey. "Ain't a chance."

"Really?" Juan Carlos says. "You ought to know, Les, that Mr. hot shot dramatist, keeper of foxy-lady Connie, can stage quite a strange show, a real sicko-fantasy without writing a word of it, but Mr. hot shot can't get it up for any foxy-lady."

Charles stands up, drunkenly knocks his chair over. "Enough!" he says, and throws his whiskey into Juan Carlos's face. "Get that queer fucker!" he yells to Les, who grabs Juan Carlos by the neck and takes him backwards onto the floor. Charles picks up the sword and swings the flat of it hard into Carlos's back, knocking his wind out. Juan Carlos lies wheezing on the floor, and Charles runs the point of the sword down the back of the downed man's jeans, and cuts them to the crotch. Handing the sword to Les, he grabs the split jeans and pulls them down to Juan Carlos's knees.

"Take a cut on that, Les," Charles says, standing up. Les Peters swings the sword two-handed against Juan
Carlos's butt with a loud crack. Juan Carlos screams and there is an immediate purple welt rising from the blow. Les hands the sword to Charles. When Charles swings the sword over his head and lunges forward it looks as though he will cut off Juan Carlos's legs. At the last second he twists the blade and it slaps loudly onto Juan Carlos's lower back, raising a welt at the top of his butt, a thin red line forming along the edge of the purple ridge. Before the line begins to drip blood down his back, Les and Charles are at the door.

"Real gentle man, that Jew-ann," Les says as they leave.

*

"I'm deciding maybe I despise playwrights," Connie says as she dabs iodine on J.C.'s ass. J.C. is lying on Connie's bed, the sun from the skylight heightening his very white cheeks with two purple stripes almost perfectly parallel. His split jeans are on the floor by her feet and she thinks again that J.C. has a small ass. J.C. is flinching and grunting from the iodine and Connie is spinning the applicator point into the cut.

"I mean the things they make people do, all their little manipulations. I remember a party, it was on Nantucket and I was between terms at Mount Hermon, and
this playwright comes over and tells me I simply must move as there's no room in the scene for a woman without tits. Imagine it!"

"Coarse," J.C. says. "Frightfully coarse. The trade sprung from precocious children, all of whom assume the appendages of small animals to be removable."

"Exactly, J.C.," Connie says. "That's exactly it. My mother warned me. We went to a lot of plays when I was growing up. Mother always said plays help you tell the difference between good and evil. When I married Charles, mother said playwrights are a different thing altogether. I should have listened. I'm not sure I can stay, J.C."

J.C. says nothing, but Connie is glad she has told someone how she thinks she has been feeling. She caps the iodine bottle and fans the air over J.C.'s cut.

"You're lucky, J.C. As drunk as those two were, something very bad could have happened. I mean, something much worse." Connie runs her fingernails very lightly up and down J.C.'s ass, her nails catch in the shallow cut and he flinches.

J.C. moans. "I must need a bandage," he whispers. "Don't you suppose I'll need a bandage?"

"The best thing," Connie says, "would be to give it some air every day." She is nowhere near the cut now and
she is using two hands. "You should definitely have on some underwear," she breathes. "Jeans alone would be the worst thing. You are about my size."

"I take a twenty-eight," J.C. says.

Connie goes to her dresser, sees from the clock face reflected in the mirror of her vanity that it is four o'clock, and is certain that Charles and Les will not be back for dinner until after six. She opens her top drawer. "Would wearing a pair of my undies for a while bother you?"

"Not if you really think I should," says J.C.

"What color?"

"Whatever you think appropriate to the circumstances," he says.

She takes out a pair of black crotchless from Xandria's and holds them up for J.C. to see. "These might be the most comfortable for you. They do me no good in here."

J.C. gets up and takes the panties and Connie turns again to her dresser and begins digging through the drawers. J.C. puts the panties on his head.

"I know the jeans I have on are my biggest pair. You can wear these." She turns, unzips her jeans, sees J.C. and they both crack up. They are laughing and leaning against one another as Connie takes her jeans off.
The jeans are damp in the crotch. She pulls J.C. against her. "I need somebody, J.C.," she tells him.

J.C. pulls quickly away as they hear the kitchen door open downstairs. He grabs her jeans up off the floor and pulls them on.

"Hey!" Les Peters yells. "Hey! J.C.! I need a hand!"

J.C. doesn't answer. He sits on the bed and pulls on his hiking boots. He and Connie can hear Les walking from room to room downstairs.

"J.C.?" he shouts again. "Hey! Anybody home? God damn it!"

"We're up here, Les," Connie yells. "What do you want?"

"Chuck!" Les yells up. "He got hurt. He got drug by that horse. He's busted up bad. We got to get him some help."

"I'm coming!" J.C. says.

Connie goes to her dresser and begins taking all her jeans out of the drawer and throwing them on the floor. She cannot decide which pair of jeans she will wear. "Charles can't act now," she whispers to herself, "He can't act." She is humming softly.

J.C. runs down the stairs and he and Les get Charles out of the BMW and bring him into the house. Charles is
unconscious and there is a great deal of blood. He is missing some teeth and his breath is coming erratic, coming in cracks and wheezes and sometimes not at all. One arm keeps grinding back, crunching at the joint, bent in an awkward angle as J.C. and Les carry him through the kitchen. They lay him on the library couch.

"I'll get some blankets," J.C. offers. "And some ice. I'll keep him going, you and Connie get a doctor."

Connie comes lightly down the stairs; she is gripping her jeans and humming to herself. "Hi, Les," she says.

"Call Dr. Barrett," Les tells her. "Tell him I'll pick him up." He runs out the kitchen door without closing it. Connie strolls to the open door and watches Les tear down the road in the BMW. Gravel spins up the dust. It reminds Connie of smoke. She thinks the road is very dusty for this time of year and she pushes the door to. She goes over to the counter, picks up the phone book and thumbs through the yellow pages.

J.C. runs from the library up the stairs. He comes back down with all the blankets from the bed. "What are you doing?" he says.

"Finding a number of some doctor," Connie tells him, and she starts looking through the white pages.

"Why are you taking so long?" J.C. asks.

"I forget his name," she answers.
"For Christ's sake it's on the cover!" J.C. yells at her.

"Oh," Connie says. "One day forgive, another forget." She knows she could remember the name, but she hears the singing. "He loved whiskey and women."

As long as there is singing Constance Pierce is very happy.
Jeremy reaches over to the volume knob of the radio in the State car and twists it violently, snapping the country tune off short. He pulls a cigarette out of the pocket of the beige shirt that sags on his bony chest and with considerable difficulty digs a lighter from his too-tight jeans. He rolls his slightly bugged eyes over to his probation officer, Dan Pearson, and flicks his lighter.

"You don't like country-western music?" Pearson asks, watching Jeremy light up, the flame accenting the purple and acne-blotched tone of the boy's face.

"Like it?" Jeremy says, straightening himself against the seat-back, cramming the lighter back into his pocket. "That shit ain't music. It's just dumb."

They are riding I-95 south, heading into the farming valley in the central part of the state, heading for Rennie LeBlanc's shop. They are taking Jeremy home.

"Why did you leave the school?" Pearson asks the boy. "You know you can get sent places that aren't so nice."

"The school," Jeremy says, his words bobbing the cigarette in his mouth, ashes flaking into his meager lap. "It's a dumb place." He sweeps his ragged and grubby-blond preschool bangs from his eyes. "There's
nothing nice about it and I hate it. All the people at the school are queer. Scared into being queer. I'm not queer, nor scared neither and I hate that place like anything."

"More than you hate your home?" Pearson asks.

Jeremy is silent for several minutes as he sucks his cigarette. "I don't hate home."

"What?" Pearson asks.

"Rennie, he ain't so bad," Jeremy says. "He ain't so smart, don't say much either way, but he's o.k. Besides, how do you hate something you ain't really got?"

"Didn't you want to go to the school to get away from Rennie?"

"I thought I did," Jeremy says. "I thought there would be kids there. You know? Kids that know some things, that liked doing stuff, that maybe I could like."

"And there weren't any kids you liked?"

"Nah," Jeremy says, looking out the window, watching the brown early November pastures fly by. "There weren't even any kids there." He turns toward Dan Pearson. "Just children. They all dress up like sissies, ties and crap. They're at the school because they did poo-poo at mommie's fancy party. I mean, can you see me in ties. I'm most proper in potato farm rags and I get these ties, coming from rich old ladies thinking maybe sometime they done
something they're gonna pay for with ties. So I look like a fool for somebody who's never gonna see how silly their money can get, and it makes me look good to a bunch of queers that all do just like they are told, some of them just like little girls. I hate them all. I hate that friggin' place."

Pearson opens his window a crack and switches on the headlights. The New England fall evening is just getting to the change of light and small clouds fog the road, skittering to the sides of the highway as the car plunges into them. It is mid-semester at the Wendham School and Jeremy Berthon is going back to Rennie LeBlanc's.

"It's probably all right that things work out like this," Pearson says after a while. "It's all right that you are going back to Rennie's, to that small town. A place that you know can maybe help you."

"Yeah," Jeremy says. "It will probably help a lot."

But it is not all right that Jeremy is going back, and he knows it and Pearson knows it, too. And, though there will never be any way of telling for sure, Rennie probably knows it is not all right that Jeremy is coming back to Burnham.

Rennie LeBlanc never mattered to Jeremy. That relationship exists solely because the state assigned the
responsibility for one human being judged incapable of his own care to another human being judged capable of assuming such responsibility. The relationship to Jeremy, who considers the matter as infrequently as possible, is a test of the State's character. He knows that Jeremy Berthon will not be the one to pass or fail this test, and that no matter what he does, the results will be the same.

There was once somebody who mattered in Burnham. Old Charlie Earl mattered to Jeremy more than anybody he could remember before he met that neat wire of an old man. He met Charlie Earl the fall, the hunting season, before at fourteen he stole the doctor's car, smashing it and the doc's youngest daughter up, before he then grabbed the investigating trooper's gun and emptied it into the cruiser, the heavy revolver leaping in his hand, killing the expensive German shepherd, one round blowing the carburetor clean off the engine so the angry and shocked statie had to drag Jeremy, screaming and biting, the hundred-odd feet up the side road to the highway to flag down a bewildered motorist who smirked in Jeremy's favor all the way to the county jail. Charlie Earl, before all that, appeared at Rennie's shop old, but young enough to be flexible as a coat hanger, smart in starch-gleaming khaki trousers and a red plaid flannel shirt. He was
tidy as his tool shed, which he kept full of curious metal implements Jeremy would never use and felt must have been the old guy's workshop fantasies. The old man's eyes flashed through rimless octagonal spectacles, and the boy knew finally he had a real friend. He remembers watching Charlie Earl's knobby hand grip something of wood, how it melded itself to a hoe handle or, more likely, a rifle stock (he had so many fine guns), as sure of its place as the pale and drowned root in a dried-up creek bed. Charlie Earl was then a break from Rennie. And he was a break from Clara LeBlanc, Rennie's wife, a bone of a woman, her sex evident only from her sweep of raven hair, which shined inspite of her bitterness and hinted at some passed-by grace of youth and beauty that was by now given over completely to mean and simple disgust. Odds are she hated her belly for doing nothing more over the years than sag. Charlie Earl was a break from Clara and her Bible and from Rennie and his mulish clattering about the shop. Charlie Earl was a real person, and his flushed and abraded face showed it.

"Sometimes," Jeremy says, "when I was at that place and one of them kids was reaching after me, real smart and thinking I was just the same as him, right then wherever I was, I was the unhappiest I ever been." He hesitates, he is speaking words, never minding how they
fall or even if they are heard so long as he gets them out. He looks over at Dan Pearson, at his creased and wattled face distorted by the weird, green cast of the dash lights. He imagines Dan Pearson's face in death. Pearson studies the road ahead of them, his fingers nervously running, lightly, along the gearshift.

"I mean," Jeremy goes on, "I don't belong with none of those people, and I get to thinking maybe I don't belong with nobody, myself nor nobody else and I think then it might be nice if it could just be over."

"Over?" Pearson echoes.

"You know," Jeremy says. "Charlie Earl and me went hunting one time. Charlie Earl said it was time to be a man, to find it out, was I ready. So we went to a place he knew, we both had rifles, and sat at the edge of this orchard, the apples all stinking so you could smell 'em through a cold. Ain't a deer around wouldn't walk into a hauling semi for apples like them. Charlie Earl tells me we're gonna get the biggest goddamn buck in the country and won't I put the surprise to a few badmouths. We sit waiting and it is coming on to dark and this big buck comes out of the trees. He is so old his gray is almost white and his rack looks like a tree all to itself. This buck is staggering like a cow in pit-silage, and all of a sudden I can smell him all over the apples
and Charlie Earl is hissing at me to hit him. So I pull up and shoot and hit this buck square in the face so he sits down like he was home, then he just sort of falls over on his side. Before I can move, Charlie Earl has the buck's throat slit and is sucking blood off his fingers and whooping it up and counting points. While we dragged the deer to the road, I asked Charlie Earl how come that buck was staggering like that when he come out of the trees. Charlie Earl said whatever it was it didn't matter now. But you know what I think? I think that buck thought I was something I'm not and that's why he was coming at me that way."

They ride in silence for several minutes. Then Dan Pearson reaches over and slaps Jeremy on the knee. He rests his hand there.

"I can't tell you anything about that," he says. "All I can tell you is that I stuck my neck out for this school thing, Jeremy. I could see you were smart and that kind of thing should not go to waste because other folks let you down a little. I mean, we have to do things for each other sometimes. Even do things we maybe wonder about at the time, but it works out mostly. Doing those things makes the difference. This school thing, I know everybody at Wendham School, some of them for a long time. Some things they do a little different than we
might be used to, but they know what they are doing. They have seen it work and I have seen it work. Sometimes you just can't come to like people any other way."


"I learned that some people ain't worth liking any way you try."

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Rennie LeBlanc knows when the blue Plymouth sedan pulls up in front of his place that the driver is not seeking his services. Though he doesn't know the man, gray-suited and clean, he knows the sound of a State car, the valves loud, ticking careless adjustment, the fan-belt chirping neglect. The man in the car leans forward over the steering wheel and looks up at the sign above the door Rennie fills. Crude black letters hand-painted on white boards say: RENNIE'S AUTO. The man takes a gold pen from the breast pocket of his suitcoat and marks a yellow pad lying next to him on the front seat. He has not met Rennie's eyes. The valves tick away, and Rennie thinks of all the young boys, calling themselves mechanics because they'd grown up around his shop, who worked on those State cars, the boys who tune
the district trooper cars to top-end at 100 mph, and to have a flat spot at 70. The man gets out of the State car, hikes his pants up over a melon-shaped belly, and walks around the front of the still-running car, offering his hand to Rennie.

"Dan Pearson," he says, looking behind Rennie. "Quite a place."

Rennie, blackened from years of engine grease, takes the smooth, womanish hand into his huge rough fist, squeezing into the palm he holds locked to his own the fresh white grease he has just been packing into truck wheels. He feels a faint tug of resistance.

"Rennie LeBlanc," he says.

The man withdraws his hand and holds it out from his side, timidly, like a finger might be shedding blood he does not know what to do about but doesn't want to get on his suit.

"Mr. LeBlanc, I understand you are the guardian of Jeremy Berthron. Is that correct?"

Rennie looks through the man's gold-rimmed glasses, into his watery blue eyes streaked with yellow lines of liver trouble. He watches Mr. Pearson's clean hand pick at the buttons of his open suitcoat.

"Yeah," he says, "it's right." He turns abruptly and walks to the front of the truck he'd been working on
and, squatting down, scoops three fingers of grease from a red can on the shop floor. Mr. Pearson stands by the rear wheel of the truck Rennie is working on.

"Well," he says, "Jeremy left school last week."

Rennie packs the grease on his fingers into the hole in the center of a wheel drum lying between his feet. "You expect he'll come back here?" he asks without lifting his curly gray head, without looking up at the State man.

"We picked him up in Winterport," the man answers. "He wasn't headed this way."

"Good," Rennie says.

*

"They could of sent you up," Charlie Earl said the afternoon Jeremy returned from the court hearing. "Shootin' up a statie's rig, killing his dog, could of got you a long time. That judge was a feeling sort of fella who seen the good in you and he give you the biggest break he could. Chances is he figures he don't owe you nothing else. I was you, I'd hope to hell that statie gets sent to some other district. He ain't gonna forget you real fast."

The old man stopped talking and drew on his pipe that smelled like burned candy when he held it away from
his lips, studying the wafts of smoke as they curled up, encircling his head. He had impressed himself with the boy's good fortune, amazed himself that Jeremy was being sent to a non-detention boarding school.

"I was drunk one time," Charlie Earl continued. "About your age, and I stove up the neighbor's wagon which I hadn't even stole. Like to killed the horses and me, and they made me plow that old bastard's fields for three springs. Course, that was a different time, and folks is smarter now."

The old man set his pipe aside and reached into the woodbin between his chair and the parlor stove. He picked out a hairy stick of cedar and, yanking open his pocket knife, began shaving bark off the wood.

"It's good," he said, "this school is run like most others. You can come home vacations and we can talk about some things."

"Yeah," Jeremy said. "We can talk a lot."

And they would have, Jeremy thinks now as he remembers his old friend not six months later, white and grim and in no way comfortable in the simple pine box resting on satin-draped sawhorses in Rennie's house. Clara LeBlanc's tears of exertion dropping hugely onto thin pages of her ever-present Bible, making the open page transparent on the page behind it which she would also
search carefully for the loss she could not possibly feel. This loss was Jeremy's and his alone. A loss for which there would be no finding, now no way for this boy at his greatest need to talk out the things in his life he knows mean something, and he realized at that moment he might never understand.

He will never talk to Charlie Earl about, and therefore might never understand, the Indian summer afternoon he spent with Heather at the Wendham School. Heather, the daughter of the Wendham School headmaster, was inexplicably home from her own kind of private school. Heather: tall and blonde, a girl-athlete, lean and hotly flat-bellied. She has dark eyes that seem to see things she never mentions, things that make her laugh, usually softly and to her delighted self, though at times she laughs in free convulsions, her mirth soaring to the tree-tops. And she can run, and she did that first time Jeremy saw her; him in the middle of Black Stream, muck to his shins, leaning his chest into the strong, cold current, his arms aching as he flicked his rod overhead, the fly zig-zagging expertly upstream, and her coming at him like a colt, beautiful and shining in the sun, her bare skin bold as she dove into the water.

And Jeremy, stepping backwards, his rod poised but forgotten, his mind and body oblivious to the push of the
current, his eyes on the spot of water not twenty yards away where this strange and naked and laughing creature disappeared, wondered why this girl was coming at him; what did she think he was? But before he could consider the matter, before he could even begin to decide that this or that was clearly so, his feet were out of the muck, they were above his now submerged head, and he moved as the water moved -- swiftly and away from the streambanks toward the swirling and freezing center where the stream emptied into a major river. When he surfaced, pulling hard for air, surprise now plain anger, he saw this pale apparition rise before him, felt her kicking his chest, dunking him again, driving the air from his lungs in a chorus of muted bubbles.

When he broke water the second time he was not of himself. He saw a self become as much its own as ever it would, the hand still gripping the flyrod lashing out, intending to cut deeply into the near and tender flesh of this female adversity, intending to destroy whatever necessary to escape.

But she was gone from there, was watching from the streambank, laughing as he came into himself whipping the water in weak and trembling frustration, and watching as he coughed up the last bit of silty water.

All that afternoon Jeremy was not himself, but saw
this gentled animal coax and tease him, saw her take his bared body to hers, saw her run, dragging him sluggish and dazzled, along the streambank, squealing with pleasure when their bare feet rested on throw-rug patches of moss. He understood none of what happened to him that day and he understands no more of it now. If anyone could help him make sense of all that, it was Charlie Earl. But Charlie Earl cannot help him. Charlie Earl is goddamn dead. And Charlie Earl is not coming to pick him up in an hour.

Jeremy has to get ready for Dan Pearson. He is packed but he has to get ready. He has to get ready to face everybody at the Wendham School, to apologize at dinner from the headmaster's table for the embarrassment he caused them all. He has to get ready for the light-skinned boys who will want to fawn on him, hungry to taste his man's-courage. He has to get ready to leave Rennie LeBlanc's. Rennie and Clara, as usual, will not see him go.

He places his luggage next to the door: one crisp A&P grocery bag stuffed with a change of socks and underwear, a mint-green button-down dress shirt, a maroon clip-on tie, and a pair of white corduroy pants for evening meals when jeans are not allowed. He wears his deep-blue tweed jacket. He walks into the kitchen, opens
the cupboard over the stove, takes two packs of cigarettes and slips them into his jacket pocket. Then he goes into the shed between the kitchen and Rennie's shop. He opens a tool chest and digs through it looking for nothing in particular. At the workbench he picks through crumpled paper sacks filled with washers, stovebolts, and roofingnails and shakes them, listening to the pleasant rattle. He goes back through the house to his A&P bag and gives it a kick. He opens one of the cigarette packs, pulls out a cigarette, and looks out the window at the village of Burnham, brown and drab beneath a thick gray sky. He flicks his lighter under the cigarette and thinks of the month he has been home.

"Don't you understand?" Rennie had said right off. "Don't you see I got to keep on with what I got right here, what I have lived, this tin shack on gravel and motor oil? Don't you see it is miserable? And always was because I ain't got one speck of real land, land where dirt washes off a man's hands with plain water. Can't you see it? What I been after, tried to get and ain't, and you no help at all. Maybe if we'd done for each other it'd be different. But it ain't different."

And Clara, not a word in thirty days. A hundred times at the same table and not a single acknowledgment, the pages of her Bible lisping sharply, the
sibilations of her hushed babble cutting through the heavy desperation with which she read, her food gleaming and cold in grease.

Jeremy stubs out his cigarette and walks to Rennie's room. He pushes open the door and enters the room, dimly lit by whatever light penetrates the yellowed and constantly drawn shade, a room so small it seems cluttered by the one lame chair and the broken-down bed where Rennie nightly and forcefully punishes the prayer-whispering Clara for one more miserable day. At the doorless closet he reaches into a black corner of the lop-sided shelf and withdraws by the barrel Charlie Earl's nickel-plated Colt .38. Dropping the cylinder, he spins three rounds out onto the floor. He picks the bullets up and slides them neatly back into the revolver as he walks to his clothes and hides the loaded gun under them, watching out the window for cars that rarely pass the run-down shop and the paintless shack that leans into it. There are no cars passing and Jeremy turns to face the dominant furnishing of this household. Hunkered in the corner, its gray screen unblinking but streaked with make-up from the countless mornings, pre-dawn mornings, when Clara LeBlanc kneels before that television, her face pressed to the glass, and, at the behest, at the mere gesture of some Minneapolis hokum dandy,
weeps away her vilest imaginings, attempting each time to weep away the sins of this and all other worlds. This electronic alter is adorned with two articles of emphasis: a fantastic and detailed plaster of the dying Christ in his loftiest agony, and her Bible. Jeremy, crossing the room, takes that Bible which seems to weigh more than a book, more than anything of its dimensions should weigh, the coarse-grained genuine leather cover curling back over his wrist as the old tome falls naturally open to the one dried white rose, to smeared pages, the impossible Gothic print smudged by fingers lending to it their feverish prints: And thou shalt know Him... He throws the Bible into the bag with his clothes and, as he does so, sees Dan Pearson's blue State sedan pull into the drive.

*

By the time Dan Pearson drives through the brick and black-iron gates of the Wendham School, he is calm. He is calm as a perfumed man at gunpoint can be. The wattles of his fatly patronizing face have ceased their quiver and his complexion is falling once again between hypertension and jaundice. Jeremy Berthon is grinning.

"Wait 'til Chico gets a load of this," he says.
"Pull over this side of the fieldhouse, practice will be
out in a minute."

Pearson pulls the car onto the soccer field and switches off the engine.

"You see anything you like come out of the gym," Jeremy says, "let me know. Maybe I can give you a last wish or something. There's a lot of last wishes around here."

Pearson says nothing and they wait in gray afternoon light for tired and showered young boys to emerge, young peaches-and-cream on the brown and cleat-worn soccer field. After a while they appear, in pairs and in small groups, scrubbed and dressed for the evening meal. They lean on each other as they walk, grab one another and hoot as they wander toward their respective cottages.

"Fun time," Jeremy says. "Everybody's going to get a little something before dinner." He jabs Pearson in the ribs with the Colt, making him jump and cry out. "Don't you wish you could stick your neck out now?"

"Jeremy," he says, his breath short. "Look. Just be reasonable. We can work some kind of deal. You don't like the school --"

"Shut up!" Jeremy yells, pointing the revolver closer to Pearson's head. Pearson looks away. "You shut up about the school! The school is nothing to you."
Nothing but a meathouse for you and some cronies."

Pearson looks out his window, concentrates his gaze on the fieldhouse out of which no boys have come for several minutes.

"Look at me!" Jeremy orders.

Pearson carefully keeps his eyes from resting for even the slightest moment on the revolver that is now fully in his face; he stares flatly into Jeremy's wide and black pupils.

"I ain't nobody's meat!" the boy says.

"I don't suppose you've ever done that sort of thing," Pearson says quietly.

Jeremy draws his lips back over clenched teeth. "I could take your head clean off from here," he says.

And perhaps he would do so, would act upon juvenile impulse, the entirety of which would be inevitable and shocking regret. Perhaps at that moment he could welcome the imperceptible shift in emotional high (the pulling of this familiar trigger) that marks the impending downslide into cosmic, haunting, contrition, a place from which there is no rising. But he is distracted, his attention caught by the graceful and angular lope of a mulatto boy coming toward the car.

"Roll down your window," Jeremy tells Pearson, who hurriedly obeys. "Hey Chico! Step it up!"
The mulatto kid squares his shoulders and leans into a swift and easy stride, closing the short distance quickly.

"Hi Mr. Pearson," he says, as he slows to a walk several steps from the car, his smile white and brilliant against ash-colored features. "Hey, Jerry. What's happenin'?" He halts abruptly, the smile fading as the situation registers. He looks from Dan Pearson's face to the revolver Jeremy holds unwavering and close to it. The smile returns to his face and he whistles, low and short. "Ain't you in a place," he says to Pearson.

"Get in," Jeremy says. "We got some things to do."

They leave the Wendham School, the three of them in the State sedan driven by Dan Pearson, directed by Jeremy Berthron, two of them elated in their newly acquired power, the third almost happy in his helpless resignation, the schemes of the two boys even grander as they drive further from the school, Pearson and the car the very answer to hysterical prayers for escape. Pearson becomes increasingly sober. He looks exhausted and old and he fidgets like a child in need of a bathroom. They drive for more than two hours.

"We're nearing the state border," Pearson says.

"Shut up!" Jeremy orders. "We ain't stupid. There's a side road after this bend. Take it and go 'til
you can’t see the highway.”

Pearson does as he is told without looking at Jeremy or the revolver now directed at his ribs. He pulls carefully down the bank of the highway onto a well-kept logging road and stops the car when the highway is no longer visible through the trees.

They walk down the road, the two boys like they are on a picnic, and they are out of sight of the car when Jeremy remembers and sends Chico back for the Bible. Pearson continues walking in front of Jeremy, not looking back, stumbling along the uneven and slightly rutted road.

“You believe in God?” Jeremy asks.

“No,” Pearson answers.

“You maybe want to start right this minute. Otherwise there ain’t any hope for you, nor no chance I’ll get mine for what it is I decide is best done to you. Besides, it is a last minute is always took.”

“You can’t scare me, Jeremy,” Pearson says. “I’m too old for that.”

“I used to scare easy,” Jeremy says. “I used to be like any other kid. But you took care of that like you took care of other kids. It don’t take too much figuring to know who sends those rich fat guys to the school. I took the money because I been poor all my life. But I ain’t poor anymore and now you get to pay. So, we’ll
see who's too old for what."

Chico catches up to them and they walk the road in silence, the afternoon air now clearing and colder. "You going to rap the Bible at him?" Chico asks.

"Don't be dumb," Jeremy says, "I got some ideas."

Pearson stops suddenly and turns to face the boys. "Far enough," he says. "Exercise your ideas right here. I don't need to be walked to death and you have to allow a man some dignity."

"Dignity!" Jeremy says. "I've seen what you call dignity. I could of left you at the school for that kind of dignity. Look down the road, Pearson. That's the end of it right there. It runs off into an orchard and you can make it that far."

They go that far and Pearson turns to face them again.

"Shall I stagger about?" he asks. "Shall I come at you, staggering?"

"You done plenty of that already," Jeremy answers. "Shoot the bastard right here!" Chico exclaims. "Let him take it in the guts one time."

Jeremy points the revolver at a bare and dying apple tree. He fires a round into the tree, the report clattering back loudly in the stillness of the afternoon. Dan Pearson looks at the tree. Then he looks at Jeremy and
Chico. "I'll get you money," he says: I'll get you lots of money. I can have it for you tonight."

"Money?" Jeremy says, "I can get a hundred bucks for my ass any time thanks to you fat man." He steps toward Pearson and kicks him in the groin. Pearson groans and collapses. He lies face down, sobbing.

"Give me a hand," Jeremy says to Chico, and the two boys drag Pearson the length of the orchard. There is an old paved road between the orchard and the Piscataqua River. Brown grass rises up out of the pavement cracks and is broken down when Jeremy and Chico drag Pearson along the edge of the river. They stop where the road curves onto a rusted single-lane iron bridge. The plank floor of the bridge gives out mid-way to open air, and thirty feet down the river rushes its way to Plymouth Harbor.

Jeremy cocks the revolver. "Take a walk," he says. Pearson gets up slowly, vomits and leans against the bridge. Then he turns, takes a couple of steps onto the bridge and stops.

"I don't swim," he says looking straight ahead.

Jeremy fires the revolver into the old planking. Pearson takes a few more steps. "I don't swim," he says again.

"I don't take it in the ass anymore," Jeremy says
and fires into the planking again. "The next one..." he warns. Pearson walks off the bridge and falls limply into the river. When he doesn't come up, Jeremy takes the Bible from Chico, goes to the edge of the bridge and throws the book into the water where Pearson disappeared.

"What the hell is the Bible for?" Chico asks.

"Some people get religion the last minute," Jeremy says, walking under the wrought-iron arborway into the orchard. Old white paint is peeling off the rose design of the arborway.

"You talking about him or you?"

Jeremy doesn't answer. He sits down on the damp and cold mound where the road becomes orchard, where he once loaded the carcass, the bloody representation of newfound and infant manhood, into Charlie Earl's truck. He remembers the urge to shit, the feeling that his entire gut was about to break free of his determined heart and slide out of him, the feeling that lasted for days, returning each time he looked into the gray and fogged eyes of that dead buck.

He can still smell the blood.

"What are you waiting for?"

"I'm never going back to no school," he says.
Chapter of

ONE-FARM VALLEY
She picks up another rough-hacked log and swings it, batting it into the jerk and whine of the spinning saw blade. For a second she can't tell if it is the saw she hears as bits of wood sting her eyes shut, or whether the noise comes from the heat rising up around her. Sawdust sticks to her face and her bare shoulders. She picks up another axed log stripped of bark.

"Damnation," her brother swears. Guy calls over the saw, "Watch it! Listen to that!" He swipes the hair out of his eyes, throws down a wrench and hurdles toward her across the small creek that powers the place. "You're gonna bust a tooth out of the saw, damn it!"

Millie looks at him for a minute and then slams the stick down onto the rusted frame of the buzz saw. "Sometimes you forget who is older!" She swings another log into the saw so hard the big wheel of a blade shudders as it bites through the sugar maple branch. "I'm gonna run this place before you ever do!"

She shoves her brother out of her way. Guy straightens up from the woodpile and looks over at her. She stares back at him with the defiance that had shocked this one-man farm for two years before Guy's birth, before he continued the dark brooding line of the Farnham family. She was different, so unlike the rest, the
stolen child that turns out to be far wilder than the stranger who took her. She was spirited beyond anything such a rough family could have planned on; more a wildcat crouched steady, stone-shaded as the sun comes up, than a little girl turning woman with waist-deep golden hair.

She stares back at her brother on his knees in the woodpile. His denim overalls are torn out at the knee, and Guy's knee is scraped and bleeding. Her yellow hair flutters in the breeze coming off the hot earth, her green eyes go the milk-pail color of the afternoon sky; she flicks tiny bits of rust at him with the fingers of one hand.

Guy looks at her, shrugs, and bends down to pick out branches she'll be able to handle from the pile of dead maple. Flies float on the gentle ground breeze, pestering at his neck and ears. Millie watches him hitting at flies. She imagines the creek downstream, herself in swimming, sun glinting off ripples, cool water. The forest-green John Deere chugs evenly as it spins the power-take-off shaft to the big circular blade on the platform behind it. Four or five spindly chickens step carefully over everything in their path behind the saw, and scratching over slabs of peeled hardwood bark, they pick quick and sharply at the fallen sawdust, cluttering away when the next branch hits, and then, repeating their
silly highstep, return for the grain littering the dusty ground around the junk yard. There are barbed-wire coils, iron scraps and pieces of old junked cars and farm machinery all over the yard. The stench of burning chicken bones rises from the oil drum that has been smoldering with a slow-burning, smoky fire for days. The place is overgrown with weeds. Bushes are budding, but the trees are ragged. A pack of five or six mangy black or yellow hound-type dogs scrabble and growl over some scraps, or else a gutted squirrel. The breeze picks up. Millie continues forcing uncut oak and maple dragged down from the pile of slash on the hill back of the house into the grating blade. Wary still, Guy keeps glancing at his foster-sister out of the corner of his one good eye. He hacks from the back of his throat, looks through narrowed eyes at her, and spits phlegm in the direction of the scapy dogs.

"God damn it!" Guy yells.

"Go to hell."

Her brother snatches off his heavy leather glove, flinging it in a spray of sweat across the saw, striking Millie on the cheek as she dodges. She bends to grab a gnarled branch he gave her and lets fly at his head. When he ducks her throw and scrambles between the tractor and the saw, jumping the turning shaft to surprise her
from the back, she twists away, her fingers tensed at the joints like claws, and scratches him off.

The tractor, grunting, draws down for a moment and Guy freezes, losing his anger, his newly-arrived sister now swinging the twisted branch of maple nearer and nearer his head.

Guy looks down at the joint of the shaft eating up his shirttail. The tractor balks, metal grates against metal and threatens to spin free, before gears grind back on track, the pace quicker now, the shaft dragging the fighting boy, his feet planted wide, closer to its precise rotation. The rotation of the power-take-off flips him. It spins him round and round, the tractor close to stalling, shoveling out some more of the dry, hard earth with each of Guy's groans. Then there is no more groaning, and Guy is pounded again and again into the shallow trench swept wide by his limp body.

Millie came here five weeks ago, from the city. She is a foster child. Out of the home centered in the Bronx, she had been subject to the bargaining street-hustle of a child prostitution ring that delivered kids for pleasure across to Manhattan. Millie usually ended up with somebody on the West Side. Up to the last five weeks, she had lived that way since before she was nine. Now she stands watching, the branch in her left hand,
screaming.

Guy is being torn apart.

It is the scorching wind of her scream that sends the chickens scattering down the hill from the barn. Her foster-father runs from the low-roofed house, falling down the shed steps with one boot on, pulling on the straps of the other. Her mother, knowing nothing, but somehow sure it is awful, answers with her own deep-throated scream at the unscreened kitchen window. The dogs set up a howl and Guy is pounded round and round the shaft, his father now on his feet, running at them yelling, "Yank it in gear! Yank it in gear!"

Millie cannot move, she cannot even drop the stick of maple, and as the tractor settles back into its regular chug, her new brother just scuffing the ground, just puffing the dirt a little as he spins on the shaft, the pitch of her scream rises. She is crying out at the top of her lungs. Millie's terror is silent.

Farnham reaches his kids now, and as he runs past Millie he slaps her out of his way, shutting her mouth and knocking her to the ground, the tractor lurching then dying as he jams it in gear. As she gets to her feet, eyes wet from this man's blow, this man she's now supposed to call father, he pulls the pin from the power-take-off shaft and yanks the tractor out of gear, sending
it in a slow roll down the hill toward the Herefords standing in dim stupefaction.

Homer Farnham has his knife out cutting at the shirt wrapped around the saw's shaft that holds his battered son to the ground.

"This ain't nothin'!" he says. "Just a knock or two. Guy's tougher than this, can't be hurt so easy."

Farnham looks up at Millie staring down at the boy, watching as this man slits the already shredded cloth in a fumbling attempt to free Guy. "Get the hell outta here!" he yells, waving her away. "Tell your ma. The doctor. Go on!"

As Millie runs toward the weatherbeaten house, Homer cuts the last strand of the shirt and then flips the shaft to one side. The boy lies still. A brilliant red begins to shine through the grit on his face, his chest, and the rips in his jeans. He doesn't lie just right, his shoulders too rounded, his arms and legs at all wrong angles, suddenly looking too small, frail, for such a good-sized rugged youngster. He was strong, everybody talked of that. Now air was pushing his teeth out onto the ground, the blood out of his nose in a splatter, as he goes on coughing deep and rattling. Each time the boy's chest lifts, Homer sobs. Each time his son rocks up on his side, his bones clicking, jerky, struggling to
rattle, hacking deep from his chest once more, blood spewing freely now, Homer wiped the remnant of shirt across his eyes. He didn't dare to touch his boy. Then Guy breathed a long sigh as though he was aware it was over for awhile.

*

Millie sat at the table, slouched on a hard-backed chair, her long thin arms folded across a chest that was just beginning to give her away, grinding her teeth, refusing to participate, to fuel her father's anger. Her brother wouldn't die and she was sure they knew it too. But her new mother sat across the table weeping into her hands, the blue-black, crow's sheen of her hair dangling shabby on her wrists and forearms, her throat and arms browned the shade of the bread she baked.

Her mother's love was hard. Millie thought of her other names: Evangelica, Angel Tits, Roxanne-Baby-Pinky-Toes, Goldie, Lacey, and her favorite, the name Tuke and Champ would most often call her -- Marlene Morning Star. She'd been conceived in June; she was a black market baby, shipped before she remembered from Skowhegan, Maine to New York City. She was blonde, ivory fair, and started out in the Village with Little Mother, a Rumanian gypsy fortune-teller, and an overlooked, wild-
dog part-Doberman called Shy Moon by some dark-faced, dark-eyed men who Millie faintly recalls came to see Little Mother. Millie remembers playing with silver coins, colored glass and terra-cotta beads. The odor of frying fish is still nauseating. There's a song she loves but she can't remember from where, a song about hanging your head low and maybe crying, and wind, and some valley. She has been a foster child for six months, and she was brought here, and Miss Matthiessen said she was going to have a new mother and a new someplace now. This new mother of Millie's, Homer Farnham's skinny, dark wife, also has real black hair. Millie has to think to remember not to call Mrs. Farnham, Little Mother.

Millie starts. "What'd you do?" Homer demands as he paces the worn soil-colored kitchen floor.

Millie watches the yellow-striped tomcat, a porcupine quill trembling above one eye, rubbing against the table leg, slouching toward her bare feet.

"I know you done something." Homer comes over and leans his short, excessive bulk on the creaking leaf of the unpainted table, his back to the old wrought-iron stove that is embossed with KALAMAZOO in large chest-nut-brown letters enameled across the oven door. He places a rough palm on his wife's shoulder and then runs it through his wiry gray head of thinning hair. He gazes at
his newly-brought daughter.

"So far, it's always you that does something," he says.

The tom nuzzles at Millie's ankle, jumping back as she presses her toe against the quill in its head, batting at her foot when she kicks him, hunkering down to watch slit-eyed, his patchy, battle-scarred tail whipping the table leg.

"Leave the damn cat alone!" Homer yells at her.

"And hear what I am saying." He steps closer to her, glaring, breathing his anger, the stink of noontime beer nearly making Millie gag. "Guy has run that saw over two years. Runs it better than me. Ain't a thing never happened. Then you get around." He turns and walks away from her, to the cheesecloth-covered window; he parts the worn cloth and looks out across the front yard. He leans hard against the window-case. "I don't understand it, you Millie. Hell, no. How my one son is upstairs all busted up, maybe real bad off, and wasn't nothin' ever happened, nothin' you done."

"Homer," Mrs. Farnham, her black-haired mother says, "Please you. Maybe you shouldn't ought to have been napping. Maybe if... the dogs... this should not have happened."

"The hell!" Homer yells, turning to face his wife.
He crosses back towards Millie at the table, getting close, kicking at the table leg. He stretches his arm, pointing at his foster daughter.

"It's that little bitch!" he hisses. He puts his face close to hers, his breath overbearing. It reminds her of drunk old men who can only pay girls five dollars. She thinks punky winos with all their dope sometimes have a smell that way, too.

"He'd better make out all right, girl. Maybe you want to pray for your brother." Homer Farnham stands back, sweat running down his heavy sad face and neck onto his undershirt, sticking the shirt to the glistening gray of his wide chest. He watches for a moment as she calmly looks him over, and then he turns, saunters across the kitchen and kicks his way out the door.

"Bastard," Millie mutters to herself.

Her mother glares at her, her thin lips sharp, pressed tightly together. "Millie," she says, "you didn't..."

Millie just gazes at this woman.

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In the days that followed, Millie was kept out of the house as much as possible. She spent long mornings watching the tall waving grass resist the early cool
breezes, the brown heads shaking as if trying to remember things long forgotten.

There must have been days, she thinks, when this yard was not grown up burdock, strewn with old tires still on rims, rusted milk cans, and apple crates. The days when this brick farmhouse had a milk shed to the barn and was well run by the sporting, fine old colonial families who lined the drive with sugar maple.

But it wasn't like that now. The maples were down. And Millie, not knowing the difference, watched Homer, the sun to his back, hill dust around his withered potato plants, muttering curses that ended in a slash of water from the bucket he carried. And it wasn't like that when later in the mornings he sat in the old stuffed chair that soaked up his sweat, the sun knocking his head back slowly until a paint fleck from the porch ceiling, a fly, or perhaps his own spit gagged him and he'd gasp and cough his way back up, grin, embarrassed, and do the whole thing again.

It was then that Millie hated him most. Not when he yelled and cursed at her. Not when he would refuse to speak to her for days, jabbering to the goats or some piece of machinery whenever he came near. But just when his head began to tilt, she felt her belly tense and she was off across the unmown lawn, running for all she was
worth. She hated him when he called at her. She despised him when he'd smile and say it nice and call her "Gypsy Kid" when he was alone with her. Millie was afraid to be by herself with this man, this new father, Homer.

Today she is by herself, because Guy is still in bed. The woman says Guy is recuperating. Millie wishes she had black hair like the woman. She does not want the woman's hair, because the woman's hair is straggly, she likes her thick full head of hair, but Millie wishes her own hair was black. She jumps up at the right moment, grabbing the rope that hangs down from the heavy brass fire-bell in the middle of the yard. She swings up hard on that rope, her tanned and dusty feet pitched high toward the marestail swept azure sky; she thinks there should be some water under a great swing like this. Then she falls. Skinning her knees on the heat of the high grass, the wrought-iron stand jerking the bell back, shaking it the way a cat shakes the morning's catch, she remembers how she'd hear church bells at every hour -- St. Peters. The farm bell clangs a long time. She still hears it, almost at the edge of the swamped farm pond, barely breathing to hear, having to stop to make sure. He would be wide awake now.

Millie sits down at the pond, leaning back against the squat white maple, picking thin slices of slate from
the ridge of ledge that rises up out of the field by the tree and then disappears into the water at the edge of the pond. She could watch the house from here. She throws the pieces of slate out over the water, bouncing them several times before they plunk out of sight, trying to reach the fat bullfrogs that wiggle the rushes on the far side.

Her brother hit those buggers ever time. Never missed. But, she thinks, it will be a very long time before he does that again. It will be a very long time before he gets her to help pull a new calf, ropes slipping off the one leg that makes it out of the mother cow his father had given Guy for his own. Perhaps he will never again take her by the hand, the two of them crouched, stepping quietly along the creek, to see a new warren of rabbits he found while exploring to find better fishing.

He will or he won't, she decides, as she gets up and walks along the edge of the pond, enjoying the cool rich emerald-green grass on her bare feet and ankles. The grass is short next to the water and it is filled with little spots of red as it runs into the high brown hay of the field. Millie picks those wild strawberries, sucking them down hulls and all, knowing the next time she looks they will be gone, pecked up by a tail-bobbing bird that screams its own name.
She thinks about picking some for Guy, but she doesn't have anything to put them in and she hasn't been allowed to see him since the accident anyway. She starts working her way around the pond full of lime-green moss like witches' hair, her fingers looking bloody from the berries, the berries scarcer in the damp lower ground where fields of alfalfa run right down to the water.

Millie sinks into the soft wet earth and, sitting back on her ankles, looks far down the hollow, watching cows graze along the pasture road, working their cumbersome way toward the dilapidated barn, around the tractor that is sitting where it had rolled to a halt many days before. The tractor; she had almost forgotten about the tractor.

One her feet now, Millie walks in the direction of the cows, pulling up fistfuls of the shoulder-high hay, black-eyed Susans and all. She is working deliberately, carrying a huge armful of the stiff hay by the time she gets up to the tractor, trailing chaff as the dry heads bend along the ground and fall apart.

"Get outta here!" she is yelling at the cows, running them a ways up the slope to the barn where they turn and dumbly watch while she goes on dropping the hay where they had been standing. She spends the afternoon, until she has a pile almost the height of the tractor. Then
she sits down at the edge of the road and pulls the hard brown parts of the hay off the green stalks. She puts the hay in the spaces around the tractor's engine, underneath the seat and between the gear shifts, and then she packs the muffler full of hay. She has a small pile left, and puts it under the tractor.

Following the hollow across the field to the barbed-wire fence at the edge of the wood, Millie walks along the fence toward the barn, catching field violets between her toes, slapping at the leaves that hang down from the trees over her head. She gazes at the sky, the sinking sun hidden behind some sudden dark clouds. She remembers a fire in an old tumble-down city building she once lived in. It caught on fire after she was asleep, but some man saved her. She looks at the clouds and wonders if she will have time and begins to jog.

Homer is not in the barn when she gets there. She walks between the empty stalls to the shed, climbing up on the workbench that's cluttered with nearly-empty paint cans, brushes that have never been cleaned, rags, and junk of metal to some machine. She pushes bags of nails, boxes of washers and screws aside on the shelf, finally grabbing a small box labeled BLUE DIAMOND.

As she trots back to the hollow, humming lightly to herself, she feels a single drop of moisture in her hair.
Her feet crunch the gravel of the dried brook as she gets closer to the tractor. She sees the cows gathered around it, jerking clumps of hay from around the engine, munching contentedly, heedless of grease. Millie bends down and searches for a rock that feels right. She throws it in the midst of the busy cows, banging it loudly off the green tin over the engine, the cows jumping into one another in an effort to avoid the worst.

"Sons-a-bitches!" she yells, her rocks bounding across the backs of the clustered cows running for the barn.

She hurriedly replaces hay the cows have pulled from around the tractor, not bothering to separate the dry from the green, the pile underneath considerably smaller than before. As she kneels, striking the matches and flipping them around beneath the tractor, the hay catching in an instant, burning so quickly it seems to simply disappear, the rain begins. Huge individual drops of water hiss into the small fire Millie has going as she grabs a handful of the burning hay and touches it around the engine. And then it comes down, brilliant silver arrows plopping into the ground, lifting the dust a few inches and then washing it back down. The smoke never had a chance to rise and all that is left of Millie's plans are a few blackened patches under the tractor,
blackened ends from the hay tossed around the engine, and
the already soaked matches she has tossed away.

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The summer shower passed leaving everything fresh,
the leaves shiny, the ground spongy underfoot, the air
with a slight sting for the nose. Late evening sun pushed
through the remaining clouds, throwing a rose light into
the kitchen where Millie sits thinking that there is some­
thing almost holy about it. Her father is sitting at
the end of the table looking out into the sunset, great
swirls of smoke coming from his nose and pipe. Her
mother is behind her, at the sink the iron pump handle
creaks as she cleans up after the johnnycake and honey,
blackberries and cream that were their supper.

"Someday," her father says, "ain't too long away,
you got to be something, Millie. What, do you suppose?"
She looks at Homer, watching him fade behind the
smoke, wondering where he was looking as he said that.
"I'll go to the city," she says.

"What do you know of any city?" her mother asks
her, standing at the sink and drying a plate streaked
with rust from the iron-burdened well water. Her mother's
hands look thin, dried out and yellow, old. "It's not
any like here at all."
"That's why it will work the best," Millie answers back.

"Listen to you," Homer says, resting his pipe on the edge of the table. She could see him looking at her now, his long yellowed teeth showing in the light. "You're full of ideas. Most of which is dead wrong. It's ideas get you in trouble. It's easy when there's more people to find trouble. And you, the born finder." He relights his pipe.

"There's lots for me somewhere," she says evenly, picking small splinters from the under-side of the table. "I don't know where. Not even what, but that it's there and I will find it."

Her father is looking out the window again, his smoke blacker now in the diminishing light. Millie wonders if she has yet ever seen him when he really got mad. She knows he wanted to fool around with her.

He tells her, "An old man starts to wonder." Then he says, "I don't care," shifting in his chair, "what to hell happens with you."

Her mother comes over to the table, a wet cloth in her hand, and touches Millie's thin shoulder as she begins to wipe the table clean of crumbs. Millie looks up into the black-haired woman's face, following her eyes to the stairs. She gets up from her place.
"Good night," she says to Homer.

He never answers her.

Millie leans back on her mother's bed, her elbows nearly buried in the weak mattress, watching the lean, tired-looking woman head the stairs. Maybe she's sick again, Millie thinks. Maybe her eyes will turn the color of daisy eyes again, the smell of coffee driving her to bed.

Sally Farnham closes the door behind her and leans against the wobbly dresser. She smiles wanly at Millie.

"Don't listen to your father right now," she tells her, "Don't mind him now. He's still bothered by the accident. He has to blame..."

"I never listen to him!" Millie says, sitting up in bed. "He's always bothered, no matter what. Mostly that I don't piss on a fencepost."

"Millie, that's just not true," her mother said sitting on the bed beside her.

"Oh, yes it is!" Millie insists. "It's the truest! And it doesn't bother me even a little. But it is true."

"Well, darlin', even if it was true, he's the only one that feels that way anyhow. You know Guy don't feel that way and why would I ever feel like that? You don't have to be the same, just like the rest of us. You're
somebody else and that's okay, isn't it?"

Millie thinks about herself being a gypsy and wandering everywhere all over the world for the rest of her life. She thinks of the continents and the oceans as they are pictured on a map. She remembers Little Mother had an old geography book that was tattered in the corners with some of the pages torn out, and she used to color with color crayons in that book of maps of all over the world. "Yes," Millie says to her new mother, "it's perfectly alright."

"So," the foster mother says to Millie, smiling, "we can forget all this silliness. Why don't you come on, help me with your brother?"

Millie wonders if the black-haired Mrs. Farnham woman loves her.

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She is awake. Millie doesn't know how long she has been listening to the chirp of crickets outside her open window. The air is hot, dank, sweaty hot when it is still, and she isn't at all sleepy. She gets up from the bed and rips her light cotton nightie over her head. She has nothing on. She goes to the window, rests her arms along the sill and her chin on her arms, and looks out at the moon on the land, surprised that everything
is so bright, the nearly full moon making everything absolutely visible. There are chickens roosting on the wheelbarrow left turned over in the yard. The trees stand out in leaf now against the luminous night. Frogs in the pond, some night birds, break up the practically soundless night. Millie watches a huge male dog cross the yard. She thinks he is after a bitch. She thinks about how dogs and cats and other animals she’s come to know go in heat at certain times, how they gurgle low in their throats, slide along the ground, hump their back-ends up and start to act weird. She shivers a little from the cool breeze against her moist skin and sinks down to the floor, sand gritty on her bare leg, resting her chin on the window-sill. She thinks about tomorrows; that Guy will be part of them sooner than she’d imagined. He was healing up well, able to move a little, whispering his needs and that something hurt too much still. He seems to like her ministrations. He didn’t seem angry and he’d asked her why she hadn’t come to him before this.

She felt good. Running to the door that separated her room from his, she wonders why she ever thought about running away back to New York City. She didn’t miss anybody. Here, she even has a songbird for her very own, a pet. There were no pets in the city for Millie when
she was Morning Star. The door to Guy's room is always kept locked, she already knew that. She thinks about how men always locked the doors in the city.

She puts both hands on the cold glass knob and, looking up at the ceiling, turns it slowly to avoid the click. She is turning it so slowly that she gets dizzy, loses her balance, falling backwards, riding the door back until she catches herself. It opened. She stands there holding the doorknob in her two hands, and turns it carefully back, wondering. She peeks around the door into his room, unable to see him, listening to the light even sound of his breathing. Millie sneaks into the room.

The moonlight coming through his window reflects off the glass of the guncase by his narrow bed, striking only the planes of his face in relief, lighting it oddly with too much white. She watches his eyes follow the passing of his life as they move back and forth. Now she is trembling. Creeping to the window, Millie slides it quietly closed. As she stands by his bed quivering, she tries to calm herself by thinking about how these things go down in the city. She thinks about cockroaches scuttling across warped floors in late hot July. She thinks about men that smell like anise seed, beer, tobacco and sausage forcing her down on mattresses in
tiny rooms where there is no sheet or any cover at all on the one bed. In some rooms, she remembers, the bed is just a slashed mattress on the floor. In those rooms, there are very often rat droppings on the floor. Once a huge man was inside her and moving around and there was a big brown rat and the man laughed and the man took out a knife with a long, shiny, sharp blade, and the man who was on her threw that silver knife at the rat. The rat, she can see it like a snapshot in her head, squealed and ran a little further, then lay still, rolled on his side and bled. She remembers the oozing blood. Millie stands there staring at Guy asleep and remembers how the man laughed and laughed then moved all around and went very deep inside her. She tries to calm herself; she tries to remember unpleasantness, his pain. She thinks, nighttime comes everywhere.

Millie bends forward and pinches the single wash-grayed sheet that covers Guy. There is dirt from his feet all over the sheet. On the surface, it feels gritty. She draws the sheet, which is ripped a little ways and frayed in a few places, stealthily down to the foot of Guy's bed. He does not struggle; he sighs deeply, shifts on the mattress and sleeps on.

He is childlike, pale in the satin light, hairless and smooth. Millie has not seen anybody like him for a
long time. He seems tiny to her, the light emphasizing his bones arranged with the randomness of dried twigs, fragile in the gray flannel that holds them in place.

She touches him. On the belly, below the strips of cloth that hold his chest. He starts, one arm flapping like the wing-beat of a partridge ripped by a shotgun. She kneels by his bed.

"Guy," she whispers. "I want to put you right again."

"Yeah," he sighs.

Then she kisses him. His lips taste bitter, dried blood and old soup. He struggles weakly against her and she climbs onto the bed, strokes nervously up and down his arm. His arm is a bone; it feels like a dog's leg to Millie. She tells him, "Things are going to be all right. You're all right. You're my brother." She goes on stroking his bony arm. Then she starts stroking his twisted leg. She strokes up the thigh. He watches her. She smiles, and he looks at her, smiles faintly back. She says, "Isn't this nice?" She wants him to nod. She nods. He tries to smile. She strokes further up. Guy tries to roll over, he tries to turn on his side away from her. She says, "No, no don't you hurt yourself. Here." She turns him by the shoulders, her palms cupping his spindly shoulders. "You'll hurt yourself like that.
Let me help you." She tells him, "You feel like wingbones." Millie cups her hands more firmly around his shoulders. She climbs on top of him. She moves her hands under his back, feels the xylophone of ribs, rests her hands palms up steady against Guy's sharp shoulder-blades. "These really feel like your wings," she tells him. She pushes herself against her brother.

His cry of pain is slight, the bark of the cowbird, his fight no match for Millie as she, trembling harder now, wraps her slender legs behind his oddly bent knees, driving the harsh young wool of her crotch against the boy.

He is sobbing steadily as she lays still on top of him, sweat dripping down her sides, between her legs, along her neck, cold against his dry flesh.

She is relaxed, her thoughts scattered. Millie used to think this place was a prison. "You're not hurt at all, Guy," she whispers to him. "It doesn't hurt at all."

Millie Farnham tells Guy, "I'm your sister." She lies on top of him, the blood drumming in her ears, Guy quivering in his hurt beneath her, and she imagines Guy teaching her to pull a calf right. "You'll teach me to saw a lot of wood right now," she says to him. Guy is crying. "Because I am your sister." Then she kisses
him again, kisses him on the eyes, tells him, "It's better if you think of lighted candles," then tells him again, "it doesn't hurt at all." She runs her hand lightly over Guy's head, gently combing the fine straight hair back from his forehead. "Don't be in a trouble," she whispers to him, "Don't be in a trouble. These green, green hills are the most perfect thing I'll ever know."

Millie Farnham sinks her teeth gently, quickly, nibbling, in the thin flesh of the neck of her newly-found brother. She does not feel any pain at all.