Little River and other stories

James Nicholas Heil

The University of Montana

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University of Montana
THE LITTLE RIVER

and other stories

By

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The doctors said my mother died of kidney failure, but I know what really killed her. She started dying a year ago, when my father's heart stopped and he fell dead in the snow trying to carry a sling of logs from the bin in the backyard. After he died my mother didn't touch anything of his: not his tools in the basement, color-coded and arranged with an artist's attention to size and function; not the bottles of blood pressure pills on the rotating tray in the kitchen. She stopped using the car then, taking her warped and rust-covered Schwinn to the corner store or paying the young boys who skateboarded by the house to run errands. She told me she was afraid to drive alone. When she called, every odd day at six-fifteen, she would talk about Dad in the present tense, as though he were standing there about to come to the phone. It was eerie in a way I had no control over, a device my mother used to endure what time was left in the cycle she once told me life is.

Over the next several months I worried she might live on forever in that distracted state, stuck in a place and time she couldn't bear to let go. But then the call came from the neighbor, Mrs. Tackett, to tell us she found my mother slumped on the kitchen floor when she was supposed to be at a potluck. "Sixty-three is so young," Mrs. Tackett kept saying. "Sixty-three. Your mother was some spring chicken."
It sounds corny in light of the folder full of medical data the hospital kept on her, but sometimes they miss the obvious. Those little bean-shaped filters were only one of many lesser failures doctors and such like-minded folk attribute my mother's death to. They don't have the instruments to detect the real cause, namely, the evaporation of will from her brain and the longing manufactured in her overworked heart.

My son, Korey, and I got here yesterday. There is no truth to the claim my ex-wife, Lynne, has made about us: that I am a criminal and Korey a kidnappee. When I came to get him I told her I needed Korey with me to help "get things together," that it may be his last chance ever to see the house, or the things my parents put in it. Lynne was irked by this. She had all sorts of words, including abduction and piracy. She tried to prevent Korey from coming here by threatening to talk to her lawyer, and then to certain friends in jobs that mattered, corporate types and people with stock. It was too soon after the funeral to drive him all the way back there, she said. She is convinced the trip will threaten his emotional stability, but I think she is really bothered by him spending another four hours in the car with me.

The hardware store I help manage has given me indefinite leave. They understand these things, how, sometimes, cleaning up takes longer than expected. Since Korey and I arrived I have done my best to stay busy. Yesterday, I spent the afternoon at the kitchen table making up lists and jotting reminders to myself. This morning I was out at seven cutting the grass, dew and all, sweeping the clumps from the sidewalk. It was an auspicious beginning, but since then I have dusted my mother's bureau three times, polished the clocks on the mantle twice, and basically done nothing more than those preliminary tasks children of the deceased are apt to do,
most of which has been to wander from room to room and stare.

Upstairs, in the space that decades ago was our attic, Korey is playing pachinko. His weight rocks on the floorboards and his laughter washes down the stairway into the kitchen. He likes the game, but he knows nothing of its history. Korey doesn’t realize that the pachinko machine came all the way from Seoul where it is played in gambling parlors as obsessively as love and money are hoarded. He doesn’t know that I brought it back after navigating a Douglas C-130 transport around Vietnam, how the pachinko machine was a gift for my parent’s twenty-fifth wedding anniversary; a gift and a kind of apology for missing it by two months. I haven’t told him that I slipped the game past customs wrapped in a parachute to avoid the surcharge, or any of the deeper secrets, like how, the first time I played the game, I was so wired on hashish I sometimes saw elephants the size of housecats walking around the room.

In the years spanning our separation, which, in truth, is nearly all the ones we were together, Lynne was as passionate about avoiding pachinko as others were about getting their turn. She cautioned me repeatedly about its influence on people, about how we would play all open-mouthed and bleary-eyed. She made claims about its dubious nature; called the machine wily and disruptive. She went on to say that, like the domestic slot machines and pinball games it is related to, it is associated with such evils as greed and avarice and an interest in oneself. When Korey was born, she made a public declaration that the game was off limits to him. She seemed to think he needed to be protected from it, separated, as if it were an ornery dog or a busy street. For some reason the game spooked her. Maybe she thought it would suddenly, unpredictably, shoot an electric current up our arms and into our brains. Or maybe she worried it might speak in tongues or that devilish images were hidden in the patterns on the front. She never
said. And through it all, I never had the courage to ask.

I see in the paper they're calling this an Estate Sale, which makes me laugh because the house is pretty small, and there isn't much furniture or impressive landscaping. Its virtues are two huge trees, one oak, one elm, out front, and a moderate sized eucalyptus in back. And there is also the half-acre lot it sits on outside of Cincinnati, part of a time-ripened neighborhood with the kind of weathered, shadowy aesthetic people will pay good money for. But really, it's not much more than a postage stamp of land, a well insulated box of a house, and a few rooms filled with the kind of curios and doodads that accumulate when people stay in the same place for so long.

Nothing has been moved since my mother went to the hospital. It's as though my parents have driven down to Scottsdale or Tuscon like they always talked about. I try to think of the house as deserted, but that doesn't work. The clocks my mother collected chime on the hour and a familiar smell is here—part tobacco, part Vitabath—as strong as any memory. Worse, there is still food in the refrigerator. I keep filling glasses of milk and only drinking half, as if out of fear that it could spoil at any moment. I try to rationalize, but it only makes me feel bloated and guilty.

On the tin doors of the pantry there is a flock of abandoned sewing spool magnets. My mother used to make them, several each year, to mascot holidays and family homecomings. Some resemble cylindrical mice, others tubular kittens, and one, I think, is supposed to be a dachshund. They stare at me with their tiny plastic bubble eyes, with pupils made from corriander seeds. When I walk through the kitchen they follow my steps as if demanding an explanation, as if I should know what's going to happen to them now. I've tried running past, but their eyes are stuck like people in
paintings or photographs. You can't shake the gaze.

In between the clock chimes and the noise Korey makes upstairs the silence is enormous, stellar even. It's as though I can hear things known only in theory, quasars popping and the spin of positrons. I am comforted when the larger sounds return: the lever at the bottom of the machine cocking and flinging those steel marbles up into the game's faceboard, Korey's squeaks of delight, his sighs. There is only one shot which wins in pachinko, one small latch the marble must hit to release the jackpot. Our game, perhaps because we can cheat it by reaching behind and retrieving the marbles it takes from us, seems easier to play than the ones found in casinos, but this is a deception. It is as frustrating as anything we can pitch ourselves against, including golf and the math used in quantum mechanics.

My father had a theory about pachinko, one he shared with me during a visit Lynne and I made years ago. He believed it was fortitude and not chance or lunar alignment which won the game; that the mind, on some plane too thin and far out of reach for most of us to notice, made a finite number of calculations involving weight and friction and the way our fingers bend. He told me a formula containing angles of trajectory, ball velocity, and barometric pressure. It was time, he went on, time which distracted us from winning, which kept us from truly examining the nature of the game. I was lost, I confessed, but curious and I told him so. I wanted to know if it worked. He looked away then, studying the floor or something deeper. "Not yet," he said.

Later, when Lynne and I were trying to save ourselves by having a baby, the game got moved upstairs where it sat forgotten and dormant for years, as much an overlooked part of the house as any door jam or electrical outlet.
To my knowledge, my father never did find the right shot. In his years of playing, he never won the game a single time. Nor, during all the visits that followed did he ever discuss it again except once, while Lynne and I were there showing off our new son. Dad and I were alone in the family room, half-watching the Bengals getting routed by Miami. At halftime I asked if he ever played pachinko anymore. No, he said, he had stopped cold turkey. He had just finished rolling a cigarette and for a moment, in the matchlight, his face went soft and entirely ageless, as easily mine or Korey's as his own. "It was doing something strange," he told me, and, in the last breath he spent on the game, he said he had stopped thinking of ways to play and began to think only of winning, a condition he likened to a virus, or consumption, a force which feeds on itself.

If Lynne knew I was keeping the pachinko machine, or why, I feel confident she would find some way to have charges brought up. She would claim it represents the same type of obsession and vice she believes are stirring around in my head. Children, she has told me, should live tempered lives. Too much involvement is unsettling, even dangerous. And she may very well be right. She could point to my mother as an example, who, childlike at the end, was destroyed by her want. Or, she could say, as she has been known to do, that Korey is in line to inherit the compulsiveness my father was subject to—that force which turned our attic into my bedroom in less than a week, and, as he vaulted past his fiftieth birthday, caused his blood vessels to swell and strain and require medication to keep from bursting.

Once, I asked her point blank if she was ashamed that my father was never anything more than a park maintenance supervisor, or if it embarrassed her that my mother rented putters at the park's miniature golf
course so she could be near him during the day. Lynne wanted to know what kind of questions those were supposed to be. Some years later, during the last tumultuous weeks of our marriage, the topic came around again. I asked if she believed in a connection between the life my parents led and what she once called my hapless and insufficient style of managing things: the hardware store, the money we would spend, our family. She was quiet for a while, then started in. Yes, she said. Yes to this and yes to that. And the rest came out in such a rush that I couldn't help but imagine her head as a balloon full of grievances, her mouth a nozzle suddenly untied. She told me, in the way that she has with her upper lip arched the way some people can raise an eyebrow, about the relationship with our dentist she was in the midst of. She talked about love: where she found it, and where she did not. I learned how secure our dentist was and how much he could offer our son, what opportunities would be afforded and where Korey could get his schooling. All the while I was trying to picture the man who had crowned two of my teeth and replaced one, the man who had been inside both of us, and what his hands looked like against her skin. I wanted to tell her how his Jaguar was just as likely to threaten Korey's emotional stability, but I never did and now fear it may follow me, unsaid, into oblivion.

Korey has come to get me. He stops in the kitchen doorway, jeans furled at his sneakers, hands on hips, and tells me with a thin reed of impatience touching his voice that one of the pachinko marbles is stuck. Standing there, he looks like a shrunken man. The way the light hits him, it swallows up his boyish softness and leaves behind the gaunt, skeletal shadows of adulthood.

"Dad," he says, "c'mon."

So I do. I sweep him up and play sack of potatoes over my shoulder but
he isn’t laughing. He insists we go upstairs.

The marble has stuck on the uppermost pin, trapped in the small space between the glass and the mosaic of pins and baffles and ornamental buttons on the faceboard. It doesn’t take much to get it going again, a rap on the top of the machine and the marble is dislodged; Korey could have done it himself if he were a little taller. Sitting, Indian style, I am his height, and together we watch the marble bounce and ricochet down through the patterns. At first, it starts out too far right, but it strikes another pin which sends it hopping back to the left.

"Oooo," we say. "Oh!"

It could work, I think. This could be the one. The marble plunks down another few steps, sets a small aluminum flower spinning. Korey’s fists are clenched into oversize golf balls, and he’s crouching now, as if that might help. The marble rebounds again, travelling floorward. It skips once, dances, then shimmies to a pause as it settles between two pins. Korey sucks in a breath and holds it.

Like so many times before, like always it seems, the marble squirts between the the two pins, roles left off another directly below and misses the latch holding all the other marbles in their cup. Korey throws up his hands and topples back into my lap. He’s grinning now, showing me all of his tiny teeth. I think that he is lucky to have gotten Lynne’s looks; it will help him someday.

"Rats," he says to me.

"Close," I say.

"Why doesn’t mom want me to play?"

"She thinks it’s bad for you. Like television, and candy."

"Is it?"

"I don’t think so," I reply. But when he’s quiet I remember what my
father said about the game, how it finally effected him.

Korey's mouth stretches into a yawn and he settles a little more deeply into my lap.

"Are we going to sell it?" he asks.

"Not a chance."

"Will I be able to keep playing?"

"You can play anytime you come over."

"Good," he says.

Downstairs, in the kitchen where I was sitting, is the stack of lists I have spent the day writing and revising. I think of them, with their cryptic doodles and abstract borders, with their catalogues and columns of furniture and appliances and craft supplies, and I feel the enormity of the task we are here to do press against our space. It strikes me how quickly the first five years of Korey's life have passed, how, one day he won't be able to remember my parents without pictures. Soon, the halls have to be swept and the fireplace shovelled out. I have to pack the tools and clean windows. Final decisions have to be made: what should be sold and what not; what kept or not; what can be given to neighbors and charity, and what should be thrown away.

Korey reaches over and places another chrome ball on the firing arm. He shoots it up to the top of the game and this one starts its way down on its own. It moves right and keeps going that way until it finally hits the side and drops to the bottom, the equivalent of bowling's gutter ball. Korey sighs and sits back in my lap.

"Do you think I'll ever win?"

"Well," I begin. "Um."

"Um?" Korey says. He's squinting at me, scrunching up his nose.

"Right."
"What does um mean?"

"It means I don't know. Maybe."

"Oh," he says frowning, and curls closer for warmth.

I hold him, his body all lightness and bend, and I think of Lynne with her dentist. I think of my mother assembling her magnets and the fury my father displayed when he hammered nails. They all seem to be just outside the room, orbiting past our window and staring in with the hundred different faces they could, at times, share: dismay and bewilderment, pride and loathing, joy and its companion, loss.

Korey yawns again and I feel his exhaustion in my own skin, worming its way down to the center of me. In the back of the house, tiny and far away, my mother's clocks start to chime.

"Here," I say, reaching around behind the game and scooping the cool steel marbles. "Let's try again."
Page 11 omitted in numbering
If you had seen Omni, the way her ears folded out of her thin blond hair, the way her spine had begun to sag by age five, you'd have known right away that she was born under a curse. She had come out feet first, had almost been strangled by her umbilical cord, and this was the first sure sign of disaster. I had been born the year before, the same month Kennedy had been shot, and carried for many years of my life a strange pride that I had come into the world at the height of such a marked and turbulent decade like the sixties. My father had gone and returned from the war. He had been bombed at once, during a brief layover at an airforce base, but never saw real combat. He had been in Vietnam when Omni was born. When we were five and six, five years after he had returned, he left again, for good.

Mom was vexed. Omni's teeth were falling out and I had begun to hit. Dad had taken the car, so when we travelled—to the store, to film matinees—it was always on public transportation. I discovered how easily Omni's nose bled on those early bus rides to town. Before Mom learned to sit between us, for no real reason except that it could be done, I would swing my palm into my sister's face. It didn't take much, just a light pat, and the blood would begin to trickle down onto her lip. My mother took to carrying packages of gauze in her purse so Omni would have something sterile to stuff up under her nostrils. She would grab my wrists and shake my hands,
as if she could shake the will out of them, and say, "Cleat! If you're looking for trouble, you found it."

We lived in a one story green house in a cul-de-sac from which we walked to school in the morning, to which we returned in the afternoon. The Kings Park Elementary school was on the other side of a shallow wooded glen. A path cut through the glen to the school, through the trees and across a small brook. Taking the path to school was forbidden, but Omni and I and our friend, Ollie Hudsey, took it each day, careful not to soak our shoes as we stepped on stones over the water.

Unlike Omni and I, Ollie was big-boned. He carried his weight around like too many books, like grocery bags about to tear. Ollie was sheer size. I was gangly, Omni hunched. None of us had a knack for sports, for anything that required the execution of motion and balance at the same time. We occupied ourselves after school by wandering around the glen and up and down the brook. We turned over rocks and deadfall and caught salamanders. Omni collected toadstools and sucked on sassafras leaves. Ollie could carry both me and Omni on his back and sometimes we would tramp through the denser areas of the woods and imagine we were being carried, dragonback, to Brigadoon, or the Land of the Lost. As long as we kept ourselves reasonably clean, our afternoons remained sovereign.

In the later part of the day, while the light waned between the tree limbs, we would sit and compare our discoveries. Omni consistently yielded the largest and most exciting collection: snake skin, ancient, mottled beer cans; a piece of shale shaped exactly like an ear.

"The thing I love most about the woods is it's full of fungus," Omni said, squatting before her assorted fungi. She ran her pale hands over them, delicately so they would not break apart. She picked one up, a broad chestnut-colored flesh flower, and handed it to Ollie.
"This one reminds me of you."

Around Christmas, anonymous packages would arrive for me and Omni. My mother unwrapped them, took out the card which said they were from Santa, and then wrapped them back up. She put the packages—usually Micronauts and Barbies, but sometimes, as we grew older, records or cheese—under the tree and put the cards in the fireplace. She cried when we opened the gifts and Omni would go and sit on her lap and put her arms around my mother's neck.

My mother was heavy and more attractive than Omni and I could ever hope to be, with light hair and dark eyes and skin as soft and unblemished as a field of wheat. We were mostly products of my father's genes, the last in a line of pallid, thick-featured Welsh. I had hoped to see my mother's gene pool resurface in my own children, but they are grown now, and as fond of them as I am, they never did acquire my mother's luster, her vigorous grace.

Winters brought snow which stayed for months and seemed to fill everything: the glen, the small plastic pool in our backyard, the hollow place in the corner of our hearts. Ollie came to our house in the mornings in a navy snow suit trimmed with red and white piping. It had soft, synthetic fur around the collar, and, with the background of white snow, made him look twice his size. Omni and I covered ourselves as best we could, tying wool scarves around our necks and pulling tight rubber galoshes over our canvas sneakers. We stayed warm, but inevitably by the end of the day the snow had worked its way through our layers to settle against our skin.

Each January we built an igloo near the path through the woods. It wasn't so much an igloo as it was a hollowed out mound of snow. It was so small only one person at a time could sit inside and Ollie couldn't even
squeeze through the doorway without knocking away chunks of ice.

"This is where we'll live," Omni said to Ollie. "You're the Wooly Mammoth. Cleat and I are the hunters. You'll carry us on hunts. If food is scarce, we'll have to kill and eat you. We can trade your tusks and blubber with other tribespeople and make coats from your fur."

Omni stood in front of us. It was the same every year. Ollie and I sitting before her, Omni explaining our roles, the conditions of our prehistoric lives. She brandished a stick like a club. At the end of her sentences she pointed the stick at us.

"It's only because we love you, Ollie," she said, aiming at him sternly with the end of her branch.

Ollie stomped around on his hands and knees, flattening a circle in the snow. When Omni and I would attack, he reared up on his knees and let out a howl, the imagined anguish of the Wooly Mammoth. His snow suit was so thick we could whack him with our clubs and prod him with our spears. We were careful not to hit him in the head, but hardly restrained ourselves wholloping his back and legs. He pawed the air and chased us. He rolled on us and crushed out our air. The battle ended with Omni abandoning her weapons and leaping onto Ollie's back. There, she throttled him bare-handed. Ollie dropped to the ground and Omni gritted her teeth. He gave one last, futile gasp and roled on his back. He closed his eyes and let out a great, white cloud of breath. Omni stood with one foot on his chest, hands on hips, and looked down at him. Ollie opened his eyes and giggled.

My mother and Omni and I went most places together, but not to the hospital. Only Mom and Omni went. A clause in my mother's insurance paid for the visits. I stayed home. Sometimes Ollie came over and we watched tv and tried to forget where my sister and mother were.
There's one picture of my father my mother used to keep in a box with her jewelry. It's a black and white photo of the two of them riding the subway in New York. They look young, in their early twenties. My father is standing, holding a plastic loop attached to the ceiling of the car. His dark hair is cut in a flattop. My mother is sitting next to him. He's looking down at her and his mouth is open as though he's saying something, telling her a joke. My mother's eyes are shut and her head is tilted back, laughing.

No matter how cold it got, the brook which cut across our path in the woods never froze. It trickled throughout the winter under the snow. It was a mystery to us where it came from, where it was going, but we had our theories. Omni tried to convince Ollie and me that it flowed up from a thermal hot spring. I told her there were no hot springs in Buffalo, not even underground. Ollie believed that the brook was a little river which flowed around the world, that, actually, it was stationary and the world spun underneath it. He told us if we followed it far enough it would lead us to Texas or Thailand, the little rivers flowed everywhere, like the network of blood vessels that wove through the body to the eye and ankles.

"What happens when the river hits an ocean?" asked Omni.

"Nothing," Ollie said. "It just starts up again on the other side."

Later, during that period of our lives, that period around high school when we were recognized as true misfits and Ollie had grown to such proportions that the varsity football team solicited him an honorary position at Center until they saw him handle the ball, when Omni's physical activity was becoming more and more restricted, we attempted to follow the brook downstream from the path until we reached its end or returned to
our starting point. Ollie and I carried rucksacs with ham sandwiches and plastic rain ponchos and flashlights. Omni fashioned a walking stick by whitling the bark off the branch of an Elm. She filled a round, tin canteen with the water from the brook and hung it so the strap crossed at a slant between her small breasts.

"This water will be all right to drink," she said. "It will not contaminate us because we have to follow it such a long way."

It was a kind of commencement, and she spoke standing in front of us, as she had acquired a habit of doing, with the sobriety a pastor might adopt when citing a verse from Kings.

We walked most of the day, until the summer sky glowed orange and yellow on one side, turquoise on the other. The brook led west past our development, out past Mills farm and behind the Seven-Eleven where they sold gas, where we stopped for cola Slurpees. The water had widened somewhat and was then, by consensus, a creek. Omni had fallen behind. She collected momentoos and had Ollie carry them in his pack once her pockets were filled. She found a piece of quartz with streaks of metallic yellow running through it. When she caught up to us she showed us the rock pointing to the colored bands, "This could be Mica," she said, "But it could also be Pyrite. Fools gold."

We stopped and spread our ponchos on a dry, grassless bank. I could no longer see any houses, but I could hear an occasional car. Ollie and I had walked far ahead of Omni and as she approached I could see she was attempting to disguise a limp. When she reached us I saw red stains on her shoes. She took off her canteen and climbed down the bank to the water. She sat on a beach of small stones and began to untie her laces. Ollie climbed down and stood next to her, towering above her like the maple trees along the water's edge. Omni slid her tennis shoes off delicately, then roled
her soiled socks down past her ankles and over her feet. Both feet were
dark red and wet. She stood and hissed and stepped into the shallow water
The slight current wrapped around her thin ankles and the water turned
cloudy maroon.

"Wow," Ollie said, almost a whisper, "What's your problem?"

Omni hitched her pants legs so the cuffs hung just above the surface of
the water. She looked up at Ollie on the bank.

"Weak veins," she said.

My mother worked six days a week at an office as a receptionist. Her
title was Administrative Assistant and it paid well enough that we could
eventually buy a car. The first car was a massive brown Chrysler, which did
not have 'air conditioning' but instead 'climate control.' She sold it after
four years, to Ollie for four hundred dollars because she knew that cars
large enough to allow Ollie behind the wheel successfully and with minimum
danger were rare and far out of his price range.

We were collected in the Chrysler the night we tried to follow the
little river from our house on its circumference around the planet or at
least to the first ocean. We had walked back to the Seven-Eleven to call,
Ollie carrying Omni piggy-bag, and me with the two rucksacks. The three of
us sat in the back, quiet, guilty of lies and ambition. Omni hung her head.
Occasionally, between long periods of silence my mother's voice would
flare up from the front seat. She said the same thing over and over: How
could we be so stupid? How could we be so foolish?

I could not tell her then that we had no way of knowing the magnitude
of our enterprise. Distance, at that age, is always manageable, easily
conquered; perseverance more dependent on imagination than experience.
With each step we seemed closer to our destination, but could not, or would
not, see Omni's swollen feet as she lagged further behind. We were too full of travel, too lost in the dream of arriving.

In the Chrysler, Mom and Omni went to the hospital every other Wednesday. They took my mother's blood and gave it to my sister. I didn't ask questions, but my mother volunteered information from time to time, as she would about my father.

Ollie and I discovered a role playing game called Dungeons and Dragons. In the game, we created powerful characters, powerful enough to withstand the worst onslaughts of ogres and demons and living sludge. It was the same year the gifts stopped arriving from the anonymous sender, from Santa, the last of them postmarked in Portland. It was a year of transition.

The beauty of the game was that it would never end. There were endless dragons to be slain, princesses to be rescued, treasure to be found. We played until midnight, into the next morning. Omni often played with us, but did not have our stamina, our zeal. She would fall asleep on throw pillows next to her pile of character sheets, next to our maps of castles and wilderness. Ollie would pick her up and trundle to her room and put her in her bed, then return and we would continue our plundering, our ruthless rampage through the underworld.

Ollie had a favorite character he named Pymatunig. Pymatunig was a Paladin with extraordinary strength and charisma. He had amassed a fortune in gold pieces. One night, having been dubbed Dungeonmaster for the day, I was leading him down the River Niagra to The Great Barren Wilderness of Lost Souls and Incredible Treasure.

"You come to a waterfall two hundred feet high. It will crush your boat if you go over," I said.

"I cast a spell of flight."
"A Harpie attacks you in the air"
"I'll fight."
"You kill the Harpie."
"Sometimes this game is too easy."

Omni was curled into a fetal position. Her left hand twitched and her eyeballs darted under her lids.

Ollie scooped her up and walked to her room. He came back and his face was drawn. He frowned.

"She seems lighter," he said.
"Your boat landed safely. You continue toward the Barren Wilderness."
"Did I get anything from the Harpie?"
"A shield of copper. Some emeralds."
"Is Omni going to die?"
"I don't know."

We stare down at the character sheets, at the map of the bogus Niagara drawn on graph paper.

"Two skeletons with flaming swords float up behind you on a log raft."
"I give the skeletons the shield and the emeralds."
"The skeletons are pleased. They float away."

The only memory I have of my father is of a Sunday morning when we were all getting dressed to go to church. My father was tying small, black leather shoes on my feet. He tied them so they would not come undone during the day, so they would not ever come off. He tied them too tight and I whined. I called my mother and asked her to retie them. My father stood at the door, irked by the extra time my mother and I were taking. Omni held his hand. He pulled her through the doorway and said, "We'll be in the car."
After Ollie bought the Chrysler we drove to Lake Ontario, to Buffalo, to Canada. We finished high school and worked part-time jobs; we talked about college. Sometimes Omni drove us around so we could drink beer or gin. Omni couldn’t drink because of her medication and Ollie couldn’t get drunk because of his size. Of the three of us, I was the only one who ever got messy.

Sometimes at night we would drive up to Niagra Falls. There were lights everywhere, and sound, like at a theme park, only it wasn’t musical, just a singular roar, deafening if you stood close enough. One night Omni drove up there while Ollie and I sat in the back doing a-shot-a-minute of National Bohemian, Naty Bo, we called it. We parked in a nearly vacant lot which overlooked the falls. Omni played the radio, a song by Journey, and left the heater running. It was early Fall and chilly.

By the sixtieth shot Ollie was feeling claustrophobic and we all got out to walk down to the concrete platform which protruded from the cliffs in front of the waterfall. A display offered information on the millions of tons of water that poured into the United States each hour, the age and relative size of the falls. A stiff wind blew up over the cliffs. It was strong enough that you could stand at an angle against it without falling over. Omni stood behind Ollie so she was not knocked off balance.

"Can we go?" she said, after a while.

"In a bit," I said.

"C’mon, Cleat. It’s freezing. And I’m tired."

"Then go sit in the car."

We were shouting. We had to.

"How long do you want to stay?"

"For a little while, Omni. Jesus. Why do you come if you’re just going to be on a bummer?"
“Cleat,” said Ollie.
“You asked me to. Remember?”
“I didn’t ask you to be a drag.”
“Only to drive you around.”
“You ever think that people get tired of feeling sorry for you?”
“Shut up, Cleat,” Ollie said.
Omni spun and started to walk up the path to the car.
“Walk away, Omni. That’s the easiest thing to do. Walk away. Just like Dad.”
She trotted away from us, up, into the lights.
“You’re an asshole, Cleat,” said Ollie.
The water spilled over in front of us, became froth and mist where it landed. I could feel the moisture in the air. I tried to imagine the water being stationary, the land moving past it, but I couldn’t see it, it was impossible.

We sped home. I sat in the back folding a beer can back and forth until it had split in half. I cut my finger on the sharp edge and then put my finger into my mouth to suck on the cut. I wondered if that worked, if you could swallow your blood back into your veins. It seemed to me that it wouldn’t, they were two different systems, but I wasn’t sure. I was no doctor.

Ollie stayed over. He felt fine, but thought it best not to drive; he could head home in the morning. He slept on my bed, while I slept on the floor. During the night I woke and saw that Ollie was not in my bed. My head reeled and when I stood I fell into my dresser. I knew where he was, I did not have to look, but went anyway, down the hall, toward the rhythmic, whispered sounds in Omni’s room.

My mother explained to me once that my father had come back from the
war very different than when he had left. Something had drained out of him. He had started smoking. He wouldn't look at her when he spoke, and she knew it was because his eyes held a lie. Finally, she had told him about Omni, about the tests and what the doctors had told her. She told him what it would take, what they would have to give. He left soon after.

I have kept three things that belonged to her: the photograph of her and my father on the subway; a gold oval locket Omni gave her one year with tiny pictures of her and I as infants; and an old diary, which on one furled page has only a single sentence: *I'm waiting by the window, but outside I can see it has already started to snow.*

Ollie traded the Chrysler for a late model Suburban. He and Omni went up to Toronto to live. I can see the truck squeezing through the customs gate, I imagine the look on the customs officer's face as he inspects their belongings through the window, scrutinizes their faces. I can hear the rumble of the falls nearby, Ollie's voice as he raises it to thank the Canadian. There are good doctors in Toronto. They kept Omni's blood thick for many, many years. They kept it coursing smoothly under her skin as it flowed out to the extremeties and back in again.

I was older then, had gone off to college, returned, met a woman. The country was under the tutelage of an aging president, an actor, and the general opinion was that the quality of life was in a state of decline. The globe was warming, ice caps melting, and the snow fell and disappeared in the same day. I read somewhere that rainforests in South America were being consumed at the rate of five hundred acres an hour. Apathy reigned, everyone seemed careless.

Up north, in another country my sister got strange blood. She lived
with a giant. If you could have seen her, seen how she laughed with him, how easily, and carefully he lifted her in the air, you could never have gone away.
We were sophomores and lived in a historic mansion built a century ago by one Lionel Heidecker, legendary miser and deed-holder for most of Crawford County, Pennsylvania. One side of our room, a cozy box of a space retrofitted on the third floor sometime during the fifties, overlooked the east yard and beyond, through a row of broad-limbed, muscular maples, to French Creek, where my roommates, Archie "Mac" MacCarthy and Hubie Benhaim, had been known to snag bloated catfish on bacon and rubberband lures. To the south, a pair of French doors, scaly and missing a hinge or two, opened onto a modest balcony, the railing of which was our access to the roof. From atop the mansion we could see the community of red brick buildings where we got our schooling, the hillside it occupied, and, for another three hundred and fifty-nine degrees, the rolling ridge lines and valley farmland this part of the country is known for.

The story about the Heidecker place involves Hubie and myself, Louis Ptoomey, Jr., but most of all Mac, in ways I only believe now late at night when sleep is as faraway as Mars and my wife, Donna, has left me to wander around dreamland. It has to do with the widow's walk, what remains of it, once crowning the roof, and old Heidecker himself who is said to have spent the last decade of his solitary life up there, gazing out over the acreage he owned. The exact fate of the widow's walk was never clear to me, but
often, in certain barrooms and bingo parlors, it was the object of dubious rumor and folktale. One rendition had Heidecker and his perch swallowed up and carted off by an evening fog. Some of the older residents, like Mr. Chuba, a twenty year resident who lived down the hall from us, said it was incinerated by lightning, its occupant fried to a black smear sometimes visible after a good rain or in the right cast of moonlight. Others said it was swept away in a violent windstorm while Heidecker was still up there, his disappearance as sudden and mysterious as Dorothy and Toto's trip to Oz. Whatever the truth, those stories and others drifted up to campus like a grass fire that first year at school, and in May when Mac showed Hubie and I the vacancy add we could hardly pack our socks and underwear fast enough. After we moved in, we asked Gus Gerrity, the current owner slash slumlord, about the truth of it all, the eternal mewling of lost souls and such things. He assured us that the widow's walk, the "lookout" he called it, had been torn down for insurance purposes when the place was converted to a tenement house, that no form of the undead had ever entered, hovered above or rattled the place, and that the rumors we heard were, quote, the kind of make-believe gobbledygook belonging to children and the weakminded rabble he rented to, unquote.

What we found, after discovering the balcony-roof stunt, was a railless platform, a flat section of tile and footworn asphalt ideal for sunning and star gazing and an occasional mushroom trip. It became--for a few months anyway--our hangout, where the three of us could bombard pebbles at the pigeons lined up like sentinels along the mansion's dormers, or drink tequila and shout obscenities up the hill at professors who thought our schoolwork less than exemplary. The truth was, we became as comfortable in the Heidecker place as anywhere you might call home, and, aside from the occasional clop-clop-clop of footsteps we heard around midnight, the
voicelike whisperings outside the windows, and, well, later on, Mac's accident, few things exceptional ever happened there.

It was Hubie who first suggested an entire night on the roof
"I'll tell you what's missing, fellas," he said. "A confrontation."

Hubie fancied himself a tough guy, what with his head shaved to its blue white scalp and a garage mechanic's sense of dress. He was a stocky, third generation Lebanese who's family lived in D.C., the southeast corner where all the murders and drug dealings are said to occur, and liked to brag how he had never taken an insult sitting on his ass. He listened to rock bands, "not punk-rock, you simps," with names like Death, Butthole Surfers, The Exploited, and took ceramics classes where he created plaster interpretations of Dante's inferno.

"Why don't you stay up there and report back in the morning," I suggested.

"Because someone's got to get help if I get juiced."

"And what if we all get juiced?"

"Then that's that," Hubie said.

This was October, the days still as warm and full of that summer green we wish for in the cold, dead part of the year. We were standing on the balcony sipping cans of Stroh's and half watching the women's soccer team pass by on their Friday run up and down Highland Avenue. Mac was shirtless, one leg slung over the railing, his body oiled and smooth as a mango.

"I'll sleep up there," he said. "No problem."

"Alone?" asked Hubie.

"Alone."

Hubie cocked an eyebrow and ran his hand over the stubble on his head.

"Shew," he said.

Down on the road Susie "Sunshine" McCurdy was bringing up the rear of
the team, her stride slow and jaunty as a pony's, legs like high art. She was looking our way, holding an arm in the air and waggling it. We waggled our own arms back, and, as she trotted and huffed her way toward the practice fields, let go one collective, wistful breath. Not only was this the height of 1982's Indian summer, thick with the promise of eternal warmth, creekside fishing and assorted evening keggers, but it was also the peak of our girlfriendlessness, a subject which, like the bangings and clangings of old man Heidecker, kept us constant company.

"That," said Mac, "is as pleasant a sight as we could hope to see on this fine afternoon."

We agreed. Sunshine McCurdy was indeed a spectacle. And flirty. A fact which only added to the strife our hormone ravaged bodies were in the midst of. We would see her in the campus post office, or the dining hall, standing about with her friends, other great beauties like Andrea Gerheardt from Corriapolis, PA, or Alisse Boname, the exchange student from France, and our affected hearts couldn't help but stir with pictures of this and that, mountain vistas or deserted shoreline and enough sappy cooing and noisy smooches to fill a lifetime.

I mentioned the roof, how it would afford us an even better view to drink our beer in front of. Indeed, I heard Mac say. And Right You Are from Hubie. So we clambored up the steep pitch to the top, our dexterity impaired just enough to make it exciting. We saw the soccer team—the Lady 'Gators—to the north, chugging their way past the school, past Bentley and Alder hall, the dorms: Carver and Edwards and Brooks. To the South was the town and its slew of Dutch colonials, the refurbished Academy Theater, the sign for Hank's frozen custard, and the Sear's and Penny's local residents take pride in. There was Highway 79, Erie one way, Pittsburgh the other And French creek, silver, brown and green all at once, winding toward its
final destination, Lake Tamarac. We saw, as always, hill, dale, hither, yon, and the maple, oak and elm growing there, above them all a postcard blue sky, split through the center by a gauzy white line, like a crease, stretching westward.

"Boys," Mac said, walking to the edge of the platform, "It's days like this that get my gumption up." He was facing away from Hubie and me and I could see flecks of grit clinging to the oil on his back and arms. "It brings out the gambling man, the daring-do." Mac turned around. "I'm in the process of making you a wager," he went on. "The conditions of said bet to be as follows: That I, Archibald Reed MacCarthy, will before the break at Thanksgiving, bestow a kiss upon, and hold the lovely hand of, miss Sunshine McCurdy, right here where I stand. And that should this not happen by the aforementioned deadline, will sleep not one but five consecutive nights on the very spot beneath my two feet."

And, we asked, if he won?

"If I win," he said, "You, Mr. Hubert Benhaim, and you, Louis Ptoomey, will each sleep an evening here, solo, one sleeping bag, one pillow, and whatever charms and talismans you think might help."

"Hmmm," we said. "Gee."

We were trying to weigh things, Hubie and I. Mac was a year older than us, had attended a prep school in Vermont, was a crack at lengthy calculus problems and a wiz at history. He played flag foot football with a recklessness we all envied, ate mostly foods linked to cancer and heart disease, and swore that Catcher In The Rye is the only book we should ever read. We considered this, along with the wiry height of him, the blond hair cropped too short by the ears, too long on top, the smug way he smiled from the corner of his mouth, and the bump on his nose attributed to a fight he got the worse end of. We weighed his random luck with women, wondered how
his looks would fair in Hollywood (average, we guessed), and in what life—at our school of twentyfive hundred and town of fifteen thousand—Sunshine McCurdy would ever deem Mac worthy of snuggling.

"Mister," I told him, "you have yourself a deal."

Mac and I commenced with the shaking of hands and opening of more beer.

"Now wait," Hubie said. "Just hold on."

"Is there a problem?" Mac asked.

"Well, in a word: yes."

"And what would that be?"

"I think we're being snookered."

"Howso?" I asked him, curious now and less confident than the moment before.

"Getting Sunshine up here is one thing. But the kissing and hand-holding part is another. Who's going to confirm this?"

Mac looked around.

"Those birds," he said, pointing to the pigeons. "That sky. The constellations Orion and Cassiopeia. There will be heralding and fanfare from above. I'll be singing. Trust me, you'll know."

"I'm not sure that's good enough," said Hubie.

What happened next is part of the story I'm often tempted to adjust, to include, say, some little tidbit of accommodation or compromise, where Hubie and Mac belly up to the proverbial bar and toast each other as the fine representatives of our species they could each, at times, be. I like to think we let the rest of the afternoon pass with our usual banter, that we saw the sun set, the moon rise, and a dozen comets flare and sputter against the layer of air we breathe. In one version, I even imagine Mac hooking an arm around Hubie's shoulder and saying, "You know, Hubes, you're right. It's not
good enough. So goddamnit, you're invited to come along. We'll each hold a hand. You can kiss one cheek; I, the other," or some such thing full of good humor and steadfast friendship. But there was no comaraderie in Mac's real life response, no brotherly love or the kind of give-and-take discussion psychologists tell us is important. There was, in fact, not even the lapse in time everyday politeness and common courtesy require.

"Tough titties," Mac said.

"Fine. Fuck you and your wager."

"I have no intention of fucking her. A kiss is all. Maybe two."

"You know what you can kiss, Mac? The hair on my shit-stained Lebanese ass."

I could tell things were deteriorating. Hubie made clicking noises with the aluminum can in his hand and Mac had eased his way back from the edge of the platform. I wouldn't say they were in sparring position, but their legs were bent slightly and I could sense aggression and other ornery emotions.

"Put your fur down," said Mac.

It came to me, in the dim way I am embarrassed to admit I receive most of my revelations in life, that the two of them were about to exchange blows. I thought about this, about who would do what to whom, and where I would have to direct my allegiance, and how, on an afternoon as truly joy-worthy as any in the history books, I found myself on the roof of a dilapidated mansion in western Pennsylvannia mustering up all the ingenuity I possessed to keep my two roommates from knocking the snot out of each other.

"Look," I said, pointing at one of the cement pineapples decorating the dormers, "a raven."

The raven was a crow, of course, but these were desperate times. It stood, big as the seven and a half pound infant I once was and no less spooky
than the creature Mr. Poe made famous, starring at us, first with one yellow eye, then the next.

A wind came up without birdsong or rustle.

"Ick," Mac said. "That thing is sin itself."

He raised his arm, brandishing the half-empty can like a stone.

"Git!" he said. "G'won, git!"

"Don't," said Hubie. But he did. The can struck the pineapple just below the crow's feet, bounced off and clattered down to the rain gutter. The bird didn't move.

"It's Heidecker," Hubie said. "Look at him. He's pissed."

Mac was shaking his arms and doing a dance you might see in the Congo.

"Scat," he said. "Shoo."

"I'm outta here, man," said Hubie. "Before he throws a hex."

Hubie shuffled to the slope of roof leading to our balcony. He put his can down gently, like a tea cup in a china shop, never taking his eyes off the bird. Before he disappeared he gave me a look, one part misery, one part fright, and asked if I was coming.

"Uh uh," I said.

"Consider yourself cursed, then."

I watched him climb down the roof, ginger step after ginger step, touching his hand to the shingles for balance. Mac was collecting small pieces of gravel and flaking cement, muttering something about chickens and shit.

"We live with an invertabrace, Louis. An ameoba. A single cell life form." He began to lob pebbles at the crow. "He's hot air, I say. Words, words, words."

I hemmed and hawed a defense, reminding Mac, piecemeal, of the touchdown Hubie scored in the intramural semi-finals, of the rugby player
he dispatched in a dormitory brawl, of the forty handstand push-ups he could
do. The word fireplug came up, as did treestump and bulldog. I was speaking
to his back, standing so that any evil wishes cast by the bird had to get
through him to reach me.

"The man's a coward," Mac said.

"He is not," I told him, mine the protest a child might make. "He's
just..."

"A milksop? lily-hearted? Unable to say 'Boo' to a goose?"

"Prudent."

"Hah!" said Mac, and chucked a handful of gravel at the crow, peppering
it like buckshot. For an instant I thought it was going to take flight, but the
bird remained there, perched on the pineapple, quiet and black as night gets
in the rainforests of Brazil.

"Well aren't you a sumbitch," Mac said.

I did not admit then, and still will not, that the animal Mac cursed was
an incarnation of some sort. I am as practical and left-brained as anyone
who grew up in the workaday world of facts ours is. But what I next heard
on the roof that Friday afternoon has stayed with me through the rest of my
school days, a move from small city to big, the death of three jobs, two
grandparents, one friend and one marriage. It was a sound which leaves the
fine hairs on my arms stiff, the type of noise we keep stored far away from
the memories used in our waking lives. For a while, I believed the bird's
squawk was so disturbing because of its strangeness— that grating,
otherwordly croak. Not until later, much later, did I understand what it was
that left me shivering, how it was not oddness at all, but a familiarity of
the kind we associate with relatives and homecomings and various parts of
our own body. I heard that creature speak, not in bird language, or in
tongues like a mystic, but in our own how-do-you-do, have-a-nice-day
That fall we gained a fair amount of notariety living in the Heidecker mansion, even managed to raise our social status from that of fools and misfits to semi-celebrities. We were rushed by a fraternity, the Lamda Chi Awfuls, Hubie called them, who sent delegates to our door, upright and formal as mormons, to invite us to dinner or social events like Porn and Peanuts Night. Somehow, they had pegged us as interested. They made promises about women and how their affection was won. They dolled out facts concerning enrollment and leadership opportunities, reciting a list of malarky so long it could have been written by the government itself. They winked, slapped us on the arm, proclaimed the lot of us chums.

Mac joined up; Hubie and I did not. Hubie was too busy in the ceramics studio. He was coming on as an artist, he said. And he had met a woman, another art student named Alfraida Noumisky who painted bleak landscapes in red and orange monotones, could use the word ontology in a sentence, and knew actual quotes from the Communist Manifesto. Besides, he told me, cavorting with fascist white-bread rich kids wasn't exactly his idea of a good time.

By December Mac had all but abandoned us. On occasion he would pass through the room, pick up books or a clean shirt then dash off with an "adios amigos" and a two finger salute.

"Look at him," Hubie said one day early in the month. We were out on the balcony, watching Mac stroll up the walk to the front door. "Look what he's becoming."

Mac was becoming something, but I couldn't say what. His outfit was a
mishmash of paisley, stripes and pastel solids, all pleats and silky fabric, a
deck shoe-loafer hybrid, not quite green but not yellow either; Ray-Bans,
and a white suede Stetson with a grouse or pheasant or some other speckled
bird's feather sticking off to the side. And he was getting bigger. He had
been lifting weights, preparing, he explained to me during one of his fly-bys,
for Hell Week.

"Hell Week?"

"Initiation. The rites of passage. You know, the fraternity's final exam.
Our endurance determines success and failure. They don't let us sleep
much," he said with a shine in his eye, silver on blue, and real live genuine
glee. He had been elected president of his pledge class and was known for
hollering about the dangers of irresponsible democracy, about Emperor Nero
who fiddled and sang poetry while Rome burned. But when I heard him speak
during a chance encounter on campus, his words were too breathy and full of
vowels to be those of a rational man, someone who considers what they do,
when, and for what reasons.

"Maybe it's a phase," I said to Hubie.

"Maybe he's wacked," said Hubie. "Off the deep end."

Yes, I thought, that could also be true.

"We should say something," Hubie went on. "He's being brainwashed.
They're turning him into a zealot."

What could we possibly say, I wanted to know, that would make any
difference.

"Tell him he lost the bet. Tell him it's time to ante up."

He was right: Thanksgiving had come and gone and Mac had not visited
the roof with Sunshine McCurdy, nor anyone else, including us, for that
matter. Mac owed me.

We stepped back into the room and listened to him on the stairs, then
outside in the hall making shuffling noises. He seemed to have forgotten
that our door was a fraction too big for the doorjam and, when all the way
closed as it was that day, required just the right amount of lean and
footwallop to get it open.

"Damn!" we heard him say. "Overgrown cheap piece of fuckin' plywood!"
The brass knob rattled and rattled.

"There's a lesson to be learned here," Hubie said. Then he walked over
to open the door.

"Well, hell," said Mac, looking at Hubie, then me in a way I remember as
dumbstruck. "If it isn't Wally and the Beav. I thought I was locked out
there, fellas."

"You should have been," Hubie said.

"Now, Hubes, what's with all the malice? Aren't we buddies, here?
Roommates? Musketeers?" Mac took off the Stetson and opened his arms as
if he were ready to embrace the both of us. "Hmm?"

"Hubie thinks you owe us a few nights on the roof, Mac," I said.

Hubie nodded. "Yup."

Mac brought one arm up to chin level, hand stroking jaw in a way that
suggested thought and seriousness. He walked from one end of the room to
the other.

"I see," he said. The other hand, the one holding the hat, was tucked
behind his back. "I suppose we've come to an impass, then."

"Five nights, Mac. That was the deal," I said, each word breaking off
and falling out of me like bits of bone. I was sorry, truly sorry, to be doing
this.

"You know," he said, shaking his finger like our stodgy professors
sometimes did, "perhaps it's time for a little chat."

"Talk's cheap," said Hubie. "We want retribution."
"Please," said Mac, "sit. And let's leave out the cliches. Okay?"

So we sat. Hubie and I side by side on matching, threadbare wingbacks, Mac on the sixty-five dollar hide-a-bed we bought from the Goodwill store. He stretched his legs out to the footlocker we used as a table, set his hat beside him, and cocked his arms behind his head.

"My friends, let me tell you about a man named Aristotle."

He spoke to us then, about metaphysics and the nature of God. About the cyclic nature of the world and why logic resides at the center of all great art. He said everything—an earthworm, a tulip, the heart—is moved by an innate desire to be something greater than it is. He stood once and said, both hands clenched tight for drama, that there is order in the world and there is chaos, mostly the latter. He repeated paragraphs from "The Generation of Animals," and "On the Soul," during which he lapsed into latin, no E Pluribus Unum or Quid Pro Quo, but actual conversation about Plato and his relation to truth. Out came words like exigence and empiricism, lyrics from a Doors' song he performed in a warbling tenor, and a poem by Yeats concerning fury and mire and the complex creatures humans are. At one point, nearly an hour and a half past the one he started from, Mac dropped to a knee in front of us, a hand on each chair, and asked in a voice doctors use to discuss death with the dying, how the hell could he be expected to fulfill obligations made over a month ago when we were all in such a turbulent and unpredictable state of flux?

Hubie rubbed his eyes with thumb and forefinger, his head shaking slowly back and forth. I could only sit and stare.

"Anyway," Mac went on, "Things are looking good. What I really need is an extension. It's been said that Sunshine has referred to me in casual conversation. One fella even admitted seeing her scratch my initials into a desk top. I've gained the favor of several respected sororities. They've
taken to calling me Honeybuns and Mr. Hungwell. I'm on a roll, boys. Lately, I've been full of," he paused, looked ceilingward.

"Shit?" said Hubie.

"The Lord's good graces," Mac said.
He stood and retrieved his hat from the couch.

"And now that I've completely forgotten what I came up here for, I'll be seeing you."

In an instant he was gone. From the stairs I could hear breath and running noises.

"It's worse than I thought," Hubie said. He was growing his hair back and what little of it there was stood straight out from his head like rabbit fur.

I nodded.

"I think we've lost him," I said.

We didn't see much of Mac after that. From time to time I would spy him at school leading his pledge brothers around, an image much like those mice who followed the Piper, or chatting up women we used to admire from afar. He had taken to slicking his hair straight back with an oily tonic, wore broad-shouldered suit jackets in shades of maroon and forest green, underneath them t-shirts with silkscreened adages about authority and how it should be questioned. If he saw me, he would wink or flash a quick, toothy smile, and I would be reminded of the previous year, even the previous quarter, of fishing or football, and how distant they now seemed.

His name began to appear in The Reporter, our school paper, linked with controversial events like streaking at basketball games or the Hereford yearling discovered one Monday morning on the second floor of Bentley Hall. And Hubie heard through sources in the art department that Mac had been put
on academic probation, about certain higher-ups who had labelled him a
disruption and potential danger to the college community.

So it was that we believed Mac had gone his way, and we ours.

A month went by. Then two.

Eventually, a winter passed and then most of spring. All total, enough
time to see Hubie win the Doane Certificate for Excellence in Art, the first
ever sophomore to do so; Mac go from pledge to neophyte to full blown
brother and house social chairman; and me meet, and fall in tongue-tied,
wobbly-kneed love with, Lisa Elizabeth Palmer, the girl who, six months
after graduation, would become my first wife.

She was the one I was with the last time I spoke to Mac at any length,
the night which revealed a side of me she grew to despise, moreso even,
than my flee-ridden Lab-Shepherd cross, Monty, or the middle-of-the-road,
soft-spoken democrats I tend to vote for. In fact, we were all there, Hubie,
Alfraida, Lisa and I, as well as several Lambda Chi's, a handful of tenants
from the Heidecker House, and a few random passers by who stopped to see
why, as we at first wondered, a crowd was gathered in the front yard
looking and pointing at the roof.

"Uh oh," Hubie said.

We were walking back from town, from a movie I thought both happy
and sad at the same time. The moon was out, up high and full as my heart
was with eager-beaver affection.

"Someone's up there," said Alfraida, as we made our way across the
yard.

"What's going on?" Lisa asked one guy I recognized from Mac's pledge
class. He was wearing a suit with a carnation pinned to the lapel.

"It's Archie," he said. "He's been up there for a while. We're a little
nervous."
"Has anyone called the cops?"

The guy shook his head.

"That's probably not a good idea. It's our Spring Formal tonight. There're controlled substances involved, here."

I could see Mac on the roof, walking back and forth, gesticulating with his arms. He appeared to be singing and only partially dressed.

"I guess we'd better go up," Hubie said. He was looking at me and frowning.

Going up, I thought, was the very last thing I wanted to do.

"I'm coming, too," Lisa said. She was a psychology major and that fact made me uneasy.

The guy with the carnation said he wanted to go, also, but Hubie talked him out of it.

"You might want to stay down here, keep the crowd from getting too antagonistic."

Alfraida made it as far as the room, but declined the last stretch of roof. I hoped Lisa might do likewise, but she was insistent. From our balcony I could hear Mac bellowing a chorus about love sweet love.

He wasn't alone up there, we found. Sunshine McCurdy was with him, standing in her underwear—beautiful, white lacy things—and making no attempt to cover herself. I wondered absently where their clothes had gotten to.

"Aw, shit," Mac said when he saw us. His boxer shorts were decorated with shooting stars and planets ringed like Saturn.

We didn't make it all the way up to the platform, so sat kind of sideways on the sloping tile.

"What the fuck are you doing, Mac?" Hubie asked.

"What does it look like I'm doing? I'm serenading. It's a historic
moment."

"You're attracting a lot of attention."

"The media, I hope. Men with pens and broadcast equipment. This night needs to be chronicled."

"What's he on?" Lisa asked Sunshine.

"NoDoze," She said. "Ecstasy. About two dozen Tequila shots and half a pan of hash brownies. He keeps asking me how I like it here in Bombay."

She turned to Mac who was doing a lumbering pirouette behind her.

"Mac," she said, "These are your friends. Do you recognize them?"

"Of course," Mac said, "that's the Lion, the Scarecrow and Auntie Em."

He pointed at us one by one.

"I think we need to get him down from here," Sunshine said. "Can either of you hit hard enough to knock a man unconscious?"

I knew Hubie could. I had seen it happen. But there were more variables involved this time.

"Mac," Hubie said. "Why don't you come down with us. We'll fix you a rum toddy or something, have a game of lawn darts."

"Bribes won't work on me, sir, I've business to attend to. There's a proposal in progress, if you don't mind." Mac's voice sounded as if his mouth were full of food, as if his tongue had swollen to the size of a salami.

"Here he goes again," Sunshine said.

Mac started singing about rain and sun, clouds and clear blue sky. I didn't recognize the song, but guessed he was ad libbing the do-wah-wah's.

I noticed my bicep tingling where Lisa had it clenched tight.

"Do something," she whispered, "before things get out of control."

"Like what?"

"Praise him. Give him positive feedback. Tell him you care."

Mac was down on all fours now, making his way out the rooftop to the
end of one of the dormers. By degrees, I became aware of my heart, which was moving around my chest like a little bird, and my brain, which was sorting through a million or so things, not the least of which was the three stories between us and the hard, hard earth.

"Mac," I said. But that was all.

"I'm going, Mac. I'm getting down from here," Sunshine told him.

He was at the end of the dormer, straddling the concrete ornament and trying to balance himself.

"For Christ's sake, Louis, he's your roommate," Lisa hissed at me. "You have to stop this."

Okay, I thought. All right.

"Mac," I said, "you win. Now get off the pineapple."

I have never been particularly gifted with an ability to say the right thing at the right time. My job and marriage records are documented proof. So it was difficult for me, and, I'm sure, for Lisa and Hubie and Sunshine, as well, to understand why my words brought about such a sudden and resolute change in Mac. Why, exactly, he squatted right down on the pineapple as if it were a giant stone egg, and assumed that well-known thinker's pose. And why, after several minutes of quiet like you can imagine in outer space, he looked up at me and asked what the hell was wrong with my voice.

"What do you mean?"

"Why's it all shaky like that?"

I didn't want to tell him about the vision I was having, how it was filled mostly with darkness and cold.

"I suppose it's a result of concern," I said.

"We're all worried, Mac. What you're doing is dangerous," I heard Lisa say. "Won't you come down?"

"Who are you?" Mac asked.
“I’m leaving,” Sunshine said. “Goodbye.”

“Wait,” said Mac. “We’re just getting to the good part. Don’t you understand? This is symbolic gesture. This is love, sweetie.”

He was standing again, one hand outstretched, one over the middle of his chest.

“This is crazy,” she said.

“Yes,” said Mac. “That too.”

Sunshine stepped over to the edge where we sat, serious, I realized, about her threat to leave.

“I’ll need help getting down, I’m afraid. I think those brownies are starting to kick in,” she said. Then to me, “Would it put you out much if I borrowed that jacket of yours?”

Mac was shouting at us, at Hubie and Lisa who were helping Sunshine, one on either side.

“Can you hear this heart? It’s breaking right in half. Cleft in fucking twain.”

“This is your chance, Louis. Talk to him,” Lisa said, looking back up at me. “Be there for him.”

At times, I think about what I did at that moment, which was sit there and scratch my ear, and what I didn’t do, which was a hundred things, all of them heroic and full of the kind of chatter we hear in self help books, and I wonder if it has any bearing on the life I live now. I look for connections between that night, that minute, and the fiery end my marriage with Lisa came to, the scotch I drink too much of, the jobs I was inept at, and how little I deserve the woman I married a year ago, the only thing that makes the rest of it tolerable. I think about Mac, the way he sat back down on the pineapple, both hands supporting his head this time, and how badly I wanted to see his shoulders shake, how powerfully I wanted him to show just one
ounce of remorse.

"Why are you still here?" he asked after a while. I was standing up on the platform, hands pocketed.

"I thought we'd go get a beer. Maybe solve a brain teaser or two."

He wasn't looking at me, but out at the light-soaked hillsides, up at the waxy satellite causing it all.

"How come it's so damn bright out? It's supposed to be nighttime."

"That would be due to the moon."

"Tell me again," he said, "how it works."

It just did, I told him.

He asked about the stars, how there came to be so many.

I couldn't say, I confessed, but there were theories.

And those people below, why had they gathered in the yard?

It was a habit we have of expressing interest, I said.

"And this world," Mac asked, sweeping his arm around in front of him, "has it always been so barren?"

"No." It was once rich and fertile. A land of plenty.

"Ah," he nodded, his face growing blank and round as the disk above us, "now I understand,"

I was ready, then, to answer all the questions he might have, the ones about time and the power it has to fix things, about how many fish there were in the sea, and why, after all, this crummy life might be worth seeing through to the end. I was ready, I declare, to take him in my arms, to embrace him in the awkward way men do when they realize what they're made of and the emptiness it implies. But it was too late. He rocked backward off that petrified fruit, just as a skindiver topples back into his ocean, feet up, head down, ass over goddamn teakettle, and was gone.
In a pleasant, formal way, Hubie and I were evicted. The college gave us each a four point for the quarter, told us to go home, rest. The Heidecker House, though not boarded up, closed for the summer so Gus Gerrity could have our balcony knocked down and the door bricked over. We went to the wake in Syracuse, and to the viewing, which was closed casket, listened to various folk mumble about tragedy and loss and how life was really no fucking fair. I answered questions about those last few minutes: he looked great, I said, handsome as a movie star, was full of love for you and you and you. And I only had to give the whole story twice, once to the police and once to his parents, minus the drugs. No one else seemed interested.

Nowadays, a decade between that night and this, I do much better, I really do. I am praised by the fifteen employees who work at the hardware store I manage, can hit a seven iron straight nearly two-hundred yards, hardly ever spend the entire night sitting in bed and staring at one particular corner of our room. We get Christmas cards, the family photo kind, from Hubie and Alfraida and their boy, Ethan. They're beautiful: tan and chubby, all smiles and hugs, and they call sometimes just to say Howdy, to see how we're getting along.

"Fine. Great," we tell them, I on one phone, Donna on the other.

"Louis is building a deck," she says. He's reading Buscaglia, Prather. Started a stamp collection.

She never tells them about the dreams I have, or the story I've told her about the third man on the roof that night, the one with the scythe and black robe and bony index finger that, ever so gently, came to rest on Mac's forehead and gave him a little shove. Or how I heard his name again, in that black bird's voice, right before he fell. She keeps those things as private as the fine, fine love we make, the sex she says I'm occasionally distant during the middle of, just as she lets me fall sullen and quiet and grow
angry without prying or nagging or blaming herself.

Only once did she ever hit me, did she lay her slender hand across my
jaw hard enough to make noise and leave a burning sensation. It was a
Saturday, one of the summer months, and I was in our living room, in front
of the window, watching children on bikes and bigger children in cars pass
through the hunk of suburban neighborhood we live in. I was ranting, she
said, raving about desolation and foolishness, about what we think we’re
here on this dusty rock to do. For fifteen minutes I went on, not making one
teeny bit of sense. So she smacked me, smacked me one good.

I shut up all right, looked down at her pink face, at her mouth which
was moving and making language.

"Now," she said, "Look again. Tell me what you see."

"Some houses. A street. There are some girls playing hopscotch over
there. A boy on a Big Wheel."

"And what else?"

"Mr. Snyder’s Mustang. A weeping willow. Some azalea bushes. A yard
that needs mowed. Some sky with clouds. Lots of things."

"Right," Donna said.

And she was.
My friend, Cripps, is a swimmer, a sprinter. In high school, he swam the hundred free under two minutes, he holds the record. He has a lope in his stroke that pulls his whole torso out of the water. When he throws his other arm forward, his body planes on the surface of the pool. That's why Cripps is so fast: While the other swimmers are in the water, he's on top of it. For Nat's his senior year, he shaved his whole body smooth as glass, everything but his crotch. His trick was to oil up everything but his arms, then rub a little alcohol from his armpits to his wrists. The alcohol caused the pores to dilate, so his arms catch the water better. And the oil lets the rest of him squirt down the lane like a lamprey. He placed third in his heat and missed the finals by two-one hundredths.

This night, he shared a joint in the front seat, driving with one hand, pinching the roach between the nails of his other. Darren's dope. Darren, with evening shadows glinting through the long golden folds of his hair, deep eye sockets and a thin, hard crease of a mouth. His truck had broken down on 322, alternator problem, they couldn't use their headlights. He wanted to know if his friends could follow our car to their fishing cabin, up past Conneaut. Sure, said Cripps, glad to help out, we were only on our way to a party at the college, a little get-together with friends. I hoisted a cool can, drinking, and thinking we shouldn't have stopped, could've passed them
easily, ignorantly, evading trouble, keeping our eyes fixed on the fading, hollow horizon.

We sped down Conneaut Lake Road waiting for him to signal the turn off. The truck behind us followed closely, its headlights off, driver and two passengers watching our car, following the light. Darren's back spread wide on either side of the seat, and he shifted occasionally to make himself more comfortable in the cramped space.

He gulped from the can of beer we had given him. I saw him finish and fold the aluminum in his hand. The can looked tiny in his fingers, like the seven ounce Lite ponies we used to drink by the case. I passed another one forward from the cardboard case, tapping him on the shoulder with it.

He and Cripps were talking about something, the fractured conversation of new acquaintences. I watched their mouths move, but I couldn't hear what they were saying, only mumbled phrases, bits of words. The speakers chugged rock from a fading Pittsburgh station. Over the din I could make out the woosh woosh of streetlight posts as we passed.

We turned left on to a gravel road, heading east away from the lake shore. I looked back behind the car to see if the truck had made the turn. One of the women in the cab waved at me when I turned around. I waved back, hoisting my beer can in salute and grinning.

For several miles, the road turned to rutted dirt. Darren indicated a grassy turn off, nothing more than a break in the trees really. About fifty yards back I saw their cabin, a trailer with a gravel drive.

"This is it," Darren said. "We really appreciate you guys helping us out."
Thought we'd be stuck on that road for awhile.

"No problem," said Cripps. He had turned the radio down. I heard the truck pull up behind us, blocking us in on the road. Then the engine gunned and the pick-up jumped past us through the weeds and parked on the side of the trailer. A spidery man, with thin sprouts of hair on his chin and lip and jaws got out. From the passenger side two women emerged, one slender like the man, and one heavy. One of the women, the heavier one, wore a Fedora with a light strip above the brim. Her hair fell from beneath it, long and straight and brown, past her shoulders.

The two women walked to the trailer and unlocked the door. They were laughing and bumping into each other. The thin man came over to where Darren and Cripps stood next to the car. I crawled out of the back seat and we all stood around.

"You guys have to come in for a beer, at least. We would've been stranded for awhile if it wasn't for you," said the man from the truck. He wore a white t-shirt under a jean jacket. His face beamed at us. He was much smaller than Darren.

"Yeah, all right." I said, looking at Cripps.

"Ok. Sure," said Cripps.

I had never been in a trailer home before and it was larger than I imagined. To the left was a small bathroom and a bedroom. I could see the double bed with its yellow top sheet neatly tucked in at the corners. In the center of the trailer was a U-shaped couch, covered with faded flower upholstery, and two chairs. To the right was a kitchen. There, a speckled formica table jutted from the wall. It was barren and clean, surrounded by four metal chairs with red vinyl seats and backs. One of the chair seats had a long cut, and bits of foam poked out from around the edges.
“Cool,” said Cripps looking around.

“We get up here once or twice a month. Some of the best Muskie in Pennsylvania down in the pond there.”

Darren pointed toward the door, but all I could see was the darkness through the window. The other man was in the kitchen getting four beers out of the refrigerator.

The women were in the bedroom talking about something. I heard them giggling. The door was halfway closed but I could see figures moving back and forth behind it.

There was a shelf that ran along behind the couch. It was about a foot wide, and went from the top of the cushion back to the wall. On the shelf was a big cassette player, with round speakers. Next to it was a shoebox full of tapes. Darren sat down on the couch in front of the shoebox with the tapes in it. He ran his fingers over the titles. I could see from where I stood that they had all been written in pen or pencil except for a few. He selected one and slipped it into the box and pushed the rewind button on top. I heard the tape spinning.

“I didn’t get your names,” said the man who brought in the beer. He held out two cans toward us with one hand, grinning.

“Jason,” said Cripps. “Thanks.”

“Kyle,” I said.

He said his name was Patterson. But most everybody called him Puck. We could call him Puck. We had saved their ass.

Cripps and I sat down on the couch and opened our cans. The tape box clicked, and Darren reached around and pushed another button. Then there was music, hollow and flat and loud, from the speakers, “Sweet Home Alabama.”

Now that I could see him in the light, I guessed Darren was in his late
twenties or early thirties. Puck looked a lot younger. He had bad skin, I saw; clusters of red sores and scars on his cheeks. It must have been the reason he had tried to grow a beard. When he took off his jacket, I noticed the veins that protruded from the skin on his hands and forearms like a tangle of long, blue earthworms. Puck asked us what we had studied at the college. Cripps said philosophy of leisure and gave me a wink. Puck wanted to know what we were doing now, and I explained we had gotten a place in the city, but were still in limbo, looking for the right opportunity.

Darren was nodding, looking down at his hands where a velvety black bag had appeared. I don't know where it came from, where it could have come from, but it was there in his hands. He was loosening the gold cord cinched around the top. My mother has a bag like the one Darren was holding, except she kept a small silver bowl in it.

From the bag, he removed a tin case the size of a wallet. He opened the clasp and took out a joint and stuck it between his lips. He took out a pack of matches from the the same case, tore out a single match and lit it, letting the flame die down in front of his face. An orange ember glowed in a short pinpoint as he inhaled deeply. Then he held the joint out to Cripps.

Cripps took a long drag, nodding when he was through, his cheeks and lips pinched closed. He held the joint out for me.

"That's some of the finest herb in the burg," Puck said watching me, smiling as I drew the smoke into my lungs.

The women came out of the bedroom and walked by us to the door. The blond one, the thinner one, looked at me briefly as they passed then pushed her friend through the door. I heard their laughter outside. When they returned they were carrying suitcases and each one had a fishing rod.

"Hey!" Darren yelled at them.

The joint had come back around to him and he held it up at the women.
Cripps and I were roommates at school. I swam too, distance events and the fly leg of the medley, but I was nowhere as good as Cripps, didn't have his desire. He posted times all around the room, written bold with magic marker on sheets of notebook paper, times he would beat each meet. He had posters of Spitz and Lundquist above his bed. He practiced four hours a day. He told me, before we became close friends, that he was going to the Olympics, it was his dream, his goal. He knew the names of the medalists from '68 on. Cripps wanted his name on that list.

There was a cloud hanging still in the air above the table, a growing haze. Puck had leaned back and put his feet up, tucked his hands behind his head. He smirked. We learned the names of the women: Ali, blond; Ellen, brunette, heavier. They set the fishing rods down in the corner near the couch and carried the suitcases into the bedroom. When they reappeared they had changed clothes. Ali had put on tight acid wash jeans and a cropped white buttondown. I could see her navel and the smooth tan flesh of her stomach. Ellen wore older jeans, Levis, and a t-shirt with a fading iron-on decal of a huge bass leaping out of a pond. Darren slapped at her butt as she walked by to the kitchenette.

Cripps was slouched in his chair. He kicked my foot and laughed through his nose, his eyes tiny slits. He made a face at me and laughed through his nose again.

"Open your eyes," I said.

Cripps raised his eyebrows, but his eyelids didn't move, didn't open anymore than they were. Darren, and Puck, and Cripps and I all started laughing.

They were rednecks—what we would call rednecks anyway, when we're not in their company—backcountry Pennsylvanians whose families probably
lost all their money when the steel industry died off. Darren had been
saying how this was what they lived for, their weekends at the trailer,
floating drunk on the pond, trailing for fish, cheeks and nose burned under
the brim of their baseball caps by the reflected spring sunlight. He'll
probably live up here, he said, when he gets enough money to get out. He
looked in the kitchenette when he said this, at Ali, the sexy one. His
girlfriend, or wife maybe, unless by some perverted law of aesthetics she
had wound up with Puck. It didn't fit though, it had to be Darren and Ali,
Puck and Ellen.

Darren asked us about school, what we did and why. He didn't seemed
as stoned as Puck, and Cripps and Myself, he seemed bored, irritated maybe,
but curious. Cripps asked him what he planned to do about the truck, ducking
the question, and I thought for a moment it was conceivable that he had not
heard it.

"Call a tow in the morning. The problem's the alternator plug. Been on
its way out for awhile. I might be able to patch it together enough myself
Have to see."

"Mmm," Cripps said.

"You boys do any sports? Football?" To me he said, "you're tall, a
basketball player?"

"We swim," I said, "Cripps went to Nationals last year"

"A couple of amphibians, huh," his voice was quiet, singular, the words
empty. But Puck thought something very funny and laughed loudly, looking at
all of us in turn.

"Right," said Cripps, his face stolid.

The women came in and Ellen sat down on Puck's lap. It seemed as
though she would crush him, that she was by far the heavier of the two and
he grimaced under her weight. She hooked an arm around his neck, slumped.

Ali stood near Darren. She held a beer. Cripps and I both looked at her, watched as she crossed one foot over the other, cocked a knee, drummed at her beer can with her index finger.

“How ’bout another joint?” she said to Darren. Only his eyes shifted to her.

“How about something better,” And sat up with a strenuous lurch. The black velvet bag appeared again, as if from a long practiced magic act. “I think our rescuers deserve a little more hospitality.”

Darren reached down under the couch and pulled out a rectangle of mirror and set it on the table between us. From a tin vile, which looked like a lipstick container, Darren poured a tiny pile of cocaine. Cripps let out a low whistle. He had never done coke before, that much I knew. He drank his first beer with me as a freshman, smoked his first joint with myself and some friends in a fraternity, underneath tapestried walls and lava lamps. But that was as far as it had gone.

“Allright!” Ellen said, pressing her lips behind Puck’s ear. He jerked his head away and scowled.

“O.k., O!” Ali said. And she sat on the arm of the couch and watched him cut out about a dozen lines. Out from the black bag came a tiny tube, made of plastic, or ceramic or something, a few inches in length. There was a design etched down the length of it. It look like the hacked off end of a chopstick from one of the better chinese restaurants, and I wondered if it was common to have ornamented paraphenelia when you were a blue collar drug user from the low rural hills outside of Pittsburgh, a kind of status symbol, like the drugs on the mirror.

I imagined, a little jealously, Darren taking Ali to bed. She was very
attractive—I had not seen her at length until now, sitting on the arm across from me. She would cast furtive glances at me and Cripps, head tilted forward, hair hanging down to her thighs. Darren held the mirror up to her. With one hand she held back her hair, with the other ran the little chopstick the length of line.

Cripps looked at me, wondering, I thought, what to do. Darren slid the mirror slowly across the coffee table with his finger tips. I could see Cripps's reflection in the mirror, right up into his virgin nostrils. He picked up the straw, held it up to look through it, through the tiny hole. He aimed it at me, then over at Puck and Ellen. He put his finger down on the trace of dust from the line Ali had done and rubbed it on his gums. I wondered where he had seen that. His index finger left a pale, fading fingerprint on the glass.

"Don't hog it," Puck said.

We did the lines. Darren put on another tape. Eric Clapton it was. Ellen played with the fuzz on Puck's red face, both hands around his neck; he shifted uncomfortably, he seemed to be suffocating. She flicked his lip with her tongue, kissed his eye. Ali walked to the kitchen, to get more bottles of Pabst. Darren lay back against the backrest, crossed his legs on the coffee table, and rolled another joint.

"We sure are lucky you guys came by when you did," said Puck from under Ellen's pecks. "You guys should crash here and do a little fishin' with us in the morning."

Cripps was sitting forward in the chair, his elbows on his knees. He wrung his hands and rocked slightly. I saw his tongue sliding between his teeth and gums. He laughed through his nose.

"Man!" He said.

I laughed. We all started laughing. Ali laughed from the kitchen.
“Woo!” said Cripps.

“This is weird,” said Puck, “This is weird.”

“It’s like we’re all old friends,” Ali called out, “It’s like a reunion.”

“Do you guys believe in spirits?” Ellen asked us.

“Sure,” I said.

“Like dead people?” Cripps asked.

“Spiritual forces, life energies,” Ellen said. Puck sputtered. Ellen headbutted him. “The energies that bring people like us together; people who would never know each other”

“Like Fate,” Cripps said.

“You can’t escape it. You can’t ask to see it,” she said, nodding.

“I think it’s a crock of shit,” Darren said, “The alternator plug split, and these guys happen to be driving by. You can’t say some cosmic forces caused that to happen.”

“How do you explain them being here with us right now, like they’re part of the family?”

“We’re stoned and tweaked. That’s how I explain it.”

“I need to walk around,” I said.

“I’ll show you the back,” said Ali.

“I feel like a rocket ship,” said Cripps.

“It’s premium stuff,” Darren said. He lit the joint in his hand.

They had built a small stoop on the back, which was empty except for a small grill in the corner. The grass was tall and chilly and had begun to collect dew. I felt the moisture seeping through the vent holes in my tennis shoes, the leather being stained with wetness. My body revved. Everything shined in the starlight.

“The lake’s down there,” said Ali, pointing down into the trees. “We
have a dock."

There was a path, dark and snakelike, through low brambles, down an incline with dangerous roots. Small trees pressed close and larger ones sealed us from the clear sky, all as if to mask the first appearance of the lake, to give it dramatic effect, as if opening a door. A quarter moon cast enough light from its apex to distinguish the shoreline, a finger lake, Ali said, like so many others in the state: Tamarac, Pymatuning. Wisps of steam sat on the glassy surface. Fish spirits, I thought.

"My feet are soaked now," Ali said, walking out on the short dock.

I was inspecting their row boat, upside down on the edge of land, I touched the bottom encrusted with algae and silt.

"The grass gets wetter the clearer the night," I had learned that in a meteorology class, "something to do with clouds."

"Darren's angry."

"About what?"

"About a lot of things. He's an angry person, that's what I mean."

I had come out on the dock with her, to stand above the water I thought if I wanted I could continue walking out on the surface, into the steam. I could smell the lake, the decay of winter's fallen foliage, and the soft breath of perfume. There was a breeze in the treetops, but only there. I couldn't feel it.

"I don't think he likes your friend. He's usually not so generous with his drugs."

Ali took off her sandals and sat down on the edge of the dock, swishing one foot in the water, and I registered the drone of frogs and crickets around the bank. I finished my beer and watched a fish break the surface of the lake, snatch at its bug, land with splash. Circles grew from its world toward ours, toward the arcs from Ali's toes, the tiny waves. With the fish
gone, the rings seem to come from nowhere, erupting in silence without reason, a moonlight illusion. Ali said, "look," and pointed to where the circles would meet. Where they touched, the lines divided, split into new patterns. I could not discern their direction, they seem to weave between one another, neither swallowing the other, as if they might be expanding on separate planes. I sat down next to her. I was ready to stay out there forever, in the temperatureless night, full of sensate lust, full of crickets and dope, higher than the stars, suspended effortlessly above everyone else in the crook of the moon's shadow. From that height, everthing, even dreaming, seemed silly.

I could hear voices back up the path, others coming to join us.

"Uh oh," said Ali.

They emerged like a tribe. Cripps, then Ellen, Puck, Darren.

"Hey, man!" Cripps called, Darren and Puck carried their rods, "you disappeared." His voice batted across the lake then back to us. They all stood on the dock.

"We figured you were swimming," said Darren. He raised his rod and poked Ali in the back. The tip bent as if under the weight of a bite. She didn't move.

"C'mon, Darren," she said.

"Let's swim," Ellen said. "Let's swim, Puck."

"I don't know. How's the water, Ali?"

"Warm."

"Let's go in. Look at this night," Ellen said. Then she shoved him, but kept hold of his arm, so he only jolted toward the water but didn't go in. She and Cripps laughed at that.

"You swimmer boys think you can make it to the other side and back? Puck and I do it to cure hangovers sometimes."
“No problem,” said Cripps.

The dock pointed out across the cove. It was maybe four hundred yards or so across, a half-mile there and back.

Darren tossed his rod in the grass near the boat. He pulled of his t-shirt.

“Goin’ in?” asked Puck.

“Yep. And so are you.”

He snatched Puck’s rod and tossed it near his, then pinned the smaller man’s arms to his sides. His fingers closed around the full circumference of Puck’s biceps, then he lifted and tossed him off the side of the dock.

“Uncool!” said Ellen.

“Darren. Shit!” Ali said, standing now, next to me.

“Harsh,” said Cripps.

Darren slipped off his shoes and socks. Then his shorts. He stood, naked before us for a moment, broad and statuesque the way the light fell. With a step he was in the air, rocking the dock with his take off, leaving me thinking of Puck’s paralysis in his grip, almost expecting him to fly up away from us, like a great bird, rather than land in the water, arms outstretched as if to smother the smaller man floundering next to him.

We all swam. We bobbed under the partial moonlight, in the day-warmed water, with the fish who darted beneath our heels or who had left for further, quieter reaches of the cove. We swam naked, Ellen and Puck spinning slow pirouettes away from us, Darren and Cripps disappearing for great lengths underwater, surfacing at various points then ducking under again.

Ali tried to dunk me twice, giggling. The first time I went under easily, down until my feet landed in the soft, bottomless muck. The second
time, I felt her breasts on my shoulders, cool in the warm water, and I did not let her hands push me under. We floated on our backs, did forward roles underwater. We went back to the dock and dove off. I tried a back flip and landed on my stomach.

I heard Cripps churn the water in a sprint, watched as Puck and Ellen drifted closer in. Ali and I sat on the edge of the dock, shivering as the air dried our bodies.

"I'm glad we met," she said, hugging her knees to her chest. "We don't meet a lot of people. You know, people different from us. We have a pretty small life."

"We're not so different," I said.

"It will always be like this for us. That's the difference. You'll change."

"It's beautiful here. You have more than you think."

"It's empty. We're lonely." She looked away. "I'm lonely."

Ellen and Puck were close by. They bobbed in the water, hair matted like long black bathing caps.

"Isn't this great?" Ellen said, her mouth dropping down just into the water and blowing bubbles.

But I felt nothing. I was no longer cold, my skin and hair had dried quickly. If there was any sensation at all it was pity. Pity for the way Puck had been hurled through the air like a cardboard box, for Darren's quiet anger, for Ali's loneliness and Cripps' lost dreams. Only Ellen seemed full of wonder at their world, only she tried to make connections. Her fantasies were there with Puck, making love just beneath the dark skin of water, surrounded by friends, and strangers, passing friends. I thought I should be able to decide who was right, Ellen, with her easy faith, her fascination, or Ali and her distant, unobtainable ambition to leave, to go further. I could
Puck and Ellen got out and stood behind us, draping their clothes over their shoulders. They clung to each other like children.

"It's freezing," said Puck.

"You'll dry quick, it's nice out," Ali said.

We were quiet on the dock. Cripps and Darren surfaced near each other, I could hear them speak, their voices amplified as if on a stage.

"Okay, swimmer, you ready to go across," Darren said.

"Anytime," said Cripps.

"A race, then, across and back to the dock."

Darren slipped into long smooth strokes, his arms flashing briefly above the water. Cripps' body lurched forward, dipping then rising again in powerful pulls. Their bodies left slowly widening wakes, as the sound of their strokes faded and the bodies moved steadily towards the other shore.

"That's dangerous," said Ellen.

I heard her and Puck walk back off the dock and back up towards the trailer. The moon had dipped below the treetops, barely visible. To the east the blackness of sky dimmed, the stars were fading.

"It's morning," I said.

"I wouldn't even have noticed," said Ali.

"Are you and Darren married?"

Ali laughed.

"We do things together. We're not married. I loved him, I think, back when I thought we were going someplace, when I thought he would love me. But nothing happened. See, he's afraid of what he can do. It's part of him, in his blood, like a germ."

"What about Ellen and Puck."

"Not yet. They will be, though. They've got a good thing. Makes me sick
to be around them sometimes."

A bullfrog roared. A morning herald. The racers were on their way back, one leading the other by fifty yards or so, but they were still too far away to distinguish between them. I had sobered during the swim, I knew now that I would sink into the lake if I stepped out above. The first ripple of exhaustion coursed through my body, goose pimples rose on my forearms. The steam on the lake appeared to be heavier now, bleeding together into one large domelike cloud, without an end or a beginning. I felt Ali's knee touch mine and there was another chill. She let the weight of it rest against my leg, accepting the contact.

"Do you think you're supposed to be here? Like Ellen said. Do you think there's a reason?" Ali asked.

I shrugged. We had been driving by, that's all. It would have been as easy to stop as to pass the truck on the road. There was no reason, it happened. I was no savior, and neither was Cripps.

"I guess it was just luck."

Ali smiled. Her hand slid over and touched my foot, she ran it up under my calf and then down again smoothing the hair.

The first swimmer appeared, pulling gracefully through the still water, beneath the fog, his shoulders rotating gracefully, his kick breaking the surface with a small splash like a trout. The head twisted up in the air pocket as the arm carried over, mouth agape, inhaling, plunging back into the lake. The second swimmer trailed, with powerful strokes, strong but too eager, sacrificing the smooth, efficient momentum of the leader. The first swimmer reached us, turning on his back, then standing, snapping his head to shake the water loose, gasping, and sweeping with both hands the long, golden strands of hair from before his eyes.
Dead Spot

Two days after Ed Houdershell moves into his new apartment, rock music starts coming through the floor. It is Saturday, a little after noon, and he wakes to find the window panes, his furniture, the half-unpacked moving boxes, all shuddering with the sound from below. He wraps himself in a towel stolen from some hotel, and walks to the middle of the living room/kitchen area. There, he feels the bass surge up his legs, rattle around the loose, pale flesh at his waist, dance along his spine and finally nestle painfully at the back of his skull. Houdershell stares at the greengold shag under his feet, as close as he can come to finding a source. He takes the towel from his waist and holds it against his ears in hopes of muffling the noise, but he succeeds only in condensing and focusing the sound until it seems to originate from inside his own body.

He goes over to where the TV set is positioned on a box and turns it on. The towel is still over his head, partially obscuring his view. He finds his bathrobe, the old blue terrycloth one his younger sister gave him years ago, back when his family still exchanged gifts at Christmastime, and puts it on. Houdershell sits back down and watches the program, feeling the music downstairs pulse through the cushions like blood.

He is tired. He has felt tired for some time—the last decade of his life—since he was twenty-three and graduated from college. Today he
blames it on the move, which, while only to the other side of town, has been exacting.

On the TV is a fitness program. A shapely blond woman on some kind of mat is going through a series of embarrassing pelvic thrusts and body swishes. She is able to contort herself in ways Houdershell finds remarkable. Behind her, a small group of equally well developed men and women mimic each exercise. Houdershell notices that the background music seems to match that coming from the floor.

Above the TV, a patterned rectangle of light decorates the otherwise barren wall. It is cast from a window on the other side of the room, and the pattern, an intricate weave of thick and thin lines, looks as if the light is shining through the branches of a tree. Only there are no trees outside the window, just a parking lot. Somehow the glass is creating the pattern, but it looks like ordinary glass to Houdershell. The design reminds him of something he has read about recently in a popular book: fractals. It's an idea Houdershell doesn't quite buy, that apparently chaotic shapes and patterns correspond to complex mathematical equations. He thinks of going back and reading that book again.

Houdershell puts on another channel, on this one a talk show. The guests, he learns after a couple of minutes, are young entrepenuers who have made a million dollars or more before the age of thirty. Occasionally, when there is a close-up of a guest, the screen flashes the person's first name and by what means they got rich. There is Danny, who owns a fleet of frozen yogurt machines. And next to him Bill, now a mogul in the coin-op laundry business. There are two other men, just as sheepish and awkward in their dark suits as the first two, but Houdershell has missed their names and occupations.

"I've always kind've known I'd be rich," says Danny, responding to a
question from the audience and picking at the eczema around his mouth. "It's what I've always wanted. You know, what everybody hopes for."

In general, television depresses Houdershell, but he often leaves his set on for the company of the sound. Because of this, he is familiar with people like Danny, the prepubescent millionaire, and the tawny aerobicist, and the others: the sitcom families, the newscasters, the cops and robbers, and the average shmoe, who, somehow, always seems to have a more exciting and satisfying life than himself. Houdershell thinks the TV people, not just the actors, but the producers and programers and writers, are particularly skillful at creating shows which promise the impossible: sudden wealth, the resolution of all conflicts; eternal, unwavering love. He knows that the world he sees everyday is far less resolute than the one he is watching now, but it doesn't seem to lessen the appeal.

There is a lull in the music below, and in the momentary stillness Houdershell is startled back into awareness of it, as he would be if his own heart stopped beating. He is supine on the bed, trying to will his headache down his arms and out through his finger tips. He contemplates flipping back to the fitness show to see if it might be over, to see if the music might have ended, but he just lies there staring alternately at the young men on the TV and the piece of light on the wall above.

Houdershell is in between jobs. Again. There have been so many in the past few years he doesn't even call them jobs anymore. He calls them stints. His last stint had been with a local radio station, WCLX, as an ad salesman, and while it had not been the most demanding of occupations, it was rigorous enough to break him, to hurl him to the other side of town in search of something else. Sales itself was not the problem; he had sold everthing from pharmecuticals to sportswear to display shelving, and done it well, for a while. When he was hot, Houdershell could sell anything, ice
to on eskimo or porn flicks to the Pope. He knew people, the doctors, the retailers, the businessmen, and knew how to convince them they needed what he offered: breakthrough medication for diabetics or the latest air-cushioned, anatomically contoured, programmable running sneaker. Only, to stay at the top of the rank sheets took a level of sustained energy he did not possess. He started every job strong, making quota, working late, but after a few months, he would find himself knocking off at noon, stuffing himself on fajitas and jumbo margaritas at his favorite mexican place, then napping away the afternoon, sometimes right in the front seat of his car. He would wake late in the day, as if from a coma, his chin and shoulder damp with drool, and drive slowly home promising to get up early the next morning and get at it. But he rarely did. And over time the workday dwindled from twelve hours, to eight, to four, or occasionally, to nothing at all.

At some point between life insurance and peddling subscriptions for American Meat, a national beef industry publication, Houdershell began to lose things. At first, it was only minor, losable items like Post-it notes with phone numbers, or product samples, though it soon escalated to more vital things like his hair, which collected in a dark, grisly mass around the bathtub drain, or his wallet which disappeared twice in a week, the second time for good. For a short while, he owned a cat, Penelope. But she darted off one night, fed up with his inept ear scratching and sock dangling, searching for something he would never be able to provide, cat love. Next were his keys, which vanished from his apartment one Monday morning without leaving the vaguest clue. Assorted clothing failed to return from the laundromat. Thoughts evaporated in midsentence. On the worst of days, when his clients didn’t return his calls, or ducked out of sight at his approach, it was his mind Houdershell felt slipping from his grasp.
Inevitably, he lost jobs, often hearing the exact same speech from his employers, the one about personality differences between him and the customer base, about his falling numbers, about his expense report. He would nod a lot, understand a lot, offer half-hearted excuses, while those who had hired him slid his pink slip gravely across the desk. Over the last year and a half, he had developed what he liked to think of as his post-termination routine: He would smile and shake the boss’s hand, drive to the Quik-Pik and buy a quart of Stroh’s, drink it in great swallows, then return and wedge the empty bottle under his boss’s back tire.

Houdershell’s headache is down around his elbows when the music returns. This time, however, it is even louder, and the rhythm has changed. Instead of be-bop, the noise now sounds like industrial machinery, like a road is being built through the middle of the four-plex. He wonders if the other tenants ever complain, or if the stairs separating the two halves of the building is enough space to keep them insulated.

Standing outside his door, Houdershell can make out the screech of electric guitar, the chug of drums. He secures his robe and begins to step gingerly down the stairs, holding tight to the rail. Any excess motion, he fears, will return the pain to his head.

There is a brass plate glued to the door downstairs with an embossed number 1. The plate has a knocker attached to it but the sound it makes is so small Houdershell himself can hardly hear it. He tries rapping his knuckles against the wood but it is too painful, so he turns around and kicks the door with his heel. To his disappointment, this too fails to make any significant sound.

Houdershell sits down on the stairs, wondering hard about the move, thinking how he could have scraped rent together for another few months, how he should have been more insistent on a second chance with WCLX. For
the first time he regrets the beer bottle routine.

Maybe it is simple staying power he lacks. Tenacity. Clarity of purpose. He rarely expected his stints to last him more than six months anymore. The truth was, he had begun to think of everything in smaller blocks of time. Even his days were no longer divided by light and dark, but rather, meal to meal, nap to nap. If he could recover only one thing that has been lost over the years, he thinks, it would be his endurance.

"Wuzzat you?"

Houdershell looks up. A man has opened the door and is leaning out looking at him.

"What?" Houdershell says. The music, if he could call it that, is pouring out into the stairway.

"Wuzzat you knocking?"

"Yes," he says. "Yes. I knocked."

The man ducks his head back in the door and bellows into the room, "Turn that shit down. There's a guy out here."

Houdershell is standing on the bottom step when the man appears in the hall again. With the added height of the stair they are at eye level. The man is bigger than anyone Houdershell has ever seen in person--almost cartoonish in his muscularity. He is wearing shorts and a tank top printed with the name of a gym and a figure holding dumbbells in the air. His arms hang at an angle from swollen shoulders. Houdershell thinks the man looks tense, like one of those big jungle cats right before they leap on their victim.

"You all right, buddy? You need help or something?"

Houdershell realizes he is staring, and then, that the noise has stopped. "The music," he says. "It's very loud. I just moved in upstairs. Maybe you weren't aware."
"We sure weren't. Sorry. And this crummy rice paper building doesn't do much to keep the sound down, either, I'm sure." The man turns back to the open door. "Why didn't you meatheads tell me we had a new neighbor?" He turns back around and extends his hand toward Houdershell.

"Willy Redmon," he says.

"Ed Houdershell," says Houdershell

The handshake catches him off guard. He hadn't come down to introduce himself, he had come down to get mad. It makes him even more angry that the man is friendly, that his apology sounds genuine.

"These are my roommates," Willy says, turning back into the doorway, "Mike and Shannon."

Houdershell steps to floor level and into the apartment. For a minute, the two roommates are hidden behind the expanse of Willy's back, but when he is out of the way, Houdershell can see a man sitting on a weight bench and a woman standing next to him. Mike, like Willy, is also hugely developed, only he is not wearing a shirt and the muscles of his torso and neck seem to flower up from his waist like a bouquet. The size of his chest makes his head look out of proportion, as if it were set there as an afterthought, a last minute adjustment. The woman reminds him of the aerobicist on TV, except that she looks broader, and not quite as elastic. Absently he wonders if she could take the aerobicist in a fight. Across the room he can see that her eyes are an unnaturally bright shade of green, like new grass, and that she is smiling at him. They are all smiling at him.

"Hello," Houdershell says.

He cannot be sure, but it seems the way they are standing, the half-conscious way they have arranged themselves--mesomorph-slender woman-mesomorph--that they are striking some sort of pose. Two thoughts cross Houdershell's mind. The first is that the apartment is too small for
three people, particularly people of their size. And the second is that he has not looked in a mirror today. When he blinks, he notices his upper and lower lids stick lightly together, giving off a slight burn, and he has the prickly sensation that a shank of flyaway hair is suspended above his right ear.

“Sorry about the stereo,” says Willy again, smiling this time. “We really didn’t know anyone was here. You’re pretty quiet.” Even his teeth look muscular.

“Well, no harm done,” Houdershell says, “Just...” he wants to say something about respect and common courtesy, but he is not sure what exactly. “Just remember I’m up there.”

Houdershell does a kind of backwards shuffle through the door. From the stairway he sees his neighbors, framed by the doorjam, wave in almost perfect unison. He raises his hand quickly, awkwardly, and hears himself bleat a thanks. Then he repeats it, “thanks a lot,” and starts up the stairs.

Standing in his apartment, in the general disarray of things, Houdershell decides he is not happy with the encounter. Not at all happy.

He can hear the TV which he left on, a door downstairs opening and closing, but nothing else. His blood pressure is up, knocking at his chest and temples like an animal, and the headache which he has been fighting on and off for weeks now lurks menacingly behind his ears. He feels worse, not better; less at peace than before he had gone to complain.

Houdershell takes a shower and has his first cigarette. He loves to smoke while in the shower and figures when he is finally down to only one cigarette a day, this will be the one. In the bathroom he resolves to bring his neighbors a gift, maybe the sixpack of Stroh’s he has left in the refrigerator. He tries to think of something else, something they might appreciate like Gatoraid or steroids, but beer is all Houdershell has.
When he is ready to go, he discovers only five cans on the plastic holder, but takes them anyway. Gesture over generosity, he rationalizes, and starts back down the stairs. He has put on chinos and a semi-spotless short sleeve button down. With each step, a strong scent of Old Spice wafts up from his shirt. The shower and smoke and revised mind set have left Houdershell buoyant, and he feels certain his neighbors will receive him, and his petition for friendship, well

This time, the woman answers the door. Houdershell wants to address her by name but draws a blank, a problem he has had all his life. He tries to think of S names, Sandy, Stephanie, but they don't seem right. She is frowning.

"Still too loud?"

"No," Houdershell says, barely able to hear the trickle of noise behind her. "No. The music's fine." She is wearing a blue lyotard type thing and he can see where perspiration has collected on her neck. Houdershell begins to feel silly again, standing there, holding the brown bag and staring, he knows he is staring, at the slight arc of her collarbone. This should not be hard. Why is he making this hard? "I brought you folks a present," he says. "A peace offering."

He shows her the bag.

"Oh," says the woman.

Sharon, he thinks. No. Sherri.

"It's just some beer.

Houdershell takes the five cans out of the bag for proof, holding them up by the empty loop. He tries to remember exactly what happened to the sixth.

"I don't drink," she says flatly. She is leaning against the frame, arms crossed, as if to block his entrance. He wonders if this is the same woman
who was waiving at him not thirty minutes ago, the same person who had
smiled at him from across the room.

"Mike and Willy have an occasional beer though. Why don’t you put it in
the fridge. They’ll probably have one when they get back."

She turns and walks back into the room. Houdershell follows, veering
off toward the kitchen. The layout is exactly like his place. Door. The
Kitchen/Living Room space, marked only by a shift from shag to linoleum. A
bedroom with a bath. Somewhere in his head he flips through a variety of
sleeping arrangements: Willy and the woman; Mike and the woman; Willy,
Mike, and the woman, Willy and Mike. He tries again to think of her name,
glancing around the apartment for clues. Susie, he says to himself. Sasha.

On the freezer is a picture of her at the beach. She wears a green
bikini, almost the same shade as her eyes, and has her arms raised and bent
like a body builder’s. Sharp lines cross her skin where each muscle meets
the next, even across her stomach. At the bottom of the snapshot is
written, “Shannon ‘The Cannon’ McClannahan”

In the momentary excitement, her name squeaks out of his mouth.

“That’s me after I won ‘Best Body on the Beach’ last summer” Shannon
explains. She is talking to him from the weight bench while doing bench
press. “Can you give me a spot, here?”

Houdershell walks over and stands behind her, watching her grunt out
repetitions. He has no idea what she wants him to do.

“Where are your roommates?” he asks.

“They’re out running. On Saturdays they lift, then go for a run. It’s
their rest day.”

Houdershell wonders what they do when they work out, lift while they
run? He can’t remember the last time he has run anywhere just for the sake
of running. He probably couldn’t run anywhere, unless he had to catch a bus

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or if someone were trying to hurt him, but that was different. It was one reason he didn’t last long in sporting goods. After he had been let go, he tried to trim down a bit, he had even bought a stair climbing machine. But at the time, he was living in a third floor apartment and the exercise seemed so redundant he finally sold it to a neighbor on the first floor for twenty five dollars.

He watches Shannon push the weight up, trying to guess how many times she has lifted it. Fifty or Sixty he thinks. On one lift, she stops halfway.

"Help me," she says, grimacing.

Houdershell yanks on the bar until it’s high enough to rest on the stand. Shannon sits up.

"How many was that?" he asks, trying to appear enthusiastic.

"Ten," she says.

She is looking at him, studying him, seeing how long he will hold her gaze. Her eyes give her an air of unreality. They make her magazine pretty, fairytale pretty. Houdershell sees the flush slowly ebb from her cheeks leaving them beige and unblemished. "Next time," she goes on with the soft condescension of a grade school teacher, "let me do some of the work. That’s the point."

"Sorry," he says, looking her right in the ear.

"Do you want to try a set?"

The idea appeals to him. Unlike running, he is fairly certain he can do this, push a bar with iron plates above his head a few times. It requires motion, but no real movement. He thinks it is something he may be quite good at; that he has, in one way or another, had to push heavy objects around all his life: jobs, his conscience, the isolation which has hardened around him like a cast.
“All right. What do I need to know?”

He takes her place on the bench, which has acquired the odor of sweat and Silkience, and grabs hold of the bar. Shannon shows him the appropriate grip, thumbs open, palms out. She tells him that all action should be slow, controlled. “Go for the burn,” she says. “You want to feel it most through the pecs and arms. Here.”

She touches him, laying her hands flat on his chest then running them up his arms to his elbows. Her palms send warmth through the fabric of his shirt, leaving a residual tingle.

“I'll help you if you get stuck.”

Houdershell lifts the weight off the stand, holding it for a moment above him, arms locked, testing it. It doesn’t feel so bad. He lowers it slowly, like the movement of a second hand, to his chest, then pushes it up again. It is much lighter than he expects. He does nine more repetitions, each a little faster than the last.

“Good,” Shannon says. “Gooooood.”

He sits up, waggling his arms and stretching.

“That was good. Wow. That was real good.” He feels as though a bucket of blood has been flushed through his head, cleansing it, sharpening his thoughts, as if his brain has had an oil change. He manages to decipher some lyrics piping from the speakers in a raspy falsetto: *It’s the eve of destruction, a world’s in reduction. In the slaughterhouse you never see the executioner’s reaction.*

“Who are we listening to?” he asks.

“The Hounds of Hell. Aren’t they great?” Shannon does some drum noises with her mouth. “How old are you, anyway?”

“Thirty-three,” says Houdershell.

“Oh. I thought you were way older. You look older.”
“How old are you?” He asks.

“How old do you think I am.”

“I think you’re twenty-one.”

“Hah!” she says, poking him in the shoulder “I’m nineteen.”

“Well you look older, too.”

They do two more sets of bench press, swapping off. With each lift, Houdershell feels a little stronger, a little more elated. He likes the sound the plates make when they knock together, heavy and solid as a highway. He likes the coolness of the bar, the dependable pressure of the weight. His back and armpits grow sweaty, and his giant water balloon of a heart sends blood shuddering into every fold and crevice of his body.

“Mike is too top heavy,” Shannon is telling him during his last set. “He needs more leg work. Quads. Hams. Cavs. All of it. We sometimes call him the stork, on account of his legs. Willy is the real champion. What a bod. Pure symmetry.” Shannon reaches down and helps him up with the weight. “It’s his work ethic. He’s, I don’t know, obsessed some people say. But I say driven. It’s his gift. The drive. He knows what he wants.”

The bar is pinned on Houdershell’s chest. Shannon is looking over towards some pictures of Mike and Willy on top of the stereo. All the strength has suddenly drained from his arms, leaving him helpless.

“Uh,” he says.

Shannon looks down at him. She puts her hands on her hips. “C’mon, you can do it.”

Houdershell grunts, pushes. Nothing.

“C’mon,” she says, “halfway.”

He tries again, but he is trapped. Shannon looks down at him, shaking her head. “That’s the difference,” she says. “Right there. That’s the difference.”
Houdershell lets the full amount of the weight rest for a moment on his chest. He stares up the length of her body, past hips and ribs and chest, to her inverted picturebook face looking back down. Then, rested slightly, he takes a deep breath and shoves against the bar.

The weight goes up four inches and stops. His elbows point out in opposing directions and he can feel his pulse in his eyes.

"Push it!" Shannon says. "Push."

He pushes. He pushes like a woman in labor, with every fiber, every thought, but he cannot move the bar past its cusp, its invisible hinge. It is like pushing against the ceiling. Houdershell's arms begin to tremble like harp strings. He has been holding his breath, using it as a kind of leverage, but it starts to sputter from the corners of his mouth.

Shannon reaches down and hoists the weight up.

"That's what you have to beat," she says, "the dead spot."

Houdershell does not move from the bench. He rubs small circles into his sternum, feeling his heart flop beneath his ribs like a fish. Trying to lift that weight, he thinks, is the hardest thing he has ever done: an impossible, Herculean task.

Shannon is saying something to him, but he has trouble hearing her because of the ringing in his ears.

"Are you okay? You look kind of yellow."

He isn't okay. Something is spreading inside him, something dark and ornery, like pain but worse, panic and pain. He takes some slow, deep breaths, like he does at night when he is trying to coax his body into sleep.

"I'll get you some water," Shannon says. She returns with a glass and helps him sit up. "Maybe I should call someone. Should I call someone?"

"No. I'm all right. Just give me a minute."

Houdershell's eyes begin to water.
“Cripes,” he says.


“I said ‘cripes’.” He has to talk through his teeth. He is afraid if he opens his mouth he will scream.

“Now you’re crying. Goddamn.”

“I’m not crying.”

“I see tears. On your cheeks.”

“Those aren’t tears.”

“I’m calling someone.”

“Who?” Houdershell blurts.

Shannon stares at him as if he has asked her to undress, as if he has just spoken in tongues. Her mouth is open, eyes wide. Houdershell doesn’t think it is such an unreasonable question. Who can she call? Who would want to help him? What he wants is for her to be close to him again. He wants to feel her hands.

“Help me to the sofa,” he says.

Shannon steps around behind him and hooks her arms under his. He can feel her breasts against his back, but they are hard, like knees, uninviting. They do a lumbering two step to the couch and she sets him down.

“You’re white as a sheet. I’m calling 911.”

“I’ll be okay.” With one hand he presses a fist against his left nipple, with the other he tries to hold on to her fingers. Black daggers frame the edge of the room.

“You’re eyes are bugging out,” she says, sadly, taking her hand from his.

“I think you’re dying.”

There is a period of time where Houdershell is without pain. His vision has gone, now saturated by the black daggers, but his other senses have
sharpened. He knows the men have returned, he can feel the heat from their bodies, hear the pressing anxiety of their questions. Shannon recounts the events of the last few minutes, taking blame and sobing. Houdershell wants to comfort her, to absolve her of responsibility, but it seems as if he is behind glass.

Thick arms slide under his shoulders and legs. For an instant he is weightless, and thinks it must be the same sensation a bird has rising on a thermal.

Someone kisses him. Houdershell is happy someone wants to kiss him, even if the lips are chapped and hard, the chin stubbly and abrasive. They lean over his heart, rocking and kissing and pressing down the way he wanted to press, hard enough to feel it all the way through to the floor. There is some jabbering and a flutter of movement above him, then someone picks up his wrist.

Houdershell opens one eye. His vision returns in soft focus, and with it, as if to balance some overloaded optic nerve, the vivid happenstance of memory. Behind the closed eye he watches his past uncoil in a series of events, failure branching into failure, until, tracing backward in time, he understands how each individual moment has led him precisely to this point. Through his other eye, he sees his neighbors speaking among themselves, arranged as they had been before, statuesque and golden. One day, they will come to love Houdershell like a brother. But now, they kneel, one beside the other, their attendant hands moving over him, and as he rises into the air, once again weightless, birdlike, he realizes that the music has been over for some time, and that the room has filled with perfect silence.
We were on our way to the rope swing, Ollie, my sister Omni, Summer Spain and I. In the passenger seat, Omni sat with her arm on the seat back and her hand on Ollie's shoulder. On the side of her neck was a brightly-colored bruise roughly the size and shape of an avocado. She tried to keep it hidden by tucking strands of wispy blond hair behind her ear, but it was still mostly visible, like a smear of yellow finger paint. Summer was staring from the back seat. She didn't know Omni was a hemophiliac. It was only our third date.

I nudge Summer's leg.
"You know, Ollie was on the football team last year."

"Really?"

"He played Center."

"That's an important position, right? He snaps the ball?"

"Right. Only he didn't play much. He never actually got to snap the ball in a game."

"Oh, really? That's too bad."

"But next year maybe."

"If he plays, Cleat," Omni added for me.

"Why wouldn't he play," Summer asked.

"The coach says I have to work on my hand-eye-foot coordination."
Ollie said. "But he says I've got good size. I've got potential."

"Well, you are big," said Summer.

"He's very big," said Omni.

"Yes. Very."

We stopped to buy a twelve pack of National Bohemian. Ollie had a fake i.d. which he never had to show. He was seventeen but looked twenty-five. He was six foot two and growing. I wondered if he would ever plateau, or would he keep rising until his head was above the clouds, until we would have to decorate him with beacons to prevent aircraft from flying into him at night. I once saw a movie where a giant had gone berserk and a pack of doctors had to harpoon him in the toe with a hypodermic needle the size of a battering ram. I could not imagine Ollie ravaging a town, he didn't have enough balance, or malice, but there was no telling what would happen once he reached the size of a building, once doctors and national guardsmen were chasing him with giant hypos.

Summer and I were in the back seat of the Chrysler. She seemed dangerously close. I wanted so badly to grab her hand and press it against my skin it was making me sweat. I thought it was too bold a move, but I had also resolved that I would advance the relationship that afternoon. I pictured us kissing the day away on the bank of the river by the rope swing. Images of our burgeoning romance had been hounding me for a month, and I was determined to see them materialize even if it meant bungling a carefully constructed Saturday.

And we had planned it.

"We'll buy some beer, go to the rope swing," Ollie had said, "Maybe a pizza on the way home. They'll love it."

"I don't know if Summer likes to swim. And the rope swing's pretty high. She might not even want to go off."
“Okay, so she can hang out with Omni if she won’t swing.”

“Well, I guess I can ask.”

“Sure you can. It’ll be great.”

Ollie smiled, proud father of his brainchild.

Summer consented with mild enthusiasm. Our two previous sojourns, both times to a movie, had seemed to entertain her. She laughed when I hoped she would. She sat close in the car. She even guessed that I was named after a boat hitch and not an athletic shoe. But a date in the daylight worried me. I was all arms and legs. There was a shaving rash under my chin. My back was covered with moles. All these things would be obvious in the daytime, if not glaring. For a while, I thought it would be best to build more of a foundation on Friday nights, fully clothed. So many things could go wrong in the daytime which could be successfully hidden at night. What if I sneezed a handful of snot onto my palms, what then? What if Summer had some unsightly scar or birthmark? What if her bikini top flew off?

And there was also Omni to consider. She wouldn’t be able to swing. And sooner or later Summer would learn of Omni’s bad blood, her weak vessels, and how any sibling could be a carrier, how it would be impossible to guarantee a full and healthy future for anyone sharing our genes. Were Summer’s thoughts enough like mine to consider the scope of a lifetime? Did she think in terms of generations?

I didn’t want to push it, wondering what our babies would be like. It was enough to wonder how kissing her might feel. I had had such little experience with women, it was a moment I considered with grave concern. It seemed there was as much room for error in that brief contact as there would be in all the hours leading up to it combined. And that no amount of preparation or rehearsal would alter the resulting emotions. There was either strict success or utter failure; no compromise when intimacy was
involved.

Ollie had little sound advice. Kissing Omni for the first time had been like his first trip to Niagra Falls, he said. It was much larger and much louder than he expected, but it wasn't long before it seemed like he had been there for years.

"I might be kissing Summer Spain on Saturday," I told him.

"Well good," Ollie said. He had a contemplative look. "You want some advice? Keep your lips wet. Make sure you've got plenty of Chapstick with you 'cause they'll dry up, believe me. And touch her face. It's important that you touch her face when you kiss her."

I stared at Summer's hands. They were nice hands, slightly pink and smooth. And she hadn't painted her nails. I liked that. The girls I knew who had painted nails also wore lots of make-up and made wise-cracks about Polacks or virgins. I decided I might have the opportunity to hold Summer's hand as we walked the path to the rope swing. There were some rocks to climb over and she might need help. It would be the perfect time. It would be hasty to grab her hand in the car Besides, my hands had gone clammy.

Omni turned to us.

"Summer, if you don't want to swim you can sit with me on the blanket."

"You're not swimming?" Summer asked.

"No," said Omni, "I'm not allowed." Then she said, "I'm sick."

"Oh. That's too bad. So, I guess you can't drink, either."

"No. I can't."

The conversation ended there, but more seemed to hang in the car, waiting to be spoken. Summer glanced at me and I shrugged hoping she would not question further
The day grew brighter and hotter. I continued to perspire through my shirt, down my back. A can of beer had gone warm in my hand, and I kept tilting it to my lips but not swallowing any. I did not want to drink the hot, flat liquid, but I did not want anyone to know that I had only been able to drink half a can. Ollie had a thing about not finishing all that you had. The rule was, if caught, you had to guzzle. I wasn't sure if he would make me guzzle in front of Summer Spain, if Ollie would humiliate me like that, but I did not want to risk it.

We parked in a gravel turn-about near the trail head. There were no other cars parked there, which we took to be a good sign. No one else was swinging. Omni brought sandwiches in a knapsack, also towels, and an old linen table cloth to sit on.

Summer stretched when she got out of the car. She reached up and stood on her toes, then bent over and put her hands flat on the ground. I watched her lithe form fold and unfold itself preparing for whatever she imagined the trip back to the river to be like. Reaching upward, Summer looked older, like a dancer, someone who had grown use to calculated movement and measured stillness. But bent over she was different. Her face grew red and swollen, her cheeks puffed like a child's, and she would stay that way until she bolted upright, tossing brown hair in an arc above her and announced in a huge breath, "Ready!"

I was smitten.

So much so I could not keep Summer's hand in mine even though she accepted it over the rocks. It was too awkward. There was no reason for it except that I ached for her affection, and that didn't seem to be reason enough. It was a draw. Summer followed step, but I did not lead us where I most wanted to go: down the primrose path, into each others arms. Even as we traipsed through the woods I fantasized about our life together, the
romance of our courtship, comforting each other through mid-life, easing into the security of old-age, all from Summer's single, gutteral "Ready!" Yes. I was certainly ready. Every sinew, every fiber said "Ready!" Only I couldn't--wouldn't--reach out and make first contact without a screen, without some excuse to give should my act suddenly be construed as the potent and consummation gesture it was meant to be.

"Almost there," Ollie cried. He lumbered through the woods ahead of us like an elephant. Then I heard Omni behind him. She must have tripped on a root because I heard her cuss. When we caught up, she was picking up her knapsack and looking at her left knee. A small trickle of blood was brimming over the wound.

"Uh oh," she said.

"Oh, it's just a scratch," Summer said. "You'll be okay."

"Don't tell Ollie, Cleat. Promise." Omni said, looking at me sternly.

"Omni--"

"Promise, Cleat."

I looked at her but she stared me down. We both knew cuts weren't to be trifled with, even small ones, especially around joints. When Omni was younger, around seven or eight, she had fallen from the second rung of a jungle gym and scraped her elbow. By that night her arm had become the color of an eggplant. By morning it had swollen to the size of a football and bending it caused tears to swell up and out and down onto her pillow. The doctors put her in a cast for three months and a sling for six after that. Caution, they told her, would be her best medicine.

"We should go back," I said.

"Cleat, I'm okay."

"What's the big deal?" asked Summer.

Omni patted the cut with a towel from the bag.
"He's gonna see it," I said.

"No he won't. I brought a bandage."

"He'll still see it."

"I don't get what the big deal is," said Summer.

"The big deal is she could die, Summer," I said and immediately wished I hadn't. Somehow I wanted to reach out and make Summer's eyes smaller. I wanted to reach in her ears and pull out the words I had spoken so harshly to her. But she didn't seem angry, only stunned.

"Oh," Summer said. "God."

"Cleat's being melodramatic, Summer. Don't worry. I'm a big girl I can take care of myself."

"Shit, Omni. You don't know."

"Cleat. Settle down."

She started walking again. We walked behind her. She stopped to dab the cut, then took out a square Band-aid.

"The bleeding's stopped already. It's a tiny cut, see." she said.

Summer was quiet. I stared at Omni's knee to see if a spot of red would appear on the bandage. It looked clean.

Omni turned and walked off, toward Ollie. I took Summer's hand and we followed.

The rope was fixed to the branch of an old elm tree with large iron spikes, the kind used to fasten track to railroad ties. The end of it, the free end, was knotted and hung on a nail sticking from the trunk of the tree. Rope swing rules dictated that the rope be left against the trunk so the next users would not have to go wandering through the woods looking for a stick long enough to hook the line and drag it to the bank. There were a few small puddles of
muddy water around. The water in the river seemed just as still.

Ollie stood close to the bank, looking out over the water. He had a new can of beer in his hand. We had just arrived. He turned to us.

"Now tell me," he said, "does it get any better than this?" He spread his arms as if to encompass the entire shimmering, summery landscape. There was a can of beer in one hand, the remainder of the twelve pack in the other and the span in between seem to contain us all. We shook our heads slowly.

Omni spread out the table cloth and set down her knapsack. She unpacked some towels and some sandwiches. Ollie took off his shirt and shoes and socks. He came up to us in his cut-offs. The less clothes he had on the more massive Ollie appeared, not because he had abnormally large muscles, they were actually somewhat soft and underdeveloped, but because we could see just how large his frame really was. We could see the way his thick bones spread out to support all that flesh.

"So who's swimming?" He asked us.

"I think maybe I'll sit with Omni for a little bit," Summer said.

Ollie looked at me.

"You comin' in Cleat."

"Sure," I said, pulling off my shirt.

"But first," he said, "We should guzzle."

"I don't need any liquid courage," I said to him.

"No. Just liquid," Ollie said, grinning.

Ollie could drink twelve ounces in just over three seconds. At the time it was a feat of superhuman capacity, since most people our age were just learning to finish full cans of beer. He sometimes proposed a guzzle just for the benefit of strangers, like Summer. It never failed to improve our status in their eyes.

My sister was not impressed. She didn't like Ollie to show off. 

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wasn't keen on drinking at all, but she tolerated it. Often, she would end up
driving us around in the Chrysler, taking us to the Seven-Eleven late in the
night for foot-long frozen burritos, then to empty lots to heave them back
up. How many times had Omni been the patient parent, the nurse, the
chauffeur?

There was a technique to using the rope swing. We had to place one
foot on the trunk of the elm and grip the rope high enough so that we would
not slam into the ground before we were carried out over the water. Ollie
had to grip twice as high as I did to accommodate for the bow of the branch
as he swung. Watching him fly out through the air and land like a small
depth charge was almost too much for Summer and Omni. They howled from
where they sat on the blanket. They must have felt much like the varsity
football team felt watching Ollie snap the ball and then try to run and block
as well. For all his size, he was not given much ability with which to
control it. Once he pitched himself out over the water it was simply fate
which determined his position as he fell into the river.

My shoulders and bridge of my nose burned a light red during the
afternoon hours as Ollie and I stumbled through our circuit: up the roots on
the bank, over to the tree, out above the river, down into its cloudy water.
There were moments when I even caught myself not thinking of Summer
Spain. But they were fleeting. On each pass I invited her out with us, each
time she deferred.

"It's not so bad," I said, standing, dripping near them.

"In a little bit," said Summer.

She smiled at me. Her bright, wide grin made me shiver.

Ollie and I held another guzzle. Omni shook her head at us, frowning.
As far as I could tell Summer was still drinking from the same can she had
started the trip with. I suspected she was pulling my trick, the warm beer trick, but I forgave her. If only she would swing with us. I didn't like the giggling between she and Omni as we passed by. I was concerned that Omni was betraying childhood secrets to Summer, tarnishing my maturity with embarrassing anecdotes of my first bed-wetting, or walking in on me jacking-off into the crease of a magazine. I could imagine all sorts of terrible secrets she could be telling, and with each plunge I feared the image of the man I had hoped to develop and the one Summer was seeing were growing steadily in opposite directions.

Summer stood up. Ollie and I were resting by the trunk of the tree, catching our wind.

"I have an idea," she said. "I don't really want to go in the water, but I do want to go on the swing. What if Ollie gets on and I hold on to him and we both swing out and Cleat, you and Omni can grab us when we swing back to the ground."

"That would work," Ollie said.

"Sure, I guess. Okay." I said.

Omni still sat on the table cloth but she was nodding at us.

Summer didn't even bother to strip down to her swimsuit. I was disappointed. Not only did she not perform the act I had imagined a dozen times since our departure that morning, but she would be clinging to Ollie and not me. The thought of her pressing against him, even though it would be out of safety and not desire, opened in me a small, jealous current. It was as though Ollie had taken my place on the river's edge, kissing, rolling around with Summer.

Ollie held the rope. He took a solid grip above the highest knot.

Summer put her arms around his neck, laughing softly. I couldn't watch. I called over to Omni
"C'mon. I'll need help to catch them."

She stood up slowly, as if stiff from a nap. Omni came over and stood by me, but facing the wrong way.

"You'll have to face the river if you're going to help," I said, now irked and impatient.

Summer had both arms and legs wrapped around Ollie. With a lurch they dropped off the bank and were swinging out twenty feet above the water. Summer screamed. The branch of the elm bent severely as they dipped toward the river. They reached the apex of the swing then started back. Summer's hair was fluttering in Ollie's face. She seemed to be clutching the life out of him. She screamed again. This time possibly because she realized what I realized: They weren't going to make it back to shore. Ollie and Summer came within a couple of feet. I managed to grab Summer's shirt, but their combined weight and momentum was far too much for my thin arms and weak wrists. The rope swung back out a second time, then a third, and a fourth, each time travelling a lesser distance, coming to a slow, gently spinning stop.

"I'll go get a stick," Omni said to me.

"Hold on," I called out to Summer and Ollie, "We'll get a stick."

They spun silently over the water. It looked to me as though the current in the river had picked up beneath them, but I decided later that I was imagining it; I was manufacturing my own danger to keep other images from entering my mind. They were irrational thoughts but they continued to press at me. I hoped that Summer would not kiss him. There was no reason she would, I knew, but they were so close, and there was the added threat of being suspended twenty feet above muddy water. Anything was possible. She could kiss his neck. She could whisper her secret desire for him into his ear, just in case they didn't survive the crisis. She could have been
denouncing me and pledging him her eternal devotion.

Omni returned with a long branch. Together the two of us managed to extend it out far enough for Summer to grab the end. We reeled them in slowly, but Summer could not hold on. We succeeded only in getting them swinging again.

Then Ollie started to yell. It was very strange to see him angry. He yelled at Omni. Ollie was so docile it gave me an icy sensation to see him become so upset. Only minutes before we had been tumbling through the air, laughing, burning under sunny skies and dousing ourselves in the cool water. It was a full minute until I understood why he was yelling.

"Omni! Jesus Christ! Your knee!"

The Band-aid over her knee was bright red. Several dark streaks ran down her shin to the top of her sock, and around the joint lumpy purple tissue began to show. In the years growing up with Omni, I had learned about the color of blood, how to determine its freshness by shade. I learned the difference between an incision and a laceration, between contusion and concussion. I learned that every pore was touched by tiny capillaries, and that more blood ran to the tips and back in one day than most people would believe. For many years there were transfusions twice a month. The doctors flushed my sister clean like a carborator, then filled her back up again, letting her leave with warnings about over-exertion, too much verve. At some point during those years of visits, I discovered that we were more liquid than solid, and how the world was full of ragged objects threatening to puncture our limbs and tear our skin.

Ollie let go of the rope. Summer’s hair stood straight off the top of her head as she fell. Then they both disappeared in the river. Ollie surfaced and had already begun to swim to the bank. Summer bobbed up, sputtering. She began to dog paddle after Ollie. Of course she hadn’t wanted to go in.
Summer could barely swim.

Omni stared at the ground. Ollie climbed up the bank to us. His black hair was matted flat and water drizzled from his chin. He gulped air.

"Damnit Omni,"

"Ollie-"

"God damnit," he said.

He hooked an arm under her legs and the other under her back and picked her up. I watched as he carried her back to the blanket and set her down.

Summer reached the edge of the water. I looked down at her. She lay against the muddy ground, sopping, sighing. I wondered what she was thinking about. Ollie letting her fall? Omni’s knee? Me? I was thinking about how pitiful and helpless she looked, drenched like a new born baby. And I thought about kissing her. I thought about climbing down the bank and pulling the wet hair away from her face and pressing my chapped lips against her moist ones, about clutching her waist, feeling the weight of her, making sure she was tangible and real and in need of my help, my presence. She gazed up at me. Maybe I imagined it, like I imagined the increase of the river’s current, but maybe her smile was real. Maybe she was saying it again: Ready.

I was still holding the branch. I lowered it slowly down to Summer and she reached up to grasp it.

Ollie wiped off Omni’s knee. He put on a clean bandage and then tied one of the towels around her leg. Summer and I packed up the knapsack. The earth had rotated far enough to cast long shadows of treetops across the river and onto the dirt we stood. In the waning light I felt the first tinge of evening coolness.

Omni mounted Ollie piggy-back. She looked like a dwarf on his back,
more like his child than his girlfriend. No one spoke. Summer was rubbing a
towel on her head and over her clothing. When we started walking I could
hear water squish in her tennis shoes.

Ollie hurried ahead of us with Omni hanging off his back. I could have
told him that another fifteen minutes wouldn’t make a difference, and it
wasn’t worth stumbling and dropping her but I let them go ahead. He would
not let Omni fall

Summer walked a few feet behind me.

"Cleat, what’s wrong with Omni? Why does she bleed like that?"

"She has a disease. I can’t explain it exactly, but her blood is thinner
than ours. It doesn’t clot. It’s very rare in women."

"And she can bleed to death from tiny cuts?"

"Well, not exactly. But there can be complications. She had to wear a
cast for three months once because of a cut. She almost always has bruises.
And sometimes swelling."

"God."

I stepped lightly, quietly, waiting for more questions but Summer was
silent. She didn’t ask if it was hereditary. She didn’t want to know the odds
of her children being like Omni if I was their father. And there were no
questions about medical expenses, or the days in the hospital, or the
therapy, or the pain.

We came to the section of path obstructed by half-buried boulders. I
took the first few steps onto the rocks. Then I heard Summer say my name
behind me.

"Can you help me?" she asked. She was holding up her hand.

They were at the car when we emerged from the trail. Ollie was saying
something to Omni as he set her down. His mouth moved quickly and he was
shaking his head. Her head came up to his chest. I stopped walking. Summer stopped beside me. We were close to them but they had not seen us yet. Omni leaned foward against Ollie's torso and put her arms around him. It looked as though she were trembling. Ollie put his hands on her shoulders and pushed her back a little. He put his hand on her face, and I saw that when he cupped her jaw his fingers rested against the bruise below her ear. They matched its shape almost exactly. It struck me that I had never actually seen them kiss. Since the first time Ollie had slept over, since the night he stole away to visit Omni's room, this had been their private act. I wondered if he always touched her in the same way, if he always put his hand on the side of her face. Could the gentle pressure of Ollie's fingers rupture the tiny veins under her skin? Was she that fragile?

I thought of Summer clinging to Ollie, swinging under the branch of the elm, above the brown river, my jealousy over their contact. Could it have even approached what Omni must have been feeling? Did she worry about losing their love as much as I worried about never finding any?

He bent down and kissed her. I thought about how they were together, that they would outlast us all. It didn't matter if Ollie snapped the football in a real game or not, if he continued to heave digested burritos and beer into empty parking lots, or even if he could guzzle in under three seconds. In that moment I believed Omni would never bleed to death, that Ollie would continue to clean and dress her wounds, to apply pressure when neccessary. He would carry her on his back across the country, around the planet and home again; he would never run out of breath.

Summer's hand was in mine. It had been there since our first step onto the rocks. I was hardly conscious of the contact, of the slight motion of her fingers. Her damp shoulder pressed against my arm. I heard her murmur a question but I did not answer. I was thinking of a day when rope swings and
wandering giants were harmless, when all the corners and rough edges of
the world had worn smooth, when I could look over and touch Summer’s face
and tell her that I was truly ready.