Madagascar| Short stories

Richard L. Nunez

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MADAGASCAR
Short Stories

by
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THE DEAD BROTHER

I began stealing when I was ten years old. One afternoon, a bunch of us were playing hockey and I shot the puck over the boards and into the creek. No one had a spare puck, so I walked to the hardware store a few blocks away, shoved three pucks in my coat pocket, and walked out. Nobody stopped me.

I scored five goals that day.

Doctor Martin asked me how I felt when I scored all those goals.
"Like Bobby Orr," I said.
"Why do you think you scored so many goals?" he said.
"Because I was good."
"You don't think the stolen hockey pucks had anything to do with it?"
"Well," I said, "we couldn't have played without them."

I know what Doctor Martin thinks. He thinks I got a rush from stealing those pucks and that's why I scored so many goals. But that's not it. I stole those pucks because of Brian Taglau. It was his puck I shot over the boards and into the creek. Brian Taglau was built like a brick shithouse. He played goalie, because he pretty much covered the whole damn net, and he must have enjoyed blocking everyone's shots because he never wore padding. No matter how hard you hit him with a slapshot, he would grin like a maniac.
Once, he took a slapshot in the head and went down like a harpooned walrus, but he got up grinning that same grin.

I want to tell Doctor Martin to find him, Brian Taglau, because he was a real head case, if you ask me.

I was seeing Doctor Martin because the prison had started a new rehabilitation program. They thought a softer approach might work with some of us. When I asked Doctor Martin why I was getting the head treatment, he said, “Because your’s is an unusual case. You showed remorse. That’s not typical behavior for a murderer.”

I said, “I’m not a murderer. That was an accident. I didn’t mean to kill her.”

“I know,” Doctor Martin said. “I believe you. That’s why you’re here.”

Penelope was her name. I walked into a White Hen late one night, when no one was around, and rushed straight to the counter before I lost my nerve. There was a moment when I could have backed off. Penelope had no idea what was going on. She looked at me funny.

"Can I help you?" she said.

I looked at her nametag. Penelope. Penelope looked down too. That’s when she saw the gun at my hip. She became hysterical. Like most people, she happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Doctor Martin’s a wide-eyed kid fresh from college. An intern. You can tell he really doesn’t want to be here, that he’s just making a name for himself so he can move on to bigger and better things. We’re guinea pigs to him. I don’t mind, though, because he really seems to like my stories. It’s also a nice way of spending a few hours a week. He gives me Baby Ruths, because I asked for them, and lets me smoke his cigarettes while I’m
talking. He's got this fancy brand, Virginia Circles. They're like ladies' cigarettes, thin and petite looking, but they taste good and last a long time.

The first time we met, he asked me tell him about myself.
I said, "What do you want to know?"
"Whatever comes to mind," he said.
"I've got Baby Ruths on my mind," I said. "It's been a long time since I had a Baby Ruth."
"I'll have some for you next time," he said.
"I sure could use a cigarette," I said. "Not that sawdust they sell at the canteen. I mean a real cigarette. Like a Lucky Strike. Or an unfiltered Camel."

He pulled a pack of Virginia Circles from his shirt pocket and threw them on the desk. "Try these," he said.

So I did. Then I said, "Can you get Jessica Lange in here?"
He laughed and said, "If I could get Jessica Lange in here, do you think I'd be talking to you?"

I could tell we'd get along. We laughed a little while, then he got serious and asked me about myself again.

"How far back do you want to go?" I said.
"As far as you'd like," he said.

I thought for a minute, then I told him about the plane crash.

I heard the crash while walking home from school. The noise was a low, sonic booming that radiated through the pavement, vibrated in my legs, and settled in my bowels. Everything got quiet. Birds stopped chirping. The wind stopped blowing. The entire neighborhood seemed to halt in mid-conversation. A bunch of us kids had just spilled out of the school bus and we gazed at one another confused.
A screen door slammed. Mrs. Pritchard burst onto the front porch, at least 200 pounds of woman wearing a pink robe and fuzzy pink slippers. She gazed out at us, an enormous pink rabbit, then she backpedaled onto the lawn and stared up into the sky.

"What is it?" she said. "What is it?"

"Maybe a plane broke the sound barrier," I said.

Mrs. Pritchard put her hand to her heart and said, "Sweet Jesus, I thought it was the bomb for a second."

All of us looked to the sky again.

When the television reported a plane crash, I climbed onto the roof of our house. There was black smoke in the distance. That was it. I thought I might see flames, or an orange glow in the sky. Mostly, I saw neighbors gathered in clusters on the street, some with arms crossed, some pointing to the sky where the smoke was rising higher. On any normal day, which was 364 days of the year, those people hardly said hello to one another.

I was surprised by how much I could see of the neighborhood, beyond the bend in the road to the White Hen, the Eaz-E Travel Shoppe, and Jake's Pizza. The high school was much bigger than I thought. It loomed above a grove of trees I guessed was Cosman Park. If I squinted hard enough, I could see the Sears Tower fifteen miles away through the smog over Chicago, like a sliver buried just beneath the skin.

I scanned the shingled roofs of my neighbors, row after row of them. If I were a giant, I thought, I could use them as stepping stones, and it seemed to me I might walk across the entire country, only to be stopped by the ocean. I thought for a minute how I might cross the ocean, but I was getting cold, and there was nothing really to see of the plane crash, so I climbed down from the roof.

"Do you have holes in all your jeans?" Eddie said.

Eddie, my best friend, was waiting for me on the ground. He lived a few houses down the road. He was a year younger than me, still in eighth grade, so we didn't go to the same school anymore.
When I jumped to the ground, I saw I'd split the seam at my crotch.

"What are you doing on the roof, Jackie?" Mom was at the front door. I was bent over, head between my knees, so I could see the rip between my legs.

"Watching the plane crash," I said.

"What plane crash?" she said.

"At the airport," I said, pointing to the black smoke. "I thought you knew."

She looked to where I pointed. Her face went slack. She stepped off the porch and held both hands to her heart. "My God," she said.

"Was there really a plane crash?" Eddie said. He was standing with his arms raised to his forehead, his hands shading his eyes.

"Oh my God," Mom said. She covered her mouth with her hands. She looked like those brunette heroines in old horror movies—*Day of the Triffids* or *They Came from Outer Space*—schoolmarmish women who slowly transform into bombshells as the horror mounts.

"I thought it was the bomb for a second," I said.

"Jackie, don't," she said. She grimaced, as if I'd made fun of her.

"Don't what?"

"Don't think such things," she said.

"I can't help it, Mom."

"I want you to stay home this afternoon," she said. She was watching the smoke again. It was spreading thicker in the sky.

"I'm going over to Eddie's house," I said.

"No," she said. "No, you're staying right here." She pulled me to her, hugging me close, as if she thought a plane might fall out of the sky on top of me. "You just want to see the plane crash," she said.

I wriggled out of her arms.

"You stay here until your father gets home," she said.
It was her stock phrase. She couldn't decide my fate without him, though she was learning. She'd decided to catch up on the women's movement after seeing Jill Clayburgh in *An Unmarried Woman*. She'd enrolled at Harper Community College and was studying for her Realtor's license. My mom hadn't worked since her waitressing days before she met my father.

"I'll stay in the neighborhood," I said. Her definition of the neighborhood, I knew, didn't extend beyond our block. Mine included all of Elk Grove Village. Further sometimes.

"All right," she said. "But stay close enough so I can call you."

"You'll need a bullhorn," I said.

She looked at Eddie. Then at me. Eddie was wearing Chinos and a button-down shirt with a starched collar. His mother always made him dress nice for school.

Mom went inside. Eddie punched me in the arm. "You want to ride our bikes down there?" he said. "It'll be awesome."

I said, "I don't have holes in *all* my jeans."

"Sorry," he said. Then he brightened up. "Hey, I've got weed. We can get stoned."

"Think of all those souls ascending to heaven," I said. "It'll be a chorus of angels."

"You stoned already?" he said.

"What are the chances," I said, "of a plane crashing on top of you?"

We couldn't get near the crash. All access roads were sealed off. The closest we got was the Edens Expressway overpass, about a half-mile away. We caught glimpses of the wreckage, and a few fires burning bleakly beneath the onslaught of firehoses, but mostly it was a cloud of black smoke. It wasn't long until we were bored. After a while, Eddie began spitting on cars passing beneath us on JFK Boulevard. He elbowed me in the ribs. He was smiling. His teeth were gray from medicine he took to supplement calcium in his body.
"Imagine what a brick would do?" he said, pointing to the cars below.

Eddie's brother had committed suicide with a shotgun. Blew his brains out in his own bedroom. Because of this, they said Eddie was a little disturbed, and he would say things like, "Imagine what a brick would do?"

I pointed a finger at him. "Don't," I said. Sometimes I think I was the only one who could keep Eddie in line.

He became sullen and said, "I wasn't really going to do it."

The truth, though, was that I had already imagined what a brick might do. If you're in a car going 65 miles per hour, and a brick suddenly crashes through your windshield, it could take your head off. Easily. Just like a guillotine. I pictured some headless guy driving his car a few hundred yards down the highway, his body not yet knowing its dead, before the car finally veers off the road and crashes into the ditch.

In history class, Mr. Hilliard told us about the French guillotine, and how some peasants would grab the newly severed head from the basket and stare into its face. Sometimes, the head wouldn't die for a few seconds and those peasants would get a kick out of watching the dead guys eyes blink in confusion, or horror, or whatever. That pissed me off. If there's one thing I believe, it's let a guy die in peace, with some dignity. I imagined some guy grabbing my head and not being able to do anything about it. I'd want to punch him, but I know there would be nothing I could do.

We rode our bikes to Eddie's house and smoked his dead brother's weed. Eddie had found about five pounds stashed in the baseboard of his brother's closet after the funeral. That was ten months ago, and at least half of it was still left.

I said, "We're smoking dead man's weed."

"Wow," Eddie said.

"There could be revenge involved here," I said. "He might not like this."

Eddie said, "Did I tell you about the time he thought someone was following him?"

"Yes," I said.
“Did I tell you about the time he was punching the wall and he broke his hand and he didn’t even know it?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“How about the time he chased the cat around the house with a knife?”

“No,” I said.

“I’ll tell you that one,” Eddie said.

So he told me about his brother chasing the cat around the house with a knife. But then he stopped in the middle of the story.

He said, "I get scared." He was sitting on the floor, his knees huddled up to his chin.

"Of what?" I said.

He was rocking back and forth. "I don't know," he said. "I get pictures."

"Photographs?" I said.

"No," he said.

"What, then?" I said.

"Pictures in my head," he said. "I see him doing it."

"Who doing what?" I said.

"I see him pulling the trigger," he said. "Over and over again."

"You weren't there," I said.

"I can picture it, though," he said.

"Well, don't," I said. "You're just paranoid. It's the pot."

"I know," he said.

"Stop rocking like that," I said. "You're making me nervous."

"Sorry," he said. "I can't help it."

The truth was he'd already spooked me. I just wanted to get out of there, but his older sister Marcie walked in the room. I had just taken a hit and had to hold the smoke in my lungs. I flicked the joint out the open window. She didn't notice.
"Mother says you've got to vacuum," she said to Eddie.

"No, she didn't," Eddie said. "It's your turn. You're just trying to get out of doing it."

I could have brained him for being so dumb. If he had any sense, which he didn't, he would have gotten rid of her quick. She looked at me, as if she hadn't noticed me in the first place. I imagined my face must have been red and bulbous from holding my breath. Her face was twisted in disgust. "What's wrong with you?" she said.

That triggered it. I exhaled a thick cloud of smoke. She was all agape. "That's marijuana," she said.

"Genius," I said.

"You're smoking marijuana," she said.

"What do you care?" I said.

Actually, I had a crush on her. She was three years older, a senior at school, and very good looking. She wore tight bell-bottoms that made her behind look as if it were carved from blue marble, and a white shirt flared at the cuffs. I looked forward to seeing her, but I hated being around her. I'd get stupid and moon-eyed, and I didn't like feeling that way, so I was always mean to her.

Since her brother's death, something went limp inside her. She didn't walk around anymore like she had a board shoved up her ass. She used to be a real go-getter, one of the pep squad girls. But she had reason now not to feel too peppy anymore. She quit cheer leading, quit student council, and broke up with her boyfriend, Kent Nelson, who played just about every damn sport at school. She smoked, but she didn't want Eddie doing it. She was afraid for him. It's a wonder what a little dose of reality will do to a person.

"I don't give a damn about you, Jackie," she said. "But I do care about what happens to Eddie."

That stung, but I didn't show it.

"Don't tell mom," Eddie said.
"I have to," she said.

"No," I said. "You don't want to do that."

"Stay out of this," she said.

"Listen, Marcie," I said. "You're just going to be making mountains out of molehills. Your mother doesn't need to be worrying about Eddie. Eddie's fine. He's a good kid. He's a smart kid. Other kids look up to him. Your mother doesn't need to be worrying about him. She's had too much to worry about already."

That snowed her. It snowed Eddie too.

Sometimes, I imagined Marcie collapsing into my arms, crying, and I would hold her, my nose in her hair. Or I would imagine rescuing her from some brute, usually Kent Nelson trying to win her back. I appear out of nowhere and deliver karate chops to his head, and kicks to his stomach. He flails at me, but I'm too quick for him and he's swinging at air. I let this go on for a few minutes, then finally I deliver a blow to his stomach that doubles him over and sends him to his knees. I tell him to stay down, that I don't want to hurt him, but he struggles to his feet and charges me, and I have to knock him down again. Finally, when he's had enough, I help him to his feet, guide him to his truck, and watch him drive away. Meanwhile, Marcie stands grateful, her hands clasped together. Because I'm so merciful, she falls in love with me.

I admit I got carried away sometimes, especially considering we'd never said a kind word to one another. I understood why she wanted to protect Eddie, but I didn't think it was fair that she assumed I was a bad influence. After all, it was Eddie's pot.

Marcie said to me, "You're bad news."

"That's right," I said. "I'm two plane crashes." I held up two fingers. "And a few murders on the side," I said. "Maybe a car crash for dessert."

"You're a real riot," she said, and she turned to leave.


"What are you talking about?" Eddie said.
"She loves me," I said. "Deep down, she knows she loves me."

"She hates you," Eddie said.

A few weeks later, Marcie caught Eddie and I smoking again. That time, she told her mother. Eddie was forbidden to see me, so we had to meet on the sly. But we got tired of that. His mother was keeping a close eye on him, pestering him about his grades and his future, and he began drifting away, taking himself more seriously. Eventually, he would go off to college, Southern Illinois University, and I'd never hear from him again.

Doctor Martin asked me if I was jealous of Eddie going off to college. When he asks questions like that, I have to laugh. Doctor Martin's a good guy, but he doesn't have much style yet. You can see his psycho-crap coming at you like a fat pitch right down the middle of the plate. I suppose that's why he's here, to learn technique. Might as well practice on convicts.

He gets offended sometimes, though he tries not to show it. He gets all puffy and red-faced, and starts shifting around in his chair, so I go easy on him and tell him what he wants to hear.

"Sure," I said. "I was the brains of the two of us."

"Why didn't you go to college?" he said.

"No one asked."

"Funny," he said.

"College isn't for me, Marty." I was calling him Marty by then. He didn't seem to mind. "It's okay for guys like you, but not me," I said.

"You might have turned out differently," Marty said. "Maybe you wouldn't be here now."

"I could have turned out like you," I said. "Right?"

"I didn't say that," Marty said.
"Save that crap for someone else," I said. "We can't all be heros. Someone has to play the bad guy."

Marty wants me to take college correspondence courses, get my degree while in jail. But I doubt he wants it for me. The degree might help get me an early parole, and that would make him look good. He didn't bring it up, though. Instead, he asked me if anything else happened on the day of the plane crash.

"Well," I said, "we broke into someone's house."

We broke into a house on Sycamore. Eddie went right to the fridge and opened a half-gallon of chocolate ice cream. I found three cases of Miller Lite in the garage and set them on the back porch in case of a quick getaway. There was cold beer in the fridge, so I opened one and toured the house. In the master bedroom, I found a cigar box in the top drawer of the bureau. Bingo! When I opened it, there was a stack of bills, a twenty on top. I counted eighty-two dollars and stuffed it in my pocket.

"Find anything?" Eddie said.

I swiveled around. He was spooning ice cream into his mouth.

"No," I said.

I don't know why Eddie came along with me during housebreaks. He didn't do much stealing. Usually, he just ransacked the fridge and cupboards, and ate a lot of candy and sweets, mainly because his mother was a health nut.

Eddie switched on the television and flopped onto the bed.

"Don't get too comfortable," I said.

No response. He was already absorbed in the glow of the television.

I searched through the lower drawers of the bureau. The light from the t.v. set made weird, shifting shadows on the wall. We never turned on the lights when we broke into a house. It might raise suspicion, so we just moved around in the dark.

"Look," he said, "it's the crash."
I turned. Dan Rather was reporting the plane crash for CBS nationwide. We were big time. He said everyone aboard died, one hundred and seventy-two people, the worst crash in the history of aviation.

"Give it time," I said.

"Give what time?" Eddie said.

I walked down the hallway to another bedroom. There were posters on the wall of Led Zeppelin, Jimi Hendrix, Deep Purple. In the corner was a Fender electric guitar and a Peavey amp. I searched under the mattress, in the bureau, in pockets of clothes hanging in the closet. I even tapped floorboards, but I couldn't find a stash. Then I suddenly realized I'd been looking for dope because I'd been reminded of Eddie's brother. It was scary, really. Especially in the dark. I could hear canned laughter down the hallway, and it sounded like a party of ghosts in the living room.

Then I did what I'd never done before. I actually imagined a family living there. I was astonished. I knew people lived in those houses, but I never imagined how they lived. I walked into the living room and looked close at the furniture. There was a cream-colored sofa, a glass and walnut coffee table, a leather recliner for the old man on Sundays while he watched football or basketball. A magazine stand was on the floor next to the recliner.

There were old issues of Sports Illustrated mingled with National Geographics. The mother collected animal figurines in a glass-enclosed case. A rabbit sat up on its back haunches, sniffing the air for impending danger. Deer foraged non-existent grass. A lioness was perpetually stalking the deer, its body lowered, one paw raised tentatively in the air. An American bald eagle, as big as the lioness, sat in the high branches of a tree, watching over the display a few inches below. I reached in, grabbed the lioness, and broke its head off.

"You can breathe easier," I said to the rabbit.

On top of the television was a family portrait. The father looked like a thumb. He had a thick neck and was balding, but he compensated by growing mutton chop sideburns. He wore a light blue leisure suit. The mother, a hangover from the early-60s, had a
bouffant hairdo, and wore a yellow, sleeveless dress I was sure went to mid-thigh. I pictured her wearing white stockings. Then there was the son. He looked angry, as if his father had forced him to sit for the photograph. He had a bad afro and wore a brown suit-jacket too big in the shoulders, probably his father's. I put the portrait back. It fell on its face. I didn't right it. Then I wondered if anyone would think it fell on its own. I liked the idea.

I admit I got carried away. I made a whirlwind tour of the house. In the kitchen, I took the milk from the refrigerator and left it on the counter. I left the cap off the toothpaste and raised the seat of the toilet. I left a light on in the garage. I tossed a few of the son's dirty clothes onto the bathroom floor. I felt like a ghost. Like I could stay in the house until they got home and they wouldn't notice me. They'd live their lives around me. It made me wonder if anyone had broken into my house. All those unexplained things, like a missing sock, could have been a burglar messing with my mind.

I thought about what I'd done. It wasn't enough. I needed to put icing on the cake. So I took a dirty plate from the kitchen sink and placed it on the cream-colored sofa. It was an immaculate sofa. It was the kind of sofa you didn't put a dirty plate on. I imagined the mother coming home, seeing the plate on the sofa and saying, "Who put this plate here? We don't put dirty plates on the sofa. Who put this plate here?"

"Who put what where?" Eddie said.

I turned, startled. Eddie was standing in the doorway to the bedroom. The ice cream carton was beginning to drip in his hand.

"Put that away," I said, pointing to the carton.

"You were talking to yourself," Eddie said.

"No, I wasn't," I said.

By that time I was getting nervous. We'd been in the house more than half an hour. I figured we were pushing our luck. I dragged Eddie out of the house and we hauled the cases of beer to an empty lot in the industrial park. We drank a few beers, hid the rest, then
went to the mall to play pinball. I paid for the games. I figured it was only fair. Eddie
didn't ask where the money came from. I wouldn't have told him the truth, anyway.

In the middle of a game, Brian Taglau came in and said he had something to show
me. He was huge by then. His face was oily from too many potato chips and french fries,
and he had a gap between his front teeth that made him look like a hippo. Eddie was afraid
of him, and when Taglau leaned against the machine, Eddie looked up and let the pinball
slide right into the chute.

"What is it?" I said.

"I can't show you here," Taglau said. "We've got to go outside."

I though it was a trap, at first, but I knew I could outrun him if I had too, so I kept
my distance. When we got outside, he pulled a wad of Kleenex from his pocket. He
beckoned me to come closer.

"What?" I said.

"Come here."

I took a few steps closer and he began unfolding the Kleenex. Inside was a finger.
A human finger.

"Is that real?" I said.

"Yep," he said, grinning, proud of himself. "Got it from the plane crash."

Eddie was standing behind me, looking over my shoulder. "What is it?" he said.

"It's someone's finger," I said.

"No, it isn't," Eddie said.

"I got it in a field next to the crash," Taglau said. "Got other stuff, too. Shrapnel.
The stuff was still hot. I had to use a my shirt to pick it up."

"Shrapnel is fragments of a bomb," I said. "What you got was wreckage."

"Whadda you know?" he said.

I wanted to say, More than you. Instead, I said, "How much do you want for it?"

"You want to buy it?" Taglau said.
"Yes," I said.

"I'm not selling it," he said.

"I'll give you twenty bucks," I said.

He thought for a second. I saw bags of potato chips and mounds of Ding Dongs and Ho-Hos running around in his head.

"Twenty-five," Taglau said. I should have known. He'd need some Orange Crush to wash it all down.

I gave him twenty five dollars. He gave me the wad of Kleenex. "Sucker," he said, and he walked off.

I looked at the finger a second. There was bone sticking out where it had been severed. I wadded up the Kleenex and shoved it in my pocket.

"Why'd you do that?" Eddie said. He was staring at the pocket where the finger was. He looked like he was about to cry.

"For luck," I said. "It's better than a rabbit's foot."

We went back inside to play Galaga, but Eddie couldn't concentrate. He kept missing the spaceships and they'd crash into him.

"I want to go home," he said.

He looked pathetic, like a puppy dog that's crapped on the rug.

"Who's stopping you?" I said. "Go home, if you want. I'm not your mother."

That really hurt, I could tell. He looked around to see if anyone heard me. Then he bowed his head. "You want to go fishing tomorrow?" he said.

"Maybe," I said.

When I got home, I undressed, shoved my clothes in the hamper, and went to bed. It wasn't until the next morning that I realized what I'd done. I was eating a bowl of Cheerios at the kitchen table when I heard my mother scream in the laundry room. When I
got to her, she was standing in the corner, staring down at the wadded Kleenex on the floor as if it were a mouse.

"What is it?" she said, pointing to the Kleenex.

I bent down to pick it up.

"Don't touch it!" she screamed.

I was in mid-stoop. I looked up at her.

"Don't touch it," she said. "Leave it right there." Then she rushed forward, grabbed me by the armpit, and hustled me into the kitchen. She paced a few minutes, muttering to herself, then sat down at the table. I felt like I wasn't even there. She sat motionless, staring out the window, hunched forward, her hands at the side of her head, as if some thought was tormenting her. Her long hair fell limp over her shoulders, hiding most of her face. She was thin, Twiggy and Mia Farrow thin, and she was nervous. She smoked too many cigarettes. One after the other.

She lit a cigarette. She blew smoke toward the window and I watched as it hit the glass, mushroomed outward, and curled back at us.

She said, "I don't understand, Jackie."

She was staring straight ahead, fixed on a point in the distance.

"I don't understand this at all," she said. "Did I do something wrong?"

I didn't say anything. I could take sharp words, a spanking, a slap on the face, but I couldn't meet Mom's disappointment. So I said nothing. Mom didn't press for an explanation.

She told me to go to my room until my father got home.

Dad got home late that night and they had to wake me so I could be punished. They led me to the living room. I slouched on the sofa, irritable with sleep. I crossed my arms over my chest and glowered.

"Sit up straight," Dad said.
He was wearing his Amoco shirt, with his name, Walter, stitched on the breast. His hands were smudged with grease and oil. I could smell stale beer on his breath.

"Where did you get it?" he said.

"Get what?" I said.

"Don't play dumb with me," he said.

I made a dumb face and let drool dribble down my chin. He slapped me. I didn't even see it coming.

"Stop that!" he yelled.

I held a hand to my cheek. "That didn't hurt," I said.

He grabbed me by the hair and shook my head. His right hand was cocked, ready to slug me. I waited for the punch. But his eyes suddenly got soft. He looked like he was scared of me. He let go of my hair and stood there with his arms hanging at his sides. Then he turned away.

"Go to your room," he said.

I went to my bedroom and crawled out the window. That night, I slept in someone's car, a big silver Toronado parked in an apartment complex. I curled up in the back seat. It was cold, late October, and when I awoke the windows were fogged over. I was shivering. I crawled into the front seat. I opened the glove box. There was a pack of cigarettes and matches. I lit one and rolled down the window. There were sunglasses, black with plastic frames. I shoved those in my coat pocket. There were packets of ketchup from McDonalds, napkins, a screwdriver, and a receipt for a change of oil. The car was three months overdue on its next oil change. The cigarette was making me sick, so I tossed it out the window.

I grabbed the screwdriver and pried open the casing on the steering column. I touched wires together, like they did in the movies, but nothing happened, not even a spark.
When I stepped out of the car, in the gray light of early morning, I felt exhilarated, like a bear emerging from hibernation. Just then an airplane flew low overhead out of O'Hare Airport, so low I could read American Airlines painted on its side. So low I could aim and spit.

One time, Doctor Martin told me I wanted to get caught, that as a kid I was manifesting some desire to be noticed. To hell with that crap. I thought I was invincible. And when I told Marty, he said, "Did you really think you were invisible?"

I got a kick out of that. I let him think I had an invisibility syndrome. Just for a little while. Then I finally set him straight. Marty looked hurt, really disappointed in me, so I told him something I'd been holding back. I told him I had a twin brother who died shortly after birth. Shrinks like that kind of stuff. They can chew on it for months.

Marty sure perked up. "Really?" he said. "And how did you feel about that?"

"I didn't feel anything," I said. "Christ, I was only a few weeks old. He could have been a sack of potatoes, for all I knew."

"I mean, when you found out you had a brother?" he said.

"I don't have a brother. I never had a brother," I said. "Don't make mountains out of molehills, Marty. You want to ask me about loss? Ask me about the puppy that died when I was a kid. I felt more for that dog than I did my brother."

"Wait a second," he said. "Just hold on a minute. Look at it this way. You two were in your mother's womb for nine months. You were as close as two brothers could be."

"Hell, Marty," I said, "we were closer than that. We were Siamese twins."

He leaned back in his chair. "You're kidding?" he said.

"No," I said. "We were joined at the chest. We shared a heart. That's how he died. Only one of us could have it."

Marty's eyes were wide. He looked scared as hell. "I don't believe you," he said.
I sighed. I did what I've always done. I lifted my shirt and showed him the scar. He leaned forward, as if he wanted to touch it.

"Jesus," he said. Then he looked me in the eyes. "How did they decide?" he said.

"Decide what?"

He pointed to my chest. "Who would--"

"Die?" I said. I was staring hard at him.

He leaned back in his chair.

"They flipped a coin," I said. The truth, though, was that I had the heart. My brother was sharing mine. The doctors didn't think we would live more than few months sharing the heart, so they decided to operate.

Marty patted his shirt pocket, then opened his desk drawer. He'd find what he was looking for. I knew, because I'd rummaged through his desk while he was pulling my file in the next room. The only thing worth pinching was a pack of gum, which I'd stashed in my underwear. Marty pulled out a pen and a pad of paper and began taking notes.

"I think we're getting somewhere, Jack," Marty said. He said that almost every time, or at least something like it.

"I'm glad to hear that," I said. "I want to be cured, Marty. I really do. I don't want to steal anymore. Or lie. I'm through with that. I want to be rehabilitated."

"That's good, Jack. That's a start," he said. "I'll see you in a few days."

So the guard took me back to my cell. Donovan, my cellmate, was in his bunk reading the same comic book he'd had for months. He let it fall to his belly and said, "So what did you bring this time, Jackie Boy?"

Donovan's a nice guy. A big bald-headed son-of-a-bitch. He'd pummeled some police officer trying to arrest him for disorderly conduct. He'd been in a bar fight and had staved of at least twenty guys. Beat the living crap out of them. Or so he says. But I believe him, because he's got the scars to prove it; a bent nose, a missing front tooth, and three
hideously misshapen knuckles on his right hand, which was surgically reconstructed because he'd broken almost every bone punching those guys out.

When they got him to the station, the police found out there were outstanding warrants for his arrest. He'd pulled a bank heist a few years back in which he'd killed a security officer and an old woman. He didn't mean to kill the woman, he said. She just happened to be standing behind the officer at the time and took a stray bullet in the throat.

Doctor Martin doesn't think I have a criminal mind. Not like most guys in here. I'll tell you what he really thinks, though. He thinks he can save me. He has this Christ complex. Donovan said I'm Doctor Martin's Lazarus. He showed me the passage in the Bible and that was one of the few times the book really made sense to me. That's the problem with the Bible. It's too cryptic. Someone else has to make sense of it for you. Take Lazarus, for example. Jesus brings him back to life and that's all we hear of him. Nothing more. I want to know what it's like to be resurrected from the dead. He's a zombie, for crying out loud. Tell me what happened to him.

"You've got to read between the lines," Donovan said. "You've got to make sense of it yourself."

"That's the problem with religion," I said. "It's like some swank cocktail party. You have to be a certain kind to be invited."

"You don't get invited," Donovan said. "You just have to believe."

"And everything will make sense," I said. "Right?"

He conceded. "Sure. I guess."

"That's blindness, buddy," I said. "That's pure blindness. There's no straight and narrow path."

"I know there's only one way out of here, Jackie Boy," he said. "And that path happens to be straight and narrow."

Donovan's only got a few more years, so I can understand where he's coming from. And he's right about Marty. Marty wants to save me. If he gets me an early parole,
he'll feel as if he's accomplished something. So I lie. Not for myself, but so Marty can feel like he's not wasting his time, and so I can go on telling stories. I like it. If it gets me an early parole, so be it. But I know I've got no chance. I may get out in twenty years, if I'm lucky, but what kind of life will I have then?

I know Marty will make mountains out of the Siamese twin story. I imagine him coming up with hokey theories about how I probably felt guilty that I lived and that my brother didn't. That even though I was a baby, the operation still had a big effect on me.

To tell the truth, though, it's the scar that bothers me. I tried keeping it hidden from most everyone, but once in a while there was no avoiding it, especially when I got to prison. Our cell block took showers together, so it was just a matter of time before someone saw it. Donovan was the first.

"Jesus," he said, "where did you get that?"
I told him the truth, but he said I'd better lie.

"Tell everyone it's a knife wound," he said. "They won't bother you if they think that."
I thanked him. It was my first week in prison. I'd just taken my shirt off before going to bed.

"That's got to be the craziest thing I ever heard," Donovan said.
"What?"
"That they cut your brother off like that," he said. "I've heard some crazy shit in my life, but that takes the cake. Let me see the scar again."
He was a big guy. I didn't want to refuse him anything. So I stood in the light.

"Were you two face to face?" he said.
"I guess so," I said. "We shared the same breastbone. Some of our ribs were mixed together. I'm missing a rib," I said.

"Just like Adam," he said.
"Adam who?" I said.

Donovan raised his hand above his head like he were asking a question in school.

"And God took a rib from Adam," he said, closing his eyes. "And He created Eve. Therefore shall a man leave his father and mother, and he shall screw his wife and they shall be one flesh."

"That's in the Bible?" I said.

"Sure is," he said. "Do you know what happened next?"

"They screwed like rabbits?" I said.

"Yes, indeed," he said. "And they had two kids. Cain and Abel. You know that story?"

"Cain slew Abel," I said.

"Yes, indeed," he said. "But that's not the crucial part of the story. The crucial part is that God preferred Abel over Cain. That pissed Cain off, so he killed his brother."

"Why did God prefer Abel?"

"No one knows," he said. "That's one of the great mysteries."

"What does this have to do with me?" I said. "I didn't kill my brother."

"I didn't say that," he said. "Quite the opposite. It seems to me God preferred you over your brother," he said. "Think about that."

"There's nothing to think about," I said. ""

"Did you ever think of getting a tattoo?" he said.

"On my chest?"

"Yeah," he said.

"I'm not crazy about tattoos," I said. "They're too permanent for me."

"That's the beauty of tattoos," he said. "They're a commitment."

"You have one?" I said.

He didn't bother answering. I think he was waiting for me to ask. He got up from his bunk and unbuttoned his shirt. He spread it wide. On his chest was a big, multicolored
butterfly. Reds, yellows, blues. Big, bright colors. It was then I realized he didn't have hair anywhere on his body. Not on his chest. Not on his head. Not on his fingers. Not even under his armpits. I got the chills.

Later, I found out he had a strap razor hidden in a hollowed-out bed post. He usually retrieved it after lights-out. Sometimes, late at night, I'd hear the razor scraping along his body, a dry shave, and it'd be a long time before I could fall back to sleep.

I stared at the tattoo. In the middle of both wings were his nipples, which were tattooed to look like eyes. Human eyes. I was mesmerized.

"You could get one like mine," he said. "It would cover the scar."

Then he reached over and put his finger on my chest. It was huge, hairless, and cold. It scared the hell out of me. But I didn't move. I never imagined myself like this, with a killer's finger on my chest.

He said, "You see how the scar runs this way on both sides? That could be the wings," he said.

With his finger still on my chest, he traced a slow outline of the butterfly.
He was an international incident, the lead story on the Five O'Clock News. The footage showed three men in black suits, U.S. secret service agents, wrestling him to the ground, while the Tangste Lama, bald, skinny, dressed in yellow and lavender robes, tried interceding on his behalf. The Lama was having an awkward time of it. He tugged on the sleeve of one agent, a burly man who remained stolid, unperturbed. But just before the footage ended, the agent lost his composure and stiff-armed the Lama in the chest, sending a violent jolt through the holy man's body.

The reporter said the incident led to a strong indictment of the United States by the Lama, who was on a worldwide lecture circuit for having recently won the Nobel Peace Prize. The footage switched to the Lama giving a speech on the White House lawn, the President standing a few feet away, looking mortified as the Lama used the incident to criticize U.S. foreign policy. The Lama smiled broadly, which was oddly unsettling, because it was incompatible with the message he was delivering.

"You are a paternalistic society," the Lama said. "You look upon so-called third world countries as children who need guidance. I asked, Mr. President, that I be given no bodyguards, but they were provided anyway without my consent."

When the footage ended, the newscaster swiveled her head significantly, looking into the camera, into millions of households, and said, "The unidentified man was taken
briefly into custody, but no charges were filed. The White House could not be reached for comment."

The unidentified man was reclining tragically on the sofa, one hand covering his eyes, the other gripping the armrest. The phone rang five times before he picked up. It was Harry Langston, his friend and colleague at the office.

"You were on the news," Harry said. "You attacked the Lama."

"I did not," Eric said.

"You looked like a fanatic."

"Stop it," Eric said. "I was there. I know what happened."

"I'm only telling you what I saw."

"What you saw wasn't what happened."

"Okay, then," Harry said. "Tell me what happened."

"I hugged him," Eric said. "That was all. A brief little hug. Then those thugs ambushed me. It happened so quickly. They must have been hiding in the bushes."

"I wonder if Cranshaw saw it," Harry said. "If Cranshaw saw it, he'd probably fire you."

"I ran into him accidently in the park."

"Who? Cranshaw?"

"No, the Lama," Eric said. "I was taking the short cut through the park. I was so lost in thought I forgot to take the right turn at the fountain. When I turned around, there he was."

"We were wondering what happened to you?" Harry said. "Cranshaw was impatient for his chicken salad. He couldn't think about anything else. We were ready to send a search party out for you."

"He was looking at me strangely," Eric said. "It was as if he almost knew what I was thinking about. I had to tell him."

"Tell him what?"
"What I was thinking about."

"What were you thinking about?"

"My fainting spells."

"You told him about that?" Harry said. "You meet one of the holiest men in the world, and all you can say to him is that you have fainting spells?"

"I think I've found enlightenment," Eric said. He removed his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Eric knew he shouldn't have uttered them. They were almost tantamount to saying he had daily conversations with God.

"What?" Harry said. "Just because you hugged the Tangste Lama, doesn't mean you're automatically enlightened, buddy. It doesn't work that way."

"What are the chances of running into the Tangste Lama?" Eric said. "It's got to be at least a million to one."

"When he's in Washington D.C., buddy, the chances are probably pretty good," Harry said. "Especially if he's taking unguided tours of the city. He doesn't quite blend in with the rest of the crowd, you know."

"The world is hundreds of thousands of miles wide," Eric said. "And I happen to run into the Tangste Lama in a small park in Washington D.C. What are the chances of that happening?"

"The world is two-thirds water," Harry said. "You've got to consider that. So now you're actually talking about one-third of the world. Then there's Antarctica. A barefoot man in robes wouldn't be in Antarctica. Or Iceland. Or Greenland. Or Siberia."

"I think this is a sign," Eric said. "I think I'm supposed to change my life."

"How?"

"I don't know," Eric said. "He's a Buddhist, right? I suppose I should check out Buddhism. See what that's all about."
"Well, if I remember my Buddhism correctly," Harry said, "you have to forsake material possessions before heading down the path toward enlightenment. Have you sold your car, or that brand new stereo system?"

"No."

"Well, that's the first step," Harry said. "Then you have to walk around in old clothes and beg for food, being very ascetic-like and rarely talking except to say something really profound. Cryptic stuff, mostly, but profound nonetheless. And when you discover that doesn't work, you go the route of disillusionment and forsake the forsaking of material possessions. You get to screw a lot and make as much money as you want. Eat, drink, and be merry, buddy."

"I already make a lot of money," Eric said.

"Well, there you go. Skip the ascetic part and start screwing, buddy."

"I'm being serious, here," Eric said. "Something important just happened to me. I can't just dismiss it."

"I'm sorry," Harry said. "I didn't mean to make light of it. So why did you hug the little guy?"

Eric sighed. "He seemed to care so much," he said. "He was so kind. He wasn't just listening, he was...he understood. It was as if he was looking right into me, right down into the center of me."

"So, he has X-ray vision," Harry said. "Like Superman."

"Forget I said anything."

"I'm sorry," Harry said. "I can't help it. He just looks so funny. Like a turtle without its shell. Know what I mean?"

"I'm hanging up."

"No, no," Harry cried. "I know this is important to you. I promise not to make fun of him anymore."
“It’s not that you’re making fun of him,” Eric said. “It’s that you’re making fun of what happened to me. I don’t think it was merely coincidence. I think it was destined to happen.”

“You really believe that?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, that’s interesting,” Harry said. “Why do you believe that?”

“It’s the things he said, I guess.”

“What did he say?”

“He said I’ve been reborn,” Eric said. “He said I’ve been given a second chance at life.”

“The Lama said that?”

“Yes.”

“Why’d he say that?”

“I don’t know,” Eric said. “I think it’s because I’ve been fainting a lot lately. Maybe he thinks it’s like death, and that every time I wake up I should consider myself reborn.”

“That’s silly,” Harry said. “Are you sure he said that?”

“That’s what he said. He said I should consider it a rebirth.”

“Some wise man,” Harry said. “What if you die next week of a brain hemorrhage? Huh? What would the Lama say then? I’ll tell you what he’d say. He’d say, ‘He should have gone to a doctor.’ Go to a doctor, buddy. Get it checked out. Even Mother Teresa relies on modern medicine.”

The following day, in the hallway of All Nation Insurance Company, Eric felt a dizzy spell coming. He rushed for the bathroom but made it as far as the drinking fountain, which he clutched at to keep himself on his feet. He fell anyway, hitting his forehead hard on the white porcelain of the fountain as he slithered to the floor. When he came to, Harry
and Cranshaw, his boss, were looking down at him. Cranshaw was slapping his face, something he'd probably learned from the television. Still dazed, Eric's immediate instinct was to punch back, which he did, hitting Cranshaw in the nose. Cranshaw fell back on his rear end, holding his nose. Then began a long, violent sneezing fit. Eric and Harry watched with amazement.

"Twelve times!" Harry declared when it was over. "That's got to be a new world's record."

Cranshaw's cage had been severely rattled. He was breathing heavily, one hand covering his heart, as if to keep it from battering his ribs, the other wiping at his upper lip and chin. His white shirt was dotted with blood.


"What's that?" Harry said.

"Defense," Eric repeated. "It's all about defense."

Harry glanced at Cranshaw, who was pinching his nose closed to keep the blood from flowing freely. He looked irritable and exhausted.

"You want to explain that to us, buddy," Harry said. "Or are you flashing back to the playing field?"

"No, no." Eric said. He raised his hand, as if warding off an attack. "It's all about defense."

"Yeah," Harry said. "We got that part. Want to elaborate?"

"It's about the body reacting to foreign elements," Eric said. "Or what it perceives as foreign elements. His sneezing fit, for example." He pointed to Cranshaw, who flinched, as if he thought Eric might slug him again. "It was a natural reaction to my punch. The body was trying to expel what it thought was a foreign and potentially harmful substance. And then there's the punch I threw at Cranshaw. That was instinct. A purely defensive maneuver by my body to protect itself against pain."
Harry and Cranshaw were watching him with detached, almost resigned, expressions. Eric made the situation worse by trying to explain. “Don't you see?” he said. “That's why I'm fainting. My body is reacting to some foreign element.”

He stared at them wide-eyed, trying futilely to bridge the mile-wide canyon between them.

“Don't you see?” he implored.

Harry and Cranshaw exchanged glances. Two secretaries rounded the corner of the hallway and hesitated briefly when they saw three, full-grown men sitting on the floor near the drinking fountain.

“Unhappiness,” Eric whispered, as the two women passed by. “My body is trying to expel unhappiness.”

Cranshaw struggled to his feet. “You're nuts, Lundy,” he said, loudly, for the benefit of the two women. “You need help.” He looked down at his shirt, noticing the blood for the first time. “Look at this,” he said. “This is a Sebastiani shirt. It cost me a pretty penny.”

Cranshaw stomped down the hallway to the bathroom, muttering to himself.

Eric turned to Harry. “Don't you see?” he said. “Everything has been pointing to this. The incident with the Lama and the bodyguards, it was about defense. They were trying to protect him even though he didn't want protection.”

“This all came to you during Cranshaw's sneezing fit?”

“It finally made sense,” Eric said. “His sneezing fit was only a piece of the puzzle. It completed the picture. The Lama was right, I have been reborn.”

“You're fainting,” Harry said. “You’re not being reborn. You have to take care of this. See a doctor, for Christ's sake. If you don’t, I’m going to tie you up and carry you there myself.”

“No, no, no,” Eric said. “No. Can’t you see it? It's simple. I've been avoiding things too long. I've been fooling myself, thinking I’m happy. But I’m not. Now, my
body is telling me. It’s telling me I might as well be dead. I might as well be walking through my life unconscious.”

“So, what are you going to do?”

“I guess the first thing I should do is quit my job.”

Harry gripped Eric’s bicep and glanced down the hallway. “Not so loud,” he said. “Cranshaw will hear you.”

“So what?”

“So what!” Harry said. “You make forty thousand a year. Why throw that away?”

“It’s not important anymore.”

“Don’t give me that Sixtie’s crap.”

“What Sixtie’s crap?”

“Tune on, turn off, drop out,” Harry said, dismissing the misquote with a wave of his hand. “There’s a good reason we chucked that crap. Because starvation is a pain in the ass. Remember Ramen noodles, buddy? And peanut butter on graham crackers? You want to go back to that? I don’t know about you, buddy, but I like a thick steak every once in a while. I like coming home, dropping a c.d. in the stereo, drinking a martini, relaxing on the couch. I like my B.M.W, too. I paid a lot for that baby. And I worked hard for it, buddy.”

“Take it easy, Harry.”

“Don’t tell me to take it easy,” Harry snapped. “I work hard for what I have.”

“I wasn’t being critical, Harry.” Eric patted Harry’s arm, as if he were pacifying a potential lunatic. Harry calmed down.

“I’m afraid, buddy.”

“Afraid of what?”

“That you’re right,” Harry said. “That all this is a bunch of crap.”

“I didn’t say it was a bunch of crap. You said it.”

Harry wasn’t listening, though. He had locked onto something, a habit Eric had accepted in his friend. Harry was tall and lanky and uncomfortable with himself, as if he
had knocked over too many vases with his long limbs. Eric always got the impression of a newly hatched bird, gangly and unsure, awkward on its feet, its denuded wings useless.

"I've been depressed, buddy," Harry said. "I gotta tell you. I come home sometimes and climb the walls. I think my life is an absolute lie. What do I have to show for all the time I've wasted in this damn building, filling out order forms, dictating letters? You know how many times I've signed my name to a piece of paper? Thousands, at least. I feel sometimes that a little bit of myself is taken away from me with every signature. You know what? I think about those naked villagers in those African countries—you know, the ones on the Discovery Channel—and I think they've got the real life. They're right there, close to the earth. They can probably track a giraffe or an elephant—whatever they hunt—and follow it for days. That's living, buddy, if you ask me. That's real living."

"Take it easy, Harry."

"I tell you what," Harry said. "Let's both of us quit. We can go to Africa. We can live like natives."

"Harry, take it easy."

"We can live close to the land. Hunt for our food."

"I didn't know you were so unhappy."

"I'm miserable, buddy. Don't leave me. Whatever plans you have, count me in. Okay?"

"I don't have any plans," Eric said. "I'm thinking maybe it wasn't a good idea to quit after all."

"You think so?"

"Get a grip, Harry."

"I'm a mess," Harry said. "Maybe I should go home. There's only an hour left in the day."

"That might be a good idea," Eric said. "Don't worry about Cranshaw. I'll take care of him."
“Okay,” Harry said. “I’m going home. I’m feeling kind of glum right now. But do me a favor, huh? If you change your mind, don’t leave without me.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Eric said. “I never planned on going anywhere.”

“That’s good,” Harry said. “That’s good. I’m going home.”

Harry stood and walked morosely down the hallway to his office. A second later, he emerged from his office, his brown tweed jacket flung over a shoulder. He waved his hand feebly. Eric returned the gesture. He sat in front of the drinking fountain a few minutes.

The thought of returning to his office suddenly depressed him. All day, he had been untangling the Dairyland accounts, which he’d temporarily inherited from Walter Bernard. Cranshaw fired Bernard last week after discovering Bernard had stopped logging insurance payments more than five years ago. When asked why he did it, Bernard said, “Because nobody seemed to care.” The records were hopeless, and despite Eric’s recommendation that every account be given a clean slate, Cranshaw insisted otherwise. “I’m sure some of those bastards haven’t paid their premiums,” Cranshaw said. “Find out.”

Down the hallway, Cranshaw emerged from the bathroom, wiping at the bloodstains on his shirt with a wet paper towel. He halted when he saw Eric still sitting on the floor.

“You still there?” he said. “You need a doctor or something?”

“No,” Eric said, rising to his feet. “I was just thinking.”

“I don’t pay you to think,” Cranshaw said. “I pay you to work.”

“Don’t be a jerk.”

“What?” Cranshaw bellowed. He marched down the hallway and halted in front of Eric, nose to nose, like a drill sergeant. “Who punched who, Lundy? And who’s the boss here?”

Cranshaw had stuffed toilet paper in his nostrils. He stared fiercely at Eric. Cranshaw was in his sixties, but he was a wiry man with a buried strength. Once, during a
meeting aimed at rallying the workplace during a sales slump, Cranshaw dropped to the floor and completed fifty push-ups. No one knew why. The effort had pumped him up, though, and Cranshaw gave a loud, impassioned pep talk. At one point, Harry shouted, “Rah-rah-rah, sis-boom-ba.” Cranshaw turned red. He shoved a heavy oak desk aside with one hand. “You got a problem?” Cranshaw shouted.

Harry squirmed. “Just being a team player.”

“Keep it up, Harry,” Cranshaw said, wagging his finger. “We’re in a real slump, here. If someone has to be laid off, you’ll make my job a lot easier. Just keep that up.”

After the meeting, Harry lifted one side of the desk with both hands, his neck muscles visibly bulging. “Must weigh at least a hundred pounds,” Harry had said. “I’m cowed. Don’t mess with Cranshaw. Don’t mess with that man.”

With toilet paper stuffed in his nostrils, though, Eric couldn’t take the man seriously. “I quit,” he said.

“What?” Cranshaw said.

“I quit.”

“You can’t quit.”

Eric looked at him quizzically. “Why?”

Cranshaw seemed thrown by the question. He shrank away from Eric. He couldn’t fight against this. He glanced at Eric, as if to say something, but instead his mouth hung open. Then he shook his head. “I don’t want you to,” he said.

“That’s too bad.”

“What do you want?” Cranshaw said. “You want a raise? I’ll give you a raise. How about that?”

Eric considered it briefly. “Why would you give me a raise?”

“Isn’t that what you’re after?”

“No,” Eric said. “I’m not after anything. On the contrary, I want nothing from you.”
"What do you mean?" Cranshaw said. "You must be after something."

"No," Eric said, shaking his head.

"What is this?" Cranshaw said. "Reverse psychology? Well, I'm not falling for it. Go if you want. I won't stop you."

"All right," Eric said. He turned to leave.

"Wait a second!" Cranshaw said. "You just can't leave like that."

"But you--"

"Never mind what I said," Cranshaw said, waving his hand. "You're after something. I know it. People just don't walk away from a good job. You're making forty thousand. You can't throw that away."

"Yes, I can," Eric said. "I quit. It's no joke."

Cranshaw's eyes widened. "You're serious, aren't you?"

Lunchtime the next day, Harry burst through Eric's front door. Eric was sitting on the couch in his boxer shorts, his living room in disarray. He had spent the morning packing his belongings, sorting the necessary from the unnecessary, but he couldn't figure out what was necessary. The task was too daunting. All he'd managed to do was make a mess of the living room.

"It's true!" Harry shrieked.

"What?"

"You quit," Harry said, pointing an accusing finger at Eric. "You lied to me. You were going to leave without me."

"I wasn't."

"Why are you packing then?"

"I'm moving," Eric said. "This house is too big for me."

"Where are you moving to?"

"I don't know yet," Eric said. "I was thinking of a place near the beach."
“There are no beaches in Washington, D.C.”

“I was thinking of the Seychelles,” Eric said. “I’ve heard it’s beautiful.”

“That’s Africa!” Harry said, pointing at him again.

“No, it’s not,” Eric said. “It’s an island. There are no islands in Africa.”

“It’s near Madagascar,” Harry said. “Madagascar is part of Africa.”

“No, it’s not.”

“You got a map?” Harry said. “I’ll prove it.”

“You’re nuts.”

“Get a map,” Harry said. “I’ll prove it to you.”

Eric rose reluctantly from the couch. He searched the bookcase for the world atlas and found it nestled between Roget’s Thesaurus and A Day in the Life of Australia.

He opened the atlas on the kitchen table. Harry stood beside him. When he found the section on Africa, Harry threw his finger down on Madagascar. “See!” he cried. “There it is. Just off the coast.”

“I thought it was in the Caribbean,” Eric said, bending over the book. He studied the little dots just north of Madagascar. They seemed puny, too small. He remembered driving through the Florida Keys, seeing the ocean on both sides of the islands, and how he felt like he would be swallowed up by water if a storm decided to blow in. Crossing the bridge into Key West, he felt he was driving off into the ocean.

“Those islands are small,” he said. “I think I’d feel hemmed in. Surrounded by water. Maybe it’s not such a good idea.”

“Those islands have been there for centuries,” Harry said. “They’re not suddenly going to fall into the ocean.”

“Atlantis disappeared,” Eric said.

“That’s a fictional city.”

“Really?” Eric said. “I thought it was real.”

“Fictional.”
"You’re pulling my leg."

"Get the encyclopedia," Harry said. "I’ll prove it to you."

"I don’t have encyclopedias."

"Get a dictionary," Harry said. "It’ll probably say in there."

"I believe you."

"No, you don’t," Harry said. "I can tell."

"I don’t want to quibble over this," Eric said, slumping into a kitchen chair.

They were silent for a moment. Harry sat down and heaved a sigh.

"You know why this is happening, don’t you?" Harry said.

"No," Eric said. "I don’t. But I have a feeling you’ll tell me."

"It’s Darla," Harry said. "You’re still grieving."

Eric turned away.

"That’s it," Harry said. "Isn’t it?"

"I’m not grieving anymore," Eric said. "That’s the problem."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I’m not grieving anymore," Eric said. "I’m over it. I don’t miss her anymore. At least not as much as I should. That frightens me."

"What’s wrong with that?" Harry said. "Christ, it’s been almost a year and a half since she died. You have to get on with your life. This is good," he insisted. "This is healthy."

"It’s not good," Eric said. "It can’t be good. I loved Darla. I loved her more than my own life, Harry. What happened to that? What happened to that love? It’s gone. I don’t feel it anymore, and that makes me sad. How could I love someone that much and lose it after only a year? I feel like I’m betraying her, Harry."

"She would want this," Harry said. "This is what she’d want. You know that. She’d want you to move on, buddy."
"I know," Eric said, "but that doesn't matter. It has nothing to do with her anymore. Don't you see? I'm living the same life, but I don't have the same life. She's gone. This life I have here was built around her. She's gone now, and this life is empty. Not because she's gone, but because I feel like I'm clinging to a life that isn't mine anymore. Do you know what I mean? I want something new, Harry. Something all my own. And that makes me feel selfish."

"Go to a doctor," Harry said. "Talk to a psychiatrist. They'll tell you it's normal. You can't grieve forever, buddy. You can't. Your body won't let you. You'd go crazy."

"I don't care if this is good," Eric said. "Or healthy. I loved her, Harry. I would have died for her. Now, I can go through an entire day and not think about her. How can my feelings change so drastically in just one year."

"A year and a half," Harry corrected.

"A year and a half," Eric conceded. "It's still the same."

"You know what this is about, don't you?"

"No. I don't. Tell me."

"You're afraid of death."

"What?"

"It's not your feelings for her you're worried about," Harry said. "It's that you don't want the same thing to happen to you. You don't want to be so easily forgotten."

"What?"

"Let's face it, buddy," Harry said. "What are you so worried about? When it comes right down to it, what are you so worried about?"

Eric stared, his brow furrowed.

"Dig deep," Harry said. "Get at the root of it. What's there? What do you see?"

"This is ridiculous," Eric said.

"No more ridiculous than saying you've been reborn. I'm helping you out here. Forget the Lama. He doesn't know you. I do. You were dazzled by him. Starstruck. Listen
to me, buddy. You're afraid of dying. That's okay. But don't throw away everything you've worked for just because some baldheaded guy tells you you've been reborn."

"How did we get here?" Eric said. "Somewhere, we made a huge leap and I missed it."

"It's not so farfetched," Harry said. "You and Darla created a dreamworld for yourselves. Don't get me wrong," Harry said, raising a hand to pacify him. "I'm not being critical. You two were in love. Deeply in love. I was there. I saw you two together. You were a dream couple. You two thought you were immortal. Then, suddenly," Harry said, snapping his fingers, "that world disappears. You grieve for a while. You're left behind in this dreamworld. But it's no longer a dreamworld. It's reality. And your facing it everyday. Staring it right in the eye. It's not pretty, is it?"

"No."

"It's what I live with every day, buddy. I'm thirty five years old and I've never been in love before. I thought I was. But I saw you and Darla together. That was real love. Whatever I had didn't compare. And, to tell you the truth, I don't think I'll ever be in love. I don't think it's in the cards for me. This is what I've been living with every day, buddy."

"I didn't know," Eric said.

"You didn't see."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault."

"I wish I'd known."

"It wasn't your problem."

"You should have told me."

"Told you what?" Harry said. "That I wanted what you had with Darla?"

"You wanted Darla?"

"No. I wanted the situation. I wanted to be in love like you two."

"It wasn't always roses."
"What is?"

"Good point."

They fell silent for a while. Eric bent over the atlas again, running his eyes along the East Coast of Africa. “Maybe this is a good idea,” he said.

“What?” Harry said.

“Going to Africa,” Eric said. “Maybe I need something like this.”

Harry leaned forward and placed his finger on Botswana. “See that?” he said.

“Botswana?”

“No, that,” Harry said. “Serowe. It’s a village in Botswana.”

“What about it?”

“I saw a documentary on it once,” Harry said. “It’s a model African village. Self-supporting. Independent. Close-knit. The people there work for the good of the community. They don’t expect much in the way of pay. It’s subsistence living, mostly, but there’s a lot of pride among the people.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I say we go there,” Harry said. “They allow white people. Dutch, mostly. They teach in schools, run the printing presses, help with architectural plans. That stuff.”

“We’re insurance accountants,” Eric said. “Who’s going to need life insurance there?”

“You’re missing the point.”

“What’s the point?”

“We’ll find our true calling there,” Harry said. “Maybe we were born to be tanners, or basket weavers, or cattleherders. Who knows?”

“That’s crazy.”

“No, it’s not,” Harry said. “Lots of people have done similar things. Chucked everything to live the simple life. Let’s face it, buddy, neither of us are happy. We won’t
be happy until we at least try something like this. I can't do it alone. I'm too afraid. But I could do it if you came with. I need you, buddy."

"You're serious about this. Aren't you?"

"It's a pipe dream, I know. But we've got to try, or we may end up regreting this moment for the rest of our lives."

"Suddenly," Eric said, "I don't think I know you. This isn't you. You were never like this."

"I've always been like this," Harry said. "I've just never told anyone. I thought it was a crazy idea. One of those things you think about, but never do. But you gave me the bug, buddy. You want this just as much as I do. I know you do. I'm hooked. I'm fixating. I spent all last night watching National Geographic videos. Lions of the Serengeti. Elephants. Masai villagers. I even had a dream last night that I married an African woman and had children and lived in a grass hut and ate elephant meat."

"I need a drink," Eric said.

"It's one in the afternoon," Harry said. Then, realizing he was late for work, he said, "Cranshaw will have a fit. I gotta get back."

"To hell with Cranshaw," Eric said. "Let's have a drink."

"He'll fire me," Harry said. "He's looking for an excuse to fire me. I gotta get back."

"You were just talking seriously about moving to Botswana, Harry. Africa, Harry. Thousands of miles away. A whole other continent, Harry. Why would you worry about Cranshaw firing you?"

"That's easy for you to say," Harry said. "You quit. You don't have to worry."

"I'm having a drink."

"Okay," Harry said. "I'll have one. But only one."

* * *
Eric knew he shouldn't have driven. Alcohol made him bold and too aggressive. He
dodged through traffic dangerously. Fifty yards from a yellow light, he stepped on the
accelerator. Twenty yards from the intersection, the light turned red. Eric slammed on the
brakes. They skidded to a halt. Harry was thrown forward onto the dashboard. He hit his
forehead hard. Eric felt the suitcases slam into the back of his seat. Harry's suitcase popped
open and showered them with clothes.

"You okay?" Eric said.

Harry was holding his forehead. A pair of boxer shorts draped his shoulder. "What
happened?"

"You hit the dashboard. You okay?"

"Am I bleeding?"

"I can't tell. Your hand is in the way."

Harry removed his hand tentatively, as though he thought his head might fall off.

"You're okay," Eric said. "You may get a knot on your forehead, but you're not
bleeding."

"My head hurts."

"Sorry."

"I think I may have broken something."

"In your forehead?"

"Stop here," Harry said, pointing out the window.

"We are stopped."

"I think I'm gonna be sick," Harry said. He opened the door and stepped out. He
walked unsteadily to the sidewalk and disappeared in an alleyway. Eric pulled to the
curbside. While he waited for Harry to return, he gathered the loose clothes and stuffed
them into the suitcase. On the floor of the backseat, he found a large woman's hairdryer.
They had packed hastily and drunkenly, but Eric couldn't understand how Harry thought
the dryer might be useful. He wasn't sure there would be electricity in Botswana. He also
expected haircare wouldn't be a primary consideration. He touched his own hair, thick and curly, and thought of shaving his head.

"I think this is a bad omen," Harry said. He was standing on the passenger side of the car. Eric stood straight and looked at him from across the roof.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," Harry said. "But I'm thinking we should turn around. Think this over."

"Think what over?" Eric said. "We've closed our accounts. We've bought our tickets. We've packed our belongings. We've quit our jobs. We've decided. Let's not run around in circles."

"What about my stuff?" Harry said. "My Beemer? My stereo? All that stuff in my apartment?"

"Call your brother," Eric said. "He'll take care of it."

"He'll take it," Harry said. "He'll drive that Beemer into the ground."

"Why did you bring a hairdryer?" Eric said.

Eric pointed the dryer at Harry. It looked like a raygun from a cheap sci-fi movie.

"I thought it might come in handy."

A couple of hours later, they were sitting in an airport bar called The Hangar, waiting for their flight to Pretoria, South Africa. From there, they were told they would have to take a bus to Botswana. A large blue knot had formed on Harry's forehead. Harry touched it gingerly every once in a while and would wince.

"Stop touching it," Eric said.

"I can't help it," Harry said. "It feels like I have a billiard ball in my head. My head actually feels heavier."

Two empty pitchers littered their table. They were working on a third.

"You should have told me you were unhappy," Eric said.

"I'm not unhappy," Harry said. "I'm having a great time."
"Not now. I mean what you said earlier, about never falling in love and living alone."

"I think too much," Harry said. "I try not to. But sometimes even the television doesn't distract me. I get this feeling sometimes like I'm being crushed. Hemmed in. Know what I mean?"

Eric nodded. "Now I do," he said. "Since Darla's been gone, now I do."

"It's like I'm suffocating." Harry rubbed his eyes. He slumped in his chair and sat dejectedly, staring at his empty glass. Eric grabbed the pitcher and poured.

Suddenly, Harry's eyes widened. He pointed and said, "It's the Lama!"

Eric turned. The bar was empty. "Where?" he said.

"On the television."

Eric squinted at the television set above the bar. A tabloid news show was replaying the incident of two days ago. The bartender was staring at the set with his arms crossed over his chest. He turned to Eric. "That's you," he said. "I knew you looked familiar when you came in here."

"It's not what you think," Eric said.

"This guy's been reborn," Harry said. "He hugged the Lama."

"Why'd you attack the guy?" the bartender said.

"I didn't," Eric said.

"Sure looks like it," the bartender said, glancing up at the television.

"That's t.v.," Harry said. "Never believe what you see on t.v."

"Why do you want to mess with a guy like that for?" the bartender said. "He's harmless. Some guy wins the Nobel, he gets invited to the U.S. of A., and some guy jumps him."

"I didn't jump him," Eric said.

"He and the Lama are pals, mister," Harry said. "The Lama told him he's been reborn. Do you know what that means?"
The bartender stared.

"If you knew your Buddhism, you'd know what that means," Harry said. "It means my buddy here has been enlightened."

"My brother ran a commune in Nevada," the bartender said. "Don't tell me about enlightenment. I've seen that crowd. They're moochers. That's all. They don't want to work for a living. They think they can live off of love. You ever try to eat love? It ain't very filling."

"Where's your brother now?" Eric said.

"Dead," the bartender said. "Some nutcase killed him for a bag of dope. My brother would have given it to him, if he'd only asked. That's the kind of guy he was. So don't tell me about that enlightenment crap. In this country, it gets you killed."

They walked unsteadily through the airport to their gate. Neither of them had spoken for a while. They suddenly seemed to realize the magnitude of what they were about to undertake.

"There's something I gotta tell ya," Harry said.

"What?"

"There's something I gotta tell ya."

"What do you gotta tell me?"

"I gotta tell ya this," Harry said. "But I don't know how."

"What is it?" Eric said.

"I gotta pee," Harry said, looking around. Then he whirled to face Eric. "But that's not what I gotta tell ya. I gotta pee first before I tell ya."

"All right."

"I think there's a bathroom back there," Harry said, pointing behind them.

"There's one right here," Eric said, pointing to the bathroom next to them.
“Oh,” Harry said. He looked puzzled by the sign, as if wondering if the stick figure represented a man or a woman. He set his suitcase on the ground and went inside.

Eric walked to a nearby newsstand. He picked up a copy of Time magazine with the Lama on the cover. The banner declared him Man of the Year. He flipped through the magazine. There he was, Page 102, a sidebar. A grainy photograph showed the Lama being stiffed-armed by the agent. Eric was on the ground, his arm wrenched brutally behind his back. He had been handcuffed before he knew what was happening.

The headline read, "Lama Hears Sound of One Hand Clapping."

He read a few paragraphs. He was still an unidentified man. The unidentified man's motives were still unsure. Still, no one was talking; not the White House, not the Lama, and, obviously, not the unidentified man.

He returned the magazine to the rack. Harry was approaching.

“What do you have to tell me?” Eric said.

“Whaddaya mean?”

“You said you have to tell me something.”

Harry thought hard for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders. “Forgot,” he said. “Must notta been important.”

“Think.”

“I can’t,” Harry said. “Makes me dizzy.”

Eric picked up his bag. They walked. When they passed through the metal detectors, Harry tripped the alarm. A red light flashed. A pinging noise was heard. Harry stood beneath the flashing red light as if a great notion had come to him.

He was ordered to step back. He removed a great wad of keys and a Zippo lighter from his pocket. He tripped the alarm again. He removed his belt. It had a silver buckle. The alarm still sounded. He removed his watch and was told to check all his pockets. The alarm sounded again. The security officer told him to remove his shoes. "They might have metal eyelets," he explained. Harry took off his shoes. He looked at Eric sadly.
"This is another omen," Harry said. "We should turn around."

Eric beckoned him forth. They were given the green light.

The airplane lifted. Eric felt his stomach tighten. This could be it, he thought. This could be the one that decides to crash. The engine falls off. The landing gear doesn't retract. The pilot's drunk. Like me.

"I remember!" Harry shouted.

"Remember what?"

"What I had to tell ya."

"What?"

"Darla and I had an affair," Harry said.

"What?"

"Yeah," Harry said. "I've been meaning to tell ya all these years, but I just couldn't."

"What?"

"I figured I could tell ya now, since we're headed to Africa. Clean the slate, you know?"

Eric threw his fist into Harry's face. The punch caught him just below the eye. Harry's head snapped back. "Ah," he said, and he covered his eye. Eric threw another punch, but Harry had the foresight to block it. The punch grazed his lip anyway.

Harry cried a few minutes. "I deserved that," he said.

He cried some more, mumbling something about his Beemer and stereo system, then he fell asleep.

Eric leaned over and wiped the blood from Harry's lip. Harry flinched, but didn't wake. Eric pressed his forehead against the window. He saw the checkerboard pattern of the countryside. Fifteen minutes later, they were over the ocean. There was so much water. So much could be down there, he thought. Beneath the waves.
He woke up hours later. The sun had already set. He was sober, but his head hurt and his stomach was roiling. He glanced over at Harry. Harry was bent over in his seat, head between his knees, a barf bag open on the floor at his feet.

Eric turned away, feigning sleep, feeling suddenly as if he'd just had a one-night stand with Harry, and was embarrassed to face him. He remembered the one-night stand a few months after Darla's death. He'd picked up a secretary at an office party and they had gone to his house. In the morning, he woke up to find her staring at Darla's picture.

"Is this her?" she said.

He snatched the photograph from her hand. "That's Darla," he said.

They made love again that morning, because he didn't want to talk. That only made it worse. She tried cuddling afterward. He got up to take a shower. He didn't invite her. He cried in the shower, thinking the running water would drown his sobs. He thought he'd profaned the memory of Darla. When he returned to the bedroom, she was already dressed.

"You don't have to call me," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"I heard you crying in there," she said. "I'll understand if you don't call."

Hold her, he'd said to himself. Go to her, and hold her. Tell her she's not to blame for this.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I thought I was ready for this."

He felt a tug on his sleeve. He opened his eyes.

"Can I tell you something?" Harry said

"Sure."

"I'm scared," Harry said.

Eric reached for Harry's hand. "I am too," he said, squeezing his hand. "I'm sorry I hit you."

"Don't worry about it," Harry said.
Harry turned to him. His face was pale, his jaw trembling. "Tell me we're doing the right thing?" he said.

Eric looked at the knot on Harry's forehead, the bruise already forming beneath his eye, the fat lip. He couldn't say anything. He tried picturing Darla and Harry together, but the image wouldn't form.
FRANKLIN, JEFFERSON AND Geronimo

He was sure his students were beginning to suspect. Hungover, his stomach liquid and rumbling, his tongue thick with thirst, he faced the yawning, empty faces of his students.

He said, “The Boston Tea Party was committed under the influence of alcohol.”

This information was greeted with stony, listless gazes. He expected the comment would lift his students up, make them bristle attentively. No such luck. Not even tabloid education interested this class. He dropped the stubble of chalk into the blackboard tray, the clatter meant to accentuate his next comment.

“Oh, stupid question time.”

He seated himself with elaborate nonchalance on his desk top. They faced him--eyes averted, heads bowed--as if they inhabited a realm invisible to him. He felt like an arm-waving loon, as tedious as a B-movie hero. Juan Rodrigo in The Passionate Bullfighter.

This was Peter Nance’s fifth semester teaching American History at Rend Lake Community College. For two weeks he had been lecturing on the American Revolution. In the last few days, however, he’d taken advantage of his student’s disinterest to ramble on about Benjamin Franklin, his favorite specimen of the era. He’d told them that though Franklin was a genius, he was also an eccentric. He explained some of Franklin’s
peculiarities, such as his penchant for taking “air baths,” which meant he’d jump around naked in the outdoors. The picture of an overweight, balding, double-chinned Benjamin Franklin prancing in the nude had always brought a laugh. But not this class. This class was a different breed. A whole other animal.

“Does anybody know what stupid question time is?” Heads ducked, eyes wandered to corners of the room. “Okay, I’ll tell you, then. It’s when you ask me a stupid question -- any question -- and I answer it.”

He surveyed the classroom. “Is that clear?”

No one answered.

He pointed to a natty-haired young man slouched in his chair. “Jason.” He was sure that was his name. “You’re first.”

Jason smirked, shrugged his shoulders. “What time is it?”

Peter glanced behind him at the clock hanging above the blackboard. In moments of the most profound silence, while awaiting answers to his questions, he sometimes believed he could hear the ticking of the second hand.

“Ten-thirty.”

He pointed to Amanda Garcia, who scribbled tirelessly in her notebook the entire class time. He guessed she was writing love letters. “Next question,” he said to her.

“Anything?” she asked.

“Anything,” he confirmed.

“How many absences are we allowed?”

“None.”

“None?”


“Do we have a final exam?”

“Not today.”
A chuckle rose from the back of the classroom. He glanced at the three students in the last row: Samson, Carmen and Arturo. They were the gigglers of the class, the ones constantly whispering to one another. He guessed Samson and Carmen were dating, and that Arturo was a tag-along, a sidekick, a Pancho to Samson’s Cisco. He glanced at Carmen: nineteen, Hispanic, already sultry. She had an oval face, a plump bottom lip, and eyes that said, Maybe.

“Carmen, you’re next.”
She didn’t hesitate. “Are you married?” she asked.
“No, and I never have been.”
Without waiting to be called on, Arturo asked, “Are you gay?”
“No, and I never have been,” he said.
The classroom burst into laughter. Arturo looked momentarily disappointed. “Was that you’re question, Arturo?” Peter said.
“No.”
“Okay, then, what’s your question?”
“When was the last time you had sex?”
“There hasn’t been a last time. I hope.”
Laughter. Carmen smiled. Peter liked what was happening. He turned to Samson in anticipation. “Samson, you’re next.”
“I can’t think of anything.” Samson sat slumped in his seat, his arms crossed over his chest. He was a full-blooded Apache Indian, big in the upper body, thick veins running the length of his forearms. He had lazy eyes, always seeming to regard Peter with contempt.
“You can’t think of a stupid question?”
Samson shook his head.
“Not one?”
Samson sat immobile, his jaw rigid.
"Which way is north?" Peter offered. "Why does the sun rise in the east and set in the west? Who invented the zipper? Why do people drive slow in the fast lane? Why does the telephone always ring while you're having sex? Should you answer it?"

Peter's eyes were wide. He felt a sweat breaking on his forehead. He needed a drink.

That night, he sat in his leather armchair watching a Norman Rockwell documentary on PBS. He'd had a few glasses of wine already. His dog Nixon, a nervous, high-strung miniature schnauzer, was asleep at his feet. Erma Bombeck was expostulating on Rockwell's genius for capturing a story in every painting.

He laughed. "Genius?" he asked the room. "Genius?"

The telephone rang.

"Talk to me," he said to the caller.

"Mr. Nance?"

"Yes."

"This is Carmen Gutierrez, from your history class."

He stiffened. "Yes."

"I sit in the back, with Samson and Arturo."

"Yes, I know who you are, Carmen. What can I do for you?"

"Well, I just want to say that I really enjoy your class."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I think all that history stuff is interesting."

"Really?" He eased into the recliner, set his wine glass on the end table. He was being buttered up, he knew, but had no idea where she was headed.

"Yeah, I do."

"Tell me what stuff you find interesting."

"What do you mean?"
“I mean, what specifically about the class do you find interesting?”

“Well....”

“The Continental Congress? The Bill of Rights? The grievances against the king?”

“The what?”

“Or do you like the Boston Tea Party? Or Paul Revere’s night ride? The really cool stuff.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“One if by land, two if by sea. The Redcoats are coming. The Redcoats are coming.”

“What are you talking about?”

“History, Carmen, history.”

“I guess I don’t know much about history.”

The old Platters song. He thought of singing it aloud, but that was history also. Ancient history to Carmen. He picked up his wine glass. Nixon nudged his hand. He scratched the dog’s head. “Well, then, what do you like about the class?”

“I like the stupid questions.”

“Carmen, that’s not history.”

“I think you should be a stand-up comedian.”

“I’m glad you think I’m funny, but I hope you’re learning something about American history. We have a quiz next week.”

She acted as if she hadn’t heard him. “I also think you’re very attractive.”

He drained his wine glass, swallowed. “Really?” He was being tape recorded. He knew it. He pictured her face; sly, mocking, as she tried to bait him into incriminating himself, holding a microphone to the mouth piece. Then he pictured Samson sitting next to her. This was his idea. He would have talked her into it. He imagined Samson leaning into the ear piece, straining to hear the conversation. No, he would be on another line. He listened for background noises: faint breathing, stifled laughter.
"Yes, I'm attracted to your mind."

"My mind," he said, flatly. He remembered a photograph he once saw of a human brain: gray, glistening, soggy.

"I think you're..." She paused, searching for the appropriate word. He set his empty wine glass on the end table. Finally, she blurted out, "Intense."

He knew then she was not baiting him, and that Samson was not involved. He briefly imagined his arms and legs entangled with hers. But why was she interested in him? He'd like to think because he was handsome and intriguing, but intuitively he knew she was probably trying to ensure a good grade.

"Listen, Carmen, we should get something straight," he said. "First of all, it's unethical for me to become involved with one of my students. I could get into a lot of trouble. But that doesn't matter anyway, because I'm married."

"You said today you weren't married."

Shit. He did say that. "Did I say that?"

"Yes, you did."

He needed more wine. He reached for the bottle on the kitchen counter, but the telephone cord wasn't long enough. "Hold on, Carmen."

"What?"

"Hold on. I'll be right back."

He grabbed the wine bottle, pulled the cork. The wine gurgled falling into the glass. He loved the sound. And the smell of wine; the vapors blossoming to his nostrils. He'd been drinking too much, he knew. He'd been too tense, too alert. He couldn't read, watch television, without becoming restless.

Talking. There was too much talking. The world was spilling over with people wanting to be heard. You couldn't talk about beauty anymore. The world wasn't as simple as sunflowers, or wheat fields, or starry nights. It was about incest, disease, famine, bigotry, blah, blah, blah.
He wanted to look the universe straight in the eye and say, blah.

He sipped his wine, then turned to the receiver lying on the kitchen table, an upended insect. He wondered what Carmen was hearing; static, emptiness, the hum of air brushing past the mouthpiece. He pictured her again, his body covering hers, her fingers clutching him. He stood leaning against the counter, staring at the telephone, the glass of wine in his hand, when he heard the bleating of a disconnected line. He reached for the receiver and hung up.

Carmen was not in class the next day. Samson and Arturo sat in the back row, Samson with his chair tipped back to the wall, his arms crossed over his chest, glowering, or so Peter thought. Peter would talk about the Indian wars later in the semester, and wondered how Samson would react. Grant, Custer, Stonewall Jackson; he did not like their policy toward the Indians, but hey were important figures in American history. Perhaps he would skip the issue altogether.

That morning, he'd been lecturing about Thomas Jefferson -- his term as vice president, his falling out with John Adams, his views on restricted government -- when he noticed Arturo was asleep: head bowed, chin to chest. Samson still sat glowering. Amanda was scribbling furiously. Jason was rolling his pen back and forth on his desk. He'd never taught students like this. Not at this level.

He decided to change tactics.

He told them that though Jefferson was famous for the line “All men are created equal,” he nonetheless kept hundreds of slaves at his plantation in Virginia. He told them that Jefferson was believed to have slept with his house servant Sally Hemmings, who was rumored also to have borne him several children. He mentioned that Adams and Jefferson, the fathers of independence, died on the same day, July 4, 1826, and that on his deathbed, Adams was reported to have said, “Jefferson lives, so does independence.” Jefferson had died four hours earlier.
They were perched in their seats, listening intently. It worked every time.

Despite this, he felt keenly Carmen’s absence. Whenever he looked to the back row, he was met by Samson’s stare; an accusation. He’d talked to Isabel, his division head, earlier that morning. When he walked into her office, he noticed for the first time the man’s picture on her desk. How long had it been there? Had he simply not noticed? He didn’t go into details about the situation with Carmen, as he’d intended. Seeing the photograph unsettled him. Instead, he told her only that he had a potential problem with a student and wanted to cover all his bases.

“In case something develops,” he said. “I just want you to know now.”

The man in the photograph had dark, close-cropped hair, an angular face. He looked rugged.

“What’s the problem, Peter?” She seemed genuinely concerned, and at that moment he realized he was using Carmen as an excuse to talk to her. He missed her. Although he’d been stoic about their break up, he’d only agreed to it because he didn’t want to seem clinging or dependent. He knew their split was for the best, but he wanted her to be as despondent as he was. Instead, two weeks later, she’d taken another lover. The man in the photograph, he was sure.

“It’s nothing serious,” he said. “Just a hunch. It could turn out to be nothing. It probably will. I just want to be safe on this one.”

“I wish you could be more specific, Peter.”

“If anything happens, I’ll let you know,” he said. “Right now, I’d rather just sit on it.”

The man seemed confident, sure of himself. He looked as if he ate rust for breakfast.

She leaned toward him, touched his knee. “Is everything else all right?” she asked.

He glanced at her hand on his knee, her fingers delicately touching. He slapped it. She recoiled, rubbing the back of her hand, her eyes wide. “What did you do that for?”
"Don't touch me," he said.
"I'm trying to help."
"No, you're not," he said. "You want me to suffer. Your pity is a disguised form of manipulation."
"What?"

It was brilliant, a beautiful insight. He was onto something. He glanced at the man's picture on her desk: Sean Connery as 007, Burt Reynolds in Deliverance
"You want me to see the photograph," he said. "You want to flaunt. You want to parade your happiness in front of me, wave your smelly flag of freedom under my nose."
Her mouth was slightly agape. "You're crazy."
"That's better," he said. "Be cruel. Be honest. Be yourself."
"I'm not listening to this."
"Why start now?"
"Get out."

He stood. His hands were shaking. He felt unsteady on his feet.

Carmen did not show up the rest of the week. Friday night, he sat listening to All Night Jazz on the radio, a glass of Cabernet Sauvignon in his hand. He would have to call Carmen, ask if she planned on dropping the class. If not, he would have to discuss the absence policy, explain that he was now within his rights to boot her from the course. He'd been trying for an hour to dial her number, but each time dropped the receiver in its cradle before punching the final digit. In that time, he'd had two glasses of wine and was on his third.

This aspect of teaching he did not like. The college, though, required such intervention, because their students were classified mostly as non-traditional: high school drop-outs, troubled teens, returning students, vocational students. In other words, people
unfamiliar with the education process. The college considered it guidance. He considered it handholding.

He dialed Carmen’s number quickly, not giving himself time to think, and began humming to “Lady of the Lavender Mist,” his fingers drumming the kitchen table where he sat.

Someone answered. A faint crackle of static. Carmen said, “Hello?”

“Hello. Carmen?”

“Yes?”

He cleared his throat. “This is Mr. Nance, your history instructor.”

There was a brief silence. He was about to go into his prepared speech, when she finally spoke. “Hello, Mr. Nance.”

He sensed timidness in her voice, and felt compelled to put her at ease. “How are you Carmen? We missed you in class.”

“You did?”

“Yes, we did.”

“I’ve been sick,” she said, hastily.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Carmen,” he said. “I wish you would have called, though. Let me know you wouldn’t be coming to class.”

“I didn’t think it mattered,” she replied.

“I hope you’re not embarrassed about what happened.” He shouldn’t have said that. He should have said, Of course it matters, if you plan on passing the course. It was then he realized he was drunk.

“Wouldn’t you be embarrassed?”

He hesitated. “I don’t know. Perhaps. But there’s no need for you to feel that way.

What’s happened won’t affect your standing in class.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“Will we see you next week?”
"I guess."

"If you miss anymore classes, Carmen, your grade may be affected." He said this in a cautionary tone, paternal.

She replied in a mock-childish voice. "Thank you for your concern, Mr. Nance."

"Call me Peter."

"Peter," she said, as if testing the name.

He felt almost giddy, a teenager again. Carmen’s coyness was invigorating.

"It’s a Friday night, Carmen. Why aren’t you out with your friends?"

"Nobody called."

"Really? Where’s Samson?"

"I don’t know."

He’d gone too far. He had to back out gracefully. "Come over."

"Now?"

"Yes."

He sat at the kitchen table, gripping his drink, scotch on the rocks. Carmen was thumbing nervously through his collection of CDs. Nixon sat beside her, wagging his tail expectantly. When he’d heard her car pull into the drive, he realized he’d made a mistake, which was further apparent when he opened the door. She seemed too eager, too awestruck. He knew he couldn’t live up to her expectations. She wanted an affair with an older, more educated man, someone who would graduate her from men like Samson, allow her to skip a few years of dead-end romances. It wasn’t as easy as that, though. Nothing was ever that easy.

"You have a great collection," she said.

"Thank you."

She stood uncomfortably, glanced around his apartment. He did nothing to make her feel at ease. Her gaze fixed on a print of Picasso’s Guernica. He’d bought it recently
from a second-hand store. He found it sitting atop a mahogany dresser, amid table lamps, upended chairs, jelly jars, ancient Coca-Cola bottles, and felt somehow that the print had been waiting for him to pick it up. He watched Carmen as she tried to discern the tangle of bodies, rubble and incompatible images.


"It's weird," she said, screwing up her eyes. Then she added, as if in afterthought, "It's ugly."

"That's the point," he said. "It's supposed to depict the ugliness of war."

"Is he the guy who cut off his ear?" Carmen asked.

"That was Van Gogh."

"I don't understand it," she said, as if she hadn't heard him. "Just because a guy is crazy, they call him a genius. Why do people like this stuff?"

"What do you like?" he said. "Norman Rockwell?"

"Who's he?"

"A painter."

She shrugged. "I guess I don't know much about painting."

"What do you know about, Carmen?"

"I'm in nursing," she said. "I know about that."

"A Florence Nightingale."

"Who?"

"Florence Nightingale," he said.

"Who's that?"

"Florence Nightingale," he insisted. "The nurse...the nurse..." He clutched his head.

"Are you all right?"

He covered his face with his hands. "I'm fine."

"Are you crying?"
He shook his head. "No. No."

"You were in love with Florence, weren't you?" she said.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up to see her standing in front of him.

"It's okay," she said.

She ran her hand through his hair, attempting to soothe him. He knew the feeling coming over him, and yet he felt powerless to it. He reached up and began unbuttoning her blouse. Her hand stopped its course through his hair, resting at the base of his skull. If she stopped him, it would be before he reached the last button. She didn't. He untucked her shirt and parted it, resting his cheek against her warm belly. She stroked his head. He pressed her to him, but felt he couldn't get close enough. He wanted to inhabit her young flesh.

He lifted his head, removed her shirt, draped it across a chair. One sleeve fell to the floor, its weight threatening to pull the rest of the shirt after it. He unfastened her skirt, and before letting it fall to the floor, he wondered why he wasn't feeling desire for her. The skirt dropped to her ankles. She stepped out, nudged it aside with her foot.

She was lithe, young, certainly beautiful, but he wasn't aroused.

She reached back, unhooked her bra, let it fall. Her breasts were full, firm, unreal, as if carved from marble, a Michelangelo. He leaned back in his chair, dipped a finger into his drink. She slipped out of her panties and stood before him naked.

He stirred his drink with his finger, then stood, holding his glass in one hand. He cupped her breast with his free hand. She shuddered. He caressed her nipple with his thumb, ran his hand across her ribs, along her hip. Her eyes closed, breath escaped, brushed his cheek. His fingers trailed into her pubic hair. Her head tipped upward, lips parted.

He felt nothing for her. He stepped back. For a fleeting moment, she remained as she was, anticipatory, yielding. Then her eyes opened, saw he had moved away, and she seemed to awaken, as if from a trance.
"Put your clothes back on."

"What?"

"Get dressed. Put your clothes back on."

"I don't understand."

He said nothing more, turned, walked to the kitchen, dumped the scotch into the sink. With his back to her, he began rinsing his glass, running the sponge along its inside. He shut off the water. She was crying. He reached for the dish towel, did not turn to look at her, and dried the glass. He placed it back in the cabinet. Then he began washing the rest of the dishes: a dinner plate, a coffee cup, a saucer, two spoons. The water still running, he wiped the counters clean of bread crumbs, coffee stains, water marks. When he was done, he shut the water off, stood listening. There was no sound. He stood at the sink a long time, listening, until he was certain she was gone.

He drank all weekend. Monday morning, he arrived at work hungover, wearing sunglasses. Isabel called him into her office.

"You look like hell," she said.

"Thank you," he said. "I can always count on you for a kind word."

Isabel shook her head, then tossed her pen onto the desk. "We need to talk, Peter, set things straight between us."

His stomach rumbled, a liquid sound. He stood. "That would be wonderful," he said, "but I have to teach in a few minutes."

"Sit down," she commanded. Her face was knotted with rage. Color was rising in her cheeks. He knew how to fluster her, push her buttons; she didn't feel comfortable bossing people around. But she had to. That was her job.

"I have a class to teach," he said. "You don't want me to be late, do you?"
She hesitated, unable to argue his point. He walked out of her office, expecting her to stop him.

When he entered the classroom, he looked immediately to the back row. Carmen was not there. Samson sat as always: chair tilted back, arms crossed over his chest, glowering. If he knew, he wasn't showing it. Arturo was already sitting comfortably, prepared for sleep, his head resting on the desk. He was vaguely aware of the rest of the students, half-attentive, there because they had to be.

His last lecture had been on Manifest Destiny: the westward expansion, gold prospectors, fur trappers, sodbusters, the land of milk and honey. This, naturally, led him to the Indian wars, the subject for the day. He glanced at Samson, then began talking about the Trail of Tears. He described the two thousand mile journey from North Carolina to Oklahoma: 18,000 Cherokee Indians rounded up and escorted at gunpoint by the U.S. Cavalry; poor rations of rancid meat, lice-ridden bread, rotten corn; dysentery, ringworm, small pox, the flu; Indians dropping dead on the trail and left unburied where they fell.

He glanced to the back row. Samson sat as before, but the glower was gone. He seemed lost, confused. The rest of the students sat as always.

"Samson," he ventured. "What do you think of this?"

Heads turned. Arturo sat up, attentive, watching Samson.

"I think it sucks," Samson declared.

Arturo laughed, believing, no doubt, that Samson was commenting on the class.

"Yes, it does," Peter said. "It's a bleak chapter in American history."

Samson leaned forward, righting his chair, its legs thunking loudly on the tiled floor. He looked around the classroom, demanding attention. "My great, great grandfather fought with Geronimo," he said.

"Really?" Peter said.

"He killed a lot of white men."

Arturo laughed again. Samson gave him a cold look. "He killed Mexicans, too."
“What else do you know about him?” Peter asked.

“My grandmother won’t talk about him,” he said. “She’s ashamed of him.”

“What?”

Samson shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know.”

“Because he killed people?”

“He was a warrior,” Samson declared.

Peter nodded thoughtfully.

That night, Isabel called and told him he had to stop trying to manipulate her, that their relationship was strictly professional.

He said, "That's good. Did the musclehead put you up to this?"

"I could have you fired," she said.

"I'd protest, take it up for committee review, take you to court," he said. "I'd tear you to pieces. And you know it."

She slammed the receiver down. He poured himself a bourbon. He sat slack-jawed in his leather armchair, gripping his drink, watching Love Story. Ryan O'Neal was bent over Ali McGraw's bedside, weeping. He raised the glass to his lips. The doorbell rang. He switched channels to a station showing Victory at Sea.

He opened the door. Samson was holding a gun. He slammed the door shut and stood frozen, immobile, feeling as helpless as if he were falling, unable to stop the progress of his descent. After a moment, Samson calmly opened the door and stood before him, the gun held low, hip-level.

"Samson, it wasn't what you think."

"Take off your clothes."

"What?"

"You heard me."
Samson reached back, drew the living room curtains shut. He hurried to the telephone, yanked the cord from the wall. He turned, swivelling at the hip. "You deaf?"

"There's no need for this, Samson."

Samson cocked the hammer, raised the gun, pointed it at his head. Peter dropped his drink, flung up his hands. The glass thunked on the carpet. Bourbon splashed on his feet. "Take it easy, Samson."

"Take off your clothes."

Peter undressed quickly. He hesitated at his underwear, but Samson's face was set hard, and he pushed his boxer shorts to his ankles. He stood naked, except for his black socks. His skin was pasty. His penis had recoiled, a button between his legs. Samson stared, half-smiling. He directed Peter to the kitchen table and told him to sit. Samson sat opposite Peter, pointing the gun. Nixon sniffed at Samson's foot.

"What's the dog's name?" Samson asked.

"Nixon."

"Nixon? Why Nixon?"

"He's named after the president."

Samson patted the seat next to him, calling the dog's name. Nixon jumped up in the chair and sat between them, staring dumbly at the wall, his tongue lolling. "He has no idea what's going on?" Samson said. "He's the lucky one."

"What do you want, Samson?"

Samson became thoughtful, as if he'd been asked a difficult question, then finally he said, "I want to know what you care about?"

"Huh?"

"I want to know what you care about?"

Peter thought a moment. The question was simple, but he couldn't think of anything. He was scared, he was naked, and he was beginning to feel cold. He reached for the bottle of bourbon. Samson snatched it away from him.
"This?" Samson said, holding up the bottle. He shook it. "Is this what you care about?"

"I don't care about anything," Peter said.

Samson put the gun to Nixon's head. "Don't you care about the dog?"

Peter raised his hand, alarmed. "Don't."

"See, you care about something."

Nixon sniffed at the gun, then licked the barrel. Booming noises came from the television: anti-aircraft guns. Peter imagined the deck cannons blasting, recoiling, the smoke billowing.

"What's on the t.v.?" Samson asked. He was digging in the front pocket of his shirt.

"Victory at Sea."

Samson nodded, placed a handful of bullets on the table. "Good show. My grandaddy was in that war."

"Really?" Peter eyed the bullets nervously. He shivered.

"Army. Private, first class. 116th Regiment. All Indians."

Peter nodded. He sat on his hands to warm them.

"You know, they used Navajo Indians as radio operators in that war," Samson said. "They transmitted top secret messages in Navajo. The Japanese didn't know the language, so they couldn't decode the messages. Your victory at sea was won by Indians."

"I didn't know that," Peter said, though he did.

"Now you do."

Samson pushed the bullets across the table. "Eat 'em," he said.

"What?"

"You heard me. Eat 'em."

"Eat bullets?"
Samson pushed the bottle of bourbon in his direction. "You can wash them down with this."

"I can't eat bullets."

"Sure you can. Just don't fart for a few days."

"Stop this, Samson. You've made your point."

Samson shook his head. "I'm a man with a mission, Mr. Nance."

"Stop this."

"Eat."

"No."

Samson pointed the gun at Nixon. He fired. Peter recoiled, heard a short, sharp yelp, saw a blur of falling dog. He whirled, saw Nixon scrambling and skitching on the kitchen tile. The dog gained a foothold on the living room carpet, then ran down the hallway into the bedroom.

He turned. Samson was grinning. "I missed."

Peter looked around him, as if expecting to see damage -- a hole in the wall, a lamp shattered -- but he saw nothing to indicate the gun had been fired. "Someone heard the shot," he said. "They'll call the police."

Samson waved a hand in the air. "Let them come." He stared at Peter, then pointed to the bullets on the table. "Go on," he said.

Peter counted ten bullets, .38 caliber. His hand trembling, he reached for one, inspected it nervously; the casing, the rounded tip. He was surprised at how small and compact it was. It was alive, vital. He felt its volatility. If he squeezed it hard enough, he believed, it might explode in his hand. He put it in his mouth, rolled it back on his tongue, swallowed. He grimaced, then grabbed the bourbon, uncapped the bottle, and swigged.

Samson laughed. "Like taking medicine."

Peter tossed another bullet in his mouth.

"I'm not a jealous man, Mr. Nance."
Peter swallowed, drank some bourbon.

"I'm an angry one. I'm Geronimo's great-grandson. You shouldn't fuck with Geronimo's great-grandson. History should have taught you that."

"You said your great-grandfather rode with Geronimo." He shouldn't have said that. He should have kept quiet. He tossed a bullet in his mouth.

"We're all Geronimo's children," Samson said. "You keep eating. I'm going to tell you a story."

Peter drank some bourbon.

"When I was a boy," he began, "I killed a sparrow with a slingshot my father bought me for my birthday. It was a lucky shot. The bird was in the high branches of a tree. I didn't expect to hit it. It was a one-in-a-million chance, a long shot, so you can imagine how surprised I was when the sparrow fell. It was like a sign from God. Do you believe in God, Mr. Nance?"

Peter grimaced swallowing a bullet, then shrugged his shoulders.

"Me neither," Samson said. "Anyway, after I shot the sparrow my mother came running out the back door. She was angry. She asked me if I knew what I'd done. I told her I killed a sparrow. And do you know what she said?"

Peter shook his head, drank some bourbon.

"She said because I killed the sparrow, someone will die."

Peter swallowed a bullet.

"Can you believe that? Laying something like that on a kid. That's heavy-duty guilt, Mr. Nance." Samson shook his head. "She was right, though. The next day, my father was killed in an automobile accident. He died instantly. Decapitated." Samson ran a finger across his throat. "What do you think of that?" he said.

"I don't know," Peter said.

"I'll tell you what I think." Samson said. "I think it serves my father right for buying me the slingshot."
The bullets were gone, the bottle of bourbon half-empty. Samson grinned. "That's good," he said. "How do you feel? Loaded for bear?"

"Drunk," Peter said.

"That's good."

"I'm cold," Peter said. "Can I put my clothes on?"

Samson shook his head. "That's not part of the plan."

"What's the plan, Samson?"

"Tell me a story," Samson said. "Tell me a story about how your parents abused you."

"My parents didn't abuse me."

"Tell me a story about the woman who broke your heart, then."

"No one broke my heart."

"Tell me a story."

"I don't have a story."

"Find one."

"I don't have one."

Samson shook his head in disgust. "Well, I'll give you one," Samson said. "Stand up."

Peter was unsteady on his feet. Samson grabbed his arm, led Peter to the front door, and opened it. "Go on," Samson said.

"What?"

"Start running."

"I'm naked."

Samson raised the gun. "That's the point."

Samson pushed him from behind. Peter stumbled out it into the lawn. He turned in all directions. A car passed by on the street. He fixed on Samson, who smiled down at him
benevolently from the front porch. He looked like a proud father watching his son make his way into the world.

"Say something, Mr. Nance," Samson said. "Tell me about Ben Franklin."

He made a break for the front door, but Samson pushed him back. He stumbled and fell on the grass.

Samson stepped off the porch, knelt before him. "I want to tell you something," he said, placing a hand on his shoulder. "I think it's only fair." He pushed the gun into Peter's stomach. "Those bullets you ate, they were blanks." He fired. The explosion threw Peter backwards. He fell onto the grass, holding his stomach, screaming. He drew his hands away, inspected his stomach. No blood. No guts. No gaping hole.

Far off, a police siren wailed. Samson looked down the road. "Here comes the cavalry," he said.

Peter stood, and began jogging. He moved clumsily at first, but the night air on his body restored him. He felt primitive. He imagined himself a Cro-Magnon man, stuck between the simean and human stage, his senses still acutely attuned to his environment, but his intelligence leading him to light, to warmth, a tidy income, a furnished house, a nice automobile, a wife and two kids and a dog in the yard.

He jogged past two boys on their bicycles. He picked up his pace, ran past Mr. Randolph standing in his driveway. He waved to Mr. and Mrs. Gilcrest on their front porch. He sprinted past Mr. and Mrs. Beston, and their three kids.

"Mommy, he's naked."

He waved to Mr. Hansen, Mrs. Lewin, the Bedford boys. He turned the corner onto Sycamore Avenue, still sprinting. He hurdled a low hedge. The effort elated him. He aimed for a higher hedge at the edge of the Waterford's lawn. He leaped, stretched, sailed up and over, descended gracefully.
He felt light. He felt he could leap and float away. Police cars turned the corner up the road, their lights flaring, sirens moaning. He ran to them. He was bathed in red and white and blue light. Swirling, dancing light.
ACCIDENTS

A year later, he was dead. I killed him. I didn't mean to. It just happened. I was out running errands one day and decided to take the dog with me. I don't know why, because I never liked him. A moment of weakness, I guess. Every once in a while he could give me that *aw-gosh* look that reminded me of the dog I had as a kid, and I felt like I had to take him even though I might regret it later. Like I did.

To justify myself, I have to tell you he was not well-behaved. When I stopped at a gas station to fill up, he jumped out of the window and started running away from me. I called after him, but he paid no attention. I get angry when I'm not listened to, even if it is only a dog. So, what I did when I caught him was throw him in the car and roll up the windows. I was pissed off, and when I'm pissed off, I tend to forget about what's bothering me. The problem ceases to exist. This may be a weakness of mine, but it's been my nature for a while. I make no apologies.

After filling up with gas, I went to the hardware store to buy a Weedeater. My friend Pete owns the store and we got to talking about old times. He offered me a beer and we sat in the back room gabbing. Minutes turned into hours and I forgot all about the dog. It was 96 degrees outside. By the time I got back to the car, the dog was stiff on the back seat. I cursed, because I knew my wife and kid would be upset. I thought about tossing
him in a ditch and telling them he ran away, but I guess I have scruples. I figured I should be honest.

Our dog was named Elvis. My daughter Melissa named him that. I'd always been a big fan of Elvis. Melissa heard me playing "Hound Dog" one day and she loved it. She thought it was about a real dog. She was only six years old, so I could understand. It was her favorite song after that. She sang it all the time. Sometimes I could hear her all the way across the house singing that song in another room. It wasn't long, though, before she wanted a real dog. I cursed myself for having played the song, but after a while I chalked it up to the power of Elvis. She whined for a few months and when I saw she wasn't going to give up, I finally gave in and bought a damn beagle. I bought it more to shut her up than because I thought it would make a nice addition to the family. But to be honest, that's what I thought of him, as an addition, sort of like an end table or a recliner.

When I went to the pet store to buy it, one of the workers there asked me what kind I wanted.

The kind that don't piss or take a crap on the rug, I said.

The guy didn't think that was funny and I told him to lighten up, I was only kidding.

He gave me this smart-ass laugh like I didn't know what it meant. I said, Show me what you got in the deep freeze. I said this just to piss him off a little more.

He showed me to the cages and there were these hyper little dogs that had rolled in their own crap and were looking at me like they wanted me to take them home. They were too eager. They reminded me of kids wanting to be picked for basketball. Then I saw Elvis curled up asleep in the corner of his cage. That was the kind I liked; the quiet kind.

I asked the guy about him and he said, That's a beagle.

You mean like Snoopy? I said.

Yes, only this one's real, he said.
No kidding.

So I took him home and my daughter named him Elvis. I was proud of her. At least she didn't name him Snoopy.

I poked the dog even though I knew he was dead. The funny thing was he didn't even look real. He looked like a fake dog, the kind you might see in the movies after it's been run over by a car, and you know it's fake because they have certain laws against killing animals in Hollywood. So you look real hard and can tell it's fake because the fur somehow doesn't look real -- it's kind of matty and dry looking -- and the limbs are a little too stiff, even though the dog is supposed to be dead. Well, that's how Elvis looked in the backseat, and it got me to wondering if maybe they did use real dead dogs in the movies. I mean, who would know? Maybe one day the director just kind of fooled everybody on the set and threw a dead dog on the road and filmed it for the sake of artistic integrity.

I shook him. He was kind of heavy, heavier than he should have been, it seemed to me. His tongue was hanging out and it drooped over the edge of the seat looking like some gigantic snail. That's when I cursed, because I knew Melissa was going to be upset and I didn't know how I was going to tell her. I mean, you just don't come out and say to an eight-year-old girl that the family dog baked to death. It could give her nightmares.

I started pacing back and forth in the parking lot because I knew my wife was going to make a big deal out of it. Nancy makes a big deal out of everything. Once, I forgot her birthday and she wouldn't talk to me for an entire week. I don't keep a calendar of events and there's nothing about my life that requires I remember dates. All I have to know is whether it's a weekday, in which case I have to go to work, or a weekend, in which case I don't.

I decided I would go back inside the hardware store and talk to Pete about my problem. Pete looked horrified at first, but then he started laughing. I got upset and told him it wasn't funny.
I'm in a lot of trouble, I said.

And he just kept on laughing and said, That's what's so funny, that you don't give a damn about the dog being dead and that you're worried because of the wife and kid.

I thought about it and realized it was kind of funny and I started laughing myself.

Jeez, I said. I just killed the god-damned dog and I'm worried about what my wife is going to say.

When we stopped laughing, Pete offered me another beer and we went to the back room to weigh the pros and cons of the situation. I laughed and told him I didn't think there was going to be any pros about it and he busted a gut again.

Okay, he said. We'll just mull over the best avenue of approach to your predicament.

So, we were sitting there and Pete started telling me a story he said reminded him of my problem. He said he read recently in the newspaper about a woman who forgot she left her baby in the car for four hours and the same thing that happened to the dog happened to the baby.

Jeez, I said. That's pretty sick.

Imagine what the baby must have looked like, Pete said. And he said for four hours the woman didn't even know the baby was missing and she began to search the house to no avail. So she sat down and thought about the day's events.

I bet she wasn't even panicking at this point, Pete said.

I imagined the woman sitting calmly on the couch, retracing her footsteps that day, remembering how she drove to the store, or to the gas station, or maybe to her mother's house, and how she recalled having the baby with her every step of the way, and how she maybe remembered driving home and seeing the baby in its safety seat every time she glanced at the rear view mirror. And then I saw her horrified expression as she must have
realized her mistake and how she must have jumped up from the couch and ran screaming outside.

So, what happened to her? I said.

Pete waved a hand in front of his face and said, They're charging her with neglect.

But it was an accident, I said. Right?

Pete looked at me and must have known what I was thinking.

What you did was an accident, he said. What she did wasn't. There's a big difference between a dog and a baby.

Somehow, that didn't cheer me up. I guzzled the last of my beer and Pete handed me another from the cooler at his feet.

So, what are you going to tell them? he said.

Tell who, I said.

The wife and kid.

The truth, I guess. And Pete slowly shook his head, making a clucking sound with his tongue. He looked at me as if I were the sorriest specimen on earth.

You're asking for trouble, he said.

What should I tell them, I said.

Say he had a heart attack.

Dogs don't have heart attacks, I said. Do they?

He rubbed his chin and started thinking. Me, I wasn't thinking, because Pete was smarter than I was and I just sort of cheered him on in silence. His eyes lit up and I knew he had a good one.

Tell them it got run over, he said.

I considered it and then shook my head.

He doesn't have a scratch on him, I said.

Well, Pete said. Run him over with the car. They'll never know the difference.

I thought about it and then imagined having to pick up the dog after I'd run it over.
I can't do that, I said.

Why not? Pete said. The dog's already dead.

Nah, I said. There'd be blood and everything.

I'll pick him up, he said. I'm used to it.

I was going to say no. I didn't want Pete doing my dirty work, but he was right. He was used to it. He'd been to Vietnam and saw the blood and guts. I was just hoping he wouldn't have one of those flashbacks you hear about all the time. I could just imagine him going berserk seeing Elvis all squashed and bloody. Pete's a big guy, very beefy, and I wouldn't want to get in his way if he'd decided to go berserk.

You wouldn't mind? I said.

Aw, hell no, he said. What's a little blood? Besides, I'll wear gloves.

Okay, I said. I'll drive, you pick him up.

Pete said we'd better go to the loading docks out back of the hardware store. I asked him how come and he waved his hand around the parking lot and said, Too many people. And that's what I mean about Pete. Always thinking.

So we got in the car and Pete looked back at Elvis.

He's dead all right, Pete said.

Did you think I was kidding?

No. I just never saw a dead dog before, he said. It's funny. After all I've been through, I ain't never seen a dead dog before.

Haven't you seen a dog hit by a car? I said.

Naw, he said. That's what's funny. You think you've seen everything, but this shit happens everyday and I never saw it before.

I looked at him. He was staring into the backseat like it was his dog. For a minute there, I thought he might just go berserk after all. Pete's a nice guy, but sometimes he can get that faraway look like he's thinking of walking into a Burger King or a Denny's with an
assault rifle and start blowing people away. I mean, it's happened before, and usually those
guys are the respectable type, with a family and kids. Something just snaps and they can't
take it no more. I hate to think that way about Pete, but you just never know. I mean, it can
happen to anyone. Right? And Pete has more of a reason to snap than anybody. I knew
about how he was feeling long before that Springsteen guy started singing about it. What
does he know about the war? From what I hear, he was one of them hippies back then
protesting. Hell, he was probably one of them bums spitting on the grunts as soon as they
got off the airplane. If Elvis were still alive -- the King, that is -- he probably would have
done the vets justice. He made me understand about negroes when he sang that song "In
the Ghetto." That was a beautiful song and it did more for me than that Martin Luther King
fellow ever did.

When we got around back of the store, Pete told me to sit tight. He lugged the dog
out from the back seat and carried him to the front of the car. He laid Elvis on the ground
where I could see him and then stepped aside. I looked at Elvis lying there. He was facing
me, his tongue still hanging out. I wished Pete had turned him the other way so it didn't
look like he was watching me.

Pete raised his arms.

Might as well get it over with, he said.

So I put the car in drive and started creeping forward. When the front wheels hit it
was like going over a speed bump. I thought I heard a crunching sound and I hit the
brakes, only I hit them too hard because I was jerked forward and my head snapped. I felt
my insides sort of shrink up on me and my throat got tight. Pete leaned in the window.

What's the matter? he said.

I can't do this, I said.

What do you mean? You already did it.
He was smiling, but when he saw my face, he must have known I wasn't feeling too good about what I'd just done.

You want me to drive? he said.

What for?

He looked at me pitifully. The dog's under the car, he said.

I felt stupid. I didn't want Pete to think I was losing it, so I told him I'd finish, only I went too slow, because when the back wheels hit they didn't have enough momentum to get over the dog. I hit the gas harder and for a second there the wheels started spinning. I groaned, thinking I must have been spraying pieces of dog all over, but the back wheels finally made it and I stopped the car.

I felt my lunch trying to climb out of my stomach and I had to fight it back. My face was hot. I wiped the sweat from my forehead and cursed myself for almost losing my nerve. When I looked in the rear view mirror, I saw Pete standing there with his hands on his hips. There was a puzzled look on his face. I thought the dog must have been a mess. I didn't want to get out of the car and look, but I knew I had to. Pete might have been disappointed in me if I didn't. Not that he would tell anyone. Pete's a good guy.

When I walked around to the back of the car, I was surprised to see Elvis hadn't changed much. There were tread marks on his belly where the wheel had spun and taken off the fur, and he looked a little flatter, but other than that, he still looked the same.

He didn't squash, I said.

No, Pete said. But you squeezed the shit out of him.

He doesn't look too much flatter, I said.

No, I mean you literally squeezed the shit out of him, Pete said, pointing.

I looked. Imagine that, I said.

This dog has taken his last crap, Pete said, chucking me on the bicep.

I tried to laugh, but all I did was sort of snort through my nose.

You want to try again? Pete said.
Hell, no, I said. It ain't going to work.

I think you're right. He's too stiff.

I told Pete we were going to have to hose him off before we put him back in the car and he went and filled a bucket with water. He didn't bother being careful and just dumped the whole bucket on him. It worked.

Hey, Pete said, you could tell them he drowned.

I looked at him funny. He punched me in the arm and said, Lighten up, I was only joking.

I figured I was going to have to tell my wife the truth. I'm not a good liar, never have been, and Nancy is the one who said so. I told Pete I wasn't so much worried about my wife as how Melissa was going to take it and he told me I was going to have to lie to her.

I don't want to lie to her, I said. Of all the people, I can't lie to her.

You don't want to tell her the dog fried, he said. She don't know about death yet. At least not like I do.

I winced, because I knew Pete was referring to Vietnam. He told stories sometimes that could really ruin your day. When he talked, there was nothing you could say. You could only sit and listen. I mean, what was there to say? The man had been there. I hadn't. He doesn't talk to me about Vietnam anymore, because one day we got in an argument. While he was telling me a story, he accused me of not listening.

I'm listening, I said.

No, you're not, he said.

Yes, I am, I said. I heard every word you said.

And to prove it I repeated everything he told me.

He just shook his head, and gave me that sorry-specimen look. You may have heard, but you weren't listening, he said.
How could I win? I repeated every word he said to me and still he accused me of not listening. I mean, what could I do? Paint pictures for him? Since that day, the subject was a sore spot between us and whenever he tried to talk about it, I would try to avoid it. So when he tried to slip in through the back door with that comment about death, I headed him off.

Let's not talk about that, I said.

About what?

About the war.

I wasn't going to talk about it, he said. Besides, you wouldn't listen anyway.

I listen, I insisted.

That's okay, he said. I forgive you

Forgive me for what?

Not listening.

I listen, god-dammit. And I don't want to be forgiven.

We threw Elvis in the back seat and I left Pete's place and drove home, trying to decide what I was going to say. But then I got to thinking about what I'd done, and it made me think that maybe I'd been a little careless. Not just with the dog, but with a lot of things. My family. Maybe even myself. Nancy and I don't have the best marriage, but I think I love her. I mean, I can't imagine life without her. She almost left me once. She said I wasn't the same person she fell in love with.

What do you mean? I said. Because I still felt the same.

You've changed, she said. You're just not the same.

Well, you've changed too, I said.

And she had. Since she had the kid, she'd gained thirty pounds and never lost it. In fact, she might have gained a few more pounds. I figured she'd lose it. I mean, she always cared about the way she looked. Before we were married, she used to take half an hour
getting ready and she would come out of the bathroom looking beautiful. I mean, she's still beautiful, but it's not the same anymore. She doesn't care how she looks. When we're going out, she'll throw her hair in a ponytail and wear whatever she's got on. I don't mention this to her, because I'm afraid she'll get upset, but I did mention something about her weight.

Have you thought about losing weight? I said to her one day.

She was standing in front of the mirror in her underwear, and she turned to me and I could see she was hurt.

You think I'm fat? she said.

I didn't expect the question and I didn't know what to say, so I lied.

No, I said. You're just a little overweight.

That's the same as fat, she said.

Her lips tightened and I knew I had to say something quick.

No it's not, I said. But then I hesitated, because I didn't know what the hell to say. I mean, after I thought about it, I realized there really wasn't a difference. So all I could say was, Fat is fat, overweight is overweight.

I thought for sure that wasn't going to work, but she turned to the mirror and looked at herself. She grabbed the skin at her belly and pinched it between thumb and forefinger.

I guess I am a little overweight, she said. But that was all. She didn't say she was going to go on a diet. She just turned out the light and went to bed.

I lay there thinking for a while and it wasn't too long before I got depressed. I mean, I got to thinking about life and death and all that crap. I could hear the alarm clock ticking and Nancy breathing. It was a lonely sound. It's not like I hadn't heard it before, but I usually just ignored it. I remember I looked over at Nancy and wanted to wake her up and tell her I was sorry. Not just for what I'd said, but because sometimes I could be a shit. And I knew most of the time that I was being a shit, but that didn't stop me. I just kept
on going, like it was going to make me feel better. But it never did. Usually it made me feel worse, like I was digging a hole deeper and deeper until one day it would be impossible for me to get out.

As I was watching Nancy, I thought about the last time we'd made love and I realized it had been at least a couple of weeks. If we were younger, I would have woken her up right then and made love to her. But she didn't like that anymore. It got to the point where she would get angry at me and one time she even elbowed me hard in the chest. After that, I never woke her up, because I remembered how stupid I felt. She made me feel like a kid who wanted too much for his birthday. But it seemed important to me then to make love, only I couldn't wake her up. I was afraid she'd say no.

I knew I couldn't go home, so I drove to this bar called Thirsty Lips to have a drink. When I parked the car, I realized I forgot Elvis was dead in the backseat. I glanced back and, sure enough, he was still there. So I went to a corner drugstore and bought a newspaper to cover him. I didn't want somebody to walk by and see a dead dog in the backseat. With my luck, some bleeding heart would have seen the dog and called the authorities to have me charged with cruelty. Which reminds me. There was another time I left the dog in the car with the windows rolled up, except that time he lived. I was running in and out of the 7-Eleven to buy cigarettes, and by the time I got back to the car -- which couldn't have taken more than a few minutes -- I found somebody had left a note on the windshield telling me I should be arrested for cruelty to animals. Imagine the nerve of somebody sticking their nose in where it didn't belong. They didn't know me from Adam and they thought I was being cruel. So I looked around the parking lot because I figured the person couldn't have gotten far, but the only person I saw was a little girl in the car across from mine. She was sitting in the driver's seat with her hands on the steering wheel and she was staring at me. I caught her playing racing car. I thought about putting a note on the windshield about leaving the kid in the car, but I didn't bother.
After I covered Elvis with the newspaper, I walked inside Thirsty Lips and ordered a scotch on the rocks. When I finished it I ordered another. There was a ballgame on T.V., and I watched a few innings. Just as some guy cranked one out of the ballpark, I heard a familiar cheer and when I looked down at the end of the bar, sure enough, I saw Harley and Joe. I should have known they'd be there, but my mind was too preoccupied when I'd walked in. I slouched over my drink trying to hide from them, but after a few minutes I heard Harley yell my name. I raised my hand, real weak-like. Harley waved me over.

Come here, he said. Let me buy you a drink.

There was nothing I could do, so I walked to the end of the bar and sat with Harley and Joe. It turned out Harley had won two hundred and fifty dollars in the baseball lottery that day. Normally, I would have been impressed and would have tried to squeeze a few free drinks from him, but I couldn't raise the enthusiasm for even that. After a while, Harley noticed I was in a foul mood.

Man, you're a bummer, he said. What's wrong with you?

I grimaced and told them I was having trouble with the wife. The funny thing was I believed what I'd said. I'd forgotten completely about the dog and was so worried about Nancy throwing a fit that to me it already seemed like it happened. I must have played it out in my head so much that it was already real to me. I was pissed that she didn't understand my side of the story, but she hadn't even heard it yet.

Harley and Joe were sympathetic and they loaded me up with drinks and told me about a poker game in town. I agreed to tag along because I didn't want to go home. I was still thinking that me and Nancy had already had it out.

We left the bar and piled into my car and drove on our way to the poker game. When we got out on the highway, I heard Harley in the backseat rustle the newspapers and
it wasn't until then that I remembered the dog. But before I could say anything, Harley screamed and Joe jumped like he was having a heart attack.

Jesus, Harley said. Is this Elvis?

Yeah. That's Elvis, I said, as if it were a natural thing to have a dead dog in the car. What the fuck is he doing back here? he said.

He's dead, I said.

I can see that. But what's he doing in the backseat?

That's where he died, I said.

Harley was quiet. Joe was staring into the backseat, squinting, trying to see in the dark. Joe finally turned to me and asked if it really was Elvis.

Yes, I said.

Then I told them the story of how Elvis died.

Is that why you and the wife got into it? Harley said.

I said yes, even though I knew it wasn't true. I didn't want to explain.

Jesus, Joe said. Do you know what you've done?

Yes, I said. I killed the dog. Let's leave it at that.

No, Joe said. I mean, do you know what the poor bastard must have gone through?

So Joe started telling us how the dog must have died. He said dogs don't sweat like we do.

That's why they pant, he said. So they can cool off.

He said since the dog couldn't cool off, the water in his body must actually have started boiling.

I looked at him to see if he was pulling my leg, but I could tell he was serious.

Boiling? I said.

Yep, Joe said, nodding his head.

A fucking doggy percolator, Harley said. And he started busting a gut.
I told him it wasn't funny, but he must have thought I wasn't serious, because he kept laughing and then Joe started telling us how the dog's brains must have fried in his head.

Scrambled eggs, Harley said.

It must have been a slow death, Joe said. He probably laid down on the backseat trying to be as still as possible.

Then Harley said, I bet he was thinking, Now where the hell is my master? And Harley slapped the backseat and then both of them started laughing. I told them it wasn't funny, but they just laughed harder until they were gasping for breath. Harley kept saying he never heard of anything so stupid.

How could you forget? he said.

It was an accident, I said.

How come you didn't roll down the window?

I told you. He would have jumped out.

Well, he won't jump out any windows now, Harley said. Joe started laughing and he slapped the dashboard, and this only egged Harley on. Harley picked up Elvis and thrust his head over the front seat. He shook him and made barking noises. That's when I slammed on the brakes.

Give me the damn dog, I said.

Harley looked at me astonished. What's wrong? he said.

Give me the damn dog.

I was only joking, he said.

I reached over and grabbed Elvis. He was already stiff and heavy, and I had a hard time getting him over the seat, so I stepped out of the car and opened the rear door.

Take it easy, Harley said. He was looking like I was going to slug him.

When I had a good hold of Elvis, I luged him to the trunk and opened it. Just when I was about to drop him inside, I looked at him and that's when I almost cried. I
mean, I didn't know. I had no idea he suffered. I thought maybe he just keeled over and that was the end of it. I guess I should have known better, but I had no idea.

Okay, so I did cry. Big deal. But it was only a little. I mean, I'm not going to cry the Niagara Falls over a dog. Besides, Harley and Joe were in the car and they would have given me a hard time if they'd known.

I placed the dog in the trunk and wrapped it up in a blanket, but I left his head sticking out, like I was putting him to bed, and it kind of made me shiver.

I don't know why I hated him. He just got in the way all the time. It seemed every time I turned around, the damn dog was at my feet. I tripped over him plenty, and usually I would kick him and he'd go howling off into another room. But that didn't stop him. As soon as I'd calmed down, he would come back and lie at my feet.

One time he shit on the kitchen floor and I stepped in it. I cursed up a storm. Of course, the dog was right at my heels, so I turned and kicked him as hard as I could in the ribs. He put up a howling that would make your hair stand on end. He ran to the corner of the kitchen and must have known he was trapped because he did the strangest thing. He just ran around in circles, howling.

Melissa came running into the kitchen then. Her eyes were wide and she looked at me like I'd killed him. She ran to Elvis and hugged him. He calmed down and started whimpering. I must have scared her because she started crying.

Don't hurt him, daddy, she said.

I wanted to tell her I wouldn't, just to calm her, but I couldn't because I was so scared. I remember I sort of yanked at my hair and took a few steps back and forth, the shit still squishing under my foot. Finally, I just rushed out of the house and drove to Thirsty Lips for a drink. I sat at the bar, trying to get my mind off it, but I kept seeing the dog running around in circles, yapping into the air like he thought the thing that kicked him was biting at his tail. And then I saw Melissa's eyes, her round, wide eyes, and how she looked at me as if I might kick her.
I shut the trunk and got back in the car. Harley and Joe were real quiet, looking like they'd been caught with their hands in the cookie jar. When I got back on the highway, Joe turned to me and sort of cleared his throat.

We didn't mean nothing by it, Joe said.

Yeah, we thought you hated that dog, Harley said.

Don't worry about it, I said. And that was all I had to say, because both of them started gabbing about the poker game. By that time I didn't feel like playing cards, so when we pulled up to the house where the poker game was at, I told Harley and Joe as much.

You're not still mad? Joe said.

No, I said. I just don't feel like playing.

Come on, Harley said, It'll do you good.

But I didn't give in and they got out of the car and ambled off toward the front steps. I headed for home.

When I pulled up in front of the house, I realized it was late -- almost ten. Melissa's bedroom light was off and I knew she was probably in bed, but that didn't make it any easier for me to go inside. A swarm of insects had gathered around the porch light. They flitted and zig-zagged. I always told Nancy never to leave the light on for me because I hated those insects buzzing and flapping around me, knocking into my neck or tickling my face when I'm trying to unlock the front door.

I sat in the driveway a long time. I couldn't make myself go inside. Instead, I drove down the street to an all-night diner. It was a small place tucked away in small shopping mall. When I was a kid in high school, we would go to the diner late nights after drinking to sober up before going home. It was the only place in town open after midnight. When I walked in, I saw things hadn't changed. All the booths were taken by a bunch of red-eyed, giggling kids tossing french fries into their mouths. I had to sit at a table in the middle of
the damn place and it wasn't long before I felt like I was the center of attention. Every time I glanced up from the menu I would catch at least one kid looking at me. I always felt uncomfortable going to certain places alone, like restaurants or movie theaters, because whenever I saw someone alone in a place like that, I always imagined they led lonely lives and went home to a dingy apartment, where they kept a cat or a parakeet in a cage in the corner of the room for company, or maybe a pet dog. That's what I thought those kids imagined about me anytime I caught them looking my way.

When my waitress came, I was surprised to see it was the same one who worked there when I was in high school. That was almost twenty years ago. She asked me what I wanted, but I was so surprised to see her I forgot what it was I had settled on and had to look at the menu again. I ordered a hamburger, fries and coffee, and stared at her while she wrote down my order. She had changed a lot. There were wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and the skin on her face was loose and doughy looking. She bulged at the waist and you could see where her bra pressed into her skin.

When we were kids, all of us thought she was beautiful, and we all seemed to have our own fantasies about her. We would talk about several ways in which we could have her and sometimes hinted as much to her in person, but she would just smile, as if to say, Dream on, and walk away leaving us feeling like anything was possible. Pete once said we needed her to have certain thoughts about because we couldn't think about our girlfriends that way, and it didn't make much sense to me at the time, although I realized that I never had such fantasies about my wife, who was my girlfriend then.

As I sat watching her, I felt ashamed, like I had returned to the scene of a crime. If she recognized me, she didn't show it in her eyes, or she didn't care, and it made me feel old, because if she didn't recognize me, I knew it was because I must have changed a lot too.

As a kid, I went to the diner with Pete, Harley and Joe and a few other guys. That was the year we won the state baseball championship, and when you're riding a wave of
victory like that, you can't seem to get enough of the people you're sharing that moment with. I mean, we were the center of attention and we loved it. Everyone seemed to be talking about us. The town put up signs at the city limits saying, "Home of the 1972 High School State Champion Baseball Team." The signs sealed it for us. We were celebrities.

One night, in a drunken stupor, Pete pulled up one of the signs and put it in his basement. We all thought it was stupid, because anytime you wanted to see the sign all you had to do was take a drive to look at it. Besides, everyone who drove into town would see the sign.

Sure enough, though, the football team won the state championship in 1985 and our signs were replaced. It happened without any of us knowing it, and when I called city hall, they said they didn't think anybody would remember the 1972 baseball game. That really hit home. I mean, in 1972 it didn't seem like they would ever forget. All that summer and even into the fall, everyone was still calling us champs and they would slap us on the backs and point us out as examples to their sons.

Then it died away, and nobody seemed to care anymore. Me and the rest of the guys were left standing around wondering what the hell we were going to do next. Some of the guys went to college and others just hung around and got jobs. Pete went off to Vietnam. Me, I was pissed, because that season our coach kept telling us we were playing like pros and that one day he was going to see us in Yankees uniforms. I mean, he made us believe we were going to make it to the pros and when it was all over I went to him wondering what my next step was. When he finally figured out what it was I was getting at, he told me I should try playing at the college level. I told him I had never thought about going to college.

I just want to play baseball, I said.

You're serious, aren't you? he said.

The way he said that made me realize I'd made a mistake. I kind of shifted on my feet and mumbled a yes. He just took a deep breath and looked at me like I was some idiot.
There are thousands of kids just like you, he said, and only a handful of those kids make it to the minor leagues. A few make it to the pros, and most who make it that far only last a few years before they disappear.

He looked at me hard. Do you understand? he said.

I said, yes, and I walked away.

I had never felt so stupid before in my life.

Since then, I've never taken anything at face value. My boss told me one time I was a good worker -- a real asset to the company -- and said he hoped I would keep up the hard work. I thanked him, but I knew he was feeding me a line of bull. I mean, I worked in a machine shop operating a drill press. I worked for a nuts and bolts company that hired about 500 other people. I was a laborer, a nobody. I did my job and that was it. No overtime, no extra work, no ball busting. I punched in at eight, punched out at five and picked up my paycheck every Friday.

Just then, my waitress came by and asked me if everything was all right. I said, yes, but then I thought about it and wondered what she would have done if I'd said, no, and then told her about all my problems, if I'd poured out my god-damn heart to her. She'd probably think I'd had a screw loose. And that's what I mean; never take what anyone says at face value.

I left the diner and went home, but when I pulled into the driveway I still couldn't go inside. So I stared at the house wondering what the hell I was going to do. If I went in and told Nancy what happened, she'd know I didn't come home because I was afraid and then she'd have something on me. I mean, she'd know for the first time that she could put fear into me and there'd be no telling how far she'd go with that knowledge. Knowing her, she'd turn into a demon. So I sat in the car wondering what to do and then I figured maybe I could just walk right in and tell her what happened and act like I didn't care what she thought. And if she asked why I didn't come home right away, I could say I was so happy
the damn dog died that I went out and celebrated with Harley and Joe. That would put a stop to any attempt she might have at becoming bold and she might even think I'd gone around the bend and look at me like I might celebrate with Harley and Joe if she ever died.

I must have fell asleep then, because the next thing I remember I woke up from a bad dream. I dreamt I was at Pete's place and I was walking up and down the aisles at the store because I'd forgotten what it was I wanted. But there was something else worrying me, something at the back of my mind, and then I realized I left the dog in the car again, so I ran outside and by the time I reached the car, a crowd of people had gathered around. They were looking into the windows of my car, and when I walked up and looked inside, it wasn't the dog in the backseat, but Melissa. I screamed and tried opening the doors, but they were locked and I couldn't find my keys. I searched all my pockets, but I couldn't find my keys. When I looked up, everyone was staring at me and Pete was there and he gave me that sorry specimen look and said, They'll charge you with neglect. I searched all my pockets, but I couldn't find my keys. Then the crowd got ugly and I could see they were going to grab me, so I started to run, only I couldn't run, because my legs felt like they were asleep and all I could do was sort of drag them along. Meanwhile, I could hear the crowd getting closer and I started to panic. I didn't look back, but I knew they were right behind me and just when I knew they were about to grab me, I screamed and that's when I woke up.

I didn't know what time it was, but I could tell it was almost morning because the sky was getting lighter. I was a little shaken up by the dream, so I decided to drive around to sort of calm my nerves before I went inside. I didn't know where to go, so I got on the highway to avoid stop signs and red lights. I just wanted to drive with the windows down. And then I remembered driving with Pete when we were still kids in high school. We were in his Mustang driving really fast on the highway with the windows down, the radio
blasting, Elvis. And I remember he turned to me and he had to shout because of the wind rushing in the windows.

Where do you want to go? he said.

I didn't know and I didn't care, so I said, Let's just drive.

He smiled and went a little faster and we just drove. And now I can't do that anymore. I mean, I can't feel that way again, because I have a wife and kid, and a dog, dead in the backseat, and my life just doesn't seem like it's ahead of me anymore, like something I can drive to.