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Menial Labor

by

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Date
We had duct tape around Eric's ankles, over the socks, and they were just taping his hands together behind his back. He leaned forward over his knees and his shoulder popped, and he squeezed his wrists together, his arms spreading up to his shoulders like a wishbone. We put a good amount of tape around the wrists and he wiggled his fingers, like legs on a crawdad, when we were done. He stood from the chair in his turquoise boxer shorts, his legs pale, his stomach and chest pale, and we all looked at him.

We were in a dorm room at the University of Montana, where I went to school. The room was cold and littered with beer cans, grains of Copenhagen dried around the rims, smelled like cigarettes, and there were candles and nice purple shades and a bathrobe hanging from the door of the closet. I lived off campus and I didn't know whose room we were in. There were a few girls in the room and they were all sitting in chairs and on the beds and they kept saying they couldn't believe it.

We got another piece of tape for Eric's mouth and we all stood there laughing and Eric told us to hurry up, he was getting cold. His dark hair was standing out and his nipples were scrunched into little beads. We were the same height, six-foot, and I put the tape over his mouth without having to reach up. I put the tape on lightly and didn't press it into the day or two's dark growth on his face. He nodded that he could breathe.

We carried him into the hall, four of us--two at the legs, two by the shoulders--all the way to the end of the hall and around the corner, and then we dropped him outside a door with a little dry-erase board and hearts cut out of pink construction paper with girls' names on them.
There was a laundry room across the hall with a glass window, and we knocked and hid in the laundry room, peeking out, and pretty soon the door opened and a girl came out, wearing blue flannel pajamas, looking frightened.

"Oh my god," she said, and turned him over. She pulled the tape from his mouth and said, "Oh my god. Are you alright?"

Eric looked away like he was stifling a sob. "I feel like crying," he said. "I really feel like I should cry."

"Oh my god," she said. "I'm so sorry. What happened to you? Who did this?"

"I feel so helpless," he said.

"Here, let me get this off you. I can't believe this." She went into the room and came out with a plastic butter knife. "I don't have any scissors. Maybe I can cut it," she said, and started sawing on the tape at his ankles.

"It's because I'm from Montana State. I'm never coming back."

"I can't get this," she said. She continued to saw with the plastic knife and the tape scrunched up under the blade. "It's just a stupid football game. I can't believe they act like this."

"Maybe you can borrow some scissors."

"I should call the police. It's kidnapping."

"The police?" Eric said.

"You poor thing," she said. "I can't believe this." She went next door and knocked and two more girls came out, both wearing T-shirts and shorts, their hair pulled back, and they both giggled a little and then got seriously into feeling sorry for Eric. They cut off the tape and Eric got up and stood in his boxers, rubbing his wrists, milking
sympathy from an accumulating crowd of the girls and their neighbors. They got him a 
T-shirt and I thought briefly that they were going to invite him to stay over for a slumber 
party. I wanted to go out and participate somehow, but I was stuck in the laundry room, 
watching and laughing, and pretty soon we quit watching and got up on the laundry 
machines and smoked and drank the last sips from our beers.

It was a good time, and we didn't mind very much when the girls heard us in the 
laundry room and came in and accused us of kidnapping Eric. He followed them in and 
said it hadn't been us, but he couldn't hold back a little smirk, and the girls knew, 
somehow, so we had to leave. Some of them laughed and thought it was funny, but the 
girl who came out first, who worked on him with the butter knife and felt sorry for him 
and rounded up the rest of them, turned very red and stood there in the hall, looking at the 
floor.

Eric touched her elbow and said it was just for fun, and she slapped him hard 
across the face and went into her room. The rest of the girls went into their rooms, too, 
then, even the ones who had said they would come back and drink with us. We stood 
there in the hall and slapped Eric on the back, and he took off the T-shirt and set it outside 
the girl's room. It was too bad, really. If some of them had come along we could have 
had a good time. But still, we went away laughing.

2.

That was the start of this whole thing. Eric feeling bad for a long time over 
nothing, a stupid prank, some girl we didn't know, sitting in his room, moping, talking
about going to Mexico, so that a few days later, in the university pool hall, I, Jacob Elliston Hartfield, standing next to a pool table, was alone. There was something calming about the green rectangular slab and the sticks and balls and stripes and numbers and the force of it all which was really very delicate, somehow. Bear down on the smooth green of a pool table and let the stick slide, listen to the uneasy thud and crack and run-out and padded rubber bump, drop into pocket, settle, scratch, stick into felt, powder-squeak, all. And then, loss. But that doesn't matter.

For a while I was thinking about a lot of things related to my status as a human and I was a bit of a nervous creature—like a little shaking frog in someone's hand. I was ready to leap anywhere and I really just needed to settle down. Then I almost met a girl and flunked out of the University of Montana. I was twenty, an age at which you are supposed to know better.

I was using a crooked stick to assail the solids, of which there were plenty left, and needless to say I was getting beat. My opponent was an older gentleman with a nose like a cauliflower. He had orange teeth and a good deal more sweat rolling off his body than I was comfortable with. I was hoping he'd hurry up and win so I could go away. The man enjoyed smiling and every time he flashed me his corn-teeth I felt obliged to smile back.

Then I saw a beautiful young woman coming in, dark-haired, carrying her own case-enclosed, expensive-looking pool stick, almost prancing, lifting her legs high with each step in a way that did not seem ridiculous, somehow, and intimidated me, too. She was just at the edge of my vision and was a little like a glitch in a movie screen in that I
couldn't ignore her. Girls with their own pool sticks were not my mania. In my experience they had issues, and issues, among other things, I was trying to avoid.

But this girl couldn't be avoided. She sat down at a table and did nothing. Just sat there, not filing her nails, not drinking a coke, not flirting with the boys or the man with the yellow teeth, not even moving. She reminded me somehow of Castro (her posture, I think) and I had a brief feeling that she was considering who among the pool players to imprison. I pictured myself in a green Castro hat that was probably really an American Army hat sitting under a bamboo hut in what I realized while I was picturing it was Vietnam. I don't know what Castro was doing in Vietnam or what I was doing in Vietnam, but someone, from above in the bamboo hut, was peeing on me. But the pee was blue, and was really the new blue Gatorade. Go figure. They had the new blue Gatorade in Vietnam already and Castro was supervising its deployment as... As what? As a torture technique, I guess. Either this girl with her pool stick had issues or I had issues.

Her hair was piled on top of her head in a way I perceived was not random, although I suspected it was intended to appear that way. She had tan skin and large brown eyes and was skinny in a natural way that didn't suggest anorexia. She looked solid, rather than hollow. Her eyebrows were raised in a questioning manner as I approached and something forced me, when I got there, to straighten the three other chairs at her table-- push them in so the chair-back touched the edge of the square table-- and, uttering only an "excuse me" as I squeezed past her chair to push in the one beside her, walked away.
She had seen me playing pool and staring and walking over, and yet she treated me as if there was some purpose to my going over and straightening up, as though I was a waiter, perhaps. I was only slightly less sweaty as I pushed in those chairs than my pool companion, and I was not one to become dopey around girls. I left the pool hall then, which this girl did not seem to notice, and went back to my house.

I fixed myself a bowl of Frosted Flakes, spun them around for a while, threw them away. I went into the living room to watch television, removed my shoes, put my feet up on the sofa, went back to the kitchen for a coke, and proceeded to endure the final three minutes of Chips. Poncharello was chasing a speeder. Poncharello remembered the woman he was meeting in half an hour at his apartment, her breasts, specifically, and Poncharello almost ran into a garbage truck.

I got back into my shoes still feeling vaguely displaced and went back to the pool hall. The girl was gone. I sat at her table in her very chair and attempted to seem engaging. It was a doomed endeavor. I kept fidgeting. I tapped my foot, bounced my knee, snapped my fingers, popped my back, stretched my arms, leaned back as far as possible without falling, and felt uncertain about life, or something. There was a pain in my stomach that I equated with the feeling of having an ulcer. I was forgetting to do something. There was a requisite drill in which I was not engaged. The world was going to blow up and I was supposed to be in a doorway or under a desk, it seemed. Perhaps it was only the fear that I would not again see the girl. Perhaps I actually had an ulcer. I don't know. I looked at the time. Three-fifteen. And here my fate assaulted me. I remembered. I had, at two o'clock, a final test in Art 151.
Flunking the class followed missing the final-- receiving the letter followed flunking the class. It arrived in an envelope that, upon inspection, resembled a check, so I had to open it. I was not deceived for long. "Academic Suspension" was printed in large bold type near the top. In the middle were my grades: C, C, C, C, and F. A two-point-zero was required to stay in business. Apologies for any inconvenience, and do not attend classes in the fall.

Thus I was no longer a student. I was a person whose few belongings still resided in a house wherein studying was said to occur amongst the residents, of which there were four, including myself. There was a very good chance that my parents would go on believing I was a college student while I tried to figure out what I really was. I will not venture to call myself a boy. You may choose the classification yourself. Keep in mind, however, that I was barely able to buy tobacco in many states, and that in certain unfortunate countries, Sierra Leone, for example, I was steadily approaching the life expectancy.

I had a girlfriend who would not be pleased with the news. She would break something on my head and then alleviate herself from the burden of being my girlfriend. That was the way she operated.

I would need to craft a fake report card for the parents. This was trivial, yes, but I was not going home. That would have been my only option. Or to get a job, which took time, supposedly, and which would not have been satisfying in the least to my figuring-out desires. The fake report card would procure money from the parents and I would go on living. Don't concern yourself too much with my parents' welfare, they could afford to keep sending me money. My family is moderately rich. My father owns a new-car
dealership and a tractor dealership and a factory where they make plastics. My mother is a teacher. She has deep-seeded beliefs on the value of education, and the report card would be mostly for her sake.

I will skip the boring details of making a fake report card—not difficult with today's computers—and proceed directly with some of the inanities of my daily life. I got up late, delaying my waking hangover, and, sometimes, took a shower. I shaved almost every day. My beard was almost non-existent, but I was not one to take chances and, philosophically, I was opposed to thick beards. I brushed my teeth with a timed electric toothbrush: thirty seconds left-upper molars, left-lower molars, right-upper molars, right-lower molars, forty seconds upper-incisors, lower-incisors. The brushes on my toothbrush needed to be changed—they were frayed miserably—and the whole process, I fear, was for not. I wore jeans or slacks and a button-up shirt, unless it was Friday, when I wore, when possible, a sweatshirt. I attended to breakfast. Sometimes a piece of toast, sometimes a pop tart, often a bowl of cereal with two-percent milk. I enjoyed the little marshmallows in Lucky Charms, but I refused to eat the puffs. I played pool in the University Center with the good folks to be found there. I played folf (a combination of Frisbee and golf) with a basketball in the street--yes, that was supposed to seem ridiculous. I rescued Eric, my roommate, from the neighbor's doghouse, after his consumption of a fifth of Jack Daniels. We had conversations:

"Did you drink out of the milk-carton?"

"No."

"There's lipstick on the carton."

"I don't wear lipstick."
"How, then, did it get on the carton?"

"Somebody who wears lipstick must have done it."

"Somebody?"

I spent a relatively large amount of my time looking at my teachers' pants. They wore ridiculous corduroy pants which came apparently only in brown and blue and which did not get washed very often. Oh, well. I was, after all, in the art department.

I did not enjoy art in the least. Art was, simply enough, the greatest insult to my father's sensibilities that I could imagine and thus the easy choice. It was easy. Too easy I think now, just to jump on that thing--art--to get a few words of discouragement and an argument out of the old man. And truthfully I believe I liked art less than I liked the prospect of pleasing my father with a business or engineering degree. But I was a stubborn weed and retreat I could not. So I became the worst art-student in art-student history. I painted landscapes with happy birds and trees and an up-close portrait of a smiling armadillo. And I formulated a plan: straight C's, every semester. It had worked for two semesters, failed in the third--I got one D--and then, with the missed-test incident, had proven itself a dead fish. I had believed in it for a while. It had kept my father furious and simultaneously at bay--he had agreed to pay for whatever schooling I wanted as long as I was passing--and it seemed like a stupid and pretentious and dim-witted and funny thing to do. I walked around with paint on my clothes and I got to see women modeling nude. Alas this plan of mine became untenable and seems in retrospect like a pale, ugly thing--I picture a raven with soggy wings and broken beak flailing in rapid descent.
3.

If you have a girlfriend who does not like your being an art major to piss off your father and she also disapproves of your getting C’s in all of your classes to exacerbate the pissing off, she will not want to hear about you flunking out of college. That was my thinking, as I stood in her, Michelle’s, living room, deciding on a course of action. I had planned to tell her the truth and endure whatever came with it. That seemed honorable, anyway. But in her living room I was much too frightened for excessive thinking. I decided, quickly, to lie. Or, if possible, to skip over it, like a boy jumping from the roof of one train car to another. That would be easy enough, it seemed. But boys are not meant to go jumping around on the tops of trains. I began telling her about one of my roommates calling poison control and reporting that he had eaten a bar of soap. My girlfriend stood there, looking at me, her big brown eyes revealing the depth of her scorn for my kind of people—the sort who do not make prank phone calls themselves, but who live with people who do.

"Someone might have died while you fooled around," she said, without any consideration for how funny it might have been. She was distracted, at least.

"It wasn't me," I said.

"Did you do anything to stop it?"

"Like what?"

"You're a killer," she said, and began tapping her foot, looking at the ground.

"Sorry."

"Jake's a killer but he's sorry."
That was the basic scenario for a few hours and then we went to dinner. I took her to a place called Ralph's, which was, despite the name, the nicest restaurant in town. I wore slacks and an Oxford jacket that my father insisted on giving me, and Jamie wore a sneaky blue dress intended to show her leg up to the breaking point. She wore revealing things when she was angry with me.

Once, in the middle of a fight, she entered a wet-T-shirt contest and took the shirt all the way off before the announcer had a chance to throw any water. The crowd was silent, somewhat shocked at the sight of her breasts so early in the routine. She glared at me over the heads of drunken ranchers and construction workers and the wives and girlfriends they had dragged along, oozing anger from her glistening skin. I was supposed to bear responsibility for the whole spectacle, the relationship-incompetent adrift in a mud-puddle of musketeers, rowdy, romantic people who knew how to slice an apple with a fencing sword and cut a girl's dress off before sweeping her off her feet. I was just occupying space. That was my role. So I accepted it and stood there in disgrace. Michelle wasn't doing the requisite shimmying and things began to drift into the over-awkward, so the announcer cocked back his bucket of water. He was engaged in the forward-bucket-swing when my girlfriend locked onto him with those eyes of hers, and he must have taken the message, because he swayed course and made an unhandsome swerve with the bucket, tossing the whole load of water onto the crowd. We departed, quickly.

At the restaurant we sat around waiting for a table and neared, distressingly, the necessity for real conversation. I was trying to avoid a lot of speech, that night, because I was aware that there was a desire lurking somewhere inside my brain to tell Michelle I
had flunked out of college. Finally I went to the maitre de' and offered him a ten just as he was preparing to seat us. I tried to rescind the offer of money, but now that it had been offered we weren't getting near any table without it.

We were seated in a corner under a fish tank that was built into the wall. It was medium in size, full of small, decrepit-looking fish and translucent green plants waving in seductive rhythm, and was, I am fairly certain, the only fish tank in any restaurant in the state of Montana. Most of the fish looked drug-addicted. They were orange with blue lips and despite the thermometer in the tank, which read eighty-degrees, I had the idea that their lips were blue from cold. I couldn't resist the notion that they were freezing there, beside our table, and we weren't doing anything about it. I kept glancing over and finally Michelle, looking jealous, told me to stop.

"But they're dying," I said.

Michelle took in the fish-tank scene for a moment, turned back to the table, lit a cigarette. She blew the smoke out slowly. "I get it," she said, "blue lips."

But she didn't get it. There was something about the look in their eyes that convinced me they were really dying, languishing above our table while we sucked on ice cubes. I didn't know what it meant, it was some sort of complicated psychological equation, the demise of fish over fine dining, but the solution, somehow, was clear. The whole situation, getting C's in art to piss off the father, not getting C's in art, not telling the father about it anyway, the distant knowledge that the father knew it was all a stunt and didn't care, sitting next to fish in a brown restaurant with cinder-block exterior, phobia of girlfriend, all were meant somehow, by someone, to add up to a clear, distinct sum. It all glazed abstractly into one frame.
"I got an "F" in Human Form."

"An "F"?"

"Fox-trot."

"In the class where you stare at tits all day?"

"You don't stare, you observe and depict."

"So, you're done? You flunked out, completely?"

"Is there another method?"

"It's not the compost pile of your life, Jacob, that I mind so much, but the fact that you enjoy, so thoroughly, piling on the garbage."

She sits relishing her anger, and then, briefly, smiles a little at this, her cleverness, and I see that just then, finally, we will be able to co-exist, perhaps, amicably. We go home then, to her house, and we go, I believe, both basking in the hope that we can have, at least, one last delectable romp, without the pressure of having to behave as though the castle is upright, as though there will be one more trip to visit the other's family, one more obligatory how was your day, one more uncomfortable dinner sat through.

4.

We have our night and it is a good one. There is more moaning and screaming and knocking over of furniture than occurred in the rest of our relationship combined. When I leave in the morning she kisses me, with a hint of the sentimental, and does not say goodbye. I feel sad, momentarily, walking across her lawn, with its good green facade, its growth and density and relentlessness. I look at my car, a white Dodge Duster,
and know that we did not have it so bad—though we did—but not now, that it is over, did we have it so bad. That is the way it will be remembered, anyway.

My roommates were not at home. I removed a Coors Light from the refrigerator—it was in the door, reserved for good beers, along with two bottles of Samuel Adams, a Fosters and a bottle of a coffee-colored beer we brewed the previous year in the dorms—and went onto the deck. Our house was a two-story that we rented for thirteen-hundred dollars because there wasn't anything cheaper we could find. Our parents were footing most of the bill so it wasn't entirely a disappointment. The landlord mowed the lawn, but not often, and we didn't have a lawnmower, so there was nothing we could do about it. Not that we would have, anyway. I sat on the deck, overlooking our uneven lawn and the apple tree and slush-pile of rotting apples from the previous Fall, sipping my Coors. I thought perhaps I would paint the deck. The paint was chipping off and there were some cans of paint in the garage. I went through the whole process in my head, chipping, sanding, painting and painting again, moving the ladder around, dripping paint on my shoes, cleaning the brushes, it all sounded like the thing to do. I sipped on the beer and watched the clouds passing overhead and thought about my life. I hadn't been doing much of anything for a while, I had to admit. Was I going to be a plastic manufacturer, in the end? Perhaps that was the solution to the whole charade. Wasting time in Missoula before going home to wear hardhat and walk in circles around heavy machinery. The phone rang. I let it ring for a while, but it sounded persistent, so I picked it up.

"You need to come down here."

"Where? and who's this?"

"This is Eric. Poncho's. Hurry up."
He hung up and I went back to the refrigerator. I was not sufficiently drunk to put up with insistence from my roommate. He was not often insistent, but when he was, it usually meant I'd end up walking home or pulling the car onto the lawn sometime after the sun came up. Eric had a particular knack for staying drunk, and for believing that everyone else had better stay drunk too, or something tragic, like boredom, might obtain. When he got insistent, it meant he was done with something, a class or a job or a girlfriend, or perhaps even done with something menial like washing his car. I drank two more Coors and cleaned up the kitchen. I didn't like getting drunk if the house was dirty, so I swept and washed the dishes and washed off the counters, put away the toaster, drank a glass of water, and took a bottle of Jack Daniels out of the cupboard above the fridge. I poured two cokes into a plastic thermos, filled it the rest of the way with whiskey, and set out to Poncho's.

Poncho wasn't a person, I don't think, or if he was, he was dead a long time ago or lives in California somewhere and collects what small check his bar might generate through the mail. It was about five miles out of town, up a canyon on a dirt road that was only plowed because of a ski-area fifteen miles farther down the road. His only customers were drunks from the area, college kids, high-school kids, and the occasional skier who wasn't interested in the newly built lounges at the ski area. The place wasn't bad, though, with a solid-pine bar that had been imported from some other floundering tavern, overturned telephone-wire spools for tables, and writing or carving on every reachable space of wall or floor or table. There were mostly names and dates, somebody loving somebody else, the usual bar-bathroom obscenities, and jokes, but every once in a
while, if you paid attention, you'd find some poetry—genuine, heart-felt, awe-inspiring rhetoric, when read at one a.m. with eyes half-shut and closing time approaching too quickly.

Eric was sitting at the bar. There was a beer and an empty shot glass in front of him. I put my hand on his shoulder and he didn't turn around. His body was tense, I could tell, and I took my hand off his shoulder. He turned around then, slowly, with a smile on his face. He looked odd, like his cheeks were stuffed full of something, or his teeth had all caved in and he'd swallowed them, something, I wasn't sure, unnatural about his face and smile.

"Jake," he said. "Get a drink." He motioned to the bartender, who brought over a draft beer without my asking for it.

I looked at the beer for a minute, making sure nothing was floating in the glass—I'd found a piece of fingernail, once, floating—and swallowed the whole ten ounces in one gulp.

"I thought you'd be here," I said.

"I am."

"Having yourself a drink."

"You too, sucked that beer right down."

"You're not around so much, lately. Are you holed up, somewhere?"

"I'm around, Jake. I live with you."

"So, what's the story?"
"No story, Jake, just having a drink here. Isn't that right, Bear?" Jake looked for agreement from the bartender, whose name wasn't Bear, but who, when called Bear, growled.

I found a spot on the bar that said Yonder lies Arabia and looked around to see what it meant. I thought perhaps there was a map or a globe somewhere--the writing seemed to mean something literal, that somewhere over there was Arabia, which was, I supposed, true, but here in a dark bar on a dirt road I was looking for something more. I looked at the bartender, a grisly fellow with a thick medium-length beard and long dark hair almost covering a silver earring. Perhaps his wife was lying in bed somewhere, her Arab hair spread over a flannel-covered pillow. Get in here Arabia and fix up some dinner. Or, Good evening Arabia, your gown is back from the dry-cleaners, will you take apple or guava for your bath bubbles, before the ball this evening. These thoughts did not seem pertinent to a place called Poncho's.

I went to the bathroom to look at myself in the mirror, which was, regrettably, the blurry kind of mirror you get in a bar-bathroom, if you get one at all. I took stock of myself for a moment. Everything seemed to be in order. It seemed like I might have black spots on my tongue, so I stuck it out and looked and no, nothing wrong there either. I looked like an okay specimen of longtime Montana stock recently freed of the obligation to attend school or be faithful to a girl or paint the deck. The only thing in my future was another glass of beer and then another and later something stronger and a hangover tomorrow. That seemed sufficient, somehow. What more do you really need? The prospect of another beer and not getting a hangover until tomorrow is akin somehow to having your life in order. It seemed like I could make that my theme: Leave the other
shit alone for now. For now there is poetry in a bar with no parking lot. At Poncho's you pull into the ditch in the summer and, in winter, crowd as close to the plowed bank of snow as you can. If the place is busy, you walk from perhaps as far as one hundred yards up or down the road. Which makes for an interesting stroll back to your car, through mud and snow, bothered by an unsteady step, usually, when you leave.

I went back to my stool and ordered another beer. I inspected it again and set forth to gulping it down. There was something going on here, with Eric, but I didn't know what, and wasn't ready to ask. These kinds of things, whatever this turned out to be, couldn't be prodded, they had a slow, steady progression which, when allowed to play out, made them easier to handle, or, at least, made them seem easier to handle. Whatever Eric's problem was it would, like a worm, come slithering out when the ground was properly soaked. I was content to sit, flashlight at the ready, and wait, getting myself, too, properly soaked to handle the revelation, if there was one. I ordered whiskeys for Eric and myself, double-shots of Jack Daniels, and we prepared to drink them, Eric nodding thanks, in silence. Mine was at my lips when Eric said, "Wait. Stop, don't drink that."

When someone says, "Stop. Don't drink that," you think you're getting poisoned and you practically fall over trying to keep the liquid from getting within jumping distance of your mouth. I was able, somehow, to dismiss the possibility of poison without making a fool out of myself and spilling my drink on my shirt. I stopped, abruptly but smoothly, and set my drink on the bar.
"Now, Eric, what is the problem?" I thought the matter warranted some directness on my part, so I was as firm as I felt I could be with someone who might have just kept me from crashing to the floor, toxin-exploded heart oozing over my extended and distended tongue.

"Let's go to the Camping Spot," he said. "Let's get some booze and Steve Earle and go there now, build a fire, pass out. We can stop at the Silver Slipper along the way. Maybe get a few of the guys to meet us."

I was expecting my dog died or my Dad's got cancer or Did you fuck my girlfriend? or any number of ominous things, including, possibly, Hell, Jake, I flunked out of school, to which I could have responded, No shit, so did I, How about that, but I got, instead, the Camping Spot, a place outside Helena where we used to get drunk, before we were old enough to pass ourselves off as old enough.

This was the normal Eric—drunk, irrational, impossible to argue with, his ideas coming so fast and possessing, without fail, such profundity. They were, at least, profoundly stupid, and therefore brilliant and impossible to deny. It wouldn't matter anyway. You could deny away, but Eric, bonehead that he was, would not be deprived.

He was not wholly jovial and, as such, I remained a bit reserved. There was something lurking there, under the surface, and it would, I knew, come out. Perhaps the Camping Spot was, if nothing else, the place to combat low spirits. Eric could tell us his Father spanked him with a bean pole and we could all laugh and slap our thighs and as he stood there crying or doing whatever he would have to do the memory and camaraderie of the place would make him forget that there was anything other than beer and whiskey and
fire and friends in the world, and above us, where the branches of a tree would perhaps have caught fire, a Cottonwood burning down.

But that was not the way things would go, because for one thing, I didn't know what a bean pole was, and neither, I thought, did Eric, and because, aside from the bean pole issue, the world was not that easy.

The road to the Camping Spot is well grated but windy, sometimes strewn with cows, and dark and far enough out of town that you drive faster and drunker than you should. It runs through farmland first, then drops in along Prickly Pear Creek and rises into the lower regions of the mountains with the creek. There, two hundred yards from the road, next to a railroad trestle, at a bend in the creek, is the camping spot, with previously mentioned Cottonwood, as yet unburned. And so we went, an hour and a half from Missoula to Helena, half an hour from Helena to Camping Spot, with sojourn at the Silver City Bar along the way, where heavy drinks were drunk and then more heavy drinks, proffered in go-cups, were escorted by stumblesome under-agers to car.

We didn't wreck the car, which we might have, and we didn't kill anyone, for which I feel guilty at having to mention the possibility of, and we did, as usual, act silly. We listened to six different Steve Earle albums, starting with Early Tracks and progressing, in order, to Transcendental Blues, with an interlude of Elton John just before Shut Up and Die Like an Aviator.

Things were mellow in the car, drunk, on the highway, passing fence posts and owls and a Highway Patrol officer parked in a pull-out. We didn't even get nervous when we passed, just continued sipping our beer, listening to our music, speeding by six miles an
hour. Some of the fellows came to meet us and brought a few of the girls from town, along with some pallets to burn and some gasoline. Before long there was a good fire threatening the tree and we were all standing or sitting around getting drunk. I saw quite a few people I hadn't seen in a few months and some, who had gone away to college in other states, for longer. We had gone through plenty of beer and people were starting to drink straight from the bottles of liquor which had been brought along and hidden under seats and in coat pockets when people were more sober and stingy, and which were now, with mass inebriation taking hold, offered up to all takers.

Someone threw a handful of bullets on the fire and as they began to go off I walked over to the railroad trestle, where stood, looking down at the creek, a girl, Carla, for whom my high-school infatuation had led to the back of my car, where I tried to get down her pants and was, unfortunately, halted with just a feel of the breasts and some heavy kissing, which was at the time, overall, considering my infatuation, satisfactory.

She was still pretty. More full grown, with a prettier face and better skin (or so it seemed, drunk, in distant firelight) and a trimmer, more muscular figure. I walked up behind her, overflowing with drunk confidence, and put my arms around her, grasping the cable railing of the railroad trestle on either side of her hands, which were holding on, too, to the metal cable separating our moment from a fall into the creek. She didn't speak, and neither did I, standing there, straddling the open space between railroad ties, where the creek gurgled slowly by.

I didn't kiss her and after a few minutes, when the bullets had stopped exploding, Eric climbed into the back of someone's pickup and started calling people over. We walked together back to the fire and prepared to listen, content, to Eric's drunken
ramblings. He had fashioned a hat out of a beer box and was pacing, presidential, in front of his audience, apparently not distracted by his lack of podium. He stopped then, lifting one foot to rest on the wheel-hub of the truck, and, leaning over his knee, eyeing the crowd in an authoritative manner, fire-light waving across his body, making him look fluid, said, "Boys, no sense in delaying the obvious, I've got something to say."

He didn't mean obvious, I wanted to interrupt, because it was not, at four in the morning, obvious to any of us what he was going to say. Perhaps he meant impending or absolute or whatever word is meant to go along with that saying, but you don't correct a bunch of drunks in the middle of the woods on their grammar. "I'm going to treatment," he said. "No more drinking after tonight, so don't pass out yet."

Someone saying they are going to stop drinking in front of a bunch of people who are and have been drinking heavily produces a sort of awed reticence in which the drinkers grasp for their wallets and feel their faces to make sure they are still awake and then gasp each of them a little gasp of the kind you might hear in a crowd watching a man with a tattooed face eat fire. An aura of shock permeated the air, along with the smell of the creek and the weeds and campfire smoke soaking into our hair and clothes, and the silence wasn't broken for at least a minute, when Nick Pearson said, sorrowfully, "I can't believe you're throwing your life away."

This was, even to a batch of drunks, more absurd than our friend going away to be told he was an alcoholic. Everyone laughed, abruptly, and the evening was saved. Only Nick Pearson continued to sulk, and even he, after a few more beers, saw the humor in his outburst. If Eric's announcement evoked no great insurgence of self-examination, it did, at least, present for us the continued opportunity for a good, sentimental drunk.
I woke up at noon the next day in Carla's bed, fully clothed. I can state with some certainty that we enjoyed no carnal rewards, but we did, I think, judging by the proximity of certain clues, namely Carla's lack of bra or shirt--her fine, attractive breasts open for display to my soggy eyes--my half unbuttoned fly, and the condom, unopened, on the bed between us, have evil intentions. I wanted to pursue the lost opportunity that morning on the bed, after twenty minutes of staring at Carla's breasts, and so I began to try and wake her up. She was snoring lightly and I sat up and shook the bed as much as possible, to no avail, so I blew in her ear, for a moment, then, fearing my breath would ruin my chances, put my hand on her hip and moved her back and forth, lightly, until she opened her eyes. She looked tortured.

"I feel like a dead dog," she said.

"It's better than a dead cow."

"Not really, a dead cow gets cleaned up. A dead dog, you'd better be prepared to rot on the side of the road."

I rubbed my hand across her forehead and then ran my fingers through her hair, hoping she'd get the hint. She lay there, smiling, not making an attempt to cover her breasts, so, to test the waters, I moved my hand down, over her shoulder, and circled her nipple with my finger.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"My house."

"Which means your house, or your parent's house?"

"I have a roommate. You're safe."
"I smell like a forest fire. So do you."

"Yes, we can."

"We can what? Smell?"

"We can take a shower, if that's what you're asking."

That was a fine little answer. I took my clothes off, right there, before she could change her mind. "Come on," I said, "let's go conserve water."

We had an enjoyable time in the shower and I felt somehow better about my life in general, having settled an old score, sort of. There were some antics in the shower and then, mostly, on the bathroom counter, and by the time I got dressed I felt like I had learned something about women. I didn't know what, but there was some imperceptible knowledge imbued which I had always previously, in my not infrequent experiences with the female species, missed. This Carla knew something that a person shouldn't know until they were somewhere in their forties, I decided. But I was glad she did. She had a way of making things go on for longer than you thought they could or should, and they kept going on, anyway, until you were positive that you were going to die, right there, beside the toilet, and then they did end, and you were uncertain as to whether or not you did die and the sink and mirror and porcelain toilet were to be the last images you took into heaven, those and the face and breasts and stomach of a girl more beautiful than you deserved or thought you'd ever have again. She didn't seem to imply that this would ever happen again, and I found myself wishing I could bring her along as a reference material for future trysts. Of course I would take something of her along, but it would be a mighty
spell, I thought, before I could repeat my bathroom performance, which had more to do with her, I knew, than with me.

I went into the living room, where Eric was on the couch, awake, smiling. He apparently knew what was going on. Carla's roommate was in the kitchen, cooking breakfast. We ate bacon and eggs and hashbrowns and pulpy orange juice out of clean glasses and Eric tried to attract Carla's roommate by saying a lot of stupid things and turning his head sideways in her field of vision, at which she laughed, obligingly, but maintained a solid shield of indifference to his sexual advances, until he finally gave up and ate breakfast. We cleared the dishes for them, loaded the dishwasher, took our leave, and walking to the car, feeling a bit unhinged, I wished I could curl up in that girl's bed and live out my days, comatose with pleasure.

5.

We drove, Eric and I, in happy-with-life spirits, myself more so than Eric, I suppose, from Carla's house to my parents' house, where there was to be some familial interaction. I had not decided if the days after being dumped by your girlfriend were to be sorrowful ones, before our trip the previous evening, but it appeared, now, that they were not. I could go on breaking up forever if the next morning were to always turn out like it had. Even, I supposed, if there were only odds that the next morning would "turn out," would I be willing to place the bet, so long as the odds were horse-race rather than lottery long. The morning was good enough to risk a few things. It was, though, a lottery morning, in that I would not have another so good, I presumed, in a while. In high-school I went to prom with a girl nicknamed "Powerball," because the odds were so long, and I had not, that night, won, so this lottery-winning was new and pleasurable for me. I do not
think that that previous lottery, in high-school with "Powerball" would have had a payoff as good as the one I experienced this morning. Such were its merits. I will stamp it with the "good" stamp and shut up.

The parents weren't expecting us, and I didn't know for sure that they would be home, but, perhaps out of guilt for the flunking-out, I felt the necessity of showing my face. I was showered and clean and still sex-elated, and thought I could do the world some good simply by being around. We pulled into the driveway and the lawn was trimmed and the sprinklers on, showering the car as we drove the quarter-mile of asphalt from the driveway entrance to the house. The driveway is tree-lined, in imitation of those large plantations of the south, where everything is supposed to be innocent, and the yard spreads over several acres which get mowed by a landscaping company with a lawnmower they otherwise use at a golf course. There are in fact golf greens out back, and my father hits at them from just beyond the back porch.

It was around two-o' clock, and a Sunday, and I was anticipating, as we parked the car, that my father would be out back, swinging his clubs or sitting in a hammock, reading the paper and having a gin and tonic, and my mother, unfortunate soul, would be reading a depressingly sappy novel. She is a high-school English teacher, has taken a Master's degree in Literature, and still, on Sundays, prefers to read romance novels of the grocery store variety. She is unerring in her devotion to books with covers displaying Fabio-replica men reaching irrepressibly for Gone-With-the-Wind belles.

Our house is a brick affair with large front windows and three stories, including the basement. The front door opens into a large foyer and to the left and right are a sitting room and the kitchen, and directly in front, a large, curved staircase. The house was
inherited from my grandfather, and for an inherited house in Montana, is unique. We don't have many Kennedys or Rockerfellers here, passing down generations of accumulated wealth.

We walked into the kitchen and my mother was there, wearing rubber gloves, assaulting a pile of dough with a rolling pin. She looked up at us, partially covered in flour, surprised.

"You're father will not allow me to hire a cook, so this is what he gets. Flour on the linoleum."

"Hello, Mother."

"Did you think you'd find him in here, slaving away?"

"Looks like a fine job you're doing."

"These, my friend, are dinner rolls."

"We're leaving in an hour."

"I won't comment on your grades, then. I don't have the time for that kind of endeavor."

This was going to be, as per usual, the kind of visit where we sat around and didn't say much and where I watched my parents do bad impressions of devoted spouses. I had not in five or so years walked into the house and seen them in the room together, but, as soon as I was home they clamped together like magnets, making a point to touch each other often. They knew I knew it was a charade, but this did not, they seemed to feel, warrant a deviation from the prescribed course. They were actors in an intricate play, and they refused to depart from their routine until I, by walking out of the door, called scene.
As anticipated my father walked into the house within a minute or two of our arrival, carrying his putter and a glass drained of everything but melting ice.

We went into the living room and my father accosted me about my summer plans. There were some very good jobs out there to be had, jobs that would provide the right kind of experience for a person my age, experience that could be used when one's plans fell through. There were jobs at his factory, in fact, that I should consider taking. It went on like that for quite a while, until my mother had had enough and interrupted:

"So, Jacob," she said, "tell us your position on God. What do they think of God in the art department?"

"I don't think they really have a stance, Mother. It's sort of decided on a case-by-case basis."

"Because your father seems to think they're making you into a heathen. Are you a heathen yet, Jacob?"

This was some sort of planned assault. I was pretty certain my father was the target of the attack, but I was still very much in harm's way. If I aligned myself too closely with my mother, there was no question I'd be in his factory carrying a clipboard within a week, but if I strayed too far and didn't let her wage her miniature war on him, I'd lose a powerful ally in my mother, whose support for the arts had quite possibly allowed me to hold out so long under the Art Umbrella.

"Your mother seems to think we should have Nietzsche tattooed on our collective ass and move into a commune somewhere."

"Yes, and your father's content to drive around with God Hates Darwin on his bumper."
"I don't believe in bumper stickers, Ellen."

I had to get involved in the conversation, somehow, before things migrated in my direction. As soon as they'd exhausted their pre-planned arsenal, they'd try to force me to take one of their sides. I had to establish my stupidity early and maintain it throughout.

"Most of Eric's family is Mormon," I said, giving him a shrug.

The parents must have sensed that I was not going to cooperate, because they both sat there for a moment, silent, watching Eric's face turn red. He would have to be the scapegoat. If neither of them could win, someone else would have to lose.

"Is that so?" my father said, almost to himself.

"Really?" my mother coincided.

"Some people," my father said, taking up his renewed glass of scotch, "will believe in anything."

"They really will." my mother said, "It's quite amazing, really, the things people will convince themselves of."

"It's not that much different from most of the other religions," Eric said, feebly.

"Sure," I said, "It's almost exactly the same."

We all sat there for a moment, waiting to see if things were over. My father was staring at his drink. Mother looked at her painted fingernail. I watched my father's face. He would be the one to signal for the final truce. He wasn't moving and I thought it might be over, when a little smirk appeared. I couldn't allow it to go on. Eric would have to be sacrificed, again.

"Except for the thing about calling yourselves Saints."
Eric's immediate family weren't even practicing Mormon's, but he had, I decided in the sitting room of our faux-colonial house, to take some of the brunt of history for the Hartfield family. We weren't from the south, and we hadn't gotten involved in slavery, I didn't think, so my rich white parents in their slavery-inspired house needed to take out their frustrations on someone. They needed religious persecution to persevere for them, and for me, and Eric would indeed, it seemed, have to be my Jesus. I hoped he'd keep his mouth shut and cooperate.

"Son," my father said, "don't be insensitive."

"We taught you better than that," Mother said.

"If there is an apple left to cherish it must certainly be tolerance," Father said.

"Apologize to your friend, Jacob, and then be on your way. We've got things to do."

This is the way my parents operate. I've spent a lot of time analyzing the way people operate, and my parents, I've deduced, are the craftiest of them all. They have achieved this distinction as much through what they don't say as through what they do say. For example: they could choose to go on with their discrimination against Mormons, but they realize that they have nothing against Mormons, or if they do, it won't get them anything here. Now, they obviously have something against each other, for various reasons, and, vicariously, against me. I'm not exactly sure what they, together, have against me. They each have their individual complaints, but they would never agree on these, because they are real complaints. They prefer to conspire against me on the things that don't make sense, which they know I will never understand, thus providing them a much more gratifying victory--the undeserved and incomprehensible and undeniable.
They, cheetah-like, hover in the reeds, waiting for my spindly legs, my cheap, twisting horns, my jolt of adrenaline-escape, and finally, to their delight, my death-squeal and gasp, and the last choking breath as they fling me, their teeth collapsing my windpipe, into the hot soil, where I bleed bleed.

Eric and I finish our drinks and leave. As we get into the car I am quite sure that I hear my father playing golf in the backyard. We have been gone not thirty seconds and already he has deserted Mother, and his driver is swishing through the air, cracking against the dimpled plastic of his Titlest #1. I could run around the house and catch him there, away from Mother, and they would not have an answer, they would stand, mute, like ghosts, astonished at this twist of fate, their game found out, my father's shoes squeaky in the grass, my mother inside, pressed to the window, both of them stumped by the situation. And while they could state, simply, that he felt like playing some golf, no big deal at all, just a couple of swings, they would not, for this would fall outside the scope of their programmed interaction with me, and, doll-like, they would simply stammer, mouth's agape. But this victory would never be recognized. And if I tried to gloat the little trance would be broken and they would out-absurd me with something nonsensical like, "You, boy, will have the teeth of a rat, someday, if you don't divine the practicality of floss." And I, eternal grazer that I am, would turn, sheep-tail between newly-shorn legs, and trot away through the tall grass.

But I do not run around the house. We leave my father to create divots and my mother to romance Fabio and we drive. Driving is nice sometimes. Eric has treatment to think about and I, myself, have some figuring out to do. I will require an enabling mode,
which I am not familiar with, but which I had better find, or else. Or else what? I don't
know. Or else something. Or else I'll have to climb under a rock and learn to eat dirt
with the beetles and maggots and ants and centipedes who certainly won't be afraid of
having me down there with them. They'll simply whisper, "Go ahead, pull up a chair,"
and of course I'll have to pull one up, out of politeness' sake.

7.

I have agreed, after a stint at Eric's parent's house, to drive him to the treatment
facility. I am picturing white. White shoes and white gowns and white chairs and white
walls and outside, white grass. I am also picturing a round building, from which escape
must be easy, for I have known several people, teenagers, when I was in high school, who
have. Escaped. I am unfamiliar with the point of teenagers escaping from treatment
facilities and going home, where they must know their parents are waiting to take them
back. It is the parents, usually, who took them in the first place. If you are a teenager and
you want to escape, you had better follow the example of prison escapees--hide in the
mountains. Or just disappear, if you can. Perhaps that is where they got the saying, "You
can never go home, again." If you have just escaped from somewhere, you can never go
home, again.

We arrive at White Pines in the evening and I see that I was almost right about the
building being round. Or, perhaps not. It is definitely square, but gives off, somehow,
the appearance of being round. It is, I think, the corners, which are angled, like you
would see on a piece of furniture, tapered edges so you don't take out a knee. They give
the building a soft, pillowy look. Don't be afraid to come in here, they say, you won't run
into anything hard. Which is the ultimate untruth. You will, if you have a reason to be
staying in there, and you stay, run into something for which hard is a laughable understatement. The building should, I decide, be made of titanium. "Look here," they could put on the door, "everything within will break you of your silly, silly life."

At the reception desk there is an attractive woman in a brown sweater. She has large, pouty lips and green eyes and I stare, as we check in, unabashedly. She begins to swish her hair from one side to the other and I catch a whiff of her shampoo, which smells fruity, and I consider, briefly, checking in myself. Things would not be so bad here, with the angled edges, the white pines which I haven't seen, and the pretty, bubbly lady, with her nice, red lips. Of course she is just another aspect of the soft facade. She is probably composed of razor-wire, tastefully concealed. The fat lips frozen, waiting for you and your gullible tongue to careen blindly in like a preschooler to the playground slide, where you will remain stuck, your skin peeling off, while you wait for someone to bring the hot water.

"Come on," she tells us, "I'll show you the facilities. There are things to do here. We try to alleviate boredom."

I try to picture what sort of things she could be referring to. She leads us through a hall and I find myself following directly behind her, with Eric trailing behind. His position at the rear is partly because of his reluctance to actually see the place, where I have no qualms considering I get to leave, and also partly due to my general bustling to be the one she has to address directly, due to my proximity to her, as we go along, and so I also get to watch her and her posterior as we walk. She has a fine posterior which does just the right amount of jiggling and which I find just about as enticing as those lips. I don't know if this one is as dangerous. I'm beginning to convince myself to have my
doubts. I could spend a few minutes with those lips and that posterior and still survive, perhaps. No, I could not. That is the very point. They are there specifically to convince you that you could survive, when in fact you could not. I back off a few more steps, but it doesn't help. Hopefully, the fate of the world doesn't rest on my being able to resist this woman's rear end.

"Here," she says, pointing into the lunchroom, "are some of the other guests." She emphasizes "guests" in a way I perceive to mean that I, too, should be checking in. Or that I will be checking in, someday. I have a notion that alcohol counselors believe all people, babies included, should be checked into a treatment facility. It borders on conspiracy, in my opinion. I also have a theory that alcoholism of the active variety has a higher occurrence rate amongst alcohol counselors than among the other professions.

The lunchroom is partly inhabited by other residents, playing cards, chess, eating, talking, and I feel suddenly as though I am in prison, and I wait anxiously for one of them to toss his lunch tray to the floor and come over and cut me. But no, things are more mild than that. There is an abundance of dog-pound atmosphere here, and I have the feeling that all the residents are looking at me, hoping expectantly that I will take them out of here. I will not take them out of here. I did not put them in here. I have some sympathy for their problems, but I will not relieve them of any guilt they need to feel. I am angry with them, because they have distracted me from the receptionist's behind. She bent over to pick up a plastic fork, while I was distractedly looking around, and I missed it. My life as hardship.

We walk around more and look at the inmates more and Eric and I exchange a few glances about this host of ours and beyond that nothing really happens. She shows us
to Eric's room, sits on the bed for a moment, which makes my leg twitch, and leaves with a cute, made-up smile, designed specifically for schmucks like us.

In the room we converse briefly. We say all the things we are supposed to and I prepare to leave. As I stand in the door, giving him a last look over, he says, "This isn't your fault. I did it on my own."

That is a nice sentiment, but I hadn't considered that it was my fault. All the alcohol that ever entered his body has done so via his mouth and I wasn't tying him up and forcing anything down. I decide just to go along.

"You were good at it along the way."

"I just don't want you taking on any blame."

"I remember a liter of J.D., about a twelve pack of beer, and a good load of gin, all by yourself, one day."

"I could have said I didn't want it, couldn't I?"

"What's this?"

"You know what it is."

"What?"

"It doesn't matter."

"You're blaming this on me?"

"You don't think you deserve it?"

"I don't think I deserve it."

"That's Okay."

"That's Okay?"

"That's fine. Maybe you don't deserve it. I don't know."
We left it at that. He had begun to convince me that I did deserve it, somehow, and I wasn't willing to get into it any farther and find out. I think I left with both of us doubting my guilt, which was, at that time, with the soft building and the room checked into and my friend staying to face the inmates while I tromped out the front door significantly more legitimate a person to the sweet receptionist by virtue of not having had to check in yet, enough. I nodded at her as I passed, gave her a look containing all the confidence I could muster, a look that said, "No, I do not belong in here, and I am all the man you'll ever need," and she smiled, turning red, and said, "I'm sorry sir, you're going the wrong way, the front door is over there." That was the end of our tawdry relationship, which seemed distant and removed as the doors swung shut, separating me from the agony within. As I drove out I thought I saw a white pine in the distance, but it turned out to be a chimney, puffing smoke.

8.

I went home to look for a job. There were numerous positions for a boy like me. Mcdonalds was seeking friendly individuals for management positions, Wal-Mart wanted someone to arrive at 10:00 pm and sweep until 6:00 am, experienced welders were needed at PressRight Machine Shop, and there were sales positions at car lots. I was not inclined to work my way up the ladder at any of these places. I would have preferred to take the job at Mcdonalds and then run with the trade secrets to Burger King. Instead, I ended up selling vacuum cleaners. I picked out a mysterious ad that said, "Earn at least $300/wk for RM Corp." They were very vague about the details, and they conducted the interview in an empty office building, where a man in a cheap-looking, poorly ironed suit asked me a total of three questions.
They did not seem legitimate, and when they called to offer me the job I hung up on them. "You're not getting me," I said, slamming down the phone. They called back.

"What do you mean?" they asked.

"I'm not up to your tricks," I said, and hung up again.

"What tricks?" they asked when they called back.

"There's no point in getting specific," I said. "I'm not up for any of them."

"We'd like you to start immediately," they said, and I hung up.

When the phone rang again, a woman was speaking. It had been a man. "You're not going to hang up on us again, Mr. Hartfield, or we'll have you cited for prank calling. Do you understand?" This did not seem reasonable, but the threat was still there. I kept listening. She had an elegant voice, deep and smooth. "We'd like to give you money, just to meet with us. One hundred dollars. Be at the office at 1:00 pm." This time she hung up. I wondered if I had tangled with the mob. This woman seemed very Tony Soprano or Michael Corleone.

There was no one at the office when I arrived. It was unlocked, so I walked around for a while. There were three chairs and a garbage can and a few leaflets for a rave the previous week. I looked at one of the leaflets. There was some poetry or rap below the address: We're gonna party all night, we're gonna do things right, until the break of light. If this was how the people who went to raves talked I wanted them all to check in to White Pines, or better yet, into Warm Springs Mental Hospital, where someone could apply gauze to their wounded brain cells.

The patient version of myself was tired and I decided to exercise my option to leave the premises. There would be no confrontation with the female mob and no one-
hundred dollars. I stood next to my car as a Ford Explorer Eddie Bauer edition came
careening through the parking lot, swerving into the spot next to mine, almost hitting me
and my car and the building in front. It seemed like the mob convening. The mob needed
to learn how to drive or pretty soon the mob would go to jail for vehicular manslaughter
and never get to extort another nickel. I braced myself for gunfire or kisses or whatever
weapon the mob would be using, and stood beside my car. The windows in the Explorer
were tinted, and I could only see the shading of some movement within. There appeared
to be only one person, the driver. The muted movement was still going on inside, and I
stood, shifting weight between my feet, for what seemed like a very long time. Finally
the driver's door opened and a figure walked around the back of the vehicle, still obscured
from my view, and appeared in the space between our two vehicles.

She was tall and slender with brown, radiant hair, and was, I realized after a few
moments, the woman from the pool hall who distracted me into flunking out of college.
She was wearing a dress, rather than an Armani suit, and her ankles ran smoothly into a
pair of black-high-heel shoes. I looked at her from the ground up, rather than up and
down, and focused last on her eyes. This was a gesture I had adopted to take away from
the leering effect of making and breaking eye contact to traverse down the body and up
the body and make eye contact again. I started at the feet, moved swiftly, interestedly, to
the eyes, and stopped, effecting grave force. It was scripted, but genuine, in this case.
Her eyes were magnificently round and large and dark and had I started with them I could
never have left.

"Come on," she said, and I walked to the office door, almost involuntarily, and
stopped when I got there. "Not in there," she said, opening the door to her Explorer.
We drove to a coffee shop. She convinced me that I would be selling vacuum cleaners for a lot of money. I would be making a lot of money myself, supposedly. I was not possessed of the necessary tools to argue with this woman. I sat there, drinking coffee, collecting my hundred dollars, and agreeing. She seemed to know everyone in the coffee shop. This was somehow, I sensed, important. Knowing a lot of people in a coffee shop was important in a way I couldn't yet understand. I hadn't really ever spent any time in a coffee shop, and I had the feeling that I had been missing out. There were a lot of smart looking people wearing fancy clothes and the cups, themselves, were pretty fancy too. They were all either orange or blue or turquoise, and they were fat, with big handles so you could really get a grip on your coffee. I tried to concentrate on these types of things, coffee mugs, croissants and fancy jellies, the bread which was not just referred to as French, but had the name spelled out in French. These were all my tools, and they helped me to avoid eye contact with the woman. I just sat there, studying a coffee shop, agreeing. Pretty soon we were back in her Explorer with gray leather seats. She was listening to Ani DeFranco, so I thought she might want to kill me later. We hadn't really been speaking for a while. I think she was tired of all my agreeing. I decided I had better make a move. I had flunked out of college for this woman, and here I was, sitting in her Eddie Bauer edition.

"You flunked me out of school," I said.

"Did I?"

"You don't remember?"

"That's the type of thing I try to forget."

"You ruined a straight C average. My father will probably have you killed."
"He doesn't like me, then?"

"He doesn't like me either."

"At least we've got some common ground."

We were silent again for a while. She didn't remember me, I could tell. I thought perhaps I really would sell vacuum cleaners for a while. I needed a summer job and vacuum cleaner sales had some very promising prospects. I didn't believe the part about the money, but I was on decent footing in that department still, with what I had saved from the previous summer's roofing job, and the money I got from my parents. Selling vacuum cleaners with Mrs. Mesmerizing. My father would hate this. I looked at her then. She was wearing a pair of diamond earrings and her hair was pulled back behind the ear.

"I guess I'll do it."

"I know."

"What do you mean, you know?"

"You've been saying you'll do it all along."

"I have?"

"You have."

"Well, I didn't mean it until now."

"Okay."

"Okay."

She dropped me off and I watched her drive away. She almost ran into a garbage can, the curb, a tree, and a Lincoln Town Car before she got to the street. This was not something I would be good at. The extent of my knowledge on vacuum cleaners: suction,
bag, push, empty bag, or don't. What was I doing? I was not going home and not going
to school and not getting a real job and not being realistic. That seemed like enough.

9.

Selling vacuum cleaners was going to involve some travel, I found out. I would
be riding with Elizabeth in her Explorer, along with another sales pro, Mr. Ian Donnelly,
who was a thirty-year-old lifer to the vacuum biz. I was given a day of training, unpaid,
and a week with which to prepare myself for our journey to Wyoming. I went to JC
Penney's and bought three pairs of pants, one khaki, one blue, one military green. I
bought *The Catcher in the Rye, The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, and a
Dog Fancy magazine. I felt like looking at some dogs. I spent my week getting drunk
and watching television and trying to attract drunk females at the bar with some friends.
They dragged me several times to the bar by almost-force, but did I blame them? No, I
did not. I went along and drank my drinks and smoked cigarettes and glared at other
drunks and sexually harassed the barmaids and peed in the alley when it became
necessary.

At home I drove the little tractor which was parked in the neighbors field, pushing
around dirt, covering up prairie dog holes, uprooting small cacti. He was putting in a
lawn, and I had been solicited as minor help. It felt good being on a tractor, upon which I
had spent many youthful summers at my uncle's ranch. I drove that tractor with as much
precision as I could muster, shifting and raising and lowering the bucket, dumping rocks
and dirt and plants into piles, being generally forceful with the earth. I had some things
to say which I could not express verbally and this tractor was saying them for me. It had
purpose and purpose was a fine thing to have.
At the end of the week I prepared my small bag with the necessities and the new pants and my books and a pocketknife and a golf club, the Calloway driver my father had purchased for me some years prior. If there wasn't any golfing I could always hit someone over the head, which I might indeed have to do, selling vacuum cleaners at inflated prices in Wyoming.

I sat on the front porch with my bag and golf club and a jacket and a six-pack of Schmidt, which I was gambling would be considered an appropriate item, and waited, watching the sparrows dart and flap and attack each other in intricate flight, and I couldn't decide if they were actually fighting or if this was some furious mating tussle. Either way, it did not seem so strange, them flying around that way, perhaps unsure themselves as to whether they were engaged in intimate bliss or arduous combat.

As I waited a policeman drove onto our lawn. He drove right up over the curb and onto the lawn, straightening his tires as he stopped, like a foot stomping out a cigarette, and pulled up some grass. He stepped out, leaving his lights flashing, his engine running, and the driver's side door open. "I'm looking for Mr. Hartfield and Mr. Snow," he said, stroking his gun holster with a leather-gloved hand.

"I'm Mr. Hartfield," I said. "Mr. Snow is inside."

"Get him," he said. "We need to have a word."

"A word?"

"Get Mr. Snow."

There were actions in my past that warranted concern, but none that I knew of would have involved Mr. Snow. This was shaping up as one of those instances where you get caught for the thing you didn't think you ever did, or did and forgot. I wasn't sure
which. I got Mr. Snow, whom I usually referred to as Rob, and we went outside. He was more nervous than I was, and kept stuttering, and the other two roommates turned giddy at the prospect of our getting in trouble. I told them I was planning on ratting them out regardless, to shut them up. Some of the neighbors had gathered on their lawns and in their windows at the sight of the police cruiser beaming on our lawn.

"Mr. Snow?" the policeman asked, forcefully.

"Yes," Rob said, stifling a stutter.

The policeman directed his gaze at Rob. He removed a pair of sunglasses slowly and attached them to his shirt pocket. He shifted his gaze briefly to me, back to Rob, and then craned his neck forward so that Rob's face and his own were only a few inches apart.

"We have reason to believe, boys, that you've been dumping garbage."

"Yes," Rob said, "yes we have. I'm sorry."

I received a ticket for unlawful disposal of refuse material, which I had not done, but which, after Rob's confession, I was not compelled to refute. My roommates had, after forgetting to take the garbage to the street for a few weeks in a row, piled Rob's pickup with the bags, dressed in masks, and filled the Hastings garbage receptacle to the brim with our household waste. Hastings called the police, who found my name and Rob's name on pizza boxes. This was the sort of criminal activity to be embarrassed about. I would have to appear in front of a judge and say, "Yes, I am a dolt." I hadn't been explicitly involved in the garbage caper, but I had known about it, thought it was humorous at the time--filling Hastings' garbage can's completely up--and was, in fact, enough of a dolt to let Rob speak, and to get caught for it when I hadn't actually done it.
So perhaps I deserved the ticket. I certainly deserved something for living the kind of inharmonious life I was living. If there were dissonant ways of being, I was among them.

I sat on my porch with the yellow copy of my ticket and watched the police cruiser remove itself from our lawn. Our neighbors were returning to their houses, grumbling. We had not provided an entertaining enough scene. They had been secretly hoping, since we invaded their fragile neighborhood, that we would, all of us in the hell-house, go down in a blaze of gunfire. This was supposed to be, the police car had insinuated to them, the day of our apocalypse. Instead they were left to look at tire tracks in our already unruly lawn. Tire tracks were not enough. They wanted a smoldering heap of siding and carpet and deck and bodies or nothing at all. Tire tracks were an insult. Tire tracks only added to the cacophony of our existence there, amongst the mowed and manicured and pruned and painted. I sat, eating an apple, soaking up their disappointment. A few minutes later Elizabeth's Explorer pulled up.

10.

For those few souls who do not know disappointment the arrival of the Explorer would have been a sour experience. For the rest of us, the wretched of the earth, it was merely expected. Instead of a white-toothed smile and the flowing dark hair turning to meet me, it was the scarred forehead and anxious, yellow grin of Ian Donnelly. "How do you do?" his expression said in an Elmer Fudd voice, without his even opening his mouth to speak.

"Where's Elizabeth?" I asked.

"Whatcha wanna know that for?"
This Ian was a nuisance. A person could hardly be expected to ride around
listening to his mangled North Dakota accent for longer than a few minutes. Something
about him reminded me of Saturday morning cartoons and I started picturing the Road
Runner dropping an anvil on his head.

"That's a funny way of speaking you've got there," I said.

"You think you're perty smart, don'tcha?"

"I reckon I'm a sight more of a tooter than you, Mr. Fudd."

"Whasat sposed to mean?"

"Means you pull on your pants a little slow."

"We'll jist see about that," Ian Donnelly said, nodding to himself as he drove the
Explorer, both hands on the wheel, his right index finger curled in an apparent angry
gesture.

We were silent for a long time and I began to feel sorry for Ian. He seemed like a
good person, and I, of course, was not. This was the type of thing that could ruin a man
like Ian's life, when all he was trying to do was get by in a nice way without too much
hardship. I strode over his place of shelter with my big, waffle-soled boots and pressed
the rubber squares deep into his forehead. Those were indentations which might never
come out. So I tried to smooth them out. I offered Ian a piece of gum, which he refused,
and then asked him to stop at an Exxon, where I went inside and bought him a Ruby Red
Squirt. He seemed like a Ruby Red Squirt sort of guy. He drank Mountain Dew, and
was further incensed that I was so far off. I finally decided I'd have to resort to speech,
which I had been trying to avoid at all costs. Speech, with Ian, was a painful thing. I
didn't know how Ian ever sold a vacuum, unless the customer bought the overpriced thing
just to get him out of their house. But they had to let him in in the first place, which I also didn't understand. If Ian ever showed his face at my door he'd be lucky to get away without someone putting an egg in his pocket and giving him a shove. Where are the people who let Ian into their house? I want to know. They deserve some great reward, something opulent like the leg-lamp on A Christmas Story or a big-honey-glazed ham. What they get, instead, if any brand of crook finds out that they are the sort of people who will let Ian into their house, is a new best friend who has all kinds of great investment ideas that require minimal cash payouts to ensure a future return. They get to be featured on investigative report shows as the spurned gullible who will never trust again, and who, after the show airs, must play host to a whole new mob of scam artists who now know via national television that these people, the Jones's, have and will let Ian in. If you have let Ian in once, sentiment says, you'll let him in again.

Ian's face has been red for nearly twenty minutes and I decide I'd better put a stop to his torture. An apology won't do, I don't think, as Ian seems like the sort of person who is used to being insulted and has begun to take the random apologies when they come as his only opportunities for revenge. I need something proactive that does not say that I'm sorry, but makes him think I'm sorry enough that he can forget it and get happy. The Ians of the world are essentially happy beings enduring their catastrophes in order to get happy again. I pull a bag of Skittles from my pocket, fill up my mouth with the chewy candies, and say, sticky mouthed, "I'd sure love to get in a game of Dungeons and Dragons." It sounds as though I'm pronouncing a lot of "w"s, with the candy impeding my tongue, and Dragons comes out Dwagons. I'm gambling here anyway, with the
Dungeons and Dragons, but it feels like a safe gamble, and if not, perhaps Ian can relate to my Dwagons. Dwagons seem like his kind of apple. Sure enough, he bites.

"You play?" he asks.

"It's been a while. I'm not very good," I say, anticipating that he'll go for some kind of trap next. Dungeons and Dwagons people are inherently suspicious and they want to believe that non Dungeons and Dwagons people will be coming around trying to gain unlawful access to their club.

"So, what do you think of Thor?" he asks, and while I would otherwise have no idea whether Thor was the king scorceror or a bump on a strawberry, I know here, in this context, that Thor has nothing to do with Dungeons and Dragons.

"What, you mean the guy from that Arnold Swartzenegger movie? Don't you play?"

"Sure," he says, self-conscious, "I was just making sure you weren't an imposter. You know how that goes."

"Boy," I say, "do I ever. This one time, in Helena, I met a guy who thought Dungeons and Dragons was just a cartoon." I'm beginning to feel like I'm overdoing it a bit here, so I back off a little, but the battle has been won. Ian is over his pouting stint, and I have a new best friend. Problem is, I just became one of the people who let Ian in, and now, alas, I'll never get him out. I'd better get out the checkbook, because I'm coming home with a vacuum cleaner.

"So," I say, "where is Elizabeth?"
"Whatcha wanna know about that for?" he says, exaggerating the emphasis. I look at him, with as solemn a face as I can produce. "Gotcha," he bursts, blowing spit onto the steering wheel. "She's in Bozeman. We're picking her up."

I feel suddenly lighthearted, on the open road, with Ian at the wheel, Michael Jackson belting "Beat it" on the radio, and my soul singing Nelly Furtado, "I am like a Bird," which sonorously preceded Michael's hit. I have never been like a bird, sober. I have been many other things, an incompetent, for one, ridiculous, for another, and lonely, in almost every way. But even Ian cannot ruin my spirits now, and beneath our Ford the white dashes of the highway are passing faster and faster.

I am not so much like a bird as I had thought. I have exaggerated my birdness. But that is okay, exaggerated birdness is not the end of the world. Ian has done this to me, made me feel more like I am somewhere under the ground than high above it. He eats sunflower seeds, and you do not want to be in an automobile on a three hour drive with someone who talks about Dungeons and Dragons as if he were really out fighting dragons and living in dungeons, and who eats sunflower seeds. Ian puts a whole load of the sunflower seeds into his mouth and chews them, and then proceeds to separate out the shells into his hand. He holds them there, in his left hand, slimy and saliva covered, for the duration of the seed-eating ordeal, and then puts them back in his mouth again at the end and sucks on them, breathing out of his nose the entire time. His final step is to spit the mouthful of shells out Elizabeth's window in a (blowhole)...like burst, with half the shells landing on the window and the door and Ian's lap. I have witnesses this same degenerate move with popcorn in a movie theater, where a woman proceeded to deseed
every kernel of a large bag of popcorn with her mouth, storing the seeds in her wet shiny hand. She too, when finished, put hand to mouth and sucked clean the remains, then spit them noisily into the bag. It is a rare site and to behold it twice, in two different mediums, is an exquisite brand of torture.

We arrived in Bozeman and I had not killed Ian. Had I done so I could have simply driven the vehicle to the prison, which we passed in Deer Lodge, and said, in a high-spirited way, "Here I am, check me in." They would of course have looked at me like I had just told them I was an alien visitor here to conduct a study on gourmet cuisine, wanting to use their facility as a testing ground, but that would have been cleared up quickly. "I have been riding with Ian," I would have told them, and then they would have understood and been sympathetic to my plight.

They would have escorted me to the warden, who, after lighting a cigar, would have said, "You killed him, did ya? Can't say as I blame you. Come on, we'll get you fixed up. No need for a trial. Ain't nobody in the world gonna believe you drove this far with him and didn't kill him." And there I would sit, a convict but also a hero.

Bozeman is a medium-size town with mountains on three sides and a university in the middle. You can hardly go into Bozeman sober, so I had Ian stop at a little bar in Belgrade called simply The Pub. The prospect of walking into a bar with Ian strolling along beside me like a lap-dog was not something I was interested in suffering, so I told him I had to use the restroom and that I'd be right back. I had been in here before sometime, though I couldn't remember when, and I had a vague recollection that they made a good drink. The place was empty except for the bartender and a couple of what look like high school girls playing pool. It was pretty dark in there and it felt good being
out of the light. I ordered a whiskey sour and sucked it down straight away through the straw, and the bartender got going on my second drink. I did not want to try to approach this Elizabeth on square ground and alcohol, for some reason, felt like it would level the playing field. She seemed like the kind of girl you have to be drunk to know how to handle.

I sat there admiring the darkness and sucking on my whiskey, wondering how long it would take for Ian to come wandering inside, when one of the girls from the pool table walked over. She looked a little older than eighteen, I decided, mostly because she was in the bar and the bartender didn't seem to mind and because I was never very good at determining that sort of thing. She had long black hair and crooked teeth and a good figure. She would have been very pretty if someone had fixed her teeth. She was very pretty, as long as she didn't smile. She was the sort of girl who, at 2:00 pm in a clothing store, would seem cute until she spoke to you, and at 2:00 am in a bar, when teeth are not a consideration, and when you can't really see teeth anyway, would have been irresistible to the masses.

"You play pool?" she said, as though she knew that yes, I did play pool, and the utterance of the question was only to humor me.

"I might."

"You might or you do?"

"I might and I do."

"Well then, come on."

I felt then that I should not be leaving Ian in the car and I should not be playing pool with girls whose parents didn't want me playing pool with them, but I did it anyway.
I racked up the balls as tightly as I could and stood back while the pair of bad girls did their thing. They were borderline sharks, these girls, and I did not get to shoot in the first game. The other girl was blond with straight teeth and smaller breasts and freckles and looked a little older, maybe nineteen, and was overall not quite as pretty as her friend. Their names were Dawn and Jenny, Dawn with the black hair, and they were troublesome for the male race.

I was pleased with my decision to come into this bar. They did make a good drink, and they provided good company. I felt a little like I was betraying Elizabeth but I didn't know how or why. It was just a feeling, and feelings come and go. These girls were not innocent but they weren't trashy either. Or, perhaps more accurately, they were overly trashy and they knew it, and therefore didn't feel the necessity to flaunt themselves in the way that makes less trashy girls seem desperate. They weren't flashing their breasts or doing the Lesbian Mime or bending over provocatively. They were just there, being pretty, playing pool. If something was going to happen it was going to happen and they didn't need to dance around it and act cute.

"So," I said, "What do you all do?"

"We strip," Dawn said.

This was not a disappointing revelation. My life had been full of less promising conditions. These girls weren't looking for a frat boy. They might not have been looking for anything. I didn't want to flub things up. I had a feeling I was making too much of it already, just standing there.

"Good," I said, "I sell vacuums."

"Vacuums?"
"Suction machines."

"I bet you're good at it."

"And you, Where do you strip?"

"Down the road," Jenny answered.

"Down the road?"

"At a strip club, silly," Dawn said.

"Well," I said, "we make quite a pair, Don't we?"

"There's three of us."

"Fine then, we make quite a threesome, don't we."

"Threesome?" Dawn repeated.

"You forced me into it. I was being clean. Clean and sober."

"That, I doubt."

"Doubt away."

We continued to play pool and I started to shoot better. Something had been set up here, between us three pool players, and I was appreciably excited about it. I wasn't sure how we'd pull it off. I had Ian to get rid of if anything was to come of this new, not-so-silent arrangement, and getting rid of Ian would mean not being able to track down Elizabeth. Perhaps I could tell Ian they were my sisters and get him to wait in the car again. He'd been out there waiting for a long time, I realized, and I wondered why he hadn't come inside looking for me. I decided I had better go tell him something. I walked outside, where it had turned dark, and Ian, of course, was gone.

*
Ian had taken my bag and Elizabeth had some kind of hold on me that I wasn't ready to quit yet, so I dug in my wallet until I found a card with her cell phone number and I called. I left a message with the number to the bar, and in an hour she called.

"Hello," she said.

"I need a ride."

"I see."

"Your man decided to go on ahead without me."

"I know."

"You know?"

"He told me."

"Well?"

"Are you going to behave?"

"I'll give it serious consideration."

"I'll be there in a while," she said, and hung up.

Dawn and Jenny were preparing to leave. They asked me if I needed a ride and it wasn't just an automobile ride they were offering, but I said no, anyway, like a schmuck. They took it without disappointment. It was either going to happen or it wasn't, and this time it wasn't. They understood life in those terms, as a series of events that happen or don't, and thus they avoided most of the hazards that plague the rest of humankind.

12.

Elizabeth picked me up wearing a cocktail dress. It was blue and low-cut around the neck and open-backed. There was a slit up the leg and I could see to her thigh, as she
drove. This was the second time I had seen her in a dress, but she was significantly more attractive this time. She had either just come from somewhere important or was just going somewhere important, and I didn't know which. Her hair was up, similar to the way it had been the first time I had seen her, at the University, and there were two little strips of hair that dangled down on each side of her face. I noticed a purplish lipstick, and some kind of strong perfume. I wasn't enough of a perfume expert to pick it out, but it smelled pleasant. That smell stuck with me.

She didn't speak for the first few minutes after she picked me up, and neither did I. There was some tension from the whole Ian fiasco, and I sensed that she expected me to pay her some reverence for the way she looked and for rescuing me from the bar, which she didn't know contained two young possibly bisexual strippers. I admired her, anyway. I was happier, somehow, to be silent in the Explorer than I would have been moaning and groaning with the strippers. Perhaps not, but that is how I felt.

"You're dressed up for a killing," I said.

"You smell stale."

"How's Ian?"

"Ian is fine. Ian is grown up."

"So is my mother."

"Okay," Elizabeth said.

It occurred to me that Elizabeth didn't want a frat boy any more than the strippers did, and I wasn't doing a very good job distinguishing myself from their ranks. We drove for a while and she either cooled off or decided the requisite display of anger had done its work. She turned on the radio and pointed into the back.
"Climb into the back, sweetheart, and make us a drink. We're going to a party."

I looked at her and she was as serious as she could be and didn't appear to want to tolerate any lip from my quarter, so I unbuckled and climbed back. Indeed, in a little cooler were all the necessities for drink mixing, including even some napkins and little colored swords in a sack.

"You're prepared for a massacre," I said.

"Just don't massacre yourself too soon," she said, "this could be a late one."

I mixed up two gin and tonics without any lime and climbed back into the front. I was still buzzed from The Pub earlier, and the booze tasted good. My tongue had been feeling a bit fat, and this evened it out. Elizabeth drank half of her gin and tonic and put it in the cup holder and rolled down the window. The air was warm and fresh and pushed the smell of her perfume into my nostrils. She looked about twenty-three or four, her skin was smooth and firm, but she gave off some sort of vibe that made her seem older. She was smarter than me, I had a feeling. She finished her drink and started chewing the ice.

We had been driving on back roads and we were pulling into Bozeman then, passing the last of the straggler neighborhoods that spread outside the city. Bozeman has about thirty-thousand people and is not small or especially large for a city in Montana. I was happy to be in the car with Elizabeth and happy to be smelling the night air.

"Where's Ian?" I asked, without the sarcastic tone I had been using in reference to him earlier.

"We, darling, are through with Ian. Ian is a sap."

"Through?"
"Ian will be taking the bus home."

"Ian is a sap."

"Ian is a bumblebee. Sap is all he knows."

We stopped at a gas station and I purchased a twelve pack of Michelob bottles. We drank two each in the parking lot and put the rest in her cooler.

"What about the way I'm dressed?" I asked.

"You'll have to do something about that."

"What?"

"Change. I put something out in the back. The very back."

"You went through my bag?"

"I went through your bag."

That seemed like answer enough. You don't really want to complain very much about having a beautiful woman go through your bag to find you something to wear. She had placed my khaki pants, a button-up shirt I didn't own, a pair of tan socks I didn't own, and my shoes, the dress ones, on top of my bag. I decided not to argue. As much as you don't want to complain about a beautiful woman going through your bag, you really don't want to complain about a beautiful woman buying you shirts and socks. They still had on the tags, so I knew she bought them and didn't steal them from Ian or an old boyfriend. And even if she had stolen clothes for me, I wouldn't have complained. That is the third stanza in the beautiful woman mantra: let them steal for you if they will.

I got dressed. I sat in the backseat and changed my clothes and didn't make an effort to hide and Elizabeth didn't make an effort to look away. It was as natural as can be, us there in the Explorer, half drunk and getting the boy ready to be seen. I made a
The shirt fit and the pants fit well and I looked pretty sharp for a person who had spent half his day in a car with Ian and the other half in a bar with strippers and had dressed in possibly stolen clothes in a backseat. Fine indeed.

"Can I stop calling you Elizabeth?" I asked as we pulled up to the party.

"What would you call me?"

"I don't know. Lizzy? Don't people ever call you Liz, or Lizzy?"

"Suit yourself," she said.

The party was in a giant brick house in a neighborhood with other giant houses and a creek. The driveway was long, not as long as the driveway at my parent's, but long. We parked near the end of this driveway, under a tree, and walked, not carrying the cooler or the beer, which was, evidently, just for us. The moon was shining down and Liz's behind was casting a shadow onto her legs. It was a very attractive thing, just then, which I had never seen before. She had quite possibly the most perfect rear end I had ever seen, more perfect even than the nurse or receptionist or whatever she had been at White Pines. I walked one step behind and kept myself from putting my hand down there to test things out. That would have been a bad move. Elizabeth wasn't the sort of woman to tolerate that sort of thing, though it wouldn't really bother her in the least, I didn't think. But she wouldn't tolerate it just the same, for the sake of not tolerating it, if nothing else. She could do that. Who was going to argue?

We got to the front door and walked in and people started hugging her immediately, women kissing her on the cheek, or fake kissing her so they wouldn't smear their lipstick, and people shook my hand, firmly, resolutely, often, without asking who I was. Elizabeth didn't offer it either. She said, simply, "This is Jake," as though that
should explain everything, and they should, regardless, treat me like I was their best friend.

Someone took our coats and we went up to the bar. We each drank a gin gimlet right there and ordered another and she showed me onto the giant deck. There were people out back playing croquet in the dark, people standing at the far edge of the yard just lit by the house lights, looking down at the tree-lined creek, and six or seven people in the hot tub, which was at the far corner of the deck. We sat on the deck and finished our drinks and went back into the house. Much of the furniture appeared to have been cleared out, and the room looked sparse and huge. There were marble floors in the sitting room and people were dancing to some kind of jazz.

"What is this?" I asked.

"A party."

"What kind of party."

"The regular kind."

"Who, then?"

"My uncle."

"Your real uncle, or is that what you call your boyfriend?"

"Who calls their boyfriend their uncle?"

"I saw it on television."

"My mother's brother. The congressman."

"Really?"

"Really."
I was introduced to the congressman, not as a vacuum cleaner salesman, and it turned out that he knew my father. They were old college buddies or hunting buddies or had simply been to the same school together and now were rich and so had to call themselves buddies. The congressman seemed nice. I detected an air of perversion in his gaze at Elizabeth, as though he wanted to be her boyfriend rather than her uncle, in which case I supposed it would turn him on to have her call him uncle. He kept touching her shoulder and I began to feel defensive of her, which of course she didn't want me doing. I did it anyway because that's what people in my position do. So I sat there feeling defensive, smiling at Elizabeth when she looked, and kissing the congressman's ass. I did not know either why I kissed his ass, but I did. I am an equal opportunity ass-kisser, it seems.

Elizabeth and I cavort around the house and venture into the yard at times and get thoroughly drunk. At one point we make our way onto a trampoline in the yard and jump in our socks, trying at first not to spill our drinks, spilling them, and giving up on the drinks entirely and just jumping. You can jump very high, drunk, at night, on a trampoline with a girl who is very attractive and fun as your cousin and who doesn't care that she might ruin her dress which is expense-wise the equivalent to a large television. You lay there, on the plastic, when you tire out, and sip your renewed drinks, and stare at the sky.

13.

I awoke looking for some water. Water does not seem the desperate commodity say, at dinner, that it turns out to be when you wake up drunk in the middle of the night.
And if you awake in an unfamiliar house at an hour where you feel the necessity to be quiet, rest assured, you will not find any water. You will consider drinking an open beer you find on the stairs, will in fact put it to your mouth, will not be able to determine if that pungent smell coming out of the can is the warm beer or the chewing tobacco someone might have spit inside, and you will set it down again, in the exact spot where you found it, taking care to align the can with the ring of condensation which glistens, almost worth licking, on the stair. You will go back to your bed--an upstairs couch--thirsty, unable to find even a bathroom in the giant house, your mouth pasty and sour and tasting like a roll of quarters.

In the morning I was not thirsty. I had a headache and an idea that I smelled. I went into the bathroom, which was ten feet from my couch, washed my face, and guzzled from the sink fountain. I guzzled for a long time, despite my earlier conclusion that I was no longer thirsty. I had been wrong. I was very thirsty indeed. I stood up, dripping water onto the floor and down my pants, and focused my blurry eyes on myself in the mirror. Someone knocked lightly at the door.

It was Elizabeth, in a white terry-cloth robe, her hair pulled back, looking still pretty for a woman hung over.

"You made it," she said.

"Yes. You too."

"Did you have an accident?" she asked, pointing at the wet spot on my pants. I was too mush-brained to refute.

"Yes," I said, "of the gravest kind."
"Perhaps we can fix it up. Have a shower and meet me downstairs." She pointed into the hall and walked away, her toes flared as her small feet went along the floor. I looked to my right and there, where she had pointed, was my bag. She was a considerate one indeed.

After my shower and four aspirin and two cups of coffee and the realization that I was going to be spending the rest of the day with Elizabeth I was feeling much improved. Perhaps that was the hangover cure: guzzle water, shower, eat aspirin, drink coffee, tag along with beautiful woman. If you could put that into a plastic bottle with a cotton swab and a childproof lid you'd be rich.

We departed giant house, long driveway, neighborhood of giant houses, and creek, in the Explorer--where the cooler of booze didn't sound as inviting--without having to make small talk with her uncle, the congressman, who was out working, or golfing, or taking bribes (listening to the interests of his constituents).

"So," she asked as we pulled onto the freeway, "did you have a good time?"

"A duck stepped on my foot."

"What?"

"In the backyard by that creek, I remember a duck stepping on my foot."

"Did it say excuse me?"

"I don't think so. I don't remember it saying excuse me. I remember a look actually, of denigration, if that's possible from a duck."

"What was the duck trying to denigrate?"

"My chances."

"At what?"
"At everything. It was a very angry duck."

"We'll try to avoid the presence of ducks at parties in Wyoming."

"So," I said, "when are we going to sell some vacuums?"

"Soon."

"Are we going to make a lot of money?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"On what sorts of things we get denigrated by."

We were ripping cross-country toward Wyoming, a cooler full of booze and two hangovers in tow. We didn't have any vacuum cleaners, but that, just then, wasn't my greatest concern. This Elizabeth seemed like a regular John Wayne, and if she said we could sell vacuum cleaners in Wyoming without having any vacuum cleaners, What choice did I have but to believe her. She was the preferred company at parties with full open bars and congressmen and trampolines and waterfowl accosting the guests.

14.

The usual way to go about selling some vacuum cleaners is to get in a car--an Explorer will do fine--and drive around the neighborhoods where you would like to unload a few of the thousand and some dollar Dirt Devil's. They are not Dirt Devil's, of course, they are Kirby's, which are basically the same thing only made of metal instead of plastic and with a little better sucking capabilities, supposedly. You case the neighborhoods and you stop where you please--usually at houses with boats and campers and motorcycles and riding lawnmowers parked outside, because you know they spend money--and go to the door and give them your spiel. You cannot just offer to show them
a vacuum any more without getting the door slammed in your face, so you trick them, a thing which is really just as easy to do as .... You tell them you are out trying to advertise, a thing they like to hear, for some reason, and you get them to sign up for a drawing for one thousand dollars and other prizes. The smart ones will ask you if you're going to call them, to which you'll respond "only if you win." They all win. You go back to your cheap motel and you call them all and tell them they've won a free carpet shampooing. About half of them will let you in. About half of those will buy a vacuum cleaner for more than a thousand dollars, whether they need or want one or not. That is the way you usually do it. You target the wealthy but not the rich, those likely to have nice carpets which you can convince them will be ruined if they don't have one of your vacuums, and the elderly, because they care, more than anyone, about their carpets. That is not the way you do it when you're working with Elizabeth, but you've had your one day of unpaid training and that is what you expect. You keep everything over one thousand dollars, and asking price is one thousand five hundred and ninety-nine. You never sell them for that, but you come close. Your boss, Elizabeth, will keep a large unspecified amount for every one you sell. The things probably cost seventy dollars to make and everyone around makes a nice profit when they go. Most bosses do not sell, they have a crew over which they supervise, but Elizabeth, along with her crew of one--you--sells. That is the way things will go, you are told.

That is not the way things go. On the first day out, in a town called Powell, Elizabeth drives to a mall, where she sells all ten of the vacuums we picked up in Billings to a smiling mall owner for twelve hundred dollars each. I don't say a word. I pack in all ten vacuum cleaners on a hand-cart and deliver the paperwork, which the man signs
without taking his eyes off Elizabeth. She unpacks one and drives it around for him—it is self-propelled and we call pushing it "driving"—and the man does not stop smiling nor does he ever, even once, remove his eyes from the various parts of Elizabeth's body. But, she did not sell him these with her looks alone. Miss America could not have done the same job on this man, who is successful and has made at least part of his career on exploiting women, since he also owns a small Wyoming chain of lingerie stores, we learn, where once a month there are "fashion" shows. Elizabeth is crafty, and just when the man thinks he is going to take advantage of her, he finds himself writing out a check on the business account, because he cannot, of course, do business for another day without these fine Kirby pieces of machinery, with their polymer hoses and NASA engineered chassis. There are tens of thousands of feet of carpet here, each one crying out in delight at Mr. Lingerie's business savvy. He got these, he thinks, for a steal.

I make two thousand for nothing and Elizabeth makes, for her brilliance, significantly more. So now we are out of vacuums.

We sit in our hotel room that night while it rains outside. The windows are open, and the rain splashes in, soaking the carpet below the window, splattering the table and ashtray and little booklet with what there is to do in Powell Wyoming. It is a small booklet. There are a school and some restaurants, though none I've heard of, and our lovely carpeted mall and around them a big state.

The rain smells like flowers, somehow. I am not sure what kind of flowers, but I have the picture of what I think is a carnation in my head, if carnations are yellow with long, pointy petals. Our hotel is near the highway—a single level horseshoe-shaped dive
called the Last Chance—and aside from the rain I can smell hay and possibly horses and can hear the steady drone of cars and tractor trailers on the highway. The evening is cool and there is a breeze and it is just getting dark.

We have brought out the little cooler, which still contains some of the original alcohol, and are mixing drinks into plastic cups. We have been mixing drinks for a while and are both now acutely drunk.

"I brought along The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway," I tell her, expecting some sort of vague praise, for this, my preparedness.

"I know."

"What do you mean--you know?"

"Of course you brought it. What else would you bring? You want to be Ernest Hemingway, like all boys." I'm not sure if she means the writing, or the traveling, or the women, but I'm pretty sure she's right.

"Most boys want to be Brett Favre," I say.

"You want to be Brett Favre too, but when you're talking to a girl, you want to be Ernest Hemingway."

"Fine, you have cheeks like white elephants."

"I think you'd better reconsider that."

"And who do you want to be?" I ask. I'm expecting her to say Cleopatra, or Aphrodite, or Nancy Reagan, who, for some reason, keeps popping into my head. Nancy Reagan is not such a bad gal. She stuck by Ronny, who wasn't such a bad guy himself. Ronny believed in America, I heard someone say. There's nothing wrong with believing
in America. It would do a lot of people some good to believe in America for a little while.

"Gertrude Stein," Elizabeth says.

"Yuck."

"See."

"I'm only kidding." I say, though I'm not. I have read the Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas and I think it would be a drag to be Gertrude Stein. Except for living in Paris and having everyone over for dinner. I would cook some rolls and have Elizabeth sell Picasso a vacuum cleaner. They didn't have enough vacuum cleaners in Paris then, I don't think, so we could probably made a killing. Perhaps we could sell ten vacuum cleaners to the Louvre, though I don't know if they have carpets in the Louvre. But they could roll those ten NASA vacuum cleaners over their marble floors, if not, which they say these vacuum cleaners are good for. They say you won't need a broom if you buy one of these vacuum cleaners. You won't need any other appliances either. You can cook and clean and wash your clothes with one of these vacuums. Elizabeth has been looking at me sitting here thinking all this. She knows I've been sitting here thinking, but she doesn't ask what I've been thinking about. I like that about her. You don't want to have to repeat every little thing you think every time someone figures out you've been thinking. She stares at me for a moment longer, until she recognizes that I've stopped thinking and am looking at her too intently.

"Me too," she says. "Being Gertrude Stein would have been lousy. I'd rather be Lucy, from Peanuts."
"I'd rather be James Caan," I say. "If your character in a movie has a huge penis, all the women in the world will believe it's really true. They'll believe you really have a huge penis."

"Then you'll let them all down."

"It's true. It happened for Caan after The Godfather; he had his own room in the Playboy Mansion, and for that Wahlberg guy, in Boogie Nights; every woman who saw that movie thinks Wahlberg swings like a gorilla down there. They love it."

"No, they don't, and anyway, it's like I said. You'll let them all down."

"I won't sleep with all of them. I'll only let some of them down. And what are you insinuating, anyway?"

"That's not insinuating. I'm saying it, flat out."

"How would you know?"

"I'm only kidding. Anyway, this is where we change the topic. Now you will go around trying to prove me wrong. I don't want to know."

"I won't. Okay?"

"Okay."

This is an awkward end to our conversation. We are both drunker than we need to be, and we both, from a rare and precious little window in the train of drunkenness, recognize it at the same time. It is a brief moment of lucidity from which you can see the way you're acting and--if you have the luck not to be distracted from it--realize that it's not going to do you good to get any drunker. You are usually blowing on someone's toupee or discussing heatedly the quality of Mash versus Cheers or trying to decide why there are so many limes in your drink when the window appears and, smugly, passes you
by. You are stuck, then, to continue talking about the really good kind of leather in someone's shoes until the bar closes or you run out of booze or your forehead gets friendly with the top of the bar.

But tonight the window sidled up smiling its straight smile and we both saw ourselves smiling our not straight smiles out the other side. We knew we were drunk because, in the window, we had mussy hair. If you see the window and your hair is mussy you had better stop. If your hair is in order you are too slow and you had better get to it.

We will inhabit separate beds. At this early hour I can still get into the bed and I still know how to take off my shoes. Elizabeth goes into the bathroom. I undress where I am, next to my bed, and get in wearing my boxers. I had considered leaving on my t-shirt, but do not. I will sleep shirtless in my black boxers in my queen size bed and I will probably snore, because I do that when I drink. Elizabeth comes out of the bathroom wearing a long t-shirt and I cannot help but stare at her smooth hard legs. The muscles in her thighs tighten as she walks. The t-shirt barely covers what it is supposed to cover.

This t-shirt is noteworthy, I think. I had anticipated sweats or some other decisively thick and bleak set of leg apparel. She has put some consideration into the wearing of this t-shirt. Or she has not, and is merely drunk, or is not drunk and doesn't care. Still, I enjoy the walk from bathroom to bed, the tease of thighs, knees, calves, the tenuous hem-- just low enough to secure the goods--the little hop under hoisted comforter, the jiggle of bed into wall, the expectancy of single room, two queen beds, nothing obtaining yet.
There will be some more vacuum cleaner selling, it seems, and I will be playing a more active role. Elizabeth has decided we will stay in Powell for a while, because it doesn't appear to have been inundated with Kirby salespeople very recently. You don't want to get stuck in a place where they've been roaming around for a while or people will be more skeptical and bitter. Elizabeth gets someone to bring down some more vacuum cleaners. They are in her Explorer when we go outside in the morning, along with all the ..of a suit, tie included. I didn't see or hear anyone come or go. We get out and start casing the neighborhoods.

Elizabeth is wearing another dress, black and long and slender, with long, black gloves and matching earrings. She reminds me of a photograph I have seen of Jackie O., which makes me feel like perhaps I'm a Kennedy. I feel more confident than usual as I walk to her car, in the suit and tie, feeling one part gangster and one part Kennedy.

We find a fairly affluent area right away and pick out a house that looks like it was built in the seventies but is still nicer than most of the other houses in the neighborhood. There are large floor-to-ceiling windows in front and several small decks overlooking a wealth of trees.

Elizabeth won't use the slanted thousand dollar give-away approach they taught me in my day of training. She doesn't believe in tricking people and the way she sells wouldn't work if she told them she was coming to shampoo the carpet, anyway. She is not going to shampoo anyone's carpet; if they want shampoo they can buy the vacuum and do it themselves.

We walk to the door carrying only a fancy leather briefcase and we shake hands with the elderly woman who answers the door, giving only our names, not our
occupations, and are immediately invited inside. We are given coffee and we sit in a fancy sitting room chatting about the weather and the woman's--her name is Francine--family and how she has come to live by herself in this large house after the death of her husband some five years ago.

The woman is very happy to have us stop by and is willing to do whatever she can to help, she says. We chat longer and I have the feeling, right then, that Elizabeth should be running for president, or will be, someday. I am not so much a Kennedy in her presence as she is one in mine, and I am something more along the lines of a groundskeeper or a butler who is here to nod and agree and do what she says.

Vacuum cleaners are not referred to for a very long time, and then, finally, Elizabeth says, "Oh, yes. I almost forgot. We brought you a new vacuum cleaner. Jacob will take a look at your old one to make sure you need it." She looks at me and smiles and I get up and stand, waiting for someone to tell me where the old one is.

"Oh no," the woman says, "it's very old. I'm sure I need a new one. He doesn't have to drag the old thing out."

"Nonsense," Elizabeth says, "he's very good. He'll take a look. Perhaps you can give it to charity, if it's not in too bad of shape."

Francine points to the closet and I walk over and it is fairly old and fairly clunky and I feel almost as though she does need a new vacuum cleaner for these fancy carpets, which look like Berber.

"Here it is," I say, pulling it out.

"Go ahead," Elizabeth says, "bring in the new one. Go ahead and set it up for her, too, would you?"
Elizabeth and Francine go back to talking and I walk outside and get the vacuum cleaner. One of the neighbors is watering his lawn and he stares at me, in much the same way our neighbors at college did, but then, as I'm walking, he waves a friendly, sincere wave, and I am almost shocked. He smiles and goes on watering his lawn and I set the vacuum down and wave back, too late, as he walks toward a tree with his back to me. It feels like an odd thing to have someone wave at you. I am not sure exactly why.

I go back inside and put together the vacuum while Francine shows Elizabeth some old photographs. Elderly people do not, generally, like to talk about their families, I have come to believe, so this seems odd. Elizabeth is sort of like a con artist, it occurs to me, as I watch her pointing at the pictures with what appears to be interest. But no, it is not apparent interest, it is real interest, I can tell, somehow, by the look on Elizabeth's face, by the way she laughs and questions Francine, who, too, is laughing, red with joy, with warm hospitality toward this presidential vacuum cleaner saleswoman.

Francine knew, it occurs to me, what we were here for all along. It was not the vacuum cleaner she was buying--though as I put together the new one I have concluded that she really did need it--but Elizabeth's exquisite company, for an hour. Fourteen hundred dollars, this time. That is not, I think, and Francine agrees, if I'm not mistaken, so high a price to pay.

We sell three more together that day. Elizabeth is just as radiant, though not quite as sincere, I don't think, at each of the other houses. I am not disturbed by this. You can't be expected to like every person you sell a vacuum cleaner to and, I'll admit, I didn't like any of them very well myself. Finally, at our last stop of the day, she has me sell the
thing myself. She comes inside, but barely speaks, acting as disinterested as possible. It is somewhat distracting and designed to be, I'm sure, but I will have to live with it.

I am not as smooth as she would be. I will have to mention vacuum cleaners to sell one. I stand there, facing a forty-ish man in Bermuda shorts and yellow shirt, hair mussed, drinking vodka and orange juice. He seems bent, somehow. His shirt, I notice, is buttoned improperly. It is misaligned by a button and one side of his collar is farther up his neck than the other. He has not shaved in a week, I would guess. He keeps pacing across the kitchen, holding a golf club by the ..., and using it as one would use a cane, though flippantly, like he is, perhaps, Charlie Chaplin. He keeps saying um-hum, even when I have not spoken. I have a bit of a worry that he will take the golf club and beat me over the head. He drinks three glasses of the vodka and orange juice and then, slowing down in his pacing, offers me one, which I accept, and drink solemnly at his breakfast bar. He works in an oil field and is single and has a maid to clean the house once a week, but he is fond of this maid, and I think the vacuum is sold from the minute he sees us walking to his door. The man has visions, I believe, of the Vietnam or LSD sort, and he keeps turning and effecting the role of George Patton. The funny thing is, I believe in him as George Patton. He is not bald enough and not straight enough and not wearing an army uniform and not standing in front of a giant flag, but he is, as much as you can be without those prerequisites, George Patton. I can feel my arm craving a salute. I will not be a crazy person George, you do not have to hit me in the head, I will go back to war. I do not know what has happened to this man, but it is not in my best interest to find out. At least he doesn't have to reinvent himself as a ground squirrel or a plant or something. Out of this, his knurled psyche, he gets some action.
George Patton wants to impress his maid. He decides, because she is a maid, that a vacuum will do a better job of impressing than would, say, a trip to the Bahamas. I am not inclined to refute his argument, and I emphasize the self-propulsion, parlaying that feature into a back-saving-maid-getting bottle of appliance aphrodisiac. I get him to stand there picturing her naked back and he gets out his checkbook. Elizabeth is reading the newspaper on his couch during this indelicate performance, impressed at my skills and not impressed at my skills alike. We get out of there, our bodies and minds still intact, feeling a little more patriotic and enormously satisfied at having one personality each.

We split up and sell the other eight vacuums the next day. I sell three and Elizabeth sells five, and we are done by 4:00 pm. Selling vacuum cleaners is not fun and not rewarding and not something I would ever want to do, were I given a list of prospective things, told I was to do one or several of them, and sent on my way. I would choose riding horses in a parade or playing polo or walking the neighbor's ten dogs or even selling cars before I would choose selling vacuums, but that does not matter. I was not given a choice. This fell from the sky. And it is tolerable. You make some money, it seems. I do not think everyone would, however, make money. I cannot see making money doing it the regular old thousand-dollar-give-away way. I cannot see that at all. You would reduce yourself too far below the level of the prospective buyer to get any results out of any such endeavor. I am sure they make some progress that way, or at least the supervisors do, because they can always get more schmucks to sell for them while they play golf or sit in their car, driving their sales crew around, pointing at houses. That
is the way to do this if you are a supervisor and you employ a fairly high percentage of
idiots, but not the way to do things if you want to really make money, and that we do.

We are out of vacuums again, but I am sure there will be more in the morning when I
awake. Perhaps there will be something for me again, too. I think instead of a suit this
time I would like a digital camera. I could see myself taking some pictures.

16.

Wyoming does nothing for my health. We spend two more weeks there, selling
vacuum cleaners, getting drunk, putting on suits and dresses, respectively, and going
from town to town. We have established a tenuous treaty wherefrom we operate: I do
not make sexual advances, she does not make me think I should. We are buddies, of
sorts, and we laugh and talk as though that is all we were meant to be. She still wears the
t-shirt to bed, I do not wear mine. There have been some near misses. I bumped into her
in the bathroom, once, when she was washing her face, and she looked up through her
dripping face and I thought she was going to kiss me. My heart pounded so loudly that I
think she heard it, which could have been what warded her off. You do not want to kiss
someone whose heart beats that hard upon the possibility of kissing without putting in
some serious consideration. That she apparently did, because it never almost happened
again. I tried to effect the same I-might-kiss-you look myself once, and she started
laughing uproariously and walked out of the room. I didn't try that again. So we have
been living under our treaty without too much awkwardness or hurt feelings and things
have been good. You can live with them, I've found, as long as you don't sleep with
them, though I have a hunch I would be willing to go ahead and give it a shot. Why am I
calling it a hunch? It is not a hunch. I would, absolutely, without doubt, be willing to try
living with her and sleeping with her, if that was the way things were to go. But for now, they are not to go that way. So I won't fret. I will make money and be amazed that this woman permits herself to be near me. She could, I think, be near the president or the pope or the Dali Lama, if she so chose. We are having fun, and I like it.

I spend the majority of my time getting drunk to get over a hangover. Elizabeth doesn't seem to get hangovers, which I don't understand. She too drinks more than she should. She gets up in the morning and, depending on how late we have been up drinking the previous night, fixes herself a small drink. That this is a behavior lending itself to addiction I will freely admit, but will refrain from criticizing, as I have begun to engage in it myself. We generally stop after that one small drink and get on with our day. We do not want to be drunk selling vacuum cleaners, just pepped up a bit.

We stop, one day, at a bar along the highway called Chico's Pit with a large-breasted, red-nippled mannequin in a barrel on the awning taking a bath. Her legs are hanging out and she is wearing a fireman's hat. There are a few motorcycles and a few broken cars and a wood walkway out front. It is an inviting sort of place for people like us, who tend to enjoy a little dirt with our beverages.

There are only four people inside, including the bartender, and two of them are bikers, the other two just regular dirty looking Wyoming bar-types. We belly up to the bar and each order a beer and a shot of whiskey and drink the whiskey together and start sipping the beer. The place isn't that bad inside. They've done some remodeling recently, and some of the old wood on the walls has been replaced by newer, cheaper looking wood, but it still looks okay. There is a pool table and a juke box and two regular dart boards that use real darts instead of plastic.
"You wanna play some darts?" I ask.

"Darts?"

"Yes ma'am, darts."

"Darts is my father," she says, in a baby voice. That's something she does sometimes. Says things that don't make sense in a baby voice. I like it. I am on the no-sense-baby level.

I ask the bartender for the darts and he turns his head slowly and looks at me. "These darts is real," he says, like maybe I can't handle them. He doesn't have another dart board, so it's not like he can give me the plastic.

"Better be," I say, "or you can keep 'em."

He has them wrapped up in a brown, commercial-style paper towel, and he brings them over and counts out three blue and three red. "I better get back six," he says, and I nod my head in conformation. The two non-bikers are shaking their heads, like they too think I can't handle the darts. They're just darts. I've played darts before, and with real ones. I'm not going to poke out an eye.

"Say," the bartender sort of whispers, "You think you can do me a favor?"

He points at my suit. "We don't get many like you around here."

I had forgotten about the suit. We probably look like bible salesmen or Jehovah's Witnesses. We are vacuum salesmen, so maybe that's close enough. I'm not ready to go doing favors for the bartender, but I want to hear what he wants. "What do you need?"

He looks at me, very somber, and then looks around the room. "Alright," he says. "I'll tell you, if you insist."

"I didn't insist. You asked me."
"Okay. I need you to pick something up for me. It's very important, so you can't screw it up."

"I didn't say I would do it yet. What is it?"

"You just bring it in here and give it to me."

"Sorry chum, not interested."

"What will you pay?" Elizabeth asks.

"I'll let you use them darts."

"We're using the darts anyway."

"I'll give you free drinks."

We walk away and he stands there, wiping the counter. We play darts for a while, tossing them into the corkboard, 301 and 501 and then cricket. I beat Elizabeth the first two games and then she comes back and beats me in the third.

"Maybe we can do this for him," Elizabeth says.

"No. It's something illegal."

"Let's play a trick on him then. Let's tell him we're the A.T.F."

"We'll get stabbed. They stab you for that."

"Fine," she says, "you're no fun."

"Yes, but I'm not in jail and I haven't been stabbed."

"Okay, Mister," she says, "Are you Chico?"

"Chico's Dead." He gets a sad look on his face, his lip hanging out and quivering, his eyes averted, like he's going to sob, and Elizabeth walks over. She goes behind the bar with a dart in her hand and I half suspect she's going to stab this guy, but instead she
goes up and whispers something in his ear. He nods and whispers something back, and Elizabeth comes around the bar. "My name's Ralphy," he says to me in a timid voice.

I just look at Elizabeth and shake my head and she's already heading for the back door. I'd better go along so she can protect me. If we get into a protracted gunfight with only our darts to defend ourselves or get arrested for delivering heroin to the reduced-speed bartender I will have issues.

Out the backdoor there is a big pit. It is perhaps twenty by twenty and full of beer cans of every variety. There seems to be some sorting, though, as there are mostly Rainer cans on the opposite side, where rise from the pit another set of stairs to another decrepit wood building. There is a rope swing at our end of the pit, tied to a car axle which extends from the roof, and you are, apparently, supposed to grab onto this rope and swing on in. It doesn't seem like a pleasant piece of business. Being at the back of the bar, I imagine that the pit gets peed in about as often as it gets jumped in.

We edge our way around the pit, which you can barely do--it comes right up to the back steps--and then edge our way to the set of steps at the other end. There is thick green paint flaking off the door and the wood around it and we stand in a pile of it, curled like woodchips, on the doorstep. Someone is lumbering around on the other side, moving things, and screaming for us to hold on, in a woman's voice. We are holding. We are in no hurry.

The woman sounds large from her voice and the way she's making the floor creak on the other side of the door and I expect to see her holding a rolling pin, which is, I recall, the way I last saw my mother. I hope it's not my mother on the other side. I can't deal with the trauma of life between the mother and the father right now. I would rather
deal with a fat angry woman with a rolling pin. Finally the door swings open, though
swings is not the correct term, it is jerked, an inch at a time, biting into the floor with
each jerk, until there is enough of a crack for us to see in and the woman to see out.

"You're at the wrong door," she practically yells.

We don't want to admit guilt in this matter. "We'll need to come inside,"
Elizabeth says.

"Who are ya?"

"We're the lawyers," Elizabeth says, and I look at her, hoping to be let in on
something, but she ignores me.

"You two's lawyers?"

We don't respond.

"You'll have to get the door open yourselves," she says, walking away.

I pound the bottom of the door with my foot until we can get in and we walk
through a laundry room, clothes strewn on the floor, to the woman's kitchen, where she is
sitting at her table, sipping coffee. The house, inside, is not in bad shape, there is new
paint on the walls, the floors are clean, except for the laundry room, and the floor and
ceiling don't seem to be warped or leaking.

We sit at the table and she doesn't offer us coffee. She is fidgety, nervous, and
keeps flipping over her spoon.

"I didn't think you'd come," she says. She is wearing an apron and her hair is
cropped short and she is, indeed, fat. She is spreading over the chair generously and I am
reminded, briefly, of the frozen rolls that come bursting out of the package when you
twist. Somewhere along the line somebody broke in here and twisted, and she's been
bursting out ever since. It doesn't look bad on her though. She is relative to herself the
way a big tomato is relative only to itself. You don't expect a big tomato to get small.
It's just big. Or a rottweiler, no one's complaining about a whopping rotweiller. Go
ahead and walk up to a rottweiler, if that's a thing you're interested in doing, which you
shouldn't be, and you pat it on the head and you say, "You, friend, look just a little bit too
bulky. Perhaps we should call in the doctor, get you doing some laps." And then you try
and get away with your leg intact.

This woman too is big and appropriately so. I resist the idea that that sentiment is
iniquitous. I resist the initiative that everything here comes down to being glandular and
therefore tragic, that we have before us a walking disease; the woman, in my view, is just
the way the woman is. Let her be. But who am I to go around resisting? I'll stay out of
the weight wars.

I feel the need to say something. "Well . . ."

"We'll have to take the goldfish," Elizabeth says, and I, once again, am left staring
at her, with her lawyerly demeanor, taking this woman's fish away, as though she is a
social worker getting out the children. Who is she to take away this woman's goldfish?
Who is she to do anything she does? I decide I don't want to stand for it. This woman
seems a sight more upstanding than our bartender with his pit of beer cans.

"You have rights, too, Mrs. . . .?" I say, scooting my chair closer to hers.

"Mr. Perrigrentus," Elizabeth says, motioning to me, without missing a beat, and
apparently expecting this little betrayal, "has been appointed as your council. He is here
to represent you. To make sure you get to keep the goldfish. But he doesn't have a case."

The woman nods, somewhat in awe, and says, slowly. "Jeanne. That's my name."
"How are the goldfish," I ask.

"They're fine," Jeanne says, pointing into the living room.

"We're not here to be intimidated, Are we Jeanne? We're here to stand up for your rights, you and I."

"Mr. Perrigrentus will go on like that," Elizabeth says, "and you can just about ignore everything he says. Now, lets get down to business. What do you want for the goldfish? And to be specific, how many are there?"

"You don't have to answer that, Jeanne. We don't want to quantify these beloved pets into a dollar value. She wouldn't expect you to do that of your children, and she can't expect it here."

"Three," Jeanne says. "There are three goldfish."

"That's the perfect amount of goldfish," I say. "Three."

"There's no way you can keep these goldfish, Jeanne, so we may as well get what we can get for you. If you listen to him," Elizabeth says, lifting her arm and pointing straight at my face, "you'll end up with nothing. He's a man."

"I don't know," Jeanne says.

"I think my client's had enough for today," I say, putting my arms behind my chair and leaning back.

"I feel obligated to inform you that Mr. Perrigrentus hasn't won a case since he's been a lawyer."

Jeanne looks at me in clear turmoil. She been dealt a lemon, in me, but she wants to be loyal. "I don't really want the fish," Jeanne says. "I just don't like him threatening
me. He said he'd cut off the porch steps if I didn't hand them over. What do you think I can get for them?" she says, looking back at Elizabeth.

"Let me converse with your lawyer," Elizabeth says, and leans into my ear. She doesn't say anything, and I sit there nodding, feeling a little guilty about starting my own, unsuccessful practice, considering the lady didn't want the fish in the first place, and decide I'd better go along. It's sort of like trying to give a homeless person money and getting told they don't want it—you feel stupid. So I sit there, feeling stupid, nodding. "You can get the backdoor fixed, and the house painted, and some planks put over your end of the pit so you don't have to worry about falling in, and he gets the goldfish."

"He won't do all that."

"He will."

"He will?"

"That's that," Elizabeth says. "We'll deliver the fish and the message."

I carry the bowl of bewildered goldfish around the pit—half expecting to fall in and lose the goldfish—into the bar, where the bartender runs out and meets the bowl with a hug and several kisses to the glass. We let him have his moment, briefly, and Elizabeth walks around the bar, again, and starts whispering into his ear, again. He nods his head at first and then pulls back and looks at her and she meets his gaze with a determined look and he leans back in and nods again and again and when she's finished he goes back to wooing his fish.

"What did he say?" I ask.

"He didn't say anything."

"But he'll do it?"
"He'll do it."

We play darts again and drink and Elizabeth wins every game. I don't have what it takes to beat her anymore, after getting out-lawyered and made to feel largely like a fool. I don't know why I feel like such a fool, I just do. That is a thing I am comfortable with. She doesn't mention my betrayal on the lawyer-front and I don't deign to bring it up, feeling basically like what I did is accepted as the way things go sometimes in battle. Sometimes you get everyone to play on your side, sometimes they go the other way. If they go the other way, you do what you would normally do to beat them, and then sometimes you stomp on their faces and pull out their hearts, if you want to. If you don't want to, you don't. Elizabeth is choosing don't, and of that I'm glad. I didn't feel like getting stomped on.

So we play darts, and enjoy free drinks, and convince one of the bikers to go for a swing into the pit. He lands face first and goes under and we stand there, holding glasses of various alcohol, pleased with the swing and the release and the landing and thinking for a while that he might never come up, not really concerning ourselves too much with doing anything to find out. He does come up, a beer crushed between his teeth, to loud applause and zealous encouragement and a full moon, shining down, making the pit look large and sad and inviting and the people around it, drunk out of their minds, seem wholly sane, and right where they are supposed to be.

One day we go into a Subway to get lunch and we are sitting down and this fat man with large brown teeth comes over to our table and says to Elizabeth. "Why don't you try keeping your boy here on a leash," and walks away, dragging along each of his
tree-stump legs with perceptible great effort. He sits down a few tables away and begins to eat his sandwich, chewing very slowly and apparently without any teeth, and stares at us in an incensed manner. Neither of us is sure what he is referring to. I begin to think that he is perhaps simply angry that I am with Elizabeth. Which is not, emotionally speaking, very simple at all. It seems rare that a person would become so angry at one person's accompaniment of another as to walk over and comment upon it.

I am sitting there pondering when Elizabeth gets up, sandwich in tow, and walks to the man's booth, where she sits down. I am somewhat shocked at the sequence of events. I half fear for Elizabeth's safety, and I also have a lingering feeling that she will not come back, that this large man has through his cryptic expression won over my girl. Won over my not-my-girl. I sit there staring at the man's red face and Elizabeth's back and decide to go ahead and eat my sandwich. Whatever heroic tendencies I may possess have been diluted by my fear that Elizabeth is going for the fat guy. Perhaps she is really a robot, programmed for obedience to one specific phrase, "keep your boy on a leash." Had I only thought of it first, she could have been mine all along.

Soon the man begins gathering up his things, sandwich included, and leaves, walking out the front door instead of the side door, where he came in. In doing so he avoids walking back by our table. Elizabeth sits there for a moment after he has left, picks up her sandwich, and returns.

"I thought you were leaving," I say, in awe, as she sits down.

"Leaving where?"

"With that guy."

"You thought I was leaving?"
"Well." I can't really explain myself, so I decide not to try. That is the key to success in life. If you can't do it, don't try. It flies in the face of hundreds of years of folk-philosophy, but it works.

"I made him apologize."

"For what?"

"For insulting you."

"I don't even know what he meant."

"He was being an asshole."

"What did you say?"

"I told him to behave."

"What did he say?"

"He agreed."

"He agreed?"

"Yes."

"I see."

I am unable to pry any more out of her on the subject. I cannot imagine what she could have said to induce him to leave, but I am left with a scene from The Godfather, "I made him an offer he couldn't refuse," going through my head. What, short of a small pistol pointed at his genitals under the table, could she have used to ward him off? That is not mine to know. Suffice it to say she is a talented girl. I am afraid now more than ever of pissing her off.
We make it to Cheyenne at the end of our two weeks and when we drive in, at 10:00 at night, it is empty and still and dim. We find a motel in the center of town, another single-level-drive-to-your-door outfit, which we have developed a preference for, and go inside. We have not been drinking and I am not sure I want to. I have a two week hangover that it would be nice to get over. But Elizabeth is not interested in hangover stories. She is tired and wants a shower and wants that I will have prepared her a drink by the time she gets out. I have no problem with obliging. I make her a Seven and Seven and, after tasting hers, make one for myself. She showers for a long time and I turn on the television and start flipping channels. There isn't anything worth watching, just then, so I flip to the History Channel and watch an account of the Battle of the Bulge.

Elizabeth comes out of the shower wrapped in a towel and dripping and leaving wet little footprints on the carpet. She sits on her bed with her back to me and starts rummaging through her bag, and her towel falls loose, exposing her back and the side of her breast and the little curve where her back slopes into her bottom and part of the bottom itself. I take a little gasp of a breath and hold it, expecting a quick re-wrapping of the towel, but she continues rummaging in the bag, and finally, coming up with a pair of panties and a t-shirt, wraps herself back up. I don't bother trying to act like I'm not looking. I stare long and hard and don't look away even when she stands back up in the towel and looks at me and walks back to the bathroom. When she comes back out she's in the t-shirt and she says, "I'm done in there," which I take to mean that I had better go use it if I am going to. If the t-shirt has meant something all along then this towel-losing means something more and the look after, the direct, here I am stare means something too, and I am going to go in and take a shower and see.
I sit under the water for a long time, pondering whether or not I saw something out there, in her face, when she walked by. I conclude that I did see something, though, knowing Elizabeth, the presence of a look holds no more promise than the promise of no look. She withholds the obligation that accompanies a look. She will give a look if she wants to, and then not acknowledge that it was ever given. I have learned this before. I have been laughed at because I had these very same ideas. I finish showering and put on some deodorant and fix my hair a little, enough so it doesn't look like I fixed it, and go back into the room. I hope to find Elizabeth naked, under the covers, in my bed, holding my drink, waiting with a lovely kiss and those lovely hands to mess up my hair and to give up on this two bed arrangement.

I decide to try the towel trick, so I go out, too, in my towel, and see her there, in the bed, covers pulled up below her chin--her own covers, in her own bed--sleeping. My bed waits, empty, for me to come on and lie down, so it too can get some sleep. Do beds need sleep? That is the type of thing I will ponder as I pitch and roll, loose in the sea of bed, heart beating fast against discontent and hangover, mind racing from illogical thought to illogical thought, listening to Elizabeth, Eliza, Liz, breathe.