Misinformed and other stories

Mark Lane

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Misinformed and Other Stories

by

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It was cold outside. Inside, the gas heater sighed and the lights were dim. Collins and Biz were on the couch, sock-feet, their legs under a blanket, imported beers. The movie was rewinding. Biz put her bottle on the coffee table and threw off the blanket, then crawled onto Collins’s lap, straddling him. She hugged him and he smelled moisturizer on her throat, a comforting odor, and he breathed deep. Then she leaned back and smiled at him. Her weight shifted, and she was mashing down on one of his testicles.

“Watch the boys,” he said, moving her tailbone closer to his knees. She made a worried face and put her hand there, softly. “I always forget.”

“They forgive you,” he said.

“I treat them all right, don’t I?” she said, her smile coming back, crinkling the corners of her small green eyes.

“They can’t complain,” he said. She looked curious. “Do they hurt all the time?”

“Of course not,” he said. “That kind of pain, you’d have to kill yourself.”

“I mean does everything hurt them?”

“How could everything hurt?”

“They just seem so tender.”
He shrugged his shoulders.

"I mean, it’s good to touch them, right?” she asked.

"They like to be touched."

"But it’s good, like it’s good with the...you know.” She patted him there.

"In combination with the king, absolutely,” he said, smiling.

"But it’s mostly about the king?” Her eyes flashed. They did a lot of their talking in a private lingo they had compiled over their time together, and she always liked it when one of them came up with new euphemisms.

"Sure,” he said, “but the king definitely doesn’t want his boys neglected.”

"So, like, touching them while you’re tending to the king makes it better?"

"The happier his servants are, the happier the king is.”

Collins laughed, thankful that they could be so open about their bodily wants.

Then he thought of something. “What about the queen?” he said. “And her handmaidens?”

She leaned back and met his eyes, mock-serious. “The handmaidens definitely like some attention."

"Percentage-wise, say?”

She looked at the light fixture and bit her bottom lip. “I’d say, eighty percent queen.”

He nodded. “But, say, rubbing helps out?”

"It’s good to mix it up,” she said.

"What does that mean?”
“It’s good to be creative. Different angles, tap on it.”

“Tap?”

She patted his nose lightly several times with the fronts of her fingers. “Tap.”

“Are you serious?”

“I know, it’s weird, but I’m serious.”

This confused him. He had never tapped, at least not on purpose. “It’s kind of hard to, you know, tap, when the...transaction...is taking place.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know, there’s not exactly a lot of room to maneuver.”

She squinted. “Why not?”

“What do you mean why not?” He was feeling annoyed. “When the king pays the queen a visit, it’s sort of airtight around the whole...area.”

“Oh,” she said. “I thought we were talking about something else.”

“How could we be talking about something else?”

“I thought we were talking manual,” she said.

“We were talking about the king,” he said. “How could we be talking manual?”

“I thought we were talking manual about the king,” she said, “then manual about the queen.”

“Oh,” he said. He took a sip of beer. Suddenly he wanted to be drunk. He tilted the beer back and drank in long gulps until he had finished it. He burped. She ran her hand through his hair. He was confused.

“So, manual...” he said. He was quiet for a moment, thinking of how to phrase
it. "But the queen’s not as involved in manual, right? She’s, like, not quite as...occupied, right?"

"What does that mean, occupied?"

"Well the king, like, occupies her more, right?"

“Oh,” she said, and looked him in the eye, the hint of an apology. “That’s not the queen.”

This jolted him. He set his beer down. He felt claustrophobic, the veins in his eyes jumped. “You’re hurting me,” he said. “Do you mind moving?”

She put her knee down on the couch and lifted her other leg over him. She sat on both knees on the couch, facing him. He didn’t look at her. He stood and walked into the kitchen and took two beers from the refrigerator. He sat back down, against the sofa arm. She grunted, annoyed, and moved closer, still facing him. He didn’t want her so close.

“You don’t want to be next to me?” she said.

“I was just sitting down,” he said. He opened a beer with the corkscrew on the coffee table. The movie had finished rewinding. He turned off the VCR with the remote and started flipping through the channels. Everything was loud and inappropriate. He turned it off.

“So,” he said, “you’re saying the queen is the one...at the doorway?”

“Where did you think she was?” Biz said.

“I thought the queen was the...the chamber.”

She shook her head and screwed up her nose. “Why would you think that?”

Collins shrugged, feeling stupid but leaning toward outrage. What did she mean
why would he think that? They had been together for a year and a half, and he made her come nearly every time, still. Both of them were frequently in the mood. He wasn’t tired of her at all.

“Well,” he said, “the king seems to get pretty good reviews. Are you just acting?”

“I’ve never acted,” she said. “Believe me, I need it to be good just as much as you do. I would let you know, you know?”

This seemed reasonable. When they had begun to get serious, she had said, “No matter what, we’ve always got to have sex.” He had never known a woman so well-adjusted in that way. He had often thought that it was precisely because they were up-front about the fact that they simply liked the way it felt, and didn’t over-emotionalize it, that it had stayed good between them. Also, she was twenty-nine, almost in her prime. Collins was twenty-four, and still as much a slave to it as when he was eighteen.

“But if the queen’s not the chamber,” he said, “and you’re not acting when the king’s in the chamber, what are you saying? That it’s just a twenty-percent kind of orgasm? Have I not even witnessed the hundred percent?” He felt as though he was losing something from his head, some kind of foundation.

“There’s friction,” she said, “there’s, well, rubbing, tapping. You’re there against me, you know?”

He took a long drink from his beer. He wanted to be away from her. “So the king has nothing to do with it?”

She squinted. “I wouldn’t say nothing.”

Collins couldn’t speak. He wanted to rewind the conversation, go back to the
beginning and take another route. He flipped through channels again without seeing anything. Then he turned the television off and stood up and walked a few steps away from the couch. He felt duped. Biz moved against him from behind and put her arms around his belly. He took them off him.

"Look," she said, "I don’t know what you’re so worked up about. It’s nice to feel it in there, you know? I love it, I’ve told you a thousand times I love it."

Like a thoughtful, useless Christmas gift, Collins thought. "Thanks," he said, mentally flipping her off, and turned the half-full beer up until it was gone. He walked into the front room and looked out the window.

There was a homeless man, a black man, lying against the abandoned building across the street in a pool of weak light, his legs jerking as if he might be having a seizure. It made Collins feel silly, here in his warm apartment with the woman he loved. But no, he was not being silly. It was not okay. It was not okay that he had had one idea of sex and she had had another, this whole time. What the fuck? Was she just having sex to humor him?

He heard her soft footfalls and thought she was going to press against him from behind again. But she stopped without coming too close.

"Can we sit down?" she asked. "I don’t understand this. I thought we were having a fun talk."

He whirled around, anger clouding everything, not sure what he was going to say. The concern in her eyes, the way she stood there looking innocent—he was suddenly certain it was staged, that it always had been. He felt foolish. He had been having sex for
nearly ten years now. How could he have missed this?

“I’m leaving,” he said, and turned toward the door.

It seemed like exactly the wrong thing to do, to walk out into the cold indifferent night, but there was just no way he could sit down on the couch and act like these things hadn’t been said. He took his coat and stocking cap off the rack and stepped into a pair of loafers by the door. He didn’t say goodbye, but she followed him to the door and held it open. He waited for her to say something that might change it all back, but she didn’t. He could feel the weight of her look on him as he walked down the front steps, then he heard the door close and it was darker.

This was the coldest New Orleans had been in the six years he’d lived here. It hadn’t gotten above thirty in a week, and the city seemed to feel confused, betrayed somehow. It was a warm, greasy town, rich with sex and booze and human funk, but this blast of cold had swept all that out.

He looked down the street both ways. The windows in all the houses were dark, and the cold weather seemed to give their peeled paint and warped boards new meaning. Usually the houses had character, their shoddiness was a happy result of decadence, but tonight they looked like failure. Everybody in the city had fled indoors to keep from having to see it all. The murderers weren’t even out. Nobody was having sex, loving anybody, because it was a goddamn sham.

Then Collins looked at the homeless man. You’re being silly, he thought. Just quit it.

He walked across the street to give the man a five dollar bill, but when he got
there he realized this would require waking him up. To a person who slept in the streets, being shaken awake in the middle of the night could only mean terror, and Collins was afraid of what might happen if he tried. He would give him the money on the way back from wherever he was going. He stood for a moment watching the man’s breath cloud in front of his bearded face--his mouth hung open as if he were enduring some slow silent torture. It wasn’t the sort of thing you could watch for very long. At least his legs had stopped jerking.

Collins walked out to St. Charles and looked at the surgically clear sky between converging lanes of old oaks. Tons of cold burning stars. He had no idea where to go. He wanted to be back in his warm apartment, next to his soft girlfriend, but this was impossible. It felt like he had been knocked over and everything about his perspective shaken. Sex wasn’t what they had built this thing on, but it was never far in the periphery. The fact that they were good for each other in that way had encouraged him to believe that they could be good together in other ways. If the sex hadn’t been about him, exactly, then what did that mean for the rest of it? The thought of retracing all his steps with Biz was dizzying. He started walking. He supposed he would go to the K&B on Washington and find something to buy.

The streetcar had stopped running for the night and St. Charles was deserted, though fairly well lit. The tracks down the dead middle ground of the avenue wanted to be symbolic, but Collins knew he was just getting sentimental. It was late at night, period, and he needed to fucking get on with it. A police car passed, brake lights flashing for an instant as he slowed to check Collins out then kept on. It made him think that someone
had probably been killed in town today—for the last few years, they had averaged a little over one a day. That dead bastard would be glad to have a problem right now.

But dammit, he had felt so good about himself with Biz. The fact that he satisfied her as often as she did him was a new thing, a thing that made all the difference.

Leslie, the last woman he had been with—the only other time he had been in love—had maybe fifteen orgasms in two years, and most of those had been right at the start. It was her fault, she had told him—she could just never get there. She told him to be proud, because she had never had one at all before him. She wanted to marry him, bear his children, and seemed to have no real sexual expectations. She claimed to have never masturbated. But beyond the shame he felt about himself, Collins began to get the creepy feeling that the way she approached it was little different from prostitution. She would trade him sex for stability, a family, an image.

What had made him hold on to belief in the king? He supposed he had always assumed that women must want the king, really crave it, or otherwise why would they even bother?

Collins had all the social disadvantages men always did with women, and now it seemed that he had no advantage. He was bigger than most women, but they didn’t need protecting the way they used to. Women could make money without men—Biz made more than he did. Collins didn’t know how to fix cars or pipes or appliances. He certainly wasn’t heroic.

He stopped walking. He was fucking cold. He was really going too far with this. He could just turn around. He could sulk in the warm apartment, ignore Biz until
morning, hope the new day would change something. But he was almost to Washington, and suddenly he wanted a cigarette. He hadn’t had one in almost a year. He had quit when Biz moved in, and he realized now that he hadn’t wanted to, that he had done it solely for her. He was angry at himself for compromising anything at all. He would be strong about his wants from here on out. He walked on, angry and cold, kicking twigs down the buckled sidewalk. He was not going too far with anything.

Purple and white, plasticky, brightly lit, the K&B looked like it had been dropped out of space alongside all the crumbling old houses. It was the only thing on the street that seemed at home in the cold.

The store was empty except for the cashier, a young thin black woman reading a magazine at the counter, and a security guard, an aging fat white man, who sat in a metal folding chair by the automatic door. They both looked up, anxious at first, then back down, as if Collins wasn’t even in the ballpark of threatening. He supposed he wasn’t—clean-shaven, khakis, wool overcoat—but still it vaguely offended him. What about the stocking cap? he wanted to say. He felt like proving them wrong, showing them he should be reckoned with. He could start doing cartwheels, pretend to have a gun in his pocket and ask for all their Skittles. . .but that dough-bottomed security guard might shoot him in the face out of nervousness. . . .

So he would get cigarettes, but he felt like shopping for other things, too. This was one of the bigger K&B’s in town. Here were food, drink, drugs, toiletries, cosmetics, small appliances, hardware, even toys. In Louisiana, too, they were kind enough to sell liquor just about everywhere.
It gladdened Collins to think that someone was out there supplying all these commodities, anticipating your needs and staying open twenty-four hours to accommodate your schedule, so you could get on with your more important business. Everybody was always bitching about America’s money lust, but there was something innately comforting about a wide variety of goods for sale.

He picked up a plastic basket and walked down the food aisle to see if he might pique a craving he didn’t know he had. Cookies, crackers, chips, dips, pasta, soup, bread. He wasn’t feeling anything. He looked around. There was a cooler with glass doors at the end of the aisle--probably more food in there, he thought. But it was no use. He wasn’t hungry.

He wandered over to housewares and hardware, and he stopped in front of the camping stoves. That was it. That was exactly it! He would set the homeless man up with an outdoor kitchen. He could sit around nitpicking about the truth of sex, or he could be a man. He grabbed an element and the largest canister of fuel they had, then walked back to the canned goods aisle. He took a can each of kidney beans, navy beans, and black beans from the shelf, three cans of chicken noodle soup, and a five-pound bag of rice. How had he never thought of doing this before? He walked up to the counter and set the basket down.

The cashier scanned everything. Forty-eight dollars and change. A small price, Collins thought, plus he could save the receipt and write it off his taxes. He took out his wallet and handed the woman his Visa.

“That it?” she asked, and he remembered what he had come for.
“Oh yeah,” he said, “can I get a pack of Marlboros.” He was going to smoke the shit out of that pack tonight. He would share them with the homeless man. Maybe he would sit outside till daylight. Everything was working out.

“Reds?” she asked, turning around.

“Yep,” he said. She scanned them, and he looked at the rows of liquor bottles behind her. They would need something to stay warm out there. “A pint of Cuervo, too,” he said.

She turned around and took it down, then looked at him suspiciously. “Anything else?”

Collins looked around. Aha. “And this lighter,” he said, grabbing a silver one with a white horse galloping across it. “Sorry,” he said, and the woman frowned. The security guard frowned, too, as he walked out, a plastic bag in each hand.

The wind had picked up and was blowing right into his face as he walked home. He leaned into it and fixed his eyes on the concrete. He had a pleasant feeling of suffering for a good cause, and began counting his steps to distract himself from the discomfort without being able to forget that it was, in fact, discomfort. After a while he looked up and saw that he had passed his street. He turned back around and walked normally, his chest flooding with excitement at the thought of the homeless man’s reaction.

But there was no one in front of his house. No wet spot or anything to prove that he had even been there. For an instant Collins was afraid he had hallucinated the man, but no. He had been there. He had left. The silence seemed to buzz, the emptiness yawned out, mocking him.
He walked over to where the homeless man had been, and put the bags down. Then he sat, leaning against the wall of the abandoned building.

He took the cigarettes from his coat pocket and opened them, then found the tequila. He lit the cigarette and took a long drag, cracked the bottle's seal and slammed a big shot.

A hot column radiated out from his middle, and he felt like he might throw up, the back of his throat quivering as if about to go into spasms. He pulled on the cigarette to calm himself, but it just tasted bitter and dried his mouth out. He had lost the taste for them, he guessed. In another mood, this would have been a good thing, but it depressed him. He looked at his front door. He was cold.

He turned the key quietly and closed the door gently behind him and worked the deadbolt. The click rang out over the heater's breathing.

"Collins?" she called. She was in the bathroom, it sounded like.

He didn't answer. He looked at the bags in his hands. What to do with them? He carried them into the kitchen and set them on the counter. He would deal with them later. He could hear her splashing behind the bathroom door.

He went into the living room and sat on the couch. He started to turn on the television, but decided to stare at its blank gray eye instead. He tried to transpose the blank gray onto his mind.

"Collins," she called again. It sounded like she might continue, so he turned his head to listen. "Would you come in here, please?" He couldn't read the tone of her voice. It didn't sound mad or even aggravated.
“I’m busy,” he said.

“For God’s sake,” she said, “get in here.”

He stood and took a deep, hopeless breath. He could put himself on autopilot. He could stonewall her. He walked through the door and stood there.

She was in the bathtub. He would not let himself look at her floating breasts, her smooth torso, the wet patch of brown hair. He stared at the tiles above her.

“Would you shave my legs for me?” she asked, her voice gentle, comforting.

He looked at her. She was holding the purple razor and smiling, with an edge of sadness, of concern. A composite of a hundred calm scenes with her, her face in front of his, came to mind—on the couch or the bed, about to sleep or waking up, cooking dinner together, brushing teeth, fastening clothes. He held his hand out for the razor. She sat up and pulled the drain until the water dropped enough that she could get most of her leg out of the water.

He held her right foot in the air as she soaped her leg and worked up a lather, and then he shaved her ankle. Small, nervous strokes. He had never done this before. It was odd feeling the prickly catch of someone else’s hair, scary not knowing how much pressure the skin was feeling. He sat on the side of the tub and shaved down from the calf to her knee, still holding her foot above him with his left hand. Then he leaned over and let her calf rest on his shoulder, and he pulled upward with the razor along her thigh. The skin flattened out in front of the razor, and he fixated on it, as if it might tell him something. He felt close to it, close to her.

“Mowing the stalks,” she said. He knew she wanted him to answer, to establish
that everything was good again.

But he didn’t answer. And he hoped she would catch his mood, wouldn’t say anything else. He wanted this moment to continue happening, because it seemed like it might bring him to something. It was scary but a little exciting, too, knowing that he had to figure out how to keep going with a whole new idea of people and their bodies in love.
My first kiss was at a Ducks Unlimited banquet in the second grade. They had hired the modeling squad from Delta State to bartend and hand out door prizes and carry around the paintings and guns and whatever else they were auctioning so the men at their tables could get a closer look. I remember these women as exclusively tall and blond, but I'm sure there was more variety than that. They wore camouflage crop-tops and mini skirts and black stiletto heels, and even though I didn't quite understand the appeal of women with boobs and hips then, the mix of skin and hunting apparel gave me a little-boy boner under the camo-covered cafeteria table at the American Legion Hall.

Dinner—fried catfish and slaw and hushpuppies—was over, and the main stretch of auctioning and awards and whatnot was cranking up. This was where it started to get boring, so Buddy Blasingame and Neal Malouf and I had found a vacant spot on the right edge of the auditorium behind a row of easels with wildlife prints on them, and we were playing paper football. Our dads were drunk and the only other kids there were junior high and high schoolers. Obviously, our moms were not there. Aside from the models, there were no women.

I didn't realize there were still door prizes left to give out, or I would have stayed at the table with my dad. I didn't have any interest in the auction or the service awards,
but there were plenty of door prizes I wouldn’t have minded having. I had just plucked a field goal that hit Buddy in the middle of the forehead when I heard my name called out on the PA system. Buddy and Neal stood up and I looked at them and they motioned for me to go.

I ducked underneath a painting and walked up the aisle on the right toward the stage, where there was a man behind a podium flanked by several other men at camo-covered tables facing the audience. The announcer at the podium saw me coming and pointed at me, and said into the microphone, “Here he comes, darling.” By the time I realized who he was talking about she was in front of me.

I remember long blond hair with straight bangs and the gap of shadow where the crop-top’s bottom, because of the size of her boobs, rested well out from her belly, at my eye level. She went down on a knee, holding a sheathed knife as long as my forearm, and said, low and husky, “First you gotta kiss me.” A shellacked wooden handle with ringed metal finger-holds stuck out of the wide end of the black leather scabbard, and when she saw me looking at it she pulled the blade out, its clean silver face gleaming wide and long as a samurai sword. I nodded my head and she re-sheathed the knife.

The furious red smile framed by her broad bright face seemed to radiate heat as she leaned in, and I felt panicky. Before I knew what was happening, I had grabbed her around the shoulders and planted a kiss on her mouth, which was unpleasantly wet. I think it sort of surprised her. She jerked back slightly, then smiled again and looked around at the audience, pointing down at me and nodding her head, starting a roar of clapping and whistling and whooping and cooing. I grabbed the knife from her hand and
turned around.

A sea of red-faced men with loosened neckties were holding their drinks high and laughing, pointing at me and nudging each other, yelling at me, and I didn’t know whether to be proud or embarrassed. I was embarrassed to face Buddy and Neal, I knew that. So I hustled down the middle aisle to where my dad was sitting. Dad gave me a strange look, half-smiling with faraway eyes, like he was considering something, and an old bald man with thick tinted bifocals and a yellow bowtie at the end of our table said, “Let’s toast the ladykiller.”

I was proud, then.
The second graders usually hated Walter, but something was doing and he felt bold so he left his friend Jason at the swingset and went to see why they were in a circle around the overturned seesaw across the playground. There was a mumbling as he approached, and the circle untied and became a half-circle, and Griffin Worley stood in the back of the arc grinning big-nostriled to high heavens.

"Come here, Walter," he said.

The second graders had their lips in their teeth and were giggling some. Walter walked until he was standing right under Griffin Worley’s ear, and Griffin Worley grabbed him by the shoulders and forced him to his knees in front of the seesaw.

"Check it out," Mike Ellard said, and pulled a crinkled paper sack off a big brown slab of something on the end of the seesaw.

"What is it?" Walter asked.

"Fossils," Mike Ellard said. "Stick your face up to it so you can see the Brontosaurus print."

Walter traced the slab with his eyes and couldn’t make out anything special, so he stuck his face right above it, squinting and looking for the claw marks. He smelled wet
wood, saw a green vertical flash out of his eye’s very edge, and the big block shot up and
smacked him squarely on the forehead. It knocked his torso back upright, and he stood
up, dizzy, and the second graders were laughing, and blood smeared his vision, and he
reeled among them seeing brick and tree and gum and tooth with the sound in reverse. It
didn’t even hurt, but his ears rang, his legs wobbled.

His mother picked him up and they went to KMC where a fat doctor with an
eyepatch sewed Walter’s head up. The whole time, knowing of the fat doctor’s work only
the bothersome stretching and poking, Walter just knew the fat doctor was going to sew it
lopsided because of his gone eye. Instead of “Shiver me timbers,” the fat doctor kept
saying, “Just a couple more swipes this here needle podner.” Before Walter left, the fat
doctor came in with the x-rays and gave him a concussion.

Seeing the zippered knot on his head in the bathroom mirror made him proud. He
walked around the house sighing like it was time to pay the bills.

His great-grandfather Weenie said, “You realize that sonofabitch leave a scar like
a sonofabitch, don’t you?”

“Good,” Walter said. “It hurts like a sonofabitch.”

Weenie said, “Shoot,” and shook his head as if disgusted.

Old tiny Essie, who now called herself Weenie’s nurse even though she had been
Walter’s babysitter all his life, had to leave early, so it was just Walter and Weenie at the
house for an hour or so. Weenie slept and Walter watched him, wondering what kind of
damage a punch to his jaw would do.

Then Walter went to his room and tried to draw for a while, but nothing came out
right. He drew a tiger that looked like a skinny bear with stripes, a horse that looked like a cocker spaniel. His mother called every five seconds. His father came home a little early and wanted to know whether he felt all right. Walter nodded grimly. At supper he had to tell the story, and his mother said those second graders were in trouble.

“You oughta shove a broom up their asses,” Weenie said, a hunk of squash stuck to his lip.

Everybody looked at their plates. Walter’s sister laughed and Walter’s mother looked spears at her.

That night Walter’s mother woke him up every two hours so he wouldn’t die in his sleep. They had to do this for a week, the fat doctor had said.

After the last stretch of dream he got up excited about having the day off, but his head slushed and wobbled, pressing against his eyeballs. He lay back down and cried for a minute, then rose slowly and slunk into the bathroom. His head and half his face were purple.

Weenie was sitting in his mechanical chair watching aerobics.

“Look at them titties,” he said when Walter walked into the room.

Walter looked at the television, but the women were nodding and chirping and they annoyed him right off. He went in the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. The orange juice was missing, and in its place were teeth. Walter went back into the den and saw the carton on the end table next to Weenie. Walter was sick of mess like this.

“Hey dummy,” he said, “your teeth are in the refrigerator."

“I had to pay with something,” Weenie snapped.
Essie clopped across the hardwood foyer into the den and said, “Come get a bath, Mr. Tankersley.”

“Look at them titties,” Mr. Tankersley said. Essie came over and worked the motor on the chair that stood Weenie up to his walker.

Walter was on the couch still in his pajamas when Weenie shuffled in from being bathed wearing a frightened, worn-out mask of a face. He motored his chair down and looked over at his great-grandson then hauled his head back in the other direction after making eye contact.

“What you want to watch?” Walter asked, feeling guilty for thinking mean earlier.

“Nothin on,” Weenie said without looking over.

Walter watched them spin for the Showcase Showdown while Weenie snored like a chainsaw. Essie came in and sat on the other couch. She lifted her leg and ripped a high-pitched fart. She and Walter looked at one another and laughed. “Shh,” Essie said, “hush.” She pulled out her jar of snuff and raked a pile of it into her lower lip with the lid. The popcorn sound of her spitting against Weenie’s long rhythmic snoring made a comfortable music. The soaps came on, and Walter and Essie went into the kitchen to make lunch.

He had gone back to his room to draw after lunch, and had a solid wood duck in the works, when he fell asleep. He woke up confused with the blunt end of the pencil jabbed into his cheek and charcoal wiggles ruining the duck’s face. A few minutes later, he heard the keys hit the countertop, heard his mother talk to Weenie, heard Essie leave. Then his mother came to check on him. She kissed him on the stitches. He told her
everything had been fine, just still hurting a good bit.

"Poor man," she said. He held onto her.

At supper Weenie refused to eat. Already Walter’s mom had to Cuisinart the meat and hide it in a roll or a pile of mashed potatoes to get him to eat it. But he refused to touch anything that night, and it aggravated everybody.

“It’s supper time, Weenie,” Walter’s mom said. “You know you’ve got to eat.”

“I reckon it’s about time to head back to the house,” Weenie said.

“This is the house,” Walter’s sister said.

Weenie stared at Walter’s sister then turned to face Walter’s mom. “Who’s that gal down yonder?” he asked.

“That’s Sophie,” Walter’s mom said. “You know Sophie.”

Weenie studied Sophie. “I didn’t recognize her without her husband.”

“Sophie’s not married, Weenie.”

Walter looked at Sophie. She was staring at her carrots like they might run off.

Walter’s dad said, “Mr. Tankersley, come on and eat now. That or we can go ahead and put you to bed.”

Weenie said, “I reckon it’s about time to head back to the house.”

It ended with Walter’s dad helping Weenie up and arming him into his room without eating. Walter’s dad sat back down and ate his dinner while the rest of them watched. He wiped his mouth and said, “Son, how you feel today?”

“My head feels big,” Walter said.

He patted Walter on the shoulder. “You’ll be all right,” he said. “This won’t be
the last time you get stitches, I guarantee you.” He winked and smiled and Walter tried to grin.

Walter’s mother read some *Green Eggs and Ham* to put him to sleep, but the night never would end. The waking up every two hours sent him into all varieties of nightmare. He woke up for good at five a.m. to get away from the big black blob that groaned and crunched the sidewalk as the Cat in the Hat steered it to his house. The purple of his face had gone a sort of rusty maroon, and his fingers against his forehead made him wince.

It was still gray outside, and Walter was scared to be awake. The only noise was Weenie’s snoring across the hall. Walter stepped into his slippers and walked out there. Weenie’s door was half open so somebody could hear if he screamed. Walter leaned in to look, and he accidentally clonked the door with his elbow. Weenie jerked upright faster than Walter had ever seen him move in any direction. Weenie stared straight ahead at the curtains in front of the picture window.

“What you want?” he said to the curtains.

Walter didn’t say anything.

“Leave me alone,” he growled. Then he started whining a little and then he was crying.

“Weenie,” Walter said.

The old man turned around, his face sickly white like dough and creased in as many and crooked directions as unwadded paper, shining lines of tears splitting it into thirds.
“You all right?” Walter asked him.

“They hidin behind them curtains,” Weenie said, his eyes burned back terrified through his skull.

“Who is?” Walter asked.

“Them little fuckers.”

“What little fuckers?”

“They little dwarfs with dog heads.”

He climbed up on the bed and Weenie held out his long yellow fingers, but Walter didn’t want to touch them. They sat there for a while without talking, Weenie’s off-and-on crying making Walter more comfortable with the morning. Then Walter’s mother came in.

“What are yall doing?” she asked them.

They stared at her.


She sat down and kissed them both. “I was just coming to wake you up and let you have another sleep,” she said to Walter. “Anybody want some biscuits?”

“I do,” Walter said, and he jumped up and walked ahead of her into the brightening kitchen.

Essie’s tardiness that morning set Walter’s dad to cursing because it forced him late to work as well. After he left, Walter and Essie went to the den. Weenie was snoring within seconds.

Walter got up and changed the channel from aerobics to No Whammies. Essie
loaded her lip. The smiling idiot on No Whammies annoyed Walter, so he changed it again. He left it on Flipper and went to sit back down. Essie herself was now dozing. There was a light brown long dribble against the darker brown of her chin and throat. Walter thought he should do something with his freedom, but he just watched Flipper zoom that boy along underwater. That boy was lucky.

Flipper ended and Essie and Weenie were still hard at their sleep. Walter went to his room and put on his new pair of Levis and the army jacket his grandfather Pops had given him with patches from two wars sewed on. At first Pops had told him he had pulled the jacket off one of his dead buddies, a midget, in France, but Walter’s mom had told him the truth and not to talk about midgets.

Walter tiptoed back into the den and opened the gun cabinet as quietly as he could. He took out his bb gun, which he was only allowed to shoot with his dad, and pocketed the canister of bb’s and his dad’s Buck knife and went back to his room and climbed out the window and lit out across the field behind his house. He was excited and vaguely angry.

He walked the turn row against the treeline that backed his neighborhood then veered right toward the highway. The field was a wilting yellow mess of soybeans almost ready for harvest. A bluejay squawked in a close hackberry tree, and he covered the bird with the bead and pulled the trigger, and the bird plopped in the dirt like a beanbag. The bird’s beak hinged open and shut and its wiry legs twitched, beads of blood set like jewels against the brilliant blue feathers. Walter cracked the bluejay’s head with his heel, and he picked up the bird and put it in the pocket of his army jacket.
A culvert taller than Walter cut through the side of the ditch that separated the field from the highway, and he walked underneath the highway and sat down. The cars rolling over him sounded like airplanes. He tried to remember how his dad had popped the breastmeat out of the doves the other weekend, but his thumb wasn’t strong enough to gouge the warm body, so he lay into the animal with the Buck knife. He managed to carve out two nice hunks of what seemed edible meat, and he put these in his jacket pocket to take home for supper. He set the mangled-hollow bird carcass next to him in the dirt and leaves of the culvert bottom and stared at it in the half-light that turned the blood smears black. He fell asleep and the bird was flapping around above his head cawing and dripping guts out of the hole he had carved.

When he woke up he knew there would be trouble. It was hot, so he figured at least noon. *Flipper* had gone off at nine o’clock. The bird had fallen over and lay facing away from Walter. He picked it up and held it head-on in front of him. Its black eyes glinted. Walter pinned it to the ground with his left hand and with the Buck knife in his right hand pried the bird’s eyes out. He shook the tiny rubbery balls in his hand like dice, then put them in his pocket with the meat and stood and walked out into the bright blue day.

He cut through the trees and came out down the street from his house, and he walked picking feathers off his hands where the blood had dried them. Then he looked up and stopped. There was Weenie, sitting in the Newtons’ flower bed, his walker in the middle of the yard. Walter ran over to him.

Weenie held his pajama top out like a sack with one hand and with the other was
filling it with pine-bark chips.

"Weenie," Walter said, "what are you doing?"

The old man looked up. "They stole these," he said. "Sorry bastards."

"No they didn’t, Weenie. Come on."

Weenie stared at him and smiled. In a new tone of voice, wistful, he said, "You always were a good boy. I miss your dead old mother, though."

Walter took Weenie by the hand and pulled, but couldn’t budge him. "I can’t pick you up," he said.

"Well," Weenie said, and tossed a piece of the pine bark at his great-grandson.

It hit Walter in the chin, surprising him. He laughed and reached down and picked up a piece of the stuff and lobbed it at Weenie. It hit him on the titty.

"Is that the best you can do?"

"No," Walter said, and he reached down for a handful of the pine bark. He threw all of it at once and it scattered like buckshot over Weenie’s face and upper body. Weenie pinched his features up and threw his head back laughing.

Walter grabbed another handful and threw the pieces one by one as hard as he could at Weenie’s face. Weenie was lost in his laughter, slobbering and slurping and coughing, unable to speak. Walter was laughing, too, throwing and throwing, sometimes leaving red marks on the old man’s papery flesh, and then he heard his name being screamed. He turned around and saw Essie hobbling at top speed across the yard toward the two of them.

"What you mean runnin off?" she screeched at Walter.
“Don’t talk to him like that,” Weenie said before Walter could say anything.

“What you mean runnin off?” she said to Weenie, her eyes wide with rage, veins bulging ropy from her thin brown neck. Walter had never seen her like this. Weenie’s face drooped.

She spoke at Walter again: “You scared the wits out of me. I ain’t took care of you six years to have you go off and die.”

Walter looked at the ground.

“I oughta tear you up,” she said. “Get over here and give me a hug.”

Walter wrapped his arms around her bony frame, his face against her warm flat stomach. She held him tight and rubbed circles in his back with both hands. “You scared the wits out of me,” she said, her voice trembling. Walter said he was sorry. She smelled like cake.

She released him and both of them stood speechless watching Weenie shuffle across the yard to his walker. He pulled it to him and leaned against it, then looked at them. “I need to shit,” he said, breathing heavy.

When Walter’s mother came home the three of them were watching *Scooby Doo*. Essie was also dusting the coffee table a little at a time.

“How was everybody’s day?” she asked them smiling.

“Fine,” Walter said.

Essie spat into her jar and said, “They didn’t hardly give me any trouble at all.”

“That’s my men,” Walter’s mother said, and went into the back to take her shoes off.
Before he went to bed that night Walter remembered the bb gun in the Newtons' shrubs. Then he thought about the bird meat and eyes in his jacket hanging in the closet and he went to look at them. The eyes were stuck to one of the pieces of meat, a little ugly monster returning his stare. Walter set the eyes on his dresser and flushed the meat down the toilet. Then he went into Weenie's room with the eyes.

Weenie was lying in the bed staring at a silent ballgame on his little television. Walter sat on the bed next to him.

"Hey there, buddy," Weenie said.

"Hey," Walter said.

"How you been?" Weenie asked him, smiling.

"You want to see something?"

"Hell yes," Weenie said.

Walter held the shiny grey eyes out in his palm.

"Let me see them things," Weenie said.

Walter tilted his hand and let the eyes roll off into Weenie's palm.

The old man held them close to his face, shaking his head back and forth like there was some mistake. He looked at Walter, then looked back at the eyes. Then he popped them in his mouth and swallowed.

The next morning Weenie wouldn't get out of bed. He stayed in his room all day and Walter's mother left school and came home to check on him. He didn't come to supper that night, and the morning after that an ambulance pulled into the driveway and left in no particular hurry with Weenie in the back. Walter knew he had poisoned his
Then there was the weekend, and on Monday Walter went back to school. First thing in the morning Miss Underhill pulled Walter out into the hall and said some people wanted to talk to him. Griffin Worley and Mike Ellard and Damian Bramhall walked toward him from down the hall in front of their teacher with their eyes on the floor tiles. Each apologized for hurting him and he said okay. Damian Bramhall was the one who had jumped on the other end of the seesaw.

When Walter asked if he could visit Weenie in the hospital his mother looked surprised. “Sure, honey,” she said, “but he may not recognize you. Weenie’s real sick.”

He lay strapped by his arms to the bed with his white hair matted and stubble on his sleeping face, mouth agape like he was waiting to be filled with something. He was connected to several machines by tubes and one of them was even breathing for him. Walter touched his face with the back of his hand but Weenie did not stir. After a half hour or so, Walter’s mother said they ought to go and just let him sleep. Walter leaned up to Weenie’s ear and told him he was sorry. Walter’s mother rubbed her son’s head as they walked the whispering halls.
Shooting in the Dark

A quarter to noon, and Lincoln is in the office men’s room thinking of the good things he will not have for lunch. Thick cuts of beef and pork and squash with onions and mustard greens and creamed potatoes and flaky homemade rolls, Lady Spooner’s specialties once but now out of the realm of even the remotely possible. Her fall at the fish factory helped her decide that after ten years it is time for Lincoln to pull his weight. It looks like she won’t go back to work, ever. When he complains about the food, she tells him to shut up or make rent. He thought that he could outlast her, that it was a phase, but she is hanging tough. Dinner last night was off-brand corn flakes.

He makes eight pre-tax dollars an hour but gives half his paycheck to the mother of the twin girls he fathered but has never met. He could lawfully have the payments reduced, but he missed some years and wants to make it up to the girls before they’re all the way grown. Plus, it has come to seem a noble thing—the only one, he is afraid—at the foundation of his personality. Somewhere in his childhood he got the idea that you may as well die or go off into alcohol if you don’t have something along those lines. He ignored the idea when he was younger, when his kids were younger, but with age it has started to seem important.

Lincoln looks in the mirror and slaps his belly with both palms then makes an
astonished face and a muscle with his right arm. He laughs and stares through the holes in his pale green eyes. Good God, he thinks, you ridiculous bastard. He laughs.

If Lady Spooner had made her stand five years back, he could have gotten out before he was so obese. Cruel how she’s withholding the same skill that’s all but bound him to her. She’s fattened him up so that he’s beyond attracting women, and now she’s playing her ace.

But she has overlooked some things. She has gained a hundred pounds of her own in the past decade--she was big when he met her--and hasn’t offered Lincoln sex in almost three years. So her strategy of food deprivation has brought the more poignant lack constantly into his thoughts. And he feels sure some women care about things besides looks. When he gets the raise, fat man or no, he is striking out into the wide world of women on his own.

And he’s starting with a pretty serious prospect just a few feet away, out in the office. Sandra, he thinks, she could fry up the bacon, no doubt about it. She and Lincoln are the last of the employees from the old days, before Whitwell River was a shoestring operation, when towboats were high-dollar. She gives him fruit cake every Christmas and calls to check on him when he’s sick, and he works on her car for free. She is big-boned without being fat and has a look of old fear about her. Lincoln likes her smile, but she never holds it long. She would if she was with Lincoln.

In the absence of looks, it seems to Lincoln, the first thing ladies go for is a joker. If he is anything he is that. Even if he weren’t trying to move in on Sandra he would need to play the clown to offset the lewd desperation that has settled into his face, under the
eyes in deep gray rings.

He doesn't know how to get serious with her, so he figures on keeping up the jokes until he has the raise. He figures that will give him the confidence he needs to make his move.

But first he needs the confidence to ask for the raise itself. It is much easier to carry on and hope things will heal. He assumes he will know his breaking point when he reaches it. He assumes he will know how to deal with the situation after he reaches the breaking point.

He washes his hands and runs a paper towel over his face. He takes a comb out of his pocket and runs it through his hair and starts to walk out, but he decides on an extra touch, for Sandra: he unrolls a good four feet of toilet paper and stuffs it in the back of his pants so it will trail him out through the office. He marches down the aisle between their desks without looking up, and he hears snorting from Lunette and Mitzie and an "I swanee" from Sandra as he stops, salutes, and walks through the double glass doors into that wall of damp heat.

Fernie has taken the grill off the shop fan he and Lincoln decided to paint so they would have something to do today besides clean the damn warehouse, which will never be clean. He has the fan laid flat and is coating its workings with gold spray paint. He stands up and looks at Lincoln, his sweating brown face flecked with gold.

"I ever show you that Chinese rifle?" Lincoln asks him.

"About six hundred times," Fernie says.

"Hell of a gun," Lincoln says, then looks at his car, which he bought with a busted
cylinder block and no seats for five hundred dollars. He rebuilt it from junkyard parts.

“How you like that Volvo?” he asks Fernie.

“Great, man. Like always, great.”

“Change the oil every thousand miles.”

Fernie doesn’t answer.

“I’m going to lunch,” Lincoln says, fuzzing things out with his eyes and a smile.

Fernie smiles back. “Yeah, you need a rest. You worked so hard this morning.”

Lincoln jumps around and strikes a kung fu crouch, forearms stiff in front of his face, and Fernie laughs.

“How many times you say your mama dropped you?” Fernie asks.

Lincoln flashes double-fives over and over above his head as he walks off, grinning to himself.

Lady Spooner is piled onto her fraying La-Z-Boy with the notebook across her lap and a lollipop stick dancing in front of her sagging face. Since the accident, that’s what she does: sits in her chair and watches soaps, researching she says. She says she’s going to break into the soap business. She says she may not be the sharpest tool in the shed but she’s sure as hell sharper than the average soap, and Lincoln has to agree with her. But he doesn’t believe she spends all her time during the day researching and writing. He has asked her to read him a scene, even just a couple lines, and she stammers and shuts her notebook, talking about the “creative process.” He thinks all she has is the title—Hussies
and Hunks—which he doesn’t think much of. He thinks the whole thing is a cover-up for actually liking soaps, for getting off on the ridiculous amount of love-making, which she is always pretending to make fun of.

Every time he walks in he feels this stab, this silly hope that there’s a word that will turn her back to the person who used to rub his back.

“What’s for lunch?” he asks.

“Proctor Lomax got his nuts off thrice,” she says.

He stares at her but she doesn’t look up, and he thinks he wouldn’t want to have even the old Lady Spooner back because she would look too much like this one. “Am I talking to the dang wall?”

She waves toward the kitchen. Lincoln says, “Shit,” and walks over to the stove.

“What in God’s name?” he asks.

This is beyond everything so far. There is a black iron skillet with about a handful of brown scrambled eggs and what looks like a square flat turd sitting in congealed grease.

“Spam and eggs,” she says.

“You ever hear of rice or something?”

“That’s supper,” she says.

“Shit,” he says, “this is--” It’s no use.

He takes a fork from the silverware drawer and walks with the skillet over to the table. Chewing the cold eggs, he thinks that this might be his breaking point. Whitwell’s not all bad—he started poor too. Maybe he’ll say he had been wondering when Lincoln
would ask for a raise.

Lincoln bites into the Spam-turd and liquid wells out of it, and he is afraid he will gag. It tastes like a hot dog soaked in stale grease and breaded with ashes. He gets the mouthful down and finishes the eggs with three more bites. It all sits so heavy he feels like he’ll never be hungry again.

To make up for the food, he decides he will do some shooting. He usually puts this, his main pleasure, off until after work, but he figures he deserves it now.

“I’m going to shoot,” he says.

“You better learn to eat them bullet hulls,” Lady Spooner says.

Eat you, Lincoln thinks. He walks out and slams the hollow door as hard as he can, and mopes over to the Volvo.

But mad or not, he can’t stop that boxy silver form from soothing him. He slaps it above the rear wheel well like it’s a thoroughbred and opens the back door. He takes the forty-round clip off the seat and shoves it against the small of his spine. He sticks the magic marker in his pocket, then picks up the Chinese rifle and jerks to attention. Ready, soldiers!

The turn row of the gutted field seems to be sprouting paper, yellow scraps blooming from the mud and weeds. Several garbage bags have exploded where they lie, coloring Lincoln’s shooting range with a wide variety of stink. Once he found a cow carcass chewed up and rotting against the treeline.
He pulls his huge slab of foam rubber out of the johnson grass, counts off a hundred paces, and shoves the attached metal rod into the mud. He counts the hundred paces back, to be precise, and sprawls on his stomach in the rank earth, the gun stock warm against his cheek. He lines the iron sights up on the elephant he drew with a black marker in the bottom right of the foam rubber and dry fires even though he knows it's bad for the pin, which he’s filed down to make the gun fully auto. He pulls the clip from the back of his waistband and shoves it in with a firm deep click. He shoots five quick times through the elephant’s ear then stands and walks over to see the damage, the midday heat ringing like a dream.

He’s grouped the shots tight, all inside the ear no bigger than a tennis ball. He pulls the marker out of his pocket and outlines the holes in black to avoid confusion.

Then he wrenches the target's shank out of the mud and steps off fifty more paces. He steps the hundred and fifty back and sits with his elbows propped on his knees. He aims for the beak of the bald eagle in the top right corner of the rubber and squeezes off four rounds.

He’s smooth as greased glass today, not a hint of wobble. He holds the Chinese rifle across his lap and rubs the polished wood grain. A fine damn gun.

He kills the camel in the top left three times, the kangaroo in the bottom left twice, then finishes off with one clean shot through Lyndon Johnson’s forehead in the rubber’s dead middle. He pulls the clip out and hides his target in the tall grass. He looks at his Casio. Time to head back to the office. A little past time, actually.
He stiffens as he turns into the drive and sees Whitwell’s Jaguar parked out front. Whitwell usually takes about three hours for lunch, but today, God knows why, he has decided to be punctual. If he’s in his office, he won’t see Lincoln drive up, and Lincoln can sneak out to the warehouse and pretend he’s been in there half an hour.

Big sharp envelopes of air slice through his stomach. He has got to change his diet, his life. This might be the day, after all, to ask for the raise. He tries to decide on a pitch, and realizes that he doesn’t have much in the way of leverage. He and Whitwell both know he doesn’t work especially hard anymore. So it will be difficult to bring up all the hard work he did in the past. Surely the twenty years of loyalty will count for something.

He kills the engine, and as he gets out he decides to sprint across the office’s side yard to the warehouse, partly to avoid being spotted but mainly to clear his head for the work of planning how to ask for the raise. He wonders why it hasn’t crossed his mind before that this is something he should think through, and he feels a thrill of panic in his chest because he knows that the big moment must come soon, if not today, and he is bound to be unprepared for it. As he sprints across the parking area he notices that Fernie’s car is here but that he is not out front by the fan.

The run doesn’t exactly clear his mind, but it does make his chest feel like it’s about to explode so that no other sensations can get through. He’s standing in the warehouse doorway heaving, waiting for the blood to run out of his chest so he can think again, with a fresh head, when he sees Whitwell and Fernie staring at him from the other side of a knee-high pile of pump parts.
“Lincoln?” Whitwell says, frowning.

“Just, uh. . . jogging,” Lincoln says, breathless, patting his stomach as if in explanation.

Fernie laughs, and Lincoln and Whitwell look at him.

Then Whitwell turns to face Lincoln again: “1:00 is what time you’re supposed to be back, not what time you’re supposed to leave the house to come back.”

Lincoln just stares at him, knowing he should defend himself, but he cannot think of a single reasonable word to respond with. He feels his heart thumping with an extra pang, and he thinks of it pumping out Spam-grease. Fernie is grinning, and Lincoln wants to get him in a headlock and give him a noogie.

“I was telling Ferndon,” Whitwell says, “I need yall to put together two pumps from these parts. The shipyard in Memphis is about through with that tug we bought, and I want to get her up and running by tomorrow. You or Ferndon either one can drive the pumps up there tonight, flip for it or something.”

Lincoln wants to call Whitwell an idiot, but instead he bites his bottom lip, which he supposes makes him look thoughtful. This is one of those quintessential bullshit jobs that Whitwell is famous for ordering. They will have to put in about eight combined hours just to prove the assignment is physically impossible. Lincoln is all but sure right now--he seems to remember that there is not a good carburetor in the pile of parts, and only one working intake valve. He and Fernie will just have to put in the time, pretend to be sincere about assembling the pumps and then, about quitting time, tell Whitwell it was a no-go. Whitwell will buy two brand new ones tomorrow and have him or Fernie drive
them to Memphis like that was the plan all along.

“All clear on that, Lincoln?” Whitwell asks.

“Yep,” Lincoln says, and Whitwell frowns. “Yes sir.”

At least, Lincoln thinks, it’s good to see the old priss out in this hot, dusty warehouse. The sides of Whitwell’s white hair are slick against his head and the pits of his turquoise button-down are ringed with sweat.

“Get to work, then,” Whitwell says. “Let me know something before five about who’s driving up there. I’ll tell Sandra to get a petty-cash envelope ready.”

As Whitwell walks away, Lincoln notices that he is wearing white linen slacks, and he is positive that Mrs. Whitwell dressed him this morning. He would like to tie man and wife up together and show them videotapes of real life.

“Son of a bloodshot bitch,” Lincoln mutters.

“He didn’t like our fan idea too much,” Fernie says. “You want to drive up there?”

“We can’t get two good pumps from that pile of crap.”

Fernie looks at the pile. “You think?”

“I know.” Lincoln walks across to the other side of the warehouse and grabs a green plastic bucket, then turns it over next to the pile of parts and sits on it. “Let’s just pretend to try.”

Fernie retrieves a bucket and takes a seat next to him.

Lincoln finds the right parts, half of them no good, for one whole pump, and arranges them in front of him. Fernie does the same. Dust motes ride the sunlight all through the warehouse so that the air seems fogged. Lincoln thinks how nice it would be
to disappear into the fog and come out to all clear, tomorrow maybe.

"You got anything close to a whole good one?" Fernie asks.

Lincoln squints at his friend without saying anything, and Fernie looks down at his pile like he might be able to mentally order it into submission. Lincoln has the strange sensation, suddenly, that they are both children, that Whitwell has got them doing something ridiculous but with just enough of an appearance of usefulness, of reality, to keep them fooled. Fuck fooled, he thinks. Except that if he is being fooled now it means he always has been fooled, and he has put in too many years to just say fuck it. A fool fog in the air, he thinks, and it's doing the fucking. Only way to forget about the fucking is money.

The raise, dammit, no getting around it. He tries to think of what he can use to prop up his argument for it, but an image of the ladies sitting naked at their desks blooms in his head. Why can't he ever untwist women from things? This is easier to consider than the raise, though, so he lets the ladies ride, and pulls Sandra into special focus, her big bare breasts consoling and tender over the top of her desk.

"Sandra likes me, don't you think?" he asks Fernie after a few seconds.

Fernie looks at him. "She likes everybody. She's a nice woman."

"She laughs at me all the time," Lincoln says. "I think she likes a man with comedy. I doubt Rodney does it for her."

"They been married about thirty years, Lincoln."

"Exactly."

"Rodney's crazy," Fernie says. "I wouldn't piss him off."
"I think we have a . . . a background, you know?"

"It's just work. Why you think all of a sudden she wants you?"

"Like I said, I make her smile," Lincoln says. He thinks about the fruit cakes and sick calls. "We go back. She likes a soldier." He looks at Fernie, and to take the seriousness out of the air he stands up and clicks his heels together and salutes. "Ready, soldiers!" he barks.

Fernie grimaces. "It's been twenty years since you were a soldier, fool. Women don't want men like you or me. That's why you got a home woman, right?"

Lincoln pictures Lady Spooner in her La-Z-Boy, drooling over soap sex. He wonders if she's fiddling with herself. He wants to throw something.

"I'm asking Whitwell for a raise," he says.

Fernie stares at him. "Huh?" he says, screwing his face up again.

"He owes it to me. You know I been working for him twenty years?"

"I guess," Fernie says. "I only been here two years, and I think we get the same thing."

"Eight damn dollars," Lincoln says. "I bet the bastard sits in his bathtub every night getting a boner over the money he's screwing us out of." He tries to laugh but can't.

Fernie winces. "Lincoln," he says, then stops.

"What?"

"Nevermind."

"Let it fly."

"I ought not to."
"You got to."
"I get more."
"What?"
"Sorry, man."
"How much?"
"I ain’t saying."
"I’ll beat it out of you."
"No you won’t."

Lincoln’s stomach contracts. Then it seems to yawn open, into a queasy hollowness. “Are you kidding? What the hell? Fuck you.”

“I had no idea, man.”

“Fuck Whitwell,” is all Lincoln can think to say. Then he comes up with something: “You know a catfish farmer offered me a job out at Stringtown?” This is a lie. But he did run into a catfish farmer from Stringtown one time when he was picking Lady Spooner up at the plant. He almost asked him about jobs.

“Serious?”

“Hell yes.” Lincoln can almost believe it himself.

“Put the pressure on him, then,” Fernie says.

The gravel outside crunches, and Whitwell’s shiny maroon Jaguar flicks a blade of light into the warehouse as he drives off. This coincidence of sun and metal somehow sums it all up. Lincoln is through with the fool-fog fucking. He is taking control.

He stands and kicks the plastic pump casing in front of him. It barely misses
Fernie’s leg as it flies against the pegboard wall and knocks down a pipe wrench.

“Watch it, man. I didn’t do nothing.”

Lincoln kicks the heavy engine block, but it just falls over onto its side. Fire shoots through his foot, and he bites the corner of his bottom lip until he tastes metal.

“Sonofabitch!”

He kicks another pump casing with his left foot, but he doesn’t hit it square and it spins off like a lopsided top. Then he just kicks at anything, at the general pile, spraying metal and plastic parts everywhere, a cloud of sparkling dust enlarging around him, his brain boiling. Then the bottom drops out of his stomach with a violent suck, and he knows he had better sprint inside to the bathroom. With every stride, his right foot feels like it is about to crack in two.

Lincoln finishes on the toilet and washes his hands and face. He looks in the mirror and feels like goddamn crying. He closes his eyes and lets out a deep breath then wets his hands again and runs them through his hair. He tries to find the slender face of the kid who jumped out of airplanes in the jungle, but it is lost in twenty-five years of fat and wrinkles. It’s like something has gradually swallowed him up along with everything he cared about. The fog, he thinks. You can get out, though. You have to get out. He walks out the door.

Sandra is rapping away at her adding machine, her lip bit and brow gathered in deep concentration. Her dirty-blonde hair rides on top of her head like a loaf of fresh
whole wheat, earthy and humble like the woman herself. Mitzie and Lunette aren’t in the office, and Lincoln doesn’t care why. He pulls up a chair next to Sandra and stares at her while she adds up Whitwell’s money. His foot convulsing makes him want to scream and fuck and die. Or something. He wants to crawl onto Sandra’s lap and go to sleep.

She stops, her finger marking a spot in the ledger, and looks at Lincoln. He is reminded of Lady Spooner’s notebook, and he thinks that he would calmly accept whatever life threw at him if he could exchange that one and her notebook for this one and her ledger. He can’t help looking at her grapefruit boobs behind a t-shirt advertising Bass Pro Shops.

“What’s up, Line?” She smiles, and Lincoln sees pain in her eyes, in the leathery side of her face, and he wants to share it with her.

“Does Rodney beat you?” he asks.

“That’s not funny,” she says sharply. She frowns and goes back to rapping at the adding machine.

Suddenly it is all too much. I just do not know, Lincoln thinks. Recomence the fucking. He lets his torso fall forward until his forehead slams her glass-topped desk. She inhales a screech, but he doesn’t move.

The glass is cool. It is just what his forehead needs. If he could walk around with cool glass on his forehead he would be much better at dealing with problems.

Then, like a miracle, Sandra’s hand is on the back of his head. A joyful shiver runs from the bottom of his brain to his ass. He forgets the pain, in his foot and elsewhere. Maybe women and God are the same thing, Lincoln thinks, his chest swelling
with promise.

"Are you all right?"

He doesn’t answer. He wants her hand to stay there forever. Any movement, any sound, will end it, and he may never get it back.

She shakes his head with her hand, smushing his nose back and forth. "Lincoln. What’s wrong? Are you overheated? Are you dizzy?"

"What’s his problem?" Lincoln hears another voice ask, from out in front of the top of his head. It is Mitzie. Don’t screw this up, he wants to tell Mitzie.

"I don’t know. Go get Fernie. We need to get him to the doctor."

She is combing his hair with her fingernails, and it feels so good. It has to mean something, he thinks, that she is willing to be so intimate with his hair, sweaty as it is. He hears Mitzie’s sandal slaps recede and the quiet rush of air as the glass doors open.

"What’s going on?" another female voice, Lunette’s, asks.

"I think he’s got heat stroke or something," Sandra says, running her fingernails over his scalp faster and faster.

"Oh, man, we’re talking lawsuit," Lunette says.

No no no! Lincoln thinks. Everybody just settle down!

Then he hears, "Who’s talking lawsuit?" and he snaps his neck upright.

Everybody looks at Mr. Whitwell and then at Lincoln.

Two boat captains talking on the marine radio is the only sound in the office. It’s like they’ve all rushed to the edge of a cliff together, and only Lincoln or Whitwell can save them or run them off it.
Whatever has to be done to get Sandra’s hand back, Lincoln will do it. He will ask for the raise here and now, but first he has to get rid of the tension. Jumping up on the desk and dancing a jig seems like just the thing, but he knows it’s not. He has to be serious. He can’t help smiling.

“What’s funny?” Whitwell asks.

“Not much,” Lincoln says, stifling his smile. “I had a dizzy spell there.”

Whitwell eyes him with softening mistrust, and Lincoln decides this is the time. Like jumping out of an airplane: go before you have a chance to freeze up.

“I was hoping I could talk to you about a situation,” Lincoln says, and he feels bold all of a sudden. “It’s a heck of a situation.”

Whitwell looks around the office, like he’s afraid somebody might attack him. Then he says, “I need you on those pumps.”

“Well, it’s sort of about the pumps, Mr. Whitwell. I mean, it sort of includes the pumps.”

Words are coming easy. It is all fitting together. Lincoln smiles. He senses the ladies’ admiring eyes on him.

Mr. Whitwell makes a face like he smells something awful. He checks his watch, then looks directly over the top of Lincoln’s head. “All right, I’ve only got a minute.”

Lincoln follows into his office, and Whitwell pulls the blinds over the glass windows giving onto the ladies’ desk area. Sandra’s hand is out there waiting. The pain in his foot is back, but it is not pain anymore. It is just a feeling, like hot or dirty.

“What do you want, Lincoln?”
Lincoln clears his throat. Leverage, he thinks.

“Well, I got an offer I need to let a man know about, he keeps asking for an answer and I’m telling him I really owe it to you, you know, to let you decide if, well--”

All of a sudden he remembers he never decided on how to arrange the speech, and he wonders if something in him made him forget on purpose. Whitwell is squinting and grimacing like he can’t figure out what ugly thing he’s looking at.

“--you know, I been with you twenty years and all, we go back and all, and I figure I owe you something, I’m not trying to say you owe me something, but--” Good words come to mind but fade before he can put them together.

Whitwell squints and runs a hand through the last of his hairs on top. “How does this relate to the pumps?”

This stumps Lincoln. The connection seemed so clear back there in front of the ladies. *Everything* seemed connected, sensible, in front of the ladies, with Sandra’s hand right there.

“Well the pumps,” he says, “I wanted to suggest, well, it’s hot as, well, you know what, and the pumps. . .yep. . .They’re out there. . .”

Lincoln wipes his face with his forearm. This is bad wrong. He wants to jump through the plate-glass window and run down the river bank and dive in.

“Are you drunk, Lincoln?”

“Drunk? No sir. I’m just, you know. . .” God, he doesn’t know how to do this.

“Because if you’re drunk,” Whitwell says, “I could maybe understand what you’re doing in here when I’ve given you a specific serious job out in the warehouse that is not
going to get done with you stuttering away my fairly precious time."

Lincoln looks at Whitwell. He wants to say, What about when you had all those
boats and needed me to keep them running? What about those all-night trips, emergency
crew changes and grocery drops and parts runs, running from here to St. Louis at the drop
of a hat?

"Look, Mr. Whitwell, all I’m saying is, well, I need to make more money."

As soon as he says it he knows it was all wrong, even the thought of it. The words
seem to hang between them, clanging. Knockout, Lincoln thinks. I just knocked my own
self out.

Whitwell’s face goes straight and hard. “Are you asking for a raise?”

“Well, you could say.” He can’t meet Whitwell’s eyes. He looks at his hands in
his lap. They seem absurdly fat and clumsy, like a big infant’s. The fool fog. Here it
comes, he thinks, bend me on over, Whitwell.

He hears Whitwell let a long self-righteous breath out his nose, but he doesn’t
look up as the old man begins talking. He feels something in him dissolving. The
breaking point, maybe. Probably, he thinks, there are no breaking points. There are just
points past which you stop caring about yourself, which would be the opposite.

“I swear, Lincoln, this really and truly beats all,” Whitwell says, then snickers
dramatically for a few seconds, gathering himself, and Lincoln gets the feeling Whitwell
has been saving up for this one.

“So you got an offer. An offer you need to let a man know about, huh?” Whitwell
shakes his head and chuckles some more, then says: “Start off with a lie before getting to
the truly ridiculous shit, is that your strategy, Lincoln?

"I mean, do you think I'm dumb or something? I may be stupid, Lincoln, but I'm sure as hell not dumb. It would take a dumb individual, wouldn't it Lincoln, to reward a man for doing less and less work every day for the last ten years? Wouldn't it, Lincoln? To give that worthless individual more money? Somebody who's a charity case already? I suppose you expect me to say, 'Sure, bud, take my money. Just walk in and by God take it!'" Whitwell slams his desk with his fist as he finishes, the glass top rattling against the wood.

Lincoln doesn't look up. He can't. He feels incredibly tired and almost frenzied at the same time. This thing Whitwell is saying is too much. Whitwell takes more calculating breaths through his nose.

"Do you really think I'm that dumb, Lincoln? How much advantage do you think you can take of me? You realize it's nothing but the goddamn goodness of my heart giving you any money at all, as it is? I mean, do you think I need you? Do you think anybody else would need you? Earth to Lincoln, Lincoln. I'm already doing you a favor, and you're asking for me to make it a bigger favor? Good God, this beats anything."

The fog is in Lincoln's brain, fucking the cells senseless. He feels like his thoughts are becoming unavailable to him, like all the right ones are in a strange language. Whitwell takes more breaths. Whitwell has got to stop all this talking, now. It is too much. He has made his point.

"Let me tell you Lincoln, do you think a dumb individual could keep this company afloat? You see all these empty buildings down the river, Lincoln? I don't have to tell
you, do I? That’s right, right? You were there, Lincoln. Those were towboat companies, 
Lincoln, and every by God one of them was booming back then. Booming, Lincoln! You were there, but guess what? They’re all shut down now! Have been for years! Those weren’t dumb individuals either. Guess who’s not shut down, Lincoln? Is Whitwell Towing shut down, Lincoln? Are we by God shut down, Lincoln? Would you look at me when I’m talking to you, son! You were there! Are we shut down, Lincoln? Are we?"

Lincoln takes his time raising his eyes to Whitwell’s. His neck feels watery, his head is a steamed teabag. Whitwell is leaning over the desk on his forearms, like he is about to spring out from behind there and pounce. His face is red and a string of drool is creeping out of his mouth corner. Lincoln is woozy. He smiles, thinking, I could break your thin old ass in two.

Whitwell stands up and bangs his fist on his desk again. “Smiling at me, son! I’ll show you funny!”

He comes around from behind the desk herky-jerky, a cartoon of mad, and Lincoln thinks, You’re right, Whitwell, that is definitely funny. It is all funny, Lincoln thinks, all a cartoon: they have ripped the edges off us and we are zipping around in primary color. Whitwell stands over him, breathing heavy. Lincoln looks at Whitwell’s little pouch of a gut under the turquoise shirt cinched tight by a braided belt. Primary color and white linen slacks. Lincoln starts laughing. Things are coming loose and all he can do is laugh.

“What do you think this is?” Whitwell says. “A family reunion? Look at me when I’m talking to you!”
Lincoln fuzzes his vision. A furry field of turquoise, he thinks. Fool fog fuck. Fuck the fool fog in the furry field. They have ripped the edges off us in order to fuck us in technicolor. This brilliant comedy. Laughing into Whitwell’s old fuzzy face.

More words are in the air behind Lincoln’s laugh, and then there is a fleshy streak out of the blur that stings his temple. Small sharp pain and focus. Whitwell above, glaring. Eyes like spoiled fruit.

“The edges are off,” Lincoln hears himself saying, “and it is all technicolor.”

Fear startles the old man’s wrenched face and Lincoln punches the fear out of it, a solid smack. The old man crumples back against his desk, and there is deep sound satisfaction, for once. But the door opens behind him and he feels himself turn around, and things go inside out. It is Sandra, stricken: “My God, Lincoln, what did you do?”

His head frozen foggy. Shake, explain, to her more than anybody. “The edges are off,” he says, trying to hold back tears. “I didn’t mean to. Please. Comedy. Sandra.”

Lincoln is in the car, the road rattling loose parts and the sun like blades. The trees reach out with their sticky green hands, the sky a garish blue. I hate weather, he thinks, I hate this junked-up car. There is no technicolor in the world. There is not even comedy. There’s only fooling yourself.

A right turn and the loose parts go smooth on the road, his road, recently repaved, and he tries to let the smoothness seep into him. He feels like he’s swallowed razors, imagines them spiking out of food lumps so the lining of his stomach pulses against their
smug silver edges. Maybe this has all been about the food, he thinks. Maybe too much bad food snaps your brain around corners and makes you believe in breaking points and shit. Maybe he can go back and explain it all to Whitwell, to Sandra.

Right, he thinks. The old fucker will have my wide butt arrested. Sandra thinks I’m a monster. Twenty years down the river. I hope I at least injured the bastard, he thinks.

He pulls into their gravel drive, the pecan tree leaning over his parking spot ready to drop nuts and drip sap and stain his hood. Piece of junk, he thinks. There are Volvo guts he’s replaced over the last couple of years rusting into the weeds he hasn’t bothered to knock down all summer. A dim light shoots back through his brain catching a lifetime of junk and bad ideas on its beam. No more fooling, he thinks.

He thinks about her sitting in there, smiling relaxed and done diddling herself. His dash reads three o’clock. Probably into the talk shows by now. He bangs on his steering wheel. Why me? Why her? Why this?

It is all her fault, he thinks: none of this would have happened if she could have cooked me something halfway decent for lunch. What would it have hurt her? Why not, just once, a nice surprise?

Just then a cardinal drops from the sky and lands on one of the pecan tree’s low branches. It sits there twitching its happy little head and cheeping, the bright orange beak scissoring arrogantly open and shut. Lincoln reaches behind his seat and grabs his gun and shoves the clip into it and jumps out of the car.

“Motherfucker!” he yells. “Technicolor!” He shoulders the gun and blasts the
thing to pieces.

What’s still together of it lies twitching headless and gooey in the gravel, feathers hanging in a stunned cloud around the branch the bird was on. Then a wind rises at Lincoln’s back and he senses motion out in front of him. He looks up. The gust has pinned the red feathers in a kaleidoscope against the blue sky between branches.

He hears the trailer door creak open, but he doesn’t turn to look.

“What did you do, Lincoln?” he hears her ask.

But Lincoln just watches the feathers. They are getting higher instead of lower, flipping around on the air and spreading out, as if he has released them to go about their business. It makes him want to die. He looks down at the piece of carcass in the gravel. It has stopped twitching.

He is afraid he might cry. He yanks the clip out and chucks it into the neighbor’s yard. It makes a thin sound. He can feel people watching him from other trailers down the park’s gravel drive, hears somebody mumbling. He turns to look at Lady Spooner, but she doesn’t notice him. She is watching the feathers, too. One more in the chamber, Lincoln thinks, looking from her to the feathers. The feathers are beautiful.

The wind blows harder and the feathers rise and spread, trembling.
Behind the Bleachers

In the fifth grade, you didn’t have a place in the bleachers at the Friday night football games. Even though the school was first through twelfth, the team wasn’t really yours until you were in sixth grade and walked the halls of the same building as the players and went to pep rallies and knew the cheers. That was when you started sitting in the student section. Also, you had to distance yourself from the elementary kids who sat with their parents at the games. So you ruled the various practice fields, about five of them, which stretched way off into the darkness behind the bleachers.

I don’t remember whose idea it was, or how exactly we organized it the first time, but at some point early in the season, playing Smear the Queer and flirting with the girls during breaks in the action turned into a mad dash of butt-grabbing. We faced each other in lines, like Red Rover except you were divided by sex and didn’t hold hands, and you singled out a girl and went after her when everybody charged, only sometimes you would have to switch targets in mid-stride if another boy got to her first, and it would become about twenty separate games of chase, the girls speeding off in all directions until a boy caught her and clamped down on her ass. There was always a weird moment when you grabbed the girl’s ass and she turned around and you were hoping it would lead to something but you didn’t know what or how to encourage it. I figured since they were
letting us do it it must turn them on, and after I had grabbed them I would look into their eyes and smile knowingly. But there was always another guy zooming in on a beeline at your girl, and she would sprint off again before anything more sexual had a chance to happen, laughing to let you know you didn’t mean jack to her.

But there was one girl, Ruth McCool, who had graduated from picking her nose and scratching herself in public to smoking Marlboros and wearing eyeliner. She was an outcast among the girls, and her status in our eyes was unclear as of yet.

One time about six of us had all ended up going after Sheree Bergeron first thing, and when I saw that this was happening and that I wouldn’t be the first one to get to her, I peeled off after a random butt receding by itself into the darkness. The butt had a head start on me, and was all the way to the soccer field, a good two hundred yards away from any light spilling down through the back of the bleachers, when I closed on it and realized it belonged to Ruth McCool.

Even if I had known exactly what I thought of her, I had gone too far and was moving too fast to stop and feel superior or whatever, so I gave her a cupped slap and held on. And once I had her in my hand, I guess it occurred to me that I didn’t have to give her the respect I would give someone like Sheree Bergeron, and as I relaxed my grip I slid my hand down between her legs and pulled it up from her vagina along her butt crack with a flourish.

She turned around and squinted at me and smiled, then her hand shot down to my crotch and she gave my package a quick double-squeeze. I stood there, stunned, and she licked me on the forehead then ran off in the direction of the bleachers.
After that the butt-grabbing seemed like child's play, but I went through the motions until the fad died out because I was afraid my stock with the girls would drop if I didn't. I never went after Ruth McCool's butt again, and I never heard if she did what she did to me to anybody else. As she developed that year she became pretty, but we were never comfortable doing anything but making fun of her. She got sent to reform school in the seventh grade when her parents caught her smoking dope.
Purvis had his sock feet on the coffee table and his hand down his undone pants, and had just cued his wife's workout tape to deep knee-bends, when the phone rang. He let the machine answer it. It was his wife. She was crying.

"Purvis, I need you. Pick up the phone... Purvis..." Dead air for a while, then she hung up.

He zipped and buttoned himself, then stood and looked at the phone. She probably got reamed by Fancy Lady, the head nurse, he thought. Fancy Lady was a widowed former debutante, meek as a puppy except when she forgot her lithium, which she somehow managed to do every other week or so. If it was serious Renee would call back.

He walked into the kitchen and got a beer. He was not in the mood for a crisis.

Purvis needed this free time. Tax day was nearing and he had been slammed with clients from eight till five. He had been off work for half an hour, and Meredith, his new girlfriend, was coming over at seven. Meredith was twenty-four and had skin like coconut milk. Purvis nearly melted just at the sight of her naked, and he had hoped to jerk off then have an hour or so to recharge and drink a few beers so he could be at the top of his game when she showed up. He went back to the couch and turned on the national news, and sipped his beer. The phone rang again. He let the machine get it again. It was her again.
“Purvis, pick up the phone... Purvis, this is for real...”

He stood up and answered it.

“Hey,” he said. “I was in the shower.”

“Can you come up here?” She spat out a few fluttery sobs. “Please, Purvis?”

“What for?” He took a drink of beer and watched Dan Rather give today’s Wall Street figures.

It took her a moment to gather her voice. It trembled: “I’ll tell you when you get here. I need to see you in front of me. Please do this, Purvis. I don’t ask you for much.”

He almost sprayed his beer at the wall. Except that I be a combination of Cary Grant and your dad, he wanted to say.

“Are you at work?” he asked.

“Mm-hm,” she said weakly, “the emergency room.” She sniffled. “Are you coming?”

The old irrational spite welled in him. “I’m kind of busy, hon.”

“Bastard,” she moaned. She hung up.

He sat back down and finished his beer, thinking of Meredith. This was his first affair, and if he had been younger or stupider he might have thought he was in love. After five years of erratic monogamy, it was like learning sex for the first time all over again. He felt sixteen when he was with her. The downside was he also performed like he was sixteen, so he didn’t see the relationship going too far. He didn’t love her, and she wouldn’t be at a loss for men anytime soon.

He supposed he had been mean to Renee out of habit—his was nothing compared
to her operatic meanness—and because he had been drooling for Meredith all week. But he would have to address this thing—he could tell by the shake in Renee’s voice that it was not a trifle. It was bigger than Fancy Lady. Possibly it was a crisis.

What if it’s serious? he thought. What if she’s dying? He considered it and was not much saddened, and the fact that he wasn’t gave him an illicit sort of thrill. God, he thought, how did you get like this?

He had an impulse to pack up and leave, right now. This seemed like the perfect opening, a window to the irrevocable. It would damn sure be irrevocable, he thought, if he deserted her in the state she was in.

Probably it was something to do with her ovaries, he thought. A year or so ago a doctor had cut some cysts off and left her and their marriage barren. Maybe something had leaked or ruptured or just bent her over with hurt and she’d run down to the emergency room during her rounds. Maybe she had a tumor. Maybe the cysts had been cancerous all along and maybe they were back.

Hell, he would go to her. Really, it was the only choice. To leave her would be to chalk up the baddest karma available. It was baby-killing mean, the kind of thing that cancels your status as human. He was human, at least. And he was pretty sure he loved her, even in his bad moments.

He called Meredith and told her there was an emergency with his wife. He was surprised and gladdened by the disappointment in her voice. It struck him that his being married was the main attraction for her. She was a psychology grad student. Maybe she was experimenting on her own brain.
They rescheduled for the day after next. He went in the bathroom and masturbated thinking of her small pale breasts in his face, then he got another beer and opened it and went out to his car.

The lot was packed but no vehicles came or went, and Purvis had the sense that he was showing up late for an assembly he hadn’t been invited to. Last night’s rain lay in greasy puddles on the parking surface. There was no wind and the light was failing in an unnatural silence. The sky was a strange purple shot through with orange swaths of cloud.

Three small black children, two boys and a girl, stepped out of a yellow pickup as he approached the double automatic doors. The driver, an old man, told them, “Ask the turd up front.” Purvis let them walk in ahead of him and he watched as they approached the reception desk shyly.

He wondered whether they were visiting their mother and what kind of injury or disease was having its way with her, and he suddenly felt all the grief of these hundreds of sick and dying pressing in on him. He felt, too, the first twinge of sympathy for Renee, who was no doubt crying alone and feeling deserted. Bastard is right, Purvis thought. Meredith’s breasts flashed in his head and he shuddered.

Renee had worked at the hospital for three years, so Purvis knew his way around it pretty well. She had always had the two-to-ten shift and he used to meet her for dinner in the cafeteria several nights a week. He couldn’t remember when he had stopped.

The emergency room--more of a hall, really, with exam rooms lining each wall--
was full but everyone appeared calm. Nurses and orderlies smiled and there seemed to be an unusual number of civilians, family members he guessed, milling around outside the room doors. He stopped a stout white-haired male nurse and asked which room Renee was in. The man grimaced and pointed to the fourth door on the right.

The door was ajar and he let himself in as quietly as he could. She was alone. She must have heard or at least sensed his presence, but she just lay on the exam table on her side, whimpering away at the far wall. Purvis was not ready for this. His foot twitched without his permission and the rubber sole of his dress boot squeaked. She rolled over and looked at him.

Holy god, he thought. The brown of her huge eyes seemed to be pouring from her head, the hurt too plainly visible for this to be anything but major. Her cheeks were red and raw from crying, her strong chin collapsed in on itself under the intensest, most implacable frown Purvis had ever witnessed. Seeing her like this made him want to commit wild tenderesses. She needed him. He could help.

He went weak in the stomach and walked over to her. She rolled back over to face the wall. He sat on the edge of the vinyle table and stroked her hair above the ear. She swatted his hand away.

“What is it, baby?”

“Just go,” she said. She covered her face with her palms and started crying.

“Look,” he said, “I’m sorry. No excuses. I wasn’t thinking right.” He supposed this was true enough. “Tell me what happened.” He stroked the side of her hair and she did not stop him this time. She was still crying and didn’t answer, though.
Purvis was scared. She was as upset as he had ever seen her, and she had been nearly suicidal for months after she found out she couldn’t have children.

“I’ll be here whenever you feel like talking,” he said. He thought of himself jerking off just a few minutes ago and felt ludicrous. “I don’t know why I was mean on the phone, baby.”

She sniffled and rolled over and looked up at him. She narrowed her eyes and tried to control her jagged breathing. The corners of her mouth twitched. She sat up on the table and pulled her legs to her chest and stared at him.

“Do you want to know what you were too busy for? You really want me to tell you? I don’t want to put a dent in your busy fucking night.”

“Come on, baby.”

“Quit calling me baby.”

“Come on, Renee. I said I was sorry.”

He had to turn away from her stare. A clock on the wall read ten to seven. He would be sitting on the couch, giddy, waiting for Meredith, if this hadn’t happened. But now sex seemed so far from the point. Why couldn’t it be far from his mind?

He looked at Renee again. She started sniffling again. She closed her eyes and breathed deep, then opened them on him, her brow knitted against a new crying jag. My wife, he thought. What am I doing?

“I got stuck,” she said.

“Stuck?” He was thinking mud.

“By a contaminated needle,” she said, looking down.
His insides seemed to fall away. No way. This was from a bad TV miniseries, maybe a news-magazine show. He did not want to wrap his brain around it. He squinted and could not find any words. He hugged his wife and she fell against his chest and cried.

She cried harder and began to beat his shoulder tops with her fists. He didn’t stop her. He held her lightly around the lower back. It seemed there was nothing else to say or do. Fucking dead, was all he could think. Renee was twenty-nine. He would be a widower before he was forty. A solitary goddamn accountant.

She pushed herself away from him and sat back up and looked at him, everything on her face wet. Purvis felt the wet through his button-down.

“The woman has hepatitis C,” Renee said. “She’s not sure if she has AIDS or not, but she’s used a bunch of dirty needles, and she’s had sex with men who ended up with AIDS.”

This sounded to Purvis like doctor-speak for You’re fucked. He swallowed, unsure how to behave.

He studied her face, tried to think how it had changed since they first met. Crow’s feet in her eyecorners, he thought. Three short forehead lines. Paler, maybe. That was the life they had lived together, he thought, right there on her face. It would never have the chance to wrinkle and pale for real. His wife, dead. It was too much.

Before masturbating, he had been able to consider the idea of her death calmly. But death was not an idea—death was cold meat in place of laughter and worry and plans for the future. So simple, but so mind-boggling. Jesus, a dead wife.

“I love you,” he said. Then, hesitating: “No matter what.” He wasn’t sure how
solidly he meant the *no matter what*.

He did love her, though. Surely he did. He had thought of leaving her plenty of times, but now he couldn’t conceive of a world without her in it. Her being gone forever was entirely different from his leaving her forever, though he couldn’t figure out exactly how.

She broke into her loudest sobs yet and held him tight around the neck, her face sideways against his chest. Purvis felt like he should cry, but his thoughts were whirling and he wanted to pin them down.

According to the doctor, there was a good chance Renee would be okay. The statistics were in her favor to start with—it had been a quick prick, no big blood-swap, and the woman might well not have AIDS—and there were pills she would start taking immediately to reduce the chances of contraction by another thirty or so percent. It would be a week before they got the other woman’s bloodwork back, though. The doctor prescribed valium for the waiting and told them not to worry.

When they got home Renee went straight for the bath. Purvis could hear her crying and some halfhearted splashing. He remembered the VCR and rewound the workout tape and replaced it on the rack. Then he got a beer and sat on the couch.

He wished she would stay in the bath forever. He did not know what to say to her. He did not do false comfort, and besides she would see right through it.

AIDS, he thought. Her body steadily evaporating. He imagined her skeleton
slowly rising through the skin. Her full breasts withered, twin fretboards of ribs, arms and legs he could circle with a thumb and forefinger, her face hollow and pitted. Open sores everywhere.

He thought of her walking around the apartment like this. Clothes hanging off her deflated body, hairless, pain-wizened eyes sinking into her skull. Moving with the patience of long suffering. No more dross. Down to the core of her.

Something like envy swelled in his chest. Ever since they found out they couldn’t have kids, it was like they’d been wandering through their marriage. Both of them were aware of it, neither knew what to do. Sex had become more of an obligation than anything else, except on rare drunken evenings when their needs happened to intersect. Their jobs were just jobs, and they had been counting on family.

Now Renee had a tragedy to make her whole. It seemed to Purvis a reasonable price to pay. Ten meaningful years as opposed to forty or fifty more boring ones. Nothing like death to make you see life right. He felt like laughing, then felt guilty for feeling like that.

Then it hit him, and he sat there stunned. He could have it both ways, sort of. Throw his life away on her care for as long as she lasted, then live on after. She would need him, need all of him, and afterwards he would know he had been of service and he could find someone else and deal with that boredom when it came. Having a tragedy by proxy was the next best thing to having a real one, he guessed.

Here it was. Here was how he could love her, love her with everything, no matter what. Here was real love--they would need each other from now on. He stood and walked
to the bathroom and opened the door.

She jerked the wet washcloth off her face and looked at him. She groaned.

"God, Purvis, not now."

He knelt next to the tub and touched her cheek with the back of his hand, wondering what it would be like to touch it once it had caved.

"I'm here for you, Renee, I just wanted you to know that. No matter what." He smiled as best he could. He could feel his brow bunching with concern but didn't know if he had manufactured it.

She looked at him with softening suspicion. "Do you mean it?"

"Yes," he said earnestly. "I'm sorry for everything." He had an impulse to tell her about Meredith, to come clean and start over right this second. But that would throw her too far off his meaning, he thought. They could deal with it later. They could start the marriage over right now and deal with the details later. "Look," he said, "All of this--tonight, everything--made me realize how much I love you. I'm here, and I'll be here. I just wanted you to know."

She held her arms out to him and grabbed the back of his head in both hands and pulled him to her. They kissed. Her mouth was warm and wet. He pulled back from her and looked down at her body. So supple. He cupped one floating breast then the other in his hand and traced the center of her belly to her brown hairs with his fingertips. He let his hand rest there. He wondered if those hairs would fall out.

"Why don't you go get my pajamas?" she said.

He stood up. He had a hard-on. He went to the dresser in their bedroom and found
a pair of skimpy silk pajamas she hardly ever wore anymore, then stopped and turned the bedcovers back on his way to the bathroom.

“If I’ve got it,” she said quietly, “you’ll leave me.” She was lying next to him, facing away. She had taken a valium a few minutes ago, after she took the preventative stuff. The valium couldn’t be working yet so he supposed it was the thought of peace that had settled her down. He had pulled her pajama top off so he could rub her back more thoroughly.

“No way,” he said. He traced the bones of her left arm from shoulder blade to knuckles. “I’m here no matter what. There’s no question.”

“Anybody would,” she said.

“I’m not anybody.” He stroked her underarm with his fingertips then let his hand wander around to her near breast. He brushed the nipple lightly, circling it, until it hardened. He loved her.

“You’re supposed to be rubbing my back,” she said.

“I’m just feeling this love for you,” he said. “I can’t help it.”

“I’m not fifteen, Purvis.”

“No,” he said. “Neither am I.” She had to take everything the wrong way.

“Look,” she said. “Let’s stop pretending. You didn’t feel ‘this love’ for me a few days ago, a few hours ago. I live in the same house as you, it’s not something I wouldn’t notice. If you think patronizing me is going to help anything, you’re a moron.”
His impulse was to defend himself. But honesty, he thought, is the only way. Make her understand. “Look,” he said, “I haven’t felt it from you either. But thinking about losing you helped me see what’s important.”

“What’s that?”

“What?”

“Important?”

He hesitated. “You are.”

“Why?”

He thought about how her face looked when he first saw it in the emergency room, about how it had changed since they met, about how it would look ravaged. “I need you,” he said. “I want to be here for you.”

“For what?”

“For me,” he said, then stopped himself. That didn’t sound right. “It’s my life, you know? You. You’re my life.”

“Glad I can oblige,” she said, and reached behind her to brush his hand off her back.

“Come on, Renee. What do you want me to say?”

“Nothing,” she said. “Say whatever you want.”

“I would take that as a compliment. If you told me I was your life, I would be thrilled.”

“That’s pathetic, Purvis. You love me because you’re pathetic, is that what you’re saying?”
How did she turn this around on him? What the fuck? Did she just not know what love was?

“Look, Renee,” he said, “all I’m saying is I realized you’re more important to me than anything else. If that’s a bad thing, then fuck me. I don’t know what you want.” He resumed rubbing her back, getting angry.

“Forget it,” she said. “Maybe you’re right. I’m getting sleepy.” Her tone was gentle.

“Look,” he said. “I love you. Just let me say it. It’s not something you can analyze.”

He wasn’t sure if you could analyze it or not. He wasn’t sure if what he was saying was based on analysis or instinct. He wasn’t sure which was truer, analysis or instinct.

It was true, though. He could tell himself he loved her and believe it, so it had to be true.

He pressed his hand flat to the right side of her back and rubbed firmly, as if he were applying car wax. He worked his right arm underneath her shoulder and met it with his left and squeezed her, squeezed her until there was no air between them.

She patted his clasped hands. “Honey,” she said, “that hurts.”

“Fine,” he said, and pulled his arms back to him. Bitch, he thought.

He suddenly felt wild, unmoored. He wanted, needed, something to happen with her right now. She was ignoring some truly heavy shit. She could stay up on the valium long enough to hear him out, at least. He wasn’t asking her to deliver a lecture.
“Don’t be grouchy,” she said. “I’m just tired. I want to forget about this day.”

“All right,” he said. “But maybe you can stay awake a little bit longer. I feel like being next to you, awake.”

“I’ll try,” she said.

He looked down at her head in profile, just a few inches from him. Her hair was swept behind her as though floating in a pan of water. He traced her hairline with his finger, and she smiled. She had the smallest, smoothest forehead. Her eyelid seemed the most delicate thing in the world. He kissed it. She smiled again.

She had her arms bent behind her head, under the pillow, so that the bottom of her breast was visible under her tricep. He loved a glancing view like that. He lay down and closed his eyes and moved his left hand over her chest. She didn’t move at first, but after a while she put a hand on top of his and he caressed her like that, her hand along for the ride. He felt himself getting hard.

Then he had an idea, an exhilarating idea. A way to prove it all, to himself and to her. Even better than that, it was a way to be with her totally, in this whole thing. He could have it all. He shook her by the shoulder.

She rolled over onto her stomach. He rolled her back over.

“Renee, wake up. It’s important, baby, wake up.” His adrenaline was up.

She groaned. “What?” She didn’t open her eyes.

“I want it if you’ve got it,” he said. He felt the thrill of being out of control. This was pure instinct.

“What?” she said. She squinted without opening her eyes.
“I want to make love,” he said. “We’ll do this together. I want to be right there with you.”

“Go to sleep,” she said.

“I’m serious, Renee. I’ve never been so serious about anything.” He meant it, he knew he meant it. He ran his forefinger under the waistband of her pajama shorts and started trying to pull them down.

She grunted and wiggled, trying to rebuff him. If she weren’t drugged, Purvis thought, she would want it. It would mean so much to her. He felt high himself.

He rolled her onto her back and straddled her about the knees, then pulled her legs from under him and rested them on his shoulders, and he pulled her shorts and underwear off. She squirmed a little. He arranged her legs around him and brought himself up to her. He unbuttoned and unzipped his slacks with one hand but had to sit up again and use both hands to get them down. He left them around his ankles.

She was not wet at all. He did not want to hurt her. He would have to make her wet.

He worked himself down to the foot of the bed and put his hands under her butt and lifted her to his mouth. When he touched her with his tongue she jerked. She slammed the headboard and sat up.

Her hair hung wild, a big shock across her face at a diagonal. She squinted and shook her head, as though she weren’t seeing right. She frowned.

“What are you doing?” She looked at him, at his face and then below.

“I told you,” he said, “I want it, too.” But he wasn’t as sure now as he had been. It
was supposed to happen in a flood of emotion. It wasn’t supposed to be interrupted, analyzed.

She shook her head slowly and put her forehead in her hand. “You’re insane,” she said. “I don’t know who you are. Of all the times you could have picked to lose your mind... Jesus, I don’t know, I can’t think straight. I’ve got to sleep. Where are my pajamas?”

He stared at her, trembling. She covered her breasts with her arms and looked at him stonefaced. Sleep was all she was concerned with. He had worked himself up for nothing. He felt like he was in the room with a stranger. Had he dreamed up all this need for her?

He pulled his pants up and fastened them. He reached under the covers and felt her shorts and handed them to her. He put his feet on the floor and bent down to pick up her top. He handed that to her. He watched her pull them on and it made him mad. Her deftness, her assuredness, her indifference—he thought he might hate her. He realized he did not know the first thing about love. He walked off down the hall, wobbling.

He felt like he might fall over. He wished he would. He wished he would fall and crack his skull and have tender visions as he died. He looked back at Renee before sitting down on the couch. She was already asleep.

He started to go get a beer. But that wouldn’t help anything, he knew. He turned on the television, violently hoping he could find something that would engross him. Maybe it would be different tomorrow, he told himself. But it would not be any different, he knew. It would never be any different. He went to get a beer.
Winn was lying on a foam raft looking at the sun through his eyelids when he heard bare feet slap the pavement and the diving board bong. He sat up, the light whiting his eyes, in time to catch the bottom of Sterling’s foot in the left chest.

It flipped him over and drove him under and sent water up his nose and he was helpless and enraged in a wash of blue and flesh and the green of Sterling’s trunks scissored around his torso before he could come up for air. He punched at Sterling’s gut but swinging conventionally his arms went cartoon slow and he lost his anger to panic. Sterling was strong and had him tight, dragging him to shallower water. Winn didn’t realize he had begun flailing his legs and arms until like magic his elbow connected with Sterling’s groin. Sterling went limp and Winn dealt him a knee to the spine before coming out from under him and above water.

Winn stood gasping, his head thumping. He blew chlorine from his nose and a buzz seemed to hang on the air. Punctuated by a jackhammer in the distance. A flock of blackbirds split the sky.

Sterling was still under, floating in the fetal position. Winn felt sure it was a trick to engage him again, but as he walked out of the pool up the steps he almost hoped the sonofabitch was drowning.
Winn felt entitled to evil thoughts at the moment. His dad was in a hotel with some woman somewhere and it was looking like divorce. After three days of watching Winn mope and his little sister Ruthie look confused, Winn’s mom, who since the night his dad didn’t come home had been randomly bursting into tears that turned to shrieks that turned to beating the walls with her forehead and fists, decided to load them up and bring them here, to spend the night or maybe longer with Ms. Derryberry and Sterling. Winn understood that his mom needed some adult company and that they couldn’t well pile in with a real family, and Ms. Derryberry was her only divorced friend. So he didn’t put up a fight, but he came over with his baseball stuff and How to Draw Faces and the new Hardy Boys and planned to keep to himself. They had been here for ten minutes and Winn could already see that this would not happen. He would have to raise hell with or against Sterling. Sterling was a year older and had a good thirty pounds and six inches on him. Winn wished the fucker was dead or maybe just crippled for life.

He dried off with a Snoopy beach towel from the tote bag of pool stuff and snacks his mom had packed, and he wrapped it around his waist and tucked the top corner against his beltline. He walked inside.

Ruthie was in front of the TV playing Atari. He sat down beside her, the cool air turning his bare top bumpy.

“Where’d they go?” he asked her.

She shrugged without looking up from her game. “Mom started crying when you went to swim.”

How could his mother manufacture so many tears? At this rate, her face would
parch and shrivel before the week was out. Winn looked around. He supposed they were upstairs in Ms. Derryberry’s bedroom, but he couldn’t hear anything.

“They left with nobody to watch you?” he said.

Ruthie was six and weighed a little over forty pounds. She had been almost seven months premature and they called it a miracle when she lived. Even after a month in an incubator, she fit in their dad’s hand. She was fine now, just small, but it was like everybody was afraid the miracle would end, so she almost never got to be alone.

“Mom told me to go sit by the pool with you.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Sterling said he would watch me.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Winn snapped, as if it were her fault.

He stared at the wall but he could feel her looking at him, and he could hear Pac-Man still ringing but none of the blurping it made when you ran your man through the pills. He wanted to put his arm around her, but he was mad, madder than he knew he should be.

The glass door slid open and Sterling walked in with his frizzy dirt-colored hair towed up like Einstein’s. The towel over his shoulder was one of theirs, from the tote bag, and this aggravated Winn even more. Sterling didn’t say anything, but as he passed them heading for his room he deathplucked Winn on the right ear. Winn spun and lunged feeling murderous, but Sterling high-stepped, laughing, and disappeared into the dark of the hallway.

“Let’s go outside,” Winn said. Ruthie stood and took his hand without saying
They were across from each other under an umbrella, silently sharing a canister of macadamia nuts, when their mom and Sterling and Ms. Derryberry came out. Winn’s mom pulled up a chair between them. Sterling and his mom sat at the other table.

“What’s wrong?” Winn’s mom asked them. She rubbed Winn on top of the head.

He just shook his head and ground the macadamias in his mouth to a fine paste. Ruthie was watching him for her cue, and he knew she wouldn’t say anything if he didn’t.

“Sterling told Ms. Derryberry you kicked him,” his mom said softly.

Winn looked over at the other table. Sterling was smiling at him, left foot resting on his right knee and his hands laced behind his head. Ms. Derryberry was staring out across the back yard, but Winn could tell she was trying to listen in.

“Full of crap,” Winn said.

“Please don’t start anything,” his mom said, rubbing his head again. “Please.”

Winn reached for the macadamias and poured a handful.

Ms. Derryberry stood up and turned to face them, smiling falsely. “About ready for supper?”

“I am,” Winn’s mom said with fake enthusiasm.

Ruthie nodded earnestly, biting her bottom lip.

“Winn, you and Sterling go get cleaned up,” Ms. Derryberry said.

Sterling stood up and said, “Come on.”
Winn did not want to go back there with him. He looked to his mom and she smiled weakly. The rims of her eyes were red. She didn’t have any makeup on and she looked old and tired.

She held out a hand, and he stood and followed Sterling to his room. He snatched his backpack from where it lay on the living room floor next to his baseball stuff. The athletic-taped handle of his thirty-inch Easton, sticking out of the duffel, clipped him on the knee.

Winn tried to start the new Hardy Boys while Sterling showered, but he couldn’t keep his mind on the page. He was ready for the night to be over and everybody asleep. He wished a bunch of nights would hurry up and be over.

He wondered what Coach Pieroni was telling everybody. Winn’s dad was assistant coach and Winn played shortstop and pitched and batted third. They had missed a game on the Friday his dad didn’t come home, and there was another one tomorrow. Winn hadn’t discussed the game with his mom, but he had brought his gear thinking that he would get her to take him to it. He hadn’t thought about what it would be like showing up without his dad. Now he thought it would be damn embarrassing. If there was anything he didn’t want to do it was explain crap like this. He wondered if Sterling knew their story. He shivered. He still wore his wet swimsuit and the towel. He was ready for a blazing shower. What was Sterling doing in there?

He pulled out *How to Draw Faces* and flipped to one of a huge old crewcut man
The door opened and Sterling walked stark naked out of a cloud of steam, right toward Winn. Winn looked down at the man in his book, but he had seen pubes, and he supposed that was what Sterling wanted him to see. Winn hadn’t gotten any pubes yet.

Sterling was looking through the top drawer of his dresser, whistling a children’s tune Winn couldn’t place. He found what he was looking for and jumped up on the top bunk.

“Where’d your dad run off to?” Sterling asked casually from up there.

Winn clenched his jaws. He almost said Fuck off, but he took a breath instead. He thought about his mom. She seemed ready to wilt or collapse at the slightest extra incident, and he could imagine her never coming out of whatever she would swoon into. Still, he had to say something.

“Where’s your dad?” he asked Sterling.

“Orlando,” Sterling said, with a note of sadness Winn hadn’t expected. “I’m going to stay with him for a couple weeks before school starts.” His tone grew more confident: “There’s all kinds of pussy down there.”

“Right,” Winn said, “Daisy and Minnie.”

“Shit. You wouldn’t know pussy if it slapped you in the face.”

“Shit,” Winn said, then couldn’t think of anything to add.

He heard the springs above him squeak, and Sterling hit the floor next to him, wearing nothing but a jock strap. He stuck his bare ass against Winn’s ear and farted.
“Gaywad,” Winn said, jumping up and wiping his ear with his shoulder. He punched Sterling half-heartedly in the chest and Sterling just stood there laughing. Winn walked into the bathroom.

Steam still hung heavy and he began to warm up. He decided to see what he could take. He ran the water all the way hot and waited. Then he stepped under the stream and balled his fists while it seared the top of his head. He bit the sides of his mouth and flexed all his muscles and for a while it felt like his skin would split open. Then he settled into the burn and it was just a feeling like any other.

But he started feeling the pain again, deeper now, as though the heat had penetrated to his organs. He decided he had proved his point, so he cut the water off and ripped back the curtain and stood on the cool tiles. His breaths came short and his heart hammered his ribs.

He heard a knock on the door to Sterling’s room and Ms. Derryberry’s voice. Sterling yelled, “Quit jerking off, Winn, it’s time for supper!”

He thought of his mom’s wasted eyes as he dressed, and he imagined his dad with slick hair and a fresh shave and a black suit, twirling a blonde woman in a backless dress across some marble dance floor. If his dad showed up right now, Winn would tell him to fuck off.

Dinner was fried catfish and spaghetti with meat sauce, which seemed to Winn an idiotic combination. Where did people like the Derryberries learn their ways? He twirled
his fork in the mess of noodles and stared at a framed rectangle of cross-stitching that read: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Sure you can, Winn thought.

Sterling hadn’t said a word. He was playing model son, over there delicately cutting his fish and wearing a face like Winn had drawn once, from somewhere near the start of his book, of a concerned toddler, brow worried but eyes wide and innocent. It had made him think of Ruthie when he finished it, and it was one of the best pictures he had ever drawn. Who did Sterling think he was fooling?

Dumb question, Winn thought. Sterling knew he was fooling Ms. Derryberry, and probably thought he was fooling Winn’s mom, too. Winn looked at his mom. She seemed to be concentrating on her food. He guessed it didn’t take much to fool her in this condition.

But really, he thought, his parents had never been on to Sterling, and it was as much his own fault as anybody’s. His mom and dad would talk about how “hyper” Sterling was whenever they left get-togethers at the Derryberries’, but Winn never told about the rest. He wasn’t a snitch, but more than that he didn’t want them to know what he had been party to.

The worst was a couple of years ago, when both families still had dads and they had finished eating barbecue by the pool and everybody else was inside. Winn watched as Sterling mangled a neighbor’s baby brittany spaniel with a weedeater. The thing kept trying to get away, and Sterling would let it pick up what little speed it could before knocking it off its feet with the weedeater again. In the end, it just crouched and tried to
cover its face with its paws. When Sterling left it alone, it dragged itself off, back legs broken, by its front legs. It came to rest against a pine trunk and lay yelping, an intricate webwork of blood set against the brown-splotched white of its little body.

Sterling had walked off laughing, without putting it out of its misery, so Winn had to do it. He lined the rock up and closed his eyes and brought it down on that lemon-sized head. A sick thud, and the animal made a sound between a sneeze and a bark and jerked for a while and then lay still with its mouth half open and forepaws extended. Winn took it to the turned field behind the Derryberries' house and covered it with huge gumbo clods as the sun fell, then vomited pork and slaw and beans. When he walked through the backyard gate after burying the dog, Sterling was cranking the homemade ice cream churn as Ruthie watched rapt, all the adults holding beers and beaming like everything was right in the world.

How did parents get so stupid?

Winn took a bite of catfish and pushed it apart between his tongue and the roof of his mouth. He thought about pulling his mother aside and telling her about the puppy so they could get out of here. But, he thought, all he had to endure was a few more hours. When Ruthie’s bedtime came he could claim he was tired too and get away from Sterling without having to worry his mom. He would definitely talk her into leaving early tomorrow.

No one was speaking or making eye contact. He looked at Ruthie, sitting next to him, and she turned and smiled, chewing, her thin nose scrunching like she was on the verge of laughter. He smiled back, and he wanted to tell everybody to put down their
forks and look at her, to just look at how hopeful and perfect she was.

He looked back at Sterling with his angelic act and shivered because it hit him
that even that maniac had been like Ruthie once. Jesus, how did people get so screwed
up?

One day you look up and your dad has ditched you for some ordinary woman.
You hate him, but you don’t stop loving him—it doesn’t make him the devil. But there
were supposed to be rules, dammit. If you want your kid to love you, you don’t leave him.
People needed to be punished for breaking rules.

But they weren’t, Winn knew. Sterling’s mom wouldn’t even stop loving him if
she knew about the puppy. You couldn’t stop loving the most horrible person, because
even he had been like Ruthie once upon a time. How fucked up was that?

He turned to his little sister again and she smiled. At least he had that. You just
had to make the best of all the crap, Winn guessed.

Facing Ruthie, Winn rolled his eyes into their socket tops and turned his lips
inside out. She swallowed her food and put her face in both hands and giggles came out
of her as natural as breath.

“What’s so funny?” their mom asked, smiling at Winn.

“Ruthie’s making faces,” Winn said. At this Ruthie burst into full-on laughter.
God, he loved the hell out of her. He was happy. To hell with whatever else. He was fine.

Sterling was fine, Winn thought as he studied him across the gameboard on the
carpet. Maybe he hadn't been acting at dinner. He was smiling broadly, his brown eyes
catching the failing light. He was just a screwed-up kid, like anybody else.

They were playing Operation, letting Ruthie win, and she was delighted. The
moms were sitting in the kitchen having wine and talking low.

The buzzer went off as Sterling’s electric tweezers hit the side of the hole trying to
extract the man’s femur.

“Dang,” he said. “Look at me, Ruthie. Pitiful, huh?”

“Dummie,” she said, and crisply plucked out the man’s liver.

Winn flubbed the hib bone. He smiled and shook his head and Ruthie clapped.

“Biscuitheads,” she laughed.

“What’s a biscuithead?” Sterling asked.

“You.”

Sterling pressed a palm to either side of his skull then to its front and back.

“Feels like bone,” he said. “Or maybe concrete.”

Ruthie laughed. “It’s dough dough dough.”

Winn turned his lips inside out and looked at her. “Dodo?” he said.

“Dodo?” she answered, mouth agape in mock astonishment.

“Doodoo?” Sterling said, and all three of them laughed.

The moms walked in smiling with their wine glasses, Ms. Derryberry carrying a
half-full bottle.

“Who’s winning?” Ms. Derryberry asked.

“Ruthie’s whipping up on us,” Winn said.
"They’re biscuitheads."

"That’s not nice," Winn’s mom said.

“They missed every single time,” Ruthie said.

“They don’t have the womanly touch,” Ms. Derryberry said.

“Why don’t yall put on a movie?” Winn’s mom said. “We’re going upstairs to watch a grown-up one.”

Sterling jumped up and made for the cabinet under the television. “Commando!” he said.

“I don’t think so,” Winn’s mom said.

So it was Back to the Future, which Winn was glad of. He especially wanted to see the part where Michael J. plays the electric. Winn’s parents would never let him get an electric, but now it struck him that he could probably wear his mother down until she bought him one. He had a cheap classical that he played chords on with a pick. It was all right, but not very cool.

His mom had made a pallet of quilts on the floor for him and Ruthie, figuring Ruthie would fall asleep during the movie. They lay on their stomachs next to each other, pillows under their throats, and Sterling sat on the couch. Once the movie started and everybody seemed settled, the moms went upstairs with their wine.

About ten minutes in, before Michael J. had even gone back in time, Sterling got up and turned off the VCR.
“Hey,” Winn said. His stomach fluttered. He should have known. Sterling had been up to something the whole time.

Sterling didn’t answer. He was running through the channels. He stopped on HBO and went back to the couch. A deeply tanned man with short blond hair was running his hands all over the front of a woman’s white dress. She had her eyes closed and was breathing heavy. He was wearing blue mechanics’ overalls that said his name was Smitty. He leaned her back onto the hood of a Thunderbird.

“Yes!” Sterling said. “I knew we could find some nudey.”

Winn got up and changed the channel back to three and turned the VCR on.

“What’s your problem?” Sterling said.

Winn ignored him, but he was afraid. This would end up bad if he let Sterling push his buttons.

Ruthie didn’t understand what had just happened. Winn leaned over and whispered not to pay any attention. She nodded.

“Afraid sissy might learn how to fuck?” Sterling said.

Winn breathed through his nose. “Shut up,” he said, trying to sound as threatening as possible.

“Make me.”

Winn looked at the movie but couldn’t focus on it. He was tensed up from head to toe. He considered waiting for the right moment to surprise Sterling with one massive sucker punch. If he put everything he had into it, maybe he could knock him out quietly and be done with it. He had never been in a real fight, though. . .Forget it. He would have
to ignore him.

Sterling got up and said “Pussy,” then went to the back of the house. Winn breathed easier. Hopefully he would stay back there. He didn’t want to look at Ruthie because he didn’t want to explain anything.

Right when the lightning struck and the car took off for the ’50s, Sterling walked back in carrying two pair of red boxing gloves. He turned the television off.

“Outside,” he said.

Winn turned the television back on without saying anything and lay down again.

He wanted to scream and cry and disappear. He could feel Sterling and Ruthie both looking at him.

“Your brother is the world’s number one pussy,” Sterling said.

Winn jumped up and froze, not knowing what to do.

“Hit me,” Sterling said, smiling wildly.

Winn flexed his jaws and looked into Sterling’s eyes. They reflected flashes from the television. Winn shivered, seized with fear. He had been wrong about Sterling, earlier. He was looking at real evil, and it threw everything off. He saw with a terrible clarity that there are no rules. He felt sick and empty and blood drummed away in his temples.

“Please leave us alone,” he said weakly.

“Please leave us alone,” Sterling chirped in a falsetto. His hands shot out from his sides and their palms smacked Winn’s chest and sent him reeling. He stumbled and landed on his ass and did not get up. He understood exactly how weak and insignificant he was. Wracked with fear.
Sterling shook his head and laughed and went to the far side of the room and crouched in the corner. He was mumbling something. Winn couldn't tell if he was looking at them or not.

Winn walked back to the pallet and sat down. He had no answers. Ruthie was crying silently. He held out his hands and she got in his lap and he enclosed her in his arms and told her it was okay. It was not okay. It was hopeless.

But wait. There was one thing.

“I’m going upstairs,” he said, his voice wavering.

Sterling did not stop mumbling.

“I mean it. I know you hear me.”

Still no response. The same unintelligible mumbling.

“Let’s get up,” he whispered to Ruthie. She sniffled and wiped her face with the back of her arm and stood up. Winn stood and took her hand in his. Sterling came toward them, and Winn realized he shouldn’t have declared himself.

Now there was no choice. He would fight and it would be over and they could go home. He felt a bitter sort of relief at things being certain. Sterling was several feet away.

“Run,” Winn said to Ruthie. “Go get Mom.” He gave her a light shove and she looked back at him, terrified. “Go!” he said, and she did.

But Sterling side-stepped quickly and cut her off and pushed her with one hand. Her feet went out from under her and her head hit the carpet with a thump.

Her tortured scream pulled at Winn’s guts. The sound and the low flickering light gave him the sense that this was all just a nightmare. Something made him look to his
right, and he was staring at the handle of his aluminum bat. It stuck out from his bag just a few feet away from him, next to the end of the sofa. Then it was in his hands and he was swinging it.

Sterling jumped backwards and dodged it, but Winn bore down on him until he had him in the corner he had just come from. Sterling held his hands in the air. Winn was conscious of sounds but a pulsing silence pressed them into the background and he seemed to be hearing the workings of his brain.

Winn was in his batting stance. Sterling was shaking and squinting and grimacing. This was a face of Sterling’s he had never seen. His open hands trembling above him seemed the most vulnerable things in the world. Winn relaxed his grip on the bat and held it to his chest and pulled frenzied breaths through his nose. He tried to think of what needed to be said. Air seemed to be rushing in circles through his head and there was a ringing and his vision went black for a moment so that he thought he would pass out.

Then Ruthie’s cry resolved out of the adrenaline silence, and his arms swung without his telling them to and he felt something in Sterling’s chest crack and give. Sterling hit the wall behind him and slumped down against it and wheezed loudly, trying to scream.

He dropped the bat and walked over to his sister. He heard a door unlatch upstairs and voices. He picked her up and held her like a baby. She put her arms around his neck and cried against his chest.

He was opening the back door and walking into the night. He was getting her out of here. No idea where.
Lake Ferguson connects to the Mississippi River, so it’s lined with shipyards and grain elevators and that kind of crap. At any given moment you had at least one oil-slick rainbow in your field of vision, bloated white spoonbill catfish like fat little ghosts floating all over the place. But it butts right up to the downtown of my hometown. Five minutes after cranking my pickup, a Toyota, I could be backing my jet ski down the cityfront ramp. They gave you a driver’s license in Mississippi when you were fifteen, and that summer I spent as much time as possible on the lake.

When I wasn’t on the lake I worked at my dad’s boat dealership, but I basically just sat around and talked to the mechanics and drank coffee. I liked the mechanics because they treated me like a grownup, and they talked about fucking without acting like they knew I had never done it. It wasn’t like anybody was going to fire me.

Dad had given me one of their demo jet skis at the end of the summer before, a Yamaha Waverunner, the kind that held two people and you sat down on. This was when that kind of jet ski was first coming out and hadn’t started to sell real well yet. It was nice, but I wouldn’t have taken it out nearly as much if Clyde hadn’t had a boat, too.

Clyde was my best friend, I guess, though we didn’t talk about much. We did stuff together, and maybe that was enough. Anyway, he liked me better than anybody else did.
His brother Rance, a year younger than us, was probably who he thought of as his best friend.

During the spring the two of them had pitched in together with money from their lawnmowing business and bought an old bass boat from a woman whose husband had just died. So the three of us went out on the lake every Saturday and Sunday and after work sometimes during the week, taking turns skiing behind their boat and jacking around on the Waverunner, staying till the mosquitoes were so thick you could kill about a thousand of them by making a fist. They shot into your eyes and mouth and ears on the ride back to the put-in.

The lake was full of women, but they were all older than us. I didn’t have any idea how to talk to girls, and Clyde hardly talked to anybody but me and his family. I guess Rance wasn’t as insane for sex yet.

I’m pretty sure I was worse than your average fifteen-year-old, which is saying a lot, because I knew I was good-looking and still hadn’t done more than kiss a few girls. Based on everything I’d heard so far, I figured all I needed was to stumble into the right situation. It was a matter of the right girl at the right time, and you felt her up or fingered her, then showed her your dick, and sex happened. They wanted it as much as you did, everybody was always quick to point out.

Maybe it would have been different if I’d lived somewhere else. At my school we had one hour of sex education in the sixth grade, in the high school locker room, taught by a Baptist preacher. Two things I remember from it: Buddy Blasingame asking why wouldn’t a ziploc bag work as good as a condom, and the preacher telling us what
masturbation was, exactly, all but whipping it out and demonstrating. I didn’t even have pubes yet but when I got home from school that night I gave it a try, using some of my dad’s shaving cream. (Bad idea—it burned like hell.) I was a seasoned vet at it by the time I was thirteen and all the way into puberty, which obviously wasn’t helping things for me as a fifteen-year-old.

If Clyde and Rance and I had had any sense at all about these things, we could have gotten women out on the lake with us, easy. I had one of maybe four Waverunners in town, and Clyde was the only one our age with a boat he could take out whenever he wanted. We could have turned the tables on the happening assholes in our grade that summer.

Instead we all three became insanely good skiers. I had learned when I was about five, but it wasn’t until that summer that I really started to rip. I got to where I could nearly touch my shoulder to the water when I made my slalom turn and could barefoot as far as you wanted me to, unless I ran into a dead fish or a piece of foam rubber or something.

We were fine on the lake without women. Well, we weren’t fine, but at least while I was skiing, or anywhere on the lake away from the sandbar where everybody hung out and drank and flirted, I didn’t worry about not getting laid. The actual skiing was fun, obviously, but there was no better feeling than drip-drying in the sun and wind, your muscles ecstatic with rest after a long run. You felt made, sufficient, needing nothing but what was in the boat, and you felt like you had earned it. You watched the trees and boats and people and industrial machinery scroll past and you were able to feel superior to it all.
in a way you never could in ordinary life. It made no difference what happened next. It
never could have been like that with women.

Most of the summer had passed like this, the lake being the only place except
maybe the mechanics’ stalls I remember feeling even close to comfortable, when, around
August, Clyde’s cousin Julie, from Georgia, came to stay with his family while her
parents finished splitting up. When Clyde told me she was coming I had a feeling I would
do something. Obviously I didn’t tell Clyde this.

Any kind of practice with women, I figured, might help me make some progress
later on. And she seemed like a good opportunity, if only for flirting and whatnot. It
would be low-risk, too, since she was young, and from out of town, and Clyde’s cousin.

So the Wednesday she got into town I went over to Clyde’s after work, figuring I
had him and Rance for a cover so I could pretend not to give a damn about her if I froze
up. But they were still out cutting yards. Mrs. Freeman was already inviting me in by the
time I realized their truck wasn’t there, which was something I would have noticed right
off under any other circumstances.

Mrs. Freeman went upstairs while I stood by the door, wishing I could run off, and
came back with Julie. She introduced us and told me Julie was an all-star basketball
player and said we should go outside and shoot until Clyde and Rance came home.

Julie was only thirteen but already had a serious chest. She also had brown eyes
and honey-colored hair she wore in a ponytail, a red band of pimples across her forehead,
and a nose that was too small for her broad pale face.

I went over to their sports closet and found the good leather basketball and she
followed me out to the driveway without saying anything. I didn’t look back at her. I started right in on long shots, and clanged a few off the side of the rim. Julie had sat down against the frame of the garage door. After I had looked at her I felt like I had to say something.

“Want to play horse?” I asked.

She shrugged and stood up, and I passed her the ball.

She started off with a free throw, and swished it. I missed. She made one from the right, near the perimeter, which I also missed. She swished one from the top of the key, made one from three-point range on the baseline, and called nothing-but-net on a left-handed layup and made it. I missed all of these in turn. The game was over, and I hadn’t made a shot. I was no superstar at basketball, but this was ridiculous. Julie hadn’t said a word, which seemed to rub it in worse than if she had taunted me. The way her boobs jumped then settled in small diminishing shakes when she shot had made my blood rise. If she had had a nice face it would have been too much—I probably would have had to shoot granny-style.

Right after we finished, Clyde and Ranee circled in the cove next to their driveway so they could back the trailer with their lawnmowers in. They had an S-10 Blazer, black. It was technically Clyde’s at the moment, since Ranee didn’t have a license yet, but it would be both of theirs the next year.

“You got some good rotation on the ball,” I said.

“My dad played at Vanderbilt,” she said.

I was going to ask her when he played, but we had to move over into the yard
because Clyde and Rance were backing in. Once they were by us I looked at her and she was already looking at me. For some reason this made me nervous, and I turned and watched Clyde and Rance coming toward us from the Blazer.

I felt like I needed to do something interesting. Clyde was skinny, a basketball and tennis player. I played these sports too but I was stouter and my best sport was football. When Clyde made it to the grass I form-tackled him, wrapped him up and drove his back into the ground with my shoulder. He couldn’t breathe for a while.

"Jesus," Rance said. "You on dope?"

I stood up, smiling, hoping everybody would think it was a joke, which somehow I had thought it would be. Julie looked scared. I sensed Clyde moving on the periphery, and then his open hand smacked me solid as a plank on the right eye. I was a little off-balance already and it knocked me down.

I tried to laugh there on my back in the grass, but my head was ringing and my eyes were tearing up.

My shiner was purple by Saturday. I was tired of explaining that it had been a joke, that I had not gotten my ass kicked. Whenever I was on the way to the lake, all the knots that stayed inside me the rest of the time would disappear. But the shiner was putting a dent in my excitement.

And when I got to Clyde’s it wasn’t just him and Rance outside gassing up the boat. Julie was coming with us, which was what I had hoped for, but now that it was happening it seemed like one more thing to keep me from feeling decent.

She was standing in the driveway watching them, wearing tan huarachis and green
nylon shorts over a black one-piece, her boobs slamming out proudly, huge, announcing that here was something to reckon with. I felt small, chained to a skyscraper of need.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey,” she said.

My insides quivered when I realized what I should say next. It was perfectly logical, practical, but I almost didn’t ask it, and it’s hard to believe I did: “You want to ride with me?”

Clyde jumped down from the side of the boat with an empty gas can. She looked at him and I took the chance to stare at her chest. She turned back and caught me. She shrugged her shoulders.

I said, “You can help me put the jet-ski in and it’ll be faster than if I wait on them to finish with the boat first.” This was true, and I was proud of myself for thinking of it.

“Fine with me,” she said.

She had said it without giving away any excitement, but still she hadn’t wavered, and this gave me some confidence.

“I’m going on ahead,” I said to Clyde. “She can help me put in. I’ll meet yall down there.”

“Whatever,” Clyde said. He was a little icy, still, because of the tackle. The fall had wrenched his neck pretty bad.

I had gone stag with a big group of people to my first homecoming dance that year, and I hadn’t been out on a single date yet, so this was the first time I ever gave a girl besides my mom a ride. My right side felt painfully exposed. I couldn’t move that arm or
leg, could only turn my head to the left. We rode in silence until we stopped at a light.

“You got any tapes?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said, embarrassed that I had forgotten to even turn the radio on. I dug around in the console and found a Kinks tape, which I thought might impress her. “You know the Van Halen song ‘You Really Got Me’?” I asked, looking straight ahead.

“No,” she said.

“Oh,” I said, and decided not to finish what I was going to say.

I concentrated on driving, glad I had that excuse not to talk. “Afternoon Tea” was playing. I sped up and shifted into fourth, my light little trailer hopping when we hit seams in the road. I thought about the fact that she was only thirteen, and that I was in high school. She should be scared of me, not the other way around. I wondered what she would do if I reached over and touched her, squeezed her, and thought probably that was what she wanted. Maybe that was all there was to it. Maybe it didn’t even depend that much on the situation. Maybe it was just a matter of letting the girl, any girl, know you were game.

We were at the waterfront. I downshifted and went up the levee. When we crested it and I saw the cloudless sky and the way the sun wiggled across the wakes people were making pulling in and out of the ramps in their boats, I began to mellow out inside. I didn’t feel exposed anymore. This was where I knew what to do, and Julie would see that and I wouldn’t have to do anything besides what I was good at. I did a turnabout and backed the trailer expertly down to just above the water, then yanked the parking brake and jumped out to unstrap the jet ski.
I pretended not to notice that she had gotten out of the truck and was watching me. I unhooked the two tie-down straps from the trailer axle then pulled the seat off the jet ski and grabbed the coil of rope I kept in the compartment under there and put the seat back on. I went around to the front and pulled the cotter pin that held the bow to the trailer. I heaved the bow toward me and threaded the rope through the hole the pin had been in and tied a square knot. Then I handed Julie the other end of the rope.

“Hold this while I back into the water,” I said. “Once the jet ski starts floating, pull it out of the way of the trailer and just hold it there while I go park.”

“How fast will this thing go?” she asked.

I shrugged. “Fifty maybe,” adding a good fifteen miles per hour. Then I looked at her legs. “If you don’t want your shorts or sandals to get wet, you probably ought to put them in the truck.”

She took her sandals off and held them out to me. “Will you put them in there for me?”

I took them and got back in the truck. I threw the tie-down straps behind my seat and was about to put her sandals back there, too, but for some reason I held them up to my nose. They smelled like the beach, and like feet. I threw them in the passenger floorboard, ashamed, then turned to look behind me. She was standing off to the side, holding the rope and looking out across the water. She reached behind her head and pulled the ponytail holder out and put it around her wrist.

I backed down and she walked along with the trailer. I stopped when I could hear my muffler chugging under water. She held her hand up for me to stop, which sort of
perturbed me—as if she knew better than I did. I watched in the rearview mirror as she pulled the jet ski off to the side, her back to me. For an instant I was able to feel like we knew each other really well, like we were a couple. Then I looked at myself in the mirror. I had forgotten about the shiner, and seeing it now I felt absurd, without knowing exactly why. I pulled up out of the water and tried to find a parking spot.

This was when I realized how many people were out on the lake today. There wasn’t a single parking space on the whole waterfront. I had to go back over the levee and park in the lot of the old C&G depot, which had been a restaurant when I was a kid but had closed down and gone back to being a deserted train station.

I took my shirt off and was about to head up the levee when I thought of something. I reached across to the glove compartment for my sunglasses, then dug through the papers in there for a blue neoprene retention strap I thought I might still have. It was in there, and I pushed it onto the earpieces and put the shades on and looked at myself in the driver’s side window. No shiner, smooth, my upper body cut and tanned and catching the sun just right. The strap even looked kind of cool, sporty, the way it cut across the back of my hair. I walked up the levee ready to take on the world.

But when I made it over to the ramp lane where I had left Julie and my jet ski, neither of them were there. I was enraged, suddenly. She had figured out how to crank the damn thing and ridden off without asking me. Not only was it rude, I had wanted to show her how to operate it.

Then I looked over at the next ramp to the right, and saw Julie holding the rope to Clyde and Rance’s boat, which sat there bobbing, neither of them around. And I saw
Rance came around the corner of the Yacht Club on my jet ski, hauling ass toward us through the no-wake zone. I walked over to Julie and said, “What the hell?”

She looked worried. Her hair had a crimp in it where the ponytail holder had been, and it hung in clumps that gave her a sort of haggard, vulnerable look. I was sorry for cussing at her.

“I told him what you told me,” she said, “but he said it was fine if he took it for a spin while we waited on y'all to park.”

It was true that this wasn’t out of the ordinary. I trusted Rance and Clyde with my jet ski, and they trusted me with their boat. We weren’t stingy like that. But this was not the picture I had in my mind. I had wanted to crank the jet ski and take Julie for a spin first thing, show her how to ride it and establish more between us.

Clyde came up from behind us and stepped onto the bow of the boat without saying anything. He sat down behind the steering wheel and ran the blower for a minute then cranked the motor. It caught on the second try, right as Rance hit the kill switch on my jet ski and floated in, smiling.

“A buttload of people down at the north end,” Rance said as I walked out into the shallows to catch him.

I just stared at him, and he understood I wanted him off. He pulled the wrist band hooked to the kill switch off his arm and looped it around the handle grip. Then he stepped off into the water and waded over to the idling boat and pulled himself up and into the back of it. Julie threw the rope into the front of the boat and was stepping onto the bow. I stood there holding my machine with my jaws clenched.
“Where you want to go first?” Clyde yelled over the motor.

I held my palms up to say I didn’t know, didn’t care. Clyde leaned back to listen to something Rance was saying. He must have told him the north end, which was where the water usually stayed smoothest and was best for skiing, was packed, because Clyde pointed in the direction of the river and put the boat into gear. I got on my jet ski and cranked it and followed behind them.

Once the wind was in my face and water was spraying me I felt good, solid, stylish. I had the throttle maxed out and was zig-zagging behind the boat, ramping off the widening V they were leaving behind them in the water. Julie was up on the front deck facing me, but I didn’t want her to think I was performing for her. I was glad to be behind the shades, not only because of the shiner but because it put a layer between us that I felt like I needed. The drops of water on the lenses dappled and distorted everything nicely.

I peeled off to the right and did a three-sixty. Going full speed, it’s about the funnest thing you can do on a Waverunner. It’s a rush changing direction so fast, some serious G-force, but it gets old, which is why a jet ski by itself all day is pretty lame. When I came out of the turn they were a good ways out in front of me. I did another couple of three-sixties then opened the throttle up to close on them.

We passed the sandbar with a whole bunch of party barges and ski boats beached in a line, some of them going-on juniors and seniors from school. There was smoke coming out of a barbecue grill on one of the party barges, and there must have been music because a guy in cutoff jeans was dancing with a blond-haired woman in a neon green bikini, their hands running all over each other’s bare backs. There was a row of about six
or eight women, and even though I couldn’t see their faces I could tell they were from our school by the way they sat. (I can’t put my finger exactly on it, but all the good-looking girls at school had this way of holding themselves so that they always looked oblivious to everything. You could shoot their dog and they would act like they hadn’t noticed, until all of them agreed to notice.) They were sitting in lawn chairs with their feet in the brown water and cans of beer in their hands, no guys around them so they seemed extra intimidating. I wondered what kind of line a man would open up with in a crowd of girls like that, and I figured it would have to be something I had never said to them, something like “Killer tits.” I swear, I wouldn’t have been any worse off with women if I had been raised by hyenas.

A little ways past the sandbar Clyde slowed down. I had the idea to ride right at them and do a three-sixty and send a wall of spray into the boat. It seemed like the kind of prank a real colorful guy would pull. But then I thought Julie might not take it so well. I had better get to know her before I did something like that.

They were broadside to me and Rance was putting on a lifejacket, getting ready to ski. Julie was still sitting propped up by her hands on the deck in front, her legs stretched out in front of her, and Clyde was still behind the wheel. I started screaming, “Whooo!” as I got close to them, then yanked the handlebars hard to the left and came to a stop well away from them. All three of them just looked at me. I killed the engine and drifted in sideways until I could reach out and grab the side of the boat.

“Killer day,” I said, and shook my head back and forth, slinging water on Clyde right next to me.
“Five bucks you lose those shades,” Rance said.

“Eat me,” I said.

“Maybe later,” he said, reaching down to grab the ski from the bottom of the boat.

Nobody said anything for a minute.

Then I noticed that Julie was definitely looking at me. I smiled.

“Can I ride that thing?” she asked.

My stomach fluttered. “Yeah,” I said, smiling again. “Hop on the back and I’ll show you.”

“We need two people in the boat for him to ski,” Clyde said, expressionless.

This was true. It was a law that you had to have somebody besides the driver to watch the person skiing. We usually beached my jet ski at one of the smaller sandbars when we wanted to ski and it was only the three of us.

“There’s no Coast Guard out today,” I said, a lie. With so many people on the lake, there would be sure to be at least one boat out making stops.

“Since when does a girl need a goddamn lesson to learn how to work a throttle?” Rance said. He was sort of sneering at me, like he knew I was up to something.

“Fine,” I said, then looked at Julie. “Come over here and I’ll show you real quick.”

Clyde reached down next to his foot and grabbed a life jacket and held it up to her as she walked next to him and over to the side until she was standing right above me.

When she arched her back to get her arms through the holes in the life jacket and her tits were right there on top of me straining every bit of her suit’s elastic, I thought I
was going to lose it. I thought how easy it would be to just reach out and touch one, stick
my face in them, pull her suit down so I could see them full on. Then she buckled the
lifejacket and they squeezed together, nearly ballooning out the top of her suit. I was
positive she had done that on purpose, right in my face.

But when she looked at me, her face didn’t give a damn thing away. It’s too bad
we don’t have some kind of digital message board on our faces. You wouldn’t want the
message to show up all the time, but if you could pick your moments we could save each
other a lot of headaches.

I realized she had caught me gawking at her again, and I didn’t have any idea how
long it had been going on. I understood that she was waiting for me to tell her what to do.

“Start’s this button,” I said. “Kill switch is here.” I took the bracelet that attached
to the kill switch off my wrist. “Put this thing around your wrist,” I said, “and pull on it if
you flip over. Throttle,” I said, mashing down on it a couple of times, “and steer.” I
worked the handlebars back and forth.

“Ohay,” she said, and gave me a small smile, encouraging.

“I’ll hold it still while you get on,” I said, moving back to the rear of the seat and
standing up, leaning over and holding on to the side of the boat with my left hand. If it
had been Clyde or Rance getting on, I would have sat on the side of the boat and held the
Waverunner steady with my feet, out of their way.

She stepped on top of the seat with one foot then put a hand on my shoulder and
stepped off the boat with the other, too fast. Her weight letting off the boat unbalanced
me, and I accidentally pushed the Waverunner forward with my legs. I managed to hang
on to the boat with my left arm, while she wobbled then fell softly backwards, hanging on to the handlebars, until she was against me and I was pinned to the back edge of the seat, my legs grasshoppered down against the footboards and my back hanging off over the water. My stomach muscles weren't strong enough to hold both of our weights for very long, so I had no choice, I thought, but to grab her around the midsection with my other arm to take some pressure off.

"Can you pull us up?" I said, breathing hard.

Clyde had stood up. "Here," he said, holding out an arm.

I was about to let him take my left arm and do whatever he thought he could, when Julie groaned and her butt wiggled against me and I felt myself getting hard.

"I'm trying," she said. Her weight let up off my front for an instant, then she was all the way against me again. My dick was poking her right in the small of the back.

"Can you?" I asked again, ignoring Clyde's hand. It was now that I realized all I had to do was let go of her, then she could pull herself up and I would be able to pull myself upright.

"I can't pull both of us up," she said.

When she said this I thought I could get away with holding on, so I did, tight, and flexed my dick over and over, because that seemed like the thing to do. Then Clyde was leaning over in front of me, pulling her forward by the arm. As he helped her upright, I let go, and he obviously knew I had been faking having to hang on to his cousin. He looked at me, and there's no way he didn't see my tentpoled swimsuit. I let go of the boat and let myself fall back, like a scuba-diver, off the Waverunner.
When I came up, Julie was looking at me. Again, she was all blank, and I couldn’t tell what she had thought about my dong against her. “You all right?” I asked.

She nodded.

“Go ahead and crank her up,” I said. “Just keep us in sight. Ride as long as you want to.”

I put my hand down my swimsuit and gripped myself underwater as she accelerated off, blood drumming through my whole body, my brain a mess of flashing skin and groans and black, painful want.

I pulled down the ladder next to the boat motor and stepped up it backwards so I wouldn’t be advertising my hard-on to Clyde and Rance. I sat there on the edge of the boat with my feet on the top rung, staring out at the grain-elevator tower on the town side of the lake, a good ways farther down toward the river. The tower was anywhere from one to five stories out of the water, depending on the river level. It had four stories out now. It was all metal, a huge wall-less permanent scaffolding. There was an enormous pipe that ran from the grain bins on the shore out to the tower, and somehow they used the tower to get the grain onto barges. We used it for jumping off of every now and then.

I couldn’t hear my jet ski with Julie on it, which meant she was pretty far from us. Those motors are so high-pitched you can pick them out of the rest of the lake noise from forever off. I wanted to suggest we try to stay close to her, supposedly for the sake of my jet ski but really for the other obvious reason, but it didn’t seem right.

Rance had come and stood on the other side of the motor from me, and he was swinging the ski rope like a lasso above his head. He let it go and the coil loosened
gracefully in the air, the handle plopping down at a respectable distance. Then he threw
the double-booted ski out on the water, flat, and it glided off on the surface to almost
exactly where the rope handle was.

“Good shooting,” I said.

“Shitbag,” he said.

“What’s your problem?” I asked, acting innocent.

But he just shook his head and snorted, then dove into the water and swam toward
the ski and the rope.

My boner had subsided, so I pulled the ladder up and went and sat in the
passenger seat next to Clyde. I sat down and went, “Pllf,” shooting air out my top lip to
let him know I thought it was ridiculous.

“What’s his deal?” I asked.

Clyde just squinted and turned the key, and the motor caught and he eased it into
gear.

“Just keep an eye on him skiing,” he said. “My goddamn neck’s too sore to keep
turning around.”

“Shit,” I said, and got up on the front deck and faced Rance back there behind the
boat. His ski tip was up straight and he had the rope. He said all right, and Clyde gunned
it.

Clyde drove south, toward the river. Rance was up and cutting hard immediately,
shooting out nice plumes of spray and getting good air when he crossed the wake,
clearing the whole thing. But for the first time that summer, I wished I wasn’t in the boat
with them. I didn’t even want to ski. If I could just get on the Waverunner with Julie, things would work out. Clyde and Rance wouldn’t be breathing down my neck and we could get to know each other.

What was their problem? Why was it their business if Julie and I hit it off? They were just jealous because she was their cousin and they weren’t allowed to move in on her. But I would be damned if they were going to get in the way of me finally making some headway with a girl.

I was staring off into space, not seeing anything, a stream of cuss words running through my brain, hating Clyde and Rance and the whole goddamn world for being all against me, all the time, where women were concerned. What kind of friend did that to you?

I see how much they really like me, I thought, trying to stay angry but feeling like something had been pulled out from under me. I thought with a sick feeling that maybe there had never been anything between me and Clyde, not to mention Rance, and that maybe I didn’t even like skiing, the lake, anything. Maybe you just found something you were good at, and you convinced yourself you liked it. You found someone who wasn’t an asshole to you, and you convinced yourself he was your friend.

Then the boat was slowing down, and then the motor was off. It startled me, like when you’re falling asleep to a loud air conditioner and then suddenly it cuts off and wakes you wide up.

I knew what had happened before I saw it. The rope was behind the boat, but Rance wasn’t. Clyde was standing up.
“Can you fuck anything else up?” he yelled at me, a vein standing out of his thin neck.

I didn’t have an answer. This, now, was clearly my fault, but I was too pissed to admit it, and too sad to pretend like I hadn’t done anything. Clyde hardly ever yelled. He had never yelled at me. Even when I had tackled him the other day, he had been silent, unless you counted the sound his hand made against my face.

“Jesus, man, I don’t know why I put up with you,” he said, his face shiny with hate.

He turned around and tried to find Rance against the dissolving horizon of lake. Boats were coming at us on either side of the path we had taken through the middle.

“If he gets run over,” Clyde said, “it’s your fault.” Then he sat down and muttered some more cuss words and cranked the motor.

I was on the verge of tears, very uncommon for me. I couldn’t believe I might cry, and I hated myself for it. I just wanted out of the boat. I grabbed my life jacket and put it on and dove into the water, heading toward the tower.

“Go on,” Clyde yelled. “I hope you get run over.”

I put my head underwater and swam, freestyle, stroking and kicking as hard as I could, trying to block everything out. Then I heard the muffled growl of a motor pulling up next to me, and muffled yelling. I raised my head and looked up, bobbing there with my life jacket on. It was Clyde.

“Just get in,” he said, disgusted. “Don’t act like a fucking child.”

I might have gotten in if he had said something different. “Leave me alone,” I
said, which only made things worse. It was the most childish thing I could have come back with.

"Damn baby," he said, and put the boat in gear. "I'll meet you at the tower after I find him."

He drove off and I swam on.

When I got to the tower and raised my head up my lungs were burning, and I was dizzy, and everything seemed brighter. I paddled over to where the stairs rose out of the water, giving you the sense that there was some kind of strange other world you could walk down them into. I felt for them underwater with my feet and stood up, dripping and breathing hard. I realized why things seemed brighter. My sunglasses weren't on my head anymore.

Anything else? I thought, wanting to scream, kick something. But everything on the tower was hard steel. I decided I would to go to the top and sit.

I felt like I was climbing up to some punishment, the ridged fabricated metal of the stairs cutting into my bare feet and my muscles giddy, disconnected from me so that I seemed to be watching my knees rise to take each step on their own, afraid they might refuse at any moment. I was glad for small hurt and tired, though. They meant I didn't have to think about what had just happened. I counted: twenty stairs per flight, eight flights, four floors.

When I got to the top I wobbled, adjusting to the flat wide open, nothing on top of or surrounding me anymore, and for a second I had the sensation that the tower was wobbling. I took my lifejacket off and set it on the front edge of the metal roof and sat on
it, my legs dangling over the water way down there, black-looking from where I was now.

A breeze gathered and smoothed my face back, cool against the mix of water and sweat, and I smiled. This had been exactly the right idea. I could see all the way down to where the lake narrowed, as if about to be pinched in by the trees, and then broke out again, wide and the color of creamed coffee, now part of the river. A towboat smokestack was above the trees to the right of the channel, about to cross my narrow window of river. The sound of its engine seemed to be the water itself growling, low and huge and patient.

Then I heard the higher pitch of an outboard with the still higher pitch of a jet ski enclosed in it off to my right. It was them, the boat in front and the jet ski behind it and to the left. There was a weak little rooster tail at a distance directly behind the boat, and I understood that this was the ski rope handle, still out. As they closed in on me I could see that there were two people on the Waverunner, my Waverunner, and I imagined that I was looking at myself there on the jet ski with Julie.

This quickly became something I didn’t want to think about, though, and I looked away, back toward the river where the tall flat nose of the towboat, bargeless, was edging slowly into the opening. Then I looked straight out in front of me, down onto the thick green carpet of treetops on the other side. Being up here I had the feeling of allowing all this to go on, allowing the river and towboats and trees to exist unbothered by me. We had a sort of harmony going.

But Clyde’s boat and my jet ski were not a part of the harmony. They were that fly in your room while you’re trying to concentrate or sleep. I looked down to my right at them, wishing I had a rifle.
Well, I thought, not a rifle. But maybe a pellet gun. My Waverunner, with Julie driving and Ranee on the back, had peeled off toward the far shore straight out in front of me. Ranee had on a lifejacket but Julie was sitting on hers, not wearing it, probably afraid of a bad tan line. Clyde was slowing down and pulling up to the tower down below me. I heard the throttle click to neutral and he walked up to the bow to catch one of the pilings. I couldn’t lean over far enough to see him actually dock the boat, but I heard a dull thud that carried up the metal until I could feel it with my butt. Then I heard the motor turn off, and the boat splashing, and I knew Clyde had just stepped off it onto the tower steps.

Julie and Ranee were over by the far shore, but I could hear Ranee whooping. He had his arms in the air signalling a field goal. When they were right in the middle of the lake, Julie cut the handlebars and went into a three-sixty, and Ranee slid right off the back of the Waverunner and disappeared, like he had been a figment of my imagination.

Julie circled and Ranee’s head popped out of the black surface of the water, and he said something and she circled again. Then he was screaming, joking you could tell, and she was laughing and kept circling. I was jealous of the fun they seemed to be having. And for some reason I believed it was at my expense.

She quit circling Ranee in the water and waved back at him, then drove off, leaving him bobbing and yelling out in the middle of the lake. I could see the smile on her face as she came toward the tower, and I could see the line of her cleavage. I heard Clyde’s feet padding up the last few stairs and coming up from behind me, and I swung my legs up and stood.

"Look," I heard Clyde saying, and I turned around.
I thought I should say something nasty, but looking at him I realized it would be false, and I didn’t have it in me. It wouldn’t be false because I wasn’t mad at him, it would be false because I didn’t give a damn about him. I knew right then we were through being friends.

At the same instant, the jet ski’s engine wound up an octave and sputtered, like a sink dispose-all stuffed too full, and then it died. I turned around and Julie was sitting there, floating toward the bank, looking back and forth at the water on either side of her legs. Then she looked up at us.

“Fuck,” Clyde said. We both knew what had happened. She had run over the ski rope and the impellor had sucked it up. This had happened before, both Clyde and Rance had done it, and it annoyed the piss out of me. It took forever to cut the rope out of there.

But I didn’t care this time. I thought I wouldn’t even care if my jet ski was ruined, because this was my chance. All that mattered was me. I was by God going after what I deserved.

I looked at Clyde and said calmly, “I’ve got it,” then flipped him off and jumped, whipping my arms around in backwards circles to stay vertical in the air. The water slammed the bottoms of my feet and hurt my ears, and then I was up to my shins in mud, water up my nose. I kicked my legs until my feet came out of the goo below the layer of silt above my ankles, then swam up to the surface and blew the water out of my head. I looked back to make sure Rance was still a long way off. He was backstroking in, leisurely, still several hundred yards away in the water. I figured he hadn’t noticed what Julie had done.
The machine’s inertia had carried her almost to the bank, in the shadow of the wide metal pipe and the bridge underneath the pipe for the workers to walk on. I swam over to her and when I straightened up to grab the side of the jet ski my foot hit the bottom. The water level really was low. I stood, out of the water from the bust up.

“Did I break it?” Julie asked, her eyes begging me to say no.

“We’ll see,” I said, pretending to be aggravated. “Get off and help me turn it over.”

She slid off on the other side where I couldn’t see her.

“Over here,” I said. “We’ve got to push from the same side to tip it over.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, and hopped over to where I was, her neck barely out of the water. “I didn’t see it.”

“Here,” I said, and stepped back to guide her in front of me. “You grab it here and when I say lift, you lift it up over your head.”

“What about you?” she asked, looking at me. I couldn’t look her in the eye.

“Once you get it started I’ll get it all the way over,” I said. “The home stretch is the hardest part.” I had a sense that I was talking in double-entendres, but I wasn’t quite sure how the literal matched up with the other.

She squinted, a twinge of fear, maybe, just as she turned around. Her chest was underwater and I was thinking clearly. She braced her hands against the underside edge of the Waverunner, facing away from me, and I moved up close behind her.

“Lift,” I said, and she flexed up against the weight of the jet ski.

I held her tight around the waist with my left arm, and I quickly slid my right hand
in through the armpit of her swimsuit. I touched the nipple with my middle finger and slid my hand fully on top of her breast.

"Shh," I whispered, "just lift." My dick was hard and I was pressing it into her back, in the curve of her back just above her bottom.

She started to cry and I massaged her breast, pretending like it might be a comfort to her. It was to me. I nuzzled the back of her neck, moving her hair out of the way with my nose so I could give her a kiss. I told her to be quiet, and closed my eyes. It made no difference what happened next.
Spivey figured the fat man was Jehovah’s Witness or something but it had been so long since anybody except the maid and home health had knocked he let him in. The guy had blue eyes set deep in a round pink face and he wore a greasy brown pencil-thin moustache. He also wore faded navy slacks pouched out above the crotch and a red blazer that barely covered his flanks and a green tie with a cocker spaniel airbrushed across its wide part. Spivey was in his bathrobe and bare feet. His shoulders ached and his mouth tasted like heartburn and shoe polish. It was four in the afternoon, a Tuesday, toward the middle of August. He hadn’t left his house in a week unless you counted sitting in the driveway drinking tea and watching the neighbors fawn over their yards and expensive cars.

“I’m from the church,” the man grinned, sweat beaded on the brown-wisped dome of his balding head.

“Jehovah’s Witness?” Spivey said, hoping. It would mean something, he felt, if his instincts had been true.

“Third Baptist,” the man said, and Spivey was so let-down he grunted.

Spivey’s dead ex-wife Glenda had been a member of Third Baptist and she had dragged him there once in the ‘70s, when they were still married. The preacher, a thin
pasty man with a mid-parted helmet of black hair, had said welfare and the Soviet Union were predicted in Revelations. Glenda had gotten Spivey on the church’s rolls and he couldn’t get off them.

They sent him form letters all the time, but this was the first time they had ever sent a person. Spivey didn’t want to talk about God, but he supposed it couldn’t hurt to talk about something else for a while. At the very least, he thought, it might be entertaining.

“Want some tea?” he asked.

“Hell yes,” the fat man said, and they went into the kitchen.

Spivey filled the kettle and put it on. “I don’t want to go to church,” he said, so the record would stay straight.

“Herb Long,” the fat man said, and held out his hand. “You don’t have to.”

Spivey shook Herb’s hand. “I guess you know my name.”

“I know practically your biography. We have files.”

Spivey imagined all those little blue-haired ladies nosing through people’s garbage, bugging phones, in the name of Jesus. It was good to talk to someone, but he didn’t trust this guy.

“What are you here for?”

“Basically,” Herb said, “our shut-in visitation program’s been on hold for a while, but Arnold Lewis—you know Lewis Grain out near Benton?--just died and left a couple million to the church, so we can afford to reach out again.”

Herb chuckled and touched the thin hairs on top of his head with his palm,
delicately, as if to make sure they were still there. Then he said, “You should have seen
the funeral.” He whistled and shook his head, with irony or no Spivey couldn’t tell.

Arnold Lewis had been a pompous asshole and a slight acquaintance when Spivey
was about town. Leaving his money to a church was exactly the sort of thing Spivey
pictured him doing, trying to get his name on something else.

Then Spivey thought about the rest of what Herb was saying. Shut-in? He was too
young to be a shut-in, wasn’t he? Besides, he had mostly worked at home even in his
prime. Then again, he hadn’t stretched a canvass in the ’90s, and he had the health of a
much older man. But weren’t shut-ins supposed to be poor?

“Who are you?” Spivey asked. “I mean in the church?”

“Just a volunteer.” Herb smiled, and scratched a nostril with his left pinky.

You could never trust a volunteer, in Spivey’s opinion. He had volunteered at a
soup kitchen to impress a woman he wanted to have an affair with once, and understood
immediately that everyone who was there for a reason besides eating had an agenda too,
whether they knew it or not.

“What does the church want to do to me?” he asked.

Herb smiled again. “Whatever you want. Mr. Lewis left enough money for us to
get a light dinner, maybe a movie, once a week. Purely optional, though.”

The last time Spivey had eaten with another person at a restaurant was seven
months ago, the day after Glenda’s funeral. His daughter was in town and she had agreed
to see him for the first time in thirteen years, which was how long it had been since he left
them. She brought the two grandchildren Spivey had never met, and he took them to Bruiser’s Catfish. His five-year-old granddaughter, from Lacy’s latest failed marriage, did a circuit of the warped dining room floor kissing every man present. Every man except Spivey. He and Lacy fought after dinner and hadn’t spoken since. He spent most days trying not to think about her.

“What do you do for a job then?” Spivey asked.

“Bank.”

Spivey nodded. Dressed like that, he thought, must be a janitor.

Herb sniffed and blinked spastically. Then he said, “Another thing I meant to say, the day is up to you. I’m divorced so my nights are free. Just me and the dog,” he said, flapping his tie at Spivey.

Spivey thought about Saturdays, and he realized he would go for the bait no matter how stupid he felt about it. Saturdays were when families and friendships happened, and they were close to unbearable lately.

The kettle shrilled and he stood up. He poured water in the mugs and dropped a tea bag in each. Then he turned around and put a mug in front of Herb and sat down.

“Saturday,” he said, without looking him in the eye.

Herb reached over and slapped him on his aching shoulder.

“Fuck,” Spivey said, grimacing.

“Sorry,” Herb said, and winked. “No thanks.” Then he burst into laughter at himself.
It was amazing the difference good threads could make. Spivey hadn’t bought new clothes in at least two years, but the morning after Herb showed up he had showered and shaved and taken a cab to the Rogue to get fitted for a suit. Standing on the platform with the young man’s hands whisking around about his legs and crotch, he had felt vindicated. How many shut-ins went suit shopping?

Now he was in front of his own mirror wearing his new tailored silk suit, gray with pinstripes, and he was almost able to accept the fact that he had no real connection to anybody out there anymore. A daughter he couldn’t bear to cut out of his will though his pride told him he should. Maybe family, friends, the whole deal, he thought, were excuses to get dressed up and walk around in the world. Which he was about to do.

He and Herb were going to Perkins, but what the hell. He wouldn’t be the first person to go to a third-rate chain restaurant in a seven-hundred-dollar suit.

He ran his hair back with Bryl creme and put his teeth in, then rubbed some Aqua Velva onto his jowls. He felt like he was going on a date, only without the pressure of having to make passes. He angled his head so the light would hit his good side just right, and he glowered like a man of purpose. Still not a bad-looking cat, he thought--flabbed, lined, sad-eyed, and all. He did have a full head of white hair. All it took was a little attention to yourself.

This wasn’t just for Herb, either. Spivey saw Herb as a catalyst. Getting out of the house again was the first step. Herb would lead to other people, new places, and Spivey would be nice. No more grudges. It was funny how any goddamn fool could snap you into a new life.
The doorbell rang, and Spivey clapped himself on both cheeks several times for color. He smiled. Arthritis and heart disease be damned. He felt good. He went to get the door.

"Look at this suave bastard," Herb said.

"I just felt like it," Spivey said, embarrassed and deflated all of a sudden.

Herb was wearing dark new jeans and a maroon velour shirt with a zip-up collar and the sleeves cut off at the elbows. Fucking loser, Spivey thought, but I guess I’m a beggar.

"I like it," Herb said. "You hungry?"

Spivey nodded, and they walked out to Herb’s car.

He drove an old brown Mercury Cougar with a drooping ceiling and duct-taped leather seats. At least there was room, though. Cramped cars killed Spivey’s legs.

"Hey," Herb said when they pulled onto the frontage road, "I didn’t mean to aggravate you about the suit. I was just surprised."

Spivey looked at him. He seemed sincere. "It’s all right."

"You want to catch a movie after dinner?"

"I don’t like many movies." This was the truth. It made him nauseous to see all those beautiful people loving and killing, unless the movie was depressing, which somehow made up for it. Also, he would have trouble staying awake if it lasted past nine or so. It was five-thirty in the afternoon.

"Okay," Herb said. "We can just talk."

Herb swung into the lot of the restaurant, which was itself in the lot of a strip
mall. He laid on the horn as they pulled in.

“Swingin dicks on the town!” Herb yelled.

Spivey laughed. The idiot was so over-the-top, what else could you do?

Herb asked for their biggest booth, since most everything was vacant, early as it was. A short old woman with spiked red hair and a New Orleans accent led them to one in the shape of a half moon that could have held eight Spiveys or five Herbs.

“Enjoy ya meeul,” she said, and walked off.

“I’m gonna eat the shit out of some potato pancakes,” Herb said.

Spivey laughed and opened the menu to the breakfast section. There was too much to choose from. He had half a mind to order eggs, cholesterol or no. He was feeling reckless.

A tall bald black woman came and filled their water glasses without saying anything.

When she walked off, Herb said, “I have a confession.”

Spivey narrowed his eyes. “Confession?”

“Confession, goddammit!” Herb yelled. He slapped the table and smiled and traced the right line of his pencil-thin with his forefinger.

Spivey looked around the room. Nobody seemed to have noticed the outburst. He stared at Herb’s eyes. They were slippery-looking, but they didn’t seem particularly crazed.

“I knew who you were,” Herb said. “That’s why I picked you off the list in Sunday school.”
All right, Spivey thought, time to go. Knew I shouldn’t have trusted this fucker.

“My dad used to have a bunch of your paintings,” Herb said. “I went to school with your daughter.”

“Oh yeah?” Spivey said, relieved. This wasn’t so bad. Nobody ever remembered his pictures anymore. Not that they should have—it was hack work. But still. He was a local celebrity back in the day. And a good day it had been, at least for a while.

“My dad and I were big deer hunters.”

Spivey had painted wildlife pictures—deer and ducks and turkeys mostly—before the arthritis got bad. In Mississippi this was a goldmine, and he had invested wisely.

“You went to Madison?” Spivey asked.

“Yeah. Lacy and I were in the same class. I used to have a serious crush on her.”

Spivey laughed. You and everybody else, he thought.

“But I wanted to paint the same kind of pictures as you,” Herb said, eyes downcast. “That was the main reason I liked her.”

Spivey was a little nervous, but mostly flattered. This guy was just a sadsack looking for his childhood.

“That’s something else,” Spivey said.

“I don’t mean to spook you,” Herb said. “I just felt like I needed to get that on the table. I work with other shut-ins too, but you’re the only one whose name I recognized.”

“How about we stop calling me a shut-in,” Spivey said, and smiled. “I’m only sixty-five.”

“Sorry,” Herb said. “Anyway, I wouldn’t have felt right not telling you. I was
hoping we could be friends.”

Spivey laughed. Friends, he thought. No one had ever gone at him quite like this. Herb was as lonely as he himself was, he guessed, if he wanted to be friends with old men. “So we can leave the church out of dinner and all?” Spivey said.

“Fuck the church,” Herb said. “It’s just habit. And insurance.” He reached across the table with his water glass, and Spivey picked his up and they clinked them together.

The waitress came back. “Ready?” she asked.

“Two orders of potato pancakes, same plate,” Herb said without looking up from the menu. “Side of bacon. Two milks.”

Spivey had forgotten to decide on anything. He looked at the page he was opened to. Potato pancakes sounded good. They wouldn’t clog him or grease him too bad.

“I’ll have the potato pancakes too. One order. And a Sprite.”

“Anything else?” the waitress asked.

“Would you look at this suave bastard?” Herb said to the waitress. “It’s his birthday, you know?”

It was not Spivey’s birthday.

She smiled. “We’ll fix him up,” she said.

She patted Spivey on the shoulder as she walked off.

“She wants you,” Herb said. “You like em black?”

Spivey didn’t answer. He couldn’t tell where Herb was coming from or going with this remark, and he didn’t want to get into it. But he liked the man, inexplicably.

“So I heard about your problems back then,” Herb said, shifting gears to high
seriousness.

Spivey’s jaw seized. “You and everybody else,” he said. His chest tightened and he was aware of a buzzing in the light fixture above the table.

“I was at Lacy’s wedding,” Herb said. “She should’ve let you come.”

“She’s been through another one since then,” Spivey snapped. “Wasn’t that important. I don’t want to talk about it right now, okay?” He couldn’t imagine Lacy having invited Herb to her wedding.

“She’s happily married now, though?” Herb asked tentatively.

Spivey didn’t answer him, and they didn’t speak again until the food came.

When the waitress left again, Herb said, “To Arnold Lewis.”

Spivey didn’t answer.

“Hey Spivey,” he said.

Spivey peppered his cakes. “What?”

“I wanted to be honest with you, man. No shit intended.”

Spivey looked at him. “I just wish you wouldn’t remind me.”

“Friends?” Herb asked, eyebrows raised, smiling gently.

Spivey was silent for a moment. “Why not,” he frowned, and took a bite. Telling himself friends could be idiots.

When they finished, the waitress took their plates and brought Spivey a huge slab of chocolate pie with a lit candle leaning over and dripping wax onto the meringue. She told him happy birthday and made as if to walk off.

“Hold it, babe,” Herb said.
She turned around and squinted at him.

“This man needs a song. Me and you. Come on babe, me and you. Let’s belt it out.”

“Not in the job description, boo.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Sir?”

“Come on babe. Me and you. Me and you, goddammit!” Herb slapped the table again and the silverware jingled.

Spivey looked around. The red-haired hostess was eyeing them.

“Leave her alone, Herb. This isn’t the place.”

Herb looked at Spivey and seemed to concentrate, and he shook his head as if to jar his thoughts back straight. Then he said, “All right, babe. Go on. Forget it. We don’t need you.” Waving the back of his hand at her.

Then he sang happy birthday to Spivey at high volume. The smattering of customers craned their necks and some from the far reaches walked over. If it had been anywhere but Perkins, Spivey might have been embarrassed, but he enjoyed it. It was a scene from his drinking days, without the alcohol.

Spivey blew out the candle and gave his pie to Herb.

The next morning, Spivey went into his old studio above the garage. He spent almost no time in here anymore and used the space to store all the things he ought to
throw away. The pictures he'd quit on when his hands started to fail him were stacked in the corner, on top of the wall-length table he'd built when he and Bridget, the thirty-year-old woman he'd left his family for, moved in. These were the only six paintings he had ever started and not finished, not counting his juvenile attempts. That was how formulaic his work was—the end result was always guaranteed. He had sketched on and off since then, but he hadn’t marred a canvass in eight years.

He and Bridget had met at his downtown studio, where he used to give lessons. She had some technical skill, but was stupid. Spivey had loved her, or thought so, and he told her exactly the opposite: that she was brilliant, and just needed more practice. This was the one thing that made her love him, he realized later, and when he ran out of ways to sugarcoat what he thought about her work, she started brazenly cheating on him. She laughed when his hands went. He let it go on for six years because he was afraid another break-up would wreck him, but one day he couldn’t take it anymore. He told her she would have to support her own nymphomania. He was a full-time drunk by then.

There was a painting of hers in the stack, and he supposed that was what he had come in here to look at. A masochistic impulse. It was a portrait of Spivey she had begun when they first moved in but that she had never finished. He flipped through his own botches until he found the portrait, and he picked it up and held it in front of him.

When she moved out, she had made a point of leaving it, exactly because, Spivey thought, it was so painful to look at. Everything from the bust up was there except hair and eyes, and it gave Spivey the chilling sensation that he was a bare container, a skeleton with skin. No man should see himself eyeless.
He had to give Bridget credit. It was the most cutting insult she could have dumped on him. That was what he was to her, a soulless cipher to project her own ambitions onto. And it made him wonder whether he were soulless period. He felt like leaving it was her way of saying there was nothing from their relationship she wanted to take with her. But maybe that was giving her too much credit. She didn’t think on such levels, as far as he could tell.

Spivey stared through the holes in his skull. Maybe he was soulless.

When he had decided to leave Glenda and Lacy, he had walked to the dinner table in better spirits than he had spent any hour of his marriage in, excepting the first year. He had kissed them both on the cheek and rattled on through the whole meal about wanting to take them to Istanbul. Istanbul just popped into his head--he had been once after college and hadn’t thought about it at all recently until that moment, and he wasn’t remotely considering taking either of them anywhere. He was able to look at his own wife and daughter with the cold eyes of a stranger and not only deceive them but give them the one impression that exactly contradicted his real feelings right then--the impression that they were his world, his life.

The next morning, after Glenda went to work and Lacy went to school, he took a shower and packed one suitcase and loaded his paintings and supplies in the back of his Bronco and drove off without leaving a note.

He and Bridget picked this house out the next day, on the spot, after one look. Spivey had enjoyed knowing that half of a town of two hundred thousand was talking about what he had done. He loved himself for having the balls not to have the decency to
move somewhere else with Bridget.

Spivey’s hands were shaking. He put the painting on top of the stack and went to the round window that faced the street.

Bertis Hoover in his black Range Rover drove by. He hated Spivey. Delores Onsburger was weeding her flowers. She hated Spivey. The Weldon’s, new thirty-somethings down the street with two young boys, didn’t know Spivey, but he was sure as soon as they heard his story they would hate him too.

For a while, and especially after he kicked Bridget out, Spivey had drawn strength from being in the midst of such animosity. He was at no one’s mercy, and he used to marvel that so few people ever realized what he understood: when you didn’t need people, you couldn’t be harmed in any way at all. He used to go for long walks pitying everyone he saw who was obviously going to be hurting soon, when their idea of someone else blew all out of proportion and crushed them.

He maintained only bar relationships during this time. He was everybody’s friend while he was drunk, because nothing counted then. He played with prostitutes and brought groups of alcoholics bursting with need back to his house when the bar closed so they could gorge themselves on his stash. He could put his finger on a person’s weak spot in a moment, but he never let anyone know it. He gave them exactly what they needed, chemically and emotionally, and it gave him a sadistic thrill. Informing them of their Achilles’ heels would have been the kind thing.

Then one night he had a heart attack. He woke up drunk and alone to his chest exploding and was just able to stagger into his living room and call 911. He fell on his
back in the floor and Glenda and Lacy were flitting about the ceiling corners laughing at him. Blood drained out of their ears in blades and they were unspeakably happy, shrieking and cackling like drugged banshees. Arms lifted him and rolled him out into a lightless world.

No one came to the hospital. He was convinced he would never escape all the layers of whiteness they had planted him in. The white was all the vacancy in the world made presence, and it pressed in on him with such terrible force that he would be on the verge of smothering, of imploding, and at just the point when he could take no more, an orderly or nurse or, less often, a doctor would pull him out of it, smiling. It was a conspiracy, an elaborate test. They had found his weak spot and were tweaking him so he would never be sane again. They told him, smiling of course, that his daughter had been called. They kept smiling when she never came. White.

One day Glenda showed up and frowned at him and cried. She told him it was killing her to say it and she was only saying it because she didn’t know if he would live or not. She said she loved him. His brain was white, vacant of words.

For four months out of the hospital, he pondered calling Glenda and apologizing for everything. He didn’t want her back, but he realized he loved her and maybe always had. He wanted to have a relationship of some sort with her, and he wanted his daughter back in his life. But he felt there was no apology to contain what he had done and become, and it was easier to avoid it all.

Then Glenda died of a stroke. She was sixty-two and in good health. Spivey was sure the torment he had heaped on her was what did it. He went to the funeral and sat in
the back and waited at the door for Lacy. The weakness of the moment was probably all that had made her agree to go to dinner, he now thought.

Spivey turned away from the window and walked out of his studio. He was going to call Lacy. He shut the door and walked downstairs.

He knew her address and phone number by heart even though he had only attempted to call a few times in the seven years she had lived in Chattanooga. His heart banged and his breath was short as he dialed. Her second husband was a neurologist and she had gotten his house on the Tennessee River in the divorce. He paid her enough child support and alimony that she didn’t have to work, so she should be home.

“Hello?” She sounded asleep. His chest fluttered, but there was no turning back now.

“Lacy?”

“Yeah.” She didn’t recognize his voice.

“It’s Spivey--I mean Dad.” Hoping with everything he had he wouldn’t flub it.

She was silent for a moment. “What do you want?” Her voice was changed, as though she had woken up for real now and was ready to do battle.

“I’ve been thinking about what we talked about last time.” He hadn’t been thinking about it--it just came to him that he would do what she had asked him: pay her oldest son’s tuition to McCallie, a Chattanooga boarding school. When she had asked, his pride had made him tell her that he thought he should get to know the boy, Nathan, first. He had only said it to try to get back into her life, but she had gone into a rage, and he wasn’t able to make himself back down.
"It’s too late for him to get in this year."

"I’ll give you the money for this year," he said, "and you can do whatever you want with it. We’ll go ahead and get him signed up for next year." Nathan was about to start seventh grade. Spivey was making about a hundred thousand dollars’ worth of promises, and it was dizzying.

There was another long silence on her end. Spivey heard the deep diesel of a towboat outside her window.

"What’s the catch?" she asked.

"None," he said. "I owe you." Please say yes, he thought. He felt completely vulnerable.

"You don’t deserve a clear conscience," she said coldly.

His insides went hollow. "That’s not what I mean," he said, his voice trembling. "It’s for you."

"Fuck you," she said, and hung up.

He sat holding the phone until it started wonking and a recording told him to hang up. He walked into the kitchen and put the kettle on. While it heated, he sat down and rested his forehead on the kitchen table. He wondered how long he would live if he started drinking again.

That night on the couch, with most of a bottle of vodka in him, it came to Spivey. He flipped through the white pages until he found Herb’s number. He lived downtown,
which Spivey hadn’t expected. Hardly anybody lived downtown anymore besides blacks and gays and arty scenesters. He leaned forward looking at the phone book on the coffee table.

“Herb,” he said. “Spivey here.”

“What’s up, buddy?”

“Proposition, Herb. How about it?”

“How about what?”

“Proposition.” Spivey’s head was heavy.

“You all right, Spivey?”

“Superfine,” Spivey grunted. “You get off work tomorrow?” Today was Thursday. Thurs. What god or planet was Thurs?

“How come?”

“Thor,” Spivey said, smiling. His heel slipped on the hardwood, and he fell back against the soft couch. He laughed into the phone. “Is that right? Thor?” He tried to think.

“Chattanooga, my friend my pal.”

“You drunk, Spivey? What’s in Chattanooga?”

“Yes,” Spivey said, laughing. “Herb my pal.” He looked at the white wall in front of him. Fuck you, he thought. He hinged his head up and down, painting it with his vision. That wall needed to be green. He would do it later. Paint the shit out of it. Fuck the white.

“You saying you want to go to Chattanooga?” Herb laughed.

“Yes,” Spivey said. Things started moving, so he closed his eyes.
"What's there, Spivey?"

Spivey’s upper stomach burned and it pissed him off. “The point is,” he said, “I haven’t had a goddamn thing to eat today.”

“That’s no good.”

Spivey laughed. “I have some business to...do...with my daughter.”

“Lacy lives in Chattanooga?” Herb asked.

“Yesss.”

Herb didn’t say anything for a minute. “You want me to drive you up there to see her?” His voice was changed, faker maybe.

“Yesss.”

Spivey leaned over onto his side. He felt every fiber in the sofa cushion with his face. So perfect that the cushion was right here, right now. It earned its keep in this one moment. Faithful implement. Implements are your friends, Spivey thought.

“I might be able to get off work,” Herb said. “It’ll be a squeeze, but I can probably do it. What time would you want to leave?”

He needed a faithful body to put his head against. “Now,” he said. “Always trust your implements.”

“Wow,” Herb said. “I have to tell you, Spivey, this is a surprise. It’s pretty fucking sudden, you know? I’d have to make serious arrangements if this thing’s gonna happen.”

Spivey couldn’t figure out what it was about Herb’s voice, so he chalked it up to booze. I am attuned to diverse subtleties, he thought, and had the fleeting feeling that he was a man of genius, if not a god. Praise vodka.

Herb sighed. “I’ll be there in two hours.”

“Fucking heavyweight champ,” Spivey laughed.

Herb cleared his throat on the other end, but Spivey didn’t want to hear it. He opened his eyes and hung up the phone, then poured the rest of the vodka into his empty glass and went into the kitchen for ice. Then he went looking for his new suit.

Spivey was well into the second bottle when Herb showed up. He had his toiletries and socks and underwear and a paisley necktie in a grocery bag, and he had his new suit on its fancy wooden hanger and a white pinpoint on a metal hanger. Wearing khakis and an old lavender pearl-snap western shirt with the cuffs stiff from snot.

Standing in his closet earlier, Spivey had come down entirely from his okay spirits and felt himself to be a joke, so the Western shirt seemed right. Something about packing normal had seemed out of order too. I am a lonesome hobo, he had thought. His nose aleak.

He heard the car pull up outside, and he screwed the top on the Smirnoff and put the bottle in his paper traveling bag. He held the bag in one hand and flung his hang-up clothes over the other shoulder and then had to bend way down to open the door with the hand that held the hangers. His spine cracked and splintered and threatened not to straighten. But only threatened.

Herb was about halfway up the sidewalk that split Spivey’s yard. His shape was
bleeding into the darkness. A ring of fuzzy glow. Smiling confused. Streetlights. Spivey felt in a movie and he didn’t like it.

“You all right, Spivey?”

Spivey considered this. “I don’t,” he said. “The back goes, Herb. It goes.” The idea of his body failing was in his brain now, and it depressed him even further. “No attacks,” he said to his body.

Herb shook his head, smiling. “You eat yet?” Smile smile smile.

Spivey’s stomach still burned. “Hell’s so goddamn funny?” he asked, wanting to lash out at everything.

“Take it easy, man, I got chicken.”

Herb laughed but Spivey did not smile. He was sucking up the night, filling with dark. Friend to no man, he thought. “Heavyweight chicken,” he said, and walked past Herb into the street.

When they got to the car, Herb said, “Look, Spivey, I know you’re drunk, but do you mind laying off the weight jokes?” Another smile. “I’m a little self-conscious, I don’t mind telling you.”

Spivey looked at him over the top of the car. “The champ,” he said, wanting to smack that face with a sturdy implement. “Fake smiler.” He dug for more insults, but checked himself.

Bad, he thought. No. Nice guy. And tried to think of a nice thing to say. A sentence was in his head, and it seemed light enough: “The deer wears a butterfly hat.”

“What?” Herb said. “What the hell are you talking about?” Sounding annoyed.
Spivey had no idea. He got in the car.

He smelled fried food and a child jumped into his lap from the back seat and he tried to scream, but his head sucked his voice up and made things wobble. His eyes tried to shut him out of it, but he looked down at his lap. A blond-furred infant with long ears, right there, licking his hand. Nice baby, Spivey said. Tried to say.

“Tank,” Herb scolded as he sat down in the driver’s seat. “Get off Mr. Spivey.” And snatched the thing into a new darkness and Spivey fell into it too and it wasn’t so bad, there was no one to bother him and he wasn’t aware of himself.

He woke up to warm gray light in a place he had never seen. A dog was licking him on the Adam’s apple. Something big next to him.

He pushed at the dog and it banged up against the white mound. He stared. What the fuck?

It rolled over. Fat face wild brown thinning hair and a moustache, maybe two feet away, eyes opening like a monster newly born. Spivey snapped upright, just this side of panic.

“Morning,” Herb said.

Mirror, television, painting of a beach with small green waves and no people. White walls.

“What is this?” Spivey asked, calmed somewhat but still nervous.

“Birmingham,” Herb said.
Spivey tried to remember the thread. Something to do with Lacy. God, what was he thinking, drinking again? His mouth tasted of bile, he felt like he had been beaten. He was wearing khakis and a shirt he had bought for a costume party he went to with Bridget.

“What is this?”

“I didn’t think you wanted to show up at Lacy’s in the middle of the night, Spivey. Plus, I got no clue where in Chattanooga she lives. Plus, I was tired, and Tank had to pee.”

Spivey looked at the dog. It was standing on Herb’s hip like a monument to loyalty. He remembered his conversation with Lacy and tried to convince himself it was a nightmare, but he knew better. He remembered stewing over it and getting drunk and coming to a decision. This was all wrong, though. A mistake.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I wasn’t thinking straight. We should go back.”

Herb rolled over and sat up quickly, accidentally throwing the dog off the side of the bed. It yelped and Herb reached down and picked it up and held it in his lap stroking it on the skull with his wide fingertips.

“Spivey,” he said. “Tell me you’re joking.”

“Lacy doesn’t want to see me, Herb. Simple as that.”

Herb frowned. “Spivey, I took off work just to bring you. I dropped everything just for you, man. I figured you had it all planned out.”

Spivey didn’t have an answer for him. He swung his legs off the bed and stood. His legs felt like they’d been shattered and put back together faultily. He hobbled to the
bathroom and made epic water. He got dizzy standing there and wondered when the last time he ate was.

When he came out of the bathroom he saw a bucket of chicken on the dresser and he carried it over to a chair by the window and chewed on a cold drumstick. He didn’t want to think past the moment.

“Listen, Spivey, you’ve come this far.”

Spivey chewed. Chicken, he thought.

“Seriously, man. What are you scared of?”

Spivey looked at him. You have no idea, he thought. He imagined how Lacy would react if the two of them and that goddamn dog showed up at her doorstep. A shotgun was not out of the question. He took another bite and concentrated on the muscle threads coming apart in his mouth.

Herb sighed and stirred, and with great effort rolled over and stood up and went to the bathroom. Tank followed.

Herb finished pissing and stood in the middle of the room, as if he were about to challenge Spivey to a fight.

“Listen, Spivey, whether you were drunk or not, something was pulling you to Chattanooga. This is your life, man, your daughter. I wouldn’t tell you this if it wasn’t the truth. I’m your friend.”

Spivey studied this odd man. Wearing black cut-off sweat pants and a white v-neck t-shirt. The guy had driven him all this way on no notice, with nothing to gain that Spivey could see. Spivey was almost touched. He wished his daughter was his life. But
maybe it’s the leftover alcohol making me sentimental, he thought.

Then a headache began to gather behind his eyes, like someone kneading his brain with tweezers. He leaned his head back. He became dizzy. His stomach lurched and he shivered. Making it to the bathroom was not an option.

He leaned over and retched on the carpet. The chicken was still cold coming up. Then he dry heaved several times and it felt like the veins in his eyes had burst. His esophagus was sore.

He looked up and Herb was standing there, looking genuinely concerned.

“What can I get for you?” he asked.

“A gun,” Spivey said, and smiled.


Spivey laughed. Then he stood and walked to the bathroom.

“Let me take a shower and figure this out,” he said.

Spivey shook. His blood felt cold in his arms and he held his face to the warm stream and it felt good. It warred against the cold shakes, but the cold shakes were winning. Warmth came over him in flashes but subsided. He felt used-up and fragile.

There was Lacy or there was home. Home was the easy choice. Anyone looking at the situation objectively, Spivey thought, would tell him to go home. Common sense.

His daughter did not want to see him, and he did not know how to handle her hate. She remembered him one way and always would. Neither of them had any idea what the other had been through or was in the middle of.

It was too bad nobody had ever created a system to cut through all the bullshit,
Spivey thought. A way to tell people what you needed, what was flattening you that only
they could bring you out of. Hook some kind of computer up to your temples that would
send a message to the person you cared about, would send the truth straight from your
brain. Why did people invariably lie about the most important things? All people wanted
was to get together, but they couldn’t ever talk about it. Spivey was tired of trying to get
his feelings across in code. He was goddamn bad at it.

Home was shutting the world out. If I go back home, Spivey thought, it will be for
good. He didn’t have to live for that much longer. He could muster enough energy to steel
himself against people again, and liquor would help. The drinking life got a bad rap.
Besides hangovers, the only thing bad about it to Spivey’s mind was that it took years off
your life. And right now, for him, that would be a good thing. And hangovers only lasted
until you started drinking again.

He figured he would last about two years if he threw himself back into it at full
speed. The thought of complete rest made his chest flood with hope. Why, he thought,
was that a wrong thing to hope for?

But then he thought about dying alone. Whitenesses overtaking him. The worst
possible thing. His head throbbed and his stomach went into spasms.

He began to dry heave again. It was as though some creature was trying to jump
from his insides out of his mouth. Shredding everything between. He winced in pain and
doubled over. He went down on his knees. The stream beating him on the back of the
neck. His head lurching against his will, with more force than he could have imagined he
still contained. His left knee slipped, and he knocked his elbow against the side of the tub.
He lay on his side, eyes closed, barking. He imagined that his guts were speaking a language beyond language, something animals and children and the insane might understand. Bwah. Bwah. Bwah. His face lay against the drain. The water beat time against his hip, indifferent.

He would go to Lacy’s. What was there to lose?

This, he thought, is your life.

Driving up 59, Spivey had a hard time containing himself. His hungover stomach had given over to nerves and it vibrated with excitement and fear. He had the sense that he was riding toward a reckoning, that his life had been designed to lead up to this point. There was no way to prepare for the situation he would be in when they got there, he felt. He would have to trust himself to improvise, to do whatever it took to smooth her over. Swallow all pride, seemed to be the only rule. His head ached, and so did his elbow, from where he had banged it in the shower.

“What time did she expect us?” Herb asked.

Spivey stared at the road. “Last night,” he lied.

“Should you call?”

“Nah,” Spivey said. “She’ll figure it out.”

He should call, he really should--there was the chance that she would be mortified when they showed up. But there was also the chance, a good chance, that she would refuse to see him if he called. It would be better to surprise her and try to gain entry from
there, rather than be denied before the fact.

Herb was wearing a tan suit and a light blue shirt and a dark blue tie with white stripes. He was smiling a lot and appeared nervous. He had stuck a Hank Williams tape in the deck when they pulled onto the interstate. His hair was slick with gel and he seemed to Spivey an overgrown, overweight child whose mother had dressed and groomed him. He kept smoothing his moustache with his fingers, even though the hairs were hardly long enough to ruffle.

Spivey was wearing his new suit. It struck him that Lacy would immediately think something was up because they were both so formally dressed. But wearing a suit made Spivey feel like he had an edge. He needed whatever he could get. Besides, it was the only thing he had packed in last night’s vodka fog, and he sure as hell wasn’t showing up in the lavender shirt.

Herb hit the blinker when they reached Gadsden. Tank, who had been sleeping in the back, stood up and looked out the window and panted, seeming to smile.

“I need some breakfast,” Herb said. “Need to get there before they switch to lunch food.” It was ten o’clock.

“Sure,” Spivey said.

Spivey wasn’t remotely hungry. His stomach was dancing way too much to eat.

Herb pulled into a Hardee’s. There was a long line at the drive-through. He parked and took the keys out.

“You coming in?” he asked.

“Nah,” Spivey said.
“What do you want?”

“I’m not hungry,” Spivey said.

Herb shook his head. “You will be.” He tossed the keys onto Spivey’s lap.

Spivey watched him walk into the restaurant, his back wide as a Volkswagon.

Poor guy, Spivey thought. He felt bad for getting so down on himself all the time. What if you were round, old man? It was too bad to think about.

He reached behind his seat and felt for the paper bag and picked it up. He took the half-full bottle of vodka from it and unscrewed the cap. Just to settle my nerves, he told himself, and took a shot. It bit going down and he could feel a heartburn rising. One more, he thought, and drank again. Then he drank one more and put the bottle back in the bag and the bag under his legs and the keys in the ignition.

He needed to drink just enough that it balanced out his bloodstream and took the roughness out. Maintain a low buzz, he thought. He would feel good, and his social skills would be peaking.

Hank moaned, “Today I passed you on the street, and my heart fell at your feet.”

Herb got in the car and handed Spivey a greasy white bag. “I got you a couple biscuits,” he said.

“Thanks,” Spivey said. He took one out and set it in his lap, just to be nice.

Herb cocked his head and grimaced. Then he rewound the tape. They pulled back out onto the interstate.

Herb sang along: “I can’t help it if. . .I’m still in love with you.” He looked very serious.
Poor guy, Spivey thought, trying to fathom the kind of lonesomeness Herb must have been dealing with his whole life. Spivey was suddenly certain that Herb was a virgin, that he’d been lying about a divorce.

He took the bottle from his bag and drank again. Herb cut his eyes at him but didn’t say anything.

Then Herb said, “Tank,” and the dog’s ears perked. Herb slung a biscuit in the back without looking, and the dog caught it in his mouth and chewed. Herb ate his own biscuit silently. Spivey reached in the bag and took another drink, waiting for it to hit him.

Spivey had never been to the house, but the Loaf N’ Jug attendant’s directions got them there fine. The yard sat well below the road down a steep drive that a higher narrower car could feasibly have flipped turning into. Patches of rocky dirt showed through grass long overdue a mowing. A white Mercedes out front, which Spivey assumed was his daughter’s. She had flown in for the funeral.

A purple bike with training wheels and a yellow plastic basket was parked beside the Mercedes, and a deflated soccer ball sat rotting in the weeds next to an old swingless swingset. The house was weathered wood and rugged-looking, two stories, big but not too big. Spivey thought it looked like a hunting cabin. The river was smooth and slow and greenish out past the house. It seemed lewd with its swells and slicks. There was a maroon ski boat tied to a small round dock.

They sat there. Spivey looked at Herb, and Herb looked back, obviously scared.
Spivey was grateful that he was somewhat drunk because this was major shit. The immensity of this gesture he was making boggled the mind. This is your life, he thought, and laughed. There was a good chance he was about to blow it to tiniest shreds.

What the hell was Herb so scared of? There was no pressure on him. He fiddled with his pouch-topped crotch and winced and Spivey looked away.

A straw-colored head popped out of a crack in the front door. The girl who wouldn’t kiss me, Spivey thought. Go-time. He opened the door and stepped out feeling a courage he hadn’t known since Korea. I will conquer, he thought. Heartburn like a motherfucker. He needed a drink.

Herb opened his door and they approached the house. The girl, Beatrice, disappeared behind the slamming door. They stood on the stoop, speechless. Spivey prepared to knock. His heart blasting away in his chest.

A brown-haired boy with a big nose and pimples across his forehead opened the door. Nathan. He was wearing a black t-shirt advertising something called Napalm Death. Headphones attached to nothing around his neck, the cord dangling at his knees.

“Hey, Nathan,” Spivey said, and forced a smile.

“Does she know you’re here?”

Spivey’s stomach fluttered. “Surprise,” he said. Herb grunted and shuffled his feet behind Spivey.

“She’s with somebody,” Nathan said. “Who is this dude?” Pointing at Herb.

Spivey instantly felt sure things would go bad. “This is Herb,” he said. “Herb, this is Nathan.”
Herb held out his hand but Nathan didn’t take it. Herb smiled and ran it through his hair with a theatrical flourish. “Too slow,” he said, and Nathan made a face.

“Come in, I guess,” Nathan said, and walked on in front of them.

Spivey heard Tank’s muted bark as he shut the door behind them. Nathan disappeared down a hallway off to the right of the living room.

Spivey felt like he had wandered into another person’s dream. There was the hush of central air and there were dense stone floors and the walls were covered in something reedlike. The furniture was angular and black and there seemed a lot of glass. He couldn’t imagine being a kid in such a house. This was the kind of place you did cocaine in.

Herb was looking around with a worried brow and Spivey realized that bringing him here was ridiculous. How the hell was he going to explain the presence of a strange lonely fat man he had known for a week? Lacy would probably think it was a trick, that he was making fun of her in some sadistic code.

He heard voices and there she was, coming down the stairs, fronted by Beatrice and backed by a tall man with platinum blond hair and a serious sunburn. She was still pretty but had gained weight in the face. Her eyes were bagged and her hair dyed black. Both adults had glasses of red wine. Spivey looked at his watch. Noon. God, he thought, that’s my fault, isn’t it?

“I’m not believing this,” she said as she stepped down to the floor. “This is a crowning fucking moment, Spivey.”

He had no idea what to say. All wrong. He looked at his granddaughter. She had her mother’s scowl, and it was fixed on him.
“I tell you I don’t want to talk to you and you do this?”

Beatrice ran out the sliding glass door onto the back deck. The blond man gave Spivey a stern look.

“I don’t know what to say, honey,” Spivey said, his voice weak. “I had to see you.”

She snorted. Then she saw Herb. “Who the hell is this?”

“My friend Herb,” Spivey said. “He drove me here. I think you went to school with him.”

“Calculus,” Herb said, and walked over smiling.

She studied him. “Holy God,” she said. “You used to do my homework.”

“I can still forge your signature,” Herb said, smiling.

She looked at Spivey. “Is this a joke, Spivey?”

“No.”

“I can’t deal with this.” She downed her half glass of wine and walked into the kitchen. Spivey heard a cork pop, and he walked in after her. Herb and the blond man were shaking hands.

“Mind if I have a drink?” Spivey asked.

“By all means,” Lacy said sarcastically, and took a glass from the cabinet above her. “You know you have to leave.”

Spivey felt exhausted. He didn’t have the energy for anything, it seemed, much less for whatever this called for. But no options, he thought.

“Just give me an hour,” he said. “I’ll leave you alone afterwards, but just give me
an hour to tell you some things.”

She looked at him with open contempt. “You’re such a bastard.”

Yes, he thought.

“I need some air,” she said, her tone a little softer. She smiled. “We’ll go for a boat ride. Then you’re leaving. I’m not going to forgive you for anything, if that’s what you think you’re up to.”

Spivey drank his wine down in one gulp and poured another. “I’m a little drunk,” he said.

“Good,” she said. “Me too.”

He wanted to hug her. “I like your house,” he said. “Do you have any vodka?”

She slammed the throttle and the boat planed out fast, heading upstream. Spivey had to hold on to the windshield with his left hand to keep from spilling the bottle of vodka. Once their speed was constant, he took a slug. The sky was high between the tight hills and it was looking like rain, a sun furred white by a cloud mass just above a peak on the east bank. A towboat pushing several barges came into view up ahead and Lacy eased off the throttle and killed the engine and let the boat drift.

She looked at him, her black hair wild from the wind and her eyes—Spivey’s eyes, hazel—wild and mean.

“For a long time I planned on killing you,” she said, and smiled.

Spivey’s chest grabbed. “You decided not to?”
“I haven’t ruled it out,” she said.

She looked like a witch straight from central casting, minus a couple of warts. He drank.

“I can’t believe you brought that bozo,” she said. “He made a pass at me once in the eleventh grade. Can you believe that? That fucking loser?”

“He’s a good guy,” Spivey said.

“You’re a desperate fuck, aren’t you, Daddy?” She patted him on the shoulder sarcastically.

He drank again. His head ached and his heartburn was still going strong and he was tired. I should eat, he thought. He wondered what Herb and Wallace, the blond guy, would talk about while they were gone.

“Do you want the money?” he asked.

She laughed. “Sure, Daddy, I’ll take your money. But I still won’t want to see you.”

She cranked the boat again and gunned it straight at the tow ahead. When they got within a hundred yards, Spivey was sure she was going to kill them both, but she veered right and caught one of its big waves and they jumped and the inboard whined catching air. They landed with a crack, and vodka spilled all over Spivey’s front. He was almost disappointed that she hadn’t run them into the big boat.

There were docks about every hundred yards, but nobody seemed to be out on them. Friday, Spivey remembered. Real people work. He drank, his lower throat burning. He was going at a crazy pace, he knew. He would be out before long, but that seemed the
best option.

She aimed at the towboat again and again she veered and caught a wave heading
toward the opposite shore. Again they sailed and again the hull smacked with much more
force than it could have been designed to take. He had screwed the cap onto the vodka
this time so it didn’t spill.

I guess this is it, he thought. Pain, no gain. Harm, foul. Jesus, what a mess.

She killed the engine again and they drifted out alongside the towboat and barges.

There was a man walking down the length of the barges. He waved. Lacy wasn’t looking.

Spivey didn’t wave back. He took another drink. He had put away half a bottle in a
quarter of an hour. With the spillage he only had a quarter of a bottle left. He wanted to
go back.

Lacy stood and walked to the stern and lifted up a seat to look for something in
the compartment underneath. She didn’t find it right off and she squatted and stuck her
head up close to look. She found what she was looking for and stood up and faced
Spivey.

It was a gun. All right, Spivey thought. Meant to be, I guess.

“I decided to go ahead and kill you,” she said, smiling.

“Okay.”

He was not going to let her have any satisfaction out of this, at least. He began to
panic, though, against his will, and he realized he did not want to die. He was surprised,
and suddenly thought of himself as tragic.

“It’s a flare,” she said. “It’ll light your ass up like a refinery.”
"Those people can see us," Spivey said, hoping he wouldn't appear nervous.

She turned to look at the towboat. "I'm crazy, Daddy. I don't care."

"You're not crazy."

"You made me crazy."

Spivey didn't have an answer for this. He drank. There were only a couple of swigs left. "Want a drink?" he asked her, and took a deep breath.

"Any last words?" she asked. Her smile was wicked.

"I love you," he said. Tears welled and he tried to keep them back.

She laughed. "Got you." She tossed the gun back into the storage compartment and pulled the seat-top over it. "You thought I'd do it, didn't you?"

Spivey shook his head and killed the bottle with a big burning gulp. He would pass out soon. He did not want to die, he was sure of it.

Herb was on the floor with Nathan playing video games and Beatrice was behind them on the couch when Spivey and Lacy came in from the dock not speaking. Spivey followed her into the kitchen without seeing her and she opened a new bottle of vodka and they poured drinks. Spivey was thoroughly dazed and waiting anxiously for the point when he couldn't see anything at all. He stayed in there after Lacy walked out, and he heard her talking to Herb and Nathan. Wallace had left while they were gone, he understood that much. Lacy swore.

When Lacy was young, Spivey had kept a ski boat not much different than the one
he’d just gotten off of in a slip on the reservoir near Jackson. They went through a phase of about three years where they would take the boat out, just the three of them, every Saturday and Sunday the sun shone, April through October. Lacy must have been five or so when they got the boat.

Right now he had the clearest picture—he guessed it was a composite of a bunch of those days—of Lacy sitting in his lap and helping him steer. The sun was slamming off the water and sailboats tacked in the distance and all three of them were bleached and burned and waterlogged. Glenda was still in love with him and she filled up a bikini right and she wore a visor and big round sunglasses. She sat in the passenger seat smiling at her husband and daughter, a smile that said this was exactly what she wanted out of her life. Spivey would cut behind other boats acting like they were jumping, but there weren’t any towboats and all that happened was the bow would pop up and down and slap the water. Lacy would screech and cover her eyes. They thought they were happy.

But Spivey could remember having to tell himself he was happy. He had to tell himself this was good enough, that he wasn’t giving up too much. He still harbored notions of painting for real, told himself the wildlife gig just paid the bills and he would get back to what he wanted to do. He had already started having affairs by this point. He guessed he had never been right for his family. He was a goddamn curse, is what he was.

He gulped down his drink and took the bottle with him and went upstairs. He needed to rest. He found a door and a bed that looked right and he lost his balance and fell in the floor, banging both knees on the stones. He kept the bottle from hitting, though. He stood it next to him and lay on his back and closed his eyes.