1991

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RUNNING WITH CECILE A NOVEL

By
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B.A., Dickinson College, 1988

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
University of Montana
1991

Approved by

Chairman, Board of Examiners

Dean, Graduate School

Date Dec. 10, 1991
And we were sitting on the porch in January and my Aunt Marge said, "Men."

"Here we go," Mrs. Johnson said, "Enlighten us, boy."

"Okay I'll try. But I probably don't know a goddamned thing."

"That's a start," Aunt Marge said, "And watch your mouth."

I lived with these women during the hours I wasn't working, which was most of the time. I drove limousines and the warm winter was costing me. Nobody was dying. Nobody was dying. No dying, no money.

Aunt Marge and Mrs. Johnson were my mother's friends who were here when she died of a cancer late in the fall. I was in California, the sandlots of San Ysidro and further south, doing other things.

My right arm has the scar to prove this, although Aunt Marge was sure it's a tattoo. She asked me to make it belly dance like sailors can do.

Wind rattled the white Christmas lights strung along the porch awning. The lights blinked then continued to blaze.

My Aunt Marge had a thing for sailors. She collected photos of them striding uneven docks in exotic ports of call, their caps cocked and arms slung over each other's shoulders. She knew they'd be whoring, but she also knew they carried worn pictures of their sweethearts wherever they went, sometimes to the bottom of the sea. I loved that about my aunt, the way she was able to hold such beliefs deep into and past the heart of her life. Romance takes stamina. Aunt Marge believed in tattoos, names and promises stitched in skin. She said my Uncle Earl went down in a PT boat just like President Kennedy did. My scar moves as no girl would.
but you see what you want.

"Wasn't that Cecile woman on Donahue? Isn't it strange that you loved this woman and you don't even have a picture of her?"

"She couldn't be photographed," I said. "I tried taking her picture once and only her shadow colored the print."

This was a lie I could believe. I'm an escapist, it is true.

"Oh that Phil Donahue," Mrs. Johnson said. She shook her head, and both women looked at me as if Phil and me were great friends.

And it was February and still the white Christmas lights burned on our porch.

"It's an act of God," Aunt Marge said. "You stay away from them, Johnny."

My name is actually Carson. Aunt Marge said my mother was clever, but I told her it was my father who named me. He thought Carson was a name fit for fame. My father thought fame was the one thing a man should strive for. Ultimately, he had told me, long before he left for the easy in California, you want people to write books or folk songs about you. He'd sit across from me at the breakfast table in his tank-top undershirt and tweed pants, an awkward outfit of cross-purposes, and highlight his latest plan for achieving immortality. Aunt Marge liked calling me Johnny.

"Your hair is even starting to color like his," she said.

That much is true. I have gray streaks running through my black and curly hair. As far as I know it's not a family trait, something that wasn't lost on Aunt Marge. Once she tried to dunk
me in holy water when I walked her to church. I told her there are better ways, that I had seen them on TV. I told her I could dye the fucking gray.

So she slapped me.

The first time I started pulling down the Christmas lights, New Year's Day, she called me a sinner and tossed pinches of salt over each padded shoulder. She didn't want to rule anything out. The second time I was branded a heathen and accused of sympathizing with skinheads in Moscow, Idaho. The third a junkie. She liked to keep the lights tacked to the awning until one bulb went and brought the rest along with it. Aunt Marge insisted upon new Christmas lights every year. She said the 1980's forced a decent woman to take such measures.

It was cold on the porch in winter. Our small front yard was frozen, the grass long dead, but Aunt Marge and Mrs. Johnson sat outside anyway. Our house was a gold shingled, two-story colonial with a garage addition my father never finished. Tar paper flapped on the roof; I promised myself to finish the job in spring. My father was infamous for his lack of an attention span. Once, when he and I were sculpting an Indy car in the sand, a life-size model with slicks and a cockpit I could sit in to work the driftwood clutch and Coke bottle brake, my father stood and walked off down the beach. I followed him for awhile until he turned to me and said he was going all the way to Asbury Park. He said he wanted to see the merry-go-round before it was torn down.

Most of the houses in Manasquan looked like ours, like mutts. The street was lined with oaks, fat branches knuckling into the swell of sky. The hardwood was shark-nose gray, and molted acorns
ringed the trunks, I used to imagine the trees as giant soldiers, rifles held high overhead. I had watched the black and white grunts, waist deep in rice paddies, nightly on the six o’clock news. The never-ending supply of acorns killed more than a few neighborhood kids turned Viet Cong, and when the yellow ribbons went up, when our people were taken hostage in Iran, I knew that all of Manasquan had joined me in the Tony Orlando fan club. I have kissed oak trees.

A privet hedge ran from the brown porch steps to the sidewalk. It was four feet high, two wide, and when I was a boy it served as the home run wall in games of one man Wiffle ball. The teardrop leaves would snap and wave like a capacity crowd in the outfield seats at Yankee Stadium. The green hands flashed in the summer twilight, begging for the ball. The porch was the bleachers down the first base line, and Aunt Marge sat and kept records of my batting average, slugging percentage and ERA. While my mother was at work, Aunt Marge taught me where to position my feet in any situation, for every combination of balls and strikes. The yard was fifty by thirty. It took a helluva blast to send the ball out of there.

Eight years later, when Aunt Marge and I started living alone in the house, the porch was not the bleachers. Each night after supper she flicked on the yellow signal light and nestled in her chair as I wrapped a quilt around her, leaving one of her arms free to raise her tea cup. Mrs. Johnson would shuffle over within minutes and comment on the creamy shine of the light.

"Like margarine," she’d say.

Mrs. Johnson lived next door with her dog Ralph. Ralph was a
girl and knew how to bowl. Mrs Johnson made Ralph a shirt, embroidering the dog's name on the breast pocket and Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin, on the back because she thought that was where all true bowlers were from. Mrs Johnson walked Ralph the three miles to the Wall alley every Friday. She smoked Player's Navy Cuts, filters snipped clean, set balls in front of Ralph and watched as the dog knocked them down the lane, toppling the pins.

One time the alley hired a new attendant who didn't like animals. I am not fond of them, he said. Ralph wouldn't budge, and Mrs Johnson raised her voice until the man agreed to a match.

By the third frame a small crowd had gathered to watch, and by the sixth it was the only game being played. People pressed in and began cheering after every ball. One man started taking bets. The match was tight going into the final frame. Ralph bowled a strike, followed up with another and won. The crowd erupted and Mrs Johnson allowed drinks to be bought for herself and for Ralph. A reporter from The Coast Star conducted interviews, and the attendant was given a raise. Mrs Johnson lived by this story. Everyone in town could tell it. Mrs Johnson said that she and Ralph are in the Guinness Book of World Records. You can look it up.

Dr. Johnson left for Florida years earlier to take up golf. He left to establish his handicap. Mrs Johnson received an occasional postcard detailing his progress and the quality of life in the New South. He always wrote he would be home soon. Mrs Johnson said her husband was a pervert.

On the porch, the women talked about the unpredictability of New Jersey weather.
“It’s the Green Room Effect,” Aunt Marge said

“It’s frightening,” Mrs. Johnson said. “Johnny, we’d understand if you wanted to spike trees. I’d be all for it. If you wanted to go to the inlet and sand fill the gas tanks in the Army Corps of Engineers’ bulldozers, that would be all right too. You have courted the devil. Think redemption.”

I was always comfortable listening to them talk. I knew what I could expect, and nothing went wrong. At twenty-one, my life was down to that.

“I’ll have Red Zinger, Johnny,” Mrs. Johnson said. “He’s really a fine boy, you know.”

“I got him to Mass last Sunday.”

“Good for you, girl.”

I went inside and made Mrs. Johnson some tea, then brought out extra blankets to tuck around their shoulders. I knew it was winter by the color of the ocean. It looked like a bruise. The beach was one mile away, the sand thick and cold. Bonaparte’s gulls spiraled and fell, close-winged, on beached mussels and the husks of horseshoe crabs and blue claws. In winter, you can hunker down in the dry sand and watch high tide steal part of your childhood and dump it somewhere to the south. First it’s just sand, then, because you know the tide rises every twelve hours and the wind in winter can be bad, it’s the land where you stood with your mother, the last time you really saw her beautiful. Maybe I could’ve saved something if I was here in the fall. I could’ve built dikes and moats to stop the tide. I could’ve prepared for the inevitability of loss.

On the porch, I sat in the shadow of the old home run wall.
No, I couldn't have saved a thing. But loss is easier to accept if you see the losing with your own eyes, no matter how ugly or slow. I know that now. I'm catching my breath.
I park my Nova, a 1976 powder-blue, post big-block lemon, in the west-wing of the San Ysidro car lot just off the Camino de la Plaza. A sign says this is your last chance to park in America. In California, I cannot dodge my sense of fate. Sometimes I limp.

"Diez," the attendant says. "I'll be here through la noche." Twenty-four hours?" I ask, handing him a ten.

"Si, amigo. Gracias."

Hills of light hook from the south to west in the old colonias. Soler and El Mirador Ciudad. I scoot between the rows of cars with more lights at my back. The border lights run northwest from a barbed-wire maze beyond the lot, across the sand fields and dirt, and they never seem to end, not in San Diego or anywhere close. We the people want our dark places lit. Given our general and guiding fear, like bunnies, we keep one eye to the night.

Shadows slip past me, out the lot, across the Camino de la Plaza and through the tourists strolling the Via Rapida into Tijuana. Two of the three Mexican men vault over a chain link fence and scramble up the chaparral-choked trench that cuts under the plaza bridge and climbs to the northbound lanes of Interstate 5. The third man falls when he loses his grip on the fence top. He jumps again, and I watch from the light as his toe slips and he bumps back down. He steps away, then lunges at the fence hard enough for me to hear over the people and traffic stuttering by him. The chain link shimmers, the man heaves himself skyward and

TWO
rolls over the top. He lands on his feet, folds to his side. I step out of the light, watch him stand and chug after the others as an Immigration officer whisks past me. The officer barks into his walkie-talkie, chases the Mexicans' shadows, and all I do is stand back in the light and hear my heart beat.

Funneling into the courtyard to cross La Frontera, the narrow walk is flooded with people. An INS officer leans against the grill of his green 4x4 in the restricted area to the right. He picks at his hand as two women draped with shopping bags talk to him. One of the women wears a straw sombrero and has a lasso roped around her waist, trailing the length of her leg. The other woman points west down an alley that follows the walls separating the car lot from the shanties in Tijuana.

"It's best to be prepared for most anything," a man says to the woman he's with as they twist by. "You just stick with me."

A thick-barred gate looms to my left. Lit billboards parallel the bars. The ads push Mexico as the place to get away from it all, and I can see myself on one of the billboards or in the half moon. That's the kind of night this is. I have an idea of myself, but most of the time it doesn't get in the way. I can ride side saddle without ever having sat on a horse.

A priest collects coins for missing children. Photos of lost boys are taped to his pail. I toss in a buck and don't ask him how he plans to get money to children no one can find. I stare at the boys and ask about the light.

"Bless you," he says. "You see it."

"That's not what I meant."

"Oh," he says. "I'm not Catholic either."
His collar's stained and booze clouds his eyes

"I want my money back."

He considers me a moment. Someone stops, looks at the both of us, then pitches change into the pail.

"It is bright," the priest says, reaching in and giving me the dollar. "Listen, just stand next to me, will you? You're good for business."

I limp away, skidding my fingertips over the bars. I'm down here for the night, drinking on a break from my study of fish at UCSD. The Corona is cheap, two dollars a quart.

"It's best to keep your eyes wide open." I say to a man I'm passing. He looks at me with disbelief, as if he cannot figure any stranger having the nerve to speak to him from nowhere.

"Stick with me."

Brick rectangles are set in the concrete walk, and sea glass wind chimes tinkle in the hot breeze. I decide to take that fake priest's blessing after all. I'll take it, and that'll be the end of it, nothing hanging over me, no missed opportunities, an ace in the hole. That's what a Catholic education can do to you.

"Taxi? Taxi?" Three drivers crash toward me.

"Cuanto?"

"Cinco, amigo." says one.

"Four," the second counters.

"Five," the third says.

Dust dries my teeth, and the warm smell of buttered popcorn waves in my nose. The upturned palms of a beggar reek with piss. His shirt says, "I'm an optimist."

"Tres," I say.
"Cost five dollar," the first driver says.

"Follow me," the last one says. He's young, with precisely greased hair and a brown shirt tucked into brown, pressed slacks. I slide next to him into the lead cab and we're off.

"Don't worry," he says, flicking on the radio. "This is Mexico."

Ranchera crackles out the dashboard speakers. The driver snaps his fingers and says something about getting laid.

"I learned Ingles from the American girls," he says. "Used to work the hotels."

Traffic's fat in the lanes leaving the country. Souvenir stalls crowd that side of the highway. The Mexicans who aren't working from the stalls bump through the cars like pinballs, trinkets raised, voices ringing. A song about the woman of the world comes on the radio. It's a slow, bittersweet song, and I listen as the cab bridges the leached, concrete-channeled Rio Tijuana, follows signs for Rosarito and Ensenada, and loops west to the Carretera Internacional.

"The girls," the driver says, still grooving. "Primera clase."

"Write a book."

"Si, hombre," he says, laughing and looking at himself in the rearview. He rakes a hand through his hair. "Maybe you write it for me."

The cab horseshoes left around the Monument de la Independencia onto Avenida Revolucion. The shrine celebrates the eclipse of Spanish rule in 1821. It's pointed and white, a squat Washington Monument.
"You want to be here next week," the driver says. "September 16th."

"Good time?"

"Muy bueno." He turns to me and smiles. "Las chicas."

Two boys swing open the door on the corner of Calle 2A. A third wiggles between them and snakes his hand around the handle. I pay the driver, hop out, and the boys say, "Tip?"

"Remember, hombre," the driver says, leaning across the front seat. "You're in fairyland now. It's magic time."

"Tip?"

"No."

"Quarter?" asks one boy.

"Siento." I say, and they do their best sad-eyed sulk.

"Okay, okay."

A cyclecade of tan-clad policia drags down the cobblestone street. The rack-mounted red and blue bubble lights spin into neon and night. Although I know better, the colors make me thirsty.

Sirens wail. A midget wedges a box camera between his pudgy hands, squints down into the box then up to a woman straddled bareback on a burro painted white, striped black like a zebra. The woman raises her arm, smiles and spurs the burro with her blue high heels. The animal shifts its ass, and the midget triggers the shutter.

"Yeeeeeeeeeeeha!"

Rap thumps through the walls of a disco. Tight-dressed
Mexican and California girls stand in line and laugh at the boys packing the balcony above them. The boys grin, look rough, and one yells, “I’m your fucking Romeo.”

“Better get down here then,” a girl shouts.

I laugh and walk away, comfortable with the texture of the sidewalk, enjoying the embedded-pebble, the way my soles grip the bumps.


“No thanks.”

“Dirt cheap,” he says, eyes trying to bore into mine. “Entiende usted?”

“Sure,” I lie, pulling back. I don’t understand him at all. “Don’t touch me.”

“Ooo, la, la,” he says as I start moving, cutting through a family huddled on the sidewalk. They’re all eating hot dogs, and the vendor is counting their money.

“Gravy,” the father says. “This Mexico is gravy.”

I head south toward a pack of bars where I know the price of beer, where I do not mind sitting alone long into the night. What I’m doing here is I’m a high water buoy pulling adrift in the tide when I’m supposed to be marking twain. I’m supposed to be a lighthouse, a beacon for a sea-tossed soul.

But the sky’s red and redder in the morning. I’ll use a blessing or whatever else it takes to keep me afloat in the rip.
The row of stools is set in a line from the swivel doors to the bathroom in back. When I'm drinking, geometry is one of my concerns. A warped mirror throws distorted images over the bar.

"You could make more money with a new mirror," I say to the bartender.

"You a maricon?" he asks.

"No, Libra. But I hate the stigma attached. I'm not balanced at all."

He hurries away. Jellied reflections quiver in the stale air, and the empty tables behind me look part of a stage set for a ghost town. The bartender had told me he likes it that way, that he was once an extra in a silent movie. He played himself, a barkeep in a good ol' saloon where gun play separated the men from the boys. He was killed by two stray bullets. The bartender ad-libbed his last words, but even though the film was silent, his speech was cut, and he was left to die without so much as a close-up. The director said no one would believe a bartender who said such things.

I take another drink of gold mescal, wanting to reach the worm sunk dead near the bottle-bottom. I'm happy the bar isn't crowded. I imagine it's my little harmless secret, the only kind of secret I want to have. It's easy to be selfish most of the time. The mescal's going down fine.

"What are you doing here?" the bartender asks.

"Ever hear the name Barnes? You got your SAG card, right? Ever see a guy that looks like me but older? Around the sets?"

"How 'bout a pork hock?" he says, twisting the jar lid.

Outside, people rush by. Their feet strobe beneath the
swivel doors

"Thanks."

"Don't lose it," he says.

I feel my pocket. Inside's a letter I got this week from my mother. It says, "I am terminal." Says it just like that.

Flat, like a fucking greeting card. It's been in my pocket for days.

Posters of never-never land stamp the bar walls. A sailfish breaks water. Pyramids reach the stars, and a samurai stands with sword drawn over a cowering peasant. The peasant's on his knees, helpless before the facts of his life. I grow brave, save the peasant, and he's introducing me to his daughter when a man comes through the swivel doors and sits on the stool to my left.

"What's your poison?" the bartender asks.

I feel my pocket.

"Shake my hand," the man says, staring at the bartender and lifting his arm onto the teak. He has a mechanical hand with metal hooks for fingers that he opens then clenches into a tight fist.

"You loco."

"I'll have a scotch on the rocks."

"Sí. senor."

The man turns to me, and I hope I know a friend of his.

"Shake my hand."

"Which one?"

He looks at me slow and steady. My eye twitches. Then he starts laughing louder than all get out and asks where I'm from and I say Montana, and he says you're kidding, do you know
Thurston Howell from Custer? I say sorry, and he goes the name's Hunter and that's all right. Thurston's an asshole and owes me mucho money from a zinc mine gone bust.

"He's tragic. Split for Sparks with a half Nez Perce squaw. Howell claims she's a relation of old Chief Joseph himself and there could be a future in that. Said they were gonna ride Highway 50, the loneliest road in America, bare-assed with the top down."

"I like that."

"That's the problem. I do too."

"Bartender!"

He hustles with our drinks, takes my money and leaves us. Hunter looks fifty, overweight and smells like a locker room floor. He has the same scheming forehead as my father. The wrinkles might as well be road maps.

"What's a kid like you doing here?" he asks.

"Don't get fatherly."

"Be serious boy."

"I have a letter in my pocket and I can't quite throw it out. If I throw it out, I'm giving it too much credence. So I'm choosing to forget."

"That'll never work."

"I can't believe what I can't remember. Yet the letter fascinates me."

"Let me see it," he says.

"What?"

"That's pretty good."

I take a bite out of the pork hock. It's rubbery and soaked
with pickle vinegar I need to skip a grove, our conversation's getting dangerous We need bar talk.

"Has your friend Thurston Howell spent time on Gilligan's Island?"

"Aaah, don't ever say that again. It's unoriginal I told you, the man is tragic Don't ever ask him about his name. Television caused that man's fall, its existence is his flaw. Imagine having that to deal with? Howell was an upstanding crook until that TV show aired He had a wife, kids Now he's so damned unpredictable"

"I can imagine I mean I can sympathize Lovey this, Lovey that"

"Aren't you the guy? Can I borrow some money? Aaah, a perfect nightmare"

"I guess we should let him have his fun."

"We?" Hunter asks

I nod Hunter's metal hand shoots rays of ceiling light I stare as he alternately clutches his glass and taps mechanical fingers on the bar

"Let me see the--"

"So your friend's off chasing women in Nevada What are you doing here?"

"Oh. Yes, I see," he says, staring at me and smiling. "I'm in search of petty crime"

We both take drinks of our drinks The mescal slides down my throat like a slug Hunter goes, ahhhh.

"May I?" he says, motioning toward the pork hock

"Sure"
He chews off a piece of the foot and swallows it quickly.
"Tastes like a wet surgical glove," he says. "I've had bridge work."

The bartender refills our glasses and gives Hunter a turkey gizzard on a napkin. Hunter frowns.
"My police scanner blew up so I knew it was time to head south," he says. Then he starts telling me crime stories.

Hunter says a man told the police a black guy stole his '73 Cadillac Eldorado, a crimson beauty with leather interior. The cop asked how the man knew it was a black guy, and the man said he had a car phone and called it. The black guy answered, "Did you steal my car?" the man asked. The black guy said he did, said you ain't never gonna see it again, and put the man on hold.

"Did you hear about James Brown's wife?" Hunter asks. "She was pulled over in Mobile, Alabama for speeding and was nabbed red-handed with a shitload of illegal substances. Mrs. Brown got violent and argued with the fuzz, claimed diplomatic immunity because her husband's the King of Soul."

"You're prejudiced."

"No. I'm serious."

I look across the bar at us sitting here. The blurred image rights itself the longer I stay and drink. I start to understand Hunter, and that scares the hell out of me. Some people are just too easy to talk to. But then I can't help who those people are. I try not to be afraid of anyone.

"You didn't hear all this on your scanner."

He smiles.
"A man swore his parrot talked when it was alone, so he set
up a video camera to monitor the varmint before leaving his house.
One day a gang of punks robbed the place but didn’t see the
camera, and when the man came home he sat down, watched the movie
then turned the tape into the police. They nabbed ‘em.”

I smile, and it occurs to me that no one really knows what
anyone else is smiling about.

“What about the bird?”

“The man was robbed again. In that case, the burglar
released the bird from its cage. After being caught, the
authorities asked him why he did it. The burglar sat in his cell
and said he couldn’t stand seeing anything locked up.”

Our drinks are empty, and the bar gets darker and quieter
than no noise. My shirt pastes the small of my back. Outside,
people still walk past going anywhere but here. It’s so damn hot
and I think I might care who those people are, where they’re all
going.

“Let me see the worm.” I yell to the bartender.

A Federale struts through the swivel doors toward us and
behind, cracking his nightstick against his palm. The bartender
smiles and brings over the bottle. He turns it upside down and
the last of the mescal spills on wood. The worm slips from the
lip then falls to the puddle. It lies there as the liquor thins,
and I reach for it, but the Federale squeezes in and slams his
hand on mine. I turn my face up to him and Hunter reaches over
and puts his mechanical fist on top.

“Three potato,” he says.

We look at each other in turns. My scalp’s wet and itches.
The Federale’s breath is loud, ticks the seconds, and a fly buzzes
and lands in the mescal puddle. I feel the bartender watching. Maybe he’s thinking about filming, about one last chance to get the scene down right. It seems we are stuck.

Until Hunter lifts his fist. The Federale smiles, takes his hand off, and I pry mine from the bar. The soaked worm lies flat against the teak. I pinch and raise it in the air. It dangles between us.

“Amigos,” the bartender pleads.

I give the worm to the Federale. He tilts his head back, drops the worm into his mouth and swallows. He burps and laughs. Hunter shrugs, and the Federale nods to the bartender and holsters his nightstick. He takes the turkey gizzard, eats that, then slaps our backs and walks out.

“That was close,” Hunter says. “Real fucking close.”

“Bravo, bravo,” the bartender says, clapping.

“Another round,” I say.

“Si, amigo. On me.”

He hurries for another bottle and Hunter asks if I have any dinero. I say, of course. I’m a student, and he says that’s a good thing. “I love young people,” he says.

The bartender returns with two tequila shots and two beers. He asks us to wait one moment, pours himself a shooter then raises his glass. We toast and chug the tequila.

“Listen,” Hunter says, turning on his stool and facing me. He rests his mechanical hand on my shoulder. “I have interest in a copper mine. Thurston and I are prepared to let you in on something big.”

And he starts talking about a heavenly mountain in Sonora.
where he's certain the metal will run like water. I stop listening. It's my father talking. I see it in the eyes, gold riding on the tail of every barroom idea. Get rich quick. The eyes show either boom or bust, no in between. Never that.

"Let me see the letter," Hunter says.

"Dad."

"What's that you say? Are you your father's son? Oh. fathers, provoke not your children to rage."

"My mother's dying," I say.

"Whose isn't?"

Indian women wrapped in rebozos huddle with children along Avenida Revolucion. They kneel behind junk for sale—costume jewelry, tin roses, straw hats and string bracelets spread on blankets. All of the old and young women sell the same things.

A small girl wearing an orange and blue New York Met jacket slumps against a lamppost and plays the accordion. Her thin arms pull, push, pull and her fingers flutter over the keys. She doesn't look up but keeps her balding head bent to her music. The song, a cowboy poet song, is supposed to be played in thirteen-eighths meter, but the girl's rhythm is off. I know the accordion. I suffered an adolescence typified by deliberate contractions of poison ivy and the longing for a wrist cast. Thus, on a pawnshop steal, I mastered the two step polka.

So I drop some change into the girl's cup and walk back the way I came. Policía direct traffic at each intersection. They ignore the signals, blow whistles and wave some cars through.
stops, halt others at greens Stiff arms punctuate the trills
A victoria bearing two lovers clop-clops past an order to stand
The officer puts a hand to his gun, leaves the intersection and
trots after them. The lovers laugh and the driver keeps going,
traffic clogging in their wake

"Looking for amor in this world?" the man in front of the
black curtain asks "Cerveza? Dirt cheap"

"Yes, I am. Cuanto?"
"I D ?"
I reach for my wallet
"Come on."

He looks both ways, takes my arm and leads me through the
curtain. The room's smoke-black and bodies hug the bar. The man
leaves, and girls half-naked and red rise from wooden booths,
stand on tables and pose, a few with painted hands on hips, a few
with hands caressing thighs and a few more sucking fingers. I
squint, and the girls are everywhere

The man returns with a skinny bottle of beer He gives it to
me, and a fat woman hooks my waist

"Come," she says
"No thanks"

Her red lips spread across her face, lifting her cheeks into
her eyes I don't know what to do. I mean I want to keep enjoying
good health, so I take a sip of beer. The woman's teeth are white
and broken, her breath smells burnt. Thighs, bulging like maples,
branch into hills underneath her negligee She starts tugging me

"No," I say though she doesn't listen. I hold back, she
keeps pulling. and then it seems to not go with her might be the
hardest thing in the world. I stop, but this big woman will have none of that.

She pulls me back to the corner of the bar. The other women step from their tables and sit on the booth tops, long legs bare, wedges like white birds in flight.

"Blow job," the fat woman says, patting the rear booth bench. "Blow job"

I turn around. Nobody’s paying attention. Nobody thinks anything funny or wrong is happening. I see myself standing here, in a Tijuana whorehouse with one hand on a fat woman, the other on a skinny bottle of beer, and I laugh. I laugh because really, who knows what’s right or wrong until they’re midway into a thing? And isn’t that our one true problem?

The woman starts belly laughing, and we’re doubling over now, looking at each other and pointing. Then she stops, puts a hand up to close my eyes and kisses me.

I admit I’m about to take the easy way out, I have no problem with that. I slouch next to her in the booth, and she reclines my head, but I open my eyes. It’s the least I can do. I can face the woman and this thing we’re doing. She has eyes like champagne—beautiful eyes.

The woman starts unbuttoning my jeans, first the top button, the next, then the lower ones. I can’t net what has led me to this moment, one I feel driven to whether there are real reasons or not. She presses into me and curls her head to my lap. I can pick any cause or its opposite. I don’t need an excuse for something that feels this good. Her mouth is warm, and I dig into my pocket, pull out the letter from my mother and stick it into
the fat woman's hand as she sucks

Ceramic Big Macs, Hells Angels and Billy the Kids stand in rows. I pay the cabby my last five dollars and climb out to the right of the traffic sifting from Mexico. The statues look like small, cartoon soldiers ready to march my ass home.

Clapboard stalls are jammed with food and crap—burritos, penny-candy pinatas and dinosaurs. Plastic Virgin Mary's glow green, dancing in brown fists. People sit in, behind and between the stalls, and children chase each other in figure eights. I want to step right up and win something for a girl at my side.

"You," she says "Blanket?"

A black-haired woman stands next to me, a blanket between us. I back away. The blanket's hand woven, pastel blue, orange and brown--the blue of an old woman's eyes.

"No"
"But you are limping."
"What? Well, never mind."
"Five dollars," she says, smiling. "One movie. You do not want to go to the movies tonight anyway. I'm tired. You would have to go alone. You don't want to go alone, do you?"

"Habla Ingles?"
Her smile quits. "Boy. Do not insult me."

She wears Levis and a white cotton blouse, the top buttons free, and huaraches on her tanned feet. Her perfume laces with the spice in the air. It smells cool, out of place in the dust and heat.
"Three," I say, although I don't have a dime.

"This is how my family gets by."

I look at the smooth slope of her breasts, the skin dark and warm with sweat. I can almost smell the salt.

"I'm no bleeding heart."

The woman looks at the sky and smiles, her mouth white as a crescent moon.

"You're not what?"

I can tell she isn't used to being turned down. It is a nice blanket, and if I had the money I'd buy it and save me some trouble.

"Bleeding heart," I say.

She starts laughing, her eyes turning dark, cinnamon growing deeper, blacker, black as night. You know she can tell you some things.

"Come," she says. "You're in Mexico. I picked you out of a crowd. This is your lucky day."

I don't know what's happening anymore.

"We're a lot alike," the woman says. "I can tell."

I backtrack over what was said to invite this luck as a young, one-legged American man dressed in combat fatigues hobbles past on a crutch. In his free hand he holds a mug clinking with coins. A bandana with the stars and bars covers his blond hair.

I find nothing in what I said. I'm clean. I'm exhibiting good behavior.

"I need some luck," I say. "How do you know me?"

"Yes," she says. "You are the one."
This chapter is a return to the time-present of the novel, after Carson's return from California. In New Jersey, he's working as a chauffeur for a limousine service. His clients are a group of bar-hopping men. Carson spends the night thinking about his mother who has died, about his first girlfriend and about his father, as he waits outside the various nightclubs and strip joints for his clients. It's revealed that he goes to California to look for his father and stays there as his mother slowly dies. The chapter ends with Carson snorting coke with his clients and the women they had picked up. He participates in an orgy, gets tipped, goes jogging and collapses on the beach.
FOUR

Ranchera wheezes from plastic-shaded windows, cantinas and street corners. The strings twang, and accordions moan in the night. I pay the cabby three bucks and get out before the boys can clump together, scurry over and cost me money. It's not that I cannot spare a quarter, but these scenes add up, and I feel I'm beating a system. It becomes a small matter of free will, the mouse stomping on the cat.

"Tip?" a boy says

"Tonight," I say, "I'm an island."

"Si," he says "Tip."

I give him a quarter and sidle over to the Long Bar. It's loud and American and one hundred feet of teak, a good place to get drunk. Slap backs and talk about how wild it is to be drinking beer in another country while most everyone else is still at home. It's a hole my father would enjoy, so I order a Tecate and toast his ghost. That's a reason for me to stay here when I should be heading east, I know what I should be doing.

Back outside, I hail a driver who takes me to the border. I made a circle because I'm nervous meeting a new girl. The cabby stops far right of the traffic so I can walk and he can turn around to corral another fare. For a moment I feel we're a team, like he might mean it if he wished me luck. But then I pay him and we go our own ways.

Corrugated tin teepees pack the ground to my right, below the sidewalk. Drink Coca-Cola's painted red on the metal.
dirt-caked girl chases a boy around and around one of the homes. The boy looks like he’s running for his life. The girl chases him in a way that says, this is only a game to me. I can catch your ass anytime I want. They disappear in back, a dog barks, then here they come again, the girl giggling and the boy running dizzy laps.

I walk to the front of the souvenir stalls and head down the line. The heat scrapes against my dry skin, so dry it looks wet. I shouldn’t be nervous, but there she is. “Shit.”

“Que dices?”

“Nothing. I’m getting dandruff.”

“You’re back.”

“Yeah,” I say. “Good to see you.”

She reaches out and touches my arm. All of me focuses on her touch.

“Blanket?” she says. “Made it myself.” She unfurls it, shakes and spreads it like a beach towel. The corners fall smooth and flat on the ground. A man curses as he has to swerve around us.

“Do you always approach people this way?”

“You came to me,” she says. “Want the blanket?”

“No thanks.”

She sits down on the blanket in the middle of the sidewalk. I stand looking at her, people pushing by, and she pulls her knees to her chin and puts out a hand. I keep my eyes on hers, take her hand and drop anchor face to face. Then she lets go.

“You said I was the one. Said we were alike.”

“If these were medieval times,” she says. “Your trouble would
be plain as a lump on your head.

"Trouble?"

"The thing that's haunting you. The reason you are sitting here"

"Well, I'd like a date"

"No one just sits here"

"Where'd you learn English so well?"

"You mean you're not going to ask what you asked me last time? If I can habla Ingles? Good. I like that in a man. In the village where I lived there was an American student staying next door. He liked me"

Waists, thighs, knees and children streak behind her and by our side. A boy stops short, turns and stares at me. He seems puzzled and points a stubby finger. An arm yanks him away.

"Excuse us," a voice at the end of the arm says

"Okay," I say, but the boy and arm are gone. Money chatter parts around us and exhaust fumes make my mouth taste yellow.

"Why are you blushing?" I ask

"That was cute," she says. "Friendly. Now why don't you buy this nice blanket?"

I skate my hand over the stream of brown and red cotton between us. We're sitting on butterfly wings that span from end to end. The woman's hair flows long and thick, spilling on the wings. She's beautiful in an easy way. Maybe she'll come with me to Hollywood. I'll lure my father out with the promise of a woman, then once I have him, I'll send him home to my mother to ask for her forgiveness. If he doesn't go, I'll shoot him.

"It's not that I don't like the blanket," I say
"What is it then?" she asks, taking my hand and turning it palm up. "Hands are very important, you know. The most important part of the body."

I do know. Hers are warm, tan and clean. You can tell most things about a person by their hands. It's a fact.

"Ever have your fortune read?" she asks.

"I'm one step ahead of that."

"Ahead of your future?"

"Yes. And ahead of needing it read."

She looks at my hand and glides a finger over one of the creases. Someone knocks my shoulder with their knee and keeps moving as a band of horns begins to sound in the traffic. The woman's fingertips bump over my callouses and trace the other lines on my palm. She puts my hand back in my lap and says, "You better be."

She's serious, her mouth thin and eyes dark. I open my hand to see what's there. I keep looking, trying to find something, although I don't have that kind of faith.

"You have no love line," she says.

"Yes, I do."

"Show me."

I check my hand then look at her.

"Trust me," I say.

The woman searches my eyes. A smile lightens hers, she taps my knee and says, "I am just joking. Your future's golden. Stick with me."

"What trouble do you have?" I ask.

"You'll see."
Here I go, bearing left when I should be going right. But I've always believed that too much self-control clogs the heart.

"Deal," I say.

She closes my fingers and takes my hand in hers.

"Pardon me," someone says.

I lift her hand and kiss the back of it. She shakes her head and says, "You're sweet. Just a boy."

"Sold!" a man shouts.

"Tell me one thing," I say. "Are we sitting on wings?"

She looks down at the blanket and flicks a piece of lint.

"You see what you want to," she says, releasing my hand. "But actually, it's an hour glass."

The woman stands and brushes something from the front of her blouse, and I watch the spot on the blanket where she was sitting. I can't see a thing besides these big brown wings.

We go for the center of town.

"I like to drink," she says, leaning into me as the cab wheels around the Independence Monument.

"That's why I'm here," I say, thinking of the letter I gave to the whore. I'll have to get that back. You can't let such information get around. It'll gain credence.

"Right now you think you're the greatest, don't you?" she says.

"Throw in a little self-doubt."

"Just a little."

"Man," I say. "This is easy."
"I'm a woman."

We duck into a dark, peeling plank-walled shop on Avenida Madero, one block east from where the cab dropped us. The woman shoulders the blanket, the frayed end falling to her feet. She stands next to me and I like that. Always the small things are what I like most. If there's any kind of ease I can then tell if words might make a difference, see if they will be something that we share between us.

I buy a bottle of tequila, and on our way out I pitch a quarter to a boy picking cigarette butts from the dirt. The boy smiles, pinches the quarter between thumb and forefinger and shakes his fist sharp above his head like a conductor or a soldier. He lowers his arm, clenches the coin and darts down a littered alley on the side of the shop, hidden from the city lights.

"What did you do that for?" she says.

"When I worked as a dishwasher I'd collect butts from the dirty ash trays, sneak into the bathroom and smoke them down to the filter. Some of the cigarettes had lipstick on them. It's scary."

"Don't give anything for nothing," she says, "You're lucky he didn't spit on you. I would've."

She crosses the street and I watch her back, the white blouse damp with sweat, until she stops and turns, one foot on the curb. People cut in front of her, her skin glows pink in the light of a cantina. "And another thing," she says, "Can you please carry..."
I smile, go to her and take the blanket, curling it around my neck.

"Gracias," she says.

"Chivalry is not dead."

"Then we better hurry."

We walk a few blocks behind a wagon vendor who bushwhacks a path through the crowd. American college students sit on the sill of an open bay window, their golf-shirt backs to us, crewcut heads tilted, swallowing beer. A prostitute dressed in yellow talks to a teenager as she cups her hand on the side of his neck and strokes. I watch them until a man carrying shopping bags blocks my view, and when he passes, the pair’s gone.

Alone, we hang a left onto 5A, Calle Emiliano Zapata. Avenida Negrete and darkness lie ahead. The woman leads me to her family’s apartment above a fruit stand. Old mangoes, papayas, dates and dewberries are scattered on the street. The pulp odor mixes with shit, sweat and fish. Big bluefin.

She steps up stairs that end at a small landing outside the second floor. I wait on the sidewalk below her, gripping the bagged tequila by the bottle’s neck and thinking about that goddamned letter and the danger I’ve put myself in. I could’ve given it to this woman, kept one eye on it and been a lot safer. I’ll apologize and get the letter back. I bound up the stairs, and the woman laughs, puts her arm around my waist and presses her ear against the thin paneling.

"All right," she says and unlocks the door.

Two bare bulbs ignite the stark white walls. The apartment’s
spotless and separate from the street below. A folding card table
with floral print, vinyl-covered chairs sits near the open kitchen
in back. A bed with white sheets lies against the living room
wall beneath a window to my right. A door across from us is
closed. And two children, a boy and girl, are sprawled on the
floor, playing with a mouse. They have it dressed in a rodent-
sized poncho and sombrero.

"Where's Mama?" the woman asks the girl.

"Gringo," the small girl says, pointing at me. The boy stops
playing with the trapped mouse.

"She's outside," the boy says.

"My brother and sister."

I say hello, and she takes the blanket from my neck and
tosses it on the bed. Then she tells the kids she loves them and
to get back on the street. They nod, and the boy reaches under
the bed, slides out a wooden candy box and hands it to the girl.
He grabs the mouse and leads the way out, and I wonder if they'll
sell what they have. I wonder if they'll be opening cab doors and
giving directions to Americans tonight. They might push limp
flowers and plastic vials of perfume that look like blown fuses on
people who seem okay. And I'll keep wondering because this isn't
the kind of thing to ask a woman you just met.

She pulls out a chair and asks me to sit. I do, and she goes
into the closed room. Her brother and sister didn't try to sell
me anything. They could've asked, but I'm glad they didn't. I'm
not sure what is the proper way to handle a situation like that.
The complications seem enormous.

When the woman comes back, she chooses two glasses from the
cupboard and joins me at the card table. The glasses have airbrushed Ronald McDonalds on them. She shrugs, and I lift the bottle from the brown bag, slit the seal with my thumb and twist off the cap.

"Do they sell perfume?"

"Salude," she says, ignoring me. We sit and drink the first half glass without talking but watching each other a lot. The room's warm, and strips of sound come in from the street below. I don't know what to do or why I'm even here. I think about sleeping with her more than anything.

"What is your job in California?"

"You don't know my name," I say.

"Your name is Carson. Like the famous man."

I look at her and she hands me my wallet. She smiles, and I do the same. Just like they do in the movies.

"I'm a student," I say, taking a difficult gulp of booze. The tequila's lukewarm and tastes like a styrofoam cup.

"Did you see much of La Migra in California? In the north?"

"They aren't everywhere," I say, splashing some tequila into the bottom of my glass. "What's your name?"

"They are everywhere. I have checked. I mean, I would think they aren't needed here. There's jobs. Money."

We sit across from each other, and it isn't awkward. She's looking down at the table and picking at a piece of torn vinyl. I once met a woman who told me I saw the world through my penis. I don't know about that, but I hope she meant she saw in me a person who wanted something and would get it. I'm not certain that's me either, but I'm willing to believe it, and right now I'm looking
at a woman who could be such a person. She’s intent on getting something, that much is clear, and she’ll be successful if I can help it. I’m now thinking that helping others is the best way to kill time. Both the silence and the words between us do not hurt. "Cecile," she says. "My name is Cecile. Like the saint." "Saint Cecile?" "Sí. Cecile Avina." Her eyes smile, and she looks away. I sit back. The sky’s thin outside the window over the bed. Pale red haze rests on the heat. "That’s a pretty name." "We’re from a village near Oaxaca. My mother brought us here, and I was old enough to know the reasons why that was a good thing."

"What reasons?"

"This is the edge of the world."

"Do you want that? I don’t. I want a wide berth. Stability. Some people might think it’s sad, but I want things to stay the way they are."

"I can leave," she says.

"Don’t. Please. I knew I shouldn’t have said that."

"I mean Tijuana."

"Where would you go? Mexico City?"

"I can walk to Arizona or California," she says. "Maybe fly.

"Walk?"

I don’t think she can walk. I know I could, but we’re different. We are not so much alike as she thinks. I drink my
tequila and pour a little into her glass

"I can see by the way you are looking at me you don't know shit," she says. "I can do just about anything I want to. I can do things you wouldn't believe. That is the way I am."

"Can you keep secrets?"

"I can fly," she says. "I can take off and never come down."

What do I know? I drink more tequila, spilling some. Maybe she can fly. She reaches her hand across the table and wipes a drop from my chin. Cecile leaves her fingers on my lips and I kiss them.

She pulls her hand away.

"I'm sorry for being mean," she says. "But what do you know?"

I try to break down my way of thinking. I was born on the lucky side of a line. You only see photos of naked children sprayed with napalm because they don't have white skin. I know that. Cecile and her trouble are as real as me and mine. What I don't know is if sitting here with her will quicken the spin of earth enough to keep the facts of my life still. The faster you go, the more things stay the same.

"We're communicating," I say.

"You bought," she says.

Okay, she's good. I'll ask her for a date. The next letter I get from my mother, I'll give to Cecile. Cecile and I will marry, get a house in the country and have children. We'll grow old and the kids will call my mother Granny.

"Will you do me a favor?" Cecile asks.

"Yes. Anything."

"Will you help me take my family to California?"
"What?" I say "I mean go"

"It is not like that. And no. There will be no green cards. There won't."

"But we just met."

"That is the only way to get things done," she says "You either do a thing or you don't."

"But you said you could walk." I don't know what the hell's going on anymore or why I feel myself about to say yes. I know I shouldn't be doing this, but I am.

"You can make a lot of money. I don't have five hundred dollars for each of us to give to the pollero. But I have some. I do not trust the pollero. They are rapists."

And then she starts talking about a family restaurant along my side of the border, and I tell her I know the place. You can find work there, she says. It'll be our way across. The restaurant will be the place from where you learn the landscape and how La Migra moves. We can sneak over the brown hills and down through Canon Zapata or run right through the parking lots into San Ysidro.

"It's done all the time," she says.

Now I'm no asshole, but I sure feel like one listening to this. I catch myself being real serious.

"And maybe in California we will have a sugarmoon," she says, taking a sip of tequila. "And that is sweeter than honey."

I smile. The woman knows my weakness.

"A coyote," she says "You'll need a gun."
I sat on the porch steps whittling a length of oak branch down to nothing. Aunt Marge and Mrs. Johnson were bundled in their chairs, breathing frost. The Christmas lights blazed the near-dusk, and I remembered when I was younger, collecting Popsicle sticks on the beach at the end of the day. I'd find fifty or a hundred tips stained blue, pink or green, wrap them in a fat rubber band and march home to build boats to race in the rain and tide puddles running curbside into the sewers. I used Elmer's Glue and constructed different keel, stern, and rudder designs depending on the conditions. If there was any wind, I'd build a mast, yard and boom for a tin-foil sail. Flood water meant sleek, sharp-bowed cigarette hulls. I wore rub-on tattoos of anchors or hearts with a girl's name stenciled in them, and said things like, "Batten down the hatches" and "Thar she blows." My boats would break apart midway across the sea, and then my imagination couldn't hold them together. The storm waves were just ripples. The howling wind ebbed to a slow breeze. The sea shrunk back to a puddle, and the Popsicle sticks split separate and drifted from each other as the glue dissolved.

"What are you making, Johnny?" Aunt Marge asked.

"A Christcraft," I said.

"No voodoo," she said.

I have said Aunt Marge and Mrs. Johnson were my mother's friends and they were. My mother and I lived in that house with Aunt Marge. She took us in after my father left for Hollywood.
when I was twelve He left to become a movie star, made a couple of films and never came home I saw one, his first, and in it he got eaten by a pack of wild dogs. I forget the title, but it was a movie about survival My mother kept a picture of him hanging in her bedroom.

She was a woman who never cried She wouldn't give herself that My mother had auburn hair like rope, usually tied in a long braid She wore old jeans and t-shirts On Sundays, she might wear a dress with a flowered print She always asked how I slept, what I dreamt about It seemed important to her She smiled, kissed my forehead and looked out the window. The soft light warmed her face and you could see she was not so old, yet it wasn't in her eyes Imagine she was a woman who never cried.

I didn't come home when she was dying of cancer because I was running with Cecile Cecile got a hold on me I couldn't break, even if I wanted to try, the racing days were a comic strip that didn't need much transition between frames and the words bubbled on top of my head. Someday you might know what I mean, if it ever happens to you. My mother went bald. Her body quit on her, turned inside out Just stopped

Aunt Marge said the phone was ringing and asked me to get it I told her it was just the bird, Foghorn Leghorn, singing, so she whacked her hearing aid and asked if I could make some more tea Aunt Marge rarely wore her hearing aid She said she didn't trust it, and if she wanted to hear something, she would hear it herself The elderly need an out, she'd said We learn self-
defense.

I went inside, into the kitchen. The last of the sun, purple and red in the west, crept in through the north windows. It's amazing the way stars become old, ordinary light, making shapes on the hardwood floor. I poured warm water into the pot and looked out at that sun.

We ate spaghetti when my father left. My mother made stabs at variety--spaghetti with butter, spaghetti with cheese, spaghetti with tomato sauce, meat sauce, canned clams—but after a few months I barely touched my plate, no mean feat seated next to Aunt Marge. I stared at my heap of limp spaghetti and thought of the moist clumps of raw squid stuck to the dry docks on the Glimmer Glass, or of the women's newly permed heads held fast under the blow dryers at the beauty parlor where my mother sometimes went to talk with a friend. I longed for a dog. Aunt Marge poked the back of my hand with her fork and said, "If you want to grow up like Pete Rose or make a lot of money, you better start eating." One time the tines broke skin and the fork anchored straight up. I started yelling 911 until my mother pulled the fork out. Four red pinpricks spilled over into tiny circles on my hand, quickly clotted, and my mother said, OK now, that's enough. She asked Aunt Marge not to do that and said I could be excused to finish my homework. I cleared my plate, and Aunt Marge winked as if we had a plan and it worked.
I traipsed home from school past the baseball card and stamp shop. Once I tried to sell my John Vukovich card. The third baseman looked like the Wicked Witch of the West and I didn’t want it in my collection. I tried in games of flip to dump the card on kids I didn’t like, but the curse was on me and I always won it back. Every new pack of cards I bought had John Vukovich buried in the middle. So I grew desperate, decided to sell. I went in the shop, and the man squeezed from behind the desk, stood behind me and talked in a warm voice, massaging my shoulders as we scanned the price book. I felt his breath on my neck. He moistened his pink, meaty fingers before turning each page. What’s your name? he said. I said, what does that have to do with the price of beans in China?

A heavy white curtain filtered the sunlight banging through the front picture window, and a small oscillating fan stirred the stale air. It was set on a case that contained the valuable cards. The glass top was smudged with stamp glue and finger prints. A Johnny Bench rookie and a ’68 Willie Mays smiled from beneath the glass.

"It says here in my book that Mr. Vukovich batted .289 in 1975," the man said, kneading my shoulders. "That’s pretty good."

"It’s all right," I said.

"That was in thirty-one games. The year before he played in thirty-eight, and the year before that in fifty-five."

"I have the card in my hand," I said.

The man’s fat palm fell to the small of my back. He rubbed in tiny circles. His left arm bridged my shoulder. That hand pressed flat on the counter next to the price guide.
"Do you play baseball?" he asked

"No," I said. "How much for the card?"

"Mr. Vukovich is six foot one, bats and throws right handed."

I pulled away from him, scooting under his arm.

"I have the numbers on the back of the card." I said.

"Let's see," he said, closing the book. He smiled and moved toward me. I had enough, so I said, "Forget it," and started to clear out.

"Wait," he said, "Please wait."

I dumped the curse on him, dropping the card on the shop floor. I ran from the store, the bells on the door jingling after me. The face on the card was one of those pictures in which the eyes follow you wherever you go. I imagined them giving that man hell. I only wished John Vukovich was a better ball player so the card might stand next to Willie Mays and Johnny Bench under the glass and always give it to that man good.

After that I always walked past there and past Tom's Variety where the manager wanted to catch me stealing model paint. I never built store models, so he went to lengths—once disguising himself as a vagrant and twice attempting to plant the small bottles in my New York Yankee book bag. I could never figure why he wanted to screw me, but I always saw him watching, plotting. He'd pull on his ragged blond beard and eye me from behind the cash register. I'd walk to the back of the store and the next time I saw him he would be peeking between the blue noses of belly boards, monitoring my every move. One time I winked at him and he bolted upright and returned to the register, somehow embarrassed.

I felt bad for him then. Maybe the guy had had more than his
share of hard luck, so I stole one bottle of metallic silver paint and two more of cherry red to make his day. He didn’t notice I pocketed a few raven blacks, greens and navy blues, but still he did not catch me. I considered going for a scaled model of the U S S Missouri but decided my charity had to end somewhere. A man must learn to take care of himself. He squinted at me, staring as I left the store with his paint.

I trudged home and killed wood bees. They nested below the garage eaves and I battled them with a Wiffle ball bat and can lid shield until my mother came home from work at the doctor’s office. She pulled in the pebbled drive, I opened her pick-up door, and she kissed my forehead and asked what I wanted for dinner.

“Swordfish,” I said. How about pasta?

I looked down at the round white pebbles, dug my hands into my pockets. I still wore bell bottoms, a daily experience.

“I think L D Hanson’s mother invited me over for dinner. They’re having fondue.”

She pulled me to her and held me tight. Then she let go and said, I don’t feel like eating alone tonight. She smiled. I have a surprise, she said.

“Aunt Marge will be here.”

She went to Yankee Stadium with Mrs. Johnson and the church group, my mother said. She lifted a grocery bag from the passenger side floor of the pick-up. You’ll see, she said.

I put water on to boil while my mother changed from her uniform, taking the bag with her. I set the hickory table. She came back wearing a light blue skirt, black stockings, and a white
blouse fit tight across her breasts. Her hair was down, and I thought about school that day, about Fanny Fitzpatrick being discovered with toilet paper stuffed in her shirt, and about the boy sprinting across the playground with the pink toilet paper streaking behind him like a kite, the other boys chasing and laughing. Fanny sat in the dirt with her legs folded under her and cried quietly with her face in her hands. I stood watching her until the monitor came, picked her up and escorted her to the nurse's office.

My mother said, I'll be right back, and flew out the door. I sat catapulting spit balls with my fork across the kitchen table. She returned with two white candles in polished brass holders. My mother centered them on the table, ruffled my hair then ran upstairs. She strode back down with the grocery bag. I watched her move behind the formica counter and grab the spaghetti box from the cabinet above the stove.

"What's happening?" I said.

She lowered the heat under the water and reached her hand into the bag.

Tonight, she said, and started pulling something out.

"What?"

Tonight, we will be having meatballs.

She lifted the ground beef and held the package next to her smiling face, holding it by the sides, and jutting her hips in the opposite direction like the women who pose with prizes on game shows. She stood looking at me like that. It was funny, and I kept smiling as best I could. She lowered the beef, and her smile vanished then reappeared.
And, she said, reaching into the bag again. Ta-daaa!
Out leaped a bottle of red wine
We're having ourselves a sweet time tonight, she said You and I, Carson Barnes
I saw how happy she was and turned to the window. Spaghetti and meatballs I looked out at the dirt and thin grass, at the rickety white fence separating us from the backyard of the house on Marcellas, and realized this was important to her She walked to the table, sat in the chair next to me and straightened my fork My mother took a lighter from her skirt pocket and put a flame to the candle wick
Honey, she said Tomorrow I have a date Tomorrow is Saturday.
The house on Marcellas, I thought. All these streets with M's—Morris, Mohegan, Main, Ballard, Marcellas—it's enough to drive me south. My mother lit the other candle and sat staring into the fire
"I'm happy for you," I said
And I was. She needed to get out, to be away from me and Aunt Marge once in a while My mother was beautiful without effort, and men looked at her She never did more than smile, put her head down and keep moving But I gave them the finger behind her back.

Once we were in a clothing store, a shop for women, and I saw a man following us I gaped at him to let anyone know I was onto him, but he pretended to be checking price tags or the quality of this or that fabric Finally, after I gave the man the finger and he didn't respond, I left my mother at the summertime slacks rack
and sauntered right up to him. I was a boy of twelve, and I
thought later I must have looked more than amusing, my sunken
chest puffed out and my baby face hard and red. I said to the
man, what the hell do you have in mind?

"I think your mother is pretty," he said. "I just wanted to
watch her shop for a while."

A person might think it was easy having a young and
attractive mother. But it wasn't all good, even though it must
certainly be better than most alternatives. I understood then, in
the kitchen when my mother said she had a date, that it could only
have been a matter of time.

You'll help me get ready, she said, standing and going back
to the stove. We'll do this together.

Saturday, I thought. All that free time to wander the
streets, shoot acorn guns and curse the Ayatollah Khomeini. I
could talk trash about that Iranian with the best of them. I had
already sacrificed a puppet of him, along with my Tony Orlando and
Dawn album, in the high school homecoming bonfire, and I didn't
plan on stopping there. When I was alone in the house I wore a
pin that said, "Fuck Khomeini." I muttered that to myself over
and over. I decided to lie to my Mom about Saturday.

"I told Ms. Applegate I'd help clean up the art room and get
the stage and costumes ready for the play. She said I have a way
with making things up."

I saw Ms. Applegate in town today. She said she was going
off to a condominium in the Poconos this weekend.

My mother smiled and started packing meatballs, a half-dozen,
then sealed the remaining ground beef and slid it into the
freezer. She began cooking, and I played with the candles while she wasn’t watching. I zipped my finger through the flames. I held it there longer and watched the small fire lick around both sides of the knuckle and fuse again on top, leaving a black mark on the skin. The sun peeled from the backyard, and I listened to the clatter of pots and my mother’s day at work. A woman was rushed into the emergency room next door to the doctor’s office. She was slugged in the mouth by flying lead. Her son was taking batting practice in the on-deck circle when the lead doughnut shot from the end of the bat, into the bleachers. The woman said through her broken and bleeding mouth she was going to sue her son as a representative of the Little League. Her husband had gone to law school for a year.

You know your uncle used to eat tomatoes like apples, my mother said.

“I never met him.”

He died young and publicly. That’s probably all you need to know.

“On the PT boat?”

That woman is suing her own son, my mother said.

She told me about a man who came in choking to death. He was drinking beer in the stands when a hornet buzzed into his mouth and stung him on the tongue. His face went blue and his tongue looked like a slab of wet bread sliding from his mouth.

“Did he make it?”

Of course. This world isn’t so bad.

“It’s a dangerous game,” I said.

You should start playing more, she said.
And then we were quiet. The room was mostly dark except for the fat light of the candles and the dome above the stove. The meatballs simmered and I waited for dinner, listening to the water boil.

She stole in with her hair wet, sat on the end of my bed and shook me awake by the foot.

Remember when those toes were pigs, she said. We have a big day.

I flipped over and buried my face in the pillow.

"I'm having second thoughts," I mumbled.

Oh, are you now? Don't think you're quite ready?

"We shouldn't rush anything."

Maybe you're right. Tonight we'll just stay in and play rummy with Aunt Marge. Perhaps canasta.

"I'm up."

She slapped my butt and went downstairs to cook eggs and pancakes. I worked my way from under the covers, pulled the red, white and blue feathered dart from the picture of Khomeini taped to my bedroom door, stepped back a few paces and fired it right between his eyes.

"Fuck Khomeini," I muttered.

I waded into the shower and let the water scald my thin shoulders, flushing them pink. I ran the soap through my pubic hair because I was proud of it. In the locker room before and after gym class I'd always let the waist band of my BVDs linger a little low to be certain another kid would see that hair. I
believed it was status, and I needed it because my armpits were bald, and I could never break a sweat during the games of bombardment or kill-the-man-with-the-ball. I often slicked my forehead in the water fountain to fake perspiration. I felt mature wiping that sweat, and for a minute I’d forget it wasn’t genuine and I wouldn’t be envious of the beads dropping from the hairlines of the faster growing boys, and we’d stand there side-by-side with hands on hips and make unintelligible jokes about the new curves on the girls across the gym. We boys didn’t understand our own words, but for an entire period each day, we knew that becoming a man was little more than a physical process.

I stood naked on the tile bathroom floor and struck bodybuilder poses in the steamed sink mirror. The skinny muscles stretched and tightened. I looked like a praying mantis. My black hair, just beginning to wave, hung wet past my chin. This daily ritual depressed me, and I wondered what disease I had. Every mark I discovered on my body was evidence of impending doom.

I left a trail of water down the hall. It matted the white carpet in a shaky line from where I stood next to my bed to the bathroom floor. One night while I slept in the house across town where we had lived with my father, I was wakened by heavy footsteps and grunting in the hall. I thought it might be a killer, so I whisked from bed, tip-toed to the door and cupped my hand on the imitation brass knob. I peeped the door open.

Light flashed in my eyes, then my vision tunneled straight down the white hall to the bathroom. The light was sharp and deep as an X-ray, the yellow and white tiles cold, glassy, naked.

My father was on his knees in the light, bare knees knobby on
the tile. He was naked and talking to himself I watched him vomit in the toilet, the splash long without echo. He kept throwing up then began dry heaving. His face was gray like skim milk, and cold sweat shone above his bugged eyes. The porcelain bowl gleamed with moisture. My father looked soft in that hard light. Flesh against bone. I stared.

Until his head rolled my way on his neck. His eyes met mine and locked. My father gawked unblinking, rigid. I looked right back, and for a few heartbeats we stayed like that, neither of us saying a thing. Then I shut the door and tried to sleep.

Downstairs, my mother watched Aunt Marge eat her scrambled eggs and listened to details of the bus trip to Yankee Stadium.

"Louisiana Lightning pitched a three-hitter," Aunt Marge said. "But you can't convince me those boys could beat the old Brooklyn Dodgers."

"How did Reggie do?" I asked.

"Eat your Wheaties."

I made a face behind her back, sat and shoveled the cereal into my mouth, happy to eat anything besides spaghetti.

"They call it the house that Ruth built. But I know it's all a facade."

But was it a pleasant day? asked my mother.

"Wonderful," Aunt Marge said. "You gotta love Billy Ball. But of course he's the enemy now. We smoked cigars on the way to the game. Monsignor Doolan passed them out on the bus like a new father."

I'm sorry I missed it.

"We do what we can," Aunt Marge said. "The church tries to
preserve the good old days"

She scraped the last of her egg against the blue rim of her plate, shimmied it onto her fork and stood, balancing the little mound. Aunt Marge held the fork in front of her and carefully stepped, free arm extended for equilibrium, across the kitchen to the brown vinyl couch and bird cage. She hoisted one foot up on the couch, stretched and sifted the scrambled egg into Foghorn Leghorn's dish.

"Cannibalism," I said.

She turned her head toward me but still stood with one foot on the couch. "Darwinism."

"The good old days?"

"Don't read into things, young man. That will only end you in trouble."

I looked to my mother doing the dishes. Strands of her hair were loose, falling in front of her to the sink. I started to complain about Aunt Marge but stopped. My mother brushed a soapy hand over her scalp to pull the hair back and left suds bubbling above her forehead. The soap reflected sunlight from the kitchen window, translucent green and yellow globes dancing in her hair. She must have felt it because she fattened her bottom lip and blew upward. The suds flew, then popped.

At the Goodwill I asked if I could stay in the truck. My mother drove a Chevy pick-up Aunt Marge had given her after the bank repossessed the Cordoba my father left behind. I liked to sit loosely behind the wheel, put my arm out the window and
pretend to smoke whenever a girl scuttled by. The Cordoba was better for this, jet-black and almost expensive looking, but the man came and drove it away. He had tried breaking into the house that day, but my mother met him at the door with a steak knife, and he thought better of it. He called her a bum, and she told me to go upstairs with Aunt Marge. I hesitated, then went, and the man gave me a taunting smirk I will not forget. I don't know what else was said or what happened, but I watched from an upstairs window as the man opened the car door with a coat hanger, wired the ignition beneath the dash and spun out, tires spitting stones.

Sure, my mother said. I'll just be a minute here. I'm looking for some shoes.

I sat in the pick-up with my arm resting out the window, my eyes dividing time between the windshield and rearview mirror. The afternoon was dotted with shoppers meandering up Main Street, and a small gang of high school kids reclined against the stucco wall of the pharmacy. They were smoking cigarettes. I studied their gestures and positioning—one leg bent with foot flat on the wall, an empty hand stuffed deep into jeans pocket. It seemed necessary to hold the cigarette low on the thigh of the cocked leg, and when inhaling to curl your neck from your collar like a turtle. Exhaling was the ticket. Each kid leaned his head back against the wall and blew plumes of smoke skyward out the corner of his mouth. You were to do this with squinted eyes with emphasis.

I practiced what I could in the truck cab until my mother returned with a pair of red pumps.

These will keep my tail in the air, she said and winked.
Salt air billowed between the shops lining both sides of Main Street, blowing west in the wind pushing onshore and rotting the chassis and bodywork of most cars in town. Fans of rust pocked the sides of our pick-up like acne. I picked red paint chips off the door while my mother was in the beauty parlor. Kids were selling candy for Little League in front of Freedman’s Bakery. The one season I played organized ball, two summers earlier, I added a quarter to the price of each can of peanut brittle and pocketed the profit. I used the money to buy invisible ink.

After a while I decided I shouldn’t be seen outside the beauty parlor, so I went inside. The long room was lined with mirrors and fern plants—Boston, rabbit’s foot and button. Ammonia saturated the air and made my eyes tear. The row of hair dryers looked like vises holding heads. Women chatted over the noise, hands flying from beneath smocks and carving shapes in the hot air as beauticians bustled around the chairs. A woman in back was enjoying a pedicure. The man rubbed her pale foot, holding it tenderly atop his crotch. No one noticed me.

My mother appeared through a curtain with her hair bound in an eye shadow-blue towel.

"There you are," I said above the noise.

She waved and followed a young woman to a vacant chair. I stood with my hands rooted in my pockets at the beginning of the row, and looking down the aisle I was reminded of church for no good reason. The young woman spiraled the towel from my mother’s head and started squeezing her hair dry. They were laughing, and
both turned and considered me. My mother stuck her hand out, waved me over.

Carson, this is Pauline.

"I've heard a lot about you," Pauline said.

I cringed, and they both started laughing again.

"Oh God, Sara, he looks just like you!"

I made a face at my mother that I hoped had the appearance of double-ean.

"The magazines are by the couch," Pauline said. "You look like a baseball player."

I involuntarily flexed my biceps inside my windbreaker.

Pauline was young and very blond. I winked at her.

Get over there, my mother said.

The couch and magazine stack were dangerously close to the pedicurist. I gazed back through the room, out the store front window at the people strolling by on the sidewalk. It was a no-win situation. I swallowed hard, moved to the couch and sat watching my mother's hair being permed in the mirror, her and Pauline laughing, telling stories I couldn't hear. My mother looked small to me then, boosted high in the big chair, but I know I probably imagined that smallness as all boys do when they reach and exceed the height of their mother. I noticed it then in the beauty parlor. I was taller. I sat and watched the back of my mother's head slowly turn more and more into kinked noodles winding to the floor.

The man is a doctor, she said. Ear, nose and throat.
"You'll need a dress"
To accentuate my figure.
"To show him we're fine"
We were rumbling down 35 through Neptune and Asbury Park on our way to the mall. My mother's hair was curled, and I told her I loved it. That wasn't true.

Is anything wrong with your nose or throat? she said
"Not yet."
Now would be the time. If my date doesn't work out, we might be able to get a check-up out of it.
"Not yet."
Did I tell you your father is making a new movie?
"No, you didn't."
I see.

Slurped through the electronic doors, I dead-headed for the store with the black-light posters as my mother went to J C. Penney's for a dress. She said I could have twenty minutes and then wanted to meet at the dressing rooms to decide.

I love you, she said.
Although it cost me time, I walked to the other end of the mall to avoid the escalator. I used the stairs.

Glittering balls spun from chains hooked to the high ceiling, and neon lights warmed the marble walls. Muzak piped from everywhere until I walked past the record store where girls in front shook to old disco. I was cool sliding by, my hands in my pockets.
The Muzak returned and I quickened. Smells of fresh dough, French fries, popcorn and new clothes collided around me. The wishing fountain was dimpled with light and pennies, and people parted in ripples as I walked.

Past the bookstore to the poster shop. Strobe lights rapidly fired, cutting time. A man in back wearing a V-necked velour shirt offered me drugs as I stood alongside feathered-hair kids and looked at the yarn rugs patterned with bright-colored cheetahs. Bugs Bunnys and '57 Chevys. The pusher turned around and pumped fifty cents into the air hockey table. The puck hovered unsteadily, and he smacked it, clap-clap off the boards. He shot again, scoring on the empty net, and looked up with a sly smile.

"Does anyone want to play?" he said.

I flipped through the poster rack filled with members of half-dressed rock bands and bathing suit girls sprawled on car hoods. There were posters of beer bottles. The only picture I liked was a cartoon duck roosted behind the wheel of a semi, thumb up out the window--Keep On Truckin'. I didn't have enough money, so I went to the counter and bought a roll of caps. The girl at the register asked if I wanted to buy a bottle of Swedish love oil or a book of Polish jokes.

"Next time," I said.

Well? my mother said. Do you think this will make him criminal?

Four of her stood turning from side to side in a white,
sleeveless dress  Three flanking mirrors captured all the angles
My mother put her hands under her breasts and lifted them.

"Cut it out," I said

She flipped her hair with mock flourish and blew me a slow
kiss in the mirror  Then she broke down laughing and pulled me to
her, arm around my shoulders  My mother held tight, then stood
normal again, loose and relaxed as if she still wore her jeans and
sweatshirt  We stood together like that, looking at ourselves in
the mirror  She just watched us, her eyes glossing a little wet.

"You look very pretty," I said

My mother straightened tall and smoothed the dress over her
stomach.

Thank you, she said  It's on sale

My mother bought us a plate of cheese fries and two Cokes,
and we sat and watched a group of children slide down the
escalator rails and land with a slap then skid of their feet. A
security guard chased them, and the children ran into the arcade,
quickly mixing into the crowd  The security guard bent over
panting, hands on knees, then stood, hitched up his pants and
walked away

During our ride home, my mother had to stop short behind a
car at a red light  She threw her arm across the seat in front of
me and screeched to a halt  She told me to always do that, always
try to break your loved one's fall  And then she slammed her
hand on the wheel in anger  She could be so hard on herself.

We drove past Shark River  A yellow fin tuna was roped by
the tail, hanging above the dock. A man was having his picture taken in front of it. A woman with long legs, pink short shorts and bikini top held the camera. The man stood grim and tall, arms folded across his chest, propped up on his belly. The fish turned slightly in the bay breeze, scales flashing in the sun, blood dripping from its open mouth. The woman snapped the picture, but the man kept standing there, frozen in front of the fish.

Late that afternoon I sat picking through my spaghetti with Aunt Marge next to me. My mother was upstairs getting ready.

"I want you to behave when the gentleman arrives," Aunt Marge said. "Don't go changing your voice."

I was never aware that my voice was changing unless Aunt Marge said something.

"He won't be staying," I said.

"Of course he will. He'll sit with the three of us for tea. Maybe play gin."

"The school nurse came and took a girl out of class this week. She was bleeding on her seat."

"Don't tell me your war stories."

My mother stepped down the stairs, through the living room and into the kitchen. She wore her new dress and shoes, her hair permed and shining. She looked at my plate.

"Tomorrow, I promise. We'll have cube steak."

"It's okay," I said.

I feel selfish right now.

"He'll be here any minute."

She went behind the counter, turned on the water and started scrubbing the pots.

"Get away from there," Aunt Marge said "Your hands will pucker."

Does the house look all right?

"Spotless," Aunt Marge said "You're a knockout, Sara. That husband of yours was a peacock."

I cleared my plate and nudged my mother away from the sink. She said, that's fine, took down a wine glass and poured herself some from the bottle in the refrigerator. She walked from the room. Aunt Marge dumped the rest of her spaghetti into the garbage and said she would do the dishes.

"I better start vacuuming," I said

"Are you pregnant?"

"Spare me."

My mother was sitting on the blue couch facing the front windows in the living room. She sipped her wine, her free arm resting on the couch back. I went into the TV room behind her and untangled the vacuum cleaner from the closet. I plugged it into the outlet and rolled the Hoover into the living room. It roared when I tweaked the switch.

What are you doing?

"Nothing," I yelled over the noise.

I pushed and reeled the vacuum in quick strikes, grinding it across the white and blue carpet. I moved fast, whipping the cord from my path, head bent to my work. I didn't see my mother get up, walk past me and jerk the plug. I completed a few more rows before I realized the machine had quit.
In kindergarten, she said, your teacher gave you an assignment to write down what mothers are for. Do you remember what you wrote?

"Mom. I'm busy."

You wrote mothers are for sweeping dust.

"No."

I was a fanatic.

I reached out my hand for a swig of her wine. She smiled and said, only a little. I drained it.

Hey!

I looped the cord and put away the vacuum. My mother sat back down and waited for her date.

He rapped on the door, and I rushed to answer it. Aunt Marge braced herself in the kitchen entrance way, wringing her hands in her apron. My mother stood and smoothed the front of her dress. I took one last look at them both, and my mother hummed the tune to Beethoven's Fifth. I inhaled and opened the door.

The man wore a tweed jacket, white shirt, jeans and cowboy boots. He had sandy hair and wire-rim glasses. He held a bouquet of daisies in a new baseball glove on his left hand. The man looked all right, smiling awkwardly.

"Yes?" I said, exhaling.

"You must be Carson."

"And you are?" my voice cracked.

"I brought you this glove," he said. "Can I come in?"

He held out his empty hand. I shook it.
"My name's Dan," he said, then held the glove out. I reached for it, but he pulled it back when he realized the flowers were still in it.

"I guess you can come in," I said, moving aside.

My mother met him at the door. She smiled easily, and Dan handed her the flowers in the glove. She gave him a quick, little hug, and he placed the gloved hand against the small of her back. I watched my mother lift one foot off the ground, the red shoe arcing, pausing, falling. It happened. Dan was tall.

She let go and smelled the flowers.

That's sweet, she said.

"Hello, Sara," he said then turned briefly and gave me the glove.

Aunt Marge coughed.

Oh, I'm sorry, my mother said. Dan, this is my Aunt Marge.

Aunt Marge waddled through the living room and gripped Dan's hand.

"You're a medical doctor?" Aunt Marge said, eyes straining.

"Yes, ma'am. Are you all right?"

Aunt Marge started laughing. "Screw gin rummy," she said.

"You kids have fun."

I stood admiring my new glove. A Catfish Hunter autographed.

You shouldn't have bought that. my mother said to Dan.

I twitched in alarm.

"It was nothing," Dan said. "Really."

My mother smiled at me, and I relaxed.

Would you like something to drink? she asked Dan.

"The driver is uncorking champagne."
Driver?

I craned my neck out the door

"I'd like to take you to Manhattan," Dan said. "Dinner and dancing."

My mother looked out the window

Dan, I don't know.

"I have a pair of sneakers for you in the car."

"Hot Damn," Aunt Marge said.

I don't think--

"What the hell Mom." The chrome on the black stretch limousine gleamed under the street light.

I don't think it's appropriate.

"It'll be fun, Sara."

"There's no harm in that," I said.

Dan smiled. My mother looked at me then the glove fitted on my hand. Her mouth smiled but stopped, eyes staying flat. She sighed, and we were all quiet for a long minute.

Dead right, she said and started out the door.

I fell asleep on the couch waiting for my mother to get home.

I wore the Catfish Hunter autographed and dreamed a road dream. A trucker heading cross-country picked me up outside the arcade on Main Beach, said he needed me to man the CB radio. I told him that was a good thing because my name was Carson Barnes.

"Trucker Harley," he said. "Six-six, one hundred and sixty pounds."

We hooted 'n' hollered down Pennsylvania 76 straight into the
little finger of Michigan. We traveled as if we were in a dream.

Trucker Harley said this is the best goddamned place on earth.

"People up here still rise for the National Anthem," he said
"Men in bars take their caps off"

Deep blue lakes flashed in pockets cut in the green, and
cottonwood leaves fell like snow Tent caterpillars hung from the
trees and plastered the semi's windshield You could drink the
air

"Breaker one-nine for a radio check," I said into the CB
mike. "This is Uncle Sam. Any camel jockeys out there?"

"We got 1200 cubic inches of American know-how under this
hood," Trucker Harley yelled over the grind of the diesel "Fuck
them Democrats Fuck 'em all"

He pulled on the horn.

"We got pistons the size of motorcycle helmets," he bellowed
"I'm sick of this country's piss-poor morale"

"Fuck 'em all," I shouted, punching my fist into the basket-
web of my glove

What's your twenty? my mother asked There's a bubble gum
machine on the road ahead. What is your handle?

She stood over me in the dark I could see the outline of
her body against the faint light whispering in from the window.
Then I could see shadows cutting her cheek bones Then her lips
and fingers and eyes

You should watch your mouth, she said quietly
She turned around and lifted her hair off her neck. She
stood like that, with her back to me, her hand holding up her hair, her neck limp and white

Can you unzip me? she said

I got up, freed my hand from the glove and lowered the gold zipper. The row of metal teeth split one by one. Her dress parted and her bare back glistened in a V

"How did it go?" I asked

It's so hot in here, she said. The limo was so cool

A picture of the Lake Michigan shore line splashed through my head. The wind plowed sand along the Sleeping Bear dunes. I sat down, and my mother kicked off her red shoes and slipped out of her dress. It made a puddle at her feet. She faced me in her bra and underwear, a few strands of hair clinging to her face.

It went well, she said. Move over a little, would you?

I gave her room, and she sank into the cushions. She lay her head against the couch back, put her left arm over my shoulders and her right hand on her forehead. It's so warm in here, she said.

"What happened? What time is it?"

She squeezed me closer to her.

Tell me that you love me, she said. Tell me you love your mother.

"I love you."

Thank you, she said. Thank you for waiting up.

We sat together in the dark. It was quiet outside, and we heard Aunt Marge cough upstairs in bed. My mother dropped her hand from her forehead to her lap.

We ate French and we danced, she said. We ate escargot in
puffed pastries. We ordered grand marnier souffle before we even sat down because it takes an hour to prepare. I had rosemary roast veal with fall vegetables, and Dan The Man had baby lamb chops crowned with duck pate. We drank wine and we danced.

My mother's stomach looked soft, relaxed as she slumped on the couch. Her breasts were full, held high by her bra, and her skin was as white as her underwear. My mother's nudity was all right. It seemed okay to me then, and it still does.

"Sounds great," I said, running my fingers over the smooth and dry leather of the baseball glove. "But I shouldn't have taken this."

I know, my mother said. Dan knew it too.

I slid my hand in and raised the glove in front of us, turning it, clamping it shut. I had let Dan buy me off, and it didn't sit well. I liked him though, and I liked that he tried. I was happy we were both conscious of the game we had played.

Years later I would be bought off for a lot more than a glove. I would let it stand that time. That is one way to see how much you have or have not grown.

"Here," I said. "Give it back to him."

My mother sighed. We can mail it, she said, taking the glove and standing. She stretched then reached out her hand to help me up. I took it—it was damp with sweat.

"You won't be seeing him again?"

Maybe, she said. But now it's time for the both of us to hit the hay.

I stood next to her, face to face. "I'm taller than you," I said.
She looked at me. Don't you think I've noticed? she said
Don't you think mothers notice these things?

She bent to pick up her shoes and dress but stopped. I'm
going to leave these clothes lying here, she said I want to come
down in the morning and see them lying here

And it wasn't until years later I learned she did not have a
good time that night. I knew something was wrong when Dan didn't
turn up again and my mother made excuses instead of answering the
telephone. I mailed the glove. Dan sent a short note, and that
was the last I heard of him. My mother never mentioned his name
until she wrote me a letter after I went away to college. She
said the date had been going fine, but then they started to talk
about larger things, the world outside of the limousine and the
French food, and Dan had told her not to think so hard. He said
that she should rest her pretty little head

When I read that letter I wanted to hurt Dan in a bad way. I
seriously considered looking for the guy. What kind of a man
thinks like that? What kind of a thing is that to say to a woman?
SUMMARY CHAPTER SIX

Carson visits Cecile, and she tells him a story about her family, about shame. The two leave Cecile’s apartment. Carson buys her flowers and they go to the Jai Alai Palace. There, they run into Hunter and his friend, Thurston Howell. Cecile seems to know them, feels threatened by them and leaves to place a bet and get a drink. Carson is fascinated. Hunter and Howell remind him of his father, and they intuit this. They also seem to know the nature of the relationship between Carson and Cecile. In this way, they are dangerous. Carson is simultaneously attracted and repelled by them. During the jai alai matches, Howell begins to tell Carson an allegorical tale about a young man who misses a “good” opportunity for profit. The two cons want Carson to join their operation. Carson refuses to listen to the story and Howell produces the letter that Carson had given to the whore. The chapter ends with Cecile returning and making Carson choose between her and them, but Hunter and Howell leave before Carson has to choose.

SUMMARY CHAPTER SEVEN

Back in New Jersey, in the time-present, Carson’s driving for a funeral. The funeral becomes a type of surrogate funeral for his own mother. He doesn’t like the family he’s driving for because he feels they are irreverent. The father of the family takes pictures of everything, including his portrait alongside the deceased, and he instigates Carson. Outside the church, Carson talks to Percy, a wino who likes to attend funerals. Percy gets hit by a car when he tries to help as a pall bearer and is taken away in an ambulance. Carson ends up as a reluctant pall bearer, terminates the fantasy that this is a surrogate funeral for his mother and realizes that Percy was probably at his mother’s funeral. He will visit Percy in the hospital to find out how it went. The chapter ends with Carson pushing the father of the family into the open grave.

SUMMARY CHAPTER EIGHT

Carson’s in his apartment in La Jolla, California. Then he goes to Tijuana and meets Cecile’s mother. He shows Cecile a letter that he’s gotten from his mother, and Cecile guesses that Carson’s mother is sick. Carson denies this, and they begin talking about their respective fathers. The men are very similar, and Cecile tells Carson that they’ll find his father when they’re together in California. Carson spends the night and in the morning takes Cecile to work on the border. He examines the border guards, the landscape, and considers the possibilities.
We were surf rats and that meant something. So when L D.
Hanson's mother got stung by a bee and died, I decided we should
quit work and head for Hatteras. My mother said I was still a
boy, but that my decision was one a man might make. I'm proud of
you, she said. You be there for your friend. I had not surfed
since my father left, since we moved in with Aunt Marge--hadn't
even thought about it. Aunt Marge warned me about quitting my job
and patterns, warned me I'd miss the pennant race, but she gave me
money to buy gas. I slipped most of it back into her purse.

A tropical depression was forming off Bermuda that would make
waves down the coast. L D said this sounded all right to him and
he could leave that night if his father OK'd it. His father
didn't come home for two days, so we loaded L D's van and left in
the night. We killed drive time cracking jokes about the things
men do, about what is so goddamned hard about coming home at
night.

When we began surfing seven years earlier the older guys
called us rats, because that's what we looked like when we were
ten and wet, out in the cold water on boards twice our size. All
the waves were big to us then. L D and I'd cut school during
hurricane season--September and October--to take our best chances
in the storm swells. When the ocean was flat we'd hang in the
shop and talk surf--the North Shore, Waimea Bay, Rabbit and semi-
guns. We argued whether it was fifty or five hundred thousand
pounds of pressure per square foot of water a twenty foot wave
produced. No one could agree, but we all knew it didn’t matter much either way. You depend on a certain amount of luck. L D and I were friends when being friends is easy, before a day in the life stacks up and topples into the next.

L D drove south on the New Jersey Turnpike across the Delaware River. The Memorial Bridge was lit, white lights arcing like a quarter moon tipped down in the yellow night.

"Delaware’s a place to piss, but that’s about it," I said. We were drinking homemade beer that L D’s father brewed in their basement. Our windows were down and the wind rattled the roof inside the van.

"I think he’s happy now that she’s dead," L D said. He looked at himself in the rearview mirror. "He did love her though."

"Sure he did." I said.

Pain tore across L D’s face. He gulped beer from his mason jar then held the jar up to the windshield to look at it. The beer was dark in the oncoming lights. Particles swirled and bobbed in it.

"I want to tell you a story," L D said. "Is that all right? We aren’t as close as we once were."

"Go ahead and tell it," I said.

L D took a drink, wiped his mouth. "Once my parents went on a vacation together," he said. "They went to the Catskills. That was when we had the Buick convertible. Tilly. My mother used to pat the dash when the car bucked and she’d say, ‘Come on, Tilly, you can do it.’ She’d pat it again and say, ‘That a girl’"

L D looked up in the rearview mirror. He stared at himself.
"They rode through New York State in the fall with the top down, drinking beer and singing with the radio."

He guzzled half his jar, put the blinker on and eased into the fast lane. We passed a black Porsche with Florida tags. A sign in the tinted window said, "College or Bust."

"Anyway, my old man pulled the car into a rest stop on the highway so they could use the bathroom. When he finished using the head he went back out to the car. He started it up and drove away. My father drove for an hour without realizing my mother wasn't with him. Down the fucking highway with the leaves falling around him. He swore he didn't realize it. He convinced my mother of that."

I didn't know what to say so I apologized. I said I was sorry like it was my fault. "That's a love story," I said.

We found the ramp onto Route 13 south. "He convinced my mother of that," he said again. "When they got home they held on to each other, laughed, and all they talked about was the color of the leaves and what a terrific time they had."

"You can't always answer for yourself, can you?"

"He won't miss us. He'll know what we're doing."

It took seven more hours to reach the Outer Banks. Bob Marley sang, I don't have no birth certificate, on the radio. Our boards, wet suits and change of clothes were piled in the back. By Maryland we were drunk, and we stayed that way into Virginia and across the Chesapeake Bay Bridge. We rode down Route 168 and 158, and we were having a high time not thinking about anything, L.D saying over and over there's nothing better than drinking and driving with your very best friend. I had a headache by the time
we reached Kitty Hawk and the Kill Devil Hills on the Outer Banks. Little Daddy Hanson said his father's homemade brew worked like a time bomb on the uninitiated.

We parked at the Cape Hatteras lighthouse. The old Ford 350 V-8 coughed to a quiet, and I saw a head peek up in a Woody across the lot. And for a minute, because I was seventeen, I wondered what that person thought about us. I wondered if the reasons we were there were in our eyes, cared if he knew we had more on our minds than cane waves.

The head stayed in the window a moment, then fell away.

It was still dark as we scrambled up the cold sand dunes through the seaside goldenrod. Pieces of tar, pop-tops, and steamer shells sank under my toes. The clear night sky met the water and the two stretched on and on, thinning to nothing, like a tight smile.

L D looked at me.

Flat.

"Looks like you'll have to wait a while to make your comeback," he said, turning and walking away.

We slept in the van until sunrise, then I pried myself out for another wave check. A light offshore wind blew, too weak to kick-up a swell. The sun looked warm, its light spilling along the horizon like a broken egg yolk, but I couldn't feel its warmth. Small waves slapped the beach. More than anything that day I wanted L D to have his pick of the lefts that peeled from the lighthouse point, and for a moment I thought maybe I made up
the low pressure system I had seen spiraling on the TV weather
channel. I believed it possible because I knew then I needed the
rough water as much as he did. My mother used to talk of a time
when she’d lay me on our beach blanket and I’d get to my knees and
start crawling toward the water. She’d have to leave her chair
every few minutes to go down and grab me before I crawled all the
way underwater. My mother said I did that all day, wore ruts in
the sand from our blanket to the surf. L D and I wanted our
rough time in the ocean, not so much at home.

Back in the van I told L D, tomorrow.
“There will be waves tomorrow,” I said.
L D crouched in the back, looking for something in his pack.

“Which way is it blowing?”

“West.”

He shook his head and pushed opened the back doors. “A
fucking bee,” he said.

I stepped behind the van to where L D had sat down with his
legs hung over the bumper. He held a dead yellow jacket close to
his eye between his right thumb and pointer finger.

“I can see right through it,” he said. “Do you want to look
at it?”

“Is that the one?” I asked, but knew it couldn’t be.

“Nothing dramatic,” he said. “A prick on the bare foot. She
didn’t even know she was allergic.”

He held the bee out for me to see. I didn’t move closer, so
he dropped his hand to his thigh.

“She always had these premonitions,” L D said. “She
believed” in them. My mother thought she was going to die by
falling out of a bunk bed She told my father that and he said, "What the hell would you be doing in a bunk bed? Sleeping around on me? Feeling young again?" My mother laughed and said, "Wouldn't that be nice." She said it would be a bunk bed or she was going to go down in flames in an F-14.

"I liked your mom," I said.

"Good," L D said. He stood and stared inland across the parking lot. "I lied before. When my parents got back from the Catskills they didn't hold each other and laugh. My mother looked at me over his shoulder. She looked like she wanted to cry." "You didn't lie," I said. "That's not what you did." He let the bee fall to the blacktop.

We decided to get food before finding a place to stay. L D. said we could sleep in the van, but I said I had some money. "Fat," I said.

I saw a sign for 99 cent breakfast, so we pulled in. The parking lot was full with pick-ups. "Those trucks are a good sign," I said, and L D. nodded, smiled a little.

The place was warm with the dry smell of salt, coffee and pancakes. The paper-clothed tables were crowded with local fisherman and a few late season tourists. A small black marlin hung on one wall. The fish arced like a bridge, spanned the length of two tables and seven seated fishermen, and it probably weighed better than five-hundred pounds. One of the men, an old-timer, wore a pink fluorescent cap that said, "No Rats."
After we sat down I said, "That's a rat fish."

We looked at it. The pectoral fin on the left side had been broken so the fish could be mounted. The body was slate-blue, fading to silvery-white underneath the belly. Black marlins can be caught in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. A few have been taken in the Atlantic near the Cape of Good Hope.

L D looked back at me and I said, "A black under a thousand pounds is called a rat. It's Australian."

The fishermen ate with their necks bowed, faces hovering just above their plates. Fake king crabs and orange lobsters stuck to frayed, brown nets on the other walls.

"When did you learn all that?" L D asked.

After my father left I had tried to plug the gap with fish. My father and I never went fishing together. We strung blue-claws but not fish. After a few years, I learned to love fish.

"Jesus," I said. "It's been a while."

The 99 cent breakfast came out to $3.98 each.

"It comes out that way because everyone knows everyone else here."

"What do you mean?" L D said.

"I mean if we lived here our bill would be half this. I bet we come in tomorrow and we'll get free drink refills."

"It says we do on the menu."

"Sometimes we do and sometimes we don't. It's just the way they are."
We found a paint-chipped, white motel just down the road, one block east of the beach and three west of Pamlico Sound. The sign said "No Vacancy," but we tried the motel anyway. A girl who looked sixteen was perched behind the office desk. She wore red lipstick and her blonde hair was high, rising in tight curls. A young boy with stripes shaved in the side of his head sat with her.

"Certainly, I can find you men a room," the Lipstick Girl said. "My mother'll be back shortly. We'd better hurry."

"Doesn't trust you?" L D asked.

"It's you she won't trust," the Lipstick Girl said. She patted the back of her hair, and blinked slow and hard.

"Moses!" she said.

The boy reached below the desk and brought up a tin bucket and rag. He twitched his head for us to follow him.

"Ya'll come back," the Lipstick Girl said.

We followed Moses down the row of rooms. When he passed the van he said, "You guys from Jersey? Shit, you ain't seen nothin'!"

L D stopped short, smiling. Moses turned and faced him.

"We have been to hell and are trying to get back," L D said.


"Ring them bells," I said.

The room was small--two single beds with lima bean green covers, matching curtains and lamp shade. The lamp hung from the center of the ceiling by a gold plastic chain. There was a
battered black and white television set, a bathroom and a Bible
Moses ran the rag once over the room and I gave him a buck

"Who are you, Frank Sinatra?" he said

I held out my hand to take the dollar back

"Psych," he said, slapping my hand. I laughed and he went out the door

We unloaded the van. L D placed his board on the bed by the door, and I leaned mine against the wall next to the television. I turned the set on. Gray people were drinking margaritas, making music and getting down in paradise. They did that on both channels

L D and I used to imagine ourselves on TV whenever we were doing anything stupid. The audience would be shaking their heads in their living rooms, and we'd be laughing. As long as we caught ourselves being stupid, we could keep going and be one up on the audience. We'd exaggerate our laughter, jab elbows into ribs. It was a way of excusing ourselves. We were exempt.

And it was the way we imagined ourselves the time we ran away from home and hid in the Cove. L D snuck from his house and showed up in my back yard. He used the meow call we stole from Huck Finn, and I climbed out my window, down the old maple tree. It was bone cold, the kind of cold that you keep talking about while you're in it. L D had a couple of blankets, his surfboard and five millimeter suit 35 hood, boots and gloves. I snatched my stuff from the garage and went with him, not asking questions. We humped to the Cove and sacked out in a clearing between the marram and sea oats. L D told me he couldn't sleep. He said his parents had been drinking and making love, but then it turned bad.
In the southwest wind the reeds made a thin, clicking sound. The Manasquan Cove is a muscular field of dunes at the end of the inlet and the beginning of Glimmer Glass Bay. The water's shallow and flat, tucked in from the winds, and we could smell the tide go out with the moon all night. It was where we would first learn about girls.

It snowed the morning we ran. L D and I were alone in the ocean. The big flakes fell, scattered on water, as we shot through churning December tubes. The barrels were thick, and tongues of white water lifted then vanished in the cold before the steel-blue lips touched down. It didn't matter that it was Christmas.

Until it became too cold for us to stay outside. We went home wet and sick, and I did time in the hospital. L D and I caught some classic waves, but we also caught a lot of shit. That's the way those things go. Both our parents had a hard time of it, and after I got out of the hospital, my father was gone and L D. could do nothing but watch and listen to the holiday swells blow in. That Christmas was a before and after day.

I told L D I was going to take a shower, and he said he wasn't going to take one the entire trip. He said he loved that crystal-skin feel.

"It's a safe feeling," he said.

The metallic water spurted from the shower head, and I heard L D knock on the door.

"Are you listening?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, my face to the water, mouth open, drinking.

"Remember the Robinson Crusoe time when we looked into my
parent's window and saw them making love? Remember that, Carson? Remember we saw my father naked and on his knees, kissing my mother's stomach?"

I turned my face from the water and peered at the closed door through the clear shower curtain. Water drops clouded the plastic.

"Yeah?" I said.

"I just wanted to be sure," he said.

At noon we scuffed to the beach, down the one way, sand-covered road where gull prints were stenciled over deep jeep tracks. I adjusted the strap on my pack, peeled a piece of dead skin from my burnt shoulder and flicked the yellow scales at L.D.

The houses along the road were built on stilts for protection against spring tides and storms. Small, migrating dunes bordered the blacktop and, in patches, overtook it. We picked up a green bench at the beach entrance, carried it toward the water and set it in the middle of the dry sand. We were alone except for the birds and a surf fisherman.

"Over there," L.D. said.

Two people were far to the south. One sprinted through the warm tidal pools, a bat-shaped kite climbing the air behind him.

"Look like lovers," I said.

"Shit. You readin' those books again?"

"No. Sometimes."

I released two beers from my pack, popped them open, and we sat and watched the water. At the edge of the continent, we were
in the center I felt it I took a pull from my beer

"The wind's changing," L.D. said after a while

I sat quiet The wind was stalling, feinting with soft gusts from the northwest

"It's going north," I said

The fisherman made an overhead, two-handed cast. The lure sailed a hundred and fifty yards offshore and sat on the surface He began reeling line in, then the "Production Rod" snapped forward, bowed, and he took a step backward A striped bass cartwheeled on the water, slapping its tail. It made a hard run south, seventy-five yards parallel to the beach. The fisherman let it run. He took in line when the fish slowed, letting the small waves help him. He held the ten and a half footer low, and he pulled. Beads of saltwater sprang from the 36-pound-test nylon braid The fish dropped back then got caught in another breaker The fisherman reeled He worked the striper in that way until it rode in on a comber

Then he clubbed it

L.D. opened three new beers and handed me one as the fisherman packed his gear and started toward us We cleared a space between us

The man nodded, sat down, and stuck his rod in the sand in front of him. The fish lay in a bag on his lap L.D. handed the old man a can.

"A keeper," he said "Thank you very much."

"Not bad for a sunny afternoon," I said

"Thank God for the Labrador current," he said "Gives me a meal a day This fish is a good twenty pounds I started out for
red drum, but switched over to this here Burke Jig-A-Doo Eel." He fingered the lure tied to the leader.

The wind was becoming less playful as we talked. A bridled tern soared on a thermal and small white caps scarred the ocean. Sand grains slid across the beach.

"I never go by the book," the fisherman said, taking a drink.

"Cast at noon, quick change my bait. Looks like a heavy day, artificial bait. I'll use some truck like chicken lobster." He took another sip from his beer. "When I should be using the real thing, I'll tie on a doodlebug jig or something like this here Point Jude Pop-Along." He dug the lure from his pocket and held it in his coarse palm. It had two treble hooks, white feathers and a black eye.

"It doesn't really matter?" L.D. asked.

"Oh, it does," the fisherman said, putting the lure away.

"Of course it does, but I don't care. Do you boys want to know why I fish like this?" He looked first at L.D. on his left and then at me.

"Why?"

"Because I like the words for all these things," he said and started laughing. "Acme Kastmaster, Wob-L-Rite Side-Winder, Atom Spinatoom. I love it." He drank down most of his beer. "I was born a rebel."

"As good a reason as any I've heard," I said.

"Those are nice words," L.D. said. "Shit."

The three of us sat laughing and drinking beer in the middle of the beach. The waves were coming, the sunlight was flat and hot. L.D. balanced a Glassy Teardrop on his big toe. The couple
with the kite strolled past us, their jeans rolled, white ankles in the water. The woman had the kite string tied to her braid. The braid dodged left and right, high above her head as the kite danced in the wind above her. We sat for a long time, until the water passed underneath us.

The next morning we ate breakfast for $2.99. Two-foot waves scooped left on the south side of the lighthouse point. A sandbar made them pitch high before falling. The water was crowded—brown skin, hot pink, neon yellow and green speckled the ocean. Sunlight cast silver dollars.

We paddled into the line-up and waited for our waves. The locals were cool about things. I sat on my board and thought about Christmas five years earlier, the last time I had been surfing. My old, six-two tri-fin fit me perfectly in Hatteras. The fiberglass-patched dings had turned mahogany and soft. Spider webs cracked deep in the rails. I had a feeling that this trip meant my last days in the water. The days felt good, and I wanted them that way forever. I was sentimental about the water. I still am.

L D caught a nice left and milked it to the shore. I sat most of the day, duck-diving under the set-waves, taking only the ones I thought would be easy to drop in on. I caught a few. L D shredded. By sundown we were burnt and tired and felt all right.

The wind spun full north and the waves got big, head-high.
The crowd thinned out, spread across the Cape, everyone having their favorite break. A school of porpoise split the warm water offshore, slick gray backs rising and falling, air holes spouting.

L D knelt on the beach and ground sand into the deck of his board. It stuck in the wax to give better traction. I ran in, paddled out in the channel along the point and caught a steep right bowl that closed out before I could do much with it. Then I jumped on a small, inside wave and rode it like a roller coaster.

L D went outside and dropped down the face of a big left. The long blue wall kept rolling in front of him as he left the white water behind. He shot off the lip and flew for a second, carved a hard bottom turn, cut back and pumped it all the way to the beach. He flashed me the peace sign, and I knew he would be okay for a little while. The ocean was a thing to count on. The swell was still growing when we left the water long after slack, dead high tide.

Late in the night L D woke me. He turned on the lamp and sat on the edge of his bed with an open book on his lap. I was sleeping on the top of my yellow sheets, sweating.

"I’ve been reading this Bible," he whispered. "There’s some good stories in here. I like the one about the flood."

I propped myself up on my elbow.

"How about walking on water?"

L D flipped through the pages. "And the parting of the Red Sea," he said.

I lay back with my hands on the pillow behind my head.

"Those are good stories," I said. "People steal them to write their own."
"That's fine." L D. said, turning pages

"Rob from the rich."

It was quiet a few minutes, and I stared at the ceiling and the shadows the lamp made. I could hear the wind outside and wondered where the Lipstick Girl was. My skin was baked dry, and I adjusted my balls inside my boxer shorts. L D. kept reading. He smelled like the ocean.

"But the best part is this," he said, closing the Bible, then reopening the cover.

I sat up, and he handed me the book. Taped to the inside cover was a 3x5 portrait of Moses. The boy was smiling wide, his blonde hair spiked in a Mohawk, and his two front teeth were missing. His eyes were red, gums pink. "Moses McMenaman, 1983," was written in black magic marker above the picture. "Bible #6," below it.

I smiled and closed the book.

"We've seen some things," L D. said and turned out the light.

In the morning we ate for $1.90. The waitress, Linda, an ex-rodeo queen, was an old, purple-haired woman who took to flirting with us. She said she admired L D.'s natural curls. She said they brought back memories of her glory days.

"You boys are starting to get lucky," Linda said. "Not with me, mind you."

"We want it all," I said.

Linda hiked her red and black checked skirt up one varicose-veined leg, put her foot on my chair and said, "You aren't getting..."
"Can't have everything," L D said.

"Try Buxton," she said. "Along the fishing pier. You might as well get that." She cleared our plates, nodded to a man who shouted for coffee, and plowed into the kitchen.

"Wind's going west," I said. "What do you think, Little Daddy?"

"Let's try it."

We pushed out our chairs, but Linda scooted by and splashed down two fresh-squeezed O J's on ice. "Old Linda's feelin' generous this morning, boys. She feels like she spent the night with Jimmy Carter."

She winked at L D and walked away.

We laughed. "What if?" I said, and we laughed some more.

L D was drinking his juice when Moses walked in. I pulled out a place for him, and the boy sat down. He motioned toward my juice with his chin. I nodded. He put his fingers around the glass and drank.

"Gracias, bro," he said.

"Did you check the waves?" L D asked.

"No time, man, no time." I got you guys a little note from my sister. It says she wants to get together with you sometime. Like tonight."

Moses produced the note from his waistband, searched the room and handed it to me. "Keep it low," he said.

I started to read the note aloud to L D, but Moses coughed to cover it up. "Low," he said. "Don't you understand American?"

The Lipstick Girl wrote, "You New Jersey boys have the nicest..."
pretty blue eyes a girl has ever seen. I'm studying poetry in school and I know all about eyes. I'm also going to call my first baby girl Poetry. Do you like that, boys? I want to see each of you tonight. You can lie naked on your beds as pretty as you please and I'll kiss one of you and then the other. We're not shy, are we?

I smiled and gave L D the note. The only girls I had ever kissed and touched were tangled in the Cove oats at night, or under a pool table with pool balls cracking or under the boardwalk with people stomping overhead. I had yet to see a real live girl in bed.

L D read the note and smiled.

"What do you think?" I asked Moses.

"Please, you guys," Moses said. "Please don't."

The shelf water was clear and blue and shallow. Waves broke along the bar on both sides of the pier. The sets were big, a couple of feet overhead. That's what I liked most about surfing. It's always different depending on the sand, wind and tide—the Army Corps of Engineers and weather you cannot see. L D. didn't like that so much, though I believe he would come to. Back then he enjoyed the challenge of the big waves, the soul experience and the speed. He did not trust things he couldn't see or touch, sometimes both.

We had our pick of the waves in Buxton. I tucked into an open barrel and gunned it down the line, the salt stinging my eyes. I got spit out in the end, and I watched L D. light up a
dark wall. He took off, airborne. The spray leaped from the lip in the offshore wind. People stopped and watched. L.D touched down on fire.

As the sun started to go we had a king of the mountain battle atop a towering dune. We were tired, but it was a good battle. Both of us claimed to be king. We stood together on the top of that dune and our thin shadows stretched to the water. The waves rumbled. I slung my arm around L.D.'s shoulder.

"Thanks," he said.

We stood with the wind at our backs and L.D. looked off over the water. Then he stared at the sand and cried.

"I haven't learned to say anything else yet," he said.

"That's okay. I know what you mean."

L.D. nodded, slid down the dune, grabbed his board by the rail and raced into the water. I caught up with him outside the break and felt the waves roll under, watched them crash inside of us in the moonlight. L.D. paddled toward shore, into the line-up, and disappeared down a wave.

And sitting there in the water like I had hundreds of times before, as if I'd have a thousand future times, I didn't think about endings in my own life. Still, I never think of my story and L.D.'s taken together as being ironic. Maybe I'm not old enough yet, but who is to say that? Is someone going to say look at what your mother said to you, look at the irony of this? Look at the women of the world dying?

My friend's mother passed away and I did my best to help. A person might think that would be hard, might give me some kind of experience. It wasn't hard. It wasn't like anything he was
I didn't know I wouldn't see L D. again after that fall, when he and his father went south before the air grew colder than the water. The first time I quit surfing was after my father left. I needed to get back on the water with L D. The second time was after he moved. I don't know what it is. Maybe I'll try it again, on a warm day when the water looks like glass. I'll sit in the sun, shake my head and wonder about the things I don't know.
SUMMARY CHAPTER TEN

Cecile gets a hold of a gun and they make love. Carson takes Cecile and her family to a fiesta, and they have a high time. The next day, Carson and Cecile go to the Bullring-by-the-Sea. There's no bullfight, so they end up racing around the arena tiers. After the race, Cecile tells Carson that she wants him to go home to see his mother then he can come back and help her. Otherwise, she doesn't want his help. Carson says he can help Cecile and her family but not his own. He makes up a story about being a hero for her. He is El Hero defeating the bull. It is a promise to Cecile.

SUMMARY CHAPTER ELEVEN

Carson visits Percy in the hospital and learns that his mother's funeral was fine. On his way home, he's asked to play wiffle ball in the quonset hut church with a group of boys. Carson accepts the offer, breaks into the church and hits a home run off the wailing women of Jerusalem. Although the scene is somewhat absurd, the game signals the beginning of Carson's redemption.

SUMMARY CHAPTER TWELVE

Carson and Cecile go to the only French restaurant in Tijuana. Carson's broke out his credit cards for the first time and is trying to impress Cecile. It's clearly not working. Cecile is angry at his romanticism and is convinced that Carson cannot help her family. He's not pragmatic. She wants him to take care of his business before helping her. They talk about his bullfight story and Cecile gives her own version of it. El Hero gets gored as the whole restaurant listens in and applauds. Carson's romantic vision is punctured by Cecile's realism.

SUMMARY CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Carson's sitting on the porch in New Jersey with Aunt Marge, Mrs. Johnson and Railroad Jack, the garbage sculptor. Aunt Marge has asked R R to take Carson under his wing and teach him about being a man. The odds that Carson are up against are considerable. The chapter ends with Carson in the bathtub, hoping for redemption, but thinking mostly about death.
"You ride shotgun. We have to get through."

"I ain't American," Cecile says

"That's okay, you're part Indian, we'll mix metaphors. I'll be your Lewis and Clark. Let's go discover something and name it after ourselves. I'm very interested in immortality."

"Can you handle it?" she asks

"Immortality?"

"No, the burden of dos hombres."

"I knew you'd ask me that, it's just like you. Here, take the wheel."

I reach around to the floorboard in back and hoist up the Dummy. I stole him from a five and dime in Lajolla. All the best heroes have sidekicks. The Dummy wears a high-peaked, dirt-white cowboy lid, sunglasses and a cheap suit, wide blue lapels and no shoes. I got him a silver badge but no gun. Cecile's 22 is bundled inside my glove compartment.

"Are you all right?" she asks

"I didn't want your mother to be nervous about us going down here alone. I didn't want her to think I'm that kind of guy. Cecile, this is the Dummy. He's our chaperone."

"So traditional," Cecile says

"In Spring Lake, near home in Jersey, they have dummies sitting in parked police cars. They're used for speed traps. It doesn't work, though. Everyone knows the gag."

"What good is it if everyone knows?"
"That's just it," I say. "It makes everyone feel superior. That's what public servants are for."

"Hola, Dummy," Cecile says. Then she turns and actually shakes his mannequin hand. This is true.

I had driven into Tijuana at dawn, abducted Cecile, two of her blankets, one to cover the Dummy until a proper introduction could be finagled, a couple of cheese sandwiches and a six pack. We're going to the beach.

"A woman has got to work," Cecile had said. "I do not think this is the right idea."

"I'm buying these blankets," I said.

"Finally," she said.

We rattle in my Nova through the wedge canyon on Mexico 1. The car's cracked, fading vinyl upholstery toughens to rawhide. The simulated wood dash becomes part of the wagon, and the steering wheel, reins, driving the horses under the hood.

"Where did you get this car? Nova in Espanol means 'no go'."

"No go?"

"They did not sell."

The sun lifts behind us bright as a naked flash, and the canyon skins open. The Pacific lies dark and flat.

"I don't believe in symbolism," I say.

"I do," she says. "But I'll consider your choice in cars - poor taste."

The road sinks into another canyon, then forks south from the bullring into Baja California. I pay the $1.75 toll, and the collector says it's one hundred kilometers to where we want to go.

Short brown hills roll on our left. We pass a pastel town.
that squats on the beach and a neon green cornfield with a 
scaregull. The road threads the hills, the hills get higher and 
the road starts hugging A mountain island rises jagged as a 
drizzle castle offshore Burned-out cars rot at the edge of the 
corn.

"Do you like blood sausage?" Cecile asks, staring out her 
window, strands of hair blowing across her face

"Never tried it Hungry?"

"No"

"What made you think of that?"

"My mother," she says "She is cooking pig's blood and fat"

"How do you know?"

"I know my mother I haven't seen much of her lately. You 
brought her up, and I've been thinking about her. She is making 
sausage right now"

"What's my mother doing?"

"I don't know her," Cecile says

"Make something up Something good"

"How sick is she?"

"Something pleasant," I say

"She is in the kitchen baking bread There's a magazine open 
on the counter, a big glossy picture of a gringa formica kitchen, 
cherry wood cabinets and a smiling woman. There's a bowl of 
sliced radishes on the white center island A blender with frozen 
drinks It's a photograph of the ideal gringa kitchen, isn't it?"

"That's not my mother"

"Your mother is not in that kitchen. She's baking bread 
It's not even her magazine"
"It’s my Aunt Marge’s," I say. "My mother’s best friend. She’s staying with her, taking care of her."

"Are you going to tell me about it or keep playing with me?" Cecile says. "Don’t start this unless you’re prepared to go on. Otherwise, I do not believe you."

"I keep getting these letters. They’re bulging my pockets."

"I know that already."

"Why haven’t you asked me about it?"

"I am a little sick of being the one to make the effort here. So please, don’t go crazy on me now. I don’t know what you’re up to, but it is not looking too good for me and you. Just do me a favor and don’t act sorry for yourself."

"I have problems at home."

"People talk to each other," she says.

I stare out the windshield, at the prickly pear and old man cactus and think. Some people.

"Some people," I say.

And Cecile tries to help, a thing she’s good at. She says a lot, but the part I understand goes something like this. She says, love can get lost between the lines, but without those lines, with no words, it doesn’t stand a chance. Really, what chance does your heart have left by itself?

"You’re vacilando," Cecile says. "I don’t think you have a word for it in English, but it means you are going somewhere without really caring if you get there. You have direction but not to anything in particular."

Desert palms stand open in the sand and scrub grass yards of motels and bars. Vacancy signs tint the fronds pink.
“My mother’s dying,” I say.

“Go home,” Cecile says. “Lo siento mucho.”

“I just want to go to the beach, okay?”

My mother’s fading, she’s not a woman I know anymore. Her latest letter talks about god Aesculapius, the Greek god of healing. My mother says she’s been trying him. Says, Too bad I don’t have tuberculosis, then I could just take the sea voyage from Rome to Alexandria and everything would be all right. Instead, she says, I’m seeking hypnosis. I’m popping every vitamin in the alphabet, praying and experimenting with organic diets. I’m eating seaweed, Carson. I believe in God.

My mother hasn’t said anything about me staying. We have talked, but she hasn’t said anything either way. I’ve been waiting for her to please tell me I’m doing the right thing. If I go home my mother will die.

“Really,” Cecile says. “You can come back in a while. Maybe then I’ll go with you to your home. We’ll fly.”

“Please,” I say, knowing Cecile means every word she’s saying. I’m here, so I can’t go home. I am the vacilador. That’s the way it is. I have plenty of direction and conviction, but I must stay en route. I can’t have everything come to an end. Who am I to do that? Who the hell gave me that right?

“Just for a little time you can be with your mother. You can be there with her and make sure she is not wanting.”

I’m not ready for this. I’ve been counting on Cecile needing me, not wanting me to leave. And the truth is, I’m hurt she has the strength to suggest it.

“Why do you want me to leave?” I ask. “It always worried you
that I might "

"I have known about your mother for a little while now," Cecile says. "Do not ask me how, but I knew I can't take care of myself and my family, find direction for us and you at the same time. I'm sorry, Carson, but I cannot. Loving you won't be enough."

"What if I leave?"

"You have to," she says. "Just let me know before you do."

The trick is staying involved. That is the secret. I'm involved, but I need to ensure continuity. Idleness is always the real danger. Idleness can kill.

We pass Rosarito, and Cecile reaches into the back and turns the Dummy's head toward the window. He's just a dummy, so he doesn't say anything. The thing I like about him is he'll come between me and the bullet meant for me, and he'll put an end to dangerous conversations. The perfect sidekick.

The heat and land are dry, sun burning drier south along the water. Nothing is settled. I'll make Cecile need me. I must know every inch of the border to make it concrete in my head. What exactly will keep us going, keep us moving. The dust blurs the trail and the past, and I stay one step ahead of the settling air. The calm that can lay my tracks bare.

Sage, mesquite and creosote brush stake claims in the hills. Grays and greens and browns. Patches of teal.

"Can you open me a beer?"

Cecile pops a top, and I take a warm gulp. She looks at me, my beer, then opens one for herself.

"Dummy?" she asks.
"Tequila is made from the agave plant," I say, making the awkward way back to easy talk.

"And mescal and pulque," Cecile says. "We practically learn that in school. The century plant, an agave we had in our yard when I was a girl, flowers once in its life then dies. It is like a lot of people. It's beautiful to watch."

"That won't do," I say, taking a drink.

"About the other night in France," she says. "I didn't mean for all those people to hear."

"You gored me."

"I know. I cannot say I wouldn't do it again."

We pass a boy carrying school books on a swaybacked horse. The boy waves and I honk. Cecile smiles and says she could picture me as the boy.

"You or my brother, Caesarito," she says.

After another pay toll and beer, we drive by a sign reading, "Love at First Sight." Cecile drinks her beer, and I see out her window brown beds of elk kelp, the soft brown of Cecile's skin. A school of porpoise breaks the bed, swimming beneath a line of pelicans.

"Thanks for being honest," I say. "I understand what I have to do."

"Good," she says. "Muy Bueno."

I run out of beer in San Miguel, a few kilometers from Ensenada. Giant bird rocks white with shit split waves and tide offshore. The toll man says five hundred pesos, and I hand him a buck seventy-five. We overtake dune buggies spuming rooster-tails of sand and RV's with bumper stickers reading, "Loners on Wheels."
Shanties built of adobe, tin and tar paper nestle in the hills, in the shade of billboards advertising beer. Across the road an eighteen-hole golf course lies like a painter’s palette at the foot of terra-cotta townhouses and kelp-covered jetties. The highway forks and we head right, toward the townhouses and Ensenada Centre. I don’t think anyone wants to go left unless they have to, or unless they have the money to make certain they are only visiting.

“My home was nothing like that,” Cecile says.

The Puerto Mexicanos, a port with commercial boats moored in the lee of a jetty, squirms with fishermen. Outriggers, cast nets, lift nets, round haul, entangling and hoopnets crisscross the yard. I ease the Nova over speed bumps into town, and two boys with capes clenched in their hands leap from behind a Bertram. They hop into the street, each in line with a headlight, ripple their capes and yell, “Toro, toro.” I pick up speed, the boys grind their jaws, set feet and hold their capes before them. We bore into each others’ eyes.

“Ole!” I shout out the window and idle through.

“They’re practicing,” Cecile says, laughing. “They want to be millionaires.”

I look in the mirror. The boys wave and dance.

“El Hero should go back and show them the way.”

“Keep driving,” Cecile says.

In town, the open store fronts look like Dodge, closer to Dodge than anyplace in America I’ve ever been through. The Dummy sits in back, keeping an eye on things. A giant gorilla head and arm marquee rips from the face of a cantina. Dangling in the arm...
is a limp woman. I park down the road from there on the Boulevard Costero, in front of the Plaza Civica

"There is my father," Cecile says

"What?"

She sticks her arm out the window. In the plaza, behind the row of curbside palms, three bronze busts gaze into the street. I get out of the car and walk over to them. The plaque under the first head reads, "Benito Juarez," Mexican hero

Cecile comes up behind me and puts her arms around me; her chin on my shoulder

"I can joke about it," she says "But I don't think my padre would be able to contain himself if he saw this. He'd go on parade."

"I can joke."

"It's not easy," Cecile says "Someday if we are in California together we'll find your father."

"I'm near him. That's enough."

"Are there any statues?"

"No statues," I say, turning to her. I hold her against me and kiss her mouth and neck. A breeze blows off the Bahia de Todos Santos and Cecile takes my face in her hands. She puts her fingers to my lips and I kiss them, her mouth, both.

"Let's get undressed," she says

"I can't wait to be alone with you in California. I want to be alone with you for a long time."

"Just a boy," she says "You're just a boy."

I hold her hand back to the car. Cecile takes the blankets, the sandwiches, and I lift the Dummy. He is light as plastic.
"Is he coming, too?"

"I think so."

"We have two blankets here. Isn't that enough security?"

"My image."

"Is there going to be some kind of showdown?"

"You tell me. I've been gored."

"All right," she says. "You can bring him. But if you start kissing me, he'll have to turn his head."

We cross the arroyo and walk to the south side of a manmade jetty. I stop at the foot of the wide beach, kick from my sneakers and shed my shirt. Cecile trudges ahead and plants herself halfway to the water. The sand scorches between my toes.

She spreads the blankets, and I stand on one corner to cool my feet. When I was a boy I could roll in the hottest white sand like swamis walk on coals. Cecile unbuttons her blouse and wiggles from her jeans. She stands in a white bikini, and I'll take hot feet and be glad I'm no longer a boy.

We have plenty of room. I sit the Dummy on one blanket, take off his blazer and pin the badge to his pale chest. I lie on the other blanket next to Cecile. My back itches from the hard cotton, but then it quits, and I am fine. I pull off my jeans, fold them for a pillow beneath my head and relax in my baggies.

"I feel miles and miles away," Cecile says.

I inch closer to her on the blanket. She puts her hand over mine.

"Good."

The breeze pushes across the blue of the water. The water's flat and laps onshore inside the hook that shelters the bay.
feel the blue and breeze gather over me as my mind bends toward
sleep. My free hand extends off the blanket and fingers a shell
in the sand. I touch the ridges, smooth the grooves. It's a
jewel box. Children laugh and splash, palm fronds click.

When I wake the red sun melts on the water. The wind has
fallen, and Cecile stands with her ankles buried in the wet sand.
The Dummy sits smiling. Skin white on his blanket. I get up and
walk to Cecile. The last light cuddling her shoulders and hair.

Hair streaming down her back

I step around her. Tears fatten her face in the sun.

"Te amo.," she says.

"I love you too.

"This has got to stop.

I hug her head against my chest and run my hand through her
hair. Her fingers pull me closer.

"I love you," she whispers, crying into my throat.

"It'll be all right.

I look over her shoulder at writing in the sand, words carved
in the wet slope of the beach. Cecile and Carson locked inside a
shaky shell or heart. My footsteps stamp right through it.

A bearded man spies on us through binoculars. He sits under
an umbrella and wears a Hawaiian shirt, straw hat, black socks and
flip-flops. He sees me eyeing him and lowers the specs. They hang
from his neck against his lobster-red, white-haired chest. The
man is not far from us. He raises a glass in salute.

Thurston Howell.
I stand on the blanket. Cecile wakes and asks what's the matter. I tell her I'll take care of it.

Before I even get to Howell he says, "Sit down, son, make yourself at home," indicating the empty beach chair next to him.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"Like my tan?" he asks. "It's all natural, my young friend. No fake bakes for me. That's the problem with your generation. Everyone's getting cancer."

"Why are you here?"

"Relax," Howell says. "I guess you have yet to fornicate. Here, have a drink."

He reaches behind to the shade of his chair and produces a thermos.

"Margaritas," he says, pouring me one. "Cha, cha, cha."

I take the drink and sit down facing the water. I don't know why, but I do.

"I see you've found yourself a partner, my young friend." Howell says, zinc sunblock coating his nose.

"Fuck you. You followed me."

"Is that anyway to treat a man who has offered you a beverage?"

"Why are you here? You shouldn't have been following me."

"You don't pay attention to the other cars on the road, so how would you know? But no, we haven't been following you, despite my foreshadowing. We are whale watching. Here, take a peek."

He unbridles the binoculars from around his neck, but I slap them to the sand.
"Where's Hunter?"

"I warn you, my young friend. I may not have money right now, but I do have means, and I don't play games. Kindly refrain from violence."

Howell pats the waistband of his Bermuda shorts then takes a long sip of green margarita through his straw. I sit staring at him, my resolve softening to a blank state of skewed acceptance.

"Men don't know how to visit," Howell says. "They have to shoot pool or go to the track. That has got to change. I've been thinking about you. Boy, we have something in common."

"My last name is Barnes," I say.

"Exactly. That mustn't be easy. Is there any pressure? You're not impotent, are you?"

"No, I'm not. Where's your partner, Mr. Howell?"

"I recently saw Bob Denver on The Hollywood Squares. I'm keeping tabs. Alan Hale, Jr. was sighted drunk in Key West. Those men will pay."

"The cartoon was a cheap shot," I say.


We both take sips from our drinks and watch the water. It is thinning and flat.

"Where's Hunter?"

"The old coot went shell foraging and lost his hand. Here he comes now."

South in the dying light, a lone figure zigzags toward us in the mud sand along the tidal pools. The person is small and dark and getting larger now. He too wears a Hawaiian shirt, belly
protruding out and over Bermuda shorts. In his hand, scanning 
back and forth across the beach, is a metal detector. A cord runs 
from the detector's control panel to a set of earphones on his 
head.

"Goddammit!" he says, tearing off the earphones.

The knobby stub of his forearm stabs the air. Hunter drops 
the metal detector, grabs the thermos with his remaining hand and 
starts guzzling.

"I can't find my hand!"

"Jesus, Hunter. I'm sorry," I say. "I failed my fetal pig 
exam."

"Out of my seat, you."

I get up, and Hunter crashes into the beach chair.

"Hello, Carson," he says. "Forgive my temper. Thanks for 
the chair, chap. You really shouldn't be screwing up in school 
like that."

I sit in the sand in front of the two con-men. Cecile yawns 
on the blanket when she sees this. She told me she loved me and I 
said it too, and maybe it has taken some life out of her. Cecile 
has been yawning since the tears stopped.

You'd think she'd be interested in this.

"Once," Hunter says. "I was accosted by a barracuda. I was 
snorkeling in the Bahamas and the sunlight glinting off my hand 
attracted the beast. It's not easy being handicapped.

Apparently, a false limb is more dangerous than yum-yum yellow."

"I'll help you search for it."

"I'm afraid it's gone with the tide," he says. "But I did 
find six ninety-five in change and quite a few mollusks."
“Let’s see,” Howell says

Hunter reaches into his pocket and fumbles out a fan of shells. He arranges them in the sand between us. I pick up each one because they are hard to distinguish in the dusk.

“Common bay mussel, kelp-weed scallop, jingle shell, milky venus, baby’s ear, sad unicorn and two sea dollars.”

“Save those,” Howell says.

“You know shells?” Hunter asks.

“I grew up on the beach. You’ve run the gamut on mollusks.”

“Wonderful,” Hunter says. “I have a brilliant pile of fish to show you. Let’s go find my hand.”

I double-check on Cecile, and the three of us set out with the metal detector. We didn’t need it though. Down the beach we caught two children playing keep-away with Hunter’s hand, tossing it skyward for the herring gulls. Hunter had to give them the change he’d found because the kids were quicker than the three of us.

“I need a drink,” Hunter gasps.

“Let’s go to town,” Howell says, bent-over for breath. “You in, Carson? We’ll buy.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Come on,” Hunter says. “We’ll be decent.”

“Cecile won’t be happy about this. She doesn’t like you guys. And I don’t.”

“Sure you do,” Hunter says. “You need to see those fish.”

“What do you guys know about crossing the border?”

“That-a-boy,” Howell says, slapping me on the back. “Be a man.”
When we get back, Hunter and Howell begin packing their things and I go over to Cecile. She sees me coming from them and doesn’t even ask. She has her clothes on and is folding the blankets.

“You three look good together,” she says.

She stops and looks at me a moment. Then she looks to the water and keeps folding.

I start to answer her but don’t. Answering Cecile is not something I feel like doing right now, even though this might be the time when an answer is needed. Instead, I stare behind her at the mariachi band crossing the beach, playing to the moonlight.

“They’ve invited us for a drink. I’d like to go. We’re on vacation.”

“I think we should go home now. I have been thinking that you really should be leaving Mexico for a while.”

“I told you I don’t want to talk about that.”

“I love you,” she says. “But I do not want your help anymore. It won’t work that way. I’ve been exploring on my own, and I can help my mother myself.”

“You can?”

“Sí.”

“ Forget it,” I say. “I can’t let you do that.”

“I will not let you hurt my family.”

I stand watching her. Her skin softening with the spin of the earth.

“Degrees of love,” I say. “I remember my father saying something to me along those lines. I had talked wrong to my mother, and my father let me have it. He said, ‘Remember that
I'll always love your mother more than you. I love you very much,' he said. 'But your mother came first. You came along."

"It is true," Cecile says. "But I don't always think about it that way. You can't use me and my family to hide from your grief. I'm showing you what to do. Go home."

"I'll help you. My mother and I have an understanding."

"Do you?"

"Yes."

"You will not hurt my family."

"Okay, okay," Hunter says, walking over. "Enough bullshit."

"You love me but—"

"Yeah."

We pile into my Nova. Hunter and Howell in back with the Dummy between them. Cecile grows quiet when she realizes I mean to stay for drinks. It may be coming to that between me and her.

"You make your own choices," is all she says.

I drive back into town and park across the street from the sportsfishing piers, just this side of the Mercado de Mariscos. The fish market is lined with booths like the border or a carnival. We get out, all of us except for the Dummy who'll watch the car, and a man tries to sell me a hammock made of buoy rope for eighteen dollars. I tell him no, and he tries to unload the same hammock on Hunter for a buck.

"This way," Hunter says. "Fish!"

Cecile puts her arm through mine as we stroll through the market. Pescado sizzles in cast-iron woks. Americans and
Mexicans stand at the booths and swallow fish tacos. Cecile is cold one moment and hot the next. Gulls wheel, pouncing on droppings.

"I'm pretending to be a tourist," Cecile says.

"Are you going to buy something miniature?" I ask.

"I am seeing what I may look like. I've always used the border and considered myself almost above it, but now I'm a little shocked. These people look like drug pushers."

The salt and dry scale smell is heavy with bean oil. The four of us buy fillets wrapped in tortillas. Hunter, Howell and I douse ours in avocado, salsa, jalapenos and onion while Cecile eats hers as is. I ask her if that is the Mexican way and she says no, she just prefers it plain.

"Leave me alone," she says.

"We'll get out of here in a minute. I have to see these fish."

"I'm feeling very self-conscious."

"What is our lovely young couple discussing?" Howell says.

"You are one beautiful woman," he says to Cecile. "Why I---"

"Quit it, Howell," I say. "Don't start."

Howell looks at me a moment, then turns to Hunter.

"Did I hear something?" he asks. "Shall I call the authorities?"

Cecile starts to speak, but Hunter interrupts her and says.

"Right this way. Hurry now." He gives Howell a look and walks.

"We'll make this quick," I say to Cecile.

We push our way through the rows of booths to the end of the market and beginning of the pier. The plum sky is soft and deep.
in the white lights strung between poles. Men grapple with crates on the docks, and the mariachi band ambles by, guitars and accordions crooning.

"I found this ichthyological gold mine earlier today," Hunter says. "We've been here for two days, have you been tailing us, Mr. Barnes?"

"Have you thought about our little business proposition?" Howell adds. "The mountain in Sonora?"

"I'm calling this reunion a coincidence," I say. "Leave it at that."

"You're in a dream world, my young friend."

At the foot of the pier looms a rust-torn dumpster holding a heap of dead fish. Ring-billed and black-backed gulls perch on top of the pile pecking eyes and garbling intestines. A few birds flap above the feast, and more wait on the rooftops and pole lines in shadow.

Hunter says he knows the whereabouts of ladders.

"What is happening here?" Cecile asks.

"This will be better than church," I say. "One catalog of the species found in this dumpster may go farther than a lifetime of Sunday school."

"The three of you are loco."

Hunter and Howell whisper something to each other and grab step-ladders. Howell nods. I ask Cecile if she wants to look and she says she'll pass, thank you. The wonderful smell, you know.

"What are you two whispering?" she asks Hunter.

"Nothing," he says. "Men's talk."

We three climb up and chase the birds. They take flight.
crying, drumming the air with wings Hunter begins sorting through the pile with his mechanical fingers

"Well, what do you make of it?" he asks

Cecile stands below us with her arms folded ready to leave, and I study the scaly mound as Hunter sorts and Howell peers

This is what's on the surface in the weak light

One wahoo, two ballyhoo, lower jaws equal to the head in length, a barred surfperch, the female of which average 33 4 embryos per hatch and is the most important surf fish taken in California, two senoritas, brown and cream, a black snook, three brown smoothound, member of the requiem shark family, an albacore, hook and line record once set with a fish caught off St. Helena Island at 69 pounds, a rex sole and rainbow runner, one yellowtail, a yard long, one California sheephead, the male of the species developing a hump over the eyes for breeding season, four blackfin lookdown, genus Selene, species brevorti, all head and no tail, two Pacific moonfish, another lookdown, one Juan Fernandez jack, a Mazatlan jack, black jack, a longfin bluntnose jack, two goggle-eye jack, a wavyback skipjack and one, two, three cottonmouth jack, a mahi-mahi, the seafood special of choice in Eagle County, Colorado, two opalesyes, the young of which have trouble leaving the nest, returning to the same tidepool after each low tide, nine true sardines, one amazing flying fish whose wings or pectoral fins do not flap in flight, only the wings of the immature do and can soar one thousand feet or more at thirty-six feet in the air with an average speed of thirty-five mph which is all really more for show than survival reason being the daredevil's chief nemesis, the dolphin, swims directly under the
little aviator at a velocity averaging thirty-seven mph and for a longer time, a deepbodied leatherjacket, 11-13 gillrakers on the lower limb of the first gill arch, and two rosy rockfish.

"Amazing," Hunter says "A virtuoso performance! Where, how?"

"I had to do something when my father left "

"A good man," Howell says. "Carson, you must join us "

"It affirms my faith in God," I say, looking down to Cecile "All these fish. It's not plausible that this variety could be found discarded in a single dumpster "

"A miracle," Hunter says. "Think of the money," Howell says "What would your father do? You're your father's son, you'll never outrun that "

We step down and the gulls dive to resume eating They shriek like I am at a loss when it comes to seagulls

Cecile kisses me hard on the lips and says, "Can you please go now?"

"No," Hunter says "He cannot "

"Stay out of this," I tell him.

Cecile starts walking and I follow her I want to know what she means by me going

"How many times do I have to tell you? You obviously have a memory. I want you to go home, Carson. I'd hope you would be there if I needed you like that "

"I love you. I'm not going "

"Who's drawing degrees of love now? You love your mother, don't you? Go home Then you can come back "

"No way "
"You sound like a baby," she says. "Like a seagull."

We stop and wait for Hunter and Howell to catch up with us through the crowd. Cecile says I sound like a scavenger, and maybe that's true, I don't know. Hunter and Howell talk to each other closely.

"We have three-hundred dollars between us not counting sand," Howell says. "Let's proceed to get drunk."

"What is it you two want?" Cecile asks, stepping right up to them.

Howell removes his hat and says, "Madame."

"It is quite clear what we want," he says. "We have an imminent deal for which we require a handshake. It is as simple as that. If we don't receive a handshake something unfortunate might happen." Howell shakes his head and refits his hat.

"Something unfortunate usually does."

"Carson?" she says.

"They remind me of my father, and that's all. Ignore the rest."

"Impossible," Howell says. "We can make or break you."

"Shall we?" Hunter inquires.

Cecile steps ahead of us, turns and stops.

"I am doing this for you," she says to me, in front of all of us. "But I'm not sure why, other than you are my ride and I love you. I don't know what is right anymore."

"Reason enough," I say and look at Hunter and Howell to let them know that I'll ask for their help with Cecile and the border. They know what's between Cecile and I, and they could help.

Cecile doesn't seem too concerned about these two. That's her
plan, an act I’m sure, but I know we need to be. Men such as Hunter and Howell don’t disappear once they’ve sniffed an opportunity. It’s best to keep them in sight.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Cecile says to me. “And you’re right. Do not consider it an option.”

We walk past the car with the Dummy, back past the heads in the plaza to a cantina with an open roof. It’s behind an iron gate bordering the sidewalk and has thatched awnings over the two bars. A small crowd enjoys the December night under the sky.

The next hours spiral with centrifugal force. Tequila flows, the stars gyrate round and round, and Cecile isn’t too happy. I’m slipping, I know. Waitresses wear next to nothing—the moon is large and low over Mexico. I laugh with con-men to see what it’s like, see if I’m missing anything, and I’m not. I am not my father. I tell Howell and he laughs when I say that and Hunter does too. They tell me to shut-up, and Howell stands, but the mariachi band marches through the bar and serenades Cecile who needs a drink, she doesn’t want a drink. Hunter wins a drink by getting the shock of his life for one dollar he holds battery wires in his metal hand as the volts are cranked by the battery’s proprietor till Hunter’s eyes bulge like a deepsea fish. His muscles twitching in convulsion. The crowd cheers. Cecile says go. Howell says stay. A goddamned Greek chorus of stays and goes. More tequila, mescal and a worm. We drink like Vikings. Howell says, I’m an epicurean, you know. I have no evil thoughts of home. Just high old days under early stars.

Howell stares at Cecile.

“We are going to the cock fights,” he says.
We're in a back-alley courtyard away from the water. Adobe walls square the dirt ground. My sidekick who will take the bullet is not here, and that worries me. Hunter and Howell talk with another American and two Mexicans holding chickens. Cecile holds me.

"Is this how you treat a woman after you have told her you love her?" Cecile asks.

"No," I say. "But I don't want my back to them right now." Money exchanges hands, and one of the Mexicans shakes his head no. The American tells him to get lost. Then, he does, and everyone looks surprised except for his friend who seems embarrassed. He shrugs his shoulders and pets the head of his bird, the head discolored like a birthmark.

"Follow me," the strange American says.

We squeeze through a maze of alleys, skim down into the arroyo and walk along that farther from town then climb out the south side into another set of passages. Howell says something to the American who then looks back at me and Cecile. He smiles, slowly. Cecile starts whispering that this is crazy, these men are cholos and will rob us blind and worse. I talk lamely about the spirit of adventure and the cultural significance of what we may see. Cecile says if I talk like that anymore, she will leave me drunk or not.

"I was being brave," I say.

"We shouldn't be doing this."

"I know. But we are."
"Excuse me," the American says, and everyone stops. "I'd like to talk if I can. I've done many a thing in my life," he says. "I've even sold life insurance, honest to God. But I must admit my first love is game cocks."

He winks at Cecile, then crinkles his brow and nods. Cecile digs into my arm. We enter a yard lit by floodlight.

Chickens. We're in a square yard fenced with tires, the black rubber glowing in the light. Weed patches surround dirt circles worn in the ground. In each circle is a large, rusting oil drum with a six foot steel cable, one end secured to the top of the drum, the other to a collared chicken. Five of them. Holes are cut in the base of each drum for what looks like shelter. The drums are spaced about thirteen feet apart to keep the birds from killing each other. The chickens can circle the drums at the radius of their cables and be as tough as they want.

"Tomas!" the American yells to the window of the shack to the yard we're in. "Spectators! One's a writer. He'll write about our chickens!"

"Who said I was a writer?"

"Must be strong birds to pull those cables," Hunter says.

"Chicken weight-lifting," Howell says.

A screen door whacks shut and three dogs bolt from the dark into light and chase a cat through the chickens. The cat looks like it has seen better days. I bet it wishes it were in Morocco where cats are held sacred.

"Tomas keeps these here dogs to offend off the coyots. They come down out of the hills for an easy meal. I shot one just the other night, myself. Ground it up in the feed. It's good.
protein. These birds eat better than most children.”

Cecile looks at me at the mention of guns and coyotes. I admit it is not pleasant. In the rawest sense we are, Cecile and I, coyote and chicken.

“I don’t believe in symbols,” I say to her for the second time today.

“Okay, El Hero,” she says.

“Tomas has six dogs in all. Look, here he comes now.”

We all turn and see Tomas emerge in floodlight, limping toward us on a bum leg. Other than his limp he seems to be a normal, middle-aged Mexican man with plaid shirt tails hanging out. He looks like a Tijuana cabby.

“I know he doesn’t appear like it,” the American whispers. “But Tomas has been all across the world. His English Setter with the tore open throat he got in England. That tangle of black hair you see coming toward us with the cat tuft in its mouth he accrued in Ireland. That Irish mutt tore open that setter-dog’s throat. They fight all the time.”

I bend down and pet the mutt. Tomas steps slowly to the American who introduces Hunter, Howell and the Mexican holding the chicken. Then he introduces Cecile and me as the beauty and the writer.

Hunter, Howell and the American all laugh at the joke. I pull Cecile closer to me, and Tomas just nods. Takes some money from the American and heads back inside. He limps back into shadow with his dogs trailing him.

“I see you are handicapped,” Hunter says.

But Tomas keeps walking.
"Never you mind him. He's just what you call medicating. He's thinking hard about attending the world cock championships in Phoenix and a-winning that $300,000 grand prize. He figures he's ready, he's got a thoroughbred, a cock that don't feel no pain. The future champ. He lives in the house with Tomas."

The American gives us all a long look.

He says all is ready for a go, and he points out a cock to the Mexican. Hunter and Howell have their money on the bird in hand, I think.

Howell says, "300 grand, this could be a new line of work for us."

The Mexican cradles his bird and follows the American to Tomas' chicken. The American chases Tomas' chicken around the drum, its wings beating, feathers flying, until he catches it and unhooks the collar. He holds it up for us to marvel. The chicken is bright white with sharp, faded purple claws and a great plume of red feathers crowning its head and neck. The Mexican's bird is in trouble.

"Tomas gets $200 per rooster and $1,000 for two hens and a rooster. Of course this is all strictly illegal."

He gives us his chicken talk look. The serious one.

The Mexican stares at Tomas' cock and shakes his head quickly no. He keeps petting his own bird's discolored head. He kisses the top of it and hugs.

"Maybe you should call this off," I say to Hunter. "The man doesn't need his bird slaughtered."

Hunter looks at Howell who shovels into his shorts and pulls out more money. Howell walks over to the Mexican and shoves the
bills into the man's shirt pocket. The man looks down at the money, the fat in his neck folding, then kisses his bird again. He hands the bird to Howell, stands gazing at it, then runs from the yard.

"Meet our investment everyone," Howell says, showing off the motley chicken. He holds it away from himself by the neck.

"Wait a minute here," he says, tilting the bird upside down. "It's missing a wing."

"Let's do 'er," the American says.

He walks through the yard, the chickens flapping madly, to a small clearing near the tires in back. No light slivers through the rubber from neighboring yards. We're in spotlight rimmed with the dark. Howell follows with his bird out in front of him, keeps saying over and over it has no wing. Hunter starts giving a pep talk along the lines of he's no chicken, he's no chicken, and Cecile and I hang back a little.

"I guess there's no quitting now," Howell says. "The dirty little beaner stole our flow. We must win."

"I'm leaving," Cecile says. "Don't you dare ask for these men's help with my family."

"No metal," Howell says.

"No blades," the American agrees.

"No. No, I wouldn't," I say to Cecile.

Both men put down their chickens. The cocks square off, their neck feathers ruffled like rising suns about their heads. They duck and feint, try fake strikes and real ones. Hunter, Howell and the American bob and weave, following every move.

"Are you coming with me?" Cecile says.
Feathers get plucked, float in the air, and others catch in claws and beaks. The chickens in the yard squawk. Tomas’ bird draws blood, its beak puncturing soft under-belly.

"Look at them birds box!" the American shouts.

Dirt clouds the cocks. They spin around each other, left and right, jerking with necks and beaks rigid, three wings bent half-open. Tomas’ makes short flying leaps to gain position until it sees the other’s weakness. It stalls, then bursts over top. The wounded bird reels to defend itself but lands on its side. It gets pierced through the neck. Tomas’ chicken stands on the fallen head, blood dripping from its beak, amber eye blinking.

"I am leaving with or without you," Cecile says.

"I wouldn’t do that," Hunter says, grabbing Cecile’s arm. He pulls her to him and touches her hair with his mechanical hand. He runs that hand through her hair. "I met your little brother the other day. Caesar, right? A fine boy."

"Let go of me," Cecile says, jerking her head.

"And your mother--just wonderful."

The American starts to laugh. I move for Hunter, but Howell reaches into his Bermuda shorts and pulls out a gun. He levels it on Tomas’ bird and fires. Feathers and blood splash against the black rubber. Hunter lets go of Cecile and runs to Howell who is hunched over the dead birds. The American stands looking at them, blinking like the chicken. The lights in Tomas’ shack flick on.

"What the fuck are you doing, Howell?" I say, leaving Cecile’s side and walking toward him.

He turns and levels his gun to my chest. I keep moving toward him, but Hunter hooks my arm with his mechanical hand.
“I’m serious, boy.”

I tear my arm from Hunter, turn to take Cecile’s hand, but she’s gone. I look around me in the floodlight. Howell begins to smile, waving the gun loosely in my direction.

“Too bad.” Hunter says.

“Fucking mama’s boy,” Howell says “What? You wanna run, too. You hear your mama calling you?”

I hear breathing in the yard. It’s loud and growing louder. Tomas limps into the light with a shotgun in his hands. He pumps the action and stands with his legs set wide at the edge of the dark. His breath is slow and loud.

“These fellows shot Rob Roy,” the American croaked.

Tomas raises the shotgun to his chest and aims it toward Hunter and Howell. He looks past them or through them at the dead birds in the dirt. The American steps backward and the two conmen look at each other then Tomas. Howell starts to laugh and lifts his 38. Hunter begins blathering

“We didn’t—”

I run from the yard, leaving the floodlight for dark. The shotgun roars, but I don’t look back. I duck out of the alley, into the night and start guessing. I smell the tide changing and I run for it, my footsteps smacking pavement under the moon and stars. Another shot fires.

“Carson!” Hunter’s voice echoes through the sleeping neighborhood “Don’t go. Don’t go.”

The voice rattles in my head, follows from both near and far.

“Run.” I hear Cecile telling me “Go.”
SUMMARY CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Carson goes to Cecile's, but she isn't there. He tells her family to pack, they're leaving tonight. Cecile's mother shows Carson that she's read his mother's letters. Cecile has obviously talked to her mother about things, and Mrs. Avina comforts Carson, but he tells her to pack again and he'll meet them at the designated spot at eleven to cross the border. It's clear at this point that Cecile will not be there and that Carson is desperate to go ahead with their plans. He needs to keep this ball rolling. He gets drunk, goes back to La Jolla to get ready and dodges Hunter and Howell who have survived the encounter in Ensenada and are following him. The woman who lives in the apartment above Carson informs him that Hunter and Howell are in her apartment and they told her that they are going to take Carson to see his father. When Carson returns to Mexico, he discovers that the gun is missing. He goes to the designated meeting place. Cecile and her family are not there, and Carson gets shot. He realizes that he is just like his father, and this fact hurts him more than the bullet. He drives himself to the hospital, tells the nurse he tried to kill himself, and she convinces him it was only an accident. The gun that Carson was shot with was the same caliber as Cecile's.

SUMMARY CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Carson flies home to New Jersey and is met by Aunt Marge at the airport. Aunt Marge forces him to accept a letter from his mother. At home, he reads the letter and learns that his mother forgave him for not coming home. She allowed him to stay a boy when he needed to become a man. Aunt Marge excuses his absence but tells him he better shape up.

SUMMARY CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

A kind of coda. In spring, Carson goes crabbing, catches dinner and goes home to work on the house. That night, he finally visits his mother's grave. The next morning he goes on a church-group bus trip to Atlantic City with Aunt Marge, Mrs. Johnson and R.R. Jack. The novel ends with Carson on the bus as he starts to tell R.R. Jack about Mexico and Cecile.