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THESIS APPROVAL

The abstract and thesis of David Tinsley for the Master of Arts in English were presented June 19, 1995 and accepted by the thesis committee and the department.

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ABSTRACT

An abstract of the thesis of David Tinsley for the Master of Arts in English presented June 19, 1995, and accepted by the thesis committee and the department.

Title: The Hero at Rest

My thesis consists of seven short stories, works of fiction, each of which deals with one or more aspects of human emotional suffering. Most of the stories attempt to examine the lives of either young or middle-aged men who have come from broken families. A number of these men have witnessed in their parents the ravages of alcoholism and yet they themselves have fallen--or are at risk of falling--prey to an identical atavistic fate. Religious faith, whether it be ecclesiastic or secular, plays a key role in their lives, to the extent that none of them have it.

Wanting to believe, however, that life consists not only and entirely of despair, I offer in several of these stories what I hope to be plausible depictions of a single character electing to take at least one small step out of and away from suffering and self-recrimination, toward

redemption, although that redemption ought always to be thought of as limited, cyclic in nature, contingent at best.

A brief list of writers whose work has influenced these stories in varying degrees includes Samuel Taylor Coleridge, T.S. Eliot, Thomas Hardy, James Joyce, William Faulkner, Raymond Carver, and Richard Ford. The first story in the collection, "Heart of Steel," will eventually be part of a longer work, one currently in progress, and thus may not appear to be fully self-contained. Ideally, the other six stories will stand as complete works, independent of any others.

THE HERO AT REST

by

DAVID TINSLEY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS
in
ENGLISH

Portland State University
1995

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Heart of Steel

At one time I looked forward to these trips on the Coast Starlight, to nights when, after settling in, I'd take a moment to glance up and down the coach, gauging eye contact, prospecting for the company of an attractive woman. Tonight I simply switch on my Walkman, slip on headphones, then lean back and shut my eyes, wanting nothing more for now than to lose myself in Saint Saens' *Danse Macabre*. The orchestra tolls, strikes midnight, falls silent. A solitary violin plays. One becomes two, and the dance begins.

The locomotive's warning whistle echoes through the station, and we start to edge forward at last. Years ago I thought the Portland skyline beautiful at night. Anymore I make it a point not to look, the old adage about familiarity breeding contempt having once again proved true. Never with the music, though, I assure myself, as each section in turn steps in, joins the allegro dance of death.

Moments later someone brushes my knee, then settles down beside me in the aisle seat. I keep my eyes closed, trying to shut out all but the music. Wheels click in metallic cadence along the tracks as the warning whistle echoes off a wall of high-rise buildings in the distance. I feel an uncanny, vaguely disturbing sense of presence. Perfume teases my nostrils.

When I open my eyes my heart comes abruptly to life, does several maneuvers it was in no way built for. She's young, though. Certainly too young for me, anyway. She offers me a faint smile before turning back to the hands in her lap. Her perfume I recognize as Obsession, my favorite. She looks like the kind of young woman most men would call nice.

She's tall but appealingly so, and slender, though by no means frail. I can't help noticing the full curve of her breasts beneath a clinging, pale blue silk blouse. Blonde and carefully waved, her shoulder-length hair glistens in the half-light. She has fine high cheekbones, a small sculpted nose, and tastefully lined and shadowed ample blue eyes that should sparkle but seem not to. Her mouth curves down expressively at the corners, the natural flare of her lips suggesting an arrogance not otherwise apparent in her face. Her skin is extremely pale--revealing networks of tiny blue veins beneath--in striking contrast to her crimson lipstick. Although I have an almost eerie sense of having seen this young woman before, I've no idea of when or where.

Discretely I brush a piece of lint off my lapel. I have on

a conservative dark gray suit, generic pastel blue oxford shirt, and equally nondescript paisley tie. For the past several months I've planned to update my business wardrobe, add a little color, maybe some pleats or suspenders, perhaps even a double-breasted jacket or two. I could kick myself now for having put it off.

Lowering the volume on the Walkman, I scan the coach. She could easily have had a seat to herself.

"I hope you don't mind," she says, glancing briefly at me. "I was just thinking some company would be nice." Her eyes, her face, seem to reflect mostly apprehension.

"My sentiments exactly." As I slip off my headphones and set them aside, my mind starts to spin, searching for words of insight, or at least something I won't regret. I've always felt a keen sense of life's key moments lost, always been receptive to omens, spectral signals, shifts in the psychic winds. So at this moment it's easy to imagine myself at a crossroads, an intersection of powerful forces, actions and reactions, causes and effects. I'm trying primarily to get hold of my thoughts, though, in hopes of putting together a coherent sentence.

"My name's Mason." I extend a hand, realizing then that I should have waited for her to offer hers, but she accepts it, smiling in a way to show mostly relief.

"I'm Tina." She seems nervous, willing to meet my eyes only in passing. Her hand shakes almost imperceptibly when she draws it away. Her face looks drawn, as if maybe she hasn't slept well

of late. I catch myself staring and turn to the window.

Bending across the Willamette River now onto a long straightaway, the Starlight gathers speed, pressing me back against the seat, a feeling I've always enjoyed and somehow equated with safety, despite the fact that it reminds me of taking off in a jet. Flying terrifies me, and I've long since conceded that no amount of past-probing or psychological mumbo jumbo will ever rid me of this fear. So for the past ten years I've spent fully a third of my time on an Amtrak Superliner trudging up and down the West Coast. This evening, however, I'm thinking of silver linings. I'll be in this seat for another nine hours. Maybe she'll stay for a while. Who knows? Maybe I'll find a way to brighten those sad eyes.

The odor of diesel exhaust laced with Obsession surrounds me. I take a deep breath, fill my lungs with the smoky sweet fragrance, and hold it for a long moment. Naturally I'm curious to know why she's here. Perhaps it's merely fate paying its dues, offering a good turn. I let out my breath quietly, quietly take another.

"So tell me, Tina, how long will I have the pleasure of your company?" I'm doing my best to appear at ease.

She looks at me in a shy, puzzled way, almost as if she imagines hurtful intent in my words. "I'll find another seat if you like."

"No, no. Please, stay right where you are. I was just curious

about where you were going."

"Oh," she says, seeming relieved, though still unsure of herself. She takes a deep breath before going on. "Well, I'm not sure. Somewhere sunny, I guess."

Her beige linen suit looks expensive and tailored to fit. She wears stylish calf-skin pumps that match her small Gucci handbag. Her outfit seems conspicuously formal, chosen possibly to show herself as older, a woman of serious intent. Diamonds glisten in the lobes of her ears, though she wears none on her fingers. A valise rests on the floor at her feet. Embossed metal letters next to the handle read C.M.E. Tina must be short for something--Christine, most likely, or Christina.

"Looks to me like you're dressed for something," I say, trying merely to keep things going.

"Oh, no . . . nothing really. But I guess maybe I did dress for the trip. Hope has no price tag, though. Isn't that what they always say?"

"It's free for the taking, surely." Aware suddenly that I'm making conversation rather than speaking the truth, I add, "If you know where to look."

She sighs. "I'm working on that, I guess."

I've nothing instructive to offer. "Well, good luck," I say.

We sit quietly while the conductor, Thomas, a man of about fifty who has worked this run for the last seven or eight years, makes his way down the aisle checking boarding passes. When he

gets to us he and I exchange greetings, shake hands. He lingers for a moment, not saying anything, seemingly oblivious for the moment to everything save Tina. I've begun to notice, too, that several men in the coach are watching her, now and then sneaking quick glances her way. I'd like to believe that my own interest in her is more altruistic, that I'm feeling nothing more than a fatherly sort of concern.

We're up to speed now, rolling upriver through the valley. The pale blue shroud looming over Portland has fallen away to the north. As if tracking us, a moonlit pathway spans the river. The water is calm, mirror-like. Stars fill the sky. Things have taken a nice turn, both inside and out.

I haven't eaten since breakfast and though I'm really not hungry, I think it best to get something solid in my stomach. When I invite Tina to join me for dinner, she smiles but declines, offering that she might like a glass of red wine instead. "If it wouldn't be too much bother," she says, taking a wallet from her handbag.

"Oh no, my treat." I wonder if she's twenty-one but choose not to ask.

When I stand she looks up at me and smiles. "Can I have it here?"

"You just sit tight, my dear." I take my briefcase down and replace it with her valise. "I'll be right back."

On the way to the lounge I stop at a restroom. I shave quickly

with my Norelco, wash my face, brush my hair. After toweling my face dry I study myself in the mirror. More than a little gray colors the temples but at least the hair offers no imminent signs of falling out. No baggy flesh under the chin. No crow's feet yet around the eyes. I flex my abdominals, punch my stomach. It's solid enough, thanks to thousands of sit-ups and plenty of tennis. All in all, not bad for forty-six. I flash myself a winning smile, then exit the restroom.

Downstairs in the lounge I chat for a moment with the bartender, Vincent, a young fellow I've come to know fairly well. I order a bourbon rocks and a split of Cabernet, then finish what remains of a bowl of smoked almonds on the bar while I wait for the drinks.

Vincent grins as he sets the wine split and cocktail on the bar. "So, Thomas tells me you've got a hot one on the line tonight."

Occasionally in the past I've been amused by Vincent's lewd sense of humor and raunchy jokes. But I'm in no mood for it now. "I seriously doubt that, Vincent."

"Well then, let's just make it three for the bourbon, and I'll cover the wine." He holds up the split and winks at me. "Candy is dandy, right?"

"Thanks, but no thanks." I hand him six dollars for the drinks, then toss a dollar on the bar, half what I'd ordinarily tip. As I walk away he mutters something that sounds like, "Who

put the stick up his ass?" But I keep walking. I have enough on my mind already. I may have to speak with Thomas about minding his own business, though.

While we sip our drinks I explain to Tina that I work as a structural engineer and project manager for a San Francisco design-build firm. Returning now to the Bay Area, I've spent the last three days on-site in Portland. We have close ties to several local developers, and during the past ten years I've overseen a number of high-rise projects in both Portland and Seattle.

She listens intently, now and then asking questions about my work. I tell her about a Seattle office tower we designed several years ago, seventy-two floors, the tallest structure on the West Coast. The work in San Francisco and LA, I explain, is always more interesting and complex, though, on account of earthquake threat. It can be exhilarating, sometimes, to stand atop a steel frame, fifty, maybe sixty floors up, feel it rack and sway in the wind, listen to the metal sing.

What I choose not to tell her is that I haven't missed a day of work in fifteen years now, having muddled through colds and flu, various broken bones and a host of ruined expectations. Even my vacations have been of the working type--project visits to Phoenix, Denver, Houston, Vancouver B.C., even to Mexico City on two occasions. I mention nothing, either, of how it feels to spend half a lifetime wrenched in opposite directions by your head and

heart. Nor of how one day you might stare up at something with your signature on it and see nothing but a monument to greed, of how you might come to lie awake at night, sickened by things you've said and done for the sake of a dollar, 99.9 cents of which belong to someone else.

Tina goes on to tell me that architecture has always fascinated her, that she even applied once to the School of Architecture at the University of Oregon before finally giving up on the idea of going to college.

"That's too bad," I say. "Oregon has a fine program. As a matter of fact, I tried it for a couple years."

"Really? What happened?"

"Basically I got careless and lost my student deferment, so Uncle Sam gave me a scenic tour of the rice paddies."

"Rice paddies?"

"Vietnam. I was drafted."

"Oh," she says quietly. "At least you finished college, though, right?"

"Eventually, yes. After I got out of the service I played musical schools and majors for about ten years, then finally managed to struggle through at Berkeley. I guess if I had it to do over again, though, I'd have stuck with Eugene." I turn to look out my window. Light playing out across the roadbed casts inscrutable fleeting shadows. I glance at her and smile. "Small world, it seems."

She looks at me knowingly and nods.

"You know, Tina . . . you're young, obviously bright. I can't believe it's too late for you, too late for school."

"Oh yes, I'm afraid it is."

The tone of her reply makes it clear that she wishes to drop the subject but at least now her face shows a hint of color. And though it hasn't yet included her eyes, her smile seems to have relaxed.

Neither of us seems to know what to say next, so we just concentrate on our drinks for a while. My own thoughts keep drifting back to Eugene, to my college days and a time when women served as diversions, each soon forgotten, each passing easily into and out of my life. I'll be the first to admit that I was once a user of women--the Crown Prince of Deceit--but over the years the scales have slowly tipped the other way, have slowly come back into balance.

To lighten the mood I tell Tina about a fraternity brother of mine who set his eyebrows on fire with a shot of flaming Bacardi 151. With her hands still resting primly in her lap, she laughs in a restrained, self-conscious way that I find extremely appealing.

She seems unwilling, however, to offer anything more personal of herself, allowing only that she's from Portland but may not be returning anytime soon, if ever. "I do have an acquaintance in the Bay Area, though," she says. "Maybe I'll pay him a surprise visit."

I feel my chest tighten and my cheeks flush, clear and familiar warning signals. "So, where does this friend live?"

"Oh . . . I'm really not sure anymore. I'll have to check the phone book, I guess."

"I'd be glad to help, certainly. Maybe drive you somewhere if you like."

"Thanks. We'll see." She nods, though not in a way to commit herself, and I suddenly imagine her walking away from me in the San Francisco Amtrak station, just slipping quietly, cheerfully, even, out of my life. And I know now that I'm in grave danger of slipping over a line, one that I've promised myself never again to cross.

Invariably, though, something in the complex mix of feminine beauty and melancholy intrigues me, draws me in. Every woman I've truly cared for has had it, suffered from it. I imagine a trout rising, lured, then hooked by a brilliant sunlit fly. I finish my bourbon, set the cup aside. "Forgive me for prying, Tina, but you seem to be carrying the weight of the world tonight."

"Yes," she says earnestly, "I guess sometimes I imagine I am. I'm terribly sorry, though."

"Please, don't be." I hold my hands out in a gesture of concern, feeling the urge to let go, to go ahead and touch her. "And if there's anything you'd like to talk about, by all means, feel free."

"That's very kind. But you hardly know me."

"So? I don't bite. I have broad shoulders." I smile, trying to appear nonchalant.

For a long moment she studies her finely manicured and polished crimson nails. Then without looking up she says, "Have you ever had just one thing you wanted more than anything else--maybe a dream you'd had all your life--and when it finally came true you felt empty, cheated almost? And maybe you felt foolish for expecting so much, or maybe angry, even, because you realized your fondest dream hadn't changed your life in the way you'd always hoped it would?" She turns and looks at me in a hopeful way.

More times than you could ever imagine, is one thing I elect not to say. Another is that anyone who tells you to follow your dreams--or says anything remotely similar, for that matter--should not be trusted and is either a hopeless romantic, and therefore a fool, or a liar. What I do say is, "Not really, but give me some hard facts. Tell me about this dream of yours."

"I'm sorry, I can't do that." She pauses thoughtfully, then adds in softer tone, "Perhaps another time."

"You just say when, my dear." I simply shrug and smile, feeling entirely ineffectual.

"I'm fine. Really, I feel better already." When she pats the back of my hand, my stomach clenches and my heart loses its footing for a moment or two. Perhaps another time, indeed, I can't help thinking.

She seems to withdraw then, turning away, leaving me face

to face with the fact that absence rules my life and that I have no one to blame but myself.

I've never been married, never been able to settle for any woman truly within my reach. My last relationship was a one-sided plunge into a sea of grief with an interior designer named Molly. We ended three years ago and I've since been, according to my standard reply, out of the game. I've never cared for the word celibate, which brings to mind images both of men who live in cassocks and of those who wear taped-together glasses and white coats and who live vicariously through lab rats.

I run my fingertips over the back of my hand, trying to renew the sensation of Tina's touch. I'm thinking of Molly, though, our last morning together.

It was a cool foggy morning, July fifth. We were lying in bed in the Filbert Street flat we'd shared for the past two years. Seagulls were calling and foghorns were sounding in the bay. Every few minutes a cable car would clatter by out on Hyde. Last night we had walked down to Fort Point to watch fireworks, and Molly had been unusually quiet on the way home.

I remember lying there that morning, watching white lace window curtains fluttering overhead in the breeze. I remember Molly sighing, inhaling, then holding her breath for a long moment. And I remember her saying my name quietly as she exhaled, just the one word, in a way to make perfectly clear what was to come next.

Tina reaches out then, sets her empty cup on the seatback tray. When I ask if she'd like another, she hesitates for a moment. "Well," she says, "if you'd like one more, maybe I'll join you."

"Two more it is, then." I'm feeling a bit lightheaded from the bourbon. Candy is dandy, indeed, I tell myself, though I'm not particularly proud of the thought.

The empty split rests on the seatback tray. When I reach for it she slips her arm inside mine and pulls herself to me. Her breasts give gently against my arm. I feel her breath on my neck, feel her heart beating. I just sit there, too amazed, too stunned to react. She's incredibly desirable, and three years can amount to a lifetime.

Then she kisses me lightly on the cheek, abruptly releases me, and I flop back into my seat. And I feel suddenly as though I'm falling, tumbling down through a long dark tunnel toward my true and inescapable self.

Meanwhile she continues to face me. She's avoiding my eyes, though, and I can read only unmistakable regret in her face. She lays her hands back in her lap, turns, stares down at them in silence. I cough, clear my throat, but come up empty for words. Somehow I manage to get up then, get myself headed down the aisle, fully expecting to wake up at any moment.

Briefly on my way to the lounge I weigh the prospect of upgrading accommodations. I have in mind a sleeping room, a double, though I know this to be merely an amusement, a fantasy born of

too many long empty nights.

Vincent is in no hurry now, making me wait a good while for the drinks, so I look around for something to occupy my thoughts. The only other person in the lounge, an obese gray-haired woman wearing a Chicago Bears sweatshirt and bright red stretch-pants, sits slouched down at a table playing Solitaire and smoking. Three Bud Light bottles rest on her table next to an ashtray stuffed with skinny brown cigarette butts.

At the far end of the lounge a TV screen mounted on the wall shows a video travelogue of sorts, one shot displaying the sorrowful fleet of mothballed warships anchored in Suisun Bay north of San Francisco. I recall having seen some of those very same ships holding off the Quang Ngai coast one morning, just beyond artillery range. Lying on a muddy hillside in the rain, pinned down by sniper fire, I'd watched them for hours and had come to despise the sailors on board, their safe haven out in the South China Sea. Silently cursing myself for not having joined the Navy, I'd begun to wonder then what it would be like to die at sea, to go down with the ship. Would I die well, quietly saving my last breath? Or would I panic, scream for help? Would I sacrifice myself in order to save a stranger, or force him under, struggling to save myself?

"Ahem," Vincent grumbles, staring at me impatiently, hands on his hips. He points to the drinks. "Nine bucks, please."

I reach for my wallet. I'd ordered a double bourbon this

time. "Sorry. I guess I'm a little preoccupied tonight."

"I wonder why?"

I ignore him and pay for the drinks. In lieu of a tip I leave him a smile, then climb the stairwell to the observation room and take a seat there. Still more than a little unnerved by Tina's embrace, I need some time alone to collect myself. I try to concentrate on the void, on empty space, which seems like an apt metaphor for my life.

As we glide through the Willamette Valley, just north of Eugene, light from a trackside flare shoots past, reminding me of tracer fire, yet another dark vestige of Vietnam. For a long while after the war I struggled to assure myself that what I'd seen and done over there hadn't hardened me, hadn't robbed me once and for all of my compassion. But I've honestly never been sure of this, and for years now I've merely chosen to shut out all memories of Southeast Asia, along with any reasons for my having been there. It seems strangely as if certain things were ordained to come back on me tonight.

I think back then to my last months in Eugene. After having flunked out and gotten my draft notice, I'd begun to go through college women as if there were no tomorrow, as if I'd been inducted into a boot camp for the heart. When I look back now I see only a gallery of nameless ill-defined faces. What percentage of them, I wonder, went on to have happy marriages, to raise healthy, happy children? I wonder, too, if any of them ever think of me, ever

say my name to themselves.

As the train brakes, approaching the Eugene station, the whistle sounds once again. I get to my feet and begin making my way back, having resolved to stop fighting myself, to let the situation take its course. After all, I'm no saint. And though Tina's young, she's not a child.

But my heart sinks when I step back into the coach, because she's no longer there. And somehow I know that she hasn't just gone to the ladies' room, but that she's gone for good.

I take my seat, set the split on a seatback tray, then swallow a healthy portion of bourbon. Both her handbag and valise are gone. Her perfume radiates from the seat cushions, lingering in the air, knotting my stomach.

I find a handkerchief and wipe my forehead, reach up, switch off my reading light. I close my window curtains. Working a lever then, I raise my leg rest and settle back. I locate the Walkman and start it rewinding, and as the cassette hums I try to compose myself, try to focus once more on empty space.

The Walkman clicks off. I'm about to restart it when the conductor steps into the coach. He walks directly over to me and stands silently in the aisle, appearing to have a thought but no words for it.

"What is it, Thomas?"

He fidgets with a button on his vest, then adjusts his cap.

"The young lady has departed, Mr. Everett. She asked me to tell

you goodbye."

"That's it? Nothing else?"

He looks perplexed but offers nothing more, makes no move to leave.

"Was there something else, Thomas?"

"No, sir. I guess not." He shrugs, turns abruptly, and walks off.

The whistle blows twice, echoing as the coach shudders and starts to creep forward. I draw back my curtain. Tina stands alone beneath a floodlight about thirty yards away, her valise in hand, a suitcase resting beside her. The shadow thrown by the lightpost conceals her face. As she turns slowly, following my coach as it begins to slip away, I tell myself that if I could think of even a single way to improve her life, to bring something worthwhile to it, I'd reach back and pull the brake switch on the wall behind me. I could do it without leaving my seat.

Her wine split and a plastic cup half-filled with bourbon stare across at me from the seatback tray. My Walkman rests beside me, *Danse Macabre* ready to replay itself. On the desk in my Embarcadero office sits a foot-thick stack of bluelines to be waded through and approved tomorrow morning. I turn instead and reach for the lever, stepping over a line much different from the one I'd begun to slip over a short while ago. Having no idea what she might want from me or what I might offer, I hope only to get

this bloody thing stopped in time. I've got to get off now before it's too late.

Penance

A clear calm April morning in the Bitterroot Valley, the air carrying only a trace of woodsmoke from the mill. A mile or so west of town, seven-year-old Matthew Goodreau is working his way downriver through deadfall along the north bank of the Clark Fork. He stops to check the rifle cradled to his chest, making certain the safety is off, then moves quietly on through his own frosted breath. He would like nothing better now than to ground-sluice a big mallard greenhead for tonight's dinner. But for the past several days the Clark Fork has been running high and muddy, filled with brush, floating trees, and a store of man-made trash, and waterfowl have quit the river. Which is all for the better, of course, because the boy has promised to kill absolutely nothing.

Frost silvers everything in the valley. After a week of warm Chinook winds his mother's early-blooming hyacinths have frozen solid overnight. Snow still caps the Sapphires, a craggy blue

line of high peaks southeast of Missoula. On the crest of the mountains the sun sits like a big yellow target, seeming to hold there as if waiting for some obscure threat to reveal itself. Bluebirds and meadowlarks chattering encouragement to the sun fall suddenly silent when the boy fires at a tin can along the bank.

Despite his mother's protests his father gave him a shiny new .22 Savage rifle this morning for his birthday. His father insists that children should begin to bear responsibility at an early age and rarely seeks to mask his distaste for the concept of childhood itself. Lately young Goodreau has come to realize that his father will spank him only for crying. Along with his spankings always comes the admonition for him not to behave like a child. He has handled firearms regularly since the age of four, when he began target shooting with his father. One condition of his gift is that he not kill anything with it until he reaches twelve, the legal hunting age in Montana.

Moments after the sun clears the mountaintops, the boy draws down on a cat perched high up in a gnarled cottonwood a hundred yards downriver. He imagines it to be only an amusement, though, an impossible shot with a short-rifle and open sights. He has never killed anything of any consequence and as he sets his sights about a foot above the target, he wonders if he'll be up to the task when his time comes.

After it falls in a series of freeze-frames, bouncing down through bare branches, he races over and finds what looks to be

a scrawny tortoiseshell, covered with blood but still alive. Either the bullet or the fall has broken its back, paralyzing its hind quarters. Slowly it drags itself toward a clump of brush at the base of the tree. The boy takes aim, shoots it in the head.

When it finally stops screeching and thrashing about, he picks it up by the tail and flings it as far as he can out into the muddy water. And as he watches it drift downstream out of sight he recalls kneeling beside his mother in church, listening to a priest in a black cassock claim repeatedly from high up on his altar that any sin, no matter how evil, might one day be forgiven. As young as he is, he understands this now to be a lie. He recalls, as well, taking root in his heart as the priest performed his sacraments, a bitter seed, a private malice for any god that would force him to his knees.

Under the cottonwood in the thick brush then he finds four tiny kittens huddled together. He drops to all fours and snakes them out. Each is only a few inches long. Their eyes haven't yet come open. The boy sits down by the river then and weeps and after he finishes with the tears he slips the kittens carefully into his coat pockets and carries them home.

In the years that follow he somehow manages to exorcise this entire incident from his memory, along with what took place once he got the kittens home. What remains instead is a nameless, shapeless malignance living always inside his chest. As he grows older he falls into the habit of trying first to drown this

malignance in alcohol. Doomed always to fail in this, he always tries then to pound it into others with his fists.

Early in his sophomore year at the University of Montana, a drunken brawl lands him in the Missoula County jail once too often. He loses his football scholarship, quits school, takes a job on a cattle ranch not far from Great Falls. From there he just lets the wind take him where it will. Never again after his killing day on the Clark Fork does he let himself cry. For reasons that remain a mystery to him he refuses ever to touch another gun.

Twenty-one years now after that April morning on the Clark Fork, Goodreau sits alone at one end of a park bench in Modesto, California, waiting in the broken shade of a diseased palm tree. Today is his wedding day. His tuxedo jacket lies beside him, draped over the backrest of the bench. Across the street from the park, a half-dozen wedding guests mill about on a pale brown mockery of a lawn, smoking cigarettes and chatting in the shade cast by St. Peter's Catholic Church. Goodreau has yet to meet any of them. He figures he knows maybe a dozen of the nearly two hundred people invited. Pigeons flock together along a row of lilac bushes beside the church, pecking at something in the grass, keeping safely away from the guests.

In the distance to the south a wire cage arches over a lateral aqueduct paralleling Yosemite Boulevard. Traffic streams along the roadway, a good portion of it bound for Highway 132 and Yosemite

Park. Couples on motorcycles and families in cars and vans with luggage racks piled high drone incessantly eastward. Once every few minutes another busload of tourists labors past, building momentum, trailed by a thick black cloud of diesel smoke.

Goodreau contemplates the procession and snickers, picturing an endless line of human forms. They come crammed together in all ages and shapes and colors--all cowering in the face of the empty moment, hoping only to dodge it, or at least to pass it off on the next in line.

To the east beyond the tall whitewashed steeple of the church, beyond a flat brown depression of sun-withered valley, gray Sierra foothills fade into an ash-white sky. The air is dead calm and a slender halo of pure white light surrounds the sun. It's about a quarter till noon. It won't be long now, muses Goodreau, till his shadow steps up to meet him.

He lights a cigarette, takes out a handkerchief from his trouser pocket, wipes his forehead. Then he applies the handkerchief to the saturated fabric beneath his armpits. For a moment then he turns his attention to a dusty boulder-strewn vacant lot adjacent the church, where about a dozen shrieking Chicano children flail away at a half-inflated soccer ball. Making no attempt to score goals, they simply cleave to the ball like hungry carnivores toying with wounded prey, chasing it around through a rocky obstacle course. Several small dogs race about amid the melee, snapping at the ball and yapping. A little black

mongrel digs by itself, burying a bone in a far corner of the lot.

A thought strikes Goodreau as he watches the dark little urchins tear about in the dust. Which species of the animal kingdom, he wonders, kill at random, purely for the love of it? Wolves on rare occasions, he imagines. Maybe grizzlies from time to time. And sharks of course--no doubt the most cold-blooded creatures on earth. He recalls hearing the great white described somewhere as nature's most efficient killing machine. Which seems entirely reasonable to him now.

When he turns away from the children then he finds a skinny old wino sitting to his left at the far end of the bench. It seems as if the little guy has just materialized out of thin air. His bottle rests beside him in a brown paper bag. Though his legs show no evidence of injury, a single ragged crutch leans against the bench. Shit, thinks Goodreau.

The wino takes a drink and swats at the air in front of his face as if to brush away an ugly thought. He slaps his temple, examines the flat of his hand, then sniffs disgustedly and takes another swipe at something.

Goodreau sees no flies anywhere and figures the old guy must be pretty well juiced. He unclasps his bow-tie, stuffs it in his coat pocket. The wino, meanwhile, takes another drink. Then he smacks himself on the forehead and turns to watch Goodreau unfasten the top button of his shirt.

As Goodreau dries his neck with his handkerchief the wino

nods his agreement. "Hot enough to fry eggs on the sidewalk, eh, sonny?" It sounds as though a mix of pea gravel and mucus clogs his throat.

Goodreau ignores him. He suspects the old sot intends to hit him up for loose change.

After studying Goodreau's attire for a moment or two the wino gazes over toward the north side of the church, where a tiny grotto features a whitewashed statue of the Virgin Mary cradling Baby Jesus to her breast. He turns back then, faces Goodreau with a skid row smile. "Taking the big plunge, are we?" His few remaining teeth resemble bone fragments in an open wound.

Ordinarily Goodreau gives derelicts and pandhandlers the quick brush-off. But he reminds himself that since he's on the verge of marrying into the wealthiest family in Stanislaus County, he might at least try to be a little kinder, a little more charitable from now on.

"In about half an hour." Goodreau takes another drag off his cigarette and blows a half-dozen smoke rings that trail off together like a silent echo.

"Well, where's the lucky lady?"

"Organizing." Goodreau nods toward the church.

The wino slaps himself, checks his hand, then slides over, clutching his bottle, and holds out his left hand for Goodreau to inspect. "Got the little bastard." He points to a weatherbeaten palm that displays nothing but a layer of grime. The index finger

of his upturned hand is nothing more than a half-inch-long stub.

"Sure enough, old-timer," says Goodreau, mildly amused.

A look of pride crosses the wino's face. "Still quick as a cat," he hisses, spitting on himself. He studies Goodreau's face for another moment, then takes a dirty rag from a trouser pocket. After wiping the mouth of his bottle thoroughly he extends it to Goodreau.

"No thanks," says Goodreau.

The wino looks and smells as though he hasn't bathed in the last decade or so. He has on a red corduroy baseball cap and a ratty olive-green sweatshirt, both sweat-stained and filthy, along with heavy black wool pants, the cuffs of which are tucked into tattered black rubber boots. His dirty face matches the color and texture of old leather. Greasy gray hair extends down below his shoulders. All the old fart would need in order to pass for Willie Nelson, figures Goodreau, is some better clothes and a few more teeth.

The wino removes a half-gallon bottle of Gallo burgundy from the bag, holds it up proudly. "Prime stuff," he cackles. "Local grapes, too." Roughly three-quarters full, the bottle sparkles in the hazy sunlight.

Goodreau imagines that right about now he could kill for a drink. He drops his cigarette, grinds it out on the hardpan at his feet. "Well," he says, "maybe just one swallow."

As he wipes the bottle mouth with his handkerchief it occurs

to him that he has never done anything to match this. But what the hell, anyway. Certainly his life will never be the same after today. And at least *now* he can say that he had a bachelor party. He glances over at the church, sees that the guests have all gone back inside.

He tips up the bottle and takes a healthy swallow, then offers it back to the wino, who's busy swatting at his mystery insects. *Goddamn* if he isn't a goofy old buzzard, thinks Goodreau as he takes another pull off the bottle. Already the wine has begun improving his outlook, casting his fate to more favorable winds. He sets the bottle back on the bench.

The wino takes up the bottle and drinks. From the bag he gets out a slice of white bread, tears it in half, stuffs it in his mouth, then washes it down with more wine. He drops what remains of the bread into his bag and offers Goodreau a conspiratorial smile. "Cures what ails you, eh, mate?"

"I wish," says Goodreau vacantly. In about eight hours from now he and his new bride, Selena, should be strolling on a moonlit beach at Diamond Head in Waikiki. He has never seen the ocean and so he at least has something to look forward to.

"Not so keen on this marriage business, eh, sonny?"

Goodreau glares at the wino. "And what exactly makes you the expert?"

The wino shakes his head and smiles, fixes Goodreau with his lead-colored bloodshot eyes. "Maybe cause I been there myself.

Smack dab where you're sitting this minute."

Briefly Goodreau entertains thoughts of telling the old coot a thing or two, things he has shared with no one. He could explain, for instance, how he himself has never had more than a couple hundred bucks to his name at any one time, and that now he stands to inherit the second-largest cattle ranch in the Central Valley. Also, that he suspects Selena must have begun to flush her birth control pills the minute he first mentioned thoughts of going home to Missoula and re-enrolling at the university, trying to set the fragments of his former life in order.

And he wishes he could tell someone how much he dreads the thought of bringing a brown-skinned baby into the world, one without a ghost of a chance of getting his own blond hair and blue eyes, his own pale white skin. The last thing he wants is some child who'll have to bear insults like spic, or wetback, or half-breed.

The wino sets the bottle next to Goodreau. "Say there, mate, how's about one a them smokes?"

Goodreau shakes a cigarette from his pack and hands it over, along with his lighter. The wino's hands tremble as he lights up. His fingernails are ragged, uniformly black. Several have split down to the quick. He takes a deep, satisfied drag off the cigarette, then returns the lighter and points to the bottle.

"No, thanks. Gotta go now." Goodreau stands and begins to move toward the church, even though he still has a few minutes left to kill.

The wino reaches up, takes hold of Goodreau's shirt sleeve, just looks at him blankly, silently. And in the wino's bleary eyes Goodreau sees himself reflected and then in his mind's eye he sees all men gazing out upon one and the same heartless world and in so doing sharing their one and only chance for true grace. But in the next instant the children playing in the vacant lot scatter, running off down the street, trailed by a little girl, the smallest of the bunch. In tears, she wails something in Spanish, holding a hand over her nose as she walks. The deflated soccer ball lies in a cloud of dust settling in the middle of the lot. The mongrel digger trots along at the little girl's heels.

Goodreau winces, aware that he feels less compassion for the child because of her dark skin and jet-black hair. Selena is half-Mexican, half-Anglo. All she knows of her natural father is that he left a wife and baby daughter and went back to Guadalajara, never to be seen or heard from again. She grew up on her grandfather's ranch just east of Modesto, where Goodreau, having migrated south as if in response to some long-dormant ancestral instinct, has worked for the last two years. In that time he has stopped fighting. Both his life and his drinking had, for a while, seemed to be leveling out.

"So, is you in or out?" The wino gives another little tug at Goodreau's sleeve.

Goodreau shrugs and sighs, sits down. He examines his sleeve for fingerprints, finds none, then reaches for the bottle, takes

two long pulls from it, and passes it back. With the wine loosening the knot in his stomach he leans back and shuts his eyes. For a moment he amuses himself with a map-like vision of California, the entire state burned over, salt covering the smoldering ground. And before long he's alone, surrounded by the sweet smell of pine trees on the West Fork Bitterroot, throwing a number sixteen Adams into riffle next to the far bank where hungry cutthroat trout slap the river surface.

"Sweet, sweet Bitterroot," he whispers, recalling a refrain his father liked to sing while casting on the West Fork. He could get up from the bench right now, walk to the bus depot and buy a ticket. With luck he might even see the sun come up over the Rockies tomorrow morning.

The wino clears his throat and spits out a sizable chunk of phlegm. "Probably gonna have yourself a whole raft of kids someday, eh, young fella?"

"Not a chance."

"What? You telling me you don't like kids?"

"No. Can't say I do."

"Well then, why you getting hitched if you don't want no little ones?"

"There's your sixty-four-thousand dollar question, old-timer."

The wino smacks himself on the cheek. "You know, sonny," he says with a grimace, "I used to have me a--"

Goodreau butts in: "My name's Matt. Don't be calling me sonny

anymore, okay?"

The wino grins, extends a hand to Goodreau. "Name's Theo. But old-timer works just fine."

Though at present he can think of nothing he'd care to do less, Goodreau takes hold of the skeletal hand and feels a tingle in the back of his neck and shoulders.

"Like I was starting to explain," says the wino, "I used to have a wife and kid. Had me a boat too. The Belladonna, a sixty-foot dragger. A real beauty she was. Run her out of Humboldt Bay, up north." He pauses, cocks his head sideways. An odd look comes over his face, and Goodreau imagines he's picking up a transmission from somewhere in the vicinity of Neptune.

"Ever been up in them parts, young fella?"

"Nope. Not even close."

"Well, you oughtta go sometime, cause it surely is God's country." The wino sighs wistfully. "Anyways, I had about everything a man could ask for and ended up losing it all. Ain't nobody to blame but myself, neither."

Goodreau checks his wristwatch and reaches for the bottle.

"Yeah, how'd you manage that?"

"Well, you know how if a dog gets an itch, he can just scratch it, simple as that? For a man it ain't always such an easy matter, though. Specially if the itch is over his wife and kid and blood-suckers on his doorstep." The wino blinks and slaps his face again.

"Blood-suckers?" says Goodreau, mildly interested.

The wino stubs out his cigarette. "Bankers," he says with a scornful look. Goodreau hands him another cigarette, along with the lighter. The wino nods and lights up.

"So," Goodreau says, "the bank got your boat, huh?"

"No siree, Bob. Old Theo beat'em out of it. Rolled her back in sixty, just off the north spit at Humboldt."

"Really? On purpose?"

"No. Might just as well of been, though. We was out one afternoon when this nasty blow come up. Hellacious big sou'wester, she was, so I tried to run her in on a full ebb and got smacked leeward by a monster sneaker. Guess I was too plastered to drown myself, but plenty sober enough to see Belladonna bust herself in half on the jetty while the Coast Guard's fishing us out of the salt. Can't say I really give two slaps by that time, though."

"Yeah? Why's that?"

The wino flashes Goodreau a look of mock surprise and points to the church. "Wasn't you the one had somebody waiting for him?"

Goodreau shrugs and signals for the wino to keep his story going. It gives him an odd feeling in the pit of his stomach to think that this little man-like shell bears anything even remotely akin to a human history.

Deep in thought, the wino lets smoke curl up out of his mouth for several moments, then says, "Well, about a month or so before I lost my boat, we was shrimping, forty-five, fifty miles off the

coast, and I done a regrettable thing. We was out maybe five days, just me and one deck hand. Fishing was piss poor, had been all summer. So old Theo got to moping around, fretting over bill collectors and the likes of what he figured was a nagging wife and a mouthy kid. The old balls and chains was weighing heavy on me at the time, and I come within a gnat's ass of chucking the whole mess, just pointing the bow up towards Alaska and never looking back."

The wino turns and stares off to the north for a long moment, then goes on with his tale. "So anyways, this pair of dolphins sets to tracking us for a few hours one afternoon. A big one and a smaller one. Mama whiteside and her pup, I guess, just playing with us like they do sometimes, and they begin to get on the wrong side of my nerves, seeing as how I figure they don't got a worry in the world except where to find their next meal. So I decide to pull out the shark gun." He winces, slaps his neck.

After another silent interval he adds in a philosophical tone, "Thing is, I'm holding a bead on the little one's head with the ought-six and I know it's probably gonna be the lowest thing I ever done, but that don't stop me."

He reaches over, takes the wine from Goodreau. He has another drink, then rests the bottle in his lap and stares at it reverently. "Anyways, the little fella rolls over straight away and sort of shudders for a minute or two, while the other one commences to swimming circles around him. Pretty soon he goes dead in the water

and begins to sink but the mama don't seem to get it, sets to pushing the dead thing around in circles, holding it afloat with her nose."

The wino pauses, gums his lower lip, then glances over at Goodreau with one eye shut. "Come to find out later the poor critters is been known to starve themselves to death that-a-ways." He continues to stare at Goodreau, who stares back mutely, knowing full well that his own face currently wears an expression limited ordinarily to various types of local farm produce. Finally the wino says, "What do you suppose the odds is on something like that? A fish killing itself over another one?"

Picturing a baby dolphin belly-up in a cloud of bloody water, Goodreau feels his stomach trying to squeeze up into his throat. "Pretty damn slim," he says, wondering what in Christ's name this all has to do with him. "What the hell's the moral here, anyway?"

"Well, I don't guess I could say." The wino strokes his chin thoughtfully, coughs several times, spits. "There's more to the story, though." He studies Goodreau's face, seeming uncertain of whether to tell the rest.

Goodreau checks his watch. "Go ahead. I'm listening."

The wino sticks his good index finger in his ear, works it around a bit, then examines his fingertip. "Well, the next evening after I shot the fish, I get a call on the radio. It's the Coast Guard station in Eureka telling me I better head in, saying the wife and kid's had an accident over on 299, about halfway to

Redding. They won't say how bad it is, only to come in quick."

He takes more wine and leans back, shuts his eyes. "When I hear Redding, I know she's leaving me, taking Robby up to her folks' place. But she never made it, on account of she drove off into the Trinity River just west of Willow Creek and drown herself and Robby both." His eyes pop open and he faces Goodreau with an aggrieved look that suddenly goes blank. He turns then, stares over in the direction of the church.

"Jesus, I'm sorry, old-timer," says Goodreau, for lack of a worthwhile reply.

The wino declines Goodreau's sympathy with a wave of his hand and laughs, though not happily. Goodreau wonders if the old man is mocking him, his feeble attempt at consolation.

"Don't trouble yourself too much," the wino wheezes, rubbing his eyes. "It was all a long time ago, more than thirty years. Truth is, ain't nothing keeps me awake nights no more. Not even the sound of that mama dolphin crying." He coughs and slaps his ear, swats angrily at empty space. "It's just these goddamn bugs can't seem to give me no peace, is all."

Lost for words, Goodreau shrugs as the church bells begin to toll, counting out noon. It's time now, so he takes out his wallet and removes a five dollar bill, holds it out to the wino.

The wino's face clouds over and he pushes Goodreau's hand away. "Save it for the honeymoon. Old Theo's doing just fine without no handouts."

Goodreau puts the bill back in his wallet. "Suit yourself, my friend."

He stands and slips his jacket on as he walks toward the church. He gets about halfway across the street, then returns to the bench, removes a hundred dollar bill from his wallet and places it under the wine bottle. The wino shakes his head, looks the other way.

Headed toward the church once again, Goodreau snickers to himself, wondering what it would cost the old fool for a new set of teeth. He buttons his shirt, takes out his bow-tie and wraps it around his neck. He fumbles with the clasp, finally gets it fastened.

When he reaches a landing midway up the steps to the church, Goodreau hears the wino call out something. He stops, turns around. "Come again?"

"What was the name, again?"

"Matt . . . Matt Goodreau."

"Well then, good luck, my friend." The wino stuffs the remaining half-slice of bread into his mouth, chews grinning, his mouth open, then raises the bottle to his lips.

Goodreau waves to him half-heartedly and looks around for a moment. Traffic still flows along steadily out on Yosemite Boulevard. Palm fronds rustle lazily in a freshening southwesterly breeze that almost seems to foretell rain. From somewhere nearby comes a mockingbird's song, like the sound of

a dripping faucet.

At a drinking fountain on the landing he rinses out his mouth and splashes cold water on his face. The water quickly turns warm, though, and he dries his face with a handkerchief. He looks back to the park then, sees the crutch still leaning against the bench. But the wino is nowhere in sight.

After one last deep breath, Goodreau begins to make his way slowly up the remaining steps toward what he now imagines might be a courthouse rather than the stonework temple of a Christian god. For a long while he stands beneath the archway spanning the twin crimson oak doors of the church, his heart rattling around inside his rib cage as if bent on escape at all costs. He guesses this would be a good time to pray for direction but he has absolutely no notion of where to begin, no semblance of a deity to address.

Finally he backs away, turns, and retreats quickly down the steps.

Selena's Porsche Carrera sits on the street in front of the church. He removes his suitcase from the trunk. On the driver-side floor mat he lays his car keys and her flawless 1 1/2-carat diamond wedding ring.

As he heads down the sidewalk toward the depot, suitcase in one hand, jacket and tie in the other, he envisions a tearful Selena alone in the chapel, kneeling in prayer, flowers long since having wilted on the altar. Then the sun peers out over the snow-capped

crest of the Sapphires, erasing his betrothed and her tears, and at that moment he feels a telltale breeze at his back, blowing him homeward. But then it occurs to him that he has only twenty-five dollars for bus fare--not even enough to get him out of the state. Three thousand dollars in traveler's checks remain safely behind, locked in the trunk of the Porsche.

He considers going back, punching out a window with a rock to get his keys. But he pictures himself in a jail cell and reasons that while he's certainly no saint, at least he'll never be a common criminal. Then, as he ups his pace to a jog, he sees coming out of a liquor store several blocks up ahead what looks to be none other than the old wino.

"Hey, Theo!" he shouts.

Brown bag in hand, the little man gives no notice, quickly disappears around the far corner of the store.

Goodreau begins to sprint but his suitcase weighs him down, banging against his thigh, holding him back. His bow-tie falls to the sidewalk. He stumbles forward without it, his sole concern money for a bus ticket home.

When he gets to the store the wino is nowhere in sight. Behind the building lies nothing but open ground for several hundred yards in all directions--no trees or tall grass or rocks to hide behind, nothing save bare sun-baked earth.

Foothills in the far distance tip sideways then and begin to circle him. His field of vision suddenly gone solid gray, he

falls sweat-soaked and breathless to his knees. And he remains there--eyes closed, head down, hot earth burning his knees--for what seems like a good while, until finally the world reappears and slowly returns to its proper axis.

Goodreau tries to stand then but fails to do so. Still lightheaded, he imagines the press of a hand on his forehead, holding him gently albeit firmly down. And at that moment he remembers seeing a cat fall from a tree more than twenty years ago, sees it once again floating on the cold muddy waters of the Clark Fork.

He recalls, as well, the look on his father's face that morning when he saw the first of the four kittens. Without a word he promptly dragged Goodreau by his coat collar into the bathroom, where he wrung the kitten's neck. As it spiraled down the toilet bowl his father finally spoke to him, said calmly, coldly, "Someday you'll understand." Then he made Goodreau do the others himself. Goodreau refused to put them down the toilet, though. Dry-eyed, he tried to dig first in the frozen ground of a field behind his house but ended up burying them in the soft earth of his mother's rose garden instead.

As he kneels down now in the dust he can smell the musky damp of freshly disturbed soil. He can feel in his hands the easy give of a slender neck, the barely perceptible crack of soft new bone. And he can see a faceless black-robed priest bestowing his benedictions and dealing his alms of absolution with the mere wave

of a hand to his all-kneeling and uniformly repentant flock.

A hot wind purls up around him, and with the clarity of a child suddenly awakened, Goodreau sees himself then as if from the outside. The face he sees bears a look of both revelation and understanding, an expression shaped by a perfect balance of sorrow and guilt. It belongs to a man who will rise in a moment and move quickly on. In the way that a wild animal will sometimes run an astonishing distance after a bullet ruins its heart.

Hunting Weather

Jack Reaves lay asleep on his sofa, having a dream that included his wife. The dream itself wouldn't have qualified as a nightmare, because for the moment at least he was someone in charge of his own life. But as he prepared to settle a grievance, calmly laying the cross hairs of a rifle between the fear-glazed eyes of a stranger, he awoke.

His phone was ringing but after a while it quit.

Jack had lost his job on the pot-line at Reynolds Metals three months ago and hadn't worked since. About a month after he was laid off, his wife confessed to a few minor indiscretions with anonymous parties, which prompted him to donate their bed to charity.

Actually, his first choice had been the county dump. It was close by and would've made a fitting statement. But the going

rate at the dump was eight dollars a truckload, and Jack was nobody's fool. Not about to throw good money after bad, he gave the queen-size Sealy mattress, box springs, and the antique wrought iron bed frame to Goodwill. The frame had been handed down to his wife from her great grandmother.

The morning after Jack gave away the bed, his wife had devised a little scheme of her own. Assuming, evidently, that there were several things *he* could do without, she emptied their checking account at First Interstate, forged his signature on the title and sold their Bronco, and then, on that same morning, embarked for parts unknown. Two days after she left, Jack had thrown a party for one, celebrating his twenty-first birthday by downing a fifth of Jim Beam and passing out on his kitchen floor.

Presently the phone started up again. Jack's wife had been gone for sixty-three days, and though his friends--what few he'd once had--no longer called, he was now more popular than ever with his creditors. So he'd gotten into the habit of simply letting the phone ring itself out. Still, he was curious.

He raised up just enough to see into the kitchen, where he had placed a clock beside the sink. It had been a wedding gift. It cast a sinister red digital glow, seeming to hover in the darkness. It read 9:30 PM. Too late for a bill collector, he reasoned. The phone refused to quit ringing, so he sat up, lifted the receiver and put it to his ear.

When he heard nothing in the receiver, an image of his wife

flashed in his mind's eye. Broke and lonely, slumped against a phone booth wall, she was searching for words, fabricating a plea for forgiveness. But it was not her on the line now. He would've staked his last unemployment check on that.

"Jack?" said a voice in the receiver. "Hey, anyone there?"

It was a male voice, young sounding and familiar, though not one Jack could immediately place. "He's out of town. I'll take a message."

"Hey, Reaves, this is Rod Burke."

"Rod Burke who?"

"Come on, man."

"Burke? . . . Burke? . . . oh, yeah. Hey, man, how was prison?"

"You're a funny boy, Reaves. You should've been a comedian instead of a welfare case." Rod Burke laughed for both of them. "Been most busy, Sahib. And besides, there's been nothing to shoot."

Jack Reaves and Rod Burke were hunters. Animals they enjoyed killing most were elk, mule deer, pheasant, quail, chukar, Canada geese, and ducks of all different varieties. They'd hunted together now for five years but saw one another rarely between seasons.

"So what's new?" said Rod.

"Same old, same old, mostly. The old lady blew town is about all."

"Bad break. Sorry."

"No sweat," said Jack. "Just makes more time for gunning."

"There it is, amigo."

Jack imagined his wife then, surrounded by palm trees in sunny southern California or Waikiki. And he wondered what her new life was like, how it compared with the old. She had left a farewell note on the kitchen table. It had mentioned something of a warmer climate, her having seen enough Oregon rain for one lifetime.

"Sahib," Rod said, "on Sauvie Island at this very moment are hordes of ducks just dying to be slain. What say? Tomorrow morning, six o'clock. I'll be on your doorstep."

Jack knew that a storm was blowing down from the north, bringing with it prime duck hunting weather. He pictured waves of mallard drakes flying low and bunched tightly in a driving rain. He felt that familiar surge in his chest. "Count me in," he said.

"Six o'clock sharp, then."

Jack said, "If they fly, they die," and hung up.

Shivering then, he switched on a lamp that sat on a table beside the sofa. He got up, went across to the living room thermostat, and turned it up several degrees.

Back on the sofa he settled in, directing his thoughts toward tomorrow's outing. As he lit a cigarette, he realized that he had no duck loads. Shit! It was too late to get any, although he did have plenty of pheasant loads left over from last fall. But all too often he'd seen a big mallard or pintail drake just wave its wings at the lighter shot and fly off with a breast full

of lead.

With any luck he could borrow some shells from Rod. It really made no difference, though. He would hunt tomorrow, duck loads or not. He could almost feel the 12 gauge smack his shoulder, almost taste cordite fumes lingering in the air.

As he went about the apartment, tracking down his hunting gear and beginning to feel better about his life, the idea of a cold beer began to appeal to him. He would have to go out for it, though, and in true adult fashion he chose to take care of business first.

Within the hour, all his gear had been set out, ready for loading into the bed of Rod's Ford Ranger. His lunch--a Spam sandwich, a one-pound bag of Cheetos, a pair of Three Musketeers bars, and a one-liter plastic jug of Pepsi--was bagged and in the refrigerator. He was set. He was thirsty.

Waylon Jennings on the jukebox, a wall of blue smoke mingled with body odor, and the crack of a break shot greeted Jack as he stepped inside the front door of Cal's No Place, a hard-hat bar where he'd once seen a man's eye poked out with a cue stick.

The No Place was only two blocks from his apartment, and after his wife had gone south, he'd become a regular there. Knowing where his profit lay, Cal always cheerfully cashed Jack's unemployment check, and Jack liked it that Cal called him by name. Cal was a hunter, too. One evening when it was dead he'd taken

out a sawed-off Mossberg 12-gauge pump from under the cash register and let Jack look it over.

Along the bar were several open stools. At one of the pool tables, three construction workers in hard hats and muddy coveralls laughed and swapped insults as they shot a game of Rotation. For a minute or two Jack watched, convinced that he could shoot one-handed and still beat any of them. Then he walked over, picked out a stool, and set his cigarettes on the bar.

On the TV set behind the bar two game little Latino boxers hammered away on one another. They appeared to be no more than teenagers. The darker one had a bloody gash on the bridge of his nose, and the other boy's right eyelid was swollen shut, gorged with blood and ripe to split open. Absorbed in the fight, the bartender, a young guy Jack had never seen before, ducked and feinted, flicking punches at nothing.

For a long while Jack sat without being noticed. When he cleared his throat, the bartender turned, eyed him briefly, then turned back to watch the final twenty seconds of the round. Still wet behind the ears, thought Jack, probably not even much older than himself.

After the round ended, the bartender came over. "Got some ID, friend?"

Jack sniffed indignantly. He took out his wallet and tossed it on the bar next to his cigarettes. The bartender removed the driver's license from the wallet, took it over to a lamp behind

the bar. He squinted at the photo, turned, studied Jack's face, then turned back to the photo. Shaking his head as he walked back, he smiled doubtfully and dropped the license on the bar next to the wallet. "Okay, friend, what'll it be?"

"Draft, *friend*. A pint," Jack snapped. "Where's Cal, anyway?"

"Taking nights off for a while." The bartender drew the pint. He brought it over and set it down, sliding it several inches, causing about a finger of beer to spill out onto the bar.

"That's too bad." Jack tipped up the glass and bolted it, then smacked the empty glass down in the middle of the puddle, spraying both himself and the bartender. "*Mas!*" he commanded.

The bartender wiped his face with a towel and gave Jack a surly look. After he'd refilled the glass and taken Jack's money, he went back to the fight.

While Jack smoked and sipped his beer, he tried to imagine the different ways that his life had improved since his wife had gone. It was now a week before Christmas, and this year there had been no presents to buy, no cards to send, not even a tree to fool with. Last year she'd dragged him around for an entire weekend, searching for the perfect tree. Sentimental hogwash, he thought. Who needs it? He laughed ironically at the thought of that same tree still lying like a rusty skeleton out on the sun deck of their apartment. Then he reminded himself that it was his apartment now, not theirs.

A gray-haired couple wearing blue jeans and matching plaid

western-style shirts had taken stools at the far end of the bar. As Jack watched them steal kisses and nuzzle up to one another like high school sweethearts, he remembered how his wife had constantly pressed him for public displays of affection, always seeming to want only the things he couldn't freely give. She was a fine looking girl, though, and she knew it. He doubted that she would be sleeping alone tonight. He killed his beer, then ordered another.

By the time he had finished his fourth pint, Jack was bored. He'd decided to get a six-pack to go, head back to his place, maybe catch the "The Tonight Show" or a late movie.

Then, in the full-length mirror behind the bar, he saw a slender brunette standing slightly to his side. She was older, he thought, but not *too* old and not hard to look at, either. She had on a white fur coat--a fake, he guessed--and a lacy red dress. Car trouble, he imagined. Probably she'd just borrow the phone to call her old man or Triple A.

He stared at her reflection as she glanced the bar from end to end, but when their eyes met in the mirror, he looked away. On either side of him was an open stool. Right here next to me, sweetheart, he said to himself, his heart threatening now to break loose from its moorings. When she slid in beside him, brushing him with her leg as she moved into position, his leg jumped as if he'd been jabbed with a hot wire. Already he was thinking of

getting even with his wife.

"Hey, sorry," she said. "That's me, always the clumsy one."

"No problem." Jack was slightly drunk and couldn't think of anything clever to say. Married straight out of high school, he'd had no experience in this. He'd been faithful to his wife, but then again, lack of opportunity might have been to blame for that. He said, "I think I'm a little drunk." Reaves, you dumb shit! he thought.

"I think I'm a little drunk, too." She nudged him with her elbow. "And I think I'd like to be a little more drunk." She looked cross-eyed at him and reached for her purse.

"That's great," he said, "me too." They laughed, their faces drawing close enough together for him to smell bourbon on her breath. Money in the bank, is what he told himself. "What'll you have? It's my treat."

"Well, a Spanish Coffee would be nice." She set her purse back on the bar. "Thanks."

Ouch! he thought. He said, "My pleasure."

They exchanged first names and shook hands. She had a strong grip for a small woman and her hand had a leathery feel to it. It was the hand, thought Jack, of a woman who could probably look out for herself. He noticed that on her other hand she wore no wedding ring.

He ordered their drinks. The bartender made the Spanish Coffee first, making a big production with flames and sparks--all

for the benefit of the woman. Finally he set it in front of her. After serving several other people, he poured another beer for Jack.

"Doctor's orders," she said when they touched glasses.

"Here's to the Pope."

"To the Pope and to Mr. Goodbar, too."

"Goodbar?" Jack gave her a puzzled look. "What's that, a candy bar?"

"Oh no," she said, coughing as she laughed at him, "an imaginary friend is all." She couldn't stop laughing.

"What's funny? I don't get it." Jack frowned and turned away from her.

She stopped laughing and squeezed his arm. "Believe me, it's really not funny at all. It's just me," she said. "I'm goofy. I'm nutso tonight."

"Hey, it's none of my business." She was a little drunk, he thought.

They were silent then for a time. She stirred her drink with a plastic straw, while he fixed a toxic glare on the oldsters still making out at the end of the bar. He guessed they were pushing sixty-five, maybe even seventy--too goddamned old, anyway, to be going at it like this in public. He imagined he could count on one hand the number of times he had seen his parents kiss or embrace.

"Do you come here often?" the woman offered finally.

"Hardly ever. What about you?"

"This is my first time. I just moved down from Spokane and haven't even unpacked yet." She sighed and her smile faded. "I may not, either."

"Yeah, why's that?"

"Oh . . . Portland just isn't as far from Spokane as I thought."

"Let me guess," Jack said. "There's a guy in this story. Am I right?"

"You got it. Give the man a prize."

Jack had no interest in the rest of this story. He thought he'd best kill it before it got off the ground. "So, what's my prize? Do I get it now or later?"

The woman stared down at her drink, then made a face that seemed to consist of equal parts injury and bitterness. "The bastard," she whispered. Then she said, "Get this," and observed a moment of silence before launching into a tale of about ten years' worth of wrongs her ex-husband had done her.

Meanwhile, Jack tuned her out. She reminded him all too much of his wife.

She had once told Jack, after he'd spent an hour gutting and plucking a goose in the kitchen sink, that he paid more attention to his dead birds than to her. And whenever she got started on her list of personal grievances, he would take out a rifle or shotgun from the bedroom closet. In stone-faced silence he would

break down the piece on the kitchen table and clean and oil each of its working parts. No one owned firearms more carefully maintained than his.

Out of the corner of his eye then Jack saw the woman pick up his matches and strike one. "Turn out the lights," she sang quietly, "the honeymoon's over." She had a nice singing voice, Jack thought.

After blowing out the flame she turned to him and brightened a little. "It's all just water under the bridge now, anyway."

"Hell, I know all about that water," Jack said, trying to sound lighthearted. "Under the bridge, down the toilet, into the sewer."

"Life here on Spaceship Earth, right?"

"You know it well." He fixed his eyes on hers. "Now, about my prize. What exactly did I win?"

"Well," she said matter-of-factly, "I guess you're looking at it, mister."

Jack choked, taking beer down the wrong way. He turned and sprayed a mouthful of foam onto the bar and let out a series of loud hacking coughs, the woman, meanwhile, smacking him three or four times playfully on his back. That's it, he was thinking, she's history, skirt to the wind.

But when he got hold of himself, finally, instead of bolting she said, "Is there somewhere else we can go? Something close, maybe?"

For a moment he hesitated, thinking of his apartment, then said, "Well, there's a place over on Division with a band and a dance floor. . . . That's about it, I guess. You'll have to drive, though. My Bronco's in the shop."

"No way, pal. My car's a mess."

"Well . . . my place is just around the corner and it's--"

She broke in, waving her hand. "Lead the way, sport."

Outside, it was too calm and not cold enough. A full moon shone brightly and stars were visible everywhere. As they walked Jack was quiet, discouraged by the weather and angry at himself because he'd left the bartender a three-dollar tip. If he'd been alone he would've stiffed the moron. The woman was having some difficulty remaining on the sidewalk, so Jack took her arm in his, steadying her for the moment.

When they arrived at his apartment complex, Jack steered the woman up a flight of stairs leading to his front door, and while he searched his pockets for the key, she put her high heels back on.

He found his key and got the door open, then switched on a light. His apartment had warmed up nicely. In the center of the living room was a large pile of things that looked out of place.

The woman said, "*My God . . . what is all that?*"

Jack announced proudly, "I'm a hunter. I'm going after ducks in the morning." He wheeled and drew down on an imaginary flight.

"Blam! Blam! Blam!" he expounded. He laughed as the woman winced and flopped down on the sofa.

At one end of the sofa, a wedding picture framed in cardboard sat on a lamp table. "Till death do us part," Jack whispered to himself as he took the picture from the table. He went to the kitchen, laid the picture in a silverware drawer, and filled two water glasses with the boxed Chablis his wife had liked. He brought the glasses into the living room and handed one to the woman. Sitting next to her on the sofa, he tried to remember her name, while she stared at the Remington 870 pump leaning against a stack of plastic mallard decoys.

She couldn't seem to take her eyes off the shotgun. "Duck hunting?" she whispered with a shudder.

Jack set his glass on the floor, then hers. As he kissed her he slid his hands inside her coat and began to work it back over her shoulders. But she drew away. Her eyes were doing crazy things, turning circles and rolling up so that only the whites were showing.

"Jesus," he said.

"Oh God," she said, "I'm sick." Then she threw up on the living room carpet and promptly left.

"Shit!" Jack said to no one as he stared at an orange pool of vomit working itself down into the nap of the carpet.

At precisely 6:00 AM, when he stepped into Jack's living room,

Rod Burke said, "Holy Christ! what stinks?"

Jack said, "It's a long story," then gathered up a string of decoys and stepped out into the dark morning.

It had grown much cooler overnight, and though it hadn't rained, the moon was only a pale glimmer through low overcast. Airborne grit stung Jack's face. Windswept trash danced across the floodlit parking lot, lifting his spirits.

Quickly they loaded Jack's gear into the truck, then jumped up into the cab. Rod fired up the big Ford, gunned the engine several times in order to wake up as many of Jack's neighbors as possible, and they were off, motoring west through nearly deserted city streets toward Highway 30. The drive would take just over an hour. They were mostly silent, aiming to hunt, not visit. Jack felt as if his blood carried an electric charge.

In the glove box he found an old Steppenwolf cassette. He slipped the tape into the deck and worked the fast forward until he found "Born To Be Wild." He cranked up the volume, then rolled down his window. The Ford's big traction tires droned against blacktop and the stereo blasted. He put his head out the window and held it there, letting the wind numb his face.

After a minute or two he got bored and pulled his head back inside. He leaned back, shut his eyes, and imagined a big mallard drake with its wings set, gliding downward, locked into a spread of decoys. He willed himself to think of nothing else.

Several miles outside town, Jack had Rod stop at a

Seven-Eleven. Rod waited in the cab while Jack went inside.

In a few moments Jack walked out of the market, grinning, a sixteen-ounce can of Schlitz Stout in one hand, an open short case tucked under his other arm. He set the short case in the bed of the truck and climbed back into the cab.

"Bad medicine, chief." Rod stared out the windshield, shaking his head. "Very bad."

Until now they had always kept their hunting and drinking separate. Jack swallowed a mouthful of beer and grinned.

As murky gray light filtered above the eastern horizon, Jack Reaves and Rod Burke sat silently in their blind at the edge of a shallow lake created by Columbia River backwater. Blowing flush from the north and colder now, the wind rippled the cold black water. Twenty yards out from the blind, four dozen decoys bobbed about, swimming lifelike circles on the lake surface.

Jack took a swallow of beer and shivered as a wind gust sliced through the blind, a flimsy plywood box they'd thrown together two summers ago. There was no roof over the lakeside half, and they had spray-painted the exterior in the fashion of military camouflage. Inside, the only permanent fixture was a wood bench set against the back wall. At one end was a door they'd once kept padlocked. Last season someone had blown the lock away, leaving a fist-sized hole in the door and another about twice that size in the opposite wall.

Rod yawned and got up and began to search the dimly-lit sky. With his call he put out several staccato bursts, followed by a long, low pitched guttural stutter and more loud bursts. He scanned the full horizon as he called.

"Hey," Jack said. "Lose the saxophone." He had never liked Rod's technique. Too rushed. Too raspy. "Let the decoys do the work."

Rod hadn't said more than three or four words since they had stopped for beer. He flashed Jack a disgruntled look now and went right on blowing.

What the hell, Jack thought, it's his problem, not mine. He took a mouthful of beer, then stood. He stretched his legs and shook his feet. He wiggled his toes, trying to get blood back into them.

Just as Jack heard their faint answering call, Rod tapped him on the shoulder and pointed to a group of dark specks circling, beyond range, above the decoys. High in his chest, Jack felt that sudden, welcome pulse. Always that first blood rush! The one thing no one could take from him, ever.

They crouched lower and froze. Jack began calling softly. The ducks, about a dozen in all, flew two more cackling sweeps above the lake. When three of them peeled away from the group and set their wings, coming hard for the decoys, Rod whispered, "I'm taking nothing but greenheads."

The birds angled in from the west, Rod's side. "Your shot,"

Jack whispered.

Jack forced himself to breathe deeply, methodically. The ducks cleared a stand of sycamores lining the west edge of the lake. Rod clicked off his safety. Jack, his. Thirty yards out from the blind, the lead mallard drake veered away from the decoys. Rod buckled it with one shot and it smacked the water cartwheeling. Jack winged a mallard drake, pumped another shell into the chamber, and sent a hen mallard tumbling down into the decoys.

The hen and one drake lay dead in the water. The wounded drake coasted several hundred yards and set down near the center of the lake.

"Sweet," Jack said.

"We'll never get that drake," Rod said disgustedly. "You *never* blow that shot." He eyed the can of beer sitting open on the bench.

"That boy's hawk food now," Jack said. "They gotta eat, too." He polished off the beer, his fourth of the morning, then waded out to retrieve the two dead birds.

For a while before wading back to the blind, Jack watched the wounded drake. It swam into the wind with enough strength to hold itself near the center of the lake where the water was too deep to wade. He knew he should've asked Rod for duck loads. Still, he had more than enough pheasant loads, and today birds would be plentiful. He would get his share. Some would live, others would die, a few would escape, crippled. The hunter's ethic.

In a nutshell, his own larger view of life. But he wouldn't let himself think of that now.

As the morning passed, the wind blew harder, hammering against the blind and bowing tall lakeside sycamores in long, sweeping arcs. And though it still hadn't rained, the iron-colored sky kept darkening and hunting was superb.

Rod waited patiently for clean shots at mallard drakes and by nine o'clock had killed four--three short of a limit.

Jack shot at mallards, pintails, widgeons, canvasbacks, and teals. Hens or drakes, anything that flew within range. He made impossible shots that amazed both Rod and himself. He missed easy ones that made them both laugh. Shortly after nine o'clock he killed a hen widgeon, his seventh duck. A good many others had flown away, wounded, searching for safe places to die.

Jack retrieved the widgeon, then added it to the pile of dead birds in the corner of the blind.

"Well, I guess you're out of the game," said Rod, who'd quit his sullenness soon after the shooting had begun.

"I guess so," Jack said. "Unless you need a little professional assistance," he added, half-joking.

"Thanks, but no thanks," Rod said, half-smiling.

So Jack switched on the safety of his shotgun and leaned it in a corner of the blind. He got out another beer, then stretched out on the bench and propped up his head with his parka so as not to spill beer on his face. As he lay there he tried to center

his mind on the sound of raindrops beginning to pelt the roof, but his thoughts kept returning to the wounded bird, still paddling out in the lake. Drifting then, trailed by cloudy images of fall and a blacktail doe he'd gut shot carelessly and then lost in Hillock Burn on his thirteenth birthday, he recalled the sacred commandments of hunting he'd learned as a boy.

Know when to kill and when not to, his father had always instructed. *Aim always for a clean quick kill with the first round, as if your life depended on that one shot. Always after a kill, he insisted, a moment of silent tribute must be offered to the dead animal's spirit. And never, never, he commanded a thousand times, mix alcohol and guns.* In the same way Jack's father had learned from his own father, and so on, ad infinitum, from one generation to the next.

By the time Jack started high school, he'd seen his father break each of these commandments at least once. But these things Jack easily enough forgave. One afternoon midway through Jack's sophomore year, though, the man vanished, taking with him only some clothes, his guns, and his old Ford pickup. Jack had never heard from him again, his father, the man who'd so often said that a hunter should conduct himself always, both in the field and out, in a way to honor everything he chose to kill.

And it occurred to Jack now, as he studied the label of his beer can, that the people you cared about who chose to disappear from your life never actually went somewhere else in the world.

Instead, they all came together as the audience for a grade-B melodrama, the movie of your life. Night and day they sat watching, all the while pointing fingers and making bets, laughing at the way everything you touched turned to excrement.

"Hey, Reaves," Rod whispered, "come observe the master."

Working a flight of about two dozen widgeons, Rod had finally turned them back into the decoys.

Jack got up, crept to the front of the blind. Rod went on calling and sucked the entire flight down to within feet of the decoys. They broke off just above the water and hovered, suspended in midair, pumping hard for lift.

"Sitting ducks, those boys," Jack said. "Just begging for it." He drew a bead on the birds with his trigger finger. "Boom."

Several minutes later, when two hen pintails made a pass at the decoys, Jack killed them.

"Fucking nut case," Rod hissed, his eyes as hard and dark now as gun muzzles. He shook his head and turned to stare out at the two pintails floating inside the circle of decoys. "Nut house fucking crazy."

"You play your game," Jack said, calmly ejecting a spent shell, "I'll play mine." It seemed only fair to him that he should go ahead and kill something now for each time someone had betrayed him. And having come to realize that for the truly vindictive there would never be a shortage of victims, he double-checked his supply of shells before reloading.

Moments later Jack gazed out into the rain. Armed with a fresh beer, he laughed to himself. The wounded mallard had disappeared, and the wind had already begun pushing the dead pintails across the lake surface, out of sight.

Rod turned to him then and smiled. "By the way, Sahib, I screwed your wife." Then he turned back to the far horizon and began calling once again.

Jack took a healthy swallow of beer, trained his gaze then on the back of his friend's head, and thought seriously about what to shoot next.

Wakeman

Wakeman sits across from his mother, watching her face while she reads. Now and then she frowns, sniffs quietly. The only other sound in her living room is the ticking of an antique pendulum clock anchored to the wall above her. Wakeman imagines it's sending out a coded message, although he has no idea what the message might be.

Encased in maple, the clock features several ornately-carved columns that create the impression of an ancient Greek portico. Along with an implicit contract never to refinish the wood, it has been passed down, nicked and timeworn, through five generations of his mother's family.

Wakeman is an only child. In due time the clock will be his. To his mother it's priceless; he has never seen another like it, has often wondered what he'll do with it, what it might actually be worth. Sunlight angling in through a dining-room window

presently obscures its face, so Wakeman checks his wristwatch. His mother has been reading for about five minutes.

Having undertaken to renounce the material world, Wakeman's single remaining ambition of any consequence is to call himself a writer. He has kept this dream alive for nearly thirty years, despite having gone in other directions for most of his life. Whether this dream is a curse, or his salvation, he can't honestly say. But for the time being, at least, his mother is occupied with one of his short stories, a moralistic piece he has worked on for the last two years. Inwardly bitter because last week she accepted an offer on her house, Wakeman has chosen to show her the story for the first time this morning.

She's just racing through each page, though, devouring whole paragraphs at a glance, sniffing occasionally, now and then biting her upper lip. Her cheek muscles flinch rhythmically. Her toy apricot poodle, Marcel, lies asleep in her lap.

Patience has never been Wakeman's best feature, and he imagines himself strapped into a medieval rack as he sits there mutely, letting her rush past the foreshadowing and irony and metaphor. He has poured too much of his own blood into this story, more than once skinning his knuckles on the metal jacket of his ancient Smith Corona. But having learned his lesson, he no longer tries to tell others how to read his work. He grits his teeth, says nothing.

And besides, Wakeman has come to expect this from his mother, her uncompromising dismissal of his work, because it always tells,

first and foremost, of grief. Each of his stories seems to possess a will of its own, with every new draft unfolding several shades darker than the last.

He always seeks through his writing, nevertheless, to shed truthful light on the human condition. For this reason certain messages tend to recur, each a variation on a single theme. His characters march pale-skinned through life as if borne along by the inscriptions on their headstones. Often their eyes are the color of jade. Each, without exception, gives more pain to others than he or she can bear.

Although publishers have yet to discover the true merit in his work, he once received encouragement from the editor of a glitzy Chicago monthly, a magazine in which fiction always takes second billing to fold-outs. Across the bottom of a rejection slip, she scribbled: *This story genuinely disturbs me!* This slip represents Wakeman's most notable accomplishment as a writer. Over the past five years he has pinned it to the walls of a half-dozen apartments, each of which has gotten successively smaller and dingier.

Still curled up in his mother's lap, Marcel stirs and lets out a muffled yelp. Wakeman supposes he's chasing squirrels, his favorite waking pastime. Marcel rarely passes up an opportunity for mischief, almost never lets Wakeman's mother out of his sight. But he's ten years old now and sleeps more than he used to.

Wakeman thinks of Arthur Schopenhauer then, a recent discovery of his, a man who spent the last thirty years of his life in a

Frankfurt boarding-house, dissecting the individual will and turning sour on the collective world, accompanied only by his poodle, Atma. Wakeman feels a shock of recognition, picturing his mother alone on a threadbare sofa in a shabby motel room with Marcel in her lap.

But his mother, he trusts, is no philosopher. She claims that idle contemplation leads only to regret, a luxury she insists she can no longer afford. And in no way is she house-bound. The perennial volunteer, she serves as Treasurer for the King County chapter of the National Audubon Society and, for the past five years, has devoted two nights each week to a children's literacy program. He believes this has been her way of filling at least a portion of the space she'd once reserved for her own grandchildren.

This morning she has on the matching terry-cloth robe and slippers that he gave her last month for her sixty-fifth birthday. She's fit, having always kept herself trim through exercise and careful attention to her diet, and remains as lucid as ever. Lately he's been concerned, though, because she has lost four or five pounds in the past couple months without intending to.

Wakeman turns away, stares up impatiently at hairline cracks that branch out like a river system across the ceiling of his mother's split-level ranch house. He grew up here. His parents bought the place when he was six. Its rooms harbor a slew of bittersweet suburban memories for Wakeman, neither the sweetest

nor least bitter of which is the sound of his father's appraising voice.

Two weeks from today, on September first, his mother will move fifty miles north to a retirement community in Mt. Vernon, where she has several close friends. Wakeman's lone comment on the matter has been to suggest to her that they'll probably not see much of one another after she has moved.

What really troubles him, though, is the loss of the house. He still remembers how it smelled when it was new, still remembers going from room to room before the movers arrived, pronouncing his name in each, testing the echo of his voice. His visceral organs go into revolt whenever he imagines never again sitting in this room.

When his mother reaches over and lays his manuscript on the end table beside the sofa, Wakeman glances once more at his watch. In a little less than fifteen minutes she has read thirty-four pages. She looks at him briefly, her eyes appearing moist in the sunlight, then turns to look out a picture window into her back yard, where two finches play in a birdbath. The story recalls the myth of Orpheus, whom Wakeman considers to be his blood brother, in light of their both having gone through hell for a wife and come out empty-handed, a little worse for wear. Wakeman's personal mythology places his own heart a few miles south of San Francisco, pushing up daffodils. The story, however, ends with a point-blank shotgun blast, the final image one of brain matter and skull

fragments diffusing out over a lake, dimpling its otherwise mirror-like surface.

Outside, meanwhile, the finches chirp happily. Watching the birds splash one another, Wakeman's mother coughs several times softly. "Matthew," she says without looking at him, "have you seen Toby, lately?"

Toby is his oldest and best friend, someone he's known since grade school but hasn't seen in the past year or so. He sells commercial real estate and owns a plush condo on Vashon Island, a twenty-minute ferry ride from Wakeman's apartment.

"Not lately, Mother." Wakeman points to his manuscript. "You know how it is. I've been so wrapped up in this."

"Yes, I know," she says, sighing pointedly.

"So anyway, Mother, how much do you suppose he paid for his condo?"

"I have no idea, Matthew. I've never seen it. You know that."

"Well," says Wakeman, "I'd guess two hundred grand, at least . . . maybe even two-fifty." He winces inwardly at the carping slant of his words.

"So what," she says.

Because he knows that she's concerned about him and the time he spends secluded in his two-room cell of an apartment, he offers no reply. But while others see him as melancholy and forgetful, Wakeman clings to a vision of himself as someone who hears distant music. And he's rarely happier than when alone and listening to

Strauss's "Death and Transfiguration" or to Mozart's "Masonic Funeral Music," anything of the sort, trying to fit words to the music.

In Schopenhauer, who saw music as the most sublime of the arts, the minor key the purest expression of pain, Wakeman feels he has found something of a kindred spirit. Schopenhauer claimed that only music has the power to evoke emotion unblemished by thought, and while Wakeman struggles to achieve a similar effect with words, he remains unpublished.

Wakeman knows, also, that his mother is concerned about the long hours he spends reading. He's been devoting much of his time lately to Chekhov, whose stories he once dismissed as simplistic. But now that Wakeman himself has faced the accusing stare of a blank sheet of paper, he takes less for granted. He often pictures himself in the not-too-distant future as Iona, the old man in "Misery" whose son has just died, reciting his tale of heartache to his horse. Wakeman sees the mare quietly chewing her hay, feels her warm breath on his freezing hands, feels the old man's despair.

He adheres religiously to Chekhov's dictum that whenever there's a gun in a story, it must, sooner or later, go off. Wakeman does Chekhov one better, though, insists that whenever there's a story, it must, sooner or later, include a gun. Like a big scavenging bird, the thought of Chekhov's death at forty-four has begun to circle Wakeman, who'll turn forty next month.

His mother worries, too, about the hours he spends alone at

his typewriter. Almost without exception, though, he prefers the company of his fictional characters to those of the flesh, most of whom he's come to believe can't even be trusted to ruin their own lives in a proper manner.

She continues to stare out her window. Finally Wakeman can abide her silence no longer. "So, Mother," he says, trying to sound nonchalant, "what's the verdict here?" It seems to him, instead, as though his voice comes from behind a big rock, part of the landscape decor in the back yard.

His mother turns to look at him, blinks several times, then shuts her eyes. "Your stories trouble me, Matthew," she says quietly. "You know that." She opens her eyes and smiles, though not happily.

Wakeman turns away, concealing his face, which he knows presently reflects as much satisfaction as chagrin. And though he does know clearly how she feels about his work, he has faith in her resilience. While she bends often enough, her eyes misting over, she rarely breaks. He has seen her cry only twice. The first time was on a spring afternoon in 1969, when he was nineteen. His draft notice had come in the mail that day.

The other was when he stood at her front door on a snowy January morning in 1977, three days after President Carter had pardoned ten thousand wayward American sons. Rather than chance Vietnam, where two of his boyhood friends had died, he'd fled to northern British Columbia. He and his mother hadn't seen one

another for almost eight years.

Before ringing the doorbell that morning, Wakeman stood shivering in the driveway for a long while. The snow was about a foot deep, a rare thing for Seattle. Having endured enough of it in Canada for one lifetime, he couldn't help wondering then whether the universe was some sort of lab experiment gone amok, or merely a training ground for bungling apprentice gods. And as he stood shivering there in the driveway, watching snowflakes spiral down through the gray morning half-light, Wakeman was thinking mostly of his father.

Early in the second year of Wakeman's exile, a letter had come from home. His father, a structural engineer, mountaineer, and proud ex-Marine who fought on the beaches of Iwo Jima and Saipan, had died of a heart attack. Wakeman's mother had delayed the memorial service one week so that he could attend.

Knowing that his father was devastated by his abdication of duty, Wakeman has to this day blamed himself for his death, despite knowing, also, that men from that side of the family tend to die prematurely, their hearts simply giving up without warning. And though his mother will at times mention his father, Wakeman has never heard her speak of his father's death, or of his failure to attend the service. Because he doubts that he would have come home, anyway, he has kept to himself the fact that her letter arrived three days after the service had taken place. He was, after all, a fugitive from justice at the time, a criminal, and

an embarrassment.

Wakeman assumes he has long since been forgiven, but still would like to hear her say as much. He understands, nevertheless, that if they're ever to confront this issue, he'll have to take the first step.

Marcel stands and stretches, then jumps down from the sofa and shuffles across the room. He springs up into Wakeman's lap and licks his face. "Welcome to the slums, Your Highness," says Wakeman as he strokes Marcel's side. Marcel cants his head sideways, inspects Wakeman's face for a moment before settling in.

Wakeman's mother smiles approvingly, then shuts her eyes and leans her head back on a cushion, resting, while he listens to the synchronized rise and fall of their breath. He knows that unless prompted she'll say nothing more about his manuscript and he's unwilling to let the issue die.

"So," he says, "what about the nuts and bolts, Mother?" Now retired, she taught high-school English for twenty-five years.

"The prose is fine, Matthew. I'm convinced that you can write."

Wakeman accepts this as more than just motherly gloss. He has never heard her offer false praise to anyone. Clearly she believes in him and has faith in his promise. What she doubts is his perseverance. Neither of them can ignore history.

She offers him a wistful half-smile. "I think you're telling

only half the story, though."

He knew this was coming. "We're talking real life, Mother. That's all. No sugar coating."

She points emphatically to the manuscript. "But you weren't *raised* that way, Matthew."

"It's fiction, Mother. It's just a *story*."

Her smile suddenly evaporates and she turns back to the picture window. In profile her face betrays no emotion; she has on her stoic mask once again.

Something in the back yard appears to interest her, and Wakeman sees that the two finches now accompany a small, blue and rust-colored bird at a feeder that hangs from the tallest of her silver maples.

"You know, Matthew," she says, still facing the window, "we've been through all of this before."

"I'm well aware of that."

"Too often, it would seem."

"Too often, indeed," he says. "Now *there's* your true story, Mother."

Her face responds, deflecting almost imperceptibly, but she says nothing for several moments. Finally, she takes a deep breath. "Matthew," she says, "there really is just one thing I want for you."

"I *know* that, Mother."

Once again chilly silence ensues. His mother continues to

look out the window, then takes her Audubon handbook from the table and begins to page through it. Watching her make her identification, Wakeman finds his emotions swinging slowly from one extreme to the other--anger succumbing, as always, to guilt--and he lets himself drift off, thinking of old friends, his father, his ex-wife.

He begins to wonder then if his lost illusions might equal the number of missing persons in his life. And while he realizes that his life story to date qualifies as less than epic tragedy, he feels he has spent his share of time staring down into the abyss that separates the mind from the heart. Each of his stories, in addition to firearms, includes at least one such abyss.

When his mother stands, drawing her robe together in front and tightening the cloth belt around her waist, Marcel jumps down from his lap and trots across the living room. He looks at Wakeman's mother and barks, scratching at the door.

Wakeman reaches over and picks up his manuscript.

Forcing a smile, his mother extends a hand to him. "Time for some fresh air," she says. "Come out with me."

"No thanks," he says tonelessly as he sorts through the pages. He shakes his head and sighs, then leans back in his armchair and watches his mother's face take on the look of utter exasperation she reserves for him alone.

"For God's sake, Matthew," she says, "I'm sick of this. If you're determined to impose some self-indulgent fantasy on your

life, then so be it. But from now on, kindly spare me the bloody details." Hands on her hips, she glares at him, while he faces her squarely, imagining that any second now one of them will freeze-dry the other in place.

They stare at one another for a long half-minute or so, but then as always, his mother's face begins to soften, soon after which she reaches out to lay her hand on his shoulder. Shaking him a little, she says, "Happiness is really nothing more than an approximation, Matthew. That's as good as it gets."

Wakeman just sits there, unflinching, ever the closed book, with his mother scrutinizing his face.

Finally, he intones, "Schopenhauer says, and I quote, 'There is only one inborn error, and that is the notion that we exist in order to be happy.'" Wakeman has spent some time memorizing this line. This is the first time he's tried Schopenhauer on his mother.

"Yes," she says, "I'm sure he does. That sounds just like the little drudge." She smiles and adds, "And you're well aware, of course, that he despised his mother . . . that he refused to speak to her for the last twenty-five years of her life."

Wakeman had expected a different response, something along the lines of *Schopenwho?* "I know that," he says, the words catching in his throat. This is by no means the first lie he has told his mother, but his first in a good while. He shuts up then, not wanting to dig himself in any deeper.

His mother looks at him knowingly for a moment or two, then shrugs and turns to the door. She opens it and steps out onto her patio, pulls it shut behind her.

She crosses the back yard with Marcel bouncing along playfully ahead, then follows the grassy pathway through her marigold beds into her vegetable garden, where she bends over to inspect her tomato plants. With a breeze playing out across the lawn and through the limbs of the tall blue spruce behind her, she picks several ripe romas and sets them aside in the grass. She breaks off a basil leaf, smells it, and smiles.

Wakeman's conscience jabs him as he watches her; he realizes that he envies her simple way of enjoying something she'll soon have to give up. He knows, also, that he has chosen to punish her in subtle ways for his own shortcomings, and that only a fool would assume she has led an unexamined life.

She stands, then arches her back and shakes her head, letting the breeze sift through her hair. Meanwhile, Marcel stands on point beside her, trembling, his nose stuck in a morning glory bush. Unwilling to take on alone whatever he imagines lurks within, he glances up at Wakeman's mother for support, but she has her eyes closed, her face to the sun. Marcel paws at the bush, suddenly jumps back cat-like several feet, then begins to circle warily, holding his distance.

Marcel's foolishness reminds Wakeman of a breezy October morning ten years ago, when he stood with his mother in her

driveway, watching a tiny tan fur ball stalk maple leaves through the yard.

Stalling for time, they were laughing at Marcel's antics while Wakeman's wife waited impatiently in their old rattletrap Pontiac. The sky over Seattle was flawless, unbroken blue. Fifty miles to the south, Mt. Rainier sparkled under autumn's first layer of snow. His father's ashes, he could only assume, lay somewhere near the summit of the mountain.

Wakeman had finally graduated from college. He and his wife were leaving for northern California, where he had accepted a promising entry-level management position with a Fortune 500 general contractor. Once there, he would add his name to the list of those seeking to stuff money into whatever gaps still remained in the San Francisco skyline. Shortly after his first interview with his new employer, he'd given his mother a puppy for her birthday.

In deference to the memory of his father, the builder, Wakeman had majored in construction management at the University of Washington. Driving off toward California, though, watching his mother holding Marcel as she waved goodbye, Wakeman was thinking of a scruffy old English professor who'd once taken him aside to suggest he switch majors. But Wakeman had another, grander plan, a blueprint for altering the face of the world in a concrete, measurable way. By then, too, he had a wife with expensive dreams.

Three years later, his mother would check him into a substance abuse clinic that sat surrounded by ten-foot high, whitewashed

stucco walls on a dusty Union City hillside. Various items had recently disappeared from his life, the most notable of which included his job, a new Porsche 911, a thousand dollar-a-month apartment in North Beach, and his wife, who'd set her sights on a real estate broker and his lakeside villa in Hillsborough.

Wakeman's mother came to see him at least once every day for the month he spent in detox. She stayed in a shabby motel alongside the Nimitz Expressway in Fremont, because she was paying for his treatment and could afford nothing more. After he finished drying out, she helped him pack, then brought him home to Seattle.

For the next several years he suffered a recurring nightmare in which he stood atop a thin white stucco wall, far above the ground. San Francisco loomed in the distance to the northwest, beyond silvery miles of bay, its labyrinth of office towers showing like a pale raised scar on the horizon. A finely-manicured network of residential estates lay like the skeleton of a huge ancient beast across the rolling hills south of the city. And Wakeman's wife stood hidden in a boulder garden below, singing an incantation to material happiness, encouraging him to jump. In the dream, he never stepped over the edge. In reality, he came closer than he'll ever admit to anyone but himself.

Over the past seven years he's worked at a series of odd jobs--school bus driver, hospital janitor, night watchman, and so forth. It's been that long since he has taken a drink.

The clock's internal hardware begins its dutiful wind-up, then bells start to chime, marking off another hour. Wakeman sees his mother look toward the house. Shading her eyes from the sun, she smiles brightly and waves, refusing to give up on him, signaling him out. He can tell by the look on her face that she can't see through the window but she knows just the same that he's been watching her.

And he begins to wonder about the hopes she might have held for her future, forty years ago. He shuts his eyes for a moment, trying to picture the young woman she would have been at the time, but he can see her only as she is now, with liver-spotted skin and wispy silver hair. Wondering when he last took a photograph of her, he feels a sudden knife-point of regret.

It strikes him, as well, that he can't remember when he last saw a picture of his father. Wakeman tries to visualize him but sees only a faceless mannequin wearing a necktie and starched white shirt. For an instant, he's tempted to slip into his mother's bedroom and rummage through the dresser where she keeps her most private possessions. But this is at least one trust he'll never betray.

With his mother still staring expectantly in his direction, Wakeman lays down the manuscript and pushes himself up from his chair. He steps to the living room door and reaches for the knob

but pauses then, suddenly dizzy, lightheaded from having stood too quickly.

After several deep breaths, his equilibrium gradually returning, he begins to feel a little more like himself. He remains at the door for a time, though, held in check by what appears to be forming in his mind's eye.

What he sees taking shape now is the seed of a new story, and he's imagining, oddly enough, that he'll make this one upbeat for a change. There'll be little need for irony and foreshadowing, and certainly no call for gunplay. He suspects he will include something of the abyss, though, using it to show how a mother's love might avert a tragic outcome. While making a good-faith effort to avoid soft-hearted sentiment, he'll do his best to show this love as a physical presence, solid, capable of pulling you back from the edge, back to safer ground.

As he stands at the door, it occurs to him, also, that this story needn't end in a way to reflect his own vision of life. And even if it does turn out seeming a bit trite or sentimental, he'll not be too concerned. It will, after all, be just an approximation. Intended solely for his mother, no editor will see the manuscript. But at least maybe *this* one she'll chose to read a little more carefully, possibly even more than once.

Then, as Wakeman turns the doorknob, his opening scene materializes. He'll begin in a living room much the same as his mother's, with two characters not unlike his mother and himself--

no high drama, no symphonic effects--just a simple portrait of two people and a dog set against the ticking of a clock.

He's anxious now to get some words onto paper, so he opens the door and steps outside. He'll spend another minute or two with his mother, offer her a few reassuring words, then get back to his apartment and his typewriter.

At the edge of the patio he stops and calls to her, "He didn't speak to her for twenty-five years, huh?"

"So the story goes," she says, facing him with her arms folded.

"That's pretty sad, isn't it?"

She nods and smiles. "Now *there's* your true story, Matthew."

Maybe so, thinks Wakeman, stepping forward into the yard.

Meanwhile, his mother reaches down to Marcel, takes him up and gives him a hug. Then she bends over and gently tosses him about ten feet out into the grass. Still a puppy at heart, Marcel loves this game. He dashes back for more, cringes in mock fear at her feet.

Wakeman finds himself wishing he could save this moment, and it occurs to him that he ought to stop somewhere on his way home to look at camcorders. He imagines that if he bought one, though, he'd be eating mostly canned soup and tuna fish for about the next decade. Wondering then if his mother will live another ten years, or five, even, he begins to see a little more clearly into the nature of a faulty heart, how it can twist time into a hard knot

of loss and regret.

Laughing, his mother gathers up Marcel once more. Marcel squirms happily, preparing for flight. She bends over and begins to swing him back and forth, counting down from five, and Wakeman sees then how his story will end. He decides that he'll wait until tomorrow to begin it, though. Today suddenly seems like a good one to spend here, at home, with his mother.

McMann

McMann had intended to be a few minutes late so as not to appear overeager. It was after sunset now, though, and he was more than a half-hour late, still sitting outside the Riverway Inn, still trying to drum up enough courage to go inside. He was staring out his windshield at the Sacramento skyline. In the failing light beyond the American River, tall buildings seemed to become one, taking on the shape of an immense headstone. It was the lone blemish on an almost perfectly flat, dust-colored horizon.

As a test of will he turned away, refusing to look at the heart of the city, an amusement that led him to imagine a fat woman in a supermarket. She had on black nylon stretch pants and a food-stained sweatshirt. Engrossed in a tabloid gossip sheet, she stood at the end of a lengthy check-out line, her shopping cart crammed with beer, soda pop, pastries and other packaged foodstuffs, a *TV Guide*, several giant-size packages of sale-priced toilet paper, and so on.

The tabloid's feature story told of a man who'd been discovered behind the steering wheel of a Buick LeSabre, crystallized, a 220 pound slab of rock salt. It ended with a prediction as to the fate of Modern man, citing Biblical prophecies and other such hucksterism.

"Poor little sheep," McMann said to his own face in the rearview mirror.

The temperature that afternoon had gone over a hundred for the sixteenth straight day. An odor of burnt wheat stubble lingered in the air, and a layer of gritty dust coated leaves on the trees along the river, which had dropped to a fifty-year low and taken on the color of jade. It was still warm out. But within the last hour marine air had begun flushing malignant air from the Central Valley eastward up into the Sierra, replacing it with the promise of an early fall.

Gulls lured inland by cooler air were floating downstream on the surface of the river. A resident flock of white swans loitered out on a sun-blached brown greenway that ran between the river and the parking lot. Two white male gulls quarreled in the parking lot over a hamburger bun, while pigeons fed on something in a quartz rock garden fronting the hotel lounge.

As McMann worked a toggle switch on the dash, raising his convertible top, a small blacktail doe slipped through a wall of underbrush lining the far bank and lock-stepped warily down to the water. Amazed to see a deer so close to the city, he thought she might be an apparition, or a bad omen--maybe both. He was a little

amused at having such a thought while he was sober.

The little doe stood scanning the river and twitching her long ears before taking a drink. At the sound of a gull's cry she raised her head briefly, then resumed drinking. Seconds later, though, when two F-16's on approach to McClellan roared past overhead, she sprang back up through the brush.

McMann pictured her as a foul-smelling, fly-covered heap of hide and bone, lying out along the shoulder of I-5 or the Yolo Causeway. He shut his eyes and shook his head, erasing the image from his mind. He took several deep breaths, trying to relax. But he couldn't help wondering how many wrong turns it had taken him to end up here, couldn't help but wonder where and when they'd begun.

By the time he was ten he was making his father's drink for him --a double shot of Beam's Choice with two cubes of ice and a dash of bitters. His father would have at least two or three every evening. Then, in his early teens, he'd watched his father begin to drink straight from the bottle in a way to dissolve slowly, inevitably inside it. Aware also that his paternal grandfather had met the same end, McMann had vowed for nearly twenty years to break this chain.

But about seven years ago, during his mid-thirties, he'd sensed a change coming over himself. And while it was nothing he cared to put into words, he understood that he had counted on marriage and fatherhood and suburban tranquillity to cure a chronic malady in his heart, and that it simply hadn't worked. In addition, he missed his

mother and father, chiefly because they were both dead and therefore unable to receive back any of the misery they'd caused him. And so he had begun to drink in earnest.

By the time he turned forty, his new self was complete. De Oro High School had washed its hands of him after he had spent fourteen years there as a History teacher and football coach. At home, on more than a few occasions, he broke plates and flung glassware through windows. He put his fists into walls and through doors that had been locked against him, and used them to threaten his wife and daughter, Angela, when their only crime was to love him.

Just over a year ago, when his wife could endure no more of his abuse, she had divorced him and taken twelve-year-old Angela away to live on her parents' farm in Illinois. McMann hadn't heard from either of them since. Finding himself alone and dangling by an all-too-familiar thread, hiring out as a day laborer in order to keep himself in vodka, he chose as a last resort to join A.A.

At least two nights each week for the past three months he had attended meetings in the basement of a Unitarian church over on Freeport Boulevard. During that time he hadn't taken a drink. He'd found steady work running a jackhammer for a demolition contractor. He felt that he had regained control of his life, that he could safely choose now whether or not to drink, and that he was, first and foremost, not a drunk. Hard pressed to believe that God had been involved or even very much interested in his affairs, he was proud of *himself*, his *own* hard-won progress. Recently, however, another

force had begun to work on him.

For the last year of his marriage he hadn't slept with his wife and he had been celibate since the divorce. But now sobriety had seemed to rekindle his desire while adding hours to his nights. His best prospect was Tina Aulden, a striking blonde whose own history of misfortune was, in his eyes, equaled only by her excellent figure. He'd met her at A.A. and gradually had worked his way into her favor. But on the night he planned to ask her out for the first time, she stopped coming to meetings. Naturally he assumed she had fallen back into her bad ways and he thought he might like to join her, maybe soften her landing. It had taken him a month to work up enough nerve to call her, though. Attractive women always made him nervous. He'd been married for seventeen years and had never been unfaithful to his wife.

On the phone Tina had seemed happy to hear from him but a little less enthused than he'd hoped for. He tripped over what few words he could find, wondering if she could hear his heart beating in her receiver, but managed finally to arrange something for the following evening. He suggested the Riverway Inn, a hotel bar and grill where he thought they might feel at ease. The lounge featured both a scenic view of the river and bartenders known for their generous pours.

Her apartment turned out to be within walking distance of the Riverway, so they agreed to meet in the lounge. "We can just go with the flow from there," McMann had said, unable to come up with

anything clever.

"My specialty," she'd said in a vaguely unpleasant tone, just before hanging up.

Because it was Sunday evening, the lounge was nearly empty. She was sitting in a booth next to a window.

"Sorry I'm late," he said, sliding in beside her.

"Well, don't you worry one little bit. I just got here myself." She smiled brightly and moved close to him. "I'm *really* glad you called, Patrick."

Her voice sounded more hopeful now than it had over the phone. His shoulders tingled when he felt her breath on his ear. "Same here," he said.

She seemed paler and had on a touch more rouge than she'd worn at A.A. Otherwise she looked flawless, except for the dark half-moons beneath her eyes. Her perfume, tainted with cigarette smoke, and her clinging red satin dress were making him lightheaded. He had a visceral urge to bury himself in her silky hair.

In front of her on the table sat a rocks glass, half full, with a lime wedge in it. He picked up the glass and smelled the liquid. "Gin," he said.

"Gin." She smiled weakly.

"Naughty girl."

"Shame on me." She bumped him with her leg.

Though still nervous, McMann was thrilled to be in a bar once

again and sitting next to Tina. It was like coming home after a long absence--the soft leather seats, the High Sierra landscapes on the walls, the flickering candles and soft jazz playing in the background--everything at the same time both foreign and familiar. And it was all his for the price of a cocktail.

"This is a nice place, Patrick." She seemed intrigued by the immaculately-ordered army of bottles behind the bar.

"There's plenty of liquor," he agreed.

After ordering a vodka martini and another gin rocks, he called to the waitress, "Make those doubles, please," as she made her way to the bar. He reached over for Tina's glass, reasoning that if he could quit cold once, he could do it again tomorrow.

"Naughty boy."

"Watch out for me."

"I fully intend to." She turned away as he raised the glass to his lips.

McMann took a swallow of gin, telling himself that tomorrow morning he would draw up a list of everyone he had harmed and think seriously of ways to make amends to them. As the alcohol began to take effect, he sat back and recalled what little he'd learned of Tina at A.A.

She was twenty-four and had been married twice. She'd divorced her first husband. Her second had died two years after she'd married him. She chose not to say how or why, offering only that he'd left her with next to nothing. She made it clear that she was coming to

A.A. only as required by her probation.

One morning shortly after the bars closed, she had managed to run off the roadway over on Folsom Boulevard and had punched a hole through an arborvitae hedgerow. Behind the bushes some retired folks had stored their pride and joy, a thirty-foot cabin cruiser. Her new Celica was totaled, the boat reduced to firewood. She ended up with a fractured hip, a suspended sentence, and a slight limp that became more noticeable whenever she was tired or depressed. Doctors had encouraged her not to hope for any further improvement.

McMann had liked her way of joking to make light of bad situations. One night she had said to him, "Maybe now they'll keep their crummy little rowboat in the ocean where it belongs." She'd claimed then that she was lucky to be alive and not behind bars but she had sounded as if she were trying somehow to wish the thought true.

With McMann's help Tina had finished her drink by the time a fresh pair arrived. A new waitress was on duty--a slender, suntanned redhead with fine cheekbones and sparkling green eyes to match her smile. McMann was almost certain he hadn't seen her there before.

As she set their drinks on the table, McMann noticed that she wore no wedding ring. He paid for the drinks and tipped her four dollars, feeling the warmth of her smile on his face. He couldn't resist turning to watch her slip away.

"Hey, Mister Moneybags, did you forget about little me already?"

Tina jabbed him with her elbow and pursed her lips.

He considered his next move, then took her hand up and kissed it. "I've missed you, lady."

She smiled and leaned against him for a second or two. "I've known men like you," she said, before tasting her gin.

He raised his glass in a toast, wondering why he'd been so nervous. "So then, here's to our long lost friends at A.A."

But a pained look came over Tina's face and she shut her eyes. "Those people give me the creeps, Patrick. Them and their bleeding hearts," she said with shiver. "I have to go back, though, and soon. My probation officer says it's either that or else." When she set her drink down a moment later it was more than half gone.

McMann told himself that he wouldn't be going back, period. But when he tried to think of what he and Tina might have in common, other than A.A., nothing came to him. So he disposed of half of his martini in one swallow, signaled to the waitress and pointed to their glasses, then forced himself to slow down by chewing ice cubes while they waited silently for the next round.

Tina kept a close eye on him when the waitress brought their drinks. He smiled reassuringly at Tina and tried to keep the waitress in view, as well.

The candle on their table had gone out, so the waitress struck a match and got the flame going again. She blew out the match and looked at McMann sadly for a moment, as if his face might be a crystal ball foretelling his future. Then she turned and went off

to another table.

After they had sipped their drinks silently for a time, Tina ran a hand through her hair twice, brushing it back over her shoulders, and shook her head. "You know, my first husband had a real thing for redheads . . . blondes and brunettes, too, for that matter." She snickered and turned to stare out the window beside her. "He called himself an ass man. *Asshole* is more like it, though."

McMann put his arm across her shoulders and drew her a little closer. She seemed to come willingly. He filled his lungs with perfumed air and held his breath. Every now and again a tiny static charge would jump from her hair to his cheek. She had more of her drink, then silently examined her glass.

"Men," said McMann, "who needs 'em?"

Tina glanced at him out of the corner of her eye and had more of her gin. "Including you, too, right? You've seen one, you've seen 'em all?"

"My armor's rusty enough."

She smiled as he ran his fingertips lightly back and forth across her shoulder, and he imagined a change of scene might work to his advantage. "Should we have some dinner . . . or maybe look for some greener pastures?"

She held up her glass, inspecting it again. Except for a few ice cubes and a lime wedge it was empty. "To greener pastures," she said, pressing up against him.

It occurred to McMann that things might be easier than he'd

expected, easier, in fact, than he would have liked. But he banished this thought instantly, finishing his martini as he slid quickly from the booth.

While Tina used the ladies' room he stood in the lobby outside the lounge, watching the redheaded waitress. She was clearing tables, stacking glassware. She glanced his way only once but once was all he needed.

As they walked through the moonlit parking lot, Tina put her arm behind him and hooked a finger through one of his belt loops. Draped over her shoulders, his blazer hung down almost to her knees, making her appear smaller and younger than she was, casting her in a light that didn't accord well with his intentions for the evening. Silently they walked past his car out onto a barkdust pathway that ran along the river.

After they'd gone a short distance she said, "I have some gin. Is that all right?" She tugged on his belt loop and looked at him in a hopeful way.

"You bet. Gin's wonderful." Several years ago he had switched from gin to vodka after discovering that vodka would leave no trace of alcohol on his breath. "My hat's off to gin."

"There's no vermouth, though. I would've gotten some if I'd known."

"Really, the gin's fine. Vermouth always gets me fucking blotto, anyway."

"Fucking blotto," she said gaily. "Fucking blotto in fucking

river city."

When she bumped him several times with her hip, smiling at him impetuously, McMann felt a sudden warmth come over him. The evening was unfolding now as though he himself had written the script, and he was almost certain it would end in a way to satisfy both of them.

Her apartment stood on the top level of a three-story maze of several hundred units. It was filled with the smell of latex paint and had plush, beige wall-to-wall carpet. A plate-glass sliding door in the living room opened onto a barren concrete balcony. While she checked her telephone messages in the kitchen, he conducted a survey.

The living room contained a stereo, an ancient black-and-white portable TV, lime-green chenille sofa, and an imitation wood-grain coffee table, all of which, he imagined, might recently have been garage-sale items. Things were surprisingly well organized, though.

On the coffee table sat a black ceramic poodle wearing a brown wool collar of the choke-chain variety, with knitted links and a metal ring at each end. "It's a dog's life, eh, old buddy?" McMann said, offering the poodle a consoling pat on the head.

A bird cage hung from the ceiling in a corner next to the kitchen. It contained some soiled newspaper and a tray filled with tiny seeds and water but no bird. On the wall above the sofa hung a framed portrait of a wide-eyed, four- or five-year-old child, rendered skillfully in pencil. McMann thought it was odd, even a little sad, that Tina would choose to put an image of herself on

display in her own living room.

Also on the coffee table were three issues of *People Magazine*, one of *Vanity Fair*, and two magazines featuring fall fashions. There were no books to be seen anywhere. When she started opening cupboards, he stepped out onto the balcony.

Lights were flickering in skyscrapers to the south, and moonlit water was glistening through trees lining the river below, reminding him of nights when he and his high school buddies had gone down to the river with cases of Heidelberg. Most of those guys were long since gone. And though he knew from listings in the telephone book that a few were still in town, he hadn't seen any of them for at least fifteen years.

"You know what I'd like?" he said, stepping back inside.

She was setting a tray of ice cubes on a kitchen counter. "You name it, mister."

"Let's walk down to the river."

"Let's do. I've been meaning to ever since I moved in." She slid the tray back in the freezer. "There's a trail, I think, just a little way upriver."

She brought a full bottle of Tanqueray into the living room and handed it to him, then went into her bedroom and put on a sweater and sandals. From a hall closet she got a wool blanket. The interior of the closet, he noticed, resembled the site of a natural disaster. On their way out she checked her front door, making sure it was locked and securely shut.

As they walked beneath a floodlight in the parking lot, she held her apartment key up to the light, which he thought was an odd gesture. When she handed it to him he slipped it into a front pocket of his slacks. Just like money in the bank, he told himself.

"To rusty armor," he said, raising the bottle.

"But with a knight still inside, right?"

"At your service, my lady." He took a drink and passed her the gin.

"To my rescue," she said.

Along the way they drank to knights and damsels, top-shelf gin, bathtub gin, Bill W., the Twelve Traditions, and what not. "Fuck A.A.," Tina said cheerfully. She said, also, that she might like to build a sandcastle.

Several hundred yards upriver, they found a trail leading down through a grove of cottonwood and alder. The trail was hard-packed, steep and slippery, and they held tightly to one another going down. In the moonlight they made their way out onto a sandy bank at the water's edge.

He laid down the bottle and spread out the blanket while she took off her sandals. She laughed as he poured sand from his new loafers. They sat then and lay back together and let the night settle in around them.

The sand was dry and very soft. A murky, sulfuric odor of decay was drifting up from the river, mingling with the smell of cottonwood. Except for the soft drone of crickets it was quiet.

The sky's lone flaw was a pale-blue electric shroud over the city.

As McMann examined the sky, confident that it held more than enough stars for a nation of fools and children to wish upon, it dawned on him that he had never learned the names of the stars or where to look for the constellations. He couldn't tell the Big Dipper from the Little, the Dog Star from Jupiter, things he imagined even his daughter knew by heart. For a brief bitter moment then he heard a chorus of the A.A. faithful calling on him to place himself in the care of God as he, McMann, understood Him.

"You know," Tina said, "I've wanted to come down here at night but I was always afraid to be by myself. That's silly, isn't it?"

"Not at all. You can never be too careful."

She thought a moment. "That's really not what I meant, though."

When McMann failed to respond, she sighed and shut her eyes. He sat up part way and studied her face, comparing it to the portrait of the happy child in her living room. And he was reminded of Angela--the way he used to watch her when she wasn't looking, telling himself that in spite of all the things he could never give her, she at least would always have a father, one who'd always be there for her.

"Can I ask you something, Patrick?" Tina said.

"Of course."

"Okay then, tell me this . . . what's the one thing you fear most?"

Instinctively put off by her question, McMann lay back and

stared up at the sky, waiting patiently for an answer to make itself known.

It occurred to him that he was afraid of losing Angela to a new father, a better man than himself, but this was the last thing he would've shared with Tina, even if she'd known he had a child. Finally he said, "Loneliness, I imagine," assuming this to be a safe reply, one that would hold true for nearly everyone but himself.

"Me, too, I guess, but not only that. I won't lie. More than once I've wanted to do it. Just end it all." She made a slashing motion across her wrist. "What really terrifies me, though, is the thought of dying alone, the thought of no one grieving when I die." She sat up, supporting herself on one elbow, and looked at him. "That's pretty pathetic, isn't it?"

"Not really," he lied.

After another moment or two she said, "Sometimes I have this dream, you know, where I'm watching my own funeral from a distance, and only a few people are there, maybe five or six, and I don't recognize their faces. But I know what everyone's thinking. They're all thinking what a shame it is, not that I'm dead, but that hardly anyone gave a damn."

She took another drink and set the bottle next to him, then turned onto her side and laid her head on his chest.

McMann could feel the pulse in her temple and muscles flexing in her cheek, and though he wanted to offer something truthful to save the moment, he could only lie there mutely, imagining himself

buried in sand. As if to protect himself, he put his hand on his stomach.

A train whistle echoed in the distance as she placed her hand on his and took a deep breath. "I want you to know, Patrick, that I've never made love with anyone I wasn't married to."

Moments later came the slowly-building drone of diesel engines. Probably the Amtrak Zephyr, he imagined, carrying its daily quota of hopeful pilgrims to Reno. And he thought he might like to be aboard it now and traveling alone, bound eastward up into the Sierra.

When she said, "But I think I'd like to change that tonight," his hand balled reflexively into a fist.

He lay there for a long while grating his teeth and ruminating on the contagious nature of despair. Finally he set the bottle aside and said, "I'm sorry, Tina."

Abruptly she withdrew her hand and sat up. "Do me a favor, Patrick, and save your sympathy for someone else."

She drew her knees up and sat with her chin resting on them as McMann drifted off, seeing in his ex-wife's eyes a look that had, in several years' time, gone from sympathy, to disgust, to abject fear.

After a while Tina stood and took off her sweater and laid it on the blanket. Then she unfastened her narrow belt and let that drop. After removing everything else she had on and laying it all neatly on her sweater, she stood facing him silently, as if to offer him one last chance. He lay there clicking his teeth together.

Just marking his time now, he saw little more than the angry red scar that ran diagonally down from her pelvic bone and wrapped around her hip.

At last she turned and walked to the water's edge. He sat up as she kneeled to dip her hand into a narrow moonlit path spanning the river.

When she began wading out into this golden wash of light, he imagined that it might be a force drawing her. And as she went deeper and started swimming toward the middle of the river, he felt a sense of detachment overtaking him, a sense of having no stake in whatever might occur next, no power to affect the outcome.

With the current carrying her down from the moonlit water into darkness, he got up and walked downstream angling toward the river. At the water's edge he stopped and called her name several times.

Although he heard no response, no sound of her stroke in the water, he wasn't overly concerned. She was merely putting an appropriate distance between the two of them, washing him out of her life. Still, he couldn't help feeling he should go in after her.

He'd walked downstream about fifty yards when he saw her wade up onto the far bank. The river appeared to be fifty to sixty yards wide at that point.

"Tina," he shouted. "Are you okay?" The words echoed through the trees lining the river. He knew that she could hear him.

He waited but heard nothing, so he walked back to the blanket and gathered up his socks and shoes. He started up toward the trail,

then went back to where the bottle lay in the sand. Holding it up to the moonlight, he considered pouring out the gin. Finally, though, he set the bottle, her bottle, back beside her clothes. It was a little less than three-quarters full.

At the foot of the trail he put on his socks and shoes, and about halfway up, paused to look back across the river. Shadows lined the far bank. He could see no trace of her.

As he walked to his car he had an ominous feeling--something not unlike a sixth sense--of having been followed up off the river. And while it had nothing to do with fear, it made the hair on the back of his neck stand up.

Convinced he'd acted in noble fashion, he slept well that night. He felt he'd finally arrived at a point where passion would no longer hold the reins to his life.

He thought about calling her before he left for work the next morning but decided not to.

On his morning break, he walked over to the FTD shop in the K Street Mall. "Yellow roses," he told the lady at the counter. "A dozen of your best, please."

He wrote a check for sixty dollars and had the flowers delivered to the dry cleaners where Tina had worked since losing her secretarial job at an insurance agency. In his slacks that morning he'd discovered her key, so he sent it along with the roses in lieu of a card. He hadn't wanted to see her again. They were just

something offered in the way of proper endings.

Thursday evening of that week he went back to A.A. but left early, wanting to get home in time to see what promised to be a good boxing match on ESPN. During the preliminaries, a pair of Sacramento County police detectives knocked on his front door. Tina had missed work for the last four days. Her clothes had been found a few yards up from the river. The blanket and empty bottle lay at the water's edge, where she had apparently tried to build something in the sand. The police had traced him through the florist.

The two detectives seemed at first to take Tina's key as ironclad evidence of his guilt. They questioned him for more than two hours, McMann reconstructing time and again their evening together. He told himself he had nothing to hide and described everything as accurately as he could. "She wanted to go in," he said repeatedly, "and I didn't. She was fine when I left her."

Evidently they believed him, that he'd had no part in her disappearance, because he heard from the police only once more. Three days after they questioned him, one of the detectives called. Divers had found her body wedged under some deadfall on the bottom of the river, several hundred yards upstream from the boat ramp in Discovery Park.

McMann had never believed in funerals, had long refused to attend them, even when his absence might cause more grief for the survivors. He went to Tina's, though.

It was held nine days after he left her alone on the river, a time in which he'd neither taken nor had any desire for a drink. And though he had mixed emotions over the role he'd played in her death, he went with a clear conscience. He was by no means proud of himself. But if he'd learned anything from his father, it was that some people simply couldn't be saved from themselves. Also, he'd begun to hope that by holding on to the memory of Tina's bad fortune, he might somehow manage to keep himself afloat. He had located her funeral notice in the *Bee*.

She was buried at the foot of the Sierra in Placerville, where she had grown up, and where McMann himself had lived until age six. Although he had almost no recollection of the little town, his parents had often spoken of it, claiming they'd been happy there.

McMann fancied himself the homeward-bound prodigal as he cruised up Highway 50, running habitually late, through the chaparral-covered foothills of El Dorado County. He thought he might even spend some time after the funeral searching for his old house, despite having no idea of where to begin.

As he drove up the narrow road to the cemetery, he told himself that this was merely an experience to be endured, one that he would not hear about or speak of after today. Only after he shut off his engine in the gravel parking lot did he realize that he hadn't needed directions.

It was a tiny postage stamp of a cemetery, lying in a sparse grove of blue oak and manzanita midway up a hillside overlooking

town. High above the cemetery to the east, in the pine-covered Sierra, snow had begun falling, a rarity for that time of year. A slew of long-abandoned gold-mining pits littered the foothills fronting the mountains. Shotgun reports were issuing like clockwork from a trap range on the hillside above, where a lone sportsman stood, breaking clay birds with machine-like precision.

A cold drizzle fell steadily, the sky seeming to draw color from the scattered headstones. There was no grass in the cemetery. Instead, a soggy brown layer of leaves and manzanita needles covered the ground. The air smelled of decomposing vegetation and raw earth, partially redeemed by manzanita and a trace of witch hazel.

Excluding the minister and McMann, seven people attended Tina's funeral. McMann stood apart from the others, and no one approached him. The minister appeared to have no set agenda. With his Bible under one arm and his hands in his trouser pockets, he stamped his feet now and then and seemed interested primarily in concluding affairs in a timely fashion. Which was fine with McMann. It seemed likely that anytime now the drizzle would be turning to snow.

A gray-haired woman of about sixty cried for a short while and appeared to be the center of attention. A slender child with long blonde hair clung steadfastly to the woman's side.

Curious, McMann had moved a little closer.

She looked to be about five or six and seemed bewildered by what was taking place. "Grandma, it's cold," McMann heard her say. And

he felt something give way in his chest then, realizing that she, not Tina, was the one in the portrait.

Before they put Tina in the ground, he left and got on Highway 50 and drove straight out of town. In Fair Oaks he stopped at a Lucky's and bought a fifth of vodka, which still lay unopened on the seat beside him, thirty minutes later, when he pulled into the Riverway Inn parking lot.

He let the windshield wipers run as he sat examining the sky. It was raining in earnest now in the valley, and he had no umbrella. The American had risen, turning swift and muddy. Gulls were still about but the swans had left the greenway to find cover elsewhere. Gutters were overflowing, creating ankle-deep lakes over storm drains in the parking lot. Meanwhile, a handful of pigeons roosted beneath the eaves of the lounge, squeezing themselves onto a stonework ledge above a picture window.

Rain drum-rolled on his convertible top while he waited, gripping the unopened bottle, fearing that from now on, all roads would lead him to the same place. He made a fist with his free hand and examined it from various angles, measuring the damage it had done, and might still do. Then, with the windshield wipers marking time, he shut his eyes and tried for a long while to piece together an image of his daughter's face.

A Stranger Unannounced

For about a month one winter a male goldfinch had used the feeder outside Parish's kitchen window. The bird's left foot was balled permanently into a little black fist. And because the little guy had been wary at first, taking sanctuary in a big Paradise rose bush nearby whenever anyone approached, Parish had sat at the dust-covered antique oak table in his dining room, watching him from a distance. In time, though, the bird had gotten used to Parish's presence at the window.

On opposite sides of the feeder were two holes no bigger than nickels. Flapping his wings for balance, the bird would grip the feeder's perch with his good foot and try to fit his head through a hole, always the one facing east. He would slip off the perch, regrip, slip off, and then try again, until he'd managed finally to pluck out a seed or two. Parish had looked around in stores, searching for something that might be easier for him to get into.

But everything seemed intended only for birds that could roost. So after two or three days Parish had given up his search for a new feeder and had christened the goldfinch Little Job--a perfect example of the unsearchable wisdom, the marvelous works of God.

For twenty-five or thirty years the old feeder had hung from the kitchen window, put up by Parish's mother. She was always fascinated by even the plainest, even the most common birds. Just how many hours she spent watching silently at the window, Parish couldn't begin to imagine. If not there in the kitchen, he could almost always find her in her sprawling backyard garden or in her rickety little greenhouse, nurturing her beloved chrysanthemums and marigolds, happily toiling away the other half of her waking life. But suddenly everything--garden and greenhouse, kitchen, window, and feeder--had become his. A week later he had given up the matchbox studio apartment he'd lived in for the past three years and had come back to share the old house with its accusatory ghosts. Since then the ghosts had grown bolder and more oppressive, the garden had fallen to rot, and the greenhouse, riddled by an October windstorm, had remained a shambles of splintered wood and torn plastic sheeting. The feeder, though, he'd managed to keep full.

At a pet store in the local mall, a high school girl had told him that goldfinches were extremely choosy, that they liked thistle seeds best. He and the girl were standing in an aisle, surrounded by a dazzling array of exotic birds--all in vile-smelling

newspaper-lined cages--the stench and jungle chatter assaulting him from every direction. She was very pretty and had a wonderful figure. And as Parish studied her obliquely, suspended midway between fatherly concern and celibate lust, he was wondering if she had any siblings. He wondered, too, how old her parents might be, and whether his definition of himself had come down finally to divorced and childless or childless and divorced.

But then she'd caught him eyeing her breasts and had bolted behind a sales counter, while Parish had promptly headed for the mall parking lot, recalling as he fought his way through a flock of holiday shoppers how he'd once looked forward to growing old, swathed in a multitude of his own children and theirs.

One day early in December Parish was standing in his kitchen, heating some chicken noodle soup on the stove's lone working burner. The crippled bird, meanwhile, was having more trouble than usual with the feeder, and it occurred to Parish that he would be lucky to survive the winter.

It was shortly past noon and it was still raining with conviction. The sky had tried to come alive early that morning but then had given up and gone solid gray once again. Parish worked high steel in Portland and Seattle, straddling girders and columns sometimes forty or fifty stories above bustling sidewalks and streets. In winter, though, he found little or no work because of the weather. And for weeks now, every new day had been draining

a little more color, a little more life from a picture of the sun he'd been saving in his mind's eye. Still, he harbored few illusions about himself. He knew that he need only look in a mirror for his own worst enemy. And as he stood there in his kitchen, waiting for the balky stove to resurrect itself and watching the goldfinch struggle for a few paltry seeds, he could imagine himself plucking out the arrows of self-pity embedded in his chest.

Out the window then Parish noticed this silver-haired old fellow walking up the street. His face was deeply tanned and he had on a sky-blue cardigan to match his blue and white seersucker slacks, a fine outfit for a sunny eighteen holes of golf at La Quinta or Pebble Beach. Anyone could see that he wasn't from Parish's neighborhood of weed gardens and year-round outdoor Christmas lights. No doubt he had a room somewhere downtown, probably at the Marriot or Hilton, and had ridden out on light rail.

The old fellow carried no umbrella and it was cold out, not much above freezing, but he seemed to be in no hurry. He walked with his hands in his pockets, his shoulders hunched forward and turned against the wind-driven rain. Gulls had filled the valley sky yesterday. But now they were gone, having all ridden the crest of a cold front westward, back to the coast. Like some giant semaphore, the big Douglas fir in Parish's front yard was bowing dutifully, making the same lonely east-wind sound it made every winter, a sound of bitterness rooted deep in the heart of the earth.

Renters in a house across the street had a fire going. Sparks flying upward from the chimney broke off sharply to the west, each only to die quickly in the rain.

The old fellow stopped at the rental house and studied the mailbox, then came over to check Parish's. One night last month someone had run a car up over the curb and had knocked down the wood post, flattening Parish's mailbox. He'd put up a new one but hadn't bothered with the name or address. As if awaiting some sort of revelation, the old fellow stood in the rain for a long half-minute or so and stared at the blank mailbox. When at last he let himself in through the gate of Parish's chain-link fence, Parish turned off the stove and stepped into the dining room, so as not to be seen through the kitchen window. As the old fellow came slowly up the walkway he frightened the crippled goldfinch off.

Through a slit in the dining room curtains Parish could see him on the front porch. He took off his glasses and tried to dry them on his sweater. Then he turned and stood, his back to the door, wondering if he shouldn't just cut his losses, Parish imagined, and head back to where he'd come from. Which would've been just fine with Parish, who had on a threadbare white bathrobe that he hadn't washed for months.

Finally the old fellow put his glasses back on. He ran his hands through his soggy hair, patted them on his slacks, and knocked. When it became clear that he planned to knock till

doomsday, Parish switched on a light in the dining room and went to the door.

He was six-one or six-two, seventy or so, trim, and looked as if he took care of himself. He smelled as if he'd dunked his head in a bowl of Mennen Skin Bracer, the same after shave lotion Parish's father had used. Smiling nervously, he said his name was Ernest Lamm. He shook hands a little too firmly but otherwise bore something of an apologetic manner, a quality to assure Parish that he posed no threat, that he had no whales or trees to save, no magazines or salvation to sell. Parish made it a point not to offer his name.

The old fellow was looking for a former acquaintance, a woman named Peggy Haines. He held out a timeworn envelope addressed to Ernest Lamm of Barstow, California. The return address was Parish's but included no name. The handwriting was his mother's. The old fellow's liver-spotted hand shook holding the envelope. Parish had never heard *anyone* call his mother Peggy.

"Haines was my mother's maiden name," Parish said, "but for the forty years I knew her, her last name was Parish. And for those forty years her first name was *Margaret*."

"Margaret." The old fellow winced. "Margaret Parish. Of course. Please forgive me, but you see--" He looked up, shut his eyes, took a breath, then looked at Parish again. "I--ah--I knew your mother a very long time ago." He gave a thoughtful pause and added, "Before she was married," nodding as if to clear himself

of guilt. "I met her in a U.S. Army field hospital in Normandy, in 1944."

Parish knew that his mother had gone to Europe as an Army nurse during the Second World War. But he had no idea where she'd served or what she'd seen. She never talked about the war, other than to acknowledge that she had been there, had wanted to do her part.

A look came over the old fellow's face then and he coughed several times. "Did you say her last name *was*?" he half-whispered.

"Was, yes," Parish said flatly. "She died last spring." Parish suddenly felt good, somehow vindicated. Ernest Lamm was no one he knew or cared to know, just some Palm Desert emissary of nothing come to grace his doorstep.

The old fellow stood staring at Parish, his lower lip quivering. As his sun-bronzed face took on the pallor of an exotic disease, Parish noticed a long jagged scar partially hidden in the scalp of his left temple. The old man tried to make his mouth work, then gave up and made a sign of the cross. Then he put his hands to his face and wept.

This went on for what seemed like an eternity, the old man sobbing into his hands, inhuman keening noises welling up from somewhere deep inside his chest, Parish meanwhile with one eye on the wall clock at the far end of the kitchen. Never in his adult life had Parish cried--a trait to prove that he *was* in fact his father's son--and as he silently watched Ernest Lamm empty

himself out, he couldn't say what he felt most--revulsion, anger, or shock. And he couldn't help questioning both the old fellow's manhood and the strength of his faith. Neither of which was doing much at the moment to buck him up.

Finally, the old man collected himself and took several deep breaths. He'd wept for almost three minutes. "Please forgive me," he said meekly. He held a fist to his mouth for a long moment, waiting for Parish to say something, then asked how Parish's mother had died.

"She went for her morning walk and got run down by a hit-and-run driver, three blocks from here." Not until that morning had Parish begun to curse the day he was born.

"My sweet Lord." The old man looked away and shivered, crossed himself again. Then he turned back to Parish. "I'm terribly sorry."

"Thanks," was all Parish could manage.

"And your father?" asked the old man tentatively.

"Dead seven years."

They stood there awkwardly then, careful not to let their eyes meet, until finally the old man shook his head. "I really shouldn't take any more of your time." He held out his hands, a picture of divine helplessness. "I wish there was something I could do, something I could say."

Parish knew that he should invite him in, maybe make some coffee, give him a chance to dry out a bit, a chance to talk.

In his eyes Parish could see how badly he wanted this. But Parish was afraid that given half a chance Ernest Lamm would begin to tell of how God works in mysterious ways, of how he wounds, only that his hands may heal. And he was afraid that when Ernest Lamm offered to pray for him, he would crack into small, malicious bits.

So Ernest Lamm turned without another word and began to walk through the rain toward the street. When he was about halfway across the yard he stopped and looked back at Parish and smiled. "Your mother was a remarkable woman, son. I hope you appreciated her."

"Yes, she was." Which Parish believed was true enough. But whether or not he had appreciated her was another matter, something he cared not to think about at the time, certainly nothing he planned ever to discuss with a stranger.

So Ernest Lamm made his way on out through the gate and moved unsteadily back down the street, looking smaller and more fragile than before. Parish turned off the dining room light as the old man trudged gracelessly off. The bulb ticked in rhythm to his footfalls as he slipped from sight.

In his living room then Parish sat in his father's old recliner and thought enviously of people he'd known whose parents had died when they were children. He stared out into his backyard at what remained of his mother's garden and greenhouse, her combination birdbath-fountain tipped over and broken, the barren dwarf apple tree his father had planted the year Parish was born. And as he

surveyed the wreckage, he tried to convince himself that he'd dealt with Ernest Lamm in good faith. Wasn't a man's home, after all, his castle, his last sanctuary from grief? What sort of reception had he expected, anyway, having come as he did in ignorance, a stranger unannounced?

But the old man had been gone only a few minutes before Parish managed to clear his thoughts and make sense of him, why he'd come looking for Peggy Haines, a woman he apparently hadn't seen in nearly half a century.

Parish had been thirty-three when his father died. He'd suffered from lymphatic cancer for several years, and in many ways it was a relief to have it done. Through it all Parish's mother had remained a picture of quiet strength. For the funeral she'd refused to wear black, had chosen instead a breezy white cornflower-print shift that spawned indignant looks from a phalanx of in-laws. Parish himself hadn't fully appreciated what it meant to be allotted only one father per lifetime until it was too late.

After the funeral his mother took his arm and they walked aimlessly through the cemetery without speaking. For a long while she wouldn't look at him. But when finally she did she was smiling in a way that seemed to speak more of regret than grief. "I know I shouldn't tell you this," she said, "but I want you to know that your father was not my first love." She cleared her throat, tried to shore up her smile. "And I think no one can ever take the place of your first."

Dumbfounded, Parish could offer only a look of concern.

"But he wouldn't have me," she said, her face drawn now by invisible fingers of bitterness into a shape Parish had never seen before, "because I couldn't put his god on a gold throne and kneel down in his presence." She began to cry and turned away again. "But lord knows I tried," she said quietly. Shading her eyes then from the sun, she stared out across a field of graves expanding and rising above them in the distance. As he stood there beside her, Parish was struck by the notion that someone had spread a huge emerald shroud across the hillside and had used headstones to nail it in place. He'd seen his mother cry only once before, three years ago, on the afternoon of his father's diagnosis.

Because no woman ever lived to make fewer confessions than his mother, Parish understood how difficult it must have been for her to tell him this. But his own life had long since taught him the truth of her words. He knew all there was to know about first love lost and about other people's fickle gods and for the time being he was saving most of his sympathy for himself. He simply agreed with her and they never talked about it again. And then suddenly one picture-perfect spring morning she was dead.

Having remembered this, his mother's graveside revelation, he peeled off his robe and threw on pants and a shirt. But he couldn't remember where he'd left his rain jacket. He wasted almost five minutes running around the house, checking his closets, then gave up and hurried out to look for Ernest Lamm. He got to

the light rail station just as the next inbound train was leaving. Ernest Lamm, of course, was nowhere in sight.

Parish didn't see the crippled goldfinch again until the Sunday morning after Ernest Lamm's visit. As Parish walked out to his newspaper box, a stray cat sauntered proudly out from under the Paradise rose bush with the bird in its mouth. He tried to catch the nameless little beast but it was up and over the fence and gone in an instant. And in a childish way he held Ernest Lamm responsible then, as if somehow the old fellow had managed willfully to bring death to his door, not only for the bird, but for each of his parents, as well.

But whenever Parish blamed him in this way, Ernest Lamm would appear in his mind's eye, soaked, dumbstruck, and weeping, and Parish would come face to face with the knowledge that he had refused to invite him inside. The man stood on his porch and wept over his mother. Why at that moment, Parish would always wonder, couldn't he have been granted nothing more than the memory, the one simple grace that might have eased the old fellow's pain? To this, of course, he never got an answer.

About seven months after Ernest Lamm's visit, a letter came from the old gentleman's sister in Bakersfield. It was curtly worded, addressed simply to Parish. It felt odd, she said, to be writing about such matters to someone she'd never met, someone whose first name, even, she did not know. But her brother had

passed away only recently and his last wish had been that she do this. He'd wanted Parish to know that he was deeply sorry for his intrusion on that afternoon in December. He'd wanted him to know, also, that he had loved his mother but had never told her so. And he'd wanted to say finally that because he had never stopped loving her, he'd chosen to remain single for life.

Not long after he received this letter, Parish began to dream regularly of the children he would never have. There were ten Parish dream children--seven sons and three daughters--each of them happy, healthy, unmarked in the beginning by life. But they brought him no joy, and in time he and his children fell apart. In a time of need late at night they would come to him, and as he turned away from them they would fall upon him with their stony little fists. In his waking hours, meanwhile, he grew wary of all children, any of whom would willingly send an arrow through his heart.

The Hero at Rest

When he answered the phone I couldn't understand him. Naturally, I assumed he'd been drinking. "Dad," I said. "How's everything in Portland?" It was his sixty-seventh birthday, and I hadn't talked to him in eight or nine months. He kept on mumbling, making sounds you'd never under any circumstances hope to hear from your own flesh and blood. It took him a good ten minutes to spell out that he was sober but had lost his dentures. He knew they had to be somewhere around the house. Annoyed to be wasting my time and money on his toothless babble, I told him I'd send him some stewed prunes and hung up.

But hearing him that way got to me, I guess, because one week later, I put in my notice at Houston Steel and in the next two weeks either sold or gave away everything I owned, save what I could stuff into my Bronco. On a chilly gray Saturday morning after my last day at work, I was homeward bound, headed west across

the flat oaky gloom of south-central Texas.

It had been years since I'd had a real vacation, so on the way back I stayed a day or ~~two~~ each in Taos, Sedona, Flagstaff, and Sun Valley. Any one of ~~these~~ clean, friendly little towns, I imagined, would've been a fine place to start a new life. But ten days after I kissed my girlfriend Mary Ann goodbye in Houston, I had my boyhood bedroom back.

Then, for the next couple months, my father and I went on to dance wordless circles around one another. It was just like old times. You would've never guessed we hadn't seen one another in five years. Two of those years I'd spent in Houston, and after only a couple days in cold, soggy Portland, a warm gulf wind and sweet Texas drawl had begun calling back. Alone every evening there with my father in that dank, dusty old cell of a house, I could feel all the old hard places returning, taking root once again in my heart.

One evening last week, though, I was downstairs in what he calls his den, making a half-hearted attempt to interest myself in a Blazers-Rockets game on TV. An odor of plastic glue filled the room and it was making me a little woozy. Torn over who to root for, I kept thinking of Mary Ann and the scent of her Chanel, trying to figure the odds of her being alone tonight. My father was at his workbench across the room, putting together one of his models.

At least a hundred times on the way back from Texas, I told

myself that he no longer had the power to get to me, which was about one time for every model I was to find strewn about the house. He'd built himself a whole arsenal of World War II ships, tanks, airplanes, and the like, each meticulously decaled and hand-painted and pulling him a little deeper down into the quicksand of his wartime past.

What little I knew or cared to know of that past, I'd learned from my mother. At age sixteen my father quit school, then managed to pass himself off as a year older in order to join the Marine Corps. He fought in the Pacific, and after the war was sent to China as part the U.S. military occupation there. He and my mother were high school sweethearts, married when he was on three-day leave following boot camp. She died five years ago, after a lengthy bout with cancer, soon after which he retired and began with his modeling.

These days he seems content just to sit home, building his plastic icons, going out maybe once or twice a week for groceries and beer. Also, he watches golf on TV. He follows both the men's and women's tours and seems to like best the old-timers' events shown on cable every now and then. He never misses a tournament and likes to call the golfers by their first names. For two or three hours at a time he'll sit there in his recliner, glued to the set.

His TV sits next to his empty maple gun cabinet, and as I sat watching basketball that evening, I kept thinking of an

afternoon one summer just before I started sixth grade. For months afterward I'd had bad dreams, awful things in which I held the cross hairs of a rifle scope trained on our little dachshund, Big Woof, my finger squeezing down on the trigger. I'd always blamed my father for letting it happen but had never told him so. Now seemed like as good a time as any. So when the game ended I went over and broke our little code of silence.

He was holding a P-39 fuselage together, waiting for the glue to bond. His frail arms and bony arthritic fingers seemed barely up to the task. He had on the same ratty old glue- and paint-stained flannel shirt and brown work pants he had worn every day since I'd been home. A couple times a week, despite his protests, I'd been running them through the wash overnight. When he'd said he didn't want me wearing them out, I imagined that he was afraid he might not outlive them.

Little ridges and swales on top of his bald head were glistening in the light of his modeling lamp. He glanced at me over the top of his bifocals, smiled, and said in his chalky, half-humorous, half-sarcastic way, "Well now, what brings you to the tenements, Your Grace?"

"I need to pick your brain for a minute, Dad."

"That'll cost you a cold beer."

I shrugged, went upstairs to the refrigerator and got out another can of Olympia. He'd been averaging at least a couple six-packs a day lately but at least he paced himself and never

seemed to be drunk.

His project put aside, he accepted the beer and took several swallows. "So," he said, "pick away."

"All right, then. Do you remember the day we drove over into the desert east of Redmond with Hank Lundy? I was eleven. We took his pickup."

He chewed his lower lip for a long moment, then said, "And we found that old homestead full of abandoned things. Utensils, pictures, all those moth-eaten clothes . . ."

"Right. And on a hillside behind the cabin a prairie dog town?"

He scratched his Adam's apple and gave me a vacant look. "No. Don't recall that."

Lately he'd been forgetting things. One minute he was fine, the next minute he needed directions to the mailbox. There was the fiasco with his dentures, which he never found. Then one morning a couple weeks ago, he locked himself outside and couldn't remember where he'd hidden the spare key. After he walked to a neighbor's and called me at work, he went back and sat on his front porch. It was cold out, mid-twenties, and by the time I got there he'd turned blue and was shaking like a grand mal seizure victim. He scared me that day, cost me two hours in wages, and I'd had to fight the urge to say something hurtful to him. Just like I was having to do now.

"You don't remember shooting prairie dogs?"

"No," he offered, shaking his head, "guess not."

I turned to walk away but he reached up and took hold of my arm. He looked at me sadly, as if he might have a redeeming thought but no way to express it. Finally he said, "Thanks for the beer," and turned back to his model airplane.

"No problem, Dad." I flashed him an exasperated look that he didn't see, then headed upstairs. In need of some fresh air, I got on some long johns and my work boots and went out for a walk.

A storm had moved in that afternoon but had let up in the last hour or so. Five or six inches of light, powdery snow had fallen. Off to the west, searchlight beams were slashing back and forth across the moonlit sky--a grand opening going on somewhere despite the weather. It was very peaceful, with almost no wind and very few people out walking or driving, and it was easy to imagine that some toxic agent in the snow had managed to kill everything. Meanwhile, I walked along old familiar streets, some I hadn't set foot on since I was a child, trying to piece together fragments of a deadly summer afternoon in the central Oregon desert nearly thirty years ago.

What was meant to be a day of target shooting had taken a bad turn when we stumbled onto the prairie dogs. Hank Lundy had insisted we use them for targets, instead. He was fat, foul-mouthed, and constantly smoked filthy cigars he claimed were smuggled in from Cuba. My father worked as a salesman in Hank's household appliance store, and I despised the way he catered to

the big slob.

The slaughter went on for what seemed like hours. What had begun for me as apprehension soon turned to dread. But when I begged my father to stop, he flashed me a nasty look and hissed under his breath for me to shut up. I can still hear Hank Lundy's sadistic laugh, still see the grim look of compliance take control of my father's face. Bullets kept kicking up dust as a crimson blanket of dead animals spread out across the hillside. A trio of hawks circled high overhead while prairie dogs streamed blindly, endlessly up out of their holes, trying to drag what remained of their dead back underground to safety.

It's an odd trick of memory, I guess, that I remember so clearly certain details from that afternoon, but have no recollection of whether I simply watched, or actually took part in the carnage. Next fall I would've been old enough to hunt deer, though, and I believe I wanted to show my father that I had both the skill and stomach for killing. Almost certainly I have prairie dog blood on my hands. But at least I haven't pulled a trigger since that day.

Hunting was a tradition in my father's family, and he'd always simply assumed that I would carry it on. For my twelfth birthday he gave me a shiny new .300 Savage deer rifle. When I told him I would never use it, he sniffed disgustedly and glared at me, then refused to speak to me for a week.

Seven years later, he stopped speaking to me again.

A U.S. marshal had just led me down steps outside the city jail to a van that would take me to the Portland airport. One week ago I'd been sentenced to anywhere from six months to six years in prison for refusing induction into the Army. My father, who hadn't spoken to me for five months, had come to see me off. Standing outside the jail, he looked me in the eye and called me a coward. "From this day forward," he said, "I no longer have a son." He'd refused to accompany my mother during both my arraignment and trial.

Out wandering in the snow that evening, I passed by the three-story Tudor where Billy Jensen's parents still lived. Lights shone inside behind closed curtains. Billy and I had grown up as best friends. Next to the Jensens' house, an apartment complex of several hundred units now stood in what had once been a filbert orchard. Billy, his two brothers, and I had played war there as kids, outfitted with plastic M1 rifles and plastic GI helmets. In the nylon mesh on our helmets we always stuck twigs and filbert leaves, then smeared mud on our faces and went to war.

All through grade and high school Billy and I played basketball together. I was the playmaking guard. He was the scoring machine at forward, a first team all-state selection his Senior year, with a silky base line jumper that had eyes for nothing but the bottom of the net. My father never missed our high school games. And it was always Billy this or Billy that--his points, his rebounds,

Billy Jensen the next John Havlicek and Jerry West rolled into one--my father going on all season long as if he hadn't seen a single thing I'd done.

One afternoon shortly before I was scheduled to go to trial, Billy stopped by the house to say goodbye. He'd been at school down in Corvallis, at OSU, and I hadn't heard from him in four or five months. Because Marcie, his high school girlfriend, had dumped him for a Senior premed student, he'd quit school and enlisted in the Marines.

So while I turned my back on Uncle Sam and went to prison, Billy gave up his basketball scholarship and went to Vietnam. And though the last time I saw him was when he stepped aboard a Trailways bus twenty-one years ago, bound for Camp Pendleton, I was, of course, to see my father again.

One rainy morning two years after I walked in through the front gate at Leavenworth Federal penitentiary in leg irons, chained to a half-dozen other men, he was sitting at the wheel of his Buick beside the sentry box when I walked out through the same gate, set free. My mother hadn't been well enough to travel at the time, so my father had driven nearly two thousand miles, alone, to bring me home. With him waiting, I stood for a long while outside the gate that morning, staring back up at the grand silver dome atop the prison's rotunda and wondering what I would say to him.

I was thinking of an older guard in cellblock D, one who

seemed almost human. After I'd been there for a month or so, I asked him why other inmates spit on me, why inmates and guards called me a baby raper. "CO ain't got balls enough to fight for his country," he said, staring at me flatly, "then he sure ain't got enough to do it with a grown woman."

The gate having just clanked shut behind me, I wanted also to say goodbye properly to the twenty-three and a half hours a day I'd spent, for twenty-two months straight, in a five- by nine-foot isolation cell--almost two full years in the Hole--for refusing to scrub toilets with a toothbrush and to be strip-searched by some cave dweller in a guard's uniform. Hacks, they were called, which is putting it kindly.

The Hole, a two-story brick building, stood in the middle of the west yard. It was an icebox in winter, a sweatbox in summer. In each windowless cell there was only a steel sink and toilet, a mattress on a bed frame bolted to the wall, and an infinity of cockroaches. You could keep with you as many books, cards, and letters as would fit into a small cardboard box. There was no hot water. Two days a week you were given a bowl of lukewarm water and a razor that had been used by fifteen or twenty other inmates. A lone overhead light bulb shone constantly--a hundred watts in daytime dimmed to twenty-five at night. There was never enough light to read, always too much to sleep.

Once a day you were let out for a half-hour of exercise that consisted of walking up and down a dimly lit, fifty-foot corridor

in front of your cell. Always you slept with your head **next** to the toilet, the night hack needing to see your upper body **through** the inspection hole in the cell door. The toilets flushed from outside the cells, and sometimes if the hack was a jerk, **he** would keep your toilet going constantly at all hours of the night. If you turned the other way, feet toward the toilet, the hack would quietly open your cell door and douse you with a bucket of cold water. Even with a decent hack, you were lucky to sleep **for** more than an hour a night.

But I was lucky, I guess, for having spent all but **two** months of my term in solitary. At least I was never beaten up or raped. You could probably say that Pfc. Billy Jensen was not so lucky. Billy, who ran afoul of a Viet Cong mortar in a rice paddy and came home in a pine box.

All these things I wanted to tell my father as we drove out across miles of brown wheat-stubble nothingness. I wanted him to think about what I'd said, and then look me in the eye **and** tell me that he still believed I was a coward. Instead, over **the** next three days, I discovered precisely how vast a silence lies **between** eastern Kansas and the West Coast.

On my trek through the snow that evening, I walked **by** my old grade school and stopped to look in a classroom window. **Everything** seemed so much smaller than I remembered, somehow artificial, too, like an elaborate doll house. I was struck then by the **fact** that

in there I'd been spoon fed so many sugar-coated half-truths about the future. And I wondered just how many times I'd got up from my desk in one of those rooms, placed my right hand over my heart, and pledged my allegiance to a piece of cloth--a red, white, and blue myth.

Having wanted to teach English and coach basketball, I went back to the University of Oregon after prison and earned my B.A. and Secondary Ed. certificate. Halfway through my second year at Centennial High School here in town, some parents discovered my felony conviction, which put an abrupt end to my teaching career. That was eight years after my release. Now I fit and weld steel barges for Zidell Corporation. I've worked in the Alameda and Long Beach shipyards in California, and on steel high-rises in Denver, Phoenix, and Houston. Anymore, I try not to think too often about regret.

Peering in the windows of the school, I began to wonder about what, if anything, my father had come to regret. Though he'd never admitted it, I assumed he felt guilty for not backing my stand against the Vietnam War. Several years ago he'd even gone so far as to hint that he was finally coming to see it, the war, as unjust. But to this day we've never spoken to one another of anything else even remotely connected to my time in prison.

Another of his regrets, I imagined, might have to do with the time I'd seen him leaving the lounge at The Flame, arm in arm with Hank Lundy's secretary, Lydia Green. I was sixteen, a Junior

in high school. Billy and I had skipped school that afternoon and gone to a matinee at the Village Theater, across the street from The Flame. Lydia was ten years younger than my mother--prettier, too--and my father still had his physique and good looks at the time. The initial glint of recognition in his eyes, malicious, like the flash of a knife blade in sunlight, vanished instantly. Then he simply saluted me casually and they drove off. But in the moment before he saw me, he was smiling at Lydia in a way I'd never seen him smile at my mother.

My father and I have never discussed that day. His initial part in the deception, I imagine, was to ignore my having skipped school. Now he avoids all mention of his own grandsons--my eight- and ten-year-old boys, who live with my ex-wife, Sharon, in Florida--avoids all mention of her having caught me with another woman. After our divorce five years ago, wanting only to stay close to my sons, I followed her as she first went south, then started ricocheting east across the U.S. But I gave up finally and stayed put when she shot off again, chasing her latest flame, a Navy flight instructor she'd met while he was in Houston, on leave from Pensacola.

It's been nearly two years now since I've seen my boys. My father hasn't seen them since the divorce.

After I'd trudged around in the snow for a couple of hours, I walked back to the house and looked in on my father. He was

still in the den, sound asleep now in his recliner, so I fixed myself a Scotch and water using the Cutty Sark he saves for special occasions. He's had the same fifth sitting in a kitchen cupboard for probably ten years, and it's still more than half full.

By the time I finished the drink, I was feeling a bit more philosophical about things, and thought I might put on some better clothes and go out for another. I had no clean socks, though, and ended up rummaging through my father's dresser. I'd never gone through his personal effects in any way, but then again, in my eyes, he was no longer the man of the house.

A hand-embroidered motto hangs on his bedroom wall above the dresser. Framed in wood and glass, it stands as the only remaining trace of my mother's presence in the house. It reads: "He is the Silent Listener at Every Conversation," testifying to her private, unshakable Unitarian faith. And as I rifled through my father's things, I couldn't shake the feeling that someone was watching me.

While I never found the socks, underneath some T-shirts I discovered something else--a badly worn, nine-by-twelve black-and-white photo of a group of Marines, a couple hundred in all, standing together at attention in their dress uniforms. They were lined up in three tiers on bleachers in what appeared to be a gym or an armory. Eventually I located my father in the middle of the front row, looking young enough to make my stomach do odd

things. On the back he'd printed:

EASY COMPANY

CAMP PENDLETON, SEPT. 1944

Along with the photo I found a square gold cross, heavy for its size, attached to a blue and white ribbon. Under the medal was a letter of citation signed by the Secretary of the Navy, James Forrestal, stating that my father had earned the Navy Cross for uncommon gallantry during the advance on Iwo Jima's Hill 362-A. And though it asserted that a number of lives had been saved, I didn't know a Navy Cross from a Purple Heart. As far as I knew, anyone who'd shown up for a war sanctioned by the U.S. Government might have one stashed under some skivvies or inside an old shoe. It was difficult, in any event, to picture my father with a medal of any kind pinned over his heart.

After work the following evening, I dug around in the county library and found that only the Congressional Medal of Honor outranks the Navy Cross, and that the odds of your earning one without first being killed are not good. Only thirty-six were awarded during World War II, better than half of those posthumously.

I spent most of that evening and the next, reading about the battle for Iwo Jima. Photos of the island and what went on there would resemble the dark side of the moon--if it were littered with corpses. Of the first five waves of Marine shock troops to land in LST's, over half never made it off the beach. The battle

continued nonstop for more than a month. My father's Fifth-Division Easy Company went ashore in the second wave. It numbered two hundred and thirty men going in, and twenty when it left. The invasion began on February 19, 1945, which would've been only three months after my father's eighteenth birthday.

It's a reasonable bet, I guess, that if the Marines hadn't taken Iwo Jima for an air base, we might never have dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I'd had no idea until now that these bombs had averted an invasion of Japan, a battle U.S. military planners estimated would last at least one full year and involve a million or more American casualties. One of which could well have been my father, whose Fifth Marines, it turns out, were among thirty Divisions training for assaults on Kyushu and Honshu. And who knows how many Japanese, both soldiers and civilians, would have been killed or wounded if the Marines had gone in?

In any case, what had long stood in my eyes as a simple matter of gross inhumanity versus reverence for life, now seemed a whole lot less absolute, a whole lot more ironic. Now, too, I could see my father, the U.S. Marine, not as a grown man--proudly saluting a mushroom-shaped cloud as it rose into the sky--but as a boy thrown into the middle of something too horrific for words, terrified, hoping merely to survive.

I began to wonder then what my boys might think of their grandfather if they knew he'd saved other men's lives. And I decided they would remember him in this way, if I were ever to

have any say in the matter. They'd never need to know about the man who spent twenty-nine years peddling washing machines, the entire time lighting his boss's cigars and laughing dutifully at his obscene jokes, or about the man who helped slaughter a city of prairie dogs one hot summer afternoon nearly thirty years ago.

But I wondered what could've become of the baby-faced sixteen-year-old who'd lied about his age to go to war. How could he have brought himself to curtsy to a pale sham of a human being like Hank Lundy? I wondered how it felt to hit the beach at Iwo Jima, a target, trying to run through a foot-deep bog of soft sand and volcanic ash, and what kind of a life my father expected to come home to if he was lucky and managed to survive. What was it like to care enough about something to be ready and willing die for it? What would he say now if he were asked to speak of freedom?

All these things I wanted to ask him last Sunday afternoon. We were sitting together silently in the den. He was watching TV, a men's golf tournament from somewhere down in Florida. I was watching him out of the corner of my eye, trying not to think too much about my boys. I asked him, instead, if he'd ever played golf.

"No," he said, his eyes still fixed on the TV. "Never even swung a club. Always wanted to try it, though." After a fat guy in rainbow-colored polyester pants sank a long putt, my father

glanced over at me. "What about you?"

"What? Golf, you mean?"

He nodded.

"No. Never. Never really wanted to, either."

"Huh," he muttered, putting the subject to rest.

At that moment I almost flinched, almost told him it was never too late for him to start, but managed to catch myself.

We settled back to watch golf then, neither of us seeming to have anything to say. The course itself was a wonder to behold, with painstakingly manicured fairways and greens, immaculate white sand traps, plenty of palm trees waving in a gentle breeze, and a clay-tiled clubhouse to give the Hearst castle at San Simeon a run for its money, all under a glossy canopy of unbroken blue sky.

The tournament came down to a sudden-death playoff between two men, a tense battle that went on for seven extra holes. In the end there was a great show of sympathy among the crowd and commentators for the loser, a graceful, soft-spoken man named Isao Aoki, who was forced to settle for a second-place check worth a hundred thousand dollars. My father had rooted for Aoki, the underdog.

Shortly thereafter my father dozed off in his recliner, so I got up and took away his half-full can of beer. I set it on the coffee table next to the untouched roast beef sandwich I'd made him for lunch, switched off the TV, then went upstairs to

check on the weather. It had rained steadily for the last three days and it was coming down, still. Last week's snow was long gone now, running down storm drains toward the Pacific. I went back downstairs then, took a seat across from my father, and listened to him snore.

It was quiet in the den, peaceful in a way, and as I sat there I began to wonder if I was wrong never to let my boys own toy guns--a decision that had sparked their tears and accusations on more than several occasions. And it occurred to me that they'd probably ended up getting them after all. For all I knew, they might even have a new and better father by now, one who taught that full magazines, not fairy tales, were the way of the world. A father who'd refuse to let life's hard ironies imprison either himself or the ones he loved.

I reached over and picked up the phone, almost started to dial directory assistance for Pensacola. Knowing I'd end up having to speak to Sharon, though, I set the receiver back in its cradle. I leaned back in my armchair then and just listened to the moments go by.

Occasionally the house would shudder in the south wind, and my father would stop snoring. Then he'd start up again, going on in his muffled, rhythmic way, his new teeth making a little chattering noise at times. After a while he quit snoring and just lay there quietly. Every now and again he would shiver for a second or two, or one of his arms or legs would give a little

start. He shivered then for a longer while, for maybe eight or ten seconds, and shifted slightly to face me at a different angle. And I wondered then if he was dreaming, or if he still could.