1991

Protecting the home

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Protecting the home

by

Paul Stephen Hanstedt

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
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CLAY

There are some comments you spend the rest of your life trying to forget. When I was sixteen my dad gave me mine. I had a forty inch northern on, probably the biggest fish I'd ever seen in my life, and I was kicking myself because I'd been dumb enough to cast a three pound test with no lead. My dad grunted once, then twice, then cleared his throat. He had a thousand different voices floating around inside him, and he could have been an actor or a comedian. Instead he was a small town minister.

He took a sip of brandy laced coffee. "It seems to me," he said, in a drawl much too strong for someone from Minnesota, "It seems to me it ain't you that's got the fish, but the fish that's got you."

Two years later, my dad ran off with the girl who played organ every Sunday, and we never heard from him again. No note, no phone call, we just set the table one evening and he never showed up.

Other than that, my life hasn't been bad. I graduated from Harvard when I was twenty, finished law school at Georgetown two years later, and got out of going to Vietnam because one of my professors had a good friend in the Senate. I met Clare, my wife, three years after that, at an art exhibition in New York. I was actually dating a friend of hers at the time, but Clare and I hit it off well. So well,
in fact, that three months later we marched up the steps of the county courthouse in Buttern, New Hampshire, and exchanged vows in front of the Justice of the Peace, and a red-haired woman named Wendy who sold dough-nuts in the basement cafeteria.

I loved Clare then, and I guess I thought I would always love her. But one morning when we were at the Piggly-Wiggly, I was trying to pick out lettuce when a woman in a pale dress excused herself and reached in front of me.

"No problem," I said. She wasn't particularly good looking, with a round face and dull brown hair that hung down over her eyes, but something about her was comforting and familiar. A few feet away stood a boy in his early teens, wearing high-top sneakers and a heavy metal t-shirt. Their basket was full.

"Isn't there any good lettuce left?"

Clare was wearing an old paint-spattered Vikings t-shirt and a bright yellow scarf that any other time I would have found attractive. That day though, it annoyed me for some reason.

I know it's not supposed to happen like this. I know there's supposed to be some china smashing apocalypse, some gradual dulling of passions, but as my wife turned over the oranges and fingered the grapefruits, I became certain that the last decade of my life had been a waste. There was no
bang, no click. Not even a slow melting that left me tired.
It was broad daylight in a grocery store, cash registers were
ringing, a man in a blue suit bumped my cart, and I didn’t
love my wife in the least. That was three years ago. The
only reason I mention all of this now is because last night
Clare told she knows I’m having an affair, and that I have a
choice: end it or get a divorce. We were at a ritzy Italian
restaurant, supposedly celebrating our fifteenth wedding
anniversary, but when I told her that I needed some time to
think, she started screaming "Son-of-a-bitch!" which kind of
ruined the atmosphere if you know what I mean. For a moment
I actually thought she was going to cry--something I’ve only
seen twice, once six years into our marriage when she had a
miscarriage, and the other time a month later when the fourth
doctor in a row told her she would never have a baby.
Eventually she recovered enough to pour a carafe of
chianti down my suit before storming out. I smiled
reassuringly at the waiters and left a nice tip. Then I
checked into a hotel.

Since I was meeting a new client the next morning, I
asked the receptionist to give me a wake up call at six. At
8:20 the sound of keys in the door dragged me out of a dream
full of three foot walleyes that leapt into the boat, and
dancing girls dressed in gorilla suits. I don’t know who
screamed louder, the tired looking maid when she saw me lying there naked, or me when I found out what time it was.

I stopped at McDonald’s to grab a quick breakfast and read my files as I drove to work. The first one was labeled “W.R. Jackson HOMICIDE I. Underneath was the trial date, 17 September. Jackson owned a bar in northern Minnesota, a low, fake log building up near Earlton, where my father used to take me fishing every summer. He was accused of killing a quarter-breed named Horn, a trouble make who’d been in jail six or seven times just in the last year. The first thing in the folder was a copy of the statement Jackson made to the police. I skimmed it briefly, then moved on. Further down were some laminated newspaper clippings, and two or three grainy reprints. I took a bite of my sandwich and flipped through them. The top one showed a dark haired man with a thin nose. He was wearing a battered cowboy hat with a woven band around the brim and looking off to the left of the camera. The next photograph showed a sheet covering what looked like a body with no head sprawled beneath the splintery steps of a boat house. A couple feet away lay the same cowboy hat, spattered with wet matter. The third photograph showed state’s evidence, a thin filet knife sixteen inches long, with the tip broken off. I put my Egg McMuffin back into its package and shut the folder.
When I got to the office, there was a note from Clare. It said:

If you need another suit, I dumped them all in the Mississippi. Have a nice day.

"A valentine?" Mary, my somewhat senile secretary, was watching me with a faint smile.

"Excuse me?"

"A valentine? Today's the fourteenth. Don't tell me you forgot?"

"Oh," I said dumbly. Clare and I never celebrated Valentine's Day. It was too close to our anniversary. "Is Trevor here yet?"

Mary nodded and wrote something down on a slip of paper. She touched her wrinkled chin with one long finger. "He's in your office with your new client."

Trevor was the newest associate at the firm. He was, and I swear now that I'm telling the truth, the most pure-hearted man on the face of the earth. He dressed in suits that were nine or ten years out of date, and I once spent half an hour in a restaurant trying to convince him that he didn't have to pay me $1.48 for a cup of coffee. You'd never know that he was a Georgetown graduate. After I'd told him about Gayle and all the others he said, "But you're married." As if that explained anything.
When I came into my office he was leaning over a tray of lures my father left behind when he ran off. Next to him was a very tall figure bent over in a light suit, who I assumed was Jackson. I never touch the collection myself--some of them were flies my father had tied using gold hooks he'd gotten from a jeweler; others were floaters made by the Heddon Bait company around 1900, and antique Spiff Spinners and Luny frogs, worth fifty or a hundred bucks a piece--but Trevor had the glass case unlocked and the cover up, and the man in grey had his hand inside, his long back bending like a reed. They both turned when I shut the door.

"Oh, hi," said Trevor when he saw me. "These are interesting. You made some of them, right?"

"My father did," I said a little dumbly. At his full height, Jackson towered well over seven feet. His face was long and horsey and he had small eyes that sunk below a high forehead. He was holding an Arbogast metal croppie, four inches long and painted yellow and silver. It looked tiny between his fingers.

I held out my hand, aware that I was staring. "You must be Mr. Jackson. I’m Henry Fry, it’s a pleasure to meet you."

He put the lure down. His fingers were thin and limp. "Mr. Fry. The pleasure’s mine." His voice was another surprise, a soft, not-quite-British lilt. I wondered for a moment why a north woods bartender sounded like a Dicken’s
character. When he smiled it was like seeing a vulture tell a joke.

"Please, take a seat." I waved towards an arm chair and glanced at Trevor to see if this was for real. His eyes were as blue and innocent as a crayon.

Sitting, Jackson was a wire hanger bent in a dozen different directions. "I think you are aware of my problem." he began with that singsong voice. I reached across my desk and pushed a button on the tape recorder. He looked at me with dry eyes.

"It's for our own use," I reassured him. "For review. Why don't you tell us what happened? From your point of view."

He blinked once, slowly, then again. "It's an extremely unfortunate situation, very regrettable. I'm sure you know the general scenario: a bunch of locals seem to feel that I murdered a gentleman named Scott Horn. They claim Mr. Horn and I argued one evening, and that I threatened his life if he didn't leave my bar." His face became downright saturnine. "Mr. Fry, you must believe me. I'm a very gentle man. I could never do anything like that."

I suppressed a smile at the formal diction, then gave him my agreeable lawyer look. "Did you get in an argument with him?"
He let out a sigh. "Who knows? I'd never met Mr. Horn before. So many faces, so many people coming in and out. Saturday nights are riotous to say the least. On average my bouncers expel twenty to thirty people."

I let him go on for a bit, just listening to what he had to say. It was important just to get a feel for how he talked, the way he expressed himself, how the jury might react. At one point I held up my hand.

"These bouncers," I said, "how many do you have?"

He examined his fingers for a moment. His nails looked almost manicured. "Four, six . . . it depends. As many as eight on a busy night."

"And who are they? Locals?"

His head bobbed. "Mainly. They're part time, most of them."

"They take care of all the problems, you're not involved?"

He nodded again and his scrawny adam's apple rose and fell. "It can get fairly nasty, I'm afraid to say. Often times force is required. In the past I've seen Mr. Horn take on three or four of my men at once. It's not a pleasant sight and . . . "

That caught me off guard. I watched him as he droned on, wondering if he realized that he'd just given himself away. I took out his file again and glanced at it, reading
over the confession, looking for any other inconsistencies. He'd said he never met Horn before, but here he was talking about the use of force. Then again maybe he was just referring to something one of the bouncers had told him. His eyes were clear and dry and he kept his hands calmly in his lap, no nervous gestures. I turned to the photographs again, the cowboy hat, the headless form under the sheets. One of the newspaper articles quoted the coroner as saying that without fingerprint records it would have been impossible to identify the body.

I had a brief image of Clare lying on our kitchen floor nine years ago, her then just graying hair fanned out as her nightgown darkened at the waist with something thicker than blood. I shut the file so suddenly that Trevor and Jackson both looked up.

"Interesting pictures," I said. My mouth felt dry.

Trevor shook his head and Jackson pinched his lips into something that resembled a smug grin. "I'm a gentle man." He repeated. "This is all very upsetting."

I stared at him, his thin neck, his drawn face. He looked back at me, his dark eyes narrow. The metal buttons on his suit glimmered slightly in the light from the window. I thought again about the cowboy hat, the dark stains. I decided that I didn't like Mr. Jackson very much.

* * *

* * *
When he left I told Trevor I needed to run a few errands, and instructed Mary that if anyone called I would be back the next morning. Gayle was just lowering the garage door when I arrived. She was still in her costume, her body covered from the neck down in neon pink fur. Around her waist was a blue tutu.

"I didn't realize you had a party today," I said as she padded up the front steps to the porch. She kissed me and dug through her bag for her keys.

"A little boy named Alex. He just turned three and my God, he was cute! I'll tell you all about it when we get inside. First I have to pee like crazy."

Her bungalow was a small wasteland of broken and unfinished pottery. Dry looking clay was everywhere, on the mantle, the couch, the dusty television set, every flat surface. In the middle of the living room stood a huge pedal driven wheel with a worn canvas seat. Next to it was a garbage can lined with plastic. I tossed my jacket over an unglazed water jug. It was the first time in eight months that I wouldn't have to worry about explaining clay dust on my clothing.

There was a flush and then Gayle came padding down the hall in her gorilla feet. Her costume was loose now, hanging off of one shoulder. Strands of red hair fell over her pale freckled skin. "There was one girl there who kept following
me around, saying, "Only you can prevent forest fires!" She
smiled and put her mask on, striking a Marilyn Monroe pose.
"Now tell me: do I look like Smokey the Bear to you?" Her
voice was muffled.

I pantomimed a scratch on the head. "Gosh, I’m not
sure. Not really, I guess. Something about the hot pink."
She laughed and took the headpiece off again. "Anyways,
they gave me a fifty dollar tip, so what the heck?" She
stopped abruptly and looked at me. Then she took a step
closer. "What’s wrong?"

I reached out and touched her shoulder and came forward
and hugged me, her head against my chest. I’ve been with a
lot of women in the last couple years, but Gayle always
seemed different to me. She smelled like clay. I fingered
the rough fur of her costume.

"How did she find out?" she whispered.

"I don’t know. Maybe she had someone follow me, maybe
someone told her, maybe she listened in on the phone. I just
don’t know."

She pulled back a bit and looked up at me. Her eyes
were dark green, the same color as pine trees. The first
time I ever saw her she was standing in line at the post
office, wearing a sun dress that tied around her neck. I’d
had to fight the urge to kiss her shoulders.

"Are you okay?" she asked.
I nodded. We were both quiet for a while. It felt nice just to hold her. "So what happens now?" I said finally.

She turned around and stepped out of her costume. Beneath, she was wearing a pair of grey shorts and a dark blue t-shirt. She looked wonderful. "I think," she said and took out a special hanger for the gorilla suit—"as far as I knew it was the only piece of clothing she ever hung up—"that you should go and make some tea while I set up the wheel. Then we're going to sit and I'm going to throw some pots and we're both going to talk, okay?"

So that's what we did. She pedaled and pedaled and talked about the party, about the food they had, the things the kids said. I listened and watched her long fingers trail through the clay. Gayle never said much about her own childhood, but the few times she's mentioned it she's ended up crying and whispering about foster homes and a mother with so many lovers she couldn't even remember her own daughter's name. Unlike Clare, who is an art teacher and who seems to see painting as a means to an end, Gayle makes pots and just leaves it at that. I've sat and watched her make pots for hours, one after another rising up out of lumps of clay. I don't think she's ever sold anything, or even tried for that matter. That isn't what she does it for. Sometimes when I come over I spend hours going through her bills and her
accounts, trying to figure out how she can pay for things and still have money for food.

Eventually it began to grow dim in the room and I got up to turn on the lights and put the kettle back on. The muscles in my back felt warm and relaxed for the first time all day. "You're not making another vase?" I said when I got back.

She smiled and kept pumping. The phone rang.
"I'll get that." I put the tea pot down.
"Leave it."
"I'll get it."
"Just leave it."
"It could be the shop, a customer wanting you to dress up as Pogo the pink orangutan." I paused by the kitchen door.

"It's a gorilla." She slid off the seat. "Besides, I can answer my own calls." She pinched my butt as she picked up the receiver. "Hello?" She looked at the floor, then up at me. "Yes, hold on one second."

Clare's voice was clear and strong, her teaching voice.
"So how was it?"
"How did you get this number?"
"Don't try to change the subject, Henry. How was she? Does she do things that I wouldn't do?"
"Clare, what are you talking about?" That drowsy feeling I'd had just only moments ago was gone now. The muscles in my neck tightened.

"I hear she's a potter, is that true? Is she someone I know, like Christine?" Christine was a dark haired prima donna from the East coast who did drippy water colors of flowers and summer lakes. When she came to visit, she and Clare talked in the living room while I poured drinks. After dinner I drove her back to her hotel, hyper-aware of her hand resting only inches from my knee. Once we got to her room we drank two glasses of champagne and had sex on the bathroom floor.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I muttered now. I moved to the far end of the kitchen, away from the door.

"You know, your signals are getting a little mixed, what with the flowers and everything. I almost expected you to come home tonight, all sad and apologetic. I should have known better."

"Flowers?" I said before I could catch myself. Then I remembered Mary and the valentines discussion. It would figure that after ten years of working for me she would be able to fake my signature.

There was a sharp pause on the other end. Then: "Well I guess it all makes sense after all. It doesn't matter, I
guess, but I would have loved slamming the door in your face."

"Listen Clare, I’m sorry. I really am. I’m a little confused right now and I’d like some time to - "

There was a snort. I wondered suddenly if she was drunk. "A little confused? That’s a laugh. Henry, come on. If you need some time to figure things out, then why don’t you come home where you belong? Or even go to a hotel or something, but staying - "

Blood rushed to my temples. "Look," I snapped. "Is there some purpose for this phone call or are you just trying to harass me?"

"Purpose? Henry, do I need a purpose? Can’t I just call to say hello? To say I love you? I mean, I’m your wife, aren’t I?" Her voice was tight with sarcasm.

I bit my lip. I felt like something had been taken away from me, some secret hiding place.

"Henry?" she said after a pause. Her tone acquired an almost frantic edge. "Henry, don’t get quiet on me."

I sighed. I could feel the blood pounding in my head. My face tingled. "Clare, I just need some time to figure it out. None of this is easy."

Her words came out in a rush: "I’ve been thinking about going to Bermuda, just the two of us. Wouldn’t that be nice?"
Sitting on a beach somewhere, the sand all warm and soft beneath us, a pitcher of Sangria, the salt water . . . ."

"Clare . . ." I stopped. Once when we were in Pamplona during the running of the bulls, there was a man hopping around a cafe with a gigantic yellow and orange foam-rubber hammer, knocking everybody on the head. No one even bothered to look up. I'd felt then like I felt now: something was curiously wrong, and nobody seemed to be noticing. I tried again. "Clare, I just need some time."

"You shit!" she hissed.

"Clare, please . . ."

"Get out of my life, you hear me? God damn you!" Then the line went dead.

I stood there for a long time, holding the phone, listening to the stillness. Gayle was in the front room, but she wasn't throwing pots anymore. Occasionally I could hear a rustling sound, like the pages of a magazine being turned, but other than that it was quiet.

I was tempted to go to her and tell her I loved her, ignore everything but her red hair and her clay smell, but I knew it would only be hiding. Who was I kidding? I had a wife, responsibilities. Love is a joke, right? Something that dies after twelve years just because you see a woman with a son in the fruit section of a grocery store and you know that you'll never have one? I stood by the phone,
thinking about this, until the refrigerator started to hum quietly. Then I went and told Gayle that I had some errands to run.

Jackson was wearing sweat pants and a pink oxford when he opened the door, looking out of sync with himself, like a cardinal caught out of his vestments.

"Mr. Fry!" He flashed that vulture's grin and opened the door wide. "Come in! A pleasure to see you!"

His hotel room was small, the usual gold bedspreads and bolted down furniture. The t.v. was on and the dresser was lined with a dozen single serving liqueurs, the miniature kind that they give you on airplanes. His expensive grey suit was laid out carefully on one bed.

He gestured toward a seat and ducked as he shut the door. "Would you like a drink? I was just watching the Timberwolves' game. A wonderful thing, basketball. I wouldn't have minded playing myself if it didn't require so much damn coordination!" His laugh was high-pitched and dry.

"What can I do for you?" he asked when he'd handed me a Bailey's and sat down. His sweat pants only stretched to just below his knees. His calves were thin and almost hairless.
I wished I'd brought my briefcase so that I could at least pretend this was an official visit. "I hope you don't mind me stopping by - "

"No, not at all!" he interrupted with that broad smile. It suddenly occurred to me that he might be a very lonely man. As tall as he was, very few people probably viewed him as anything more than a freak.

"I just have a couple questions," I began again. "For business." He bobbed his head and looked at me squarely. I didn't even have a notebook with me. In the corner the t.v. blared and I glanced over my shoulder.

"I'll get that," he said, and in two strides he was over there. Two more brought him back and he folded himself into the low armchair again. He took a sip of his drink and the ice-cubes popped. "Now what was it you wanted to inquire about?"

Once again his phrasing caught my attention. "Your accent," I began, "that's a strange thing. It would help if I could explain it to the jury somehow or other."

He wrinkled his forehead for a moment and studied his fingernails. When he looked up again his eyes were very serious. "That's not what you really came to find out, right?" I shook my head. He looked back down at his hand and went on. "But I'll tell you anyway: Cambridge, class of '68. I met my first wife there."
"You were married?" I barely kept the surprise out of my voice.

He grinned and I fought the urge to flinch. "Sounds strange, doesn’t it? The British, for all their faults, are a little less influenced by superficial appearances than we Americans."

"What happened to the marriage? Forgive me for being so personal."

"Not at all." He downed his drink with one quick motion. His adam’s apple bounced. "My father died and left me the bar and restaurant. I had no other real means of making a living, so Audra quit her teaching job and we both came back. After two years of pickup trucks, bar fights, rednecks in flannel shirts breaking the furniture, she decided her feelings for me weren’t as strong as she’d thought they were. She went back."

"I’m sorry." I really was.

He shrugged. "Now tell me what you really came here for."

I tried not to show that I was off balance. After all, who would trust a lawyer who couldn’t keep his own life in order, much less that of his clients? I sipped my drink, crossed my legs and sunk lower in my chair, a relaxed man having a good time. Jackson’s eye brows knit together over his thin nose. His fingers rested on the arms of his chair.
"Mr. Jackson," I said finally. I stopped and took a deep breath. "How could you do that?"

He watched me for a long time. In the hallway outside his door someone passed by with a rattling service cart. Then he nodded calmly. "You realize that if you break my trust you'll be unbarred."

"I won't break your trust." I felt numb inside. In the eleven years that I'd been a lawyer I'd never asked a client that question before. I'd never felt the need.

He got up and went over to the dresser where he dropped three fresh ice-cubes into his glass. Above the band of his too small sweat pants I could see the label on his shorts. Fruit of the Loom. It seemed strange to think that a seven foot tall man who had been educated at Cambridge and who had crushed a person's skull with an iron pipe could wear such ordinary underwear. He finished mixing his drink and returned to his seat.

"It would be no surprise to someone as perceptive as yourself, I'm sure, that life for a person like me would not be easy. I'm not saying that over-all things haven't gone reasonably well--extremely well, in fact--it's just that there are those moments when it occurs to you as though for the first time that you will never be on the inside of things. You will never have what others have, or be like others are. Sometimes you can deal with it. Other times you can't.
Generally you dislike being reminded." His voice was gentle. He used a finger to stir his ice cubes, then licked it like a ten year old. "That night, Scott Horn made it a point to remind me. Several times in fact."

He didn’t go on. "That’s it?" I said after a moment. He bobbed his head. I struggled to keep the incredulity out of my voice. "You killed a man because he made fun of you for being tall?"

"Are you disappointed?"

"No, I - " I tried to recover my thoughts, tried to remember what I’d been looking for. "I just expected some - some other . . . ."

"Some other reason. Some real reason." He sighed and mournfully stroked the side of his chair. "It doesn’t always happen like that, I’m afraid. Things just accumulate."

I put down my drink and stood up. My legs felt weak. I couldn’t stand the calmness of his voice. "I should go."

"Home?" He rose out of his chair and towered over me. His head was silhouetted against the ceiling fixture.

"Excuse me?"

In a shadow his face grimaced and he waved his hand. "That was rude of me: I’m afraid your associate is a bit too open. He told me you were having a family crisis of sorts."

Which explained how Clare found out about Gayle. I felt my face go red and I turned to put on my jacket. Leave it to
Trevor to slip with something like that. It irritated me that Jackson knew. "I'm going," I said again. He ducked his head foreword, like he hadn't heard. I didn't repeat myself.

At the door he held onto my hand. "I'm sorry if I disappointed you."

"No disappointment," I stammered.

"I do regret it, if that helps." His small eyes were sincere. We could have been talking about selling a used car.

I tried to smile assuredly. "I just needed to know. It'll help - with the case and everything."

He nodded agreeably--too agreeably--and said goodbye.

I drove north first, up towards my home in Mahtomedi, then turned south back towards St. Paul. I hadn't had anything to eat all day so I stopped at a Hardee's in Maplewood and ordered an ice cream cone. It tasted flat and sugary. I threw it away when I was only half finished. Then I drove around some more, turning on the radio, switching stations, turning it off. At about two in the morning I left my car at the end of Gayle's block and walked up to her house. Her front porch light was on, but everything else was dark like she'd gone to bed. I stood under a birch tree in her neighbor's yard and watched the windows, hoping for some sign, some movement that would tell me to come in, give me an
excuse. I wondered if Clare was still up, waiting for something to happen, wondering why I was gone.

I stood there for a long time, water dripping down off the trees around me. It was an unusually warm February, and the ground was wet, with a thin fog crawling beneath the street lights. When I was a kid my dad and I used to get up early in the morning once or twice every summer and take a canoe out on the Mississippi. He would wear his green cap, and his hands would be chapped from reaching into the bait bucket for minnows. Sometimes the mist would come down from the hills and settle just off the water, sheltering us in a bright cave of soft white light. There'd be days where we'd sit there for hours, casting and reeling in, casting and reeling in, never catching much but never really feeling like it mattered. Nothing would ever change. The coffee was hot and dark coming out of the thermos, laced with brandy.

Finally my feet begin to grow numb. The ground is wet and soggy and all I am wearing is a pair of old penny-loafers. I put my hands in my pockets and walk across the dead grass and up the steps of the porch. I rap my knuckles on the on the metal storm door, softly. For a while there is nothing, then a light goes on in the bedroom and Gayle appears, her hair pulled back, ginger strands falling out over her forehead. She unlocks the door and in the half-
light I can't read her expression. She's got her robe pulled tight around her.

"I'm sorry," I say as I come in. My voice is dry and low and it cracks.

"It's all right," she murmurs back. She shuts the door again and locks it, then turns off the porch light. In the dark her body is a thin shadowy vase. I wonder if it will ever end. I wonder if I will ever be all right.
Not that Frank Bell didn't remember his ideals on occasion. For instance, one warm day in June when three men in dark suits came into his bank, looking more like CIA agents than the glorified accountants they really were.

"Francis Kane, Federal Regulation Service," said the one in the middle. He checked his wristwatch and surveyed Frank's office quickly. "We'd like to speak with an employee of yours named Raymond Kelly. Is he in today?"

His fingertips sweaty and a migraine starting to rise up in his head, Frank buzzed his secretary and asked him to page Kelly. Frank and Ray sometimes played raquetball, and on occasion they'd get together, along with their wives, and go to Ricky's or one of the other fancy restaurants in Uptown. They'd even collaborated on some investment work.

Ray was smiling when he came in. Then he noticed the three goons. "Frank, what's -"

"Are you Raymond Kelly? Francis Kane, Federal Regulator's. Would you place your hands in front of you please? You have the right to remain silent . . . "

Ray had time to throw Frank one startled, pale look and say, "Call Carol, will you?" before they led him handcuffed out into the now staring lobby. Frank looked up the number
and jotted it down for his secretary, then took off early to
go see his lawyer.

When he finally got home that evening he felt calmer,
although not much. June was his favorite month of the year,
even when it was hot like this. The sky was a bright clear
blue fading into a rich yellow in the west, and the elms over
the garage were so dark and green that you felt cooler just
looking at them. As he got his brief case out of the trunk
he paused. The automatic sprinklers whirred quietly. The
muscles in his neck and shoulders began to relax somewhat.
This was nice. When he was growing up, their house had been
right next to an off-ramp from the highway and the dull grind
of diesel engines and braking tires served as a background
music for all his childhood memories. It had taken him a lot
of years and a lot of wrangling before he could get out to
the suburbs.

His younger daughter, Daisy, met him at the door.

"Hi, Daddy! How are you?"

He stopped on the porch and looked at her with a wary
smile. "Fine, petal-head. How are you?" When she said good
and kept smiling, he became suspicious. She hated that
nickname. Then she took his coat and offered to run for some
lemonade, and he knew for certain something was up. He
settled into the old la-Z-boy by the window and pretended to
flip through the sports section.
"Guess what?" she said when she came back with the lemonade. The ice rattled in the cool glass.

"What?"

She shrugged and began to drift casually around the room, stopping to touch the flowers that Beth had brought in from the garden, letting her fingers flutter just above the delicate Hummel shepherd she knew she wasn't supposed to pick up. She stopped at the aquarium and tapped on the glass.

"Honey - " Frank stopped himself. His migraine was starting to kick in again. He tried to calm down. "You'll scare the fish," he finished weakly.

She bit her lip and pulled an apologetic face. "Scott Sheffard's got a B.B. rifle."

"Oh really?" He waited for her to go on. When she didn't he asked, "Is it a nice one?"

She nodded and placed her hand flat against the glass. "He got it for his birthday." The pale light from the aquarium flickered off her cheeks. A silver and black angel fish swam around the air pump. "I'm not tapping it, see? I'm just putting my hand here."

"I see." She turned nine in less than two weeks. He wondered where his wife was. Already Daisy had learned to divide and conquer. Together Frank and Beth usually provided a unified front, but get them apart and Daisy knew she had a
chance. He suddenly wished he'd scheduled his vacation a month earlier.

"I sure would like one of those rifles," Daisy said and tapped the glass again.

He changed into shorts and a t-shirt and went downstairs. Beth was moving furiously around the kitchen, her hair in a loose sweaty bun, her hands dripping in front of her as she moved from the sink to the refrigerator and back to the sink again.

"Broccoli or asparagus, what do you think? Hope is bringing Chuck over tonight." She unrolled a package of meat and Frank stopped in his tracks.

"Porkchops! What's going on here?" Beth didn't like supporting people who raised animals just to make a buck.

"I told you, Hope invited Chuck over for dinner tonight. What do you think, asparagus or broccoli? I suppose we could have both."

Frank bent at the waist and concentrated on his back muscles. "Has Daisy talked to you about this B.B. gun thing?" He stood up and did a knee bend. His joints cracked.

Beth held a porkchop under a stream of running water. She rolled her eyes. "I should have figured she'd ask you
about that. I told her specifically if she asked me one more
time I'd throttle her, if that’s what you mean. She’s been
bothering me about it all day."

"So what's the problem?"

Beth dropped the chop on the counter with a wet slap! She began on another. "Things are bad enough in this world without teaching a nine-year-old girl how to shoot a gun."

"That's a little sexist, don't you think?" Frank teased. "Things are bad enough in this world without teaching little boys how to use a gun either. You're not going to go play basketball, are you?"

"I was, actually."

Her blue eyes searched his face carefully. "Bad day at work?"

"Sort of." He moved close enough to his wife so that he could smell her. When she was harried like this she had a warm, electric scent. The way he felt now he would have liked to curl up with her on their bed, just for a few moments. He did another deep knee bend.

"You better hurry." Slap! "Chuck will be here at seven."

"Who's Chuck?"

"Oh, Frank!" Beth laughed. "I cannot believe you! Chuck is Hope's boyfriend; she's been dating him since the prom."
Frank probed his memory for an image. Had they met before? When was prom? A brief parade of peach-fuzzed young men marched through his head. He took a guess. "The guy with the puffy hair? The earring guy?"

Beth turned off the faucet. "You're unbelievable. That was Kurt. He was a skier, remember? That was nearly a year ago."

"She has a new boyfriend?" He felt embarrassed asking, but he really couldn't remember. "Have I met him?"

"No, you haven't met him. But Hope was all upset because she was afraid no one would ask her to the prom, remember? Then she met Chuck downtown somewhere and the two of them went together. Where have you been? Oh come on, I know I have a broiling pan here somewhere." Beth rattled around in one of the lower cupboards before finally emerging victoriously.

"I don't know where I've been," said Frank, and he really didn't. This was not a good day. "It's beyond me why Hope would be so intent on getting a new boyfriend now. She leaves for Harvard in two months." He put his hand on the door to the garage, then hesitated. "Oh, by the way, some federal agents came in today and arrested Ray."

Beth stopped, the broiler in mid-air. Her mouth was open. "Oh my God. What happened?"
"They think he's been making some illegal investments, using customer funds, real estate, that sort of thing." Frank tried to keep his voice neutral. The last thing he needed was Beth getting upset.

She put the pan down and leaned back against the counter with one hand over her mouth. Her fingers, a little red from the cold water, were beautiful and thin, strong. "Do you think he was? Doing that, I mean?"

"I don't know. There's a fine line I guess, what's legal and what isn't."

Beth dropped the chops one by one onto the pan. Frank again felt that urge to curl up in a dark room with his wife. Instead he opened the back door.

"I wish you hadn't told me that," she said. "Hope is worried about Chuck meeting us, and now I'm going to be distracted."

He shot baskets for an hour, working up a good hard sweat, trying to tire himself out, calm his frayed nerves. He almost expected a plain looking car to pull up at the end of the drive, and three men in dark suits to get out and start walking toward him. When he came in it was almost seven and he didn't have time to shower. It was just as well. He'd been right at least in part: Chuck did have dark
puffy hair, and a small diamond stud twinkled in his left ear.

Frank made an effort to be friendly. "So, what are your plans after high school, Chuck?"

"Well," said Chuck and Hope shifted slightly in her seat. She was the kind of girl people called "attractive," and sometimes Frank wondered if they shouldn't have encouraged her to spend less time studying and more time doing social things--horseback riding or ballet maybe.

"Chuck just got back from the Brahmaputra," she interrupted her boyfriend. "In India."

"The what?" Daisy said shrilly.

"Daisy, there's no need to yell." Beth's voice was even. Frank took a bite of porkchop. The meat was too salty.

"He was tour guide." Hope's eyes were a little wild. She sprinted on. "He used to lead raft tours, didn't you, Chuck?"

Chuck bobbed his head, chewing steadily. He swallowed. "These are great porkchops, Mrs. Bell. Nice and salty." His earring sparkled.

Beth smiled, and anyone who hadn't been married to her for twenty years would have thought she was pleased. She put some peas on Daisy's plate. "So Chuck, what are you doing since you got back to the States?"
"I'm working down at Custard Street Shell, actually, as a mechanic. I do oil changes and -"

"You'd be surprised how much money they make, really," Hope said. She tugged on a strand of blond hair. "And he's going to enroll in the G.E.D. course next fall, aren't you Chuck?"

"The G.E.D?" echoed Frank. He wondered briefly if there were going to be any more wonderful surprises today, perhaps an avalanche or a flood, maybe an airplane landing on their garage. He decided he'd better give Ray Kelly a call after dinner.

"It's my birthday in thirteen days," Daisy cut in. "Guess how old I'm going to be."

"Actually," said Chuck, "I know it sounds kind of strange, but I really enjoy working on cars. It's kind of soothing, taking things apart, putting things back together again." He smiled briefly in Frank's direction, then stared down at his fork. "I know it sounds kind of strange," he repeated.

Frank made another effort to be agreeable. "No, that's interesting. Kind of like Pirsig, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, right?" He tried to catch his wife's eye.

Chuck's face was puzzled. "Pirsig?"
"You might go on to tech school, right Chuck?" Hope smiled desperately. "Or maybe even college."

"Last year, we went to Ponderosa for my birthday. For dessert I had strawberries this big," Daisy made a circle with her hands roughly the size of a grapefruit. "When we got home I barfed." The table was silent. "A lot too, all over the bathroom."

"Jesus," muttered Frank. He had the sense he was trapped in a bad episode of The Brady Bunch: chaos erupts in the Brady home, and Jim, fresh from a day at the office, takes it all in stride with a smile.

"Daisy, not at the table." Beth's voice was taut.

"Well what am I supposed to say?"

"Nothing," said Hope.

"I don't care," Beth groaned. Frank could tell she was about to erupt. "But you know better than to talk like that."

"So how old did you say you were again, Chuck?" Frank interjected, not solely because he wanted to change the subject.

"Twenty-five."

"I'm going to get a B.B. rifle for my birthday."

"That's it!" Beth stood up with her plate. She reached across the table and started picking up silverware. "Supper is over."
Later, when they had a moment alone, Frank led Beth up to their room and turned off the lights. For awhile they just stayed there, curled up together on top of the bed. He listened to his wife's breathing, trying to match it so that their bodies moved ever so slightly together. Just as he was about to fall asleep, she sat up suddenly and flipped on the lights. Her hair was tousled and her eyes were dark.

"What do you think about this?"

"About what?" Frank asked.

"This . . . this Chuck thing. What do you think?"

"I - "

"We weren't like that, were we?" Beth stood up and paced around the room. She paused in front of the mirror and smoothed a few loose locks behind her ear. "I mean, 'it's kind of strange, but I really enjoy working on cars. It's soothing.'" She mimicked Chuck's voice.

"You might want to be careful, honey. I think they're on the porch." Frank moved off the bed and shut the front window. Outside, yellow lights poked through the dark neighborhood.

"An auto-mechanic." She unbuttoned her jeans, pulling the denim down fiercely over her hips. She was wearing a pair of pink cotton underwear. "It's not like Hope's a smart
girl, not like she's a Merit scholar or anything. I can't believe this. Why him?"

"I suppose she finds him interesting." A dark fleet of worst-case scenarios floated through Frank's mind.

"And twenty-five! Can you believe it? Most of the boys in her own class seem too old for her." Beth was sitting on the bed now, pulling her shirt off. Her breasts, though a bit tired after nursing two children, still retained most of the shape they'd had in college. Frank calculated, briefly, how long it would be before the two of them could crawl safely into bed without having to worry about being interrupted. "Frank, do you remember the things we used to do when we were twenty-five?"

He smiled: once while still dating, he and Beth had spent a week at his parents' house over the holidays. Unable to control themselves, they'd finally taken the car and driven out into the country for a "quickie." A few days later his mother--a narrow, sincere Lutheran--had come into the kitchen while Beth was out and asked Frank if he was "living sinfully."

"What do you mean?" He looked down at the unopened accounting book in front of him. He and Beth had been smoking and drinking coffee, talking about whether or not Nixon would consider himself to be a dictator.
His mother sat down in the chair next to him and put her nervous hands in her lap. Her hair was just beginning to turn gray, and she looked as though she hadn't been sleeping well. "I don't know, I'm just -" She shifted her thin shoulders back and looked at him earnestly. "Would you marry her? Do you love her?"

Frank rolled his eyes and let his hands drop onto the table with a slap. "Mom, what are you talking about? I've only known her for a few months. Beth and I enjoy each other's company, but it's a little too early to -" and then Beth had come in and he'd let it slide. The rest of the week he was very careful not to be in the same room alone with his mother. He and Beth had eventually gotten married, and it wasn't until after their second year together, when Beth was carrying Hope, that Frank found out his older sister had gotten pregnant in high school--when he'd been only four--and that his parents had paid for her to go away to a special home in Kansas.

Beth sat down and began to wipe cream on her face, the same thing she'd done every night for the last twenty years. "I don't know, Frank, I think you should mention it to her tomorrow. Maybe even right now. She's only seventeen."

"Have you talked to Daisy?" he asked.
"I told her no on the B.B. gun thing, but you might want to go see her as well. I get the feeling she thinks I'm just being a Mom."

It was getting darker now. In the window he could see his own reflection. He didn't look bad really, considering his age, but his hair was thin and his eyes looked watery.

"Frank?"

He started, realizing that his wife had asked him a question. "I'm sorry, what was that?"

"Maybe you should go talk to Daisy now. The sooner she gets this idea out of her head, the better, don't you think?"

He hesitated. "Yeah, I guess." He paused at the door and looked back at her. From where he was he could see the pale freckles on one bare shoulder moving in a circular motion as his wife rubbed the gel off her face.

Daisy was already lying in bed, the spread pulled up to her armpits. Frank had the eerie sensation that she had known he was coming.

"So how's my Daisy, Queen of the Wildflowers?" He sat down next to her and straightened the covers even though they didn't need it.

"Okay," she said, but didn't smile. "You're not going to let me have the rifle either, are you?"
He shifted. "No honey, I'm afraid I'm not."

For an instant he expected her to cry—in a sense he almost wanted her too—but she just looked at the ceiling and blinked. When her eyes came back to his face she looked more genuinely angry than he'd ever seen her before. "It's because I'm a girl, isn't it?"

Frank shook his head. "No, it's not because you're a girl."

"Then why is it? Don't you think we should have gun to protect the house from burglars?"

He remembered once when they'd gone camping while the girls were still young. In the woods not far from their site he'd stumbled across the fly-covered carcass of a calf that had gotten lost. He went back to the tent and told his wife, and the two of them, afraid that Daisy would find the corpse herself and get scared, led her out there, explaining along the way how nature worked in cycles, how some things died and then made it so that other things could live. They'd expected her to be curious, to have some questions, maybe even to be a little scared, but they hadn't expected her to bawl the way she did when she saw the remains, and they certainly weren't prepared for the nightmares she had for weeks after.

He tugged the covers again. "There are just some things that people shouldn't have to deal with until they're older."
A gun is one of them. Your mother and I think it would be better if you learned how to play with other things now instead."

Her eyes softened as she tried to figure it out. He bent down and kissed her lightly on the forehead, brushing his lips against her dry skin. She smelled like bubble bath. "If you want," he told her, "we'll talk about it more in the morning, okay?"

She nodded, scrutinizing him carefully. He waited until she kissed his cheek, then moved away from the bed, feeling dented and tarnished. He felt her watching him all the way out of the room.

In his study he shut the door quietly, then went over to the phone. Carol answered after half a dozen rings. She sounded perfectly normal

"Hi, Carol. This is Frank Bell, from the bank. Is Ray around?"

There was a pause, then, "Sure, Frank." Her voice sounded a notch more distant.

He glanced around the room while he waited. He liked being in here. It was one of the reasons he and Beth decided to buy this particular place. The study smelled of dark wood
and it always seemed ten degrees cooler than the rest of the house. This house.

There was a click and Ray said, "Hello, Frank," and then another click, and Frank knew that the manager had sought a more private extension. "How are you?"

It seemed like a funny thing for a man who had been arrested to be asking. "I'm fine," said Frank. "What about you? Is everything okay?"

There was a sound like a sigh. "I'm still alive, I guess. It looks pretty bad though. My lawyer said I really shouldn't talk about it."

"Yeah, I know. That makes sense." Frank rubbed his face nervously. From his desk a picture of his family stared up at him, taken two years ago at Rocky Mountain National Park. "I'm sorry about all of this."

"Yeah, well . . ." Ray didn't go on. The two of them were silent for a bit. In Frank's photograph, his wife and two daughters posed high above a panorama of grey foothills and dark pine. The wind was blowing Beth's hair across her smile. The sky was blue.

"Did they - ?" Frank let the question hang.

"No," Ray answered. "They didn't ask. I think it's just me they want."

"Oh." Frank tried to keep from sighing in relief. The muscles in his chest relaxed for the first time all day.
"Listen," Ray's voice was drained. "I should go, all right? Thanks for calling."

"Sure. Let me know what happens."

In the darkened living room he paused by the picture window. Frank could see his daughter and Chuck out front, sitting on the huge porch swing, silhouetted against the pale brush of the street lights. They kissed once, then twice. He moved softly over the carpet toward the front door.

There was silence for a moment, then Chuck said something that Frank couldn't make out. They kissed again, and Hope spoke, her voice sounding so gentle that Frank almost didn't recognize it: "I am too."

He stood still, wondering if he should go and interrupt, and then he heard his daughter say, "I love you," and Chuck reply, "I love you too." The words were simple and foolish, Frank knew--coming from two people who were completely ignorant of how the world really was--but something in his daughter's voice stopped his breath. He thought about his wife lying up in their room watching the evening news, about his youngest daughter curled up between Winnie the Pooh sheets. He thought about Ray Kelly, and his own parents and the family they had, his sister and the questions his mother asked about Beth. He had a sense suddenly of seeing his life
from a different angle, one that turned the foreground into the background and brought the background into the light, showing not the people themselves, but the spaces between the people and the lines that connected or held them apart.

He stepped back and moved into the dark kitchen. He flipped on the lights and made a point of slamming the cupboard doors and banging a lot of pots and pans as he got himself a glass of milk. He returned to the hall and stopped by the front door. He leaned his head in the direction of the screen.
I'll tell you the worst thing I ever did. It was back when Kathy decided she wanted a puppy, so when I had a day off from the garage we went down to the shelter and picked out this little brown and white one with short ears. Kathy held it by the neck and talked baby talk to it all the way home, even though it peed on her.

Maggie--that's what Kathy called her--was trouble right from the start. She was fine around Kathy, but every time I came into the room her ears went flat and she growled like I was going to kick her. I tried giving her food, cheese and little bits of hotdogs, but she would just take the stuff and then slouch away. And she cried all the time, especially at night. We had to move her bed into our room so that Kathy could sleep with her hand dangling over the edge, just to let her know she was there. One time when I was doing dishes and Kathy was gone, Maggie yelped every time the pipes rattled. She wouldn't stop. I tried giving her biscuits to shut her up but she only crawled in a corner and peed so finally I threw her out back and shut the door. When Kathy came home she was still out there.

"What's Maggie doing in the yard?"

"She was crying so I put her out for a little bit. She seems happier there."
Kathy's eyes got real dark and then she threw her purse down. When she came back in she was holding the puppy against her chest and petting it. "She's a house dog, do you know what that means? She's supposed to stay inside! I don't want her out there. What if she bit through the fence and ran away?"

I was going to point out that there was no way a dog that puny could bite through a chain link fence, but I saw the way Kathy was looking at me.

Maybe two days later I got the dog into the car and drove her, growling and snapping, out to a little state park east of St Paul, where I left her. I figured that way someone else would find her and maybe take care of her. Halfway back I started to think about how sad Kathy would be when she came home from work and found Maggie gone, and I started to feel awful, so I turned around. When I got to the park I looked hard, but all I could see was grass and trees and the Mississippi flashing off through the woods.

Kathy cried. I told her that I must have left the door open when I went out to the garage or something, and that it was all my fault and that I would get her another one. Nothing seemed to help. We put ads in the paper and called all the pounds, but no one turned her in.

I felt like shit. What kind of idiot was I? I couldn't eat for two days and my stomach always hurt. I drove out to
that damn park three times in a week, but I couldn't find her anywhere. I even asked the guy who picked up the garbage if he'd seen a brown and white mutt running around. Nothing worked.

When I come home two weeks ago Kathy's on the phone talking to some guy I never heard of. I figure someone's phoning an order because she's got that yellow pad out and she's scribbling on it with a pencil, making dusty noises.

That's what Kathy does: she makes these little clay ornaments and ships them out to a company in Texas. Little hearts that say "Be Mine" and tigers that say "Grrr My Sweetheart!" Before that she sold screwdrivers and stuff over the phone. And before that she was a waitress, a taxi driver, a janitor, a phone operator, a door-to-door makeup person, and someone who sat behind the counter at a laundromat and gave you change. She never sticks with anything for six months but that's fine with me, just as long as she's happy.

When she hangs up she hugs me and presses her lips against my cheek. "Guess what," she says. She smells like candy.
"What?" I say like it's a game. Kathy's thin as a stick, all bones. She rubs my shoulders and kisses me again. Kathy's always moving, she never sits still.

"I'm going to see my baby. Isn't that great?"

At first I think she means me, then she shows me a picture that came in the mail, of a boy with straight dark hair and blue eyes. He's smiling and he's got braces. Then I understand. She used to get pictures like this every year when we first got married, but it was never any big deal then, just some mistake she never wanted to talk about. Now, I can't think of anything to say, so I do what my mother said and just shut up. I take a pizza out of the freezer and pull the plastic wrapper off.

"Don't you think that's wonderful?" she says again. Kathy's got thick lips that make her look like she's crying even when she's happy. Seeing them always makes me want to kiss her but I don't now.

"I guess so," I tell her, but she stops smiling.

From then on it's not very good. We eat pizza in the living room watching Cheers and Kathy never laughs even when Cliff talks. I burn the top of my mouth with the first bite. I hop around and act like I'm Harpo Marx but she only smiles a little bit and then looks at her plate. She picks her fork up, then puts it down, then picks it up again. She keeps being quiet all the way until we're done and then when I do
the dishes she goes to our bedroom and shuts the door, not very hard but just hard enough so that I'll hear it.

I go to the living room. I leave the t.v. on and take down all of the books on the shelf and look at the backs of them. Romance in the Highlands, The Secret Lover, stuff like that. I'm not a very fast reader so it takes me awhile, but when I'm through I'm pretty sure there isn't anything about a woman finding a baby she gave up a long time ago. I sit and watch t.v. Johnny Carson with some guy juggling on a unicycle. When I go to bed Kathy's snoring.

After Arnold split for lunch the next day, George ducked under the body of this Buick I was working on and said, "Come on, bud. We're taking this puppy for a cruise." George was Mexican, or Indian or something and he's real good looking. When it got real hot we'd sit and watch the chicks come in for gas in their shorts and tube tops. Now he was talking about this MG some lady brought in, real nice with red leather seats and a sunroof. I can't say I really like little foreign jobs like that--they're too complicated, give me a Ford anytime--but that day for some reason I did it. I don't know why. I left the convertor where it was, I put my wrench away, got in, and we hit the road.

Out on the highway my head felt empty and calm for the first time in a long time. George cracked open a Fanta and I
turned up the radio and we drove and drove. When we whipped past a ramp leading back up to 9th, George laughed. "Looks like we missed our exit!" The corn fields were this whizzing green and tan thing behind him. "Sure would hate to miss the next one!"

So we did. The Mississippi was so bright that it gave you a headache trying to look at it. We went all the way to Fairmont, the radio cranked up and the two of us hollering and laughing whenever we went past an exit-ramp. After we finally turned off the highway and stopped on a dirt road just before heading back, I shut the tunes off and there was this pause where the wind stopped blowing in our ears and it was like we could hear the crickets or whatever making all that noise in the fields for the first time in our lives. I almost thought George was going to say we should keep going. I almost wanted him to. But then he muttered, "Ahh, what the hell," and turned around and we went back.

Arnold had a shit-freak of course.

"Do I look like I'm running a god-damn Avis here? You keep the damn blessed cars on the lot unless I tell you, got it?" He bit down on a toothpick and tugged on his pants. After the doctors told him quit or die, none of us bitched when Arnold said no smoking in the garage, even though he said it was just for appearance's sake. I gave up drinking and coffee too while I was at it. It made me feel good, like
everything was clean inside my body. I figured now Arnold was kidding mostly. Mechanics cruise cars all the time. I could see little yellow splinters on his fat lip. "Next time," he hollered, "I'll kick your butts right the fuck out of here." Then he slammed the door heading into his office. A Fit-Rite poster swung on the wall and then fell off.

When I was six my Dad took off. Kevin and I were playing basketball out front and he walked up and spit once on the driveway. "I'll tell you something: you two are little pieces of shit, you know that? I don't know who your mother was screwing but it sure wasn't me." And then he got in his car and drove away. That was it. Kevin and I went inside and my mom was sitting in the kitchen, little drops of blood making a soft noise on the plastic table cloth. She was holding an ice cube over her eye and whenever she breathed you could hear this little popping sound. She looked at us and tried to smile but quit real quick like it hurt. Later she washed her face and took us out for ice cream.

"You either shit or you get shit." That's how Kevin explained it a couple years later when we were talking. "You don't remember, but she's tougher now than she used to be. She won't take anything from anybody."
I guess he was right. Whenever Kevin or I would screw up she would shake her head and blow smoke out of her mouth like she didn't know who the hell we were.

"You got your father's genes," she would say. At first we thought she meant pants but then we figured it out and it became like a voodoo hex, the worst thing you could say about someone. She didn't mention it a lot, just when one of us did something wrong, like the time I got caught stealing a basketball from Woolworth's and that sort of thing. This was before Kevin started selling drugs and ended up in prison, but that's all later.

After work the next day I stopped at this travel agency down on Grand. Inside everyone was wearing bright blue uniforms with little buttons that said Let Me Take U Places. The air conditioning was on full blast. When the lady came over to talk to me I hid my hands behind the counter.

"What can I do for you, sir?" She had on dark red lipstick. She was young and kind of pretty.

"I was just wondering," I said and then started over. "I mean, I'm not really going anywhere, I was just trying to find out how much it cost to go to - to Greece." I got the place from a poster behind her. It showed two people in swim suits sitting on brown rocks in front of a green ocean. They were smiling just like she was.
"To Greece?" She raised her eyebrows and kept being cheerful. "Athens or Corfu?"

"Yes," I stuttered.

She laughed and it sounded like a tape recording.

"Okay, I'll check them both out." Her fingers clicked on a thin keyboard. Her nails were the same color as her lipstick. "We have a holiday package for two, three days in Athens and then a week on Hydra. Or were you thinking about going alone?"

"For two," I said. I felt like I was fifteen years old, trying to buy a Penthouse or stealing basketballs again.

"All right, for two"--I could see the outline of her bra underneath her blue shirt. That air conditioning must have been tough on her--"that would be $1,799, flight, room and board. Would you like me to make a reservation?"

"Um," I said like I was really thinking about it. A woman was standing behind me with a kid in a baby carriage, looking tired.

"If you want, I could look at some other packages. We've got some nice trips to Corfu." Her eyes were bright.

"No that's okay, I was just checking. I'll get back to you I guess." I almost tripped over the baby carriage as I left. My face was red even though it was freezing in there.

* * *
Of course I knew Kathy had a baby. She got pregnant when she was in high school. Don't look at me, I was still in fifth grade or something. But this guy she was dating knocked her up and then split for Los Angeles, and her dad hit her so hard that she had to go in the hospital. Afterwards they sent her to a foster home, so of course she gave up the baby and went back to high school. When I met her, maybe ten years later, she was working at the Holiday Inn out on 35. Some dumb-ass left his lights on all night, and after I gave him a jump I went in for a cup of coffee and there she was standing behind the cash register, wiping the counter down with a rag, filling salt and pepper shakers. On our first date she was telling me about her dad and the baby and everything and I got so nervous I spilled spaghetti on my shirt. She said I could use the washer in her building. She took my clothes off right in front of the t.v.

"I know you won't hurt me," she said when we were laying on the couch. Even after she fell asleep she kept moving, her hand twitching against my side. I just laid there in the dark, in a strange building, listening to strange sounds, feeling completely happy for the first time ever and thinking, "Maybe this is it, maybe this is it."

The next day she wanted to go to the zoo, so we did. We saw the elephants and some zebras, and when it got too cold we went into the building where they keep the penguins and
things. One of the dolphins had babies, and there was this big sign saying how it was so rare that they would have twins like this one did. Kathy put her nose against the tank and waved at them. The big mama fish swam by, looking like she was smiling. Underneath her were the two little ones.

Kathy grinned and I felt like hugging her, so I did. "I feel so good," she said, when we were looking at the fish again. Then she asked me if I could have anything in the world, what would it be. I thought about it. It was a funny question. The dolphin went through a big hoop on the other side of the tank. That water looked nice and blue, warm.

"I'm not sure," I said. "Maybe an island, you know? You always hear about these millionaires that buy their own islands. That would be all right."

Her eyes got bright and I felt like I'd said the right thing. "I could be there too, wouldn't that be great? Just you and me, and we could go swimming naked and eat coconuts!" When she laughed it echoed a little off the walls. A security guard down the hall looked at us. "We could have kids too, eleven of them, that's what I want. I'd want to have all my come and sit on my lap, and I could tell them stories about what it was like back in the olden times, in Minnesota, where there was snow and everything!"

I didn't like that idea of eleven kids. In my head I could see the two of us walking along some beach, like you
see in the commercials, and that was nice. But then she would be surrounded by all these little kids and I couldn't get to her. I remembered the night before when it was just the two of us laying on the couch in her living room. When I didn't say anything she squinted and made me tell what I was thinking.

"I don't know about those kids," I said after a minute. "Couldn't it just be you and me?"

"Karl," she told me when I didn't go on. She put her arms around my back so her face was on my chest. Her hair smelled sweet like perfume. For the first time since I'd met her she was completely still. "Every guy I've ever known has treated me like shit, you know that? Every one of them. Except for you." Stiff hair brushed my chin. She twisted her head and looked up at me. Her eyes looked nice. "So I guess then what I really want is you."

This blew me away. It was like one of those things you hear in a movie. Two weeks later we got married.

George was watching me change tires on this Bronco with California plates and telling me about a girl he knew who liked to do it doggy style when Arnold came over and shook his head.

"You two are pitiful specimens of a mechanic, you know that?"
George smiled and grabbed himself like he does. "Yeah, well Arnie, you ain't doing so hot yourself."

Arnold shook his head again like he was a king or something. "Pretty sure of yourself there, George."

George kept grinning but he glanced at me. "I guess."

Someone rolled up to a pump out front, setting the bell off. Arnold looked to make sure someone was taking care of it, then took his toothpick out of his mouth and looked at it. "Just figured I'd let you two know there's a new policy here: any mechanic who takes a joy ride gives me three hundred dollars. Starting with that MG. All right?" His eyes were tiny.

George moved like he was dancing. "Hey, Arnold, man, what's the deal? We didn't hurt nothing."

"Jesus Arnold," I said, because I could tell he didn't like the way George was talking, "we've been here for ten years."

The toothpick pointed straight at me. "Listen pal, you take that car out for a drive last week?" I stared at him: it was Arnold, fifty pounds over-weight, little zit scars on his cheeks, fat little lips, the same Arnold that hired me. I nodded.

"You add forty miles on the speedometer?" I nodded again. "You leave that radio on?" I shrugged. George started to say something but Arnold moved the hand holding
the toothpick. "You do the crime, you pay the price." He stared at us both. "Otherwise you get your pink slips. Got it?"

When Arnold split, George threw a fit, kicked some tires, went out back and threw a bunch of old bottles against the wall, pissed on a Chevy back there that Arnold was trying to sell. I finished rotating the tires on that Bronco and took it down off the hydraulic. Then I hopped in and backed it out into the lot where I parked it between a Jeep Cherokee and somebody's Sundance.

Not too long after I started working at Arnold's, my Mom came into the living room where Kevin and I were watching t.v. and shut it off.

"Frank and me are going to California," she said. She blew smoke out of her mouth and then looked at us. "I don't know when we'll be back or anything, but it doesn't really matter. You two can take care of yourselves now."

Both of us just looked at her. I tried to figure out if she meant she was going and then coming back or if she was just going. I thought about the Christmas right before that. All three of us went to this restaurant with red candles in tiny glass chimneys and had turkey and stuffing and cranberries. It was nice.
"You're both working. You can take care of yourselves," she said again, and I knew she probably wouldn't be back. Kevin knew it too, I could tell by the way he kept staring down at his Road and Track. He was probably stoned.

"That's fine, Ma, you go do what you want." He turned a page. "We'll be fine back here."

Mom bent over and put out her cigarette. Her hair was gray where it was parted, blonde everywhere else. Kevin looked at me and winked. He was stoned.

"Why are you going to California?" I said.

She frowned at me. Frank's old Chevrolet thumped into the driveway.

"Frank's got a job there."

"You already have a job."

"You go pack, Ma," Kevin said. "Frank's here."

"You guys won't even make it to North Dakota," I said. Frank's boots sounded hollow on the porch. In my head California was this big red and brown place. People said it was supposed to fall into the ocean.

"Frank's brother is opening a bar. A nice one, with palm trees inside and fish tanks." Mom tilted her eyes. "You're not going soft on me, are you Karl?"

"Is my lover honey in there?" Frank's voice came deep and phony through the screen door.
"Be right out." My mom straightened her jeans skirt. "Why don't you run down to Lacey's and get some beer?" Then she turned and walked into her bedroom. Frank's boots clunked again.

"She just met him."

"Tough shit, Karl. Let her go if she wants to. She doesn't owe you anything."

I kept quiet for a bit. What could I say? Then I told him, "You don't care about anybody but yourself."

"Look who's talking," he muttered.

When they left she waved once from the driveway and once from the Unocal station down on the corner. When we went back inside I turned on the t.v. Kevin went into his room. A few minutes later the whole house smelled like dope.

One place I went to wasn't air conditioned at all, but they'd done it up with bamboo screens and fans in the ceiling so you felt like you were already someplace nice. When the lady at the desk asked me where it was I wanted to go I told her Acapulco, thinking that it was in Hawaii. When she asked me if I had a visa and everything I got confused but I guess I got through it all right. She was wearing a red shirt with no sleeves and her shoulders were tan and soft looking. Her smile was nice. She gave me some brochures and told me to
stop back in when I decided. When I got home I found an old atlas. Acapulco is in Mexico.

Yesterday I asked Kathy what would happen if they'd moved out of town.

"What do you mean?" She was unpacking the groceries. The form was on the table, with her big round signature, Kathy Stills. She dots her 'I's with circles.

"What happens if he doesn't want to see you?"

She didn't answer, just slammed the coffee can into the cupboard and shut the door.

"I mean..." There was this skinny little line between her eyebrows. I knew I should shut up. But for some reason I felt like hurting her, just a little bit. "I mean, he probably will and everything, but what if? What if he doesn't? Or what if his parents won't let him?"

"His parents don't have any say in the matter. He just turned eighteen."

"How do you know?"

She stopped and stared at me. Her bottom jaw stuck out. "I'm not even going to answer that. Think about it a minute, Karl."

This hit me hard. How could she remember that? After all this time? I couldn't think of once in the last six
years that she'd even mentioned him. I thought they'd even quit sending pictures and all that stuff.

"When was it?"

"June 11th. Last Wednesday." The bacon nearly stuck to the back of the refrigerator she threw it in so hard.

I shut up. Later I started a list of questions I had.

1. Why are you doing this now? 2. Don't you love me anymore?

It seemed to me there were more things I wanted to ask, but at the time I couldn't think of any of them. My stomach hurt and my head felt heavy.

Now we're sitting in the bedroom and Kathy's reading the stuff they sent her. I'm undressing and her pencil's tapping away. She makes little grunts whenever there's something she doesn't like or something she doesn't understand. Once she asks me where you go to get something notarized. I don't know.

"Do you need any other help?" I ask. It's so quiet in there.

"I'm okay, Karl," she says, and then, "Thanks," like she doesn't want me to know she's mad at me. Lately she's been doing different things with her hair. Tonight she looks like she's going to a prom or something, it's all tied up in back with big curls hanging down the sides.

"We could go to the zoo tomorrow, if you want," I tell her. For the first few years after we got married, we used
to go almost every month. Kathy used to joke about it being the place we fell for each other. She said that dolphin was named Cupid. "We haven't been there for awhile."

She puts her pencil down suddenly and the little pause of silence reminds me of when my Mom used to yell at Kevin and me.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"Don't you ever care about what I want?"

"What do you want?" I ask her the same question she asked me that day in the zoo.

"God damn you, Karl! He's my kid! Will you just leave me alone?" The papers on her lap slide to the floor. She flops on her side and reaches up to turn her lamp off. I'm standing in my underwear in the middle of the room, feeling like there are people watching me.

"Do you want to have a baby?" I ask. It just comes out. It's the only thing I can think of to say.

She doesn't move. I can't see her face, but when she talks her voice sounds funny. "Karl, I can't believe you just asked me that. You always do this. You're so selfish." She turns over and stares at me for a long time. Her eyes are narrow. She's shaking her head a little bit like she thinks I don't understand. Then she says, "I mean, all along you don't want a kid, and now, when I find out that
I can see my baby, you come right out and ask me that like you do."

"I don't know what you mean." I feel like I'm talking to her down a long long hall. My head hurts.

"No. You don't." She just looks at me from the bed.

"I have to go to the bathroom," I say and leave.

In the mirror my face looks the same as it did when I was in high school, only my hair's a little shorter. I look plain and simple. I remember that Kathy said a long time ago about how she didn't think I could ever hurt anyone. I think about my father. I wonder if he ever loved my mother.

Back in the room I lay down on my side of the bed.

"Do you want to watch Carson?" I ask.

"No."

"Cheers?"

"Karl."

I turn off the light and we lay there like two people who don't know each other.

There was a mechanic at work once who swore to God he saw Kevin beat a guy's face in with a brick. I don't know if it's true. I don't think so. Kevin never told me about it.

He was selling drugs before Mom left, so I guess I wasn't surprised when he started selling them more after she split. And I guess I wasn't surprised when I came home one
day and there was a cop in a blue uniform leaning on the porch railing. He was holding an envelope.

"You Kevin Stills?" His eyes were green.

"I'm Karl." I didn't try to go inside, just stood there by the steps. It was hot. September I think.

"Any idea where you're brother is?"

"No."

He slapped the envelope against his hand and squinted up at the sky. "Guess I'll just stay here for awhile then."

He sat on the porch all evening. I gave him a Coke and some Doritos, but I didn't let him into the house. At ten another guy came and the first one left. The second cop just sat in his car though. When I got up the next morning he was still there, the thermos cup on his dashboard making a little pattern of steam on the windshield.

They finally found Kevin in Colorado, in a stolen car with eight boxes of Encyclopedia Britanicas and a dirt covered shovel in the back seat. He spent eight years in a prison in Duluth. I only visited him once. His lower lip was swollen and there were yellow lines below his eyes. He smoked a lot and didn't look at me much. When he got out he crashed on the couch at mine and Kathy's place but he only stayed a week.

"Can't get a job here," he told me when I was driving him to the bus station. He'd shaved his head when he was in
prison and it made him look young. He was wearing a huge shirt with flowers on it that Kathy gave him. "Go out to California and no one will bother checking to see if you have a record, know what I mean? I figured I'd hook up with Mom for a bit until I got my own place. That should be all right."

"I hope you can find her." For a couple years after she left we kept getting drink coasters and stuff in the mail that said Frank and Wayne's Mai Tai Paradise on the front, but after awhile that quit and we just got a postcard every Christmas or so.

"Yeah, well . . ." Kevin looked out the window. He rubbed one hand over his short hair. My dad's genes. He fingered his shirt collar. "That Kathy sure is great."

Kathy said he gave her the creeps the way he looked at her sometimes. She said it was probably from being in prison for all that time. You go without anything for eight years and see what happens to you, I told her. She laughed.

"I'm sure it'll be nice out there," I said, even though I didn't know anything about it.

"Probably not," he muttered. "But it's got to be better than here." He rubbed his hair again.

"Where's George?" I finally asked Arnold. He was in the store part of the garage, telling dirty jokes and rubbing his
big belly up against the four-eyed teenage girl who worked the register.

He stopped laughing. "El-spico? Beats me. If he's got half the brains God gave the rest of us he won't be coming around again. Never will be too soon!" Then he and four-eyes started laughing again and he put that toothpick back in his mouth. I felt like punching them, breaking that girl's glasses and her stupid bright eyes.

"Hey, Karl!" he hollered when I was just going out the door. I nearly bit through my lip. When I turned around he stopped smiling. He stared at me for a second or two before he started talking again. His voice was softer. "I talked to my wife about that money. She's just going to take it out of your next three paychecks. How's that, all right? That way you won't have to go broke or anything."

"Yeah, okay. Thanks Arnold." Back in the garage I started draining the oil on a Dodge. Through the service doors I could see the women coming in to fill up their cars. Some of them were wearing shorts, some of them were pretty. I wished George was there. I wished Arnold would die.

"What are all these?" Kathy says when I come home from work. She's in the kitchen making macaroni and cheese or something. The place smells like burnt toast. On the table
are all the pamphlets I picked up in the last couple weeks, ones for Bermuda and Barcelona and Sagres and Acapulco. She kind of watches me with her head turned sideways as I look at them. Next to the one on Thailand are the ornaments she was working on before all this started. They look dusty.

"I don't know," I say, "I just thought I'd pick them up." I want to leave the kitchen and take the brochures with me.

"Why?" She keeps stirring. The steam is making her hair hang flat. She's wearing one of the dresses that she used to only wear when we went to parties or church. She's been doing that a lot lately. Whenever the mailman comes by she jumps.

"For vacation."

"Whose vacation?"

"Who do you think?"

When she doesn't say anything I leave and go take a shower. There's grease in my hair and I can't get it out.

At supper the leaflets are still laying on the table between us. She says, "We can't afford to go to any of those places."

I eat my fish sticks. They taste sharp like they were cooked too long. "I just thought it would be nice to look is all."
She picks up the one on Ireland. On the front there's a picture of a white cottage with a big green hill behind it. It looks like it must rain a lot, like everything's wet. A woman is standing in front of the gate, wearing this outfit that makes her boobs look big. She's got her arms out. She's smiling. "Look at this: $1,500 for two weeks at the Royal Alms Hotel. Who can afford that? How long have you been getting these things?"

I take the pamphlet out of her hand and shrug and put it back with the rest. I pick up a little clay tiger holding a heart. He needs paint. I ask her if she's going to give up the ornament making thing.

That night when we're in bed, she moves closer and touches my shoulder.

"You know," she says, and in the dark her voice sounds very clear. "I'm thirty-six now."

"Yeah."

We lay there for awhile. We can't even see each other. I don't sleep real well so Kathy got heavy curtains to keep the light out, and she bought all clocks that don't tick. Thinking about that makes me feel sad because it reminds me that we didn't always act this way.

"Once I was at the mall, at Penny's you know?" Her voice is soft. "Getting some shoes. And I saw this little kid trying on sneakers. He was maybe eight or nine. Anyhow,
he didn't like the color or something, and he was crying and his mother kept telling him to shut up, not real mean or anything, just "Hush up, hush up!" Like that." She takes a breath and lets it out. She smells kind of like coffee. Her feet keep moving under the sheets. "I swear to God it was him. He looked just like his dad, black hair and all. I wanted to run up and hug him, buy him the stupid shoes he wanted, grab him and take him home."

I stay still, not breathing. Does she think about his dad a lot?

"Don't you ever get scared?" she whispers finally. Then: "Oh, I don't know." She's quiet. My insides jump.

In the dark I can hear her rub her face. The air conditioner in the living room starts to hum. "I mean - it just being the two of us when we're old. Doesn't that scare you?" Her voice is louder now.

That makes me angry. "No," I tell her. When I said it the other night she wouldn't even think about it.

She's quiet then and nobody says anything for a long time. Then I fall asleep.

I'm sitting in the living room watching deep sea fishing on T.V. Kathy's pacing around, picking stuff up, setting it down. She keeps stopping in front of the mirror and messing with her hair. She's wearing a new dress, a white one that
has flowers on it. Every once in a while she picks something off it, even though there's nothing there. She's been standing around like this for over an hour.

"You sure you don't want me to come?" I ask again.

She sighs and tugs on the hair behind her ears. Her voice is tight. "You know what the counselor said."

I figure she's trying to guess what he'll be like, whether they'll be nice to her, whether she'll be able to visit more than once. She says the agency let her pick them out herself, but still you can't tell much from a piece of paper. When she showed me the return address on the envelope, I drove over there. The house was huge, as big as that place in Caddy Shack, with white pillars and a lawn like a golf course. I know they'll be nice. I know they'll be nice and take care of her, and I think that's good.

Because I'm leaving.

She looks at her watch again and tugs on her skirt.

"Maybe I should just go," she says.

On the t.v. a man in a white hat has a big one on the line. His pole bends and the camera shows one of those sword fish jumping out of the ocean, white water falling off its back. The man laughs. "Whatever," I tell her.

The closet in the hall squeaks and then she comes back in, carrying her purse. She's wearing high heels. "Bye,
honey." She leans over and kisses my cheek. Her lips are soft and dry.

"Bye."

She stops by the front door. "I should be back by suppertime, all right? Maybe we can go out or something."

"Sure."

She's got her purse in one hand, her car keys in the other. She pulls her shoulders back a little straighter and then leaves.

I wait until she's got her car down the driveway and grinds off in first. I don't pack anything, just leave the door unlocked and go.

I drive around for a long time. Out on the highway that day with George it felt like he could keep pushing the accelerator down and nothing would stop us. I fill up at a gas station and drive towards the freeway, feeling like I'm picking someone up for a first date. I cruise past the garage. Arnold's in the shop area, pressing his butt up against old four eyes. I turn around and head back to the highway. While I wait for a light to change I imagine I'm doing it, just like that. I'm going 75 and the road feels smooth under me, like a brush. The radio is on. I pass an off ramp, and then another one, and another one, and every time I go by one I keep pretending that I won't turn around,
that I'll keep heading west. When the light changes I go straight and then double back towards home.

When Kathy returns I have reserved two tickets for California. I have taken the suitcases out of the basement, put all our clothes in them, swimsuits, sweaters, t-shirts, underwear, pants, dresses, everything. I have taken paper bags out from under the sink and gone into the bathroom and dumped whole drawers into them. I have taken all her books off the shelf, all her photo-albums, all her knick-knacks, all my tools, all my magazines, my basketball, my video games; I have taken all this stuff and thrown it together, in carry-ons, in garbage bags, in the laundry basket. I have packed it all even though I know there's no way we can take it on the plane with us. I have unplugged the t.v. and taken down the pictures from the wall, the one of Kathy and me in a white dress and a suit, the one of two deer in the woods during winter.

When she comes home I am in the middle of the living room, surrounded by it, all around me, everything we've ever had, and I am smiling because I know this is the best thing I've ever done. She comes in and shuts the door behind her. She's holding her purse and a silver balloon that says A Very Special Mom. She turns and takes her shoes off, then sees the mess. Her mouth opens. She stands there, her coat half off, her jaw hanging, just staring. She looks at all the
stuff, all the clothes, the t.v, the garbage bags. Then her
eyes come up to meet mine. She's wearing make-up, more than
I've ever seen her wear before. Her eyes are blue. She
smiles.
JUGGLING MONKEYS

Somehow I ended up with oil paints all over my feet, feeling cool and sticky between my toes and making a funny squishing noise as I limped across the kitchen in the dark.

"Hello?"

"I couldn't sleep without you." His voice was a husky whisper.

"Oh hello, Mr. Coney. It's kind of late, isn't it?" I fumbled for a bit and finally hit the Record button on the small green tape recorder the phone company gave me earlier that month. Mr. C is my obscene caller, only he's not very obscene if you ask me. I named him after a pretend friend I had when I was little.

"I keep imagining you're in the room. I keep thinking I smell your perfume. . . ."

"I hate to be rude, but you know I have a show next week. Is it possible that we could - ?"

". . . the little hollow of skin between your neck and your collar bone. I feel it, I can smell it, I can imagine what it would be like to lick it, pressing my nose . . . ."

I held the phone away from me and looked at it in the dim blue light coming through the kitchen window. His voice hummed. "Don't you ever sleep?" I asked.
"I can't sleep without you, you know that. How's this: 'Amarantha sweet and fair, Ah, braid no more that shining hair!'"

I waited until he was done. "That's Lovelace, right?"

"How did you know?" He sounded pleased.

"My ex-husband." I'm only forty-one but my hair is pure silver. Henry used to say my hair was the thing he loved most about me. "He used to recite it all the time."

There was a tiny pause on the other end. "Oh."

"You're giving yourself away," I told him.

There was another little silence, and then his voice came over, meekly: "Do you still love me?"

"Will you let me go to sleep if I say I do?"

"Do you?"

"Will you?"

"Maybe."

"You have to promise." On the counter the clock ticked quietly. Ten after three. The numbers were pale yellow.

"I can barely restrain myself."

"Okay," I said. "I love you."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Then good night, my sweet angel." There was a click and silence. I replaced the receiver and turned off the recorder, then hopped over to the sink. The paint was
stickier now, less pleasant. I tore off three sheets of paper towel and stuck them under cold water.

"Holy Cow!" Tim swore when I crawled under the warm comforter. "What did you do, put your feet in the freezer?"

I kissed his cheek. His skin was smooth and taut. "Who do you think left oil paints right outside the door?"

He laughed, a soft deep chuckle. "Oh, really?"

"Uh-huh." I kissed his forehead.

"Who was on the phone?"

"My secret admirer again. He couldn't bear to be without me."

"Oh." I could feel him tense up under the sheets. "You talked to him long enough."

I ran my fingers through his thick hair. It was fine, like the hairs on a brush. "The phone company says I need to keep him on the line, tape his voice. You know that."

His low laughter echoed again in the dark. "The phone company also told you not to worry about it, remember? Until your windows started getting broken."

I shushed him and kissed his shoulder again. "Don't be silly; Mr. Coney is harmless, you know that. He just wants someone to talk to. Now go to sleep so you'll be ready for tomorrow night."
He reached silently for my hand, then turned his head away. Within a few minutes his body relaxed, and then his breathing became calm and steady.

I stayed awake for a long time, thinking, remembering what it feels like to fall in love. I'd been doing this a lot lately. In high school there was a guy named Jason Davids, with a leather jacket and brown hair that curled down his neck. My first year of college Corey Johnson, used to sneak up the fire escape to my room, smelling like pot smoke and whistling a Kinks' tune beneath his breath. Then there was Henry. When I first met him, his body was like sand-dunes, his shoulder blades, the back of his knees, all lines and angles and peaks and valleys. And so soft. You wouldn't think someone who was twenty-six would feel that way. In bed he used to make sounds like a little kid. I have no doubt now that anyone who knows him as well as I do would think he was slime. But back when we first met, that was something else.

"Look, Mom: one hand." Tim juggled four eggs off his palm and centered the skillet with his free hand. "And: no hands." All four dropped into the pan, shells and all. "Hope you like your eggs crunchy."

"It's Friday," I told him. "Andrew's coming over. And don't call me Mom."
"Okay, Teach."

"Not that either. Is that one of your tricks for tonight?"

"Nope." Hair fell over his eyes as he picked bits of egg shell out with a rubber spatula. "Just the usual, riding unicycles and juggling monkeys."

I poured six scoops of coffee into a filter and fitted it into the machine. Last year in Tokyo, Tim placed second at the International Juggling Competition. He's ranked number one in the U.S, not, he claims, because of his abilities, but because of his "charming wit and boyish dimples." He's twenty-five, give or take four years.

"Did you notice your art work?" He nodded towards the floor. Across the white linoleum tiles were multi-colored toe prints. "Not bad for the middle of the night. Pollack would have been proud."

"Are you nervous?"

"Nah." He took a pound of cheese out of the refrigerator and started grating. "But let's not talk about it, okay?"

The phone rang.

"'Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach? I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach. I have - ""
"Not now, Mr. Coney," I said and hung up. Tim glanced up once, frowned, then began slicing mushrooms, expertly, with a thin knife.

"I'm sure he's harmless." I got the milk out of the refrigerator.

"I didn't say anything," he murmured. He concentrated on the mushrooms.

"He's been doing it for over a year. I'm sure he's fine," I repeated. I hadn't told Tim about my Henry theory because I didn't want him getting jealous.

"Whatever . . ." He left it hanging.

After my shower he came in while I was drying off and brushed his teeth, each side, up and down three times using straight even strokes. Afterwards he stood behind me and wrapped one hand around my belly. His breath smelled like cinnamon.

"Look at this," he said, and wiped off a spot on the steamy mirror. In the bright light my skin was pink, faint stretch marks showing white across my hips. My pubic hair was a thin triangle of color. I tried to tighten my stomach a little bit. Things were starting to droop. "Don't we fit well together?"

"Very nice," I replied. There was something nice about it, his young square jaw and my pointed face, his short hair
and my dark eyes. His hips pressed against the small of my back.

"Are you sure you don't want to come tonight? They offered me extra tickets."

In the mirror my hand came up and caressed his face. "You know I can't do that. I've got a class this afternoon. Besides, there's too much to do with this show and everything. I really want to, though."

"Okay." He tugged on my earlobe with his teeth and went to finish packing. I finished drying off, then brushed my hair and got dressed. Tim was on his way out when Andrew showed up. He winked and slung his equipment bag over one shoulder. "Bye, Ms. Weston."

Andrew watched him stroll down the icy sidewalk and then gave me the raised eyebrow look. "Your lawn boy seems to be here awfully early."

I stuck out my tongue as I led him to the kitchen. "Typical heterosexual reaction," he continued as we began to unpack the grocery bag he'd brought along. This was our Friday morning ritual: a bottle of Taittinger and pain du chocolat. "Divorce your husband and then run off with someone half your age."

"And what's the typical homosexual reaction?" I asked. "Kill your lover and run off with a vacuum cleaner." He popped the cork and let loose a gale of histrionic laughter.
"To success," he murmured, as we clinked glasses.

The studio was a mess, paintings spread all over, leaning four or five deep against the wall, stacked diagonally on the floor. When I'd gotten the offer from the gallery I dragged everything I'd ever done out of storage. Some of them were covered but others just stared out at you, bright colors and landscapes of corn fields or trees, nudes, self-portraits. On one giant easel I stood looking out the studio window, my mouth covered by my hands.

"What's first?" Andrew said, and took a noisy sip of his champagne.

"The gallery vans are twelve by twenty-six, so anything that doesn't fit, we have to break the stretch boards down. All of these." I tapped the paintings by the window. "I marked them all, so we'd know which to take. The ones with a blue 'X' on the back go; the ones with red stay." The canvas felt tight and smooth under my fingers. When we'd first moved in, Henry'd had some builders add on a full-sized studio with three floor to ceiling windows overlooking the golf-course bordering our property. Shadows from the leafless trees shifted over the paintings on the floor. "The other ones we just need to cover in oil paper. I've got a staple gun, so it shouldn't be too hard."

We worked all morning, pulling nails out of frames, stapling until our hands were blistered and we had dust in
our hair. At one point Andrew got a sliver that went in clear behind the nail, so we stopped and I got the hydrogen peroxide and a tweezers from under the bathroom sink and tried to pull it out. Andrew's been my best friend since we were at RIS-D. After my parents died my freshman year, he was always there, making me brownies, phoning the lawyers, buying me flowers. At night we used to sneak into the planetarium and smoke grass until the stars became a blur, Orion the Hunter, Cygnus. Back then I was the promising young savant and Andrew the sniveling sycophant, his Igor to my Doctor Frankenstein, but in the twenty years since he'd had a dozen openings in New York and I'd sold exactly eleven paintings. Just the way things work out, I guess. This opening was the first real show I'd done in a long time.

"Is Henry coming?" he asked when the sliver was finally out. His face was pale and there was a thin layer of sweat on his forehead. I wiped him off with an extra cotton ball.

"I don't know. I sent him an invitation, but I haven't heard anything yet."

"Is he still seeing what's-her-face?"

"Gayle. I'm not sure," I lied. Just a week earlier, Tim and I had driven past them on Grand Avenue. They were coming out of a movie theater and she was up on her toes kissing him, her arm around his shoulder, her nose pressed
against his cheek. Her hair was bright red under the marquis lights. "His little friend is still calling me, though."

"Really?"

"He's into poetry now. Last night he told me he couldn't sleep because he kept thinking, 'I was in the room. He could smell my perfume.' That sort of thing."

Andrew flicked his chin like he was lathering for a shave and tsk-tsked. "I still think it's creepy. I mean, the window and everything. This guy sounds like a real nut." I laughed and he shook his head. "I'm serious. Besides, how do you know this guy's got anything to do with Henry?"

I picked up a hammer and went to work on a crooked nail. One morning maybe a month ago, I came into the studio and discovered tiny slivers of glass dusting the floor beneath a fist-sized hole in one of the windows. While I looked for the duct tape, Tim ran outside and found what he thought were footprints. To me they just looked like flat spots in the grass, nothing special, but to him they were proof that someone was out to get me. I went back inside and swept up, all the time expecting to find a stray golf ball. Tim called the police.

Now I fiddled with the nail. The head was bent, stuck into the wood. "Doesn't it seem like something Henry would do? The kinds of questions he asks, the poetry? Last night
he read a poem that Henry recited to me on our first date. That says something if you ask me."

Andrew raised his eyebrows in his usual noncommittal way.

"Besides," I went on, "you know Henry. He likes to keep his hand in everything, keep his options open, right? When we first split up he wanted me to go see a shrink, just so he wouldn't have to worry about me. He even offered to pay."

Andrew nodded and looked down at his hands. "That's Henry," he said after awhile. I pretended to be concentrating on the wood. Finally Andrew nodded again and picked up his staple gun. After that we worked in silence.

There was Theodore Harris, a gray dingy writer who never ate enough and wore the same red and blue sweater every day. He lived above a group of us that summer in Florence, and when we had a party and it got too loud, he'd come shuffling down the stairs and sit in the corner drinking cheap wine and telling bad jokes. Everybody made fun of him, but one night not too long before we left I crept up to his room and the two of us sat drinking strong coffee and talking in the dark. His bed smelled mildewy but it was warm, and lying in it you could see the river through the window, and the old women going to the shops early in the morning.
That afternoon, when I finished teaching my beginning color course, Miss Hung cornered me in the bathroom where I was scrubbing my hands, trying to get the paint out from along my nails.

"A Mister Wheeler called and asked me to tell you that he arrived in Los Angeles unharmed. I left the message on your door." Miss Hung was a seventy year old spinster who should've retired as department chair a long time ago. Her wrinkled skin surrounded thin eyes that drilled straight into your private life.

"Thank you," I said and gave her my most pleasant smile, hoping she would go away.

She resettled her glasses and looked down her thick nose at me, if it's possible for a person shorter than you to do such a thing. "He sounds awfully young. I hope he's not a student."

"He's a juggler."

"Oh?" Her eyes glimmered quizzically. "Are you sure?"

"He's on Johnny Carson tonight. Maybe you should watch." I cut myself short, aware that my voice was getting sharp. I turned off the cold water and reached for the paper towels. The girl's bathroom always smelled like clay and soap mixed together.
Her withered hands settled on her hips. "Mrs. Fry, you should know by now that I am not the Johnny Carson type."

I felt the urge to tell her that she should know by now that I wasn't Mrs. Fry anymore, but I kept my mouth shut and pushed past her into the hall instead. A few students hung around lazily next to the pottery lockers. Miss Hung came close behind me, using her thick cane to keep the door from slamming in her face.

"That's too bad, Miss Hung." I said. "You might enjoy this actually. He's very good."

"I hadn't realized that juggling was that amazing an accomplishment."

"He's very good." I repeated. I kept smiling, wondering briefly what it would take to make a septuagenarian drop dead from shock. I eased towards my office. "He rides a unicycle and juggles monkeys."

"Monkeys! Is that legal?"

"I'm not sure." I unlocked the door and squeezed in so she couldn't follow. "Have a nice weekend." I slammed it behind me and turned around. On my desk was a single red rose. I walked over and picked it up. Attached to it was a single square of white paper, with Mr. C. scratched on it in pencil. I went back out into the hall and caught Miss Hung as she hobbled out toward the parking lot.
"Excuse me, but you didn't let anybody in my office, did you?"

Her watery eyes searched my face. She had a hat on now, a black one with a wide-brim that somebody had once joked used to belong to Georgia O'Keefe. Miss Hung reacted then as she did now, by twisting her lips into a secretive half smile. "Why do you ask?"

"There's - I was just wondering."

She turned back towards the door as though she was leaving. "It's not my policy to let people into other people's offices."

I grabbed her arm and then let go quickly. Beneath her winter coat she was just a stick. "I'm sorry. I was just wondering. You didn't see anybody hanging around then?"

She shrugged as though I was still holding her, and began to amble on. "No, I did not see anybody 'hanging around.' Goodbye, Mrs. Fry." The heavy doors swung shut and she shuffled down the sidewalk.

Juliana Barth was a cello player at RIS-D. She had blonde hair and a wide bright mouth. The night before she finally dropped out she came to my room and hugged me and we cried and cried and cried. We smoked cigarettes until the
sun came up. The next day she gave me her rocking chair and left.

At 10:25 I turned on the t.v. and waited for Carson. Tim was a "performance" guest so he wasn't going to be interviewed, which meant he probably wouldn't be on until late. I figured I'd watch the whole thing though, just in case Johnny said anything ahead of time.

At 11:15 it paid off when he finished interviewing an aging actress who's gold lamé dress crawled up her thigh. Tapping his pencil he smiled at the camera. "Time for a commercial break. When we come back, we'll have the unicycle riding, juggling, bicycle bubbling - " His tapping increased in tempo and Ed McMahon laughed uproariously off camera. Johnny wet his lips and kept smiling. "Try that again: the unicycle riding, juggling king of America. Back after this," and then he was replaced by an anguished looking man in front of a medicine chest.

The phone rang.

"Did you get my rose?"

"Yes, I did. How did you - "

"Do you like roses?"

"Of course I do. Henry must have given you the keys, right?"
"I can see you from where I am right now, you know. I love your hair like that. Is it new?"

I was standing in the back hallway, next to the kitchen. All the curtains were closed. For him to be able to see me he'd have to be phoning from a heating vent. Nonetheless I felt a little chill rush over me. I reached down and switched on the tape recorder. "Mr. Coney, I'm sorry, can we please not do this right now? There's something very important that I - "

"Don't you care about me anymore?"

"Oh, I do, but"--on the screen a boy with brown hair and a white t-shirt was getting his clothes hopelessly dirty while his mother shook her head--"But there's something I need to do, and - "

"Can't it wait?"

"No. It's on t.v. and I'm afraid I have to watch it now." I waited for him to protest, but there was only silence. "Mr. Coney?" The Fruit of the Loom Grapes danced across the screen, a soft shoe routine. A delighted housewife joined in.

"You'd rather watch t.v?" He sounded stunned.

"Well of course I wouldn't rather, but I need to watch it now. It's - "

"It's your choice, is what it is." Johnny was back on the screen, looking like he didn't know what to expect next,
and then there was Tim, treading back and forth on his unicycle, four colored pins spinning out of his hands. "I guess I know now where I stand in your life."

"Mr. Co - " but he'd already hung up. I put the phone down and turned the volume up on the set. Tim moved over to his table, scooped up six wooden blocks, and began a daily double, one small arch spinning off of each hand. He didn't ride the cycle as much as he balanced on it, using the pedals to keep himself in place. One of the blocks bounced off his shoulder and he was off and back up again before you could blink. The two small arches became one large circle.

"I had to do that - " he said when he was going again.

"Just to look human," I told the t.v. set.

"- just to look human." The audience laughed steadily. Someone in the crowd had a horsey whine. Tim flashed his dimples, all the time he keeping his eyes focused on the blocks.

When he moved onto the meat-cleavers the audience grew quieter. "Actually, this is the part I like best. Everybody needs a little danger. Then again, everybody needs fingers." The knives flashed in the bright lights. "You know: they wouldn't let me do it on this show, but my specialty is juggling live monkeys." A medium sized laugh. "Just kidding. That would be too cruel - "

"These monkeys are dead."
"- these monkeys are dead." Another long laugh, and then Tim popped off the seat and did one low bow, the cleavers thumping down on the stage around him. The cameras switched to Carson, who looked ruffled. I turned off the set and went to bed.

I met Tim at a senior recital. A girl in one of my classes was performing and Tim and was singing a duet with her. While Sharon's face was stretched and earnest, Tim smiled as he sang and during his rest bars he winked at the audience. Afterwards, at the reception, he came up to me and took my hand.

There were tiny wrinkles around the corners of his eyes, unusual for someone so young. "I'm Tim Wheeler," he said. "And I've always wanted to meet you."

The next morning I dragged myself out of bed at seven and threw on a pot of coffee. In the studio early winter sunlight drifted in through the big windows and across the floor. I tuned the radio to an old sixties station that managed to play The Kinks every hour or two, and started on the canvases. The trucks were coming at nine the next morning and I still had two dozen to go.
Andrew called at eleven to say he couldn't make it after all. "Chris Falin and Terry Johnson showed up. Chris just got hired as a chef at the Paidlin. He's going to make pressed duck for us." His voice dropped. "If you're nice, maybe I'll save you some!"

I told him to have a good time, and went back to work. At noon I went into the kitchen and fixed a bagel and some cottage cheese; other than that I worked straight through until 5:30 when the front door slammed and Tim called to me from the living room.

"What's that?" I flipped off the radio. Janis Joplin died in mid-screech. He met me in the hall, still wearing his leather jacket, his dark hair tousled.

"What's with the roses?"

I kissed him quickly and tapped his nose with a screwdriver. "It's beautiful isn't it? It's from my secret admirer. I suppose you're sad now that you didn't get me one too."

He frowned. "All those?"

I looked at him. "What?"

He grabbed my hand and led me into the living room. Roses were everywhere, on the mantel, the couches, the record player, the windowsill, my writing desk, jammed into the frames of paintings on the wall, on the footstool. Tens, maybe hundreds of loose, long-stemmed red and white roses.
Tim let go of my hand. "Well?"

I stared. The room smelled like a perfume factory. I tried to think of a moment when anything unusual might have happened, a sound that caught my attention, made me stop what I was doing. The afternoon was a blur of Jefferson Airplane, wood-splinters and canvas.

"Well?" he said again. He looked older than he had yesterday morning, a century away from the cheerful young entertainer on television last night.

I picked up one of the roses and sniffed. It was sharp and strong. The stem was green, fresh. "I don't know."

"Didn't you lock the door?"

"I did, but . . ."

"But what?"

I sighed and put the rose down. I almost smiled, but Tim's face told me I shouldn't. I picked up another flower, just to keep busy. There were so many of them, how was I going to get them all in water? "I guess . . ."

He leaned forward. I stopped. Henry loved roses even more than I did. For our anniversary one year he gave me four dozen, all wrapped in silver paper. I felt like I was going to burst with pleasure. Tim waited.

"Henry must have given him the key," I murmured finally. I almost wanted to hug him--hug somebody!--but I knew it
couldn't be him because of what was coming. I hadn't expected to reach this point so soon.

"Who?"

"Mr. Coney."

He smiled like that was the answer he expected and with one wide sweep brushed the loveseat clear of flowers. I resisted the urge to kneel down and gather up the scattered roses. He sat. "Clare," he said.

"What?"

"These aren't from Henry."

"How do you know?" I picked up a white one and ran my fingers over the petals. They felt smooth and soft.

"Henry has nothing to do with 'Mr. Coney.'" Tim wasn't looking at me. His face was twisted into a smile. It was an expression I'd never seen on him before.

"That's not true," I said.

"Yes it is." He began to rock gently. "You can call him and ask him yourself."

"That's not true," I repeated.

He looked at me sharply. His eyes were clear and blue, with those little laugh wrinkles around the sides. He shook his head.

"How do you know?" Something inside me started to tear.

"I asked him."
"You asked him?" I said, then bit my lip. I was beginning to sound like an idiot.

He continued rocking. "Right after the broken window thing. That's why I called the police. Henry has nothing to do with Mr. Coney."

I stood still. The clock on the other side of the room ticked soothingly. It was our clock, the clock Henry and I bought when we redecorated. This was our room, our stuff, our house. Henry picked out the carpet for our bedroom when he got his promotion and we had a little extra money; the hutch in the dining room was a wedding gift from his side of the family; the maroon love seat that Tim was sitting in was supposed to be for me and my children, our children, Henry and mine. The shingles on the roof were paid for with money I made giving private lessons. Everything in this room belonged to Henry and me, was bought by us, for us. Except the roses.

"Can you leave?" I asked Tim.

He looked at me, startled, and I suddenly realized that until then his expression had been almost smug.

I said it again. "Will you leave?"

He frowned and then opened his mouth to speak, but I put my hand up. I was still holding the rose, so it looked like I was offering it to him. "Please? Now."
He stared at the dark red bud, watched it, then his eyes came up to meet mine. "Really?"

I nodded.

When he was gone I picked up as many of the flowers as I could and put them into a huge vase one of my students gave me for Christmas the year before. Then I took the tape out of the recorder by the phone and put it on the stereo Henry'd hooked up in the den. Mr. Coney's voice filled the room.

"... feel it, I can smell it, I can imagine what it would be like to lick it, pressing my nose..."

My own voice was nasal and low. "Don't you ever sleep?"

"I can't sleep without you, you know that. How's this: 'Amarantha sweet and fair, Ah, braid no more that shining hair!'"

"That's Lovelace, right?"

"How did you know?"

I stopped the tape recorder and rewound a bit. "How did you know?" His voice rose in pitch, genuinely surprised. I let the tape run on.

"My ex-husband. He used to recite it all the time."

"Oh." Dull, saddened.

After that the glee in my own voice sounded almost moronic: "You're giving yourself away!" I hit stop and
took the tape out of the machine. I went into the kitchen and made myself a cup of coffee and a sandwich, then went and turned on the t.v.

He finally called at 9:30, right in the middle of the Saturday Night Movie.

I didn't bother turning on the machine. "The roses -"

"Just listen," he said. His voice was low and rich, more full of more energy than ever before. "I found this today, and I want to read it to you. Are you listening?"

"I'm listening."

"Okay: 'Had I the heaven's embroidered cloths, and enwrought with golden and silver light, the blue and the dim and the dark cloths of night and light and the half-light, I would spread the cloths under your feet.'" He hesitated. "Still with me?"

"Still here, Mr. Coney. It's lovely."

"Thank you. 'But I, being poor, have only my dreams; I have spread my dreams under your feet; tread softly, because you tread on my dreams.'"

I waited a minute after he was done, then swallowed. "Where are you right now?"

"Excuse me?"

"Where are you?"
There was a long pause. "Why?" he said finally. He sounded suspicious.

I swallowed again, and ran my hand over the tape recorder. My fingertips were sweaty. "I - " I began, then stopped myself. I took a deep breath. "I want you to come over."

"What?"

"I want you to come over. Right now. I want to see you."

Another long silence, and then his voice was higher, tight. "Are you serious?"

"I'm serious."

There was a dull pause. "Why?"

"Please," I said. "I want to see you."

"This isn't a trick?" he asked finally.

"I wouldn't do that to you."

"No, I know you wouldn't, but still ..." His voice faded. I tried to picture him in my head, dark hair, light hair, thin, fat, tapping his fingers, biting his lip, trying to decide.

"I'm alone," I said. "I'll be here, okay?" Then I hung up.

I poured two glasses of wine, took them into the living room, turned off the t.v, lit some candles. I sat down and tried to calm myself, then stood up, then sat down, then
finally got up and went over to the mirror. In the dim light
my hair looked darker, almost black. I pulled it back from
my face and stared into my own eyes. They too looked black,
the dark pupils wide surround by the smooth rounded muscles
of the irises. I watched myself, trying to figure out if I
passed myself in the hall would I think, "This is a woman who
wants to fall in love again, this is a woman who is
desperate, this is a woman who doesn't know who she is"? My
face, a few more wrinkles, a little drier, stared back at me.

I went and sat down, took a sip of wine. Outside the
wind shook the birch trees next to the garage and rattled the
back door. I waited.