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A Thorn for the Flesh

by

Robert Stanley Boston
Signature redacted for privacy

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of The Requirements for the Degree of MASTER OF ARTS

Major Subject: English

Approved:
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In Charge of Major Work
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For the Major Department
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For the Graduate College

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

1971
This thesis has been accepted by the Department of English in lieu of the research thesis prescribed by the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.
To Pearl Hogrefe, who kicked me
when and where I needed it.
Chapter One

It was a bitter winter, that winter when the boy was born. The first snow had come before Thanksgiving, before the corn was in, and all the men in the neighborhood had had to finish picking corn in the bleak white winter. The sun glimmered wan in the slate-gray sky as they labored and cursed in the fields with their groaning tractors and steaming teams. The sun was too feeble to melt the early snow, so when in mid-December a heavier snow fell, the men had to slog knee-deep in snow to throw down hay for their livestock; had to shovel snow away from the hinged doors of chicken coops, hog houses, and barns; had to fight snow every mile they drove on the narrow country roads.

In January, the brief thaw which usually comes to Iowa was usurped by a blizzard. The wind whipped the snow, new and old, into a chill frenzy. It obliterated roads and lanes. It mounded over cars and machinery. It mounted up the sides of houses like angry white breakers smashing sea walls. It screamed and tore like a living beast at the tiny white house where Lute and Mary sat in darkness, awaiting the birth of their first child.

The house was old, and the settling of its foundation had forced the window and door frames askew, opening chinks through which the chill wind whistled. After the urine in the chamber-pot had frozen one night, Lute had done his best
to stave off the cold. He had shimmed and weatherstripped the door frame. He had nailed weathercloth to each misshapen window and had lined each sash with felt. Through the placid snows of November and December, they had been almost warm enough as they huddled in the living room listening to Jack Benny or Fred Allen or the Grand Ole Opry through the screech and crackle of their battery-powered radio.

But the January blizzard was too strong for Lute's defenses. It nosed out a gap at the bottom of the door and jabbed a white claw into the kitchen. It roared at the chinks in the clapboard siding and frosted the baseboards with its breath. It tore at the glasscloth on the windows until it had opened rents through which it whistled shrill derision.

Mary pulled the blue sweater tighter around her and screamed her chair back from the table. The sweater had been a wedding gift from Lute's youngest sister only seven months before, but Mary had had to wear it every bitter winter day. It was already thin and worn, as Mary was herself, although her belly drooped heavy with the unborn child.


"Stoke the range." She rubbed her hands together to warm them. "It's almost noon."
He said nothing, just glared through the frost-covered window at the featureless white storm. He drummed his fingers on the oilcloth and whistled. Monotonous. Tuneless.

Mary waddled to the stove, her legs splayed wide by the weight of her belly. She lifted the biggest lid of the range, scooped some cobs from the coal hod at one end of the stove, and dumped them into the opening. Grunting, she squatted down and shook the brass handle low on the front of the range to sift the dead ashes from the firebox. Then she stood again, slowly, holding the handle of the oven door for support. She picked up a short black poker and clattered it inside the hole on top until sparks flew from within. Replacing the lid, she brushed back a wisp of light brown hair that was sweat-plastered to her forehead. She shivered and pulled at the sweater again.

"Why didn't you let me do that?" A hint of anger in his voice. "I would've done it for you." He pounded the worn oilcloth lightly with the side of his fist, punctuating his words. "A woman in your condition's got no business doing stuff like that."

"It's okay," Mary said. "I'll need you to reach the damper, though. It won't draw right with this wind." She dried her face on the long roller towel near the sink. She shivered again as the wind howled a particularly high note.
Lute sighed as he stood up. He stretched and yawned, muscles bulging under his plaid shirt. He ran a big callused hand through his black hair and moved to the stove—not walked, but moved—lithe and easy like a fighter or a dancer, aware of the motions of his body, conscious of the strength he had.

"Damn weather." He removed the lid again and looked down into the fire. "Snowbound way to hell out here, and your time . . ." He stopped talking as he adjusted the damper, watching the fire below him. Its yellow flicker outlined the smooth curve of his jaw and threw the twisted shadow of his broken nose across one cheek. He replaced the lid and rubbed his hands together over the range.

"There's nothing you can do about it, honey," Mary was slicing cold leftover potatoes at the sink. She did not see him grimace when she said "honey."

"Shit." He moved to the window and began to scrape at the frost with one thick fingernail. Outside, the wind tore snow from the tops of drifts and hurled it aloft with a swirling flourish. He stopped scraping. Through the shriek of the wind he heard a fainter, deeper sound. He whirled from the window and grabbed his high-laced boots in the corner by the door.

"Get your coat and overshoes on," he said.

"But the food," she protested.
"To hell with the food. Get dressed."

She began to waddle toward the bedroom.

"Move!" he roared. She waddled faster.

He finished lacing the boots and strode across the room to the coatrack behind the range. His controlled grace was gone now, replaced by an awkward frenzy. He snatched the denim jacket from its hook and struggled with it madly, cursing as his thumb caught in the heavy lining and ripped down the length of the sleeve.

"Move your ass, woman," he shouted.

She plodded into the kitchen, her coat stretched taut across her swollen middle, a thick wool scarf twined about her head, exposing only her eyes. He jammed a flaking leather cap on his head, seized her hand, and dragged her outside.

"Lute," she cried, but the scarf stifled his name, and the wind whipped it away. She stumbled in the first drift and sagged to her knees. He wrenched her up by the arm and dragged her on. She was crying behind the scarf, and the wind whipped the tears across her eyes, blinding her. She fell again. He dragged her for a step or two, then stopped and pulled her up once more.

"Damn it, watch where you're going," he shouted.

She moaned and held her belly with her free hand. The wind drowned out her moan.
He had pulled her only halfway down the lane when he saw the snowplow go by, the snow spuming up before it higher than the cab of the truck.

"God damn! God damn! Going the wrong damn way." He jerked her arm viciously, and she shrieked. He turned to glare at her and said, "Shit!"

Snow was drifted around the old Plymouth at the end of the lane. Lute brushed off enough to open the door. He slid in, pulled the choke, and pumped the accelerator twice. He turned the key, waited a moment, and then pushed the starter pedal. The engine ground over. Once. Twice. It caught.

"Jesus Christ," he said, "I thought she'd be dead."

He set the choke at a fast idle, got out, and began to brush the snow from the windows and hood. Mary eased herself into the car and inched across the seat, grunting with the effort. The car rocked as Lute shoved away the thick coating of snow. She cradled her belly in her arms and closed her eyes. Sweat beaded up on her forehead along with the tears and melted snow. She wound the scarf from her head and mopped her face with it.

Lute slid back into the car, ground it into gear, and let the clutch out slowly. The car crunched forward only a few inches before the rear tires broke loose and whined. Lute backed up and tried once more. Again the car floundered ahead and stopped.
"Shit," he said. He opened the door and got out. "You drive. I'm gonna have to push this bitch." His eyes watered in the cold blast.

Mary struggled across the seat.

"Move, damn it! The road's drifting over already."

She let the clutch out too quickly the first time, and the wind carried his curses to her as the rear tires whined. She backed up and tried again, more carefully this time. The car lurched forward, crunching through the bank of brittle snow. She heard the floorboards scrape across the bank, and then the car was free upon the plowed track.

Lute jerked the door open, and she struggled across the seat again. Sweat was running down his face, darkening the turned-up collar of the denim jacket. A gust of wind caught the door as he started to close it, and he cursed once more. He did not notice that her arms were clasped tightly about her belly.

"Why couldn't that damn plow be going our way?" he complained. "We could've just followed him to Dad's place."

"Dad's place?" Mary's voice was weak, almost a whine.

Lute eased out the clutch; the car wallowed forward.

"Sure. You think we're going for a joy ride or something?" He reached over and patted her belly. "I'm sure as hell not going to deliver that little bastard myself."
Mary began to cry, burying her face in the wool scarf. "I didn't think you noticed," she sobbed.

"Didn't notice! Jesus Christ, woman, you're crazy, you know that? Your old man comes around with a shotgun, we get married, and I didn't notice you're knocked up?"

"I mean the pains. The pains started, and you didn't notice."

"You mean the little bastard's coming now?"

"Yes," she said, "today's the day." She suppressed a giggle.

"Shit," Lute said. "Well I'll be damned." He pressed the accelerator harder, and the car wallowed on through the drifts which were already encroaching upon the cleared road.

Winter is a dreary time anywhere, except perhaps in the mountains, where the snow lends even more majesty to the aloofness of the peaks, and where the dark spruce and pine below the timberline stand out in sharp contrast against its brilliance. Even so, the beauty of the mountains is a stern beauty, harsh and unyielding, unfriendly to man—a beauty which may be respected by man, which fills him with awe, but which holds him and his puny powers in scorn. The god of the mountains is a stern god who cares nothing for man, a god of flint and iron and granite who seems incomprehensible, immutable, immortal. So winter does not much affect the mountains. Its bleakness merely makes them more awesome, more indomitable.
But the goddess of the plains is a tender goddess, soft and warm like the rich dark loam of the fields. She is both lover and mother to man, for man is the child of the prairie, and she is his bride. Like a child, he revels in the newness of spring, the melting smells of earth and leaves, the promise of life to come. Like a bride, she lies supine before him, awaiting his touch, his seed, his vigilant and competent care to bring forth the life that is within her.

And that life is man.

Three months of springtime: the first impregnation and joy of their union.

Three months of summer: the care and the growing which make her his wife.

Three months of autumn: the fruitfulness showing, the bringing forth life.

But then the winter. And the goddess of the plains, the tender goddess, withers and shrivels in the ice and the snow. The rich earth stiffens and grows cold. The trees shed their leaves and stand stark and skeletal against the dull sky. All the soft growing things are blasted, sere. The wind roars unchecked across the barren land.
Through this dead land the old car crawled. The journey was just slightly more than a mile in length, but they had gone only a third of the way when the car floundered into a deep drift and stopped. Lute, cursing himself for having forgotten a shovel, strained and grunted and forced the car through. At the French Church corner he stopped the car and gazed hopelessly at the cleared road stretching eastward before him.

"Should've known." He pounded the steering wheel. "The bastard came from the White Fox road. Didn't even plow down to Dad's."

"Maybe we can go on to the White Fox road and drive to town." She put her hand on the sleeve of his coat. "I'd really feel better in the hospital, honey. I mean, it's sanitary, and they have ether, and . . . ."

He snorted, "Hell, woman, we can't make it to town. Ten miles? The way this stuff's drifting?"

"Well, we can't just sit here."

Lute stared down the road leading south to his father's farm. The wind had blown it clear in spots, but in other places the snow rippled and eddied across the road like a frozen flood. "Damn road ain't been plowed at all." He ran his big hands around the rim of the wheel. "Oh, what the hell. We might as well try it, I guess. One mile's better than ten."
He gunned the engine and smashed the car into the ridge left by the snowplow. The old Plymouth shuddered. It lurched sideways and rocked precariously for a moment on top of the ridge as if gathering strength. Then the wheels bit again and held, and it plunged ahead.

The wind roiled the snow into an impenetrable white haze about them. The car crawled forward, Lute peering through the frosting windshield for familiar trees or bushes amid the featureless white. For, except for the few bare patches he had seen earlier, there was no road. Only snow. Snow filled the ditches and spilled over, obliterating the roadbed. Snow whirled in the air so thickly that it was almost indistinguishable from the snow on the ground. Snow distorted distance; the telephone poles and fenceposts which marked the outer sides of the ditches shimmered and undulated under their veils of snow, like frigid strip-teasers promising tactile reality but spinning away into illusion.

The Plymouth would bog down in the sheltered places where the snow had drifted deep, and Lute would curse while Mary prayed, and he would get out of the car to push and rock and heave it through the snow. The wind lashed at him, drove needles of snow against his skin. But his clothing was sound and his hide was tough, and he exulted in pitting his strength against the fury of the storm, against the
unwieldy bulk of the old car. He shouted curses into the wind as he felt the strain and surge of his shoulders and thighs and arms, as he felt the car tremble and inch forward, its movement a testament to his courage and strength and will.

Each time they bogged down, Mary would grip the steering wheel and heave herself across the seat, sweat rolling down her forehead and cheeks, sweat gluing her blouse to her ponderous belly, sweat chilling in the frigid air, making her teeth chatter and her arms shiver as she tried to steer the car into the swirling snow. The pains were more intense now, and she would clamp the steering wheel until her forearms ached to keep herself from doubling over.

Finally, the road sloped upward; there, the wind had swept it clean of snow. A dark mass in the white swirl gradually became the windbreak north of the house. Mary began to cry as the big house loomed white in the whiter air. They could see Lute's father, Daniel, driving a tractor up and down the driveway to make a path. He waved to them as the Plymouth nosed into the drive, and he backed the tractor up to the yard gate. Lute stopped in front of the garage. Daniel set the tractor's brakes and dismounted as they climbed from the car.
"I was just going to get the truck and come up after you," he shouted. "Ag wouldn't let me wait till the wind died down." He wrapped his big arm around Mary's shoulders and led her to the gate. "She said it was about time. Said we just had to bring you home right now. Wouldn't hear of waiting another minute, she said."

He saw the sweat on Mary's face and turned her toward him. "Has it started?" he said.

"About an hour ago."

"God, we'd better get ready." He nestled her under his arm once more and started toward the house. He shouted back over his shoulder, "Lute, put the tractor in the white corncrib. I don't want her freezing up."

When Lute entered the house, his mother had already taken Mary to the first-floor bedroom, the only one which was warm. Daniel was standing at the kitchen sink, stropping his razor. Lute paused in the doorway to knock some of the snow from his boots.

"For God's sake, boy, close the damn door," Daniel said. "It's hard enough to keep this place warm as it is."

"Is Mary all right?" He walked to the range and rubbed his hands together over it.

"Sure. Aggie's with her. Prob'ly got her in bed by now." He finished stropping the razor and laid it, open, on a clean towel.
Lute sat down and began to unlace his boots. His fingers were still cold, and they fumbled stiffly with the laces. "You just now gettin' around to shaving?"

Daniel laughed. "That's for Mary."

Lute's hands stopped moving. He looked up. "You're not going to . . . to cut her, are you?"

"Cut her?"

"Yeah. Like you did that old white-face cow that time?"

Daniel sighed. "No, I didn't reckon on it. Hope not, anyway. But she ought to be shaved."

"You mean her . . . her pussy? Hell, she can't shave it. Can't even see it with that belly."

Daniel laughed again. "Boy, you don't know diddly, do you? She ain't gonna shave it. You are."

"Me! Oh, Dad, no. I couldn't do that. I mean, Jesus, what if I cut it? What if I slipped and cut it?"

He tugged furiously at the bootlaces.

"Well, it ought to be shaved," Daniel said. "It'll be cleaner and easier if we shave it. Not so much chance of infection."

"Maybe Mom could shave it. Maybe one of the girls."

"Your maw never used a razor in her life. And the girls are in town. Got stranded at school when the blizzard hit. You've got to do it."
Lute began to work off one boot. "I don't know why," he said. "You never had to shave a cow."

"Well, good God, she ain't a cow, neither, is she."
Daniel walked to the stove and dipped some water from the hot-water reservoir at one end. He ladled it into an enameled dishpan.

"But, God, what if I cut it?" The boot finally came off. He tossed it toward the rug by the door and started to work on the other one. Very slowly, as though he wanted to prolong the task.

Daniel put the razor into the hot water. When he spoke, his voice was flat and hard. "You want me to do that for you too?"

"Too?"

"Like everything else, I mean." He turned away from the sink and glared at his son.

"Like what?" Lute sat rigid in the chair, his shoulders squared.

"Like seeing that you done the right thing by her. Like letting you work here for more than you're worth. Like paying the rent on that goddam place of yours."

Lute opened his mouth to protest, but his father silenced him with a gesture.

"You get drunk, and I bail you out of jail. You knock up a girl, and I have to keep you from running away. Now
you want me to shave her privates and deliver your bastard for you. You don't deserve a girl like that, boy." Daniel was breathing hard. Sweat glistened on his forehead and lips. "You want me to knock her up for you next time?"

Lute sprang from the chair, his fist drawn back. Daniel sneered at him, his massive shoulders flexing under the straps of his overalls. Lute lowered his fist. Daniel motioned toward the dishpan.

"Be a man, boy. Do what you have to do."

Lute sat down and pulled off the other boot. He got the shaving mug from the cabinet over the sink, dipped some water from the reservoir, and worked up a lather. He picked up the dishpan and walked to the bedroom. Daniel followed him, his face still grim.

His mother had turned on all the lights in the room. She had even brought a floor lamp from the living room for added light. When Lute and his father entered, she was sitting beside the bed, holding Mary's hand and talking to her. She paused and smiled at them.

"Well, it won't be too long now. Pains are about ten minutes apart." She saw the basin and the shaving mug. "Going to shave her? Good. Wish we'd a-known that when Rosie and Mona was born. Makes it a lot neater. Course, they was no way we could've known until Lute. He was the first one born in the hospital, you know." She patted
Mary's small hand. "So don't you worry, now, honey. Daniel's delivered two by his self."

Mary forced a smile and squeezed Aggie's hand. Her face was white and damp. Her eyes were frightened and pleading when she looked at Lute. He turned back the patchwork quilt that covered her. She was wearing one of his mother's flannel nightgowns. Under her buttocks and thighs, his mother had laid a checkered oilcloth from the kitchen table and three bath towels, folded double. He pulled the nightgown up, exposing her. He blushed.

"Never thought I'd hate to do that," he said. It sounded false, hollow.

"Lute," his mother said, "don't talk so."

Mary bent her knees and spread her legs wide. Lute held the shaving brush ready, hesitated a moment, then began to lather her.

"Not too much," Daniel said. "You've got to see what you're doing."

Lute set the mug and the brush aside. He picked up the razor and dried it on one of the towels. Mary stared at it. She gripped Aggie's hand tightly. Lute sat on the edge of the bed, resting his right elbow on the mattress between her legs for support. Even so, the razor trembled in his hand. He held the blade above her. Sweat rolled down her belly and mingled with the soap. He brought the
blade closer, laying his little finger on her skin to steady his hand. She shivered when he touched her. He scraped the razor across her too quickly, as if he could not bear to prolong it. She said, "Ouch," and giggled nervously. He dipped the blade into the water and approached her again.

This time, just as the blade was about to touch her, Mary had a contraction. She jerked convulsively, and the blade nicked her. Blood spread through the soap and hair. At the same time, her water broke, and the fluid gushed out, carrying the foam and blood with it, drenching Lute's hand and elbow. He reeled from the bed and vomited into the basin of the corner washstand. Mary shrieked and clutched Aggie's hand. Daniel grabbed Lute's arms. Lute shook him off and ran from the room, vomiting as he ran.

"Lute," Mary cried.

"Let him go," Daniel roared. "Let him get the hell out of here." He picked up the razor from where it had fallen and rinsed it again in the water. "Should've known," he muttered as he sat down on the edge of the bed, the razor poised above the white-faced girl.

Daniel and Aggie worked calmly, quietly, beside the bed. Daniel's callused hands were firm and gentle with her, soothing her as they had soothed so many cows and mares. Aggie crooned to her softly between contractions, wiped her
forehead and cheeks with cool cloths. And during the contractions she was a source of inexhaustible energy, driving the girl to push and strain and breathe and scream.

"Holler away!" she would shout, and "Push!" as she stood over Mary, their interlocked hands whitened by the pressure, the sweat rolling down their faces.

And all the while the wind howled outside the big house, its shrieks a weird descant to the shrieks of the girl, its chill a strange counterpoint to the warmth of the two hearts beating in her body.

Out in the storm, Lute wandered through the fields and groves carrying an ancient, single-shot .22 rifle. He had tried to coax Roxy, the farm dog, to join him, but Roxy had sniffed the brittle air only once and returned to his nest in the cowbarn. The wind blew powdered snow into Lute's eyes, and he pulled the cap lower to shield them. The rolling land was almost featureless. Occasional straight drifts, four or five feet high, showed where the fences were, but even they were hard to see in the raging swirl of white. The house itself had disappeared in the frozen haze. Even the stark black mass of the windbreak had been engulfed by the screaming white maw of the blizzard.

The black bones of a tree took shape near one of the drifted fences. As Lute approached it, he saw a rabbit gnawing bark from the downwind side, the side to his right.
The rabbit must have been blinded by the snow and deafened by the shrieking wind, for it did not notice Lute. He edged forward a few more steps. The rabbit gnawed at the tree. Lute dropped to one knee. He flicked off the safety and cocked the hammer. He raised the rifle to his shoulder, his elbow high, his cheek pressed firmly against the stock. The rabbit was dark against the snow. It was extended almost full length up the side of the tree, nibbling the bark between its tiny forefeet. Lute lowered the rifle and released the hammer to half-cock. He removed his right glove and jammed it into a coat pocket. He put the rifle back to his shoulder and cocked it again. He breathed in and let half the air out. The rabbit stretched itself further up the tree. Lute's finger tightened slowly.

The crack of the weapon was all but lost in the howl of the wind. The rabbit jumped into the air, its forefeet still stretched above its head. Then it fell to one side and lay motionless. Its fur was warm when Lute picked it up and stuffed it into one of his coat pockets. He smiled and put the glove back on. There were more trees upwind of this one. He trudged into the wind.

When Lute returned to the house, his father was sitting at the kitchen table, a cup of coffee in front of him.

"Colder'n hell out there." Lute drew off his gloves and rubbed his hands over the range. Then he turned and
pulled the stiffened bodies of the rabbits from his pockets. "I got some rabbits for supper. Want to help me skin them?"

"Skin 'em yourself," Daniel said.

"Okay, but you do it a lot faster."

He wrestled his way out of the denim coat and hung it on one of the hooks by the door. Then he sat down and started to unlace his boots. "Mary pop yet?" He concentrated on the movements of his fingers.

"A boy."

"I'll be damned. How about that?" He grinned at his father.

Daniel picked up the rabbits and put them in the sink. He dampened a rag and wiped the congealed blood from the table. "Name's Nathaniel." He did not look at his son.

"Nathaniel? That's a hell of a name."

"Said she liked Nathaniel Hawthorne." He refilled his coffee cup.

Lute grunted as he pulled off his left boot. He watched his toes wiggle. "Shit. I never did understand The Scarlet Letter."

He pulled off the other boot and walked to the cupboard by the sink. He got a small knife and a whetstone. After spitting on the stone, he began to sharpen the knife. For a time, its rhythmic grinding against the stone and the whine of the wind were the only sounds in the kitchen.
Daniel slurped his coffee. "Too damn hot," he said. "I mean, shit," Lute paused to test the blade against his thumb. "I mean, the real juicy scene where old what's her name, old Hester, gets fucked, that's . . . ."

"Watch your mouth!" Daniel said. "You don't use that word in your mother's house!"

Lute's face reddened. He pressed his lips into a thin, hard line. His voice was tight and deliberate as he said, "I mean, the real juicy scene where old Hester gets fucked, that's the one the dumb shit leaves out, you know?" He waited. Daniel said nothing; he slammed his cup down on the table, splashing coffee across the table top, and stalked from the room.

Lute put the stone away and turned to the sink. With swift, sure movements, he cut the forefeet off one of the rabbits and sliced neat, circular cuts around the hindfeet.

"A boy, huh?" He grinned. "Nathaniel Parker. Shit, how about that?"
Chapter Two

Nate awoke in dirty gray dawn, before the red life-blood of summer morning flushed the clouds and sky. He lay quiet, not wanting to wake Esther, listening to her heavy breathing and the hums and rustles of her house. Why is it, he thought, that a house makes noises only at night? It's like breathing, he thought. You don't hear people breathe during the day. But at night, when they're asleep, you can hear them breathe. Snore, sometimes. Like Esther, now.

He turned his head to look at her. Her mouth was open, flaccid, and every inhalation made a sucking sound—the sound an actor makes to represent a death rattle, the sound that always made him think of a red-smeared face in a Kansas City motel.

He eased himself from the bed and looked for his clothes. His head throbbed when he bent over to pick up his shorts. God, he thought, what a weekend. His ribs twinged as he pulled the knit shirt over his head. He smiled to himself.

"Jesus Christ, Parker," she had said, "not again. Don't you ever get sore?" She had clasped her legs tightly on his hand so he couldn't move it.

"You're just out of shape," he had said. "All you need is exercise."
"Exercise! That's all I ever get from you, bastard." She had laughed and spread her legs wide. "Hell, another workout won't hurt." She kissed his throat and murmured, "If we get in shape, maybe we can make the Olympic team."

He finished dressing quickly, not bothering to put on his socks, but just stuffing them into his pockets. He checked his watch—six o'clock—plenty of time to get home and clean up for work. He opened the bedroom door carefully, hoping it didn't squeak. She moaned and rolled over, out of the covers. He gazed at her for a moment. Large breasts, flattening themselves by their own weight, soft white belly just beginning to show a bit of paunch, smooth muscular thighs, and that sweet, dark patch of hair. Again he thought of Kansas City. Then he pushed the memory from him and eased the door shut.

The air was still cool when he stepped outside. Across the street, a mockingbird hidden in a tree was running scales, warming up for his dawn song. Nate's tongue was thick and dry in his mouth. He wished he could have taken a drink of water before he left, but he had been afraid that the sound might wake her. The car's engine caught immediately. He backed out of the drive and drove off down the sleeping suburban street toward the city.

Very few cars were on the expressway at this hour of the morning. Nate barrelled along at five miles over the
speed limit. He had rolled down all the windows, and the heavy morning air surged through the car, blowing some of the booze-smell off him, he hoped. The land was flat, the grass burned brown by the merciless August sun, but looking a dull gray in the pre-dawn light. Below the level of the freeway, flimsy two-story apartment buildings, tawdry liquor stores, and occasional gas stations flashed by. Nate could see over all the buildings to the land beyond, stretching away to level horizons, indistinct and hazy, and it gave him the feeling of flying alone and aloof toward the coming dawn, above the dingy world, unsullied by it.

Ahead, the sky reddened; then blazed golden. And thrusting up from the flat land, raw and startling, was Dallas. The buildings black against the new sky, hiding the sun behind them. They dominated the landscape like an Old World cathedral or the Emerald City of Oz. Nate laughed at the thought and began to sing, "Ding dong, the witch is dead." But that was all he could remember, so he sang it over and over. "Ding dong, the witch is dead. Ding dong, the witch is dead." He pressed harder on the gas and hurtled toward the city.

The telegram was in the mailbox when he got home. He carried it into the bathroom and dropped two Alka-Seltzer tablets into a glass of water. Then he tore open the yellow envelope.
TRIED TO CALL. NO ANSWER. LUTE DIED SATURDAY.
FUNERAL TUESDAY 2PM. PLEASE COME.

MOM

He read it through twice more. The Alka-Seltzer had dissolved. He drank it and belched. What did he feel? Nothing? He looked at his face in the mirror to see what expression he was wearing. Nothing. Only his face, blank, staring back at him. He folded the telegram and put it back into the envelope. What are you supposed to feel when your father dies? Pain? Sorrow? Loss? Regret? He looked at his face again. None of those.

He went to the kitchen and started a pot of coffee. He wrinkled his nose and frowned. Stale beer and rancid grease. The dishes were stacked deep on the counter and in the sink. Laid out all that money for a house with a dishwasher, and the dishes were still piled in the sink. He picked up a greasy fork; let it clatter back to the counter top. The mess would still be here when he got back from Iowa.

The coffee was perking vigorously. Its fresh smell penetrated the putrid odors of the kitchen. He waited impatiently for it to finish. Might as well do something, he thought. He cleared the dishes out of the sink and began to load them into the dishwasher. The coffee had stopped perking by the time he finished. He poured a cup
and turned on the radio to get KVIL's seven o'clock news. He sat at the table, smoking a cigarette and sipping the hot coffee.

The announcer's smooth voice rolled on, but Nate paid no attention. Only when the station manager started his fifteen-minute sports show did Nate realize that he had missed the weather report, the one thing he had wanted to hear. He crushed out the cigarette and carried his coffee into the large bedroom, where he undressed.

By eight o'clock, everything was ready--suitcases packed, kitchen cleaned, clothes bag hung in the car. He made sure for the third time that he had unplugged the coffee pot. Then he locked the door and carried his suitcase to the car.

No matter what the weather report had been, Nate could tell that it would be another hot day. The shimmering haze had already been burned from the city by the sun, and the sky was clear and brilliant. He had not thought about the telegram since he had started the coffee. As long as he was active, he could concentrate on the immediate task and put everything else out of his mind. He had always been able to do that. But now, driving almost automatically through the traffic, he thought about it, could no longer avoid thinking about it. He craned his neck to get a glimpse of himself in the rear-view mirror. Still nothing.
The Boss was not in yet when Nate got to the office; neither was his secretary. Nate started to write a note explaining that he had to leave town, but he changed his mind and decided to wait until eight-thirty, when the workday was supposed to begin. It was unusual for the Boss to come in after eight. Maybe he'd had a wet weekend.

Nate smiled.

Cordy, the Boss's secretary, strutted in about twenty after, walking her usual walk, as though she had nothing between her legs at all and would not know what to do with it if she had it. Nate suspected that she also wore a bra two sizes too snug. He remembered the day a strap broke and she flopped all over hell.

But she was a damn good executive secretary. She had perfected the vital art of smiling warmly at you as she stated (in a tone as frigid as she was) that the Boss could not possibly see you until a week from next Tuesday, and that even when he did see you he would not pay any attention to what you had to say to him because he had already told her that something exactly like your idea, which one of the other managers had asked about last week, was completely out of the question. And with dealers from outside the metropolitan area—straight down the hall they'd go, to some poor clerk, without even a remote possibility of getting past her. Damn good secretary. Knew her job.
"Good morning," she said, not bothering to look in his direction. She laid her purse on the desk and plugged in the coffee pot (which she efficiently prepared each night before going home).

"The Boss isn't out of town, is he?"

She sat at the desk and began arranging her daily appointment calendar. "No. Why?"

"He's later than usual." Nate saw her look at him for the first time. A sharp look. Was he criticizing the Boss? Had he taken the Boss's name in vain? Nate threw her a guileless grin. Horseshit, he thought.

"Why, he spent the weekend at the lake. Weren't you there?"

Damn. The lake. He'd forgotten all about it. The annual fishing-gambling-boozing party. "No, I couldn't make it." Top of the shitlist, there he was.

"Why?" She began to arrange the weekend's mail.

Why? Because he couldn't stand to watch everybody, especially himself, sucking ass, struggling into the thick, stifling coat of genuine imitation joviality? Because after a solid week of talking about cars and sales and money, he couldn't see spending the weekend talking about cars and sales and money? Because he didn't like anyone in the Company? Yes. But mainly because I preferred to spend the weekend in bed with Esther, he thought. How's that
grab you, Cordy? Know what that means? But he had to come up with a plausible excuse. The Boss would expect one, even though he wouldn't ask for one. Nate squirmed in the chair like a kindergarten kid afraid of wetting his pants.

The Boss whooshed into the office like a sudden summer storm, pelting them with a torrent of words. He was a tiny man with a round, pink face, but his resounding voice and staccato movements gave him an aura of boundless energy and strength. Nate rose to meet him. Without stopping, the Boss clapped him on the shoulder and led Nate toward his office.

"Cordy, have one of the clerks gas up my car and tell Larry to bring the Nemecek file in. Nate, you missed a hell of a weekend. Jesus to Jesus, what a party. Wish you'd been there. I wanted to see you first thing this morning about Nemecek. What's going on down there anyway? I mean, Jesus to Jesus, the guy's sitting on his ass. Market penetration's dropping every month. Larry tells me he won't even talk about a new building. Even a remodeling job." He guided Nate to a chair as he talked, sat down behind his big, bare desk, and opened his briefcase. His brilliant blue eyes, glittering hard against the soft pink of his face, riveted Nate to the chair. "Your reports on him make a lot of promises. He's going to add new salesmen. He's getting bids on a remodeling. He's looking at new
locations." The Boss threw the sheaf of reports on the desk. "And nothing's happening down there. What's going on?"

Nate worked his mouth silently. It had happened too fast. Check's business, the car business, was filed away somewhere in the back of his mind. In front of them were his father's death and the lake outing. He cleared his throat. "Boss, after all, the man's been there for twenty-five years." It meant nothing, and he knew it. But it was all he could think of.

"And it'll be another twenty-five years before he gets his ass in gear, at this rate. Either he's snowing you with a bunch of bullshit or you're in bed with him." The Boss paused, and Nate shifted in his chair, finding it hard to meet those cold eyes. He knew he was supposed to say something to fill the gap. Defend himself, perhaps. Make some kind of concrete commitment. But as the silence stretched between them like an unbridgable chasm, as he felt the Boss's anger seethe within that chasm like a flood tide, the only words that came to his mind were, My father is dead.

The Boss sighed. "Jesus to Jesus, boy, what's wrong with you? You're tough. You've always been tough. No god-dam crap. No screwing around. We could count on you." He riffled disdainfully through the reports. "Now you're running around with your finger up your ass. And for what?
For some old fart who's too outdated, too lazy, too goddam old to cut it anymore? Good old Check, sending in his kolaches and kolbase and goulash. Shit, the secretaries love him. The clerks love him. Hell, I like the old guy too. But affection don't sell cars."

The Boss shoved his chair back from the desk and leaped up. He trotted to the door. "Where the hell is Larry?"

"He's not in yet," Cordy replied.

"Jesus to Jesus." He turned back to Nate. "Okay, we're going down there as soon as Larry comes in. You'll lay it on him. Either he gets his ass in gear, or he's out. And I mean today. Larry's got his termination file ready. I want you to give him the word."

"I can't, Boss." Nate's voice was weak. He cleared his throat.

"You can't?" His eyes were as metallic as his voice.

Nate fumbled the telegram from his pocket. "My father, he died. I just found out this morning. I have to drive up to the funeral. To Iowa. That's what I wanted to tell you."

The Boss's voice softened, and he hit his forehead with the heel of his hand. "Jesus to Jesus. And I've been raking your ass over the coals. Jesus to Jesus." He laid a delicate hand on Nate's shoulder. His fatherly gesture.
Nate felt his stomach churn, and he almost gagged. The Boss exuded the heavy odors of hair oil and sweet after-shave lotion. His small hand was heavy and warm.

"I'm sorry, Nate. God, you should've told me before. Go ahead. Take a week off. We'll talk about Nemecek when you get back." He added a note of concern. "You need anything? You fixed okay for money?"

Nate nodded.

"Okay, get going. I'll send somebody down to your zone. Somebody good, I promise. I know you don't want your zone messed up while you're gone." He pounded Nate on the shoulder. It was supposed to be a sign of affection. "I really am sorry, Nate. I know how close you must have been to your father."

Nate wanted to puke. He said, "That's okay, Boss. Thanks." Fuck you, he thought. He felt the Boss's hand propelling him toward the door. He did not look at Cordy as he walked through the outer office.

When he was at the outside door, he heard the Boss boom, "Larry! Where the hell have you been? Jesus to Jesus, bring that Nemecek file in here."
Chapter Three

Nate cursed when he turned south on the Interstate. Force of habit, he thought, after so many months of turning south each Monday morning to go to his zone. But he did not turn around at the first interchange, or at the second. He let the car drift southward with the flow of traffic until he was out of town. Then he admitted that he was driving south on purpose, that he was going to see Check before he went to Iowa.

He had known Check before his promotion to zone manager, of course. Everyone in the office, from the Boss to the switchboard operator, knew Check in one way or another. To Nate he had been only a voice on the phone—a friendly voice, most of the time, rarely complaining or angry, always opening the conversation with a new joke, very vulgar and very funny. It would have spread throughout the office by the end of the day.

Unlike most of the dealers, Check never came to Dallas when he wanted a favor or when he thought he was getting screwed. To most of the people in the office, then, as to Nate, he was only a voice on the phone. Later, he told Nate that he figured a dozen kolaches were worth five trips to Dallas, and he was right. The boys in Nate’s department worked their asses off for Check. Most of them were just starting with the Company, and therefore had no real
authority. But they were also doing the most basic work of the Company, and they could really get things done for a dealer, since they didn't have to worry about protocol, procedures, and priorities.

At start-up time, when cars were scarce, Nate's boys could always find a way of accidentally diverting a unit from one of the city dealers to Check's little town of Weston. They always managed to lose all records of the diversion so that no one ever knew what had happened to that car. Somewhere the coder's desk and the assembly plant it had disappeared. The computer must have eaten it, they would say. And two weeks later, when Check had delivered it to his customer, the zone manager would bring a couple dozen kolaches to the department when he came in on Friday.

And at balance-out, when the dealers were struggling to keep from drowning in the metal vomit of the assembly plants, cars would mysteriously vanish from Check's allotment and just as mysteriously reappear on the lot of a Dallas or Fort Worth dealer. At the end of the week, the zone manager would struggle into the department with his load of kolaches. And the guys from Sales Planning, who had little contact with the dealers, would wander in and complain that they didn't see why Nate's boys should get all the goodies. Nate's department manager suspected, but he never asked.
Occasionally a city dealer would discover a shortage or surplus and would storm into the office, screaming all the way down the hall to the Boss's office that he was getting screwed and by God he would have someone's ass fired. The Boss would begin by defending his people and end up by saying that by God he would find out who the sonofabitch was. If it was a big dealer, a really big one, the Boss would clomp down the hall to Nate's department with him. If it was only a medium-big dealer the Boss would send him next door to the Assistant Manager's office, and the Assistant Manager (who was called the Ass by the clerks) would clomp down the hall with him.

But no matter how big the dealer was, no matter who clomped down the hall with him, the department's routine was always the same. The dealer and the clomper would descend on the department manager, a meek and sneaky little man who left the running of the department to Nate and therefore didn't know anything about it. He would say that he really didn't know anything about it and that it must be that bastard Nate again, and by God he would get to the bottom of it and have someone's ass for it. Then the three of them would burst in upon the clerks, flailing their arms and roaring (wringing his hands and simpering, in the case of the department manager), filled with the wrath of Jesus confronting the money-changers.
Nate would say that he sure didn't see how the dealer's allotment could be wrong, but by God he would check the records, and the clerks would surreptitiously close the boxes of kolaches, lick their fingers, and scurry around, digging up all the records of the past month's production. They would cover their desks with order forms and rebill forms and diversion forms and spec change forms and phone records and ponderous IBM runs, and after an hour they would have proven that they not only did not screw the dealer but had actually done him four favors which he didn't have coming.

As the clerks built their mountains of paper, the clomper and the department manager would make a slow transition from outrage to bewilderment. Then, perhaps because they knew they were being conned and had no chance of winning, perhaps because they were tired of having their time wasted by this whining dealer, they built their bewilderment and impatience and frustration into a violent anger and vented it upon the poor dealer, whose own initial rage was flaming even higher after the reams and files of paper were dumped on it. In the end, of course, the three of them would storm, clomp, and simper out of the office, committing verbal mayhem on each other, and Nate and his boys would jam the papers into the files, open the kolache boxes, and get back to work.
So, after two years with the Company, Nate felt that he knew Check personally. It was only when he got his promotion and went out to his zone for the first time that he realized he had never seen Check. He had torn into the zone with acid on his tongue and zeal in his heart. At the end of the first week, he had already advocated the replacement of two dealers—one an old fart who did not give a damn about his business, and the other a dumb shit who did not know a damn thing about his business—and he had told a third dealer that if he did not crank up his operation in used cars and parts he would be terminated or bankrupt or both at the end of three months.

His first week's itinerary called for a stop at Weston on the way back into Dallas. He pulled into the little town about noon on Friday, feeling the self-righteous satisfaction that was probably felt by the witch-hunters of Salem and the McCarthy era. He marched into Check's dealership armed with a thick file containing sales records, financial statements, registration records, and progress reports on current sales programs.

The showroom smelled like all other showrooms, a mixture of metal, plastic, rubber, gasoline, and that undefinable new-car smell. But here there was also the smell of dough and of hot coffee. A large coffee urn stood on a table just inside the door, and beside it lay an open box
of assorted kolaches. A dog, large, brown, and of no particular breed, sprawled on the floor from the table to the rear tire of the one car which filled the tiny showroom. The car glistened in the sunlight which streamed through the spotless windows, and it stood out against the richly paneled wall opposite. Even the wide, sliding door which led back to the service department was covered with the same paneling, so there was no break in the luxurious look of the wall. But Nate could see that it was difficult to maneuver cars through the sliding door into the showroom. He made a mental note: new facility needed.

At the rear of the car was a narrow swatch of carpet and a counter of the same paneling. Behind it, Nate saw two women—one frail and pink, with dazzling white hair and a handsome, angular face; the other about thirty-five or forty, big-boned and smiling. Her voice was rich and almost as deep as a man's.

"So you're the new roadrunner, huh? I'm Peg. This is Lily. Check's back in the office. Hey, Check! The new roadrunner's here."

"I'm Nate." He was a little awed by her.

"Aw, hell, you guys come and go so fast I don't bother to learn your names anymore. You're all roadrunners to me."

But Lily smiled, showing teeth so flawless they almost seemed false. She reached her thin arm over the counter
and took his hand. "Nate," she said, her voice as small as she was, "I've looked forward to meeting you. I'm Check's wife. He's told me so much about you."

"He has?" That was when Nate realized he had never seen Check before, that Check was only a voice on the phone. But he also believed that what she had said was more than the usual meaningless formula; her brilliant smile and the warmth in her voice made him believe that she really had looked forward to meeting him, that Check really had told her about him.

Then Check's familiar voice bellowed from the doorway at the end of the counter. "Nate! Come on in here. Don't waste your time talkin' to them old women."

Lily chuckled and motioned him toward the door. The walls of Check's office were of the same dark paneling, but they were covered by rows of framed documents and pictures. The desk, old and battered, took up nearly all the floor space in the cubicle, leaving room only for two straight-backed chairs, the desk chair, and a wastebasket. The desk was buried deep in papers, ledgers, and order books. Check stood up as Nate entered. He was short and broad, his back very straight, emphasizing his wide barrel chest. The hand he extended to Nate was brown and thick-fingered, large in proportion to the rest of him.
"Hi, you old bastard," he said as he indicated one of the straight-backed chairs. "I knew you were gettin' your damn promotion, but I don't know why they had to send you down here. Why didn't they let you go out and screw up the West Texas dealers?" His laugh was a voiceless wheeze that shook his body and squeaked the springs of the swivel chair. He closed his eyes when he laughed, and Nate noticed that his lower jaw was at an angle from the rest of his round, bronzed face.

"I don't know, Check. I guess they figured this zone was already so screwed up that I couldn't make it any worse." He laid the thick file on the desk. "For instance, I looked through your financial statements last night. Do you realize that your return on investment is about half what it should be?" He thumbed through the papers until he found the statements. He handed them to Check. "Take a look at your net profit figures, there, and compare them with your total investment. Hell, Check, they're way down. Only ten per cent or so."

Check studied the statements. Then he laid them down. "That's not bad," he said.

"Not bad? Check, it's terrible. Why, twelve per cent is the minimum return."

"Who says?" Check grinned at him. Nate felt himself getting angry.
"That's the minimum Company standard," he said. Check knows that, he thought. He's just playing dumb.

"Well now, Nate, who's got to live on that money, the Company or me?" His voice was slow, its drawl exaggerated—a "good ole boy" accent. "I do, of course, and that there ten per cent is plenty for me. Hell, I pay my bills and still put money in the bank."

"But look, Check . . ."

"Hey, man, did you see that old dog out there?"

Nate nodded. He wondered what the dog had to do with return on investment. But this first week had taught him to be patient with the roundabout ways of the country dealers.

"Well, let me tell you about him." Check wheezed again, and the chair squeaked. "See, he's not my dog. He belongs to old man Kozelski down the street, the butcher. But he thinks he belongs to me. Follows me everywhere, all day long, and everybody in town knows it. Whenever I go to the cafe or the bakery or like that, he just sits down on the sidewalk in front of that door and waits for me to come out again." He leaned across the cluttered desk and lowered his voice to a half-whisper. "Now, you wouldn't think a little old town like this'd have a whorehouse, would you? But it does, see? About halfway down that alley across the street there's a flight of stairs, right across from the back door of the bank. One of the best whorehouses in Texas up there, they tell me."
"Anyway," he began to wheeze again, and tears rolled down his furrowed cheeks. Nate was laughing, too, infected by Check's contagious wheezing. Check wiped his eyes.

"Anyway, I went down to the bank the other day, down the alley as usual, and that old dog followed me like he always does. But when I came back out ..." He stifled a wheeze.

"When I came back out, there's that damn dog sittin' at the foot of the whorehouse steps, and about half the town standin' around, waitin' for me to come down the stairs." He collapsed in laughter and pounded one big fist on the desk, strewing papers all over the floor. Tears were now streaming from Nate's eyes, and his jaw ached.

"And when I get back to the store, here's Lily, madder than hell, tappin' her foot that way, you know. 'Where were you, Harold?' she says. Now I know she's really mad, 'cause she called me 'Harold.' 'At the bank,' I say. 'Don't lie to me,' she says, 'I saw that dog.'" They were both sobbing now as they laughed. Nate held his aching sidea, but he could not stop.

Finally, when his laughter had subsided to silent chuckles and he had wiped the tears from his eyes, he saw that Lily had come in. Check had stopped wheezing, but he too was still shaking with chuckles, still squeaking the chair.

"Were you telling him about the dog?" she said.
Check nodded, unable to speak yet.

"You must have gotten to him, Nate. He always tells stories like that when he wants to change the subject. Don't believe him, either. I knew where he was all the time. Why, the old fool couldn't even make it up those stairs, let alone do anything once he climbed them."

"Aw, Lily," Check said, "you know better." He reached across the desk and took her hand. Nate was struck by the contrast—her frail, white hand so tiny in Check's big one. He felt a warmth which they seemed to radiate, a unity made even stronger by the contrast between them. He thought of Leslie and of the empty house in Dallas. He wondered again if the job was worth it.

Lily blushed and turned her face away. "Frank Hlavati's out here," she said. "He wants to talk about that pickup he looked at last week."

Nate stood up and moved his chair so that Check could edge around the desk and follow her out the door.

"'Scuse me, Nate," he said. "I'll be back as soon as I sell him. Next week, probably. These damn Bohemians."

Nate rifflled through the papers in his file, but they no longer seemed as important as they had when he came in. He laid the file amid the clutter on the desk and looked around the tiny room. Just above him on the wall hung an enlarged snapshot of Check, a man Nate didn't know, and
Scott Richards, another of Nate's dealers. Each of them was holding up a glass, and across the picture was written "Three Bastards" in Check's scrawled hand. Beside the picture hung a diploma from the University of Texas, proclaiming that Harold J. Nemecek had received his Master of Arts degree in 1925.

"Well, I'll be damned," Nate murmured to himself.

Beneath the diploma was another framed document. Nate stood up to study it more closely.

"To Harold J. (Check) Nemecek, for his twenty-five years of service as mathematics teacher, football coach, high school principal, and superintendent of schools, the community of Weston, Texas, gives its devotion and gratitude."

The rest of the document consisted of signatures. Nate began to count them, but he lost track at 120 or so. God, he thought, a whole town giving you something like that. Everybody in town probably signed the damn thing. He thought again of Leslie's story and of the empty house in Dallas. Shit, he thought, it doesn't make any difference. Check still sold out, like everybody else. Like me. What do you want, gratitude or money?

He sat down once more and picked up the file, riffling through it until he found the sales and registration records. Check came back into the room.
"I told you it'd be next week before that damned Bohemian makes up his mind." He wheezed a laugh. "He thinks he's keepin' me up in the air. Thinks he's got me worried."

"Aren't you worried? You couldn't close him." Nate's voice had an edge to it. The effects of the dog story had worn off.

"Aw, that ole boy is just playin' hard to get. Hell, I've known him since he was in diapers. Played football for me."

"But what's to keep him from going down the street? What if they make him a better deal?" Nate stood up. He looked down at Check and consciously hardened his expression. "Look at these, Check." He waved the registration records before him. "You're being outsold in everything: cars, trucks, even used units. How many of your good ole boys bought from the dealer down the street? How many of your football players?"

"Aw, them records don't mean nothin'." Check sidled around the desk and rummaged through the papers on it. "Looky here," he said, holding up two lists, "these are straight offa the pink registration slips at the courthouse. One car registered to his sales manager's address. Another one. Here's a truck registered to his own address. A car registered to a salesman's house. Another car to his sales
manager's." He threw the lists down on his desk. "Why, the folks he's sellin' to aren't even in our market area, don't you see? He's fakin' those addresses to get more registrations. Otherwise, dealers in Waco or Hillsboro or somewheres would get the credit."

"Don't you do the same thing?"

Check did not reply.

"See, that's not the point." Nate picked up the two lists. "It doesn't make any difference whether the registrations are fake or not. The sales aren't fake. The point is that these people bought cars from him instead of you. That's why you ought to be worried about good old Frank Whatisname."

Nate paused, but Check still said nothing. He just stared at the cluttered desk and then sat down in the squeaking chair. Nate looked down at Check's ruddy bald head with its fringe of white hair. He thought, suddenly, of his grandfather. The same head he had patted, saying "That's okay, Grandpa. You're going to be all right. Don't cry, Grandpa." But then he had been powerless to help. He could do nothing but sit and watch. Now, though, he had some power. He could do something to help Check, even if it meant pushing harder than he wanted to push this old man. But when he spoke, the edge was gone from his voice, and he could not force it back in.
"Look, Check, I've read the thing there on the wall. I know these people think a lot of you. But gratitude doesn't sell cars. So what are you going to do? How are you going to get sales up?"

"Hell, I don't know." Check's voice was tired. He looked at his watch. "Let's go get some goulash."

Nate shook his head in self-disgust as the red car purred southward down the Interstate. "Let's go get some goulash." Check's answer for everything. Or, "You want some kolaches?" And Nate had given in to him. That first time, and every time since. "You're in bed with him," the Boss had said. Was he? If so, who was getting screwed? Check. Screwing himself. "Shit," Nate said to a roadrunner darting off into the mesquite. If he had been a little harder, a little tougher. But he was such a good old man. Grandpa. No, Check. Devotion and gratitude. Gratitude doesn't sell cars. "Hell, I like the old guy, too. But that don't sell cars," the Boss had said. Nate's mouth twisted into a bitter smile. Devotion and gratitude. They don't sell cars.

Nate turned on the radio. His father's voice filled the car. "Young love, first love, filled with true devotion. Young love, our love, we share with deep emotion."
"God damn!" Nate shouted. He twisted the dial viciously. The jazz station in Belton was safe. They never played country music. He watched the land roll by and tried not to think. It was poor country, poor land, rocky and dry. No trees. Only scruffy mesquite and scraggy brown grass. A monotonous brown. Brown dirt, thin and pale. Grass burned brown under the broiling sun. Even the sky was boiling brown sometimes when the wind blew in, carrying half of West Texas with it. But today the sky was blue and cloudless, and the morning sun baked the dry air and brown dirt and the big red car that purred down the road, tearing whorls of brown dust from the shoulder.

Peg gave him a look of mock amazement when he walked into the showroom. The dog was stretched out in a patch of sunlight beside the door. Peg straddled the dog as she drew a cup of coffee from the urn.

"Hey, roadrunner, what're you doing here on Monday? And, my God, it's not even lunchtime. You won't get any goulash or kolbase at ten in the morning."

Nate did not banter with her as he usually did. "Is Check in the office?"

"Sure," she said. Her voice sounded a little hurt at his curtness, but Nate ignored it.

Check's face broadened into that lopsided grin when Nate walked in. "Hey, man, what's up? It's not Friday."
Check closed the ledger he had been studying and balanced it on top of the mound of papers covering the desk. "Hey, I got a good one for you. You hear about . . . ."

Nate cut him off. "Check, I have to talk to you." His voice was more urgent than he'd intended.

"Sure, Nate. Sit down." Check looked bewildered.

For a moment, Nate wondered why he had come here. What was he going to say? What did he hope to accomplish? He slumped into the chair. "Check, I . . . ." He searched for words. "I guess I haven't been a very good road man for you."

"Aw, hell, man, we get along fine. Nothin' wrong with you." A look of concern swept over his face. "Say, Nate, you ain't in trouble are you? They ain't gonna fire you or somethin'?"

Nate shook his head. "No, nothing like that. It's just that . . . . well, I just haven't done a good job. I mean . . . ." He glanced around the room, looking for words, unable to meet Check's eyes. He forced himself to say what he knew must be said. "Look, Check, I just talked to the Boss. He's got a termination file on you."

"Shit! That's what's buggin' you? Hell, man, they've had that old file for years. That don't worry me none."

Nate felt sweat trickle down his sides. "No. This time he means it. He was going to come down here with me today to terminate you."
"I don't see him nowhere. I mean, he's a little fart, but he ain't that small." Check attempted a wheeze, but it didn't work.

"Check, goddam it, I'm serious. I told him I couldn't. I have to go to Iowa. My father just died." Nate's fists were clenched, and the twisted hand, the one with the scar, was starting to ache. He tried to relax it, but he could not.

"Hey, Nate, I'm sorry to hear that. Jesus, I'm really sorry."

Nate slammed his scarred fist down upon the desk, and pain lanced up his arm. "Listen, will you? That's not important. I'm telling you that as soon as I get back, he's going to come down here and terminate you. Close you down. Get rid of you, dammit." He was shouting, and when he stopped, the room was very quiet.

Check did not say anything. He stared at the papers strewn over the desk. He picked up a snowfall paperweight and turned it over and over in his hands. Nate was aware of Peg standing in the doorway behind him. He watched Check's hands turning the paperweight, watched the way the big veins moved across the tendons under his skin. Out back, a mechanic cursed as a tool clattered to the floor.

Check sighed and slouched forward. He seemed very small and very old. "Okay." He looked at Nate and grinned that
crooked grin, but his eyes were dull and tired. "So what
do you want me to do? What are you going to do?"

Nate could not meet his gaze. He shrugged his shoul-
ders. He was thinking of helplessness, of the smoothness
of a bald head under his twisted hand. Don't cry, Grandpa,
he was thinking. "Nothing to do," he said. "It's too
late."

"Yeah, I guess it is." He watched the snow settle in
the paperweight. "Guess I'm just not much of a business-
man."

"Don't say that, Check." Peg walked into the room.
"It's not your fault. It's his." She looked down at Nate,
tears of fury and frustration in her eyes.

"Peg," Check said.

"It's true," she said, her voice breaking. "What did
you ever do for Check? Not a damn thing. Coming in here
every Friday and laughing and swapping jokes. Going out
for goulash and beer. Going fishing on Saturdays. And
never a word about business. Not a damn word. You never
helped us a bit, Mister. I hope you're satisfied."

"Peg!" Check shouted, but she burst into tears and
ran from the office.

"You know she's right, don't you?" Nate said.

Check turned the paperweight over again and watched
the snow fill it. "No, it's not your fault. You tried,
I guess." The dog came in and stretched himself out beside the desk. Check reached down and scratched him behind the ears. "No, it's my fault as much as yours." He put the paperweight on the desk. "You know that. Hell, it don't do no good to blame yourself. I was the one who always changed the subject. You were just being kind to an old fart."

"Christ, Check, that's what I mean. I should've been harder. I shouldn't have let you con me so easily. Hell, that's my job, pounding dealers over the head, kicking them in the ass until they do something."

"You tried."

"Shit. I didn't pound on you at all."

Check stood up and edged around the desk, stepping over the inert dog. He put one hand on Nate's shoulder. When he spoke, his accent had disappeared. "Did I ever tell you why I quit teaching? I know I didn't. It was my sixteenth year as principal, my eighth year as superintendent. In a little town like this, a little school like ours, there just isn't enough money for full-time administrators. Not really enough work, either. So I still taught one class, and I coached the football team as well. It was 1941, and the war was raging in Europe. Many of us knew it was only a matter of time before we got into it, before the kids in our classrooms would be dying in the mud somewhere."
Nate felt that he was listening to a stranger, a man he had never known before. Check’s voice was calm and reflective, as though he were thinking out loud.

"I had one big senior on the squad that fall. Strong as an ox. So big that I had to order a special uniform for him. But he was the worst player I had. Kids half his size could push him all over the field. So one day in practice, I chewed him out. ‘Why don't you hit?’ I said, ‘Why don't you flatten somebody? You a sissy?’ And he said, ‘Gosh, coach, I couldn't do that. I might hurt 'em.’"

Check stopped talking. Nate could hear his breathing deepen, as though he were trying to control his emotions.

Finally, he said, "I thought it was funny, of course. Laughed like hell. But the kid died the following summer. Blown up by a grenade on some little island. And I told the school board I wouldn't coach football anymore. I just couldn't teach kids to hit each other. Not after that. And I couldn't bear the thought of seeing those kids in my classes, knowing that they'd be learning to kill six weeks after graduation. So I started a used-car lot."

Nate felt Check’s hand tighten on his shoulder. The dog sat up, yawned, and scratched himself.

"You remind me of that kid, Nate. You don't really want to pound anybody. I told him to quit football. Maybe you should quit the Company."
He stood for a few seconds without speaking. Then he pulled his hand away and said, "Shit, man, let's cut this out. We're just crying on each other's shoulder. They're going to terminate me, and there's not a damn thing we can do about it. So what the hell?" He started out the door. "Come on. You got to get on the road. Take some kolaches with you, okay?"

Peg was working on some repair orders when they walked from the office. She did not look up as they passed her desk. Check closed the box of kolaches by the coffee urn and handed it to Nate.

"Be careful," he said.

"Always am," Nate said. He almost choked.

They shook hands awkwardly, and Nate walked out to the red car. As he drove away, he could see Check standing in the showroom, looking after him. Nate pretended not to see his wave. But in his mind he saw faded gray eyes filled with tears. He felt the warm, smooth head beneath his twisted hand and heard his voice saying, "That's okay, Grandpa. You're going to be all right. Don't cry, Grandpa."
Chapter Four

It was noon by the time he got through Dallas and the highway narrowed to four lanes once more. He opened the box of kolaches and began to eat them. He wished he had stopped in Dallas to get a carton of milk or a Pepsi or something, but it was too late now. The kolaches reminded him again of Check, and Check reminded him of Grandpa, and Grandpa reminded him of his father. Those three men had whirled in his mind all the way from Weston to Dallas. He could not stop thinking of them, of things that had happened with them. Even the radio did not help. He switched it off.

But most of all, he thought of himself and how he had come to be what and where he was—whatever and wherever he was. He was no longer the lean, suntanned Youth of the stories he and Leslie used to write about themselves; he starring as the Youth, Roger; she as the Girl, Natalie. Such profound stories they had been, fraught with drama, symbolism, and moody introspection. The Youth and the Girl, lean and beautiful, searching their minds and hearts for something to give true meaning to their empty, dissipated lives.

He laughed. Good soap opera stuff. The Youth, twenty-six years old now, pale as a terrified albino, his belt straining at its last notch, his neck spilling over the
top of his white collar, the firm line of his smooth jaw buried somewhere under even smoother jowls. His ideals buried somewhere under sales quotas and house payments and cocktail parties.

The Youth, setting out now on a journey, going to bury his father. To lay away the past and find a brighter tomorrow. God, what crap. A brighter tomorrow. Coming back to terminate Check. He wondered what Check would do. Could he go back to teaching now? To coaching? Perhaps it had been long enough. Check would be a good teacher, a good coach. Nate wished Check had been his coach.

The smell of wintergreen and sweat and bandages and canvas in the locker room. The feel of nervousness in his belly, nervous sweat trickling down from his armpits to his rib pads. He had wiped the sweat off with his tee-shirt and then put the tee-shirt on over the rib pads. The other guys were laughing and joking among themselves, snapping asses with towels, threatening to fill jockstraps with wintergreen, that kind of stuff. Nate was by himself, more dressed than they were because he wasn't included in the horseplay, left out because he wasn't a starter and probably never would be. Too light, too slow, and too kindhearted, the coach had said. And, of course, the bad hand. But he could overcome the bad hand if he wanted to, if he had the desire. Get mean. Get tough. Hit! Hit! Hit! Drive through that man! Grind him into the dirt!
He wrestled himself into his shoulder pads and laced them up tight. Then he pulled the purple jersey over his head and tucked it into his pants. None of the others was dressed yet, so he sat on the bench to wait for the coach's pregame pep talk.

"He's around here somewhere," the coach said as he came into the locker room. "Oh, yeah, over there."

Nate looked up. All the noise in the room had stopped. Down the aisle between the benches walked his grandfather. Rough, callused hands dangled from the sleeves of his blue Sunday suit; a white collar stretched tight around his thick neck. Someone else was walking behind him, but Grandpa was so broad that he blocked Nate's view. Nate stood up. He could see over Grandpa's shoulder.

"Dad!" he cried, "Grandpa! What are you doing here?"

He felt proud in his uniform. Grandpa had driven two hundred miles to see him. And Dad ... he didn't know.

Grandpa laughed, and Nate could smell beer on his breath. "I figured you'd be surprised. I told you he'd be surprised, didn't I, Lute." He laughed again, punching Nate's arm.

Lute was expensively dressed, as usual, but his clothes did not look new. He was weaving back and forth, and he put one hand on a locker to steady himself. His voice was thick and blurry. "God damn. This place smells like a crib in a whorehouse."
Grandpa paid him no attention. He grabbed Nate by the shoulder pads, and his breath full in Nate's face churned up the queasiness in his stomach. Grandpa just stared at Nate, his gray eyes, liquor-bright, showing admiration, his weathered face a little redder than usual.

The other guys were looking at them, especially at Lute. Of course, Nate thought, they knew who his father was. Had been, anyway. Most of them had never seen a recording star up close, even a drunk, has-been recording star. He thought of the Kansas City motel room and of Leroy's money and of that red-smeared face. He wanted to vomit.

But Grandpa was smiling at him, his thin, snuff-stained lips stretched wide, and Nate grinned back. Self-conscious. Embarrassed.

"By God, Natty, you look like a man in that outfit. Don't he, Lute? Looks like a real man."

Nate smiled tentatively at his father. Lute swayed forward, his blue eyes out of focus. His moist mouth twisted into a sneer beneath the beak of his broken nose. "Man? I don't see no man. This looks like the little shit that ran out on me in K.C."

Nate felt his face redden, and tears filled his eyes, tears of embarrassment and frustration. He averted his face so Grandpa would not see. But Daniel had already whirled
away from him, sending Lute sprawling with one heavy hand. Lute's knees buckled over a bench, and he crashed against the metal lockers. He lay still, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth to the fraying white collar of his shirt.

"Get up," Daniel snarled at him. "Get up. Look at your son. What do you mean, calling him shit? He's doing something that takes guts and strength. Takes a man to do." He reached down, grabbed Lute's suit coat, and pulled him to his feet.

Nate looked at the other guys. They were all very busy putting on pads and jerseys. Christ, he thought, Jesus Christ. He felt a pang of guilt for taking the Lord's name in vain.

"What did you ever do?" Daniel was saying. "You ever play football? You ever do anything that took guts?" He had one hand on the nape of Lute's neck, shaking him like a dirty rag. "No. You diddle on that damn guitar. You call that a man's work?"

"Christ, Dad, you're breakin' my neck," Lute slobbered.

"I should break your damn neck. Who did the running out, anyway? Not this boy." Grandpa shook him again and turned Lute's head to face Nate. "Now you look at your son. Tell him you're sorry. Tell him he's a man. More man than you'll ever be."
"Fuck you," Lute said. He wrenched free of Daniel's grip. The three of them stood eying each other like strange dogs. Lute pulled a brilliant white handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the blood from his lips. 

"You tell him whatever you want to," he said. His voice was still blurry, but brittle. "He still looks like a damn candyass to me."

Daniel lunged at him.

"Grandpa!" Nate shouted. He grabbed Daniel's arm hard. He felt his grandfather's body quivering beneath his twisted hand. He could feel the rigid muscles straining against themselves. Then he felt them relax.

"You're right, Natty," Daniel said. "He's not worth whipping." He turned and walked away down the room. The players moved out of his way as he passed. One of them clapped Grandpa on the back and said, "Good punch, Gramps."

Daniel stopped and glared at him. The boy backed away. "That don't make a man, son." He walked on out.

After he had left, Lute kept dabbing at his mouth even though the blood was gone. Nate watched him, unsure of what to do.

Lute finally said, "That old fart."

Nate did not say anything. He could think only of his hatred for his father.

"'Ever play football?' he says." He put the handkerchief away and brushed off his clothes. "Ask him sometime how I had
to get my ass home every night for chores. I had to work like a man. Never had time for no kid games." He tried to look hard at Nate, but his eyes wouldn't focus. "If I'd a had time, though, you can bet your sweet ass . . ." He laughed. "You can bet your candy ass I wouldn't be no fuckin' benchwarmer."

He tried to stalk away, but he was too unsteady. He weaved down the aisle between benches. The players parted for him as they had for Daniel, and he passed by them without a word. The coach re-entered the room as Lute reached the door.

"That son of yours is a pretty good man," the coach said.

"Shit." Lute weaved out of the room.

The coach looked after him a moment, then shrugged his shoulders and blew the whistle. "Everybody up!" he shouted.

Nate found it hard to move his feet toward the other players. He did not look at them.

"Hey, Gnat," one of them whispered, pronouncing the "G," "tell us how it feels to have an old man who's a big record star."

He glanced down at the speedometer. He was speeding again. "Damm," he said aloud. His bad hand was gripping the wheel so hard it hurt. He shook the hand to loosen it up. What the hell put that in his mind? He hadn't thought about that in a long time--forgotten it, almost. Jesus Christ.
He shook his head and grinned bitterly. "That don't make a man, son," Grandpa had said. But what did? Had Grandpa been a man? What was it that was man-ness in him?

Nate tried to picture Grandpa in his mind. It seemed so long ago that he had died. What was it? Eight years? Nine? He had lost track. It had been the year he had started college. Fifty-seven. Nine years ago.

Grandpa. Daniel Parker. Big. Big-boned. Big neck. Big arms and legs and hands and chest. He remembered being caught up in those big arms, being squeezed against that big chest, feeling the rough denim of the bib overalls under his hands, feeling the stubble of Grandpa's cheek rasp against his own.

"And who is Grandpa's boy?"

"Me!"

"And who are you?"

"Me! Natty Parker!"

"And who is Natty Parker?"

"Grandpa's boy!"

And Grandpa would laugh and squeeze him again. He would try to hug Grandpa back, but Grandpa was too big. He couldn't get his arms around that big chest, so he would wiggle loose and hug Grandpa around the neck. Grandpa would pinch him on the bottom and give him a stubbly kiss on the cheek.

Nate found that he was smiling to himself, remembering the smells of acrid sweat and cow manure and Copenhagen snuff.
Grandpa was a lipper. He would put a wad of snuff—he called it snoose—between his teeth and lower lip, so that his lip always bulged out. He carried a tin can with him around the house and would spit tobacco juice in it all the time. Natty thought it smelled bad in the can, but it made Grandpa smell good.

Natty had tried it once; Grandpa had given him a little pinch of it. It tasted bad and burned his mouth. Tears came to his eyes, but he wouldn't spit it out. It was a grown-up thing, and he felt very grown-up. His mouth filled with spit, and he was afraid he would swallow it. He spat into Grandpa's snoose can over and over, but it wouldn't stop. Finally, he decided that he had had it in his mouth long enough, and he spat the whole wad into the can.

Grandpa laughed. "By God," he said, "you didn't get sick. I thought you'd puke all over. But you handled it like a man, Natty." He set the boy on his knee and said, "That's Grandpa's big boy, by God. Grandpa's big boy." And Natty grinned and stuck out his chest and felt proud. Then he threw up on Grandpa's bib overalls and on the chair. Grandma was very mad, and she yelled at Grandpa for a long time.

"But I didn't mean nothin', Ag," he kept saying.

"Daniel, don't tell me that. You knew the boy would get sick. You did it on purpose, and you know it."

"Now, I know better, Ag," he shouted, "and anyway he wanted some, didn't you, Natty?"
Natty was crying too hard to answer.

"He's just a little boy, Daniel. Just a little lovin's." She gathered him in to her soft body. "And you see that you treat him like a little boy from now on. No coffee, no beer, and no snoose! You hear me?"

"Aw, Ag," he said, and Natty heard him stomp off upstairs to change his clothes.

Grandpa had come from Missouri when he was a young man. He had worked his way up with a railroad construction crew. Nate remembered their neighbor, Henri Marchant, kidding Grandpa over and over again about it.

"By golly, ole Dan he come up here layin' track. He so dumb he don't know how to foller dem track back home again. Had to stay up here, by golly." And Henry (they all called him Henry Marshall) would split his wide face open in a laugh and slap his short, bowed legs, and all the men would laugh too, even though they'd heard Henry say the same thing for years. They would pass around a bottle of Henry's homemade wine (which smelled the way Henry smelled) and Grandpa would splutter as though he were highly insulted.

Finally he would say something like, "Why you damn old Frenchy, at least I can talk. Been here twenty years, and you can't even talk yet."

"By golly," Henry would laugh, "you one fine man, Dan. One fine dumb man."
And they would take swigs from the bottle, wiping its neck on their shirt sleeves. Natty would get a sip of the wine too, like the rest of them. It was always sweet and red. He liked the taste of its sweetness and the warmth it spread through his belly. He would take only two swallows, like the rest of them, and then politely wipe the neck on his sleeve before passing it on to the next man.

He did not know how Grandpa and Grandma had met. He knew only that she had been living at home with her parents and had been teaching in one of the small country schools in the township. He did now know how they got the farm or when they had been married. He had seen their wedding pictures, though.

Very stiff and formal. Very young. Grandma in a long white satin dress and a veil that had little white beads which looked like pussywillows. Her skin seemed very smooth and soft, not like it was now. Her hair short, dark. Her face was beautiful. And Grandpa in a striped suit and vest. A white collar that seemed too high for his short neck, accenting his wide lantern jaw. His face almost a rectangle, with ears sticking out like Natty's. An unruly shock of dark hair. His eyes were sharp and close-set beneath a wide forehead, and he was wearing button shoes. Lute looked like Grandma. Natty looked like Grandpa.

When he first saw the picture he didn't believe it was them. They were skinny, and their skin was tight and smooth.
And Grandpa had lots of hair, and Grandma's hair was not long and white. But after his mother had told him, he could see that it was true. He could see that Grandpa had looked like Grandpa even then. But he thought it was too bad that Grandma had become fat, because she had been really beautiful. He told his mother that he would never get old and wrinkled and fat. She laughed and swatted him lightly on the bottom. After that, he would study Grandma and Grandpa secretly sometimes and compare them with the picture.

Grandma noticed it once and said, "Natty, why are you staring at me like that?"

"I'm not staring, Grandma," he lied, and he felt himself blush. "I was just looking." Before she could question him further, he ran away upstairs to look at the picture again.

He was passing through Denton now. It seemed that he had been on the road for a long time, but only an hour had passed since he left Dallas. The kolaches had made him thirsty, and he pulled off at the first Texaco station he saw to gas the car and get a Pepsi. The air was stifling when he climbed out of the car. The sun's rays reflected off the white building, and Nate felt sweat pop out of his body at once. While the attendant pumped gas, he walked into the office and got his Pepsi. He saw a Central United States map and picked it up. He studied the route carefully, even though he nearly had it
memorized. Interstate 35 was still not completed through Missouri. Oh well, a few miles of narrow road was no problem. He glanced at his watch. Should be able to make it by two in the morning. He grinned and touched his ribs lightly, thinking about two o'clock this morning, and Esther, and the Olympic push-up title. It was a long time ago.

The Pepsi was too sweet on top of the kolaches. He drank only half of it and poured the rest down the toilet. He drank some water to wash the stickiness from his mouth. Then he signed the charge slip, thanked the attendant, and hit the road again.

It felt good to be back in the air-conditioned car. The sun was just beginning to stream through his window. It would be a hell of a lot hotter by the time he got to Oklahoma. He wished again that he had bought some sunscreens for the windows. The tinted glass helped, but not enough.

He had not paid any attention to the rolling land and trees between Dallas and Denton, but now that they were behind him, he missed them. The land was flat and featureless again, more brown dirt and scrub, perfect land for horned toads and lizards, but not much else. Here and there he could already see indications of the scrawny red soil of Oklahoma, the soil that looked so parched and lifeless.

Sagging, unkempt fences lined the highway, so unlike the fences that Grandpa had put up. The strands were twisted and
loose, and the posts were just old crooked tree limbs, some of them rotted through and collapsed, pulling the barbed wire down with them. He thought of Grandpa's fences, of the times he had helped Grandpa string them. The straight, solid posts, their creosote smelling sweet and pungent at once in the afternoon sun, their smell blending with the dozens of other farm smells—the hay drying in the fields, the rich, fecund smells of the hay and straw and manure and animals in the barn, and the old wood smell of the barn itself. The smell of dirt like the smell of spring, the smell of life. And the smell of himself and Grandpa. Their sweat, the soap and bleach in their clothes, Grandpa's snoose.

But most of all, the smell of hot creosote on those black posts. Grandpa would get on the tractor and pull the barbed wire taut around the posts. Then he would set the brakes, and the two of them would pound staples (steeples, Grandpa called them) deep into the posts, pounding just right, for if the staples were left too loose, the wire would sag; if they were too deep, the wire would be pinched and weakened.

Grandpa had told him once about a neighbor who had stretched his wire too tight and then had pounded a staple in too far. When he pinched the wire, it had snapped and had neatly cut off his left hand. Nate remembered seeing the man at threshing and baling times. He had been fascinated by that hook where the man's hand should have been, and he was thankful that his own hand was merely scarred and twisted a little.
Grandpa's fences were always tight and straight. They showed evidence of care and pride. These Texas fences were slovenly by comparison. But they went on unbroken for miles, while Grandpa's had encircled only a few acres. Nate supposed that creosoted fence posts were expensive if you had to buy enough for eight or ten miles of fence. He decided he was being too hard on the Texans.

Perhaps his memories of Grandpa and of the farm were idealized. He was certain they must be. But still he could not remember any pain or sorrow or real unpleasantness associated with Grandpa and the farm. He had often stayed there with Grandpa and Grandma in the summers after his father had left, and no matter how hard he tried, he could not remember a rainy day during any of those summers. He could not remember crying (except for the time he had tried snooze) or being bored or being punished.

That's how he knew his memories had to be idealized, for Grandpa was firm and strict and permitted no boyish nonsense. The tools and the grounders, he had forgotten those times. But even so, only two punishments in all those summers... there had to be more.

He had been much younger when Lute punished him, and yet he could remember vividly Lute's knuckles scraping the back of his head. Lute liked to hit him on the head, not hard, but sharply, rapping him on the back of the head with the second knuckles of two fingers. He used a razor strop and a belt, too.
Nate could not forget the belt. But what Lute really liked to do was to hit him on the back of the head or rub his knuckles hard up and down the back of his head so that the short hair was pushed the wrong way.

It was odd, but Nate could never remember what he had been punished for. He remembered being hit and being whipped with the strop or the belt, but he could not remember why it had been done. Except for the last time, of course. He could not forget that, and he had tried often.

He had been six years old, in first grade, and he had had a fight with Jerry Chappell. He had lost the fight. He ran home, crying and ashamed—ashamed of losing the fight, ashamed of crying, ashamed of running home. And once he was home, he knew he was trapped. He could not face the others again.

His mother comforted him, washed his face, and put some kind of salve on his cut lip. "Now run upstairs and change your shirt, and then we'll go back to school. I'll explain to Sister why you're late."

"No," he said.

"But you have to go back to school, honey."

"I'll never go back there," he screamed, tears rolling down his cheeks once more. He tried to whirl away, but his mother caught him by the arm.
"Because you lost the fight?" she said. "Because the other kids will make fun of you?"

"No," he lied. But he knew it was useless. She saw through him. She understood how he felt. And he was even more ashamed because she saw his shame and his lie.

"Why then?"

He did not answer. He looked at his shoes and tried to stop crying.

She said, "Natty, every man gets beat once in a while."

"Even Daddy?" He looked at the picture on the mantel. Daddy had been gone for a long time, but his mother had told him that Daddy was a brave soldier.

"Yes, even Daddy. And that doesn't make him any less a man. Do you know what I mean?"

He shook his head. The tears were under control now.

"I mean that losing a fight doesn't make you a sissy. But running away does. A man has to learn to accept defeat and to try again. You don't have to be brave to fight; you only have to be scared. But it takes a real man to stand up and look everyone in the eye after he's been beaten. It takes bravery and courage." She was hugging him now, and he could smell her powder and the bleach in her clothes.

Then she held him by the shoulders at arm's length. "Look at me, Natty." He stared at his shoes. She shook him.

"Look at me, son." He raised his head slowly. "Only a
sissy runs away and hides and feels sorry for himself. Only a coward does that. Are you a coward?" He shook his head. "Say it, then."

"What?"

"Say, 'I am not a coward. I will go back to school.'" His head drooped once more. She shook him again. "Look at me and say it."

"I'm not a coward," he quavered.

"Look at me and say it out loud."

"I'm not a coward," he shouted.

"Say it all."

"I'm not a coward! I will go back to school!"

She hugged him tight. "That's my big man. Now change your clothes, and we'll go."

Suddenly he felt very proud and very big. "You don't have to come with me, do you, Mommy?"

"No," she said, "I suppose I don't have to."

"Could I just take a note for Sister and go by myself?"

"If you want to," she said.

"Good." He smiled at her and ran up the stairs.

When he came back down, a man was standing in the living room. He was kissing and hugging Mommy.

"... hit record. I got the biggest damn house in Nashville," he was saying, "but, God, it's good to be home."
His mother looked down at him. She was crying.  

"Natty, it's Daddy! Daddy's home."

He looked at the man and at the picture on the mantel. It was Daddy, but he was not wearing a uniform. He was wearing a cowboy shirt and boots and a big black belt with a silver tip. Natty opened his mouth, but he didn't know what to say. Daddy scooped him up in his arms. He smelled of soap and hair oil. "Natty, you and Mommy are going to come home with me now. Won't that be fun?"

Natty was not sure. He remembered knuckles and the razor strop.

"We have a big old house and a swimming pool of our very own, and you'll have so many toys . . ."

Natty struggled, and his father let him down.

"He'll be okay," Mommy said. "It's been a long time."

"Sure," his father said, "he'll be okay."

The boy clung to his mother's skirt. "Mommy, my note," he said.

"I'm sorry, honey. I forgot." She went to the writing table.

"What note?" his father said.

"For school. He has to take a note to school."

"How come?"

Natty felt fear in his stomach.

"It's nothing," his mother said.
"Is he sick?" Lute felt his forehead. Natty cowered.
"No," she said. "It's not important."
"Important enough to keep him out of school. What's wrong?"

She finished the note, folded it, and gave it to the boy. "There you go. Give Mommy a kiss and run along."

"Wait!" His father's voice was harsh. "What's wrong, boy?"

Natty could not look at his father. "I got in a fight," he mumbled.

Lute chuckled and patted him on the head. "That all? Sister sent you home for fighting, huh? I told your momma that those damn nuns don't understand boys. Who did you beat up?"

Natty did not reply.

"Come on, boy, what's wrong? I'm not mad at you. Hell, there's nothing wrong with fighting. A man's got to fight sometimes, stand up for himself."

Natty stared at the floor. He felt his throat tighten, and he knew he was going to cry. He tried to swallow back the tears. He felt the change in his father's mood before he heard it in his voice.

"You did win, didn't you?" Lute was no longer chuckling.

Natty felt tears spill over onto his cheeks. He wiped them away with the back of his hand.
Lute gripped his shoulder, hurting him. "You did win, I said." He shook the boy, snapping his head back and forth.

"I got beat up," he wailed, "I ran away."

"You got beat up?" He shook Natty harder. The boy was sobbing. His teeth clicked together as his father shook him. "Why, you damn sissy, lettin' some little bastard beat you up. Runnin' home to Momma."

"Lute," his mother said.

"You keep out of this, dammit. You babied him long enough. You and them damn nuns make a goddam sissy out of him." He dragged Natty up the stairs. The boy was blinded by his tears and by his terror. He lost his footing, and Lute pulled him along by the arm, bumping and bruising him on each step.

"Lute!" his mother cried from the foot of the stairs.

"Keep outta this, I said. This is a man thing. I'm gonna teach this boy what happens when he loses a fight." He hurled Natty into his bedroom and slammed the door behind them. The boy crumpled beside his bed. His lip was bleeding again. He tasted the metallic blood and the salty tears that ran into his wailing mouth.

"Stand up and bend over that bed," his father barked.

"Stand up, I said!"
Natty saw his father strip the heavy belt from his trousers, and he shrieked, backing away. Lute wrenched him around, bent him over the bed. The boy covered his buttocks with his hands. Lute cracked the heavy silver buckle across his fingers. The boy squealed and pulled his hands away. The belt snapped across his back and bottom. He screamed.

"Holler, sissy," Lute roared.

Again and again, in a regular rhythm, the belt snapped. The boy screamed with each savage lash until his voice was hoarse and his throat burned. He tried to stop, tried to throttle the screams as the belt snapped. The screams became agonized animal squeals. His body was arched as the belt snapped. He writhed away, but the belt snapped. He heard the whistle as the belt snapped. He squealed each time the belt snapped, and the whistle and snap and squeal set up a tempo of torture.

Finally, Lute stopped, letting the belt hang limp in his hand. The boy slumped to his knees beside the bed, his body racked with convulsive tremors of pain and hoarse sobs. His eyes were dry. He had no more tears to shed. He could see only the brilliantly polished shoes of his father and the cuffs of his trousers. And the silver tip of the belt, swinging slowly just above the floor. It was flecked with bright blood. Above his own sobs, he could hear his father's
heavy breathing. He shut his eyes tight and felt the sticky smoothness of the varnished floor beneath his cheek. He smelled it and tasted it with each gasp.

"There, now," his father said between breaths, "you remember this, boy." He paused. Natty could hear the air whistle through his nostrils like the whistle of the belt. "You remember this good. Cause the next time you lose a fight or run away from one, this belt will be waiting right here for you."

His shoes turned and walked toward the door. Natty heard the door open, and he heard his mother cry, "Lute, you've cut him!"

"Leave him alone," his father said. "He's my son, by God, a Parker, and I won't have you make him into no sissy. He'll be a man yet."

"If you don't kill him first." Natty saw her feet moving toward him, and he bunched his legs beneath him, trying to stand before she reached him, trying to show them both that he was tough, that he wasn't a sissy. But his knees folded, and he collapsed again on the floor. Then he felt her warm arms around him. He winced and moaned when she touched his back.

"Oh, baby, I'm sorry," she cooed as she laid him on his stomach on the bed.
"Leave him alone!" Lute shouted. He dragged her away from the bed.

"But he's hurt."

"Shit. It's good for him. Make a man of him." He pulled her toward the door. "When he finds out a whipping hurts more than a fight, maybe he'll fight. Now leave him alone."

Natty heard the door click shut behind them. He buried his head in the pillow and cried silently so they could not hear. When his mother came back a few minutes later with soap and water and iodine, his shirt and shorts were already stuck to his body by congealing blood.

"This will never happen again," she whispered to him. "I swear to God this will never happen again." She dabbed water on the cuts to loosen his clothing. Even so, he shrieked as she pulled his shirt off. "Dear Lord, forgive me," she prayed as she dabbed water on his shorts. "Forgive me for what I have to do."

He screamed when she removed his shorts, and she cried at the sight of his cuts and bruises. She would have cried more had she been able to see the small, hard, dark thing that had begun to grow within them both.
Chapter Five

It was the Army that taught Lute how to play guitar. If it had not been for the Army, he would not have been shot in the head. If he had not been shot in the head, he would not have been taken back to the hospital in England. And if he had not been in the English hospital, he would not have met Corporal Bowman, who taught him to play guitar. It was the German Army that did all this for him. The American Army did not shoot him in the head.

He was nineteen years old when the United States entered the war. He had been married almost two and a half years. The boy, Natty, was almost two years old. Lute was still working for his father on the farm, and it had all become very old--marriage, parenthood, farming. So when the war broke out he went into town and tried to enlist in the Navy. But he could not pass the physical. Flat feet.

He told himself that he had tried, anyway, that if the Navy didn't want him it wasn't his fault. Mary said don't feel bad (not knowing why he had tried to enlist) that farming was a draft-exempt occupation, so it must be important, and that he could do his part for the war effort right there on Daniel's farm. She started a Victory Garden the following spring to do her part.

But his father said, "Hmph," and as usual Lute did not know what that meant, did not know whether he was glad that
Lute would be staying with him, out of danger, or whether he was disappointed that Lute had failed once again. A couple months later, on Natty's second birthday, Daniel drank too much homemade wine and told him it was good that he did not have to go, good that he did not have to risk leaving an orphan and a widow behind. Lute felt better then. His father had not actually said that he would feel a loss if Lute died, but he had at least implied it. He had implied concern for Lute, if not affection.

Of course, the war went from disaster to catastrophe, from Corregidor to Bataan, that year. Daniel railed against MacArthur for running. By God, if he were in the Pacific he'd give those damn Japs something to worry about. All we needed were some real men to do the fighting. So Lute tried to enlist in the Air Corps as a pilot, but he couldn't pass the physical. Color blind.

Mary said not to worry about it or feel bad. Somebody had to produce food for the war effort. His father said, "Hmph," and this time there was no question about what he meant. Millions of men were laying their lives on the line for the country, and Lute wasn't even good enough to get into the service. What did that make Lute? What did that make the man who had sired him? While Lute's brother-in-law (whom Daniel considered a jellyfish) was streaking through the wild blue yonder in a P-40, Lute was jouncing through a cornfield on a Farmall H tractor.
Natty's third birthday was a bad day. It was winter, of course, and there was virtually no work to be done. Daniel had five milk cows to take care of, and that was an easy job for one man. Lute spent most of his time at home in the little house, listening to the battery-powered radio or reading or playing with Natty or arguing with Mary. When the boredom became too great he would drive to Daniel's place to play cribbage or checkers. And when it became too great for both of them, they would argue or go into town to drink beer with the other men of the neighborhood.

Lute did not like to go into town. The conversation would always turn to the war, and Lute was usually the only one in the tavern who was under forty. Now and then, Junior would also be there. He was the part-time bartender, and he was only twenty-two. He was also diabetic, and his left leg was two inches shorter than his right.

So when the men began talking about the war and what our boys were doing and what they should be doing, when each of the men laid out his brilliant plan for ending the whole mess in two weeks, when the veterans started talking about how it had been in St. Lo and the Argonne, and especially when they spoke of letters from their sons who had gone through school with Lute, he would shift in his chair and try to change the subject or challenge one of them to a game of pool or go off by himself and play the pinball machine.
On the way home, Daniel would be strangely silent. He would not respond to Lute's efforts at conversation. Eventually Lute would give up and stare out the window at the bleak fields fleeing by--no bleaker than his spirit. When he returned to the little house where Mary was waiting he would eat without speaking and go into the living room to listen to the radio until bedtime.

Natty's third birthday was like the other days of that winter. There had been little snow, and the land lay black and frozen beneath a colorless sky. They had gone to Daniel's house for dinner, the noon meal, and had followed it with Natty's birthday cake and ice cream. After the meal, Lute's three younger sisters took Natty into the living room to play, and the four adults sat around the kitchen table. Daniel had bought a case of beer, and Lute had brought a fifth of whisky. Daniel opened beers for himself and Lute and dug the limp Bicycle cards from the drawer. They did not talk much as they played. There was not much to talk about. It was as though life in the neighborhood had stopped, as though human life had become as dormant as plant life during the dark winter days.

Concentrating on the cards made talk unnecessary, made the long afternoon pass more rapidly.

Both Lute and Daniel drank too much. After they finished the beer, Lute opened the fifth of whisky. Mary
and Aggie objected, but the men would have their way. They had gone too far to stop now. Perhaps both of them knew what was going to happen. Perhaps they knew it would be unpleasant, vicious, and they drank to be able to excuse themselves for everything they were going to do, going to say. Perhaps they knew that all the trips to town, all the boredom, all the implicit criticism had built up a pressure which was inevitably coming to a head that day, a pressure which could not be released otherwise.

These were the thoughts that Lute had later, years later, when he awoke in an alley in a Georgia town, his head throbbing, his stomach convulsed with retching, and saw his guitar smashed and splintered on the bricks beside him. He wondered why he had broken it. He wondered when he had taken the first step on the road that brought him to this alley where he sprawled, filthy and stinking, in a pool of his own bloody vomit. And he thought back to that day, Natty's third birthday. He and his father sitting across the kitchen table from each other, on opposite sides, as usual, a glass of straight whisky in front of each of them.

The game had stopped. They had not finished it, but suddenly it was over, the scores incomplete, no winner, no loser. Someone had not played a card, and that was it. No one had spoken since Mary had said "Lute!" and Aggie
had said "Daniel!" when he had poured the second jelly glass of whisky for himself and his father. Lute did not know how long it had been since then. It seemed a long time. He stared at his father's puffy, reddened face, and he was aware of the women's apprehension. But it had to be done. It had to be said. The thing that had festered beneath the surface for so long had to be exposed.

"What do you want from me?" He tried to control his voice, but he was almost shouting. He heard a gasp from one of the women. He did not know which one.

Daniel turned the jelly glass in his hand, studying the way the whisky sloshed. He looked up, his eyes gray chips of flint. "I want you to make me proud of you."

"Proud of me," Lute said. "Proud of me!" He laughed. "What the hell do you think I want, Dad? That's all I ever wanted. Ever since I was a kid. Proud of me."

"You haven't done it yet," Daniel said. His voice was rising. Scornful.

"Jesus Christ, what do you want me to do?"

Daniel's face seemed to swell with pent-up emotion. His lips were pursed, pressed tightly together, as though he were trying to contain a volcano of fury. Finally it subsided. He sighed. "Be a man. That's all." His voice was weary.
Lute felt tears of anger spring to his eyes. He swallowed them back, but his voice was thick with emotion and alcohol. "How can I? You never give me a chance. Everything I try you laugh at. Everything I do is no good. Shit." He shoved his chair back from the table and started to walk away. But Daniel got up too, and grabbed his arm.

"Runnin' away again?"
"Again?"
"Like before. Like always. Like three years ago, when the boy was born. Like the war. Like every time you had to be a man."
"The war," Lute said, "that's really it, isn't it? The goddam war."
"How do you think I feel, walking down the street with you? Everybody lookin' at you, big and strong and healthy, sittin' on your ass while their kids are dyin'?"
"That's not fair!" Mary's voice surprised them both.
"He tried. He wanted to go."
"And they wouldn't take him."
"But that's not the point," Mary said. "He wanted to go. He tried to go. That's what counts."
"He didn't go, though, did he?"
"But he's important here," Mary pleaded. "Everybody can't fight. Somebody has to raise the crops. Somebody has to feed the country. Why is a farmer draft-exempt?"
"Damn if I know," Daniel said. "But I can run this
damn place by myself, if that's what you're sayin'. Might
as well be runnin' it alone now, no more help than he is."

"Then run it alone, goddam it," Lute shouted. He
yanked his coat from the hook by the door. "Dress the boy.
We're leaving."

"Lute," his mother cried, but he was already through
the door, walking blindly to the car.

Two weeks later he got a job in a grain elevator. It
was not a draft-exempt job, and he notified the draft board
right away. He was sure he would be called into the Army
at once, but nothing happened. The job was not much, but
it was a job, and it did make him independent of his father,
he thought. But as the days crawled by without a word
from the draft board, he found that Daniel was in his
thoughts more and more. He could not lift a shovelfull of
oats without thinking of the hardness of his muscles, the
muscles of a man. He could not drink with the boys after
work without drinking as much as he possibly could, more
than any of them could, to prove that he could hold his
liquor like a man. And, although he did not tell Mary,
could not tell her because she would not understand, he
hoped for the day when the Letter would arrive, when he
could go and prove his manhood to Daniel.
Being drafted was part of that proof, he told himself. If he enlisted in the Army, he would have some control over his future, some choice of assignment. But if he were drafted, he would be completely at the mercy of the military. He would have to be able to take it. These were the things he told himself, anyway. He did not question them at all because he wanted to believe in them whether they were true or not. And because he did not want to believe it, he would not admit to himself that he was afraid to enlist because he might fail the physical once more. Or because, worse, he might pass it.

The Letter had still not come by Natty's fourth birthday, a year since Lute had started working at the elevator. This time Daniel and Aggie came into town for the boy's birthday. Lute had seen his father only a few times during the year. There was no actual animosity between them, at least not on the surface. But Lute found it was harder than ever to talk to his father. Mary had warned Lute about drinking before his parents arrived. He had only a few bottles of beer in the house.

She need not have worried, for neither of the men drank anything but coffee. Daniel spent most of the afternoon with Natty, playing with the rubber baseball and bat he had bought for the boy's birthday.
"That's Grandpa's boy," he said over and over as the boy swung the bat, which was still too large and heavy for him, even though it was only a rubber toy. "Whup, by God, that's Grandpa's boy," he would say as Natty sprawled on the floor to keep the ball from rolling past him. And when the boy was worn out from playing, he refused to take his nap. Lute was angered by his obstinence and was about to spank him. But Daniel picked Natty up and cradled him on his lap. "That's okay," he said, "It's my boy's birthday. He don't have to go to bed, does he?" Natty shook his head and laughed. "He can just sit here on Grandpa's lap."

Daniel hugged him tight and put a bristly kiss on his cheek. Of course, Natty fell asleep in his arms. Mary wanted to carry him to his bed, but Daniel said, "No. I told him he didn't have to go to bed. I'll just hold him till he wakes up."

Lute, watching all this, felt jealousy toward the boy. He could not remember his father ever playing with him. It seemed he had been working all his life, his father driving him on. Even playing baseball was work. He remembered evenings on the huge front lawn, his father hitting grounders to him, yelling, "Get in on it! You can't wait for it. Get in on it and get rid of it."

It had been one of those evenings when Lute's nose was broken. He was twelve, maybe thirteen. He had charged the
ball, but it took a bad bounce and hit him on the forehead. Tears blurred his eyes, and he threw it wildly in his father's direction.

"No!" Daniel shouted. "You'll never make an out if you can't get it to first base."

"But it bounced wrong," Lute said.

"Bounced wrong, hell. You played it wrong. Now do it right." He cracked a grounder that sizzled through the grass, leaping and bounding erratically. Lute held back, tears still hot in his eyes.

"Get in on it, boy. Don't sit on your ass."

The ball bounced past him, and he turned to chase it. He gritted his teeth as he ran, and the tears of pain became tears of frustration and anger. "Fuck you, you old fart," he whispered.

"God damn, you afraid of the ball?" Daniel shouted as Lute threw. "You scared to run in on it?"

Lute did not answer. He crouched, waiting for the next one. His jaws hurt from being clenched so tightly. The ball cracked off the bat, a white blur in the grass. It was not bouncing, just smoking along the ground. He would show the old fart this time. He charged in, keeping his eyes on the ball, his glove open to snatch it up, timing his charge so he would be set to throw when he met the ball. Then he was on his face in the grass, and the grass was warm and sticky
against his skin. His head was shattered by pain, and he could not see. He could feel his father's callused hands lifting him by the arms, but his legs were not there, and he felt the grass beneath him again.

"Jesus Christ," his father said. "Jesus Christ, you really took one." His father pulled him up once more. He felt himself being dragged across the yard. He tried to move his legs but couldn't seem to find the ground with his feet. He felt the porch steps bang against his legs, then heard the sound of the screen door spring.

His mother shrieked, "Oh Lord, what happened? What did you do to him?"

He felt himself being folded into a chair and falling over against the smooth enameled table top. He tried to sit up, but his body would not work.

"I can't see," he whimpered. Speaking shot pain through his face.

"Oh, Lordy," his mother cried, "you blinded him. What happened?"

"Nothin'. He just played the ball wrong, that's all. Hit him in the face."

He felt his mother's soft hands raising his head, cradling it against her warm breast. He felt a cold wet cloth on his skin, wiping away the stickiness. It touched his nose, and he screamed.
"Daniel," she cried.

"Prob'ly broke his nose, that's all," his father said.

"Nothin' to worry about."

"But he can't see."

"He'll be okay."

And, in a few minutes, he was. The light glaring off the white enameled table hurt his face, and he closed his eyes. He was able to sit up by himself, and he held the bloody washcloth against his face. Daniel was wrapping ice in another cloth.

"See? I told you he'd be okay. Goddam ball hit him in the head, didn't it? Can't hurt solid bone."

"Daniel, what a way to talk. Poor little lovin's."

"Well, dammit, Ag, the boy ain't got sense enough to play the ball, he deserves it. Might teach him somethin'."

"You don't have to make fun of him."

"Want me to pat him on the back? Man who can't even catch a ball needs a good whack. Knock some sense into him."

Lute felt hot tears roll down his cheeks into the washcloth. He did not try to stop them.

That had been nine, ten years ago. And now here was his father, hitting a rubber ball across the floor to Natty. Saying, "That's Grandpa's boy." Shit. Whose boy had he been? He watched his father stroking Natty's head as the boy slept, the big hand rough and dark against soft
pink cheeks. It seemed to him that there was a void in his life, a part of him unfilled by love. But even the thought of love for or from his father embarrassed him. Why should that be? Why should it be an unmanly thing, a weak thing, to love your father or your son?

He could not think of a reason, but he knew that it was so. He knew he could never have shown such affection for Daniel as Natty showed. He knew that Daniel had never shown such affection for him. And he knew that he would never be able to show love for his own son. It was not manly. Weak. Soft.

But at the same time, it did not seem weak or soft in his father, now as his father held the sleeping boy. It seemed instead somehow right and natural to see them together, and Lute felt cut off, isolated from them both and from the bond which was between them. It was not fair, he thought, not fair that the boy should win Daniel's affection, affection which had been denied him. Now it was too late. Flat feet. Color blind. Accidents of birth, of nature, of timing. These had come between him and his father, had stifled any hope of winning his respect or praise or love. And all the things which had gone before, all the reprimands and ridicule, had made it impossible for him to show any respect or affection for his father.
He realized that his teeth were clenched, that he was glaring at the two of them nestled together in that chair, and he tried to relax the tense muscles of his face. But he had made up his mind. If he did not receive the Letter for the next month's draft call, he would enlist. The Army would ignore flat feet and color blindness. He would go. He would show the old fart. He would not run away. He would not hold back and wait any longer. If they would not come to him, he would charge in on them.

So he did.

Mary cried when he told her, but then she became very brave and said that she could understand how he must feel and that she was very proud of him. His father said, "Hmph," but he turned away quickly and said that he had to get a bucket of water from the well. When he returned to the house, Lute could see that his eyes were red. His mother did not say anything. She ran into the downstairs bedroom and did not come out for over an hour. When she finally reappeared, she bustled around the kitchen, making supper for them as if nothing had happened. Lute and Daniel shared a pint of bourbon. Daniel praised him for three solid hours--"He is a man, by God"--and wept openly when Lute and Mary left for home.
Lute had an easy time in basic. His body was already lean and hard from his heavy work, and he had always been an excellent shot. He was the top man in his company, and the CO gave him a three-day pass as a reward. Lute spent the three-day pass in Killeen, screwing the wife of a captain who had just shipped out. It was the first piece of strange ass he'd had since his wedding. The captain's wife said she was in love with him and was going to divorce her husband, so Lute made a point of never seeing her again.

After basic, he had a ten-day leave to go home before he shipped out, but he ran into a beautiful twenty-year-old hooker while he was waiting for his train connection in Kansas City. He screwed her standing up in a broom closet that someone had forgotten to lock. He heard his train being called, but by then they were down to the short rows and couldn't stop, so he missed the train. She figured that she owed him something, so she gave him the entire weekend free.

She did not want to marry him, so he wrote down her name and address on Saturday morning when they got out of bed. Her name was Margaret, but she said that it was too plain a name, especially when she was called Mag or Maggie or the horrible name given her by her older sister: Maggot. She had her back turned to him as she talked about it, as she put a pot of coffee on the two-burner stove that was
furnished with her sparse room, and he only half-listened, fascinated by the way her dark hair fell about her broad shoulders when the rats and pins were out of it, fascinated by the two dimples just above her ample ass.

"It was really very cruel of her, don't you think?" He smiled when she stressed the "el" in "cruel." "It was such a horrible name, Maggot. I always hated her for it, you know? She did it because she was jealous. I always did have a better body than she did, and she was jealous. Even when we were in high school. I was a freshman when she was a junior, but I already had D cups and she only had B's. So whenever she walked down the hall and saw me with a real snazzy guy, she'd say, 'Hi, Maggot.' And when a guy came to the house to pick me up she'd say, 'Just a minute. I'll see if Maggot's ready.' I know. I used to listen for the guys to come in so's I'd know how long to keep them waitin', you know?"

She turned away from the coffee pot, and he felt a deep visceral thrill, seeing her pendulous breasts and beautiful oval face and the belly that protruded just right, just enough to make her look fecund, fertile, without being flabby. He motioned her to him, and she sauntered to the bed, chuckling deep in her throat. He was propped up on one elbow, and he ran his free hand up inside her thigh, fingering her finally, warm and moist and soft. She laughed and brushed his hand away.
"You big bastard," she said, "you've had enough of that for a while. Any more and you'll start to take me for granted." She danced away from him, back to the kitchenette, picking up a robe from the foot of the bed as she went. She walked through the kitchenette to the bathroom, and in a moment she was back again, the robe tied around her waist, accenting the swell of her hips and belly, falling open as she bent over him, exposing the pink fullness of her breasts. He tried to pull her down onto the bed, but she shook him off and bent over him again, a washcloth in her hand.

"Jesus, that's cold," he yelled.

"Haven't you ever had a woman wash you off before?" She fondled him with the wet cloth, washing more than she had to.

"No," he said, "but don't stop now." He felt the blood rushing to his genitals, felt the pounding in his belly. She slapped the cold cloth across his stomach, and he yelped.

"Well, now you have." She laughed and skipped away from him, back to the bathroom. He heard water splash into the bathtub. At the same time the coffee began to perk. He swung his legs out of bed, and he marveled again at their slim strength as he saw the muscled cords stand out in his thighs. He pulled on his shorts and pants and rubbed his hairless belly.
The girl said something to him, and he went to the bathroom door, pulling on his shirt as he said, "What?"
"Keep an eye on the coffee, I said."
"Sure." He buttoned the shirt and tucked it in.
"This is kinda nice, you know?"
"What?"
"I said it's kinda nice. I mean, I like bein' a hooker and all, but it gets kinda old sometimes, you know?"
He said, "Everything does, I guess." He looked around the room for his tie.
"No," she said, "I mean... aw, you'll prob'ly think this is dumb."
"No. Go ahead." He was only half-listening to her. Where the hell was that damn tie?
"Well, I mean it's kinda nice, just doin' it for fun, you know? Makes me feel like just a girl, like back in high school, you know? I mean, sometimes you'd like to forget that you're a pro, you know?" She laughed. "That's how I paid my sister back, though."
"What?" He found his tie draped over the back of a chair.
"I said that's how I paid my sister back. You shoulda been there. She married this insurance guy, see? And I went to her house a couple months ago. I was kinda short, see? Hey, you watchin' the coffee?"
"Sure." Lute knotted the tie and began to search for his jacket.

"So she introduces me to her husband. 'This is my sister, Margaret,' she says. The bitch calls me Margaret for the first time in her life, you know, and it really pisses me off. So I say, 'Call me Margie,' and he shakes my hand nice as you please."

Lute buttoned his jacket and adjusted his overseas cap.

"She says, 'Would you care for some coffee, dear?' God, what a faky bitch! And I say, 'Why thank you, dear.'"

Lute pulled a bill from his wallet and laid it on the dresser. He checked himself once more in the mirror. He supposed he could shave on the train.

"Then her old man says, 'What do you do, Margie?' and I see my sister about ready to shit a brick. I smile real sweet, you know, and I say, 'Well, at present I'm employed as a whore.' God, you shoulda been there."

The coffee pot began to boil over as he pulled the door shut behind him.
Chapter Six

The time at home was short. Mary met him at the depot in Iowa Falls. He was glad he had not called her before he met Margie in the Kansas City terminal, for he did not have to explain his delay. On the way home, she babbled about Natty's adventures and mishaps, and occasionally the boy would break in to correct her, especially when the story involved his disobedience. Mary pressed herself tight against him as he drove, and secretly, so the boy would not see, she caressed his thigh.

That evening, he played with the boy after supper as his father had done. But it was not the same. It seemed to him that Natty did not laugh as much. He found that he could not involve himself completely in the game as Daniel seemed to do, and it bored him. He went through the motions--tossing the ball, shouting "Get it! Get it!" as it bounced toward his son, laughing "That was a good one" as the boy caught it in his soft pink hands--but he did not really care. It bored him.

Finally it was the boy's bedtime, and Lute gave him a horsey ride up the stairs to his room. He stood by while Mary readied the boy for bed, and an inexplicable pain shot through him when the boy, kneeling at the bedside in his cowboy pajamas, said "God bless Daddy." He felt a guilt for which he could not find a reason, as though he had somehow
betrayed his son. He turned and walked from the room, afraid to give the boy a good-night kiss.

"He cried," Mary said as she sat in her yellow slip before the mirror, brushing her hair. "He said, ' Doesn't Daddy love me? !"

" I'm sorry. I just felt sick all of a sudden."

"Army food," Mary said, " and lack of sex." She blushed.

"You damn betcha." He thought of Margie's breasts swelling beneath her robe.

"But spend some time with him tomorrow, okay? He really misses you, Lute. He talks about you all the time. 'When will Daddy be home?' or 'Guess what me and Daddy are gonna do when he comes home.' That's all I get from him, all day."

"Sure, I'll spend some time with him." Lute realized with a shock that he was lying. He had not looked forward to being with his son while he was in basic. He had no intention of wasting his time playing with the kid. That was no way for a man to feel about his son. But he did feel that way, and that was the source of his guilt.

No. The source was beyond that. He stared at her as she brushed her gleaming hair, hypnotized almost by the steady rhythm of her brushing. But at the same time unaware of it, as the thought of himself and what he had come to be. His father had been right. He was not a man. He ran. He
ran away every time. And he wanted to run away now. There was his guilt. He did not want to be a husband. He did not want to be a father. He did not want anyone making demands of his time, of his work, of his love. Even joining the Army, he realized, had been a flight from the responsibilities of home and family and job.

Perhaps he should have joined the Army five years ago, as soon as he found that Mary was pregnant. That would have been running away too, but it would have saved him from so many other responsibilities. But it would have destroyed as well any respect his father might have held for him. And all because of a hot, sweaty moment in the back seat of the old Plymouth, like so many other hot, sweaty moments there. He grinned bitterly. It hadn't even been a good piece of ass. Not nearly as good as Karen, with her big boobs and hot pussy. God, could she move.

But he had waited too long to ask her to the Prom, too confident that she would go only with him. So there had been no one left but Mary. Skinny, gawky Mary. Still, she might be a good lay. He knew that she had the hots for him. Even though she hadn't put out the few other times when he had dated her. Hadn't put out for anybody, as far as he knew.

So he took her to the Prom, and there was the party afterward, and the drinks he had shamed her into taking.
Then the murmured protests in the back seat, the dry hand thrusting roughly between her tight-pressed thighs, and finally the sweaty, panting moment. And her tears.

As he looked at her now, putting away the hair brush and rubbing her face with cold cream, he realized how much he had thought about Margie on the way home; how much Margie and the captain's wife had meant to him physically. For Mary was small, her chest flat, her hips narrow. The hot, sweaty moment in the old Plymouth had been the high point of their sexual involvement. As she wriggled out of the yellow slip and stripped off her pants and bra, he thought about the hot, sweaty moment in the broom closet of the Kansas City depot when he had lifted Margie's skirt and had found nothing but hair and wet beneath it.

Hair and wet. Gasps and sweat. That was all he had ever known with women. It seemed to him that there should be more than cock and cunt, groan and grunt. But he did not know what. Love? Delbert Myers, friend and competitor since grade-school days, always called his wife "darling." It made Lute sick. It sounded artificial and unmanly to him. He rarely called Mary by any name. That first night, in the old Plymouth, through her tears afterward she had said, "Can I call you honey now?" The question had taken him by surprise, and he had said, "Sure." But now, whenever she called him that, it sounded like an accusation, and it made him wince.
He did not know what the answer was, but one thing was clear to him. He could not, he would not run away again. He would prove to his father that he was man enough to accept his responsibilities. He would show the old fart. Perhaps if he kept at it, the business of marriage and parenthood, whatever was missing in him would appear and he could be happy.

Mary lay beside him now, the nightgown pulled up almost to her crotch, the way she knew he liked it, and what could he do? He labored over her, and labor was the only right word. Not love. Not labor of love. An obligation difficult to fulfill, for his ribs hurt after the previous night's session with Margie, and his sexual drive was dissipated. He hoped she would not know, would not feel the difference inside him. And he thought it strange that he should feel that anxiety. He had decided that he did not love her. He had not been faithful to her. Yet it was very important to him that he possess her love and that she remain faithful to him.

To guarantee that she would, he told her when he left to let the hair on her legs grow. No man would like hairy legs, and by God if he came back to find that they were shaved, he would kill whoever had caused her to shave them. Later, when the ship was gliding as silently as possible through the waters of the North Atlantic, he would think
about that command. What if they were torpedoed? Would he expect her to be true to his memory, her legs shaggy and unkempt? Why should he expect anything of her at all? Did he have that right? There was the captain's wife. Margie. Why should Mary be different from him? Living by herself, the kid small enough to accept an "uncle" without question.

But news of the Normandy invasion came while they were on the ship, and he put her out of his mind. The men were jubilant. They cheered as the announcement crackled over the P.A. system. But under their cheering was a note of fear. The European war was really on now. There was no doubt where they would be going. No doubt what they would be facing.

Lute's outfit stayed in England for ten days, restricted to the base, playing pool and drinking bad English beer at the service club. They were pissed off. They had heard from other guys about British girls and American nurses, and they were all horny by that time. They felt that the Army owed them a little ass. Only the queer in G Company was happy.

And then they went across the Channel. It was almost funny, how they went. Neither the American nor the British Navy had enough ships to move the thousands of men who were to be moved. So they went across the same way the British had come back from Dunkirk: fishing boats, ferry boats,
excursion steamers. Lute thought it was funny, anyway. But then he was older than most of the guys in his outfit. He remembered Dunkirk as an almost personal experience because he had read about it so often. The kids with him remembered it as something the radio announcer talked about, something that broke the mood set up over their car radios by Harry James or Glenn Miller or Benny Goodman, the mood that made it easier for them to unbutton blouses or unsnap brassieres or lift skirts or simply hold sweaty hands and wonder if she would mind a hug and a kiss, or just a hug, even.

Lute went across the Channel in a tourist boat, a Channel ferry. Not in it exactly, but on it. His company went over with Head & Head, and the brass took almost all the bunks in the lower decks. Some GI's, those who loaded first, got into the lounges and galley, but Lute ended up on a deck chair. It was June, and June on the Channel is cold. He was smart, though. He grabbed a chair beside the grating over the engine room, and the heat from the big Diesels kept him relatively warm during the night crossing.

The British crew that had staffed the boat in better times was still on board, and a steward came by about 2200 to ask if they would like something to eat. They all said yes, and the steward returned fifteen minutes later with cucumber sandwiches. None of them had ever heard of cucumber
sandwiches before, but they were hungry, and they ate. The sandwiches were soggy, thick with butter. England had been on butter rationing for a long time, and Lute knew that the butter was an important thing to them, a real sacrifice. But the heavy butter and the bland cucumbers and the smell of Diesel oil through the engine room grates made him sick. He puked over the side. It was the first time he had puked; even the stale air and belly-churning roll of the transport ship had not made him sick. Now the British, with their dammed sandwiches and sacrifice, sent him to the rail.

Even as he vomited, he thought it was funny. He began to laugh as he vomited, but it choked him, so he stopped. He went back to his deck chair, wrapped a blanket around him, and tried to sleep. The man next to him, Levine, said, "Tastes like shit, doesn't it? Wish I could puke." He turned in his chair to face Lute. "You know, I've never been able to puke. In all my life." He laughed. "In all my life, or at any other time. God, I wish I could toss my cookies over the rail like that."

Lute did not answer. Goddam kike. He pulled the blanket up around his face.

"Sure wish I could puke," Levine said. He turned his back to Lute and snuggled up against the grating where the Diesel smell and heat gushed out.
When reveille blared over the boat's P.A. system the next morning, they were at the site of an earlier landing. Lute wondered if it was Omaha Beach. The bodies were gone by that time. There was nothing left but the burned-out hulks of ships and landing craft. Lute stared at a ship whose upper decks jutted from the water. It seemed ominous to him. It was a big thing, and it was destroyed. If they can destroy something like that, he thought, think of what they can do to me. He shivered and looked away toward the beach.

The bodies were gone by that time, and he could only speculate, only imagine what it must have been like. There were no guts washing about in the surf. No skeletal hands reached out with clawing fingers toward the beach they would never grasp. The hastily dug trenches were empty. All that remained were the hulks of ships and landing craft, the burned-out shells of trucks and tanks and halftracks. And Lute, along with the rest of them, was silenced by a sudden awe. The men stood at the rails and stared at the ravaged beach.

Sea birds wheeled overhead, shrieking "Kreee, kreee," and the sea crawled up on the beach and retreated, hissing, into itself. The men stood, silent, at the rails, awed by the savage beach. They saw the tanks, gutted on the golden beach, and they thought of their training which told them
that a tank was a nearly invincible thing. They saw halftracks bogged down in the fine sand, their machine guns pointing listlessly at the ground, and the men thought of lectures which had assured them of invulnerability as long as they trailed the tanks, as long as they crouched in the halftracks.

The men shuddered as they slogged up out of the surf onto the glistening sand. Like children in a midnight cemetery they faltered forward among the desolate machines, each machine a metal gravestone. And the men looked at the mechanical carnage about them and saw that it was a war of machine against machine. These were only dead machines. Not dead men. No men had died here. Like children in a midnight graveyard they began to whisper to each other. Then mutter. And finally some of them giggled nervously.

"What a fucking mess," Levine said.

Lute did not answer. He continued to plod toward the trucks and halftracks waiting for them just beyond the beach, waiting to take them forward to another fucking mess.

The trip down the road was uneventful, although the men in the halftrack with Lute kept glancing apprehensively at the sky. The driver had told them that this part of the trip was a milk run, that they would have no problems until they left the trucks and started walking to the battalion command post. The only thing they had to worry about now was strafing by the Luftwaffe.
"You're full of shit," Levine said. "The Krauts ain't got no fuckin' airplanes left."

"Yeah?" the driver sneered. "Well, you just keep sayin' that when they start strafin', kid." He looked at the rest of the men, gave them a broad wink. "Anyhow, that's just Nazi propaganda. They wanna catch us off guard. I mean, shit, they told all them dumb Jews they was gonna get showers, dint they? You ain't like them dumb Jews, are you, kid?"

Levine glared at him. The driver laughed, and Levine flared red. He climbed into the back of the halftrack, sitting beside Lute. "Don't believe him. He's just tryin' to scare us. There ain't no Luftwaffe anymore." He glanced at the sky.

The trip was long, although they could not have traveled more than ten miles. It seemed odd to Lute that the country could be hostile, for it was green and blooming, like the country at home. It smelled good, fresh, after the stifling hold of the troop ship, the musty barracks, and the Diesel stench of the Channel ferry. It seemed impossible that fear and hate could exist in a land so green and growing.

But then they approached the front, and he could hear the sharp cracks of rifle fire, the whoosh and boom of artillery, the nagging rattle of machine guns. The convoy stopped. The squad leaders and platoon leaders leaped from the tricks and ordered the men to dismount. They
milled about in a confused herd, trying to find their units. A lieutenant he didn’t know told Lute to lug the BAR. Lute said he’d fired it only once on the range, but the lieutenant--Lute guessed he was nineteen or twenty--said he had great confidence in his men and if they all pulled together as a team he was sure they could make it.

When the lieutenant told Levine to carry the heavy packs filled with BAR magazines, Levine said, "But, sir, we ain’t even in your platoon."

"Makes no difference, soldier," the lieutenant said. "Everything’s fucked up. Half my platoon’s still on the beach, waiting for these trucks . . . these vehicles to come back for them."

"But, sir," Levine said.

"Look, soldier, we only have to march three miles to the CP. We can regroup there, okay?"

"Yes, sir," Levine said.

They slogged off the road. The lieutenant and the squad leaders yelled at them for the first quarter mile or so to increase the intervals between them. The men would move a yard or two away from each other, but after a few steps they would be tightly bunched once more. When they had gone perhaps half a mile, the lieutenant called for the BAR man, and Lute and Levine had just caught up with him when the sniper got them.
The lieutenant collapsed like a folding chair, and Lute stared, bewildered. Then the pain was in his head. Not a pain, exactly, but a pressure, a blackness. He saw very clearly the grass and flowers crushed beneath his face. He felt the wet grass against him as he had when his father had hit him with the screaming grounder. He would show the old fart. He felt the blood on his face and on the grass, and he raised his head, feeling his jaw hang loose and limp. He tried to scream, "You bastard," but his mouth would not work. All he heard was an animal cry of hatred and Levine saying, "Jesus Christ." Damn kike, he thought.

He saw the trees very clearly. He saw the man who had shot him on one of the branches. It was hard to raise the twenty-pound BAR from its resting place on the tender grass. It would have been so much easier to let himself fade into the earth. But he saw the man in the tree raising the baseball bat to his shoulder, heard him shouting, "Get in on it! Get in on it!" He would show the old fart. He fired a burst, a BRAAAAT, into the tree. His father fell. Lute fell, knocked on his back by the recoil. Levine bent over him, staring at his face. "Jesus Christ," he said. Then he turned aside and vomited.

When Lute woke, he found a priest bending over him where Levine had been. A priest dressed in OD's with a purple cloth draped about his neck, mumbling gibberish in
Latin and rubbing an oily finger on Lute's forehead. The room pulsed like the Channel ferry, and Lute felt himself retch at the memory of Diesel smell and cucumber sandwich. The priest's finger moved to Lute's lips, and Lute stuck out his tongue. The priest jerked back, and Lute said, "Fuck you, father, for you have sinned." But the words came out an unintelligible burbling. Lute tasted blood in his mouth. The priest smiled at him, a shit-eating, everything's-all-right smile. Lute laughed inside himself. He knew the priest wanted him to die, wanted to send another soul to its eternal reward. That was the reason for Extreme Unction. Anoint the dying man. Oil him well for the fire. The bastard. Lute gave him the finger. The priest looked very irritated just before Lute drifted back into darkness again.

When he came back out of the darkness, he was convinced that he had done it on his own. Almost. In the back of his consciousness he remembered someone picking him up and carrying him across wet green grass, someone who really cared for him. He was sure it was not God. It may have been his father, or was that before? But he was sure it was not God. Later on, when the doctors and nurses complimented him on his tenacity and will to live, it was easy for him to almost believe that he did it by himself, that he needed no one else, that he had fallen into the darkness and conquered it alone.
When he woke, it was Corporal Bowman whom he was first aware of. Not Corporal Bowman himself, but the driving rhythm of Bowman's fingers on the steel and bronze strings of the guitar. In Lute's mind, in his ears, the chords were almost a torture; yet an indescribable and euphoric pleasure. For they were evidence that he was alive. Unless all the stories he had heard about angels' harps were bull-shit. Unless angels played gut-bucket guitar instead of harp. And he lay there, first-awake, for a moment, thinking that it would be much better in heaven if angels did play gut-bucket guitar. Harp was such a goddam vapid instrument, flowery and flowing, with no drive.

Then he was aware of the pain in his head, and he thought that maybe hell was the place for gut-bucket guitar and that the pain in his head was merely the initiation of a new lost soul, that perhaps when he opened his eyes (if he decided to do so) he would see his body stretched out before him, mangled and riddled by sniper's bullets. Then he thought, "Shit. At least I don't have to worry about fairy robes and golden curls. I don't have to worry about goddam wings getting in my way all the time." And he opened his eyes.

The ceiling was gray. The room was bright. There was a ragged edge around his field of vision. Bandages? He tried to raise his right arm to feel his face, but it would
not move. Something restrained it. He raised his left arm. Bandages all right. He tried to look at his right arm, but the bandages or something else immobilized his head. He reached across his chest and felt his right arm from shoulder to elbow. A strap. Further down, a bandage, a tube. Then he saw the bottle hanging above him, just at the edge of his field of vision. Plasma? Intravenous feeding? Probably. Arm strapped down so he wouldn't tear the tube loose.

He called out, "Hey!" but he could not open his mouth. The word came out "Rrrrrrr." It hurt like hell. The guitar stopped, and a face peered down at him. A very black face.

"Don't say nuffin, man. You can't talk nohow. They got yo mouf wired shut." The face disappeared. "Hey doc," Lute heard him say, "this Parker cat's woke up."

That was Corporal Bowman. He was a medic, an orderly in the hospital, and he was one hell of a guitar player. On his free time, he would sit in the ward for hours and play for them. Finally, when they let Lute sit up and then move around, Bowman began to teach him how. There was nothing else to do. Lute liked to read, but he soon tired of the same magazines. And one day, when he was just sitting on the edge of the bed, listening to Bowman play, Bowman said, "Shit, man, my fingers is some kinda sore. One of you other cats play for a while." And he handed the guitar to Lute.
Lute picked at it for half an hour, until his fingers ached. But he managed to make it through "Red River Valley" on single notes. After that he was hooked. He began to work on the instrument every day, playing until his fingers were on the verge of bleeding. And Bowman would show him things: how to arch the wrist under the neck of the instrument, keeping the thumb on the centerline of the neck for more speed; how to use the right hand to get bass, melody, and chords at the same time; how to barre the left index finger across all six strings at once. Bowman taught him blues licks and chord progressions, how to improvise off chords, how to improvise off melody, how to get a fuller, richer sound by substituting ninths and elevenths and thirteenths and minor sevenths and major sevenths and some chords he couldn't even name.

One day a colonel came into the ward while Lute was playing, and he pinned a Purple Heart on Lute's hospital gown. After they had saluted each other, the colonel said, "That's fine guitar."

"It's not mine, sir," Lute growled. He growled all the time. Couldn't speak any other way, with his jaws wired together.

The colonel laughed. "No, I mean the way you play it." He seemed to be thinking deeply for a minute. Then he said, "Tell you what, Parker, if I can arrange it, would
you like to come over and play at the Officers' Club some night?"

"I don't know, sir, I never played for anybody before."

"Aw, come on, Parker," the colonel wheedled, "all we ever have are these damn Limey bands playing imitation swing. We never get any good old down home music." He lowered his voice to a confidential tome. "It'll pay fifty dollars and all the whisky you can handle. How about it?"

"Bowman too, sir?"

"Bowman?"

"It's his guitar, sir. He taught me how."

"Sure, Bowman too." The colonel attempted a jovial laugh to show Lute that he was a regular Joe, even if he was a colonel.

"Fifty dollars for him too, sir?"

The colonel hesitated, then clapped Lute on the back, sending ragged shards of pain through his head. "By God, Parker, I haven't heard music like that since I left home. Sure, fifty dollars each. I'll talk to the warrant officer who books the acts. You'll hear from him."

It was the easiest fifty dollars Lute had ever made. The warrant officer booked them back for three nights each week, and by the time the doctors had finished rebuilding his jaw, Lute and Bowman had added a drummer and a bassman. By the time they removed the wires, a piano player had
joined them. And by the time Lute was ready to be released from the hospital, the group was a permanent fixture at the club. The colonel would not hear of sending him back to his old unit. He had Lute promoted to staff sergeant and put in charge of supplies at the club. Bowman was assigned as Lute's clerk. They were each making two hundred dollars a week playing at the club, and Lute had also worked out a deal with the liquor suppliers which brought him another fifteen hundred a month. It was a good war.

So it was not surprising that Lute did not go home after the war. There was a hell of a gap between two grand a month and what he had been making at the grain elevator. And he would show the old fart. He wrote Mary that he had a business deal to take care of in Nashville and that he would come home as soon as he could. He sent a thousand-dollar money order with the letter. He could afford it. He had saved up over thirty thousand tax-free dollars while he was in England. With that nest egg, it didn't take him long to assemble a first-rate country group.

They worked a few club gigs and some dances in Nashville, did twelve weeks of one-nighters from Tennessee to Texas and back, and finally landed a recording contract. Lute wrote Mary every week or so, enclosing a money order with each letter, but never mentioning what he was doing or when he was coming home. He also never mentioned that
there was a girl waiting impatiently in his motel room bed as he wrote each letter. Perhaps because he never thought of it. It had been slightly over two years since he had left home, and he had come to accept strange ass as a routine thing. Sure, it had troubled him a little at first, the thought of Mary sitting home alone while he screwed around. But then, he was a man, after all, and that was just part of being a man. In an odd way, he felt that he had actually been faithful to his wife. As faithful as any man could be. After all, he was working for her, trying to make it big so that he could give her and the boy some security, some of the things they'd never had.

The first record was a hit, a million-seller, the trade papers said. It was a good record, and a few bucks in the palms of disc jockeys and trade paper editors helped it along. He bought the car, a big white Packard, and took an option on the house. He bought five dresses for Mary and a bicycle for the boy, and he went to Iowa. As he drove he conjured up and rejected dozens of plans, dozens of ways to surprise her and the boy, dozens of ways to shock the old man with his wealth and success. He was more excited than he thought he would be, and as the odometer rolled off the miles, his anticipation grew.

Perhaps he was ready now to settle down, far from Daniel, with his wife and child. Maybe now that they had
some money things would be better. He imagined the three of them playing beside the pool of the new house, him teaching the boy to dive and to swim underwater, Mary lounging in a poolside chair, the curves of her body stretching a brilliant red bathing suit to its limit, the sun making jewels of the water droplets on the soft, smooth skin of her arms and throat and legs.

Thinking of her made him churn inside, and he was glad. Glad that he really wanted her now. Glad that he had faced death and had won. He had shown the old fart, and he would show the old fart what kind of man he was.

When he finally stopped the Packard in front of the house, he could hardly contain himself. All the plans he had formulated were forgotten. He bounded up the front steps and opened the door. She was in the living room, to the right of the entry hall, sitting at the writing table. She turned as he entered and stared at him without speaking. She looked just as he remembered. Light brown hair falling about her shoulders. Small, firm breasts swelling against her white blouse. Her delicate mouth caught midway between astonishment and joy. A blue skirt falling away to one side, revealing the smooth sweep of her leg and dainty, almost fragile, ankle. He thought of those long, smooth legs opening for him, and desire pounded in his belly. "I'm home," he said, and she began to cry.
Chapter Seven

Nate had hit Oklahoma City at the afternoon rush hour, and it had pissed him off. Driving through the town was bad enough even in light traffic, for there were so many lane changes and weaves to be made. On his first trip north through Oke City he had waited too long to make a lane change and had ended up on the Tulsa Turnpike. He hadn't done that this time, thank God, but it had been a hassle crawling along in the bumper-to-bumper traffic.

Now it was good to be back in the country, even the bleak, arid country of Oklahoma. The sun was low in the sky, and it seared through the tinted glass of the car. It seemed to him that he had been trying to escape the sun all day. He could feel the skin on his back and legs beginning to chap from the sweat which plastered his shirt and pants to the vinyl upholstery. Too damn bad he hadn't brought Esther to his place for the weekend. If he had known of Lute's death earlier, he would have been able to make the drive last night instead of in this infernal heat.

His hand was starting to ache again, also. He let go of the wheel and flexed it as much as he could. He cursed Lute, as he always did when the hand bothered him, and immediately tried to put that night out of his mind. Perhaps he should be grateful to Lute. At least, the hand had kept him out of the Army. Better to be in Oklahoma with a stiff
hand than to be a stiff in Viet Nam. He pushed his palm
down on the seat, trying to force the hand flat. Of course,
it never would flatten completely; the tendons were simply
too short. But pushing down like that, trying to flatten it,
seemed to take away some of the ache where the scar was.

He turned on the radio to catch the six o'clock news.
Nothing new. The weather: hot today and hot tonight and
hot tomorrow. Now back to million-dollar music on KOMA in
Oklahoma. He flicked the radio off.

Ninety-seven degrees. What a change from his first
trip south through Oklahoma with Les. Back when he was so
fucked up. He laughed. Back when? Still fucked up.
What was the point of it all? Was there a point to it all?
Those were the same questions he had been asking himself
when he and Leslie had split for Texas in the first place.
The same questions he had asked that day in the blood bank.
If his life had a purpose, he could not see it. Beyond
pounding dealers over the head. Beyond pounding faceless
women in the pussy. Beyond pounding his chest and shouting
"Virility is mine!" Beyond pounding his breast and whimpering
"Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa."

Those were the actions which circumscribed his life.
Where was the point of them? Did they have a purpose? He
could see that his life up to now had been one purposeless
decision after another. Sometimes not even that, not even decision. Sometimes just purposeless action with no conscious decision being made. Like going to Check's this morning, finding himself southbound on the Interstate without even thinking about it. Like taking this job with the Company, the first job he had interviewed for. Like coming to Dallas with Les in the first place. Like letting her leave him. Like now, going to Lute's funeral as though it meant something.

Like all children, he had thought that adulthood automatically brought freedom of choice, that a man could do whatever he wanted. Unlike other children, though, he had believed in the myth long after high school. Was that why he had quit college after pre-law? Was that why he had split for Dallas, why he had let Leslie tag along? Because he had thought he was exercising his freedom of choice? Or was it because he had really know that there was no freedom for any man, but had refused to accept what he knew?

There were times when he thought the Behaviorists were right, that there was no such thing as will, only glands and fear, that a man's decisions were based not upon goodness and truth and reason, but upon DNA. If that were true, then Lute could not be condemned. At least Nate could not condemn him. If that were true, then all the things which Nate had admired in Grandpa were only natural, and if natural,
then not admirable, since Grandpa could have changed them no more than he could have changed the color of his eyes or the shape of his protruding ears.

It was comforting to think that way, for then all his own guilts, fears, and weaknesses were eliminated. If he had no freedom of choice, no will, then sin and evil were nonexistent. Then only those actions which were unnatural were wrong. Therefore, he should not feel guilty about screwing whatsername. (What was her name? The first one. After the movie. The movie was Raintree County. The year was 1962. Shit.) At any rate, he should not feel guilty about that, but about keeping himself "pure" until he was twenty-two goddam years old. Jesus Christ, yes. How stupid he had been, suffering from blue balls all those times, keeping his hands off them, "respecting" them when all they really wanted was to get laid. Jesus Christ. Even Carol. She wanted it too. "I wanted it so much," she had sobbed afterwards, "But it hurt so bad."

But if that were true, if only the unnatural was wrong, then why did his stomach turn each time he thought of Carol? Why did he still feel guilt? Why could he not forget the vivid picture of her lying on the floor, her petticoat bloodied, her pants half torn away from her, her breasts showing bruises where he had pulled the lacy white brassiere from them? "I wanted it so much," she had sobbed, and he
had run out of the house and puked in the hedge by the sidewalk. Was it because they had just come from seeing the priest about the wedding? Was it because they had kept themselves "pure" for so long? Or was it because her bloodstained thighs and petticoat reminded him of that red-smeared face in the Kansas City motel?

But that had been the start, hadn't it? The guilt, the feeling of evil, had been with him in one way or another since that night. Unable to face her without being revolted by what he had done to her. Had tried to do. Unable to see her without thinking that she, too, had wanted it, that she had wanted to sin with him, that he was the occasion of her sin of lust. Unable even to speak to her on the phone without remembering that goodnight kiss in her apartment after they had gone to see the priest together. Just after they had gone to confession. The sudden awareness of her breasts pressing against him. The feel of her lips growing soft and yielding. The rage in his genitals. The blinding blood pounding in his head and belly. His hand pressing her to him. Rubbing against her through their clothing. And then the hand fumbling beneath her skirt, beneath the stiff starched fabric of her petticoat, beneath the clinging wool of her sweater. Then, somehow, she beneath him on the floor, her legs spread, her eyes closed, her arms pulling him down upon her as he kissed her open, moaning mouth.
Then the touch of hair, of wet, of warm. The shudder, the unspeakable thrill. The thrust. The pain. The scream. Her fists pounding. Her eyes wide, terrified, so close beneath his. The hot, white, wracking jet spurting between her legs.

The realization.

Standing. Pulling up his pants. Her arm across her streaming eyes. Between ragged gasps and wretched sobs, "I wanted it so much. But it hurt so bad." Red-stained thighs and petticoat. Blue bruises showing on her breasts.

And then the guilt, thick and hot as semen, washing over him in waves. All the teachings, all the beliefs of twenty-two years, swept away in one frantic moment. All the trials, all the times when he had struggled so valiantly to overcome the base desires of his body, made meaningless now by one savage animal act. And there on the floor before him, the girl he loved, ravaged, humiliated, her immortal soul soiled by him, the man who was to be her husband, the man who, through the sacrament of matrimony, was to help her to achieve eternal life.

Yes, that had been the start. The conviction that he was the embodiment of evil, that he would destroy anyone who became close to him. The need, therefore, to break off all close ties, to associate only with those who were as evil as he. And yet, that merely seemed to increase his
guilt, not absolve him of it. Breaking off the engagement only a month before the wedding. Screwing whatsername on what was supposed to have been his wedding night. That was funny. Really funny. He still lost his virginity on his wedding night. What the hell was that girl's name? How could he remember *Raintree County* and forget the name of the first girl he ever screwed? But he didn't really feel guilty about her, did he? It was the fact of his wedding night that made him feel guilty, wasn't it? And remembering Carol's bloody petticoat as he groped under the skirt of whatsername.

And did he still think about her, about that vivid image of blood and semen on the petticoat beneath her tattered pants? Had he thought about it this weekend with Esther? He did not know. Perhaps the memory was there every time he went to bed with a woman. Perhaps that was why he was so gentle—they had always marveled at his gentleness, every damned one of them. And, God, how they dug it! A new thing, to be caressed and fondled tenderly instead of whambamthankyoumam.

But was it because of Carol? What difference did it make? It probably would have been the same with any other girl—any other virgin, anyway. Too bad they had both been virgins. No damn excuse for that, he knew. Virgins at twenty-two. Shit. What he had needed was to be taken to
a whorehouse at the age of sixteen. That might have let him put sex in its proper perspective instead of treating it as a mystical gift from the Almighty, something to be abhorred and adored. Of course, by the age of sixteen he had already been brainwashed by the Church. He probably would have tried to save the whore's soul.

Yes, he decided, in that way, at least, the Behaviorists were correct. The unnatural was wrong. For it was the years of attempting to suppress his sexuality which emphasized the awesomeness of sex, which had made it impossible for him to accept sex as a normal, natural part of living.

But when the dam of suppression broke, God, what a flood. A flood of semen, a flood of booze. He shook his head, remembering. How screwed up could you get? And he had thought it was masculine, the manly thing to do. Jesus. Just like the old man. A chip off the old blockhead. But the old man had never met a Leslie. Or, if he had met one, he had been too far gone to be reached by her. He had certainly been too far gone for Mom to reach him.

Nate had met Leslie during the flood, when the flood was threatening to drown him. He could see now that he had been on the verge of flipping out--boozing and screwing every night, too fagged out to do more than go through the motions of working at his crummy temporary job during the day.
He had begun to believe that he was irresistible to women, that he had only to touch their knees, and they would spread their legs for him. And it did seem that way. In fact, there were a couple whom he turned down. He found that almost unbelievable, turning down a piece of ass.

So it shocked him when he slid onto the stool beside Leslie at the piano bar, and she told him to split. He had been making the rounds of the bars, looking for unattached girls without success, and getting a little drunk in the process. He picked her out as soon as he entered the Redwood, and he cursed because there was a man sitting beside her. He sat in a booth and studied her. Her face was childlike; freckles splattered across high cheeks and a perky nose. Dark brown, almost black, hair contrasted sharply with her fair skin. She looked as though she should have been a redhead, and Nate wondered if her hair was dyed. A heavy coat concealed her figure, but the legs it revealed were long and slim and lovely. She did not speak to the man beside her, but stared, brooding, at the glass on the bar in front of her.

Nate had decided to leave after one beer, but before he finished it, the man got up and left. He had not been with her at all. Nate picked up his beer glass and moved to the stool beside her.

"Hi," he said, "you look lonely."
"Split, man," she said.

"But I just got here." He reached into his pocket for a cigarette.

"You've been here too long already. Split."

"What the hell. I'm just sitting here." He affected what he thought was a deep, seductive tone. "I'm not going to place my vile hands upon your luscious, white body."

"That's for damn sure," she said, and she stood up and walked out. He stared after her, dumbfounded, then raised one middle finger as a parting salute.

An insult to his masculinity? Yes. And a challenge as well. He went to the Redwood every night for a week, waiting for her to come in. He would sit in a booth, sometimes alone, sometimes with other people who made the rounds of the bars every night. He drank beer by the pitcher and smoked cigarettes until the ashtray overflowed or caught fire. Each morning he awoke with a thick tongue, a throbbing head, and a retching cough that twisted his guts and tore at his throat.

She did come to the Redwood finally, one night about eleven o'clock. He had been sitting alone in the booth since six-thirty, and he had lost track of the number of pitchers he had emptied. His mouth tasted like old brass, and the beer would not wash away the parching cigarette smoke from his throat. He saw her through the undulating haze as she sat at the piano bar, and he stood to join her.
His legs were numb and stumbling as he wavered toward her. The sinuous smoke wound around him, making the room lopsided, tilting it uphill. He grasped the bar beside her for support and lifted one leg to slide onto the stool. "Hi," he said, as the stool melted away from him and he drifted to the floor.

She looked down at him, and in her eyes he saw a strange pain of recognition, the kind of look a mother might give her son who had come home, crippled and mutilated, from the war. She said, "Jesus Christ," and reached down to help him up. She drew his arm around her shoulders and half-carried him from the bar to her car.

When he woke the next morning, she was lying beside him, looking at him. They were both naked, so he supposed that he had made love with her, but he could not remember. He was lying on his stomach. "Hi," he said into the pillow. "What's your name?"

"Leslie," she said. "God, you must've really been out of it." She traced designs on his back with her fingertips.

"You tell me last night?"

She nodded. "And you told me that your name is Nathaniel and you used to be Nat but all the kids called you Gnat so you changed it to Nate. And your father is a big record star and you hate his guts. And you were engaged to a girl named Carol but she wouldn't fuck so you broke off
the engagement. And now you've got the good life. All the booze and all the ass you want."

"That's right."

"And you're really wiggy, you know that?" He did not reply. "I mean, you're tense as hell. God, you should feel the tension in your back. And you just woke up, for Christ's sake." She began to rub his shoulders.

He mumbled into the pillow, "You a psychiatrist, a masseuse, or what?"

"Everything, man. I'm everything. A mind reader, too." She knelt on the bed, straddling him, and began to massage his back and shoulders with both hands. "Want me to read your mind?"

"Whatever turns you on," he mumbled.

"Okay. You've been hitting the bottle for about three months. You're drunk every night and all day on weekends. You smoke about two and a half packs a day. Right so far?"

"Mostly," he said. "Only about two packs a day." He wondered vaguely how she knew so much about him. Had he told her last night? It was not important to him just then, for he realized that she had been right about the tension. He hadn't known he was tense before. But now, as her hands kneaded and caressed his muscles, he could feel them loosen and relax. He could feel the nameless thing which had been driving him on for the last few months slip away from him, ooze out of his body like rank sweat.
"Want me to go on?" she asked.

He moaned a reply.

"You've got some kind of thing about sex, I think. You have to prove your masculinity, be King Stud. But at the same time, you're ashamed of it. You feel subhuman, like an animal wallowing in filth, or something like that. Right?"

"Horseshit!" The muscles tightened. Real sweat popped out of his skin. He shook her from his back and began to dress. She pulled the covers up around her and sat with her back against the wall, watching him.

"Too close to home?"

"Where the hell are my socks?"

"Inside your shoes. You stuffed them inside your shoes after you put your wallet in your shoe. You really thought I'd roll you?"

He did not answer. He pulled the socks from his shoes and put them on.

"You didn't answer my question," she persisted.

"Sure, you might roll me," he spat. "How should I know?"

"Not that question," she smiled. "I mean about sex. Was I too close to home?"

He drew his belt tight, dug into the right shoe for his wallet, and sat down on the bed to put on his shoes. He tried to think of an answer that would really put her down,
but the fury and shame in his mind blotted out all thought. "Screw yourself," he hissed.

"You really mean that?" She laughed out loud now. "Really? What if I enjoyed it more than last night? Would that bother you?"

But he was already charging out of the room, pulling his sweater over his head as he went. He crashed into the door frame and cursed. Her laughter followed him. He struggled into the sweater and found his coat lying across a chair. He burst into the frigid January air without bothering to put it on. He slammed the apartment door behind him, cutting off her laughter.

There was an unopened fifth of Jim Beam in the kitchen cupboard. He opened it as soon as he got home and poured himself a jelly glass full even before he took his coat off. You're drunk all day on weekends. He swallowed half the bourbon at once. "Screw you, bitch," he shouted at the kitchen sink. You really mean that? she said in his mind. Too close to home, she had said. Wallowing in filth, she had said. Like an animal. Wallowing in filth, like an animal.

The house was a mess. Dishes piled up in the sink. Six bags of garbage on the floor beside the greasy stove. The smell of rotting food permeating the air. He took off his coat and carried it into the living room. Ashtrays overflowing. Glass rings intertwining on the tabletops. Through the bedroom door he could see rumpled gray sheets and pillowcases stained by boozy sweat and dirty hair. Dirty hair. Like an animal. He scratched his head. The hair was heavy with filth and body oil. His scalp crawled back across his skull in waves as he realized how filthy he was. Wallowing in filth. Like an animal.

He hung his coat in the closet and returned to the kitchen, where he gulped down the rest of the whisky in the glass. He poured another drink, smaller this time, and cut it with water. Glass in hand, he surveyed the kitchen. Where to start? He opened the refrigerator and gagged. The
stench was overpowering. He tried to remember when he had last eaten at home, but he gave up. He poured a quart of sour, congealing milk into the dish-filled sink. A rheumy brown head of lettuce landed in a new garbage sack, and after it flew a package of green bacon, a slimy steak, and a bowl of something which he could not identify. A dozen eggs, a can of grease, a limp stalk of celery, a powdery green lemon, a rank chicken leg, until he had filled two sacks and the refrigerator was empty.

He worked in a frenzy, scrubbing out the bare fridge, stacking the sparkling dishes in freshly washed cupboards, dumping ashtrays and magazines and yellowed newspapers into sacks, carrying the sacks out to the wooden platform where the garbage cans sat. He paused occasionally to pour another glass of bourbon, but he sweated it out as soon as he drank it. He piled all the dirty clothes on the bed and tied the corners of the sheets together to make a ponderous bundle. Finally he swept the floor and made up the bed with fresh linen. It was done. He did not know how long he had worked, but the sun had set.

Then he took a shower, scrubbing his skin until it flamed red, shampooing his hair until he felt as though his scalp were bleeding. Dried and dressed, he returned to the kitchen and searched through the cupboards for food. Only a can of soup. He heated it and ate it from the pan, not even
bothering to sit at the table, but just leaning against the kitchen counter. He washed the pan and the spoon and put them away. The house sparkled. All that remained was the laundry.

He had just put on his coat to drive to the laundromat when she walked into the living room. "Ever hear of doorbells?" He went into the bedroom for the laundry, turning his back on her.

"You wouldn't have let me in anyway," she said.

"No," he grunted, hefting the bundle, "probably not."

"So it wouldn't have done me any good to ring the bell, would it?"

"Nope. Guess not." He struggled to get the laundry through the door. It was a tight fit.

She unbuttoned her coat and laid her purse on the table. "Look," she said. That was all, as though she didn't know what to say from there on.

He set the bundle on the floor, punching and kneading it into a narrower, taller shape. "Hmmm?"

"I mean, Christ, you could look at me or something."

"Why?" He stepped over the bundle into the living room and tried to pull it through the doorway.

"Shit." She slumped into one of the dining chairs. "I mean, Christ, I'd like to talk to you, you know?"
He forgot the laundry and stood erect, looking at her for the first time, a bitter grin twisting across his face. "Talk to me? You'd like to talk to me? I thought you said it all this morning." His tone became sarcastic. "Why the hell didn't you say so before I left? I mean, I wouldn't have dreamed of leaving your goddam bedroom if I'd known you weren't finished putting me down. I mean, you should've said, 'Look, I've only called you a nut, a drunk, and a eunuch, and I've got a few other things left. They'll only take a minute or two.' Why didn't you just say that? And, hell, I would've been glad to hang around a little longer. I just didn't understand."

He stepped back into the bedroom and kicked at the bundle. The sheet ripped. A dirty sock lofted into the living room. He stared at it, then at the deflated bundle, its contents strewn across the floor. He said, "Shit."

She picked up the sock and handed it to him. "I'm trying to say I'm sorry, you know? I didn't mean to piss you off."

"Sure. You figured I'd be eternally grateful for some bedroom analysis." He turned away from her and started to pick up the scattered laundry.

"No, it's just ... well, look ..." She faltered, searching for words, and then said, "I just thought it might help, that's all. To know that somebody understands how you feel."
He whirled to face her. "Understand how I feel? You understand how I feel?" He laughed a bitter laugh. "Man, I don't even understand how I feel. Horseshit!"

He saw tears glistening in her eyes, and he felt a sudden cruel glee in knowing he had hurt her. He pressed on. "You think that you're such a good lay I should let you castrate me afterwards, right? And you say I've got some kind of thing about sex. Jesus Christ, you're a god-dam Black Widow. Or a Freudian whore. You don't take money, just sadistic kicks." She was crying now, her lovely face contorted, and he delivered the final blow. "Well, you've been paid off, baby. You got all you're going to get from me."

He had expected her to leave then, crushed and humiliated by his outburst. But she only stood in the bedroom doorway, crying silently, the mascara-stained tears smearing her cheeks, an occasional gasping sob tearing its way down her throat. He turned again to the laundry on the floor, but he could not stand to know that she was still there, that she had been sincere in coming to apologize. And his vengeful joy turned back on him as self-hatred. For she had been right, after all. She had only told him what he knew to be the truth. And that was why it had hurt so badly.

He dropped the dirty shorts he was holding and went to her, putting his hands on her quaking shoulders. Her eyes
were open, glistening, boring into his, and he felt all the pain that was in her—not only the pain he had caused, but also the pain she had caused herself, remorse for the way she had hurt him, humiliation in coming to apologize. And he suddenly realized that he was crying too. He pulled her tight against him, burying her head in his chest, stroking her dark hair, and sobbing in rhythm with her sobs. They stood that way for some time before they stopped and released each other self-consciously, neither willing to meet the other's eyes.

"You're getting footprints all over your sheets," she said.

"What the hell, I've got to wash them anyway." He stepped off the sheets and wiped his face with his coat sleeve.

"You don't have to do it right now, do you?"

"No, I suppose not, but . . ." He raised his eyes to her. She had let her coat slip to the floor and was unbuttoning her blouse. "No, I suppose not," he said, "if you want to do something else."

This time, afterward, he did not talk as she rubbed his back and shoulders. He merely lay face down on the bed, spent and warm, feeling her hands drain the tension from him, listening to her murmuring voice far away, not really conscious of what she said, but letting it soothe him,
letting himself drift into sleep and tranquility for the first time in months.

Now, for the first time in hours, for the first time since he had opened Mom's telegram, Nate did not have the searing light of the sun beating upon him through the windows of the red car. Now he was enclosed in darkness, except for the tunnel his headlights cut into the night, reaching out, illuminating his pathway. But in his mind, there was a light pointing backward as well, a light of knowledge that let him see his whole life, his whole erratic journey toward manhood, as a process of erosion and rebuilding. Leslie had found him crumbled and crushed, without humanity or self-esteem. She had made him see that he had neither, that he had lost them somewhere, not only in the tangle of tattered panties and bloody petticoats, not only in the gallons of booze and mounds of cigarettes, but somewhere, somehow, else. In the locker room, perhaps? In the shame of Lute belittling him? In running home from school, away from Jerry Chappell? In his shame for Lute, that night in the kitchen, when he hid behind the bulk of Billy Phillips? Or the threshing day, the day of the contest? Or that sickening morning of the red-smeared face in the Kansas City motel?

All of these times and more, his pride slipped away a bit at a time. So gradually that the losses were imperceptible,
like a wearing away, an erosion that can be measured only microscopically, but erosion nevertheless, so that he was not aware of any real loss at any one time, not aware until he suddenly crumbled like a coastal rock pounded for centuries by the winds and waves and tides.

You can't say that the rock crumbled in any moment or on any day, but that it crumbled from the first instant of its existence. And you can't say that it was this wave or that gust of wind which destroyed the rock, but rather that all the winds and waves it had ever known, even the faintest whispering breeze and the tiniest lapping ripple, were its destroyers. And the rock becomes sand, and the sand becomes stone once more. But not the same stone as before. And not in a moment or in a day.

He could not remember all the wavelets and breezes which had made him crumble, only the hurricanes and typhoons. And the rebuilding had only just begun. After all, the destruction had taken twenty-two years; how much rebuilding could he do in only four? And the rebuilding, like the erosion, is the work of pressure. The pressures which eroded his old values and ideas and self were painful---some of them excruciating. The pressures of building new values and ideas and self were no less painful. Perhaps more so.

For, like the eroding rock, he had lost only a little at a time, an infinitesimal particle of what he had been,
but he still had the great bulk of his beliefs, of himself, and that great bulk had given him a base upon which to stand, a sense of what he was. But now, like the sand, his identity was diffuse, shifting, ephemeral. All the minute particles that were his ethics, his morals, his intellectual and physical desires, roiled and churned with each new pressure, each new situation, so that he could not tell which particle fit where, which particle took precedence over others. He could not tell which grains of sand would be the basis of the new self he was building. Worse, he did not know what that new self would be.

Yes, the pressures of rebuilding were far harsher than those of erosion, for there was nothing solid left of him, no firm code or value to stand upon. Check's termination, for instance. A new pressure. How should he react to it? Did the particle of him which was his career supersede the particle which was his personal feeling for the old man? How could it? His career had superseded his feeling for Leslie over a year ago. But perhaps those particles had shifted positions since then.

His headlights caught the sign which announced the Braman, Oklahoma, exit, the last exit before the Kansas Turnpike. He pulled off the Interstate. After gassing the car, he went to the Formica-modern, A-frame restaurant next door to the station. He was the only customer in
the place, and he ate mechanically, not thinking about the
tasteless food or the weak coffee, not aware of the list-
less conversation between the red-haired waitress and the
cook. He could not shake Leslie from his mind.

They had stopped here once, on the first trip to
Dallas. Her car had run out of gas about two miles from
town, and they had driven his to the station to get a gallon
or two. They had been on the road almost twelve hours by
that time, and his hand was cramped and stiff. After they
rescued her little sports car from the Interstate, they had
some coffee at the restaurant. It seemed different then,
warmer, more alive. Perhaps because it had been January
instead of August. Perhaps because Les had been with him.
They sat at a table near the door, smoking cigarettes and
blowing their coffee to cool it.

"They'll just shit," she said.

"What?"

"Bricks. They'll shit bricks."

"Two points for you, smart ass," he said. "I mean who."

"My folks. I was just thinking, just before the car
ran out of gas, I was thinking what they'll do when they
find out."

"Yeah," he laughed.

"Drop out of school. Run off to Texas, of all places,
with a guy I've known for three weeks." She shook her head
and smiled. "No job. Almost no money. Hell, we don't even know anybody in Dallas."

"Aw, come on," Nate said, "you mean they'd really get shook up over little things like that?"

"And when they find out that the only reason we're going to Texas is because it's warmer than Iowa . . . God, they'll just shit."

"And they'll say, 'Leslie, dear, where have we gone wrong? How have we failed?' Right?"

"Yeah, and my mother will wring her hands and cry, 'My baby.'"

"Living in sin."

"Throwing away my honor."

"Throwing away your education."

"Throwing away my career."

"Throwing away your life."

"Throwing up."

They laughed and sipped their coffee. As he put his cup down, Nate became serious. He rubbed his aching hand and stared at the steam rising from the coffee. He thought of Les—pretty, intelligent, evidently not hurting for money, if her apartment and her clothes were any indication.

"Les?" He paused, not really wanting to ask. "I mean, well, why are you here? I mean, I've got nothing to lose. I'm out of school, got no money, no real family but Mom. But, well, why are you here?"
She turned her coffee cup around and around on its saucer, and he watched the movements of her thin fingers, the tendons rippling on the backs of her hands, the coffee sloshing back and forth in the cup.

"You don't know?" she said, finally.

"No, I really don't. I mean, you're giving up a hell of a lot."

She stopped twisting the cup, and he looked into her transparent blue eyes. They were brimming with tears.

"You dumb shit," she hissed, "don't you know I love you?"

The tears overflowed, and she leaped up from the table to run out, spilling their coffee as she did so. Nate could not move; he could hardly think. He watched her walk through the doorway and turn toward the place where they had parked the cars. He heard her car sputter into life and roar off toward the Interstate.

Another life screwed up. He had screwed up someone else. Why was it that everything, everyone he touched, turned to shit in his hands? Tattered pants and petticoats of blood. Leave 'em weeping. So she loved him. Threw away everything, all that she had, for him. Him. Big man. Big schmuck. Fuck 'em all, fuck 'em all, the long and the short and the tall. And now another one. Another won. She loved him, a weak, sniveling, pitiful non-man who couldn't even love himself.
He thought he had reached the depths of self-hate that night at Carol's, but he had proven himself wrong by screwing whatsername on his wedding night. Maybe that's why he was drinking so much, to forget for a minute or an evening how much he really hated this despicable subhuman creature named Nathaniel Parker. Maybe the hate was intensified because he saw in himself all the things for which he had despised Lute: the booze, the broads, the braggadocio, the essential unmanliness. But then, with the truth that Leslie had made him see came some kind of hope. Hope that perhaps he could avoid hurting someone, for once. Hope that perhaps he could achieve some kind of inner peace.

And now this. She loved him. He had taken her away from everything that was important to her. Scored again. He wished he could cry, and for a moment he actually made tears blur his eyes. But he had made the tears on purpose. Couldn't even feel true sorrow anymore, he realized. Not even that much feeling left.

At least, when he had been bent over the bed, when he felt the cruel silver tip of the belt bite into his back and legs and buttocks, he could cry in pain. And he knew, even in his six-year-old mind, that the pain would end eventually, that Lute's arm would not hold out forever. But now, the pain was worse--true agony--for it was not a pain of the body, but of the mind, of the soul, of that part of
him which was the essence of him. And that pain was inescapable. It was unutterable. He could not even vent his sorrow through tears.

And the dark thing which Lute had sown in him with the lashing tip of the belt so many years before had grown and flourished and swollen within him until it had taken him over, body, mind, and soul.
Chapter Eight

The house was tiny, only three rooms and a bath. It sat on a street only two blocks long in the Dallas residential area called Oak Cliff. White paint peeled from its clapboards in a few places, but its roof was sound, its foundation sturdy. In the back were two screened porches looking out on the pecan and mimosa trees in the back yard, and the honeysuckle vines which clambered up the sides of the sagging garage. Both porches had windows which could be closed against the weather. One of them was closed all the time, and they used it for storing luggage and books and odds and ends for which there was no room in the house itself.

The other screened porch was open most of the time. They ate out there in the evenings, away from the heat of the kitchen, talking quietly and listening to the flittering leaves, the crickets, and the hushed voices of birds settling down for the night. In the afternoons, Leslie carried the coffee pot out there and wrote or sketched or read until it was time to start dinner. Lately, however, they talked less when they sat on the screened porch. They watched television more and more in the evenings. Leslie did not write or sketch in the afternoons as much as she used to. She still tried to read, but she rarely finished a book.
This afternoon, though, she sat at the typing table, a cup of coffee steaming beside a ream of fresh, white paper. She rolled a sheet into the typewriter, poised her hands over the keys, and said, "Shit." She pushed her chair back and picked up the coffee cup. The first tentative sip brought tears to her eyes, and she wandered into the kitchen for an ice cube to cool it. Then she carried the cup into the bedroom and looked at the suitcases lying on the bed. She went back to the porch, sat at the typewriter, and wrote

Leslie: Her Story

The Youth and the Girl. Roger and Natalie. Many stories before have we written about them. But now is no time for pseudonyms. Fakery. Fiction or falsity. Now must we give them their real true-life names.

Nathaniel and Leslie. Their names. Les and Nate others call them. But not she. Les was okay, but not Nate. To her. To her Nate sounded different from him. He was not Nate. Nathaniel she called him, he her both Les and Leslie. Nat, once she said, should be the nickname for Nathaniel. Gnat he had answered was what the kids called him, so he changed into Nate. But she would not call him that. It was not his name.

Nathaniel. She loved him more than she had ever loved. More than the high school boy. Pimples and acne at the
movies or Prom. More than the college boy. Dark blue blazers and an XKE. More than the guy with whom she'd lost her virginity. But, of course, she hadn't loved him at all. She'd wanted it that way.

Tapping on his door, the boyfriend's room mate. Skinny neck and dirty tee shirt. Ron's not here. Two day field trip. I know, she said. Stomach tight and nervous. Scotch and wine and beer. Go to bed with me. His eyes wide. Surprised. Rumpled sheets and armpit stink. Hot red pain between her legs. Garlic breath. Acrifd sweat. Take that, Mother, you filthy bitch.


All next day and the day after, walking, knowing, hiding in her pants, a hair. On her thing. Feel it there. Dark and secret. Rubbing against her skin. A hair.

Momma and Daddy. Bedtime kiss. Pull up the blanket to cover her thing. Hair showing dark though concealed by pajamas. Momma, kiss. Daddy, kiss. Stare scared into the dark. Worried by the dark hair.
The sinner's mark? Cain had one. God put it on his brow. Had He put the hair on her thing as well? To show that she was bad? Her thing was bad. Momma said so.

Don't touch your thing. Don't play with it. Wipe it off and wash your hands. Amanda had a thing like hers. She'd seen it one day going swimming. She'd looked away, like Momma said. Amanda's thing was just like hers. Pink and soft. Without a hair. The sinner's mark, that's what it was. She cried into the velvet dark.

Whenever she undressed for bed, whenever she went to the bathroom, she gazed upon the one black hair and wondered what her sin could be. She one night stood before the mirror, just before she said her prayers. (She said them alone now and got into bed so Momma and Daddy would not see.) Her thing looked darker, in a shadow. She sat on the bed and studied it closely. Other hairs were growing darker. She touched them. Rubbed a finger across them. Real hairs, dark, like on her head. Not silky hairs like on her arms that only show when flour is on them.

Momma and Daddy on the staircase, coming up for her goodnight kiss. She donned her pajamas and leaped into bed. Fear made her breathing come in gasps. Fear made her face get hot and sweaty.

Say your prayers dear? Momma asked her. Yes, she lied, and her face flamed hotter. Momma kissed her on the cheek.
She stood up, worried, touched her forehead. Feel all right dear? You feel warm. Yes, she answered, I feel fine. But Daddy touched her forehead too. You sure you're okay? he said. She nodded, smiling through her fear. He kissed her gently on the cheek.

But she had lied about her prayers. She worried about Hell and being Damned. Yes, God had put hairs on her thing. To test her faith, he'd put them there. And she had lied because of them. She failed the test. She would be Damned. And all because of those hateful hairs that God had put on her hateful thing.

If thine right eye offend thee pluck it out, Jesus had said in Sunday school. She waited until they went to bed, then sneaked across to the medicine chest. The metal tweezers gleamed in her hand as she plucked the offenders one by one. She wanted to cry, it hurt her so. But Momma and Daddy would wake if she did. She lay down in the bed again, knowing that she had saved herself. She had followed the Word of the Lord.

Two days later the hairs were back, thicker, darker than before. She did not pluck them out again. There is no hope for a doomed, damned soul. She was fascinated. Horrified. She had not seen the mark of damnation before. It filled her with a mystic awe. To see the hairs. To feel them there, where everybody had smooth skin, as she had had before her
sin. Feel them? Yes. Her thing was bad. But she would only touch the hairs. Momma said don't touch your thing. But she had never mentioned hairs. How could she? No one had hairs on their thing. That made her feel a bit less guilty.

Undressing now before the mirror, looking at the patch of hair. Touching the hairs and feeling them curl. Reaching down after the goodnight kiss to feel them dark and secret there. Nice to touch. She wondered why. They signified her blackened soul. But touching, rubbing her hand across them, made her stomach quivery and odd. And every night she'd rub and touch them until at last she fell asleep. Or until a flood of guilt engulfed her and she pulled her wicked hand away.

Then Junior High. PE class. Run. Run. Down the hall. Panting. Breathless. To the locker room. The others were coming. Into the toilet stall. Change her clothes. The others must not see. And she could not see them. Their things soft and pink and naked. Hers enmeshed in hateful hair.

One day, secret in the stall. Her panties dangling in her hand. Blood. She touched her hairy thing. Blood. Blood. She almost screamed. Rubbed herself the night before. Scratched her thing? Rubbed a hole in the tender skin? Momma must not see her pants. She would know what Leslie had done.


What if her thing bled during the night? Stains on her pajamas and sheets. She couldn’t wash out everything. Why
hadn't she listened to Momma? Why had she rubbed her thing? Why had God put that hair on it? It was all His fault. If He hadn't tried to test her, none of this would have happened. Now it was too late. She would bleed to death during the night. Momma and Daddy would find her in the morning. They would see her bloody, hairy thing.

Back to the bathroom. Toilet paper stuffed into new pants. Then on with her pajamas again. If she did live through the night, her sheets and pajamas would not be stained. Momma and Daddy came in to kiss her goodnight. She almost cried. She knew she would never see them again. She prayed until she fell asleep. She swore that she would never rub her thing again. If God let her live.

She was still alive in the morning. But the bleeding had not stopped. Back to the bathroom. Toilet paper and water and Ivory. An extra pair of pants for her bookbag, just in case. Gym period. Into the stall. Oh dear God, let them be white. Blood. She cried. Silent. So the others would not know. Fresh pants on. Back in the stall after gym. The fresh pants bloody! She cried again. Toilet paper. Folded and stuffed into her pants. She hoped the others would not hear it rustle.

Biology class. Mr. Thorne. Kind. He smiled a lot. Told funny jokes sometimes.
Mr. Thorne? How long would it take for someone to bleed to death?
That's a pretty gruesome question, isn't it, Leslie?
But how long would it take?
Well, it depends on where the person is bleeding from.
She blushed. From her thing, she wanted to say. But then he would know. That she had sinned.
A severed artery would lose blood more quickly than a severed vein.
Relief. How can you tell the difference, Mr. Thorne?
Well, blood from an artery is bright red, and it usually spurts. Venous blood is darker, and it usually flows evenly. Why do you ask, Leslie?
I just wondered.
Her blood was dark. It did not spurt. It was venous blood, and it would take her a long time to bleed to death.
How long? She was afraid to ask him. She walked back to her seat. Spraddle-legged because of the toilet paper.
Morning. School. No. Saturday morning. No gym class. Saturday morning. Sleep. SATURDAY MORNING. MOMMA'S WASH-DAY. BLOODY PANTS IN HER BOOK BAG. WITH HER GYM SUIT AND TOWEL. MOMMA WOULD FIND THEM.
She bounded from bed and opened the book bag. The pants were gone. Instead, a complicated tangle of elastic and metal clasps. A book. *What Every Young Girl Should Know.*

Momma never did talk about it. Her message was clear, nevertheless. High school. Leslie dating boys. Unspoken fear in her mother's eyes. Once when she stayed out too late Mother took her to old Doc Ellis. She didn't know why until Mother told Doc what she wanted him to check. Leslie cried. Shame and hatred.

The examining room. Doc gave her a chair. Folded face and bright white hair. His voice as soft and deep as his eyes. The hand that delivered her patted her hand.

Don't be too angry. Don't hate her, he said. She's only afraid for you, horribly frightened.

She just doesn't trust me. Sniffles and sobs.

She's frightened of sex. She thinks that it's dirty. Don't let her fill you with fear and with shame. I won't examine you. It's none of her business. You're a young woman now, no longer a child. Your mind is your own, and so is your body. It's up to you what you do with them now.

He gave her the names of a couple of good books and told her to call if she had any questions. Then he sent her back to the waiting room and asked her mother to come in for a moment. She never did know what he said to her.
mother, but when Mother came out she was angry, embarrassed. On the way home, she said she was sorry.

Forgive her? Never. She should have lost her virginity that night. Some justification, at least, for her humiliation. Never forgive her. Never forget her sour, pinched face or the brittle reproach in her glittering eyes.

Her body was hers. She guarded it, kept it pure. Not because sex was bad. Because the decision must be hers alone. Not give in to pleading, attempts at seduction. Hers the virginity. Hers to decide.

College. Ron. Blue blazers and an XKE. She loved him, wanted him. But he wanted her too. Not her decision, then. Not hers alone, if she gave in to Ron. That would not do. That was why. She could not love him, whoever, at all.


She did not enjoy it at all. An operation. Bloody. Impassionate. Losing her virginity like losing her appendix. Ridding herself of an unnecessary impediment.
Quick sharp slap. Blue blazer swimming in tears.

Slut!

No. We can do it now.

Whore!

Don't you see?

Bitch!

I love you.


The operation was a success, but the patient . . .

She woke one morning, two or three months later. She didn't know how long it was. And looked into the mirror. Her hair filthy. The smell of it. The greasy feel of it around her face. Nausea. Her eyes sunk deep in dead gray sockets. Her teeth yellow. Gritty against her tongue. Her vulva itched. She scratched. From her hand dangled rheumy yellow pus. She gagged. The bathroom. Wash the hand. Scrub the vulva.


She woke. Uncomfortable plastic chair. Gray-haired man. She was talking. Her mother and pubic hair. Her
wrists. Fine white scars. She knew where she was. Where she had been while the gashes healed. She no longer belonged there. The gray-haired man knew too. After a month, she left.


Then Nathaniel, a week later. Crumpled on the floor. In his eyes despair and guilt. She understood. Jesus Christ, she said. She pulled him from the bar. As the gray-haired man had pulled her. From the slime and ooze of her own mind. A debt repaid. Partially. Allowing him to spill in her some of his confusion.

He moaned. Tossed fitfully. She stroked his furrowed forehead. Kissed him lightly on the cheek. He would not allow that if he were awake. Too vile, he thought himself. Too far beyond feeling to accept tenderness. But he, still asleep, took her hand in his, relaxed once again. She smiled. Wanted to cry. She loved him.


I'm going south, he said, out of this shit.

Where?
I don't know. Dallas, maybe.

When?
Next week.
We'd better start packing.

He pulled away from her hands. I'm going, he said. Me too.

No. Just me. You stay here.

Why?
Turning away from her. Taking off his bulky coat. Look, he said, I've screwed up my life. That's enough. I don't have to screw yours up too.

I don't care. If you don't take me I'll follow you anyway.

Turning around again. Pain in his face. Not just of frozen ears. Anguish of hurting her. His own evil destroying her. She understood that pain.

I mean it, she said.

Shrugging his shoulders. Okay, he said.

That first year. Tough. Fun. Exciting in a morbid way. They lived on what they could scrounge. On who they could con. Parents, sometimes, friends, hockshops, sympathetic grocers. They did little honest work. None dishonest. At least they retained some morals, ethics, honesty. Most of the time they were broke. Looking back, Leslie could not remember how they survived.

But they were free. Perhaps for the first time. Really free. No one saying be here, be there. Sometimes for several days they did not look at a calendar. They ate only when they felt like it. If they had food. They read, wandered, watched, listened. Pinto beans and salt pork. Thirty-seven cents a meal. And filling.

They rambled to the coffeehouses and bars where others like them were. Irresponsible. Broke. Introspective. And
in the same strange way, happy. Hunching over tiny tables in dim-lit rooms. Talking of Odetta and Ferlinghetti. Batal-
man and kite string. Sartre and Cynthia Gooding. Miles Davis and Kerouac and Howl! while folk singers strummed
and sang songs of toil and poverty, love and war. They
felt very tragic and intellectual. Superior to all those poor
people caught in the ratrace. Often they would tell each
other how sorry they were that everyone could not be as
free and happy as they were. How unfortunate that most
people didn't question their Philosophies of Life or their
Roles in Society. How pitiful, insignificant were the con-
versations and concerns of middleclass Americans. They met
painters and actors and conmen and whores. Singers and
sculptors and excons and queers. They felt very worldly
and very hip and very very tragic. Dean Moriarty and Hol-
den Caulfield and Little Orphan Annie all at once. With a
bit of Gully Jimson thrown in.

Then, after a year. TV. Hi-fi. Slide rule. Guitar.
Typewriter. All sold or hocked. Cars almost out of gas.
No food. No cigarettes. Nathaniel out to make the after-
noon scrounging rounds. Leslie going through ashtrays for
butts. She had found five when he burst in. His eyes wild.
His cursing incoherent. A wad of crumpled bills. He threw
them on the floor. From a sack he took a bottle of cheap
Scotch and stalked into the kitchen. She heard him get a
glass, pour a drink. She picked up the money. Fifteen bucks.
Where did you get it? she called.

Shit!

She walked to the kitchen doorway. Slouched at the table. His head in his hands. Staring at the half-filled glass.

Where did you get it? Pause. You didn't steal it?

Wish I had, he mumbled. I'd feel better.

She stuffed the bills into her Levi's pocket. Poured herself a drink. Watered down weak. She sat opposite him. He took a gulp of Scotch.

I sold my damn blood. A goddam pint of AB Negative. Like a fucking whore, selling myself. Shit.

Something new in his face. His expression. Anger? Perhaps. But different from the pain, self-pity, usually in his eyes.

Jesus, you should've seen them. God. Old alkies. Old, grizzled, filthy bums. Watery eyes. Greasy, stringy hair. Stubble and dirt and broken teeth. I thought, my God, what the hell am I doing here? Is this what I'm becoming?

He paused. She said nothing. He took another drink. A sip this time. Averting his eyes from her. As though her gaze were an accusation.

I'm not going to do it, Les. I'm not going to end up that way.
He stood up. Paced aimlessly around the room.

We've wasted a goddam year. Do you realize that? A whole goddam year. For nothing at all. Jesus. We feel sorry for ourselves. Telling ourselves we're happy. And living on shit all the time.

He hit the table. She jumped.

I've had it, Les. God damn, we can live like people and still be free, can't we? We don't have to live like the goddam middleclass just because we have some money. Do we? We don't have to starve to be real.

No, she said, we don't have to.

But she did not know.

He began working for the Company. They still went to the coffeehouses and bars. Now and then. They did not stay late. Work started at eight-thirty. He got hung up in the job. Coming home late. Too tired to do anything. Sitting around. Watching TV. Some of the old crowd came by occasionally. But Nathaniel and Leslie lost touch. Gradually. Inevitably.

They would come home. Nathaniel would bitch. How empty it was. How pointless the lives of those people. And Leslie would think, deep within herself, that their own lives were

Nathaniel, dear Nathaniel,

I tried so goddam hard to write this out as I used to, as we used to. Remember how we would sit down when everything seemed really shitty and fictionalize what we were going through? Remember how we could work out so many problems that way? How we would compare the stories and laugh and say, Someday when we're old and straight we'll remember these damn things and read them and remember how foolish and beautiful and happy these times really were? How we figured that someday we might put them all together and call it the Great American Novel and publish it and be famous?

I tried to do it again, but I just can't. So I just have to say it straight, I guess. I can't laugh anymore. I can't write. I can't do a damn thing. I could put up with no money. I could get by on pinto beans and cornbread. We both could. We did. And remember how happy we were. Remember how exciting life seemed when we would go out to the coffeehouses and sit up all night talking to Eddie and Mary and Chris and George and all those guys. Sure, I put
it down in the story. Overexaggerated it, I suppose. Very
tragic, and all that. But we were happy. We were truly free.

And now I sit at home alone every goddam day and try to
write. Try to read. But I end up drinking coffee until I
go to the john every fifteen minutes. And I can't read
because you're not here to talk with about the shit I'm
reading. And I get so fucking bugged with you coming home
and flopping in front of the tube and sucking up beer. I
get so fucking tired of going out to Company parties and
talking with emptyheaded Company wives and watching all of
you trying so goddam hard to be Company men. Shit. SHIT!!!

But the new house is it, man. The last of many straws.
This little house has been home for almost two years now.
We were so unbelievably happy here. So free. And Mr. and
Mrs. Morton. We'll never find landlords like them again.
I love this little house. It's home.

But it's not good enough for your goddam Company people.
After all, they have those thirty-thousand-dollar monsters,
so we have to have one too. Shit! And you used to put
down the middleclass people. Plastic people, you said,
hung up in their fucking possessions. Man, look at yourself.
We can still be real, you said. Sure. Barbie dolls are
real, too, but who wants to be one?

What I said at the beginning of this story is true. I
do love you more than I've ever loved anyone before. But
you! Not the schmuck you're becoming. I'm not going to sit around and watch you turn into the Compleat Company Ass. I love you too much for that.

I should be driving through Oke City by the time you read this. I'm taking just enough money to get me home, so you don't have to check the cookie jar. Your wallet's still in your shoe.

I'll write and let you know where to send my stuff. I'll write to the office, since you'll probably be in that damn new house by then.

I made a meatloaf and put it in the fridge. Bake it for an hour at 350.

I love you.

Les

P.S. I'll write to you now and then so that you'll know where to find me when you get fed up with that Company shit.

P.P.S. I love you.

She pulled the last sheet from the typewriter and added it, face down, to the stack on the table. Then she turned the stack over, evened up the pages, and placed it in the center of the table.

She went through the house one more time to make sure she hadn't forgotten anything. She would send for her books
and records later. They were too heavy to carry now. She was certain that there must be some more clothes in the laundry, but she couldn't find them. The laundry. She smiled and kicked the bundle, remembering that night.

She picked up a book of short stories she had only half finished and stuffed it into a suitcase. Then she lugged the suitcases to the car. It was a beautiful September day, warm and sunny. It would be cooler back in Iowa. Autumn in Texas didn't have the crisp bite of Iowa weather. She locked the door and put the key in the mailbox. She should have told Nathaniel where it was. Oh well, he'd find it.

She walked to the car and looked at the house one last time. It was so perfect. White, compact. Homey was the word. The twin rose bushes in front of the tiny porch, the mimosa tree back by the corner, the honeysuckle vine. So happy. So free. So much love and pain and comfort in this place for her. For both of them.

She started the car and headed for Hampton Road, then north to Stemmons Freeway, the Interstate. She did not cry until ten o'clock that night, alone in a room in a Holiday Inn.
Chapter Nine

Nate did not even look at his watch when he reached Kansas City. It made no difference whether the watch said ten, eleven, or twelve. His body said it was time to sleep. He cursed himself again for having spent the weekend with Esther instead of sleeping. He had been driving since what? Eight-thirty? A hell of a long day, made longer because he could not stop thinking of Check and Lute and Grandpa and Leslie.

All the way through Kansas, as his headlights bored into the blackness surrounding the Turnpike, he had tried to stop thinking of her story. But it was impossible. He had almost memorized it. How many times had he read it? He did not know. But it was yellowed now, and dogeared, in the center drawer of his desk at home. A testimony that his life was not the only one screwed up by a parent, by guilt. The story made him feel better sometimes when he felt alone, when he remembered what he had been, what he had gone through.

But there were also those times when the Company was getting to him that he hated to read it, for then everything Les had said seared his eyes with the hot coal of truth. What was he, after all? Nothing but a plastic, briefcase-toting automaton? No. A man had to be more than that. The Company could not circumscribe his life. But didn't it, really?
He drove through Kansas City so he wouldn't have to fight the traffic in the morning, and he checked in at what seemed to be the last motel on the northeast side. He asked to be called at seven and went to his room. He unpacked the fifth of Scotch which always nestled in among his shorts and socks when he packed for a week in his zone, and which he had automatically packed for this trip. He fixed a stiff Scotch and water, showered, and stretched out on the bed, sipping occasionally at the drink.

At least he wasn't a Company man in his liquor. Most of them drank Jack Daniels or George Dickel--bourbon and branch. The first time he had tasted Scotch, when was it? Twelve years old. It was a threshing day at Grandpa's farm, and all the men in the neighborhood were there. Most of the farmers in the county were harvesting their oats with combines by then, but the men in the neighborhood had chipped in to buy the thresher only twelve years before, and they still all worked together when harvest time came. After all, they told each other, a good thresher should last twenty, even thirty, years. They would get their money's worth out of it.

Threshing times were always happy times. Grandpa would go out one day with the binder, which cut the oats and bound their stalks together in bundles. After a field was cut and bound, Grandpa and Nate and Harry, the hired
man, would stack the bundles in groups of six or eight which were called shocks. And after a few days of drying, it would be time to thresh.

The day before threshing started, Grandma and the other women in the neighborhood would fire up their stoves early in the morning and begin to bake bread and biscuits and rolls and pies. The days were always unbearably hot at threshing time, and by starting early, the women could get most of the cooking done in the morning, before the heat of the day made it impossible to even be near the monstrous, cob-burning ranges, let alone cook on them.

"Ag, we got to get a gas stove," Grandpa would say every summer. But Grandma refused. She was used to the old black range. And besides, it made the kitchen warm and cozy in wintertime.

But in the just-dawn of the day before threshing, the heat in the kitchen felt like four in the afternoon. Grandma tied her long, gray hair into braids and curled them on top of her head. Then she tied a cloth—usually a feedsack dishtowel—around her head to keep wisps of hair from falling into her bread dough and from plastering themselves to her damp, heat-reddened forehead.

Nate loved to sit at the kitchen table and watch her bustle around the huge kitchen, mixing her batters and fillings like a rotund sorceress. He would have already gone
to the cob-pile several times to fill coalhods and buckets and boxes with cobs for the stove, pausing every now and then to wait for a mouse to stick its head cautiously from between the cobs, waiting silently, afraid to move, afraid even to breathe because the movement or the sound might warn the mouse of his presence. The dog, Roxy, waited too. He knew the game as well as Nate did. They would both be poised, ready to strike at their minute quarry. And then a cob would tremble. They would stiffen, Roxy's hair standing on end. The cob would dislodge itself from the pile and tumble down. A whiskered nose would appear, twitching suspiciously. And WHACK! Nate's shovel would smash against the cobs. Roxy would pounce, sending cobs flying as he burrowed after the stunned mouse.

Grandma, hearing the metallic whack, would open the screen door and call, "Natty." (She still called him "Natty." It insulted his twelve-year-old dignity.) And he would begin again to scoop cobs into the container. Of course, after each container was filled, it was legal to play the mouse game one more time before he lugged the container to the house.

Then he sat at the kitchen table, hearing the flames roar as they digested the cobs in the belly of the tall black stove. The stove creaking and groaning and murmuring to itself as warmth flowed into its metal flesh. The coffee
water in the speckled blue teakettle began to hum and whine, and finally it burbled as steam spewed from the spout. Grandma had already prepared the coffee grounds in the drip pot, and Nate carefully poured the water into the top of it. It was his duty to keep watch on the coffee and to pour a cup for each of them when it was done, for Grandma was too busy to take the time.

The whole room was filled with a haze of flour dust. Flour was everywhere. It settled like mist on her arms, on her faded dress, on the fine, silky hairs of her moustache. On her forehead, rivulets of sweat traced pink lines through white flour-mist, like water droplets wandering down the sides of teeth-chilling pink lemonade glasses. It was as though the heat of the stove had vaporized the flour and had sent it billowing throughout the room in thin, dry clouds to condense on skin and hair and table top.

As the coffee water dripped slowly into the bottom of the pot, Grandma plunged her hands into the glutinous mass of dough which nearly filled the huge earthenware mixing bowl. He watched, fascinated, as she punched it and pulled it and kneaded and squeezed. The muscles bulged in her forearms, and tiny geysers of flour spat up from the bowl for a while, then ceased, and she finished the blending. She hefted two wads of dough from the bowl and dropped them SPLAT! SPLAT! into bowls just as big. These she sat on the
very top of the range, standing on tiptoe to avoid the hot metal. She covered them with dampened towels and warned Nate to leave them alone. He was forever standing on a kitchen chair and lifting one edge of the towel, trying to see the dough grow. It was a miracle, a mark of Grandma's wizardry, that a little glob of dough could swell to fill the whole mixing bowl.

The coffee was done. He poured two cups. It was murky and bitter, the way Grandma and Grandpa liked it. He cut his with heavy yellow cream and two spoons of sugar. Grandma set him to work peeling and coring apples while she started to make more dough in the mixing bowl. Pie dough this time. Always before when threshing time came, at least one of his aunts would help Grandma with the kitchen work, and Nate would go off with Grandpa and Harry. But this year all the girls had left for the summer to earn some of their college money, so Grandpa had told him to fetch and carry for Grandma.

He didn't mind too much, even if it was girls' work. He would work with the men tomorrow. Besides, the kitchen was starting to smell good. The sweet-sour odor of the apples in his bowl, the dark, rich coffee, the heavy smell of yeast working and growing, these harmonized with the underlying smells that were always in the kitchen: the scents of sweat and smoke and soap, the indelible essence of onion, and the faint odor of manure from Grandpa's boots outside the screen door.
He finished the apples, and Grandma put him to work pitting cherries, keeping a watchful eye on him, but not letting him know that she saw when he slipped one into his mouth. Some of the pie shells were in the oven now, and the smell of their baking joined the other smells in the room. Grandma was putting the rest of the dough into pie plates, rolling out fragile circles, molding them to the tins, and snipping and pricking and pinching them into perfect shells. Some of them she filled with sliced apples, sprinkling pungent cinnamon over them, then covering them with another layer of crust. The others would hold the cherries. If any were left when Nate finished.

Then the tempo of her work increased. The bread dough had to be kneaded. The apple pies replaced the empty shells in the oven. Their smell billowed into the air, sweet and tart and pungent all at once. The empty baked shells balanced precariously on the sills of open windows. The pitted cherries whisked away to an enameled kettle on the stove. She dumped scoops of sugar into the kettle, and dippers of water. She never measured anything; she knew when it was right. And the cherries started to stew and simmer, roiling the air with clouds of steam at first, then puffing out tiny jets of steam as the syrup thickened.

Nate watched in awe as she flitted around the kitchen, checking her pies, stirring the cherries, kneading the
baked dough, pouring cups of coffee, checking the pies once more. She was indeed a sorceress, brewing up magic potions to win the hearts of men. And then, when her pace was most furious, she began to sing bits and pieces of her song. Nate had never heard her sing the whole thing at once, all the way through, but he knew that it must have been in her mind constantly, for she would work silently for a while, and then a line of the song—sometimes not even a whole line—would trill into the steamy, odor-laden air, and she would work silently for another while.

Pick up a potholder. Open the oven door. Steam billows out.

I'll have you to remember
Close the oven door. Lean over the cherry kettle.
Sniff. Gray hair and dishtowel blurred by swirling steam.

Love will live in
Giant spoon stirring the syrup. Free hand wiping her drenched forehead.

Then let us part
Hum four notes.

Too old to dream
Put down the syrup-stained spoon. Stand on tiptoe to reach one of the bread-dough bowls. Carry it to the table.
Remove the towel. Study the dough, hand on chubby hip.
Wipe hands on apron. Bustle to the pantry. Battle of metal and glass.
When I grow too old to dream, I'll have you to remember in counterpoint with the rattle.

Waddle back to the table, bread pans in one hand, wiping her forehead with the other. Bread pans clatter on the metal table top. Wipe hands on apron.

Your love will live in my heart.

He sat at the table, not at all bored or restless as he usually was, but entranced by the magic in her flitting, flour-caked fingers, in her eyes and nose and tongue which could measure unerringly the correct amount of sugar or water or spice. The flour-clouded air cast a misty haze over the whole ritual, enhancing the aura of mystic unreality as her turbaned head bowed over the heavy dough which she would charm into light white bread. And snatches of the song swelled and dwindled like magic incantations.

Then, noticing his inactivity, she stopped and grinned, her false teeth slipping a little. "Out to the garden with you," she said. "Granmaw needs celery and radishes and onions and lettuce."

Reluctantly, he went to the pantry for the garden basket. He was convinced that the most magic time of all must be at hand, and she was banishing him from the kitchen to protect the secret of her spell. For he knew what apples and cherries and lemon and dough tasted like. Yet, when Grandma turned them into apple pies and cherry pies and
lemon meringue pies, she put them through some kind of magical transformation which made them taste like apples or cherries or lemons, but better, somehow.

So he slammed the screen door loudly to let her know that he was really gone, and then he stood on the porch, peering back through the screen, hoping to catch a glimpse of her delicious secret. But there she stood, her thick arms folded beneath her tremendous bosom, staring straight at him.

"Out to the garden, Granmaw said." She tapped out a warning with the toe of one incongruously small shoe.
"Now scat!"

Defeated, he turned away and plodded off to his labor in the warm brown earth and the sun, which had almost finished its daily task of burning the dew from turgid green leaves. But after he had pulled only five radishes, a car, chased by a thick yellow cloud of dust, turned into the barnyard and crunched to a halt down by the barn. Big Buster pried himself from the seat and bellowed, "Hey, Nate!" (Buster understood that a twelve-year-old could not be called "Natty."). "Is your grampaw around?"

Before Nate could answer, Grandpa emerged from the workshop side of the barn and began talking with Big Buster and the two men who had come with him. Nate looked doubtfully at the forlorn radishes in the bottom of his basket and then ran to join the men.
The men were talking about setting up the thresher for tomorrow's work. He tried to join them unobtrusively, edging up beside Big Buster. He never did understand why everyone called Big Buster "Big Buster" and Grandpa "Daniel." It seemed to him that they should say "Big Daniel," for Grandpa was even bigger than Big Buster. The only man he'd ever seen who was bigger than Grandpa was Billy Phillips, and they just called him "Billy," not "Big Billy." But thinking about Billy, he grabbed his hand, the hurt one, and he felt hot fury boil inside him again, as it always did when Billy or his father was near, as it always did when he only thought of them. Grandpa saw him grab his hand, saw the pained expression on his face.

"You all right, Natty?" he said.

Nate nodded, ashamed that Grandpa had seen him. He did not know if Grandpa knew the secret of his hand, how it had been hurt. He had never told anyone, faithful to his promise to Mom, and it always bothered him when anyone noticed his hand. Bothered him more than the pain he sometimes suffered from it.

Big Buster grabbed him under the arms and hoisted him into the air as if he were a very light sack of potatoes. "Sure, he's all right," Buster roared. "Big ole fella like Nate . . . I tell you, boy, you're gettin' bigger ever time
I see you." Buster stooped forward, and Nate slid down his back, whooping as his feet thumped to the ground. Nate felt too grown up for that sort of thing, but it was a ritual he and Big Buster had performed for years. He did not want to hurt Buster's feelings.

"Lessee that muscle, Nate."

The boy pranced around Buster's bulk, pulled up the sleeve of his plaid shirt, and strained to make his bicep bulge. Buster tested it in awe. "I swear, Dan, you gonna have to watch out for this fella. He's gonna take you one of these days."

Nate grinned proudly and scuffed his toes in the dirt. He felt Grandpa's hand on his shoulder.

"Aw, Natty wouldn't never take his old grandpa, would you, Natty?"

Nate shook his head, red now from embarrassment, feeling the pleasure Grandpa took in Buster's praise. The men began to talk of hog prices and grain prices, and they ambled through the barnyard toward the corncrib where Harry was greasing the threshing machine. Like a metal dinosaur, the thresher huddled all year beside the crib, which was supposed to serve as a windbreak for it. Not an efficient windbreak, though, since the crib was hardly larger than the machine. Nate ran ahead to open the gate for the men. Not to be courteous, but to show that he was strong enough to handle the heavy gate by himself.
He wrestled it open, grunting and panting, hurting his hand a little, and looked up to receive their praise. But they just sauntered on, taking his show of strength for granted. Grandpa dominated them all, even Big Buster. His faded plaid shirt strained at the chest and shoulders and neck. From its rolled-up sleeves his thick brown forearms jutted as solid a four-by-fours. His strides seemed enormous, ponderous to Nate, and the swing and tilt of his barrel-body gave a feeling of massiveness and control, as though he had vast resources of power which threatened to burst forth at any moment.

"Say, Natty," Grandpa said as he strode through the gate, "ain't you supposed to be helping Granmaw?" He stopped and fixed Nate with a knowing look. Nate had been afraid he would remember. He nodded. He knew better than to lie to Grandpa. "Well, then, get up to the house and help her."

"But the thresher," Nate protested.

"These fellas here can help me and Harry with the thresher. But Granmaw ain't got no help at all. Now, go on."

Defeated again, Nate trudged back to the garden. No work with the men until tomorrow.

Threshing days were always the same, but each time Nate woke in the damp gray dawn of a threshing morning he felt a surge of excited anticipation. In the next room, Grandpa and Grandma were moving about, grunting and rustling
into their clothes. The birds were stirring in the trees outside, waking each other with hesitant chirps and twitters. Far off in the mist, a cow lowed.

Nate threw off his covers and shivered to the window, rubbing his goose-pimpled arms and stomach. Below him, the farm stretched away into invisibility in the half-light, the sidewalk stabbing straight away from the house, between the windmill and garage to the barnyard, where a few chickens were already scratching and bobbing over morsels of corn and insects. And beyond the barnyard, visible between the barn and the white corncrib, its cold gray skin blending with the gray mist of morning, hulked the leviathan, its tubular neck towering above the strawstack, the moldering remains of its last year's vomit.

Yesterday, Nate had watched as Grandpa and the other men had stirred the monster from its hibernation by the red corncrib. All through the white-shrouded winter and the blazing summer it had huddled, sleeping, its great steel wheels sinking into the earth, its gears and pulleys filming over with dust and rust. Then yesterday, the engine of the tractor had roared, the men had shouted, and the dinosaur shuddered and groaned, protesting its awakening. But the tractor and the men would not let it rest. The roar of the engine lowered to a growl, a straining grunt, and the beast held back, its wheels embedded firmly in the thick,
black soil. Grandpa, Big Buster, and the other two men levered timbers under the axles, struggling to break the titan's hold. And finally the monster shook off its sleep and lumbered forward an inch. Two inches. A foot. It waddled cumbrous from the refuge of the red corncrib, lured out by the harsh roar and screaming gears of the tractor Harry drove. It followed the tractor through the gate, around the lofty barn, and settled finally in its feeding place behind the barn and the white corncrib.

Today they would feed it golden bundles of oats, tons of oats which it would chew with its massive whirling teeth and spew out, the straw from one mouth, the grain from another, filling the air with golden dust and shattering racket, its bowels churning incessantly, grinding violently, battering the precious grain from the yellow straw. The men scurrying to and fro about it, bringing food to the dinosaur, laughing and cursing and sweating beneath the merciless disc of the broiling sun, their faces and arms and overalls covered by the golden dust as they stood atop the hayracks, pitching the golden bundles onto the leviathan's ever-lapping tongue which carried them up to its third mouth, the devouring maw. Other men brought trailers to the monster, filled them with its vomit of gleaming grain, and trundled them back to the elevator at the side of the white corncrib.
Above them all, on the broad, flat back of the machine, stood Grandpa, his hooked nose covered by a red bandana, gilded now by the all-pervasive dust. An oilcan he clutched in one thick hand, with the other hand gesticulating to the men below, his shouted directions engulfed by the thunderous bellow of the beast, his goggled eyes constantly surveying the whirling and oscillating gears for signs of trouble in the machine's digestive system. As each trailer mounded up with golden oats, he heaved back on the smaller neck of the machine, cutting off the flow until an empty trailer edged into position. When the mountain of straw became too high at one point, he wrestled the larger neck a few feet to the left or right, beginning the building of a new peak. The gilded bandana covered only his nose; beneath it his mouth worked constantly, shouting directions, cursing the machine, occasionally spewing out a thin brown stream of tobacco juice. It seemed to Nate that Grandpa had control of enormous power, and each time he and Harry brought their hayrack in from the field, Nate stood for a while in the bedlam of sound and dust and action to feel pride course through him—the pride of knowing that Grandpa was the master of the machine and of the men, the pride of sharing in the grit and sweat and labor of the glorious golden day.

While Harry pitched their load of bundles onto the conveyor belt (Grandpa said it was too dangerous for Nate to
help; he might fall into the machinery.) Nate walked over to the white corncrib. The roar of the monster was not so loud there; above it was the grind and clatter of the elevator which carried the oats to the top of the crib, where they plummeted through a spout into storage bins. Nate watched the elevator for a while, a rippling, golden waterfall in reverse, and then he went into the dark center section of the crib. Machinery was usually kept here, the tractors and a cornpicker, and the smell of gasoline and oil blended with the rich smell of drying corn and the faint musty odor of mice. On threshing day, however, a new smell joined the others. The yeasty-sweet scent of beer. Two large galvanized washtubs were filled with chunks of ice and bottles of beer and pop. Three or four men and some of the neighborhood boys hunkered or sat on the hard-packed dirt floor, sipping Falstaff and orange pop. For a few seconds, they were only dim shapes to Nate, his eyes blinded by the sudden dark. He edged forward until he could see, and then he went to the tubs, plunged his hand into the stabbing cold of the icewater, and pulled out a Falstaff. He paused to see if any of them would notice, but they all went on talking, telling stories and laughing.

Grandma did not like him to drink beer, but Grandpa had said, "God damn it, Ag, if he works like a man he should drink like a man," and that closed the issue. He opened
the frosty bottle, then reached into the tub once more for a piece of ice to rub across his prickling face and neck and arms. He hunkered with the others and sipped from his bottle, letting it rest in his mouth, fizzing on his tongue, before he swallowed the beer and felt its chilly warmth spread through his stomach and chest.

"Well, Nate," one of the men, Delbert Myers, shouted, the shattering roar of the thresher still in his ears, "you gettin' any work outta that goddam shiftless Harry?" He looked up in mock surprise. "Oh, hi there, Harry. Didn't see you standin' there."

Harry popped open a beer and sat down beside them, stretching his long legs out on the dirt floor, leaning his back against the slatted boards of the wall. "By God," he shouted, "I'd like to see any of you bastards pace me and Nate. Right, Nate?" Without waiting for a reply, he said, "We just put that goddam Farmall in third gear, open her up wide, and move on out."

"Shee-it," Delbert said, "I seen you out there at the north end of the field, sittin' on your ass on that goddam Farmall while Nate pitched bundles for you." The men all laughed, and Harry's face reddened.

"By God," he retaliated, "I'd like to see any of you bastards keep up with this boy. Jesus Christ, he's a god­dam workin' fool." He paused, looking from face to face,
his guileless expression crying for justification and finding none. "Why, he wanted to pitch bundles, didn't you, Nate?"

Nate took a sip of his beer, feeling their eyes upon him. "Sure," he said, "only next time, drive a little faster, would you, Harry? I was gettin' goddam tired of waitin' for you to catch up with me." He felt a pang of guilt for the sin of profanity.

"Shee-it!" Delbert laughed, "Sheeee-it!"

"You talk about a chip offa the old block," one of the other men shouted, "by God, here it is. You ever see Nate's old man work? By God, now there was a workin' fool." He clapped a callused hand on Nate's knee. "You gonna be a good man, Nate, just like your pa and grandpa. Chip offa the old block, by God."

Nate felt his chest swell with pride, and he drew designs in the dirt with his forefinger. He wished Lute had been there to hear.

Now and then, when the wind was right, the smells of cooking floated down to the men gathered around the ice tubs in the white corncrib. The women had come early in the morning, only shortly after the sun was up, laden with pies and hams and chickens and roasts. While the men sweated and joked in the blistering heat of the sun, the women gossiped and dripped in the baking heat of Grandma's
frying and roasting the food, washing and polishing the
company china and silverware, filling urns and pitchers
with steaming coffee, rich yellow milk, and icy lemonade
and water. And when they smelled the cooking smells, the
men would look at their watches or check the height of
the sun, calculating the time until noon. Then they rubbed
their bellies, downed their beers, and ambled back to the
tractors and racks to head once more for the field.

And all the while, the behemoth throbbed and bellowed,
devouring the bundled oats with one mouth and belching
forth golden vomit with the other two. As the men began
to tire, the laughter and the jokes lagged. Their eyes
burned with acrid sweat and dusty heat. Their ears could
not escape the shattering clangor of the monster clamoring
for more and ever more golden food. The bedlam of sound
and the searing oven of air deadened their spirits,
crushed their enthusiasm. Before, they had pranced through
the field, feeling the dew against their legs, feeling the
strength in their arms and backs and shoulders. Now they
plodded along beside the hayracks, arms and shoulders aching,
reluctant to pitch one more bundle upon the load. Their
ears whistled and rang from the pounding of the thresher
and the closer roar of the tractors' engines.

The sound became almost a part of them, working its
way into every muscle, every nerve, echoing not only in
their ears, but in their bellies, behind their eyes, in
their heat-parched throats. So that when the machine
suddenly stopped, they were not even aware of the silence
for a moment or two, but kept pitching bundles onto the
racks, the cacophony still resounding within them.

Nate was deafened by the roar of the tractor’s engine
before and beneath him. The heat of the engine and the heat
of the air had worked with the jouncing tractor to churn
the beer he had drunk into a bloating froth, and he wished
he could belch. Harry had just finished pitching a shock
onto the rack, and Nate was crawling along toward the next
one, when he felt Harry climb up on the drawbar behind him
and felt Harry’s voice vibrate unintelligibly, only another
buzz joining the buzz which was already in his head.

"What?" he shouted, and his own voice was merely a buzz,

"Dinnertime!" Harry buzzed back. Nate stopped the
tractor and throttled down, relieved by the relative silence.

Harry stepped down, unhitched the rack, and got back
on the drawbar. Nate slipped the tractor into fifth, road
gear, and they whizzed toward the house, shifting down only
at the big rut and at the right-angle corner where two field
lanes met. When they arrived at the strawstack and Nate
shut off the engine, the silence was almost a physical shock.
The thresher squatted mute before the new-grown mountain of
straw, its long neck swaying back and forth in the breeze
as though it were searching the pile for a tiny prey, ready
to plunge its head into the straw and gobble up a mouse. Nate's skin tingled. His ears buzzed and whistled from the noise, and his head and chest felt as though some gigantic pressure had been removed, as they felt sometimes when he stayed underwater too long at too great a depth.

On the broad front lawn of the house, the men lay in patches of shade thrown down by the pines and mulberry trees. Long wooden benches stood beneath one of the trees, holding basins of water, bars of Lava soap, and feed sack towels. The cold water felt delicious to Nate as it peeled away the layers of salt and sweat and dust from his arms and face. When he had finished washing, he emulated Harry by dumping the remaining water over his head. He could almost feel it wash down each individual hair and trickle across his scalp, drowning some of the buzzing within his head. The frothiness in his stomach was also gone now, replaced by a sharp stab of hunger.

He lined up with the rest of the men and filed into the house. Grandma stood at the door, counting the men as they entered, for there were only so many seats at the table, and she would have to cut off the line when all the places were taken. Nate was only number twelve, so he got to eat in the first shift. He had planned it that way. If he had been too close to the front of the line, Grandma would have told him to wait until the second group of men filed in.
Through the kitchen he followed the other men, into the dining room, which was used only at threshing and baling times, when there were many men to be fed. The immense oval table was almost bending under the weight of platters of meat: golden chicken, steaming hams, and slabs of beef oozing pink liquid pearls. The tablecloth was dazzling white, and the china and silverware gleamed. Beside each plate lay linen napkins, so crisp with starch that they shone. Delicate crystal goblets caught the reflected sunlight streaming through the open north windows and threw it upon the tablecloth like multicolored gems. Massive blocks of butter nestled among high-mounded bowls of mashed potatoes and peas and green beans. Golden ears of corn were stacked on platters like miniature woodpiles.

The men stood around the table, waiting for Grandpa to come in, unwilling to sit until he did. They looked out of place in the midst of all this magnificence, their big red hands dangling from their shirtsleeves (buttoned now, but creased where they had been rolled up during the morning's work), their fresh-scrubbed faces burnished bronze and shiny by rivers of water and Lava soap, their hair lying flat and damp on their heads. They spoke in what seemed whispers after the hoarse shouting of the morning, as if they were awed by the luxuriousness of their surroundings, and one or another of them would examine his shoes to make sure he had wiped them clean of mud and manure.
Then Grandpa ambled in, a little too nonchalant, trying to act as if the family ate in the dining room every day, as if he took the fine china and crystal for granted, but really showing that he also was afraid of breaking a delicate glass or dropping an errant pea into his lap. He glowed with pride and pleasure in being able to provide such a sumptuous meal for his friends, and Nate, seeing his happiness, felt it reflected in himself, feeling as much the host as Grandpa was, wanting to make sure that each friend and neighbor had enough to eat, that his chair was comfortable, that the butter was passed to him, that his water was icy and his coffee steaming.

Grandpa blustered, "Well, what are you all standin' around for? Won't get nothin' eat that way, by God." He walked to the head of the table and pulled out his chair, motioning for the rest of them to sit. Then their voices came back, and the room was filled with sound as they talked and laughed, scraping their chairs on the floor, unfolding their napkins, and tinkling the chunks of ice against the sides of their glasses.

As the heavy platters began their circuits of the big table, the women began their own parade to and from the kitchen with dewy pitchers of water and milk and lemonade, bowls and baskets piled high with thick slabs of bread and golden biscuits and rolls still steaming from the oven.
As the men emptied each platter or plate, one of the women would snatch it up and whisk it away to the kitchen to be replenished.

Mealtime on the farm, especially dinner, the noon meal, was usually a time of no conversation. Grandpa would be listening to the noon news and markets, occasionally cursing President Truman (even though he was a Democrat), more often worrying that that damned Eisenhower would be elected, but rarely saying much at all. At threshing time, though, dinner was more like a neighborhood picnic, a kind of harvest festival during harvesting. The men were jovial, and the dining room was a hubbub of jokes and jibes and laughter. The women joined in too, sometimes, needling their husbands or being teased about their figures, their shrewishness, or their jealousy. ("Better watch that old man o' yours, Martha. One more of Aggie's biscuits, and he'll be runnin' off with her.")

Then came the coffee, steaming and black, and the pies: pumpkin and apple and cherry and lemon meringue and blueberry and banana cream. Nate had cherry (the one he had worked on with Grandma) and blueberry a la mode. It was a struggle to get the second piece down, but he knew if he didn't, Grandma would scold him. ("Eyes bigger than your stomach, eh?")
Even before the last drop of coffee was sipped, the women were at work brushing off the crumbs and clearing the table for the next group. The men filed out, patting their bellies and praising the redfaced women (redfaced from both the steaming kitchen and the embarrassment of being praised) to lie in the shade and the breeze while the second shift ate.

Some of the boys had brought baseball gloves, and they played Five Hundred for a while. Nate batted first. It was his bat and ball, and besides, that second piece of pie discouraged him from running. Then, when the men warned the boys about getting too hot on full stomachs, they also lay down in the shade of the trees.

Always afterward, it seemed to Nate that this was true happiness. To work hard and sweat in the clean dirt of nature, to eat and drink to satiation with hearty men and jovial women, and to lie in the shade of a brilliant day, feeling the sweet breeze ruffling his hair, caressing his sunburned skin, feeling the cool grass fragrant and living and soft beneath him. To hear the languorous midday rustlings of the birds and the murmurs of men talking around him. To smell the sun and sweat on his own skin, the deep rich odor of earth and plants, the lush aroma of life.
The harsh crunch of tires on the gravel drive made him open his eyes. A big white car had pulled up in front of the garage, its dust rolling in a choking cloud over the relaxing men. One by one, they sat up and looked curiously toward the yard gate by the garage. An expensively dressed man climbed from the car and lurched toward the gate. He stumbled and clung to the gatepost to right himself.

"God damn," Grandpa said, and Nate felt as though the dust cloud had shut off the sun, chilling his arms and belly.

"I'll be damned," Grandpa said, louder this time, "it's Lute."
Chapter Ten

"Shee-it!" Delbert whooped. "Lute! Lute, you old son of a bitch! How the hell are you?"

All the men had crowded around him, extending hands, laughing, but at the same time uncomfortable, throwing curious glances at the big white car and at his expensive suit. Nate stood at the edge of the group. He could not see much between the shoulders of the men, but he did catch an occasional glimpse of his father's face. Nate had not seen him for a year, perhaps a little longer. His father never came to the house in town where his mother lived. Never came to the Catholic Boys' Academy, 200 miles away, where Nate went to school. But once a year, at some time during the summer, Lute would come to the farm to stay for a day, a week, sometimes only an hour or two, and then be off again for another year.

His father pushed through the circle of men and stuck out his hand to Grandpa. "Hello, Dad," he said. His voice was thick.

"Lute." Flat. Emotionless. Not a greeting, but a statement of fact. Finally, Grandpa shook his hand.

Then his father was looking down at him. Nate felt so many different things that he did not know what he did feel. Terror, pride, shame, joy, anger, hatred, all at once. He stuck out his hand. He knew immediately it was
a mistake. His father looked at the hand, the scar across the palm and fingers twisting it grotesquely, cupping it permanently. He began to reach for it; then his own hand wavered, hesitated, and clapped Nate on the shoulder.

"Natty," he said, his voice clearer now, as if the sight of that hand had sobered him, "it's good to see you again."

Nate did not reply, did not know what to reply. Suddenly his father was not just the man who had come to see him before, not just the man who had gone fishing with him and Grandpa once or twice, but a man of such importance that he could make others feel uncomfortable, could dominate men even more than Grandpa. He felt a sudden inexplicable pride in being his father's son, a pride like that he felt in being Grandpa's boy.

"By God, Lute," Delbert shouted, "you ought to see that there boy work. A goddam workin' fool, that's what."

"That so?" Lute smiled toward Nate, but he was looking at a spot just above the boy's head. "That's good. A man's gotta work hard if he's gonna amount to a damn." He lowered his eyes, but Nate saw that his father could not focus on his face. Instead, Lute was looking through him, his eyes red and blurry. "You 'member that, boy. You 'member that good. Your ole dad said a man's gotta work hard if he amounts to a damn. If he's gonna, I mean."
"That's right, Lute," Delbert said, "that surely is the truth." Nate heard an odd tone in Delbert's voice, a sarcasm he had never heard before. "A man's gotta work hard. Yes sir. And that boy of yours. Frank Hayes and me talked about him this mornin'. 'A chip offa the old block,' Frank says. 'Shoulda seen his daddy work. Now there was a workin' fool,' he says."

Nate could see arrogance and pride in his father's face as Lute swayed toward him, winking. He smelled an unfamiliar smell about him. Something like whisky, but not quite the same.

Lute said, "Thass right, Delbert. You wanna make it big, you gotta work hard. Maybe thass why you're still on the farm."

The men muttered angrily, and Delbert said, "What work you done lately?" Lute did not catch the sarcasm in the question.

"Just finished a week in Chicago. Openin' tonight in KC. Figured I oughtta stop off 'n see if the ole place's still here."

His father's hand was damp and heavy on his shoulder, almost pushing him off balance as Lute swayed back and forth. Nate wished he would let go. Delbert snickered, and Lute did let go, spinning unsteadily to face Delbert.

"Whass so goddam funny?" His jaw thrust forward, his lips a thin line.
"Nothin'." Delbert gave the other men a knowing look; some of them chuckled.

His father lurched a step or two toward Delbert. "What's so goddam funny, I said." His voice was growing harder and clearer.

Grandpa put a hand on his shoulder. "Nothing. Forget it, now. You just had a little too much to drink, that's all."

Lute shook his hand away. "Too much?" he snorted. "You work like a man, you gotta drink like a man. You told me that."

"Shee-it, man," Delbert guffawed, "you ain't gotta work. Standin' around. Pickin' that git-tar." The other men laughed.

"Come on, Lute," Grandpa said.

Nate saw his father's neck and ears darken. "Delbert, you got a mighty short memory, you know that? Hell, I could always work circles around you."

Delbert was still grinning. "Sure, Lute. Fifteen years ago, maybe. But you got the good life now. Fancy clothes. Big car. You forgot how to work. I betcha that boy of yours can outwork three of you."

His father glanced back at him. Nate saw that his eyes had lost their glassy look. They seemed smaller, harder. "Maybe he could outwork me, Delbert. Like you say, he's
a chip offa the old block." He moved close to Delbert and poked his chest with a forefinger. "But I know one thing for damn sure. I can still work the ass offa you any day in the week. I know that for damn sure."

Some of the men laughed. Delbert said, "Shee-it, man, go on." But his smile looked strained, artificial.

"By God, I mean it, you son of a bitch." Lute's voice was clear now, menacing. "I'll prove it too, by God."

Nate felt a sudden excitement. He did not know why. Perhaps because Lute was his father, after all, and he was proud of the challenge in his father's voice. Perhaps because he felt ashamed of his father's drunkeness and wanted so desperately to feel for him the same kind of pride he felt for Grandpa. Perhaps because he hated Lute and wanted to see him humiliated.

"Then get yourself a pair of overhulls, goddam it, and we'll just see." The jibing tone was gone from Delbert's voice, as though he was tired of kidding Lute.

"I don't need no goddam overalls," Lute sneered. "I can do it without even workin' up a sweat."

"Mighty fancy suit for pitchin' bundles," Delbert said.

"Shit. Not even tailormade. Only cost a hundred and seventy-Five."
Delbert's face flared, and Nate heard some of the other men mutter. He did not hear what they said, but he could see that they too were angry with Lute. The tension added to his sense of excitement.

"Okay," Delbert spat, "whatever you say, big man."
"You goddam right."
"Pick a driver," Delbert said.
His father turned to face him once more. "You as good as he says?" Nate blushed and stared at the ground. "Well, are you?"
"Chip offa the old block," Delbert sneered.
Nate felt a surge of anger. "You goddam right," he said. He wished his voice were deeper. Another sin of profanity, too.
"Hold it," Grandpa said, "I don't want Natty driving up by the thresher. It's too dangerous."
"Horseshit," his father said. Nate felt very small.
Delbert said, "That's okay. We'll each of us take over when the racks are full and drive in from the field ourselves."
"And whoever has the most loads in by three is the winner, right?" his father said.
"Three? Shit, Lute, that's only a couple of hours."
"Gotta be in KC by eight, Delbert. Gotta leave by three."
"Aw, what the hell," Delbert said, "you ain't even gonna last till three. Come on, Frank, you drive for me." They all walked down to the tractors and drove out to the field.

Nate hitched on to an empty rack and pulled up beside Delbert and Frank. His stomach was tight with excitement. His father had chosen him! Out of all of them, Lute had chosen him as his partner.

"You sure you want to do this?" Delbert shouted.

"You damn betcha," his father said.

Delbert shrugged his shoulders and pulled his pitchfork from the rack. Lute took of his coat, removing a silver flask from the inside pocket, folded the coat and put it into the tool box behind the seat of the tractor. He opened the flask and took a long drink, then held it up to Nate.

"Want some?"

Nate reached hesitantly for the flask. "What is it?"

"Scotch, boy. Damn good stuff. You wanna work like a man, you gotta drink like a man."

Nate took a sip of the whisky. It burned in his mouth and throat, and he felt tears come to his eyes. He forced a smile and gasped, "Good."

His father laughed and put the flask in the tool box. "Let's go," he shouted to Delbert.
Nate watched his father as he worked, pitching the bundles up over the eight-foot-high sides of the muck, his fork moving effortlessly in a steady rhythm. The other men were back in the field now too, but they lagged far behind, stopping their work now and then to watch the contest. Delbert and Frank were only idling along, it seemed. He and his father were already two shocks ahead of them. Lute removed his necktie and stuffed it into the tool box, swigging hastily from the flask before beginning the next shock. His skin had been very pale, but it was red now, and sweat poured from his forehead, cascaded down his cheeks. He was better than Harry, whose movements had always been strained and jerky. It seemed to Nate that he was better than Delbert, too, and he was very proud that his father had chosen him, proud that they were ahead of Delbert and Frank, that he was a chip off the old block. And he knew that Grandpa would be proud of them both, as proud as he had been when Nate had learned to field his steaming grounders. After all, they were Parkers. They could take anybody.

Three-quarters of the way down the row, his father stripped off his shirt. His hairless chest and arms shone brilliant white in the sun—shocking contrast with his flaming face. Sweat had darkened a band around the waist of his trousers, and they were rumpling under a
film of yellow dust. He gulped more whisky from the flask, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand afterward. Nate glanced over his shoulder. Telbert and Frank were only one shock behind. Lute saw that the gap was narrowing, and he worked furiously, increasing their lead slightly by the end of the row. Nate whirled the tractor into the next row, forcing Frank to drive to the one beyond.

"We'll call the end of this row a load," Telbert shouted as he walked by them. "Think you can make it?" His grin was confident.

"Shit," Lute said.

By the middle of the field, Lute had slowed down. His back and arms gleamed red with sweat and sunburn. The rhythm of his work was ragged, and he grunted as he pitched each bundle on top of the load. Telbert and Frank were even with them now, Telbert still maintaining his pace, his bundles arching high over the side, his arms and back and legs moving like parts of a machine.

Lute emptied the flask two shocks later. Nate could see his sides heave as he gasped for air. He lost his balance sometimes when he hefted the bundles. Once he did not push upward hard enough, and the bundle stuck to his fork, dragging it back down to the ground. Telbert was one shock ahead of them now, and Nate yelled at his father to hurry. But he knew as he yelled, as he looked
back at his father, that it was no use. Lute's face was red, more than the red of sunburn. The redness of fatigue, of thin blood pumping frantically.

His expensive pants were a shambles, covered with dust, cockleburs, and devil's pitchforks. His own pitchfork seemed cumbrous, unmanageable. Above the roar of the tractor, Nate heard the shouts and laughter of the other men. He could not distinguish the words, but he knew they were deriding his father. His hand ached. Odd. He had not thought of it since he had extended it to Lute. But now he was very aware of it, curled awkwardly about the wheel, cramped and stiff. He was also aware of wishing that Delbert would win, that his father would be humiliated. For Lute was not really a man at all. Delbert had been right. Nate could outwork his father. He was more than a chip off the old block. He was better than the old block.

Lute stumbled to the end of the row, beginning his last shock just as Delbert finished his. Nate climbed down from the tractor seat as Lute pitched the bundles. Delbert was driving toward the gate, his heavy-laden rack swaying over the uneven ground. Lute pitched his last bundle and clambered up to the tractor seat. He reached down to open the toolbox and pulled out the flask.
"It's empty," Nate shouted.

"You finished it off? You little bastard."

He didn't remember, Nate thought. Only a few minutes ago, and his father didn't remember licking the last precious drops from the neck of the bottle. "No. Not me," he shouted. But his father did not hear him. Delbert was already rumbling down the lane between the cornfields. Lute ground the transmission into fourth gear, opened the throttle wide, and popped the clutch. The rear stakes of the rack collapsed. Bundles tumbled out.

"Dad!" Nate shouted, but his father went on, deafened by the snarling engine. The hayrack jounced across the field, and Nate ran after it, trying to make himself heard over the engine and the rattle of the rack. Behind him, he heard shouts and the laughter of the men. Then Lute's engine raced for a moment, gears ground, and the tractor leaped forward. "No, Dad!" Nate yelled. Lute had shifted into fifth, road gear. With the throttle wide open, the tractor would go almost twenty miles an hour, much too fast for the undulating dirt lane even without a hayrack. The rack bounded high into the air as it passed through the gate. In slow motion, the rear of the rack swung sideways and crashed down upon the gatepost. The post splintered and caught the left rear wheel, tearing it loose, and the corner of the rack crunched into the dust of the lane. Lute did not slow down.
Nate saw him trying to advance the throttle even more, arms straight from shoulder to wheel, like a race driver, before the dust thrown up by the deep-treaded tires of the tractor and the shattered corner of the rack hid him from view momentarily. Then, where the lane curved to the left, he saw Lute overtake Delbert, saw Delbert look toward Lute, his mouth moving silently in the roar of the tractors. Lute raised a fist above his head in a victory gesture. Beneath him, the tractor bucked, throwing him into the air.

At the same time, his hayrack swerved up against the rear tire of Delbert's tractor. The rack shuddered, rose into the air as its tongue snapped, and slammed back to earth with a shivering crack and a billowing cloud of dust, from which emerged Delbert's tractor and hayrack, without Delbert, crashing through Grandpa's cornfield like a gigantic lawnmower, flattening a huge swath of the precious crop. As the dust settled, the men in the field could see Delbert, one overall strap flapping behind him like a thin blue pennant, chasing the machine through the crumpled corn. Later, some of them said they could hear him hollering, "Whoa! Whoa, God damn you!" as he waved his arms wildly above his head.

But others said it was Lute doing the shouting as he clung to the back of his tractor seat, his Italian
shoes cutting tiny furrows in the dust of the lane. He had appeared like a stage magician from the dust cloud, trying to run along behind his tractor, afraid to let go of the seat and sprawl into the dust, unable to run fast enough to catch up with the drawbar from which his mangled rack had broken loose.

And on top of the thresher, Daniel tore off his red bandana to shout curses into the impartial heavens. On one side of him a tractor and hayrack were crushing his golden-eared money; on the other side his only son dangled from the rear of a tractor hurtling along a rain-gullied dirt lane.

Almost simultaneously, Delbert caught his tractor and stopped it, and Lute's tractor, in fifth gear, struck the big rut through which the men had driven in first. The tractor leaped like an obese gazelle, slamming Lute down upon the drawbar, facing the lane over which he had just come. He opened the tool box and withdrew the silver flask. He put it to his lips just before the tractor reached the right-angle turn leading to the thresher. Disgusted, he tossed the flask into the air as the tractor ignored the corner and sprang into a field of soybeans. The furrows jounced it first one way, then another, and it wandered through the field like a ranging bird dog, pounding Lute's butt on the drawbar, his head against
steel bottom of the seat. Then it picked up the scent of
the white corncrib, and it charged along Daniel's straight-
cut furrow directly toward the men standing by the elevator.
They shouted, leaped aside. And above the howling tractor,
they could hear Lute's voice, the voice that had sold
millions of records, singing "Lay that pistol down, babe,
lay that pistol down. Pistol-packin' maa-maa, lay that
pistol down."

They laughed at the insanity of it as the tractor
burst SPUNG! through the strands of barbed wire at the end
of the field. It hurled the fencerow and hurled into the
narrow neck of the elevator, spuring golden oats into the
air, twisting the elevator like a piece of baling wire. The
radiator of the tractor spurted steam, and the engine went
from a howl to a raucous clatter, then to hissing silence.

Nate had run in from the field with the other men.
By the time they reached the white corncrib, Lute was
stretched out flat on the oat-covered ground, an ugly
scrape oozing its way down one sunburned cheek from a
hideous blue lump on his temple. Nate thought he was dead,
and he ran to his father and cradled the wrecked head in
his arms. Lute's eyes flickered open, and he murmured,
"Drinkin' beer in a cabaret, was I havin' fun ..." and
his bloodshot eyes rolled back, and he went limp.
The doctor told them that Lute would have to stay in bed for at least a week. A bad concussion, he said, and Lute was lucky at that. Nate felt such remorse, such guilt at having hated his father, that he sat at Lute's bedside until Grandpa came in and made him go to bed that evening. And he was there the next day, and the next, even though the men were now threshing at Henry Marshall's place, and Nate always loved to work at Henry Marshall's because of Henry's sweet red wine and because of the tremendous meals his wife made.

Lute slept most of the time during those two days, and when he was awake he kept repeating himself, asking how Mary was, and did Nate like it at school, and by God, they showed Delbert, didn't they, and would Nate like to come to Kansas City with him. Nate, full of love and remorse, said sure, he would go to Kansas City or anywhere else with his father.

And on the third day, Lute rose again from the bed, over his mother's objections, saying that the damn doctor hadn't realized how slight his injury was. He said that he absolutely had to go to Kansas City the following day, doctor or no doctor. And to prove his head was on straight, he offered to beat Grandma and Grandpa at a game of cards as soon as they had finished supper.
"Tell Daniel he's wrong," Grandma said. They were sitting in the kitchen, playing "Spit in the Ocean."

"For what?" Lute said.

"Now, Ag, it's over and done," Grandpa protested.

"What did he do this time?" Lute grinned sardonically, eager to hear the details.

Nate was entranced by ESP then. He concentrated on making Grandma lose her voice. It didn't work.

"Why, that Billy Phillips come over the other day and asked Daniel for five thousand dollars."

Lute's face hardened, as it always did when Billy Phillips was mentioned. Nate flexed his twisted hand.

"Five thousand dollars?" Lute scowled at Grandpa. "You didn't give it to that bastard?"

"Just a loan," Grandpa said.

Grandma said, "Call it a loan if you want. Just as leave throw it down the well."

"Now, Ag," Grandpa began, but Lute cut him off.

"What the hell does Billy Phillips need five thousand dollars for?"

"Tell him, Daniel."

Grandpa threw his cards down. "Why, you just tell him yourself, you goddam old screech owl. You been tellin' it all, ain't you?"

"Screech owl, is it? I'd rather be a screech owl than a dodo, wouldn't you, Natty?"
Nate did not say anything. He wished he could vanish. He concentrated on making himself invisible.

"What did he want the money for?" Lute was getting irritated.

"He wanted to buy a goddam truck," Grandpa roared. "He wants to start a contract hauling business, that's all. Damn little farm of his don't pay nothin'."

"So he comes to Mister Soft-touch here, like everybody else," Grandma said. "Never will see that money again, you mark my words."

"Now I know better, now, Ag! Billy's a good man. And besides, I get one-third of the profits."

"If any," Grandma said. "Just like that Delbert Myers. He ever pay you one red cent for his share of the threshing machine?"

"Now, Ag."

"She's right," Lute said. "You trust people too much, Dad. They take advantage of you. You remember that, Natty. Be like your old daddy, not like Grandpa. Never trust nobody. Nobody, you hear?"

It was obvious that his ESP had failed again. He was still visible. He nodded his head and felt like a traitor to Grandpa.

"You just can't afford to do business with friends, Dad. It'll either ruin your business or your friendship,
you hear? Christ, I didn't get where I am today by bein' a nice guy. You gotta be hard and mean and tough. You gotta pound 'em over the head till they give you what you want. You can't just say, 'he's a good man,' and give him the shirt off your back. Goddam it, Dad, you just can't do business that way."

"I'll tell you what, boy," Grandpa said, "you do business your way and make all the money you can. Hell, I don't care how many people hate you. It don't make the least little bit of difference to me. But me, I'd rather have friends. I'd rather help a fella when he needs it. And, Natty, you can believe your daddy if you want to, but you just count how many people come to his funeral and count how many come to Grandpa's. You'll see."

Nate was suddenly very frightened at the thought of Grandpa's dying. And he was bewildered by what Grandpa said. What did funerals have to do with business or with friends?

He called his mother the next morning. At first, she did not want him to go with his father, but after he had pleaded with her for ten minutes she relented. He loaded his suitcase into the big white car, and after both of them had promised Grandma they would be good, he and his father went to Kansas City.
They checked into the motel, and his father was on the phone at once.

"Yes, Teddy.

"No, Teddy.

"Sure, I'm okay.

"So, pay Murph the penalty and tell him I'll go on tonight.

"Sure, I can do it. Just a little bump on the head.

"Look, don't worry about it, okay? I'm all right.

"Okay. If they want an interview, tell them to come backstage after the second show.

"Sure, I'll be okay."

Then a long pause, his father's face growing dark, his lips pressing thin.

"Look, dammit, you know better than that. On the road, during the day, it's okay, no sweat."

Another pause, his face set and hard.

"Okay, God damn it! So one time, huh? One fucking time! You just tell those bastards to be there. I'll be fine, you hear?"

A longer pause, his father's face now contorted with fury. His smooth hand, still sunburned, blazing white as he gripped the receiver.

"Listen, you little prick!

"Listen, I said!"

A pause. He smashed his fist down on the desk.

"That's exactly what I mean. You catch on fast. Now get your ass back to Nashville and try to get somebody else to manage.

"You damn betcha. Because after I get back, you won't have shit. You hear me?"

He slammed the phone down, muttering, "Little bastard. 'Boozehound,' he says. 'Bottle baby.'" He turned to Nate, sitting on the edge of the bed. "See what I mean? Like I told Grandpa last night, you can't trust nobody. Nobody! Little bastard."

He dialed the phone furiously, as though he were trying to tear the dial off. "One fucking time. One lousy fucking time the damn reporters come in. Drunk, hell. A couple drinks. Big fucking deal. The little shit." He turned to Nate, the phone still to his ear. "Natty, run down and get Daddy some ice. There's a dime on the dresser."

Pause. Attentive listening.

"Murph? Lute Parker."

"Sure, I'm okay. Just a little accident on Dad's farm."

"Naw, just a little concussion."

"Teddy told you what?"
"Well, by God, I'll fracture his skull if I ever see him again.

"Yeah, I just fired him. Little bastard was rakin' off. You can bet your sweet ass he'll never manage anybody again."

He took a deep breath.

"Say, Murph, I'm really sorry about this thing.

"Yeah, I know I fucked you up, and . . .

"Hell, Murph, it couldn't be helped. I mean . . .

"Murph, accidents happen, you know.

"What do you mean, 'Damn often?' Hell, I never missed a gig before.

"Chicago? Well, I was sick. Drizzlin' shits."

His voice was growing desperate. Nate wished he could hear the other side of the conversation.

"No, Murph, you know better than that. Goddam teetotaller smells yesterday's booze and flies off the handle.

"Murph . . .

"Murph!"

"Jesus Christ, Murph, you work hard you gotta drink hard, you know?

"Okay. Sure, I understand.

"Come on. Twenty-five per cent I can see, but . . .

"Okay."
"Okay, goddam it, thirty-five.
"Yeah, you got me by the balls."

He saw that Nate was still standing there, listening to him. He pointed to the ice bucket and motioned him out the door.

"We'll have a drink after the show, okay?
"Sure, after the show. Old times."

When Nate returned with the ice, his father was still on the phone. Lute pointed toward his suitcase.

Nate opened it and dug around until he found the Scotch beneath the monogrammed underwear.

"Everything went okay, then?" his father was saying.
"How was the gate?
"Not bad--not too damn good, though.
"Murph pretty pissed off?
"Yeah, I just talked to the bastard. Thirty-five per cent penalty.
"Yeah.
"Yeah.

"Well, shit, Leroy, there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it, you know?"

Nate set the drink on the desk beside the phone. Lute picked it up and swished the ice cubes back and forth, tinkling against the sides of the glass.

"Okay, meet me down there about eight. We'll run through that new Hank Williams tune. See you then."
He rattled the receiver into its cradle and gulped half the drink at once. "Aaaah," he said, wiping his mouth with his index finger, "damn good stuff."

Nate was sitting on the edge of the bed. Lute folded himself into an armchair and took another drink, a smaller one this time. Nate tried to think of something to say. It seemed wrong that he and his father should sit in this drab motel room, sharing only the sounds of tinkling ice and the rush of passing traffic. Like strangers thrown together in a bus or elevator, each sitting with his own thoughts, cut off from the other. His father was a stranger to him. It was not at all the way he had hoped it would be when he and his dad were finally alone together. Lute was his father; his dad was a myth patterned after people in books, Grandpa, and Jerry Chappell's dad.

When Lute had asked if he wanted to come along to Kansas City, Nate had imagined it would be the way it was with Jerry and his dad, laughing a lot, talking about football and school and model airplanes. Jerry and his dad played catch and wrestled, and Mr. Chappell was teaching Jerry how to box. Once, in a moment of hatred and envy, Nate had shouted at Jerry, "What are you griping about, anyway? Your dad gives you . . ." He wanted to say "love," and he wanted to say "friendship," but both words come
hard to a boy—"love" because it is somehow unmasculine, not a man-to-man word, not even a son-to-father word; "friendship" because a son and a father are never really friends, because even boys are never really friends; the violence and rivalry lie too close to the surface of their relationships, the violence of play which can so easily turn into battle, the rivalry of strength, of courage, of grades, of girls (even though they don't admit it). So he finished the sentence, "He gives you everything."

"Oh yeah?" said Jerry. "That's what you think. My old man is mean as hell."

Nate cringed at Jerry's profanity and prayed for his soul. But he wished Mr. Chappell were his father.

Now he sat without speaking, watching Lute rise from the armchair to get another drink. He had so often bragged about his famous father to the other boys at the Academy. He had so often made up stories about the things they did together, about the adventures they had, that he almost believed them himself, sometimes. He desperately wished that they were true. And now it seemed to him that his life had been so bounded by school and Church that he could say nothing which would interest this strange, brooding man.
"You been around niggers much?"

The question was so strange, so far from his thoughts, that it took Nate a few seconds to understand it. Finally he said, "There are a couple at the Academy."

Lute sipped the new drink and sat down in the armchair again. "I just thought I should tell you. Leroy—I was just talking to him on the phone—Leroy Bowman's his name. He's my lead guitar player. He's a nigger."

"Oh." He felt he should say more, but he could think of nothing to say.

"Damn good guitar player, though. He taught me, you know that? Back when we were in the Army."

"Oh." He felt stupid, saying nothing but "oh." There were so many things he wanted to say, but all of them boiled down to one question: "Why did you leave us?" And he could not ask that question.

His father swished the whisky around, staring at the ice cubes whirling in it. The afternoon sun shone through the curtains behind him, and to Nate he was only a dark shape in silhouette.

"How's school?"

"Fine," he said. An opportunity to say more, to tell this dark man something of himself. "I made the honor roll last term. I got three A's and two B's."

"Oh?"
He waited for some praise, but Lute said nothing more. 
"I'm going out for football this fall."
"That's good." His father sipped some of the Scotch.
"I always wanted to play football, but . . ."
Nate waited for him to finish the sentence. Instead, Lute took another drink.
"Why didn't you?" he finally asked.
The dark figure shrugged its shoulders. "Never had time, I guess."
"Oh." Disappointment sounded in his voice. He could think of nothing more to say. The conversation was over.
"Oh." His father mimicked him. "You think I was afraid, too. You and the old man. Grandpa's boy, huh?"
"No, Dad." He was confused. He did not understand the outburst.
"Well, let me tell you something, boy. I'm a bigger man than Daniel Parker ever was. You want to be like him, scrabblin' your life away on a two-bit farm? Bustin' your ass to make a buck?" He stood up, still a dark shadow against the cheap curtains. "I bet he's filled you up with a lot of high-sounding crap about honor and dignity and pride. And good honest work. Horseshit!" He walked to the bed, and Nate could see his face, twisted in contempt.
"You know why he says all that? Do you?"
Nate shook his head, afraid to speak.

"Because he can't say nothin' else, that's why. Money, that's what you gotta have. You can't have those things without it. You can't afford honor or pride. So you can only talk about them." He gripped Nate's chin in his hand, forcing the boy to stare into his eyes. "He's filled you up with a lot of shit about me, too, hasn't he?"

Nate shook his head.

"Don't give me that bullshit. I know better. He hates my guts. You know why? Because I told him to go fuck himself. I told him to ram all that up his ass, and I left. I wanted more than bustin' my ass on that goddam farm, and by God I got it. And he's jealous. He's mad because he knows I'm a bigger man than he is. That's why."

He wrenched his hand away, whipping Nate's head to one side. He got his glass from the armchair and poured another drink.

"He's gotta bring me down. He's gotta make you believe I'm a piece of shit. Make you think he's bigger than me, better than me. Who ever heard of him? But the whole fucking world knows who Lute Parker is, by God."

He stood at the desk, his back to Nate, his fists resting on the desk top. He stared at his reflection in
the mirror above the desk, and Nate felt that his father had forgotten he was there. Lute muttered something Nate could not hear. Then he picked up his glass and went back to the armchair, back to the shadow.

"So that's why I brought you down here, you understand? I wanted to show you that he's wrong. A son ought to believe in his father, and I wanted to show you. I'll show him too, the old fart."

Nate slammed his empty glass down upon the bedside table. "God damn you!" he said to the empty room. To the spectral figure hunched in the vacant chair—the figure changing, rippling like a bad television picture. He got up from the drab bed, shivering in his nakedness, and poured another drink. Perhaps that would make him sleep. Why couldn't he sleep? Too long on the road? Too tired to relax? He glanced at the dark figure in the plastic-covered chair. The same height, the same shoulders as his own. A figure like himself in many ways. Perhaps they had been in this very motel. Improbable, but possible. The same plastic chair. The same nobby bedspreads, dingy and nondescript. The same cheap prints in the same cheap frames.

He lay down again and sipped the Scotch. The dark figure shimmered in the chair, changed to an old man. Pale, emaciated, with a close-cropped shock of stark white hair.
An old man of forty-four, his body wracked and drained by too many nights of booze and broads, of hotels and whores, of memories and might-have-beens. Margie was her name.

"I'm Margie," she said, and the boy shrank from her fetid breath, her caked face flaking white around harsh red lips. "I'm an old friend of your daddy's"

The smoke in the place hurt his eyes, making them water, blurring everything around him. But her face stood out sharp and clear, red and white, as she leaned across the table and grasped his twisted hand.

"I'm very pleased to meet you," he bleated, wishing she would go away.

"I knew him a long time ago," she said, "when he was in the Army. You must have been just a baby then."

The music and the noise of the crowd almost covered up her voice, and Nate had to move closer to hear what she was saying. The rotten, boozy smell of her breath joined with the odors of sweat and perfume to make his empty stomach roll. He wished he had dared tell his father that he was hungry while they were at the motel. But as Lute neared the bottom of the Scotch bottle, he had grown more sullen, and Nate had been afraid to speak to him at all. And he did not imagine that his father would not eat supper, would only drink until it was time to leave.
"How did you know me?" he finally said.

"I saw him sit with you at intermission. I guessed."

She reached out and touched his face. Her hand was smooth and white, traced by delicate blue veins, much younger than her flaking, sagging face. "You look a lot like him, you know."

"Yes." He turned away from her rudely, hoping that rudeness would make her go away. His father was just finishing a chorus of "Slippin' Around," stepping back from the mike as Leroy, the guitar player, took over the lead. Nate was fascinated by Leroy's hands on the strings, the way his fingers danced up and down the neck, the way his right hand seemed to do twenty things at once, as if each finger had its own life, its own song to play. He thought of his own twisted hand and was filled again with hatred for his father. He would never play guitar. He glared malevolently as Lute stopped playing the rhythm and turned his back to the crowd to pick up a big glass of straight whisky from Leroy's amplifier. He swallowed a third of it in one gulp, wiped his lips with his index finger, and turned back to the audience, pounding out the chords as though he hadn't stopped at all. He had missed one measure.

The flaking woman had said something, but Nate could not understand her over the noise.
"What?" He leaned again into the breath and sweat and perfume.

"I said does he always drink like that?"

"Who?"

"Lute. Your daddy."

"Sure. So what?" Nate felt a kind of shame, as though she were accusing his father of something bad.

"He never used to drink that much, that's all."

"You work like a man, you gotta drink hard." He realized he had said it wrong. "I mean, if you work like a man, you gotta drink like a man."

"That what he says?"

"Sure. Grandpa too." He was growing angry with her snooping. He began to wonder if she was really a friend of his father.

"Grandpa? Your daddy's daddy?"

"Yeah."

"Does your grandpa drink like that?"

"Sure," Nate said, "all the time." He felt his face grow hot with the lie. Grandpa hardly ever drank more than a beer or two. Except maybe at threshing or baling time. Once or twice, maybe, on Saturday afternoon in town. And every time his father came to visit. He turned back to the stage to avoid her eyes.
Leroy had finished his solo, and his father was back at the mike, his voice booming over the chatter and laughter of the crowd. The hot lights shattered on the spangles of his shirt as he swayed from side to side with the rhythm of the song. His right arm pummeled the dark flat-top guitar with the "LP" monogram on its sounding board.

"Then I won't have to slip around to have your com-pah-neehee." His father's voice dwindled away on the last note, and the band played a four-bar ending. The crowd whistled and clapped, and Nate again felt pride bubble inside him, seeing his father grin and bow at the mike. Perhaps he was right about Grandpa. It seemed that the crowd would never stop clapping and whistling as his father held up his arms to quiet them. He grinned and bowed again as their applause thinned out. Then, as it died away, he said, "Y'all listen to the jukebox for a while now, hear? Me and the boys gonna take a short break. We'll be right back." He used the Ozark accent he always affected on his records. The crowd noise dwindled, and a Hank Snow tune erupted from the loudspeakers.

His father twined his way among the tables, stopping now and then to shake a hand or sign an autograph book, grinning at women and slapping men on the back. Nate had never seen so many people so friendly toward anyone before. His pride grew. Lute Parker was his father, and all these people were his friends. He was important!
His father screaked out a chair and sat between Nate and the woman. "How'd we sound this time, ole buddy?" he said to Nate, still using the affected accent.

"It was real good, Dad." He blushed. His father had called him "ole buddy."

"Hi, Lute," the woman said, brushing her heavy hair back from her caked face.

"Take off," his father said, not even looking at her. "You a little young to pick up whores, ole buddy."

She laughed, embarrassed. "Don't you remember me?"

"Look, dammit, this is my son. I said take off." His voice was hard, the accent forgotten.

Nate looked at the woman, awed. He had heard of whores from the guys at school, but he never thought he would see one. He felt sick and dirty. His father knew a whore.

The woman's face had sagged even more. Her bright red mouth twisted against itself. "Margie. In the depot. Don't you remember?"

His father looked at her for the first time. Nate saw that his eyes were red and glazed, as they had been the other day at the farm. The woman smiled uncertainly, almost shyly.

"Jesus Christ," his father said. "Well, I'll be damned. Margie!" He smiled for a moment, and then a hard mask fell across his face. "You lookin' for a touch?"
She started to say something, but he cut her off. "How much? Ten? Twenty?" Nate was ashamed. He wished he could leave before the woman started to cry.

"Lute!" The sound of her voice was almost as bad as if she were crying. People at other tables were looking at them. Did they know she was a whore? It made no difference. He felt an overwhelming flood of pain and sorrow at the anguish in her voice. "Just for old times, Lute. Nothing else. Old times, that's all."

His father's expression softened. He said, "Natty, go back and talk to Leroy for a while, will you?"

Nate did not say anything. The woman smiled at him, the smile crinkling her face and cracking the heavy white makeup around her red-slashed mouth. He slid off his chair and wandered through the thick blue swamp-fog toward the backstage door. A fat woman clutched at him. "C'mere, honey, you little sweetheart." He backed away, terrified, and bumped into a man who snarled, "Watch it, you little bastard." He grabbed Nate by the arm. "What's a kid your age doin' here? Ain't your folks got no decency?" Nate tore loose and ran to the backstage door. Leroy bought him a Coke and asked him who the woman was. Nate said she was a whore.

"Goddam whore!" Leroy said as Nate opened the motel room door. "Walkin' out in the middle of the goddam night
with a goddam whore. Your daddy's a motherfuckin' lush, you know that?"

"He is not!" Nate cried. He didn't know what a motherfuckin' lush was, but it sounded bad.

Leroy followed Nate into the room. "You tell him we split for Nashville, hear? You tell the motherfucker he'll be hearin' from the union, hear?" He grabbed Nate and spun him around. Nate felt hot tears spurt from his eyes and roll down his cheeks. Leroy was only a dark blur.

"Hey," Leroy said, "hey, Natty, I'm sorry." His voice was suddenly soft and crooning. "Hey, man, I didn't mean to make you cry."

"I'm not crying," Nate said, angry with himself for breaking down, for showing his fear and anger to this stranger.

"Course you ain't," Leroy crooned. "A big ole man like you don't cry."

Nate strained to control his sobs, tried to swallow them. He wiped the tears from his eyes and sniffled. Leroy knelt on the floor, his deep brown eyes level with Nate's, his adam's apple bouncing in his skinny black neck.

"Hey, man, I'm really sorry," he said. "You okay now? Everything tight and bright and all right?"

Nate tried to smile, nodding his head. Leroy guided him to one of the beds and sat him down on it. Then he
sat on the other one, his sharp knees jutting awkwardly into the air. Nate dug out his handkerchief and blew his nose. He could see from the look on Leroy's bony face that Leroy felt sorry for him. That made him want to cry again.

"Jesus Christ," Leroy said, "what in the world am I gonna do with you?" He rubbed his pointed chin with his long, pink palm. "What if Lute don't come back?"

"He'll come back," Nate quavered, as if he were sure.

"You don't know, child." Leroy hesitated as though he couldn't decide if what he was about to say should be said. "Look, sometimes he just goes off on a toot for a week or two. That's what me and the boys figured when he didn't show up this time." He edged forward on the bed. "He really have an accident?"

"Yeah," Nate said. "He was a little drunk, I think."

"Figures. I mean, he most always is anymore." Leroy studied his hands for a while, rubbing his callused fingertips together. "What in the world am I gonna do with you?"

"I'll be okay. He'll come back."

"But if he don't?" Leroy thought for a moment, then stood up. "Look, Natty, you got any money?"

Nate shook his head.

"Okay, here." Leroy dug into the pocket of his pants and brought out a thick wad of bills. "Ole Murph paid us off, see? He known it wasn't us guys' fault, what happened."
He peeled bills from the wad and held them out to Nate. "Now there's a hundred bucks, okay? If your daddy don't come back by mornin', you take a taxi down to the train station and get yourself a ticket to your Grandaddy's, hear?"

"He'll come back." Nate felt his lower lip begin to tremble.

"You take this money, hear? And don't let nobody see it. Don't pay nobody 'cept the ticket man with that twenty. You got plenty of fives and tens in there. And don't keep it all in one pocket. And ..." He stopped abruptly and knelt down by the bed, his long hand warm on Nate's arm. "Look, boy you sure you don't want me to take you down to the station and put you on the train?"

Nate shook his head. "I'll be okay."

Leroy stood up again, still holding the money out to him. "You sure got a lot of guts, boy. You a real man, I'll swear. More'n your daddy is, that's for sure."

Nate did not reach for the money. "You just get out of here, Leroy!" He felt tears coming up again. "You just get out and leave me alone!"

Leroy grinned and shrugged his narrow shoulders. "Okay, mister, I know what you're sayin'." He laid the money on the desk. "Sure does beat all how a fine boy like you can stick up for a miserable man like that." He walked to the door.
"Leroy," Nate said, trying hard to control his voice.

Leroy turned as he opened the door. Nate stood up and walked to him, his hand extended. "Thanks, Leroy," he said.

"Sure." Leroy's big hand closed warm and leathery around his. "You gonna be okay, man. You take care now, hear?" He turned and ambled off to where the others were waiting in the car. Nate could not stand to watch him leave. He closed the door and locked it. Then he undressed to get into bed. He put the money in his jeans before he shut off the light. He did not put it all in one pocket.

The woman was still there when he woke up. She lay on her side, her back to his father, one heavy arm stretched out between the beds as though she were reaching for Nate. He almost cried out when he opened his eyes and saw her lying there facing him, her garish lipstick smeared across her face. She was naked, and she had no covers over her. He stared at her for a long time. It was the first time he had seen a naked woman.

Her body fascinated and repelled him at once. Her heavy breasts sagging from her like mushmelons rotting in the sun, her long hair tangled about her flaccid cheeks. And the mysterious triangle of hair between her legs. He felt himself getting an erection, and the thought of it almost made him vomit. The thought of her giving him an
creation even as he tried to shut out from his memory the moaning and panting and sucking sounds she and his father had made last night when they got into bed, thinking he was asleep.

He eased himself from the bed, trying not to look at the wondrous horror of her body. He dressed himself and packed his pajamas into his suitcase. He looked around the room one more time before he opened the door, and he patted his jeans to make sure that Leroy's money was still there. His father lay on his back, one hand on the woman's bare hip. Nate saw that the sunburn was almost gone now, leaving his father's face pulled in the half-light of dawn. His stomach churned, and he eased open the door, hoping that it would not squeak and wake them. Then he pulled the door shut behind him and walked to the taxi stand in front of the motel.
Chapter Eleven

He woke before seven, cancelled his wake-up call, and took a long shower. He was on the road by seven-fifteen, watching the buildings of Kansas City dwindle away to rolling countryside along Interstate 29. In fourteen years he had come full circle. Sneaking out of the motel room fourteen years ago, sneaking away from a naked woman asleep in bed, walking away from his father. Then yesterday, sneaking out of Esther's bedroom, away from a naked woman asleep in bed, driving to his father, to all that remained of him.

Only five hours to go. Five hours separating him from home and Mom and Leslie. Leslie? Would he see her? He hadn't intended to. But she was only five hours away. The gulf seemed much wider than that. The span of a year between him and Leslie--a year since she had gone. A year filled with Company parties and Company people and Company images and Company crap, just as she had said. A year of rattling around in that big house, alone most of the time. Now and then with a woman, a faceless woman like Esther who filled it not at all, who filled only the bed for a while. Who neither filled his need nor fulfilled him, even for a night. Who left him always with a bad taste in his mouth from too much Scotch, too many cigarettes.
Thinking of it now, of what his life was, he could see that he had indeed come full circle in fourteen years. He had thought that he had rejected his father, his ideals, his values, all that his father represented. But he could see now that he had become like his father in many ways. Lute's life must have been as empty as his own had been during this past year. Some money. Some success. But empty. Faceless women, like Margie, like Esther. Cold gray dawns and the vile aftertaste of booze and cigarettes. But Lute had had a real father. And while Leslie had walked out on him, Lute had been the one who walked out on Mom.

Five hours between him and Mom. But how many years? How many prayers? How many Rosaries and Masses? She measured her weeks by Sundays, her years by Lent and Easter, her minutes by beads and Hail Marys. It was more than he could stand, more than he could understand, to see her retreat into a life of abnegation. Living alone in the small house in the small town, her life revolving around the Church and the study club and the Catholic Daughters of America. Visiting her was like visiting a convent, she a cloistered nun surrounded by shrines and statues with candles burning before them. Her conversation limited to last Sunday's sermon and the study club meeting and an occasional sermon of her own on faith or sin. Was he still attending Mass weekly? Had he met any nice girls? It
sickened him to see her so humble, so self-effacing, for he suspected that she had dedicated her life to saving the souls of her husband and her son. She had convinced herself that she had somehow caused Lute to leave her, and that through forcing her husband away, she had condemned her son to a life of sin.

Nate could not remember when he had first noticed this passion for self-sacrifice, but he knew that it had not always been there. Or if it had been there, at least it hadn't dominated her life as it did now. She had seemed happy before he went to college. She was active then, still working in the yard-goods store she'd opened with Grandpa's help, still seeming youthful—and she had been young, he realized, only in her mid-thirties—still fun when he brought friends from the Academy home to spend Christmas or Easter vacation.

But while he was away at college, she changed. Her clothing became as drab and gray as her hair. The house seemed darker, more somber, as she added shrines and crucifixes and candles. He had come home one Easter to find a portable kneeler in the living room on which she would kneel for hours before one shrine or another, rapidly ticking off her Rosary beads as if God believed in piecework. Her eyes became haunted, her voice muffled, stifled by a constant consciousness of guilt, a guilt she refused
to discuss. "The propitiation of sin," she said when he asked her what she was praying for. "What sin?" he asked, but she would not say, only gave him a look of such sorrow and pain that he went to her and held her for a long time in his arms.

Guilt, it seemed, was the thing which drove them all on, a sliver or a thorn, embedded so deeply within each of them that it could never be withdrawn. Instead, it festered and pussed, working itself ever more deeply into their spirits, poisoning more and more of their happiness, until it became the only motivating factor in their lives. His grandfather, guilty because his son had been so weak, because he could not imbue his son with standards of dignity and honor. His father, guilty because he had abandoned his wife and child to pursue wealth and fame and hedonism. Leslie, guilty because she had violated her mother's standards of decency and morality, because she had deserted him when he needed her. He, himself, guilty of so many, many things: the Church, Carol, the women, his greed, his inability to help Check, his hypocrisy driving Leslie away.

His mother, guilty because ... why? Because she feared for the souls of him and his father? Accepting their guilt as her own in order to save them? Because she, a lone woman, could not raise her son to be a real man? But no woman alone could do that. And she had tried to
avoid that danger by having him go to the farm every summer to be with Grandpa, by sending him two hundred miles to the Catholic Boys Academy for junior high and high school. Why, then, should she feel compelled to shoulder his guilt, to drain the pus from his thorn into her own spirit? Yet, the guilt was unmistakably there. She was indeed atoning for something which concerned him and his father. The thing that had happened to his hand, disfiguring him for life? No, that was not her doing. And it had been his father who left her, not the other way around.

Nate shook his head violently and opened the window. Cool morning air whipped around his head, clearing his mind of the past, of the unanswerable questions. The highway crews had been at work, mowing the tall grass beside the Interstate, and the moist air carried with it the heavy odor of drying hay, a smell that took him back to Grandma's miraculous kitchen at baling time, a smell which conjured up the happiness of boyhood, the freedom of summer, the pond by the pasture where he and Grandpa used to fish.

He and Grandpa walked through the pasture, the sun in their eyes, the chestnut colt gamboling about them, ambling sedately for a while and then suddenly scrambling across the grass on legs too long, chasing his fleeing shadow. The grass was clipped short by the horses and the cattle, and it was fresh and springy beneath their boots.
"You remember when you wanted me to get some horses?"

Grandpa asked.

"I did?"

"Sure did. You said you was tired of goin' out after the milk cows. Said if you had a horse you could bring 'em in a lot faster, just like Roy Rogers." He laughed, and Nate joined him. "Roy Rogers. That's all you used to talk about. Granmaw and me'd take you into town with us of a Saturday. Had to be there by one o'clock so's you wouldn't be late for the damn Roy Rogers movie. Made no difference whether we had ten minutes' or an hour's worth of business to tend to, we always had to wait till the movie let out at three--sometimes four, if it was a double play."

"Double feature," Nate chuckled.

"Sure, that's what I say. And you got me in some pretty hot water too, with your damn double features."

"How's that?" Nate had heard the story before. Almost every time they walked through Delbert's pasture to the bass pond, one of the horses would come along and get Grandpa started. Still, he smiled.

"Well, this one time we went into town as usual, and I dropped Ag off at the Fareway store like I always did. I'd usually take you by the movie theater and go to the locker plant or feed store or wherever. Then I'd go sit at Ross's
tavern with the boys and wait for you to come in after the movie. Then we'd meet Ag wherever she said and pick up the groceries and go home. But this one time I didn't have nothin' to do, and I sure didn't want to sit in Ross's all afternoon, so I went into the show with you. It wasn't no double play, and we was supposed to meet Ag at three o'clock at Ward's." They were nearing the bass pond now, and he lowered his voice.

"But you little fart, you let me fall asleep, and then you sat there and started watchin' the damn movie through again! I woke up and, hell, the damn movie was still goin' on, so I just watched it till the end with you, never even thinkin' that it was the second time through. And all that time, for two hours, here's Ag, walkin' up and down Main Street, searchin' through every goddam bar and tavern in town, figurin' that I'd got drunk or somethin'." He started to laugh, trying to stifle the sound for fear of spooking the fish. "Woman never been in a saloon in her life, and here she hits every damn one of them in two hours. And did she whale the tar outta you, you little fart? No! Course not! I was the one who got it, like it was my fault. Nagged me for near a month cause you wanted to see the same show twice." He punched Nate on the arm. "I should've whipped you then, cause I sure can't do it now."
Then, while Nate was still laughing at the picture of Grandma trudging into one saloon after another, her shopping bag in one hand and her purse in the other, her eyes flashing at the snickers of the farmers at the bar, Grandpa's mood suddenly changed.

"Natty, we always did understand each other pretty good, but I never told you how much . . . well, I mean, bein' just an ole dirt farmer and all . . . here you'll be startin' college in a month or so, first Parker man ever went to college, and . . ." He looked at the toe of his boot, glistening dew-wet in the sunlight as it traced a design in the grass. "Your dad, he's got money and all, but, well, you're just gonna be one hell of a good man, and it makes me feel damn proud of you, that's all." He looked up beligerently, daring Nate to accuse him of showing emotion.

And Nate felt so proud, so full of love for the old man, that he could not say anything, could not look at him. Instead, he simply touched Grandpa's thick arm, gripped his forearm hard, and that was enough.

Grandpa had his stroke that afternoon.

They were scaling the fish right after dinner. Had to clean them as soon as they could, Grandpa said, because after all, it was August, and damn hot. Big Buster came by while they were in the middle of the scaling. He wanted to look at a new combine, he said, and would Daniel come
along with him. When they returned an hour and a half later, Grandpa could not stand alone. Buster was scared. He thought Daniel had just fallen asleep in the car on the way back, but he didn't respond when Buster tried to wake him. Grandpa was awake now, but he said he was dizzy. Buster and Nate supported him between them up the walk. Grandma began to cry as soon as they got him into the house, but Grandpa mumbled, "Now Ag, be quiet now. Just too much sun this morning, that's all."

"I'd best call the doctor," she sobbed.

"Don't need no doctor."

"Best call him anyway."

"Now Ag, I know better now! Just too much sun, I say."

Buster looked at Nate over Grandpa's head, and they nodded at each other, each seeing his own fear mirrored in the other's eyes.

"Get us some cold water and washcloths, Grandma," Nate said. "Let's take him into the downstairs bedroom, Buster."

"Don't need to lay down," Grandpa slurred.

"You can't stand up, Daniel," Buster said.

"Well then, by God, you can put me in my own damn bed."

Grandpa was crying now, and his speech was almost unintelligible.

Grandma followed them into the downstairs bedroom with cloths and a dishpan full of water. "Daniel," she whimpered,
"Oh, Daniel." She spilled some of the water as she put the dishpan down. Buster put his arm around her and led her from the room. She kept trying to pull away, but Buster was firm with her. Through the open door, Nate could see him lead her to the living room couch and arrange a pillow for her head. He covered her with a shawl from her rocking chair and went to the telephone. Nate could not hear what he said.

"Natty," Grandpa whimpered, "you there, Natty?"

Nate forced himself to look down at the suddenly shrunken face, the faded gray eyes filled with tears. He stroked the warm, smooth, bald head and said, "That's okay, Grandpa. You're going to be all right. Don't cry, Grandpa."

The ambulance came and whisked him away. Nate followed its flashing red light into town. Grandma sat beside him, tears trickling down her cheeks, her lips pressed together in mute fear and pain.

A stroke, the doctor said, oxygen and fluids and rest. But for Grandma and Nate there was no rest. They spent all visiting hours in his room, sitting on opposite sides of the bed. They watched the faint puff and suck of his cheeks through the distorting folds of the oxygen tent. Waiting, fearful, for each stumbling breath. Nate tried to pray as Grandma did. He succeeded occasionally, but more often failed, thought instead of the strength and joy and virility
now sucked from the shrunken husk that was no longer Grandpa, somehow, leaving him dried and rattling like the shriveled shell of a giant junebug enshrouded in the web of a spider half its size.

They called the relatives, of course, and the girls took over the running of the house for Grandma. Their husbands, Nate's uncles, did not come (Daniel was not their father, after all) but stayed on at their jobs, waiting for the call or the telegram that would tell of his death, allowing them to take a day or two off for the funeral. Nate's mother came, even though Daniel was not her father, either. Lute was not there. No one knew where he was. He wrote home only infrequently, and never twice from the same place. Someone had told Mary that he was bumming from town to town through the South, playing for drinks in bars. They could not reach him.

Then, after only a week, it began to look as though the uncles would not have to come for a long time. The doctor removed the oxygen tent, and Grandpa had opened his eyes once or twice, the night nurse said. The family had started going to town one at a time, so that one of them was always there at the hospital, day and night, sitting in that stark white room during visiting hours, dozing on the slick, sweaty plastic chairs of the lounge at other times. It was Nate who was there that night, when the nurse
told him about Grandpa opening his eyes. If he would be very quiet, she said, and did not disturb him, Nate could go into the room. If Grandpa did awake, it would be good to have one of the family there.

The dull glow of a plastic night light cast craggy shadows on the white walls. It made more sunken the eyes and cheeks, more waxy the skin of Grandpa's face. Nate stared at that face, seeing not the frail, wasted body before him, but the robust giant atop the thresher, the machinery roaring at his command, his chestnut face and arms gilded by the swirling chaff; hearing not the lacy, whispering breaths, but the rolling laugh and "Whup, by God!" as Billy Phillips toppled off balance into the barnyard dirt, pulling Grandpa down after him, their brawny hands still locked together in Indian wrestling, the other men roaring with delight as the two massive bodies thudded to earth.

That was a man, what a man should be. Strong and confident, glorying in his strength, joyfully pitting his strength and skill against machines and men and nature. Grandpa had taught him that. He had taught Nate how to use the right tool, how to care for it. He had taught Nate how to place-hit and charge grounders and throw with rifle accuracy, even with his twisted hand. Together they had done the things men do--sweated in the scorching sun with tools and
tractors, swapped tall tales and shady stories over heavy-misted beers, coaxed from their haunts the sleek black bass and gruesome catfish, laughed and argued and joked and swore.

Grandpa had faults too. He pushed hard. Like the time he was teaching Nate to charge grounders and the ball smashed into Nate's face, giving him a bloody nose. "Just like your pa," Grandpa had shouted, "afraid of a damn little ball. Now do it again. Right this time." And Nate had wiped away the tears and the blood and charged in over and over until he fielded each one perfectly. Like the time he had put a spade in the toolshed without cleaning and greasing it, and Grandpa made him clean and polish and grease every tool in the shed before he could eat supper. But Nate had never missed a grounder in high school, and he had never owned a rusty tool.

Grandpa's eyes opened and stared blankly at the ceiling. His mouth worked silently for a moment, and then he moaned. Nate felt sweat break out on his palms; his throat was tight and dry. He forced himself to keep calm, stifling the shout that roiled inside him. He leaned over the bed and pushed the button to summon the nurse.

"Natty? That you?" Grandpa's voice was thin and raspy, but it was clear--not slurred as it had been the day of the stroke.
"It's me, Grandpa." He clasped one faded brown hand.
"You're okay now. You're in the hospital." He felt his
eyes go blurry with tears.
"Hospital?"
"Yes, Grandpa. You're okay now. Doctor says you'll
be okay." His voice quavered, and he swallowed hard to
steady it.
"I had me the strangest dream ever I had." Behind him,
Nate heard the door open and the rustle of the nurse's
clothes as she came in. "I planted me an apple seed way out
in the middle of the east pasture, and right away there was
a tree, and I reached up and picked this yeller apple. It
was cold, like it just came from the icebox. And I opened
my mouth to eat it, but it turned brown and rotten in my
hand, and all the meat kinda fell apart."

The nurse padded around to the other side of the bed.
She reached for Grandpa's wrist to take his pulse, but he
wrenched the arm from her, and Nate felt a thrill of excite-
ment, seeing the strength in his body once more. "No, by
God! I'm talkin' to my boy." His voice was full and clear.
He gripped Nate's hand. "Who's Grandpa's boy?" he said, and
his gray eyes misted over.

"I am, Grandpa," Nate choked out.

"Damn right!" Grandpa turned his eyes back to the nurse.
"Now you just wait, by God."
"But, Mr. Parker, we mustn't tire ourselves." She shrank from the bed, awed a little by Grandpa's energy.

"Now I know better, now! Just be still a minute and let a man finish." His gaze wandered back to Nate. "Now where was I? Damn woman, stickin' her big nose in, interruptin' a man."

"The apple rotted away," Nate said.

"It did. Rotted right in my hand, and all the meat just kinda fell apart. And here's the funny thing. There was another apple inside! Yeah, a new apple, even bigger than the first one. And it was shiny and yellower and warm like an apple oughtta be on a hot afternoon. And I bit into it, and it was the sweetest, juiciest apple ever I tasted. Crispy and crunchy and sweet, sweet, sweet. And so juicy that it ran all down my chin and onto my shirt." He was no longer looking at Nate, but off into the distance, as though he were smelling the hot dust of the August pasture, feeling the golden light of the sun and the steady breath of the afternoon breeze. "I never tasted no such apple before. Never before. Strangest dream ever I had."

"Grandpa, I'm going to call Grandma now. Tell her you're awake."

Grandpa clutched at his arm. "You gonna come back, though. You ain't goin' away?"
"No, Grandpa, I'm just going down the hall to call home. Tell them you're awake." He glanced at the nurse and nodded. "Now, the nurse has to take your pulse and stuff. You behave yourself, hear? Don't be chasing her around the room, now."

Grandpa smiled and squeezed his hand once more.
"Grandpa's boy," he said. "Grandpa's big boy."

He died at six in the morning. The funeral parlor could not hold all the people who came. Neither could the church. The procession to the cemetery was three miles long.
Chapter Twelve

The town huddled beside the small river which cut a crooked seam through the flat and fertile land. Nate followed Highway 20 through the five-block business district, torpid in the noonday sun, and then turned left onto a narrow residential street arched over with cool elms. Most of the houses were small and white, about thirty years old, their lawns and hedges meticulously trimmed, the shade of the elms protecting the grass, keeping it green in the surly August heat.

His mother's house was like the rest, a white cottage fenced off from the street by a disciplined hedge of Chinese elm. In the front yard stood an arched rose trellis, and the tendrils of a white rambling rose clambered up its sides. On the other side of the yard, surrounding a great elm tree, was a tiny rock garden, and at its edge sat a wrought-iron love seat, painted gleaming white. His mother came to the door as he carried his suitcase and clothes bag toward the house. She waved to him and opened the screen door for him. In the entryway, he set down the bags and embraced her.

"You got my wire," she said. "I was so afraid you wouldn't. I tried to call you, but no one answered."

"I was out all weekend. A Company thing."

She looked at him sharply. "A Company thing? You weren't out with some woman? Or drinking?"
"No, Ma. A Company thing. I won a sales contest."

Why was he lying to her? Twenty-six years old, and she was making him feel like a school kid who had come home late after a date.

"Oh, Natty, I'm sorry." She clasped his hand—the hand—between hers and brushed it with her lips. "It's just that . . . it's that I worry so much for you. For what we've done to you. And I pray that you can be strong and virtuous in spite of it." She closed her eyes and rocked her cheek back and forth across his hand. "The sins of the fathers, you know. Just last Sunday, Father gave his sermon on that. 'The sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the sons.'"

Nate pulled his hand away from her. "Come on, Ma, not right now, okay?" He tried to affect a lighter mood. "I'm starved! What is this? A ravenous man comes to your house, and you give him a message instead of a meal. For shame."

He could see the hurt in her eyes, and he felt cruel for cutting her off so abruptly. Her hands fluttered out toward his, but she dropped them to her sides again and smiled. "What am I thinking of? Of course, you've driven all this way." She grasped his hand once more. "Tell you what. You go take a nice hot shower and change clothes, and I'll have some lunch for us when you're done. Okay?"

For a moment, she looked almost as she had before—really happy, as though planning such a simple thing as lunch was
an exciting conspiracy between them—the way she had always looked when they had planned for parties and graduation and summers with Grandpa and college. How she had changed. Her skin was startling white against the drab black of her dress, bleached white by hours inside, hours of prayer and meditation, and her hair was turning white as well. Her body was still slim, but it was no longer straight and erect, as it had been before. Now she slumped when she stood and plodded when she walked, as though she bore some heavy burden all the time. The folds and planes of her face seemed to be set in a permanently somber and sorrowful expression, as though her face had never known a smile. But when she did allow a smile, like the one just now, her whole appearance changed, and she looked as young as she was, forty-four instead of sixty.

The meal was ready when he came back downstairs, thick ham sandwiches with mustard and mayonnaise and lettuce. His mother did not eat much—only half a sandwich and a glass of milk. She cleared her plate and glass away as soon as she finished, rinsed them in the sink, and sat down again at the table. The kitchen was bright and warm. The sun cascaded over the brilliant flower garden in the back yard, the blossoms swaying slightly in the faint breeze. It was a pleasant day, a pleasant place. But the silence between him and his mother was uncomfortable. She sat rigidly, waiting for him to say something, or waiting for the right moment to say something herself.
"I had a good drive up," he said. "Stayed overnight in Kansas City."

"Good."

The silence closed in again, and he could think of nothing to break it. The ham sandwich was dry in his mouth, sticking to the roof of his mouth like peanut butter. He took a drink of milk and almost choked.

"You're glad he's dead, aren't you?"

The question took him by surprise. He tried to swallow, but could not.

"I am too. I'm really very glad he's finally dead."

He forced the food down. "Mom, you don't mean that."

"Yes I do. I mean it." She stood up and went to the window, as if she could not look at him any longer. "And I know you're glad. You almost hated him, I think."

Nate could not answer. It was true. After all, Lute had gone away, had left them both. He had never come back to see her. Never saw her again.

"But I don't hate him," she said. "I never hated him. It's on me that the guilt rests, the guilt for all his misery and sin."

"No, Mom, you can't say that. It isn't true. He was a weak man, but he was a man. His life was his own doing, not yours."

"You never knew him. Not really." Her voice was far away. She stared out the window at the sun-splashed garden.
"You never saw him working in the sun. Muscles! Muscles rippling all over his back, and sweat rolling down his chest and arms. So brown. And the way he used to laugh and sing with you when you were a baby. He was happy. So happy."

Nate felt anger seethe inside him. He left the food unfinished and stood up. "All I remember is the feel of that belt and that night you were locked in the bathroom. That night Billy Phillips . . ."

"You shut your mouth!" She spun around to face him, her cheeks suddenly red, her mouth contorted, teeth bared. "You have no right! No right to talk that way about him. You don't know anything about it. So just shut your mouth."

He was staggered by her fury. He reached out for her, but she turned away again, slumped, looked down at the window sill.

"I'm sorry, Mom. I didn't mean to . . ." He let the sentence trail off. She seemed so small, so frail, to have accepted such a burden. All the blame for his father's leaving. All the responsibility for bringing him up alone. And she would defend Lute. Defend his drunkeness, his irresponsibility, his weakness. "But it's time you faced the truth, Mom. It's time you quit blaming yourself for everything. He left you. He left me. Maybe he was a good man once. A man. Once. But that was a long time ago, and all I remember are the bad things, the weak things."
His voice was out of control. He felt himself trembling with rage, but he could not suppress it. Did not want to suppress it. "And I'm glad he's dead. I'm glad! He only hurt people, everyone he touched, I know that much. And he disgusted me." He felt tears roll down his face, but he did not wipe them away. "That time he took me to Kansas City. Oh, God, he disgusted me."

He felt the sting of her slap on his cheek, but he went on. "And look what he's done to you. Made you into an old woman. An old woman! Sitting in this damn house. Cut off from everything. Praying for his sins. Praying for my sins. The sins of the world. What kind of life is that?" She slapped him again, and he grabbed her wrists and held them hard. "He was no good. No good! He broke Grandpa's heart, and he ruined your life. But, by God, he's dead now, and I'm glad."

He was drained. He slumped back against the table, heard his glass smash on the floor. It made no difference. He had said it. He relaxed his grip on her wrists. She tore free. She slapped him. Again, and again. Beat her fists on his chest. He did not resist, could not summon the energy required to raise his arms and block her blows.

She stopped hitting him and began to laugh, tears streaming down the folds of her face. "Did you ever stop to think that we ruined his life? You? Me? Grandpa? Yes, Daniel Parker. What a great man he was!"

Nate reeled to his chair. His stomach was roiling, and his face felt cold and bloodless. She followed him, stood over him, her voice harsh and sneering. "Who was it that constantly belittled your father? Who was it that pushed him and pushed him to join the Army so he could get shot? Who was it that made him feel he wasn't a man, could never be a man? The great Daniel Parker. Who gave him the idea that drinking was a manly thing? Who convinced him that he could never do anything right? Who turned his own son against him? 'Grandpa's boy,' 'Who's Grandpa's boy!'"

Nate felt great waves of undefinable emotion sweeping across him, as though he were a swimmer, lying fatigued in a heavy surf, wishing to escape, but powerless to do so. He opened his mouth, but she slammed the table with her fist.

"Don't you dare interrupt me! You talk about facing the truth, and you don't even know what it is. Here's some truth for you to face, boy. Daniel Parker took away every shred of pride and manhood and self-respect your father ever had. Set himself up as such a great man that Lute could never please him. Lute was always wrong, and the great man was always right. 'I know better now.' How many times have you
heard that? 'I know better now.' Oh, my Lord, how I hated those words. 'I know better now, Ag.' 'I know better now, Lute.' Stubborn, pig-headed old man.

"And I saw your father humiliate himself over and over again to please that man. Trying so hard to please him, to win his respect. And Daniel would laugh at him. Tell him he was ignorant or weak or sissy. It just made me sick to see it. Your father, just like a dog, fetching every stick that Daniel threw. Fawning up to him to get a kick in the ribs. Every time. Every blessed time."

She stopped talking, and Nate could hear her breathing, harsh and ragged. Her fists were on the table before him, the knuckles standing out white against the white of her skin, the tendons etched sharply in her hands and arms.

"And you. Playing right along with him, believing every word he said like the gospel truth. 'Grandpa's big boy.' Couldn't do anything wrong. Never did anything wrong, as far as that man was concerned. Let your father criticize you or discipline you, and there was Daniel, protecting 'Grandpa's boy.' Lute could never say a word against you without Grandpa jumping on him. And you just ate it up. Every time the three of you were together, you'd be the most spiteful, snotty little brat. Defying your father. Disobeying him. And Daniel would pick you up and hold you, and you'd have the most obnoxious mocking smile. I could have killed
you sometimes. And Lute was so hurt and so jealous. Oh, Lord, I can't tell you. Because you got everything from Daniel, and he got nothing. Never a smile. Never a word of praise. Just criticism and ridicule."

She stopped again. Calmer now. Almost wistful. Nate saw her hands relaxing on the table top. He could not look at her face. He knew it was true. The time in the locker room.

"And Daniel taught you so well. So very well. You come here and tell me how Lute ruined my life and broke his father's heart. So self-righteous. So quick to condemn him. So superior. Telling me to face the truth. Oh, Lord."

She plodded to the other chair and collapsed upon it. She was weeping again, staring at her hands fluttering aimlessly on the table top. Nate looked at her. Tears glistened on her cheeks. They dripped from her chin onto the table. She paid no attention to them as they formed a small pool before her. He felt the sting on his cheeks where she had slapped him. But he felt the pain of her words even more. A pain that drove to the core of him.

"And I am the worst of us all." Her voice was flat, emotionless, as though the violence of her speech had numbed her. "I drove the last nail into his cross. I jammed the crown of thorns on his head." Her eyes were vacant now,
staring out the window at the garden and the golden sunlight. "I thrust the spear into his side and spilled the last of his manhood on the ground. That's why he left. You were there. You remember. You know why I had to do it." Her lips twisted into an ironical smile. "But you're just like Daniel. You refuse to see the truth. You think I pray for Lute's sins? For your soul?"

She looked at him then, her eyes tortured, tormented. "You foolish boy. You foolish, foolish boy. I pray for me. I pray to be forgiven for what I did to him. The final, most terrible sin."

Her hands writhed together on the table like two serpents. "I told you a long time ago that only a coward runs away to hide and feel sorry for himself. As you ran away that day. As I've run every day since then. Remember that horrible day? No, you remember only the belt and the knife when he came home. You remember the pain of your back and bottom and hand. I remember more pain than you will ever know. The pain of seeing his manhood die as I thrust that spear into his heart. A slow, lingering death. The body died twenty years after the man. Oh, Lord, forgive me."

She crossed her arms on the table and laid her head upon them. No sobs. No tears. Nate felt paralyzed. He did not move. He could not think. He only stared numbly at the top of her head, the gray hair parted to reveal the white of
her skin, the hair straggling down to cover her black sleeves and the marbled gray table top. He would have felt better if she had wept. He would have been able to cope with that, to comfort and soothe her. But this mute despair was beyond his ability, beyond his understanding. He had heard her words, but he could not comprehend their meaning. What her spear had been. What her sin had been.

But he saw that all his life he had been deluding himself. That there was no truth of which he could be sure. That he had nothing, not even himself, in which he could put his faith. For she had shown him all too clearly the truth about himself and Grandpa. The horrible torment they had put Lute through. And all his certainty was gone at once. The convictions of his life shattered in five minutes. He felt empty of will and emotion and thought. He could only stare at her and feel the vacuum within him.

Finally, she lifted her head from the table. She did not look at him, and he averted his eyes from her face as well. She plodded from the kitchen, and he heard water running in the downstairs bathroom. He forced himself from the chair and went to the kitchen sink to splash water on his face. He mopped it off with a dishtowel. She was standing in the doorway when he finished. Her face still showed faint tear stains, but her hair was in place once more, and her back was straight, her chin high.
"It's time," she said. "We'd better go."

He could not reply. Instead, he simply nodded and led the way to the front door.

Nate did not want to take another breath. The room was warm, too warm, and the sick cloying odor of flowers made the air even warmer, heavier. He felt as though he were trying to inhale maple syrup. The organist was playing random chords, all majors and simple sevenths with too much vibrato, and the organ was muffled by the red velvet drapes which enclosed the room, stifling the sound as the heat and odor stifled the few people in the room, as a river of whisky had stifled the man in the coffin.

The flowers were stacked in tiers around the coffin, mounting up layer on layer until they surrounded it and rose above it, their lustrous green and white and yellow setting off the gleaming copper color of the casket and the red of its satin lining. The head had been propped up so that it stood out against the open cover. Stark contrast, white hair against the red; dry, dead white against the vibrant red. And the face. Sunken, hollow, waxy. The thin beak of a nose twisting up from between cavernous black eye sockets, which even the cosmetics of the funeral parlor could not disguise. Thin lips, pressed tightly together even now, so that the muscles in the chin were tightened, thrusting it
forward, as though Lute were facing death with the same bitter cynicism with which he had faced life.

Nate tried to avoid looking at the face, but he was in the front row with his mother, and there was nothing else to look at. He tried to concentrate on the flowers, on the velvet curtains. But that shock of white hair against the rich red satin drew his eyes each time he tried to look away.

Behind him, a woman's voice murmured, "Why, I didn't realize Lute's hair was so white. Imagine, forty-four years old. Only forty-four, and he looks seventy."

Another voice, another woman, said, "And he was so handsome when he was young. Remember, Karen? So strong. He was a good man."

"Yes," the first whispered, "he was a good man."

And Nate remembered, seeing the white hair against the red. White against red. Red against white. Red blood against white snow. His blood. White snow, lying quiet and peaceful under a brilliant January moon.

The iodine stung where the belt had cut him, but he would not whimper or cry out. He would show his father. He could be tough. His mother tried to soothe him, but he turned his face away from her and burrowed into the pillow. Finally, he heard her tiptoe from the room and close the door behind her. He hated his father. Billy would get
him. Billy would beat him up. Tomorrow he would go next
door to Billy's house and show him the cuts, and Billy
would beat him up.

Downstairs, he heard his mother and his father shouting
at each other. He could not hear everything they said, but
he knew they were angry.

"Not now!"
"... two goddam years ..."
"... come in this house ... that boy with a belt ...

to bed?"
"... your legs, did ya? ... what that means."
"Lute! ... better than that."
"... Billy Phillips ... next door ...

"Lute!"

The front door slammed, and the house was quiet. Out-
side his window, a bare branch swayed in the wind, tapping
against the pane, a tapping he had become accustomed to
during the past few weeks. He closed his eyes and listened
to the familiar tapping. And tried to forget his pain.

The tapping grew louder and louder until it was no
longer a tapping, but a pounding. He opened his eyes. It
was dark in the room. The pounding was downstairs. He got
out of bed, wincing as he sat on the edge. The cuts. From
downstairs, a crash. Splintering wood. Shattering glass.
He heard his mother cry out. He was frightened. He inched
his door open.
"... own damn house!" his father's voice roared.

His mother screamed, "Lute! No!"

Natty clambered down the stairs and into the hall.
The kitchen light was on. He could see his mother, in her
pink flannel nightgown, huddled against the wall. She had
one arm raised as if to ward off a blow. He ran down the
hall. His mother got to her feet. His father moved in
front of her. Natty saw his hand reach out. Strike her
face. So fast. She crumpled. Blood was running from her
mouth. Natty stopped. He did not know what to do. Then
his father moved away again. Natty ran to his mother. He
tried to help her up, but she pushed him away.

"Get to bed, you little bastard." He turned to face
his father. "Get to bed, I said."

His father's face was puffy and red. His eyes were
red too. In one hand he held the butcher knife. It gleamed
in the yellow light of the kitchen.

"Don't you hurt my mommy," Natty said. His chin trem­
bled. He felt very small.

"Shit! Get the hell outta here, I said." His father
stumbled toward him.

Natty leaped forward and tried to grab the knife from
his father's hand. His father flung him aside, but Natty
scrabbled at his legs. He heard his mother shriek his name,
and he saw the bathroom door open and her pink nightgown
whisk through the opening. His father kicked him away and began to pound on the bathroom door. Natty ran into the night.

When he pushed himself up from the snowbank he saw blood where his right hand had been, and it scared him. He had been scared before, but he hadn't had time to think about it. Now he realized how frightened he really was, how terrible it was, and he began to cry. He stumbled through the snow to Billy's house, a black mass against the luminous sky.

"Billy! Billy! Billy!" He pounded on the storm door so hard that the glass cracked. Inside, a light came on, and Billy Phillips' huge silhouette lumbered across the front room.

"Who the hell is it? One o'clock in the morning," Billy rumbled.

"It's me, Billy. It's Natty." He tried to control the tears, but it was useless. "Oh, Billy, hurry!"

The porch light came on as Billy wrenched the door open. "Natty, what's wrong?" He towered over the boy, a faded plaid bathrobe barely covering the vast expanse of his chest. He grabbed the boy's right arm. "You're cut, Natty. What happened?"

"It's Daddy. Hurry up, Billy."

"Sure, Natty, sure. Just let me get my shoes."
But Natty pulled away and ran down the porch steps, into the snow. The big man followed in his house slippers, yelling, "Natty, wait up. Wait a minute."

He fell again in the deep snow, and again his bloody hand left its bright red mark. Then he felt himself being gathered up in Billy's huge arms, and he cried out. The cuts. Billy carried him the rest of the way, and he felt the tight-curled hair of Billy's chest against his wet cheek. When they reached the porch, Natty saw that the storm door hung by one hinge, and the glass was broken out. The front door lay splintered on the hall floor. He hadn't noticed before.

From the kitchen, his father shouted, "Open this door, damn you!"

Billy put him down. "You stay here," he said. He lumbered down the hall toward the lighted kitchen and Lute's voice. His body almost filled the hallway. Natty crept along behind him, sniffing, wiping his face with the back of his bloody hand. Billy paused in the kitchen doorway. Through his widespread legs, Natty could see his father pounding on the bathroom door. His shirt was torn at the shoulder, the shoulder bruised and bloody. The butcher knife was still in his hand, and the blade was stained with blood. "My blood," Natty thought. Lute's black hair hung down over his forehead, wet and shiny with the sweat
that poured out of him. He did not see Billy, but kept pounding on the door with the handle of the butcher knife.

"Lock me outta my own damn house! Open this door, woman!"

"Lute." Billy's voice was low. Lute turned to look at him as though he did not recognize Billy at all. Natty could see slobber mingling with the sweat on his father's chin.

"Lemme alone," Lute said. He pounded on the door again.

"Lute!" Billy shouted this time. Lute turned again and started to laugh. The sound of his laugh, the vicious snarl of it, frightened Natty more than his shouting had. The knife gleamed in his hand, swayed from side to side like the head of a coiled snake.

"Come on, you big sonuvabish," he growled. Then he saw Natty cowering in Billy's shadow. "Well, you lil bastard, you wanna help? Wanna grab this knife again?" He laughed, and Natty whimpered once more.

"You cut this boy?" Billy's voice welled up out of him like the roar of an approaching train. It was almost deafening in the little room. "You cut your own son?" He started to move toward Lute.

"You damn right," Lute snarled, "an I'll cut you too, 'fyou stick your big nose in where it don' belong." His
red eyes narrowed. "Maybe you been stickin' somethin' else where it don' belong too."

"You're crazy, Lute."

"Crazy, hell. She don' wan' me. Lock me outta my own house. Somebody gotta service her, an' I say it's you."

He lunged across the room, the knife bright in his hand. Natty screamed. Billy grabbed Lute's wrist. The knife flew away. Lute slammed his other fist into Billy's face. Natty winced at the sound it made. Billy swung Lute around by the wrist, crunched him into the counter. Natty saw one huge fist sink into his father's stomach. He saw Lute bend over, very slowly, it seemed. He saw his mouth open and heard the horrible gagging sound, half retch, half scream, that his father made. He saw Billy's fist draw back again. He saw it all slowly, as though the two men were under water. He felt himself running across the room. He heard himself cry, "Don't you hurt him! Don't you hurt my daddy!" He saw the big fist descend slowly upon the back of Lute's head. He saw Lute crumple beneath it and crash to the floor.

Then he was pounding on Billy's back and legs and belly, and he saw the bloody marks he made wherever his right hand hit. He felt Billy hugging him tightly, pinning his arms to his sides, rumbling, "There, there, Natty. It's all right, boy. It's okay."
He felt very small in Billy's arms. He cried weakly, smelling the big man's sweat and his father's vomit, hearing Billy's gentle rumble and the hysterical weeping of his mother. Then Billy was holding him over the sink, and his mother's hand was on his forehead, cool and soft. He was throwing up, seeing the water wash his vomit down the drain, seeing the red stain of his hand on the white enamel of the sink. Red on white. Red blood on white enamel. Red blood on white petticoat. Red lipstick smeared over white powder.

White hair on red satin.

The funeral director, a tiny pink man, bent and withered by arthritis, slithered from one person to another, saying to each in a rasping whisper, "Have you viewed the remains?"

The people filed up to the front of the room and stood between Nate and his father's coffin, looking down at the artificially cosmetic face and the startling white shock of hair.

Then it was time. He took his mother's arm as they walked out. He wondered if she was crying behind the veil that covered her face. The funeral director was standing at the door as they walked through. He put a knobby hand on her shoulder and said, "Lute was a fine man. We all share your loss." He smiled, revealing a flawless set of false teeth.
"Thank you," she said. Nate felt her squeeze his arm tightly.

The August afternoon hit them like a sledgehammer as they walked from the building. But the Cadillac that took them to the cemetery was air-conditioned. They did not speak on the way. His mother's veil was still down, and he did not want to disturb her. He would not have known what to say. There was no sound in the car except the rush of tires and the hum of the engine. The driver, a middle-aged man from the funeral parlor, stared straight ahead at the glistening hearse.

They followed the hearse off the highway and onto a narrow gravel road which led to the cemetery where Grandpa and Grandma had been buried. The graveside ceremony was mercifully brief, the small knot of people clustered about the freshly dug hole while the priest read the words. "Thy servant, Luke," he said, and Nate felt a flare of anger at the mistake.

Then they started back to the cars. Some of the children began to play tag among the gravestones, and their parents tried only half-heartedly to stop them. For the adults were now gathered in groups themselves, gossipping and joking as if they were at a neighborhood picnic.

Nate felt a tug on his sleeve. He turned to face Billy Phillips.
"Hi, Nate," Billy rumbled. "Hi, Mary." He was still huge. Fatter than Nate remembered. They smiled at each other in the uncomfortable silence of people who no longer know each other, who have nothing to say, but feel that they should say something.

Billy cleared his throat. "Well, I hear you're living in the big city now, Nate."

"Yeah," Nate said, "the big city."

"That's nice," Billy said. He shifted his bulk awkwardly from one foot to the other. "Well," he said, "well, Mary . . . Nate . . . I was awful sorry to hear about Lute." He looked away from them. Looked at his meaty hands. "He was an awful good man. Awful good."

"Thanks, Billy," Nate said.

His mother did not say anything. She began to cry.
Chapter Thirteen

He did not stay at his mother's house. He did not stay in town at all. And he suspected that she was not sorry to see him go. He drove the red car east on Highway 20. As he approached the familiar turnoff, he braked and turned north as he had done so many times in the past. The gravel road was hard-packed and rough, the ruts cut in early spring baked into it by the relentless summer sun.

The old place had been changed by its new owners. The sweeping porches had been removed, and the house was now yellow instead of the brilliant white which used to blind him in the sunlight. The barn was swaybacked, some of its shingles missing. Behind the barn, only a low gray mound remained of the golden strawpile built up by the thresher so many years ago. He did not drive into the lane, but simply stopped the car on the road and looked at the buildings. There was no life about them. Nothing moved. He shut off the engine and heard only the breeze rustling the leaves, and somewhere a rusty gate hinge creaking.

He did not know what he had hoped to find here. He did not know if he had found it. But it was home. His roots were here. The arid flat land of Texas was now only a distant and unpleasant memory. It seemed to him that his life in Texas, his life in the Company, his life of Scotch and sales and sterile sex was as arid and desolate as that Texas land. He had become as dry and coarse as the
mesquite, the chapparal, the horned toad of that country. The juices of compassion and joy had been boiled from him in the pressure cooker of the Company, and there was nothing left but the hard shell of competition, the dry scales of commerce, and the thorns of guilt turned inward, festering in the arid pith of his spirit. And now the dreams, the ideals he had cherished, the memories he had clung to, dried and shriveled in the sere glare of truth.

Thinking of these things, he began to understand what had happened to his father. So intent upon proving himself a man to his father, to his wife, to the world, Lute could not be a man to himself. And Nate could see that he too was following the same path—squeezing out love for money, sacrificing self-esteem for self-aggrandizement, wringing compassion from his life to leave a hard knot of callousness. Devotion and gratitude don't sell cars. But money and prestige don't mean success, either. And if a man must prove his manhood, that proves he's not a man. In his own mind.

That was why Lelsie had gone from him. She could feel her own juices of life being sucked from her by his parched spirit. She could see that he was becoming something other than he had been when they had met. Then he had been troubled and guilty, but his guilt had been partly the result of his compassion, his unwillingness to hurt others through what he thought was his own inherent evil.
She had helped him alleviate that guilt, had helped him regain some measure of self-esteem, for she understood that part of him.

But when he bartered his self-esteem for pride and status and money, she could no longer help him. She could no longer understand him. She could not stand to see him sell himself to prove himself to others. It was ironic, he thought, that he regained his self-esteem the day when he returned from the blood bank, sickened at the thought of selling part of himself to survive. For now, in the Company, he was selling something of himself far more precious than a pint of blood. He was selling his self-ness, his manhood, his vital fluids of compassion and love—much more vital than plasma and hemoglobin. Leslie had seen it long ago. Why had it taken him so long to see?

Because in a world of blind people, the sighted man is blind. And in the world of the Company, most of the people were blind. To see like them, with the same sort of blind-sight they had, he tried to blind himself to those things which they could not see: understanding, empathy, and kindness. Once he had obscured his vision of those things, it was much easier to see the virtues of profits and promotions and pride at the expense of people. But although his vision was obscured, he had never been able to blind himself completely. There were still
occasional glimmers of light around his self-imposed cataracts, disquieting reminders of the sighted world.

Check was the brightest, the most persistent, of those glimmers. Check was in the wrong world too. He did not belong, for to him compassion and love and understanding shone too brilliantly to be blotted out. And the Company could not tolerate a sighted man. They had to terminate him. Terminate him. It sounded like death. And Nate could do nothing to help him. He felt as he had felt at Grandpa's bedside, hoping for a reprieve, but knowing all the while that there was no hope.

He started the car and turned around in the drive, headed back toward the highway. Around him were the fields of corn and beans, swelling green and rich in the sun, each plant plunging itself deep to find moisture. Each plant struggling to survive in the blinding glare by thrusting its roots into darkness. Cut off the roots of a plant, and the plant dies.

But the roots of a man can trap him in darkness, can make him fear the light, can immobilize him. He can grow so dependent upon his roots that he will not move for fear of tearing them loose. And his roots, lying in darkness, become more important to him than the light. He nurtures those roots and neglects his blossoming and his fruits, and he begins to wither and die.
For a man gains his nourishment not only from his roots, but from the light and from other men. The root-bound man is not free to pursue the light, not able to bind himself to other men, for he struggles only to push his roots deeper and deeper into the darkness of the past, of tradition, of his father's teachings. He expends all his energy in the darkness and has none left to reach for the light. He becomes brittle, unyielding, and thorny.

A man must cut himself loose from the dark roots which bind him. The amputation is painful, but a man must be free to soar into the light like a far-blown seed, to germinate and grow something new, to reach toward the brilliant light. He need not forget the roots from which he sprang, but he cannot allow them to fetter him, as Lute had done, as Nate had been doing.

The red car sped southward between the fields as the sun dropped lower in the purpling sky. The gravel road became concrete, and the concrete became the asphalt streets of the university town. Nate checked into a motel at dusk. He sat at the desk of his motel room and wrote two brief letters, one to Check, and one to the Boss. He sealed the envelopes and riffled through the phone book on the desk. When he had found the address, he checked himself in the mirror and left the room.
The air was cool and dewy as he started the red car. He inhaled deeply as he drove from the parking lot. The town had changed very little. A new pizza parlor. A new name for an old bar. A new dormitory going up on campus. He stopped at a mailbox and deposited the two letters. Then he turned down a quiet residential street.

The house was one of those big, boxy affairs which encircle college campuses, probably a converted fraternity house. A sign in a ground floor window said "APTS FOR RENT." In the dim yellow glow of the hall light he checked the names on mailboxes. Then he climbed two flights of stairs to apartment 3-A. The house smelled of cooked cabbage and cigarette smoke and old varnish. The door of apartment 3-A was covered by peeling gray paint. He knocked. The door opened.

After the dinginess of the hallway, the light from within the apartment blinded him for an instant. He could see only her silhouette, but that was enough.

"Hi," he said. "Can you feed a guy who's out of work?"

"Nathaniel," she said, and opened her arms to him. He walked into the brilliant light.