Lines and shadows

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Lines and shadows

by

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Early on an overcast Saturday in November, Russell Sterner is already at his office desk, working. He works often on Saturdays, but this will be a long one. The company has two deadlines coming up in the next week: a World Bank interim project report due on Tuesday, and a proposal to the Department of Labor on Friday. At the moment, he's re-checking tables of regression coefficients for the World Bank report. It's all been done by the computer, of course, but the results are crucial and Russell wants to be careful. He works his way down each column of numbers, concentrating. One page, another, then the third. At the end of the last column on the third page, he rubs his eyes, leans back for a moment, and gazes out his fourth floor window.
The first thing he sees is a fight. Two men, struggling, far down in the alley directly across from his window, on the other side of Nineteenth Street. The men are too far away to see clearly, but they look young, maybe even teenagers. The one nearest Russell is smaller and wears a dark sweater. The other man lunges at him once, then again, and they lurch together into the brick wall on one side of the alley. Then the taller man lunges again with a quick flicking motion of his right arm, and the smaller one doubles over and falls to the pavement. The taller man is long-legged, almost gangly, and has a narrow, long head. He turns and runs the other way, and then Russell can see that he's wearing a red and gold Redskins jacket.

Russell's immediate reaction is: this hasn't happened. This isn't real. It's all so sudden, he thinks it's a game, maybe--some kids clowning around. He looks back at the printout, and then he stands up from his chair and stares down at the body, lying there. Come on and get up, he thinks. This is long enough.

At this moment, Branson passes his office and hollers in. "Hey, conference call in Joel's office. Cambridge. Bring the World Bank printouts." Russell starts to say something, but Branson is already gone, rushing off, and there's no chance. He looks down at the body again, then flips through his file drawer for the right printouts. He
looks once more at the body, far down there in the alley, still not moving. He has to do something, right? What? Branson is hollering again, from down the hall, "Come on, move it willya? Christine's waiting." Russell picks up the phone, dials the local police station, two blocks up on Twentieth Street. A woman answers the phone and says, "Fifth precinct. Hold please." Russell stands there, still on hold, and Branson hollers once, then again, from down the hall. The body's still lying there. Russell taps his foot, drums his fingers on the desk top. "Come on, goddamnit!" hollers Branson. Still on hold. Then, from Joel, a long plaintive "Russell," droning down the hallway. Russell jams down the receiver and runs off to Joel's office.

Already there's an argument on. The main office, in Cambridge, is writing the final draft of the World Bank report, but Russell has done a big section of the economic analysis, which is what the argument's about. Although he's only four years out of grad school, he's already a top economist in the company; two more years and he'll be up for Senior Associate, and it's only a step from there to Project Manager. The argument gets heated, Joel and Christine, in Cambridge, shouting back and forth. Russell trying to explain. It's finally resolved, but then there's a discrepancy in one of the data charts. Russell and Branson check through the final computer runs, numbers flying in a
frenzy and Christine telling them to hurry up and get their act together. At last Russell finds the mistake, and everything is ironed out. The rest of the problems are minor, but they take time too, and the whole call lasts well over an hour. When it's finished, Russell and Joel and Branson talk for half an hour about the DOL proposal, and then Russell heads back to his office.

Once during the conference call, he thought he heard a siren, somewhere. But he'd been flipping through printouts at the time, arguing with Christine. Back in his office, he looks down at the alley and the body is gone. So an ambulance has come and taken it away, he thinks. Or was it an ambulance? Maybe the siren, if it was a siren, was something else. Maybe the guy, whoever he was, just got up and walked away. Just had the wind knocked out of him for a minute. Russell sits in his chair, by the window. It is dark outside, low gray clouds pushing in from the north.

At lunchtime it's pouring rain, and Russell is in the middle of another conference call. Joel calls down for take-away from the Great Wall, on the ground floor of their building: Moo Shu Pork and shrimp with lobster sauce. They all eat in the office and work. The afternoon's full of more calls and tedious arguments, checking and re-checking data tables, polishing the last sections of his chapter, and
they don't finish until after six. Outside, it's still pouring.

He's supposed to pick up Susan at seven, and he knows he'll be late. He drives home past the Capitol to Pennsylvania Avenue, down to Eighth Street. Once he's home he can call her; it'll be okay. He parks his Honda in front of his building and runs up the stairs. After the call he showers, dresses, straightens the cushions on his sofa and stacks the week's newspapers under the coffee table. He's at Susan's place by seven-thirty, and they head over to Augustino's for dinner.

He and Susan met at a party six weeks ago, and have seen a lot of one another since then. At Augustino's they order dinner and a liter of the house red wine, and they talk without stopping. She's a lawyer at EPA--she talks about her work, the past week, and then Russell tells her about the DOL proposal.

He feels good, talking about his work with Susan. Sometimes he feels self-conscious, telling all the details of what he's doing, but with her he's enthusiastic, and easily carried away. The DOL proposal is for a demonstration job training program: they'll set it up in six different cities and monitor it for three years. Job training for the long-term unemployed, employment counselling, placement. If they can just be careful, think
it all through and avoid the dumb mistakes, do it right--then they'll have a great project, a project that really means something.

They eat, drink the wine, talk on. They're almost finished when Russell looks up and sees a short guy, near the door, wearing a Redskins jacket.

"Hey, I just remembered," he says. "Something weird happened today. At work."

"What's that?"

"Well, I was working, and I just happened to look out my window down that alley, and there was this fight. Two guys, fighting. And then one guy hits the other one and knocks him down, and then he just runs away. And the other guy, the short guy, he just lies there, not moving. Right there in the alley."

"So what happened?"

"Well, I don't know. I mean, I had to go down for this conference call, right then. Right at that moment. And when I came back he was gone."

"Oh, so he must have been okay. Probably just some kids. Hey, you know, if we hurry, we can make it to the One Step Down for the ten o'clock show."

"I mean, I thought I heard this siren once, during the conference call. Could have been an ambulance or something."
Susan looks back at him again. "So, what're you saying?"

"Well it was hard to see, and all that. Way down there in the alley. I keep thinking, What if the guy was really hurt? I should've done something. But then I heard the siren, and later on he was gone." He rubs his fingers over his head. "It all happened so fast, you know?"

"The guy's probably okay. Nine times out of ten, you go barging into something like that and you get hurt yourself." Susan looks away again, sips her wine. "Right?"

"I thought I heard a siren. Or something."

"So why don't we pay, huh? We can get coffee over there."

They get parked and inside just in time for the ten o'clock show. It's non-stop solo piano for an hour and a quarter; they order espresso and decide to stay for the twelve o'clock show. It's over at one-thirty and they drive back to Capitol Hill to Russell's place. Russell pours them each a brandy, but it's only half-finished when they go in to bed.

They sleep late in the morning, and at ten Russell walks down to the Ridgeway for the Sunday Times and fresh croissants. Later in the afternoon they drive out to Great Falls for a hike, and they're back by five. Russell drops off Susan at her place and then heads home.
Alone, he pours himself a Jack Daniels over ice, and sits on the sofa. And then he thinks again of what he saw, yesterday, at the office. Two men fighting in the alley. It was all so fast, such a dumb chance that he saw it anyway. From his office he has a clear view right up that alley. On one side of the alley, to his right, is the back end of the Crown Center, a sheer brick wall, and on the other side is the back end of a series of old rowhouses that have been converted into shops and restaurants, fronting on M Street. Only from his office can you see all the way up that alley. One office to his left or to his right, and he couldn't have seen what he did.

Even though he only mentioned it that one time, at Augustino's, it's been on his mind a lot, just under the surface. Russell takes his drink and walks downstairs to see if Arruzione is home. Arruzione's been his downstairs neighbor ever since Russell moved to Washington, four years ago, and is probably Russell's best friend. But the lights are out, and when he knocks there's no answer. Russell sits on the stairs and finishes his drink, and then he walks down to Eighth Street.

At the Ridgeway, he buys the final Sunday edition of the Post. The local paper. If anything happened, anything serious, it would be in here, right? He sits down in the Deli section, orders a capuccino, and starts with page one.
He reads every article lead, in order, carefully. Now we're getting somewhere, he thinks. Yeah. He works his way through the pages—left to right, top to bottom. SILVER SPRING MAN FOUND DEAD OF ASPHYXIATION; HIGH WINDS, HAIL, BATTER WINCHESTER; FORMER DRUG ADDICT DON'S PASTOR'S ROBES. Every section: News, Sports, Leisure, every word of the obituaries. Nothing.

So that's it, he thinks. Russell leaves the paper on the table in the Deli and walks home. The guy got up and walked away. Or, if it was an ambulance, then it was something minor, no sweat. At this point, he thinks that he is free of it, but later, lying in bed awake, he pictures it all again, runs through the entire scene. The two men locked together, the tall one lunging, the quick flicking motion, the body falling. What if it wasn't nothing? What if the tall guy had a knife and stabbed the other guy? What if the other guy was bleeding to death when I hung up the phone, he thinks.

He lies there in bed, unable to sleep. After a while he rolls onto his side and flips through the Newsweeks and Times that are stacked by his bed. But he can't read. He looks over at the two bookcases on the far wall. They're old bookcases, solid oak—he bought them cheap at a garage sale and refinished them both. He likes the feel of a room with bookcases full of books. Here, and at the office too.
There is something comfortable, something solid and dependable about all those rows of books there. Sometimes he can waste a whole evening browsing through them, organizing, rearranging them. On the bottom shelves he's got reference books, in the middle hardcovers, at the top paperbacks. On top of both bookcases he's got a row of photographs: he and his parents when he graduated from Michigan, his parents on the front steps of their house in Ann Arbor, his little sister at her high school graduation. It's too dark now to see them, but he can recognize each one from the size and shape of its frame.

He turns on his other side and looks out his back window, at his balcony. He looks at the hibachi, at the antique school bench that he's refinished, the potted spruce plant, and the thin black railing. Past that the bare chestnut tree in the back yard, and then the fence. Beyond that is an alley. What would I do, he thinks, if he saw a fight in this alley, right now, and one guy was hurt? I would run down and help him, wouldn't I? Yes, of course I would, he tells himself. Of course. Yes.

At the office on Monday morning, he calls the emergency room at George Washington hospital. If he had heard a siren on Saturday, and if the siren was an ambulance picking up the guy in the alley, then they'd take him to GW--four
blocks down on Twenty-First Street. After four rings a woman answers.

"Emergency room. Can I help you?"

"Yes, I was wondering...could you tell me if anyone was brought in to the emergency room on Saturday, say about nine o'clock in the morning? A young man with some wounds or cuts?"

"What was the patient's name, sir?"

"Oh, well, I don't know the name. I just saw, I mean, I heard about this little accident over here and I just wondered if everything was all right. I mean, I'm not even sure if it was serious or anything, or even if he was brought in--I don't really know anything about it, you know." He feels his own shortness of breath, sweat on the receiver under his palm.

"We can't give out this information sir, unless you know the patient's name. Are you an employer, or next of kin?"

"Oh, no, no—that's all right. Never mind, it doesn't matter." Russell hangs up, wipes his palms on his pants' legs. He feels flushed, hot. What's going on? Why did she ask about next of kin; wasn't that the question when someone dies? He leans back in his chair, turns toward the window, and there's the alley again. He already knows that he doesn't want anybody else to know what he has seen.
At lunchtime he goes down to the Taj Mahal, the third rowhouse in the row on M Street with their backs on the alley. It's a tiny Mom-and-Pop cafe—he eats there often and the owners, Mr. and Mrs. Mukherjee, know him. Here's a place he can ask some questions, at least. He takes the daily special and sits near the cash register. Mrs. Mukherjee comes padding over in her flip-flops, chattering, and he asks her. "Say, did you hear anything about a fight out back on Saturday morning? In the alley?" He drinks his tea, tries to look unconcerned. But she says no, no, she hasn't heard anything but it wouldn't surprise her, kids these days, and drugs. She waves her hands in a nervous flurry and goes back to the kitchen, her sandals flapping.

Russell eats his curry, and in a moment Mr. Mukherjee sidles over. Before Russell can say anything, Mr. Mukherjee starts right up, in a loud whisper. "Drugs. He stab him." Mr. Mukherjee makes a quick flicking motion with his right arm, and the funny thing, the bizarre thing, is that this motion is exactly the same as the motion made by the tall man in the alley. "Drugs," says Mr. Mukherjee. He cups his left hand around his mouth, like he's telling a big secret. "He stab him." He wrinkles his nose and then waves his left hand downward, like he's had enough. Before Russell can ask anything, before he can even think of anything to ask, Mr. Mukherjee has gone back to the kitchen.
Russell sits there for a while, and then he notices that it's five after one. There's a staff meeting in the office at one. He pays quickly, then runs out, runs down M Street and around the corner, up Nineteenth Street to mid-block, crosses through traffic and runs into the lobby. He takes the stairs two at a time, still running, up to the fourth floor. When he barges into the conference room, Joel's already explaining new budget allocations.

The next ten hours are pure work. Cambridge has decided that the cost estimate on the DOL proposal is one hundred thousand too high. Russell has to shave twelve-five on his section, and he has until close of business Tuesday to do it. If that causes any changes in his research design, then he has to rewrite his chapter of the proposal, too. He works in his office, poring over old printouts of cost projections, pounding on his Hewlett-Packard. Dreaming up alternatives, working them through, tossing them and trying others. He is totally consumed, and happy for that.

At six-thirty Joel orders carry-out from the Great Wall: Szechuan beef with snow peas, chicken with cashews. Egg rolls with tea. Joel and Branson and Russell: when the food comes, each eats in his own office, working on through, eating around the work. Branson bails out at nine. At ten-thirty Joel comes in to Russell's office and they go over all the numbers. They check it all, carefully, and at
eleven-fifteen they're finished. Russell walks down to the metro, and he's home just after twelve. It's all quiet in the house, and Arruzione's lights are out. Russell trudges up the stairs, drops his briefcase on the couch and goes directly for the kitchen.

He takes the Jack Daniels down from the shelf and pours a tall one, into a tumbler. From the freezer he forks out two ice cubes and tosses them in too, waiting for the drink to cool. There's something pleasant about the waiting, the tension of waiting. After a while, he drinks it all. He feels a certain happiness: the drink still burning in his throat, his tiredness, the absolute certainty that he'll sleep, soon. He slips off his shoes, and heads into his bedroom.

Tuesday is a carbon copy of Monday: working straight through, rewriting his chapter. It's a brilliant chapter, he knows, and he loves it--loves the insights, the careful planning, the logic. Most of all he loves the pure sense of being in control--of encountering a problem and then resolving it. In this he has a lot of confidence, and that's part of the fun: knowing that if he thinks long enough and works hard enough, he'll come up with a solution. And they're important, interesting problems too--issues that affect people, everyday. Things that can make a difference.

He's home at ten o'clock, and calls Susan first.
"Good Lord, did you just get home from work?" she asks. "What's going on with you guys?"

"Yeah, lots of last-minute changes. Hey, wanna come over tonight?"

"No, sorry, but I really can't. I've got to go to Philadelphia tomorrow and I won't be back until Friday. They cut our travel budget so I've got to take the goddamned metroliner. Six A.M."

"Yeah, but can't you come over? I'd sort of like to talk."

"No, Russell, sorry, if I come over now I won't sleep and I'll be dead tomorrow. Really. We've got to argue a toxic waste class action and this judge is a real tight-ass."

"Yeah. Okay." Russell clears his throat and runs his fingers through his hair. "Say, you know that fight I told you I saw? The two guys in the alley? I've been thinking--what if this guy got stabbed? I mean, what if the big guy had a knife?"

"A knife? You didn't say anything about a knife."

"Yeah, but I keep thinking, well, maybe he did have a knife."

"Russell, what are you talking about? I mean, if he'd had a knife wouldn't you have seen it? You said it was just a fight."
"The more I think about it the more I don't know what I saw. Maybe the guy had a knife and stabbed him, and then I should have done something. But I had this meeting, really a crucial meeting. Crucial. And then, I don't know anymore, it's like...."

"Russell, listen, you've been working too hard. I'm sure it was nothing. You're just under a lot of pressure now. If it had been something serious, you'd have done something, right? Just take it easy, okay?"

"I don't even know anymore."

"Russell, just relax and forget this. Hey, I'll be back Friday afternoon--I'll call you then."

"Yeah, okay," he says. "Okay."

Wednesday, he's up at six, showered, and in the office by seven. He has to finish the final rewrite of his chapter of the DOL proposal today, and it consumes him. He works through till lunch, stops for two egg rolls and a Snickers bar, and works through the afternoon in a frenzy. There are calls from Cambridge, Christine on the line with endless questions, Joel in and out of his office, worrying. At seven-fifteen, he's finished.

It's clear that he's finished--there's nothing else he can possibly do. He looks out his window, into the city darkness, and the alley is still there. He would love a
drink, and he knows without thinking what he wants to do. He leaves his briefcase and walks down to the corner, at M Street.

The first rowhouse is a bank branch, and it's closed. The second is The Alamo: Tex-Mex with live bluegrass on weekends. He sits at the bar and orders a plate of nachos and a Carta Blanca. After a while he asks, but no one knows, and he goes on. The third rowhouse is the Taj Mahal, which he skips. The fourth is a second-hand bookstore, where he browses for half an hour before asking the guy at the desk. Nothing. Number five is a men's clothing store, still nothing, and next is the M Street news stand. Russell browses, flips through magazines, then asks the guy at the register. "Yeah," he says. "Kid got stabbed." He nods next door.

Next door is the Bronze Star, a video games arcade. Of all these places on M Street, this is the one he's never been in. It's dark inside, just a flurry of colored lights from each of the games. Who's in charge here? There's no desk, no counter, nothing--just four rows of games and people, teenagers and grown men, playing. He walks down the first aisle, and his eyes adjust to the darkness. The lighted name above each game gives off a glow, and he reads them as he passes: Choplifter Rescue, Invaders from Saturn, Lion Safari, Mission Impossible. There's no one just
standing around—everybody's either playing, or looking over somebody else's shoulder, watching. Russell stops at an empty game, slips a quarter into the slot, and starts to play. It's called Pole Position.

In the game he's a race-car driver. He has to push down the accelerator, and at the same time steer through the course, past other cars, obstacles, curves. He starts off slowly then pushes ahead, weaving through the other cars till suddenly there's a sharp turn he can't handle in time, and he crashes. The screen shows a mock crash, but within seconds the car is repaired and whole, and he's off again. This time he's more careful—he whips the wheel right and left, avoiding signposts, other wrecks, swerving drivers. His score mounts. Suddenly the car in front of him changes lanes in a curve—Russell whips to the outside but the curve's too sharp and there's another crash: hubcaps and fenders go flying, jagged orange flames shoot over the screen. His score plummets. He takes out another quarter and shoves it in.

There is a peculiar serenity to the game—he feels himself enclosed in a sort of quiet harmony. The world reduced to accelerator, wheel, screen. After a while he glances at his watch and is startled to see that he's been playing for almost an hour. He looks up and around him again—there's a lanky kid to his right who's just finished
a game of Lion Safari. Russell chances a question. "I heard a guy got stabbed out back here, on Saturday."

The kid looks over, sniffs twice, wipes his nose with his finger. "Yeah. Maurice," he says, and shrugs. He sniffs again and wipes snot with his finger and rubs it into his jeans. "Maurice the dickhead." The kid turns back and slips in another quarter.

With the name "Maurice", the careless shrug and the runny nose, Russell backs away, staring at the kid. He notices a door at the far corner, and realizes that it must lead out to the rear. He takes it, goes on through a hallway and another door, and finds himself in the alley.

He stands there for a while, shivering at first in the damp night chill. There is a row of garbage cans, rain water standing in potholes and the center trough, and busted bricks scattered around from the Crown Center construction. Where did it happen? He looks around for a sign, any kind of mark, but of course there's nothing. And then he looks down toward Nineteenth Street and sees that narrow column of windows on his own office building. His own window—fourth floor, room four twenty-six. Just that single column of offices: the Great Wall on the ground, then two twenty-six through eight twenty-six. Just those seven goddamned offices—hundreds of offices in the building and just those seven could see down here, down the alley. He shivers
again, and he realizes that he's standing on the spot where it happened. Stupidly, he looks around for blood on the pavement. That black spot, there, could that be...no. No, of course not. Rain would have washed it all away. He scrapes a shoe over the pavement. Maurice. Two twenty-six through eight twenty-six. He turns and starts down toward Eighteenth Street, heading for the metro.

When he drags in, the lights are on at Arruzione's. He goes upstairs first, heads for the kitchen and pours himself a tall one. He realizes he's left his briefcase at the office, but it doesn't matter. He takes a long sip, then walks down the stairs and knocks on Arruzione's door.

"Hey, Russell, you working late again?" Arruzione pounds him on the shoulder, pulls him in.

Russell slouches down on the sofa, takes another drink. "Yeah," he says. "Working late."

Arruzione sits in a chair across from him. "So what's up, eh?"

Russell takes another sip, then stares down into the glass. "Something really weird happened at work."

"Yeah?"

"On Saturday. I was sitting at my desk, you know how I can look down in that alley? And one time, when I just happened to look up, I saw this fight. Two guys. And then one of them hits the other one, the shorter one, and then he
just falls over. Right there in the alley. The shorter one. Then the other one runs away." He stops now, feeling himself growing warm, and takes another drink.

"So what happened?"

"I was just watching this guy, lying there. Like, he didn't move or anything." He can feel that tiny prickling sensation, on his skin, just before he starts to sweat.

"So what happened then?"

"Well, I called the police, and..."

"So this guy in the alley," says Arruzione. "He was okay?"

"Well, actually...well, I had to go to this meeting, right at that moment. A real important meeting. So, I mean, I never actually knew how it turned out."

Arruzione leans back in his chair. "Huh," he says. "Well, the police were there--they must have taken care of the guy."

They talk on for a while, but the conversation's over for Russell. He hasn't said what he wanted to say, what he'd planned to say all the way home on the metro. He hasn't said it. Not yet.

The next morning he's in early again. He tells his secretary to hold all his calls, closes his office door, and phones the police.
This time a woman answers—he can't tell if it's the same woman as Saturday. "Fifth precinct," she says. "Can I help you?"

"Yes, I wanted to ask about a stabbing. Last Saturday. I think there was a man stabbed, near Nineteenth Street."

"You know who was handling the case, sir?"

"I don't know. I mean, I'm just calling in for the first time, now."

"What was the name of the victim, sir?"

"I don't know that either. I just know, I mean, yeah, I know that there was some kind of stabbing."

"Yes?"

"I know there was some kind of stabbing, or something, and I just wanted to know, you know, like, how everything is going. What the status of everything is right now."

There's a long pause at the other end. Finally she says, "Sir, what exactly do you want to know?"

"Well, if there was a stabbing...well, I think I might have seen something."

"Sir, if you've witnessed a crime, you should come in and fill out a full report. We'd appreciate it if you'd do that as soon as possible. What was your name sir?"

"Oh, okay, I'll come in and fill out a report."

He hangs up, abruptly. What is happening here? He turns in his chair and stares down at the alley. What was
it he saw? Just a fight. Two guys, probably just kids. Two kids fighting, one gets knocked down, the other runs away. That was all, right? So what should he have done? What?

He gets up and walks down the hall, to Branson's office. Branson's at his desk, bent over a pile of monthly staffing schedules, and Russell says, "Hey. You got a minute?"

"Yeah. One minute, yeah."

"You know on Saturday? That conference call I was running a little late for?"

"Hell yes I know. Christine was having a shit fit."

"Well the reason I was late, like...I saw this fight. Down in the alley." Russell looks out Branson's window, but from here you can't see up the alley, only the entrance. "Nobody else can see up the alley. Just from my office..."

"Russell, sorry, but you can't have another office. We're short of office space already as it is. No new offices, forget it."

"I just saw these guys fighting, up the alley."

"If you don't want to see the alley, pull the fucking blinds, for Christsakes."

Russell starts to speak again, but at this point Joel buzzes him on the intercom with more work, and he accepts it. Proofreading the DOL proposal, rechecking the data
tables, some minor number-crunching. By five-thirty he's finished. He closes up and heads for the Bronze Star.

Inside, it's crowded again, and dark. He stands for a moment, letting his eyes adjust, then heads for Pole Position. He clutches the wheel and rams down the accelerator, pressing forward. Hip lunge, shoulder jerk—he spins the wheel wildly, then whips it back in time. He is full, consumed—he wants only to push on faster, higher, flying way out in front of it all, in the clear, untouchable. He plays twelve games before he looks up again. There's a kid next to him, at Lion Safari, and Russell asks him. "Heard anything about that stabbing, on Saturday?"

The kid doesn't look up. "Bad news," he says. He pegs two lions in a flurry, and the score clangs up. "Rubbed him out." He nails another lion on the run, then another from behind a tree, but then a big one mauls him from behind, and the safari's over. When the kid turns, Russell can read the inscription on the front of his t-shirt:

If you love something
Let it go free
If it doesn't come back
Hunt it down and kill it
Russell heads for the metro. It's past eight when he gets home, and Arruzione's lights are on. Russell pours himself a Jack D, then comes down and knocks. Arruzione slaps him on the back again; Russell flops onto the sofa and Arruzione sits across from him.

"Hey," says Russell. "We've got to talk." He takes a long drink.

"What's the deal?" says Arruzione. "You look a little ragged."

"I've got to tell you something," says Russell. "I mean, I've got this thing I keep thinking about. It's like it's filling up my head." They are looking at one another, all this time, while Russell is talking. "You know that fight I was telling you about? The two guys in the alley? The one guy lying there, not moving?"

"Yeah?"

"Well...I think he was hurt pretty bad. Like, it turns out, he was stabbed."

"Stabbed? Really?"

"Yeah. And something else. You know how I told you about how I called the police?"

"Yeah?"

"Well, I...Arruzione, man, I've got to tell you. Like, I didn't get through to the police right away. I was real
busy then, with work and all, and I just didn't take the time right then to get through."

When he says this, Arruzione's eyes flicker to the side for the first time. They don't move far, maybe only to Russell's right ear, but it's enough.

They talk on for a while and Russell tries to soften it as much as possible. Arruzione slaps Russell on the back, tells him it was really okay, what the hell, a little delay probably didn't matter much anyway. And he did call the police--that's what really mattered, right? Yes, Arruzione says that too. After a while Russell goes up to bed.

He stares at the ceiling, thinking, What have I done? I've worked, he thinks. That's important, isn't it? That DOL project means jobs for two thousand people, maybe tens of thousands if they can do it right and get it fully funded. That really matters for something, right? A man, lying in the alley. Maurice. Rubbed him out. That snot-nosed kid, and his shrug. It's hopeless to try again to reconstruct the exact details of what he saw, but by now he's convinced of the worst. He saw it all, he knew the guy was badly hurt, half-dead, even at the first moment. He saw a guy get stabbed, and what did he do? He walked off to a meeting. If he, Russell, had gotten up at that moment, run down and administered first aid, then he would have saved a
man's life. But he didn't. It's all over for Maurice, but for him, Russell?

In bed, he turns to look at the bookcases, and the photos on top. The tall rectangular one is of his parents, on the front steps of their house. Rose Avenue, Ann Arbor, Michigan. What if his parents were sitting in their back den, or at his Dad's office, and they looked out the window and saw a guy beat up, lying in an alley? What would his Dad do? What would his Mother do? He knows the answers to both questions. And he also knows, for the same reasons, that he'll never file an official report and never tell anyone what he has seen, and what he has done. It's all his.

Friday in the office there's not much to do. The DOL proposal is proofed, finished, and delivered by noon. In the afternoon there's an office party to celebrate: Joel calls the Cafe de Paris and orders a platter of brie, foie gras, bottles of Beaujolais. Russell picks at the food, gulps the wine. Branson tells a lot of loud and dumb jokes; Joel talks about getting the offices remodeled. By five o'clock everyone's gone.

Russell's the last one out. He walks over to The Alamo, on M Street, sits at the bar and orders a double Jack D, straight up. How's the saying go? Whiskey, then wine:
mighty fine. Wine, then whiskey: mighty risky. He belts it down and orders another. After that, he goes out and walks.

He wanders around for a time, although he couldn't have said if it was a long time or a short time. A Friday night, in November. He should call Susan, but he couldn't stand it, not now. Lots of people are out, all along M Street. He watches them pass. He stops in another bar, somewhere, for another drink, then wanders on. He thinks again about how it all happened: the pure chance of it. Hundreds of office windows in his building, but only those seven--two twenty-six through eight twenty-six--could have seen it. If he'd been in another office then. Early on a Saturday--if he hadn't had to work then. If he'd just come to work fifteen minutes later, missed a couple of lights on the way in. When it'd happened, he'd been checking a column of coefficients. What if the column had been two coefficients longer, or two shorter? He'd have looked out the window at a different instant, and never have seen what he did. And what if there hadn't been that conference call, right at that precise moment? What if he hadn't been put on hold? What if there'd been a secretary in the office then,
anybody, just so he could have turned it over to somebody else? But no, it all came down to him.

With a such confluence of improbabilities, it seems like it was fated to happen, like there's some mechanism to the whole thing that's beyond his control, perhaps even his comprehension. As he walks along M Street again, he begins to feel that he is on the verge of some important understanding. What will happen? He catches his reflection in the glass store-fronts: an ordinary man in a sportcoat, still a youngish man, walking. What is this man going to do? He steels himself to become observant, to catch every nuance around him, every sign or symbol that might come to him, feeling that somehow, he will discover the right one, and then he will know what to do. Then the whole affair will be rounded off, complete. Maurice. Two twenty-six to eight twenty-six. Rubbed him out. It all means something, doesn't it? He walks into the Bronze Star.

He goes to Pole Position and slips in the first quarter. He drives a couple of games at a leisurely pace, enjoying the pure simplicity of it—the tight control, the speed, the hairpin turns, the fiery crashes. The car, always perfectly reconstituting itself, whole again every time. He goes to the change machine for more quarters, and keeps playing.
Game after game passes, he's no idea how many. He stares into the screen, concentrating, knowing that he's on the verge, the very edge, of some discovery. Maurice. He stab him. The night rolls on, it's very late now, he knows. Friday night, Saturday morning. It's been almost a week since it happened. Two twenty-six to eight twenty-six. You'd have done something, right? If it doesn't come back, hunt it down and kill it.

He crashes again, a three-car pileup in a straightaway, and when he dips into his pocket, there are no more quarters. He straightens up and feels, abruptly, how light-headed he is. Fresh air, that's what he needs. He heads for the back door, walks through, and out to the alley. He breathes in the cool air, and then he notices a kid to his left with his back to him, smoking a cigarette. It's that same kid again, the first one, the runny-nosed one who'd said "Maurice." Maurice the dickhead. The kid is tall and thin, and now he's wearing a Redskins jacket.

This is it, Russell knows, the one final confluence of events, the true and perfect ending. Without feeling the need to think or be nervous, utterly calm in his certainty, he picks up a loose brick by the far wall, and advances. Two steps, three—like the race-car, edging up to pass. Maurice. Rubbed him out. One more step, then he strides
forward and with his right arm brings the brick down viciously into the kid's left temple. The kid collapses immediately to his knees with a muttered "unhh," turns slightly toward Russell, and falls on his side, blood spurting from a split along his hairline.

Russell is ready to hit him again, but at the sight of that blood he just stands there, watching it flow. Blood in the alley. Blood has spurted onto his pants' leg, and onto his right hand, too. He feels the pavement underfoot, the rough brick in his hand, the cool night air, all with a peculiar, heightened clarity, as though he has never felt such things before. He drops the brick, turns, then starts to run. Past the rain-filled potholes, the slick asphalt by the garbage cans, he runs for Nineteenth Street, and when he looks up, he sees it: Two twenty-six through eight twenty-six. The smooth dark glass of the windows, the flawless concrete gleaming white above the street lamps.

He runs.
My Mother is Blind

Leonard Bowman sits alone in the Hilton bar, by the window, sipping a Heineken. With his recent success he feels breezily self-confident, and full of an innocent sort of wonder. The bar is empty, no one to talk to, and he gazes out the window at downtown Lusaka, twelve floors below. There is a single strip of modern buildings along the main street: hotels, banks, and offices flanked by wide sidewalks. Beyond there's the airport, the railway station, and the presidential palace squatting among the thick mimosas. The rest of the city is vague and low, a jumble of rooftops and squat, bushy trees. A highway and a railroad go loping off to a stark horizon. All around lies the flawless savannah, dusty brown with the green acacias flat and round as coins. All around. From here the city appears spectacularly vulnerable and small in that immensity of
land and sky. Bowman is on the top floor of the tallest building in the country.

He has never been here before, and it is unlikely, he thinks, that he'll ever return. He is a vice-president for project planning with Weyerhauser, and he has just finished four days of meetings and is very pleased with himself. All the papers are signed for a project that's been on the books for a year now: a new pulp mill near the river, southwest of here. It was his idea, his initiative, and it's going to be a big winner.

This is the part of the job that he loves: you begin with a clean slate, you create the elements you need, you set them in place. There have been problems, of course. Labor contracts to negotiate; an all-weather road to build; option rights on the forest; bonding and currency exchange requirements. But he's worked them all out, and that's what he thrives on: that heady sense of pure control. Once construction has started, Administration takes over--they can deal with the messy, day-to-day hassles. No, he's a big picture man himself--a planner. There's a certain pristine nature to it--everything is clear and resolvable.

Bowman finishes his Heineken. He feels expansive here, on top of the city, and would like to talk, but the bar is empty. There is only the bartender, over behind the bar, and Bowman turns and speaks to him. "Pretty slow today,
huh? Not much business." But the bartender only shakes his head. "Slow today," he says. "Very slow today." Bowman stares through the glass again: presidential palace, main street, airport. All else is too muddled to see, a random chaos of trees and tiny metal rooftops. He gets up and walks out of the bar to the elevator, down through the lobby, out.

Outside the Hilton, the midafternoon heat presses down on him. He stands for a moment, sinking in it, feeling it press down on him. In a way, it's a pleasant feeling, for it reminds him of southern Georgia and his childhood. He could take it back then, of course. He was a wild, rangy kid, and he never even thought about the heat or the dirt. No way to cool off anyway--his folks never had any money, but it didn't bother him back then because he didn't know anything else. It pleases him that now, nearing forty, he can still take it, that he knows what it is. He pushes himself forward down the sloping curve of the asphalt driveway, past the two gray-uniformed guards who stand all day at the sidewalk entrance. Across the street, along the sidewalk.

The main street is neat, pleasant, familiar. A row of Mercedes taxis waits in front of the Hilton. He passes a souvenir shop, which he's already visited, a restaurant, a book store. Two businessmen walk by him, and then a pack of
schoolchildren. He feels almost as much at home here as in Seattle, or Manhattan, and indeed, that's how it's been the whole four days. He's spent much of that time meeting with local officials: cabinet ministers, bankers, two union leaders. They are serious, capable men--men he can deal with easily. All of them experienced, well-travelled, well-educated; a couple have degrees from Oxford. Indeed, Bowman feels sometimes sheepish among them, with his own still-sharp Georgia drawl. He's interviewed and hired some local people as well, including a construction foreman named Peter Dada, who holds a Master's from Georgia Tech. They're having dinner together tonight at six; Bowman's plane leaves at nine.

He still feels that expansiveness of earlier, and is full of a wonder that is almost childlike. He's seen the main street, and now he would like to see the rest, that jumble of trees and rooftops visible from the bar. The rest of the city is new and unknown to him, and he will never be back here again. He wants only to wander, to see houses, families, people living. Humanity. Culture. In the few hours remaining he would like to see it all, to be able to say: yes, I have seen it, I know it. He turns down a side street into a grove of mimosas.

The red and pink mimosa blossoms lie strewn across the black asphalt. The shade is dense and pleasant. He passes
a bank, an office building, then an embassy. There is an unfamiliar flag--black, red, and green--hanging exhausted over the door. Small birds are twittering in the thick leaves near his head, but when he turns to look he can never see them. He feels a sultry heat even in the shade, and thinks again of Georgia. He doesn't get back there much nowadays. His parents have been dead for a while and his brothers--well, no, there's nothing there anymore. No, he's put it all behind him now, and that's the way he wants it.

His parents and all three of his brothers were pure racists. All the white people were, back in little Ralston, Georgia, where he grew up; the blacks were all second-class citizens. He has to grimace when he thinks of how it would have been if his mother had been here now. "Lord, what a passel of niggers. Never seen so many niggers in one place." He can still hear her voice. Indeed, at times he thinks of this project as a sort of atonement for his family's racism. A way of saying that those things can be changed, that a person can change himself through a sheer act of will. And he is secretly pleased to be able to say "Yes, I pulled myself up, I was just an ignorant Georgia farm boy."

He walks on for a while, and then the larger buildings stop abruptly in a bank of high grass and trees that border a railroad track. The sidewalk ends; the road narrows and
turns to gravel. There is a ditch, choked with weeds, scraps of paper, rusted tin cans. He crosses the railroad track, and the trees thin out. A crow caws, nearby.

Ahead, there are narrow low buildings of wooden planks, stretching out in a curving line across a dusty field. The roofs of the stalls are corrugated tin sheets, held down by old tires, bits of stone, broken cinder blocks. It is quiet for now—he can hear the sound of his loafers scuffling over the sand and the dust. He walks closer, and sees more lines of stalls, meandering away in both directions. He sees a man asleep on a straw mat, a dog sprawled at his feet. A child, eating a stalk of sugar cane. Nearby, a stooped-over old woman turns and stares at him, but does not speak.

He walks down one of the narrow pathways between the stalls. Here there are more people, and a low hum of conversation, growing. It is all a sort of market area, he sees, reopening now after midday. He walks on. The first flimsy shops are loaded with fruits and vegetables: mangoes and oranges and thick stalks of stubby green bananas. A woman is lining up papayas in precise rows on a burlap cloth, and a man in a batik robe sets up a table made of packing crates. On every side there’s something different: a bag of purple onions, a skinny long string of garlic, cabbages piled up like cannonballs at a war monument. All spilling into the aisle—it’s barely possible for him to
pass through without stepping on something. Bowman tries to look as he walks, here, and over there, but it is too much and he slows. Many of the things he cannot recognize: strange fruits, new spices, dusty rootlike vegetables he has never seen. By one stall great round tomatoes are stacked in a series of precise pyramids, and their redness stuns him: a pure ripeness he hasn't seen in years.

He turns a corner, up another lane. Many more people now--one shouts to him as he passes, and then another. "White mon! Ripe melon here--you come look! Cheap cheap for you! Hey?" Two small children back away in terror when they catch sight of him, and then a scrawny dog sets up a howl. Farther along more people shout to him, the same loud slogans. As he passes by they switch into their busy private chatter, a riot of words like a new sort of music. Once, when he is quite near, a young woman turns and is startled into speechlessness by the sight of him. After seconds of silence she erupts into laughter, bending over, slapping her knees, a great nervous rush of release. All the others laugh too, and go on talking.

He wanders on, through the twisting maze. He knows he is lost but dismisses it easily, full of his own exhilaration and the quick sense of adventure he is feeling. He wants to see it all, to take it in, like a show. He sees a woman in a floppy dress and a turban stirring peanut
butter in a wide iron pot. Nearby is a table loaded with dried fish, and two slender men chanting in unison to the passing people. A runny-nosed child tugs at Bowman's arm and smiles, but when Bowman reaches down to pat him, the child squeals and runs. Once, he finds two men selling cooking oil. They funnel it out of their bulky tins and into the second-hand bottles their customers all bring. Old bottles, scrubbed out again, most with their labels still on: Beefeater Gin, Pepsi-Cola, Johnny Walker Scotch Whiskey. They fill up with the shiny liquid.

There is a smell—what is it? Wild and pungent, almost rancid, he can sense it growing stronger. And a noise too, a steady low hum. Suddenly, it is there. A row of long tables, people crowding in, bargaining. Meat. Slabs of red flesh heaped on the tables: thick slabs and stringy long slabs, ribs and bones and organs. The customers shout their prices, three butchers carve it up. The freshness, again, stuns him; the pure red flesh seems to throb.

The noise is the flies. Great, thick, rowdy flies, bottle green or iridescent blue—they crash into the meat, whirring and moaning. They are heat-crazed, lunatic; they divebomb the table and then peel away insanely, attacking people too in search of moisture. People swat, fan themselves with scraps of cardboard. Two of the flies screech into the sweat on Bowman's forehead, and he slaps
them away. He turns, and then another one swarms crazily against his right eyeball. He curses, jumps, strikes out wildly; the fly is gone and people nearby are laughing. An older man calls to him, "Hey white mon!," and then leaps into the air, doing a pantomime of that frantic reaction.

He moves slowly now, through the damp closeness of the people and the stalls. It is crowded and busy again, a jumble of bodies. People shout to him from all sides now, and wave. "White mon! You look here! Best price for you! Fresh-fresh!" He smiles and waves back sometimes—he is still watching it all with a wide-eyed fascination, like a child at a carnival. Women wrapped in billowing cottons brush by, squalling babies strapped to their backs. He sees an old man dozing on a mat, and a pack of children careens by him, chasing a yapping dog. Nearby, a slender young woman suckles her baby beneath a mimosa, while an older woman smokes a pipe and watches. It's a whirl of sensations, too much to take in, to grasp at once. He has wanted only to look, but that's impossible of course, for he is a sight himself. The people shouting, waving at him or twisting around to stare and smile. It seems like there's a sort of rhythm to the crowd itself, and he's caught up in it. The people brushing by, the movement all around, like a wave that he can't restrain.
He comes to a corner shaded by three ancient mimosas. It's packed with people--mostly young men, in long pants and sandals and floppy bright shirts. They are drinking from paper cartons, cracking jokes and howling in laughter, and the flirting girls come up close. Two men notice Bowman and call, "White mon, you drink some beer with us, hey?" and then there's a paper carton held out to him. He takes it and tries a sip, warm but wet anyway, and then takes another. People scatter past. One of the men is slapping him on the shoulder and chattering, while he drinks some more, standing there in the shade. And then, nearby, an older woman begins to dance. She hops about, twirling and spinning with a mad clumsiness, and the others clap and shout to her. Abruptly, she spots Bowman and reaches out for him, snagging an arm. She yanks him into the center with surprising strength, and they swing around together while the people nearby yell and whistle. He tries to get away, although strangely enough, he feels himself laughing at the same time. Strangest of all, the woman actually makes him think of his mother: the crazy, enthusiastic way she used to dance herself, at church socials, or picnics, or just for the hell out in the back yard on hot nights. The thought makes him laugh out loud, and the woman jerks him closer. They spin and dance crazily, colors and shapes fleeing past, and he is aware of all the people watching
him, in the middle. At last he frees himself, and heads for the side. He lurches through the crowd and collides with a bony man cradling a squawking chicken. Then, finally, he is through and into another aisle.

He feels relief at being away, but he's still in the center. People jostle against him and move on, back and forth, the warm bodies in a muddle all around. More people shouting, "You come look! We do business, hey?" All these people, so close! On him. The dust and the sweat and all the sharp ripe food smells. He stops for a moment and feels the heat gripping him, that swell of people all around.

He feels a sort of numb lethargy settling over him, but at the same time, a peculiar, not unpleasant sense of release. All this swirling mass, around him: the running kids, the little man dozing on the mat, that crazy dancing lady. He is a man who has learned to say: I will go on. I will control the situation. But now he feels a strange indecision, an odd but comfortable feeling of acceptance, as though, somehow, he's on the verge of some important revelation. His mind is wandering in the craziest way, to he and his brothers scuffling in their back yard, helping his mother chop weeds in the garden, sleeping summer evenings on the porch, the smell of damp earth and sweat and fried food. The strangest thing--he would love to sleep right now, to just give in. It would be so easy--curl up on
one of those mats beneath the mimosas, the warm bodies all around. Drifting along into the cool night. So easy.

No! No! For the first time he feels shaken. He looks around and realizes again that he is lost in the middle, but this time it frightens him. He pushes himself forward, down the aisle. Get out of here, he is thinking. Out of this heat, this crowd. All these people, so close. He comes to a corner, turns right, then left again. Sun in the west, main street must be there. Or there? He turns right again, past the stalls and the piled up fruits. The people, staring.

He finds himself, abruptly, in an open area framed by two mimosas. An older woman is sprawled in the dust by the nearest tree, and when he looks closer he sees: she is a cripple. Both legs are gone--she waves a bony hand at him and mouths some words. But he's already looking away. There are five aisles; no, six--all sprinting off from the circle. He picks one to the left and goes for it, past the blur of her body and the reaching fingers. He must get out, he must.

He is in a narrow deserted lane between the back-ends of some stalls. All the garbage is thrown here--orange peels and bananas and white little bones; straw and sucked-out mango pits, scraps of paper and crates and bags. A dog is poking through it, and he looks up and snarls.
Someone has set fire to it all—low smoldering flames and an acrid black smoke that rises straight up. Should he go on, or back? He hesitates. And then there is a man there, coming up behind him.

"Please, Mistah! Some shillings, hey?" The man is short but thick, in a ragged pair of green shorts. He runs up to Bowman and thrusts his arms up, pleading, and then Bowman can see. The man has no hands. "Please Mistah!" he says. "I have a family—you help me, okay?"

"No, no, I have to go." Bowman looks down at the man's face, and then at the arms reaching for him, the soft folds of flesh where the hands should have been.

"Please, white mon! No work for me, and my mother is blind." The arms grab at Bowman's wrist, squeezing at it like a pair of pincers. "Some shillings, please."

"No, let go now. I have to go." Bowman pulls at the wrist, and the burning black smoke is on them.

"Please! White mon!" Those handless arms, reaching.

"No, no, no." Bowman wrenches away and the man reaches out for him again, pleading. But Bowman is already running.

He can taste the fear in his mouth, running. Through the smoke and the ashes, wobbling and frantic, and his breath comes hard and hot. He feels the afternoon close and damp on his cheeks, and the smell of that smoke and the other man in his nostrils. He turns corners, careens down
passageways and they all look alike. The heat slashes. Another opening--two men are selling goats and a woman squats behind a charcoal bucket, grilling maize over the smokey flames. What is happening here? Where is the end? He does not answer when the curious people shout after him. Farther, he turns a corner and almost stumbles over a knot of old men. Seven, eight of them--crouching on stools and drinking from a single gourd. "White mon! You want marissa? You come drink with us!" He runs.

On and on. Suddenly there is a gravel road with a row of brick buildings opposite, behind some mimosas. Farther, a big jacaranda tree. Which way to go? He runs past the tree and down to his right. Past more buildings, shade of trees, and then there is the railroad track and an asphalt road. Abruptly, he is back on the main street. There is a parked Mercedes, two yellow taxis, a group of white tourists on the sidewalk. A man with a leather briefcase walks by. The Hilton is just beyond.

He is trembling, panting. His temples ache and his eyes blink and blink, stunned at the suddenness of it all. The people on the sidewalk pass by--they're in no hurry. He pulls back his hair and breathes deeply, twice. The guards at the Hilton smile and greet him. Quickly into the men's room, and then he is at the basin, washing. Soap and water and more soap, rubbing his hands. He splashes cold water
onto his face, twice, three times. He looks up into the mirror, and there he is. The same again, yes--the same. The eyes, the chin, the slender nose. Yes, yes. He dries himself, combs his hair, takes many deep breaths. Yes, it is all the same again.

He walks out into the lobby and the elevator returns him to the twelfth floor. In the bar, there is only the bartender. "Hot today, hey? Wat you drink mon?" Bowman takes his Heineken and sits by the window. In the chair he leans back, wipes his face again with the cloth napkin. Just relax now, he is thinking. Okay. He squeezes the mug, and it is cold and solid; the beer glides down his throat and fans out in his chest. What happened back there? What was it? Must have been sunstroke, he is thinking. Sunstroke, or fever or something. With the napkin he wipes the dust off his loafers. There must be an explanation. That crazy dancing lady and the beggar with no hands. All that dust, and that hot beer in the carton. Yes, he can explain it all. He breathes deeply again, many times. Soon the Heineken is gone. Goddamnit, that heat, incredible. They say white people can't take it. Sunstroke. That's all it was. Lucky I didn't pass out or something. Yeah.

He looks back through the glass, over the city. It is so very very quiet here in the bar. And cool. He looks again--the trees, the shiny tin roofs. The main street, the
presidential palace, the airport. It is all okay now. He has a plane to catch, after dinner. A plane at nine, dinner at six with Peter Dada. He straightens his tie again, and smooths back his hair. Yes, it is all okay now—he'll have a nice dinner with Peter Dada. He's a good man, thinks Bowman, smart as a whip and hardworking too. Pulled himself up from nothing, just the same way Bowman has, too. He's the future of the country really—a man who's looking ahead, a man with plans for himself. Yes, that's what it takes—you have to put the past behind you, pull yourself out and up.

Bowman is looking again, through the thick glass and over the city. He looks and looks, and then, down there in the distance, he sees it. The smoke. Yes, there it is, that smoke again, at the market. It hangs in a single black band above the trees and the mass of tiny rooftops. He is standing right at the window now, tinted glass that dampens the glare, and into his mind's eye comes the persistent clear image of dust and sweat and ashes and black skin, black skin that he has known forever. And there are his brothers too, and his father and mother, and he cannot for the moment push the image away. He stands at the window and looks, and he cannot stop.
Jos stands behind the bar at the Gouden Leeuw, carefully drying genever glasses, one by one. He whips his plaid tea-towel around the rim of each glass, and then tilts the glass up to the light, checking for smudges. It will be a slow Saturday, he knows. The bar is only a block up from the beach at Scheveningen, and they have a solid, middle-class clientele: Jos knows all of the regulars by first name. On most Saturdays they're packed in here, but on this Saturday it'll be calm because everybody's at the demonstration, downtown. Today there are only four customers, and they are all Americans.

"Hey, four Americans," says one of them, Cory. "How about it?" He's a regular--here every weekend, and a lot of weeknights too. Teaches high school algebra over at the American School.
"Got them outnumbered today," says Pearson. He's some kind of a political officer at the embassy. "Down here anyway."

"Great," says Marilyn. She's the only woman, and a regular too. "Anybody know where kids can go trick-or-treating in Holland?" She hauls her husband along every now and then, a lanky guy who only drinks coca-cola, but today she's alone.

"Probably nowhere," says Cory. "Halloween's not what it used to be."

"You know Lindsay's never been trick-or-treating?" says Marilyn. "Shit, my only kid and she'll never even have a real Halloween." What's she talking about—Halloween? Jos has never heard of it. He finishes the last genever glass, then slips the wet tea-towel over the drying rack and leans back against the counter.

"Not what it used to be at all," says Cory. "I hear that back home they're afraid to let kids go trick-or-treating anymore, afraid they'll get poisoned or knifed or something."

"Two days till Halloween," says Marilyn.

"Another tradition shot to hell," says Cory, and drains the last of his beer in a rush.

"Five till three," says Norman. He is the oldest of them all, just over fifty, an engineer with Shell. His
Dutch is very good, although Jos has never talked with him much. "It comes on at three, huh Jos?" Norman waves up at the TV.

"Yes, we are viewing on the television on three hours," says Jos. Even though he understands everything, his spoken English is a little shaky, he knows.

"Hey Jos," says Cory. "How about another round before it starts?"

Jos plugs in the TV cord, then gathers up the four glasses, pumps each one up and down over the wire glass brush, and taps the Heineken. He taps them all full, and then he sets them up in a row on the bar-top and sweeps off the caps of foam with a flat swabbing stick, like a croupier gathering in chips. The TV screen flickers to life.

The first fifteen minutes are a summary of all the traffic jams caused by the day's influx of peace demonstrators. Buses backed up to Leidenscham on the A4, and way out to Zoetermeer on the A12--must be ten kilometers at least. A helicopter hovers overhead, filming the chain of stalled vehicles, stretching off in a blur. On the ground, people abandon the buses, setting off on foot for the city center, laughing and waving placards. Taped footage shows trains leaving other stations in the early morning: Rotterdam, Haarlem, Utrecht--all converging on The Hague. The passengers crushed in together, leaning out the
windows, shouts condensing into fog in the frosty air. For an instant Jos feels a thrill of anticipation. What will happen? The whole country's in on this, either coming to The Hague or watching on TV, and he feels a certain pride too. He leans back on the counter again, and peers up at the screen.

Pearson crouches forward on his bar-stool, watching. He is first secretary for political affairs, and he should be at the embassy right now. The ambassador wanted a full staff on hand in case anything came up during the day, and he, Pearson, should be there. He told Jeanette, his wife, that he was going in, knowing all the time that he wasn't.

To tell the truth, he is scared. All those demonstrators make him jumpy. All those demonstrators right there by the embassy and all it takes is one lunatic to toss a brick through a window and then God knows what might happen. They've already had bricks through the window of the consulate in Amsterdam, and a couple of bomb threats in The Hague. They are expecting as many as half a million people today--in a crowd that size there must be at least a dozen lunatics, maybe even a hundred or so. The brick through the window, the crowd gathering, a few shouted slogans, another brick, a frenzy. Not likely, but still, it could happen--Teheran or Beirut or Islamabad all over again.
Pearson adjusts his glasses and cups his hands around the beer. Perhaps he's getting too old, he thinks, although he is only thirty-eight. He has another year to go in The Hague, then another two-year post, and then he'll be back in Washington. With any luck he can stay there. He's had enough of this travelling, two years here and two years there, a new language and a new system every time, always a crisis to handle. And now this. Half a million demonstrators.

If he can just make it through this day, he thinks, a quiet afternoon in a bar with three other Americans. They're not bad people; Cory and Marilyn don't understand the half of it--probably aren't much interested anyway. Norman's the unguided missile. When he gets worked up he can really go into orbit. If we can just have a calm, uneventful afternoon, thinks Pearson. No surprises on the TV, no detonations from Norman, just peace and quiet for once. That's all. Another crisis shuffled out of the way, another rough spot smoothed over and forgotten. He adjusts his glasses again, shoves the wire frames up onto his nose, and watches.

Over half a million people, says the announcer. Five hundred and fifty thousand, perhaps six hundred thousand; the largest public demonstration in the history of the Netherlands. The greatest peace demonstration of the year
in western Europe. The helicopter films the crowds, milling onto the Malieveld, along the Lange Voorhout by the embassy, through all the narrow streets where no cars are moving. It's a sunny day—that'll boost the crowd totals. On the other hand, thinks Pearson, maybe the sun will mellow everybody out. Maybe the whole thing will turn into a gigantic picnic: everybody having fun, nobody listening to the speeches. No frenzy, no lunatics, no trouble.

"Six hundred thousand in a country of fourteen million," says Cory. "That's over four percent." He swivels on his barstool and scratches his chin. "Back home, that'd be over nine million people. Catch that, willya? Nine million?"

"It'd never happen in the States," says Pearson. "No way. Not in Washington." Three more years, he thinks again. Just keep your socks pulled up for three more years, then it's back to D.C.

"They're pretty damned lucky there's no rain today," says Norman.

"Hey Jos," says Cory. "Another round."

A TV camera on the stage at the Malieveld sweeps across the crowd. Banners and placards and flags are thrust up from the crowded bodies, all flattened out on the screen. "Nuclear Weapons Out," "Away With Pershings and SS-20s," "Russia and America—Stop Your Madness," "Rid The World Of
Nuclear Weapons--Begin With The Netherlands." At this point it's all still a carnival, thinks Pearson. The speeches won't come until later.

"I hope a storm comes in from the North Sea," says Norman, "and pisses on all of them."

Pearson glances across at Norman's reflection in the mirror behind the bar, but he doesn't say anything. Just take it easy, he thinks. A couple more hours, and it's all over and forgotten.

"I hope it pisses on every last one of them," says Norman.

Norman rests his elbows on the bar and kneads his fingertips into his forehead, where his hairline is already sharply receding. He likes listening to the Dutch on the TV--he speaks the language almost fluently and enjoys the subtle pleasure of that extra bit of concentration needed to follow the TV announcer. It sets him apart from this crowd, although Pearson speaks it tolerably well too. What the hell is Pearson doing here today anyway, he wonders--today of all days. The guy annoys him on any day. Cory and Marilyn don't amount to much, but if he'd known Pearson would be here today, he might have stayed at home, even all alone.
Norman and his wife Evelyn chose their house in Kijkduin, right by the dunes, especially for Evelyn, thinking that living by the beach might ease some of her homesickness for Brooklyn. It doesn't seem to help much. Just last week she flew home again, her seventh trip back in the last four years. She always has a good excuse—problems with their son in law school, problems with her parents, or his parents, or sisters or brothers, or whatever. Well, family is number one, he has always said. Sure. Family is number one.

Before moving to The Hague, he has lived all of his life in Brooklyn, except for his first year. That first year. Born in Prague in 1936 and within the year most of the family had fled. Just a handful stayed behind—some of them too stubborn to leave, too set in their ways, or too certain that nothing would happen. Two of them, his father's uncle and his father's mother, died at Auschwitz. He thinks of it often, the sheer chance of it all: lives shattered, his life altered forever. It could happen again, and that's what infuriates him about the demonstrators: that blithe innocence. That failure to even realize that they could lose all that they have, everything. It has happened, but they all just ignore the possibility. He stares up at the screen again.
The TV cameras stay on the crowd, up from the train station and across the Malieveld. Half a million people lurching through the streets. The banners range from serious to silly, from childish to spiteful. "Disarm East, Disarm West--One Begins, And Then The Rest"; "Reagan: Take Your Missiles Back to the White House and Stick Them Up Your Ass." A group of amputees in wheel chairs rolls by with a single banner that proclaims only "Peace." Nearby, a small low sign stating "I'm For Peace Too" bobs in the crowd, strapped to the back of a nervous dachshund. Norman would like to grab and shake them all, tell them: Listen! You don't know the score! You don't know the half of it!

"Over half a million people," says Cory. "It makes you numb after a while."

"It makes me sad," says Norman. "Very sad."

"It's only the speeches that matter," says Pearson. "It won't amount to much. It can't."

"It makes me sad and angry." Norman leans forward, his elbows on the bar-top, and rests his head in his hands.

"Over half a million. Hey Jos!" Cory twirls his empty glass above the others.

He feels the anger growing already, a sort of formless rage, like a balloon in his head, expanding.
Jos gathers in all four glasses and fills them again. He moves with a certain relaxed ease behind the bar--never in a hurry, but getting it all done too, always on top of things. He owns a twenty percent interest in the bar, and hopes to buy more in a few years. For four years he and his wife Marieke have worked and saved, but now Marieke has stopped working because she is eight months pregnant.

For the last half-year he's worked on their little apartment in Schilderswijk, getting the baby's room ready. Fifteen centimeters of insulation all around, new walls of the best pine panelling, a double-glass window, a chest and a baby-bed. He learned woodworking from his father, and can make almost anything. Now that the room is ready, he is busy with the furnishings. No plastic toys for his child, none of that cheap rommel from the dime store--no, his child would have solid, home-made, wooden toys. Jos is carving them all himself.

First he'd carved a fire truck, a five-car railway train, and a sailboat, and then he'd built a dollhouse and carved a table and set of chairs. All of them are completed now, sanded and painted and lined up on the chest in the baby's room, waiting. Now he is going on to his greatest project, the most difficult of them all. He wants to carve a seagull.
When he was a child, his father had often taken him on Saturday mornings to the beach and dunes north of Scheveningen. It is one of his earliest distinct memories: the beach and the salt wind, the surf pounding, the seagulls darting and gliding above the dunes with a sort of graceful ease that seemed like it could never be touched. No matter what happened, the gulls were like one thing that could never be brought down, or dirtied.

The carved gull would hang from the ceiling, wings outstretched, gliding over the baby's bed. It must be solid and well-built—nothing flimsy—and yet it must not appear heavy or clumsy. It must not appear to be a toy at all. It must be graceful and fluid, delicate in motion, with a lovely slender head and curve of neck, fine wide wings, bold and sleek and pure. He could picture it in his mind. Now he must make it. He must make it so that the finished gull becomes far more than a block of wood, far more than a mere carving. It must breathe and throb, come to life. It would soar forever, above his child.

Jos pours himself a cup of coffee, then leans back again to watch the TV. The crowds are still shuffling through the streets, so many that thousands are waiting to begin when the head of the parade arrives back at the starting point.
"It's a signal of our weakness," says Norman. "A clear signal. The whole Western malaise."

"Well, don't make too much of it," says Pearson.

"The Russians are loving it," says Norman. "Every minute of it."

Jos half-listens to their comments—they hardly matter to him. He's only interested in what's happening on the screen, that great random energy of the event itself. The TV cameras wander through the crowd, stopping for a moment here and there, at something peculiar or bizarre. Crazy people! Jos lets out a snicker. There's a girl in a red patent-leather miniskirt holding a sign: "Rather a Russian in my bed, than a cruise missile in my garden." Her boyfriend grins and flashes a "V". A group of punkers stroll by, all in black leather, Mohawk haircuts and paperclip earrings. Their faces are painted a milky white, with barbed wire mouths and splintered eyes. A group of six line up in a row for the camera--each has "NO" painted on his forehead.

"Malaise. Defeat. Christ," says Norman. "It makes me sick to see it."

"It'll blow over," says Pearson. "A few weeks from now it'll be all forgotten."

"Hey Jos!" says Cory. "Another round, huh?"

Jos rinses all the glasses, then fills them again.
Cory is on his sixth beer. He watches the TV and listens off and on, although he can't follow much of the Dutch. Same problem as in Bern, where he taught before coming to The Hague. Even after four years there he could never carry on a decent conversation in French or German. At least almost all the Dutch speak English. In fact, that's one of the main problems in learning Dutch—as soon as he starts, everyone answers in English. What's the point in fumbling through "Mag ik een halve volkoren, alstublieft?" when the answer is always "Do you want it sliced or unsliced?"

But even in English he can't seem to make any friends. He's got this American crew in the bar: Pearson's okay, even if he is pretty stuffy sometimes. Norman's a grouchy old fart, but Cory still likes him all right. Seems like everybody Cory meets is already married, and with the Dutch—well, he just never seems to get anywhere. Same as in Bern. Thirty-two years old, five years in Europe, and he never seems to get anywhere. Why couldn't he meet somebody like Marilyn before she was married? Why the hell did Marilyn have to be married anyway?

Her husband Fred is a dippy sort of a guy. If he hadn't been working today, he probably would have spent his Saturday painting the shutters or waxing the car or something hopeless like that. Marilyn ought to dump him, he
thinks, she really ought to dump him. Ol' Marilyn is all right. Cory swirls his Heineken and takes a long gulp. He looks around at Marilyn, next to him, but she's locked onto the TV screen. He takes another gulp, and then goes back to watching.

The TV helicopter hovers above the Malieveld. Nothing but people—can't even see the grass anymore. Demonstrators are still coursing through the streets, splashing together onto the field, exhilarated, shouting. Up on the stage, a Dutch rock band is playing "Sweet Dreams Are Made Of This." The camera finds a series of men wearing plastic Ronald Reagan masks, their hair slicked back and their eyes round and bulging. One is dressed in a business suit, others as cowboys or soldiers or Indians waving rubber tomahawks. What a circus! For a moment Cory wishes he'd gone to the demonstration too, but no, on second thought, it's better here. Here he can drink, and besides, you can always see these things better on TV anyway. All the highlights, the Saturday afternoon game of the week, right on the tube.

Suddenly a column of soldiers is there in the midst of the parade, all in uniform with a banner rustling. What does it say? Cory squints at the Dutch letters, and pieces them together: "NATO Soldiers Against Nuclear Weapons."

"Hey, what's this?" says Pearson.

"Christ Almighty!" says Norman. "Can they do that?"
"What does the sign say?" asks Marilyn. Her Dutch is really bad, even worse than his own.

"Ssssssh!" says Pearson, and waves his hand. Cory leans over toward Marilyn, and whispers the slogan toward her ear.

One of the soldiers is speaking, and then they are chanting quickly in unison and then hooooopf!—all of them have fallen on the ground in a heap, all stretched out and silent. That's all there is.

"They ought to get the sack," says Norman. "Every last one of them." He slaps his hand on the bar-top and beer sloshes over the rim of his glass.

"Hey, watch it, don't waste good beer," says Cory, but Norman ignores him.

"Well, it's not so much," says Pearson. "No more than fifty of them I'd guess." He swallows the last of his Heineken and then twists his empty glass, very carefully, back and forth over the bar-top, like he's operating some precision instrument. Pearson and Norman both take it all so seriously, thinks Cory. As if they could do anything about it. The world's going down the tubes anyway, why worry? Better to just take it easy, and remember to duck when they call your number. No point getting into a lather.

"Hey, what's he saying?" asks Marilyn. On the stage, one of the speeches is beginning.
"Ssssssh now," says Pearson. "Listen." This time Cory can't help her--it's way over his head, he can't follow half of it. Instead, he finishes his Heineken, flips up his index finger, and shoves the empty glass over toward Jos.

Marilyn takes a drink and doesn't say anything. She glances over at Pearson but he is still locked to the TV screen. Why the hell isn't he working today? He's a first secretary and he's sitting on his ass knocking down Heinekens while Fred, just a visa officer, has to work the whole damned Saturday. That was just like Fred anyway--whenever there's work to be done, he somehow manages to be first in line.

Well, they couldn't have done much around the house today anyway. They live on the ground floor of an old rowhouse in the Trompstraat, right off the parade route. The place would be packed with demonstrators all afternoon--probably couldn't even get in and out of her own front door for all the people. If Fred had been free they could have gone away somewhere, but damned if she was going to sit alone at home all day. Lindsay had gone off to a scholmate's house; at least she had the bar.

She was tempted all along to go to the demonstration. A march for peace. No more weapons--no more war. There was a time--twelve, fifteen years ago--when she would have been
there, right up in the front row. Those were the days weren't they? Nineteen sixty-eight, sixty-nine. There was a feeling then like you belonged, like you had dreams and you could accomplish things, important things. Did she really feel that way back then, or is that just how she's remembered it? No, hell no, of course that's the way it was. So why didn't she go today? She'd waited and waited, tossing it back and forth, and then had finally just taken the street-car down to the bar. She knew some of the others would be here too.

The speeches go on, and they all sit there, watching. A row of speakers sits stiffly at the back edge of the stage--others come and go on the stairs at the end. Although she doesn't know the language, Marilyn has the feeling that she can understand parts of the speeches anyway. Most are short: some read and some memorized; some anxiously nervous, some angry or loud or falsely over-dramatic; some quietly eloquent. She studies all the faces on the screen: the eyes, the hair, the curve of chin. The flow of foreign words is like some surprising, yet pleasant music. Sometimes, strangely, she feels that she's on the verge of understanding it all, and yet she can't. After a while, it's only frustrating.

Cory flips up his finger and orders another beer. She watches Jos set up the Heineken and then wipe the bar-top
with his tea-towel, quick, short semi-circles over the glossy mahogany. When he's finished, he leans back against the counter again, only watching. Why didn't I go? thinks Marilyn. Why?

No one else comes into the bar--Jos doesn't expect anyone else now until evening. He leans there, watching the TV and listening, and watching the others now and then too. Pearson hangs on the edge of his stool, busy fingers shuttling back and forth from beer to glasses. Norman drums his fingers on the bar and stares at the screen, his brow knitting up tighter and tighter into a frown. After some speeches he gives a sudden tight release of breath, like steam escaping from an overheated radiator. Marilyn and Cory just watch, Cory swivelling on his barstool sometimes, as the speeches go on.

Abruptly, Princess Irene is at the podium.

"What?" says Norman. "She's really doing this?" Why not? thinks Jos.

"Who is she?" asks Cory. "A Princess or something? Yeah, no kidding?"

"She is being sister of the Queen." Jos tries to explain it to Cory and Marilyn. "Very nice lady, very clever." He taps his finger against his right temple.

"What are we doing?" says Princess Irene.
"A real Princess speaking," says Cory. "All right."

"Quiet now!" says Pearson. His hands are waving in the air.

"For centuries long we've been growing and learning," says the Princess, "and that means stumbling, arguing, making mistakes. But with these weapons we've made, we stand on the edge of the abyss—we can't make any more mistakes, because that will surely mean the destruction of our earth."

When she is finished, Jos stares at the screen for a long time. "Well, what did she say?" asks Marilyn. "C'mon, I want to know this time." But Jos doesn't turn—he just keeps watching.

"She said nothing at all of real significance," says Pearson. He takes a long slug of the Heineken and then wipes both his eyebrows. They'd heard at the embassy that she might speak, so it's no surprise. She's sort of a flake anyway, he thinks, and this speech was nothing. Pure fluff.

"She said we're gonna quit," says Norman. "Give up, roll over and play dead."

"She said nothing at all regarding policy," says Pearson. He looks at his hands, cupped around the sweating beer. "And anyway, she spoke as a private citizen. Not for the royal family."
"Can't somebody just translate her words?" says Marilyn. "Please?" Why can't they listen to her, goddamnit? She grips her beer and stares first at Pearson, then at Norman.

"She said the same things Neville Chamberlain said in 1939," says Norman. "Appeasement. Compromise. The whole Western world goes down the tubes."

"It's just a demonstration," says Pearson. "In the grand picture this is only a blip."

"Neville Chamberlain," says Norman. "Nineteen thirty-nine." Goddamnit it's the same thing again, he thinks, the world is full of cowards and simpletons. If they could just see that, if he could make them see that. "Decline, I'm telling you. Decline."

"Yeah, so what?" says Cory. "Decline is just a natural, scientific process." After all the beers he is feeling light and airy--he swivels back and forth on his barstool. "Rise and decline--all the great empires go through the same. Egypt, Greece, Rome, now it's our turn. It's just natural."

"Well there you have it," says Norman. "The Western sickness."

"Maybe it's the Arabs' turn now," says Cory. "The Arabs...."
"What we need is leadership. Where are our leaders?"
Norman feels his own voice spiralling up higher and higher.
"What the hell is our embassy doing about this?" He glares suddenly down the bar at Pearson.

"Oh, uh...." Pearson fumbles with his glasses, then grips the edge of the bar. "Well, we've always felt, you know, perhaps the demonstrators have a legitimate concern, but in the final analysis, well, it's a matter of political consensus, of keeping the alliance together."

"Legitimate concern hell!" says Norman. "You guys want to sit on your ass and do nothing. Sit on your ass like Neville Chamberlain."

"Well, I don't see what everybody's so excited about," says Marilyn "It's their country. I mean, they can have a little demonstration if they want."

"It's not a goddamned little demonstration," says Norman.

"I mean, I even demonstrated once," says Marilyn.
"Back when I was in college."

"Oh yeah?" says Cory. "No kidding?" He swivels on his stool again. "What'd you demonstrate against? Vietnam?"

"Yeah."

"Well there you have it," says Norman.

"I don't blame them for demonstrating," says Marilyn.
"I wish to hell I'd demonstrated too, instead of sitting
here all afternoon. Goddamnit, why didn't I?" She waves her arms suddenly upward, then stares into the mirror behind the bar.

"It's treason," says Norman, flailing once more at the screen. "First those soldiers, then the sister of the Queen. It's the end of the Western alliance, and what do we do? We sit on our asses." He stops flailing at the TV and flails at Pearson.

"No, no, no, it's not the end," says Pearson. "Just be calm. We have to manage this thing--you know, package it, make it containable." He takes a careful sip of his Heineken. "I mean, in a way, you could say that it's a measure of the strength of the alliance, that it can sustain such a demonstration and still remain viable." He stops abruptly, pleasantly surprised by the sound of his own words. Not bad, he thinks. Not bad at all. Maybe he can work that into a memo on Monday.

"The whole balance of power. NATO versus the Warsaw Pact." Norman turns on his stool and flails at Cory.

"Nineteen thirty-nine. Neville Chamberlain."

Cory ducks his head toward his glass, but it is empty. "It's all too complicated, man. The more I think about it, the more it gives me a headache. Huh Jos? Whaddya think?"

"I am not knowing the answers for these things."
"We've got to stay strong," says Norman. "The world's always changing."

Cory cracks his knuckles, then does a quick swivel. "That's why I love algebra, man. You got the square root of two, it's always the square root of two. Never changes. Doesn't matter if you're a Russian or an American, a Buddhist or a Baptist. The square root of two is always the square root of two--good 'ol one point four one four."

"Great, stick your head under the covers," says Norman. "Just ignore it all, while the free world collapses around you." He waves both hands in the air again, then brings one down hard, on the bar-top. "It's the end," he says. "We're rotting from the inside. Just like nineteen thirty-nine."

Cory flips up his finger and orders another Heineken. Norman's still ranting on, but at least the others are quiet for now. Jos sets up the beer and Cory takes a quick sip, then glances over at Marilyn, but she's looking straight ahead. He tries for a bank shot in the mirror, but it's no good, she doesn't see him. A long slug of beer, and then another, and it's almost gone. Another Saturday into the books. Cory squints up at the screen, and lets the last blur of speeches wash over him.

Pearson watches the final commentaries on the TV, thinking, let it be over. If this is all there is, then we
can contain it, we can come through it. No reports on violence yet, and the speeches are all calm. He wishes Norman would shut up, but even that's got to end sometime. It's all got to end sometime.

Marilyn watches Norman's face—the tiny white lips and the clenched jaw, the right eyebrow arched up in an upside-down V, and the eye bulging dangerously, white all around the iris. If he turns it up one more notch, she thinks, that eyeball's gonna pop right off his face, like a button off a too-tight overcoat. She wonders, for a moment, what she could say to push him over the edge, but then they are all speaking again.

"These fucking idiots want to give it all away," says Norman. "They want to destroy our whole way of life."

"Well, there's really no need for hysteria," says Pearson.

"Yeah, let's all just calm down," says Cory. "The world's hopeless anyway."

"How the hell can you be calm about war?" says Norman.

"War, war, war," says Marilyn. "I've had it up to here with war!"

"They are the ones who are going to give us a war," says Norman. He waves up at the screen.
"We just have to preserve the alliance," says Pearson. "To maintain the balance, to...."

"I just want my child to live in peace!" says Marilyn. "These people won't let you have peace!" says Norman. "No way!"

"Yes, but the alliance...."

"Please!" says Cory. "Why don't we talk about something else, about baseball, or...."

"Nineteen thirty-nine!" says Norman. "Neville Chamberlain!"

"We can contain it!" says Pearson.

"Mahatma Gandhi!" says Marilyn. "Martin Luther King!"

"These are the people who gave in to Hitler!" says Norman. "Now they want to give in again!"

"It'll blow over! It will!"

"Just peace!"

"These people caused Auschwitz!"

After that, no one speaks for a long time. Pearson sits with his hands cupped around the sides of his eyes, like blinders on a racehorse. He hears the Hudson clock ticking on the side wall, Jos stacking some glasses. Cory swivels once, then stops. "It was an unforgettable day in Dutch history," says the TV announcer. Most of the demonstrators are heading for home.
It's over now, Pearson is thinking. All over—finished. No frenzy, no violence, no radical groundswells, no crisis. With everything finished, he feels a sort of emptiness settle over him, like he doesn't know what to do next. It's all over—no crisis. That's all it came down to, he realizes—everything reduced to two basic outcomes: crisis, or avoidance of crisis. On the screen, there's a replay of some of the crazier demonstrators: punkers, people in wild costumes. Then there's a clown wrapped up in a Peace flag, surrounded by children. The clown dances and whirls, skips down the street tossing candy and gumsticks from his pocket, and all the children shriek and run after him, breathless with laughter.

For some reason this scene, the clown and the gleeful children, fills Pearson with an indescribable sadness. The longer he watches, the sadder and the emptier he feels. And at this moment he begins to realize, however murky, what his life has come to. Avoiding a crisis is a good thing, it had to be a good thing, of this he is certain. But he has lost something too, something that image of the clown and the laughing children represents. He has only tried to do the right thing, to do something good—how could it come to this? Abruptly, he decides that he'll go in to the embassy now. Traffic will be hopeless—no way to drive, but he should be able to get through by street car. Maybe there
will be something to do--phone calls, letters, reports to
draft, anything at all. Maybe there will be something.

Norman is still gazing at the screen, but he's no
longer paying attention. He's done it again. Blown his
top, lost control, said those things that should've never
been said, just like he's done dozens of times before.
Hundreds of times before, and just like he knows he'll do,
without ceasing, for the rest of his life. It is a part of
him like a flesh wound that, even as he watches it heal, he
cannot stop from obsessively clawing open once again. He
feels very cold and distant, and he would like to come
closer to the others, to the living, if only for a moment.
He sits on the stool, elbows on the bar, his fingers
kneading his forehead, over and over without stopping.

"Hey," says Cory, after a while. "We oughtta all shake
hands and make up. Stick together. After all, we're all
Americans, right?"

"Right," says Pearson. "All Americans."

"America," says Norman. "God Shed His Grace on Thee."
He sucks down the last of his Heineken and shoves the empty
glass away.

"Damned right," says Cory. "Red, white, and blue. The
Stars and Stripes. The Liberty Bell." He swivels twice,
then hiccups.
"I'm going home," says Marilyn.

"I'll be leaving too," says Pearson. He pulls out his wallet, then flattens a fifty guilder note on the bar-top.

But then Norman whips a hundred guilder note out of his own pocket and pushes it toward Jos. "No," he says. "Here, let me pay."

"No, I've got it," says Pearson.

"No, really, I'd like to treat everybody. Please." Norman hands the bill to Jos and tells him to keep the change, an enormous tip, and then he steps down off the bar-stool and turns away, embarrassed and silent.

"You got any plans for tonight, Cory?" asks Marilyn.

"Nah, nothing special."

"Why don't you come over to our place for dinner then?"

"Yeah? You mean it?"

"Sure. Lindsay's over at a friend's house--she's due home at eight. God knows when Fred'll be home--he had to work today." She glares at Pearson for an instant. "I'll take some chicken out of the freezer and after dinner we can carve a jack-o-lantern with Lindsay. I bought a pumpkin at the market this morning."

"Hey, that's great! A real pumpkin, huh?"

"Crappiest pumpkin I ever saw, but at least it's orange and round."
"Sounds terrific," says Cory. "Let's tee off." He is already down off his bar-stool, standing.

They all head for the door together. When they are almost out, Pearson remembers Jos, and then the others join in. "Hey thanks, Jos. See ya' later, huh?"

"Goodbye," says Jos. "Good weekend, everybody."

They are all gone and it is quiet. The TV coverage is over. Jos wipes off the bar, washes the glasses, straightens up. He feels all right. Maybe more customers will come in later, but now it is still and peaceful again. He likes it fine. He goes off-duty at eight--he can have a late dinner with Marieke. Tomorrow he's free--if the weather's still nice, they can go up for a walk in the dunes, and along the beach. Beautiful there, and always so quiet. Always. He leans for a while with his back on the bar, resting, gazing out the window into the soft mauvish light of the day's end, thinking about the seagull.
The Path

"Stick to the path," the lieutenant tells us in the morning. "Stick to the path and nobody gets hurt." The day before, Billy Hatcher had stepped off the path to take a piss, tripped a landmine, and blown himself to pieces.

We're on another patrol, southwest of Quang Tri: five days out and back. I have exactly sixty-one days until discharge. The path is smooth and slick, about two feet wide, and we all stay carefully in the middle. Everything is wet. My uniform is soaked through, a warm clinging dampness except when something happens. A movement, a funny noise, and the dampness is suddenly cold--I'll have a chill
while I crouch, trying to stay low, until the lieutenant says, "Let's move."

About noon we come to a village that looks deserted, and the lieutenant says, "Check it out. We go by the book." There are twelve huts and we check each one. Twelve times moving up to a dark entry, twelve times that brief hesitation and then the barging in, twelve times that single shivering instant. They're all empty. "Let's move," says the lieutenant.

Back on the path, I concentrate on sixty-one days, repeating the number to myself like a mantra. But a picture keeps creeping into mind, and I can't shove it out: the picture of Billy Hatcher's left foot, still in his boot, lying in the bush off the path yesterday, after it had been blown off his leg. The boot was standing upright in the bush, and it was still laced up. No one else saw it, and I didn't say anything because I was too afraid. Afraid because the foot was off the path. The foot just stayed there, tangled up in the bush.

The lieutenant calls a break and we all sit down on the path. I keep thinking sixty-one, sixty-one, but the image of the foot is filling up my head. I kneel down, put my face close to the path, and feel the dampness on my back, growing cold again. I run my hand over the slick packed earth of the path. It is firm, solid: a smooth, empty
path. It feels good to touch. But then I see an ant on the path, near my hand. He is angular and spiky, and very quick; I reach out and crush him, feeling at the same time the chill on my back and in my folded-up legs. There is another ant behind the first one, and then several more behind that. They come out of the bush and march on the smooth path. I crush another one under my palm and then another, feeling a chill as I shiver, again and again, and I want to annihilate them all. I reach out after them with both arms but then the lieutenant is saying, "Let's move," and the others are standing.
Are You Praying?

Ike. That's where it all begins. General Dwight David Eisenhower: a glossy color photo on a 1948 calendar from the First National Bank of Covington, Tennessee. January through June, then you flipped it over and there was another color photo of the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C., July through December. The Jefferson Memorial and Ike, standing there in his olive-green uniform, straight as a fence-post, with the American flag waving in the background. It was a present from Daddy, the last one he ever gave me. He brought it home and said, "Here's something you can hang up on your wall, Martha. You go hang it up." I was seven years old.

We lived in the back end of a country store that was the only building for a couple of miles around. It was what they called a crossroads store: two country roads crossed and there on the corner was our store, all alone, nothing
around but cotton fields and pasture and pine hills sloping down toward the bluffs at the river. My brother and sisters and I rode the schoolbus to Covington, except on the days Daddy had to drive there. He drove all over Tipton County in his old Dodge pickup—Brighton, Randolph, halfway to Memphis—making deliveries and buying or trading for anything he could find. He knew everybody.

There wasn't much money in that store and he had to trade close to make anything. We carried a regular stock, but Daddy would trade in other stuff too. All kinds of stuff. Old tractor parts, second-hand clothes, used tires or hubcaps, snap beans or watermelons or okra. Swapping this for that, trading one piece of junk for another one next week. He'd spend half an hour squabbling over a bushel of butterbeans.

Daddy kept his army uniform in a plastic bag in the hall closet. He let me see it sometimes on Sunday afternoons, and once, I remember, he even put it on. Mother and the other kids were gone somewhere, and Daddy put on his uniform and took me up in his lap and told me about Europe, and about driving a jeep, and about Eisenhower. He had seen Eisenhower twice: once from a distance, in a jeep, and the other time from up close when Eisenhower had stopped to shake hands with some soldiers. He shook hands with Daddy too. Daddy's uniform was the same fuzzy olive green that
Eisenhower's was in the photo on my bank calendar. Eisenhower had a row of medals and stripes that covered half his chest. Daddy had two medals: one for service, and one for when he broke his arm in a jeep accident. He showed me a photo of him receiving the service medal in a ceremony.

There were other photos too--blurry black-and-whites of Daddy and other men standing by a jeep or standing by a truck or just standing. My favorite was one of Daddy and some other men walking along this real narrow street, somewhere over in Europe. The buildings were all close together and tall and the street was real narrow, and it was made of big stones--cobblestones, Daddy called them. Not gravel, or asphalt, or concrete, no--cobblestones. This narrow cobblestone street somewhere over in Europe and the soldiers walking down it and Daddy was in front, grinning and holding a little American flag.

He held me in his lap that afternoon and showed me those photos for the first time. "Those were good years," he said. "The best years." He shuffled through the photos again, and then he put them back into his uniform pocket, where he kept them. "It was like I was part of something that was bigger than me, bigger than any of us," he said. "Something that you know is bigger than anything else you'll ever do." I sat there in his lap while the light faded through the screen door, feeling the stiff and scratchy
green uniform on my legs and arms, and the thick gold buttons and the two medals on his chest. "The biggest thing I'll ever do," he said.

That November he died. It was a rainy night, and cold, and he skidded through a curve and down an embankment in that old Dodge pickup. Mother kept the store running, but that's about all you could say. Hadn't been much of a store in the first place, and now it went downhill in a hurry. One day when we were all at school, Mother threw away Daddy's uniform, and all the photos, too. When I asked her about them she said that keeping all those old things was morbid. "We got to make a fresh start," she said. "Forget about old things."

I still had my calendar though. General Dwight David Eisenhower and the Jefferson Memorial. After the year was over, I cut out the pictures, and tacked them up on my wall, by my bed. It was the last thing that Daddy ever gave me, and so it was like those two pictures were my last link to him, a way of holding on to him. Nobody could take them away.

The next spring Mother's sister, Aunt Luanne, came up from Munford to live with us. She was a skinny, nervous woman, with curled-up hair and little black eyes. She helped out in the store and cooked the meals, and she tried
to mother all of us kids. When mother had had all she could take, and was slumped down in a chair somewhere, Aunt Luanne would still be running around, trying to keep the store going or trying to get some sort of meal on the table. She tried to keep all of us kids under control too, and we all had to help out in the store now. The others didn't seem to mind, but for me that store started to feel like a prison, like a place where I couldn't get my breath, and I longed to get away. There was just the store, and the bare cotton fields all around, and mother always worn-out, and Aunt Luanne always hanging over me.

One time when she was trying to hug me and I was trying to squirm away, Aunt Luanne said, "You're just Mama's little girl, ain't you? You're just like your Mama, just like her."

"No I'm not," I said, squirming free at last: "I'm not." I looked up into her tiny black eyes. "I'm like my Daddy."

"I'm going," he said. "Come on. Say yes. Say you'll go with me."

We were in Luvern's pickup on a Saturday night, parked on a farm road south of Burlison, and I knew that I was going to say yes. I was sixteen and he was nineteen, and he
was going down to Memphis to join the Marines on Monday morning.

"I'm not even finished with high school yet," I said. "I got two years still."

Luvern let out a short little hiss of breath, and swayed his head back and forth. "High school." He shook his head some more, and then smacked his palm against the top of the steering wheel. "What the hell is high school around this place? Huh?" He smacked the steering wheel three more times. "Tipton County's nothin' but rotten meat. Rotten. The buzzards ought to finish it off." Smack, smack on the steering wheel.

The crickets were whining in the grassy ditch by the road, that shrill sort of whine that goes up and down, up and down, like it could be pleasure or it could be pain. The pines pressed in close on the right and on the other side there was nothing but cotton, knee-high, and a moon that was not quite full.

"Mother," I said. Saying "Mother" and all the time knowing what was coming, knowing that both of us knew it. That we knew it so well that we wouldn't even have to say it all anymore.

"Your Mother," he said, still smacking that steering wheel. "You gonna wind up like your Mother? Scraping
nickels outta the dirt? Drinking Four Roses out of a tea cup?"

Mother still tried to hide it. Everyone knew and she knew that everyone knew, but she still tried to hide it and everyone let her try to hide it. It was like those cartoon characters that can just keep walking on air until the moment they notice that they've walked off a cliff. They never fall until they notice it. Mother drank out of a tea cup in the mornings and a coca-cola glass in the afternoons, all the time talking about "my tea," or "my coke." All the stumbling and bumping into things and forgetting—not even being able to talk plain English sometimes. And then sometimes she'd knock over her cup or her glass and you could smell it all over the store, and her saying "Oh Lord, I spilled my tea," and all of us nodding and looking away and hauling out the mop and the Mr. Clean.

"It's rotten meat," said Luvern. "I'm breakin' outta here. You got to break out too. I want to see something. Do something."

I thought about the long years rolling on out with Mother, and Aunt Luanne, and my brother and sisters, and the store, and that was all. Work and family, those hard, fast things that were always there, always clinging to you.

"I'm gonna have basic training and when that's over I'm coming back for you." Luvern stopped smacking the steering
wheel and held me, and I rested my head on his shoulder. "I want you, Martha," he said.

There was Luvern's hard shoulder and his arm across my back, and the cotton and the moaning crickets and the not-quite-full moon. That smell of early July, the wet earthy smell like something is going to happen.

I knew I would say yes but I was not saying it yet because I wanted to hold on to that yes for a little while longer. I thought about Daddy walking down that cobblestone street in Europe with his flag, and about General Eisenhower. I still had those calendar photos, Ike and the Jefferson Memorial tacked up on the wall by my bed. Ike was President now, in the papers everyday. Father's words, "something bigger than me, something that you know is bigger than anything else you'll ever do." Those were things that were different, that didn't cling to you. They were out there, and you had to reach for them. I knew that I was going to say yes, but I held on to it a little longer, with Luvern's arm around me and the darkness and all the vague promises and dreams and that yes that I held down inside, cradled there like my own treasure.

"We regret to inform you." You read those words and you know all that comes after them, like your mind just telescopes and takes in all of it with just those words, and
then when you go on and read the rest of the letter, the
details, it's like you're looking back from a distance on
something you've already known for a long time. "Staff
Sergeant Luvern Baylor." "In the line of duty." "Southwest
of DaNang, Republic of South Vietnam."

David was seven years old when we got the letter. He
hadn't seen his Daddy in over two years, but he said that he
could still remember him. We met the plane carrying the
coffin out at Andrews, and the next day they had the
ceremony at Arlington, where they buried him.

The Marine Corps takes care of their own--I'll say
that. Luvern had three medals, and they presented those
medals to David and me during the burial, and they gave us
the flag that was over the coffin, too. Later on we got
Luvern's uniform and all his other personal things. I
cleaned it all up and then I showed it to David and let him
touch it all, every last thing. And then I wrapped it up
real careful and put it all in the cedar chest, and I had
those medals mounted on a black velvet plaque that we could
hang up on the wall.

We got letters, too. Letters from buddies of Luvern,
men that had served with him. They told about how brave
Luvern was, what a good soldier he was, loyal and
hard-working. They told about things Luvern had done,
things he had taught other men, times they'd had together.
Whenever we got one of those letters I would sit down with David on the couch, and read it out loud for him. Then I would fold it back up and put it away with the others in the cedar chest.

One time we got a letter from a man who had served under Luvern for a while in Vietnam. This man was from Memphis, and he wrote that he and Luvern had talked a lot together about west Tennessee. About growing up and school and family. About high school football and duck hunting along the river, and about that special soft tint of green every spring when the first sprigs of cotton start poking up out of that dirt. About how they hated it sometimes and missed it sometimes. He asked in that letter if I thought I was going to move back there, now that Luvern was gone. I got letters from Mother and from Aunt Luanne asking the same thing. Not even asking if really, more like asking when.

We had lived up near Washington for eight years then. After Luvern's basic training we got sent to Quantico, and we lived there on the base for four years. When Luvern made sergeant we got us an apartment in Alexandria, and that was the only place we ever had. I used to go into Washington pretty often. I'd ride with other wives some days, but I liked it better to go alone, on the bus. When I was alone I would just walk along the Mall, past the monuments and the reflecting pool, along the Potomac by the cherry blossoms,
around the Tidal Basin and up to the Jefferson Memorial. It sure was prettier than it was on the calendar photo—I can tell you that. It was different every time I saw it. Cool and bluish on a cloudy day with the water gray and choppy, or warm and unbelievably white with the sun glinting off the dome. Soft and real pure at nights with the light just there and all around darkness, the reflection perfect on the dark water. It was a beautiful building but there was more to it than that. It gave me a real good feeling, just to look at it—a happy satisfied sort of a feeling, but full of hope and expectation too. Sometimes when I looked at it I would just start to smile, not knowing why really, just looking at it and feeling myself smiling.

After they buried Luvern, David and I would go back to visit his grave every few days. Arlington is a beautiful cemetery. That neat clipped grass and the white marble gravestones, row after row of marble gravestones, up the hillsides and across the valleys. Acres of white marble gravestones. One time, after we'd put some flowers on Luvern's grave, we walked up the hill to the old Custis Mansion at the top. We could see out across the cemetery, and in the distance the Potomac and downtown Washington—the monuments and the capitol and the Jefferson Memorial off to the right on the water. It was a sunny day, a little breezy, but warm.
I was thinking about those letters, from Mother, and Aunt Luanne, and that Marine from Memphis. We could go back to Tipton County, back to the store. I thought about Daddy—I was eight years old when he died, just a little older than David was now. I thought that Daddy might have liked to have been buried at Arlington, instead of Covington. I bet he would have. Buried in his old uniform from the hall closet, with the photos of Europe and his buddies in his jacket pocket. I thought about the years with Luvern, all our plans, the things we wanted together. I thought about David. I stood with my arm on his shoulder and I looked out across that cemetery and the river and city, and then I said "No." "No, I won't go back." I was still a young woman, I told myself. Not but twenty-six. I'd never had a real job and I didn't have a high school diploma, but I wasn't afraid of work, no. I felt strong. "No." I said "No" standing there with David on the hilltop, looking down over the river and the city, over the neat green hills filled with white marble gravestones.

Parquet floors are the worst. Regular hardwood floors you can sweep and vacuum and wax, and carpet—you can always get carpet to come clean, one way or another. But parquet floors—they have all those joints between the wood, and after a while those joints split and dirt gets down in
there, and it's hell to get out, let me tell you. You can try to vacuum it, but if it's anything sticky a vacuum cleaner won't do it. A stiff wire brush will get out just about anything, but a wire brush will scratch up a parquet floor. Doesn't scratch it up right away of course, but you use a wire brush over years and years, decades--then you start to get problems. The best thing I found was my own thumbnails.

Of course, if I didn't care about the scratches, I could've saved my thumbnails and used a wire brush. But like Hodges always said, those rooms were the showcase of America. Hodges was the night crew supervisor. He would come around every night, checking up on all of us, making sure everything got done. There was no cutting corners with Hodges, no easy way out, no. With Hodges it was a showcase and you had to do it right, because like he said, there was no telling who might be walking through there on the very next day, and we had to have it ready. I felt that way too--I was with him all the way.

After they buried Luvern, the Marine Corps helped me get on the night crew at the Pentagon. I was just happy to get something regular, but after a while I started to really like it. There was something peaceful about working at night. I could sleep some during the day when David was at school and then he and I had the afternoon and evenings
together. And then after a couple of years an opening came up on the Executive night crew, and I went for it. They started me out over in the Old Executive Office Building, cleaning the conference rooms on the fourth floor, and after a year they moved me over to the White House.

At first I just had to help out wherever they needed me, but then I got my own area, on the east end of the first floor: the Blue Room, with the parquet floors, the Green Room, the East Reception Room, and the Cross Hall and Entrance, where the portraits of former presidents hang.

I started there in September of 1970, but I didn't see the President until December. Every year there was a little Christmas reception for the night crew down in a conference room in the West Wing. All of us came a couple of hours early and brought something: fruit punch or eggnog or fruitcake or cookies. The First Lady dropped in for a few minutes, and some of the other staff, and each of us got a Presidential Christmas Card and a box of Russell Stover's candy. And then at some point somebody came in and said that it was time, and we all trooped down to the Oval Office to meet the President. We each walked by and shook his hand, and then we stood in a group and he thanked us for our work and wished us a good holiday, a good year. Then it was over, time to go to work.
I was surprised that first time at how small he was.

You know how it is when you've seen somebody like that in the newspaper or magazines, or on the TV. Smiling, waving down at a crowd, giving a big speech or something. I'd been seeing him for years, ever since Ike was President, and then I was shaking hands with him, and I was surprised. I shook hands and stood there listening to him: a middle-sized man with slouchy posture and a weak handshake. It was the place that impressed me: the room with the curving walls and thick curtains, the solid, heavy furniture, the flags, the stacks of papers on the side table--that edgy sense of big things always happening there. The room and the man: him sort of looking around at us while he said those few words and then smiling when he was finished in that way that we knew it was over, that it was time for us to leave. We had those get-togethers every Christmas, and that was the only time I saw him for four years.

The August that it happened was hot like every August in Washington, only it seemed worse because of the traffic. They were building the subway through downtown that year and half the streets were torn up. I took the bus in from Virginia then and even at night the traffic would be snarled, tied up for blocks sometimes, the bus just creeping along and the sweat beading up on you even at night. And there was a lot more traffic than usual that August because
everybody stayed in town. Usually Washington empties out in August--Congressmen go home for the month, workers take their vacations. But that August, with everything that was happening, nobody left town, and it was hot and crowded.

Of course we all knew that something might happen--with all that pressure building up on the President for months, something had to give. Anybody who read the papers could have told you that. I saw him first on a Monday night. Or a Tuesday morning I should say--about two in the morning. I was scrubbing the baseboards in the Blue Room when I heard the voice. It was coming from the Cross Hall where the Presidential portraits hang, and as soon as I heard it I knew that it wasn't somebody on the night crew.

It was him, I knew, even though he was too far away to make out what he was saying. When I heard that voice I sort of got this feeling like--I don't want to hear. I didn't go out of the room to look, I just stayed there scrubbing at the baseboards, thinking I don't want to hear, I don't want to hear, but still, at the same time, listening.

The voice didn't seem to come any closer--it sounded like he was way down at the far end of the Cross Hall. That voice--sometimes harsh and sort of shrill, way up high, and sometimes soft, almost still. Swooping up and down sometimes, like the nervous way that swallows fly at sunset. I could just make out words every now and then, snatches,
still scrubbing along the baseboard. My God, how long had it been? Must have been an hour I thought, then looking at my watch and it couldn't have been over ten minutes. Just snatches I could hear, single words, telling myself I don't want to hear, I don't want to hear, as I finally put down the cleaning rag and moved slowly, slowly toward the door to the Cross Hall.

I watched, peeking around the corner of the door, in the dark where he couldn't see me. He was down at the far end talking to one of the portraits, just like it was alive. Railing sometimes, with his arms jerking around wild-like, then quiet again with his head bowed, like he was pleading for something. I couldn't tell which portrait it was, down there at the far corner by the stairway, and I couldn't make out what he was saying. Except for one time. His voice rose to a sort of crescendo, almost a shriek, as he waved his fist up at the portrait and I could hear, clearly, "Goddamn you!"

Right after that he turned and I jumped back, afraid that he would see me. I heard the footsteps on the marble floor, coming closer at first, but then I could tell they were passing by. I looked out again and I could just barely make him out, through the west door of the Cross Hall, lit for an instant as he walked by a hall lamp, then lost in the darkness toward the other end of the first floor.
After a while I stepped out into the Cross Hall and walked down to the far end, where he had stood. The portrait he'd been talking to was Thomas Jefferson. You know that portrait, the one in the history books, the one your elementary school teacher shows you when she tells you about the founding fathers. Thomas Jefferson, in his bulky coat, looking down from the wall. "Goddamn you!" I already knew that he would come back again the next night.

I went home that morning and David and I sat down to breakfast and I thought I would tell him about it, but I didn't. I didn't want to tell Hodges or anyone on the night crew, because I was afraid that they would want to come by and watch too, and I didn't want that. So I thought I would tell David, but then I didn't. He was fifteen then, already big as his Daddy had been. He was just average in school, and pretty good at football; he played electric guitar in a rock and roll band. I was already starting to lose him.

One time I was telling him something about the President, and he just started to laugh, right out loud. I asked him what it was, and he said, "Aw, Mom. It doesn't mean anything." It was like, for him, the President was just a joke. The whole idea of even taking the President seriously was just a joke for him. And then I suddenly realized that he wasn't just laughing at the President, no. He was laughing at me. After I realized that it was like
there was something between us, something I didn't want to believe. Something I was afraid of believing, afraid of having to face.

So I didn't mention the President's night-walking to David, or to anyone else. I went into the bedroom that morning and tried to sleep, but I didn't do anything more than nap. Knowing, somehow, that he would be back again the next night. Picturing Thomas Jefferson staring down from the wall and that "Goddamn you!" circling in the air, while the President waved his arms. I thought about the times I shook hands with him, at the Christmas receptions. My Daddy shook hands with Eisenhower; I wondered if that was any different. David didn't laugh at the President--he laughed at me.

I even thought for a while about calling in sick for that night. But I didn't do it. I went in like any other night, watching the city slide past from the bus window. The river, the monuments, the office buildings with the lights still burning, precise little squares of light in the humid darkness. I checked in at the East gate with my ID, got my cart, went to work. I was in the Blue Room, cleaning those parquet floors, when I heard the voice.

It came from the east end of the Cross Hall again, faint at first, then louder. Swooping up and down like the
night before. I hesitated for a moment, then went to the door.

He was at the far end again, but on the other side this time, talking to another portrait. It went on for a while and then he turned, and I jumped back. I could hear the footsteps on the marble, faint at first, then coming closer and stopping. The voice again. I looked out and saw him on my side of the hall, talking to another one, about midway down. Franklin Roosevelt, I thought, or maybe Woodrow Wilson. I was afraid that he could see me, so I moved back, but I could still hear. "...not any different from the rest," "...always out to get you," "...did it too, all of you," and then again that "Goddamn you! Goddamn you!" I was backing up some more, thinking I don't want to hear and not able to stop listening.

The voice stopped abruptly this time and I heard the footsteps again, coming closer. I went down on my knees and started cleaning at the floor--I didn't want him to see me. Those footsteps closer and closer on the marble floor, and I knew he was coming for the door. Closer still, and I just put my head down and waited, and then the footsteps were on the parquet. Thin, crackling sorts of footsteps, after the heavy marble. I just kept my head down, and then I could see the toes of his shoes stopped in front of me. There was a silence before he spoke.
"Are you praying?" he asked.

"No sir," I said. "I have to clean this floor." I looked up at him, and he stood there with his arms at his sides and his eyes sort of wild, white all around the iris.

"You are a floor cleaner," he said. "That is your profession."

"I clean all this end, sir."

"Cleaning floors," he said, in a low mumble. He jammed both his hands into his pants' pockets and stared down at me in a funny way like he wasn't really seeing. His tie was in a mess, and he needed a shave. "I started out at the bottom, too," he said, so softly I could barely hear. "Right at the bottom, didn't have a thing. No money, no connections." He paused, staring. "But I had dreams!" he said, waving his arm suddenly up toward the ceiling. "I had dreams didn't I? Didn't I have dreams?"

"Yes, sir."

"I had dreams didn't I? Great dreams. I made it didn't I? I toured Europe. Went to China. Millions of people cheered me, all over the world." He stopped now, sunk again with his shoulders hunched in. "Goddamned sons-of-bitches." He stared down at me again. "And the others, you know they were no different, right? Right?" He lunged his head down closer to mine, pleading.
"Yes, sir," I said. "Right." I backed up a little and tried hard to swallow.

"The others were no different, no, they couldn't have been any different." He looked over my head now and back into the corners like he was searching again. "They were the same goddamnit, they must have been the same!" He looked back at me. "Come here," he said. "Come here, I'll show you," and started toward the door.

"The floor...."

"Come here," he said again, and I got up and followed him to the door.

He plunged on into the Cross Hall, waving his arms. "They were all the same weren't they? Didn't they do the same things?" He stared at me with his arms out, still pleading. "Huh? Didn't they?"

"The floor," I said, thinking I don't want to hear any more, no. "I've got to...."

"Goddamnit, they were all just like me!" he screamed. "They must have been just like me!"

I started to back up, thinking Where can I go? I have to get away. And then he stepped over to the portrait by the door, the one I knew. The portrait of Ike.

"Goddamn you, Ike, you were no different from me, you son-of-a-bitch! Goddamn you, you cold-assed, lying son-of-a-bitch!"
When I heard that it was just like something snapped. I ran toward him, feeling myself running toward him without knowing how I started, and I waved my hand now too, and shouted at him. "You can't say that! Don't you talk like that to him!"

He sort of jumped and turned around, real surprised, with those wide eyes wild as ever now, staring at me. And then he smiled. He didn't do anything else, just smiled, with those crazy eyes, and then he turned and walked away.

I stood there for a pretty long time, and then I walked across back into the Blue Room and looked out one of the windows on the south side. The lights were on at the Jefferson Memorial. Way over in the distance, but I could still see it. Harry Truman had a whole grove of trees chopped down so you could see the Jefferson Memorial from the White House. That cool marble, peaceful and still by the water.

I was a little shaky there for a minute, but then it was over and I felt a sort of emptiness, like I had turned a corner and couldn't go back. I might lose my job, but I wasn't thinking about that. I remembered the times I'd shaken hands with that man, the ordinary man in the big office. Daddy shook hands with Ike. "The biggest thing I'll ever do," Daddy said. Daddy waving a flag on a cobblestone street in Europe. Ike on a calendar photo.
"Dreams," the President had said. "I had dreams." I thought about the dreams I'd had, standing on that hilltop with David.

I was proud when I first came here. Down on my knees scrubbing—I didn't mind. I was proud to do my part, and then my own son laughed at me. David. Dwight David Eisenhower. Ike. I thought: I'm glad you are dead, Ike; dead and buried and away from us all, with only a portrait and a marble block left behind to protect you. All that's left is memories and dreams, those earthless vanishing things, and the marble protects it from all of us. Keeps it in place, and pure. Washington is a city of marble. Marble floors, marble buildings, marble monuments. Acres of marble gravestones on the clipped green lawns. That perfect white marble of the Jefferson Memorial, shining pure on the water. Marble, slick and flawless, cool as death.
On the train she could always escape, lose herself for a while among the nameless bodies. She could close her eyes and relax into the safety of that private darkness. On the train.

It was the PATH tubes now, four nights a week to Jersey City. The station there was right across from the Hilton, where she'd been singing, Wednesdays through Saturdays, for the last nine weeks. The Rainbow Lounge it was called; Meredith found her the job. Meredith, with his hang-dog eyes and out-of-breath voice, wheezing, "Sarah you won't believe it kid the find of the year perfect for you I mean PERFECT." Well, it wasn't bad. The crowd was usually okay, mostly conventioneers or business people in for a meeting. And the house band was really pretty good--all older guys who knew they'd never make it big, and just loved to play. It was okay. It was singing.
It seemed like she'd always known that she would be a singer. From the days in the choir in Thompson's Crossing, and all the other choirs, and the musty school auditoriums. The years of lessons with Miss Eliza Clark, and the Mississippi State Fair, three years in a row through high school. The family reunions and the summer evenings on the back porch, singing "Ten Thousand Miles," or "Wildwood Flower", with her mother sewing and her father reading the baseball scores. All those songs, "I Come to the Garden," and "Love Lifted Me," and the others; syrupy sentimental songs that you could shake your head and laugh about, but that people always asked you to sing because they were part of home, like something you knew deep down. Later there was the radio, and the records from the Holly Springs Library--Mahalia Jackson and Judy Garland and Ella Fitzgerald spinning out of her parents' clunky Magnavox. Singing along and dreaming, those teenage dreams of glamour and fame and being a singer. A singer. On the train, rocking through the tunnel under the Hudson, she closed her eyes and repeated the words to herself.

The train, brakes squealing, lurched to a stop at the Jersey City station. Sarah grabbed her bag, loped through the station and crossed to the Hilton. She changed into her Friday stage dress in the ladies room off the lobby. Eye shadow, a touch of powder--her skin was pale and she
smoothed on a soft layer of rouge. Then she pinned her blonde hair over her ears and combed it out long in the back, off her shoulders. When she was finished she went into the railroad bar, back of the lobby, waiting for show time. The guys from the band were already there--Eddie and Floyd and Rusty, all sipping Rheingolds and talking football.

"They'll never get to Jaworski, I'm tellin' you."

"They're gonna be tough through the middle, they got...."

"Okay, all right, four and a half. I'll take four and a half. Hey Sarah, how's it going?"

"Okay guys. Feel all right?"

Pete, the regular drummer, was out with a cold, they said. They'd lined up a replacement from the city, an old duffer named Sonny, with clicking teeth and a high wrinkled forehead. "Hey, let's have fun tonight," he was saying. "Let's have a ball." He was some kind of an official in the musicians' union.

Sarah had a ginger ale and watched the clock. The band went in for the first show at nine; they loosened up and then started in on "St. Louis Blues." Sarah could hear them from the bar, the bass and the drums thumping, Floyd skittering up and down on the piano, Eddie blowing his first solo on the tenor. All of them stretching it out, getting
comfortable. They'd run through "St. Louis Blues" twice, do a long lazy version of "Basin Street Blues," and then roll on into "Take the A Train," upbeat and tight. Then she was on.

She was always nervous, just before. Not sick-nervous or blank-out nervous or anything like that--just a tense nervous, a little quickening inside, sweat on the palms. She knew the show would be good, that people would like it. She could make them like it. But she never knew exactly how she would feel or how the show would all fit together, before she went out there. Sometimes it was just straight singing of a nice bunch of familiar tunes that sounded fine, and it was nothing hard to do. Sometimes when the band was really tight and playing well, she just coasted along with them and her voice was another instrument that rounded off the sharp edges of the music. Other times her voice was out front, pulling the band along behind her, making them play a little better maybe, making them come up and push her even more. And there were other times, not so often, but still, sometimes, when it all ran in together in a way that you couldn't understand. It was just there. Like your voice and the rhythm and the band and the songs were all part of one big thing, without borders, all mixed up and yet all together. That was what could happen sometimes, on the stage.
She wondered if the people out there listening could tell the difference. Maybe not. Maybe for them it was just five people up on a stage doing a pretty good job of playing some old jazz standards. She never knew exactly how it would go, and that finding out was the kick. Maybe, she thought, if nobody else could hear the difference, it was a kick that was only hers, a secret you couldn't share.

She could hear them finishing up "Basin Street," sliding through the last notes, slow and long. She walked out of the bar and around to the side door into the lounge. There was a wireless microphone that she used, waiting by the door. She always came in singing in the middle of "A Train," and walked through the audience up to the stage. They'd worked it out during her first week there--the guys liked it, the audience liked it, and Sarah liked it because she could get started in the middle and by the time she was up on the stage she was halfway through the vocals and all the jitters were gone.

Now they were into "A Train," playing it through straight once, Floyd doing a twelve-bar solo and then she was into it too, singing. Chairs scraping and turning, heads twisting--she strolled through the forest of tables, taking her time. Her voice was smooth and she felt fine. Then she was into the lights, up with the band and rolling
on through quickly to the end and the applause was all over them.

They started in right away on "That Old Feeling." Sarah weaved across the stage, edge to edge, prancing a little, getting loose and letting her voice fill out. She was feeling great. Later on they would slow it down with something quiet, a couple of ballads maybe, but she loved to start it off like this, straight-ahead and fast, all thumping bass and rhythm moving up with the music, "I saw you last night and got that ooooold feeling."

They followed up with "April in Paris" and then Floyd did introductions all around, and after that they eased into "Round Midnight." Sonny wasn't too bad on the drums, if you could keep from looking at him. He didn't look like a drummer at all--stuck his elbows way out to the sides and flicked at the drums like he was tossing a salad. The hard stage lights caromed off his big false teeth, and his high forehead was wrinkled as a week-old peach. Still he wasn't bad, and the others were playing fine.

They had a good first show and most people stayed around for the second, which got started at eleven. The applause was still strong and a few requests came up too, always a good sign. Sarah was working hard, sweating a little. She was out front tonight, carrying the band. You could never tell. Maybe it was Sonny, maybe the others were
a little too careful, playing it too fine. Anyway she
didn't mind. She got out front and stayed there, and the
music was all hers. The stage lights were on her and the
band all coming up from behind and out there was the flat
gray haze of cigarette smoke and the clink of glasses and
the pairs of eyes, looking up at her. They shimmered and
blinked in the dim light.

The second show ended just after one. Sarah changed
right away—jeans, boots, a suede jacket. She packed her
dress and shoes in her bag and headed for the station. The
train was half-full even at that hour. Passengers sat
slumped into the hard seats, dozing or staring away at
nothing. Sarah closed her eyes and leaned her head against
a window.

At Fourteenth Street the train shivered and lurched to
a stop. The doors clamored open, a rush of people in and
out, snatches of conversations. "C'mon, shitface," "We
ain't gonna find it here," "I tol' ya, Union Square..." A
bag lady sat down across the way, her shopping bags huddled
around her like children waiting to hear a good story. The
doors clanked shut. Sarah stayed on up to Times Square.
She usually met Mark at two, wherever he was
playing—tonight they were filling in at a Burger and Brew
on West Forty-Seventh.
She had started seeing Mark four years ago, when they were both students. She'd been a sophomore then, two years out of Thompson's Crossing, and he was a senior, a New Yorker, tall and dark, with slender girlish hands and long slick hair black as shoe-polish. Back then he'd played his guitar and sung in obscure, smokey coffeeshops and basement bars and in Washington Square on weekend afternoons. He would wear a leather jacket with the collar turned up, his head cocked at a lonesome angle, and those beautiful lithe fingers would skate over the strings while strangers dropped quarters in the guitar case yawning on the pavement.

Four years ago. Somehow things hadn't worked out as she'd imagined. Mark had never made it as a solo act, so he'd started a rock band two years ago. They weren't going to make it either, and they both knew it. The band played high school graduations, class reunions, weddings, bars or restaurants off and on. "We're the kings of double-knit rock," Mark would say, but it was never very funny. She'd passed Mark a long time ago, and she was still heading up. They both knew that too.

Sarah walked into the Burger and Brew and the band was way over in the corner playing "Light My Fire." They really weren't so bad, she thought. Mark picked a really good guitar solo, and his voice was pretty good too. It was just--well, she didn't really know. Maybe it was the sound
system, or the room that was too small for them. Or maybe it was Louis, their drummer, who usually was pretty wired by this time of the evening and had a tendency to overwhelm them all. Something just wasn't there.

Sarah sat at the bar and ordered a chef salad and a Schlitz. The place was half-empty—a few couples sprawled back in the corners, some others out on the dance floor, clowning around, drunk. After awhile it was over, and Mark found her.

"How did it go?" she asked.

"Shitty. I mean shitty with a capital S." He took a long pull of her Schlitz and finished it, and then he stood at the bar, hands on his hips, tapping his foot against her stool. "Let's get outta here."

They took the IRT down to Fourteenth Street, then walked up to Fifteenth Street. Sarah's building was a tenement in the middle of the block; they trudged up five flights of stairs to her apartment.

"You want a beer or anything?" she asked. "I could put on some music."

"No, I'm beat. Let's just go to bed."

They undressed in silence, and Sarah shivered in the damp darkness. The heat was off until morning, when it came rattling back through the pipes. They slipped between the sheets, clutching one another, Sarah on top but then Mark
rolling her over, kissing her neck and shoulders. He went on and on and she lay under him, waiting. Sometimes it was good and sometimes she faked it, and sometimes she just watched it happen. Mark pushing down on her, moaning in her ear, her fingers digging in his back. This time she watched it happen.

After a while Mark slept. Sarah peered out through the window, into the vague yellowish glow of the sodium lamps. Cars passed below. Shadows fled across her apartment ceiling. Mark's fingers lay spread out on the pillow beside her. How she used to love those fingers; she'd kiss them, take them in her mouth and suck each one, warm them at her breasts. She wanted to give them strength, to make them fly still higher and, at the same time, to capture some of their strength for herself, to warm herself in their glow. They lay still and flat, on the pillow. She rubbed her fingertips over them, and then her cheek, softly, and then again her hand, back and forth. She stroked them gently, over and over, as she would a child's.

They were awakened just before noon by the telephone. Sarah vaulted up in bed, ran into the kitchen to answer.

"Hello?"

"Hey sweets! How's my songbird today, huh?" It was Meredith.
"Hi Meredith, what's up?"

"Lots honey, lots. Your trusty agent's got a surprise."

"Yeah? What?"

"We're very close, I mean VERY CLOSE to a recording contract with Concord Jazz. Just a couple of things to work out still."

"Yeah? What things?"

"Just a couple of little things..."

"What things, Meredith? C'mon for Christsakes." It was still cold in the living room. Slivers of sunlight came in through the Venetian blinds.

"I just need to drop by your place sometime so we can talk this over sweets, how about Sunday? Is that rock and roll dropout still hangin' around all the time? Can you get rid of that creep for awhile?"

"Meredith, I..."

"I mean Sarah, you've got to learn how to tell the bacon from the rind--a little Southern metaphor for you there, like it?--and this clown's definitely rind, spell it R-I-N-D."

"Look Meredith, why don't you...."

"I'll come by on Sunday, all right?"

"Yeah, okay, all right."
"Oh, and tonight at the Hilton there's gonna be one Very Important Person there to catch your act. V-I-P. Give him a good one, he might just have an offer, okay?"

"Yeah? Who...."

"Just give him a good one, and I'll see ya' on Sunday, alright?"

"Yeah, okay, Meredith."

Sarah hung up and went back to the bedroom. Mark was already up and half-dressed.

"Who was that?" he asked.

"Meredith."

"What's that greasy twerp up to?"

"He wants to drop by tomorrow."

"He wants to get into your pants again."

"He says he's worked out a contract with Concord Jazz."

Mark was putting on his socks and when she said the word "contract" he hesitated, just for a second. It wasn't even a full second really, she thought, probably more like a tenth of a second, something you wouldn't have noticed if you hadn't been looking for it. It was just a flicker, and then he went on, trying to make up for that lost tenth-of-a-second, trying to cover it up. "No shit," he said. "That's all right." And then he was looking out the window. It was a sunny breezy day, and two children were
playing on the fire escape of the building across the street.

"Hey, how about some coffee and donuts?" said Sarah.

"No, I've gotta get moving," said Mark. "I've got an appointment at one."

"Yeah? Who?"

"Just some guy." He got up to leave and gave her a quick kiss. "So I'll see you around two tonight—okay?" He walked out and closed the door behind him.

Sarah put on a pair of jeans and a sweater, made a pot of coffee and poured herself a bowl of Total. She took out the box of donuts, half-expecting roaches, but she didn't see any. Maybe they'd already been there and gone, a hit-and-run. The little bastards went back and forth like guerrillas in a border war. She slipped out a donut and took a bite.

Meredith. "I just need to drop by your place sometime sweets." Meredith, with his Basset-hound eyes, sitting on the couch by her, edging closer. She had made two serious mistakes last year when Meredith became her agent. The first mistake was that she slept with him, just a single time, one lonely afternoon after she and Mark had argued. The second mistake was that she told Mark about it. It was funny, but she had thought that telling him might be a way of strengthening their relationship, like saying to Mark,
"look, we can have our rough times, but you're the one I'm really open to. It's you I come back to." But he hadn't taken it like that, and now he always held that one crummy afternoon over her. One afternoon when she felt lousy and alone, a half-hour of wrestling on the couch with clumsy Meredith, knees and elbows all in the wrong place. To tell the truth she could hardly remember it at all. But now it had a full life of its own, like a perpetual motion machine. Mark going off in a huff; Meredith a little closer on the couch. A little closer, an arm over her shoulder, saying the same things he'd said that afternoon last year. Saying those things that she could shrug or laugh about except that, when she looked at him, she knew that he believed them himself. "Sweetheart, you are really a special--I mean of all my people you are THE SPECIAL ONE, the one who's gonna make it. I mean that, seriously. Seriously. We're going places, huh sweets?"

Meredith and Mark.

She sat in the rocking chair in the living room, feet propped on the window sill, and gazed at the building across the street. The building was just like hers, an older tenement: six floors, eight apartments per floor, with an average of three persons per apartment, that was one hundred and forty-four people in the building. All of Thompson's
Crossing could fit into that one building, with two floors to spare.

When Sarah left for New York, Aunt Ruby had given her a going-away party. Almost everyone from Thompson's Crossing was there, as well as all of her relatives, from all over Mississippi. Aunt Ruby put up long tables in the backyard under the sycamore trees, and everybody set out whatever special dish they'd brought with them. There were two kinds of fruit punch, country fried ham and biscuits, Aunt Nell's okra gumbo, little cheese balls with rice krispies in the center, and chocolate marshmallow cupcakes. Aunt Lillian brought four boxes of her special party cookies. Each cookie was in the shape of a heart, and had a layer of pink frosting with a single red-hot in the middle.

They all sat together under the sycamores, eating and telling stories. Stories about aunts and uncles and grandparents and kids, stories that'd been told before but that nobody minded hearing again. Later that evening, after they had finished eating, Sarah sang all their requests. The gospels and the hymns and the old southern folk songs--"Love Lifted Me," and "Wildwood Flower," and "I Come to the Garden," and "Ten Thousand Miles." She had sung the same songs for as long as she could remember--the words had lost all their original meaning. Those songs were like something pure, something outside of time, like those
special recipes and the family stories. She sang them for the others, and all their eyes were on her.

After awhile Miss Eliza Clark stood up and said a few words about dreams coming true. Those were the very words she used. "We can be mighty proud tonight, cause some of Sarah's dreams are just startin' to come true." And then everyone was wishing her good luck in New York, and kissing her and saying goodbye, and it was over. Sarah stood on the porch and watched them go.

She gazed out her window at the dingy tenement. The kids were still out on the fire escape, running back and forth, laughing. One floor below two old ladies were leaning out their windows, jabbering back and forth. Those ladies were always there, every day, their cushions on the window sills, leaning out on their elbows, yakking and yakking. She wondered what they could talk about for so long. Maybe they were talking about her, she thought. They could see right into her apartment--maybe they were talking about the girl who always slept until noon.

Sarah got up and put on a Billie Holiday tape. Then she sat on the couch and flipped through a copy of the Village Voice. The kids went in from the fire escape--it was clouding up outside. Maybe Mark would phone later, she thought. "I've got an appointment at one." What appointment? Maybe he'd give her a call later. Billie was
singing "Strange Fruit." "Strange Fruit" had been banned on the radio back in Mississippi because the governor said that it provoked race riots. Before that, "Gloomy Sunday" had been banned on the radio because they said it caused widows to commit suicide. Sarah finished the Voice and looked back through the window. The old ladies had gone inside. Rain would come soon. Maybe Mark would call later, or maybe somebody else would call. She checked to make sure the phone was plugged in, you could never tell. Billie was singing "God Bless the Child." She'd written that one herself, after her mother refused to loan her twenty dollars. The music played on through the afternoon. Rain slanted down outside.

Later on she showered, ate a tuna sandwich and some yogurt, and packed her Saturday dress and shoes for the evening show. She set out for the station in the rain. The train was packed, standing room only, shoppers and families and rowdy kids out for a night. Sarah leaned on the standrail.

She was much too early at the Hilton. In the ladies room she took her time, smoothing her dress over her hips, lining her eyes. "A V-I-P there to catch your act." What V-I-P? Meredith and more of his nonsense. "Give him a good one, might just have an offer." Probably somebody from Concord. Or a club in the city maybe. Just maybe. She
turned at the mirror, left, and then right and around. Not bad. Damned good, in fact. Saturday night was the sexy-dress night, a long white silky number that was split up to her knees in front and swooped down low in back. What would Miss Eliza Clark say about this one? "Lord child, I just don't know. Lord, Lord." Sarah walked out and into the railroad bar.

The guys were already there, sitting in a row on the barstools.

"...and Carmichael. You seen that guy? Christ, he must be seven feet tall."

"Four and a half, Rusty. You ain't gettin' any more."

"Hey Sarah, how's it going kid?"

"Okay guys. Feeling alright?"

"Great, great."

She sat on a stool and drank a ginger ale, waiting. In a while they were on.

Pete, the regular drummer, was back in again and everybody was warm and playing fine. They started off with the regular numbers and then Sarah sang "I Ain't Got Nothin' But the Blues." Pete was laying it down smooth and neat and Rusty had the bass moaning right up behind her, and then the piano just slipped in softly from the other side, subtle, like a stranger with his arm suddenly around your shoulder. There was a big crowd there and they applauded like crazy,
and after that it just got better and better. Her voice was all there tonight and she was using every bit of it. All of it running in together, the music and the rhythm and her voice, pouring through her. When it was over, it seemed like a long long time since she hadn't been singing.

When they were leaving the stage after the first show, Bronson, the stage manager, told Sarah that somebody wanted to see her. He pointed to a hefty man in a light blue suit, sitting alone at a table by the side wall. She walked over and the man leaped up to greet her.

"Sarah, how're you? Doug Kessel here, with the Indigo Moon on West Fifty-Second. You heard of us?"

"Yes, yes, of course."

"Have a seat, have a seat."

She sat down and he pulled his chair close to hers. He was a short rock of a guy, with black hair that grew in a tangle of tight scribbles, close to his head. The hairs seemed to sprout up all over him—the tops of his fingers, out of his nostrils. His eyebrows were as thick as a boxwood hedge.

"Terrific show, great voice," he was saying, in a windy high tenor. He drummed his pudgy fingers on the table and then twirled his bourbon around in the glass. "Meredith and I were talking and he told me all about you. Super, really
super." And then his chair was edging closer and he lay his fingers across her forearm.

"You know, I'm always on the lookout for girls like you," he said, suddenly softer. "Girls with real talent." He took a quick slug of the bourbon and pulled his mouth back in a grimace. "How would you like to come sing for me? No big deal, just come by Tuesday night, sing four or five numbers and we'll see how it goes. If everybody's happy, then maybe we can work out something regular." He rubbed her arm with his forefinger, back and forth, like he was stroking a kitten.

"Why yes, of course; I'd love to."

"Great, terrific." He took another sip of the bourbon. "Just be there at seven, huh sweetheart?"

And then she was saying that was fine, just fine, and getting up to leave. She went back to the railroad bar, and sat for a while with a ginger ale. It happens just like that, she was thinking. A meeting, a couple of minutes at a table, another rung up the ladder. That's how it happens. That's all. A Tuesday night at the Indigo Moon, maybe weekends at the Indigo Moon. Fifty-Second street. Just like that.

The second show was easy and fun. She coasted through "Willow Weep for Me," and some Ellington, and then somebody requested "St. James Infirmary," and she got a big round of
applause. Then the show was over. She said goodnight to the guys, changed, stuffed her dress into her shoulder bag and walked over to the station. The train rattled in half-empty; she took a seat and closed her eyes. On the train.

Concord Jazz and the Indigo Moon. Fifty-second street. Meredith would have something to crow about. "Hey, I take care of you sweets--me and you, right?" Meredith, on the couch. And now this new guy, Kessel. "Meredith told me all about you...Always on the lookout for girls like you."

Okay, all right. It was Fifty-second street; it was Concord Jazz. She could phone her parents tomorrow. Maybe she'd call Miss Eliza Clark too. She could take Mark out for dinner. Mark. "Hey Mark, guess what? I've got a contract with Concord, and I'm singing at the Indigo Moon next week."

Yeah, terrific. It was all terrific.

She opened her eyes for a moment and looked around. The train was speeding on, through the dismal warehouses and refineries, into the tunnel. She felt empty somehow, and edgy, like she had forgotten something somewhere and she couldn't remember what. Mark and Meredith and Doug Kessel. Christ, why did that first show ever have to end? Those few minutes when all the pairs of eyes were on her. When her body was empty and all the music poured through.
She opened her eyes once again, and then she knew that she was not going to see Mark tonight. The train pulled into Fourteenth street station, and she got off.

She pushed through the turnstiles, running from the crashing filament of the station, upstairs into the night. There were taxis on the avenue, a few couples and kids on the sidewalks. Sarah passed Fourteenth street, passed Donegal's and the news stand, turned into Fifteenth street.

The block was quiet now, a tunnel of silence. A patchwork of lights shone in upstairs windows, but there was no traffic, just the noise drifting in from the avenues at either end. It was late now, after two. She would not see Mark tonight. She felt suddenly free, jittery, reckless even, like she could cry or laugh; she didn't know which. Concord Jazz and the Indigo Moon. Maybe this was the big day of her career, the turning point. Maybe it was the day that, later, when she was interviewed by the Times, or the Voice, she would say, "And, oh, when I got my first offer at the Indigo Moon, well then...." Maybe.

She stopped in front of her building and peered in through the glass door. Three naked bulbs lit the first floor hallway—eight metal doors, all locked up for the night. And then she turned and kept on walking.

Concord Jazz and the Indigo Moon. She crossed Eighth avenue and looked into the optician's shop on the corner;
all the blank eyes stared back at her. She walked on west, Fifteenth street and the ragged gray apartments past Ninth avenue. The sagging warehouses, garbage piled up on the asphalt. There was nobody else around. Beat-up old signs hung from the sooty buildings: ABC Imports, Agostinelli's Restaurant Supply, Chelsea Auto Parts. At Tenth avenue the tunnel of buildings ended—across lay the docks and overhead ran the West Side Highway, all concrete and steel. She crossed over and walked out on the docks.

It was empty and silent, just the waves clapping on the pier. Across the water came the distant flickering lights of New Jersey: homes and factories and shopping centers sprawled over the land. Behind her the lights of Manhattan rose up, and she gazed at the city: the lights and the myriad windows, the rooms behind each window, the warm bodies sleeping in every room. She looked back at the water. She could feel something, inside her, tangled up but growing.

It was way down inside somewhere, but it was welling up now, uncoiling. And then, abruptly, it was there, and she had only to release it. First "Ten Thousand Miles," then "I Come to the Garden," and "Wildwood Flower," and all the others, every one of them. On and on, her voice stretching out, living. She sang them all and after awhile she was not really singing; she felt them and did not have to remember
them, and they and her were all part of one thing. The music grew and scattered out across the waves, and she sang. And sang.
Daniel was slouched down in his Lay-Z-Boy, midmorning, when he got the idea. Betty and her second kid, Joanie, had just left, a solid hour of "Papa this," and "Granddad that," just like every other morning. The nights were the worst--waking up and the ceiling pressing down on him, and never able to get back to sleep again. And then in the mornings it was always Betty and one of the grandkids, coming around and fussing. He slouched down, breathing, trying to get some strength again. Staring out through the front window at the grass and the sycamore and the cars whizzing by in the street, and then Yes! He knew what it was that he wanted to do.

He'd dreamed about it for weeks, months even, but he'd never had the guts to push it through. Deep down, he knew he was too old, and he'd been afraid that he would die before he could ever do it again. Now was the time, he
thought. Today. Forget about Betty and the grandkids, all
the fussing and arguments about getting enough sleep and
resting his legs and everything else. This was it. Now.
He pulled himself up, shuffled over to the end-table, picked
up the telephone and dialed. 624-T-A-X-I. He still
remembered the number. "Yeah. Need a cab. How soon can
you get here?" He gave his address and hung up.

Oh! He turned right and left, feeling the smile
spreading over his face. Yes! He felt stronger already.
Now think. Didn't have much time, had to think of what to
carry. It was August, didn't need a jacket or sweater. No
cap either. Just some money, an extra handkerchief,
sunglasses, chapstick in case the wind was up. And his
walking stick. He gathered each one, checking out the
window in between for the taxi. And then it was there,
honking in the driveway, and Daniel was fumbling at the
door. He pulled it shut and locked it, then tottered across
the yard to the cab and slid into the front seat. Didn't
like back seats, too cramped. "Bus station," he said.
"Greyhound."

Aw! this was fine. He felt a little kernel, down in
his chest—a trembling fire, like that moment when you're
out on the river alone at daybreak, and the first line
breaks the water. The trees and the houses fled by, and he
gawked at every one, like a kid in from the country. Didn't
get out much now, once every three months to the doctor, now and then to Betty's or one of the grandkids. Aw, they'd shit in their pants if they knew about this, wouldn't they? Daniel laughed out loud. Oh, this town was fine, he thought, and it had never looked finer than today. The white clapboard houses and the clipped green lawns and hedges, the oaks and beeches stretching over the street and then the bright glitter of storefronts blurring by as they drove into downtown. A bus to the beach!

It had been four years since his last bus trip. Four years. Betty drove him to the station then, all the way with her "Dad are you sure you can manage?" "Dad are you sure you'll be warm enough?" "Dad can you find your way when you get there?" Then once they were at the station it was "Dad do you know which bus it is? Let's check at the desk."

No! Hell no he wouldn't check. Taken the bus for years, didn't need to check. He headed straight for the gate, Betty yapping at his heels every step. At the gate he finally turned on her. "Goddamnit I'm not a six year old kid so quit treating me like one. I can damn well take care of myself, so go the hell home and leave me alone." All the heads turning to stare and he could see the hurt in Betty's face but he couldn't stop. He turned again at the bus door
and shouted back at her "And I can goddamned well find the right bus!" and then stepped up and found a seat.

It was the wrong bus. Didn't realize it till they were halfway to Natchez and the lady next to him said something about the Antebellum Pilgrimage and River Drive. He managed to hide his surprise but when they got there he just caught the first bus back and took a taxi home. Didn't call Betty. Later, he apologized for the way he'd talked to her at the station, and she said that it was all right, she understood. He never told her about it being the wrong bus, but somehow, he thought she knew. She'd checked the board or asked at the desk--somehow she'd found out. She knew, but she never said anything.

This time, he did not take the wrong bus. He asked at the desk and asked the bus driver too. "Coast Express. All Aboard." Daniel took a seat, halfway back on the right.

The bus rattled out of the city and onto the highway. Asphalt everywhere. He could remember cotton fields, almost up to downtown, little snatches of pine forest all along the river. Near the highway interchange there had once been a dairy farm with a red windmill and a pond surrounded by willows, where Holsteins lounged through the summer. Gone now, all of it gone, nothing but used car lots, gas stations and shopping malls. Signboards screaming This Bud's For You, Step Up To Salem, Fly First Class With Wild Turkey.
The land spread out, flat and hot, a dusty tired green. Daniel squinted down at the cars and the pickups as they sped by, a bright blur of headachy colors.

He was already tired. The frummeling in and out of the taxi, the prowling around the station, the crowds and the noise and the lights. The little white fire of excitement he'd felt, leaving, like a coal that burns hot but fast—it was gone. He leaned to the side, cradled his head into the notch between the seat back and the window, and breathed deeply. He dozed, blinking his eyes open now and then.

They were in forest soon, the squatty gnarled oaks and the pines. Years of hiking here, Sundays as a kid, and later with Margaret and Betty. Betty had brought her kitten once, he remembered, and the damned thing ran up a pin-oak and wouldn't come down. Took him, Daniel, half an hour to climb up and fetch him—Waffles, that was his name!—Betty bawling and all the people stopping to gawk or laugh. He gazed out at the trees again, miles of them still, restful and dark, at least that hadn't changed. Then he leaned back and closed his eyes again. There was just the soft whoosh of traffic and the steady rhythm of the bus rolling over the long concrete slabs. Slab, joint, slab, joint. A rhythm like a sailboat maybe, the hull sweeping up and slapping down again on the waves—whoooomp Ah! whoooomp whoooomp whoooomp Ah!—over and over. He was eighty-two years old and that
was one more thing that he'd never do before he died--cross the sea on a sailboat. He held his eyes closed and drifted. Whoooomp Ah!

He slept almost all the way--woke up as they were coming into Gulfport. Godalmighty, he was doing it! Yes! He felt strong again, and straightened up to look out the glass, waiting for that first glimpse of the Gulf. The bus rattled over potholes, around a curve, a corner, one more, and there it was, straight ahead. That great flat stretch of colors: gray, almost green, growing to blue, spreading up to the sky--he could see it a million times and never get enough. He could feel himself smiling again.

The bus stopped for ten minutes at the city station, but Daniel stayed on. He wanted to get out of the city, somewhere along the coast. Soon they were off again, bumping along the coastal highway, past the motels, the marinas and the baitshops, the lined-up seafood chains: Captain D's, the Red Lobster, Shrimp Shack--All You Can Eat $9.95. Took thirty minutes just to get out of town, out to some open beach again. Daniel yanked the cord and got out.

He thought he could remember this place, but he wasn't sure. Little stretch of boardwalk, couple of snack shops and souvenir stands, beyond that just open beach. He thought he could remember it but God knows--how many years had it been since the last time he was here? He walked up
the path and the steps onto the boardwalk, and leaned on the railings, looking out to sea. Handful of sunbathers on the white sand, kids splashing in the waves, the flat gray water turning over at the shore.

How many years?

At least five or six years—he could remember trips down with Betty or the grandkids, but when? Sometime after Margaret died. There'd been plenty of trips down with Margaret, but of course plenty alone too, and plenty with friends, fishing buddies, his brother Walter or his sisters in their old Dodge, bus trips full of rowdy schoolkids, he'd even hitched down sometimes, back in the twenties when he was in school. When was the very first trip? With his parents before the first war, he could remember that open Model-A, he and Walter and the girls in the back, the salt wind buffing 'em all the way. Nothing here then, not a building in sight. Not much building till the mid 20s—twenty-six, twenty-seven.

Nineteen twenty-seven. One nine two seven—that was a year. Ruth hit sixty, Lindy flew to Paris, and he, Daniel, got married, bought a house, and started teaching. Forty-two years he'd taught—forty-two. Gone straight through the war without a hitch, right up to his sixty-seventh birthday. Could have taught longer of course, but by then Margaret was sick. Nineteen twenty-seven to
Nineteen seventy. Ho! Not bad. Algebra, geometry, trigonometry, forty-two years of it. Years of Pythagorean theorems and equilateral triangles. Sine, cosine, tangent. The fistfuls of exambooks and the chalkdust spilling down his trousers. The slide rule he wore on his belt, all the kids teasing him, calling him Quickdraw.

What a crew he'd taught—kids and kids of kids. Some quiet and some wild as monkeys, always full of shenanigans but he'd outfoxed 'em all, most of the time anyway. Some of 'em turned out pretty well—doctors, lawyers, architects, couple of state senators. Some of 'em never amounted to diddley-squat. Most of 'em were just right in the middle, good solid citizens who paid their taxes and kept their grass cut. Generations of 'em, forty-two years.

Daniel straightened up from the railing and stretched his back. Aaaaach! It was a hot day, clear except for a few lazy cumulus. Not many people down on this part of the shore, just a few families out for day-trips. He walked a little ways along the boardwalk, right hand on the railing, left on his cane. Jeez it was hot, and what a glare. Already past noon; he was hungry. There were two snack shops, one down at the far end with a neon Budweiser lamp over the door, and one nearby with a sign: Safe Harbor—Hamburger and Fries $3.95. Daniel went into the
Safe Harbor and sat at a table by the window. "Hamburger and fries," he said to the waitress. "And a large beer."

"We don't serve beer, sir."

"Got any whiskey?"

"We don't have a liquor license, sir. I can serve you Coke, Sprite, Tab, Seven-Up, Dr. Pepper, Orange Crush...."

"Just a glass of plain water then. Got any of that?"

"Yes sir, sure do."

The waitress went back to the kitchen and Daniel peered out the glass. Couldn't see much of the water, the boardwalk railing was right in the way. Couples strolled by, then a gang of teenaged girls and three kids playing tag. The kids chased and screamed, giggling at last in that helpless, unstoppable way of small kids, and then he, Daniel, laughed too, infected by them. They scurried on, then a seagull landed on the railing and stared in at him.

The waitress brought his hamburger and fries, on a paper plate. Damnit, nobody used real plates anymore, used to be you could go into a restaurant and get a real meal on real plates. No plates anymore, no sir, and God knows what the hamburger was made of, probably kangaroo or armadillo or some miserable varmint he'd never even heard of. What the hell, nothing to do, you had to eat. The gull flew away and more kids ran by, shouting, the water glistening on them.
He remembered the times they'd brought Betty down here, when she was just a kid. Scuffling around in the sand, moats and castles, one time the little squirt had even buried him in sand, right up to his neck. He'd hold her hand and they'd go running into the surf, her screaming "Daddy! Daddy!" and then he'd scoop her up in his arms as a breaker split past them. The feel of that tiny body, so thin and vulnerable, crushed up against his chest, the salt spray flying.

Betty, there at his house again every morning, always worrying. Damnit, what all had he said to her this morning? Couldn't even remember it any more but he knew it was pretty nasty, sometimes he was just pure-D ornery. Daniel twisted in his chair, tugged at a lock of his hair. He finished his lunch and shoved the plate away. Damned armadillo-burger. He paid and hobbled back outside, back to the boardwalk railing.

He ought to apologize to Betty, for grousing at her this morning. Damnit, he'd have to apologize, for this morning and for all the other times too. To Betty and to Joanie and to all the other grandkids, they all meant well but all that fussing around just irritated the shit out of him, he wasn't one for fussing around, no. He knew they meant well though, and he ought to tell 'em he appreciated
it, but he wasn't one for speeches either, sappy soap-opera stuff, no, never had been.

He twisted around at the railing and then Hey! A souvenir! He could buy Betty a souvenir. Give it to her tomorrow. "See honey, your old man can still take care of himself. Just had a nice day at the beach yesterday, and brought you a little something to say thanks for everything." God, she'd have a cat, wouldn't she? Aw, this was fine! He plodded down the boardwalk into the nearest souvenir shop. Captain Kidd's Treasure Chest--Fine Art, Memorabilia, Souvenirs--Credit Cards Accepted.

It was freezing inside, they had the air-conditioning running full-blast. Place was full of stuff, floor to ceiling. Ninety percent of it junk of course--conch shells mounted on plastic, laminated driftwood, schlocky little paintings of fishing boats and waves breaking over boulders, probably color-by-number sets that'd been painted in Taiwan. Crap! The world was full of crap. Daniel snuffled through it all, the flip-flop sandals, and the keychains and place-mat sets. Had to have something nice, something she would like, and something he could carry around without any trouble. He flipped through the scarves and at last found one. No high fashion, but still, it wasn't bad--a nice deep burgundy with blue marlins swimming around the edge. He took it up to the cashier and paid.
"Gift wrap it too, willya?"

"Would that be regular or deluxe wrapping sir? Deluxe is fifty cents extra."

"Sure. Make it deluxe."

The sales lady disappeared to the back for a minute and then returned with the package—blue paper with white clouds and a silver ribbon and card. On the card, Daniel wrote "To Betty, from your Dad." He hesitated a moment, then added "With Love." What the hell, let's shoot the works. He slipped the package into his trouser pocket and trudged back out to the boardwalk.

The salty heat blew up against him, and the high sun caromed off the water, glimmers dancing back and forth, over and under with the waves. Daniel clipped his sunshades onto his glasses, stared out to the sea. What a day! That sharp, pure smell and the wind blasting his face—he breathed in and filled his lungs, lifted his face toward the sun. Ah this was healthy, best medicine there was. He shuffled along the boardwalk, hanging on at the railing. Pretty soon there was a bench, and he sat down. There were kids nearby in the sand, others splashing down in the surf. Kids he might have been teaching, if he'd still been teaching. He'd cram some sense into their heads, wouldn't he? Get 'em straightened out and flyin' right. That was his job, wasn't it? His life. He slid down farther on the
bench and watched the waves breaking, one after another. That wrinkle of water building up and up, the lovely thin sheet forming, turquoise and white, so thin you could see through it just for an instant, then collapsing again, all the spray foaming. That constant rushing sound, restful like some music he'd always known. The sun on his cheeks. He closed his eyes for a moment.

When he awoke, his mouth was dry and his neck hurt. Didn't know where he was at first, and aaaaach!--his neck was stiff as a fencepost. The sun was lower, but still bright--his nose was running to beat sixty and goddamnit what a wind. He wiped his nose and pulled himself up on the bench. Out on the gulf, boats were heading in, menhaden and shrimp, thin white wakes and the gulls screaming. A few ragged clouds had come up. Midafternoon, time for a drink. Yeah, that's what he needed, a couple of good stiff ones. He looked around and saw the bar down at the end, with the neon Budweiser sign. What a hike. He stood up, got his wind, started off. Tramping down the boardwalk, the wind whipping up sand now, gulls screaming.

Finally he was at the bar. It was right at the end of the boardwalk, beyond there was just open beach and dunes. He shoved open the door and walked in. Cold again, the air conditioner was blasting. A few scattered tables and he was the only customer, just a girl waiting behind the counter.
"Watcha drinkin', Pops?"
"Got any whiskey?"
"Got Schlitz, Bud, Miller Lite. Watcha havin'?"
"Bud. Make it two."
"Alrighty."

The girl tapped the beer into paper cups. Nobody used real glasses anymore, it was always paper or plastic or some chemical shit, the beer was probably all chemicals too. Used to be....

"That'll be two-eighty." The girl slapped the cups down on the counter.
"Eh?"
"Two dollars eighty. Buck forty a throw."

Hell's bells, a dollar forty for a beer! He laid two bills on the counter and squeezed out some coins. The girl scooped them up and dropped them into the cash register.

"Alrighty."

Daniel hung his cane over his forearm, gripped the two cups, and hobbled to the far table by the window. A buck forty beer out of a paper cup. He stretched out in the chair and twisted his neck, right, then left, until it was loose again. Better. He started in on the beer. Could have used some George Dickel now, never been much of a beer man. Used to call it cat piss. Nothing but beer though,
and he was thirsty for sure. He finished the first and started in on the second.

His neck still ached a little, and his back too. What could you expect at eighty-two? Eighty-goddamned-two, nine squared plus one. What a shitty age to be. Eight more years and he'd be a right angle. Maybe Margaret had been lucky, dying at sixty-seven. A year of sickness, then it was over. Maybe it was better that way, instead of flummoxing on like him, an old duffer with a runny nose, stringy hair white as ivory, almost yellow. Aches and pains and forgetting, falling asleep in the middle of the day. At least Margaret didn't have to go through that.

God he was bushed. That salt air and the sun--they could really do you in. Phew! He finished the second beer and shoved the cups away, then put his head down on the table to rest. Just for a moment.

"Hey Pops! You all right?"

"Eh?"

"Wake up, willya?"

"Margaret."

"C'mon. Time to get going."

"Margaret was here."

"Whadja say? C'mon, you got to go now--we got to close up."
The hand on his shoulder. The lights. He pulled himself up, blinking and blinking. There was a girl there, shoving a mop at his feet. He stood up, shaky, gripping his cane and a chair back, and then he headed for the door. Outside, it was very dark.

Where was he anyway? At the beach. Sure. He knew, vaguely, that he had to catch a bus home and that he had to get down from the boardwalk to catch it. He stepped down the stairs at the end, carefully, one at a time, onto the sand. Just walk along here for awhile, he thought. Get a clear head.

Margaret. She'd been right there with him for a moment. It was a dream, he knew, but it seemed like something more. Dead thirteen years now, crazy the tricks your mind played, the things that came back to you. Like all that flotsam the sea washed up, the slick shiny things from years ago while the things that fell in yesterday got buried in the mud. Maybe it was the bad things you forgot. That last year with Margaret--cobalt treatments and vomiting and all her hair falling out--funny how little of that he could remember now. It was the other things that always came back.

The way she sat, with her legs crossed and her back straight as a T-square, hair halfway down to her waist, or up in a bun after Betty was born. Those slender fingers,
the supple way they moved. That look in her eye sometimes, she'd kid him, call him Dangerous Dan. Certain parts of her body, that little hollow in her neck, just above her collarbone, the curve of her hipbone at the top of her thighs. Sometimes he could still feel her skin on his fingertips.

The times they'd had together. Working on that damned house, adding a guest's bedroom and then a playroom for Betty out by the patio. Klutzing around with wallpaper and linoleum tile, Margaret crouching up on the step-ladder, painting those ceilings. All those simple, ordinary things that got done every year, raking bushels of oak leaves and unclogging the gutters, year in, year out. They'd built up their garden together, he could still see her down on her knees clipping away that nut grass at the edge of the oleander beds.

That time after the war when they bought the new Plymouth. Aw! they were proud of that thing. Big as an aircraft carrier, but they went everywhere in it didn't they? The Smokey mountains, and the Ozarks, out to California that time, nearly overheated going up Pike's Peak. Margaret in her sundress with that little brownie camera flopping down from around her neck. Plenty of trips down here to the shore too, picnics and hiking in the dunes, driving back sunburned and tired.
The bus.

Daniel stopped suddenly, looked around. Son of a bitch, how had he walked so far? Ahead of him was only open beach and dunes, and back behind him, a long way back, was the boardwalk. He could see a few lights flickering, a car passing now and then on the highway, way over in the distance. He had to catch a bus damnit, a bus. He had come the wrong way.

Now what to do? Goddamnit what an old fool he was! He'd have to walk all the way back now. He was too tired to walk back, worn himself out walking down here. Just take it easy, he thought. Little bit at a time. Don't panic. He walked a short distance, but it was no good. He was already bushed, and the sight of all that sand between him and the highway just knocked all the stuffing out of him. Better take a rest, he thought. Get some strength. He plodded up the first row of dunes and down the other side, then lay down on the far slope. It was easier getting up and down, he thought, lying on a slope. It was fine here, the wind was down and it was still plenty warm. There was a full moon just coming up, way over to his left. Just rest a moment. He closed his eyes.

The moon was far overhead when he awoke, and he stared at it for a long time. Funny how clear it was, he thought.
All those craters, the peaks and the valleys. He could hear the waves spilling onto the shore nearby, the soft wind whispering over the dunes. It was late, well after midnight he reckoned. No more buses tonight, no—he was stranded here in the dunes. Stranded. Have to ride out the night alone, hope he could make his way back tomorrow. He lay in the sand.

It occurred to him, as though an afterthought, that he might die here. It was still warm but it would get cooler toward morning. He’d had a long day and he was a worn-out old man anyway, weak as a kitten. He might die here, on this night.

So what? he thought. Who gives a shit? He wasn’t afraid of dying, no, no way, he’d convinced himself of that. You had to go sometime, sure, why not tonight? Big deal. Somebody’d come along and find his body, they’d shovel him up, haul him away and bury him. He could see the headlines: EMINENT EDUCATOR PASSES AWAY WHILE VACATIONING, CAREER SPANNED SIX DECADES. This night.

He just lay there, trying to relax, but suddenly it was no good any more. Oh God, what a fool he was! Why had he walked all the way down here? Why had he had those damned beers, made his head fuzzy? Fool! Why had he come alone anyway, should have asked Betty to bring him, but she was always such a worry-wart, wanted to do it alone to show her,
damnit. Goddamnit Betty, it was all your fault! Goddamnit! ABANDONED MAN FOUND DEAD IN DUNES, DAUGHTER CHARGED WITH NEGLIGENCE.

Daniel scrabbled in the loose sand, clawing on all fours like a lunatic crab. He worked his way up to the top of the dune, and then he stopped, wheezing out of breath, heart thumping like a motor.

What was the point of it? He couldn't make it back to the boardwalk tonight and even if he could, so what? There was nobody around this late, no phone, no more buses either. It was his own damned fault not Betty's, and now he just had to ride it out, what else ws there to do? He could get up again in the morning when he was rested, or call out for help when there were other people around. If he made it till the morning. Maybe he really would die, tonight. This night. He felt a stupefying sort of numbness settle over him, a torpor.

He could hear himself breathing, his own breath, in-and-out, in-and-out, and then abruptly, it seemed like he had to breathe harder, to reach out for each breath and suck it in, harder and harder, each one thinner and farther away. He could feel the warm sand all around him, sense it, and then he was sinking in it. Sinking! Quicksand! He thrashed out wildly, tried to yell but his mouth was too dry and his tongue thick. His legs dug in and his arms flailed
in a panic, trying to pull himself up from the sand, out. He had to get out! Yes! He lunged and bucked, loose sand flying, and then he was bushed again, shot, and he just lay there, not moving. He gulped for air, and he could feel the fear, feel it inside like it was twisting up through his legs and his gut, way out on his fingertips.

He knew it was fear of death. No matter how much he denied it there it was again, every night for months now. Every night. He could slough it off during the days and the evenings, but that hour always came, the middle of the night waking up and the fear pressing down like the ceiling and the walls. Sometimes he knew the fear was coming, could feel it coming like a train in a tunnel, and then it was the fear itself he was afraid of. Goddamnit, that mindless, numbing fear, he could feel it now and he shivered in the sand, and felt himself still gulping for air.

Think, goddamnit! That's what he had to do, think. Use his noggin. Line it all up in some rational order, he thought, like an algebraic proof. Maybe if he could come to some understanding, like some summing up, or like finally figuring out what the meaning of it all really was, the point. Maybe then he could beat the fear, could meet it head-on anyway, but no it was still there, he could feel it. He shivered again, his body stiff as a plank, and he wrapped his arms around his chest and squeezed. He squeezed and
squeezed, fingers digging into ribs, forearms crushing down into his gut, and then he stopped, and closed his eyes.

He could feel his whole body, every part of it cold and tight, lying still on the sand. Legs spread out down the slope, arms folded over his chest, grains of sand blowing in his hair at his temples, and that hopeless, mindless fear, still there. He could hear the wind blowing over the dunes, the spare reeds rustling nearby. He forced himself to listen, to concentrate on listening. Any sound, anything at all to get out of himself, out and beyond the fear. The surf coming in, over and over, a gull every now and then with a crazy shriek. He shifted again in the sand and then he felt Betty's package in his pants' pocket. If he died tonight at least she'd have that. Betty.

He had sudden intense vision of another summer night, years ago. He was just back from a Little League baseball game—he was assistant coach—and they'd lost again, had a miserable team that year. Margaret wasn't feeling well, she'd been to the doctor that afternoon and hadn't gone to the game. She was already in bed when he got home, but she was still awake. He slipped in beside her, just under a sheet, it was not even late at night and the wind barely stirred the curtains. "I have a surprise," she said, and then she was on top of him, pushing him down with her hands at his ear, then whispering, "I'm pregnant."
He'd gotten up and pulled down a jug of apple cider from the pantry. Poured them both a toast. Sipping that cider in the bed, the hot darkness and the crickets whining outside in the hedges, and both of them yakking and laughing like teenagers.

He jumped abruptly, startled by the sound of his own laughter. He had laughed out loud! He opened his eyes again and there were the dunes and the ocean, the white moonlight on the waves. Yes, goddamnit, he had laughed. Those memories, all the crazy ones coming back. It was something to hold onto anyway, a little nugget he could squeeze. He could feel the tension draining out of him now, legs relaxing, arms relaxing, breath coming easier. The sand seemed warmer now--was it hot or cold? He couldn't tell anymore.

Those memories. Goddamnit he'd have one hell of a memory if he ever survived this night, wouldn't he? He stared out over the ridge: the sand, the sea, the light from the moon. The sky--no seams or corners or edges, no ceiling pressing down on him this night, no, just moon and stars. The longer he looked up at them, the deeper they seemed. If he stared, it was almost like he was part of it, like he was falling into the sky. Like it was all around him.
That one night. Kissing Margaret's belly and spilling apple cider in the bed, both of them laughing. That's all that mattered, he told himself, lying in the sand, feeling his own exhaustion again. Those memories, and that laughter. Yes, it must be, staring up at the wide sky, yes. Feeling himself nodding and smiling, as he closed his eyes one more time.
All those years when I was mixing mortar or setting up a line, or when I was in a routine, laying one brick after another, I thought about it. I planned out how I would disappear—how I would stand up from wherever I was and just walk away, and nobody would ever find me again. That's not as easy as it sounds. You think about people looking for you—company, family, police, neighbors and landlords—it's not easy. But I planned it out good, many many days just thinking about how I would do it, and do it right so I would never be found. How I would walk out from wherever I was and disappear forever. New name, new place—like I would be a new person. Sometimes just thinking about that was almost like being free.

When I retired, Haskins Construction Company, where I worked, gave me a Seiko watch. I'd never had a watch
before, never seen any percentage in wearing one. A watch is liable to get busted when you're laying bricks. This Seiko watch was gold and on the back the company'd engraved "Vernon Bixler May 16, 1982." That was my sixty-fifth birthday, and the day I had to retire. I didn't care anything about retiring myself, but that's a company rule.

Right about the time I retired I got a letter from my daughter Mary in Cincinnati. She was married and had three little ones. I'd seen her oldest right after he was born, when they was all still living in Nashville, but I hadn't seen any of them since. I hadn't seen much of any family since 1946, when my wife LeeAnne and I split up. LeeAnne got remarried in '51 and moved out to California. I was alone then, and that was the way I wanted it. Whenever I thought about seeing them again I started to feel weak, like I was afraid. But LeeAnne and Mary both kept in touch with me, I'll give them that. They sent me Christmas cards and letters, and they both telephoned sometimes too. Mary sent me some pictures of her three little ones, and I still carried them around in my wallet.

This letter from Mary told about her husband and kids, and then she wrote, "Daddy, it seems like I never even knew you." She said that now that I was retired, I ought to come up to see them, maybe stay for a while. She said she'd like for her children to get to know their granddaddy.
But I had some other ideas. If I couldn't lay bricks in Nashville anymore, I could damn sure find something else. I can tell you, I worked all those years: overtime, weekends--there's plenty of weeks when Vernon Bixler put in sixty hours. You take a fellow who worked like that, thirty-six years, and then you put him down in his room and tell him he can't work anymore, he starts to get ideas. There was things I wanted to do, and I just said "why not?" All that time to think, maybe that's what gets a man in trouble.

I was strong, and had a little money saved up too. I told people I was going on a vacation. Told my old foreman down at Haskins, told my next-door neighbor Bernie, sent a note to my landlord, wrote Mary, even wrote LeeAnne out in Los Angeles. Everybody could understand that I reckon, cause they probably said to themselves "It's about time Vernon Bixler took a vacation, he never took one when he was working." And it's true, I never did take one, all those years. I never did see much percentage in vacations.

I took a Delta flight to Atlanta, and flew on TWA to Paris. I didn't have much luggage, didn't need it--just one bag. I like to live simple. One Wednesday morning I was in Nashville packing my bag, and on Thursday morning I was in Paris. I never had been on an airplane before.
The first time I was over there, in the war, all the travelling was by troop ship. I was in England for almost a year then, down near Southhampton, and I landed in Le Havre in August of '44. The 128th batallion, D Company. We was in Paris by September and then we just sat there for three months. Not doing a damned thing. I can't abide doing nothing, never could. Other fellows in my company--they'd get into drinking or playing cards, chasing women, but me, I just went out and walked. I'd never seen such beautiful buildings. The way they stood up high and square, real solid, they could make you feel small and still good at the same time. I loved to go out and look, run my fingers over the stones in those buildings, stones hundreds of years old. Feel the pocks and the chips and the smooth polished surfaces of those stones. You knew those stones had seen some things, and they'd see a lot more before all the shouting was over. In December we got orders to move, and right before Christmas we was heading up to Belgium.

When I got into the airport at Paris, I just rented me a Peugeot and got on the highway heading north out of the city. I thought about trying to find some places in Paris I remembered from '44, but all those people made me nervous and I thought, maybe later. I had plenty of time. And there was some other things I wanted to do first.
It was peaceful, driving up through the country. I kept off the big highways and just took it slow. There was some pretty farms there, the wheat still young and green and every now and then some Charolais grazing on a hillside. I passed through a lot of villages, and sometimes I could of sworn I remembered things: a bridge with pots of geraniums along the railing, or an old church with wild basil growing out of the stones in the steeple. Maybe the quiet way a stream curved through a hilly town. Maybe even the name of a village, names like Roissy, or Neuilly St. Front. Names that I had a hard time to pronounce, but that just looked nice when you came into a village and saw them on a signpost. Maybe I did remember some things, but it was a long time and I couldn't of said exactly what for sure. There's no accounting for the things you remember.

One thing I damn sure noticed was the buildings and the walls. Just like in Paris, all those years before. In that part of the country near everything's built of brick, and it's all old. Not much of anything built this century even. When a brick wall gets that old, that's when you can start to see how it's really made.

A brick wall's got a soul, and the bricklayer's the one who put it there. When you start to laying bricks, the first thing you got to do is set up some lines. A ground-line, plumb lines, horizon sight lines. You can use a chalk
stripe or a plumb-bob, or stretch some string to help you out, but if you want to do it right, you got to feel that line yourself. Once you feel those lines, then you can lay those lines right into the bricks, and make them all one. I've seen a lot of bricklayers in my day, and there's plenty of them who can't ever do what I'm telling you about. Those people are just stacking bricks, they're not feeling anything. You take your average person and show him a new brick wall, he won't be able to tell you the difference. He won't see a thing. But you go fifteen, twenty, thirty years down the line--that wall's going to lean, and then crack, and that wall's just not going to make it. That wall's going to die, just like a person dies. But if you feel those lines and lay them in with the wall, why then you've done something. All those walls I saw, driving up through France, walls over a hundred years old, they all had lines in them. Hard straight lines, over a century old. You could see that, just looking at them, and when you saw that you saw some of the bricklayer too. Those bricklayers was dead, but you could still see them there in those walls, like they'd found a way to cheat death.

The 128th spent Christmas of '44 in a bivouac near Vouziers, and after New Year's we crossed the Belgian border and headed up toward Bastogne. There had been a lot
fighting there, and the whole company figured that's what we
was heading for. But we stopped about ten miles short of
Bastogne, and set up a bivouac near a little village called
St. Margriet. There was already a dusting of snow on the
ground, and it was always damp. At night the wind would
come down across the hills and rustle through the pines till
you couldn't tell if a sound was the wind or something else.
Sometimes we could hear artillery fire, up ahead.

Every day we woke up thinking we was going on up ahead,
where we heard the artillery. We had round-the-clock guard
duty, and we all stayed right there, close to the tents.
The fourth night we was there I got guard duty from midnight
to six. The snow stopped by midnight, but the wind was
still blowing, kicking up little gusts all around us. I
stood out there with the back of the tents in a neat line to
my right and nothing but a bare hillside sloping up to my
left. Farther over on the hill was a row of little willows
that had been cut back for a windbreak. I'd been
practice-shooting and drilling with guns for two years then,
but that was the first time I ever figured I might have to
use one for real. When I held that rifle, it was like I was
feeling it for the first time. Feeling that smooth polished
wood on the stock, the slick coldness of the barrel. Most
of all that coldness. I stood there rubbing that barrel and
looking up the hillside, listening to the night and the wind.

Driving in that Peugeot, I had plenty of time to think about LeeAnne, about Mary and her kids, and about my plans. I figured if I was careful and thought things through, I could do it pretty good. All those years I'd planned it, about how I would disappear so nobody would ever find me again, and now was the time. I wanted to do it right, but there was something else I wanted to do first.

On Saturday afternoon I crossed the Belgian border and just kept on driving till I got to Bastogne. It was a lot bigger than it was in '44--there was a big chemical factory out on the south side, and a whole slew of high-rise apartment buildings. I drove on down to the center and parked the Peugeot on a side street, in the shade. There was a big street I thought I remembered, real hilly, and I walked along there. There was two hotels I passed, but they looked crowded and pricey, and I just walked on till I found me a cheap-looking one. The Hotel Beau Site. It was a four story walk-up with a green neon sign out front. The light was out on the last e, so it looked like Beau Sit. I got me a little room on the top floor where I could look out over the street.
It was already getting dark, and everything was in the shade. There was a grocer right across the street so I went back down for some shopping. Bought me a long loaf of hard bread, a wheel of camembert and a smoked sausage. I could tell that grocer knew I was a foreigner by my accent, and he kind of wanted to talk to me, but I just kept my head down and minded my own business. I bought two bottles of Heineken and then I went back to my room and ate me a supper there by the window, looking over the street and the buildings. I never did see much percentage in restaurants.

It got dark and the street lights came on and I finished my supper, but I still sat there by the window. I was thinking about who would try to find me when they realized I wasn't coming back to Nashville. Some buddies from Haskins, my neighbor Bernie, my landlord, Mary, maybe LeeAnne once she heard about it. It was hard to figure up.

LeeAnne and I was married in '38 and we had Mary the next year. We didn't have nothing but a two-room rented house back then, but still, I guess you could say it was a happy time. I couldn't rightly say what a happy time is, but when I think back on that time I can't hardly remember any of it, so maybe that means it was happy. I went into the Army in November of '42 and shipped out to Southhampton in June of '43, and I didn't see LeeAnne and Mary again until December of '45. I can tell you I remember plenty
from those years and the years since then, but from those years before-- '38, '39, '40-- I can't hardly remember a thing.

In '46, when we had our troubles, LeeAnne kept saying that those years before the war had been happy years and I guess I believed her. One time she said to me, "You just don't even seem to care about people anymore. About me or anyone else. It's like you're not even here." I didn't argue with her.

I didn't sleep much that night in that hotel, but I was ready to go in the morning. I ate the rest of my bread and camembert, and then I got in that Peugeot and drove down toward St. Margriet. It was still early when I got there.

The wind kept up all that night while I was on guard. The camp was still, just that row of tents and no lights or movement. I could see another guard, way down the line beyond the willows. I was thinking a lot that night, and sometimes when a man gets to thinking too much that's when he gets himself in trouble.

I was thinking about what it would be like to die. About if a fellow came up real sudden and just shot me before I had a chance. I'd never thought about that, at least not in that way. I hadn't seen LeeAnne and Mary in almost two years then, and I tried to picture them, alone.
The thought of that must of made me edgy, that's what it must of done. The things I remember are digging the toes of my boots into that fresh snow that was still powdery, and sliding my hands up and down that rifle. The steel barrel that was cold as that snow, and the wood stock that was still kind of warm--warm, cold, up and down. The sounds of the wind in those willows and the snow kicking up, branches creaking.

It was close to dawn when I saw him. Just a low figure sort of crouched over, up the hillside in that line of willows. I watched him coming down through the hanging branches, coming my way like he was fixing to walk right into camp. I watched him and I started to shake, and I told myself, "It's only from the cold you're shaking--that's all." He came closer, straggling through those branches and the snow, and I was still shaking and when he was close enough I cut loose. I shot him once when he was standing and three more times when he was on the ground. After I pulled the trigger, I started to laugh.

Men came running from camp, and four of us walked across the slope to where the body was. It was lying face-up and looked like what I thought a German was supposed to look like: blonde hair and blue eyes. He was wearing an old ripped-up Army jacket and canvas pants and rubber boots, and he couldn't of been more than fourteen years old. There
was a hole in his neck where blood was coming out, and the
first thing I did was to stick my finger in that hole and
try to stop that blood. The blood was real warm, and my
finger went right in like I was sticking it down into a
rubber hose. The sergeant told me to stand up. They
searched his pockets but they didn't find anything, not even
a dog-tag, except in one pocket there was two apples. Later
on that day the sergeant told me I'd just been doing my job
the way I was supposed to.

I parked the Peugeot down in the center of St. Margriet
and walked out the main street to the west. I found the
bridge I remembered and then took the turn-off that led out
toward some pasture land. It was starting to rain.

It's funny, memory. I thought I could walk right to
that spot, but damned if noon didn't come and I still hadn't
found it. I'd follow a road or a path for a while and then
get all turned around and have to backtrack to that bridge
again. About mid-afternoon I was a mile out of town
following a dirt road and I came over a hill and started
down the other side. There was a row of houses on my
left-hand side in a line down the slope. I got to the
bottom and turned to look back uphill, and then I knew I was
there.
That row of willows had been cut down and that's where the houses stood. The last row of tents had been right about where I was standing. I walked a few steps back up the hill, over to my right a tad, and I was standing on the spot where it happened. I couldn't tell you how I knew, I just did. I stood there with the soft mist falling and the young grass wet around my ankles, and it was quiet and nothing was moving.

I could feel that gun in my hands, how the barrel was so cold and the stock was smooth and warmer. I could feel the hole in that boy's neck, how my finger went right in and the blood was hot, and how the blood dried on my finger, my index finger, the one I'd pulled the trigger with, and later I had to scrub to get it all off. I could feel that shaking, and how I'd laughed when I shot him. When I was doing that shaking I thought fear was the worst thing, but then I learned you can even go fear one up, like you step over a line and get on the far side of fear, in its shadow. I could still feel that laughing, laughing while I squeezed the trigger.

I stood there in the rain, getting soaked, and after a while I walked back up that hill and in to St. Margriet. I bought me some more food for the night, and it was dark before I made it back to my hotel room. The rain had picked up some, and I could see lightning off to the west. I ate
by the window, watching the street and the sky, and pretty soon there was thunder rumbling, way off.

I could of done it right then. Left it all behind, passport, clothes, everything. Just walked right out. It was dark and nobody was on the street. I was strong and I could walk a long ways—I figured I could make it to another village somewhere south, get on a train and by the next day be way down in France. I was sixty-five, but I could still lay some bricks, and I could still speak a little French from that time in the war. I'd find some tiny village way back up in the mountains where nobody'd ever find me and then I'd work. I could say, "Listen here, I'm a man and there's one thing I can do right, and that's lay brick. Fletton brick or Old Virginia or glazed yellow shale. Running bond or Flemish or a pretty herringbone. I can do it all. I can make it so it won't ever come down, won't ever crack or fall or break apart. Make it so it'll outlast every last one of us."

I could of done it then, but I didn't. I sat there by the window, still feeling that rifle barrel in my palm, that boy's neck on my finger, feeling it the way I had all those years. I wanted to go back there again, to dig the toes of my shoes into that dirt and rub my palms over the young grass. To feel that dirt on my hands, to stand there again
and walk down that hill to where that boy had been. Just one more time.

I was tired but I couldn't sleep for nothing that night. The lightning came down in streaks and the buildings in the street would quiver in that light, and then it was all rumbling darkness again. I lay on the bed and got up and stood by the window, planning it. I was going to get rid of it all, destroy it so it couldn't ever come back. Rip up all my papers and flush them down the toilet, take that Seiko watch with Vernon Bixler's name on the back and throw it in the river. There wouldn't be anything left.

I woke up and the sun was coming in the hotel window, and I could tell from the angle that it was already late. I jumped up off that bed real quick, but then I sat down again. This was the day I was going to do it, and I didn't need to be in a hurry--I had plenty of time. There's no percentage in getting in a hurry, that's when you start to make mistakes.

I washed myself and went down to the street and bought me two rolls at a baker's shop. I didn't go back to that grocer again--I could tell he wanted to talk, and I didn't see any percentage in getting too familiar. I ate the rolls in the car on the way down toward St. Margriet. This time I knew which way to walk when I got there, and walked right
out of town toward that hill. It was muddy from the rain, and my shoes and pants' legs got soaked through in the damp grass.

I came over the top of that hill and the first thing I saw was a woman wearing a wide purple dress. There was a little girl with her, and they had a red and yellow beach ball they was throwing back and forth. They was standing down the slope, where I had stood. This lady in the wide dress moved kind of slow, and then when she turned sideways I could see she was pregnant. They'd throw that ball back and forth, and whenever somebody would miss that little girl would go running after it, laughing, and that pregnant lady would laugh too. They was standing right where I had stood.

They didn't ever notice me, and I just stayed up at the top of the hill, watching. After a while I sat down low in the grass. My pants and shirt sleeves was all wet from the dew, but I didn't mind any. That girl must of been about the age of Mary's youngest--eight, maybe ten. She and that lady laughed and laughed. I watched them for a long time.

I never did go down that hill to where it happened. After a while I just got up and walked away, drove back to Bastogne. I parked the Peugeot at the bottom of a steep street down in the center. It was real shady there. A lady and a boy passed me on the sidewalk, and they was both laughing. Laughing like that girl and the pregnant lady on
the hillside had laughed. I had laughed too, when I shot that boy, but if you asked me I couldn't of told you when I'd laughed since then.

LeeAnne said those years before the war was good years, but I can't rightly say I remember them. I even have some pictures of Vernon Bixler with his wife LeeAnne and his baby daughter Mary, Vernon Bixler with a big smile on his face. Sometimes I used to look at those pictures and try to remember how I felt when they was taken, but I couldn't ever do it. When I looked at them, I knew that with people you could think everything was solid and right, but it could all crumble and fall down real quick and you could never tell when.

This was the day I'd decided I was going to do it. I'd planned it. Maybe I'd laugh again when I ripped up all my papers, when I threw Vernon Bixler's Seiko watch deep in the river. Laugh like I did in '44. Laugh like that girl on the hillside. A girl the age of Mary's youngest. "Daddy, it seems like I never even knew you." That's what she'd written to me--I remembered that. "I'd like for my children to get to know their Granddaddy." I had pictures of all three of them, just like that picture of Vernon Bixler before the war. I was going to rip them all up today--that's the way I'd planned it.
I'd been standing there on the sidewalk, gawking in a store window, and then I turned and started walking up the hill. Today was the day I was going to do it, but there's no percentage in getting in a hurry. I'd laughed on that hillside in '44, and now there was a girl and a pregnant lady laughing on the same hillside. I stopped and looked in another window. A girl the age of my youngest granddaughter. It was getting on toward noon and there was a crowd of people passing by me on the sidewalk, people shopping, talking together, stopping to look in all those shop windows. Pretty soon the street would be in the sunlight--I looked up at the light on the buildings at the top of the hill. I thought about maybe buying me something to eat--about maybe going back to that grocer. I turned and started walking uphill again, in among all the other people, trying to find my way.