Father of the man:
Two fictional stories
by
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The child is father of the Man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.

William Wordsworth

The 15th century Sufi poet, Rumi, wrote:
"I laugh when I hear the fish in the sea is thirsty."

My father shared something like this with me when he visited in a dream a few years after he died. These stories are dedicated to the memory of how much he wanted to love me, how, until recently, I couldn't let him, and how his visit, when I finally came to understand it, taught me that it's never too late.
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MAGIC BULLETS

"Bring the body and the mind will follow."

Old wives tale.

Chapter 1

For weeks Leonard Littlefield has had no relief from the dull warm pressure in his bladder. Sitting in the waiting room of the Medical Multi-Imaging Facility in Portland, he's worried someone will say something about the wad of sterile cotton lining his jockey shorts. As though maybe they could tell, or even care. Since the biopsy five days before, he's needed the pads to absorb the leaking.

No. These other losers thumbing month old People and Popular Science magazines and waiting for their pricey calibrated dose of radiation or chemo-therapy, they could care less about his leaky plumbing. The guy parked under his I.V. pole with his hair falling out in patches reminds Leonard of his father. That scooped out look in the eyes, his body receding into his clothes. His father's face was just like that--bloodless and smooth, the chemo, drop by drop, neutralizing the
angry fervor with which he'd reigned at the Littlefield supper table. He hadn't been much older than Leonard is now.

Or that poor woman bent over in her wheelchair. Or that old guy whose head and hands twitch uncontrollably. Jesus, the company a leaky dick would get you. That's what the Old Man said. He'd turned gray right from the first treatment. But that was the old style chemo. Almost thirty years ago.

Anyway this is different. Routine, the urologist called it. The catheter and biopsy, the follow up. Covering the options, just to be safe. Covering his high-priced ass, is what the doc meant. And he'd taken his sweet time getting back to Leonard. So obviously this would be a matter of living with a little discomfort, probably watching his diet, maybe opting for surgery if it gets uncomfortable. They don't make you wait five days if it's malignant.

When Leonard turns the page of the three week old *Time* on his lap, the paper sticks to the perspiration on his thumb. The Old Man, they ran the first course on him the day they told him. Not for this guy. Leonard Littlefield has other plans. Besides, he's played the medical game before. Prescription meds were his specialty.

Anybody could see he's in better shape than these walking cadavers. What the system turns you into, the medical mudslide. Take out a little of this, radiate a little of that--you don't really need it anyway. Flush a few chemicals through the old organs. Take some pills to keep you from getting nauseous from all the other stuff. Leonard knows the song and dance. The Old Man played the game with the
medical guys when Leonard was in high school. Six years ago Leonard put in a couple weeks on a medical ward himself, detoxing, shaking, sweating.

It's a business like any other. Not some charity for the indigent and wayward. Take that girl behind the desk in her white nurse's uniform. A marketing gimmick, pure show business. She's a secretary.

But it's the kind of business Leonard wants a part of. These professional types all use accountants. If he only had a brochure printed up to drop around the office.

Next appointment he'd wear a suit, yeah, instead of the Dickies and workshirt. Maybe tell the doc... But hell, there isn't going to be a next time. Attitude, self-control. They'll send him home with their pamphlets, some pills, a cheery professional smile. He is okay. They would have told him. Nobody's been through this place in a long time as healthy as he is. See if anybody ever catches Leonard Littlefield slumped in a wheelchair mainlining a plastic bag full of chemicals.

Nylon carpet muffles the clopping of leather boots. A haggard looking man swaggers slowly down the hall from the examination rooms. Leonard guesses they must be the same age, though the guy looks used pretty hard for forty-something. The high plastered wave of gray hair and feverish eyes belie the reckless walk. Blue jeans, a tooled belt buckle, short-sleeve sport shirt rolled up to his bony shoulders. What does this guy think, maybe Roy Orbison is still surfing the top forty?
Leonard catches a strangely familiar glint from the guy's eyes as he taps a cigarette out of a pack from his shirt pocket and turns at the nurse's station. "So, doll, I guess you gotta set me up in a couple weeks." He leans over the white Formica counter on his elbows, canting a hip so his pelvic bones and elbows stick out at odd angles.

"Bobby, for heavens sake." She looks up at him, shaking her head. "You know there's no smoking in here."

"So who's smokin?" Arms out, shoulders up, he turns to Leonard. "Hey, buddy?" His eyes are deep in his head but piercing. His mouth turns up at one corner. The unlit cigarette dangles low in the other. "You see anybody in here smokin?"

Leonard's stomach bunches like a fist. Held for a second like prey, he gazes back into those gray eyes. He feels the trade of fire for fire. Leonard knows the haggard looking man knows too, even as he turns slowly back to the secretary.

"Bobby, now be nice." She's playful with him, maternal. "Dr. Balford's told you. If you're going to kill yourself with those things, you have to do it outside the office." She hands him a card. "Show a little consideration for the other clients at least."

"My middle name, doll," he says jauntily. "Mr. Consideration." He tucks the card into a back pocket and whips back a pair of aviator sunglasses, easing them on. "Way I figure, I'm good for a sizable stake in this gig. Oughta show a little respect for a guy who's keeping your cashflow in the black."
He turns for the door and the secretary calls after him, "See you in two weeks, big guy."

Ambling across the waiting room he says over his shoulder, "Right doll, if I'm still alive." He snaps his finger to the side, and a match flickers in the outstretched hand. Then he's outside. In front of the large bow window he hunches over the match and leans his head back taking a deep drag. He levels another look through his shades at Leonard, blowing a stream of smoke from the corner of his mouth. He snaps the sunglasses higher on his nose with a toss of his head, and swaggers to a polished black Chevy Blazer, then disappears behind its smoked windshield.

"Uh, excuse me?" Leonard catches the secretary's eye over the counter. She probably never sees a healthy looking male this side of the waiting room. "I was wondering? That man who just left, that was Bobby Trask, wasn't it?"

She looks back at him, cocks her head to the side, kind of playful, sexy. "Do you have an appointment here this morning?"

Leonard enjoys a little fracas. He springs to his feet and walks up to the counter. She couldn't be any more than twenty, less than half his age. He could be her father. He bends over closer to her while producing his appointment card. "This is the Premier Poodle Emporium, isn't it? I've brought my little Fifi in for a trim and some highlights."

She looks at him askance, her cheeks sucked in. "If you'll notice, Mr. uh Littlefield," she points to a stack of brochures on the the side of
the Formica counter. "We protect the confidentiality of our patient's records."

"Oh, I know," he answers, a little distracted by how pretty she is trying to look businesslike. "I'd certainly want you to protect mine." She looks away. "It's just that Bobby and I went to school together thirty years ago." Leonard nods toward the bay window. "So I was wondering if you--"

"You must be pretty new, huh?" She rolls her eyes and turns her back to work on the computer.

"I beg your pardon?"

She reaches into a bag of Diet Lite potato chips by the side of her computer, and doesn't look at him. "Most insurance investigators get that old-friend line from a textbook."

"But I was only asking about an old... friend."

Crunching a potato chip she adds, "The experienced ones get a hacker to tap it through the phone lines."

"But I was ."

Typing something into the computer, she says, "When Dr. Lewinsky is available, I'll call you, Mr. Littlefield."

Eight months ago Leonard had stopped at his sister Margaret's yoga studio in Moodys Harbor to invite her to supper in his and Marie's new apartment in town. Flushed bright from an hour class, and sweat stained at the neck and armpits of her leotard, Lucinda Parsons stood at the door talking with Margaret. Leonard recognised her as though
they'd left ninth grade biology the day before. It was Lucinda, not Margaret, he'd invited to dinner.

She told him over dinner that Bobby Trask was still around Moodys Harbor. "You remember back in ninth grade, Leonard?"

He remembers how Lucinda had looked over supper at the new apartment. The single candle he'd dug out of a packing box cast a playful shadow across her lips. He'd whipped up poached salmon and stir fry vegetables to impress her. How she'd hurried into her coat afterward looking embarrassed, claiming she wanted to get home to her children and husband. It was late. Then stopped and asked if she couldn't see him again the next night.

"Why wait until then?" he asked.

Leonard keeps track of the months in Moodys Harbor by the length of time he and Marie have been visiting Tricia, the counselor, who is helping them patch up the mess he'd made of their relationship. Yes, he remembered the ninth grade. How could he not with Lucinda beaming back across the table at him. She a doctor now, a pediatrician, talking about the year they shared a table in biology lab. Him a middle-age guy with a few adventures behind him, enough to keep an old friend amused a couple hours before he'd picked up on her reluctance to leave, and they'd had their little long postponed honeymoon.

Leonard remembered all right. Bobby Trask was the first of those adventures. "Fuck with Bobby," they used to say, "you best be fast."

Lucinda had laughed. "That's right. And you were."

"No I wasn't. I was smart. Or at least I thought I was."
Bobby Trask was the oldest kid in Tenantsport Regional High School and still a sophomore. Stories about him should've warned Leonard that his academic standing targeted him for Bobby's general loathing of anyone better than himself, which--Leonard soon dreamt of demonstrating--was everyone. At least that's how he remembers it.

Leonard's flare for innuendo tempted Bobby early freshman year. Sheltered as he'd been from calculated brutality, Leonard returned Bobby's silent glare across a study hall the first week by innocently picking his nose with his middle finger. A benign gesture, one he frequently exchanged with his older brother Tad in the buffet mirror over supper at home.

An hour later, when the class was seated over lunch, Bobby slammed open the cafeteria doors. A platoon of grunts in tow, he marched through the large open room, stopped at Leonard's aisle seat, and hauled him up by his shirt front. Reeking of his half dozen lunch time Luckies, he whispered hoarsely, "Ya wanna keep yer middle fingers, asshole?"

Leonard was stunned, cold with fright.

"Right. So from now on make sure I don't never see'm. Ya got that?"

Leonard stared into empty malevolent eyes, a frozen fawn. Bobby hauled him higher and growled, "I know yer type. Yer a smart boy who thinks ya know everything. But you don't know nothing. And I'm gonna teach ya if ya don't wise up."
He'd stood up to a few pushing and shouting matches, but Leonard had never taken or given a good clean swing. At fifteen here was the first person who ripped through his dreamy remove. With Bobby Trask there would be no appeal. Zero.

"Mr. Littlefield?" Still seated, the secretary is looking over the white Formica counter top at him. "The doctor can see you now." Without getting up she directs him to a door down the carpeted hall. "He'll be in shortly."

Right, move the product along the conveyor. You handle the paper, the doc delivers the spiel, maybe scrawls out a script or two. Then it goes back to you for a signature on the liability release forms. And out you go, sucker. Make room for the next set of tired glands till the insurance policy makes good on the bill.

He's seen the biz from a different angle. The girl behind the counter ought to have the records. He'd leveled with the urologist about his addiction to pain meds. The one true lasting love affair of his life. Which ended for him six years ago. His wife of ten years had left. The whole wheat bakery he'd been running on the investment of several friends was a financial shambles. The IRS was dogging him for an audit. On advice from his lawyer, Leonard had checked himself into Maine Medical's detox, where for ten days he shook and sweat and begged for Dilaudid.

"Nothing major league," he told the nurses, trying to sound reasonable. "Just a couple 25's, enough to stop the dry heaves and heart palpitations. Something to take the edge off."
They'd checked his vital signs and pupils every hour, and kept a security guard on the ward the first two days. They asked if he knew where he was; who was President. Then, at the end of the first week, if he'd ever heard of Alcoholics Anonymous.

"This is the Swiss Exhibition at the Epcott Center," he told them. "I can tell by the way you salute the guys in the white coats. If Jack Nicholson isn't president yet, he ought to be. And I'll be god damned if you or anybody ever gets me praising the Lord with a bunch of brownbag burnouts. Now will you give me something to stop the shaking? What the fuck are you here for?"
Chapter 2

Taking a leather padded chair opposite the empty laminated desk, Leonard looks around the small office he's been directed to. A stage set, all the props carefully placed. A few books on the shelves, anatomical charts, hinged models of male and female torsos, their organs a colorful jigsaw for demonstration, a couple phony gold plated Parkers in the deskset. The scripts would be in the middle drawer. Always somewhere handy.

No name on the deskset, no sign of paperwork, no framed paper on the walls. Welinsky must share the place with the team of oncologists, cardiologists, urologists and whatever other shysters who rotate through. The Medical Multi-Imaging Facility is only a franchise. What they need is a drive-up window. Name and registration at the entrance, diagnosis and meds ready when you reach the counter. Wouldn't even have to get out of your car. CAT scan the whole damn thing and give you a readout on your maintenance schedule at the same time they give you your pills. Double the business.

Some day Leonard would have a place like this, his own office. But with taste. A couple of Marie's watercolers, a Thomas Mosher desk and matching chairs, oiled woodwork. It would say something other than I'm just renting this shitbox till the nylon carpet wears out and the
paint gets smudged. He's smart about things like that, about how people see him and what they want.

Smarter than Bobby Trask was. Jesus, had that guy changed at all? Being smart about how he looked and sounded had been Leonard's safety net in Tenantsport Regional High.

Intent on human progress, Miss Webster, their doddering spinster history teacher had applauded Leonard's view that learning history made people wiser, but not much. She'd looked satisfied, working her dentures, as Leonard explained his paper on Social Darwinism to the class. In biology he wrote a paper on tropical diseases that he'd shared with Lucinda: Invisible organisms that penetrated your body, slumbering for years. Given proper conditions heat, dampness, darkness, malnutrition, everything he'd felt when Bobby collared him in the cafeteria--the dormant strains hatched like spider eggs in your blood. Leonard pictured wet vines sprouting from his body orifices, his brain boiling with maggots.

But English was sanctuary. Everything was named. Knowing the words gave you the power to keep them at bay. Calling something by name made it yours. The buffer between Leonard and the dog-eat-dog world was that he knew what to say.

But the teacher was this young bouncy track coach right out of State. He strutted around the classroom in Nikes, sportshirts and tight blue jeans that accented his muscular build. Mr. Ferrone tried to humiliate him into running cross country. He told Leonard in front of the class that his slim leggy build was perfect for distance. Competition
took strategy, brains. "You could be a contender, Leonard. You're a smart boy."

"I'll think about it," Leonard answered. Like maybe for the rest of his life. Just what he wanted to do every day, sweat himself feeble-minded running circles on the cinder track around the football and baseball fields. Then take showers with Bobby Trask and the other pituitary cases, like his older brother Tad, who seemed to think that getting a ball or a stick or your body across a white line was some kind of heroism.

In Latin class he read about Caesar crossing the Rubicon, the real thing, *real* life. Being smart was Leonard's free ride across the Rubicon. He realized then that it was not Bobby Trask, but destiny that had yanked him up by his shirt front. Settling the score was inevitable. It had nothing to do with winning or losing. It was a matter of self-respect. Silence, cunning and exile, according to the Roman General, were the truest allies. Agility, speed and strength were only foot soldiers in service to them. At this game he was a natural.

Bobby's goons colonized a back stairwell. A litter of cigarette butts, crumpled wrappers and empty cans marked their turf. The gang hunkered against the brick kneewalls, unfiltered *Luckies* dangling from sneering lips. They were an extra-curricular education for the mostly college bound, naive white kids. Among whom, Leonard knew, he was too shining an example.

"Hey, smart boy!" rings in his memory thirty years later. That's what they yelled most days. When they felt creative, you'd get an
inventory of lower body functions and organs. As if this would make you piss your pants.

Leonard shakes his head, chuckles, scans Welinsky's ersatz office. If they only knew. It's just happening thirty years late and at unaccountable times, especially after those damn tests five days before. You can't even feel it most of the time.

The nurse assisting Welinsky explained that the procedure temporarily disturbs the sensor nerves for the retaining muscles. She'd given him wrapped packets of sterile cotton batting to tuck in his underwear. When she showed him the diagram in the idiotic pamphlet demonstrating how to use them, she could have been explaining menstruation to her ten year old daughter. The pads are Kotex in fancy packaging. Marie, at least, has been good about leaving the male menopause wise cracks to him.

A brisk, clean shaven, balding stranger in a white lab coat marches quickly past Leonard. He has a folder tucked under an arm. He seats himself in the wooden springback chair behind the desk, opens the folder, glances at the head sheet, and asks, "Mr. Leonard Littlefield?"

Leonard waits until the man looks at him. "Present and accounted for."

The guy moves one of the fake gold pens on the deskset and cuts him an annoyed look. "Dr. Harlan Walsh." He adjusts a surgical clamp in the breast pocket of his lab coat and stretches his neck to either side. A muffled snap clicks twice. "Chief resident for oncology at Maine
Medical." Underneath the coat Walsh's charcoal suit is buttoned at the waist. A vest is buttoned below that to where three inches of Navy blue tie are framed by a starched white shirt collar.

Leonard looks at his watch. He knows the type. The Big Doc. Let this guy see right off Leonard Littlefield doesn't spook. Fifteen minutes, twenty at the most is all this guy will give him. Not enough time to start anything with the poker faced, fat ass yuppy. "So, what brings an oncologist to this part of town?" Bearing bad news, Leonard damn well knows. Poor bastard must have to do this five or six times a day. Turn anybody into a bureaucrat.

Walsh leans back in the spring-back chair, fingers tented together below his chin. "Dr. Welinsky asked me to evaluate the lab results from the uroscopy and biopsy." The overhead lighting reflects off the sheen across his forehead. "He's told you by now, certainly. The tissue removed from your prostate contained malignant cells. I'm here to spell out what we're going to do."

Leonard shifts and the leather-backed chair creaks. The cotton batting in his pants suddenly feels damp against his crotch. "No," he says. "I mean, Dr. Welinsky never said... He just gave me another appointment." He waves weakly back toward the waiting room. "He said... or I thought it was... routine... a follow-up." His face is clammy, his tongue thick.

Walsh lifts a cloudy x-ray out of the folder. A bright hard line snakes through the lower area of clouds. He taps it with the fake gold
pen where the line ends. "This is your problem, right here. And from now on I'm in charge."

Leonard feels a dull cramp in his lower abdomen. The first sign. Can't let those continue or they get painful. He excuses himself to the bathroom, saying he'll be right back.

"If you'd like, Mr. Littlefield, I can offer some Valium. This is probably difficult for you."

With his hand on the doorknob, Leonard looks at Walsh. The smug bastard hadn't even read his history. "How about fifty miligrams of I.V. Dilaudid instead, Doc?" Walsh purses his lips. "Then you could tell me you killed my mother, and I wouldn't care."
Chapter 3

The rear shocks in Leonard's '83 Datsun pickup had gone soft even before he'd overloaded it, trucking boxes and furniture down from Marie's Portland apartment to Moodys Harbor. Holes rotted through the rocker panels funnel drafts around Leonard's ankles when he nudges it over fifty.

He'd wanted to unload it before the rust got terminal. Some high school dropout would cough up a thousand for a junker like this as long as the drive train wasn't too noisy. Lay on the Bondo, some paint, mud tires, maybe chrome stacks if the kid has a job. Then beat the shit out of it, clawing up the muddy woods roads around the Harbor. Instant manhood to these kids in the Harbor's fishing families.

Leonard had had to keep it though. The eighty bucks a whack he paid half of each week for counseling made a big enough dent. He couldn't talk any loan officers into stretching his credit thinner for new wheels. Most any dealer offered him for it was five. "Service Representative," their name tags said. Amateur barber and tooth extraction would be more to the point. "The credit history and collateral isn't there," they'd say. "Not enough on paper anyway."
The envy of the enslaved. They'd give him their card, and Leonard would give them his back, C.P.A. printed after his name. You could see them kicking themselves as he walked out. Someone as smart as him, of course he knew how to keep most of his income off the books.

And he had only one more course to take before the C.P.A. was real. He showed Marie the forms he had to fill out to take the class. But he hadn't told her he couldn't swing the tuition with what they were paying Tricia for counseling.

The potholes in the Post Road back to Moodys Harbor irritate the pressure in his bladder. He feels he needs to urinate, and knows he doesn't. Leonard tries to picture the small piece of tissue the urologist sucked from his prostate five days ago. A pink slip of skin stuck in a refrigerated file with a number taped on it to reference a computer index. The same number some medical student will scrawl on his toe tag some day like a prescription. Then the guy will zip up Leonard's body bag and wheel him into cold storage, his organs rotted to leaky sponge by cancer, his blood a brown stain along the gray lining of his veins, his penis and abdomen surgically laid open layer by layer by some sardonic professor before a circle of intellectual twits, the pieces carried out in heavy-duty red plastic bags printed with sharp warnings.

"Smart boy," Bobby Trask hissed at him, passing in the hall. "You don't know shit, and I'm gonna teach ya."
The slice of frog brain squeezed between glass plates and dyed red his freshman year in high school. He and Lucinda Parsons took turns at observation, sharing notes, their hips brushing.

The bulging fist-size bulb of the wasps nest caught his eye in November that year, after winds blew away its cover. Entranced by the force inside, Leonard flicked the papery fringe on the bottom. A distinct warning rattled: Life! Danger! Revenge! Here was fruit ripening with pain over the winter. It was charged like the loaded gun he felt inside, skirting Bobby's turf. He had a weapon. In imagination he pitched it at them dozens of times. It was sweet to him and noble—the balance of Bobby's sin with this retribution. Destiny awaited.

Leonard pulls into his parking space behind the old rooming house that has been partitioned into cramped apartments. He and Marie share a second floor walkup. "A more healing environment" is what they'd said to each other. A view of the ocean, a smaller town, neighbors, quiet streets.

Her new burgundy Camrey sits under the century old flowering chestnut. Probably planted when men sailed gaff-rigged ketches out of Moodys Harbor. With nothing but handlines they'd pull up enough cod and haddock in a day to keep a family comfortable winters in a big house. Nature provided. A man could make a livelihood. A woman would respect him, need him, keep the house, the kids. There was balance and purpose.
Marie would be dabbling with her water colors. And he would tell her... what?

They'd known the next day, Walsh said. Welinsky hadn't told him? "A procedural delay," Walsh said, never apologizing. They wanted to get started. "Further prophylactic measures," is what he called it. Not just the normal surgery. But nothing radical. In and out in an hour, both procedures. Then the routine chemo follow up, but with something new the FDA just signed off on. This part Leonard won't tell her. He wants to make the decision. He's got himself this far, god damn it.

The Big Doc told him that a recently developed course of low level chemotherapy, in combination with an orchiectomy—the surgical removal of the testicles—would afford us—"us" meaning Leonard and them—greater certainty of a long term remission.

"We don't talk about 'a cure' any more, Mr. Littlefield." Studies show that testosterone production neutralizes the efficacy of their new chemicals. Jesus, the gall of that guy. So the choice is between that or high doses of the longer-used variety with the standard side effects—hair loss, depression, immune suppression, bleeding, possibly secondary tumors.

"We want to offer you a better alternative," Walsh said. "Something with less risk." That cheery fucking assurance. "We have a lot invested in you now, Mr. Littlefield." He must be about Leonard's age and chief resident for oncology at Maine Medical. "You're in much better physical condition than most of our other long term remissions." That's what Walsh called him—their long term remission. Theirs. "We
don't talk about a 'cure' any more. This is more a problem of management, so to speak. Silicon implants are available now. Once the incisions heal, you'll look and feel exactly the same. And some men do manage an occasional erection afterwards."

Thrilling, Leonard wanted to say. Let's hope it doesn't metastasize to my tongue. Or do they have implants for that too?

"A nearly perfect target for this new treatment," Walsh continued. "Don't get me wrong, Mr. Littlefield, there is no magic bullet in this business. What's most effective is application of a broad spectrum of treatment."

Leonard wanted to ask him what color his fucking BMW was. The secretary had a handful of pamphlets waiting for him. They were splayed like a straight flush on the creamy counter top when he stopped to schedule another appointment. Line drawings of a penis, the urinary track, the walnut sized culprit at the base of the bladder. The print was big enough to read across the room. "Living With Cancer," "Your Prostate and You," "Chemo-Therapy. Some Common Questions."

The bitch had known from the minute he'd walked in who he was and what was what. He pointed at the pamphlets and asked her, "This is your idea of confidentiality?"

Leonard uses the side entry to his and Marie's apartment. It's a weathered wooden stairway hammered together at a door cut off the kitchen to meet town fire code. He likes the give and shiver of the
spruce frame. It's too grained with waterstains and dry rot to hold paint any more. He tosses the pamphlets on the kitchen table, runs some water and bangs Marie's copper bottom kettle against the faucet.

"Helloo?" comes from the livingroom.

"Yeah, hi," he calls softly. "I'm back." He leans over the sink looking out the kitchen window. Their view. Roof tops, second floor bathrooms, a patch of blue between the trees when the tide's in, gray when its stormy, green when the tide's out, silver under a moon. Instead of a T.V. they could get binoculars he told Marie. His and hers. Like their bank accounts.

Behind him he hears her stop at the entry from the livingroom by the door of the bathroom that separates the two rooms. "Did I ever tell you about Bobby Trask?" he says without turning around. "He was this hood when I was back in high school. We had a run in." He turns to her, smiles, dazed still by the light from the window. "The way you always say men do. He was bigger, faster, older than me. It was the first time I ever had that gut sense of what was real and what wasn't. I saw him today."

Her long dark hair pulled back, knotted roughly in a purple ribbon, Marie cocks her head and searches his face. "You saw who, Leonard?" She glances at the pamphlets on the table, then quickly away. Her nose quivers almost imperceptively.

Even in the old jeans and his brown checked flannel shirt that she wears when painting, her body is alive for him. The simplest movement cries life, desire, warmth. She tucks a loose strand of hair behind her
ear, crosses her arms, leans against the refrigerator. Her head falls back against the white enamel. She’s waiting for him, comfortable. That way she is after working with her water colors afternoons. Not like the disparate arm flinging gestures and torn voice she gets more and more when they’ve circled the wagons over some rift about money, the apartment, his business. Lucinda Parsons.

Leonard enjoys looking at Marie. The quickness of her feelings alive in her face. He knows she likes him to talk. "Bobby Trask was my first taste of that real world my Old Man kept warning me would catch up with me some day. He was the first person I ever wanted to hurt. Funny, I had no qualms about what I wanted to do to him, only about getting caught."

She looks at him with curiosity. "I remembered once when we were in Tricia’s office, and I wanted to tell you," he adds, not quite getting it straight. Lucinda Parsons had actually jogged the memory eight months before. But he couldn't tell Tricia or Marie that. Information traceable to Lucinda Parsons would not have been welcome or much helpful to his standing at the time. At keeping track of lies he was pretty experienced. It's what would make him a good accountant some day. Even if most of his business was still figuring other peoples' taxes for fees that were off the books for both of them.

"I saw Bobby coming out of a doctor's office up in Portland."

"What did they tell you, Leonard?" She's always encouraging him to talk. "What did the urologist say?" She moves to brush her hair back again but stops. Her full lips, olive skin, rounded face, dark eyes all
contract. The calm she carries from her painting shrinks off like loose Saran Wrap. This is where, Tricia says, Marie needs to work a little harder. Crossing boundaries.

He looks back at her as if to say, Wasn't I talking about something else?

"I'm sorry, Leonard. I've been worried all day. I need to know too."

Leonard lisps his tough guy Bogart impression from the side of his mouth that always makes her laugh. "Well sweetheart, Big Lewie deals me a full house, see, with only a jack showing." He nods at the pamphlets on the table. "So I'm thinking, this could be a setup, and I don't wanna get in too deep before I can--"

"Leonard, you don't have to joke for my sake. I just want to know."

"Then Lewie, cool as a cod on ice, with only a ten showing, he calls in my hand. So me, I wanna see what this guy's made of."

"Leonard, please. What happened?"

"So I up the ante, turn over my hand, and tell him he's gonna hafta be good to step outside with this guy."

Leonard points at the pamphlets and says, "So Big Lewie, he turns over his hand and says, 'Read'm and weep.'" He turns around and looks out the kitchen window. "They're nice up there about losers. They're going to let me work it off over time. A little blood here, an organ there. Some experimental chemistry now and then. He tells me if I play it
their way, odds are fifty-fifty I'll be around long enough to get mugged or join the ranks of highway fatalities."

Her lips are trembling when he looks at her, tears forming in the corner of her eyes. He never knows what to do when she's going to cry. "Those doctors don't know a fucking thing about me," he says bitterly, and feels his anger coming. "This clown wants me to be one of his conservatively managed cases. Strictly volunteer, of course. He checked, and since I don't have insurance, grant money will cover the procedures. But only as long as I do it their way. The Big Guy says an assistant's already working up a paper on me for the journals. Everybody's doing their homework. We're going to be famous."

"Leonard, please." Marie is rubbing her face with her fingertips. "I want to know what you're going to do."

More of Tricia's strategies. You need to learn to be direct about what you want, Tricia says. Leonard turns his back again. "It's all there in black and white. The real world. Even the illustrations. You want it straight? Read'm and weep." Then he shuts up.

Marie thinks Leonard doesn't talk enough. He holds out on her purposely. So let her think. Some kind of punishing thing Tricia dragged out of her around the controlling disregard daughters get in a traditional Italian family.

"We should talk about this with Tricia," she says to his back. "The appointment's at five." He hears her pick up the pamphlets and return to the livingroom.
The appointment. As though he needs reminding. She and Tricia Burokowski, MSW, a couple of mental health evangelists. "You don't sound like you operate with much hope of anything turning out well, Leonard?" Tricia had told him about four hundred times.

He'd wanted to ask, "You ever think of working this thing door to door?" But smiled and shrugged. "Hope or no hope, tomorrow always comes. Keep your expectations low. That way you're right more of the time."

"That's what's most important to you, Leonard? Being right?"

Marie always had to jump in. "Hope isn't needing things to turn out the way we want or think we need them too. It's realizing, no matter how things turn out, they still make sense, life is still good."

Tricia smiled at her.

"That the answer teacher was looking for?" Leonard asked. "Was that right?"

He'd heard it all before, the kind of thing Marie said when he'd been railing on the news or foaming over political and environmental problems in the most remote reaches of the planet. "Platitudes like that," he said, "are grounds for justifiable homicide, or at least divorce."

"You don't have to worry about being divorced, Leonard," Marie replied. "As long as you can barely support yourself, there isn't likely to be a marriage."

"Have I ever suggested," he said, "you ought to pitch your comfy little meal ticket?" Tricia raised a hand, but Leonard was rolling. He pointed at Marie. "Don't worry about sanctioning our relationship--such
as it is—in the eyes of family, church and state. I know well enough that risk isn't what life is about for you."

"Oh right, you talk about taking risks," Marie said. "But you don't know the difference between that and vanity."

Tricia stopped them and asked them to back up, look at what they'd said. "You appeared to be hurt by what Marie said, Leonard. Can you be more direct with her about how you felt?"

"What for?" he asked, and slumped in his chair. Hadn't he made his point? "What for?"
Chapter 4

Marie paints vivid landscapes. Layering, puddling, splashing luminous colors—cartoon like at first glance. But look at them long enough and they sort themselves into planes of light and depth that Leonard never sees in the actual topography. Under sunlight her paintings glow with the same light as autumn trees. As though the spirit was momentarily trapped exiting through the surface.

So Leonard listens to her, sometimes even wishes she were right. He'd like to see what she sees. To be as receptive and pliant and warm as Marie must mean something. In his better moods he lets her have her magic bullet and keeps his mouth shut.

It's all right with him actually: both her mail order income and these warmed-up leftovers of Marie's childhood Catholicism—what he calls her "New Age fairy tale religion." Her voice is tranquil when she talks this way. Her lower vibration soothing.

How astounding it was/is, the first time and almost every time, to physically enter the warm wet velvety folds of her from whom that faith and softness issues. Even if, when he analyzes it, it sounds childish to him.

"You won't find hope out there in your real world, Leonard, no matter how far back you look. We have to find it within ourselves in the moment. That's the purpose and the meaning you're always looking for."
The real world. How would her platitudes play where people sacrifice and work hard to pull their lives together only to find they have cancer? Leonard doesn't ask. Their discussions about the real world never bring them closer.

Four years ago Marie answered his ad in *The Portland Herald* offering free-lance help with income taxes. She was divorced six years from a Boston surgeon. Comfortably alimonied too, Leonard saw, in return for single-handedly raising two children. She'd sold a few of her delicate impressionist water colors, and completed illustrations for a children's story book for Little Brown. She wanted help figuring the income into the alimony.

He'd factored it out as wage labor on the basis of a rough time estimate. Then showed her how, after the cost of materials and labor, "in real world terms," her extra income tallied below minimum wage. So she wasn't obligated to pay taxes on it, only a little Social Security.

He'd held out the completed forms over his plank and cinderblock desk in the roughly refitted warehouse he lived in Portland. She'd looked back tight-lipped. "I didn't ask you what my time is worth. And I'm not paying you for anything other than factoring my income. Do you want to do that, or do I need to go to somebody else?" She'd told him several times since that she doesn't want to hear his advice about anything other than what she specifically asks about.

Eight months of counseling has taught him, if nothing else, to keep quiet about what she does with her paintings and mail-order income. Tricia's hokey psychologising and stupid echoing techniques have taken
some of the heat off him for the affair with Lucinda Parsons. So he's played along.

He told Tricia their first visit, "What I did or didn't do wasn't the problem. Getting caught was." She looked back at him blankly. "Hey, you said you wanted this honest. I told you the truth."

That's what he told Lucinda Parsons too when she'd said Bobby Trask still lived in Moodys Harbor, and reminded Leonard of when they'd started high school together. The problem wasn't what he planned to do to Bobby. It was culpability. Open aggression would bring school disciplinary action. Not to mention detonating Bobby's quantum level retaliation. Leonard told Lucinda that he'd pictured himself wrapped in barbed wire, and roped by his feet to the bumper of Bobby's polished black Malibu. Those empty gray eyes glistened in the rearview mirror.

So Leonard had contented himself with thinking about the wasps' nest and visualizing Bobby puffy with welts. In the meantime Leonard endured the backstairs idiot insults through the winter and early spring. Silence was his ally. He waited, sensing rebirth drawing near.

By spring Bobby had galled other guys into confrontation. Bloody noses, a swollen cheekbone, a swift kick that left a boy sprawled in the hall. The warning blows were always public. Bobby's proper business, like evening a score, was always a private matter. Or so the rumors went.
Openly, he and his goons lifted lunch bags out of hand, demanded loose change, snatched term papers, dispensed unchallenged shoves. All of it was delivered without rancor. And mostly to guys like Leonard: smaller, thinner guys, uncoordinated class dips whose hands waved like cattails from front desks, who talked up a teacher, won class debates--smart boys.

"Oh, but you were a smart boy, Leonard," Lucinda had said enthusiastically. "I always thought you, of all people, would make something of yourself." They were in bed the third night in a row. And she laid her palm against his chest when he tightened and snorted, "Yeah, that's Leonard all right. A smart boy. And, as you can see, a smashing fucking success." He waved at the open packing boxes around the cramped bedroom.

"I better go." Lucinda pulled away. "It's late. Dennis knows I don't stay around the E.W. when I don't have to."

Leonard folded his arms and stared at the ceiling. "You're the doctor."

And then the phone rang. He waited for the second ring, afraid it was Marie calling down from Portland. But no, there was only one person saucy enough to call after midnight. He picked it up. "Hello, Aleena." He held up his finger to Lucinda and mouthed, "Sister," hoping she'd stay until the call was over.

Only at odd times would Leena call. Off hours from off places care of some off-the-map would-be resort switchboard. Katmandu, Ho Chi Min City, a Pacific Island no one ever heard of. She'd be scouting some
find for the travel packages she and her lover, Marcy, sold. To agoriphobics, Leena said.

Margaret and Leonard joked that Leena had inherited the wonderlust that had kept their father, and the rest of the family too, moving from one Navy base to another until finally settling in Moodys Harbor. Leena claimed she was just doing what Leonard and Margaret did in their heads standing still. She'd gotten farther away than any of the rest of the family. Nobody ever knew where she was. And none of them spoke about brother Tad at all.

The still girlish voice cut through the static on the other end, skipping hello. "What has six legs, five arms and three heads, none of which know what the other is doing?"

The answer was always the same: a Nepalese, Viet Namese or Balinese or whatever-ese travel agency run by two local drug dealers and one Communist amputee from some American police action, all of whom want both her body and her American dollars badly enough to lie about the beauty and convenience of their shabby accommodations, and put her up a few days free of charge in the bridal suite of some god-awful fleabag bamboo and chewing gum hut with hot and cold running cockroaches and ripped mosquito netting stitched from old U.S. Army parachutes, and meals scavenged from the month-old plane wreck on the local runway.

"Sounds like a great place for you and Marcy to run a diet tour," Leonard said. Aleena was the only one of the Littlefields to be overweight.
"Yeah," she shot back, "or a rehab." Which is how they loved each other. Aleena is fat, and Leonard's a drug addict. Her being "a big girl" is a useful sales tool in the Pacific rim. "Big American women are kinky to Asian men," she'd said.

She hadn't called for nearly three months. "In Pago Pago just talking with an American woman is so foreign to businessmen that it's like dangling the promise of U.S. military aid from one hand and the threat of military intervention from the other. You never have to do anything. These little brown guys love just being seen with you."

Regardless of time, they'd talk for fifteen or twenty minutes. And they'd always say they loved each other before hanging up. Which was awkward this time with Lucinda Parsons dressing and straightening her hair while Leena and he talked. Lucinda slipped back into her white lab coat with her name tag pinned to the breast and her stethoscope hanging out of the hip pocket.

Leonard didn't want Lucinda to leave before he could explaining about his sister. So after the "I love you too, Leena," he jumped their favorite line and held up his finger again to signal Lucinda he'd only be a minute. "Well, so long, fat ass," he said.

The laugh at the other end was deep and warm. Leena graveled her voice. "So long, fat ass," she said back.

The Old Man's favorite punchline, Leonard explained to Lucinda. The only joke he remembers his father ever telling. Leena never tired of it. "There's this Navy Ensign dozing behind a desk at the motor pool,
see." He wanted to explain this even though he could see Lucinda wanted to leave.

"You have to picture my father in the fullness of the Littlefield arrogance. Here's a guy who had worked his way up from the bottom to Commander on a Navy frigate. To him, see, anybody stuck at Ensign was an example of the ultimate shiftless employee.

"So the phone at the base motorpool rings and the voice on the other end commands an inventory of the vehicles in the garage. The Ensign scratches his behind, digs in his ear, pulls on his nose and acts like the half-wit the Old Man thinks most people are, especially those who have worked for him. 'Let's see,' the Ensign says. 'There's a few pick-up trucks, an armored personnel carrier, and three of them jeeps those fat ass Admirals ride around in when they run out of paper to push in their cushy offices.'

"A spluttering sound comes from the other end of the phone. 'Excuse me, Ensign, but do you know who you're talking to?'

"No sir. Can't say I do.'

"I happen to be one of those... those Admirals you mentioned.'

"Is 'at so?'

"Yes, Ensign.'

"Well tell me, Admiral. Do you know who you're talking to?'

"Another spluttering sound. 'No I don't.'

"Well then, so long, fat ass.'"

Leonard told Marie this joke half a dozen times. She'd insist every time she wanted him to act out the voices just the way his father did.
Then she listened as raptly and laughed as wholeheartedly as she might have with one of her children.

Lucinda looked around for her pocketbook, and buttoned her lab coat. "I've got to go, Leonard," she said. I don't know when I'll see you again. I'll call."
Chapter 5

The tea kettle whistles. Alone in the kitchen, Leonard spoons instant coffee into a large mug. So there's the appointment with Tricia at five. Check in at the emotional switchboard. Tricia shunting their mixed messages. "How do you feel when you hear Marie say she feels like you're shutting her out, Leonard?"

He stirs the brown water and sniffs at the cup. "Oh, I don't take it personally," is what he'd like to say. "Yeah, see, I grew up with a couple sisters and my mother always complaining about something. So I've always known you just have to let them get it out. Doesn't bother me most of the time." Best to play along. Pay the price for his little indiscretion.

He stirs in a second spoon of coffee and takes a sip. "Your affair," Tricia called it. She always had to say that several times, every session. "Your affair with this woman, Leonard."

But neither Tricia nor Marie knew anything about it really. They didn't want to know. When he'd tried to tell them what Lucinda brought back of himself, of Bobby Trask, of his family, Tricia had interrupted him. "What's relevant here, Leonard, aren't the details of what you did, but why you did it. You need to keep focused on motives. You tend to wander from that."
He takes another sip of coffee, winces at the bitterness, and pours it down the sink.

"You and Bobby Trask, Leonard," Lucinda Parsons said. Their fourth night together in the apartment. "I couldn't tell you at the time, but you were my first live hero." That weary smile of hers, a doctor across the table. Her hair turning gray, but her brown eyes still bright. Unlike Marie, Lucinda used makeup, a lot actually. Someone good and hard-working and dedicated to helping others, and who wanted to look like something she wasn't. "But you were so unapproachable," she added, "so alone and off by yourself most of the time."

He wondered why she wouldn't dye her hair too. "I've found middle age a good time to make up for lost opportunities," he said. And by the way she laughed, he knew she wanted what he wanted. This is one of the seven deadly sins? Leonard remembers thinking that. With Lucinda under him, with her in his arms afterward, when she'd closed the door behind her. This is a sin?

Lucinda Parsons was a girl of beauty, brains and social standing lightyears outside the trajectory of a bony awkward smart boy from some Navy family. On track for pre-med at fifteen, she acted flattered when, in a crowded hallway one afternoon, Leonard asked to borrow her father's *Physicians Desk Reference*. Researching his Biology project, he told her. The physiology and treatment of bee stings. Her curiosity seemed personal, so he elaborated on what he'd read already about stressing the kidneys and liver with edema. In the enjoyment of his
words he must have appeared too content. Could Lucinda Parsons really like him? Him, skinny lanky Leonard Littlefield?

Bobby Trask and one of his grunts, Richie Cole, spotted them, stopped, looked them over. Leonard kept his back turned, trying too hard to ignore them. Bobby shot a loud, "Ha!" reeking of tobacco and tooth decay. He hung his arm around Richie, who smiled like the dumb mutt he was. "Hey, smart boy, you really like her, huh?" Bobby said.

Leonard cut him a warning look--his most daring since being collared in the cafeteria. Bobby saw he was hooked. "Hey, it's okay." Gesturing with his free hand, placating. "I know how it is. Treat her nice, you expect her to put out, right? So don't worry. She puts out." He patted Richie on the head like a pet dog. "Richie here can tell you."

Leonard laughs at how clear his memory is of those two teenage hoods. Their black leather jackets, tight jeans, T-shirts bulging with cigarettes. Their faces smug sneers daring him to say something back.

The wasps' nest, he thought. The question was no longer if he would do it. But when, where, how.

He paged through Dr. Parson's P.D.R., adding to what he'd found in the library's health texts. The women's self-defense manual he'd found in the stacks he'd slipped out under his coat.

Clipped at its stem, the gray papery nest slid neatly into his lunch bag. Afraid the buzzing inside would force open the folds at the top, he taped it shut. Angry electricity rattled, each winged creature a searing piece of shrapnel imbued with the fulfillment of his dream. For three
days he ambled from class to class. Lunch bag in hand, he was enveloped in the culmination of his plan, his fantasy, the deed already accomplished. He was a luminous green planet orbiting a black hole.

Lucinda told him that Bobby Trask had taken over his father's lobster business after flunking out of neighboring Waterford Mills High. Leonard remembered catching sight of him a few times at the town wharf, but had always figured him for a fisherman anyway. What he didn't know was that, several years later Bobby had turned the business profitable to a degree few of the old farts around Moodys Harbor could imagine. He'd borrowed an unspeakable amount of money during the recession of the early eighties. With this he built two sixty-foot aluminum trawlers, and kept nine men and three refrigerated trucks busy air-shipping frozen fish and fresh lobster overseas.

"Rumor has it," Lucinda told Leonard, "he's made more the last ten years than I'm likely to make my whole life. Even with both of us working." She stopped, looked away, rolled up and sat on the side of the bed with her back to him. "I'm sorry, Leonard. I don't know what I'm doing here."

He stroked her smooth bare back. "Maybe you're looking for something you lost somewhere, like me."

She looked at him then. "I haven't lost anything, Leonard." She held out a hand to his bedroom. "This isn't something I lost. I grew up and left this behind twenty years ago."
Their bedroom. His and Marie's. Their new apartment. A more healing environment. It was his and Lucinda's last night together.
Tricia Burokowsy sweeps her bright multi-hued cotton dress grandly around her knees and crosses her legs. "You have to allow Leonard time," she tells Marie for the umpteenth time. Nothing half way about how Tricia dresses. Pure show biz. But foxy still beneath the New Age glitz. "Leonard needs time. Reticence was his survival tool."

He wants to ask her if they can't get this on tape so Marie can play it back the couple days before her period starts. Coming to Tricia's cozy office-- with its over-stuffed furniture, lavender pillows and low toned art prints-- just to hear the same shit over and over is boring. It's also costing.

"Leonard's former drug addiction, that self-destructive streak, his self-enclosure--this is all his Littlefield perfectionism punishing him for never measuring up." She fingers turquoise beads at her breast. Adjusts a heavy metal amulet dangling from an ear. "To feel safe his little boy needs what he never got growing up: patience and time and acceptance."

"And good sex and strong coffee," he adds. Eight months they've been wading in this drivel. He's paying half, so sometimes he says what he wants. It's all part of the show anyway, judging by her costumes.
Tricia smiles at him, demonstrating patience, as though maybe he'll catch on sooner or later. He knows the look. The high priestess in Our Lady of Perpetual Communication, bestowing her blessing on a favored altar boy.

Tricia's problem is she thinks he's the straight man. Two words could change the whole charade. If he thought it would do anything except cost more money, he might say it. Prostate cancer. All he'd have to do is say it out loud, the way he can see Marie wants him to. Then they'd all be off on another crusade for months, looking for Leonard's long lost little boy. The kid kidnapped supposedly by the Ottomans of real life. Leonard doesn't need to the sob story today. Especially not at eighty bucks an hour. Maybe some other session. Maybe later.

Their hour's only half over. Tricia always tries to wind it up on time and with some little festive pep talk. Cheerleader goes pro. Home girl saves world. Leonard would be happy for half of Tricia's action. Making eighty bucks an hour he could probably afford to take her schlock seriously. He could even afford being sick or taking a vacation.

"And Leonard has been so much more open about sharing the last few weeks. It's important to his little boy that he receive acknowledgement for that too, Marie."

What the heck, the self-help paperback jargon seems to calm Marie down. It's taken some of the heat off him, too. So he plays his part. Even uses Tricia's stupid echoing techniques trying to keep the premenstrual scrimmages civil back at the ranch.
But there's this old fantasy tugging. He'd wanted to tell Marie about Bobby Trask in Tricia's office—somewhere he could make some sense of it without having to slog through the usual paranoia about how he knows what and who he's been talking to. All the baggage Marie unloads since learning about him and Lucinda Parsons, probably from just about everybody in town. How could he have forgotten what Moodys Harbor was like? Had he been gone that long?

Tricia is outlining her "needs assessment checklist" for Marie. Insisting on the progress she's seen in them both. "You tend to work harder at discounting your gains," she's saying to Marie, who is biting back her protest.

Leonard wonders what gameplan Tricia's working today, and how long Marie will wait for him to say something about the diagnosis. They're making so much progress? Why all the good news? Tricia's earrings cast back warm light from her silk shaded lamps. More props. Just like the Big Doc at the Multi-Imaging Facility, only shooting a different angle. Teacher's lesson plan sounds a little ragged around the edges. "Leonard sounds so much more relaxed than he used to, Marie." The fix is definitely in.

Growing up in his house good news was always a dodge. The laundramats his father bought and ran since retiring from the Navy were thriving. Just a little cashflow problem. The Old Man was nosing around supposedly for other prospects. Talking with the bank's lawyers about refinancing. They never talked about his cancer.
"He is receiving treatments," Leonard's mother told him abruptly. He'd wait until they were apart from the others, the same way he had growing up, when he'd asked for help getting his breakfast. His mother was always in such a hurry. Everything he needed was always such an inconvenience. She had other things she needed to do. Leonard had asked about his father's ashen complexion, the small patches of his scalp showing through. "Your father is going to be fine. He's always been a responsible man." Then there was someone she'd needed to phone.

So much of his childhood seems hidden beneath a creamy layer of clouds. Leonard thought of himself as flying at the family dinner table dreaming his single engine plane aloft, alone above dense white overcast. There was only blue sky, a white sun, thin air, the hypnotic drone of the engine. Nothing below the clouds was certain, except that soon he must take the plunge down through them, find his mark. Even his plane--the machinery thrumming around him--seemed thin, ghostly, disintegrating atom by atom, the engine bolts rattling loose, stripping their threads in the block. He was a veteran Kamikaze... in search of Navy frigates.

Calm with the certainty of fate--so the fantasy went--Leonard would suit up and slide into his plane. His fuel tanks held only enough for departure. A single massive explosive was wired to the plane's belly. The landing gear was useless. Fear drenched the enemy like smoky sweat at the thought of his approach. Tailwinds and searing sunlight would carry him softly over the turned up belly of the clouds, straight to his destiny.
The evening after he'd cut the wasps' nest loose he came to with his Mom's dried-out baked potato wadded on his tongue. To his left big brother Tad--two years older, four inches taller, fifty pounds heavier--grunted over his meatloaf. Scrolled dinnerware, monogramed napkins, ceramic trivits. The family seated erect around the heavy mahogany table. One hand in your lap, one to lift the fork. Everything in its place. But a lit fuse sputtered beneath it all.

Tad said, "Gail Bridges was dumb. She should've never told Miss Anthrax that Bobby Trask slid his hand up her leg. Typical girl." He looked at their older sister Margaret. "You can be just as cramped up as you want, Miss Daughter of the American Revolution. Gail Bridges should have handled the problem herself, without copping to Miss Anthrax,"--what the sports jocks called Miss Anderson, the librarian.

"Just like a girl," Tad grumbled, and eyed Leonard in the buffet mirror along the opposite wall to drill the meaning deeper. Clearing his throat and reaching for the ketchup bottle as cover, Tad hammered his heal down on the toe of Leonard's canvas sneaker.

"Like Gail Bridges expects Miss Anthrax, or what--maybe her Mommy and Daddy--to take care of her problems for the rest of her life?" Tad snorted. "I mean, what the... the heck." A half pint of bloody tomato blurted out over his half pound slab of baked ground beef. Tad sighed, knowing he'd earned at least a warning bark from the Old Man.

Little sister, Aleena, across the table from Leonard was always quick with a diversion. "You'd have had better luck teaching it to swim, Tad, while it was still alive."
Across from Tad, Margaret carefully cut and chewed her meatloaf. Her head was bent, lips pursed, eyes jumping between Mother and Father at either end of the table. Mentioning her menstrual problems, for which she'd been taking increasing doses of progesterone, was Tad's means of silencing her. Shorthand for more to come if she said anything back.

Margaret was graduating in a few months. She'd applied only to colleges in the Midwest. They had to be far enough away. She reached for her glass of milk, but withdrew her hand realizing she hadn't finished chewing and swallowing. An infraction of proper table manners the Old Man reminded her of frequently. Son of a bitch always had something to say, nomatter how good you were. And nobody was better at being good than Margaret. Her kind of perfectionism wasn't skin deep. It reached from her othodontry all the way down to her endometriosis.

Bolt upright in his arm chair at the head of the oval table to Leonard's right sat the proverbial he. When Leonard talked about his father in counseling, Marie looked vaguely embarrassed. She said she couldn't see Leonard, with his manners and dreaminess and sarcasm, sitting next to the angry Doberman he's described.

Leonard checks his watch. Twenty minutes. Marie and Tricia are off on some tangent about the patriarchal religion, family, culture they grew up in. When it's his turn, Leonard wants to ask Marie when he's ever acted like he's in charge of anything. More and more it looks to
him like other people are taking charge of his life. Tricia, for example, Chase Visa, the IRS, the Medical Multi-Imaging Facility.

Chancing an end run around his breach of table manners, Tad shammed one of the Old Man's pet lectures. "What do girls think, that somebody is gonna take care of'm and protect'm their whole lives, or what? Sooner or later you gotta fend for yourself, or you take what others are dishing out." He waved his fork in Leonard's direction, flinging a few drops of ketchup against his sweatshirt. "It's dog eat dog in the real world."

His knife and fork poised mid-incision in the usual Tuesday night gristle, the Old Man scanned Tad's bland acne blurred face, then the red puddle oozing on his plate. "The correct verb for the assertion of a fact, an action, or one's own will, young man, is not 'got.'"

Regardless of subject, their father's voice was a monotone threat. Unless he'd cornered you at ten or eleven at night, after five or six fishbowl size gin and tonics. Then he'd want to tell you what life was really like. Supper times he was only mildly lubricated. "The proper use for the word 'got' is the past tense of 'get.' Which means to obtain or receive."

Leena rarely resisted the opportunity to salt a wound, especially if it might sound like she was trying to defuse the tension. She nodded at the spot on Leonard's sweatshirt. "An interesting color, Tad. But a little, oh, too bold for Leonard. Why don't you try it on the wallpaper. Might provide some interesting contrast to Mother's beige paisley."
Leonard held his breath, chewing slowly, hoping enough saliva would flow to wash down the wad of potato. He exhaled when the Old Man reached for his half gone martini. With his tie loose and jacket and vest unbuttoned, he looked about as relaxed as he ever did. In-charge, but for him, relaxed. He'd been talking with the god damned layers that afternoon about refinancing. Hence the young exec look. His lips were blue though.

Leonard talked a lot about his father in the sessions with Tricia. More than about himself. Picturing the Old Man's canine temperament to his right at the dinner table, the axis of his solar plexus still tilted left. Away from the left hand that, often enough, left the right side of Leonard's head burning for what the Old Man called his smart boy remarks.

"Was this what they called patriarchal?" he wants to ask. Or, "How about cancer? Is that patriarchal?"

But if he'd learned anything the last eight months, it was that women had a way to make you pay for indiscretion. Getting out from under the weekly expense looks like a better option than paying more processing fees. He wonders how long Marie will sit on her obvious impatience. Cancer, he taunts silently. Go ahead, say it. I dare you. Cancer.

Margaret and Tad hadn't brought up Bobby Trask's behavior in study hall by accident. People talked around school. They'd heard about him and Leonard.
"I mean, who could I ask?" He'd explained to Tricia and Marie about eating dinner. About Bobby Trask the clouds were still clearing. Sometimes it took him days to pull together childhood memories. "Even if I was in some kind of trouble, who could I ask about it?"

As a high school freshman at his father's dinner table how anybody felt was not the agenda. It was tactics. Brother Tad had hoisted a worthy challenge. He'd openly insulted older sister Margaret by sneering at her story of about Gail Bridges. Then he'd hooked the Old Man on his phony sense of propriety, slathering Mother's usual overcooked supper with ketchup. The unprovoked assault on Leonard's toes made for a score so nearly perfect, it begged for retribution.

In his imagination Leonard dipped the white bandana in blood and bound it around his forehead.

"Thoughtful of you to donate your brain to the primate institute, Tad." Leonard nodded to the red tide on Tad's plate. He casually reached for the salt and, under cover of Mother's chintz table cloth, knocked his brother's knee hard with his own. "But they'll probably find it's too deformed to be any use."

"You might try putting it in a plastic bag and selling it to the Red Cross," Leena added.

A three-month-old football injury still bothered Tad enough for him to wrap his knee in an Ace bandage for track practice. Leonard's return volley seriously upped the ante. "Or you could use a trough to eat it out of."
Tad winced at the blow, but caught the cue. Ten years the Old Man had been telling them what ungrateful boors they were. About screwing around at the dinner table he mostly stayed aloof. But sometimes he'd stop chewing and draw a bead down his nose on you for a full thirty seconds--his warning shot. When the nervous hush at the table was thick enough he'd continue chewing, swallow, roll his fork in your direction. "Wait till you get out on your own and see what the real world is like, sport. See if you think you're so funny then."

His favorite allusion--the real world. You don't have any idea what it's like in the real world. The way he'd win his arguments. You didn't know... Wait till you found out... When you were working in the real world...

His other favorite phrase, when one of them would venture an answer to some problem--like what Gail Bridges should have done about Bobby Trask--was to ask, leaning on his armrest and sucking his teeth. "So sport, is that your magic bullet?"

"Yes, granted," Tricia is responding to Marie now. "Leonard tends to go off into his own world." They both smile at him, and he tries to look engaged. "And, yes, his charm can be diverting when he's in the mood. But the question for you, Marie, is about learning to keep the focus on yourself. And you've made such strong gains."

Fifteen more minutes of team spirit, listening strategy, win-win tactics, and they're out of here. Out another eighty bucks too. "Can you acknowledge, though, that he's shown some progress in these sessions?
Leonard needs that too." Sounds like coach is getting to the end of another losing season. Still working her angle.

At the Old Man's dinner table the game was only about evening the score. But without getting singled out and asked to leave. Tad eyed Leonard in the buffet mirror, chewed with his mouth open, jabbed Leonard hard with his elbow, too hard, and snorted as though laughing.

At her end of the table Mother rustled nervously, and faked a poorly disguised evasion. "If I were Gail Bridges, I would just stay away from that Bobby Trask and keep my mouth shut." Careful to put her knife and fork across her plate, she cleared her throat and pursed her lips--signs of an impending lecture on proper demeanor. "Everyone knows what a troubled young man he is. There is simply no point--"

"Fug with Bobby," Tad mumbled at his plate. A little ketchup drooled at the corner of his mouth. "You best be fast."

Tad's foot-in-mouth disease was never long in remission. Dropped the big one. Almost as good as Leonard had planned.

The wind rose from the right. "I beg your pardon, young man?" The Old Man put down his knife and fork. The implied threat of their father having his hands free hadn't made much of an impression on Tad since he'd hit six four and two hundred twenty pounds, and become the only junior in Tenantsport Regional High with letters from three varsity sports.

Besides, Leonard sat between them. Careful to keep his back straight, he inched out of the line of fire.
"I beg your pardon, young man?" the Old Man barked again. "What did you say at my dinner table?" Clenched fists poised either side of his plate, their father leaned forward taking aim with his face.

Tad slouched over his meal, rested his forearms on the table, stirred the scarlet stew on his plate with his fork—all grand infractions of the rigid etiquette hammered into them since they were old enough to hold a spoon, all intentional. "For Chrise sake, it's somethin everybody says at school. 'Fuck with Bobby, you best be fast.' The guy runs the hundred and the hurdles faster than--"

"I don't care what the guy does, young man. Do you understand that?" The Old Man's sinuses whistled in the silence. "I will tolerate no locker room talk at my dinner table."

"Doug?" Mother pleaded softly, and adjusted her place setting. "Doug, let it go, please?" She disapproved of such language no less than the Old Man. But she was more strict about appropriate times and places. The dinner table was neither for confrontation. "Sit up, Tad," she said weakly. "We'll have words with you later."

Older sister Margaret had half-chewed food stopped in her mouth. She watched from the sides of her eyes. Leena looked at their Mom, silently pleading. Leonard reached for another forkful of potato, and offered, "Yeah, it's just something kids say around school... Dad."

But he extracted payment by bumping the sore knee once more, the balance of which was too great an owing for Tad. "Yeah, you oughta know, fuckwad," Tad snarled, and knuckle drilled him hard on the shoulder.
The Old Man's deep canine growl rises from memory of the next few seconds. Following his father's voice is his Mother's higher appeal, "Doug, no. Oh no, Doug, please? Not tonight."

Tad's low rumble is a steady rhythmic undercurrent, "What the fuck, you fucking think you're gonna fucking fuck with every fucking thing I wanna fucking..." His plate flips over on the table, his chair crashes back into a shelf of nicknacks. Tad and the Old Man are writhing on the dining room carpet by Mother's chair, locked in each other's arms. The Old Man's elbows are pumping like a two-cycle engine, and he's bellowing something Leonard can't quite hear in memory, unremitting as a Doberman in a dog fight.
Leonard's armpits are clammy, breath short, abdomen locked when he thinks of this. He can't remember how it ended except that Mother was crying. They were all icily silent, drifting off to their rooms. Tad and the Old Man didn't look at or speak to each other for days. But each strutted around as though he'd made his point.

Leonard secretly admired his brother. It was beautiful, he'd told Tricia and Marie: that plunge into self-destruction. "It had symmetry. For a moment in my blankness around the charge, I was up and soaring next to him. Side by side, fuel half gone, Tad and me leaving miles of uncharted sea and sky between any hope of return, closing in on the bright flash that lay ahead. Beautiful."

Later that night Tad's voice came through the darkness of their shared bedroom, across the invisible line on the wide pine board floor that he'd drawn with his toe years before to mark what was his, what Leonard was never to touch. "Fuck with Bobby, shithead, you better have somebody on your side. Any dip in the freshman class could tell you that."

To this day his brother is judgmental of Leonard, though more in a moral than practical sense now. Tad's proven himself helpful to others nonetheless as--of all things--a Christian Counselor. One whose sense of
destiny, like Leonard's, reaches far beyond his own life, if only in a narrow straight line.

Early in the sessions with Tricia Leonard told Marie what he could remember about Tad. The childhood abuse, Tad's conversion to Christian fundamentalism, his judgmental proselytizing masked as prayers before the infrequent dinners they'd share at Thanksgiving and Easter.

"My own brother," Leonard told Marie and Tricia, "whose life has delivered him the fulfillments I've wanted for myself--an attractive devoted wife, not one but two obedient sons, a modest but well earned financial security, a deep spiritual link to a larger reality--and we'd both still rather eat our own shit than acknowledge the jerks we were thirty years ago.

Tricia is looking intently at Marie now, demonstrating active listening. "I hear that you have some fears about my suggesting you might effect closure with some of these issues right now."

Night of the Psycho-Babble Zombies. Leonard told Marie they ought to work up a screenplay. Therapists secretly taking over America, infiltrating other countries. It would make a great horror flick. Everybody walking around with needle sharp pupils, heads cocked to catch feedback, getting clear about their stuff, their needs, their moms and dads.

Tricia is speaking to him now. She wants Leonard to look at his tendency to drift when others are speaking. "You seem only marginally interested in living in the present, Leonard," she says yet again. She'd
said it early in their eight months. "You're rarely all there and available for anyone."

So what else is new? A former wife and a few lovers had said as much in less caring ways. Marie just nods. "When you talk about what your family was like, I picture you fading in and out of the picture. They only knew you as quiet and dreamy. All they ever saw was your body. Your little boy was miles away in hiding. And he still is."

One of the dimensions his little boy slips in and out of during these sessions is what kind of lover Tricia might be, how she could babysit his little boy while he played with her little girl. He checks his watch.

"Your little boy never learned how to play with others, Leonard."

He wants to tell her not to talk like he's six years old. He's old enough to play doctor for real.

"The affair that you had, Leonard," Tricia says, and he immediately wants to change the subject. "That was simply another example of how your little boy breaks off and disappears from one part of your life into another."

"Little boy?" he asks her, and laughs. "Who's kidding who?" He's paying. He can say what he wants. "What kind of little boy dreams every night about driving a knife into his brother's heart while he's sleeping?"

Leonard remembers about Bobby Trask and wants to tell her. But Tricia is focused on the progress they've made made in working through their problems "with your affair." She has to keep saying that. "Your
affair, Leonard. That way you have of going off into your own world."

But she's suggesting now that they take time to celebrate work accomplished; maybe consider terminating for a while. Ten more minutes.

Leonard cut the wasps' nest lose the day after Tad's plunge into self-destruction. He'd been carrying the lunch bag bearing it for three days. When the lunch bell rang the fourth day, Leonard took his time getting to the locker room. Jules and Felix, two of Bobby's grunts, leaned against the wall either side of the open door, pretending not to see him. Rummaging in his locker until he sensed the room was empty, Leonard looked up. And there they were. Five of them ringing the entry way, Bobby in the center glaring at him. Jules and Felix to one side, Big Al and Richie Cole to the other. Just the way he'd pictured over and over, planning, hoping, dreaming. It was coming true--his first experience of life imitating art.

Bobby snapped his fingers, and waved a hand in Leonard's direction at Big Al. Bobby's way with insult: send in the dumbest, lamest, most pathetic of the bunch for bait, daring you to say something smart to light his fuse.

Big Al slouched over, scuffing his heels across the floor. He stuck out his dumb horse face and glared, his mouth hanging open. Leonard held out the bag to him gingerly, hoping Al would remember what he'd come for. Al snatched the bag and turned. Bobby tilted his head, and Big Al stopped to think. He turned back, laid his hand on Leonard's
chest and, as though careful not to hurt him, gently pushed. Leonard exaggerated the force, slamming the locker behind with an elbow, hoping the noise would satisfy everybody.

Glancing either side, Bobby nodded backward, jammed an unlit Lucky in the corner of his mouth, pivoted, and left. "You'll be hearing from us, smart boy," echoed behind.

"I'm counting on it, Bobby," Leonard crooned to the empty doorway. Destiny turned a corner and disappeared in the maze of ill lit halls where he could not see. "I'm counting on it," he sang softly.
Leonard had wanted to say good bye to Lucinda somehow. One more thing not on Tricia's agenda. Odd, how women, in their pain and self-righteousness, could be so oblivious of the other woman. What they could talk about was his naivete, his little boy running for cover.

Shortly after Marie had moved down from Portland, she'd answered the phone in the middle of supper. "It's for you, Leonard. A woman?"

"Business, babe," he said, forcing the jauntiness. "Just the beginning."

"No," he'd had to say to Lucinda. "I'm sorry, Dr. Parsons, we're in the middle of supper. Can I call you back a little later?"

"I don't think you better." Lucinda hesitated only second. "Good bye, Leonard. Good bye."

"All right then," he said a little too loud to the click on the line. "Uh huh. Yes, tomorrow afternoon. Fine, thank you. Yes, goodnight, Dr. Parsons."

Marie watched him. "Sounds like you've made some contacts already."
"She's from one of the old families. The town's pediatrician. Knew her back in high school."

"And you call her Dr. Parsons, a high school friend?"

Leonard pushed some rice around on his plate. "A little professional groveling. Part of the game. Gotta make'm think you need them. Same as any relationship."

"And you call her Dr. Parsons?"

"Sounds like prostate problems, Leonard," Lucinda said. He hadn't come to her office to tell her about his trouble urinating. He only wanted to say good bye. Tell her somehow that what they'd shared had meant something to him. He felt alive again. The chill autumn air was full of promise, the way it was for years with school starting. But sitting in Lucinda's examination room on one of her pediatric paper-lined wheeled stools, he'd gotten turned around.

Poised across from him in her white coat, her stethoscope around her neck, she'd asked how he was doing. Fine, he'd said, great. Except for this pressure in his bladder all the time. Maybe it was the white coat, Jesus. "You know, nothing major. A little Draino; maybe get Jimmy Googins to Roto-rooter the old pipes. You doctors charge three, four times what Jimmy does."

"You ought to have it checked. We've reached that age, you know."

"What age?"

"Well, the age where they've got your old friend Bobby Trask about down to birdfood and grass clippings."
"Pardon?" he asked. All he wanted was to say good bye. He'd donned his single charcoal suit. Even dragged the briefcase in as cover so Ellie St. Jean, Lucinda's old biddy at the desk, wouldn't gossip the way she did about everybody else in town. Then somehow the conversation had gone astray.

"For what he eats. His diet." Lucinda turned away looking annoyed he hadn't gotten her joke. "Doesn't seem to make any difference though. Everything just clogs him up."

She chatted pleasantly enough, professional, distant, as though instructing an obstinate client. Bobby had a triple by-pass at thirty-one. Everybody in Moodys Harbor knew. He'd been on medication ever since that probably left him impotent. He was Maine Medical's miracle child. The staff cardiologists had, strictly off the record, given him five to six years. He had no children, but was married to one of the Bridges girls from Tenantsport. All the ferocious energy that built him a business more profitable than anything else in town also apparently transformed most of what he ate into arterial plaque. So, in between driving his work crews, he'd had five or six minor heart attacks and as many angioplasties.

"Everybody's waiting for Bobby's big one," Lucinda said. "His doctors told him years ago if he didn't quit smoking he'd be lucky to see forty. They say he's made the last four or five on sheer spite."

"Lucinda," Leonard was confused. "I came to say good bye. How did we get off on this?"
She looked back at him steadily. "Everybody in town knows about him. Funny that, for as long as he's been a town institution, nobody will miss him too much. Except maybe the men on his payroll. Bobby never did anybody any real harm. And he won't leave owing anybody anything. I guess that's about as good as could be expected... for most of us."

"Can we see each other one more time? I want to get this one thing right, Lucinda. Just say good bye so we can keep what we shared."

"You know Leonard, Bobby's not going to leave behind too bad a record. Just a little too short." She looked at him steadily. "I don't have the time to relive mistakes, Leonard. This is a small town. We'll bump into each other."

She nodded at her wall in the direction of the reception desk. "Did you know that Ellie St. Jean lives in your building?" Lucinda smiled at him, her expression amused. "All the years she's been working for me, and I didn't either." She chuckled and shook her head. "Get your prostate looked at, Leonard. Don't put it off. You don't have that much time either."
"Leonard, we're running out of time," Marie says. "I'm sorry, but I wanted you to bring this up." She looks to Tricia who looks back at her with that focused gaze--her way of silently asking if you really want to pursue this. "I mean, don't you want to talk about your... Don't you want to say something?"

"Isn't what we're supposed to be learning here," Leonard shrugs, "how to take care of our selves?" He's got her now. "If I want to talk about something, I will. I don't need an invitation. It's my business, Marie. I'll talk about it as I see fit. Just like you and your finances."

"Well, do you think maybe I have some feelings about it? Maybe I need to talk about it?"

Tricia turns her chair toward Marie. Body language to Leonard for: time to slip out the back, Jack. "Marie, this sounds like another of those issues where your focus is all on Leonard again. You don't need to wait for him or ask his permission to talk about your feelings. Not about anything."

"Look," Leonard says, "this is my problem, right? It's no different from my financial problems, and I don't see you needing to talk about those. I'll handle it on my own time table. I just need some time, Marie. That's the truth."
Eying him skeptically Tricia says, "Leonard needs time, Marie. It's true. The real issues in his home always got lost in the rapid fire put-downs that passed for conversation."

Leonard looks at Marie and smiles.

"I told you the truth." Four times he'd insisted to Marie that no affair had taken place between him and Lucinda Parsons.

"It was Dr. Parsons, as I remember."

"I ran into her at my sister Margaret's yoga studio. I fixed dinner for us at the apartment. We caught up on old times. She went home to her family. Lucinda was an old friend and a business prospect, that's all."

"You mean Dr. Parsons?"

"Marie, the woman is married, a doctor. Everybody in town knows her. All we did was talk." Leonard held his ground, believing he was in the clear. After all, what had he done to her? It had nothing to do with Marie.

But Moodys Harbor is a small fishing town, and gossip is its second business. Besides, the only person he'd ever lied to for any length of time was himself. Marie knew what had happened, and she eventually made him say so. That's when he'd agreed to see Tricia, the couples' counselor Marie had talked about for nearly a year, and on whose services Leonard had insisted he would never, ever waste his hard-earned income. What there was of it, anyway.
"I told you the truth," he'd said to the Assistant Principal. "I was in the cafeteria eating my lunch." Which was true, much to Leonard's disappointment. In his mind's eye he'd seen his coup from a window overlooking the back stairwell: Bobby snatching the bag from Big Al, ripping off the top, too cool to even look first. Him holding the wasps' nest, paralyzed by recognition of Leonard's genius. The five of them scattering frantically, trailing clouds of starved hornets.

But the Assistant Principal had come to Latin class with his sleeves rolled up and tie hanging loose, looking like he'd been interrupted in the middle of housework. He leaned against the door jamb scanning faces, pointed a finger at Leonard. "You. Come with me."

"I was eating lunch at that time," Leonard said again. "With friends. I could give you names." He was disappointed with the cramped office, and the A.P.'s self-importance, unironed shirt, and boredom.

Not that he hadn't known their meeting would have to happen. Leonard had pictured a rambling dialogue between the two of them on the reclaimed back stairwell. They'd be kicking around ideas about the relative nature of right and wrong. Leonard would hint about the possibilities for future cooperative disciplinary action which the A.P., of course, couldn't openly endorse. But he wouldn't deny either a certain symmetry to this sort of self-regulation amongst the student body.

"Sure, I heard what happened to those hoods," Leonard said. "A lot of guys thought they had it coming. Why me? Who said it was me? Who?"
The A.P. wasn't impressed. Five students were in the emergency ward, two of them being held for shock. "Did you think this was some kind of joke? Think you're a smart boy, do you, Leonard?"

That remark soothed the fear in his belly. Almost ready to come clean for wanting credit for his work, Leonard realized suddenly that Authority would not, henceforth, necessarily be on his side. Being smart was not, in the eye of the law, being right. He'd done nothing. Simply let them take what they'd demanded. He was blameless, free. "I told you the truth," he repeated.

The A.P. exhaled, sucked his teeth, waited. Then he nodded at the door. "Get out."

So long, fat ass, is what Leonard thought.

Tricia is checking her watch now. Game time. She leans forward. "Leonard, you've been showing more willingness to reveal yourself recently. Your former drug addiction, your father, your regrets about your affair. I see strong signs of progress." She looks from one to the other. "I've thought you two should consider taking some time off. I'd like you to talk it over with one another. Let your present progress settle into normalcy."

Marie looks stricken. "I don't think--"

Tricia interrupts. "I'm only suggesting you think about it. You're both sounding so much stronger. You ought to do something to acknowledge and celebrate that. Treat yourself in some way. Make an event of it. It may give you a chance to test your abilities. With summer
coming, I need to make room in my schedule for my own family. You'd have my phone number and we could pick up again in September if you still feel the need."

Leonard reaches across the space between their chairs and squeezes Marie's hand. "Let's just think about it." He feels the cool clean draft of escape on the back of his neck. "Nothing's written in stone."

"What about your--" Marie bites her lip.

"It's the truth, Marie," Leonard says, eying her. "I could use a break too. I've got other things I need to take care of for a while." Even a cheerleader needs some time off. Build up the team spirit for the fall competition. So long, fat ass, Leonard thinks. He sees his father again, splayed with plastic tubes in the intensive care unit, his chest heaving each time the bellows on the respirator collapsed.

"Thank you," he says pleased. They all rise. "We'll let you know."

And so long, fat ass.
"Yes, I'm quite sure," Leonard says emphatically to Marie. He looks back at the young Chinese waitress. "The Whey Shang Schezuan Pu Pu Platter with three stars." You'd think two years of dating and two of living together would have clued her he doesn't like being prodded. "And another pot of green tea."

If Whey Shang is all he can afford for a night out, he will damn well eat what he wants. Marie is holding up the girl waiting on them, as though maybe the waitress doesn't have anything else to do.

Marie tries a joke. "Your mother always says," imitating his mother's low tobacco-roughened voice, "'Oh, but Leonard was always the smart one.'"

"Oh yeah, that's Leonard all right." Pressure is building in his bladder. "Running about two decades behind in the rites-of-passage department. But smart? Shit yes. Smart enough to know what I want without somebody coaching me." He empties the stainless tea pot into his cup, raises his eyebrows and looks at Marie as if to say, Your move. Then says to the waitress, "Thank you, that will be all for now."

She must have brought along the pamphlets intending to talk with Tricia about them. Leonard guesses the Chinese waitress is a college girl earning tuition money in her spare time. She smiles at him, uncomprehending. The stories she must tell at the end of a night. Leonard thinks Marie probably looked a lot like this when she was younger, the high cheek bones, the uncertain smile. But that's not something you say to middle age women. Especially one who doesn't trust you to begin with. And not without reason. "It'll be the Schezuan Pu Pu Platter for me," he says again. "And I'll take it with two stars instead of three." He nods toward Marie to grant his compromise. "And don't forget the green tea please?" He holds up the empty tin pitcher.

The urologist warned Leonard before the CAT scan and surgical exam about tea and coffee. Caffeine is a diuretic. Too much of it turns your urine acid. It would irritate the nip in the urethra where Welinsky biopsied and cauterized his prostate through a urethral catheter. The thing had bled a little for the day after, and he'd had to go back and have it recauterized. Not a pleasant trip for somebody who can't handle prescription painkillers. So Leonard has been careful since then.

Marie takes out the pamphlets and fans them on the table.
"I know, I know." Leonard holds up a hand. "I read the damn things. This is our night out, remember? We're supposed to be celebrating? One meal can't possibly hurt. Besides, it's been five days."

The Big Doc, Walsh, had warned him about spicy food. The pungent components are volatile and absorbed in the blood. They're excreted largely by the kidneys, also irritating the urinary tract.

"They say to keep protein to a minimum during treatment, Leonard."

"So who's in treatment?" He holds up his hands and looks at the waitress, remembering Bobby Trask from that afternoon, then Lucinda Parsons as a freshman in high school. Marie slumps back, her chin tucked in disapproval. "Look," he says, "it's been almost a week. Our nights out together are infrequent. Tricia said to make it a celebration."

Mind your own fucking business, is what he'd have said eight months ago. Maybe he's become too self-conscious about Marie's disappointment if they don't orchestrate their conversation toward making love at the end of what Tricia calls their "designated quality time together."

Another body function in noted decline. Possibly due to middle age, probably because of the tumor, the procedure, all those gloved hands prodding and poking, the tubes up his penis. Jesus. Leonard hasn't had a servicable erection for weeks. Something nobody's said anything about. Not the docs, not the pamphlets. Maybe you're supposed to figure that part out on your own?
The waitress smiles at Marie and taps her pad with a pencil. "So one Ye Sing Sweet-and-Sour Eggplant, and one number two Schezuan Pu Pu Platter."

She brings the second pot of green tea. While Leonard pours another cup for each of them, Marie asks, "Leonard, why didn't you say something to Tricia about... your diagnosis?" She warms her hands around the small ceramic tea cup on Whey Shang's red and white checkered oilcloth table cover. "Why couldn't we just talk about it?"

Leonard gulps his down, scalding the roof of his mouth, and reaches for the tin pot again. "Just what I need, one more doctor telling me what to do, and lightening my pockets for the privilege. You think maybe cancer would respond to better listening skills?"

Marie looks away, her mouth ticking at the corner. "It would have been a good place to talk about... our feelings."

"Ah soo, yang and yin." Leonard holds his chopsticks angled down against his lower lip like a long thin mustache. His caricature of Confucius that Marie always laughs at. "Welinsky and Walsh want to cut it out and dose what's left with poison. You and Tricia want to talk it to death."

Marie props her chin in a palm and traces the squares on the table with her finger. "And what do you want, Leonard?" She looks up. "You haven't said." Her voice grows phlegmy. "You haven't said anything yet."
With her dark hair loose down around her face, Marie's black pupils flash deep in the impenetrable night Leonard has always seen behind them.

"What I want?" he says more softly. What he wants is to be able to tame her electrical storms with sex, the way he could when they first met and he'd moved into her apartment. He wants to take her unwilling into his arms, and feel her soften and give into the strength in his shoulders and chest and hips. He wants to press the once hard reliable fact of his desire against her that had kept some of the balance of their need for each other unexplained.

The pressure in his bladder is insistent, and the back of his throat is catching. Leonard slides sideways out of the booth under the red tassled overhead lamp. "What I want," he says standing, "is to take a leak without feeling like a cheering squad of health care specialists is holding my dick for me." He turns toward the men's room, then back. "I'll try to make this quick. Sometimes it takes a while."

The green tea is strong. Over their entrees Leonard lets it loosen the dam that holds back the memories of his family. He's repeating a lot of what he's told Marie in counseling, trying to get at what's behind it. She seems grateful enough just to vibrate for a while. "More tea?" she asks.

He glances down at his lap to remind her of what the urologist said. The pressure in his bladder isn't uncomfortable. But he doesn't want it to get that way again either. "What the hell, if I'm going under
the knife. I'd be better off with a plastic one anyway. Maybe I can get one with batteries and a built in vibrator."

"I can't tell if that's yes or no, Leonard." She refills his cup anyway. To what Leonard was talking about, she adds, "Your mother always said you were smart enough to keep your mouth shut, even as a little boy."

Leonard gazes into the tiny teacup and inhales the clean bitter woody steam. His Pu Pu Platter is only half gone, too spicy, even for him. "Grow up eating dinner every night between two bad tempered Dobermans, and the noise in your head becomes what Tricia calls, 'a reasonable option' to conversation."

Marie is practicing patience now, something that doesn't come naturally to her, but urging him to continue. Her head cocked, eyes at him sideways, enticing. And in his right frame of mind, she is enticing—he doesn't hang around just for the hormonal squalls. "Besides," she says, "I don't believe you. You never were a little boy. You were born with a balance sheet and calculator in your hands. You always wanted things to add up."

A familiar gaff. Marie didn't cut her teeth verbally jousting. She doesn't know the rule about not repeating yourself. Leonard's the straight one supposedly. She's the artist, the spontaneous free spirit. He's joked from the beginning about their being the archtypal technonerd/earth mother duo... precisely because they don't fit the mold.

But he always feels a twinge of resentment at this inference that he's rigid and unimaginative. Him, the middle-age teenager with his
entry-level income, kicking off his fifth career. A predictable cost projection he has never been. He wants to keep it light, though.

"No, really. That's how it was." He snaps his chopsticks like pinchers over the bright red spare ribs. "My mother grew tired of having to say everything two or three times to me. She had my hearing checked by an ophthalmologist. He sent us to an allergist. Mom asked them both if maybe I had a brain tumor.

"But you know doctors. They told her I had an allergy to house dust, and gave me antihistamines. Something to keep my sinuses dry and Eustachian tubes from backing up. I don't mean those weenie little green things you get over the counter either. These were the old brown bombers the size of peanut M&M's that Hoffmann LaRoche only sells in Mexico now. An open prescription.

"Just the thing you trust a ten year old with, right? Talk about spaced out. I'd pop one any time my nose itched. And good old Mom, she'd renew the prescription without blinking. To her they weren't any different from vitamin C."

Marie beams dreamily at him across the table. She hasn't heard a word he's said. She's drumming her fingers in time to the cover of "The Fool on the Hill" coming from the tinny P.A. system.

"Ah soo." Leonard says in mock pidgin. "You speaka my music? Famous hit for Yokohama shakuhachi quartet. Christ, the years I sang that tune night after night in bars. Singing totally drunk on my ass to people even drunker than me." He shakes his head. Marie looks away. She probably thinks he's making fun of her. Maybe he is.
What the hell, neither of them brings up Tricia's suggestion to terminate. "Dinner was my favorite time to vacate," Leonard says, changing the subject. He tells her again about the recurring daydream he'd drift off in over dinner. "I can't remember when it began, but by the time I was fifteen the pattern was detailed, the action blocked, the feeling reliable. I was a Kamikaze pilot. Over and over."

Then she's looking at him again, happy probably just to vibrate a little. Who can figure women? "Remember I told you a little about Bobby Trask and me?" he asks. "I saw him this afternoon."

She focuses on him now, curious. "When we were in Tricia's office, I meant to tell you," he adds, not quite getting it straight. Lucinda Parsons had jogged the memory eight months before.
Chapter 11

"I told you the truth," Leonard says and points his finger to illustrate how he'd stonewalled the Assistant Principle from beginning to end.

"I told you the truth," he'd insisted vehemently to Marie eight months before. No affair had taken place between him and Lucinda Parsons. "I told you the truth."

Marie has been silent the whole time Leonard has been telling her about him and Bobby Trask. Through the meal, and now on the way home. She looks out the side window of the Camrey when he tells this part--how insistently he clung to his lie in the A.P.'s office. He's driving Marie's car, one hand on the wheel, one gesturing between them, catching up with the memory of his run-in with Bobby.

There were other disappointments about his handiwork as well. But thirty years of drifting--his magic bullets hitting wide of their mark--has given him a better appreciation of how reality always falls short of vision. "I'm surprised actually by how closely life did imitate art in this instance, at least up to a point," he says.

"I caught sight of Bobby and Richie and Felix in the hall next day. Their faces were flushed and puffy with bee stings. Big Al and Jules had suffered allergic reactions and were still being watched in a local hospital."
Leonard is animated telling this finally. All the things he couldn't tell Marie in counseling: about Lucinda Parsons those first two weeks alone in Moodys Harbor, about why he needed to move back here in the first place. It's all contained in this. If she can only hear it.

"See, I knew this wouldn't be the end of the story. Remember, I was a smart boy. For all my dreaminess and isolation, I understood Bobby wouldn't fold in the face of superior intelligence. I knew his payback would be swift, public, painful. I'd done some homework on the problem and guessed his rage could work to my advantage.

"I actually got a little euphoric when the greaseball pulled up in front of me in the hallway that afternoon. He was flanked by Richie and Felix, all of them pink water-filled balloon cartoons of themselves."

Leonard roughens his voice and jabs the Camrey's steering wheel with his finger. "'You and me, smart boy,' Bobby croaked, completely backed up with body fluids. 'Just you and me, we got a date.'"

Leonard had needed all his strength to keep his knees from buckling. But he'd practiced a lot, wanting it to sound casual. "A few months late, Bobby, don't you think?" he said.

Bobby's swollen face cracked with a smirk that obviously caused him pain. He jabbed Leonard with a finger. "Behind the football field. Tomorrow, dickbrain. You got that?"

"Tomorrow, Bobby? How about right now?" Leonard batted away the finger. This wasn't bravado. It was arithmetic. Before him stood the textbook contra-indications of emergency doses of cortisone, antihistamines and benedril. The three of them could have been
illustrations right out of Dr. Parson's P.D.R.--edema, fever, drowsiness, sluggish coordination. Added to Bobby's pack a day of Luckies, plus the ten pounds of water he carried to flush wasp venom, time was on Leonard's side.

He pressed his advantage. "You're afraid of me, Bobby."

The hood stuck his pink face into Leonard's, his mouth ticking with craving, eyes glassy with adrenaline. "What?" he croaked. They were motionless, each suspended in his own disbelief, a living sculpture of adolescent male vanity.

Leonard swallowed dry air. His Rubicon. Only one direction. He unfroze the lump in the middle of him to deliver his rehearsed clincher. Had to sound like an afterthought, obvious. "You're just a chickenshit asshole, Bobby. And you're wetting your shorts right now because you know everybody's about to find out."

In memory, but as in a slow motion dream, Leonard can still see his hand reaching out all by itself and pushing Bobby Trask on the face. There are only a handful of other moments in Leonard's life as slow and vivid--a minute on stage warming up two thousand people for King Crimson; holding his only son, perfectly formed, unearthly quiet, stillborn. Each is a window through which he could both be himself and see himself at the same time. He was an instrument in a moment of intense sympathetic vibration. He had pushed bobby Trask on the face. He had done this.

Then there was the familiar fleeting blackout.
"Do you have to go into all this now, Leonard?" Marie asks. "The pamphlets say you should avoid emotional stress. The muscles in your abdomen will work better relaxed. You need to keep your spirits up." She grips her pocketbook with both hands and looks straight ahead.

"Sure," he says stiffly. "Okay. We'll do calm, relaxed. Serene even."

They drive the winding, bumpy Post Road for five minutes in silence before Marie gives in. "I'm sorry, Leonard." She touches his arm. "You have a right to talk about what you want to."

What he remembers next is explosive physical energy. Feeling alive the way you do only once or twice in a lifetime. Him pounding down the stairs, bursting through a door into the schoolyard. Bobby in pursuit, not far behind. Leonard mentally intoning his do-wop mantra, "Oh yes. Please, please, please." Over and over and over.

Down the block, the first leg of the planned run, the elation of release and deep breathing and the pastel spring sunlight opened an edge of euphoria new to him. He checked to see Bobby wasn't falling behind. The guy had actually closed on him. His eyes and face were riveted to Leonard's, legs and arms pumping. Even bloated and pink and
spotted, Bobby Trask was filled with a singleness of purpose that Leonard has since learned is rare in this world.

But along the back streets between the high school and the athletic field he was born forth upon his vision. Destiny awaited. Not in back of the grandstands. Not in darkness. But in light. In the full glare of lengthening days and admiring schoolmates.

The plan was simple and clean. The double S shaped route through the back streets would, after a near mile run, take them up the back entrance to the football field. The track team would be working out, as well as the girl's field hockey team, maybe a late gym class, and some of the sports jocks' groupies.

This had to be public. The fifty yard line was the stage. The choreography would be swift. That he'd never thrown or taken a decent punch in his life had never made the script. Everything rolled forward as planned.

Leonard could hear Bobby's breath gurgling and choking behind him as they pounded up the gravel entrance to the field five yards apart. Closer than he'd thought the jerk would be, but still there--precisely as he'd planned, wanted, seen. Leonard remembered the illustration of the eye stab from the women's self-defense manual he'd stolen from the library. His secret weapon. He wanted Bobby's eyes. He'd practiced on his own image in the bathroom mirror. He knew by heart what this would look like. It was real life as he knew it had to be. His eyes.
Midfield Leonard danced to the right and spun on his winded pursuer. He easily ducked Bobby's first stumbling left jab. This could be fun, he thought, fingertips tingling. Exhilarated by the mile run and the sweet unfolding of revenge, he spun away again, this time from Bobby's reputed right hook. Leonard taunted, "So, this must be what you had--"

Bobby's leather boot shot out of nowhere up into his crotch. Leonard can remember not being able to draw breath, his arms and torso twitching around frozen lungs. Next is Bobby's fist plowing slow motion through the amber spring air straight for his face.

Fleeting internal lightning flashed between chin and crotch. The light went out, and gravity became iffy.

Unaccountable minutes later, a porthole opened in the utterly mindless blackness. He recognised sky through the shadowy surround of the track team. The coach's cocky voice echoed somewhere out in the blue beyond, "Ah, he's gonna be okay. Just folded like a piece of toilet paper."

Leonard rolled to his side and, with a moan, puked up his coveted lunch on the coach's new Nikes. Somewhere in the dizzy ether above he heard his brother's voice, matter of fact and certain of himself as he's ever been. "Damn if that wasn't the cleanest K.O. I've ever seen. J'you see that? One shot. Damn. Fuck with Bobby."

Leonard can feel himself wound up and rattling all this off as he parks Marie's Camrey. His mind is running ahead of him now, careening toward something large and dark and solid up ahead in the darkness.
And he has to pee again. All that tea. He's had two of those little stabbing spasms that get worse if he ignores them. Marie jumps out of the car as soon as he shuts off the engine, unwilling to sit until he finishes the part about his family.

"Excuse me, Margaret." Tad was unusually polite, the way they acted when company or relatives were at the table. "But could you please pass the chicken to me?" He kicked Leonard's foot under the table.

Margaret and his mother were hashing out the likelihood of Margaret's winning a National Merit Scholarship now that the Coast Star had published her test scores ranking third in the state. "They take into account other activities as well." Mother was enthusiastic. "The D.A.R. award will count very heavily in your favor, and your art work too."

Tad cut himself a polite mouthful of dried out, over-baked chicken, raised it carefully in front of him, toasted Leonard via the buffet mirror, and chewed slowly as though with great pleasure.

The Old Man's sinuses whistled rhythmically to his right. Leonard rarely looked at his father any more. None of them did. He was sallow and hollow cheeked from the first rounds of chemo-therapy. His hair was falling out in patches on the side of his head. And, according to Mother, he was working much too hard for a man being treated for prostate cancer.

About the swollen purple bruise spreading under Leonard's chin from his cigar size bottom lip, Aleena asked if maybe he didn't want to
put it in a sling. "It looks like something that would be more appropriate for dessert, Leonard."

Smirking at him in the mirror, Tad added softly, "Yeah, and maybe for breakfast you'll want some Grapenuts to go with it, huh?"

Leonard spooned dabs of instant mashed potatoes and margarine very delicately between nearly closed teeth, and sucked Vanilla Metracal through a straw. The truss that Dr. Parsons had fitted him with pinched, but eased the throbbing in his lower abdomen.

He was weightless, adrift, completely untouchable downwind of the tiny white codeine pills Dr. Parsons had prescribed. He'd known not to waste time taking one or two of the things. He'd chased down six of those suckers on a bottle of beer he'd swiped from the Old Man's liquor cabinet.

At the time it seemed a fair exchange for his embarrassment; and they began the secret but one true lasting love affair of his life. Something Marie would never want to hear. Something the whole team of specialists handling his case would never understand. He was better at asking for what he needed than Tricia would ever know. When the time came, he'd know what to ask for and how to ask for it. And if the doctors wouldn't give it to him, he knew how and where to get it himself.
Waiting for him to find the right key and unlock the apartment door, Marie asks testily, "This is the man you saw in Portland two days ago?" Her back is turned. Her tone of voice is flat, a diversion. She's probably afraid he'll fall silent. "At that x-ray place, or whatever it is?"

"The Medical Multi-Imaging Facility. It's much more than an x-ray lab. I told you." As much as she likes the vibration of a little conversation, Marie rarely stays with the substance of what he says. He gets off on tangents, she claims, and makes everything sound so complicated and threatening.

"It's so confusing," she says. "Why can't you let go of it. Make up your mind to be happy?"

The way she has, she means. A rich husband gone to a younger woman, two children off making lives for themselves somewhere, a check in the mail every month. What does she know?

Marie puts the teapot on to boil as soon as they enter through the kitchen. "Would you like some camomile before bed, Leonard?"

He's told her any number of times that stuff tastes like warm piss, so he doesn't answer. "I asked around about him this afternoon," he says, again not quite getting it straight. He heads into the bathroom.
Then through the half open door, "I meant to bring it up with Tricia. But she got so caught up with this thing about our progress."

"About who, this Bobby guy? In counseling?" She sounds irritable. "You won't talk about having cancer, but you want to go into this kid stuff?"

"It was important to me, Marie," he yells over his shoulder. "It was my first run-in with real life." He can't relax enough to pee, and gets another spasm, sharp this time. Jesus, and sometimes it leaks out by itself.

"Real life, Leonard?" She calls back, taunting. Which gets him mad. He comes to the bathroom door forgetting his pecker's in hand. Marie holds up her hands, her eyes rolling around the cramped kitchen where they're standing. "What do you call this, a fairy tale?" Then she sees him and stops.

"No." He's too emphatic, pointing at her again. "If you remember, we called it a practical step toward the realization of our dreams. We were looking for a healing environment, remember?"

"Leonard, are you all right?" she asks gently and nods at his pants. The end of his penis is stained with a little blood, and the hand he'd pointed at her has some on the fingers. "Oh shit," he says, and backs into the bathroom.

This time he sits down. You visualize a mountain stream, fresh water burbling over a granite stream bed, a slow warm sun loosening the abdominal muscles and hips on each exhalation. He gets the telltale burning sensation that means it will come on the next breath. And he
realizes how tense he's become the last hour. Slowly now, breathe. In, out, again.

His urine's dark, and there's a little spot on the pad in his underwear when he takes it out. No big deal. The Big Doc said a clot might let go and cause "a temporary incidence." He can handle this. You breathe deep, slow, long. Listen to the wind in the back of your throat. Fill your lungs with white light, with life. Now visualize, the way they'd taught at the rehab. The energy flows down your arms, down into your hips, surrounding them in warm white light. Sinking deep into the dark core below your navel. Feel the pulse there. Count your breaths.

Maybe flushing a clot; nothing to worry about. The life energy is still strong in him, healing, teaching him. He can do this by himself. No problem. He's okay. Relaxed now, relaxed.
When he comes out, Marie stands at the stove with her arms crossed, waiting for the water to boil. "It's all right," he says. He wants to comfort her, to keep calm himself. "The doc said I could expect a little bleeding, remember?" The pads. He hadn't tucked another one in.

"That was five days ago, Leonard. He also said no caffeine."

"He said cauterizing a biopsy down there is nearly impossible. Marie. What, is this supposed to be my fault now? Christ, it couldn't be any worse than what you go through every month."

"What I go through every month isn't life threatening." She looks away, her lower lip trembling.

Leonard waits until she looks back at him. "I wonder sometimes if it is to me."

Marie looks relieved and pours her tea water. She asks softly, as if to apologize, "I'm not that bad, am I?"

"You don't think we're paying eighty bucks a week just because my little boy can't find his way home? If I've learned anything that last eight months, it's that it takes more than one person to screw things up as good as we have."
She puts a cup of tea at either end of their small kitchen table. "So I guess this guy you were talking about, this Bobby Trask, is still around?" They sit down at the kitchen table opposite each other. Leonard takes a sip before remembering he doesn't like this kind.

The upshot was the A.P. traded a neighboring town their prize punk for Tenantsport's. Maybe he thought a fresh start might change the malignant tide of Bobby's hormones. The hood was out for good, friends said glancing at Leonard. But they never said anything more. Not: Way to go, guy. Not even: You all right, Leonard? You okay?

None of the things he'd seen and heard in his vision.

Fingering the notification of Leonard's three-day suspension, the Old Man looked him over, jaundice from the chemo in his eyes. "And you're supposed to be the smart one, they tell me. You with your test scores, your advanced track classes, your term papers, your 3.9 average. You're the smart one, Leonard?"

He shrugged and felt the truss pinch. Best not to do anything to boost the Old Man's blood pressure. Listen to his bullshit and boogie worked fine. Leonard had two weeks worth of those little white suckers. So long fat ass, he thought.

"Think you're some kind of smart boy, don't you, Leonard?" They both waited. "Well, I'm not going to even try to get you out of this one, smart boy. Taking the consequences might teach you some responsibility. I only hope you learn something from it."

"This is your father?" Marie asks.
Leonard raises an eyebrow, heaves a sigh. "No, it's the fucking Easter Bunny."

The usual sloppy violent death of the closet drunk still waited for him a year up the road. Leonard had been the one who pried the half gone pint of bourbon out of the crumpled cracker box of his father's van in the junk yard where the state police had dumped it. The doctors treating him for what they called secondary tumors in his prostate, lung, brain, liver had told him that he absolutely could not mix alcohol with the medication he was taking.

He'd winged a bridge abutment at sixty miles an hour, sailed through the windshield, airborn a second, and landed fifty feet away.

Before visiting in intensive care, where his father gurgled away his last two weeks, Leonard braced himself with mouthfuls from the bottles left in his father's liquor cabinet. Drunk one night, he'd pointed his finger and barked at the nurse precisely the way the Old Man would have. "If my father had wanted to commit suicide, he would have done the job right."

He'd been furious the nurse had even asked.

Three years of unfiled finger-soiled tax returns lay doodled amid the debris on his father's desk in the cellar at home. Going through his papers, Leonard and his brother drank up the half gallons of gin and bourbon their father had stashed behind boxes, in desk drawers, between the rafters in the cellar ceiling. They picked through the papers, shook their heads, mumbled to each other, "So long, fat ass." Then showed each other what they'd found.
Marie looks at him quietly now, grim but listening, no longer trying to stop him.

The Assistant Principal caught Leonard's eye passing by his open door a week after the suspension. The voltage of the A.P.'s glance stopped him. This self-important wrinkled looking bureaucrat sitting behind his desk. They eyed each other long enough for Leonard to feel his pulse throb several times in the bruise on his chin. "You're one very lucky smart boy, Leonard," the A.P. said matter of fact. "Someone might have gotten seriously hurt."

"I didn't say anything, just turned and walked. I owed him nothing."

For all her patience around the diagnosis, Marie does not want to hear the rest of this. She knows where he's headed now. "Leonard, please. You're upsetting yourself. The urologist told you to avoid stress. It makes the muscles down there contract. Besides, I can't do this any more, not tonight. Let's save it for next Thursday, for when we see Tricia again."

Leonard's told Marie several times. He's in search of the one thing that will redeem all the aimlessness of his life, something he can stand by without the least trickle of doubt, die proudly in the midst of if he has to. Something that adds up, something with a certainty of completion--the transmutation of imagination into real life. And, hence, into meaning and purpose that others might see and cling to after he's gone. Something besides this sorry endless keeping count and not
knowing that drains people over the years and leaves them not caring, not seeing, not living even. Only existing, keeping the body alive and everything properly inventoried in hope that some day--some day--it will all add up to something. That's what people really wanted, what they'd pay you for--accurate records for the big audit in the sky.

"Your magic bullet," she calls it. "Keeping count."

A sharp spasm in his lower abdomen sparks his anger. What higher faith could there be? Her with her fairy tale procreative vision of some fuzzy all-encompassing loving goddess. "I want to live in reality," Leonard insists. "I want to make something real." As though this emphasis clearly distinguishes his pain from hers. "That's all these doctors and counselors are doing--helping us keep track of our stuff. There's no difference."

"Now you are turning cynical."

"I am not a hateful or bitter man, Marie. As much as I fear and loath men like Bobby Trask, the news of his heart problems left me sad. I felt sorry for him."

"We should talk about this with Tricia."

"Oh right. That's always your answer: Pay somebody else to fix you. Her with her six year old's vocabulary and her motherly instructions and her lavender pillows and expensive art prints." In fact, the news about Bobby let not the slightest bit of life's justice or meaning or balance penetrate the emotional armor in which Tricia claimed he was still earnestly jousting with life. "What does she really know? All
she has for our eight months work is the bare outline. She doesn't know me."

"Leonard," Marie pleads now, "I want to finish this with Tricia. We can set up an extra appointment. You're getting upset. The doctors told you--"

"The doctors don't know a fucking thing about me either," he shouts back. "All they know is what they read in books and see under microscopes. But they don't know anything about *me*. They don't want to. Not one of those fuckers was the least curious about what I eat or what I do to stay healthy. All they care about is whether or not my dick bleeds.

"I stopped wasting my breath on them after leaving their fucking treatment center six years ago. Now they tell me I can be one of their stellar conservatively managed cases. Do you know what orchiectomy is, Marie? Do you know what their idea of conservative is?"
Chapter 15

Marie tells him it's okay. Whatever he decides. She likes all the other ways he has of stimulating her sexually. She'd rather he be alive a long time than potent and hungry right up to the short lived end. You know, they're both forty-something anyway, and moving, faster all the time it seems. Menopause isn't that far off. And there's a lot more to loving a person than--

"Easy platitudes to slip away with," Leonard says. But he knows she cares. For all of the glib sexiness that drew them to each other in the beginning, she ought to at least be willing to admit her disappointment and anger over this too. It isn't like he's a little kid. "I want to live in reality," he barks at her. And he feels another sharp twinge in his abdomen.

"I don't know, Leonard." Her voice trails off and she looks away, weary with him now. "There's a point where I just don't know anything any more. And so I take the next step into the darkness and admit that I don't know what I'm doing or where I'm suppose to be going or why."

"The fucking doctors," he's shouting again. "They don't know either." He doesn't want to shout, and tries to contain his voice, grinding his teeth. "They don't know what it's like to live without your balls. All
they know is that some asshole somewhere will sue the shit out of them if he gets sick again after they treat him."

It isn't Marie he's mad at, but he stands and points at her, his knees shaky. "It's like some mechanic changing your oil, who offers to change your transmission while he's at it. You know, just so you don't run into problems down the road. They don't fucking know. Smart boys, all of them. Smart boys who don't know anything."

Sitting across from him, she looks strangely blank for his outburst. Nodding at his pants, she says softly, "Leonard?"

A small dark stain is spreading next to the lower part of his zipper. He feels the warm wetness in his underpants.

Marie looks into his face grief stricken. "What are you going to do?"

He backs into the bathroom. "I don't know."

"I'll call the hospital, Leonard."

"No! Don't. Let me think about this," he shouts through the door. "They don't know what the fuck they're doing. They don't know anything."

He doesn't know either. Doesn't the hero get the girl in the end, along with the warm glowing sunset of everybody's admiration. He never thought about what's supposed to happen after that.

So you declare yourself the winner. Then what? Bobby Trask and he haven't fared too much differently.
Leonard unhitches his belt, afraid to see what's there. Dabbing off the blood and rinsing his penis with a cold washcloth, this doesn't seem like all that big a problem. He's not in any pain, and the bleeding would probably stop if he could get himself to relax, do a little visualization.

He looks at himself in the mirror and dabs a fingerprint of blood between his eyebrows. Ah soo. The Kamikazes. They knew what an ending was.

This makes him mad. It isn't fair. While wrapping up the damned oozing thing in one of those thick surgical sponges they gave him, he begins to quietly cry. Some ending. Our hero slowly bleeding to death into a cloud of sterile god damned Kotex.

Not those Kamikazes. Those fuckers had the right idea. Purposeful, sharp, to the point. When he'd had the time to dream it to the end, Leonard's Zero always plowed square for the bridge of the biggest ship.

There would be the wasp-like drone of the engine dispersed into the bright cloudless blue surround. The universe sending a warm vibration up his spine. The same way he felt leaning against his mother's churning Maytag while staring out the back kitchen window at the salt marsh on rainy days.

He'd discard radio contact after take-off. What could a human voice much less an order to abort--possibly mean in pursuing the peace of fulfillment? He'd not allow the disturbance of second thoughts or human navigation. Destiny waited out there in front of him, a magnet drawing him forward.
Knowing he was flying straight for them, they'd have the sky around the gray ship peppered with flak and machine gun fire. But he'd nose in on his gentle arc through the bursts of smoke and light, intent on the windows of the forward bridge. Go for the eyes *first* was the advice in the women's self-defense manual. Full incapacitation can be effected with a single direct stab of the fingers.

Gunfire riddles the wings of his plane, shatters through the control panel and window in front of him. Piece by piece the plane comes apart around him. He can feel air rushing through the holes in his body. Consciousness hanging by a thread, he spies the rusty gray superstructure looming ahead. A split second expands to allow recognition of the ant-like gunners drilling his plane with bursting metals. They're tearing at his body in desperate hope of changing the course of all the inevitable explosive judgment zeroing in on them.

In another strangely infinite fraction of a second he sees a face. The man on the bridge, his uniform unkempt, sweat-stained at the armpits and collar, his rank and battle decorations hanging askew. He looks at Leonard looking back at him, and yells futile orders into a horn-shaped microphone, eyes wild, arms flailing. There are no commands that will save him, nothing he can say, no one to lash out at. Though each time is a little different, Leonard sees clearly that this man on the bridge is always--always--his father. Delirious with pain, Leonard yells, "So long, fat ass."

And then there's the flash, the warmth and the light, and him rising, his body surging quickly out of its pain on a jet of light, up over
the flames and vomiting black smoke. Soaring upward where the cries of men convulsed from torn flesh and boiling blood sound more and more like the cry of gulls rising on their hunger into early morning sunlight. Gulls beating upward in search of food. The way they did from the marsh in back of his house.

Mother will call soon. She'll tell him again in her impatient voice how to fix his toast and cereal so that he won't have to wait for her to start his day. He was such a good little boy, and so alone, mesmerized and filled with a nearly religious ecstasy by the dew strung cobwebs sparkling under early summer light in his own backyard. Surely good little boys don't die. Not from prostate cancer. Surely not from that.

"I called the E.W. to tell them we're coming in," Marie says through the door. When he doesn't answer, she adds, "The nurse said she'd call Dr. Welinsky, and that we should get there right away."

Leonard tries to say something, but only a mucousy gurgle comes out.

"Leonard, are you all right?" she calls. "Do you need help?"

She opens the door, finds him hanging on to the sink, his bloody underpants and trousers down around his knees, his penis wrapped in a wad of awkwardly taped cotton batting. He's crying so hard his shoulders are shaking with the effort to keep her from hearing. He can't look at her, can't see her seeing him this way.

"Leonard?" she says softly.

"Oh, Marie," he cries, "I'm so ashamed. I'm so sorry."

Then his tears really come, and he can't help himself any more.
She helps him fasten his trousers, washes off his hands and forehead, and leads him to her car. All the way to the hospital Leonard cries and tells her he's sorry. "I never wanted to hurt you, never, especially not that. I'm sorry, Marie. I'm sorry." And he can feel them drawing closer to others who will try to help.
OLD STANDARDS

"We can't accept your check, sir." Christ, how many times had he heard that? As though the "sir" would mask the boredom in her voice.

"The bank's around the corner." The counter-girl gazes out the narrow storefront window. "They cash checks with proper identification... sir." Twentyish, heavily made-up, she smiles, placid and square as a piano under her bulky single piece cotton shift.

Behind the old glass counter jammed with newspapers, candy, cash register, computer, lottery machines... are other women. Slender hungry women vaunt breasts and buttocks and pouting mouths from recent issues of magazines Richard leafed through years ago.

The small roll of bills he'd scooped off his chipped dresser in the morning dark feels thin before the heavily mascaraed eyes of this one before him. There was the transfer in Boston too that they'd want money for. "Giving you cash for the bus fare doesn't leave me much traveling money, Miss." He knows how to handle this kind. "How about you call my bank--"

"We take only cash or Master Card or Visa. It's policy... sir." She straightens a box of Almond Joy next to the register.
The oak shelving and woodwork are smoky brown, the original varnish peeling, bare spots raw with splinters. Richard's intestines are queasy. The way the cover-girls look back at you bleary with desire.

"So okay." Pocketing the roll of bills, Richard gropes at the checkbook in his inside jacket pocket. The fare would bring his account below the hundred dollar minimum again, and they'd fine him. But he'd need the cash for something to eat later. "Tell the driver to hold on a minute if I'm not right back--"

"We don't hold a bus just for a single passenger." In the narrow glass store front people lean into cold damp December air. "It's policy... sir." She lifts a thumb to the clock above her head but stares out the window. Colored lights blink out of sequence around the frame.

Blocking most of the girl from him, plastic cigarette lighters line the old register. A regiment of sleek hard minnows, each decalled with a tiny photo of some bimbo awkwardly arcing out her body. The counter girl's face is a blank moon above a seething pool of sex. He used to wake up with girls like her and couldn't remember their names.

"Besides, he's already behind. He'll want to get in and out." She looks at him from under hooded blue lids, her perm tight as a football helmet around her face. "There's another in a couple hours... sir." She shrugs, compressing her lips as if to keep from smiling.

Richard meets her eyes and exhales slowly to ease the pinching in his belly. Girls just like her. Couldn't remember their names. They'd always say something about how in the light of the bar the night before they couldn't see that well. "Look, I'm visiting my son. It's Christmas
Eve." He holds up his battered briefcase. "He's in Bridgewater - the prison?"

The tension in him gives at the conferring of guilt, and he looks away, hearing what he's doing. Her mouth tightens and she draws an audible breath. "I'm sorry," he adds quickly. "I know. You only work here."

She looks out the window, testing the back of her perm. "So, you want this ticket or not... sir?"

Richard eyes a lighter-decal of a woman reclining on a bear skin, her legs wide around the snarling head. "Yes. Thank you."

The decision made, the computer beeps and chatters to life. Integrated circuits. Push a button. Instant foreplay. Girls like here. Just a little surprised, they'd say, and wouldn't look at him. You look so... different in the light, that's all. Old is what they meant. Old.

Richard looks around the vintage oak tobacco shop turned bus station, candy counter, newsstand and God only knows what else. Sixty years ago the town's wealthier summer residents probably skulked in here with the excuse of needing a smoke or confection. About the time he was born. They'd purchase out of the back room what's laid out on the counter today: booze, girls, numbers--all state sanctioned now that he doesn't need them any more.

Bouncing the weight of his battered briefcase in his hand, Richard wonders if Anthony does.
"That boy of yours, Rich," Charlie Whittle was saying on the drive into town from Moodys Harbor that morning, "he don't care nothin 'bout you. All he ever wanted when he made all-state was to see his picture in the Sunday papers. You got to take care. Ain't no one else do it for you; specially not that one. Un uh, not Tony."

"People change, Charlie," Richard snapped, edgy with resentment at the intrusion. "You, of all people, know that." Dazed from fitful sleep and lack of coffee, Richard watched the dreary half-light spreading as they rolled the thirty miles from Moody's Harbor to town in Charlie's borrowed taxi cab.

"Fear and pride, Rich," Charlie lectured, gesturing over the grease stained steering wheel. "Keeps us locked up worse'n jail. It's death to people like you and me, and that boy of yours too."

For two years Richard had listened to Charlie's homilies and advice while the old carpenter drove them to and from A.A. meetings. Charlie had driven him to the bus station a few times during Anthony's trial too. Now Richard was grateful for the broad numbing hum of the cab's snow tires.

"You can't go there expectin him to have his arms open," Charlie said. They sat at the counter in Woolworth's where they shared breakfast. "You got to remember: you're doin this for yourself." Charlie's voice made what Richard already knew real for him in a way his own couldn't. "You bring him the book I told you to?"

Richard tapped his battered briefcase.
"All that flap about his trial in the news last year couldn't have drug him any closer to his right mind. Here, I'll get that." Charlie reached for the bill. "You got yourself a day ahead. Gonna need a little cash on hand."

They must have been about the same age, though Richard never asked. Both of them gray, lined around the mouth and forehead from laughter, care, rage; seared under the eyes. But Charlie looked old. His rumpled khaki pants and shirt, worn work boots, torn canvas jacket. "And that sorry God damn book about him. You'd think they'd've had the decency to ask you something about what he was tellin." Under his international orange feed cap, Charlie flushed through his usual two day grizzle.

People had asked. Some of the reporters had followed Richard. Or found him at his home out on the saltmarsh. Or waited for him at the post office in the village. His pleas to be left alone were answered in time. He and Charlie had been over this. Richard would listen to the arthritic old carpenter replay his advice and stories, and those damned slogans that would set Richard's teeth on edge. "Keep it simple, Rich. Just for today." Christ.

Two years before Richard had wakened in a hospital bed and seen the same weathered face hovering over him. An electric crown of fluorescent lights fired the orange cap like a corona around the calm eclipse of Charlie's tired eyes. "Think there'll be brain damage?" Charlie's voice echoed out of some vast space above them. From somewhere behind another voice echoed back, "We'll see, after he stops
hallucinating." Richard can remember itching all over, and being unable to get his hands or feet free to scratch away the damn things burrowing his skin.

"It's just another day, Rich." In front of the beat up, chalky white taxi Charlie stuck out his big hammer hand, bent sideways at the rheumatic fingers. "That's all we got, is today."

They agreed Richard would walk the half mile into town from Woolworths. That way no one would spot Charlie unloading a non-paying customer, what with the way that kind of thing tended to get around. Richard leaned over the window of the idling cab as Charlie dropped it into gear. "You know I have to do this. I have to see him no matter what he thinks of me. Ellie says they're transferring him from the psych lockup to minimum next week. Besides I've put this off too long." Richard looks away. "I'm afraid he'll run again, Charlie. He always did."


Backing out, Charlie shouted through the side window, "You leave them city girls to boys that got more sense." Charlie grinned at him and dropped the column shift into first with a flourish. Then he gunned the engine, popped the clutch, and fishtailed the old cab the length of the parking lot, spewing icy gravel behind.
"He's running about ten minutes behind, sir." The girl's voice startles Richard. "They called down from Portland. Should be here any minute." She leans on the counter slowly chewing gum, eyes glazed. The colored lights wink around the window frame. So there would have been time to get to the bank. And she knew it all along. Richard runs the change in his pants pocket through his fingers.

He hears a gentle drumming at the front window and sees a bright scarlet Santa in the frame. Standing outside with his arms up like goal posts and his belly, mouth, nose, palms pressed against the window, he looks like an enormous tropical fish clinging to the wall of a gray aquarium.

The Santa takes a step back and points to the counter girl. He holds his belly with both hands and mimes an exaggerated, "Ho, ho, ho!" rocking back on his heels. She smiles. With her hands on her broad hips, she shrugs her shoulders. Then deliberately raises her head with her eyes closed, and turns her face away, miming a jilted prima donna.

She turns back to see the Santa's response, and notices Richard watching. "One of my Dad's friends." She waves the fingers of one hand at him.

Hands to his heart, the Santa pivots to face the street, opens his arms, and shouts loud enough to hear in the store, "Merry Christmas to all!"
The girl leans on the glass top and works her gum. "Weird old guy, huh?" She shakes her head, inspects her fingernails, drums on a candy box. "Some people, I don't know."

Behind Richard the glass door crashes open with a jangle of bells. "What the hell kind of way is this to treat a customer?" an angry boyish voice demands.

A young man stands in the doorway. His faded blue jeans are ripped at the knees. A red and white ski parka flashes against the gray light behind him. A blue knit cap sits cockeyed on his head with ear flaps and ties that hang like bell strings. He pitches his bundles into the doorway -- a cylindrical canvas tote bag and a bound set of skis, poles, and boots. He hauls his jeans higher on his waist and mumbles "God damn sonofabitch."

Fixed on the girl at the counter, he snorts, hesitates a second, sweeps up his bags, and without breaking stride, marches through the door and halts at the register. "That freakin driver left me standing in the middle of god damn nowhere this morning with no god damn money." He locks his eyes on her and slams down his bundles. "Is that how you freakin treat people around here?"

She holds still, and replies evenly, "If you want to register a complaint about an employee... sir, we have a form--"

"I don't want to register nothin." He cocks his head to the side and his earflaps and ties dangle over his shoulder. "I don't want to fill out nothin." His head moves to the other side. "I don't want no forms." He
punctuates each word with a toss of his head. "No complaints, no bureaucratic B.S., and no more of that 'sir' shit."

Well all right. Richard feels gleeful. Put it to her, boy.

They face each other silently. He, head to one side smiling tightly. She, chewing gum slowly from behind the cash register where she's moved to place it between them. "So what do you want?" Her voice still even.

"Me? Want?" He draws down the zipper on his jacket revealing a university ski team sweatshirt. "Well, damn." He pulls open the coat and rests his fists on his hips, surveying the store front, and says casually. "I wanna get the fuck outta here."


Looking at her again, the corners of his mouth upturned, the boy adds, "But I'll settle for a ticket to Boston. One way." He gropes into a back pocket, holds up an empty wallet, pinches out a credit card and scales it on the candy boxes beside the register.

Moving her eyes down to the card, then back to the young man's face, she smiles faintly. "It'll have to be MasterCard, Visa or cash."

"Just like that freakin driver," he yells, a hand raised, fingers writhing. "Typical. Freakin typical. He doesn't even wait two minutes while I get the cash." The boy's voice climbs higher. His arms rise. "Just throws my shit on the curb and takes off. Nobody gives a flying fuck any more."
With his voice lower, he jabs toward the register. "Some guy in a five hundred dollar suit slides me this card over a chrome desk with a big smile. And you stand here surrounded by tits and ass and candy bars and tell me it's dog shit?"

He tears at the cap, yanking it off his head. Then turns away as though to hide the secreting of bills from his cap. Easy kid, Richard thinks. You've made your point. She's just doing a job.

The girl waits, fingers drumming on the counter, lips pursed.

Raising the money overhead, the young man turns and drives a fist of bills down on a candy box. "How's that for credit?"

She searches his face. "One way to Boston, right?" she asks, a suspicious compliance in her voice.

His eyes are wide and challenging, the pupils afloat, his hair tousled. The boy blinks, coming back into himself. He runs a hand through his closely cropped sandy hair. "Yeah, right." He looks around quickly to see if anyone's watching. Then absent-mindedly he pockets two of the decalled lighters off the front of the register. "Simple. You show your money, and you get treated like a person." He looks at Richard for the first time. "Typical. Freakin typical."

The kid's right. Richard had money once. Before anyone even dreamed up plastic credit. It hadn't stopped him from swiping things either. Souvenirs. To the victor--

"So hey, old man, how you doin today?" The boy leans against a stack of taped boxes near the door. He slowly unwraps a pink cube of
bubble gum. Under the blue knit cap crushed half down on his head, his eyes appear to puzzle over the deliberate movement of his hands.

"Not too bad." Richard enjoys the insolence. He sizes the strong features under the ski jacket: square hips, chunky thighs, a low center of gravity. Good for speed on the straight aways, or for jumping. Yeah, crazy enough for jumping. "And not as old as you'd think, either."

The boy grins. "Name's Jack." He tosses the gum three feet in the air, cocks his head back and opens his mouth in time to drop it on his tongue. "Practice. That's what the old man taught me." He winks.

Richard's heart tightens. He told Anthony the same thing. It was all there'd been time for when he was gigging steady and the money was good. Later on the boy had been too self-willed and snorted back at him, "You mean like you, old man?" A school counselor diagnosed him early on. They gave him drugs to keep him in his seat.

"So, you gettin any these days, old man?" Jack studies the gum wrapper smoothed out in his hands, testing its strength.

Richard watches his face until their eyes meet. He feels weak for quoting Charlie's fool slogans, but can't clear any other thoughts from his anger. "We all get pretty much what we need."

The boy pulls apart the gum wrapper and exhales sharply. His head falls to his chest. He picks up his bag and skis and wedges open the door. Then he turns to Richard and slowly mouths, "Bull shit." In a jangle of bells and waft of cold air he's gone.

"They called earlier. Told me he was on his way in." Richard turns to see the counter girl staring out the window. "We get all kinds." Under
her cotton shift her breasts fill the space between her pudgy upper arms where she leans over the counter. "I'm gonna write a book some day."

Girls like you, he thinks. Jesus, the mornings he'd try to remember their names or which joint he'd picked them up. What a life: wine, women and song. And penicillin. That time he'd infected Ellie too. Difference was the wife would stay and sleep next to you, even if you were too loaded. The others always wanted to go home.

Framed in the winking storefront, Jack and the Santa face each other on the curb outside. The boy's hands claw at the air. Richard can hear faintly, "You have no right--" then loses the thread when the boy turns his head to the street and stabs at the church on the other side. The boy's hands, the way they move apart from the rest of him.

Richard remembers taking a stand once. The owner of that toilet in New York, the joint where he'd backed up strippers after Sonny dumped him. The guy had asked him to boogie the Doxology for a number the girls would do dressed as nuns. Steady as the bread was, Richard waved the sheet music in the guy's fat greasy face, crumpled it, and threw it on the floor. "This... is shit," he said. He had _some_ principles. Even strung out.

"Hey white boy," the owner called to him as he strode toward the door. "There's plenty of coons out there play better than you do." The afternoon sun scalded Richard's eyes when he slammed the door behind him.
"Sir... uh, sir?" Her voice pulls him back into the dark shop. "This is yours, sir. Your bus?" The girl stands behind the counter, her head cocked to the side, eyes inquisitive. She appears caring in a way he'd not noticed. Like the boy's mother. The way Ellie would wake him up sometimes to make a gig on time.

The night before in her apartment, when he stopped to pick up the sweater she'd knitted their son, she told him, "Anthony won't see you, Rich." She was planning to move south soon, to be closer. She could visit more often after they moved him to minimum. "He says he won't ever."

He pressed the sweater carefully into his briefcase beside the book that he'd gift-wrapped. "People change, Ellie." He rested his eyes on her and thought how beautiful she must have been the three years he was mostly away with Sonny's band, and the money was good, and the girls... That was before Ellie gained all that weight. She'd deserved better than Moodys Harbor. Her tiny apartment in the old boarding house, her ten year old dresses. The low paying job as medical secretary.

He wanted to ask where she was moving. He wasn't even supposed to be there. The six-year-old restraining order had stipulated in perpetuity. She'd said he could come to pick up the sweater. He missed Ellie, especially going home alone at night. The way she used to wait up for him. He was glad she hadn't seen him the last few years of his drinking when he was sick most of the time.
"Ellie, I'm..." He had to look away. " Aren't you afraid he's going to run when they let him out of the psych lockup?"

She held her chin higher, a familiar disapproval in her eyes. "The doctors say his medication is balanced now. And Anthony promised me--" 

He looked away again. "I made a lot of promises too."

Settling in his seat near the front of the half empty bus, Richard watches an older woman hurry into the tobacco store, big hips jiggling under a dark faded dress and patched winter coat, the sort of things Ellie wore now.

A minute later she emerges flagging the bus driver with a ticket. " I thought you was goin to pull out without old Mary. " She wheezes as she pulls herself up the steps. " Good thing I ain't the only thing that's old and runnin late."

The driver touches the brim of his cap. " We always hold the bus when we know a passenger is on the way, Mam."

She turns to the aisle, spots Richard sitting alone and smiles, her face a mass of ridges, her head a tangled mop of gray knots. He opens the briefcase on the seat next to him. Old people, Jesus. Richard clears his throat. Want to know about your children, your health, your pension. He hears her rustling past still wheezing, and he shivers.

He brushes his hand over the sweater folded in the frayed fiber briefcase. Time was he would have lifted a sweater like this from the
same case and found music books, a sandwich of homemade bread and cheese, a pint of gin "just in case," all carefully folded and packed by Ellie.

It wouldn't have been a bus he'd be boarding though. "Sonny don't ride wid no trash back a no bus." The older black man had sounded angry when Richard asked about it, but grinned after.

Ellie would have rolled the '59 Caddy into a train station or airport with the baby silent on the seat between them. "Nothing but first class door to door for my boys," she'd say gaily. Then the tears would come and she'd beg him not to leave again.

"Any boy serious 'bout blowin big time," Sonny told him early on, "better find hisself some sweet, ugly woman don't be worryin him." The older man put his arm around Richard's shoulder and tilted his head toward him. Richard could smell the pomade Sonny used to straighten his hair, and vodka and tobacco too as they ambled from the airport entrance that first tour.

"So hey, driver, we hittin Boston today or what?" Jack stands fidgeting in the aisle, bag in hand, skis upright on the floor, scanning the bus seat by seat. He tosses the bag and skis on the floor in front of him, rocks his weight from one hip to the other, and hoists his worn jeans up higher under his sweatshirt. The earflaps and ties of his blue knit cap dangle at the sides of his head.
Without taking his eyes from the rear of the bus, he bends at the knees, sweeps up the bags and coos distinctly under his breath, "So old man, you partyin big time this Christmas?" Then moves quickly to the back where, as he boarded, Richard saw two young women seated together. In the same breath but louder the boy continues, "Hey, Boston, huh? Good times in the big time?"

A few giggles, yeahs, the popping of gum. Then the door thuds, the bus lurches and the town moves across smoked glass at Richard's side. Behind him the boy's voice hums above the engine.

That's how he'd worked it too. You don't break stride. Hesitate a second and the whole thing sounds phony. Got to be like it's the next most natural thing that crosses your mind. "So here we are together, darlin; and where are you headed; and what's your game?"

You had to keep it moving; push the girl a little, like with a solo line. You always start somewhere familiar, easy, playful. Let it sort of draw you in, maybe for a chorus. Then you got under it a little, and pushed until you felt like you were almost chasing it, breathing hard just to keep up, but still echoing the melody line. You'd hold it there, oh maybe a little longer than you ought to, another whole chorus anyway. Just to get the audience edgy. Then you jumped on it with your whole body and let it take you.

"Only white piano player I ever see bring his balls on stage wid him," Sonny said. Richard remembers bending over the tiny gold spoon Sonny held out to him in dressing rooms, bathrooms, parked cars. He'd
pinch a nostril, anticipating the first cool slow burn, then the quick too brief meteor shower of clarity.

What Sonny liked about him, what got you someplace, gumption. Two years at Juilliard, and he'd already been stalking the joints farther up town they had late night sessions. Go right up to these cats whose names and faces were on sides he'd listened to over and over, and ask to sit in. It rubbed some of them the wrong way. But what did he have to lose? A couple shots of Johnny, and he delivered every time.

Warm, dry air from the heater vents at the base of the bus window parches Richard's sinuses. He blinks at signs rushing past on the interstate. Hearing no voices over the hum of engine and tires, he turns cautiously. In the aisle Jack stands sideways near the back of the bus. His jacket and sweatshirt are bunched and dangling from one arm, his hat crushed on top of his head. He pulls a frayed blue T-shirt down from his bare stomach over the waist of his blue jeans. "So I need to slip into something a little more comfortable, all right?" Testy. "No big deal."

The two young women Richard spotted earlier keep their eyes fixed out the window. "Besides," Jack sweeps around and announces to no one, "I'm beautiful and it's all available for free." His laughter tears at the air. The girls glance at each other, then out the window again. That way the young ones have of going blank, not seeing you. We all push too hard sometimes, Richard thinks. Especially when we're young and too full of jism.
Whatever Sonny's distaste for white trash, there'd been other bus rides. The tours Richard had to bus home from alone. Sonny would shake his head and smack his lips counting out a few small bags. "Dis here white powder ain't gettin yo white ass no better credit wid da company sto, boy."

But hey, a well packed nose... blows, man.

A couple times he'd phoned Ellie for bus fare from what? Detroit, Kansas City, Santa Fe, maybe somewhere else. Then Sonny stopped calling. Three years on the road together, and the sonofabitch never told him it was over.

Ellie was there though. She would hand him the briefcase at the door of their apartment, or from the door of the second hand Chevy he'd had to trade the Caddy for when he lost his license. And Richard knew what would be in the briefcase, "just in case." They didn't talk about the green pills he wrote scripts for on the sly, but he knew that she knew.

They'd had to move to a walkup in Jersey. He'd wished she would just hate him openly then. Just walk out instead of getting teary and stoic and holding him tighter before he'd leave to play some dump in the city.

Then they'd moved back to the Maine coast where he'd grown up. To get away, they said, where Richard could put all that behind. Get clean. Somewhere quiet Richard could practice again, write out the tunes he'd composed and only played by ear. Maybe sell some of them.
Ellie wanted that too. And he owed her. He'd still lose it sometimes though, his right hand lashing out in the midst of an argument like it was someone else's. He hated himself for days after. The boy rarely spoke at all around him.

Jack's muscular body slides by the seat. He falls into the seat behind the driver with an air of boredom. Leaning forward, his head behind the driver's shoulder, he stares out the windshield a few seconds. "Hey, you handle this rig real smooth." He appears dazed by the rush of highway traffic, strangely torpid. "Thought for sure we'd be late, but I'll bet you get us there right on time."

He looks at the driver. "You oughta get a tip when we get to Boston."

Richard can't hear the driver's voice over the road noise but sees him pointing to the painted metal signs above the windshield. They warn passengers not to converse with the driver while underway, and spell out the bus line's policy against tipping.

Jack pulls himself to his feet by the vertical chrome bar next to the driver. He grabs the bar across the aisle and rocks back and forth between them. "Well jeeze, I'd still like to give you a tip, you're so good." He swings around, leaning off the bar the length of his arm and sees Richard. Jack smiles, raises his knit cap, arches his eyebrows and crosses his eyes. Crushing the hat back on his head, he squares himself to the aisle, hitches up his jeans, and marches to the back muttering, "I gotta take a leak."
So the kid has a little too much energy for his own good. Richard moves his palm over the worn briefcase. You have to be a little crazy to do anything with your life. It's another thing he'd wanted to tell Anthony. How else would the boy find out, growing up mostly in that backwater fishing town? All Anthony knew of a better life were hotel kitchens in the tourist traps where Richard played dinner music summers. And the lessons Richard gave the town's pampered brats on the old Baldwin upright in the Congregational church. No wonder the kid never cared.

There were the arguments with his mother too, the yelling, the broken dishes, Ellie crying in the end, always crying. His teachers said he wouldn't sit still without the drugs. Four of them had sat at the end of a conference room--a teacher, the guidance counselor, the principal, the school board's lawyer--their fingers tight bundles on the long table. They spoke mostly about the boy, but sounded angry and nodded sideways at Richard frequently, addressing him as Mr. St. Jean. Ellie used a lot of makeup to cover the fresh bruise on her jaw. She wore long sleeves and the broad sunglasses he'd bought her years before in the city "for the bright lights, babe." Nobody asked if he was the piano player on two of Sonny Lester's best known albums. No one knew. How would they, those hicks?

The driver announces the town he's pulling into off the interstate. The bus glides through an empty parking lot toward a small cinderblock station in the back, and Jack surges by in the aisle. He clunks to a halt
against the vertical chrome bars. "Best driver I ever seen. Right on time." His head bent to the ragged neck of his T-shirt, the boy leans between the two uprights and shoots out the door before the driver finishes opening it.

Just a little too much energy. His coaches probably love him for it; get him to try anything. They know when they have a ringer. The way those bastards would send his own boy up the middle for the short power plays; use him for the grunt work, the suicide runs. Anthony used to score, Ellie would tell him, slam the ball into the ground, and raise clenched fists while strutting back through the broken lines of the other team, taunting them. That was his last two years in high school. His teammates had learned to keep away. The others had heard not to fight him, no matter what he said.

On a rush of cold air from the door Jack heaves up opposite the driver, a Coke can in hand. Standing sideways to the aisle, he scans the length of seats over his shoulder and slowly cracks the seal, ripping off the top. He flips the ringtop over his shoulder out the door, chuckles at something, smiles dreamily, and chugs the entire can.

Then he sighs, wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and looks at the empty. "So tell me something, old man." He runs a hand under his T-shirt and rubs his stomach. "I mean honestly." Crushes the aluminum can and bunches it in his fist like a paper cup; then looks at Richard. "You think maybe I need to lose some weight?" His gray pupils flicker.

Richard is amused. "I think you're beautiful, kid."
"Thing is, old man..." Jack ambles toward the rear, and lets the crushed can roll on to the seat beside Richard. "I ain't no kid."

What Anthony had said. The same words. The first time Richard bailed him out of the county jail. An early Sunday morning. When was that, spring of '78, or was it '79? Drunk driving, speeding, resisting arrest. And only sixteen.

Richard picks up the crushed can and bounces it in his palm. You'd think somebody would have seen what was coming. "I ain't no kid," Anthony said, staring through the windshield of Richard's old beat up Galaxy. They parked at the beach to watch the sun rise. Then he asked flatly, "Anything left to drink in this shitbox?" He groped under the seat, rifled the glove compartment.

Richard watched his son, how terribly restless he was, his hands jumping to life apart from the rest of him. He drew a half gone pint of gin from his coat pocket and held it out to the boy. They looked at each other through the bottle and laughed. More than Richard could ever remember. Laughed, passing the bottle, about the police, about the boy's mother. Laughed about the shabby fishing town they lived and the hicks who ran it.

Toasting the red low sun blazing off shore, the boy said, "Here's to the new light of the NFL rising in the East. Huh, old man?" They laughed again and Richard put his hand on the boy's shoulder.

Anthony flipped the empty out the side window, swallowed, and jerked his shoulder from under his father's hand. The shattering glass startled Richard and sent a shiver through him. "So, okay if I sleep at
your place a few days? Mom'll be pissed when she gets wind of the DWI. I can go back when the dust settles." Clear of the ocean, the sun burned in Richard's eyes.

It was the last time he ever touched his son. He bounces the crushed red and aluminum ball once more, holds it up between his fingers and rolls it into the briefcase. People can change.

A wave of cold air carries cheap perfume, a rustling of clothes, a soft tinkling of jewelry. A young girl struggles up the bus stairs pushing a bulky suitcase. She's heavily made-up. Long dark curls fall over a fur collar. Rings glint from most of her fingers. Before she's cleared the stairwell, Richard hears from behind him, "Hey, hittin Boston for a few days, huh? Good times in the big time?" Jack sweeps up in front of her.

Great timing anyway, kid. Great timing.

"You didn't know you got a first class ticket just now, did ya?" Jack bends to pick up the suitcase. "Yes Mam, first class only on this rig. And there isn't no tippin either. All expenses paid."

She blinks, then smiles and laughs nervously at the muscular figure facing her in his worn jeans, frayed T-shirt, and crushed knit cap. "Hey, be careful wid dat." She laughs again, and there's a wisp of whiskey in the sweet cloud of perfume and bubble gum that trails her as she follows Jack.

"One first class window seat to Boston coming right up," Jack announces. Richard turns to see the other passengers staring out the
windows. Like people in a laundromat trying not to look at each other's underwear.

"Actually, it's ta Waterbury," she offers.

"Hey, no problem. Know just how to get there."

The boy's voice floats on the idling engine. So what if other people disapprove. You need to be a little crazy. Just back off some, kid. You didn't need to live all the time with your foot to the floor. It's what he'd wanted to tell Anthony after he'd been booted out of State for beating up that bastard football coach. That temper of his. If only Richard could have said something to him.

But he'd been in no condition to tell his son anything. He was bartending by then. Places with only a jukebox, where they wouldn't have heard about him. The Starlight Club. God, how many nights he closed that joint barely able to see straight, never mind counting the drawer. And there'd be some girl waiting on him--big girls who liked to drink and could hold him up if he fell. Brendas, Darlenes, Rayettes: girls whose fathers had wanted sons.

He bragged about the boy to the barflies who would tell him about Anthony's writeups--how he'd made the finals of the eastern division lineup before being cut because of that coach. The eighteen months the boy got at the state farm for his first assault and battery Richard heard from the T.V. at the end of the bar. The news caster moved on to the declining potato harvest, and someone ordered another shot and a beer. The bastard on T.V. never said anything about Anthony's most valuable player award.
Richard tried to see him there. The stories he read about the boy's threats left him shaky. The man hospitalized with skull fractures, the woman with the broken jaw. The prison guards wouldn't let Richard in without a breath test. His own son, and they wouldn't let him in. So he gave up after the second try.

With the bus rolling the turnpike again, Richard can see sunlight bathing the city skyline below lifting cloud cover in the distance. Behind him Jack has fallen silent. Richard doesn't turn to see what kind of muddle the boy's created this time. He's thinking about Anthony now.

There was still hope, even after the prison. When the boy was released there were pro teams waiting to test him in their farm leagues. It was that woman at the fish cannery where Richard was working who'd told him. Her hands were red and raw at the finger tips as she passed back his pint after a hard swallow. "He's a good boy," he told her and stole another swig, scanning for the super. "A good boy. Just a little crazy sometimes, you know?"

"Like his old man, honey?" Her ragged gums gleamed pink between thin, tobacco stained lips. She moved toward him, put her hand between his legs, and rested her cheek against the rough green shirt pocket where his name was sewn in red script. He looked into her greasy curls, tasted ammonia, salt and sulfur in the air.
"Hey driver, you did it." Jack surges past Richard and stops himself on the chrome bars at the driver's side. "Best driver I ever seen. Right on time." He buttons his wrinkled flannel shirt, and tucks the flaps into his beltless jeans. His sweatshirt dangles from a forearm jammed through to the elbow. Bending lower he brings his head to the side of the driver and pulls the sweatshirt over his head. "You deserve a tip for being so good," Jack booms. "I bet ya get tips all the time."

The boy swings himself into the seat directly behind. He leans forward smoothing his cuffs, and says more softly, "If I wanted to get the next bus to Waterbury, could you tell me where I'd get that?"

Richard is drawn by the boy's hands. When Jack leans forward to hear the driver's reply, his hands leap and bounce on his thighs in unison. They hang in the air a second twitching, jam themselves together, bounce some more, never more than six inches apart. Jack rocks as he listens.

Just like his hands. Like when he'd seen his son last, almost a year ago. Just like them. Those hands held out between them, the fingers bent at odd angles, and writhing with fury. The boy's set smile and gleeful sunken eyes. Ellie said they'd started him on medication before the trial, but hadn't gotten him stabilized. "You proud of your boy now, old man?" Anthony shouted. The crowd surrounding them looked at Richard. The hands charged up, parallel fists in front of his face shaking toward him. "You proud now, old man?" Anthony sneered.

With the low metallic winter sun glinting in the windshield of the bus as they pass a blur of tenement roofs, Richard recalls strobe flashes
scalding his eyes where he and Anthony stood and faced each other the last time. The long granite stairs of the federal courthouse. News people pressing in around them. Shouting questions. Poking cameras with flash attachments in his face.

The boy refused to see him during the trial. His lawyer had requested Richard be excluded from court. The state hadn't objected. So Richard waited on the steps, hours sometimes, just to catch a glimpse of him.

He caught the boy's glance only this once as he was marched down the stairs in the middle of wary escorts. His hands were clenched tightly together at his abdomen. Charlie had told Richard to stop wasting his time. Leave the boy in God's hands.

"You proud now?" Anthony said that last day, leaning over the officer's shoulder and grinning. "Mom always said you was a proud man," he taunted, his hands climbing the air together between them.

"Said that's why you hit her."

The crowd was pushing at Richard's back. Some carried roughly scrawled signs demanding reinstatement of the death penalty. Richard was blinded by flashbulbs, but still able to make out the boy's hands in front of him chained together at the wrists.

"This is big time, old man. Hard time." Anthony shook his wrists toward him. "No honky tonk bullshit for this boy." Raised the hands higher into fists. "Followin in the footsteps of the father." His hands were raised overhead, clenched white above the steel cuffs. "Big time, old man," he shouted.
The boy swept the crowd on the stairs with his tight smile and gleaming eyes. He shook his fists as he moved down the stairs, chanting, "Big time!"

Richard thinks he shouted something back. "People change, Anthony. We can change." The armed escorts, reporters and jeering crowd closed on the steps between them. At least that's what he remembers. And how his voice was stopped in front of him.

There was nothing in the papers, Charlie told him later, about what he'd said. Just quarter page photos of the boy with his arms raised under large bold print of his own mad words.

Good old Charlie in that stupid hick orange feedcap. His face floated in the fluorescent lighting above Richard like a red moon against an electric sky. "You know where you are yet, Rich?" Charlie had shouted to him at the detox.

Richard had strained at the leathers on his wrists and ankles until his skin chafed. He could smell his urine and sweat in the hospital sheets twisted around him. "How long have I been like this?" he'd asked. His voice was a dry croak, his throat raw.

Charlie beamed down at him. "Yessir," he announced, his voice still echoing. "Think he's still got some brain left." He pulled the damp sheet up to cover Richard's legs. Later Charlie helped the nurse change the bed, and walked Richard to the coffee machine at the end of the ward.

Richard glimpses Jack's red and white ski parka and clownish blue knit cap. They're inching toward each other up opposite roped-in ticket
lines that turn parallel in front of the counters at the Boston bus station. Jack has his skis and tote bag balanced on one shoulder. The young girl's bulky suitcase swings in his other hand. He shifts his weight from one foot to the other, twists his shoulders, sweeps the skis with him, oblivious of others in line. Whatever direction, he talks without interruption.

The young girl glances at Richard, then around them as though searching for help. She chews gum frantically, works a curl on her shoulder around a finger tip, no longer smiles.

They move closer and Richard catches the boy's eye. Jack grins, raises his eyebrows and nods at the girl. Richard smiles back and nods at an angle as if to say, "Not bad, not bad at all, kid." They move up to adjoining ticket windows together. Richard names his destination at the plexiglass shield that stops the sound dead in front of him. "Bridgewater." He feels the boy's restlessness beside him.

"You goin where, old man?" Jack crows.

Richard looks at Jack. He feels frightened, then very tired, as though he wants to cry. He wants to grab the boy by his open jacket and shake him. Shake him till they're both worn out and quiet. Shake him and then hold him and cry for a long time, for days.

"Shit," Jack snorts, "nothin in that town cept the state pen for flashers and slashers." Jack dumps the skis and bag off his shoulder, drops the suitcase. The young girl slips behind him, gingerly lifts it and backs off into the crowd. "You know, old man." He holds the flaps of his
ski jacket wide in each hand and thrusts his hips forward, "Sex offenders!"

Jack laughs and turns on the balls of his feet. Glazed with joy, his eyes shine out over the heads of the silent crowd around them. People back away, murmuring, and the boy comes back to himself.

Richard faces him. Everyone watches them, listening, waiting. The girl has disappeared, thank God. "I'm visiting my son there." Richard's voice trembles. But he holds Jack's eye as the boy lets go his jacket flaps and hitches up his jeans. "I'll tell him you said hello."

The boy picks up the bag and skis, turns searching for the girl, and hisses, "I give a shit what you tell him, old man." Finding himself alone, Jack looks like he's forgotten something. He pushes past Richard toward the street entrance.

"People change, kid," Richard offers, as Jack brushes past.

The boy stops. He glances at Richard over his shoulder expressionless, then strides toward the door. Jack jogs up to the glass partition and halts abruptly in front. His feet move up and down indecisively. He throws the skis and bag to the floor either side of him, and hauls his jeans high up on his waist under the sweatshirt and ski jacket. The ear flaps and ties of his cap flop at the sides of his head. Bending at the knees with a straight back, his eyes fixed on the door, Jack scoops up his bundles, rises as though off a ski jump, and kicks the door open with a single unbroken sweep.

"Hey Boston!" he yells. Richard hears him clearly from where he watches by the counter. "What you got..." Richard is unable to hear any
more before the door swings shut on the street and on the metallic blaze of afternoon sunlight into which the boy disappears.

His son won't see him today. It comes to him just then. Ellie was right, of course. He couldn't let the thought in the way he does now. A young woman behind him asks in an irritable voice if he couldn't step away from the window and let her buy a ticket. Richard murmurs an apology. He moves to a bench and stands, wondering what to do. His hands search his coat pockets absently.

Maybe the boy will never see him. Richard could leave the sweater and the book he brought with a guard when he gets there. Then he could sit a while in the waiting room if they'll let him. Just sit until he grows quiet inside, or tired. The boy will know he's been there. That will be enough.