1975

Hollow storm

Jack Campbell Cloar

Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation

Cloar, Jack Campbell, "Hollow storm" (1975). Retrospective Theses and Dissertations. 14416.
https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd/14416

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Iowa State University Capstones, Theses and Dissertations at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Retrospective Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
Hollow Storm
by
Jack Campbell Cloar, Jr.

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

Major: English

Approved:

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
1975

Copyright © Jack Campbell Cloar, Jr., 1975. All rights reserved.
This thesis has been accepted by the Department of English in lieu of the research thesis prescribed by the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.
Hollow Storm

All Material in this Volume
© Jack Campbell Cloar, Jr. 1975
CHAPTER ONE

Mona Peterson's chair creaked. That was how you knew she was there, sitting in the shadows, too far away from the fire that Snake and the Horton boys were tending out in the yard. She sat in that big straw rocker of hers and it made little noises for each thought; each little fret and notion came out in that chair. The others were shadows: squatting, poking the porch wood with knobby knives or leaning, shoulders against the porch column, enjoying their cigarettes. Some were out in the yard, watching the east, and their faces were lighter so that you could just about tell who they were. Like Tommy Rome and Andrew Glimm. There were the Swanson brothers. And Snake, squatting with the Horton boys. The fire pushed into their faces and made them mobile, as if the skin itself had turned to fire and was a moving flame. Nobody said much but just listened to that old straw rocker which came alive with Mona's every little thought.

Snake finally stood and pranced stiff-legged beside the
fire to get his limbs stretched. He looked like a mut, because his legs were stiff. Snake followed the creaking to where Mona was rocking. Probably not one in ten could tell you her real name, Mona. She was Mamaw. The others stopped squatting, leaning and mumbling to themselves and looked at Snake as he finished stretching his legs and went to where she was. None of them could even see her.

"Momma?"

Mamaw gave a little start and moved in her chair. It creaked loud, like ship timber groaning. She rubbed her face with her hand and stretched out the fat arm until she'd touched Snake's side. She smiled.

"Mayor and me will go to the store, I reckon."

She nodded. "Where's Jerry?"

"Not back yet."

---BREAK---

Jerry, at the Burger Darl, had just finished filling a small cup with Coke. When Jackie Roy said large Coke, he took his hand off the handle and glared. And she leaned into the window on her chest, pulling onto the little ledge so that her heels kicked up outside. Why, she knows, thought Jerry. She knows she asked for a small Coke.

"Please?" Brown hair fell over her eyes as she looked at him.
Slush went the pop into the sink. "One Dari Jumbo comin up," mumbled Jerry.

Business was good at the Burger Dari in summers, and on school nights. It was the place, the hangout where nearly every Clinton Hollow adolescent came, or if he didn't he wished he had. You hadn't been cool until you'd circled the Burger Dari. Pete Cantrell said just last week, before he put electric insect juicers on top of the juke box speaker poles, that business had been unusually good. And now that you could hear the moth and mosquito fluids sizzling as they brushed into the glowing electric surface, you were reminded that gnats would no longer bother the Jumbos and Burgers so much. Cantrell had petitioned the Federal Food Agency to re-evaluate the restaurant. No longer, he felt, should the Burger Dari only merit a C rating.

Jerry privately thought the insect juicers wouldn't make that much difference, though. The grease of many a summer's night was caked onto the walls of his small kitchen. The place wasn't ventilated properly, either.

"God. There must be a million germs crawling in here," he mumbled. He scooped a basket of Golden Brown Dari fries from the bubbling grease pot and dumped them onto the draining wire. With a flick of the wrist he salted them, scooped up two, mashed them together and fed them into his mouth. Chewing, he leaned out from his little window stand to see why no one but Jackie Roy had come to order anything.
As he was looking, two cars roared onto the gravel and joined the semicircle already in the lot. Headlights flashed off. Doors popped open and a body of excited kids jumped out, moving immediately towards a larger group which stood under one of the electric juicers for insect relief. Someone saw Jerry twisting out of his window.

"Punch up some music. Punch up some music."

Jerry looked back into the greasy kitchen light and began to run his finger down the dirty cardboard listing for the juke box. Soon Elvis was singing and Jerry pulled himself through the window again, straining to know and trying to push a few stray red curls back under the tissue topped cardboard cap. It was a rare night, and he loosened the greasy collar of his sweat-stained shirt. He was glad he wore black jeans so as not to have to wash them much. Two figures were walking down the dusty bank next to the lot. Jerry recognized his father and his grandfather, the Mayor.

"Want anything at the store, Jerry?"

"Nope."

Snake moved his nose in the air just beyond Jerry's little window. His moustaches wriggled. Behind him, Mayor humped his cheeks and leered. Jerry grinned.

"You want a Dari Burger or somethin, Daddy?"

"No. No, I don't want one," said Snake, pulling a moustache.

But Mayor hunched higher behind Snake. His lips trembled
as if they moved to taste the smell of fries. Jerry picked up a box of buns and twisted his finger through the cellophane wrapping. He scooped up the meat patty that had been sizzling on the grill and put a crinkled bun around it. He squirted mustard and pickle juice on it.

"I was fixin it for myself, but--here." Mayor took it, gummed it.

"Let's go, Daddy," said Snake. To Jerry, "We'll go to the store a minute. Mayor forgot his chew."

Jerry broke off another frozen patty and tossed it onto the grill, moving his mouth. He licked his lips and salted the fries.

It was a clear, cold night with sharp stars. A night for fires, working like fallen stars in the night. Perhaps the sky had opened to let ten or so sweep down, where they lay fluttering on their sides, warming the hills. You could stand above the hollow and look down to see them. On crystal nights men looked over the rim of fire and felt its glow, enjoying the indifferent face licking. A man would have creek stones ready placed in a circle down a shallow that in day was dusty and mixed with ashes. At night, men would come and help rake the limbs and dry kindling. You could keep it going till midnight, one, two, or three. If you were down you stayed longer, maybe feeling the kids asleep and the wife--nervous, waiting--in bed. Sometimes a close friend would stay to share the damp morning down-ness. You mumbled a few words
about it. Maybe two an hour. Very seldom, anyway. Man feelings don't usually come out in talk. Anyone who was friends with you knew, and shared. So you squatted, peering into the fire over its rim.

Snake and Mayor were following a gravel road for some ways, then cutting across a brushy knoll called Hoosier's Hill. They turned to sidestep quickly, sometimes half scrambling to keep balance on the steep hill. Occasionally, Mayor would slip and hang on a handful of weed, or of bush, before twisting around to get sideways again and skidding down to Snake, who hardly ever lost his footing. Their skins felt tight and scratchy and vigorous as they scrambled. Snake stood and waited for Mayor, who had slipped again. He watched Mayor turn right again, pause to feel balance, and ease once more into that side-stepping crab-walk descent. As he watched, Snake pulled out a cigarette, pinched it in two, lit it. So that when Mayor arrived, Snake's face showed the fluid fire of cigarette light. Snake held a match for Mayor to light the pinched-off half, and the men climbed down until they reached the bottom of the knoll. They wandered across the state road and were at the store. Snake unlocked it, pulled the light string. Bottle tops popped, cellophane rattled. They had a pop and a pie.

It did feel like fall that night, the first of the late summer evenings to actually be autumn-like. In the west, the moon hung full and black orange. It jumped, teasing in front
of Snake and Mayor as they climbed back up from the store; this time on a gravel road that wound slowly up the mountainside until it eventually touched the top. During the day you could climb up and see the Great Smoky Mountains. A little bit hazy, but almost a part of the sky, and on a rainy day, not visible. Then, the tall Smoky Mountain foothill of Clinton Hollow was surrounded in mist. The world closed in considerably, those days.

When the moon came into view the men kept an eye on it. To Snake, it was the Halloween moon, glowing on harvest fields and silhouetting hag mouth witches and their cats. The air was crisp in his lungs and smelled of woods. All around them were molting trees. The gravel path was nearly covered with leaves. In day, orange and black like the moon. Now, the scratchy swooshing around their feet meant that the leaves were still there. Perhaps it was their smell that made it fall. A rich leafy perfume that made your heart beat faster, and nearly always in the daylight they smelled like dry roasting things, cooked either by sunlight or by fire. The trees rustled unseen in the brisk night. The moon appeared again and bobbed up when the men stepped forward and bobbed down when they changed from right to left to right leg again. Snake looked at the grizzled nape of neck going up and down in front of him. For Mayor, Snake thought, the moon was never very still, so long as he walked. It must bounce and jerk for Mayor, for he was bowlegged, and he limped. Poor
Daddy. For Snake it was that cool orange moon, looming large and soft through the night dew, that ultimately worked fall on his insides.

Mayor was also a half mute. Maybe that meant he wasn't mute at all, since he could talk when he tried. But it hurt him to. Not just because his teeth were gone either. It was his voice. Mamaw best told the story of Mayor's accident. It hurt her to think of it, and when she did you had the whole story, just as you sooner or later had the tale of everything she fretted about. She worked herself into a pitch of worry that could only be climaxed in the story, the tale. It hurt her, perhaps, even more than the terrible war. But she had to describe it.

There had been a cold, snowy day forty-five years ago, soon after her marriage to Mayor. The clouds said that more was sure to fall. You could feel it in the air. Rabbit tracks crisscrossed Mona's front yard, and over the smaller tracks were larger ones. In some places the larger tracks ended in skid marks. Mona stood in the door, not as fat then, but husky; she stood in the warm flannel nightgown that Kurry Stokes had given for her cedar chest on her wedding night. All was still. As yet only half an inch or so of snow had fallen, and it blew in clouds from one end of the yard to the other, so that the hodgepodge tracks were filling in. Far away Mona heard barking. Otherwise, everything lay in an awesome silence; not even the birds were chirping yet. And
Mona closed the door and came out on the wood porch in her flannel nightgown, spellbound by the powder snow and the tracks. It was plain that Henry had been chasing rabbits. It was Henry's bark way off in the morning, probably further down the holler, almost to the road.

She thought of dinner and rabbit as she stood in her flannel nightgown in the silence, looking through the gentle snow, so cold. She thought some minutes before returning to the warm house. Mayor was just up. He really was mayor of Clinton Hollow then.

"That dog of yours must sure be chasin rabbit," said Mona, patting Mayor on the arm as he shaved.

"Why?"

"Well, there's his tracks out front, skiddin. And under them is rabbit tracks. And now I hear his bark--"

"Hmm."

"And I might like some rabbit stew later on--"

"Well."

Mayor wiped the white soap from his face and went out with his gun. Mona stood again on the porch and watched his back bob as he walked to the trees. Henry was still barking, far off, near the road.

They didn't have rabbit that day. Mona heard the crack of Mayor's rifle all right, after about fifteen minutes. Henry stopped barking. But twenty minutes later Mayor was still not back. Mona stood on the porch and watched
the snow. The clouds were thicker. The snow was stronger. Old Henry came, limping, into the yard, head down and tail drooping, about an hour after Mona had heard the gun. She wrapped the warm hearth rug around her shoulders and began to struggle through the clearing, ankle deep in snow now, towards the woods. She noticed the routine chirps of birds now; the rustling of animals. She startled a rabbit and it went high hopping for cover. Soon she found her husband. Mayor lay sprawled in red snow, half down the mountainside, his gun flung away, bear clawings on his throat and torn shoulder.

Snake shook his head, the moon and Mayor's bobbing shape in his eyes. Poor Mamaw. She only said she wouldn't mind some rabbit stew. She'd wake up in the night now. She told that tale often, to whoever would listen. Her lips puckered and trembled, the ancient straw chair popped with her fidgeting—the futile worrying. It eased her some. And Mayor would be amused, yet sorry. He'd never talked much anyway.

Snake sighed and flicked away his cigarette. The road was leveling, and the moon shone full in front of them again. It silhouetted the little Burger Dari, dark now except for the electric insect juicers, which glowed on, boxed up high on their speaker poles. They glowed and hummed. Moths and gnats flew into the electricity and sizzled as they got zapped.
CHAPTER TWO

Sometimes Jerry would lean from his burger stand out into the air and part of him would zoom up to the stars. He would come outside of himself, imagining his mind telescoping outwards in the time exposure-like thrusts, each one bringing a consciousness of stars, planets, even of other solar systems nearer, so that he could actually feel into space. When he watched Star Trek, and Captain Kirk would yell: Scotti, get to the bridge, quick, and could see through the scanners a twirling, slowly gyrating anti-matter, glowing red and sinister with cold energy.... Then, too, it radiated outwards from his chest, arcing away in a beam of pure white light...through the wood of Mamaw's house...maybe even being amplified through the t.v. antenna. And in pure white streams flowing out of Mamaw's house into the night sky, over the foothills, high above the Smokies. And from there, like an extension of himself, into space. Up, up to the starship Enterprise to watch as the ship was pulled towards a cold gyrating energy.
And maybe some night at the Burger Darl the electric insect juicers will become that slowly turning, cold force. That oppo-polarized energy. The moths turn into Enterprises and Jerry snickers vengefully when they sizzle and burn.

"What's the matter, Jerry?" said Sardi, or Jackie Roy—or anyone who had been standing patiently, mouth all set for a Darl Burger, fries, or shake. "What's with you?" they'd say, wondering why he stared all unfocused at those boxes—the red juicers, his mouth turning up at the corners but not smiling, his eyes twitching as if they watched a dream. And Jerry would look down, call backhisterecelom mind-spirit, be Jerry again. Mechanically toss frozen meats on the grill, or shake fries, pull a Coca-Cola.

People had begun to talk about Jerry Peterson and his trances, even though he was part of their adolescent experience. Always good naturedly nosing around his greasy little kitchen—cooking, lounging, munching his fries. The kids appreciated him. But they'd begun to talk, though they couldn't have the experience without Jerry. He blended, becoming a part of the very smell. The taste was Jerry. The night was Jerry. To think of the Burger Darl was to see Jerry's long fingers tapping over the buns and warm food, making and cleaning. Yet that Jerry Peterson. Yes, all those Petersons. Strange people. But Jerry, he's.... Well, he's Jerry. They, the kids, didn't want him to be strange.

Perhaps it was concern more than gossip that made them
talk. A newly arrived member of the adolescent set might ask on any night: Has he been weird tonight? Still looks at the moon? --the juicers? The kids didn’t like it. They watched him, wondering what he thought about as he leaned out of his little window, chin on fist, staring. They only wanted his spirit to stay.

"Jerry, where are you?" Sardi gently spoke right into his ear. She studied him curiously. Jerry looked away from the red sizzling things and rubbed his head. "Where were you, Jerry?"

"No place." He put his chin on his fist and set his jaw and knitted his brows at her. He imagines her as the Andrierian Queen, Darla. From the Zalba system. Many light years distant. Ship's log stardate eighteen point thirty-two.

We are approaching the Zalba system. Strange. I feel, along with the entire crew, a certain longing...a-- Jerry stared at her with determined brows, wanting her on the Enterprise.

And so the conversation had been about Jerry on that particular fall night, especially after the pale light had winked black inside the little Burger Dari and Jerry had taken the key and gone home. Some kids still stood under the juicers. He'd turn them off later, he'd said as he walked by. Smiling, he'd folded his paper hat shut and stuck it into his pocket. He'd looked fine then. Same old Jerry. But after he left, the same questions got around. Snake and Mayor stopped as they walked by, having reached the Burger.Dari after
following that gravel road to the level place, and the questions—the talk about Jerry, stopped.

"Why?" asked Snake.

"Why what?" asked Ricky Miller, smiling as Snake and Mayor came up.

"Why are all of you standing around here talking after Jerry closed up. Does he know you've got the juicers on?"

"He left them on."

"Hmmm."

Snake stood among the little group, his hands in his pockets. Mayor did too. They all breathed just a bit of vapor from their mouths and noses with the temperature nippy. There were ten or fifteen kids. Snake looked slowly from one to another, squinting, and he thought how they all looked young, yet smart. Even adult. He wondered what they talked about. Snake had his suspicions, his reckonings—his fantasies about them. The kids so cute and young. He could tell by their attitudes that they thought they were something, and sometimes he wanted to hit them. Like tonight when they stood so close and talked with animation. And yet the talk had stopped when he and Mayor had walked over to join in. They made him feel older.

He had his reckonings about what went on among these younger people. Anybody that looked like Sardi. Look at her. The way she holds her legs in the faded jeans. How the jeans waist dips just below her belly, and her shirt doesn't quite
meet them. Her tummy shows. Look at that. He'd pointed it out to Mayor one time. She'd come in the store like that and when she left Snake had said, "Look, Daddy. That was somethin', wasn't it?" Mayor had smiled and chewed, his arms crossed in his lap. Snake looked at her, in the group, and didn't look to the next person. He kept watching her. She looked at him. He still didn't look away. The others were talking again, ignoring him. Snake narrowed his eyes and sniveled. Sardi laughed and pressed back to the group, leaving him cold. He looked at Mayor. The stars pricked against the black sky. The moon was overhead. The smells. These kids.

But it was more than time to leave, to get back to the house. Mamaw would be impatient. Everyone must be waiting. Snake sighed, looking at his watch.

"Come on, Daddy," he said.

The kids were looking at Mayor, though. They were smiling. Sardi was laughing and moving her hips, while Mayor-- What was he doing? Well, be darned. He was winking at her, his face turned so that Snake wouldn't notice.

Snake stared at Sardi. She sputtered—a half laugh. Mayor's eyes, Snake's eyes, watched that belly, which wasn't even covered. Snake glared at her. And it was time to go back up to the house. Snake would leave Sardi and her curved hips and belly which looked perfect, like a plastic model of female belly, only one that seemed warm. Jackie Roy was there, standing almost in the shadows, nearly out of the group. Her
belly didn't show. But she stood unnoticed while Sardi literally rubbed from one boy to another. Guy Davis's daddy was up at the house that minute. What would he say if he saw Guy Jr. carrying on? Guy and his lanky shyness, hanging on her. Or look at Bill Williams hurrying around and waving his arms and jabbering, his face blushing. Others he only knew vaguely. Denny Max's boy, Frosty Denton's boy. One of the younger Hortons. All a tangled body of males yapping among each other. Dog faced, they let themselves be pawed. They hung back from Sardi, unsure—they didn't reach for her, but allowed themselves to be bumped or patted, turning red when she touched. Even Mayor, a grown man...even Snake! But Snake was infuriated. He jerked his head at Mayor.

"Come on," he said.

But Mayor, shuffling towards Snake, looked back. The kids kept talking. Sardi laughed and giggled, shaking her head. Denny Horton had said something funny and she giggled, accidentally stumbling into him; he accidentally holding her, touching the belly to keep her from falling down. Mayor hesitated a minute, moved closer. Sardi looked up, because he stood right there near her and seemed to want attention. She pushed out her mouth in a sexy way. Mayor said, "Honey, uh. Well, a minute ago, when I made eyes at you-- Well." And Sardi's eyes questioned, sparkled. She looked around the group as if to appeal for their help with this stupid man, the Mayor.
Snake scowled and was ready to walk over and take his father by the arm to get him, drag him if necessary, but for heaven's sake to get him back home somehow before Mamaw fretted herself near to death. They could have been to the store and back twice by now. Mayor's hands opened and shut. He started again. "Honey, I didn't mean nothln by it, you know. Only kiddin." He walked forward and touched her shoulder. Sardi drew back, screaming deep from her throat. Snake jumped towards them and had to pull Sardi away from Mayor like he would pull away a vicious cat. Snake guided Mayor away by the arm. Mayor saying, "What's wrong with her, anyway? I didn't mean nothln by it. I told her...."

Sardi's breath came in soft little gasps, and she kept smoothing her hair, pulling strands of it from her face and putting it over her shoulders. Boys stood around her with their mouths pouted out. Sardi irritably shrugged away the hand Dave Horton had put on her arm. He blushed. Sardi's lip trembled as Jackie Hoy touched her, said something in her ear, offered her handkerchief. She blew her nose on Jackie's handkerchief. Then she screamed at Snake, who stood just within the light.

"You just keep that old father of yours away from me, Snake Peterson."

The little bitch. Keep him away from her, indeed.

"I know about you, Snake Peterson. I know what dirty thoughts go on back of those eyes."
"Like what?" said Snake.

"I'm not sayin', but you just keep away from me too, o.k.?"

Snake walked towards her and she squealed, a hand over her mouth. "You dirty-bad thing," he said.

Jackie Roy backed away. The boys looked at each other, afraid. Snake crept up on her. "You wiggled, laughed, and teased him. And now look at you!" Even the boys backed away now, hardly knowing it. Sardl half crouched, a hand over her mouth. She crouched under those speaker poles, and the juicers buzzed above. They glowed red. The night was chilly and clear. Snake was hot; Sardl felt shivers on her spine. Snake stopped when he was close to her and glared. He spat.

Sardl bristled. "You sorry son-of-a-bitch," she screamed. And Snake was on her in two steps, shaking her like a rattle.

"Just a bitch yourself, aren't you? Don't you know better than to call decent people by your family names, huh?" He shook her good before he shoved her away. She stumbled backwards, and the boys flowed toward her like a tide. She trembled; the boys stared. Her shirt was torn and part of her breast showed. It had a scratch on it. The boys stared and got hot, while Snake glared defiantly. He heard young breathing, and it excited him.

Mayor moved in closer. "What's wrong with them? We were all funnin' before, weren't we? I tried to tell her...."

"Hush, Daddy." Snake leaned his weight onto Mayor's shoulder and began to turn away. Sardl crouched like a
harried animal under the speaker poles. She let Jackie Roy use the handkerchief to dab at the red scratch. The boys stared, breathed in young anger and awe.

Snake was silent before their eyes, glad to be the object of their young stares. Sardi crouched, letting Jackie Roy dab at the scratch while the boy eyes glowed at her. The boys stood with tense bodies in man-like, or man-imitating poses, dry tongues licking red lips. Snake grinned and wondered if they each had a little erection, too. Now that would be sweet. They must have stood there breathing at each other for five minutes, and Snake thought casually that Mamaw would be sending Jerry after them.

A mist was forming now, close to the ground, clinging to grass and the orangish leaves. Snake and the rest were conscious of it on their faces, dampening their clothes. The moon glowed hazy and still, veiled, spooky. The whole sky had begun to diffuse from the moonlight, be phosphorescent. And the mist thickened, wrapping the hollow and obscuring it, as the rain always did. Soon, it would be difficult to see very far in front of you. The night was cool and misty. Viewed from the sky the mountainside was dark and sleepy, with soft focuses of light, like beams concentrated on a stage, illuminating some mottled cast. Towards the top of the hill there were fires, and many people swarmed and talked and sat before a large fire in front of the porch at Mamaw's house. Men had carried kindling and dry tinder, carefully built it, and many sat or
stood around it now, not even realizing there was a chill or a mist because the fire's reds and yellows, licking, evaporated the chill. Fire licked at the faces, warmed. The coffee, too, warmed, and the men sipped it, as their wives, standing, sitting, leaning around the porch gabbled quietly and forcefully, picking at solutions to husbands, or to their children's wild habits. Talked frankly about their running naked and touching dirt, or feeling mommy, feeling themselves. Wondering how they, like little heathen children, could run like idiots outside around the daytime fires of cold ashes. And play barefoot, bare chested, even the little girls coming in with grimy faces, sticky hands, basted in ashes. About strategems for making them eat before scampering out to yank some dull and rusty wagon--four children pulling the handle while three more crowded in and joyfully clutched the sides as it hopped like a devil's toy, some Halloween fiend. About worrying as the wagons jolted over a bumpy hillside, many times spilling and the little half naked creatures tumbling out and down the hillside. About praying to God that they'd get up laughing, kicking and not bleeding, hollering. And about how to put Bactine or merthiolate on cuts and scratches, or how to stop a bigger wound with washcloths and direct pressure till the doctor came.

About how to keep the men healthy and proud. About how to keep themselves reasonably fit and healthy. How not to worry over dirt or the children not eating enough. About how
to be happy, be Mommy.

People were beginning to move to inside the house. Mamaw's chair, the rocker, was still warm, with cushions, light blankets in the seat. Messed, where she had sat, brooding. Her presence still lingered now, though she had gone with Jerry in the car. But people were going inside now.

The lights between Mamaw's and the Burger Dari were bright in front, hazy red in the rear, as a vehicle slowly followed the gravel road. Turning and twisting with the road. Jerry at the wheel. He took a greasy cloth to wipe at the window as it misted over from the inside. He turned on the wipers to get the outside dew. As the car wound around on the dark road, tree branches reached and scratched at it. Mamaw's deep breathing, her fidgeting. Her warm smell. Mumbling under her breath about Jessie and his father...still at the store, or where? The car came to the flat place and they saw the insect juicers glowing. And there were Snake and Mayor. So. They were here! Mamaw's lips puckered out as she saw them.

Snake had seen the lights coming down, winding. It was too dark to tell whose car it was for a while. The lights had twinkled briefly, then disappeared, twinkled, vanished again. Each time they got some brighter. The car drove up. It was in the shadows. The window rolled down. An arm out the front window. A fat arm. Mamaw.

Now they'd done it. Because here was Mamaw, come to
check on them herself. And Snake could feel what anxiety she had; he had sensed it before now, before she even left that chair, the rocker, and drove down with Jerry. He could see her peering out the window, her head bobbing this way and that, a shadow head. And a silhouette he knew was Jerry at the wheel, speaking to her. Snake mumbled under his breath, looked down. But he couldn't help seeing Mamaw's arm motioning for him to walk over there. Jerry got out and hurried to the Burger Dari to turn off the electric juicers.

"Hi, Momma," said Snake. He leaned in towards the window. Mamaw's face, he saw, was quivering with reproach. "Listen, Momma. We are just leavin' this minute. Really."

Mamaw pushed out her lips and stared at him, then at the group under the speaker poles. There was a pop and the electric juicers went out. Some of the kids began to leave, while others called to Jerry, wanting them back on.

Mamaw was tense, her big body swelled in and out as she breathed. She fidgeted, turned, stared out the window. Snake put his hand on her arm. Shaking her head, Mamaw fumbled for a handkerchief and pushed it to her nose. Jerry was walking back towards the car with Mayor.

Mamaw waved the handkerchief at the kids. "What is this? What have you been doin'"

"Well, nothin, Momma. I mean, we just got to talkin, is all."

"I can't understand it, Jessie. Why tonight?" She looked
him in the eyes from behind the handkerchief. "Why pick tonight for your foolin around?"

"Momma."

"No. Be quiet. I won't hear it." The big woman fidgeted. Her bosom heaved up like a great animal and then lay flatter again. She fingered the little watch which dangled from her neck by a chain. "Look. Nine o'clock, Jessie."

The back door opened. Jerry was helping Mayor step into the car. "Aren't you ashamed?" Mamaw said. She'd been speaking to Snake, but Mayor cringed as if one of Mamaw's big hands hovered near him, ready to smack. "Lord, it's getting so cold, too, Jessie."

"We've got that fire," Snake said.

"I told Lolly Phillips before I left--I said, 'You might want to get inside there, some of you, for it's gettin cold out here. Just make yourselves welcome,' I said. And I suppose we'll all have to go inside now. And you know what a mess it is in the house. There's not enough room, either."

Snake had climbed into the back seat and slammed the door shut. Jerry was behind the wheel again.

"But people were gettin cold, Jessie, so I said for Lolly and some of the others to go in, but I know she won't. Not unless others go first. I just know she's outside freezin this minute."

Jerry was sitting quite still, casually listening,
staring out the window. Mamaw fidgeted so that the seat squeaked, frowning at him and fingering the watch. "Well, let's go," she said.

But Jerry held up and hand, and the next thing they knew a shadow figure was walking up near Mamaw's window, hesitating there. A female form. Mamaw started and turned to look. The figure stooped down so that they could see the face. It was Sardi. Mamaw rolled her window back down.

Sardi still had that handkerchief of Jackie Roy's, and wiped at her nose as she stuck her head close to Mamaw's. Snake could see five or six stray boys milling around behind her, and Jackie Roy was close, too. Various thoughts were frozen on Snake's, Mamaw's, Jerry's faces as they sat there. Mayor's too. Mamaw was a little drawn back, staring, like she knew the girl but couldn't place her. Snake sat with his mouth open a little, his throat tight. Jerry hadn't changed from his contemplative, wistful position, his eyes vacant. Sardi's eyes were red, her dark hair messed, her clothes torn. Snake tried to get Jerry's eye, hoping Jerry would start the car and drive away. But that was wishful thinking. Jerry stirred, spoke to her.

"Well, what happened to you?" he said.

And she sniffled and kept her mouth covered with Jackie Roy's handkerchief.

"Here, honey," said Mamaw. "That thing's all nasty." She fumbled in her lap for a clean one. "Here, dry your eyes."
Mayor had leaned over to Snake and whispered in his ear. Snake sat with his leg crossed; he ground a cigarette butt into his boot sole.

"Well," he said, looking toward Jerry, "hadn't we better be gettin' on up to the house?" He leaned up slightly in his seat towards the girl, so that only she could see his eyes, his mouth. "You'll have to excuse us," he said. "We've got business."

"I know," said Mamaw, "you're one of the Crisp girls."

"Sardi Crisp," said the girl.

Mayor touched Mamaw's shoulder, pointed towards the road, and Mamaw took up her watch again to look. "Did you want something, honey?" she said. "We do have to get on up to the house."

"Yes," said Sardi. "I've got to ask you to do somethin' for me." And she looked defiantly towards Snake, Mayor. Jerry fiddled with a torn place in the seat and tried to catch her eyes. "Will you tell your boy, and that man of yours, to please leave me alone?"

Mamaw grunted, drawing back a little more to focus on the girl's face.

"I just about got raped tonight, and I'm not goin' to forget it. You tell that--that Snake Peterson and that Daddy of his that I'm not goin' to forget it. Just tell them that, Mrs. Peterson. All right?"

Snake wondered why she kept telling his momma messages
for him, when he and Mayor both were right in the car there, hearing every word. Snake fingered his moustache, his mouth open a little. He looked at the back of Mamaw's head. From the head to Sardi, with his mouth open. Then he noticed Jerry staring at him.

"She's a liar," said Snake.

"Now wait a minute Daddy," said Jerry.

"What, wait a minute? What's the matter with you?" Snake closed his mouth now and his eyes glinted. "What's she tryin to do, anyway?"

The back of Mamaw's head came unfrozen, moved again. Mamaw's fingers began to run up and down her arm. "Come on, Jerry," she said. "Start the car. We've got a meetin."

Sardi gaped. "Did you hear what I said? Your son tried to--"

"Now you hush," whispered Mamaw, harshly.

Sardi shook her head. "No, I won't hush. Don't you care or anything? Your son-- Well, look. She hitched up her blouse, shoving the red scratch into the car. "Look what he di-ud," she moaned.

Mamaw slapped at Sardi's arm. "Now you git! Go on. Jerry, get this car movin."

Sardi burst into sobs, stepping back but reaching her hand, her pointing finger almost under Snake's nose. "You just tell him I won't forget! My Daddy will hear about it, and--"
It trailed off as Mamaw hurried to roll up the window and Jerry started the car. The lights came on. The car began to crawl forward and away from the lot, completely in the shadows now, leaving Sardi. Only two or three of the boys left now, but they stood by her. As Snake looked back, he cursed under his breath. His last glimpse was of each of those boy hands, raised mockingly, third finger erect. Throwing a bird. Snake cursed under his breath and turned back around, only to meet Mamaw's trembling face, lurid with reproach, suffering from the effort of turning her great body around in the seat. There was a hollow thud, then another, as Mamaw's hand struck and struck again. Snake cringed into the corner. Mayor rasped, wheezed. Jerry kept his eyes fixed rigidly on the road and drove. Following its white turning surface, he watched for the moon as it bobbed out of sight, and then appeared again from around the next curve.
CHAPTER THREE

Scratchy weeds and vines clogged the entrance to a wide-mouthed cave on down the mountainside. It was a snubbed cave, going back only a few feet. It was full of sticks and wrappers and thickly crossed with sneaker tracks. Generations of holler kids had called it the pit. They crept down to that place, tense—knowing it was a secret ground where grownups didn't tread. A place where kids could play their roughest games, for days at a time. They liked mummy's tomb, frankenstein, cowboy and detective. During games of horror it became a dungeon for torture, a laboratory to create monsters. Sometimes it might be a jail.

Poison ivy surrounded the mouth of the cave, and just knowing that the stuff was there and that they need not fear it made the kids feel smart—very hush-hush. They'd learned exactly where it was and how to avoid it. For years the youth culture of the holler had included knowledge of the poison ivy code.
The only thing was that in the evenings lanky young men were rumored to lead tall rosy girls there, much to the consternation of the younger kids, who hated the vague stories of romance and who, guys and girls alike, vigorously swore they would never do such things. Young men were said to come at night and, kneeling down, tremble because they were caught in a clinging girl. Guys shuddered at the tales. The girls became thoughtful for a second before they, too, swore off the taboo mystery. They all struck a pact of allegiance to the club. And that meant no evening visits.

Therefore, it would seem strange tonight that high-pitched voices mixed with yodel-like yells could be descending on that daytime clubhouse. Some scuffed white shoes bounded down and jumped: one-step two and hop-down, stop. The code for missing the ivy. Billy Archer stood in the shallow cave and listened as the shouts grew louder, listened to the clumsy brushy stumble of their feet through weeds and leaves. Three sets of brown shoes bounded through the cave's mouth and the four boys found themselves nose to nose, hot breath in each other's faces.

"So, mister white shoes, you want to be the good guy, huh?" Jeremy Peterson lunged for Billy's shoulder and, missing it, crouched. "That why you wear white shoes? Want to be mister good?"

Fred and Ralph Coffee laughed. Billy knocked Jeremy down and hit him. Then, taking a gulp of chill air into his chest,
he held it. Now a low trembling moan crept into the air, tickled Jeremy's ear before deepening in Billy's throat and sliding into a yell—an angry battle yell which split the eardrums of poor Jeremy. Before cop Fred or cop Ralph could jump to cop Jeremy's rescue Billy had weeded some ivy and smeared it all over Jeremy's face.

Jeremy knocked Billy's hand into the rocks and the cops pounced on Billy and they all four thrashed and hollered. Billy slipped away and stop, hop-up and two, one-step, jumped away before they could re-grab him and he was gone. Winning, he let his legs fly, enjoying the feeling of breath and of feet hoofing in and out of danger without having to be told what to do. He reached the level place and walked more calmly to the large red fire and let his heart pound-thump and the blood gently fill with oxygen and he was squatting casually with the men when the cops finally trudged like losers towards the back of the house.

The meeting was nearly in progress. Snake Peterson had arrived, hailed with boiling shouts by half the men around the fire, who had run at the car as it drove up the drive, waving and flitting around the car lights so that Jerry had to creep along. Snake leaped from the moving car and sprinted with the others towards the fire. McAlister Crisp was talking to three men and waved Snake over.

"Glad you could make it, Snake," said McAlister as he warmly shook Snake's hand. McAlister smiled confidentially. "A
little business, huh?"

Snake looked confused, wondering what that meant.

"I mean, a little business has caught you up down at
the store. That's why you're late."

Snake mumbled and looked to the other men, who were
talking avidly.

Up on the porch some of the women whispered about Lolly
Phillips, poor spindly thing, who had finally dragged Mamaw's
big rocker in from the porch and sat rocking for a while,
watching the goings on. She'd folded Mamaw's blanket so that
it cushioned her head, and dozed off. Two young girls sniffed
at the blanket which Lolly had folded under her head. They
looked at each other with mock horror. They held their noses
and laughed.

A few minutes later Jerry was helping Lolly from Mamaw's
chair so that he could haul it outside, Mamaw officiating.
And Lolly Phillips, apparently trying to help, put out a
restraining arm. Mamaw whispered something to her and pulled
at Lolly's hand. One of the women stepped forward with a baby
blue shawl for Lolly's shoulders and led her back to the house.

"...no reason we can't get started this minute," McAllister
was saying with the approval of the others, who were grouping
around the fire getting good seats near McAllister and Snake.
"Snake, we'll let you open this, here," continued McAllister
Crisp. "We're all talkin our tails off and not gettin
anywhere." McAllister winked through his bushy eyebrows and
others laughed. Mayor walked up next to Snake and Mamaw and stood nodding at people. Someone came over and conferred with Mayor, who nodded and laughed and, from the expression on his face, apparently gave some sage words of advice.

"I think we're ready now," said McAllister, bustling around in one general area, glancing at the fire and towards the porch. "Excuse me," he said. Mimi Crisp, his wife, was calling him and he left, touching Snake's arm and looking at the men. "Only take a minute," he said.

Snake squatted with the men around the fire.

Meanwhile, Ray Smith was talking in low tones to Swimmer Jarnigan.

"There was this guy," said Ray, his tongue probing his cheek, "who had his wife to run off about three years back, and that got him bad. He wanted everybody to know, you see, that it wasn't his fault, and that he was much put upon with those three kids to take care of."

Other men were talking but their conversations were quiet, droning unnoticed in the background. Ray made it quiet when he told something. Swimmer looked at his kind red-rimmed eyes. Ray's eyes had red in the whites, too, and his eyes held Swimmer's stare. His face said I like you if he really did.

"He started goin with his momma to church, with those children. Every Sunday they were there."

Ray was carefully watching Swimmer's eyes, like a preacher
studying to see how his words affected you as he talked to you in person. Swimmer was scratching at the ground with his fingernail. He did like to hear Ray tell about things.

"Aw, I think you know who it is already," said Ray. "This guy hasn't missed a Sunday since then. I've watched to see. Well, except he did miss after that Saturday night at that little drive-in."

Swimmer smiled. "It's Snake Peterson you're talkin about."

He looked around for Snake, saw him squatting near the porch, outlining some plan in the dirt as other men looked on. "Old Snake." Swimmer laughed. "Somebody drove by there. Ha! Old Snake was talkin to them kids there, like he always does. And somebody threw a cherry bomb down by old Snake's boots!"

The two men chuckled, looking into each other's eyes. They rubbed their hands together. It was getting chilly and late. McAlister Crisp had finished with Mimi and was walking toward the fire.

Snake opened the meeting, talking slowly at first, rambling a bit. Welcoming the guests to his house. And Mamaw had to say how they could go in for ice water or Cokes if they wanted, or if they wanted food there would be plenty if they'd just ask.

"And now we'll begin," said Snake. He paused and looked out over the fire, to the men around it, as if he were counting. He glanced at Mayor and Mayor whispered something. "Last year," continued Snake, "we didn't have this meetin and didn't decide
to protect the property. Not in any way except each man for himself. There was five hundred dollars damages done to my store, cause I couldn't be there all the time. I went out to Craig Dearstone's house when somebody started a fire out there and while I was gone, well. You all know about the windows broke and the stealing. So we're goin to do it right this year. I understand the sheriff will give us some protection.

Some of the men snickered. Sheriff Blake and his deputies were as good as no sheriff and no deputies. Couldn't do the job. Everyone knew how Sheriff Blake took bribes. He wouldn't be re-elected come November.

"But it's generally felt that some organized protection will keep them Oak Grove boys from doin much, if they do anything at all."

McAlister Crisp had been listening intently, his face like a carved stone bust. But he changed expressions now, coughed. He moved around where he sat and, all the while looking into the fire, raised his hand until Snake noticed him.

"You all know, I think, that we had a close call last year at my place." McAlister looked towards Mimi, who was standing on the porch, listening. "My equipment up at the barn, the milk equipment.... Uh, you know we have to have a bulk tank now, and they're mighty dear. I just felt that those old boys would come up and bother my bulk tank before anything, it being expensive equipment n all." McAlister took
a deep breath, glanced at the fire, at the ground. His mouth sucked at the Rolaid as his eyes stormed. "Well, I went up there and sat with my shotgun and a box of ratshot cartridges. I sat out there in the front with both doors open so I could see. Sat straight through to ten-thirty and sure enough those boys started climbin the hill for my barn. I heard em say, 'Let's go on over and bother old McAllister some.' Well, there they were, fifty yards away before they spotted me and took off down there. What do you think? Those boys were shootin bee-bee's from the field at one of our windows. It just happened that Sardi and Jane, they had a little Halloween light in their window and it was shinin orange--only light in the house." McAllister was quiet a long time. The fire crackled and leaped and Snake watched the red sparks fly from the wood cinders. McAllister finally continued. "I knew one of those boys, thought he was a friend. That summer he'd helped me put up hay and I paid him good because he wanted this old motorcycle. Paid him real well, but I guess he never did like me much." McAllister was quiet some more, watching the fire. "It just bothers me that anybody would hurt one of my girls. Boys, let me tell you--it's no friend of mine that does that, no sir."

Snake sniffed and looked up from the fire. The other men watched Snake.

"Thank you, McAllister," said Snake.
Inside the house Jeremy Peterson was "it". Hide n seek. Run and hide, but not out of the house, so that the house, as Jeremy counted with his eyes closed, was a turmoil of kids running from room to room, bumping into each other and into the women who tried to keep some semblance of order.

"Twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five. Here I come! Ready or not."

And Jeremy was trotting here, there. Looking behind doors, under his bed, Jessica's bed. Bed! There was Fred Coffee.

"I see you! Come on out."

Fred helped look for others.

In Mamaw's big closet there were clean sheets.

"I didn't mean to," yelled Jessica Peterson, standing on a wad of clean sheets in the closet. "It was dark. I didn't know it was the sheets."

Jessica joined Jeremy and Fred.

Room to room they went, even sent a search party scouting around the house. They ran into Jerry's room and turned up two more kids hiding under his bed. As they were leaving, Jessica clamped a hand to her mouth, her eyes bulged. She pointed at Jerry's desk. He'd been building a balsa wood model of the Enterprise. The dome top had been crushed.

"Who did it?" she moaned. "Who broke my brother's model?"

They were ten strong by the time they got to Snake's
room, and Jessica was apprehensive. She wanted to keep them out of there, but it was impossible. She quickly surveyed her father's room. The stuffed rabbit on his dresser—intact. The leather scraps littering the card table, the half finished leather vest he was working on—intact. The leather boots—yes, they were in their place by the bed. Jeremy opened Snake's closet. Four boys were standing in there around the ham radio.

"All right, come on out, you guys."

He tagged Sam Pardue and was barely able to tag Denny Smith in time to keep him from running away, safe.

Jessica was shouting at Fred and his friends. Just as she had let herself believe that everyone would leave her father's room without breaking something, Fred had slyly pulled open Snake's bottom dresser drawer, and now he and Jeff Crawford, Billy Archer and Joe Ball were pulling out boxes full of leather scraps and various doo dads.

"Get out of there!" screamed Jessica.

Jeremy ran up and tried to pull Fred away, but one of the others—Frank Coffee—said "WOW" and, all big eyed, pulled out a Playboy. There were others. Fred twisted loose and grabbed one. Then they all stood there, laughing. Jessica about fainted with the shivers in her stomach, and some of the girls smiled bitterly at her. In the boys' hands naked flesh flipped like pictures in naughty arcades. Breasts—modest, flabby, or bouncy breasts—nakedness! Greedy Fred and his naughty
cohort. Jessica stared helplessly into her brother's wide eyes.

"Come on, let's get out of here!" she said. Jessica ran to Jerry's room and slammed the door, locked it.

Jessica had watched Jerry's slender hands working with the balsa model Enterprise. Watched as he carefully cut exact pieces of light balsa wood and as he guided the razor blade around the pattern. He'd drawn up plans and all. His sketches looked to Jessica just like an architect's—all full of precise lines and exciting surfaces as it took shape on the rectangular cardboard. Jerry had also done a color replica with pencils and Jessica could look at it and let her imagination bring it alive. They'd both stared at it and talked about the Enterprise as if it were in space and not on the cardboard. Closed their eyes together and seen the black background, and the starship floating by in white tones with blue shadows and Jessica's mind slowly came closer and closer so that the dorsal boosters and fuselage would enlarge before her and she could see people through the little windows. Once she had jumped and said aloud, "There's Captain Kirk." Jerry simply observed, "That's Spock he's talkin to, isn't it?" And over the days Jerry's hands made the wood go just right. Jessica felt she was looking into the creation itself, privileged to be present as the Enterprise became three dimensional and real. A thing of delicate beauty.

Jerry told her how the ship she saw on t.v. was only a
plastic model, not any so rare and real as this.

But the circular top now hung limply from the fuselage, and Jessica tried to make her fingers do as Jerry's had done—carefully, steadily glue the dome against little vertical broom straws. That way it would dry at precisely the correct angle, not tilted and weak.

All the while Jessica listened to the footsteps pounding in and out of different rooms, galloping and pawing in front of Jerry's door, which Jessica had locked. Sometimes the door knob would jiggle and twist before the footsteps would trot away. Other kids, impertinents, would try the door only to bang loudly and holler for it to open. Jessica could hear an occasional, "who's in there?" Then more knocking and shouting to be let in. Jessica couldn't get her hands to be still enough for the delicate work. The dome fell crooked and then dropped onto the table. A starship of genius was now broken—clumsy. Jessica cried.

---BREAK---

This meeting had brought together four Monopoly pros. Four kids who looked forward to getting up a good game and who, while the game was in progress, were not much aware of what happened around them. Randall Jones, Jane Crisp, Michael Jacobs, Rick Phillips arrived an hour early and set up the game in the living room. The game belonged to Jane Crisp. She'd asked for it brand new for her birthday.

The square property cards were still slick, the colorful
money all crisp and neat. The houses and hotels, the silver
tokens, the board—all fragrant and new. While everyone else
ran past them playing tag and other games, while the television
droned in the distance, while the laughs and shouts of the
men outside came in the open window, the Monopoly game went on.

The game was going well for Jane Crisp, she couldn't be
doing much better. She had money and the prospects of building
an empire. While she had no monopolies yet, she lacked only
one property card in two different color groups of having one.
All four kids were huddling over the board in close attention,
stomachs knotted with wanting a jackpot which broke the rules
by its very existence. This jackpot was Jane's chance—she
knew it and planned to land on it. With the money she could
become invincible and sweep on to win the game. The jackpot
had caused the bank to be broken twice and now most transactions
didn't go through the bank, but through jackpot. The bank sat
in shambles, merely a cardboard money drawer with a smattering
of ones, fives, fifties—nothing more. In the jackpot, though,
wonderful piles of crisp new money were stacked high and the
kids were greedy for the piles of yellow-orange-blue.

Jane had been watching Michael Jacobs for the past forty
minutes with calm grey eyes. She watched all boys this way
when they were doing something not too smart, as boys are
often bad to do. And Michael had recklessly used great wads
of his money to buy property right and left so that now only
a hundred dollars was to his credit. Jane was satisfied that
his end was near, especially now that Randall had a monopoly. Jane watched Michael with calm attention, her lips pushed out. Michael was rolling for jackpot, but the wicked monopoly of Randall's lay in his path. Jane wanted more than anything for Michael to mess up. She knew how much he wanted to win; she liked to see boys cry.

The plastic cubes rattled together in Michael's palm. He shouted, "lucky seven!" and let them roll. They tumbled out spinning and bouncing, dice hot as Vegas, and one came up four and the other...spun as if it knew that Michael's stomach cramped double until it stopped. Jane, too, held her breath—could not be calm. Rick, the banker, clutched the two red hotels Michael would eventually buy if he became wealthy now. The dice spun, then stopped. Not on three, but on one. "Four plus one," said Jane, hoarse from relief, and even little Jane Crisp was almost unable to get the sing song mock into her voice. "No dice, Michael," she said, and looked at him with her calm grey eyes.

"No dice, no dice," came the dry voices of the others. "You needed seven."

Jane would not quit watching Michael's face as he pounded his race car token five spaces forward. She knew without looking where he would land--she knew and was spiteful, wicked and smug in her victory. They all knew that Michael's token would land on Tennessee Avenue. Randall Jones was already jumping up before the race car token stopped there and
shouting,

"I own it!"

Made Michael madder.

"That'll be one hundred and eighty dollars, please," said Randall.

Michael looked at his holdings and realized for the first time that this had not been his day—nothing had gone right. Nothing he'd tried to do had worked. He'd managed to land on and buy Boardwalk with great show. Then Jane Crisp had snatched up Park Place before Michael was even around the board again. It just wasn't working, this strategy. It had been get the hopes up, have them dashed by "friends". Michael was close to having two monopolies if he could only stay in the game and squeeze out enough money to buy them. Michael ran his fingers across the scattered rows of property cards, noticed with a sigh that they were all mortgaged. His hopes had been on jackpot, and now.... Michael licked his lips. A rumble of low laughter blew in through the open window and Jerry Peterson's voice was saying something. Michael looked at Randall Jones.

"I owe ya," he said.

Each of the players smiled at that and Michael just didn't know, couldn't believe. Their eyes watched him.

"...all his property's mortgaged, you see," Jane was saying. "He's just bankrupt, that's all."

Michael shook his head. "Uh-uh. I, I've got Boardwalk."
Somebody can pay the mortgage for it and they can have it. I'll give it to anybody. Come on, you guys!"

They had turned their heads slightly from this plea, as if it would not be polite to watch.... Unfortunate, sad tragedy.

"The rules--" Rick began, already lifting the mortgaged property cards one at a time, placing them at the bank, explaining what Jane knew so well. How all Michael's property would go up for sale--and Jane was nodding her head, fingerling her money. She pointed at Boardwalk and bought it from the bank as Michael looked on. Michael threw down his race car token and ran from the room.

Somewhere beyond Jane's victory, the EBS test was on t.v. Someone had told little Amy Pots that it was not "merely a test", and she ran screaming to the kitchen while some boys shouted after her.

"The planes are coming. Take shelter!" they roared.

Amy's piercing screams solidified Mable Lawson's headache. Mable was searching the cabinets for some crackers to feed her little boy, who was hungry--and the meeting had not adjourned. Mable found the crackers and stood with the box in her hands, eyeing little Amy at her feet, making clucking noises and stooping to smooth away the child's tears. Wilma Jeffers walked briskly towards the living room and Mable heard her monotone voice make the boys stop shouting about air raids. When Wilma came back in the two women exchanged expressions which meant, "Well, I'll swan....", and wiped
their brows almost in tandem. Mable offered Amy some of the Saltines and put crackers into other eager hands. Fourteen-year-old Craig Sanders ran in for some food and, since he waved away the crackers, it was necessary to light the Peterson gas stove, lard a frypan, turn out fried peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

Randall Jones heard the pans rattling and smelled the hot jelly. Jane agreed that time should be called for refreshment, so Randall grabbed a few sandwiches and the Monopoly players were soon calming their nerves with thinking of the greasy sandwiches instead of jackpot. Jeremy Peterson snatched one, Fred and his cohorts, now a banditto gang, held up Mable for five of the sandwiches. And Anne Campbell, told where the bread was kept, found it in the container Snake had made for Mamaw and opened a new package of Bunny Bread. They discovered more JFG peanut butter in the cellar along with rows of homemade grape jelly. Soon bony Wilma Jeffers and short, friendly Bertha Samuels, always a dear to have in emergencies, were helping in the serving line so that the whole operation was efficient. They found pop in the cellar, too. The little kids threw down their crackers and begged for fried sandwiches. Everyone was quite jolly.

"Well, she said they could have food. She won't mind, Mona won't," said Anne, her face perspiring.

"Oh, no," Mable agreed. "Mamaw Peterson won't mind as long as we clean the mess."
It was hot in the kitchen with the stove burning, the kids running around, the screen door banging open and shut. Mamaw and Jessica kept the Peterson kitchen spotlessly clean. Cabinets designed by Snake lined the wall above the porcelain sink, and on the back porch two tall metal cabinets stored other of Mamaw’s canned things. The cellar was full of home-canned corn, beans, red beets, pickles. Homemade jam and jelly. Cases of store vegetables or soap or popcorn that Snake had brought home. Underneath the kitchen sink were the cabinets Snake and Jerry had installed one Mothers’ Day, where Mamaw kept her large pots and pans. An oak table sat in the middle of the kitchen area. The walls of the spacious room were decorated with watercolors suggesting scenes from all over the hollow. Jessica did these special for Mamaw.

The screen door swung open and banged shut. Stan, Bertha’s husband, walked in and helped himself to a sandwich and a Daisy cup of pop. Mable dried her hands on a towel and asked how much longer.

"Don’t know."

Stan looked around the kitchen, walked to the den and back. "Boy. The house is tore all to pieces. What’ll Mamaw say?"

"We’ll have it fixed in time for her to see, I reckon," said Bertha, wringing her hands.

Stan, laughing, stuffed the sandwich into his mouth, took his cup, and walked back towards the meeting.
He burst from the house running, pumping those legs fast as pistons--his rear end swiveling precociously and infuriating any woman who chased him, who craved to aim a good lick at that bottom. Billy Archer. He burst from the house pursued by Frank Low, Randy Baker, Hugh Coffee, who chased Billy in a wide arc around the fire and the semicircle of men. From a distance it looked as if the boys ran in slow motion, their figures disappearing slowly into the shadows. Shouts, churned up leaves and brush. Quiet. Now a yell from Archer himself, and the four figures came panting and laughing towards the light, homing in on the porch. They bore to the right and towards the fire until, ten yards away, they split and stumbled, laughing, into the group. Billy jolted Mamaw's rocker and made her lurch so that her beans almost spilled. Jerry jumped to his feet. Billy turned and ran as fast as he could to the house, Jerry following for a ways. The screen door slammed loud.

"The way I see it," Snake was saying, pausing to see that Mamaw got settled in o.k. again, "there are those here who've got more than others. More property to protect. Just naturally that's the way it is."

The men were watching him, lounging around that fire in various attitudes, all watching Snake while they mulled their individual thoughts. Mamaw's chair popped regularly, like a slow metronome. She'd settled back now to stringing her beans
into the plastic washtub.

"Those that's got the most will just naturally stay with their own property. Like, McAlister will want to guard his barn again this year. And I'll want to stay at the store with Mayor to keep anybody from botherin it."

"Daddy." Jerry raised his hand, Snake nodded at the hand. "Pete Cantrell has guard duty this weekend so he couldn't come tonight. He says to tell you we're keepin the drive-in open Halloween night since there's gotta be someone watchin it anyway."

"You'll be workin?"

"Pete'll work till nine and I'll work till closin."

"Good."

Snake told of how this would be an all-night affair. It would last all Saturday night, all the way till dawn when the devilishness of Halloween evaporated and it was Sunday morning when everybody was goin to church. Didn't think there'd be much trouble then. Surely not. But it was the dark hours they had to worry with.

"Well," Bucky Simms was saying, "I'm one of them that don't have too much—you'll all agree." Bucky was looking around and some of the men laughed.

Snake watched his dark head, black beard and black brows--always brooding, always hiding something, Snake thought. One of them what goes to Morristown six days a week to work at Berkline. Likes that Dolly Smith, Ray Smith's sister and no
tellin what the world is comin to when Dolly Smith gets a
man--even when he's Bucky Sims. Most people'd said she was
over the hill and might as well get out the old maid clothes
when she turned thirty.

"I volunteer to be on the all nighter patrol, watchin
other people's things." Bucky looked at Snake. "That's even
though I don't put people in stacks the way Snake here does:
those that's got a lot and those that's got nothin."

Bucky's dark furry head just served to nurse the sparks
already hot and glowing in Snake's thought. They glowed like a
cigarette when Snake would take a drag on it. Snake scratched
at the top of a wooden match he'd been piddling with and lit
a cigarette, took a few drags on it as he watched the sparks
at its tip. He thought it was good Bucky was willing to leave
that crackerbox house of his and come watch property that was
worth something. Bucky brooded into the fire.

A bunch of other men one by one followed Bucky in volun-
teering for the all nighter patrol. They were mostly men who
lived by themselves or just hadn't accumulated anything they
cared much about. Jeff Swanson was one who volunteered,
though he had a family and all, but Snake thought how old Jeff
was a good sort to do that. Jeff was another of the Eastman
Kodak workers and had wiry blond hair clipped close to his
head. Two years ago Jeff got shot up pretty bad in a fight
at some rinkydink billiard bar outside Morristown and nearly
died, if Jeff could die from some brawl. Took him four months
to recover himself, though. But that didn't bother Jeff none. Jeff came down and sat at the store during the last month of his healing up and Snake sure hated it when he got well enough to go back to the Eastman. Though other men volunteered for the all nighter patrol also, Snake liked Jeff the best for it. Wished he could be out with them himself. 

"So this is the way I figure we should work it," said Snake. "We have three foot patrols, three men in each patrol." He paused and looked around at everybody. They were watching him, watching the fire. Mamaw had looked up from her beans to watch Snake. It was her plan he was telling everybody now. "Two patrols, two men each, who'll be in cars and will crisscross the Holler, here, while the three foot patrols will stay put in perimeters of about a quarter mile each--that should cover the whole area."

"Wait a minute. Wait a minute, here." Ray Smith looked confused and like something wasn't just right. Snake looked up, recognizing him, even though he sure enough had pulled some of his practical jokes on Snake, Ray Smith had. Snake remembered that night at the Burger Darl and the fifty-one Chevy swooping down, the arm throwing a cherry bomb at his feet. "What about us men who's got businesses and home property to protect? I can't leave my wife and my girls all by themselves at the house. I gotta be at my garage when I should be at home, too."

Snake glanced at Mamaw, who was holding beans and rocking
herself. "O.k." Snake held up a hand and waited for quiet, because other men like Ray were jabbering and talking and shaking their heads. "I think we've got an answer here. I was comin' to this part of the plan. You all know I've got an old ham radio set in there that I use sometimes. And I know at least five or six men here what's got walkie talkies already."

The talking was starting again as people caught onto the idea and Snake was quiet while the disorder broke out. They seemed to like it and Mamaw was rocking and doing her beans again. It was her idea. She rocked and her chair popped and two more men came out of the house with sandwiches and sat down. Kids were running at the perimeter of the man-encircled fire. Jessica was standing just beyond the porch trying to get her father's attention, and Snake turned and abruptly waved her back.

Now Snake held up a hand for quiet once more. "Just hear me out," he was saying. "Hear me out good on this." Finally there was quiet again and the fire popped and licked as McAlister Crisp threw some more kindling on. "I've got two extra walkie talkies here at the house, and Joshua Blake of Morristown, who works at Gibsons there says we can have three or four more just for that night. Men who don't have access to phones can call into the main radio here and I can—or Mamaw—can radio one of the car patrols to get some men over there quick. Women alone at each house can phone into our
place, and Mamaw can relay the message to one of the patrols."

And that seemed to be a very well-accepted plan, indeed. Snake was proud for Mamaw and for the fact that everyone was paying attention to him—McAlister Crisp, too—and saying it was a good idea as they nodded and winked and talked about Halloween night. The air was getting real cool and in the fire there was also the smell of the fields around close and the fresh mown hay. There was tobacco in the air from the Peterson's tobacco curing in their barn before it would go to Greeneville for sale. Somewhere beyond the excitement of the men and the noises of kids and their moms, a dog was barking. It was a good night.

After the particulars of just who would receive the surplus walkie talkies had been worked out, Snake was congratulated so many times that Mamaw finally told everybody that she had worked out that plan, not Snake.

"That's a real good idea you've worked up there, Mamaw Peterson," said Ray Smith, garage cap in hand. "If it works out all right, I don't see why we shouldn't do it this way every year."

Mamaw rocked and said thank you to Ray and strung her beans. Yes, it was good to come up with a plan that would keep those Oak Grove boys out. Teach em a lesson. All this stuff about how to call in about some trouble was just hogwash. All they had to do was press the button and Mamaw would hear them on the ham radio outfit. The only problem she
could foresee was too many people pressing the buttons at once.

"So," McAlister Crisp was saying, "all I have to do is push this little button here. Like this." Snake had been showing around one of the Peterson walkie talkies. "I don't know much about these things," said McAlister, pushing the button over and over. "What do I say?"

Mamaw's rocker popped faster. For Heaven's sake, what would he say to anybody he was talkin to? Mamaw shook her head and rocked, but she was laughing inside. McAlister had been a favorite with her, from the time when he was a younger man and dove into Norris Lake to save her little Rabbit boy. Rabbit had been just eight years old and visiting his Aunt Coleen up around Norris Lake. Just happened that McAlister was up there with Mimi for a weekend camp out like they were always having. McAlister saved Rabbit's life, though he was later killed in the war. Mamaw snapped some beans and tried not to think about it.

Snake took the walkie talkie and held it to his mouth. "This way, McAlister." Snake pushed the button and there came a nasal flow of ham radio language as Snake casually muttered into the mouthpiece. "Break-break, breaker. Ah, this here's Snake up at McAlister's milk barn, over?" Snake looked around. The men were half smiling and watching. McAlister looked a bit awed, his mouth open. "Then Mamaw, or whoever's on the main set will say somethin like, 'this is F control and we read you, over?' Then you say, 'Yea, well we may have some trouble over
here at the milk barn. Can you send one of the patrols over to
help?" Snake took the walkie talkie from his face and looked

"You're real smart aren't you, boy?" Mamaw looked up
from her beans, watched Snake with a wry expression on her
face. Snake looked down and was turning to show Bucky
something. But there was a shriek—a child screaming—and
the women died a little and the men looked up. Everything
seemed frozen during that scream which caught them all up and
stopped time. The scream trailed off but still seemed to
vibrate. There was a beat, then another and another, faster.
The moments unfroze and began to rush forward again, carried
along by the shrieks, which kept coming from the house. Among
the men McAlister Crisp seemed to burst out of his frozen
moment even before it would have liked to release him and he
bounded to a house which now seemed frozen in screams.

---BREAK---

Wilma, Bertha and Anne had closed down the food factory
and were busy fixing the house back to rights. The frypan was
scrubbed and put away; the bread, peanut butter and jelly put
back. Soggy, slobbered-on crackers were cleared. Soon nearly
all the women were helping, seeing how messy the house was,
and being too polite to leave it that way. From kitchen to
living room to everywhere they moved, picking up and warning
kids not to throw down—undoing effects of tag and hide n
seek. Turning Jessica out of Jerry's room before branching to
Snake's room and confronting the **Playboys** which lay scattered over the floor and bed, piling them into a corner before smoothing the leather doo dads and putting the table back to order. They even dusted the stuffed rabbit; they were crusaders destined to sleep all the better for knowing they'd done right by Mamaw Peterson.

Jane and the others were so into their Monopoly game that they hardly noticed the woman, but rolled and rolled for snake eyes and double sixes, though no one hit jackpot until nearly time to leave.

The money and property was now well distributed between players—**the type of game you like to see but which hardly ever occurs.** One man was already bankrupt. Rick owned the most property, while Jane and Randall were about even. Of course Jane had Boardwalk and Parkplace with a hotel on each and she'd been pleased to collect huge sums from her unlucky friends who landed there.

Jane's heart beat quickly. She was on **Chance** coming towards **Free Parking.** She felt it in her bones that she would roll three and land on **Free Parking.** The huge fortune in jackpot would be all hers and she'd almost certainly win the game.

"Lucky three." The dice rapped together in her fist. "A two and a one. I feel it."

"Jinx, jinx, jinx," said Handy and Rick. They made faces and boohed.
"Come on lucky three," and with that Jane sent the dice spinning across the floor. So far away that she had to scramble up and chase them. One landed by the stuffed blue chair. It was a two.

Randy and Rick ran over to see that it was really two.

"Two and--"

Mrs. Jeffers was at that moment walking efficiently through the den on her way to arrange some pillows and her long foot blindly sent the other lone die spinning back towards the Monopoly board, clicking and sliding so horribly before Jane or Randall or Rick could verify the number. Had it been a one? Jane gaped while it spun to a cock-eyed stop against the money in jackpot. They all three glared at Mrs. Jeffers, who was by now fluffing the pillows with her long hands.

Mrs. Jeffers walked briskly towards the door, stopping to warn the children not to be messy, then padding on her determined way again. Jane was crying quietly as she rolled once more—a six. She directed her thimble token six spaces, had to pay Randall seven hundred dollars when the six caused her to land on his property. She watched Rick turn the dice in his hand, turn his eyes towards heaven, five away from the jackpot. Five!

"Lucky five," said Rick. "A three and a two."

"Jinx on that. Jinx on four and one," said Randall.

"A three and a two or a four and a one. Come on heavenly.
FIVE!

The dice spun to a stop. Four and a one. Rick got jackpot, Rick got jackpot, got jackpot, got jackpot, etc. Jane watched him lift, rustle, stack, return for more rainbow money. All the money, all the pot. Jane, Randall and the bank watched through tears as Rick calmly lifted, rustled, stacked, returned for a greedy handful more. And Jane—something broke within her. Her mouth snapped open. Screams tumbled out as if they were handkerchiefs tied end to end and somebody was pulling them hand over fist from her throat. Kids were running in, women were hurrying towards the awful noise. Jane reached down and snatched at her new Monopoly board.

Silver tokens, red hotels, shiny green houses seemed suddenly brittle and suspended for long seconds in mid air, kept aloft by shrieks as Jane Crisp slung the Monopoly board to the ground and stomped it. And then, as her mother swept her up, the plastic things fell to the ground, with jackpot money raining on everyone. McAlister Crisp ran in and stared at his little Jane as she squirmed in her mother's arms.

---BREAK---

It puzzled the men outside how a kid could go crazy over money and property, and they laughed about it, punching one another playfully. However, they couldn't forget so easily the wild and beaten figure which plodded out between her parents, Monopoly board tucked all crazy under her arm. They wouldn't forget the look of confusion about McAlister and
Mimi Crisp. McAllister's mouth was grim and set. Though his body was submissive, his hand in Jane's, his eyes were brewing and darting all around. Once they rested on Snake, who looked trapped for a moment with shadows of the fire on his face.

"Honey, will you take my chair back inside?" Mamaw asked Snake. "I know it's about ruined now from this dew. And Jerry's drivin Lolly Phillips home, so he can't do it."

Snake hauled the chair towards the porch even though Ray Smith was winking and wanting him to stay to hear what really happened last Halloween at his garage.

Snake's daughter broke some news to him as he carried the rocker past her.

"Well for cryin out loud," said Snake. "What'd they bother? That rabbit had better not be messed with."

"It's o.k.," said Jessica. "But your magazines got ruffled some."

Snake froze, blushing before Jessica's accusing face.

"Oh Pa," she said, "what are you doin with magazines like that? I like to died."

"Damn kids."

And out of the dark, in the direction Ray Smith had last been seen, came the singsong taunt of kid voices.

There's a place in Mars where the women smoke cigars
And the smoke they make is enough to kill a snake
If the snake don't die he's a lucky lucky guy.

Snake pinched a cigarette in two, lit it, watched the sparks fly off the end. He stood by himself on the porch and
blew smoke into the mist. Mamaw came up behind him and wanted her chair.
CHAPTER FOUR

Lolly Phillips took a lipstick-blotched Kleenex from her patent leather purse and rubbed the vapor from her side of the window. Now they'd driven down by the store, around the wide curve, and up a side road that led to a little nook where a small wood house sat, almost unnoticed. Lolly began to move her hands, her fingernails scratching for purse and shawl, bustling to have everything ready so she could get out at once when the car stopped at her door.

Jerry hesitated. Lolly had her door open; she paused and looked back, one foot already out.

"I'm fine, honey," she said.

"I know." Jerry rubbed at the steering wheel. "Wasn't so long ago I had you in the fifth grade," he said.

A flicker of memory in Lolly's eye. "Fore I retired. Yes, Jerry."

"Your last year. I had you your very last year in the fifth grade," Jerry said. "I was just thinkin here what a
good teacher you were."

"Well thank you, Jerry." And she was out in the small yard and up to the porch. Let herself in. The light came on. She pulled back the living room curtain and Jerry could see the bony fingernailly hand waving. So he left her to herself.

Tonight Jerry had heard millions of violins buzzing like fruit flies over the meeting. Jerry had seen the beginnings and the continuings and, yes, he'd seen Lolly's careless head nuzzling into Mamaw's rocker and the women bending around her like angels and whispering their sympathy, their "poor things," for Lolly Phillips. Snake said she'd been a real looker when he'd had her in fifth grade. As Jerry watched her it struck him that she'd possessed blazing lips and soft breasts which shimmered as though red stars were brilliant beneath her gown. Men had put strong hands against Lolly's waist and waltzed her, captivated.

"I love to see em happy," she'd said, dry bones rattling beside him as he drove down the mountain. Loved to make those kids happy. Jerry wiped the windshield and peered out, hardly seeing. He imagined a corridor stretching to infinity and formed by blood-red dots which trembled and seethed.

"Imagine a young man," thought Jerry. "His skin is firm and new and he can run fast and sleep good and get wet without catching pneumonia. But look at someone old, like Lolly Phillips, whose skin is crinkled and blotched."

It hadn't really hit home until tonight how his skin was
crawling with eighteen years worth of those seconds, the almost
imperceptible red paper seconds. The red moments multiply as
the years pass. And it happens fast, faster, like a car
slowly gathering speed.

When he was five, a whole day might seem like three
days, and then he didn’t care about time, didn’t know. Thought
he’d stay five years old and run around the house--maybe take
a nap every day and get washed by Mamaw--forever. And here was
Lolly Phillips, the living picture of time’s ruin. Red
moments had swarmed and left their blight. No more wonderful
brilliance, electric lips, butter tummy sliding under the gown
for Lolly. The gown now faded and the muscular hands of her
beaux had pulled away even as they themselves withered,
futilely shaking at the red moments which seethed and multi-
plied as the years passed. Jerry was suddenly still; he even
eased off the gas pedal.

"Lolly Phillips probably looked sexy as Sardi Crisp,"
he thought. He unconsciously brushed at his arm as if to
knock a couple zillion of the dangerous red things from his
skin. He felt just like crying.

Snake had told of how his whole fifth grade class spent
a month of bitter November days packing cold oranges, figs,
and candies into straw baskets, hauling them back into the
sticks where more people than you would think were poor, or
had been raped by unnoticed moments. Lolly had supervised the
Thanksgiving baskets for years. No more.
Strangely, she still walked with hips and butter tummy swinging even today. Walked through Snake's memory of a middle aged spritely lady who loved children. Mayor's memory of a beautiful woman with beaux beating a path to her door. A shame that with each succeeding memory between Mayor and Snake Lolly walked with stiffer steps, dimmer youth. Her purpose never diminished, though the brilliance of her body did. She was walking into deepening shades of grey, treading the tiny red paper moments......

"I love to see em happy." A latest blip of Lolly which would echo through Jerry's aging mind.

Snake's moustache had become a string of stars as Jerry stared at the sky. Strings of stars formed Mamaw's rocking chair and Mayor's head bobbing and Snake's hooping it along strings of tiny unnoticed star dots. But the red sky was no place for words, which droned behind Jerry. Words lost forever, words coming undone over the fire and going into the sky, each catalogued into tiny vibrating red things, unnoticed.

And Lolly must have been young once if that meant dancing in the sky, a body sleek and rippling like a cat, a light from her young soul shining ruby bright through the fingers of a beau's strong hand.

Luckily, something in the music had been Sardi, and Jerry grabbed that essence of her. But was it fair? Should she resent Jerry making her do that in his mind? It was only her essence, but the mind is sacred.
It was too quiet. Jerry looked at the green circle on his wrist: ten till twelve. He turned around curves zigzagging the state road till it glided past the store. Then he was around another curve and turning onto the dirt road which ribboned up the mountainside to home. The night mist was enveloping the whole car again and the front window kept fogging.

Parking the car beside a darkened Peterson house and walking slowly towards the back porch, Jerry eased himself through a hole in some shrubbery and felt with his feet for the path. It led up through the quiet darkness. The brush and leaves at his feet rustled as if an intruder was about. Jerry stopped to breathe, pulling his jacket collar up around his neck. He saw that it was five till twelve midnight.

"The witching hour." And this two days before Halloween. Ghouls, gowls, goblins and that dark bloodsucker, Dracula. The ghosts of all those men who as boys once ran over this very soil like little heathen children. Men who had grown before those all seeing eyes of Mamaw, ever watchful that nothing happened. But even Mamaw couldn't protect them from the war.

Jerry felt creepy, as he had on the Saturday morning years ago when some burly recruiter in Johnson City had brought the pea green bus. Thirteen year-old Jerry pausing in his run down from the house and staring at a soft yellow glow diffusing through fog and then seeing, when he crept nearer,
silhouettes of lanky boys standing at attention. Boys from yesterday's roly bats and monster games, maneuvering like puppets to the man's bark. Those grown up boys who knew about tall rosy girls, who were used to taking them out for a stroll or to secret places on the mountainside. These guys now in the line--stiff, erect, scared. And many tall rosy girls huddled with parents and friends under the veranda of Snake's store, even they seeming under the spell of the sergeant's military crispness. The sergeant's big chest, the sergeant's hair going in disciplined waves back from his forehead.

After all the boys had snapped to attention again and again, the sergeant said something to another man, who stood at the folding door of the pea green bus with clip board and ball point pen and made a clean stroked check every time one of the boys hollered out his last name.

It was foolishness thinking of the ghosts, though every creature scooting around near Jerry reminded him of one of the boys who never came back. Unidentified things were continually rustling before his feet as he approached the lair of some rabbit or mouse. Jerry tried to think of Sardi.

"Am I really on my way to see Sardi Crisp, alone, in a cave?" he thought. His blood ran cold. He laughed.

Jerry thought about Snake. Snake, with his funny black moustaches and his interesting curses and the way things touched his nerves. Snake had been planning that meeting all week. Why had he nearly missed it merely for silliness at the
Snake had tales to spin every time he and Jerry went camping or fishing. New ways of doing all the mysteries of camping and fishing. Snake could sit on the bank and flick a fly lure so that Jerry himself had to squelch an impulse to turn fish and dive in for the bait. Snake loved to catch the fish, though he could haul one in much more quickly than he often did. Sometimes he jerked the rod and stumbled back, pretending a big one had got away; or he might stumble into the water, hollering, "hep me, hep me," as if the fish were a monster.

There was the summer Jerry had begged to go camping with them, pulling himself up to his full height and prancing around to show his worth. Snake had finally said yes, had assured Mamaw it would be o.k.

But that night, after camping in a green forest cove of the lake and feasting on a good catch of fish, after putting up a lean-to and crawling in for some shut eye, Snake was about his mischief. Old Snake had been careful to warn Jerry about the bears, telling about a half remembered camping trip years ago. A bear had pawed and toppled Snake's tent and sent him scrambling for his life.

"Now, if a bear comes after you, boy, what'll you do?" asked Snake.

Jerry said that he might just run and jump in the lake.

"No, son. Climb a tree. No bear can touch you up a
Snake had decided to impersonate a bear to get Jerry in practice for a real one. Snake and Mayor had crept outside as Jerry breathed a deep and relaxed sleep. Snake cut a branch full of twigs and leaves and began pounding it against the lean-to, and they'd all of them shouted,

"Jerry, Jerry! Get on out of there. A bear's tryin to knock down the lean-to. Run for your life!"

A muffled scream from inside and Jerry—as Snake told it—came flying out of there like a scalded cat, or worse. Ran straight for a tree and was up it in two bounds. Jerry remembered Snake laughing so hard that no sound came out for a whole minute.

Jerry's light laugh mixed with the shuffle of leaves as animal eyes blinked at him from the night. Jerry could just feel himself running like a cat and jumping that tree. Awful funny, Jerry's first camping trip.

Almost jumping up a tree now, Jerry froze, listening to a moan reverberating through the woods. He listened as another, more eerie than ever, drawn out moan swooped down and then climbed quickly into a screech. His heart pounded. The bushes to his left shook. A figure jumped at him, arms waving.

"Jerrryyy Peetersssonnn..."

It was Sardi.

She'd changed clothes from earlier in the night and now
wore a parka and different, newer looking blue jeans.

"Tryin to scare me, are ya?"

They stopped and kissed, Sardi doing most of it. But she was warm and her mouth was like all the softness of any kiss and her shoulder, which Jerry squeezed, was making him dizzy.

There was a cave near the top of the mountainside which everyone knew about but didn't bother with, since most didn't care to fool with the ever turning and twisting path up there. The cave was one of the deepest on the mountain and went back about twenty feet and had a fairly high ceiling. Some said the cave was blasted out years ago by an old man who thought there was coal there. Sardi had asked Jerry to meet her there, around midnight. Jerry, flattered, had kept naming the guys in his mind who would give anything to meet Sardi in this cave—at any hour.

The opening was grown up with weeds and bushes and tree saplings, though there wasn't much growing inside. Jerry blinked as the light of a small fire hit his eyes. It was warm in the cave.

"I said, where is that boy?" Sardi was saying. "I didn't have my watch. It got broke tonight when a certain person threw me down. Anyway, it seemed like way past time."

She grabbed his wrist and turned Jerry's watch to her. "See, I'm not very late," said Jerry.

"I heard this laughing so I hid in the bushes. I
couldn't tell if it was you or not."

They sat by the fire and Sardi put on more of the twisted branches she'd piled there. Jerry didn't especially like being here all alone with her--what with the wee hours of the morning and everything. With her waiting for him after talking him into coming up in the first place. And then she'd nearly scared him to death when he arrived.

Jerry tried to explain in a few words about Snake's pranks on Jerry's first camping trip.

"I can just see myself scootin up that tree," he said.
"And Snake-- He couldn't stop laughin at himself."

"Speakin of Snake--" Sardi looked up, smiling bitterly.
"Did Mamaw Peterson believe me or not? I mean, she rolled up that window and gave me a look like I was--"

"She believed you. Just let it go at that, all right?"
Jerry crossed his legs and stared at her eyes. "But I've been wonderin just what did happen."

Sardi's mouth dropped. "Jerry Peterson, what the hell do you mean?"

Jerry kept staring at her, unmoved.

"Am I a liar? Is that it?"

Well--knowing Snake--he may indeed have been carried away, even torn her blouse. If it were true, if it really did happen--if Sardi had gotten him, well, riled--he was capable of it.

"He wouldn't just jump you," said Jerry. "I guess I'm
tryin' to think of what you did to get him mad."

As Sardl stared, her eyes got even keener about the corners so that they squinted. Among society of the holler, this was called the do you see hate in my eyes? expression.

"He called me somethin," she said.

Jerry could picture it. Mayor and Snake coming back from the store and the kids still there talking. The juicers crackling and the Burger Dari closed and dark.

"Called me a dirty bad thing," said Sardl, pouting.

Jerry watched the fire and wondered. Maybe Snake was slipping. It just seemed ridiculous for Snake to be calling McAllister Crisp's daughter such names. That was bad enough. But for a man like Snake to even bother to pay attention to Sardl was stupid.

"I don't mind bein' knocked around or anything," she was continuing. But I'm a...a woman, Jerry."

Her face looked dramatically reflective. Jerry supposed she meant to look dreamy eyed or something.

"There's some places a woman can be hurt bad by a man. If I wasn't embarrassed enough to have my shirt ripped and all those little boys gaping at me. No, that wasn't bad enough, cause now there's the germs; maybe a bruise, too."

One single cricket outside the cave started going and a puff of breeze blew in. All Jerry could think was, how could Snake even give Sardl Crisp the right to use his name in such accusations? She'd tell her father, too, and old McAlister
Crisp would come over and ask scalding questions. Snake would get more angry realizing he'd given this little thing, Sardi, a power over his word. Jerry got up and dusted his pants.

"I'm goin'" he said.

Sardi's mouth dropped open about a foot. "You can't go now, Jerry Peterson. You promised...."

"I'm leavin'" he said again. "I haven't got anything to talk about with the likes of you."

Sardi looked away. "Well I never, Jerry. You too, a 'friend.' I'm sorry then, Jerry."

A pitiful expression of hurt spread across Sardi's face. She met his eyes, touched his hair.

"I think I see," she said. "It's your Daddy, isn't it? I mean, I'd give hell to anybody sassin' at my Pa. Nobody does that. Look, baby, I'm sorry. It's not your fault at all."

Jerry tried to brush her hand away from him. Then he didn't want it away, didn't know what. She was sorry.... Maybe she wouldn't blab to everybody how Snake Peterson nearly raped her. It would just kill Snake when he woke up in the morning and thought about it, no matter what Sardi said. It would be like death if Sardi Crisp made him a fool.

Jerry sat down again and let her tickle his ear. Put his arm around her. She was warm.

"Just don't spread that tale, Sardi." He looked at her.

"If you ever want to be my friend--"
"Oh, sure. Just forget, right?"

"If you want me to stay."

"Well, you make me forget, lover. I'll forget, but you've got to make me."

Jerry felt his face getting hot. "I can't make you...."

"Just do anything I say. Then I'll swear Snake Peterson never laid a hand on me."

They played Simon says, with Sardi being Simon. Simon says for Jerry to put a hand on top of his head, Jerry did it. Simon says for Jerry to lean over on his elbow, he leaned. Simon says kiss Sardi, Jerry kissed. Did it for Snake. Simon giggled, says for him to roll Sardi around on the ground. Simon says to do things faster, faster. Sardi laughed and clapped hands. Jerry Peterson in her control, like a puppet.

Simon says for Jerry to close his eyes and look down. Through his eyelashes Jerry glimpsed a Sardi pulling the parka from over her head, then reaching backwards the way women do and unhooking the white bra and, still with his eyes closed, watching her breasts come together as she folded her arms under them. They did look bigger when she hugged herself, looked very nice.

"Simon says open eyes."

Even without eyelashes catching drops of firelight to glow around her, Sardi looked so much like a young human colt, all sleek and healthy curving. Simon says for Jerry to come to Sardi. Looking deep into her eyes, those faintly humorous
eyes, searching for some spark of what Jerry Peterson felt. And Simon says to hold the girl and Jerry felt like the fire was in him, licking and turning tomorrow's dewy breathing inside him.

Kiss her, says Simon. Do anything. Sardi leaned back and unbuttoned the shirt from Jerry's chest. Red down caught the fire and then the softness of Sardi as she tickled his bare chest and hair.

Simon says wait, kneel down. Jerry watched and Sardi, giggling, went around the fire with her arms gently folded. Then went around some more and she was dancing across the ashes, stepping just beyond the flames. Leaning full in Jerry's face to grab some sticks and throw them on the flames--which leaped for them, crackling and smoking. Jerry could smell night dampened wood. Sardi giggled, nervous-like, as she danced barefoot in the fire's ashes.

Simon says go around the fire with her, Jerry. Together they trod barefoot, open breasted, around the ashes, hardly missing red flames. Smoke in the cave, in their eyes. Simon says touch, touch, kiss. And Jerry kissing Sardi with his arms around her folded arms and his hands tangled in her hair. Then his hands pulled by Sardi to her chest and she said,

"Strong hands, Jerry."

"What?"

"Such strong hands you have."

And Jerry with red blotches, red things in his eyes. And
so this is what it's like. Take her, says Simon, crush her and squeeze if you want, anything at all to comfort you at the black path's end. If you want any faint tatters of the once raging glow to help you through those spent years before the eternal fire.

Jerry danced around the fire, feeling warm ashes and hot flames near his feet. With their eyes closed now they danced around the fire and time seemed suspended and Simon was pounding in Jerry's head. Sardi limp in his arms, looking through Jerry's eyelashes as if she could be asleep, be totally Jerry's.

Simon didn't say to sink down on his knees at her feet and to put his head against her legs, stilling her dance around the fire. Or say to pull at the jeans. The snap was loud and Jerry was pressing his face over the butter belly which felt smooth and then felt like an animal and Sardi sinking down on her knees by the fire, her eyes open wide now. She was saying words which were coming out of her mouth like far away buzzes and not very loud. And as Jerry pressed his face closer and deeper the buzzing was louder, but Jerry didn't care. Then a thump against his head and he heard more clearly, buzzing something like,

"Stop!"

Nearly a scream, frantic as Sardi squirmed out of his grasp and leaned breathing on her elbow. Jerry breathed and stared at her as she grabbed at the jeans and pulled them up
again, shaking her head at him as he knelt there breathing at her.

"I didn't mean.... I didn't mean...." she was saying over and over.

What she meant was that Simon hadn't said, or shouldn't have said or implied that—

Jerry's face felt red and waves of burning rolled off it, a lump in his stomach. His hands tingled.

Sardi stood and looked distractedly for the white bra and when she located it, slipped the straps over her shoulders. Her arms went backwards and she hooked it. Sardi shook the parka and pulled it over her head, still breathing. She licked her lips often.

"Well...." she said. "I didn't mean...."

"What?"

Sardi sat down.

Now after all that, if she didn't keep her promise Jerry would come to her and stomp her into the ground. He trudged back down the mountainside, having left her squatting and catching leaves on fire. He'd gotten up to leave, had been nearly out of the cave when she had looked up, said,

"I didn't mean...."

Jerry staring with tingling hands.

Jerry beat the bushes and weeds at the side of the path with a branch of leaves as he walked. Emphasizing each I didn't mean in his mind. There was no memory of undoing the
Jeans or anything, but there she'd been after that screeching stop and there he'd been with her in his paws. It was her fault, flirting and playing with Jerry. Using him like some puppet. Saying Simon says come closer and touch me, and Jerry doing it for Snake—at least at first. Later caught up and rushed, trusting himself to the flood. Whatever she meant, it was all her doing.

That didn't stop the shame on Jerry's face, and he stomped down the path swooshing everything in sight with the leaves, using them like a whip to pelt the path with his anger and to get some of the rage out of himself.

"Why, she must have done the same thing to Snake. Used him, and then used me."

And Jerry cast Sardi away, or tried to, and pounded the leaves to the tune of *What kind of fool am I?*

He crept into the house, made it to his room by walking cautiously through the den and then feeling cautiously along the wall for his door. When he got in and could turn on the light the first thing he saw was the Enterprise. A new wave of sickness hit. He hurried to the table, reaching for the two pitiful pieces of starship.

There was a note.

*Jerry. They broke it. I couldn't fix it. I cried.*

*Jessica*
CHAPTER FIVE

Lolly Phillips worked afternoons at Snake's store, and most of the Halloween candy and what-not seen around Clinton Hollow had passed through her hands first. It was she who went to the store room and brought the stuff out to the display case all neatly packaged in cardboard boxes direct from the candy company. And it was she who stood and picked out whatever kids pointed at and figured up how much change it would take to pay for it.

Sometimes, especially after school had just let out, the kids had to wait longer than they would want to get their stuff, because Lolly couldn't be rushed. It often seemed like a slow motion movie of Lolly as she slowly reached for a black wax moustache, paused, said, "Now was that two paraffin teeth or one tooth and a tongue?" And finally taking the lucky person's money and dropping the purchase into a crisp little brown sack and handing it across the counter.

Some afternoons Snake would come over and stand with
Lolly. He wasn't so patient with the kids, many times spoiling the whole fun of deciding about which candy would do best. The sack would be all crumpled when Snake thrust it across the counter. In spite of the wait, it was much better when Lolly was alone.

It was one of those old country stores. Been in the family since nineteen twenty-two. The floors were dark mahogany colored and were dried out from being walked on and scrubbed again and again. The store smelled like what was sold there, all mingled together. And there was something quite earthy about the whole appearance. The first thing to the left was bins of crusty potatoes, then bushels of onions and onion sets. Snake also kept eggs and lettuce, cabbage, and vine-ripened tomatoes through early fall. Home-grown carrots and broad-leaved dark greens which would cook up with beans to make one of the tastiest meals this side of the Smokies.

To the right was a large counter colored like the floor and consisting of wide glass panels with wood frames. All the better for looking. Since this was Halloween time, the case was filled with waxy black moustaches, red gummed paraffin buck teeth. Muted red wax tongues and fat jelly red wax lips. Calliope witch whistles: those nickel treasures of smooth orange wax which ran the scale of Halloween with flute-like arpeggios when kids ran their lips across them.

There were striped straws filled with grape or cherry or
lemon flavored sugar stuff. There were long twists of licorice and cardboard boxes of flat bubble gum packages with free monster cards in them. There were those miniature paraffin bottles filled with cherry yum yum juice and wax lids which the kids bit off to get at the juice. Boxes of candy lipsticks in cellophane wrappers, boxes of Butterfingers, Three Musketeers, scrumptious long-lasting caramel Big Daddys, Sugar Babies, salty delicious Pay Days. Hershey Bars, Milk Duds, sizzlin hot cinnamon Red Devils, and Jaw Breakers.

And on top of the counter, metal racks with clips holding Gordon potato chips, cheese curls, fried pork rind and popcorn. A display of real-looking, roll-your-own chocolate cigarettes. A display of little jokes with stenciled on pictures of men and women holding their sides, straight lines drawn from their mouths to show they were laughing hard. Jokes like fake bird-do and exploding pellets for cigarettes. Packages of Juicy Fruit gum with mousetrap springs. The ever popular whoopee cushions. And one of the favorites: plastic puke.

On the wall behind the counter, rows of real tobacco and roll-your-own papers and packages of pre-rolled cigarettes. Lolly wouldn't sell real tobacco to anyone unless she knew he was better than eighteen years old.

Lolly liked her counter and the kids who came to it. She liked the powdery, sweet-smelling cardboard boxes in the store room. She liked opening the large boxes left twice a week by the Johnson City truck. In the large shipping boxes
were small cartons containing packages of candy or jokes or smooth orange witch whistles with cardboard placards showing a howling cat with jagged tail and a witch lady flying over the moon. Lolly put the cartons of witch whistles at right angles, thinking them an even more tempting buy. She kept a secret tally in her mind of how many she'd sold that day—figured by the dozen and gross—and checked figures.

Snake had his own counter near the rear of the store. He and Mayor seldom knew of the goings on up front. Only heard the bell tinkle incessantly from three thirty till four on afternoons. Knew, when it began ringing and kid voices drifted back, that Mamaw must just now be sitting down to As the World Turns, having washed the dinner dishes, swept the floors, done the ironing. It gave Snake some satisfaction to think of Mamaw easing her heavy bones into the rocker, because it marked the count down to closing time and supper. Snake usually treated himself and Mayor to liverwurst on rye and a Pay Day or any candy bar or pie they wanted. The busy time for Lolly was a slow time for them.

Snake sold cheeses and meat and watched the portable television with Mayor. Snake weighed the stuff and wrapped the white paper around it, talking all the while to whatever customer it was. Mayor often tied the string. Snake hated the string part.

At noon men came in for sandwiches which Mayor and Snake made from ham and cheese or bologna or liverwurst, or whatever.
Did a nice tidy little business over those sandwiches. Through
summer and on into October you could get fresh tomato and
lettuce on your sandwich at no extra charge. There'd always
been sandwiches sold at Peterson's store. A passel of Hollow
men had always sat around the veranda and eaten them with
potato chips and bottles of pop or chocolate milk.

Lolly came in around twelve or so and stayed till closing
time. Wasn't much call for the candy and pop until then. And
those hours just suited her. Even then she was often exhausted
by six. The kids were the highlights of her day. Reminded
her of Bruce.

Though it had been a long time since Bruce was a boy,
years and years. But Lolly remembered, and it gave her
pleasure to think of him. Bruce had come by this very store
on his way home from the same school the kids today would come
from. Good old Central School. Had come by here with Snake
Peterson, lots of times. They were friends, Bruce and Snake.
Always been friends.

And they enlisted together, though they'd been grown men
when mostly boys were being sent. Twenty-eight, both of them.
Bruce knew how to fly and the army was after men who could
fly. They enlisted together, trained together, wrote home from
Ft. Campbell together. But they had to go their separate ways
after basic training.

The letters still came from Bruce, and Mamaw would read
letters from Snake, and Snake's brother Rabbit. In fact, all
worried mothers would meet at the Petersons' every Friday night and talk about the war, read letters. Compare news.

To think of quiet, bookish Bruce in a fighter plane buzzing poor foreign people, as the t.v. showed, and buzzing other planes...flying in squadrons like on Twelve O'Clock High and machinegunning. Maybe dropping bombs, too. It wore Lolly down and no telling what would have happened to her but for Mamaw, and the realization that Bruce would be home one day.

"He'll be back," Mamaw Peterson had said forcefully, in Lolly's ear. "He'll be right here at this house, and my Rabbit boy'll be in, and Snake. And we'll all laugh again and hear about the planes and the troops."

"Yes," agreed others. "My Herbie will be back, right here."

"Old Owl Tate will be back here as cheerful as ever."

They said and said to one another. Oh, there was much reassuring patting of hands and glancing into eyes those Friday nights.

When the telegrams began to come, there began to be fewer women at the Peterson house. When her friends received such telegrams, it was as if Lolly had been hit in the stomach. She felt for her friends and the boys she'd taught in school.

A letter had come from Bruce of how his company had given candy and cookies to children. A picture with the letter of dirty youngins with familiar looking chocolate chip cookies made Friday night two months ago. The surprised eyes of a
little girl without any clothes, like she'd never had a chocolate chip cookie before. She was on Bruce's knee, and her brother was on his other knee and in the background were many other dirty little children looking surprised and hungry.

The letter said that Bruce had been given four days without having to fly or do combat of any sort, and he'd played with the children and he and his buddies had distributed cookies from the package.

"The boys say thanks to everyone who had a part in sendin it. The war is still on and morale at our unit is low, though I have hope. What have you heard from Snake?"

Mamaw held Lolly around the shoulders and let her talk those little picture children out of her system. Later the women had talked about how Bruce meant well, but shouldn't have sent the picture to his momma. Not just yet. Not until he got home and the war was over.

When Lolly's telegram came she had a nervous breakdown. She'd been near one anyway. Mamaw Peterson was with her most all of every day. Everyone was kind and saw to Lolly. One of the men took her to the hospital in Johnson City twice a month. Lolly loved for Mamaw to read the Bible to her, and always Mamaw holding Lolly's hand in her big warm fist.

All around telegrams kept coming to other families. It didn't seem fair when twenty boys from the Hollow were either missing in action or reported outright killed. Mamaw's telegram came. That night there was a sickness in people.
Even Mamaw's closest women friends had never seen her cry.

Lolly never went back to teaching school and there were several years of doing nothing. Now the candy store kept her occupied. And the kids, always excited, always with their little fists wrapped around sweaty pennies or nickles. An occasional quarter. Lolly never hurried them. They always got just what they asked for in a crisp neat sack from Lolly Phillips.
CHAPTER SIX

In a high ceilinged hallway with orange wood floors stood a girl with brown hair and a limp dress. She was tall and willowy, and her eyes were fixed on Miss Adkins. Above them both an oak framed clock ticked and a second hand reached twenty seconds, fifteen, ten. The second hand swept past five and the willowy girl clutched the metal ring and the cord tied around it. Three-two-one. Miss Adkins nodded and was already walking away when the girl tugged the string, feeling spring and striker lean away from and then bang back to the bell. Clang! The girl held her ears and Miss Adkins by this time had returned to her office. She was sitting at the desk. She had taken up her pen. She was writing.

In the wake of that bell there were seconds of suspension when the waves vibrated throughout the whole school, across the playground, across the canal stream into town. Spaces between seconds while the bell’s waves reached each ear and before the brains of hundreds of kids and thirteen teachers
assimilated the sensation of ringing into one assumption that
the brass bell opposite and above Miss Adkins' office had
been rung by that girl in the limp dress.

Every day there came that moment when the bell still
echoed and the rambling dusty playground sat in utter silence.
The sun had moved a quarter further away since lunch. The
discarded apple cores lay in the same positions as earlier and
yellow jackets hovered around them, landing to sip the brown
juice. The oak trees along the canal bank rustled slightly in
the breeze.

Teachers in each of the large classrooms scurried like
mother hens trying to line the kids up. There was no unorderly
discharge from this school at three-thirty. The kids marched
neat and orderly from the structure--out through the double
doors, in orderly formation until they passed through the
trellis archway in front of the school. Large old Central
School with its aged brick walls interrupted by windows and,
out front, by a slab of concrete with Central School, 1902
etched into it.

Jeremy walked home and each step made puffs of dust on the
kid trampled playground. The smell was of burning banana peel,
gum and candy wrappers, apple cores. Fires in rusty trash
barrels burned slowly, and their smoke wafted lightly into the
October sky. Kids around him screamed loud. When he didn't
watch, they jostled and worried him like so many little fishes
swimming across the dusty playground and past the large gnarled
oak trees on the canal bank. On towards the concrete bridge which spanned the canal stream and led into town, where Snake's store was. Jeremy kept his eyes at his feet. He smelled the odors and ignored the shrill arpeggios of the witch whistles which were carried by on every side.

The day had been one of calamine lotion and taunts. Jeremy recalled the image of his surprised face in the mirror Saturday morning. His face was all red, and tiny blisters were forming on his nose, near his eyes. Some of them were on his mouth, too. He recalled being very still, then pounding the dresser with his fist in a slow even rhythm that sounded the slow burning rage inside. Billy Archer! Find him and stuff handfuls of poison ivy in his face, making sure to rub it around his mouth. The dresser mirror on the wall taunted Jeremy with being Billy Archer's stupidest victim of all. The doctor had branded this the worst case he'd seen. Jeremy could only eat soup and liquid foods. Every morning, afternoon, and night Mamaw dabbed sterilized cotton balls in calamine lotion and blotted it onto the sores.

All day long Jeremy had felt like a little brown and orange leaf blown about by jeers. Billy Archer wasn't having such a bad day. Everyone simply felt sorry for him. He didn't look ugly, and his bandaged hands prevented him from doing any writing in class. Billy couldn't do homework. Jeremy, blown hard all day, had said to himself, "I know!" and had plotted revenge on Billy.
"If I could get Billy Archer alone, after school, with all his friends gone," thought Jeremy, "I could have the poison ivy ready in my hand...."

He had slanted his eyebrows devilishly and pictured stuffing poison ivy by the handfuls down Billy's pants, rubbing it around down there.

"Then he would always have to scratch it. He wouldn't be able to drink much. The doctor would say, 'a very interesting case, indeed.' And all the guys would haw-haw him to death. He'd wish he was a damn girl by the time it was over."

Everyone was swarming towards the bridge spanning the stream which bordered the playground—called the canal stream—and which led to Snake's store. Jeremy was trying to get across the playground without having to talk to anybody; he just wanted to get to the store and speak to Snake. But Denny Martin was feeling high as a kite this afternoon. School was out for the day, he was going home. Denny and his crowd closed in around Jeremy, shrieking in his ears, making him look up at them. Denny had one of those sweet smelling wax moustaches stuffed up his nose and paraffin buck teeth crammed into his mouth so that when he talked, the words sounded muffled and slurred. A little girl had a witch whistle and she was shrilly going up and down the scale. Denny Martin forced his face in front of Jeremy, moaning and shaking his head back and forth.
"Jeremy Peterson, Jeremy Peterson. He don't need no Halloween costume this year!"

Jeremy cuffed at him, but Denny was dancing around just beyond his reach, his head of black hair matted down with the sweat of the day and his slit of a mouth inflamed with the teeth.

"Ummmm, Ummmm," went Denny, moving the teeth around. "Bet his Pa'll go trick r treatin. Bet I know who to."

Kids ganged and pawed at Jeremy, many of them trying to torment him now. A boy and a girl on each side of him pushed witch whistles near his ears, dancing around like demons so that Jeremy wished he could, leaf-like, blow way up high, away from them, and float out across the canal stream to the store.

"Ha, ha, ha," they jeered in chorus.

"Hey, Jeremy. I'll give you fifty cents if you'll let me wear that mask next year."

"I heard Jeremy's on his way to pose for monster cards. How much they payin you, Jeremy?"

This was terrible. It wasn't so much his face, but something else—something that no one had told him. Poison ivy, bad as it was, would go away, but this was a complete surprise, what they were saying about Snake. And about Sardi Crisp. Some people had it first hand that she'd been roughed up Friday night, but at first Jeremy had thought nothing of it. David Benson, a good friend, had hailed him on the way to school. After some talk about itching and calamine lotion and
eating problems, David had said,

"Say, what about Sardi Crisp getting roughed up Friday night?"

"Didn't know it," said Jeremy.

By lunchtime Jeremy had begun to suspect that something very creepy was going on. Friends would avoid him. Others would be strange and stare or whisper among themselves. At first recess two tattered boys with tight sandpaper tough hands had followed him around with a small chain whining five feet behind Jeremy's head. Wheeeeee, it went. Jeremy ducked and looked back over his shoulder, alarmed. Wheeeeeee, wheeese. The boys followed him in a shuffling side gait. They brought on the chain at a slant.

Jeremy didn't know what to think. The chain boys usually stuck to third and fourth graders. "I'll whoop up on their heads," thought Jeremy. He pushed out his lips at them, made his eyes glint, slowed down. Did automatically all the things to show that he was no third grader, that he understood, that he was aware of himself and of what punks they were. "Whoop up. Show them to mess with me. Punks." Jeremy turned around and stared at the two. They stopped walking, dirty faces confronting him. Their eyes on the ground, their chain jingling in their palms.

"Boy," said one. Boosh, it was pronounced. Pronounced with the do you see hate in my eyes? expression.

Jeremy stared back, hate in his eyes, too. "Mess with
me," he thought. "Just try it. I'll whoop you." But he felt his eyes burning from the pressure of it. This was nothing easy. Chain boys should be bothering third graders, not him. And way off he could see some of his friends watching to see what he'd do. Every time Jeremy would walk, the two dirty ones would follow, swinging the chain closer to his head. Wheeew, went the chain again, and Jeremy turned again to walk away. Whoonngggggggg, went Jeremy's ear. The chain had just nipped it. Jeremy turned and glared. This was it. He could feel the calamine lotion getting gunky with sweat.

"Go have your fun somewhere else," said Jeremy. "I'm not in the mood, you punks."

"Ahhh, too bad," whispered the one with the chain.

"Wait," said the other. "This boy's sick. Look at that face, Sammy. Ain't it awful?"

"Looks like white shit," said the one with the chain. "Pigeon shit."

Jeremy took a step forward. "Whoop em, whoop up now," he chanted to himself, gritting his teeth.

One of them was beckoning with his fingers, his chin thrust forward. "That's it," he said. "Come on." He beckoned with his fingers. "Come on, boy." He swung the chain.

Jeremy dropped his head, turned to walk away, then sprang back even as the other boys began to hoot at him. Jeremy grabbed the chain, pulled it away, made it whirl at the tips
of their noses. The two backed off. Jeremy was cool now.

Jeremy stood at the boundary line and called to a willowy girl in a limp dress who was holding one end of a rope and counting. Her name was Janet Wilcox, and when she heard Jeremy calling she smiled, though continuing the count. The red-haired girl jumping hadn't missed a skip. She waved her arms like feathery antennae in time to each step. Finally she got a rock in her shoe and stopped. Janet ran over to the boundary.

"Hi, Jeremy. Got poison ivy, don't ya?"

"I ought to know it by now."

Janet smiled and they stood another minute looking at each other. Jeremy reached for one of the scattered coal cinders.

"We've got to talk, Janet," he said.

"What about?"

"About what's happenin. Somethin strange; somethin I can't find out. But you know, don't ya?"

A little second grader appeared from around the corner of the school ringing a small handbell. She ran along the length of the building signaling an end to recess.

"At lunch then," said Janet. "I'll be ringing the main bell and dining with Miss Adkins today, but I can see you at twelve fifteen."

Now to go back inside for more of what had been happening all day. Back inside to endure History and Geography while
his face itched. With the girls glancing at him and thinking he looked icky. The guys watched only with their eyes. Jeremy imagined he would see eyes in his sleep tonight. Eyes that watched and knew.

When the dinner bell finally did ring, Jeremy could picture Janet standing there with the cord in her hand. He could picture her holding her ears, then picking up her sack lunch and entering Miss Adkins' office. Visions of Miss Adkins' hard boiled egg, celery, Scotch plaid thermos tumbled through Jeremy's head. Janet would try not to smack her lips over her peanut butter and jelly sandwich, her Gordon potato chips.

Most people didn't bring their lunches, but exchanged thirty-five cents for gunky cafeteria food. As for Jeremy, he was doomed to go through the lunch line without getting any food. Mamaw had packed him a thermos full of soup. He marched with everyone else down to the rambling Central School basement and walked in one of the groups of ten to a large metal wash fountain where someone stepped on the iron ring circling the bottom and water spouted from tiny holes along the inner surface. Jeremy went through all the motions, getting his hands wet and soapy at the first fountain and proceeding to the rinse fountain. Now he let himself be swept into the cafeteria line, only to walk with averted eyes past plates of his favorites: grilled cheese, soup beans, greens. At last the line emptied into the table area and Jeremy hurried to an
obscure corner, sat down among kids he didn't know, tried to enjoy his steamy soup.

Janet was waiting on the playground when Jeremy finished. At lunchtime the boundary didn't apply, and Jeremy walked onto the girls' side and stood with Janet under one of the large leafy oak trees that lined the sidewalk.

"None of my friends will talk to me today," said Jeremy.
"They must want to stay friends with you."
"Just tell me what's going on, Janet. We're pretty good friends still."

"Well I, for one, am glad to hear that, Jeremy Peterson. I was beginning to wonder." Janet leaned against the tree and poked at black ants on its trunk with a stick. She watched Jeremy. "Is it a coincidence that the day you speak to me again is the day you want something?"

She was looking down, biding her time. Rather enjoying the moment. Her long brown hair clung around her neck and there was the faintest smile around her lips.

"This past Friday night your father nearly raped Sardi Crisp," she said.
"You're lyin."

"I am not, Jeremy. How dare you say it? You come over here, ask to know what's going on. Did you really expect it to be something miniscule?"

Jeremy wondered if Billy Archer could somehow be behind all this, destroying Jeremy's word with some lie. It
aggravated Jeremy now that he'd given Janet the chance to build her stupid drama, complete with big words, learned for the teachers so they would call her refined, even brilliant. She'd set Jeremy up like on a soap opera, and he wondered if Billy Archer could, somehow, have— "Ah, rats!" Billy Archer or no, it was Jeremy who crawled to Janet Wilcox. And that made her above him, had right away enabled her to mock him. There had been a time when Jeremy and Janet— It was painful to think about because Jeremy considered himself a fool for ever letting that time be. But Janet had once flattered him. She did stuff like always being around after school and wanting him to walk her home. Making her limp body seem so weak and helpless. So that he had said he'd go with her to that skating party in Morristown. In spite of himself he'd accepted. "To think, that is the first girl I ever kissed."

The guys knew nothing about it, though he'd expected her to brag and blab it all around. If only there hadn't been that one night, that kiss which turned into three kisses with a long wet one at the end and Jeremy, in the dark, thinking he actually— For that one night, but not after—just while he was kissing her and she was all warm up against him—thinking he must love her. Even waking up the next morning he loved her. But when he'd seen her the next Monday at school, he couldn't believe what he had done...it was awful. He'd been a fool.

Now when he thought of Janet it was to hate her guts.
He even struck up a conversation with Ricky Miller and David Pardue one day for the sole purpose of putting her down in front of them.

"You know old Janet Wilcox?" he'd said. "Rings the bell for old lady Adkins. Now there's a pig."

Jeremy had felt superior. David and Ricky had made sour faces and said,

"Yea. Old stick legs. That's a pig alright."

Now, as he walked home from school, Jeremy asked himself desperately why he had done it. "Why ask Janet Wilcox a stupid thing like that? Why did I go to her?" He asked the question again, to himself, and pinched his arm so that it hurt.

Jeremy bit his lip and worried. Had Jerry known about Snake's rough housing Friday night and forgotten on purpose to tell him? Jeremy was bothered because everyone knew he didn't like being at the Burger Dari. He didn't like Jerry's juicer gazing, or moon staring, and got all embarrassed for his brother.

"Why is he doing this?" he'd think. The kids murmured about it, trying not to smile while Jeremy was there.

Sometimes Jeremy was reminded of a kind dog that just wanted to be alone--a kind red cocker spaniel dog. Jerry's hair was red and all, and like the speckled dog trotting up the canal bank now, his body was covered with freckles. And of course, dogs do howl at the moon.

Back when Jerry was Jeremy's hero they'd camp out
overnight, just the two of them. Go perhaps up the mountainside and camp in a clearing they liked. They'd string a canvas tent and cook bacon and hotdogs. Jeremy remembered one night, a June night three years ago. It had been cool and they'd packed blankets. That was when Jerry had just begun tending the Burger Dari for Mr. Cantrell. Jerry was still a Boy Scout.

They squatted by a pile of dry brush while Jerry patiently explained how to start a fire by using flint and steel. Jeremy held the flint and scratched it against a file. Once he got a spark, but it didn't even land on the kindling. Again a red dot, very tiny. This one hit the kindling and they could smell smoke. No fire, though. Ten minutes had passed with Jerry squatting there, smiling, at rest. Jeremy himself getting impatient. Striking and striking that flint.

The moon was a pastel yellow through the mist; a kind of half light touched the trees and the brush around them. The final dark didn't come until eight-thirty. And somehow he remembered that whole night as half light, with the moon shining through the mist, a pastel yellow. And animals not yet asleep. Two squirrels weren't at all scared in their nest above the tent. Birds made loud roosting noises as they settled into their trees for the night.

And Jerry gazed into the fire, throwing strips of twig towards it. "Haven't you ever done something that made you feel all warm inside?"
That had been before even Janet Wilcox, but yes, Jeremy had felt warm before.

"Like when Mamaw does for me or Jessica when she doesn't feel up to it? When I catch a big fish, or hit a home run?"

Jerry smiling, nodded.

"And you know, Jerry, when I pulled Jessica out of the lake."

"You were a hero."

And there'd been the warm feeling of being there with Jerry, his brother. Just the two of them doing with each other, camping out in the tent all by themselves, cooking hot dogs and marshmallows over their own fire.

"There's somethin there I can feel," Jerry had said. "It's like just because I am happy and can notice things. Like the way I can look at that fire, the red sticks and grey ashes with red spots in them, the way they are now, and be reminded of somethin deep."

But what was it? Something that had stumped Jeremy, though perhaps the understanding and feeling of fire would come one day. So far it never had, and that something deep of Jerry's had gradually caused the friction between the two brothers.

Jerry said, "It's like I can think up things." And his eyes showed it. That night Jeremy had stared at them and wondered. They'd been unfocused, kind of. Kind of vacant. Those eyes that gazed so casually at the red embers and that
seemed to indicate that Jerry was far, far away...

For Jeremy there was the warm feeling around the fire when he, Snake and Mayor went frog giggin. They and others out in the boggy lake places, sometimes all night. Along about four or five a.m. they'd pause and reflect and talk as they cooked up frog legs for breakfast around a large fire, and Jeremy could feel good having worked all night, stooping and peering and jabbing at frogs—gigging them. On many an early morning Jeremy would sit with aching legs and shoulders, relaxing in front of that fire. The warm licking fire which toasted the frogs and warmed the men. Sitting next to his father, feeling Snake's damp warmth. The steam of Jeremy's wet trousers mixing with steam from all the men and spiraling up towards the moon, or out across the lake. The frogs croaking a low dirge for their dead frog friends on the bank.

Jerry hated frog giggin. Jeremy had come to assume that Jerry's "somethin deep" was entirely different than his own warmth, or Snake's warmth. Mayor's warmth. Jerry wouldn't eat the frog legs they brought back to the house, and that sort of hurt Snake.

"Who are you?" Jerry asked.

"You know who I am. I'm Jeremy."

"How do you know?"

Now how does anyone know who he is? He grows up with people calling him by his name, so that he can at least be sure of that.
"Momma and Snake named me Jeremy," said Jeremy. "They named you Jerry."

Jerry continued to stare at the fire, that look in his eyes. "Haven't you wondered," he said, "if there isn't something else besides just a name? Thousands of guys must be named Jeremy, or Jerry. How do you know who you are?"

Jeremy was getting impatient. A person just knows who he is.

"For starts," Jerry said, "you're my brother. That's part of who you are. Then you're Jessica's brother. Snake's son. Mamaw's grandson, and Mayor's grandson. And to each of these people you act a little different."

"Aw."

"What would happen if you treated Mamaw the same way you treat Jessica, or Snake?"

That seemed funny, too. The suggestion that a guy knows who he is by what his family and others think he is.

"Like Aunt Marsha is always saying you're a fine young man," said Jerry.

And it did make sense, because what other people called him made him feel different.

"Something as simple as wearing a tie makes you act different," continued Jerry.

Jeremy had never put all this together. Stuff that Jerry got from the fire. Got in that far away place his eyes told of.
"Nobody better not say nothin about me or Snake or Jessica--anybody in your family--because we're a part of you. We're your blood. We're who you are."

That's one thing Jerry said that had since been under the surface of Jeremy's mind. Nobody said stuff about Jeremy, because he would whoop up on their heads. And nobody said stuff about his family, because that would be even worse.

Now Jeremy had been forced to ask Janet Wilcox what was going on because his own friends wouldn't come talking trash about his family. That would be an insult. Of course it could be that Jerry had information that this story was false, that it had been all explained by Snake last Friday night. That no one in the family realized the story had gotten to be public knowledge. Jeremy stood and breathed a deep relaxed breath. That had to be it. Snake would show em--he'd send em packin with their stories--make them seem silly.

Those people who dared to continue challenging Jeremy's word, Snake's word--the family's word--tomorrow would answer to Jeremy. He climbed up the canal bank and walked until he could see the store. Kids were still coming out of there, harping on those witch whistles and sucking paraffin bottles of yum yum juice. Most stared at Jeremy and wouldn't speak. A lean brown dog met Jeremy at the steps, wagging its tail and jumping on him with its paws. Then the brown dog glimpsed the cocker spaniel and got to watching it, keeping very still. When Jeremy reached to pat the brown dog's shoulders and
throat, he could feel a growl rumbling around down there. The kids standing around laughed and whispered to each other, hoping the dogs would fight. Someone way down the road was hollering, "Come on Cooky, come on!" The cocker spaniel perked its ears, then trotted away.

Lolly Phillips was toting some boxes of candy to the counter as Jeremy walked in. It seemed as if she, too, looked at him differently, though she smiled at last and stood nodding from candy to candy as Jeremy made up his mind.

"Snake told me you had poison ivy, Jeremy. If you aren't a sight to behold."

"Give me a package of Sugar Babies, please. I'm starvin. Not much I can eat, you know."

"Well, I do say."

Snake was watching television with Mayor at the back of the store. They each nodded at Jeremy and kept watching. Jeremy stood at Snake's counter and tore the top of his package off in a straight line. He shook one of the caramel candies out and carefully put it into his mouth. It hurt to chew.

Mayor was laughing at something on t.v. and mumbling about it to Snake.

"Pa," said Jeremy.

"What?"

"Can I see you?"

"Sure. What do you need, son?"
Snake hadn't taken his eyes from the television screen. For a minute Jeremy watched with them. Then he said, "In private."

Snake looked up, finally meeting his son's eyes. Something about them warned. So they went back to the stock room and sat on some cases of Tide, and Snake was all ears, eager to know. Jeremy fumbled with his Sugar Babies. He waited until he'd chewed the one in his mouth.

"Pa. You gotta tell me about what happened to Sardi Crisp last Friday night. What really happened."

Snake sighed and twisted and scooted a foot across some stuff on the floor and stood up. He sat back down again. Jeremy's stomach was beginning to itch along with his face.

"Damn it," said Snake. "What'd you hear? Who's been talkin' about it?"

"Nobody would come right out and tell me. I finally asked Janet Wilcox."

Snake grumbled something.

"She said Sardi Crisp was nearly raped."

"Now Jeremy, that's a lie."

"So what's the real story?"

Snake put his elbows on his knees and his chin in his palms.

"I guess I got mad, Jeremy. I sort of remember shakin' her a little. You know, tryin' to get some sense into that head of hers. She can get a body riled."
Jeremy scrutinized Snake. "You shook her?"
"Somehow she got scratched near her tit."
"You mean, it really happened?"
"Dad-blast-it, boy! Get on outta here. I never raped her."

Once more Jeremy walked with his hands in his pockets, his shoulders hunched. Kicking any rocks or papers that were in sight. Mamaw grabbed him the minute he walked in and washed his face. She got out the sterilized cotton and dabbed on more calamine lotion. Jeremy would not ask about Snake. He only glared when Jerry came in for supper. Jeremy could see that school was going to be hell for some time to come.
McAllister Crisp as a rule had to watch his weight, his bronchitis, his temper. He'd been on a milk diet for the past two weeks for a peptic ulcer. Daily, when he looked into the ancestral mirror above his dresser, he saw a face more and more withered beneath his shaggy eyebrows. The ruddy complexion seemed to be dimming.

He shook his head slowly while looking into his own eyes. Others were not aware of his inner tenderness just because he was a tiger on the outside. The bushy eyebrows, which he often smoothed with a ham-like hand, poked and frayed themselves up as the day wore on. Mimi said they made his brow look stormy. How she'd loved them when he'd first courted her. She had fallen all over herself from the beginning to get his eyes to turn her way, and gazing there to pause a mere three seconds with Mimi in their range. McAllister would look in the mirror and smooth the brows down in the morning, remembering a younger Mimi, knowing of at least four
ladies who still went all red in the gaze of his eyes to this day. And didn't that put more strain on the man inside. Difficult enough keeping his own wife under control.

"To my enemies," he thought, "who very seldom even realize who they are up against, or that they are my enemies, until the last minute...uh." An ear must be avoided with the straight razor, and the Gillette Foamy covering it and part of the sideburn made this dangerous. McAllister smoothed the foam with his thumb and twisted his mouth to the side and carefully scraped at the beard. "To my enemies, I would wish the itch that comes from having too many women and the problems of not, uh." Whack, slide around the chin, scraping carefully. "...of not being able to get it up anymore."

That should do it. McAllister edged his fingers over his cleanly shaved face and grunted. Some wonder he hadn't cut himself today. There are things, worries and events that immediately go right to the quick of a man and nick him hard. They tug at his guts like an ulcer, only they are quicker and much worse. Dangerous as it was to insult McAllister Crisp behind his back, it may have been done recently in an ugly way, and this he tried not to think about while shaving.

What a tense situation when any of the women had to be defended. But the Crisps never shirked. The Crisp honor was legendary for its purity and strength. Crisp honor was more than enough to take care of this situation, though McAllister also found himself married into a fine old family which also
prided itself on honor. The Sardis. His wife was one—Jeanne Mimieux Sardienne—and her beauty and pure lineage proved it. She'd done him proud. The Sardis had always been proud to boast of their beautiful women: the black hair and blue or hazel eyes. Full round smooth parts which flowed into each other like honey, and all of them hot to the touch....

McAllister splashed and blew in cold water, sloshing it in his face, reaching blindly for a towel and blotting the brows, the clean shaven cheeks and chin. In the mirror he could see his color coming up red.

Now he dressed, pulling on socks darned by a Sardi woman, a shirt made by one. She'd bought the pants in Johnson City as a Christmas present. And the little wood drawer at the very top of his dresser: he pulled it out and rattled it—the little drawer small enough to fit in the palm of his hand. The nicknacks and what-not contained inside had been made by his own little Sardi, fruit of the union between a Crisp and a Sardi.

And years ago he'd wondered what a union like that would yield. Now it was becoming obvious. The little dark-eyed girl was growing up into a real Sardi woman, though she would always be known as a Crisp. McAllister sighed, sliding the little drawer towards its slot and missing. Some of the nicknacks tumbled out. He grabbed at them and the little drawer lurched, throwing everything into the floor.
McAlister Crisp on his hands and knees fumbling now under the dresser, now under the bed for nicknacks. There were the cuff links. He scooped them up, pasty but nice, lots of love went into them. She'd brought them home two years ago from Bible School. Two years ago--just about the last of that straight fragile little girl who was a Crisp through and through. Her little bony figure had seemed so pliable, as if she possessed cartilage ribs. She'd squirmed in his hands and laughed, laughed. She'd grown overnight so that his hands one day jumped away surprised and he'd turned his head to look at her again.

McAlister crawled and grunted until he'd found the watch fob, the woven leather watchband and the tiny stick pins for laying out his insect collection. Sardi'd waxed the pins just for McAlister. He got everything in the box again and slid it into its slot. Then he stood a few minutes, arms on the dresser, his head down.

The kitchen was alive with good smells: of bacon, of scrambled eggs, of delicious golden brown pancakes. At McAlister's place sat a bowl of shredded wheat and a glass of milk. Mimi kissed him and glanced toward his eyes.

"I know, honey. Believe me," she said.

Trying to comfort, trying to comfort. Fixes his favorite breakfast and he can't eat it. Trying to comfort. McAlister unfolded his Tri City paper and put its print between his eyes and the food. Sardi came prancing in and started helping
herself to eggs and pancakes.

"Oh yum," she said.

Mimi fluttered around pouring orange juice for Sardi and herself, throwing tentative glances at McAlister's hands, which gripped his paper, every now and then giving a twitch.

"Hiram's done been here and gone," she said. "That's why the big breakfast." She looked at Sardi, who was gulping down bites of egg and bites of bacon, bites of pancake. "McAlister, honey. I said we're havin a big breakfast because of Hiram. He's got a big test today at the high school and he'll think better, you see, with a good breakfast."

"I'm glad," said McAlister. He made the paper snap, folded it in half, in quarters. Perhaps would have kept folding it if it hadn't gotten unruly and bulky. "I think I'll have just a few of those pancakes," he said.

Mimi looked up in time to rap his hand as it glided across the table towards the pancake platter. At the platter, to which Mimi's hand and McAlister's hand had met, as if their hands had been gliding eels. Their eyes met.

"I'm well, Mimi."

Mimi shook her head. "Now I don't want to hear that, honey. You said that last year, and I believed you."

McAlister mumbled, looking back to his shredded wheat. Sardi was gulping her food with relish and smiling at her father's impatience. She reached over and patted his arm.

"Where's my Jane?" said McAlister.
"Gone early. I suppose just to drive in with Hiram," said Mimi. "You stop worryin so much and settle down some, honey. Then you won't even get ulcers."

"Well this un here isn't helpin me any, that's a sure bet." He looked at Sardi, who seemed troubled as he said that, and paused in her chewing. Now she broke into an understanding smile and pushed away from the table, swallowing her mouthful, catching her troubled Daddy up in her arms so that he became very still.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Daddy," she said. "I know I said I'd be in at eleven last night. Momma told me you waited up."

McAllister wiped at his mouth and freed himself from Sardi's clinging arms, her woman's hold.

"That don't bother me near as much as some other things, young lady."

Sardi nuzzled her head into his neck and he stroked her hair. "Little Sardi," he said.

"McAllister..." Mimi was leaning around her clasped hands and smiling towards her husband and his daughter, trying to look through the embrace to her husband's eyes and launch a spark of communication towards them, make them refocus and understand. "I believe there is something to settle this morning," said Mimi.

McAllister sighed and played with his shredded wheat. He could feel the milk in his stomach going sour and he winced, holding his middle. A gas bubble came up and he relaxed some,
though he pushed away the shredded wheat and got out a Rolaid, slipping it into his mouth. Sardi was eating again; Mimi was watching her.

"Young lady, give me your full attention, right now," said McAlister.

And then McAlister's attention wandered. To last night, and Sardi. To how there is a special spark in that girl and how it seems to run around under her skin. Squirming within her soul. Hell, maybe it was her soul. Burning her insides till she turned this way, walked that way, moving her hips as if they were attached to one of those swivel fishing lures. While sitting up with Mimi last night McAlister had gone over it in his mind, trying to understand the hot spark that made his daughter wear those short shorts and skimpy tops that showed her entire breasts when she bent over or reached for something. The spark made the tummy and hips seem sexy. If he'd just let his mind relax and wander where it would in a dream-like way, McAlister could see past the girl Sardi to the woman, and his little girl Sardi would become so much the younger Mimi. So much the Sardi woman.

Sardi had slowed her eating, noticing Mimi staring at her, noticing McAlister's gaze, fixed now on Mimi, now on Sardi.

"What's goin on?" asked Sardi, winking at her father.

"Tell me about last Friday night," said McAlister from his trance. "I want to hear from your own mouth what
happened." He reached for his stomach again, unrolled another Rolaid, put it in his mouth.

And his daughter's face going all limp, as if the sun had been suddenly obscured by clouds. In this transition her eyes shifted like changing projector slides, unfocusing from happiness and refocusing to something between disbelief and cringing-trapped-creature. Her lips began to move. No sound as they moved and she licked them and looked at her mother. Softly, saying finally,

"Well maybe it's none of your business." Continuing to look at her mother, then at McAlister's cat-in-the-chickens face. "What in the world, Daddy?"

McAlister cleared his throat. "You must be aware that there are stories," he said.

All was quiet. Mimi sipped at her juice, looking down.

"Well," continued McAlister. "There are stories. They worry me."

Suddenly McAlister wanted to scoot away from the table and run as hard as he could from those accusing eyes of Sardi and the picture of her head swinging from him to Mimi. Sardi's head was framed by the blue of the outside sky, and McAlister wanted to run into that sky, into the field under the sky and pretend that nothing was amiss or that the Crisp honor was not being challenged at all. Run into a day where Sardi was his little girl and he'd never made promises to Mimi to get to the bottom of this today because there'd been no
such thing as the stories. A day when he'd feel the damp black earth all day and get that fence repaired. Be on time when the vet came down to vaccinate the cows and then to work with Bill Willis on getting the rest of the hay mown and baled.

McAllister had his fist to his chest from the gas. He pushed himself away from the table and stood up.

"You're not leavin' yet, McAllister?" said Mimi.

"Momma, just tell us what you want Daddy to say! What is so important? You seem to be the one, if you ask me." Sardi looked at her mother defiantly and Mimi glanced to McAllister.

"I never want to hear you talk like that to your mother, girl," he said.

McAllister stood another few seconds and then his boots clumped on the wood floor, and his chair moaned as he scooted it back to the table, hand on stomach. He kept his eyes on Sardi, whose face was pale. She looked dreadful.

"He never laid a hand on me, Daddy." Her eyes were resolved, strong, focused on the wall opposite. "He never laid a hand on me."

And McAllister's fingers were twitching. "Just tell about it so I can hear from your own mouth," he said.

"There's nothin' to tell, Daddy. Nothin'." She glared at her mother, who was sipping orange juice, buttering toast, looking as if she'd butter a hundred pieces just to use up the tension of Sardi staring at her like that.

McAllister waved a hand. "Sardi, it was me, uh. Me who
told your mother about the stories, so I'll thank you not to make her feel criminal with those stares of yours."

Sardi looked away from Miml and into McAllister's eyes; McAllister began to think again of the sky, the tempting land. Must get this over, get it done.

And she kept saying NOTHIN, nothin happened, over and over. That's all she could say and they couldn't get anything more out of the girl. Her nothins filled the room and filled McAllister's ulcer. "Nothin," she repeated, her lower lip stuck out and her female spark running all around under her skin and changing her from pouter to hater to crusader. McAllister could tell it was a charade because Sardi stared at the wall with her eyes going from sparkles to dull and back. She had her reasons for saying nothin. And she stuck to her nothin even when McAllister explained about the boyfriends, how they'd come to him and tattletaled all over themselves, all full of Snake Peterson and a torn blouse and a scratch where it shamed McAllister to think of. "Nothin," she'd said as she denied that Snake had shaken her in an ugly way. "Nothin," to the statement that Snake had thrown her down. "Nothin!" she'd screamed to the suggestion of the torn blouse, the scratch.

"Not a scratch on her," said McAllister, tight lipped, to Miml. "Not a scratch on her, well then. We'll just see."

Sardi looked up, met her mother's eyes, while McAllister carefully picked up the tightly folded paper from the floor. He unfolded it and turned to page three. Miml stood and
touched Sardi's shoulder and Sardi balked and pushed her mother's hand away and said, "Momma, how dare you?"

They went into the bedroom. The door closed. Everything was quiet. Now there was a yelp and a chair tumbled over with Mimi talking rapidly and Sardi stifling a sob.

The door opened, the door closed. Mimi walked back into the kitchen.

"The poor thing's been scratched," she said.

"Well." He paused. "Is it bad, then?" He hurried a Rolaid to his mouth.

"Of course not." Mimi sat down and sipped at her warm juice.

"I'm goin to beat Snake Peterson's head in two." McAlister hurried towards the sky and his chores, a hand on his belly and a storm in his eyes.
CHAPTER EIGHT

Jerry thought of how the juicers are an audience, perched on their poles looking down on the little dramas played out under them each night. Glowing red, humming, zapping the moths and gnats and mosquitoes before these creatures can swoop down to flit and hum in kids' faces. No one ever sees the patched roof of the Burger Dari, thought Jerry; and yet the juicers must be more familiar with the bumpy roof than with the kids on the ground.

Pete Cantrell said to keep the juicers off in the daytime. Bugs don't come to the lights in day. Bugs are sleeping then, for all Cantrell knows, thought Jerry.

"No, Jerry. Keep them juicers off in day. Keep em dead. Don't give em any juice before six o'clock, and then give em all the juice you got."

Saved money that way, said Pete Cantrell. But in daylight they sat there atop spindly poles, naked no nonsense things. Just like the midway, the booths, the ferris wheel and the
roller coaster of a carnival, which all depend on moving electric lights blinking and juicing it in the night. In the sunlight carnivals are places you might not even take your kids to, all dirty and uneven.

"Halloween should be black. Exciting, somehow. Not like this."

Jerry looked at the October blue sky and at the blacktop parking lot. His eyes took in the trees and bushes, the weeds growing all around the lot. He wiped his face.

"It's hot for October."

Jerry remembered two years ago when Halloween had dawned crisp and chilly like the end of October should be. And last year it had rained all day—a slow drizzle. But even that hadn't been so bad. It had been a day of brooding, and the night had been wet and dark. Tonight, when dark came down and red sparklers, fire crackers and roman candles painted pictures in the dark—then it might be Halloween after all, in spite of the clear muggy day.

Jerry's gaze swept past the speaker poles and around to the Burger Dari and his counter. Inside to the frypots that wouldn't need to be washed again tonight because he'd spent all morning with scouring pads scrubbing until they were shiny. To the floor he'd scrubbed just last night with scalding Mr. Clean water. Last night Jerry had stood back and sighed with how good and clean the floor was, but today the shine was dulled by a greasy scum which seemed to have sneaked
out of the corners, where it lurked forever—always present after all those years of burgers and fries. As Pete Cantrell often said, the previous ownership had not been careful.

Now that it was Halloween afternoon, Jerry felt disappointed and irritated with the kids who were just now padding down all stiff jointed to the Burger Dari to find out if anyone besides Jerry was there, and to see if anything was happening so early on Halloween.

"Tonight the juicers will be red and the lights will be on. Everything around here will be in shadows. But now---"

Now the Burger Dari was fake-like, similar to the daytime carnival. Reminded Jerry of a daytime carnival house of horrors. At night the horror house monsters are wet with fresh smelling blood, their skin is green and moldy looking. You watch, and their eyes probe yours, their hands quiver, and their mouths mumble: haunted, slurred voices come out.

"Ahhhh...."

Jerry unconsciously imitated the sound, scratching his arm, watching his counter.

"Just a dummy, really," he thought. "In the daytime they're just fake dummies. Not scary. Just as dull as this drive-in is now."

Each year Jerry somehow forgot that Halloween didn't really come until nightfall.

Jessica was tapping at Jerry's window with her fingernails. "Boy, those fries look good," she said.
Jerry smiled and grabbed one, just one fry, and put it into her mouth. "You earned it," he said, patting her cheek and pushing his tissue top cardboard hat back, wiping his forehead. "Sure is warming up today."

"I did the windows already."

"Oh. Right." Jerry looked at them. "You did real good."

He gave her the fifty cents and she ran off, climbing into a path beyond the blacktop which led up to the house. Little Jessica, who got up early every Saturday morning and washed the Burger Dari, hosing down the blacktop and the building. Today the morning mist had been cool, but the work hadn't been fun. Jerry finally told Jessica to go home.

"You don't need to work today," he said. "Halloween all, you know."

But she stayed. Her little legs flying around over the blacktop, almost enjoying the work. Jerry's muscles ached. He felt like he had a cold, his head hurt. He wanted to holler.

"Just go on home, honey," he said again. "It's no fun working today."

"But I like it. It's not so bad."

Jerry wanted Jessica to turn on cartoons at home and watch them. She kept running around, though, happy as you please. Jerry shrugged and made himself work, convinced that the kids who stayed up all night only to sleep late today were
the smart ones. Halloween didn't start until nightfall anyway. Like a fool, Jerry got up at dawn. He felt sorry and watched Jessica, wondering how she could feel so good.

Doing the old hangover routine, kids were beginning to walk stiff-legged down to the Burger Darl for food. They began showing up around one-thirty—the girls with short-shorts and sleeveless tops, the guys wearing wrinkled jeans or wrinkled Levi slacks. Many of them were barefoot because it was seventy-five degrees, by the Bunny Bread thermometer outside Jerry's window. Unusually warm. Jackie Roy was one of the first girls to come walking down barefoot, stiff jointed, her every movement like a stretch and like a confession of, "yes, folks, I'm one who stayed up half last night partying."

She walked up to the window, her eyes squinting in the sun, a hand shading her eyes to see if Jerry were in there.

"Didn't know if you'd open before two on Halloween Saturday, Jerry," she said. She stretched her shoulders and Jerry could hear bones popping.

"Still stiff from yesterday, I see," said Jerry, smiling and throwing a frozen meat patty on the grill, dropping a basket of fries into the grease. Jerry rested an elbow on the sill and leaned his face against his palm, looking Jackie Roy up and down, smiling. Girl short-shorts, especially worn-out cotton shorts, show good curves and lines around the legs. Jerry watched Jackie Roy's legs, and she bent one of them to
scratch up and down it with her fingernails.

"Uh, sleepy, Jerry." She stretched her arms and shoulders again, yawning. It was as if her whole body was a unit not yet warmed up. She shivered after the yawn and hugged herself. Jerry could see her girl toes stretching, too. They were painted light pink. Her legs and feet were tanned, and when she stretched, her shorts came up above the tan mark. "Sleepy, sleepy." She yawned and didn't cover her mouth.

Jerry's hands moved of themselves, seeking the spatula, tapping the meat patty, turning it, shaking the fries. Jerry punched his finger through the wrapping of a bun box and put one bun face down on the grill to warm.

"I know, I know. Rough night, right?" said Jerry.

Jackie Roy ate her fries and her burger right there on Jerry's window sill, while Jerry told himself he'd ask her to move if anyone came down to order. They never did, though, until she'd finished. Some guys eyed her up and down, from head to foot, and smiled at where her short-shorts showed her curves and lines. But Jackie Roy went cold and turned away.

As for Sardi, Jerry hadn't seen her since Monday afternoon. Monday after the flaming Friday night when it had been Jerry who stayed up half the night and got up the next morning with mules kicking against his eyes. He'd wanted to see her when he awoke, no matter how he'd felt about it before. But she didn't come around and he didn't go seeking her.
Monday afternoon she found him. Smiled real big and pulled him aside next to the highschool and pressed into him, laughing. "Simon says..." she giggled, looking at his legs. She called him a tiger, whispering it in his ear so that he had goose bumps and red face and tight pants. Watering mouth.

"Hadn't realized you were a tiger, Jerry. You scared me to death. I mean, well, I hadn't meant...."

That was Monday afternoon, before he'd walked home to Monday evening supper, and brother Jeremy, who'd looked as if Jerry had said something awful, or done something crude.

"Now Jeremy," Mamaw had said, "you better tell your Mamaw what's happened. I know it's somethin about your daddy."

Finally, Jeremy had told of being pursued all day by kids who'd mocked and jeered him.

Since his second meeting with Sardi, Jerry felt as if he were strong. Very, very strong and ferocious, having to think about girls every time he was alone. He relived last Friday night in the cave and Monday afternoon outside the highschool.

Jerry relived these times even though he'd been mad at Sardi as of Monday night. Sardi told her father about Snake, breaking her promise. Jeremy found out at school, and it worried Jerry, like it was his fault. Not that he'd done anything but drive Mamaw down to the drive-in just in time to discover what had happened there. And he'd been a knower before many other people had found out, and still hadn't taken Jeremy aside and explained it to him in a nicer way than Jeremy had
heard at school. A further evidence against Jerry: he had watched an upset Sardi stick the wound under Mamaw's nose, and even with this proof had not confronted Snake about it or told Jeremy, his brother. He had bargained with Sardi to deny it.

At any rate, Jerry had the next day, Tuesday, refused to see Sardi or to tell her why he wouldn't see her.

"I'm confused, Jerry. Why won't you talk to me?"

The note she'd sent, thrown away unanswered. Sardi wasn't the only girl in the world. There were hundreds of them hiding curves under wrinkled short-shorts and burning with the same female heat as Sardi Crisp.

On Wednesday, Jerry had wised up and admitted that even if Sardi had told her father, it was ridiculous to think that the story would not have been common knowledge. There were at least ten witnesses just waiting to spread it across the playgrounds of the hollow. Just waiting to find Jeremy and taunt him. So it was no good even with Sardi denying it....

Halloween afternoon was getting on and more kids were milling around the Burger Dari. Jackie Roy smiled and said, "Bye for now, Jerry," her body seeming more warmed up after her burger and fries, her stares. She wandered on out under the speaker poles and congregated with the others, jabbering. More kids came--a whole passel of not warmed up units standing around under the speaker poles. Hungry kids swamping Jerry's window to order burgers and fish filets and creamy thick
shakes. Jerry's hands worked efficiently and automatically.

Wednesday night Jerry had arrived home from work to find McAllister Crisp, red in the face and obviously upset, even though he talked calmly to Snake as they sat on the front porch. McAllister emphasized each point as calmly as you please with a raised finger, only occasionally popping those Rolaids. Snake sat there in the attitude of one who is open minded and willing to hear a man out.

As Jerry walked by, he heard bits of McAllister's talk.
"...can't have somethin like this in the community. Scandal. Of course you understand...Sardi's a good girl. A little rowdy, a little, uh. Can we say...."

"Oversexed," helped Snake.

McAllister shook an adamant finger under Snake's nose.
"Listen here, Snake--"

"No thanks, McAllister. No thanks. I've listened."
Snake stood.

Jerry was in the house by now, having taken as long as he could to get up to the porch and into the front door. In the empty front room the t.v. was on with the eleven o'clock news. The light in the kitchen fell yellow over Mamaw as she sat at her big round table, sewing. A chunky candle burned on the table near Mamaw's hands. She looked up when Jerry walked in.
"They still out there?" she asked.

Jerry nodded, went to the refrigerator and got out some ice water for himself. He sat down and sipped it. They sat
in silence, except for Mamaw's rocker barely squeaking as she moved her hands over the material. They could hear the television, and Mamaw's rocker.

"Well, shoot," said Mamaw, reaching for her scissors and cutting a stitch. "I can't do this tonight." She put it down, leaned back in the chair and rocked. "You know that's no social visit out there."

Jerry sipped his ice water.

"He's not showin how mad he is inside at Snake," she said. Mamaw looked down, rubbing the knuckles of one hand. The chair squeaked, the candle flickered, a swirl of smoke went up and a drop of wax splatted to the table, and Mamaw began scraping it with her fingernail. Then she sighed, glancing at Jerry, who was drinking his ice water. "Sardi's his little girl. One of em, anyway. And she's--well. I don't call her his favorite, exactly, but she's the one that's grewed lately, Jerry." Jerry sipped his ice water. "She's turned woman this past year. Can't help but be hard on McAllister." Mamaw rocked herself, her chair popping louder. She shook her head, reached for a handkerchief, made Jerry sorry for her as she looked at him with pleading eyes. "Honey, you see what's happenin here."

Jerry sipped his water and stared at the candle.

"Your daddy's done wrong. And nobody but me can imagine how much it's hurt McAllister. She's his baby, Jerry. Only she's not a baby no more. And Snake," said Mamaw, harshly,
"Snake has proved it. Proved once and for good that she's not no baby."

No, thought Jerry, seeing her dance around that fire, hugging herself. She's not no baby. He sipped his ice water.

"Where's Jeremy?" he said.

"Oh, I don't know, honey." Mamaw's hands moved in her lap. "He was through here an hour or two ago, on his way to some meetin at the school, poor little thing." Mamaw looked at Jerry's eyes. "I sure thought you'd told him for Monday, Jerry. That was hard for Jeremy." She wiped her face.

There was again silence, broken by Mamaw's rocker. Above the t.v. set Jerry thought he could hear other voices. Mamaw looked up. Jerry was putting down his ice water, turning to go towards the front room. There was a crash and voices loud above the television. Another crash, and Jerry could hear Snake's voice, hard and brittle and mad.

By the time Jerry arrived the night outside was very quiet and very still. It was one of those things where you know something's wrong, something terrible has just happened, but you can't find it. The atmosphere was tense and angry. Snake had his fists raised, juggling them slowly in front of McAllister's big fists. Occasionally one of the fists would touch. Snake would take a quick swing and McAllister would retaliate, his breath going ungh-ungh at each punch.

"Daddy!" Jerry jumped between the two. "Daddy!" Mamaw was at the door, breath rushing into her lungs as she saw.
"Snake!" rapped Mamaw, her voice cracking like a whip.

Shadows from inside the house and the one forty-watt porch light flickered over the scene. Snake was a thin spring wound too tight and the electricity of the whole night was in his nervousness. His fists danced and bobbed in front of McAllister's fists, daring and taunting them. But McAllister turned his back on Snake the minute Mamaw came out. McAllister helped her into a chair, where she sat panting, a hand going through her grey hair. McAllister met Snake's stare, then he was gone--disappeared into shadows beyond the porch.

Snake's teeth seemed to gleam phosphorescent white beneath a drooping moustache; all that electricity inside him seemed to be juicing it through those teeth, which were white under his black moustache and shadow head. He watched Mamaw a long while from where he stood, and his eyes were white. His fists had dropped to his side and they kept tapping his shadow legs. The current flew between those white eyes, white teeth and Mamaw's frazzled grey head. As Mamaw watched her boy, the second son from her womb, his airy high-pitched moan crawled into the air, riding the night breeze to Mamaw's presence there on the porch. Jerry knew from her looks that Mamaw recognized the sound in her heart, and couldn't keep watching Snake with hate in her eyes. She just couldn't, because all this had upset him. She saw now that he was even more upset than she or Jerry. She stood and reached over to his head, smoothed his hair. Snake couldn't keep from sobbing louder, and he put an
arm around Mamaw.

Snake and Mamaw dissolved from Jerry's eyes and he could see a jagged line twisting back from his window. Here he'd been, hardly moving during what looked to be the rush of the day. The kids were still yawning and stretching, scratching themselves.

"Still sleepy," thought Jerry. "Good thing, because now they don't care how fast the line goes."

Jerry watched the worn-out girl shorts, noticing the lines which followed their bodies and showed how they were females. His hands began to move. Lines and tummy curves. Hands moving and Jerry was coming out of it like a locomotive slowly gathering steam. So, shake them fries, Jerry. Pull Cokes, Jerry. Slap those burgers on the grill and watch em sizzle. Make sure they get done because nothin's worse for ratings than a customer with raw hamburger.

"Gimme two Dari Cheese Burgers, small fry and, umm--" The kid hesitated over the drink.

Jerry tossed the frozen patties on. Shook the fries.

"Hurry, Tom. There's others waitin."

"And a Coca-Cola, large."

"Comin up."

"Gimme a Deluxe Burger, and Triple Decker Burger, a plain cheese sandwich."

Now two orders of fries and creamy thick shake, Jerry. A plain hamburger, please? A strawberry sundae? Jerry's hands
flew and he wished Pete Cantrell would come help today. Halloween Saturday wasn't any ordinary Saturday. This is a full fledged rush!

Surely, thought Jerry, this never ending line will one day evaporate. And it did, if only for one day or for a few hours or minutes. Anyway, during one lull in business Jerry found himself searching among the bodies congregating under those speaker poles. He took off his hat and wiped his brow with the apron, leaning into his little window stand. Surprising himself when he realized that the one set of legs he hoped to find were Sardi's—but he didn't see her legs. And if he had? Perhaps if she'd been there sliding around in wrinkled shorts and skimpy top she might come up to the stand and lean against it.

"Hi, big boy," she'd say.

But Jerry was sure there was no Sardi out there under the speaker poles. Maybe she'd come later, but she sure wasn't there now. She wasn't the girl now walking over, head down and arms swinging, walking so that Jerry thought the girl might come clear through the window. She thrust her head in.

"Hey," she said. "Punch up some music, will ya?"

Jerry looked to the juke box and scanned the listing for something good. Nothing seemed very good written down, so he punched a series of numbers, half heartedly. The speakers popped. There was an opening drum beat, loud and staccato, and the first number was off and running. Some of the kids
were throwing o.k. signs now. A few new arrivals were walking into the lot and towards the drive-in.

One of them was Billy Archer. The other was good old Hiram Crisp, perhaps just a former friend, though Jerry hoped not. Jerry put their orders on the grill and leaned out to talk while it cooked. The music was blaring and heat waves were rising from the blacktop. Jerry wiped his forehead again. Hiram asked for his Coke now, so he could be sipping on it as he waited.

"Ahh," said Hiram. He sipped his Coke and turned to the kids under the speaker poles, and they all three watched the bodies. Some of the kids were really warming up now, getting into the spirit now their tummies were full and the music was on. Some girls had paired off with some guys and they danced.

Jerry turned the burgers, put the buns on to warm, scooped up fries and arranged the lettuce and the ketchup and mustard bottles. Hiram was sipping his Coke thoughtfully and watching the kids. Billy Archer, his hands bandaged in gauze, leaned against the Burger Dari, listening to the beat.

"Ahh, listen, Peterson. Ahh, Jerry." Hiram looked at Jerry with his large eyes. "Ahh. Just want you to know, well. I don't blame you for what happened to my sister. It's a mess and I wish it'd never happened. I don't want it to come between us." Hiram stuck his hand through Jerry's little window and Jerry, bun in one hand and pickles in the other jumped, said, "Oh. Oh, sure!" And looked ridiculous trying
to put everything down at once and shake Hiram's extended hand. Jerry got the pickle juice wiped. "Sure thing, Hiram." They shook hands; watched each other's eyes.

Good old Hiram Crisp, making the sportsmanlike move. Nice of the guy. Jerry scooped up the burgers, wrapped them in wrinkled buns, put the ketchup and stuff on. He shoved one to Billy Archer, one to Hiram.

"Here," said Jerry. "Let me fill that cup for you, Hiram."

Jerry took Hiram's half empty cup and fizzed it full again with Coke, then eagerly shoved it back.

"Ahh, thanks. Real nice of you."

Billy Archer looked at them unapprovingly. "Kiss and make up," he said.

"Get out of here, kid," said Jerry.

The air was filled with pops and crackles as the first tune ended abruptly. Jerry could hear the mechanical arm rattle as it took up one and selected another record. The arm returned, flipped down. More crackling. Moments while people wonder what the next tune will be, and then the opening strains of I Got You Babe pulsed outwards from the metal speakers, which gave the tune a tin-can muting. The kids broke loose and ran around chaotically; kids grabbed partners and began twisting all around to the crooning of Sonny and Cher.

Hiram propped his body against the building and smiled, humming with the music.
"Like that one, do you?"

"Shoot, I'll tell you what-- It's a good un."

A boy had just jumped onto the blacktop from where the mountainside came to it and he turned, holding his hands in front of him. A skimpy topped girl emerged from the overgrowth and he helped her down. Raymond Jones and his girlfriend, whatever her name was. And Jerry was busy mixing a shake for Raymond and doing a special chocolate sundae for his girl; Raymond called her Priscilla. She smiled and giggled and the braces on her teeth were, perhaps, cute for her age.

"Thank you, Raymond," said Jerry.

Hiram was wadding up his burger wrapper, having found the last crumb and the last fry chip. He was looking around for one of the Burger Dari trash receptacles. Jerry wiped his hands again, looking nervously at Hiram. Jerry pushed back his hat and wiped his brow, not knowing whether to ask Hiram about his sister. That might seem as if Jerry were taking advantage of a friendship Hiram had just now affirmed. All Jerry could think about was how Sardi must be mad and might even be going around with someone else now. It had, after all, been Jerry who had torn up her note into a million pieces.

Jerry took a breath. "Hey, Hiram," he said. Hiram was on his way to a trash receptacle. "Hiram."

Hiram turned, squinted into the Burger Dari window. "Yes, Jerry. What do you need?"
The Sonny and Cher hit had come to the "false stop", towards the end when the lyrics and music stop before the hit continues with an encore. During the crackly silence the two looked at each other. Jerry kept wiping his hands and glancing at the fries. He licked his lips.

"Sure you won't have somethin else?"
Hiram stopped, looked at Jerry. Then smiled. "Ahh, no. No thank you, Jerry."

Three or four kids had that moment stepped away from the speaker poles and were walking slowly towards the Burger Dari. It was now or never, and Jerry breathed in.

"Hiram, how is Sardi?"
The words were out as the Sonny and Cher number was ending. Had ended. The juke box was clicking as it hunted the next selection and had nearly found it before Hiram unglued his eyes from Jerry's and shifted his weight to another foot.


"Just wonderin."

"You're after her yourself, aren't you?"
Jerry cleared his throat. Hiram did not like that question about Sardi. His eyes branded Jerry as one-of-them-Petersons and his face went through a whole series of realizations, from surprise to disbelief. And finally to the solid conviction that Jerry was interested in Sardi. Billy Archer
was in the group of kids who had now arrived, standing around waiting for Hiram to move. Hiram's eyes were rimmed with red.

Billy Archer looked at Hiram, then at Jerry. "Uh, oh. They're mad again."

"Well that takes all," Hiram was saying, half to himself. "You're after her yourself."

Jerry turned the switch which cut into the juke box feed, picking up his dirty microphone and pushing the button, taking a deep breath as he watched Hiram's eyes.

"The drive-in will be closed for one hour while the operator goes home for supper. Thank you." Crackle. Jerry let up on the microphone button and switched back to the music.

Jerry knew he was closing thirty minutes early, but Hiram's friendship and his understanding of Jerry's intentions were more important.

"Walk a ways with me, Hiram," said Jerry, still meeting Hiram's eyes. Billy Archer had run back to the group, the others following. All the kids looked up as Billy blabbered it all over the place. Everyone stared at Jerry's window, at Hiram turning abruptly from the window and stomping off.

Jerry hadn't moved his head, so that he was looking into Hiram's eyes, but then they were gone. The space where Hiram's eyes had been went all blurry. The sinking sun caught Jerry's eyes. Soon it would be dark—really seem like Halloween, and Jerry felt sorry, sensing the monsters. In the evening sun Jerry felt them marching.