Balance: short stories

Gregory Alan Larson
Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd
Part of the Creative Writing Commons, and the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd/16097

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.
Balance: Short stories

by

Gregory Alan Larson

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

Department: English
Major: English (Creative Writing)

Approved:

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
1995
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TITLE</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRIVATE HISTORY</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOUBLE BOGIE</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LONG LUNCH</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZERO RETURN</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE HIGHER OCTAVES</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BALANCE</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PRIVATE HISTORY

The year I was finishing sixth grade, for no reason at all, I plucked the colored paper tulip bulbs, thirty-six of them, from their paper stems on the bulletin board at the end of the hall that said "SPRING HAS SPRUNG." During last hour the principal even made an announcement about it, asking for everyone's attention over the P.A. system and then saying what an inconsiderate and destructive piece of work he thought it was. Vandalism, he called it, and hoped that whoever had done it would think about the feelings of those who had worked so hard to put up such a lovely bulletin board.

I thought it was a dumb bulletin board and anyway I hadn't been trying to hurt anyone's feelings. I fingered the construction paper in my pocket during the announcement, but Mrs. Rice didn't seem to care about the bulletin board either and didn't even talk about it afterward, as Mr. Burns suggested. The truth of it was, I hadn't even been thinking about what I was doing when I picked them off, one by one like a lawn mower on my way to the boys' bathroom. I'd been thinking about Cally and her new boyfriend.
Cally was my sister and a sophomore at the high school. The night before I'd pushed through the door to her room without knocking and found her sitting by the open window next to an electric fan. When I saw she was smoking a cigarette, I came forward open-mouthed. She'd seemed startled at first, too, but when she saw it was me only tapped the cigarette on the edge of the saucer she was using as an ashtray and squinted at me through the curling smoke.

"Jeez, Cally, aren't you afraid Dad'll find out?" I'd asked, voice hushed with awe.

"He won't find out," she'd said, puckering her lips luxuriously and blowing smoke in my direction. My eyes burned. "He's downstairs reading. And you're not going to tell," she added as a threat.

"Where'd you get them?" I asked.

"From Sean. He's going to be a senior."

I knew the name. I'd overheard it as I lay in bed late the night before. It was my habit to keep myself awake long after I went to bed, and I made it my business to listen hard, afraid I'd miss something. I'd been listening to the familiar voices of the news anchors saying goodnight and then to The Twilight Zone coming on, when Cally came in the door. I'd caught something about "with Sean" and then my father's voice saying "Not on a school night, young lady." Then Cally had stomped up the steps and paused in my doorway on the way to her room. I'd looked at her, the light from the hallway making a half-moon of her face. She'd leaned against the door frame and opened her mouth but then shut it again. She had on bright red lipstick, and when she left to go to her room, the scent of perfume reminded me of the car idling in the driveway and being left with babysitters. It was the first time since our mother had left that I'd heard Cally get in trouble.
In her room, when I didn't make any reply, Cally said, "T.Q.?"

"Yeah."

"Will you do me a huge favor and help when Sean comes over? I think Dad'll like him more if you get along with him."

I shrugged. "I guess. Can I try smoking?"

"No way," she'd said impatiently. "It'll make you cough and stuff – you have to know how."

"It looks easy," I'd protested.

"No. That's final. Shit, you're a little kid."

I'd made a face and left, leaving the door wide open behind me just so she'd have to close it again, and gone to my own room, where I cried – another one of my habits.

In the next few days, Cally talked about Sean a couple of times at dinner. Dad asked some questions, but I could tell he wasn't all that interested. Finally, Cally brought him home, and I figured she must have coached him plenty before he came, because he asked a bunch of boring questions about history. I noticed Sean smelled like peppermint, which seemed untrustworthy somehow, and that his politeness and smiles seemed forced, but I tried to be nice when he asked me about baseball. Cally winked at me.

When Memorial Day weekend arrived, our father let Cally invite Sean to the cabin with us. I thought it never would have happened when our mother was still around. And I didn't approve at all.

By Sunday when the day was growing dusky and yellow, I felt anxious. The sun had swung around behind the cabin and the slope of the island, and I could see a line of shadow on the water at the mouth of the bay. Beyond it, the
white hulls of sailboats still heeled in the breeze. Only one more day of vacation. Then it would be back to school where I'd have to walk past that bulletin board springing its spindly headless stems.

I watched Cally and Sean through the screen door. My nose was pressed right up against the screen so I could feel the tiny squares cutting into my skin. They were down by the shore and Sean had his shirt wadded up in his fist. I saw that he had hair on his chest. His muscular arms and legs were covered with curling dark hair as well. I thought about my own bony knees.

Cally laughed and put a hand on Sean's chest. Her eyes were the same color as the lake out there next to the shining sailboats. A little dry sand stuck to her ankles and the pink underside of one foot.

They turned toward the cabin, so I pushed open the screen door and walked out onto the deck. The breeze smelled sweet, and the waves curled and slapped on the shore.

"Hey T.Q., what's going on?" Sean said as he came up the steps.

"Not much."

"You about ready to be done with school yet, big guy?" Sean punched me lightly on the shoulder and showed straight white teeth.

I hated the way Sean treated me like I was so much younger. As if Sean were an adult with a license for using pet names. I refused to get caught up in his mock excitement, and answered only, "Yeah, I guess."

Cally hung on Sean's arm and looked at me. "You heard what Dad's doing tonight?"

"No, what?"

"He's going to a party," she said and smiled.

"Dad?" I couldn't imagine it.
"Yeah. Isn't that great? It's about time he went out. Anyways, that means he's taking the boat across to the marina, and he won't be back 'til late, so I'm supposed to keep an eye on you."

"Whatever."

"I'm just telling you."

I shrugged and made my way down the porch steps. Behind me I heard the screen door close and soon after voices from inside the cabin. That would be Sean starting some conversation on history with my father: *We were just reading about Rome in class, and I was wondering, Sir, if you think the entertainment of the coliseums can be compared to violence on American television?*

I walked along the water's edge in my bare feet and felt the slight tug of the waves as they eddied around my ankles. I was tall and thin and the way I lifted my feet almost out of the water at each step made me feel like a crane hunting the shallows. I followed the shoreline as it turned gently east, forming Pike Bay. When I reached the point, where the sand bar stretched for a hundred yards into the lake, I turned away from the shore and walked on the sandy bottom until the water came up over my knees.

I liked to walk out on the sandbar and then turn around and look at the island, so far away. On this secret strip of land, buried by water and marked only by a red and white buoy out at its tip, I felt buoyant, and tall like the first time I'd been on a horse.

As I turned toward the island, I saw a great blue heron spring from its hiding place among the foliage overhanging the shallows. It flapped its huge wings slowly, tucking its neck into a compact "S" as it flew low over the water.
I followed its flight as it headed out around the buoy and turned toward the mainland. I thought of Cally when we were younger, and how she would swim out to the buoy at the end of the sandbar when I was wading. Those effortless strokes making my waterwalking stunt seem cheap and amateurish.

To make matters worse, I hadn't learned to swim well until I was in fourth grade, so I had to wear an optic orange life jacket around my neck, tied in a ridiculous bow under my chin with flat nylon straps. Cally had always been kind to me then, not staying out by the buoy for very long, and looking for turtles and sunfish with me closer to shore. I liked the way the sun turned the ripples on the water into bright white lines that wriggled like eels along the sand at the bottom.

But now, since she'd met Sean, it seemed to me, she'd stopped being interested in anything I was doing. I could stand out here in the water forever, and she'd never come look for anything with me.

At dinner that night, I sat next to my father and across from Sean and Cally. We ate at the picnic table out on the deck, and my father and I sat facing the lake, our backs to the front of the cabin.

My father wore jeans and a polo shirt, which I thought looked kind of funny. But Dad only smiled and said you couldn't wear ties to everything.

We ate in silence for a few minutes, while Sean worked up a history question. I noticed his hair was neatly combed and he wasn't touching Cally at all.

"So Dr. Corson?"

"Yes, Sean."
"When they talk about time before history, when nothing was written down? Isn't that like not having clocks to measure time? I mean, we don't know what happened before the stuff in books – it's meaningless."

I slurped my milk and stared across the table at him.

"Well Sean, I'm not sure I understand your analogy, but you've brought up an interesting point about the importance of the historian's role." He was looking intently at his student and gesturing with a fork.

I asked Cally to pass the salt. She glanced at me and pushed a little white shaker toward me, then went back to listening to Sean and our father.

"No, that's the pepper. The salt has more holes in the top." I said it good and loud, doing my best to be disruptive.

She reached across Sean's plate then and handed me the pepper, frowning at me. I sighed and turned toward my father.

He'd placed his fingertips together, resting his hands on the edge of the table. His sharp nose was pointed at his plate and he appeared to study the label on a bottle of salad dressing. "You see, in a culture without strong oral traditions, when an historian marks an event with his pen, sets it in writing, he confirms something more fundamental than the significance of the occurrence – he establishes its very existence. For without that written account, it passes out of public knowledge, and is forgotten. It might as well have never happened."

I looked across at Cally in the middle of this speech and she looked at me, too, and rolled her eyes and smirked. I quickly glanced at Sean, and saw that he was still bug-eyed and nodding at my dad. I liked this tiny private joke.

"Dad?" I said when he'd finished talking.

"Yes?"
"I think you better stop talking about that stuff before the party, or people will get bored."

My father looked startled for a moment, and Sean and Cally turned to me. But then his face broke out in a grin and he said, "Ah, good for you, T.Q." And before I knew it, my father had put his arm around me and given me a quick squeeze.

I reddened. It was embarrassing that he would make such a gesture in front of Sean. After all, he'd never think of doing such a thing to Sean, or even to Cally. With them, he folded his hands or cleared his throat. They possessed some sort of weight, some gravity I hadn't achieved. It was still possible for me to be chucked under the chin, for my hair to be tousled.

Later, I helped my father get the boat ready to go across the lake. I loosened one of the lines tied around the wooden dock post while my father worked at the other. On top of the post, I noticed the ghostly skin a cicada had left clinging to the wood.

"Dad?"

"Yes?"

I wanted to ask something about Sean – whether he liked him – but instead I said, "You know what Sean said about time without clocks?"

"Um, yes."

"What do you think about unclocked time?"

My father had worked the loops of rope off the post and held them in one hand now like a lariat. I was glad for once that he took questions like these seriously.

"What do you mean, T.Q.?"
"I mean can you unclock it."
"What do you mean?"
"I mean smash it."
"No."
"That's it? No?"
"Yes."

"Oh." I watched the boat buck against the dock. "Do you think that's why people believe in reincarnation?"
"Why's that?"
"So there's another time."
"I suppose."
"Do you?"
"What?"
"Believe in reincarnation."
"No."

I could see he was growing impatient to leave, so I tossed the line onto the bow of the boat, but then he said, "Is there something bothering you, T.Q.?"

He was looking at me like he might come over and tousle my hair, but I felt a need to speak. "Well, maybe." I felt the blood rise to my face.

"What is it?"

"At school there were these paper tulips I tore off a bulletin board and the principal made an announcement about it." I said it as fast as I could.

"Paper tulips?"

"Yes, in the hallway. Somebody made them and I tore them off and crumpled them up. No one saw."
"Hmm," my father said, lowering his eyebrows. But when he checked his watch, I saw he wasn't angry. "Well, they were only paper. You shouldn't have done it, but I think you realize that – so there's no sense in ruining your weekend over it, huh?"

"No," I said, not feeling much better.

"You take care of your sister, now. I won't be back until late, so I'll see you in the morning."

"Okay. Bye, Dad." I watched him hop down into the boat and back it away from the dock. Soon the boat had disappeared around the point, and after it the whine of the outboard. I waited until the wake had rolled into shore before I turned around and headed for the cabin.

Not long after our father left, Cally and Sean began to get the little Alumacraft ready. It was a twelve foot rowboat pulled up on the shore near the dock. An ancient ten-horse Johnson outboard was mounted on the back, painted a dull red and an aged white the color of the chipped cups and saucers our mother used to let us use up in the treehouse.

I watched them from inside the cabin, with their sweaters and windbreakers on in anticipation of the cool evening breeze, as Cally put a plaid wool blanket into the boat. Then I saw Sean take two flat bottles from the pockets of his jacket and slip them between the folds of the blanket while he waggled his eyebrows and Cally laughed.

Sean stayed out by the boat and looked at the water while Cally bounded up the steps and came into the cabin. "Hey T.Q.," she said, pushing her short brown hair off her forehead with one hand.

"Yeah?"
"Me and Sean are going to go out in the boat for a while. You going to be all right here?"

"I guess."

I must have sounded more disappointed than I wanted to let on, because something happened in Cally's face then, a slackening around the mouth and eyes, and she came over and kissed me on the forehead. She smelled cool and sweet like the wind off the lake. "Thanks," she said, and turned to the door.

"Cally?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you going to be gone long?"

She didn't turn back to me, only said, "Don't worry about it. If you get tired, go to bed."

"Oh I won't get tired."

"Great," she said. "I'll see you later."

She went back outside and joined Sean, who kissed her on the mouth slower than I thought he should and then lifted her into the stern of the boat.

When Sean pushed the boat off the beach, I heard the scrape of pebbles and sand amplified by the aluminum hull. Then Cally was yanking the starter cord on the little outboard with expert snaps from her elbow while they drifted sideways near the dock. Finally, it spluttered to a start, coughing blue smoke, and they motored out of the bay.

After they'd left and before the sun set completely, I tried hunting frogs in the tall grass along the shore. I did it only half-heartedly, though, using limp little swishing kicks to flush them from their hiding places. And even then I never bent down to grab for them, only watched as they showed their white throats and bellies before flopping back to earth.
When I grew tired of that, I stumped back to the porch and lay down with a squeak in one of the lounge chairs. It was that time of evening after the sun has disappeared when everything goes one color of blue. When my friends and I would keep playing baseball because the ball was still so easy to pick out against the sky; until we suddenly realized, ten minutes later, that it was dark.

I saw the colored lights on the boats moving over the water, red and green and white. After a while, they seemed like strings of lights hanging from a tree branch and swaying in the wind. Then I fell asleep.

When I woke up again I had the sensation that a long time had passed without me. The wind had switched directions and was blowing straight in toward the cabin, which was silent and dark behind me. My neck felt stiff, and I rubbed it as I sat up. Out on the water, no lights were moving.

I strained my eyes out to the dock, but didn't see the boat tied there. The rowboat was not silhouetted on the shore, either. I was still alone. I remembered what Cally said about going to bed, but I didn't feel tired anymore, and besides, the dark cabin seemed forbidding.

I got up from the lounge chair and descended the porch steps carefully, because it was very dark. It seemed almost unnaturally dark, and then I noticed that the wind had brought a thick clot of clouds with it, for no moon or stars were visible above me. A solitary plane angled silently upward, discernible only from intermittent flashes which winked out as well when the plane entered the lower clouds.

I remembered the rowboat had only a tiny red and green light on the bow, no long-stemmed white light in back. It wasn't even legal to have out on the water at night. I didn't think they'd taken a flashlight. Cally knew better.
I reached the dock and walked out to the end of it. Below me, the water looked black and cold. I remembered what my father had told me about peripheral vision being better able to detect movement — something he'd learned on guard duty in the navy — and I tried to be aware of what was at the corners of my eyes as I strained out over the lake. I located the dark shapes of five Canada geese paddling across the bay, but nothing more.

I stood there for quite a while, listening to the water sloshing under the dock and to the birch trees hissing out back. Fear slowly seeped into me, and I couldn't help feeling something horrible had happened.

I thought of myself as at least a little prescient — hadn't I, for example, known just by the sound of the phone that my mother wasn't coming home again, wasn't just late but leaving? What had caught the others by surprise, I had known about when my father went to pick up the receiver. I remembered him sitting down hard in a kitchen chair and saying "Louise" in a voice too high; and the way Cally had held him when the phone had slipped out of his hand, the taut cord jerking it across the table. I remembered how off center they'd looked. She'd stood next to him and held his head against her, his glasses pushed crookedly off his nose, and I'd had to look away, at the phone spinning there on the end of its cord like a muffed yo-yo trick.

I felt like I could have warned them if I'd had the words. And now I heard something fearful in the hissing birches. Something that told me Cally was gone.

I thought hard, trying to be as brave as possible. Then I marched back down the dock and up into the cabin, not thinking about how dark it was in there. I stood just inside the door and swiped the back of my hand against the
wall until I hit the light switch, and then squinted and blinked for a minute while my eyes adjusted.

I went to my room where I found my swimsuit hanging around the bedpost. I undressed quickly and put it on. Then I found the big beam flashlight, which we used during power outages, under the kitchen sink. I turned the lights in the cabin off again on my way out, then clicked on the flashlight as I took a deep breath and headed around behind the cabin to the shed.

The shed was a frightening place, full of shadow and spider webs. It was cluttered with gas cans, a green wheelbarrow, an old lawn mower, tangled water ski ropes hanging from nails, life jackets, a spade with a broken handle, and various other containers and water toys. I was interested in the water toys: I pulled out an innertube and a pair of flippers. After a pause I took one of the orange life jackets.

I lugged all the gear back around the cabin to the waterfront and sat on the dock with my feet dangling in the shallow water to put on the lifejacket and the flippers. The lake felt very cold, and my fingers shook as I pulled the rubber tightly around my heels.

When I'd finished, I stood up and pushed the innertube ahead of me into the lake. Then I sat down in it, and the chill of the water rushed into my crotch and over my legs. But I began to kick, warming my thighs. In the beam of the flashlight the water looked dark green and frothed with white where I splashed with my flippers.

I labored steadily, kicking hard and sweeping the beam of the flashlight across the water as I went. I had to face away from where I was going, so every
so often I made a complicated twisting motion with my flippers to spin around and look out over the bay.

Minutes passed with nothing but my kicking and breathing. I began to feel nauseated as I became more certain what had happened. The boat they were in was so low to the water, and without a light they'd be run down by someone in a big boat going too fast. My legs burned and my arms felt weak, but I tried to keep the beam steady. My exhales began to come out in whimpers.

Yes, I was sure of it. I could see the hulking black shape of the cruiser that had struck them, almost feel the sickening impact.

I wondered where the bodies would go. I could see Sean's head snapped back on a useless neck, his body rolling a couple of times in the cruiser's wash before sinking out of sight. But Cally could swim. She would have leaped free if there had been any time at all. And swam.

I began to look for her in the water. I had drawn almost even with the buoy marking the sandbar now, and I saw its red reflective tape flare in my flashlight beam sixty yards off. I longed for the smooth clean strokes that used to take her so effortlessly out of my reach. Because that memory would be inverted now, capsized like the boat she'd be swimming from.

Smashed.

This time, she'd be pulling towards me through the waves, not away. She could hold tight to the innertube I had, like a lifesaving ring.

But I was growing tired, and the cone of the flashlight beam, riding the surface of the lake pale and diffuse as a ghost, revealed nothing. I stopped kicking. Bobbing alone, I was overcome with confusion and grief. The water and the sky were oppressively dark and I was shivering uncontrollably. I began to sob, and I felt my lower lip grow slick and wet with drool as I blubbered. I jerked
the flashlight back and forth in front of me without seeing clearly or even caring what it illuminated. And then I went limp, listening to my own sniffing and feeling suddenly unable to cry. The rubber of the innertube pinched the skin under my arms.

The waves and the wind lifted me closer to shore, and in a little while I saw them, near the rocks off the point. I saw the bow of the boat first, a dull gleam of metal from beneath the tree branches which overhung the shallows. Then the rest of the shapes arranged themselves in the flashlight beam like a slide on a screen: Sean's green windbreaker and then the shake of his black hair, and Cally's white cable knit sweater and her hand around a bottle. Then I saw their heads turn, Cally's fingers splayed against the light, Sean's hand over his brow in a flat salute as he squinted toward me.

"Are you all right?" I called out in a quavering voice as I drifted nearer.

I heard Cally giggle. Sean said, "T.Q.! Turn that stupid light off!"

Instantly, I fumbled with the flashlight and clicked it off. In the new dark, I couldn't see them at all, and didn't know what to say.

Cally said, "What, are you in an innertube?"

"I was worried. I didn't have anything else to use." It suddenly occurred to me that they'd probably been watching me the whole time, spinning circles out on the lake, my flashlight winking bright and dull like a lighthouse. Maybe they'd even heard me, I thought, wondering how loud my sobs had gotten. "Didn't you see me?" I asked.

I thought I heard Sean mutter something and Cally shush him. "Hey, T.Q., why don't you go on in?" she said. "We'll be back in a little while."

"What'd Sean just say?" I demanded. Unexpectedly, I was angry.
I thought I heard Sean snickering, but Cally said, "Nothing. Now go on in."

"I want to know." My voice cracked, and the back of my throat felt hard.

"It doesn't matter," Cally said, and this time I thought she was stifling laughter, too.

I stirred the water with my flippers and imagined them holding each other drunkenly under the branches along the shore. And I wondered what did it matter, what did it.

I wanted to answer, but I felt strangled by the clumsy tightness of the life jacket around my neck. And they seemed too far away now to hear my protests. I'd need a phone to bridge the distance I felt.

And that's what I wanted – to jar them all awake with a ringing, to push them back in their chairs with the force of my articulation. But my voice was so thin that all I'd ever said with it could be wadded together and still go unnoticed, like the little bulge of paper tulips in my pocket.

Even my body was unbearably light. Tied to my life jacket and jammed in my innertube, I couldn't get below. I wished for the up-rush of a bass to break the surface, show its white underbelly and slap circles in the silent water before it disappeared. Because without that inscription of ripples I'd never believe that deep things rise. And I wished I could point to their broadening circumference and tell Cally, there, that's what I mean; but my meaning was saturated with the black water. I didn't have words, only currents and eddies. Things forgotten by everyone but me, because no one else was writing down this history.
DOUBLE BOGIE

The gallery member, the one who mouthed off, continues backing, his face a blotchy red, the sneer still on his lips. Wild Bill goes after him, putter gripped murderously in his fist. The rest of the gallery scatters, squawking like geese, in a pastel fluttering of polo shirts. Wild Bill's caddy, the longsuffering Reverend Martin Duschene, stands apart and murmurs a prayer.

"Get 'im, Bill!" someone screams. "You the man!"

Wild Bill marches forward, head lowered, teeth bared. He's seething, boiling, absolutely frantic with rage.

The object of his fury tries a little caper in front of him. "Threeeee putt," he taunts. "Threeeee putt, Billy Boy." There is a collective gasp from the crowd, which has formed a ring around the two. There are clicks and pops, the whine of someone's auto rewind.

Wild Bill remains silent, but switches his grip on the putter, begins swinging it in wide arcs through the air. Whoosh. Whoosh.
The taunter, whose name is Mitch, stops. He holds his ground, begins to assume a crouch, his hands outstretched like a wrestler's. "Come on, big shooter," he calls. "Bring it on."

And Wild Bill brings it, suddenly lunging and aiming a vicious swipe with the putter at Mitch's head. Mitch ducks away with preternatural agility. He gives Bill a wounded expression. "Aw, you're killing me here, Billy Boy. What's the matter – concentration shot?"

Whoosh.

"Whew," Mitch says, theatrically wiping his brow. "That was a close one, Billy."

Whoosh.

Someone in the back shouts "Ole!"

"Billy, Billy, Billy." Mitch shakes his head, as if all the fun has gone out of his life.

Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh. Wild Bill comes unhinged. He's a ninja, a samurai, a silvery apoplectic blur of rage and Ping putter. Mitch slouches a few feet away from him, looking bored, exactly as if he were at the end of a long line at the bank.

The crowd gathers courage. Shouts erupt from all directions now until the group works itself into a frenzy. People grit their teeth. They shadow box, waiting for the fateful connection, the satisfying sound of someone being brained, knocked silly. Only the good Reverend Duschene looks the other way and hopes for reconciliation.

With a terrifying animal shriek, Wild Bill sends the putter whistling through the air. It misses its mark and sends a good section of the gallery behind his opponent to the deck. Mitch dances away, slips up behind Wild Bill,
and delivers a devastating blow to the back of his head. The golfer flops face first into the number two rough and lies motionless.

Money changes hands in the gallery.

Back in the spacious comfort of his home, Wild Bill holds an ice pack to his head and remembers when golf wasn't like this. He recalls the days of long ago when he was hacking away as an amateur, wishing desperately for his PGA player's card. Sure, he'd had to work hard, devilishly hard, to maintain his game. He'd slaved away until he'd developed his draws and fades off the tees into a science, his middle irons into surgical instruments, and his chips and putts into something that could only be called poetic. But there was the pleasure of it, too – the pure love of the game and its rolling green landscapes. The quiet. Oh, how he missed the quiet.

Of course, he wasn't nearly so popular then as he is now. If he'd been in love with the game, he'd also labored in obscurity. No one had followed him from green to tee as they do now, hoping for a glimpse of his legendary drives. No one wore T-shirts then, as they do now, that said WILD BILL KICKS ASS. In fact, people called him William Caine, which is his name.

"Marty," William says now to the Reverend Duschene, who is reclining on the leather sofa, his stockinged feet on the coffee table, "Marty, I don't know how much further we can take this thing."

"What the hell kind of crap are you talking," growls the Reverend. "We can ride this thing until we're all sunk deep in the downy depths of a nice, fat retirement." He is waxing alliterative, and he wiggles his behind into the sofa as he speaks, as if nesting. "Ain't that right, Mitch?"
Mitch, who is sipping a Perrier in the recliner across from him, shakes himself alert at the sound of his name. "Eh? What's that?" He looks distracted, and appears to stop listening for an answer as soon as he's spoken.

"Well – Mitch here is one of the things I'm not sure I can take much more of. I mean shoot, Marty, look at me."

"Oh, you're fine. Just fine. Don't do this to me, Bill. We gotta stick with this angle for a while. Hell, it's just catching on – you saw 'em out there today."

William feels a bit plaintive, even whiney. "Could we at least have it so I win a little more often?"

At this, there is a small, dry cough from the direction of Mitch.

"Deal's the good doctor bests you seventy-five percent of the time," the Reverend says gruffly. From his tone, William knows there's no arguing.

He tries a different tack. "All right, all right. But how's this?" He holds both hands out front of him, his thumbs making a picture frame. "Instead of Mitch taunting me and then pummeling me, we have words, and then I challenge him to a round of golf, or a putting contest, or something." He smiles hopefully.

In the recliner, Mitch is shaking his head scornfully. He rattles the ice in his glass.

"Are you out of your mind, Bill?" asks the Reverend, as if he's really wondering. "The only reason we're making any dough at all here is because it's not golf. You got that?"

"But what if they kick me off the tour? What if they revoke my card?"

The Reverend studies the ceiling. "Once upon a time, Bill, golf was a respectable game. Announcers whispered. Players buttoned their collars" – here the Reverend holds up a finger – "And, people snoozed. But you've changed all
that. You, Bill, have injected new life into a tired game. You are a revolutionary, and the single biggest draw the PGA has."

William mumbles, "What about Jack?"


"But what if they do? What if they tell me I can't play?"

The Reverend examines Bill with his cold blue eyes as if he is an advanced sort of appliance, the workings of which he can't quite discern. "As long as you make them money," he spells out, "they won't touch you."

"Oh." William feels dejected. How'd he get himself into this anyway? He winces at the thought, because he knows all too well. The drinking. It had been a double whammy – first it played havoc with his game, then set fire to his temper. Twice since he'd turned pro, he'd pitched whole sets of clubs, after ripping them away from his terrified caddy, into water hazards. And once, he'd gone so far as to take a wild swing at his playing partner, a mild Spaniard who continually showed him up around the greens. Expulsion from the tour was only a matter of time.

And that's when he was discovered. Marty Duschene had seen the news clip of his most recent antics and called him up, promised to turn things around for him. Money? No, he didn't want any money. He just loved the game, and hated to see one of its up-and-coming superstars fizzle out before his time. Yes, he just wanted to get William on his feet, and then they could talk terms. A real humanitarian.

At the time, with judgment impaired, it had seemed like a good deal. He took Marty on as caddy, and Marty shrewdly began to market his new commodity. He'd shown up the first day with a brand new bag for William, decked out with leather fringes and embossed with his new stage name.
Now, in his living room, the good Reverend himself is standing before him. Mitch, his latest little weasel of a thug, stands next to him. "We gotta get going, Bill. We got some contacts to make with some of my people in Potomac. Kemper Open's on its way, and we want the folks there nice and primed for Wild Bill."

"Right," says William, trying not to say anything that will delay their departure.

Once Marty started running the show, things did go better for a while. William had to credit him for getting him off the bottle, for instance. The first time they met in person, Marty emptied every last container of liquor poor William had stashed in the house, then took his campaign to the garage. And later, when William had been reduced to sobbing, Marty had held his head to his own chest like a child's and stroked his hair. He was a dream, Marty was - all bristling energy and discipline one moment, and concerned mother the next. The perfect solution to William's woes.

And as testament to this, slowly William's game turned around. He picked up two top twenty finishes in the PaineWebber Invitational and the Chrysler Cup. He felt steady on his feet, determined to make the breakthrough into the big time. More than anything, he wanted to be a household name.

But one day, while he was standing in a deep bunker during a practice round, his ambition took a devastating blow. Marty - his caddy, rescuer, and trusted friend - said he wasn't good enough. "You look at your Freddy Couples, your Fuzzy Zoeller, and what do you see? You see natural born talent. They got the gift, Billy, the gift. You? You bust your butt every day of every week just to hang in on the list of also-rans. They're laughing at you, Billy. You understand? Laughing."
Of course William was crushed. If the one person who believed in him enough to call him in his moment of abject failure, the person who believed he could stop drinking, didn't believe he could golf his way to the top – then what? William trusted this man.

"But what will I do? This is the only thing I know." He gestured around him at the sand, the stately trees, the hundred shades of green. The sun hung low in the sky. He felt betrayed. And worst of all, he felt like he wanted a drink.

That's when Marty played his trump. "You see this?" he demanded, shaking William's golf bag. "It's time you started living up to the name on this thing."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about Wild Bill. The man with the long drives, and the short temper. The man I saw on the news."

William was aghast. "But Marty. That was when I was – are you saying?"

"No, I'm not saying you should go back to the firewater, big guy. But you got to play to your strengths."

"But you just said I'm not good enough."

"You're not. I'm not talking strengths in the game. I'm talking showmanship, Bill. Entertainment value."

William looked off over the lip of the bunker to the fairway, where one of the grounds crew was setting up a sprinkler. "What are you trying to suggest?"

"I'm proposing that you and me go into business together. You're good enough to stay on the tour – that's all you need to do. I'll take care of the rest." Marty smiled at him mirthlessly and slapped him on the back.

William coughed. "The rest?"
"Trust me," said Marty.

The rest turned out to be a voice coach, a stunt coordinator, a four-person committee dedicated to publicity and public relations, a line of fabricated adversaries to be planted in the galleries, and Marty's own character, the Reverend Martin Duschene. All of which was paid for, of course, out of William's hard-earned savings. "Trust me," said Marty. "Your investment will reap dividends."

For a while, though, those dividends didn't appear in any tangible form other than the people Marty had hired. And these seemed plentiful enough, it was true. Ms. Erika Redfield, the voice coach, for instance, was nearly ubiquitous for the first two weeks. She was a slim, bewitching woman in her late thirties who wore her hair in lovely chestnut locks that performed a gravity-defying dance across her shoulders. To William, she looked for all the world like a shampoo commercial.

Apparently it hadn't escaped Marty's notice that William mumbled a lot, rarely raised his voice, and chose to remain silent whenever possible. For this reason, he assigned Ms. Erika (as he introduced her) to shadow William everywhere he went; she would exhort him to more effective use of his voice in his everyday interactions.

"You fear, William." She was the only one who called him William, and he enjoyed it. In fact, he found it hard to pay attention to what she said – he was distracted by the purr in which she said it, and by that mesmerizing hair. "You have deep-seated feelings of inadequacy, and therefore you do not carry yourself with authority." They were standing on the sidewalk outside the local grocer's.
William had just purchased a half gallon of milk and a cantaloupe, which he cradled in a paper bag. He glanced nervously at the passersby.

Ms. Erika noticed his discomfort. "You see? You're worried what they think, aren't you? Forget them, please, William." She dug in her purse, pulled out a compact. She flipped it open and held the tiny mirror up so William could see his reflection. The mirror did not waver one iota in her hand, the fingers of which had perfectly sculpted nails, polished in shell pink. "You see that? You're looking at my hand, William."

William colored.

"You can't even look yourself in the eye."

"Uh -"

"No! No, William. Positively no hesitation words. I won't allow them. That's lesson one: Hesitation words show a lack of confidence. You must have confidence. Watch me."

Without further warning, Ms. Erika drew in a mighty breath as if she were planning an extraordinarily deep dive, and unleashed a beautifully-rendered but ear-splitting version of "I'm a Little Teapot." William was flabbergasted. People walking by stopped dead in their tracks. A teenaged boy in a letter jacket raised his hand to point, a smirk on his lips, but Ms. Erika turned the full heat of her gaze on him until he seemed to shrink and curl like a scrap of paper in a furnace.

By the time she'd finished, in fact, several people burst into enthusiastic applause. "You see?" she said, acknowledging her admirers with a little nod. "Confidence."

From then on, William paid attention to what she said.
Even with such valuable lessons in self-worth and vocal projection, however, after a while it got to be a bit much. He was worried about his golf game: he knew how to curse stylishly after making bad shots, but he ought to be concerned about making good shots. Shouldn't he? He asked Marty.

"I have someone I want you to meet," Marty replied.

"Okay, but —"

"He's the new stunt coordinator."

"The new one? What happened to Earl?"

Marty was impatient. "Earl," he said, and the name clung deep in his throat, as if it were so much phlegm to be cleared. "The man had no imagination. I iced him."

William winced. He winced a lot around Marty — it was hard to tell exactly how to read the man, with his expensive Italian suits and the aggressive way he chewed gum.

Marty saw it and gave him a wolfish grin. "Relax. Figure of speech, Billy. Point is, he couldn't even come close to this Chet guy. The choreography he's bouncing off me — dynamite, I'm telling you. And catch this — he's even got ideas about spicing up my caddy routine. Says I should actually wear a collar out on the links — you know, dress in black, the whole nine yards. Thinks it will play well, Billy. I'm telling you, this Chet guy's a genius. Genius."

"Great," said William. But the very idea of Chet filled him with despair. He represented one more removal, one more level of abstraction from the game William was trying to play. Or thought he was.

But Marty didn't notice his lack of enthusiasm — he himself was brimming with good humor. It led him to confide in William, something he rarely did. "What do you think of this?" He abruptly turned his back on William, then
turned slowly around, and as he did so, a miraculous change came over his face. His eyes seemed focused on some far-off and beatific vision, and all the scorn and malice had drained out of them. Even the black hairs of his stubble looked softer, as if he'd lathered them with Ms. Erika's shampoo.

He snapped out of it, said, "Eh? How about it?"

"That's – remarkable. The Reverend, right?"

"Yeah!" Marty clenched a fist in triumph. Then he leaned closer, conspiratorially. "Been to church three weeks in a row. Trying to figure out what motivates those guys." He placed a hand on William's shoulder.

William could feel Marty's breath against his cheek. He tried, but he couldn't understand the sense of what Marty was telling him; the words themselves seemed malformed, as if they were being pulled apart by a great wind rushing between the two of them. He felt the corners of his mouth tug into what he hoped was a smile, but his lips were full of the tics and tremblings of someone on the verge of tears. "That's terrific, Marty," he managed. "Really great."

When William did indeed meet Chet face to face the next day, he was a bit taken aback. Somehow, William had pictured him as an effeminate man who would wear turtlenecks and gesticulate expressively. As it turned out, Chet was a long-armed, bow-legged wiry little man who carried with him the faint, sickly sweet smell of rotting fruit. His small brown eyes rolled from side to side mischievously, revealing whites that were yellowed like old socks.

"Why, hello," said William, as he stepped woodenly away from his entry door to let them in. He was put off balance by Chet's appearance, who had a finger in an ear now, scratching, but he remembered Ms. Erika, who was watching intently from the top of the stairs, and stood his ground.
Marty grinned. "This is Chet. He'll be the mind behind the madness out on the greens. Chet, this is Wild Bill."

Chet cocked his head. "'Lo," he said. He ignored the hand William had confidently extended.

"Chet thinks the next step for you is yoga, Bill. Yoga! What do you think? Deep breathing. Muscle control. Finding the harmony of your body." Marty was speaking even faster than usual, all the while grinning like a joker. "Ain't that right, Chet?"

"Yeah."

William studied Chet in silence, trying to see him as Marty did. He had the uncomfortable notion that the real Chet was hiding in the bushes outside, and soon would emerge to join the others in a vigorous hoot at William's expense. Marty's face, however, was perfectly serious, if eager. So there was nothing for William to do but play along. He said, as briskly as he could, "Okay. Where do you want to start, Chet?"

Marty said, "Why don't we use the back yard? There's all kinds of space out there where we can get you two moving through the paces. Start with the breathing, and then climb your way on up the ladder to the really complicated stuff. Well, listen to me, ha-ha. You know what to do, don't you Chet?"

"Yeah." He grimaced, baring crooked yellow teeth in a wide mouth.

At the top of the stairs, Ms. Erika smiled, too.

Marty kept grinning.

As the weeks rolled by, and as William hopped through hoop after hoop like some panting show dog, it seemed as if Marty was grinning more and more. He had good reason – he turned out to be a masterful image-maker.
Under his direction, the team led off with a series of incidents designed to reveal the resurgence of William (Wild Bill) Caine's temper. After shanking a fairway wood into the trees at Cheval, William cut loose with a powerful and near-operatic howl. In trouble at the Las Vegas Invitational, he bent a pitching wedge over his knee. Coming off the island green on the seventeenth hole at Sawgrass, he menaced a vocal fan with his putter while his caddy crossed himself and looked heavenward. And was that a clergyman's collar shining whitely under his upraised chin? This crazy lump's caddy was a priest? Great Scott, what a story! The media began circling.

Marty loved it. The publicity department hummed like a hive. A lawyer was added to the team. They printed T-shirts. William received scores of endorsement offers. The money came in by the truckload.

Through it all, William remained obedient, and Marty directed the squad like a general. He rattled out scheme after scheme. He hired on more sophisticated actors and developed actual scripts for them to follow. The fight scenes got longer, the stunts more daring. The ranks of Wild Bill's fan club swelled. Marty hired six more people to answer mail.

And almost imperceptibly at first, but then with gathering intensity, a sense of dissatisfaction gnawed at William. Sure, in a sense, the attention was flattering – undeniably, his was a household name. But he didn't feel happy. He wasn't sure exactly what he wanted, but it was something else. Mostly, he missed golf.

Late at night, when the entourage had finally scattered, and William was left alone to his weariness, sometimes he would keep himself awake just to savor the solitary moments. He'd turn off all the lights and press his face against the dark screen door, listen to the trees shaking in the breeze outside. It gave him a
feeling similar to the one he used to have when he'd play a round in early October, after most of the recreational golfers had packed it in for the year; it was the lift of spirits that came from being alone on a leaf-scattered green, the flag flapping amidst the gentle swells of that emerald carpet like a ship's sails billowing on the unbounded sea.

So it is with a heightened sense of resolve that William watches the receding backs of Marty and Mitch. He swears he'll get out of this somehow. His head begins to throb again, and he groans as he shifts the ice pack.

Oh, they've had their fun with him, all right. They've milked him dry and then hollered for more. But for the last few weeks, William's been screwing up his courage. Something has to give.

Even if he could expose Marty and himself and the whole business as a fraud, however, it wouldn't do him any good. The fans would be outraged, and no doubt the PGA would seize the opportunity to expell him. Then he'd be permanently sealed off from his chief love in this life. But he's got to get out, nevertheless. It's a matter of sanity.

William gets up, paces over to the sliding glass door. Outside, something that looks like a black-billed Cuckoo is flitting from branch to branch in the silver maple. He reaches for his birding binoculars on the lampstand. A little thrill of pleasure shoots through him when he makes a positive identification. He basks for a pristine moment in the peace and simplicity of his hobby.

And then, as he lowers the glasses, it hits him – spying. Why not hire a private investigator to spy on Marty? The man must be engaged in no end of shady things. If he could gather enough dirt on Marty, have him thrown in the slammer, and clear his own name, then he could golf again. Just golf...
But before the thought is even fully formed, he knows it’s idiocy. Guys like him don’t outwit guys like Marty Duschene, even with the help of a private eye. William heaves a sigh, plunks down his binoculars, and wanders off to bed in a funk.

At the Kemper Open, things begin to unravel. After Thursday and Friday, he’s right on the cusp, and barely makes it to the third round.

"You better start nailing those birdie chances, Champ," growls the Reverend Duschene as the two of them make their way to the clubhouse Saturday morning.

"Oh, I know, I know. I’m just sick about it."

Reverend Duschene shoots him a flinty glance and adjusts the shoulder strap of the bag. "You’re sick? Son, you don’t know sick until you miss that cut and cost us prime TV coverage."

"I won’t miss the cut," William protests. "So what’s the plan today, anyhow?"

"Nothing," mutters the Reverend through clenched teeth. "Just golf."

"Gee, you mean it?" William brightens visibly.

"Yeah, that candyass Mitch wants more money for his little tricks. He’s holding out on me." The Reverend shakes his head at the presumption. "But I’ve got Chet working on it."

"Oh," says William, crestfallen at Marty’s determination, and perplexed at his choice of intermediary.

Marty jerks open the door to the clubhouse, still irate. He recovers himself just in time to nod benignly at a few of the others milling around immediately inside the entrance.
Of course he doesn't say so, but William is beginning to feel optimistic. Maybe Marty won't be able to think of something. Maybe today he'll be able to play a nice, clean round. Maybe he'll be able to concentrate on his chipping instead of trying to remember that ridiculous choreography.

"Hey, what's doing, Bill?" A confident, smiling Australian with heavily freckled arms sticks his hand out for William. His partner for the tournament, Kirk Kingston.

William shakes with Kirk. He glances sidelong at the Reverend, but his caddy's face tells him nothing. "I'm feeling it today, Kirk," he declares.

Kirk raises his pale eyebrows. "Well, well. We'd all better watch it, eh?"

He feints like a fighter and laughs.

William looks uncomfortable. He scratches his shoulder and glances around. The truth is, he's lost any respectability he might have had with the other pros. Kirk is good-natured about it, but some of the big guns have started to resent all the attention William garners. "No, I mean I'm really feeling good. Really."

"Whatever you say, Bill." Kirk's laugh reverberates again.


And just then, with impeccable timing, in slouches Chet. He makes a clunking sound at the door before pulling it open, and all heads turn as he begins a bee-line across the room toward William and Marty. He's been eating a powdered donut, it appears, because his shirtfront is covered with a fine, chalky substance. William becomes intensely interested in pulling on his golf glove, and tries not to see Kirk's eyes widen in disbelief, his smile broaden in delight.

There must be some other activity in the clubhouse, some other conversation, however hushed, but William hears nothing but the faint chick-a-
chick-a of a sprinkler outside, shaking like maracas in accompaniment to the beat of Chet's allegro shuffle. "Hey, Chet," he mutters.

Then, mercifully, Marty grabs both of the others by an elbow and ushers them out the door leading to the first tee. Outside, he steers Chet a few paces off, and they speak in urgent, low tones until Chet seems to grunt in protest at something before shambling away.

Marty turns to William. "Chet tells me still no deal with Mitch – but as long as he's here, he's decided he wants to stick around and watch you in action today – help him to visualize – you know Chet, alway's thinking." He gives his temple a single tap.

"Sure, sure," says William. He doesn't listen any further than to understand that today he is indeed a free man on the course. The thought is invigorating, and seems to buoy his physical strength, because William is every bit as good as he's promised off the first tee. His drive is deep, very deep, and it tails off to follow the slight dogleg right.

Kirk gives a low whistle. "Someone ate their Wheaties." He gazes glumly out to where his own ball rests, a good seventy-five yards short of William's. "Wait up, will ya?"

The Reverend bags the driver and smiles.

The next several holes follow the same pattern. After birdying the first, he follows up with another birdie on the par five, plays steady par golf for five holes, flirts with an eagle on the eighth, and finishes out the front nine by chipping out of the sand and in for yet another bird.

"Are you trying to tell me you're four under already?" Kirk is incredulous.

William can hardly believe it himself. The course is murder today: the wind's been rising steadily since dawn, and the greens are dry and very fast. His
confidence has been growing, and Marty has been mercifully distracted and silent. Even the gallery has begun to get behind him, actually cheering his putts instead of waiting eagerly for disaster to strike and for Wild Bill to ride again.

Yes, he's playing the round of his life.

He can almost hear the creaky hinges of the door he's been knocking on for his entire career. If he continues to play like this, he may be able to push through to the other side. The elite side, where he can walk amongst the masters, the venerable old sages of the game.

Starting out the back nine, he hooks the ball badly into the trees lining the fairway on the left. There is a thick silence in the gallery behind him. A few people clap meekly, hopefully. William hands the driver to the Reverend, who takes it without comment. Kirk lofts his tee shot into the center of the fairway, and they all move on.

William tries to fight off the creeping doubts. He tries not to believe that this is the beginning of a bad spell. But his dilemma is the same as the insomniac's - the more he tries not to think the thoughts, the faster they come.

His shot out of the rough goes about ten yards. The lie was tough, hunkered down among some leaves and tree roots, but there's no excusing it - he's topped the ball badly. William bites back a curse. He'll have no part of the Wild Bill routine today. He won't. When he hands the wedge to the Reverend, though, he thinks he sees a thin, mocking smile on his lips, and for a moment he feels genuine anger, dizzying and black.

"In a spot of trouble, Billy," says the Reverend simply. He is tight-lipped, but William can see he's boiling underneath. Doubtless he's brooding about lost profits, about Mitch on the phone at five a.m. demanding more money.
William himself is the picture of restraint. He blinks at his caddy. “Nothing I can’t recover from. What do you think from here? Eight iron?”


As William lines it up, there is a rustling from the gallery. Someone shushes the offender. William takes an easy practice swing, limbering up. Then, in the middle of his shot, there is a coughing fit from the same spot that produced the rustle. He’s met the ball well, but the disturbance causes him to flinch at the last second, and the ball slices to the fringe when he really needed to go right at the pin.

William whirls around. Mitch, he thinks – Mitch’s here. But no, it’s not him. In fact, he doesn’t recognize any of the faces that stare back at him, save Chet’s, with its low forehead topped by a shock of dirty brown hair. He turns his gaze on the Reverend, but he only shrugs.

Miraculously, William escapes with a bogie. But more are on their way. In fact, on the par five thirteenth, after playing sloppily through all of the first three holes and losing two strokes, the wheels come off the wagon. He catches the fairway bunker, then hacks his recovery shot into the deep rough.

By this time, the Reverend has taken to trying to keep William settled. He’s begun to worry about William slipping out of contention and not even making it to the money round. “No sweat. Chip and a putt.”

“Are you serious? I must be three hundred yards from the green.” William almost hisses it. For how long, he wonders, has he been clenching his teeth? He rubs his jaw. Forty yards away, on the crest of a little rise in the fairway, Kirk smacks his second shot. William follows it as it ascends, up, up, until it hangs like a star before finally beginning to arc back toward the earth.
He turns to his own ball, barely visible in the Bermuda grass. He tries to remember what he was doing on the front nine that was so magical. Somehow, he's got to claw his way back. This is his chance, he tells himself. Avenel. The Kemper Open. A nice television audience.

When he duffs it this time, a groan escapes the Reverend. William snaps his head around and before he knows what he's saying, demands, "Problem?"

The Reverend Martin Duschene regards him coolly. "Oh, I'd say yes. I'd say you have a big problem at the moment. Now concentrate. Tomorrow's the big day, and we'll have everything back on line. So don't screw it up."

William clamps his mouth shut and hands him the club. He feels the one chance he has to prove himself, the one unsullied round of golf he's played in a long time, slipping away from him. And from somewhere he hears a faint buzzing, as of electrical current. His hands aren't shaking so much as vibrating, and his eyes seem to have dried in their sockets, because he has to blink repeatedly.

He begins to walk from shot to shot like an automaton, bending over the ball, winding up, following through. He plays just well enough to preserve the faint cinder of hope he has glowing among the cold ashes of his vital organs. He approaches the tee on the seventeenth hole knowing if he can birdie the last two holes, he has a wavering mirage of a chance at making the cut.

Wild Bill's fans sense the desperation of the moment as their hero leans down and pushes his tee into the turf. Birds twitter in the uneasy quiet. There is a roar of applause from the sixteenth green as someone drops a long putt. Even the Reverend produces a handkerchief and pats at his forehead.

It's a par three, a hundred eighty yards. William addresses the ball, waggles his iron over it a few times as if invoking a spell, and swings away.
All heads turn to follow the path of the ball. It takes off in a high trajectory, but then almost at its apex, begins a slow, sickening fade over the pond on the right. It takes fifteen seconds – twenty – for the ball to plummet through absolute silence until it strikes the rippled surface of the water with an excruciatingly audible *ploink*.

"Aw, shit!" says the Reverend, forgetting himself.

The gallery shifts uneasily. Kirk and his caddy murmur to each other ten yards away.

William looks over at the Reverend. "What was that?" he asks, the corners of his mouth twitching.

The Reverend throws his hands up. "You've done it. You've missed the cut. Thrown away money. Do you realize what this means?"

Then something slips in William's head, like a load shifting in the back of a semi. He approaches his caddy slowly, looking down at the grass, as if he is pacing in front of a jury. He pitches his voice just above a whisper. "Maybe you should tell me what it means, Marty." He stops inches away. "Maybe you should tell me how it feels."

For the first time since William has known him, Marty looks uncertain. In fact he looks, William is pleased to see, short. Yes, he's just a cheap huckster with a lot of gold jewelry. William glares down at him, blood in his eyes.

But Marty doesn't give up quite yet. He'll not be intimidated by William, of all people. Why, he *made* William. He glances off into the gallery, and snaps his fingers twice.

William can't believe it – the gesture is surreal in its arrogance – but he follows Marty's eyes. There, already pushing his way forward through the crowd, is Chet. He throws elbows, steps on toes. A fleshy bald man, his head
scarlet from sunburn, scowls when he's shoved aside, and a woman with sunglasses and a pair of binoculars dangling around her neck protests with a startled, "hey!" Chet plows through, oblivious.

He comes to a stop just in front of Marty's right shoulder, as if the two of them are going to perform a ventriloquism routine. William is nose to nose with him. He sees Chet's nostrils flare slightly as he breathes, the tiny eyes rolling, apparently sightlessly, like marbles in their sockets. It's too much – to be threatened by Chet, by this stooge – this, this ape. Ridiculous. If he weren't so enraged, William would laugh out loud.

But at that moment Marty clears his throat, and before William knows what is happening, Chet has drawn back a fist as if notching an arrow, and popped him in the nose with it.

William stumbles back two steps, his eyes suddenly full of tears. There is pain, but mostly he feels numbness. He touches fingers to nostrils, and they come away stained with bright blood. When he raises his eyes to Chet again, the other man is not dancing in front of him, ready for more. His blood is not boiling. No. Chet is standing there obediently next to Marty, arms hanging limply at his sides, instructions carried out. He's a lifeless thing, and William's dismay at the sight momentarily overcomes his rage – for in this moment he sees, with crushing clarity, his own condition.

There is little time for reflection, however. The gallery has not taken kindly to the interloper who has dared try to derail the main event – Chet is a distraction, a nuisance, and he has no business sullying their hero's moment.

It's the red-pated man who begins it. Already in a foul mood from the rude treatment he received moments ago, he slips a chubby forearm around Chet's neck from behind, and jerks him backwards off his feet. With a gargled
yelp, the miserable creature falls prey to the crowd. It's that simple – people drop programs, knock each other's visors off in their hurry to get to the son of a bitch. He soon disappears in a mass of flailing arms and legs – above it all, a purse swings by its leather straps, repeatedly pummeling him.

William looks at Marty. Marty looks at William. For an instant, a connection, as they wonder simultaneously what demonic force they have awakened. But there is no question of who's in control now. Chet's weight out of the equation, there is an almost palpable shifting of fortunes, as if Marty's end of the see-saw just swung him high in the air, leaving him with legs kicking vainly for a purchase. William sniffs and draws the back of his hand across his injured nose, eyes still fastened on his tormentor.

From somewhere in the mob, which has dispatched Chet and is tightening now around William and Marty, there is a shout, hoarse and angry. "Get 'im, Bill!" Several cheers go up at this, and the crowd begins to jostle in closer. Marty pales.

William smiles as the other man begins backing away. From here, it will play just like the old script. But better this time. Much better.
LONG LUNCH

Cal had been shrink wrapping lettuce heads for the past half hour, and he was starting to get hungry. He untied his green apron and hung it on a peg next to the portable radio, from which issued a barely audible murmur of oboe and violins – some new arrangement of a Rolling Stones tune.

He wandered over near the delivery door, where cartons of oranges were stacked. He counted them, moving his lips. Just as he thought, shorted again. He scratched a hairy forearm with one thick finger. He'd have to speak to Hack, the driver, about double-checking the invoices. He worried about what the display would look like by the end of the week: a sickly scattering of dented and discolored specimens, pale against the molded purple cardboard underneath. It was not what people wanted. He thought of the twitching hands on grocery carts, of lists rattling in disapproval, and heaved a sigh.

He grabbed his lunch, which he stored in the milk cooler, and pushed through the swinging double doors. The smell of the fruit and vegetables out on the floor was fainter and sweeter than in the back room, and mixed with the cool
swirls of outside air which worked their way back from the doors up front. When he reached the register area, the sunlight glancing off the glass and steel of the display window made him blink. One of the cashiers looked up from a can of soup she was studying. "Lunch already, Mr. Plunkett? Lucky you." She snapped her gum and grinned at him.

Cal ducked his head in acknowledgement and quickened his step a little as he passed through an empty register aisle and made his way to the humming electric doors, their black rubber mats slick with water and gritty with the salt and sand of the parking lot. Outside, the snow was gone except for the blackened scabs along the curbs. Water trickled in shining rivulets through the gutters, and the rubber tires of passing cars hissed pleasantly in the wet street. With the breeze, it didn't feel as warm as he expected it to, but Cal smiled at the sun overhead and began to hum to himself rather tonelessly.

Four blocks south, he turned up one of the blacktopped footpaths of Baker park and headed for an empty bench. When he'd seated himself, he opened up his lunch sack and bit into a mealy apple. He chewed it in silent disappointment and absently scratched the top of his balding head. Twelve years as produce manager at Red Owl and he chose mealy apples for his own lunches.

The noon sky stretched taut above him as he ate, high and featureless. The day promised the kind of uninterrupted brightness that caused people, at the end of a long winter, to think about taking the storm windows off, to notice the dust along the sills.

He watched a hat appear at the top of a rise in the footpath as he unwrapped his sandwich. A distinguished looking middle-aged gentleman arose beneath the hat, coming toward him. Cal chewed and looked him over. He wore a finely tailored tan overcoat, but his shoulders hunched in it like a condor's.
the noon sun, the brim of his hat threw his whole face into shadow except for the
tip of his nose. The man's approach was laced with hopping little hitches – he
was kicking a stone in front of him. He paused abruptly when the stone went
bouncing off the path, then, as if deciding something, he swung toward Cal with
long, purposeful strides.

In a moment, it became clear the man was going to sit on his bench. Cal
glanced around hopefully at the three empty benches in sight; he liked to eat
alone. He liked to be alone. Not long ago, in fact, he'd given up his last public
ritual: working earnestly on his hook with the other bachelors in the Thursday
night bowling league. It was just a bunch of guys from the store, which is why
he'd begun in the first place, but lately he'd felt disoriented by the shuffling and
sliding back and forth, and unnerved by the sudden explosions of pins. The guys
hadn't really even seemed to notice when he didn't finish out his last line one
night. And when one of them had called him about going the following week,
he'd said he'd "really rather not," while feeling a clutch in his throat as if
someone had invited him to eat a spider. Now his phone sat, bundled in its cord,
on the dusty second shelf of his bookcase.

The man sat down very carefully on the bench, about six inches too close
to Cal. He left a good two feet on the other side of him. Cal shifted his weight
uncomfortably and watched two squirrels scabble up a black-barked oak. He
felt the man's eyes on him. "I bet I know just what you're thinking," the man
said.

Cal looked askance. The voice carried an unexpected bitterness. The man
had tipped his hat back to reveal pale gray eyes, fogged like hothouse glass.
"Excuse me?"
"You maybe thought to yourself, 'There goes some guy, some guy on his way back to the office,' but I'm not on my way back to the office. I haven't been in today."

"I see," said Cal. He finished the last of his sandwich.

The man's eyes didn't waver. "No you don't. Not yet. I should tell you my name. It's Morton George, no kidding. People think it should be the other way around. You can call me Mort."

"Okay, sure."

"Come here often?"

"What?"

"The park. You like this place?"

"Oh. Well yeah, I guess."

"Me, I like being outside like this – gives you room to think, you know?"

He nodded his head and lapsed into silence for a moment, as if making use of the room. Then he stirred, and looked at Cal again. "Damn, I can be rude. I didn't even ask your name?"

"I'm Cal."

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Calvin." Morton stuck his long, slender hand out. The nails were pink and well manicured.

Cal took the hand unenthusiastically and said, "Hello."

"Spring," Morton said, "Spring, spring, spring." He settled himself on the bench, long legs outstretched, hands behind his head.

"Uh-huh. Listen, I should probably get back to work."

"And where might that be?" The tone was invasive, prying.

"The Red Owl. In the produce department."
"Don't they give you time to swallow your food before you're back at it, Calvin?" Morton's voice was caustic again, but he seemed genuinely to want Cal to stay.

"Of course they do, it's just — "

"How long you been working at that place, Calvin?"

"Twelve at this one." He wasn't sure why he felt he had to answer at all; Morton just seemed to be in command, and Cal accepted his authority instinctively.

"Twelve! That's a dozen!" The exclamation was so inane that Cal turned to look at him, but Morton was staring away into the park with his lips twisted into a wry smile.

"Look, Mr. — "

"Morton."

"Mr. Morton — "

"No, no. We've been through that. Call me Mort."

In his exasperation, Cal had twisted his brown paper lunch bag until it looked like a funnel of muddy water eddying in his hands. "Yes, well, I really do have to get back to work now." And he rocked his weight forward and prepared to stand.

"Okay, pal, okay." Morton held his hands above his head. "Didn't mean to get you all worked up."

Cal heard him curse under his breath and felt the man's gaze follow him as he tossed his crumpled lunch sack in a nearby wastebasket and walked down the footpath away from the bench. He glanced ostentatiously at his watch, snapping his elbow out to pull his cuff away from its face. Of course he didn't have to get back to work yet, and he was reluctant to let go of the rest of his time
alone. He decided to find a place out of sight of Morton's bench, among the elms that grew closer together on the other side of the park.

In a few minutes, Cal felt more comfortable. He was already explaining Morton away as a freak. One of those people who haunted public transportation and city parks. He sat down on a bench under the elms, but in the shade it was too cool to sit still for long without a jacket. He shivered, stood up, moved on.

At the outer edges of the grove of trees, the sun began to dapple the grass again, and Cal thought seriously about taking the afternoon off. He had to concede that Morton might have been right about rushing back to work – after twelve years, he could count the number of vacation days he'd had on one hand.

He ambled toward a bench in the sun, and was about to reject it as occupied because of the presence of a slim leather briefcase, when he realized no possible owner was in sight. He paused, still ten feet from the bench, and considered whether this object was indeed a forgotten thing. Sometimes you could tell when something had been lost – a battered baseball mitt he'd once found for instance, soggy from a day's rain. But this, this seemed to have been at rest only minutes. The brass buckles on either side of the handle, which was standing stiffly at attention, glinted in the sun.

As he approached the bench, he glanced once over his shoulder. He put his hands behind his back so if the owner was out of sight somewhere watching, there wouldn't be any suspicion that he was about to snatch it. He began to hum again and bent over the briefcase. Engraved in a bold, fluid script were the initials, "M. G."

"No kidding," Cal mumbled. He straightened up and whirled around, staring back up the footpath. There was no tall man in a hat following him. Cal sat down next to the briefcase to think.
He was almost fidgety with curiosity. He tapped the toes of his loafers on the blacktop. Sitting there contemplating the case, he was engaged in a way he could never be while sitting next to a person. He liked objects – liked unpacking and sorting and arranging them.

Cal knew it was unreasonable to think he'd be able to look inside this briefcase, or to carry it home with him. Nobody left a briefcase on purpose for long, especially a rich, burgundy leather one with initials engraved in gold, or gold plate, or whatever it was. Before he knew what he was doing, though, he'd stood up, grasped the upright handle, and hefted the thing.

It wasn't unusual in any way – the briefcase seemed exactly the weight of a few sheafs of paper, some paper clips, and a couple of pens. He was caught off guard by his own disappointment at having to relinquish the fantasy that Morton was harboring some automatic weapon. Morton, it turned out, was just another guy like him. Cal sighed and thought he should put it down and go back to work after all.

He remembered Morton's anger, however, and did not loosen his grip on the handle. After all, he had been a little rude, leaving like that. There was no call for ruffling people. Besides, hadn't he detected another note in Morton's voice, a certain detachment, his aggression edged with boredom? Perhaps he owed Mort this one gesture of good will. Soon he was walking briskly, briefcase in hand, back up the path toward the bench where he'd left him. Still, he didn't have any ideas in particular about what he would do when he reached him, other than hand it to him, and be on his way again.

But by the time he'd decided to turn back, he'd reached the point in the path where he could see the bench, and Morton was gone. In the center of the seat, however, was his hat, tipped upside down as if an invisible minstrel was
inviting coins. Cal felt a prickling at the back of his neck, and he continued on toward the bench. When he reached it, there was just a hat. He turned full circle, scanning the park, but could see no one. The sun still shone brightly.

He reached down and picked it up by the brim. Clinging to the hatband was a single dark hair tipped with gray. The weight in his hand was odd, too heavy somehow. He supposed it was just the strangeness of holding someone else's hat. He saw by the size printed on a white nylon label that it was too big for his own head.

Cal sat down again, the briefcase at his feet, the hat on his knees. He spoke a few words out loud, a habit of his. "The briefcase, okay. But the hat? The hat, too?" He watched a large crow flap down a few yards away and begin strutting.

Cal tried to sort the possibilities. Then he got up suddenly, deciding Morton must still be in the park somewhere. As he took the path the other way this time, trying to close the circuit, he had the same feeling he'd had when he answered Morton's questions — that he had no reason for doing this. But he was fascinated now, puzzled by the mystery and unable to leave it alone. He carried Morton's briefcase in one hand, his hat in the other, and moved crisply over the blacktop. The heels of his shoes clopped pleasantly and made him feel important, determined.

Up ahead he caught sight of something mottled green stretched across the path. At first he thought it was a snake sunning itself, but then a slight breeze lifted the tip of it, and he saw that it was Morton's necktie. He stooped and picked it up, pausing only to lay the tie across the back of his neck and let it dangle like a scarf. Whatever was happening, it was just ahead, and he felt he needed to hurry.
The path soon divided, one fork curving sharply back to the right, while the other sloped gently down into a little wood which surrounded, Cal knew, a dark, still pond. He chose the one leading to the pond.

A few yards further along, he came upon Morton's wallet, which was lying open at the edge of the path. He scooped it up, his hands trembling a little. This object, more than the others, stirred a mote of panic within him, as if the door to a long unused room had been suddenly thrown open. He wished, instead, that he had found Morton's pants dangling on the stiff bare branches of the hedge; at least that way the nuttiness of it all would remain the relatively innocuous nuttiness of a flasher, a kook. But here he was staring at the contents of a wallet, the dangerous colored plastic of lost credit cards.

Cal wished he had stayed at the store and eaten his lunch amidst the silent mounds of his tomatoes and oranges. It seemed impossible to him that he'd begun the day in the familiar surroundings of the grocery store, so far removed from the experience of trailing a stranger who was throwing away his possessions.

A sloshing sound that Cal's subconscious had somehow expected and dreaded to hear came from the direction of the pond. It was nothing – it was the curl and slap of a single wave on a beach – but it tipped Cal into motion. He started off walking quickly, then broke into a trot, the briefcase bumping occasionally against the outside of his knee. Cal was not a graceful runner, and in fact he hated to exert himself. But he hustled his bulk along now, breath coming in heaves.

When he finally had the water in view, he saw that a translucent film of ice still lay around its edges like the last of the frozen sherbet in a punch bowl. On the far side, a single mallard duck balanced on it and slept in the sun, its
head tucked under one wing. And then Morton's hand broke the surface, slapped like a fish tail and disappeared again.

Cal dropped the things he was carrying and stood rooted in his place. All he could think was, It's one o'clock in the afternoon. He wanted to shout that to Morton, tap madly at the crystal of his watch — one o'clock.

What he should be doing right now, Cal thought, was walking back into the store out of the incandescent day and letting his eyes adjust. His lunch ought to be settling as he fretted over invoices. But instead, here he was watching a man drown; and instead of shock, he felt a slight buzz of excitement.

He was transfixed by the place where Morton's hand had been, which was circumscribed by ripples opening silently in the sun. Had someone else walked by just then, Cal might have been a man tossing pebbles in the pond instead of a man about to run flailing into the water. But the very next moment he stumbled forward into a sprint which carried him into the slapping shallows. Then he was high-kneeing it until he'd lost his momentum.

It was bonechilling. He could feel his joints stiffening and beginning to ache almost on contact, and his breath came in sharp, wheezing gasps, as if he'd been socked in the stomach. Under his feet, the bottom was sickeningly soft and yielding, the kind of sludge he'd feared as dangerously leech-infested when he was a barefoot kid. As he struggled deeper, his shirt bubbled absurdly under his arms and his chin and then flattened against him with a sucking sound.

He was swimming. Morton had not reemerged, but Cal didn't imagine the pond was more than about ten feet deep at its center, which he was fast approaching. Deep enough to drown in. And cold. Cal couldn't remember ever being this cold.
Something brushed against his elbow and he reached with his other hand and clamped onto Morton's wrist, pulling with all the strength of terror, going under himself once, the icy water closing over the top of his head as he groped in the murk until he had Morton under the armpits and was kicking hard for the shore. Still beneath the surface, the thought that he would die there in a pond in a park he liked to eat lunch in filled him with nausea and caused him to twist violently away and upward for air. And then he had the ground beneath him again and was hauling at one of Morton's arms. He managed to drag him to the water's edge, and then, with another supreme effort of will, up the bank a few feet into the dry brown weeds standing along the shore.

There Cal sat down hard, heaving. Morton's face looked gray in the sunlight, and his lips, Cal thought, were the color of ripe plums. They were pulled back from his coffee-stained teeth in a grimace made more ghastly by his wide open eyes. Cal couldn't imagine that this was the same man that had sat next to him a few minutes ago.

He forced himself, even in his weariness, to move forward and roll Morton over onto his face. He didn't know if he was doing the right thing exactly, but as he pushed with the heel of his hand between Morton's shoulderblades, he judged by the water sluicing out of his mouth that it was doing some good. He noticed that Morton's coat pockets were full of stones.

Then he flipped him back over. It was odd: he didn't even think twice about sealing Morton's mouth with his own, about pinching his nose or straddling his chest, as he thought he'd seen it done. All the dignity of the other man's body seemed to have drained away with the color in his face, and Cal found himself wishing Morton would end the ridiculous, frantic motions he was performing by rolling him off his chest and pummeling him; for this, surely, was
violation. But Morton remained motionless except for the tiny shrugging motions his shoulders made when Cal pushed on his chest.

When Cal finally rested for a few seconds, feeling somewhat warmed by his work, he detected a faint pulse, and soon after Morton gurgled and hacked, squeezing his eyes tightly shut and furrowing his brow.

And Cal was afraid then more than ever. What if, he wondered, he'd spoiled the day this man had chosen to die? Would he be angry? Good God, would he be thankful? Would he weakly pat the back of his hand and smile with unfocused eyes as he told him he owed him his life? Cal fought the urge to scramble away through the empty park before Morton fully returned – maybe he could leave a note, as if he'd dinged Morton's door in a parking lot.

But Morton only groaned and began to shiver. He looked bewildered when he saw Cal. "You," he said.

"I saw your briefcase," Cal said, as if that explained everything.

"I'm cold."

"I know," said Cal, and he looked around him, trying to decide what to do.

"I'm cold," Morton said again.

Cal wished his voice wasn't at quite that pitch, imploring and unselfconscious. It was full of the same naked intimacy as a lonely drunk on the make. But even in his embarrassment he bent over Morton like a lover. He put his hands underneath him and lifted him to a sitting position.

The breeze was slight, but frigid now against Cal's skin. He slung one of Morton's arms around his own neck, and stood, pulling the other man up with him. The weight Cal was bearing up under was awkward, prohibitive. He paused a moment, steadying. It would be a weary walk, and slow, but he would find help.
Granite Dunn sat in the uncertain light of the video screen, going over the convenience store footage with a more-than-clinical interest. The principal subject on the tape, a woman behind the store's counter, was not a traditional beauty. She was rather short, had mousy hair with no particular style, and, well, worked in a convenience store. But on that set, under those lights, she was in command. She prowled the area behind the counter with a smoldering intensity Granite didn't think he'd ever seen in a cashier. He watched as she turned aside cranky customers with withering silences, and he marveled at her sharp tongue and quick wit. Once, she'd made a pubescent boy who'd ventured a wise-ass comment burst into tears by stealing the Bulls cap right off his head and threatening to scorch it with a lighter. And once, he'd even seen her vault over the counter to collar a woman who was heading out the door with six York Peppermint Patties in her coat pockets.

But it wasn't just the steely nerves and the surprising agility which attracted him. It was the little things, too. The way she stood on tiptoe to reach
the cigarette cartons displayed above her head, and the way she bumped the register drawer shut with her hip. These things were almost dainty.

Before he knew it, Granite found himself looking forward to his job – quite an accomplishment for a videotape coder working on the Consumer Transactions Project. The CTP was just one of the studies being conducted at the research center, none of which he knew anything about. This was by design: he was not allowed to be familiar with the hypotheses or goals of the studies, especially of the one he was working on, as it would bias his coding. His task was to watch videotaped images of people making purchases – all the way from very large ones, like cars and houses, to very small ones, like cigarettes and candy bars – and to evaluate and code the behavior he witnessed. He used an arcane system of abbreviations to represent certain actions and emotions: “H” for handshake, “L(n)” for nervous laughter, and so on.

Currently, Granite was at work on the small transactions, most of the footage of which was filmed with convenience store surveillance cameras. He didn't have the slightest idea where they got the other film. Just thinking about the consent forms that must be involved gave him a headache. So from the beginning he'd done the simple thing, and made clean marks in red ink on thick graph paper without worrying about much else. Certainly he needed the money. He was trying to write scripts for movies, but that wasn't working out very well, so he took this job. He told himself it would just be for the summer.

He sat all day in a private cubicle with an elaborate electronic console in front of him, which made him wonder who was funding this project. The lights were always dimmed, like in a movie theater. Each day his boss, Jasmine Peach, placed a stack of tapes on his desk, and each day he inserted them into his VCR one by one, and coded. First he watched the transaction through once,
then rewound the tape and went through it stop-and-start, recording every nuance of gesture and inflection.

At times, he had fantasized the people on the tapes were acting out a script he'd written, as if they were actors in a movie. It helped to pass the time. But he'd learned to try to be cautious about this sort of make-believe. Once, when he himself had been in line at the grocery store, waiting for a cashier, he'd spotted someone just ahead of him who he thought he remembered from somewhere. He'd spent an agonizing two minutes trying to identify where he was from, and was on the verge of speaking to him to see if the man recognized him too, when he realized he'd watched him on tape that afternoon.

A chill had gone through him. Here was someone he had no knowledge of, except that he'd recently purchased a Pontiac with power windows and a driver's side air bag. A mundane detail, and yet utterly unknowable to a stranger. It spooked him, and Granite realized he'd never thought about the man existing outside of that video screen. The man was not a character or an actor, as Granite had come to think of the flickering images he coded, but a blood-filled person acting only as himself.

In the past few days, however, Granite had relaxed his rule of remaining imaginatively uninvolved. As he'd coded the small transactions, he'd begun to realize they were often taken from the same store, which meant he frequently was watching the same employee. And he'd let this employee, this woman, begin to fascinate him. At first he'd found himself looking forward to the footage in which she appeared with the same anticipation he felt for his favorite drama on TV. But soon it ran deeper than that. He began to suspect he was in love. With Rita – for that, he was elated to discover, was her name. Just yesterday he'd heard a regular at the store greet her with it.
The problem, he came to realize, was that he didn't know how to find her. He had no way of knowing where she worked. It was a convenience store, certainly, but which one? She wore a vest over her clothes which he imagined was red (the surveillance footage was all black and white), but he had no other clue to the identity or location of her place of employment.

To make matters worse, the research center never gave any indication from what season or even year the film was taken. He could be looking at things that happened last week or three years ago – he had no way to tell. Considering the turnover rate at convenience stores, which he imagined was high, he didn't even have a guarantee that Rita was working at any such store at all.

Even so, he had an almost overpowering desire to meet her. He didn't imagine it would be uncomfortable, as it had been with the man who'd bought the Pontiac. For some absurd reason he felt she'd recognize him, too. And in his mind their relationship would crackle with repartee and sexual energy. She'd be Princess Leia to his Han Solo, and they'd play off one another with the bold finesse of fated lovers.

Granite had developed a habit with the footage involving Rita. When he came to a spot where she was in a pose facing the camera, he would press a button on his control pad which was labeled "INDEX." This was a way of marking the spot on the tape, like inserting a bookmark in a novel, so that he could come back to it easily. Every place he marked the tape became a starting point, and all he had to do was press another button, "ZERO RETURN," and the VCR would fast forward or rewind to that point.

As he manipulated her image in this way, studying her features to try to memorize them, he thought vaguely that he was doing something slightly voyeuristic, but he rationalized it as an honest effort at getting to know her, at
transcending the need for small talk if he ever got to meet her. Like video
dating.

He was just finishing up his stack of tapes for the day, several of which
had included Rita, when Jasmine Peach appeared behind him. She had a way of
moving softly, like a panther, and she never failed to catch him off guard. His
discomfort was heightened by the sense that she was coming on to him most of
the time. He might not have minded so much, but there was something about
her he couldn't put his finger on – something artificial.

"You all done, Mr. Dunn?" Her voice was smoky and deep, and she smiled
at her joke.

Granite hit the "STOP" button on his pad and swiveled around in his
chair. Static danced on the screen behind him. "Oh! Hi, Jasmine. Yes, I believe
I got 'em all."

"Well then. Give them to me, why don't you." She held out both hands,
displaying perfectly manicured nails painted fire engine red. Coco Chanel sifted
down over him in a cloud.

"Ah, yes. Of course." He handed her the tapes and she gathered them to
her ample breasts in a stack. As he watched her move off to the next coder's
cubicle in her brightly colored power suit, placing one foot directly in front of the
other like a runway model, he wondered for the hundredth time what she was
doing here. The frosted hair, the fine smooth skin, the lusty voice. It didn't add
up to a serious researcher. He supposed he was stereotyping. Still, the pungent
physicality of her presence frightened him.

He stepped out of the dim interior of the research center and into the
bright haze of the July evening. Granite didn't have a car, so he walked
everywhere, or took a bus. He lived uptown, about a mile and a half from here,
in a small studio apartment. His parents, from their neat home in North Platte, worried about him living alone so far from family and friends and the vast stretches of plains where folks were decent. They didn't understand that very few writers that Hollywood cared about were from Nebraska. They hadn't felt, as he had here in the Twin Cities, the thrill of vigorous, artistic solitude.

Still, instead of going straight home, he wandered over a couple of blocks, pushing through the rush hour crowd on the sidewalk. He loosened his tie and thought about the Coke he'd buy at the convenience store. Because it was hot and he was thirsty, he told himself. But he knew it was because he wanted wished and hoped to see Rita.

The next morning was Wednesday, and Granite was in a good mood. He hadn't found Rita, it was true, but his faith that he would was unshakable. He knew from the movies that unshakable faith was his duty, and even if nagging doubts told him the whole notion was fatuously romantic, it was an enjoyable fatuity. At the very least, he'd see Rita on the tapes at some point today.

He began his morning flawlessly – he remembered to drink his orange juice before he brushed his teeth and he set the toaster just right so it didn't scorch his bread for once. He whistled "You Are My Sunshine" as he trotted down the steps to the street.

Across from his building, he noticed the swallows flapping around the green-and-white striped awning on the Italian restaurant. Of course he'd seen them before, but on this particular morning he noticed the way the sun slanted across the awning, and the flight patterns of the birds, looping as if they were paper airplanes a little boy had carefully folded and tossed. The whole morning had a clarity to it he wasn't sure he had ever experienced. It was as if the
shapes and colors were more precise somehow – closer, like in a child’s pop-up book.

Probably because of his enthusiasm for this beauty, he was hit by a bus. For had he not been so enchanted by the splendor of the morning, he almost certainly would have been paying more attention to the crossing signal, and thus would have avoided the catastrophe of a collision with the 16A Northbound. Even so, he also would have missed glimpsing its driver, in whose expression he read unqualified concern, and with whom he was instantly smitten.

It was Rita. He was sure. His trained eyes, adept at picking out details, noticed two things: a bee caught just below the bus’s wiper blades, still living, its black bands cutting through gold with the same clarity as the colors on the awning, and then Rita, her mouth rounded into a perfect little "O."

When he recovered consciousness, he saw a boy looking down at him with a fist in a plastic baggie full of jelly beans. They were all black. "Is he dead?" Granite heard him say through a mouthful of the candy before one of the medics in sharply creased white trousers pushed him out of his line of vision. He thought he smelled licorice.

The clouds above the faces that leaned in on him were white and scalloped like wedding dresses. He expected at any moment to feel himself rising toward them, turning back to look at his twisted and mangled body with a new and deified sense of irony. He thought he’d pity the love that had struck him down, and bless it sadly through half closed eyes as he floated away to embrace the light.

But when he did feel himself rising, it was because he was lifted, with something hard against his vertebrae, by four men who slid him into the back of
an ambulance like they were sliding a loaf of bread into an oven. A police radio crackled with the dispatcher's voice.

He thought of Rita the busdriver as the ambulance sped toward Memorial Hospital, and warm feelings enveloped him. IV bags swung back and forth on metal frames with liquids rocking in them, and he thought he might whistle again. Then Granite tucked his chin against his sternum and looked down toward his toes. His right femur was jutting whitely from his twisted and mangled leg. Without the slightest feeling of irony, he said "Arg" and passed out.

He was conscious of movement. Lights slid by overhead, but he wasn't sure whether he was in the ambulance still or in a hospital corridor. Everything seemed blurred and indistinct, and for some reason he thought he was being pulled along in a wagon by the boy with the jelly beans. He allowed himself to drift away into that darkness again, licorice black.

When he opened his eyes next, the television on the bracket in the corner of the room was staring at him intently. His leg hung straight out in front of him, encased in plaster or fiberglass, he wasn't sure which. Someone had taped tubes to his arms, and there were splotches of iodine on his chest and on the cotton hospital robe. A thick bandage was wrapped tightly around his middle. He smelled faintly of dirty clothes.

He lay still for a long time, trying to focus on his situation. When he finally looked around some more, he noticed he had the room to himself. The bed next to him was empty, its blue spread flattened as if with an iron. A fluorescent light shaded on the underside by a metal casing was the only light on in the room. It was the indirect light that allowed for both patients' sleep and the quiet
duties of nurses and orderlies in their silent rubber-soled shoes. On a little cart next to the cold metal rails of his bed was a buff-colored telephone.

He supposed he should call his parents and tell them what had happened, but his head hurt and he felt too tired to talk. Besides, it would be hard to explain, and would only add to their dismay over his activities: pursuing frivolous dreams, being hit by city buses. He was fine now. No sense in worrying them.

A nurse poked his head in and noticed Granite's open eyes. He lifted a finger at him in greeting and whisked away again. In a couple of minutes another nurse, a woman who said her name was Judy, came in to check on him.

"So you're Granite Dunn. Kind of an odd name." She smiled at him as if she'd said hello.

"Granted," said Granite. It came out as a croak, and he realized how dry and swollen his throat felt.

"Is there a story behind it?"

There was – a long one about his father's concrete business. "No," he said.

"Oh." She smiled again and tapped on his IV bottle with thick pink fingers. "Well, Mr. Dunn, you've had quite a day. The doctors had to put your leg back together in surgery, and you broke three ribs. You've got a concussion, too. Any trouble with the vision right now?" She clicked a penlight on and off while she thumbed his eyelids wide open.

"Not really."

"Good. The doctor will be in to see you tomorrow morning – it's three a.m. right now – would you like something to eat? Cereal? A fruit cup?"

"Umm. Just some water sounds good right now."
"Okay, I'll get you some. And any time you need me, just press the red button." She indicated a small control with a cord attached to it, which had been threaded through the bars on the bed and was resting next to him. "The black one's for the television."

"Thanks," said Granite. He was thinking, suddenly, of Rita. He wondered if she'd visit him here. He wondered if it were something that was done — visiting people you run over. The etiquette seemed complicated.

And he wasn't sure she was real. The whole event seemed somehow removed from reality, beginning with the hyper-clarity of the morning. After all, was it really possible he had seen and read her name off her jacket before he'd been hit by the bus? Was it possible her mouth had made the shape he thought it had, like the opening to a Coke bottle? Granite pressed the black button.

When Judy returned with his water, which she poured from a squat pitcher into a clear plastic glass, he was staring at the bright colors of a test pattern. "Do you know," Granite asked her, "if they play the national anthem before they go off the air anymore?"

"The national anthem? I don't know if I've ever heard of that. I didn't think they even went off the air anymore."

Granite nodded at the screen. "They do," he said. "Some of the networks, anyway. For a couple of hours all you can get are these colors." He clicked it off, and winced when he moved his arm too quickly. His ribs were very tender.

"You'd better get some rest," Judy instructed.

"Yes," said Granite, feeling spent from the effort of talking. He sipped his water carefully, relishing the cool trickle sliding down his parched throat. Then he closed his eyes and tried to settle to sleep. He felt his leg hanging awkwardly, and more than anything he wanted to be able to roll onto his side. He tried to
remember what Rita looked like, but all he could picture was her mouth, and before long even that dissolved into the soft static of sleep.

The doctor stopped by to see Granite at ten thirty the next morning. Granite was just finishing the lukewarm coffee from his breakfast tray when he swept into the room, smelling of freshly oiled leather. He was perhaps fifty, a smooth and powerful man with black hair that was graying just above his ears. He clicked a ballpoint pen with his thumb and pushed up and down on the balls of his feet as he stood next to the bed.

"You need to watch where you're going," he advised, his voice mellow. Granite noticed he had deep creases fanning out from the corners of his eyes when he smiled. "You're lucky to be alive after the knock on the noggin you took."

He introduced himself as Dr. Lanz then, and slid into a routine of taps and squints, finally grunting with satisfaction. "I'm most concerned about that leg of yours," he said at last, slipping the ballpoint pen into his breast pocket. "I'd like you to come out of this without so much as a limp, but it was a tricky process in surgery — your femur was an absolute mess and you had extensive arterial damage. We're going to keep you here for a little while and keep close tabs on it."

"All right," said Granite. He tried to smile. He felt grateful to have this man confirming the trauma to his body, because it in turn made the bus which had done it a solid object, something he was having trouble remembering clearly. He remembered a bee, which seemed ridiculous. He wanted to be able to recall the impact, the moment before he had buckled and snapped, when he'd seen
Rita. As it was, all he was conscious of was the throbbing of his leg and the sharp jabs he felt every time he breathed too deeply.

On a pad of paper which the nurse had brought him earlier that morning he had made a list in pencil:

- Sparrows
- Awning
- Sunlight
- Bee
- Bus
- Rita
- Love
- Jellybeans
- Hospital

He'd played with the order for a few minutes, but had finally settled on it this way. The problem was the list didn't seem to connect to reality at any recognizable point. As sure as he felt this was the way it had happened, looking at it in number two lead, it seemed preposterous. So the doctor telling him he had a fractured femur made him feel much better. Such crushing effects must have had a weighty cause.

When Dr. Lanz disappeared through the doorway, Granite sat back and began to worry about work. He wasn't sure if his accident would have been on the news, or if anyone at the research center would have seen it if it had been. He glanced up at the flat gray-green eye of the television hanging in the corner and hoped somebody had seen him being loaded into the ambulance. Maybe they'd interviewed Rita, distraught and teary-eyed. Oh, he hoped someone had filmed it.
He supposed he'd better phone in sick. After all, he was halfway through missing his second day in a row, and though it was true people at the center were rather isolated from one another, someone would have noticed by now even if he hadn't been on television.

He tried to reach for the phone, but it was too far away. His leg was held firmly in traction, and he couldn't twist his upper body without a great deal of pain, because of his broken ribs. He finally had to call a nurse, who set the phone on the bed next to him. He picked up and dialed. To his chagrin, the sultry voice belonging to Miss Jasmine Peach said, "Hullo."

"Um, hi, Jasmine. This is —"

"Granite. How we've missed you. You should have called. Naughty."

"Yes, well I've had an accident. A bus —"

"Accident? You don't mean you've been hurt?"


"Oh, Granite. Tell me you'll be all right."

"Yes, I think I will. The thing is, though, I need to stay here in the hospital indefinitely, and —"

"Which one?"

"North Memorial."

"I'm coming with flowers."

"No! I mean wait a minute. What I was going to ask is maybe I could get some work done here. It isn't the video display at the center, but there is a TV in the room. And if I had a VCR and some tapes, a remote, and my coding pad I'd be all set."
"Won't you tire yourself?"

"Sure. But I could do a bit and rest, and go at it again."

"These are confidential tapes, Granite."

"I have the room to myself. And none of the nurses will pay attention anyway. I won't do any when anyone else is around."

"You're so dedicated. It gives me chills, really, to think of you laid up in bed like that — and still wanting to work. Oh damn."

"What?"

"I can't make it over there this evening after all. I have aerobics class."

"You take aerobics?"

"I teach it."

"I see."

"Right after work tomorrow, though, I'll bring the things you need. Cross my heart."

"Thank you." Granite didn't really want to work that badly. In fact, at that moment he was fishing with his finger in a tiny clear plastic cup for his painkillers, which were pale blue and oblong, like robin's eggs. But he needed to remind himself of Rita's features. The thought of pressing "ZERO RETURN" cheered him.

He glanced at the pad of paper next to the phone when he'd hung up. _Rita Love_. Ah, Rita. If only he could remember what she looked like. He prayed she'd be driving the same route when he got out. Then he could stand at the stop outside his building with change jingling in his hand, waiting for her.

That night, well after midnight, he could not get to sleep. On top of everything, his foot had begun to itch. He glared at it, his purplish toes barely
visible at the base of the cast. He had begun to regard the appendage hanging over his bed as a nuisance, but not particularly as part of himself. The pills had rendered him at least partially numb, and he was willing to allow his leg to separate and float away from him like the booster stage of a rocket. But then his foot started itching, and he became excruciatingly whole again.

He couldn't scratch it, so he tried not to think about it. Instead, he stared at a modern art print hanging on the wall by the doorway – it was mauve and grey-blue and looked roughly like a torn paper landscape. He imagined it was supposed to be soothing. Someone in the next room was coughing violently. Granite felt at the edge of that despair peculiar to hospitals in the middle of the night. He realized that the semi-dark was continuous, that the bedcovers were thin, and that he never slept in a sitting position at home.

He suddenly wanted to see a nurse, so he fumbled for his control and pressed the call button. The television came on.

It was just as well, he thought, and he tried to concentrate on the figures on the screen. Before long he recognized Night of the Living Dead. As he watched, he thought he discovered something about the horror of that movie. He had never before found the idea of zombies, flesh-eating or not, particularly frightening. But it was the relentless press of bodies that made the story horrible. Their movements were mechanical, endlessly predictable, but unyielding. And there was something terrible about the empty detachment of the undead even as they groped for the living.

Granite glared at his own foot again, so far out of his reach, and grit his teeth. He willed it to wither and perish, and leave him in peace. On screen, the zombies tottered and jostled, animated, he supposed, only by the insatiable appetite for life blood.
He didn't sleep at all. At four a.m., an infomercial came on, assuring him that stress-free living could be his with just a paperback, two videos, and what looked like a bungee cord.

As he watched, it struck him that the station hadn't gone off the air. No test patterns, no national anthem. Just a continuous stream of signals groping in the dark.

The next day, Granite finally dozed for a while after lunch. His foot had mercifully quit itching, but the rest of his body ached from trauma and fatigue. He tried to allow himself to sink into the bed, to melt away altogether.

It was in this nearly insensible state that he heard Rita's voice. It sounded like it came from somewhere far away. It was in conversation with a nurse's voice.

"You family?"

"No, I'm afraid I'm the busdriver who put him in this mess."

"Oh no!"

"Yeah. I just needed to see that he's going to make it, you know?"

Granite shook himself out of sleep. When he'd focused, there in the doorway to his room was Rita. He immediately recognized her arrival as magical – the kind of magic he'd made rightfully his own through his faith in love's fortuitous plot twists. Her sudden appearance in full color reinforced the aura of enchantment. The shift from black and white reminded him of watching *The Wizard of Oz* as a kid: it gave him that same feeling of having left Kansas.

What did he care that the reason she'd come was because she was unsure whether the light was still yellow when she'd charged through it? What did he care that she did not wear a prim dress or ruby shoes, but jeans and a gold
sateen jacket? These things were not important. The important thing was that this was Rita, the woman who starred in dozens of his videos.

"Um, hello," she said. "My name's Rita. I'm afraid I'm the one who ran over you. I'm real sorry."

"Forget it," said Granite, waving her off gallantly. He'd practiced this part. "It's nice of you to come."

There followed a short silence in which he stared hard at her, trying to reconcile image to flesh. The woman standing in front of him, looking at his leg now somewhat shyly, didn't seem so feral as the one he remembered from the videotapes.

"Yes. Well. It looks like your leg is pretty bad. Does it hurt?"

No, no. This was all wrong. The wrong question. Rita would come up with something snappier. A joke maybe. "Nah."

"You're just saying that." Her face softened with concern.

"No, really. I'm on all kinds of drugs." He smiled at her, but it felt strained. There was no denying he was disappointed with her struggle for words, with her awkward sympathy.

She reddened. "Are they going to keep you here long?"

"They haven't been too specific." He had the sudden insane urge to purchase something from her. To see her move according to that script. A candy bar, perhaps.

Rita was looking away, toward the window. "I certainly hope it won't be too long." She looked at him again. "I wonder if you'll have to have some physical therapy on it."

"I believe it's been mentioned." He leaned forward as much as he could and before he knew what he was saying, blurted, "Can I have a piece of gum?"
Rita knitted her eyebrows, a half-smile on her face. "Excuse me?"

Granite pointed to his mouth. "It's just that my throat gets awful dry. I'm sorry."

"Oh, no no. Actually I have a pack in my pocket —" She jammed a hand into her jacket. "Oops. I've got Certs?" She was painfully accommodating.

"Sure." He watched as she peeled the blue foil paper away. "Thanks," he said when she handed him the little mint.

"I suppose it's the drugs," she said.

"The drugs?" he repeated.

"That make your mouth dry."

"Yes, I suppose you're right." The mint was cool on his tongue. He was afraid she was going to leave — she looked uncomfortable and unsure. Somehow he had to tell her he knew who she was.

She gave a short nervous laugh. "Wow, you know, I never expected you to step off that curb." She shook her head.

"Yeah, it was pretty silly. But you shouldn't have been going so fast," he prodded.

She looked at the floor. "I know," she said quietly.

He adjusted the pillow behind his head, utterly dissatisfied. "Say, how long have you been driving for MTC?"

"Oh, a couple of months, I suppose."

"And what did you do before that?"

Rita looked for just a second like she might say it wasn't any of his business, but then again, maybe she was just embarrassed. "I worked," she said, "as a cashier."
Granite wasn't sure just how many questions his position granted him, but he pressed on. "Oh really!" he said, as if she'd told him she'd been a neurosurgeon. "Where did you do that?"

She paused for a couple of seconds before answering, but then said simply, "7-11."

He crunched the brittle remains of his Cert. "Can I ask you a question?"

Rita shrugged.

"It might seem a little strange."

"That's okay."

"It's just that a guy gets to thinking about stuff when he's sitting in bed all day."

"Uh-huh."

"Anyway. You know those six-packs that are fastened together with those rings of white plastic?"

"Yeah?"

"You had those at 7-11, right?"

"Right."

"Would you have sold me just one can pulled from one of those?"

She placed her hands on her hips. "Not unless you were the pope, bub."

"A-ha! There's the Rita I know," Granite said, too conscious of his triumph to notice the slip. He smiled at her approvingly.

"What are you talking about?" Rita's tone was suddenly cold.

"Oh. It's kind of a long story. Kind of a strange one, too, actually — ha ha."

"Really. I bet it'll be fascinating though — ha ha," she mimicked.
Granite was at a loss where to begin. Standing a little closer to him, Rita seemed convincingly real now. Big as life. He cleared his throat. "I've got this job that's a little out of the ordinary." He paused here for her to respond, but she just stared. "What I do is I watch videotapes."

"Videotapes."

Somehow this encouraged him. "Why yes, videotapes. And what I do with these tapes is code them . . . ."

She did not respond.

"Right, code them. I code what I see people doing on them, which in my case is buying things. And would you believe it, a whole bunch of the ones I've watched have had you in them." He clapped his hands together and let his mouth hang open slightly.

When Rita still didn't respond, he decided to call her bluff. He'd seen her perform this silence routine before, and he refused to be intimidated. With affection welling up in him, and with a certainty that he was making the biggest speech of his life, he said, "And the truth is, Rita, you fascinate me. No, that word is not strong enough to express this, this -" He held his trembling hands three feet apart, like he was measuring a fish he'd caught. "You consume me, Rita."

Rita's expression remained blank, but she began to wag her head back and forth very slowly. "It must," she said finally, "be the drugs."

Granite shook his head vigorously. "No, I swear."

"Nothing but drugs," she continued, ignoring him, "could possibly make someone in such an idiotic position as you're in now say something so potentially dangerous." And she gave his leg a not-quite-playful slap.
"Whoah. Careful there, Reets," advised Granite, suddenly not at all sure he sensed the crackling of sexual energy.

She came up to the head of the bed then, and actually seized him by the front of his hospital gown. She brought her face in close to his and grinned like a jack-o-lantern. "Listen, asswipe. I don't know what kind of sick creep you are, but if I decide not to kill you right now, you'd better watch it when you drag your sorry body down the street again. Because if I see you, I'll run stoplights, I'll climb curbs, just for the satisfaction of hearing you scream before the wheels get you. Are we communicating?"

"Yes," whispered Granite.

She let him go and backed away a step. Without taking her eyes from his face, she did a neck roll and shrugged her shoulders. Then she turned and stalked out of the room. On the back of her jacket in bold letters were the words "STRIKE FORCE," stitched above a fierce-looking bowling ball scattering pins.

Granite sat for a minute without moving, wondering where the script had failed him. He felt weakened from the release of adrenaline, and he couldn't bring his breathing under control. The supreme effort he had made for the last few minutes collapsed on him, and he gasped under the weight and the pain of his failure.

His leg jutted out in front of him in stiff salute, and his butt felt numb. Bed sores, he was certain, were growing like moss all over his underside. It wasn't possible to grin through this now, not with the prospect of another night lying uncomfortably awake listening to the phlegmy coughs of the man next door, while he stewed in humiliation. After all, it was humiliating. The pain of being sent sprawling on the pavement coupled with the pain of being threatened by the one to whom he professed his love was almost unbearable. He looked at
the little plastic cup which had held his painkillers and then at the clock. Still another two hours before he got any more.

He wished he could slip out the door and go for a long, lonely walk. But even that symbolic progress was denied him: he'd been rendered immobile by the very person whose memory he wanted to escape. Rita, the one he'd waited for, had run him over again. For his faith, for his professions, he'd gotten nothing back – zero return.

At five-thirty Jasmine Peach arrived, wheeling a cart in front of her. On her cart was a VCR, along with a stack of videotapes, a remote control, three pens, an official coding notebook, and a vase containing one dozen pink roses.

Jasmine wore a sleeveless black dress with a scoop neck which was only slightly sexier than what she had worn to work. Her frosted hair bobbed neatly behind her ears, and she entered the room with her electric green eyes wide. She drew in her breath at the sight of him, and came over to his bedside. "Oh, you poor thing," she breathed. "Are they taking care of you?"

Granite had just finished throwing up. Something in his medication was making him nauseated. "Of course." He trembled visibly.

"You're lying to Jasmine," she reprimanded, trailing her fingers lightly along his cast.

He looked at her miserably, but said nothing. This woman, who constantly behaved as though she were in a B-movie, was the last person he wanted to see right now. She inspired in him the same horror as the zombies did – he could predict her movements, but he could not stop them.
Jasmine gazed vacantly at him, possibly awaiting his answer. When he made none, she came closer and laid her hand on his forehead. "Sweetheart. You're so feverish."

Granite was staring beyond her, at the television screen hanging in the corner like the convex security mirrors in convenience stores. In it, he could just make out his room, his bed, and Jasmine's figure bending over him. All of it was reflected crudely, in dim lines and muted colors.

Unexpectedly, he began to cry. Not with great sobs, or even whimpers, but silently. Still, the tears gathered quickly in his eyes, and he did his best not to blink; for he wanted to savor an instant of salt-stung blindness before the drops slid down his cheeks and Jasmine reappeared to kiss them away.
The truth was, he still felt more than a little drunk. The dark hung around him like curtains, and he felt he had to paw it away from his face as he tried to avoid running into anything. Upstairs, Liz was in bed and asleep. She too had been drinking. But that was the difference between them — she could always flop on the bed and drop away immediately. He, on the other hand, had to do things. For instance, he'd had to stand up straight and count very carefully the proper number of bills for the sitter. It was up to him to concentrate fully.

Later, he'd had to sit up in a chair, the objects in the room swerving uncomfortably as his ears buzzed. The only illumination in the room had come through the rectangular window in the front door, from the porch light. He'd clicked on the television, just to have something other than the ringing silence to listen to, and to empty his mind of the party — one Liz had said she'd needed to attend, as other artists would be there, along with critics and collectors. She always said she despised these sorts of things, but they'd stayed late.
The clamor of the commercials, their dizzying images, had soon annoyed him and he'd clicked them off again, stared for a moment at the fading phosphorescence of the screen in the dark. Now, the porch light off and the door locked, he was on his way upstairs.

He shouldn't have driven home. It was reckless and it was thoughtless and it was dangerous. He knew it was. The fear of something happening briefly penetrated the fog of his thoughts, absurdly late, and he stopped at the base of the stairs, steadying himself with a hand on the wall. Poor, dear Michael, left all alone. What would have happened to their son?

These thoughts, however, were too full of sadness to be held for long by a man in his condition who had a staircase to climb, a glass of water waiting as reward at the top. Instead of feeling depressed or regretful, he felt giddy. He climbed the stairs precisely, placing each foot firmly and squarely on each step. He was a master of control, capable of amazing acts of dexterity.

In the bathroom, the nightlight was on. The glow bothered him, and he squinted against it, though it must have been only a few watts. He decided to pull it out of its socket completely, but then he lost his grip on it somehow, and it fell to the floor, where it clattered into the metal of the wastebasket. In the bedroom, he heard Liz sit up. She was awake - he heard the covers being shifted. He waited, holding his breath.

"Jason?"

He remained frozen, not speaking. Why didn't he say something? Why didn't he say it was just him, go back to sleep, he was getting a drink of water? But he couldn't. No, he had a practical joke to play on her. It had just come over him, a stroke of genius. Something so clever it almost made him giggle. This
was the sort of thing Liz would appreciate, he told himself – spontaneous and fun.

"Jason?" Liz's voice was tense this time. She worried at night – she was the type to check in closets and under beds, even as an adult. Silly. "Jason, what are you doing?"

Still he didn't answer. He had to bite his lip to keep from laughing. This was the sort of thing people did at summer camp. His heart hammered against his chest. He stood on his toes, his calves trembling with energy. He could hardly contain himself.

"Jason?" The tone was imploring this time. Don't do this to me, it said. Stop fooling around. Ali-ali-incomefree.

But he was good at this game. He wasn't about to let it end here, to let her win. He knew she'd be up soon, up out of bed, itching with curiosity. Yes, she'd never be able to rest until she found out where he was. And she'd want to check on Michael. He knew her. She was over-serious about these things, but he'd loosen her up.

Besides, he remembered, he was a little angry with her. She'd been paying him scant attention lately – in fact, he'd come to feel neglected, secondary to her painting, which she labored over relentlessly. And then there was poor Michael. She wasn't being a good mother, either. It was time to shake things up.

She was coming. He heard her bare feet padding across the floor. Her ankle or her knee cricked. He pressed himself against the wall of the bathroom and reached his hand for the lightswitch, slowly, stealthily, careful not to make a noise, not to even draw breath. This was going to be good.
In the next instant she was in the door of the bathroom and he flicked the lights on and hollered at her. "Bwooah!" he shouted, and then he was laughing hysterically, laughing and pointing at her. Liz's legs had turned to pudding from the fright, and she dropped to the floor, clutching at the towel rack.

"Your face! Liz, your face! You should've seen how scared you were," Jason said, almost choking. It was better than he ever thought it would be.

Liz stayed where she was too long, though. She wasn't a sport about it, not at all. In fact, she practically spoiled it all by crying. Her hair hung in her face, and she sobbed. Her feet, splayed out at funny angles, looked pale in the bright light.

"Oh, come on," Jason said, but she wouldn't listen to him or look at him. He reached down and tugged her chin up toward him. Her eyes were bloodshot, defiant. "Come on, that was funny."

She shoved his hand away. "Don't!" she said.

Then the pitifulness of the whole scene rushed in on him – the towels hanging crookedly on their rack, the nightlight lying on the floor, the nail clippings clinging to the rug – and he slapped back at her. He slapped her right across the face. He gave her a kind of kick with his thigh and knee, too, so her head bumped into the tile wall.

The tips of his fingers tingled, and he thought he'd hit her ear. For that, he felt sorry. He mumbled an apology, but she just glared up at him when he did, and then she said, "Jason." She looked right at him, held his eyes. He didn't know why she said it, of all things. He wished she'd said any goddamn thing but that. But eventually, he grew disgusted – she'd pulled this poor-me thing a few too many times. He went to bed, turning off the light as he left the bathroom.
That was last night. Now, Jason drives, of all places, toward Pleasant Oaks, where Liz's grandmother Jensen lives. Michael is in the back. Liz is not in the front. Jason is fighting off a headache. It stabs at the back of his eyeballs every time he shifts his gaze from mirror to speedometer to traffic in front.

The argument this morning had been uglier than he'd expected. He knew they'd fight — it wasn't that — it was that the fighting didn't have any of the intimacy that their arguments usually had. He felt like he was being yelled at by someone he'd rear-ended in a traffic accident.

This is how bad it was: he'd come into the kitchen and she'd had her hair pulled tightly back in a ponytail. The ponytail was tied with a piece of ordinary string, as if to emphasize its purely instrumental purpose: to show off the bruise which darkened the side of Liz's face. The bruise was unmistakable in the morning sunlight, a purplish color like crushed blueberries.

The sight of it chilled him. He couldn't reconcile such a vivid consequence with his own dull actions. He thought of how he might apologize. "Liz, I didn't know. I mean, are you okay? Last night —"

"Today's Grandma's birthday," she said. "She's eighty-seven years old."

Jason considered this. Liz was in sweatpants and had her legs crossed. Her stockinged foot bounced up and down with nervous energy. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?" He didn't like the way she stared at him, the wicked pleasure she seemed to be getting from starting so perversely.

"How do I look?" Liz asked, turning her face this way and that.

"Stop it."

"Oh, don't want to argue this morning? Had enough, have you?" She got up, headed to the refrigerator for some orange juice.
Jason sat down at the table, placed both of his hands there in front of him, flat, and looked at them. The birthday party. He'd forgotten that it was today, and that they would be expected to be at her parents' home all afternoon. "Liz," he said.

"I know what you're going to say – so don't. Spare me. I'm not going to go visiting, and I'm not going to tell anyone I wiped out on my skateboard. Forget it." There was a pause, where she shut the refrigerator, leaned against it. "You know, I'm not going to make up any excuses at all. No games."

Her mood was disturbing. She was threatening to violate an unspoken rule. They had always kept their relationship away from her family, who tended to think of Jason as something of a disappointment. Liz was offended at such a judgment, and normally went to unusual lengths to demonstrate that it was wrong, that they were a well-suited couple. Thus, even when she and Jason fought, it was considered something to be smoothed over in the presence of the Perrys.

Jason discovered that he was calm, analytical. This was a problem. He had the solution. "I'll go, then." He thought of it as volunteering, but when it came out, it sounded more like a challenge.

Liz barely looked at him. "Sure – you'll go."

"I'll take Michael with me. We'll have a good time."

"You can't do that," she said.

"Of course I can." Of course he could. Of course.

"And what will you tell them about me?" Suddenly she sounded petulant.

"What do you care?" He pronounced the words carefully, separating them.

"Where's Michael?"
She ignored his question. "Mom asked me if we'd bring Grandma. I said we would."

"I'll pick her up." He could do this, too. All things were possible. "Where's Michael?"

"Upstairs."

"I'll bring him with me. I'll pick up your grandmother. I'll visit with your family." He named the things like items on a list. He wiggled first one finger, then another on the table in front of him. He expected her to react then, to shout or cry or strike out at a nearby object.

Instead, she said nothing. She sat down carefully at the table, directly across from him, and poured herself a glass of juice. She poured it past the usual height, not leaving any room at the rim, so the orange liquid was level with the top of the glass. Then she left it there at the table, and left the room without a sound.

Thinking of that now, Jason curses under his breath. More and more, it seems, he doesn't understand her at all. He checks the mirror. In the back, Michael seems to be drifting in and out of sleep, his lashes fluttering periodically, his chin rising and dropping. Jason envies him his oblivion.

He turns into the circular drive of Pleasant Oaks and parks outside the front door. He retrieves Michael from the back seat, and together they go in. The lobby smells of new carpet and fresh paint. The colors are brighter and more cheerful than Jason remembers. He notices, however, that the renovators haven't reupholstered the chairs that face one another in the little sitting room off the lobby. Against the wall is an aquarium full of brightly colored fish, which causes Michael to slow down and stare. Jason tugs him along by the hand.
When the elevator door opens on the fourth floor, there is a little crowd of people, some in wheelchairs, others sitting in straightbacked chairs with puffy, vinyl covered seats. Several of them turn at the sound of the door sliding open, and one of the women, wearing a pink shawl and holding her teeth in her lap, begins to mutter at the sight of a little boy. Jason smiles at her, and as they pass, she reaches out to Michael, who hides behind his father's leg.

The two pause in front of the nurse's station. "I'm here to pick up Doris Jensen for her birthday party. Do I need to sign her out somewhere?" Jason asks a woman about his age, who has her hair in a pony tail and who is writing something on a yellow slip of paper.

She looks up and nods, points to a three-ring binder at the end of the counter. "Yes, right down there." Then, standing up so she can see Michael, she asks, "This your son?"

"Mmm. Sure is." Jason checks his watch and fills in the sign-in sheet with a pen attached to the counter top. The chain hisses over the formica as he writes.

"Oh! Now I remember," the nurse, who has been studying Michael, says. "This is Michael, right? My, my does he have his mother's eyes."

Jason smiles at her. "Yes, right."

Grandma's room is mustard colored. Liz's mother has purchased a floral print comforter and a tiny lamp with a colorful shade to try to spruce it up, but Jason finds the results depressing, even with the sun streaming in through the window.

He notices the bed directly across from Grandma's is empty, the mustard bedspread smoothed absolutely flat. There are no pictures on the bulletin board on that side of the room, just three or four silver thumbtacks, and the dresser top
is empty. He thinks he remembers Grandma had a roommate named Violet, but he hasn't heard anything about her for a while now.

Grandma Jensen herself seems to be in the bathroom. He hears her voice and a nurse's from behind a door to his right. He steps into the room to take a look at the pictures hanging over Grandma's dresser. Liz has painted some of them.

He thinks of her, locked up in her studio, secretive and moody. Jason goes in there sometimes when she's not at home, and gingerly touches the still-wet canvasses, sorts through the crumpled tubes and reads their labels — ochre, titanium white — as if they will give him a sign of how to navigate this world of hers that seems so foreign to him.

The paintings in front of him are old. The frames are dusty. He's never even seen them. One in particular catches his attention: a watercolor of what looks like a train station in the rain. There is a large cluster of bicycles, and people moving, umbrellas opened, between the station and the bicycles. It isn't an American scene — it makes him think of countries he's never been to. He can't remember seeing Liz paint anything else in watercolor.

Just then there is a noise behind him, and Grandma Jensen emerges from the bathroom, her wheelchair being pushed by a nurse in white slacks and a pair of running shoes. Jason glimpses the stainless steel railing that runs around the tiled wall before the nurse hits the light switch. The plumbing hisses as the toilet tank refills.

"Hello!" Jason greets her. "Here we are. Happy birthday!"

"Where's Liz?" Grandma Jensen replies. "Liz was going to pick me up."

Jason glances at Michael, who now sits on the empty bed across the room, kicking his feet impatiently and looking out the window. "Well, she's really busy
today," Jason says briskly. "Painting like a woman possessed at this very moment."

"Busy?" Grandma Jensen sputters. "Busy?"

Jason isn't quite sure how to respond. "Yes, well – it is upsetting. She really wanted to come, but –"

"Well then she should have," Grandma says flatly.

"Absolutely. I can see how you feel." He tries a little clap. "Anyway, we'd better get rolling. They'll be expecting us soon."

In the corridor outside the room, someone is vacuuming. Jason becomes temporarily mesmerized by the machine's movements backward and forward in the orderly's hand. Then he hears the pitch of the motor's whine change to the higher octaves of things gone haywire, sees the orderly fumble for the power switch and bend down over the vacuum. A curl of acrid smoke rises from it, and Jason knows the belt has gone. As he passes, pushing Grandma's wheelchair in front of him and looking behind him to see that Michael is following along, he breathes in the smell of it, hot and bitter black.

Getting Grandma settled in the front seat of the car is an ordeal, because he has to help her from her wheelchair into the front, then fold up the chair and fit it into the trunk, where it keeps bumping up against the spare. Michael is whining because he's hungry. Jason feels suddenly as though he's been stuck with these two – that he exists only to hold things together. It's no wonder he's been feeling a little frayed at the edges lately. How can Liz blame him for losing his temper once in a while?

Jason finally climbs into the driver's seat and looks across at his passenger. She's staring rather fiercely straight ahead. "So Grandma," he attempts, as he pulls out of the drive, "are you looking forward to your party?"
"How do I know what your driving's like?" she says.

"But surely you've been in the car with me before?" He smiles his reassurance.

"Liz has always been here."

"Yes, well, not today," he says, trying to make it sound musical, light. He doesn't want to argue with her.

Inexplicably, Grandma begins to whistle. Jason glances at her again. She's sitting with surprisingly good posture for someone with a broken hip – back straight, hands folded neatly in her lap. He gets the idea she just doesn't want to talk to him.

He checks the rearview mirror. Michael is looking at him in the mirror with something like concentration on his face. Jason feels grateful for his son – for the way he finds him interesting enough to focus on. "How you doing back there, bud?" he asks, giving him a wink.

"Dad?" he says. "Where's Mommy?"

For some reason, the question is unexpected, and Jason opens his mouth and then shuts it again.

Grandma says, "You're going the wrong way. You should have exited back there."

Jason looks around. "No, no. You see, I like to try to avoid the construction on 31st. This way will work fine."

"Dad?" Michael pleads.

"Bad enough I'm living in that place without people lecturing me on how to find my way around town."

"That's not what I meant at all. I'm sure you could find their house on your own – it's just that – " He stops himself. He feels frustration, but more
than that, a queer sort of isolation, as if all three people in the car are speaking separate languages.

"Dad," Michael says again. "We there yet?" He's given up.

They are stopped at a light only two blocks from Liz's parents now. "Almost," Jason says, feeling the weary muscles holding up his smile.

When they reach the Perry's home, Mr. and Mrs. Perry and Liz's older brother, Henry, come out into the driveway to greet them. There are more expressions of surprise at Liz's absence. Jason recycles his story about her having to finish up some paintings for a big show that's coming up. She thought she was ready, but it seems she wants to work out a few things that have been bothering her. He's ready to answer what show it is, why it's more important than other ones — but he doesn't think anyone will make a fuss. Liz's family is rather indirect; they absorb information like this stoically; they refract emotion like prisms do light.

Jason doesn't miss his guess — no one questions him further. Instead, Henry helps him with Grandma. They get her settled in her wheelchair, and then Henry pushes it toward the house, rolling through white fluff from the cottonwood, which swirls around their feet. Mr. Perry snatches Michael out of the youth seat and tosses him in the air on their way in.

Jason survives the preliminaries inside. The business of placing the serving dishes on the dining room table and of digging out some toys for Michael to play with allows him to comfort himself in routine. But Mr. Perry corners him by the TV set, where the football game is just coming on.

"So what do you think," he says. "Do they have a chance against the Niners?" He studies Jason intently, chewing thoughtfully at his lip.
The question, Jason feels, is something of a challenge. After all, they've had this conversation before. In fact, he's told Liz's father several times that he's not much of a football fan. "Oh, I think so," he ventures. "This seems like their year."

"What, are you serious? They haven't won in four games. San Francisco's offense'll eat 'em alive," Mr. Perry says flatly. He shakes his head. And then, as if any further discussion is pointless, he turns off the television, says, "I think dinner's ready."

By dessert, Jason is struggling. He's found the conversation during the meal exhausting, and his headache is worse than ever.

Grandma Jensen whistles in her wheelchair at the head of the table. Henry sits next to her. He asks would she like some coffee, and without waiting for an answer, brings the pot over to her half-empty cup. She slaps at his hand, however, with a surprising amount of quickness and energy.

"Don't you listen after you ask questions?" she demands. "When I want some coffee, I'll get it myself." She glowers at him and he raises his hands in mock surrender. She goes back to whistling – it isn't airy, toneless whistling, but musical, sure of itself. It's almost aggressive in its disregard for the rest of the table conversation. Jason has been trying, vainly, for some time to identify the tune.

But it isn't only the whistling he can't get a handle on. He's been having trouble keeping up with everyone. The members of Liz's family are all unselfconscious conversationalists. They all have the same bright eyes that seem to be able to anticipate just what you're going to say, and the mental dexterity to have a response ready to roll off their tongues as soon as you're done with
whatever dull thing you're trying to articulate. Jason finds them intimidating, right down to Grandma Jensen. His discomfort is furthered by the knowledge that they think Liz could have done better. And today, Liz won't be telling him, as she once did, that he shouldn't pay attention to them – that she loves him for his thoughtful silences and his deliberate nature.

Even so, here he is. He's braving it, showing Liz she's wrong about him – that she's not so smart and he's not so helpless. He massages his eyelids with his knuckles and glances down at a napkin covered with confetti and balloons. He's tense, but he's pushing through.

"So how's my boy, anyway? What's he been up to?" It's Mr. Perry – Jack, he'll call him Jack from now on, Jason resolves – sitting at the head of the table, fiddling with a toothpick in his mouth. He points with it at Jason, who suddenly remembers that in Liz's absence, he has to act as the lone mouthpiece of Michael's latest escapades, the teller of tales. He racks his brain for something cute, something funny.

He gives it his best shot, tells them about Michael's latest stalling tactics to avoid going to bed on time. But he must not be telling it like Liz would. He sees Jack look at Mrs. Perry, Mrs. Perry pick at cake crumbs with her fork, and Henry pour himself another cup of coffee. When he's finished with the story, there is a brief silence.

"Just what in hell did you say Liz was doing today?" Jack suddenly demands, a look of stern good humor on his face. "Has she gotten so busy with that painting nonsense she doesn't have time for family?" He winks at his wife, who puts her hand on his arm.
Jason feels rebuffed. Still, he sees an opportunity presenting itself. He sighs. "Well, I guess you might say that. Michael and I hardly see her anymore, what with her in the studio all the time."

Mr. Perry makes a sort of rumbling sound in his throat. His heavy eyebrows lower a notch as he studies Jason. Mrs. Perry leans back in her chair. Jason sees these movements as signs of attention. He goes on, encouraged. "Yes, ah, Jack – she's developed a rather strict routine. It's a strategy, really, I guess. She feels she needs to lock herself away, so to speak, at the same time each day in order to be most productive. It's okay – we all have our habits – just that Michael doesn't always understand that Mom's home, but not home, you know?"

"Is that healthy?" Mr. Perry asks his wife.

Mrs. Perry sniffs, tilts her head. She tucks in the corners of her mouth.

Jason is pleased by the impression he's created. He reaches for the sugar, spoons some into his coffee. "You know, she says painting is just like any other career, and if she's going to survive, she's got to spend time at the office." He smiles indulgently as he stirs the sugar into his coffee.

"Kathleen, do you hear that?"

"Yes, yes. I don't know what to say." She scratches at her temple with her index finger.

Jason tries another sigh. "We're not sure what to say either." Now that he's got them, he shrugs magnanimously. "Still, we don't fault her for her dedication to her work. The price of success, I suppose."

"Well I think it's a damned shame," says Henry abruptly.

Jason gives him a look. Henry appears to be smirking.

"Scandalous," whispers Mrs. Perry.
"Intolerable!" Mr. Perry practically shouts, and he pounds the table dramatically.

Too late, Jason sees what's happening. It's him – he's the joke. They don't believe a word of his tale of neglect, and now they're dancing rings around him, making a mockery of him. He could swear Grandma Jensen is chuckling.

In order to show them what a lot of fun they are, Jason smiles. He even forces out his own laugh. All things considered, he should be the one who's laughing, anyway. Let them think him a complete ass – it's better that way. At least he's cured Liz of thinking the same.

As a matter of fact, the way the situation has unfolded – Liz at home, the rest of the Perrys here – turns out to be much more satisfactory than Jason at first realized. Liz is sometimes encouraged by this sort of smugness. If she's separated from it for long enough, she might become a lot easier to live with.

At that moment, the phone rings. Nobody moves for it at first, but they all grow quiet. On the third ring, Mrs. Perry finally says, "Oh, I'll get it, I suppose." She makes a show of laboriously pushing herself away from the table, then skips into the next room.

She returns, however, immediately. "Hung up as soon as I got there," she announces, seating herself again. "I hate it when that happens."

Henry and Jack begin to talk business – Henry owns a sporting goods store in Brainerd – and Jason is left to try to make conversation with the women. They, however, both appear interested in the sporting goods, too. Jason doesn't know anything about such matters. He himself works in insurance, but no one's asking.

Then the phone rings again. This time, the sound of it registers with Jason, and a chill goes through him. Suppose it's Liz? What if she's calling to
say she's coming over after all, sorry she's late, but she'll be right there? He has a horrible vision of her showing up on the front step, hair pulled back with the same piece of dirty string. He's about to volunteer to get up and answer the phone when Mrs. Perry excuses herself again.

Jason strains to hear what's said from the next room, but, as before, she returns to the table right away. "Nobody there?" he asks.

"Nope. Nobody." She shrugs, annoyed.

If it is Liz, he has sorely misjudged her. He thinks of her greeting in the kitchen this morning, of the orange juice trembling at the top of the glass, and he begins to wonder if she is capable of doing something like this just to torture him.

"I'd better go see about Michael," he says, and pushes his chair back. Michael has been spared the post-dessert session of adult conversation, and has gone to play out in the back yard. Jason concentrates on balancing his plastic fork and crumpled napkin on his plate with one hand, and keeping his fruit punch from spilling out of his cup with the other as he carries these things to the kitchen counter.

Before he makes it to the back door, however, the phone rings again. His nerves jangling, he pauses, forcing himself to be perfectly still for an instant before he steps over and picks up the receiver.

"Hello? Perry residence." He waits, dreading the answering greeting.

"Who's this?" The voice isn't Liz's. It belongs to an older woman.

"This is Jason," he says, raising his voice, but not explaining further.

"Who're you?" says the woman. "Where's Doris?"

"Oh! Why she's just finishing her birthday cake." By this time, Mrs. Perry is standing in the doorway to the kitchen, an inquisitive look on her face.
When she hears him allude to Grandma, she moves forward, hand out for the phone.

Jason gives it to her, and as she takes it, she whispers that it is Grandma's old friend, May. "She has trouble with telephones," she explains.

Jason shrugs and walks out onto the patio, still holding the punch.

Michael is out there in the yard, digging for China. At least that's what Jason supposes he's doing, what Jason himself did as a child in the neighbor kid's sandbox. He remembers suddenly the cold wet feel of the sand getting deeper, and remembers too the turds, the cat turds some roaming tabby would leave in that box, carefully covered over to be dug up like rich dark truffies.

Jason watches Michael, who is hunched over his tiny excavation, plastic shovel gripped awkwardly in his fist. He stands there and imagines China, imagines it as a world of umbrellas and bicycles. With a start, he realizes the image isn't his own — it's from Liz's watercolor on Grandma's wall — and he can't remember how he used to picture it when he was Michael's age. It's an unpleasant feeling, as if he's been cheated out of something. The fruit punch he's drinking suddenly tastes too acidic, and he flicks the remaining half cup pattering over the grass.

His mother-in-law says through the screen door behind him, "You going home now, Jason?"

Jason smiles bitterly out at the yard. A hopeful question. Downright impolite. "Nah, not yet."

He expects some kind of response, another question, but he hears the chuff of her feet on the linoleum, going away. He remains in the same position for several minutes, watching his son dig. The sound of the shovel chopping into the sand floats across the yard to him. Then Henry comes out on the patio.
"Hey," he says.

Jason looks at him, tearing thoughtfully at the rim of his cup, and nods.

"Busy lady, that sister of mine," Henry says. "You'd think I drive down here every weekend the way she's behaving." He looks off to where Michael is playing. "So I called her."

Jason glances at him, flicks his eyes away again. "Oh – well, good."

"Nah, she's not answering."

"She's not?"

"No."

"Probably has the music on loud in there – you know, her studio. Sometimes she just ignores the phone."

"What I figured. Say – "

"Yeah?"

"You two aren't having any trouble? I mean, I don't want to be rude – "

He crushes an acorn under foot.

Jason feels the anger rising in him. He knows, more clearly than ever, that he's lasted longer than Henry and his parents ever expected. He knows Henry regards him as dull, obtuse, hopelessly incapable of sustaining Liz's interest. And Henry loves to be rude. But before he can make an answer – he has no real idea what it will be – Mr. Perry pushes open the screen door just far enough to stick his head and shoulders out.

Henry glances around. "Oh, hi Dad."

"Hey guys. Jason, you think you could bring Michael in here? It'd be fun to get a few pictures with Great Grandma on her birthday. She doesn't see the kid much."
"Yeah, sure." He starts off across the back yard, glad to be moving away from Henry and his obnoxious questions. A surprising number of grasshoppers scatter away from his feet, a few whapping their hard heads against his pantslegs. His own head is pounding now, and he feels nauseated from the pain, and from the effort of ignoring it.

When he reaches Michael, his son looks up at him and drops his shovel, waiting to be picked up. Jason feels gratified by this immediate, almost instinctive display of affection, and as he scoops him up, he asks him what he's making.

"The biggest hole in the world," Michael says proudly.

Jason follows the others into the house. As he passes through the kitchen with Michael, he hears the family's voices boom and echo off the walls. In the living room, Mr. Perry says, "Well, let's get those pictures, shall we?" He grabs his camera from where it rests on the closed cover of the upright piano. "Come here, kiddo."

Michael runs to join his grandfather, who gives him a bear hug and kisses the top of his head before sweeping him over to Grandma Jensen's lap. He lands there with a laugh, and Grandma Jensen grasps him with blue-veined hands, beaming from the pleasure of holding such a young creature.

There is a flash. "Ah, there!" says Mr. Perry, looking up from the camera's viewer. He motions to his wife and son, and the two of them slip behind the wheelchair for the next shot. Mrs. Perry holds one of Michael's hands, and Henry gently grasps Grandma's narrow shoulder.

Observing this scene, Jason experiences a pang of something like regret, only sharper. This is not his family, not his home, not his Sunday afternoon.
He's disconcerted by how comfortably his son fits into the picture. There are flashes again, and twice there are cries of "one more!"

Then Mr. Perry turns to Jason, holding the camera out to him even as he is leaning away, toward the group. "Would you mind?"

Jason takes the camera and waits while Mr. Perry positions himself. Closing an eye, Jason squints through the viewfinder to focus the shot – he realizes then that his hold on Michael is in danger. The recognition comes late, but he sees it starkly as he presses the button and the flash pops again, throwing bursts of shadow from the little group. He's filled with the desire to step over and pull Michael to his side, to move with him out the door. And he will do that, soon. But for now, he leans against the hard edges of the piano, concentrating on the sound of the flash unit recharging – the thinnest filament of sound, beginning as a whine, but then ascending out of the range of human hearing.
BALANCE

They didn't arrive until long after they'd expected, and when they finally pulled into the gravel parking lot of the lodge, Will had reached a trembling, caffeinated exhaustion which had bordered on tears after he'd missed their turnoff in the dark for the second time. His wife was asleep. He'd cranked the window down so the rushing wind would keep him alert, and had finished the thermos of coffee he'd refilled at a fast food place a couple of hours back. He killed the lights as they were still rolling, and the last pops of the tires on the rocks punctuated the silence. Will expected to hear crickets, but even that sound was absent. A cloud of gnats swirled noiselessly around the single light above the door to the low building containing the toilets and showers. It was getting to him already.

It was quiet here, and still; the silence was viscous, like skin on a mug of warm milk. He wished he was at home, with the alarm clock set for six. He wanted to go to work in the morning; work, where he could crunch numbers, lose himself in the details.
He didn't wake Kirsten up right away, but sat there listening to the engine ticking and trying to collect himself. He thought about unloading the packs from the trunk, about digging for things like deoderant and toothpaste. Outside, the trees stood straight and close together, the pine and birch forest he and Kirsten had come to love on their honeymoon eight years ago. They'd promised each other then that they'd return to the north woods and the Boundary Waters every year afterward, but had only made it back twice, what with tight budgets, new jobs, and other demands which somehow seemed to always come up in July. This year, however, they had made the time to come.

"Honey," he said, reaching across the seat and touching her knee. Her head was tilted back in the awkward manner of sleeping in the front seat of a car. Even in such a position, though, Will thought anyone would be struck by how pretty she was. The tilt of her head accentuated the line of her jaw and the soft bow of her neck where his own jutted with a prominent adam's apple. "Honey, we're here."

She moaned softly and sat forward, bringing the heels of her hands to her eyes and then stretching. "What time is it?" she asked.

"Two something. Let's get inside and get some sleep. We can leave the junk in the car until morning."

"Uh-huh." Kirsten pushed open the door and let it clunk shut behind her. Will got out the other side and kicked at the left rear tire on his way to the trunk. The spare was narrow and lacked a hubcap, but it had held air.

"You think this tire will hold until we can get one the right size?" he asked.

"Uh-huh."
He popped open the trunk to pull out their sleeping bags. The light on the underside of the lid attracted a few bugs, and he grabbed the slick soft nylon quickly and shut the trunk again.

They stumbled together to the screen door. The manager of the outfitters had left the key under the mat, which Kirsten fitted into the lock. Their feet made scraping noises on the concrete floor while Will found the light switch and flicked it up with his elbow. They were actually in the "kitchen" – a room full of windows that contained a refrigerator and a microwave, where campers could sit at picnic tables and eat instant oatmeal or Corn Flakes from tiny boxes before setting out in canoes on the immense chain of lakes. Down a hall, there were several doors, behind which several other luckier people had been sleeping for hours.

On one of the tables was a handwritten note that said, "Welcome! Sorry about the flat. We'll have your packs set for you down at the office. Forecast is for sun and around 70. Kip."

Will picked it up and handed it to Kirsten. She followed him down to their room for the night, which was, like the rest of the place, paneled in knotty pine, and which contained nothing but two steel-framed bunkbeds with thin bare mattresses. Will unrolled the sleeping bags on the top and bottom bunks of one of the beds while Kirsten collapsed on the bottom bunk of the other set. When he was finished, he turned and looked at her. She had a forearm over her eyes, nose buried in the crook of her elbow, shading them from the overhead bulb.

Will felt a twinge. She cried that way sometimes. She had lain that way in the hospital bed not long ago while he clutched at her other hand, as if she were trying to pull away from him. He'd watched her helplessly and thought
about what a stupid, bloodless word it was: *miscarriage* – like *miscue* or *mispronounce*.

Conscious of the neighbors, he whispered, "Sweetie. I have to go to the bathroom. You coming?"

"I should wash my face," she said without moving.

He stood still, waiting. "I have to go now."

"Go," she said.

He went back out through the kitchen, and then took the little path to the outbuilding. An exhaust fan hummed on the side of the building, near the apex of its roof, and just below it, Will could see a dim light coming through a small, rectangular window.

Inside, he used the toilet and washed his hands and face in front of the mirror. The gurgling of the drain sounded loud in the still air. There were more gnats in the sink, some mosquitoes, and a moth, its wings folded in like a Japanese fan, its antennae soggy and broken. Someone had left a splash of shaving cream on the tap marked "H." His eyes were bloodshot and puffy from driving. He thought he looked haggard, old. He'd turned thirty-two a month ago.

Will shuffled back outside, and stood for a few minutes just staring up at the night sky. Through the branches overhead, the stars were white and silent and innumerable. He thought about squatting on the shoulder of the road earlier that evening, trying to place the car jack in the proper position while he saw out of the corner of his eye headlights bearing down on him. The cars and semis shook the pavement, and buffeted him with the heat of their passing, lights alternating to red as they rushed away and grew small. He’d never changed a tire in his life, and at that moment, it had seemed like an impossible
job. Kirsten had stood on the other side of the car, away from the road, and waited patiently, knowing not to say anything. Still his hands had trembled and he'd found he couldn't stop cursing; he'd strangled on the rage he felt at being crippled, immobilized.

Though he knew he should get some rest, Will didn't feel particularly sleepy. Getting his legs moving a little, along with the cool night air, had revived him slightly. Instead of going back to the room, he paced down to the boat landing. He could smell the lake. He stooped, picked up a flat stone, and skipped it out onto the water. It made a plishing sound and disappeared. He was aware again of the stagnant space around him. There weren't enough obstacles up here to prevent his thoughts from gathering force and rumbling in on him, repeating themselves like echoes.

When he got back to the room, the light was off and he could hear Kirsten's slow, steady breathing from the top bunk. Will silently took off his pants and tossed them in the direction of the other bunk, pulled his shirt over his head, and climbed into bed beneath her. Instead of going right to sleep, though, he lay on his back and stared into the dark. He reached up and felt the wire mesh which held the mattress above him. He could feel the curve of her weight through it, and he trailed his fingers along where he imagined her shoulder, her hip must be. He remembered hating the bottom bunk as a kid at camp; he'd felt as though the body suspended there above him would come down on him, and he'd suffocate in the night.

They'd been paddling for a couple of hours, and the wind was against them. Will had already eaten one of the granola bars from their packs. Ever since they'd launched the canoe late in the morning, he'd wanted to make up
time, so they could set up camp and relax over supper. He wasn't sure Kirsten was pulling very hard or dipping very deep. Once in a while, the blade of her paddle would slip and scatter droplets of water across his forearm and the front of his shirt.

"How you doing up there?" he said.

She answered, but she didn't turn toward him, and her words were blurred into a kind of sing-song cadence, without consonants. As he looked at his wife's back, he felt as though she were inaccessible, a stranger somehow. He might be two seats behind her on a bus somewhere.

He looked down at the map he had at his feet. The island they were hoping to reach, on Northern Lights Lake, looked a long ways away. They still had two portages to go. "You think we should stop for some lunch soon, or keep going?"

She was still facing away from him, and he strained to hear her reply. We're losing the baby.

"What?"

"I don't know – maybe," she said again, louder, looking back over her shoulder. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Let's just keep going for a while."

"All right."

Will felt the terrible need to keep moving, and though he felt weary from yesterday's work and driving and mishap, and though his arms were fatigued and sore, he kept steadily pulling along. He wanted to get away from what he was seeing, away from the drenching images of blood; of Kirsten bleeding in the bathroom and he not being able to comprehend all at once the magnitude of crouching in a dry tub and the way she looked at him with a sorrow that seemed
to beg him to make it stop. But he hadn't been able to make it stop. He'd been watching television. Her insides had all loosened and let go and he'd had the baseball game on TV. That had taken on nightmarish prominence—how distinctly he could hear the inane chatter of the commentators from the other room as he held his wife and wept—as if he could have prevented it through paying closer attention.

Kirsten set her paddle down in front of her, so it was resting across both gunwales of the canoe. She pointed off toward the shoreline on their left. She was wearing a white tank top, and Will could see the tanned skin of her shoulder round over the lean muscle underneath when she raised her arm. Her skin was smooth and warm in the sunlight, and his eye traveled along it until it reached her fingers, the gold band, the curve of her unpainted nails, and then the air just beyond, moving past.

She turned and looked at him. "Do you see them?"

He smiled and nodded, changing his focus to register the familiar shapes of loons, with their dark, sharply-curved heads, diving and resurfacing.

"I just love to watch them," Kirsten said.

"Yes," said Will. He placed his own paddle across his knees and glanced down at the map.

"How fast can they swim under water?"

"I don't know. Fast."

"They use their wings, right?"

"I really don't know, Kirsty." The wind was pushing the bow of the canoe off course, and he was flushed with a sudden, intense frustration. He dug deeply with his paddle, gritting his teeth. He pulled much harder than necessary, and the jerking of the canoe moving forward again caused Kirsten to rock backward,
losing her balance. Her knees came up and bumped the paddle off its resting position with a clatter, and she knocked her elbow against the side of the boat.

"Ow!" she said, angrily, and turned to glare at him.

He said, "Sorry," without sounding as if he was. She turned away and began paddling again, steadily and silently. He watched her work, feeling foolish and angry. Of course he was behaving like an idiot. He knew it, and it made him wretched — but he couldn't help feeling choked by their lack of progress. And in a palpable way, moving over the clear water so deep that the sunlight lost itself in black fathoms, he felt lonely.

He felt unready for the restoration this trip was supposed to represent; and he feared Kirsten was somehow moving away from their loss at a rate of speed he could not possibly sustain. He couldn't gauge it exactly, because she grieved so differently than he did — more than anything, he wished his grief was like Kirsten's, soft and malleable, able to be pressed into corners, quiet as clay. Instead, his own was hard-edged, baked brittle by the heat of an anger he sometimes thought would burst him. An anger that came perilously close at times to focusing on Kirsten's body — Kirsten's defective, rejecting body. When his thoughts moved in that direction, he was filled with self-loathing, and he could feel something like a sinking away of wet sand, opening in himself a space as aching and bare as an abandoned womb.

Toward evening, the wind died away to almost nothing, and the silence settled down around them as if it had been kept aloft by the breeze. They hadn't seen anyone else out on the water since first launching their canoe from the outfitters, and they were now making for the island that Will had thought they'd never reach.
The trees, mostly pine, surrounded the lake in a thick forest. The sun was descending, and Will could see a line of shadow on the slope across the lake. Above the line, the treetops were tinged with a yellow light, and below, the cool evening pooled in blue spaces between the trunks.

Kirsten's paddle struck the side of the canoe as she pulled out of one stroke, and the sharp sound of its aluminum shaft on the aluminum hull echoed like a distant gunshot. She stopped paddling, and whispered, "Did you hear that?"

Will nodded. This was almost a scripted routine for them. Any time they were someplace scenic, or especially quiet, they hushed themselves, maybe shook their heads slowly. He supposed it was only natural — a natural awe. But at the moment it felt predictable, and he could imagine every lout from the suburbs having the same epiphany on Northern Lights Lake: the sudden recognition that they hadn't heard an airline jet all day. He kept paddling, though he did so gently, first on the left, then the right. Water dripped in fine pattering drops from his paddle.

Kirsten whispered again, this time gazing into the deep, cold lake. "You can drink this water, you know. Just dip a cup into it. Imagine." She ladled palmfuls from the surface back into the lake.

In answer, Will stopped and let the canoe keep drifting toward their destination, now only a hundred yards away. They had, after all, been drinking the water for a good portion of the afternoon. The red plastic cap to a thermos lay between them on the bottom of the boat. Normally he would have teased her with a sarcastic remark, letting her know how obvious she was being. But he not only found he had nothing to say, he felt she wouldn't be able to hear it, as if
she were behind a thick pane of glass. She was taking such a deep, unthinking interest in every distraction, steeping herself in forgetfulness.

She didn't seem to notice his lack of response, or that they weren't moving ahead at the same steady pace. She looked like she was thinking about something else. She leaned back on the pack that was behind her seat and looked straight up. "It's so pure, so simple up here. I wish I could inhale the sky. Just breathe it in and blow clouds out like smoke rings." She giggled, then fell silent. "Wouldn't that be something," she said more quietly.

Will was a little embarrassed by this; it seemed contrived to him — a soliloquy in a play. He shifted his gaze beyond her, to the flat, lichen-covered rocks that jutted out into the lake like a thrust stage. Up there, they would make camp. The idea of "camp," with its nylon and its zippers, pleased him. Everything about it was so light, so mobile.

When they had finally pulled ashore, and he and Kirsten had found a flat square of shallow dirt and brown pine needles on which to stake their tent, they gathered kindling and started a cookfire. The sun was gone by the time they ate supper, which consisted of a dehydrated pasta mix and some dried apricots, and chocolate bars for dessert.

They sat up for a while, out on the great flat rocks, and felt the coolness from the lake drift over them. Kirsten put on a sweater. Will permitted himself a few passing worries of a superficial sort. "I put the car keys in my shaving kit, didn't I?"

"Yep."

"And I'm sure we set the timers on the lights at home."

"Of course."
"You think the food will hold out?"

"Oh, I think so."

This litany of little fears reassured him. These were things Kirsten could go over with him, and scratch off like items on a list. These were things to add to the catalogue of manageable distresses.

Before they went to bed, Kirsten held a flashlight while Will threw a rope over the highest exposed branch they could find. They tied up their food pack and hoisted it up and, hopefully, out of reach of curious black bears.

Will was glad they did, because he was awakened at some unidentifiable hour by snufflings and grunts outside their tent. In the still blackness, it sounded no more than a few feet away. There was a scraping on tree bark, a thump as of a log being rolled over. He felt his body go rigid in his sleeping bag. He could hear from Kirsten's breathing that she was asleep, and he wasn't about to speak a word out loud to wake her. He knew it wouldn't do any good — that the bear would go away without bothering them any in a little while.

But his imagination wouldn't allow the sounds he heard to assemble themselves into a simple, thick-furred bear foraging for food. Instead, he thought first of people creeping through their campsite like burglars through their house; and then, worse, of some unspeakably deformed creature dragging murderously towards them. He felt his pulse pounding in his throat, and he fought panic when he heard the thing shuffling through the pine needles just on the other side of the tent's nylon. Its breath came out slow and labored and slightly amplified, like someone breathing through a halloween mask.

The next morning, Will woke up hungry. Actually, the hollowness in his stomach had awakened him more than an hour before that, but he hadn't
wanted to go out and dig in the food pack in the dark. Now the pale, early sunlight caused an unearthly light in the tent, and as he looked up, he saw the tracings of tree branches on the roof like blood vessels wrapped around a heart.

He touched the slope of the roof with one finger, and found that it was wet with dew and the moisture of their breathing. He remembered that this was what he hated about camping – the soggy mornings, when everything dripped, or glistened with water.

His movements must have disturbed Kirsten, because she stirred, and he turned his head toward her. She squinted at him, as if trying to pick him out of a crowd. "Are you getting up?" she asked.

"Yeah, I think so."

"I want a kiss."

He leaned over and kissed her on the forehead.

She rolled her eyes. "Thanks a lot," she mumbled, but only bunched the sweatshirt she was using as a pillow more comfortably beneath her head. Will crawled out of the tent, taking a pair of sweatpants with him, and carefully zipped the door behind him.

He went directly to the edge of the clearing that surrounded their campfire, where they'd hung the food pack the night before. The bear hadn't gotten to it. In fact, as he looked around, he couldn't find any signs of its passing, and he began to wonder if he'd dreamed the whole thing. In any case, it was long gone, probably curled up, asleep somewhere deep in the woods.

He took down the pack as quietly as he could, the taut rope scraping a groove in the tree bark as the pack descended. He dug out a bagel, used a pink plastic knife to spread it thick with peanut butter, and walked to the water's edge to eat it.
A mist was clinging to the surface of the lake as if it were spilling out of a block of dry ice. Something about that swirling screen attracted him, and when he'd finished chewing, he decided to push off in the canoe to float in its midst. The canoe scraped against the sand as he shoved off. He felt the mud of the bottom between his toes, and one cuff of his sweatpants dragged in the water as he stepped in over the stern of the boat.

He dipped his paddle in only once or twice, just enough to send him out away from shore. The mist was cool and wet on his skin, and as he floated there he suddenly felt weightless, as if suspended in a world of water. He kept expecting to hear a loon, or possibly the cry of a hawk passing overhead, but he heard nothing but his own nostril whistling when he exhaled, and the slight metallic tinkling of water moving against the hull of his canoe.

When he turned back to look at where the campsite and Kirsten were, he saw the mist boiling around the edges of the rocks and trees as if they were just thrusting themselves up from the depths. He looked down at the water near the canoe, and saw dozens of insects – water skaters, he thought they were called – sculling with long legs along the water's surface. They left almost imperceptible "V"s behind them as they busily zig-zagged.

Looking at them, he felt infinitely heavy. His existence was on a separate scale from theirs – he was a whole earth, and his movements were slow. He positioned a lifejacket behind his head and leaned back against the stern of the boat. He closed his eyes and felt the warmth of the sun on his face. If he could bring himself to sleep, sleep in the sunlight, he thought he might get past this thing. The insides of his eyelids were the searing bright red of oxygenated blood. He squeezed them tightly, resisting the temptation to sit up and paddle hard;
fighting the pressure, like an insistent finger in the small of his back, to keep moving.

He sat for a long time this way, as the sun rose higher and the mist burned off, concentrating. He had drifted quite a ways from the island, the canoe turning slow circles on the still surface of the water. When he finally relented and sat up, he looked back toward the campsite and saw Kirsten standing out on the edge of one of the great rocks that jutted over deep water.

She was not wearing clothes, or even her swimsuit. This was unusual for her, who was accustomed to modesty even in solitude, and he wondered briefly if she knew he was watching – she was facing away at an angle, and he could not read her features. He had an odd sensation of removal, as if he’d drifted over to another campsite, and was watching someone completely other, someone with no knowledge of him. Behind Kirsten, though, he could see the familiar green dome of their tent, splashed with shadow, and his own towel lay at her feet.

From this distance, her nakedness was not finely detailed, nor particularly arousing, but Will was compelled, nevertheless. Her body looked smooth and warm and pure, like honey folding off a spoon. He was struck by the easy intimacy between her and her surroundings. She moved unselfconsciously over the rock, through the sunlight.

He watched closely as she stretched up on her toes, her arms held straight over her head, her chin pointed upward. He knew that now was the moment she was taking in breath, filling her lungs deeply. He caught his own breath and held perfectly still as she suddenly sprang forward, her feet lightly leaving the earth and following her outstretched fingers in an arc that split the flat water purely.
Will was startled by the sound of the splash, but it soon calmed over the
spot where she had disappeared, and everything went unearthly quiet. He tried
to follow her progress under the water, to predict where her head would bob to
the surface. It did not appear, however, as soon as Will expected, and he began
to count: six seconds; seven, eight . . .

Though it really wasn't a long time to be under, he made a little moaning
sound and grabbed at the paddle spasmodically. Five more seconds passed, and
then ten, and he was paddling madly, limbs buzzing, a suffocating pressure in
his chest. It was as if the air had disappeared.

And then, far beyond anywhere he would have thought possible, Kirsten
broke the surface. She let out a whoop, and called to him. "Did you see, did you
see?" she asked, laughing.

Will stopped paddling, feeling his body go limp. One of his legs, balanced
on the ball of his foot, bounced up and down uncontrollably. "Yeah," he said. His
voice broke. "I saw." He watched her turn back for shore, limbs flashing, and he
was suddenly seized by a deep, shuddering sob that heaved out of him like a
cough and subsided. He leaned forward, crossed his arms and clutched at his
shoulders. He longed to get to shore, to wrap Kirsten in a towel and hold her
hard against him. But for now, he kept still, feeling his momentum as he drifted
over the water. He knew he had only to balance, and he'd soon be with her. He
concentrated on the rivets on the gleaming floor of the canoe. He had only to
balance.