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Six Minutes

by

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CHAPTER 1:
STAND UP

I ran again this afternoon after school, after my mother took me aside to tell me she was pregnant. “Things will be different,” she told me as she gave me a hug. “But not that different.” I ran further than I usually do on weekdays, to the highway outside of town, and picked it up on the way back. I’m nauseous now, walking with my arms over my head at the end of the driveway, when I hear the screech of brakes and a whimper behind me. I spin and see a dog trotting away from the postal truck in the middle of the street, turning his head around to eye it as the driver inside coughs hoarsely and rubs his forehead. I walk over to pick up our mail.

“Hey, Ron,” I say.

“Want to race?” he asks. “Hop in. Normally you’ll never get a chance to ride in a postal truck unless you’re wrapped up, weigh less than seventy pounds, and can stay real still.”

I climb over Ron and settle in on the floor.

“Careful that a box doesn’t land on your head. To keep from losing my job I’d have to throw your body in a ditch and pretend I’d never seen you.”

“So what’s the deal, Ron?”

“Well, your great-aunt’s feeling better and is thinking about coming for a visit.” He hands me an apparently unopened letter. “And here’s a couple of college letters, they’re addressed to you. In general, things are just fine. But winter’s near and I’m coming down with something, not to mention the Publisher’s Clearinghouse is out soon and everyone thinks they have to buy a goddamn magazine to enter, which puts me in a foul mood. The old woman
up the gulch subscribes to Runner’s World and she’s 84.”

“She’s not quite right in the head, is she?”

“Well I won’t disagree with you but we shouldn’t talk like that about the elderly. It’ll happen to all of us someday. Race you to it, though.” He coughs. “This is what’s going to happen. I’m going to park the rig and make my way up the hill on the right with these two bundles. Whereas you are going to run up the hills on the left with these bundles.” He points to several bound stacks of envelopes. After that he doesn’t speak. The truck stops, I take my packages, hold them tightly and take off.

Ron used to be a Scoutmaster with my dad’s cousin Joe, back when I was pretty small; I remember him being over at our house a couple of times, wearing a uniform; I also remember him being given a citizenship award in the paper for going out in a blizzard and finding a lost kitten. But that was years ago. Ron’s been talking to me ever since a triangular tournament we had at home last January. In my second match I ripped a guy’s shoulder out of the socket. It was against Cambridge, the kid was probably a freshman, hadn’t wrestled much. He was double jointed when we started and I figured he was at least going to be triple jointed by the time I finished. I was wiping up the mat with him; the thing was that he was so flexible he could touch his shoulder blades together.

I wanted to pin him bad. I’d told everyone on my team that I wouldn’t run up the score on anyone, I’d leave them that shred of dignity. And I couldn’t stick him. In a way he was beating me, everyone was wondering why I was taking so much time. I took him down and let him up a few times. Then I started turning him, cradle, chicken wing, arm bar, I stuck in the legs, I
was running out of moves.

I was up 16-3 and I had him flattened out on the mat, not moving. I cross-faced him once and took his arm in a chicken wing but pulled it straight out, "the baseball bat" we called it. Keeping it extended, I brought it straight across his back before the ref had a chance to call dangerous position. Except I ended up slipping, or he moved, and I brought it straight across the back of his neck, ripping his shoulder out of the socket. There was a wet grating sound, then his arm went limp but he still wasn't turning, then silence for a moment before he began to scream, lying face down on the mat, rolling away from his shoulder. The crowd went silent. My team, standing apart, looked at me. The trainers hurried to close up their boxes and ran out onto the mat; their coach was already there. The ref didn't know what to do. He began to laugh, like I've heard sometimes that nervous people do at funerals.

My coach called me over while they started to work on him. All I remember thinking was that I screwed up, I'm going to get disqualified. I'm going to lose. My coach was sitting in a yellow plastic chair, elbows on his knees, leaning over at the corner of the mat. He motioned me down to his level.

"That's the way to do it," he said.

Ron was at that match. He came up to me afterwards and shook my hand. "That was survival," he told me. "He had defined victory in his terms. You redefined it." I'd run into him a few times at the mailbox but that was the first time I formally met him. He went to all the high school events and had been for years. He used to go with his girlfriend, they weren't married but they'd been together so long everyone treated them as if they were. She
was a stork-like blond woman, thin and weathered, who looked like she had flown the wrong way. She always seemed cold. In the winter she'd be bundled up in a big white coat and hat and scarf, Ron would be walking beside her just wearing a vest. And when they spoke it was quietly. I can only imagine Ron talked as he does now, looking down at you, his eyebrows never moving.

Folks say that he hasn't been the same since she left. Other people say that he drove her away, that he was getting strange before that. I've heard there was a lot more to the relationship. Ron started planting thorny bushes and buying freeze dried foods, generators and water filters. He has a place almost back in the woods, on a high place above the river. It's away on its own but people said they heard things: shots being fired, yelling, things breaking. The police got called in once but no one seems to know any more about it than that. People said they were hitting each other. I don't know about it, it was three years ago. People would have been more concerned if they hadn't seen her driving off in her own car, a white Ford Escort. She hasn't been seen since.

I'm waiting for Ron when he gets back, leaning against the front of the truck while he ambles down the hill. He mutters something, "make a good postman out of you yet," I think he says. Then he asks me if I'd rather run or if he should give me a lift back home. In Ron's world, though, my not wanting to run is impossible. He nods and leaves me to run the three miles. I carry our mail.

I have plenty to think about while I run, besides my mother; that
doesn't seem quite real to me yet. It's still months away, so much has to happen before that. The leaves are in full color and are just beginning to fall, which means I'll have to rake them. A small grey dog comes running out of a front yard at me barking, but I've come this way enough and it knows me; I growl at it and it growls back but doesn't come any closer. I run everyday now and lift four mornings a week. I went to the state tournament last year and didn't win. I finished fifth but no one thought I would go so far. Now people have expectations and I just can't train them away; when my coach or Ron or Joe sees me out running, that only encourages them. Last season ended for me before it was settled.

I am taking chemistry this fall. I'm taking American history and calculus. I will learn things that I will soon forget. It's been almost a year since the start of last season and I still remember. Six minutes, a match, isn't long enough any more, it's down to this season, it's now and the memories I'll have for the rest of my life. So I run, through the town and around it, on trails that take me alongside the creek and the willows the color of dried blood. Sometimes I crash the overgrown snowmobile trails or deer trails that loop around back in the woods, hurdling deadfalls and running through the bushes.

In another month the season will have started and practice will be easy at first. But I don't remember much from last season. After Christmas, I'll drop down a weight class. Last year I lost 12% of my body weight, all the weight around my eyes. I remember being cold a lot, not being hungry so much as withdrawn, conserving my energy and living more hour by hour than day by day. I remember going to school in the dark and returning home
after practice in the dark, and when I finally saw the light of day it was spring. I don't remember much about people and places, anything that was said. This winter will pass much the same way, much as every other winter has, but I'm trying hard not to forget my life this year. In March the season will be over, about the same time I have a brother or sister. In June I graduate and I'll leave this town; we don't have an extra room in the house. I guess the last few years have been such a blur I want to remind myself to remember something when I go.

Sometimes I hear men talking all their lives about what they did in high school, there's a lot of that around here. I hope to God I do something else after high school. They all did, they have families and jobs but they still never seemed to escape it. I may have the rest of my life but I only have this one chance. Joe is training for his high school reunion right now. He likes to talk to me about when he was young and he had his legs and his back was good. He relives that when we're together. I don't know what he's like when we're apart. I think that's why he likes me, he sees himself in me, but all the stories he tells me are starting to sound the same. When I talk to men they all do that, not so much apologizing for the present as reliving the past, when they were lean and strong and coaches called them stallion. I don't see people like that today, who are willing to make the same kind of commitment I have. The people I go to school with are already fat and have bad knees. Maybe they've figured out that it's easier to get old and to pretend. And for the old men who were like me, what happened?

I stop running at my driveway and walk up and stand on the porch. I watch the sun as it goes below the horizon. It's already set, it takes eight and a
half minutes for the light to reach the Earth, so I'm looking into the past, right when it first left. I dare myself to stare straight into the sun but can only for a second, then the scene turns all black and spotted. I close my eyes and look away, but everywhere around me I see the sun, burned into the back of my eyes. Then in another instant it's gone, slipping through the autumn sky to leave just a red glow at the horizon. The wind's picking up. It's getting cold.

Still in my t-shirt on the steps of the porch I am acclimatizing to the cold before winter, trying to get used to it; I start to shiver but I expect it, and the pain you expect is never as bad as the pain you don't. And there will be no surprises. Just a week ago it was warmer but now it's fall, every night is longer and darker still. My mother turns on a light in the living room and taps against the window for me, motioning that the door is unlocked. In a minute I will go inside and stretch but I will wait that minute out, flex against the cold that runs through me like waves, and the wind that's howling but doesn't say anything. I will stay just a minute more. The price to succeed, the training, what I pay to feel something, it doesn't take much. Every day in junior high gym class we would start by running a lap around the baseball field, and every day I would finish first. One day all the other guys decided ahead of time they would beat me. They sprinted out, some cut corners, but most of them did. Then the next day they jogged and I finished first again. To succeed, it's less than people think but than they want to pay. And if I die here trying, steeled against the changing seasons, better now than later.

"I talked to Lindsay while you were out on your run," my mother tells
me as I walk inside. I shut the door and lock it behind me. "You should call Joe." She hands me a slip of paper even though I know the number by heart. "Dan called too, he’s got a new job but he didn’t say where. I think he’s working tonight, though." I hand her the mail, she hands back the letters for me. "What were you doing out there for so long?" she asks. "I thought I saw you out there but then you disappeared."

My dad comes home from work so I eat with my family before I have a chance to shower. We have a tuna noodle hotdish with some peas. We don’t talk much, a little about the baby, but our mouths are full. It should be due in another four months. They’ve known for awhile but she didn’t want to tell everyone and get her hopes up; now that she’s starting to get bigger there’s no hiding it.

"This must come as a surprise," my mother says. "It was for me." I ask if it’s going to be a boy or a girl. They don’t know and aren’t sure if they want the doctors to tell them. My dad turns on the TV.

The letters I got are from the coaches at Wartburg and North Dakota State. They’ve each included a pamphlet about their programs and a sheet that asks me to fill out my weight, my record, my GPA, tournaments won, that kind of thing. I decide to fill them out tomorrow and send them in. After I shower, I call up Joe before I start on my homework. We talk very briefly. I agree to help him on a project that will require my youth and his experience. Lunch is included in the deal. He tells me he’ll pick me up Saturday morning at 8.

"I’m going to cut this short," he says. "I have to read to Scott, Lindsay wants me to spend more time with the kids. We just finished the Black
Beauty series and now we're starting on this book of Norse mythology."

I've worked for Joe Smith the past two summers through the city department of parks and maintenance. I got the job mostly because I'm related to him; Dan worked with us for awhile too, until he got fired. Joe's not from around here originally but settled down with his family off a rural route outside of town; his kids have a forty minute bus ride into school. I spent the summer by his side: planting trees, tearing down brush, shoveling gravel, splitting wood, and holding a flashlight and listening to him swear. This is pretty rare though, the swearing; with his job things are either under control or he's getting them that way.

There's a lot about Joe to admire. He has better stories than my dad, or at least he tells them better. Before he had this job he worked on the Wolf Project tracking and collaring wolves in Glacier National Park. He also spent some time in British Columbia before he came back and started logging. But now he has a family and needs regular hours, insurance, a pension. Joe has a boss, and has to answer to about three different committees. He gets called a lot at strange hours of the night to take care of the latest disaster. That's hard on the kids. Lindsay is having allergy problems, the doctors can't figure it out, and gets migraines that lay her up for days and everyone has to be really quiet.

Lindsay is Joe's wife. He met her working on the Wolf Project and they have two kids, Scott and Molly, and in a lot of ways seem like the perfect family; they go camping and fishing together, stuff like that. The story how they got married is pretty romantic. I don't know how they met, but they were living together up north outside of Grand Marais. They had been meaning to get married, they even had the license, but Joe came from a fairly
well-off family that didn’t approve of his life choices and he didn’t want to make a big production out of it. “They call it a personal life for a reason,” Joe says, “it’s nobody else’s business.” Supposedly they had gone out to visit some friends one Sunday evening and they ended up staying later than they meant to. The next morning, Joe was so hung over he could barely move. He had just started working for a new logging company and his boss was a complete teetotaler who would give talks at the library about the evils of drink. So Joe had Lindsay call up and tell him Joe wasn’t going to be at work because they were getting married. His boss got so excited, he liked the both of them, that he insisted he be at the ceremony. So they got on the phone with the justice of the peace and got dressed up in a hurry and met the boss at the courthouse, where he both gave Lindsay away and served as best man. Then they decided to go to Duluth for their honeymoon and his boss gave him ten bucks for a wedding present. They were halfway to Duluth when Joe realized he’d forgotten his wallet. So they put five bucks in the tank and went and saw “E.T.” at a dollar movie place, bought some popcorn, and made it home on fumes. Joe claims to have given up drinking soon after that, figuring that it could never happen twice.

Joe likes to talk about his logging days. He talks a lot about football too; he was a halfback during high school in Michigan and won some awards, All-State honorable mention I think. He’s not tall but he’s big, and I still don’t think I’ve seen anything he can’t lift. But logging didn’t do any favors for his back. He takes some pills and I try to have him stretch out, but with his job he won’t ever get much of a rest. He’s put on some pounds too. He skis in the winter and bought a Nordic Track and does that every night. He has a
class reunion this year and is trying to get back into fighting shape. More and more he talks about his age, his back, and when he was young. Maybe it's not the talk but that he's starting to believe it. He watches me sometimes, working alongside me, and it's something else for me to think about.

As I lie in front of the television and do my math I think about Amanda, though maybe I've been thinking about her all along. Math is the only class we have together, and besides, I saw her today as I ran back through town, outside the library picking up some books it seemed like she had dropped. We have a report coming up in history; I'm doing mine on the frontier and the trials of the early pioneers. I have a few books but I haven't really looked at them yet. Of course there were other things I saw. I passed a woman walking her dachshund, letting it lead her as if she was afraid she'd hurt it if she pulled on the leash. I saw an old man on a ladder taking down his American flag. The bushes kept him from putting the ladder right up next to the house and he dropped it as he reached to pull it loose. But when I saw Amanda she was alone. I waved and she looked at me, surprised, and didn't wave back. I think I smiled at her but when you're running and trying to smile it looks like you're about to spit; I hope I got it right. On the screen in front of me a man is about to rescue a beautiful woman from danger using only his kung fu skills. I have a hard time not watching.

I have a hard time talking to her. She isn't in many of my classes, just calculus. She takes art classes and spends a lot of time in the art room, making things that last and can be looked at, while I'm running around kicking my own ass in the twilight. She works mostly with clay, I think. In
the middle of practice we'd head up the stairs, get a drink of water to rinse our mouths, spit it out, and head back down to the wrestling room. Sometimes I would see her wearing a dirty grey smock, standing out in the hallway. Sometimes we make eye contact.

I don't know if she's beautiful but it's my secret. I listen, but I don't hear anyone talk about her. In my mind I try to describe her: baggy pants, loose shirt, straight brown hair that falls over her eyes when she's thinking and doesn't notice; but the words are gaps, sound and air instead of flesh, that fill up the spaces in my day more than they fill up the spaces in my life. When I talk to her I feel like confessing, but as time goes by I've gotten used to not doing it.

"I'm going to bed." My dad pulls his chair back into the upright position and gets up. "You're mother's probably already asleep so try to keep it down. Here's the Popular Science if you want it." He tosses me the magazine. "Turn off the lights when you come up."

Sometimes I can't remember what she looks like. Sometime I should take a picture. I remember words about her eyes, how they seem to me like fish underwater on a sunny day; I can see them clearly but they bend light, they're not exactly where they seem to be. Wherever I see her: at school, in town at the drug store, sitting on a bench watching the ducks, they are the same eyes. In this way I think we are similar, we are both somewhere else and by chance or not we have met, if only in my head.

I think about what I would say, and about rejection, how people fear getting hurt by someone they don't know. It's a trade-off. When you're young you can hide by closing your eyes and thinking that no one sees you.
It's when you're older you open them again and expect to be recognized, to look around to see that nobody has moved. In my mind, she smiles thinly.

I have this strange memory of her from when we were in ninth grade, and in the same gym class. We had a mixed doubles badminton tournament, she was Scott Osbourne's partner and I was with Joanna Hynes. It wasn't about how she played; she would almost jump but not commit to leave the ground. When I hit the birdie toward her she seemed to have to remember to hit it. She was wearing a grey t-shirt and dark blue shorts, the same as I was, and played right across the net from me. She didn't want to be there and watching her I didn't want to either but I was playing along. I didn't know if I should just not hit it toward her, not disturb her, or if I should try to get the game over with quickly. I lobbed her the birdie, she hit it back. I returned it and Scott jumped in front of her and I had to drop it off to his side.

We won but after the game Amanda didn't say anything, she just picked up the birdie and hit it over the net to me. And I hit it back. We did that for awhile, stepping back and swatting the birdie, you could hit it hard but it flew high and slow. Everyone else had left the gym and, for awhile, I lost track of time, we were volleying and everything was forgotten. Then I realized it was just a different game, that you had to hit it over the net to the person on the other side, and if they couldn't return it the game was over. Time was slowed, both of us could feel it; even though we were late it was almost a relief when the bell rang. I wanted to say something like, "We'll have to finish this later," or to just pass it off to whoever was going to play next, but it didn't sound right to me and we just let it drop.

In the night, when I fall asleep, I might dream of her again. I dream all
the usual things first: flames and darkness, pygmies overturning a casket full of skulls. I dream in black and white. Sometimes I have wrestling dreams. There is no clock and there is no crowd and I am scarcely breathing. There is only execution, moves; no emotion, no elation in victory, and no defeat. I don't dream that I'm falling, that I'm being chased and can't run, or that I've gone to school in my underwear. I almost never wake from my dreams. Somewhere in the middle of them I realize that I've been dreaming and I freeze, and try to pretend that I'm asleep, that I don't have a choice in what happens at all again but it never works. I open up the window and lie there, tired, but I can't sleep. I hear my coach talking about our drills, to develop muscle memory, because thinking is too slow when you need to react. In the night I hear all of the memories, the creaking of this house I've lived in all my life and something beyond me, and I do not turn on my lights or move.
On Friday I run out to visit Dan working his new job at Holiday, I leave right after I get home from school. He just started a week ago and is talking about it all the time, about how it's a real job, there's computers and a retirement plan. We've been giving him crap about it, though. After this, what's the next step; I guess you move on down the highway to the Kum & Go or the Pump & Munch. Dan, for the most part, ignores us.

It's a little over eight miles from my driveway. When I get there, Steve's halfway through a Cherry Big Drink. Dan's wearing his uniform shirt and is giving him a tour of the store from his spot behind the counter, extending his arms in big sweeping motions. Dan repeats for me the parts of the tour I've missed.

"Don't you ever get nervous?" I ask him.

"About what?" he says.

"Working in a convenience store. That you'll get shot."

"If somebody comes in with a gun I'll give him the money. I don't care. Didn't you see the sign, there's less than $100 in there."

"I always wondered about that," starts Steve. "Suppose a guy fills his tank and comes in and buys fifty packages of hot dogs."

"That still wouldn't be a hundred bucks."

"Ok so he buys buns too and a magazine and it's a hundred bucks. Then another guy fills his tank and buys liquid Tide or something. That's more than a hundred bucks. So where do you put it? Do you stick it in your
pocket? How come there's not more than a hundred bucks in the register?"

"I can't tell you. It's a trade secret."

"What?" says Steve. "Don't bullshit me."

"It is. I can't tell you. You see those mirrors, the ones in the corner too, they all have cameras behind them. If someone robs this place they have it on film. They record everything, if I sneeze on the produce, they know. If I tell you, that's it. I'll never work in a convenience store again."

Dan's partner Brent is behind the counter doing Tai Chi. Dan told me about him. He graduated from the high school two years ago without attracting much attention and left town without too much smoke. Someone had said he he'd gone out west but no one had heard or thought a whole lot about him. No one remembered much about him either. But a couple of weeks ago he returned and within a day or so he was working at this job. He seemed different, though.

"What's he doing?" asks Steve. Brent moves slowly, spreading his arms out to his sides with the same kind of restraint and the look on his face you'd have if you were trying to keep from shaking your knees together in class because people are looking at you and thinking you're playing with yourself.

"Better ask him," says Dan.

I had a thought that most guys, when they hear you talking about them like that, will just come out and tell you what they're doing. We wait for a moment before Steve asks.

"It's Tai Chi," Brent tells us. "It's an ancient Chinese meditative form of combat. The monks would go on long journeys and be meditating as they
walked along but then they'd be like attacked by robbers and have to defend themselves. But to do that they'd have to break their meditation and that ruined the point of everything. So they developed this by studying the motions of the world around them."

"It doesn't look all that hardcore," says Steve.

"It is," says Dan. "Dude, haven't you ever seen Kung Fu?"

Steve nudges me. "I bet you could take him," he says. I'd hope so.

"I don't have any problem with him," I say.

"Why do you work here?" Steve asks Brent.

"Why not?"

"Don't you want to do something better?"

"What's better?"

"What's worse?"

"Hey," says Dan.

"There's a lot of worse jobs," I say. "You could work at KFC and you'd have scars from all the grease burns."

"You know what I think would be the worst job?" says Dan. "It'd be a masturbation teacher for health class; I heard on the radio that they were going to do this. Can you imagine standing up in front of a group of ninth graders? Can you imagine your first day if you were really nervous; 'um, uh, this usually works'."

"Wouldn't you rather have a job that paid more?" asks Steve.

"How much money do you need? Man, if I like what I'm doing, if I'm helping people and not hurting them, isn't that a great job? Isn't that an important job? If I'm wearing a suit and driving a big car but I'm filled with"
hate, isn't that a bad job?" He is still doing his Tai Chi. I'm waiting for someone to come in and want to buy something.

"You know what I think would be a great job?" says Dan. "You know when we invade places and we've got them all holed up and we send in psychological operatives to figure out how to bug the hell out of people. That'd be great. They put up big speakers and blast loud music at them, trying to annoy them but not too much because then they'll turn violent. Can you imagine going to a meeting every morning to make up the playlist that will sap people's wills?"

"I'd play a lot of Yoko Ono," says Brent. "I bet John Lennon's in hell for ever letting her sing."

"No, I bet he's got a great job in hell," starts Dan. "People there suffer eternal damnation, but after a while you'd probably get used to it. I bet they gave him an air conditioned room and told him to get comfortable and just keep searching up new tortures." I wonder where Dan has ever heard a Yoko Ono album. I haven't.

"Do you need a key for the bathroom?" I interrupt him as he starts to get going.

"No," says Dan. "We trust you here."

When I get back Steve is just taking off and Brent is putting on his coat, some South American wool patterned thing. Dan is punching something into the computer. He points his fingers like a gun and looks up at me.

"Hey," he asks, "could you give Brent a ride home? This is the deal. I said I'd give him a ride but I'm going out with Tracy before the play and I need to go back and change. So you drop me off at my house, drop Brent off,
and come back and I'll drop you off on the way to Tracy's."

"Fair enough." He flips me the keys to the War Wagon, the Mercury Colony Park Wagon he drives, that he bought from his dad. It's really a family car. It's silver with fake wood panelling, most of the windows don't work, and it only starts in neutral. There's a box of graham crackers behind the front seat that Dan decided he didn't like about a month ago now, and the whole back is covered in dalmation hair. When the vent's just right I can smell Heidi and Sonja.

It's less than a couple of miles to Dan's house. He sits in the back and jumps out as we pull in his driveway, hitting the hood of the car as he runs past up into the house. I back out into the street.

Brent has been silently investigating the car, running his hand along the plush burgundy interior, his finger along the little sign above the glove compartment that says "Ride-Engineered." We've never been able to figure out what that means.

Brent notices I'm watching him. "Thanks for doing this," he says.

"That's all right. This is my ride home too."

"You could've run home. You ran out this far, you're not constrained."

"I suppose I could."

"Would you rather run home? I mean, it's dark but would you rather run?"

"I don't know. Maybe. There's something about running out somewhere just to drive home."

"Back in the store," says Brent, "you mentioned KFC." I nod. "I
almost worked at Kentucky Fried Chicken. There's a lot about that place I respect. We do one thing and we do it right, chicken. But the chicken is almost incidental. It's a very Zen concept.”

“Why didn’t you work there?”

“What you said about the grease burns. Plus I don’t think the food is very healthy.”

“You work in a convenience store,” I tell him.

“But I give people choices. Or I witness them making choices. And it’s hard to really get a full meal there. I mean you can get Hamburger Helper, and I don’t eat meat, but with a vegetable that’s a pretty balanced choice. I respect balance.”

“Dan told me he once played horse against a guy from Kentucky who said that, when he was a kid, he lived just a few blocks away from the Colonel. All the kids in the neighborhood would ride their bikes over to the his house, stand at the fence and scream, “Colonel, Colonel, we love your chicken.” One day he came outside, dressed in his white suit, and they all swarmed around him. Then some of his friends came out with buckets of fried chicken, like they’d been in there eating it the whole time, and they all had a picnic, right there on the lawn.”

“What a great story, man.”

“I’m not sure I believe it.”

“What does it matter, if you believe it with your heart? It tells me what I know about the Colonel, that he was a good man and a wise man. He had one thing in his life and that was chicken. But through that vehicle he could behold this world and finally transcend it.”
"I guess I just don't love chicken that much," I tell him.

"You got it all wrong, dude. It's not about love. Love is just a western thing: Jesus loves you, love will set you free, and all that on the radio. Everybody wonders about it, tries to figure out what it is, how to get it. In the east it's the same, only see, it's enlightenment they're after. It makes more sense. We're always running off and getting ourselves in trouble because we don't understand. We may find love but it doesn't seem to do us any good. We still wonder what the hell is going on. That's my house half a block up on the left," he adds.

"That's your house?" We pull up into the driveway of a colonial bilevel with blue shutters. There's a basketball hoop out front.

"I'm living with my parents for now but I'm looking for a place of my own. I'll have to invite you over when I find one." I nod and he bows and shuts the door behind him. I back out of the driveway and drive to Dan's.

Dan sits next to Tracy, her friends on the right side, and I'm sandwiched between Steve and Matt on the left. We're at the fall production of Fiddler on the Roof, almost everyone's here. I wasn't really thinking about coming, but I didn't have any other plans either. At first we make fun of Peter Harleman because he plays a guy named Motel but once the lights go down everyone becomes strangely reverent. Watching, I forget that I know these people, I forget I don't like most of them, that they should spend more of their time pretending they're themselves. But tonight it's not the same, they dance and break into song, they talk about love and address the heavens, and don't stop to think what they're going to say. I can't sit here without
wondering if that's something I could do, carry on like that and ignore the crowd.

I find myself paying close attention. Alison Hughes plays this old woman who's setting everyone up. None of the marriages work, they all fall in love with the wrong people; by the end of the first act Motel's getting married to Molly Warner, who isn't nearly as much of a prize in real life as she seems to be here. Then soldiers show up and trash the place. Jeremy Goeden, who plays this communist, is the only one who fights back but he gets hit in the head and goes down.

We make our way out into the hallway for the intermission. There's a big line at the bathroom, Matt decides to go outside. Everyone's standing around with nothing to do but talk. I'm kind of up against the wall near the opening to the auditorium. I see Amanda, maybe eight feet away, wearing this blue and green sweater and it looks very nice with her hair and all but I don't know if I know her well enough to tell her that. She might take it the wrong way. She is standing in the crowd, not talking to anyone either. She looks straight ahead and I think that watching her is kind of like watching TV, she doesn't do much but I seem to lose a lot of time that way.

When the crowd moves, she walks past me.

"Hi," I say. "How do you like the play?"

"It's pretty good," she tells me.

"Have you ever thought about being in one of these?"

"No," she says.

"I think it's starting." Either one of us says this.

In the darkness I make my way back to my seat. In the second act
everyone's hooking up, left and right, no one's getting permission. I locate Amanda, she's near the front and I'm up high. On stage the old couple is singing. Matt Johnston, who plays the old guy Tevye, is asking his wife, Betsy Robinson, it's a stretch, if she loves him. She says she supposes she does and they sing about it for awhile.

The play ends as soldiers are approaching and everyone has to leave. They sell their homes and load up their wagons, and head in separate directions away from this place where they've spent all their lives. The curtains go up before the lights do, all of the actors take turns parading on stage, bowing, and the director gives them flowers. We all stand and clap. We clap for so long that we have to look around and try to figure out when we can stop.

Dan and Tracy are saying goodbye to each other like he's going on a secret mission but Matt and Steve are in a hurry to leave. Steve stole some beer from his dad and they want to go drink it. Waiting out in the hallway I'm disoriented again, caught in the flow of people pushing toward the doors. I look back for Dan and feel a hand on my shoulder.

"Hey," says Ron. He's wearing a buckskin shirt and a bolo tie with a pair of camo pants.

"Hey Ron," I say. I'm surprised but I shouldn't be. "What did you think of it?"

"It was pretty good; not as good as last year, though." Last fall they put on Seven Brides for Seven Brothers, by most people's standards it wasn't a roaring success. I look around to see who may be watching us.

"Say, I got to be heading out," Ron tells me. His eyebrows don't move
while he talks. "But I just got this new knife-fighting book, it's good. I thought you might be interested. Life skills."

"Yeah, ok."

"I'll catch you on my route. Some Sunday you come over, I could use someone to practice with."

I nod and we shake on it as he disappears back into the crowd. I make toward the door. Matt and Steve are waiting out on the sidewalk, most people are walking toward their cars. Dan follows moments behind.

"Let's go," he says.

We park the car on a turnoff down the road and walk back up to the bridge over Temperance Creek. A year ago Jim Trent was arrested here, right at this time of year. They were stupid enough to build a fire and when the cops showed up and everyone started to run, he pegged one in the head with a can of Miller.

"We're drinking them all tonight," says Matt, referring to this historic event.

We settle into the rocks on the south side, high above the water and right in the crook of the bridge. Dan opens the gym bag that Steve is carrying and surveys the contents.

"We've got nine beers."


"I'm out," I say.

"Three apiece," says Steve. "That means we have to shotgun them."

It's a crisp night, we're out of the wind in the darkest spot under the
bridge. I pull up the hood of my sweatshirt and listen to the sound of beer being drunk quickly. By consensus they all decide to kick back and sip their last ones.

Alcohol does different things to different people. Steve starts bitching about his English class. Every paper he writes is about television, not just about it but defending it. He wrote about how it teaches gun safety, how it encourages parents to talk to their kids about sex, how it opens people’s eyes up to the cold realities that stand before them. He likes to use the example of his cousin, who grew up without a TV, quit school, ran away from home, and became a daddy by age 19. If only he could have seen more of the problems of the world he never would have run off and done what he did.

“I think I’m going to be a poet,” he says.

“What the hell are you thinking?” says Dan. “You’re barely passing English.”

“I know,” he says. “But I have a vision.”

“Yeah,” says Matt. “So what. What are you going to do as a poet anyway? Write poems?”

“You can woo women,” I say. Dan is somewhat legendary among us for the wooing of his girlfriend Tracy, in which poetry played a pivotal role. None of the rest of us have a girlfriend.

“I don’t think that works,” says Matt, after a pause. “Maybe you used to, you could go on quests and write songs and shit but people just aren’t very romantic anymore. If you go up to some girl you barely know and give her a poem she’ll just show her friends and they’ll all laugh at you, they won’t even play along. Even if you do know them they’ll probably do that, but
that’s hard too. How do you even get someone to notice you?”

We all go silent as a car rumbles over the bridge and is gone. Dan picks up a rock and throws it toward the creek but we hear it bounce off a rock in the darkness.

“Here’s an idea for you,” says Steve. “If you want to get to know someone just bump into her and then pick up her books and whatever else you knock over.”

“Yeah, my cousin Harry, he lives down in Texas,” starts Dan. I’d never heard of his cousin Harry before. “He was turning around from his locker and accidentally elbowed this girl in the face, split her lip, she needed five stitches. He felt so bad about it that he asked her out and they ended up going out for the next two years. Of course she had to get an abortion and then she went psycho. But that’s not the part you should remember. They were in love for awhile there.”

“So I have to go up and hit her?” asks Matt

“Not hard. Of course you always run the risk she’ll slap you. I’d go for something incapacitating, like the shoulder so she can’t raise her arm. I’d stay away from the head. You don’t want to mess up her face.”

Steve is tapping his empty against a rock, making a conspicuous sound. “It sure is cold up here,” he says. “I can see why they built a fire.” Matt belches in agreement.

Cautiously, keeping our eyes out for traffic as we emerge from underneath the bridge, we make our way back to the car. It’s a clear night, full of stars, I don’t know their names but they look familiar, with a quarter moon just starting to rise. We couldn’t see any of this when we first got here. A
wind blows at our backs as we walk along the edge of the road, kicking rocks as we go.

We pile back in and drop off Matt and Steve, driving without saying much. Dan and I dump the empties in a garbage can at a park near my house. He drops me off and I fumble with the keys for a moment, then walk upstairs and brush my teeth. I look at the clock. It's not even 11:30 yet but I go to bed anyway.
CHAPTER 3:
ARM BAR

“What do you think they’ll name it?” Joe asks, as we drive away from my house in his truck. It’s about 8:30, Joe was on time but he came in to have a cup of coffee with my parents. He always looks a lot meaner to me when I haven’t seen him for awhile, he has a scar down the middle of his cheek from years ago when a chainsaw kicked back on him. I’ve heard that it’s a sign of strength where your scar is because when the saw shoots back it comes rising straight at your face and it becomes an issue of how fast you can stop it. There’s a lot of guys out there, big guys, with scars down the middle of their forehead. Joe won’t let me anywhere near a chainsaw. He also has scars down his shins and never wears shorts, not even in the middle of the summer.

“How about Joe?” I say.

“What if it’s a girl?”

“She’ll just end up tougher for having a boy’s name,” I say. “Kind of like that Johnny Cash song.”

“I don’t think it works that way,” says Joe. He’s palming the wheel with one hand, drumming his fingers. “Anyway, I’m really happy for your mom. Lindsay’s pretty excited too. She’s getting together some of the Scott and Molly’s old baby clothes, and some toys too. I can’t imagine they have too much around from when you were a toddler.” He arches his neck to look down over his shoulder. “Are you hungry? Do you want a Fruit Snack? There’s a box in the back I saw.”
I unbuckle and reach behind me and pull out two foil packages and hand one to Joe. I read the label: 130 calories and 0 grams of fat, mostly high fructose corn syrup but with some real juices as well. Joe keeps one hand on the wheel and opens the package with his teeth.

"I got a pterodactyl. What'd you get Joe?" He holds up his Fruit Bite.

"It looks like a penguin. No it's Tyrannosaurus Rex. Snacks are educational now. I wonder when parents are going to start buying snacks for sex education. It'd save a talk." I look at my next Fruit Bite.

"Eat up," says Joe with his mouth full. "Have another one. You're going to need your strength today." With one hand, he folds his foil wrapper into a tight square and places it in the ash tray. "I see you out running from time to time, by the way, you look good. The season must be starting up soon."

"Just a few weeks. I'm making sure everything is in place."

"How does the squad look this year?"

"We're young but we should be competitive." I stay noncommittal. Joe catches my drift.

"Well my season has already started but I've been so busy that I've barely been able to get out. Me and Byron are making a date of it tomorrow morning; remind me to call him. I just bought a Remington 11-87 12-gauge, semiautomatic. You'll have to see it, I was out behind the house with it before I came over this morning. It feels right. Birds beware."

Joe shrugs his shoulders, trying to stretch out his back while he drives. I find out that we're going to clear brush on the ski trails outlying the city. It's not difficult but we have to cover ground and carry a bunch of tools. It's a
saw, machete, and clippers kind of thing. A chainsaw would be overkill and Joe won't let me near one anyway. It's not a real emergency job, he could do it by himself, but it takes up a lot of time. From the time that we've been driving, I'm guessing that we're starting on the ski trails closest to Joe's house.

"Do you still see Dan much?" he asks me.

"Yeah," I say.

"Is he still pissed off about me firing him? It's nothing personal, just that I've got enough to worry about with this job without him. The only time he moved was when he was knocking something over."

"I think he's pretty much forgotten," I say. Joe keeps driving, looking straight ahead. He motions for me to give him another package of Fruit Bites.

"You know, reading this Norse book to Scott," Joe continues, "I think maybe that men like us were born too late. There'd be these great battles; Odin, the head guy, would decide ahead of time who was going to win. But during the battle the Valkyries, these beautiful women, would fly down and tap the bravest warriors on both sides. That was their sign to go crazy and take out as many as they could, then the Valkyries would take them up to the Great Hall. They'd eat and drink until they passed out and fell asleep on the benches. Then they'd wake up and grab their weapons and run outside and fight each other all day until the dinner bell rang and they'd reattach their limbs and go back and feast again. How's that for heaven?" I look at Joe and nod as he pulls the truck to a stop.

"Hey Steve," asks Dan. "You don't normally take hot lunch?" I was
up on the balcony section of the lunchroom, eating with Dan, Steve, and Matt. I was spearing ravioli with my fork and watching Amanda, four tables away.

"I don't know. I guess I lost it."

"You lost it?"

"Yeah, I had it in my locker but I don't know where it is."

"You lost your lunch in your locker?"

Amanda was sitting facing me at a table with Kira Dowling, Kerry Gardner, and Sara Evenson. They were having some kind of inaudible conversation, all of them leaning forward over the table. Amanda alternately uses her fork to sort and eat a salad, and to emphasize the points she seems to be making. Kira yawns. Directly across from me, Matt places his fork on the table then hits it with his fist to launch it end over end down to the main level and signal that he is finished eating.

Dan was talking about a friend of his who worked at a bus garage and had a bus roll over his leg, so now he can't use it but they settled out of court and gave him $10 million so he doesn't have to work.

"What does he do all day then?" Matt breaks in loudly. "Would you let someone cut off your leg for $10 million?"

"No. I'd let them cut off my arm for $10 million maybe." Steve looks at Dan.

"How about your leg for $15 million?"

"Here's one. Here's one for you," starts Matt. "For $15 million they cut off your arm and give it to you and you have to eat it."

"Is it raw?" asks Dan.
Watching Amanda, I wasn't sure what it was I wanted her to do. It was good to see her laugh, but then if she was having so much fun with her friends she really didn't need me around. I was pleased she had friends and something secretive to talk about. I was pleased each time the fork reached her mouth but a part of me wanted to see her miss, or start laughing and cough up milk, just to make sure she was real. Matt and Steve picked up their trays and left.

"Who are you looking at?" asked Dan.

"No one. Just thinking."

"Who are you thinking about?"

"Don't start on me."

"OK, tough guy. You're awful defensive. It's about time you do something normal. Are you looking for someone to pick a fight with?"

"I'm looking at women and trying to imagine what they look like old."

"I always try to imagine what they look like naked, but then maybe I'm just naturally more optimistic. You're not telling me that you're into naked old people? You know, I look at women too, but I try not to. You know that dream where you come to school in your underwear. That's what I think being a woman must be like, everyone trying to imagine what you look like in your underwear."

"So why are you telling me this?"

"So." Dan pulled his chair closer. "Who looks good old?"

"A lot of people. Some people look better, more settled, they grow into their face, the gray kind of goes with their eyes. Other people, like Betsy and Ashley, their hair thins and their face gets plastic. They wear tape on their
foreheads to pull back the wrinkles and overcook roasts. They scare the hell out of their grandkids. A lot of people I can’t even see old."

“How does Amanda look old?”

“I don’t know. What do you think?”

“I think you have a thing for her. I think you’re looking at her and you’re full of shit if you try to tell me otherwise. I know you too well. If you’re fooling yourself then you’re fooling someone, but not me. That’s the extent of it.”

“So what if I do?”

“I’m still trying to figure it out. It doesn’t fit right away, she’s kind of quiet and artsy. Give me awhile to think about it. Personally I always wanted to breed you with Tanya. Your children would be Greek gods. I would enter them in races against horses. The prospects excite me.”

“Do you know her at all?”

“Amanda? She has friends but kind of keeps to herself, she’s not much into the school spirit thing. I think she’s cool. Let me talk to Tracy.” I nod and watch as everyone from her table stands up. Amanda picks up her tray and slides into the crowd in front of them and out of sight.

“I think you should ask her out,” he says.

“What would we do?”

“If you have to ask me you’re further gone than I thought.” I looked at him. “You’re more chickenshit than I thought. You can do a thousand pull-ups and kick more ass than anyone I know, but you can’t fucking ask a girl out. You’re chicken.”

“You’re just trying to get me to do it.”
"I shouldn't have to trick you to do it. I'm going to ask her out for you. I'm going to ask her out and we're going to drive by your house laughing. We're going to go at it in your front yard, right in front of the picture window so you can watch us while you're doing sit-ups in front of the TV."

I lean forward on my elbows on the table. Dan slouches back in his chair and crosses his arms.

"Jesus, if you were any stiffer I could take you surfing. I'll talk to Tracy and see what she thinks."

"So what do I do? Just ask her out?" I was talking to Tracy the next day. Dan brought her by after lunch. "You can trust her," he said.

We went outside to the foyer at the front of the school and Tracy told me what she knew about Amanda: that she was smart and kind of quiet, that she made things out of clay, and that last year in the speech unit she did a speech about taking care of her dog. Tracy had talked about what you can do to help stop deforestation. Dan and I were in a different class. Dan talked about his three-step method where he could teach anyone to juggle. In the middle of his speech he asked for a volunteer from the audience and randomly chose me, who already knew how to juggle. The next day I talked about variations and finishes to the single-leg takedown. Dan got a better grade; on our evaluation sheets Mrs. Peterson described his tone as "engaging" and my body language as "brutal". As Tracy talked, it wasn't that she told me something I didn't know, just that I didn't expect her to know it.

"Yeah," says Dan, leaning against the payphone. "How about that."

"No," says Tracy. "You're missing the point. You have to be smooth
about it. You have to bump into her accidentally, run into her someplace you wouldn't expect to. Then you have to talk for awhile, and discover that you have similar interests and think the same kinds of things are funny. That goes on for awhile, then you can ask her out. Ask her if she wants to go do something fun that you were probably going to do by yourself anyway because your friends wouldn't be into it because they're so immature."

"That doesn't sound smooth."

"It's what you do," says Dan. "You send roses, you don't send dogshit."

"But what are we going to do. If I ask her out we have to go somewhere."

"You'll think of something," says Tracy. She smiles.

"You can show her some moves," says Dan. "You can go lift weights."

"The thing that gets me," I say, deciding to play along, "is that she'll be able to see right through all of this. It's obvious and she's going to be suspicious. She's going to want to know why I asked her out. She's going to want to know what I've been doing thinking of her when I don't even know her that well."

"Most people aren't going to spent a lot of time worrying about why you like them. You're not a dork," says Tracy. "Don't think about it so much. Most people are already preoccupied wondering why nobody likes them, so it's enough of a change. You learn to be happy. You learn it's just not constructive to be always wondering why you're with the people you're with."

I sit next to her in calculus class, I smile as I sit down. Periodically, I
find myself watching her; I'm not hypnotized, it's something different. It's like someone has just sat in front of me as the movie begins, I become aware of exactly where I sit and how tall I am. I'm aware of what I'm doing. I'm taking notes, just like her but there's nothing accidental, nothing inevitable about it. She moves little in her seat, looks straight ahead, doesn't fidget or chew her pen. If she drops her pen I'm right there to grab it, but it lies deep in the arch of her fingers; she writes almost sidehand, her palm is barely off the surface of her notebook. She copies the board and writes the same thing that I do.

At the end of class, our last exams are handed back. When hers is dropped onto her desk he looks at it without expression, then tucks it in a folder and gets up and leaves. She is like me. She gives nothing away.

I borrow my dad's car tonight. I got my license a year ago but I don't drive much. I really don't have much of anywhere to go to. Neither do any of my friends, and when we're out going nowhere, I'd just as soon be in their car, even if I end up driving them home.

I think my dad was taken aback when I asked for the car. He wanted to know where I was planning on going.

"There's a dance at school. I thought I might go to it."

"Are you going with someone, dear?" my mother asks.

"No, I just thought I might go and see what it was all about."

My mother gives me one of those smiles, that she's pleased that I'm doing something normal and that's one less thing to worry about. She's tired this week, with working her same shift at the hospital and carrying around
the baby, she's been going to bed a lot earlier. She's also starting to look larger, though it might just be that since I found out I know to look for it.

I know my parents talk about me, if not actually talking to me, and probably not as much now; they've got a lot on their minds. We talk about school, my dad and I watch football and we'll go to movies together on Saturday and Sunday afternoons sometimes, when a new Arnold movie comes out or something. Afterwards we'll walk back out to the car and talk about what a bad ass the guy was. I like these movies and so does my father. As I've gotten older there are other types of movies I go to but not with him. Neither of us wants to guess at what the other one wants to see and be wrong, so we stick with what is safe.

Sometimes I think that my parents want to say something. They've never been very good about that; they gave a very abbreviated sex talk when I was 13 and not much more when they told me I was going to be a brother. They seem to worry about me, though I don't really give them anything to worry about. I don't drink, smoke, or do drugs. I think that's clear. I take hard classes and get pretty good grades. I get up early in the morning. I make dinner a lot of times when they come home late. They've given me a lot of space and I'd like to think I turned out all right. Maybe they'd like it if I was a little more normal, if I went out more; my mom said something like that to me once. She wanted me to go out and have fun. I think my parents want to give me advice, to keep me from making the same mistakes that they made. It's just that so much has changed since they were my age, I don't know if they feel they can anymore.

The dance starts at seven so I figure I should show up at a quarter to
eight. I spend a little time getting dressed. I end up wearing a green checkered shirt, it's not flannel but it looks that way, and my black Nike pants. I wear a navy-blue hooded sweatshirt and borrow a jacket from my dad, in case I decide to go for a walk.

The high school is about a mile from my house, not far enough to warm the car up. I haven't been to one of these things in over a year but not much seems to have changed. Points of bright orange light glow far back in the parking lot. The people I am walking next to up to the gym entrance seem in a good mood and smell as if they have just chewed several sticks of Big Red. The assistant principal seems surprised to see me when I flash my ID at the door and give him a can of chili for the food drive. He seems glad to see me, as if he realizes it's me who should be surprised to see a man in his 30's at a high school dance and is trying to play it off.

There's a DJ set up against the back end of the gym, yellow lights periodically flash up against the wall and the hardwood floor. Out in the hallway they put up streamers and some teachers stand behind a fold-up table, handing out Dixie cups of Coke and 7-Up. Kids stand in line, dripping sweat.

Those inside seem caught up in the moment, I enter the room unnoticed. People spread out in the gym in segregated clumps: the girls are all talking to other girls, they sway together without moving their hips, drifting out into the center of the floor before they realize they're dancing. The guys all kind of standing together, not looking at each other; they dance for a little while, then stop. There's a few jumping up and down and slamming into each other; some of the sophomore hockey players have
taken off their shirts and are doing push-ups until the assistant principal walks over and makes them put their clothes back on. He walks around on the perimeter of the dance and grabs anyone who's getting out of control, brings them back a few yards and has words with them. I look at him as he passes. This isn't the kind of dance you always see in 50's movies, when the dances had names and guys would have to ask girls, where they would dance together, sweeping around in the middle of the floor. I watch my body language. I take my hands out of my pockets. I am standing close to the wall.

None of my friends are here, the crowd is mostly high-pitched and younger. They are dressed up: blouses and oxford shirts and jeans mostly, but I saw a bolo tie and a pair of leather pants. None of my friends are here, they're probably out in Dan's car, trying to race somebody on the highway. Maybe they're down by the creek. Maybe they're out drinking and driving, heading home with blood and gravel on their hands; hell, around here sometimes it seems like there's no one to hurt but yourself. I don't know why I came tonight, I don't know what I thought I would find here, wandering and lost. I just don't know where she would be. I don't know where anyone is, except maybe my parents, at home with the TV on, spending another quiet night together with my mom on the sofa with the baby name book and my dad repanelling something. I see Martin Schowalter, the red-haired guy from my calculus class, he's the only other senior I see. He's leaning up against the wall in back with a Pepsi, and when I look at him he waves. I nod back.

I watch the crowd in front, lost in the music, staring into space and dancing all at once to some song they've heard on the radio in the car or in
their bedroom a hundred times. I'm standing on the edge of the fun, silent and motionless and not caught up in the twisting illusion that ends at 10:30 when their parents come to pick them up, and they walk out into the quiet and cold. Somebody left the door open and I walked in, something cold in the heat and light and humidity of breathing. Cold is nothing, the absence of heat, and I don't cast a shadow, just a chill. From the back wall I watch the ninth graders up in front, who when they meet on the gym floor brush tentatively, and as they dance they look around, unsure of what to do next. I watch a couple who turn and see each other at the same moment, they stop but it's too loud to say anything. I don't know them. Hands in my pockets, I walk back out to the car.

I'm in no hurry as I walk through the parking lot, there's a small crowd out there, each in their separate pockets. They're the ones that are drunk and know they'll get in trouble as they try to get in. Freshmen mostly, that have glommed on to some sophomore with a car, with nothing going for him except his sixteen years. I make a beeline to my car and walk slow right through a group of five of them.

The big one steps in front of me. He's at least a head taller than me, maybe goes 220, lineman size on the football team. And his friends all stand behind him because he's big but even with his jacket on you can tell he's fat, and they're willing to ignore that. They're willing to ignore a lot. As soon as I see he's going to stand there a part of me starts going I wish he wouldn't do this but then I take a step and my feet come down and it's like I just connected an electric circuit with the ground.

"You got a problem?" I say. And I've said it before, it's instinct.
"Not unless you want to look fucked up and stupid." He's been waiting to use that line and I smack him, cuff him right on the backside of the head. And as he steps I take his arm out to the side and crank the elbow into a Russian tie and even as I move into a single he's falling, face first, and I step across and take his legs out from under him. I kick him in the ribs.

This other kid in a green ski coat steps forward in some kind of karate stance. "Stay down asshole." I say to the fat kid, I kick him in the head and he starts to cover up.

As I walk away I think they're going to jump me, they're going to throw something at the car or run up and key it once I get inside. But they don't and I drive away.

Maybe at the heart of it I just don't care. I'm an asshole. Beneath the sweat, when the pain clears and the talk dies down, there's an empty place where there's nothing. That's how I win, how I grind their face into the mat, then smack it to make them move. My mother doesn't come to my matches anymore. She came to one last year and sat by the clock, and told me, unless it was state or regionals, she was too nervous to do it again. She said that if she saw two people fighting like that in our front yard, she'd have to call the cops. My dad usually can't make it either. There's no one to watch me. I don't look across the mat before matches or pose in front of the mirror at home, like I used to. I just don't give a shit.

People expect me to win, so no one is surprised unless I don't. My matches lack all drama. It's like sitting through a movie where I know the good guys will win even though they don't in real life, though it wasn't that
long ago I wasn't too sure about anything. When I fall behind I come back. That's what I do. Maybe we write the scripts for our life. But I think about someone who risks his life every day, like a fireman; every day he runs through the blaze and every night he comes home for dinner. After awhile everyone expects him to survive, every day becomes just another one.

I drive slowly without turning on the radio. Maybe I am an asshole. I like hurting people and making them bleed. Maybe that's what I understand. Back in time, maybe there was a place for me. I read wars in the newspaper, in Africa, in the former Yugoslavia, that started maybe 900 years ago over something that no one remembers: who killed who, invaded what, and took the others’ land; these aren't about love, just memory and something else. And the people who win are the ones who are willing to forget. The ones who are willing to kick the door open without worrying about what or who is waiting on the other side. That's me. That's how I'm going to get out of here.

It's too early to go home, my parents aren't asleep yet. I drive through town and look for someplace to go. I walk around the mall and deliberately stare at people, daring them to look back at me. Few do. I feel like a camera among primitive people who've never seen one, they see their picture and think I've taken their souls. I see babies, some mothers pushing strollers, awkward preteens; some who don't think that they're beautiful, they're rich, tough, or cool. I see a pregnant woman, leaning forward, resting on a bench. I stare and stand in their eyes for that fraction of a second. The only ones who stare back are the fat girls.

I exhale through my nose as I walk, all the things around me: the
cigarette smoke, the thick perfume, the caramel corn; I try not to breathe until I get back to the parking lot. These are all false scents, they say what we want to say about ourselves. I try to exhale it all. There are too many memories in smell. I don't want to have to know that I've been here before.

On the way home I drive behind an old woman at about twenty-five miles an hour. I can see her in her car, illuminated by all the colored signs of the strip. She turns in to Kentucky Fried Chicken, it closes soon, and I imagine her, the only person in there, ordering a three-piece box and going home; and under 60 watt bulbs eating each piece and leaving nothing but bones, her wracked and greasy fingers fumbling to throw away the box, watching TV with the sound turned way up until it gets late enough to go to bed. I would never eat that shit. I drive home and run, going nowhere but out, blind into the darkness, my breath the only sound until I fall to the side of the road to throw up but there's nothing in my stomach.

From the ditch I see the few lights of the city off in the distance. The front lights of the houses on both sides of me are off, maybe only a bedroom light now and then, but below me is lit up in rows, blurring into darkness along the edges. I see my life as a time machine, before me is the future, behind me is the past; for now I can't move. Not for the fear of missing out on something, but that once I start moving I won't be able to stop. I remember hearing that the faster you go the slower time goes; in ninth grade physical science Mr. Lofquist told us how Einstein said something about two twins, one who stayed on earth and the other who went on a trip in a spaceship at the speed of light. After 50 years he returns to earth, his brother meets him on the pad and the cameras flash as they reunite. They stare at
each other. The astronaut hasn't aged; the hand he clutches, the face in the mirror, belongs to a frail old man.

I don't think about what they say in that moment. They're brothers, they'd have to think of something. I'd think that being in a spaceship for 50 years all you'd want to do is talk, breathe and run around. I'd suspect there'd be so much relief that the other was all right, that you weren't alone. There'd be so much catching up to do I think that, after the shock wore off, things would fall right into place. What I wonder about is the day before the launch, with the hype and the pressure, standing in line to see the universe and take a rain check on time. I think about what needs to be said and how easy it is not to say it, and blast off assuming that every 50 years turns out the same. I sit there for a moment, wondering when I'll begin to run home.

It's getting colder, it's darker than at this time last Saturday, and I'm not cramping but my legs are starting to tighten up and you could just about play my hamstrings; I try to stay fluid, head up, arms forward, moving enough just so I can run again tomorrow. With the season close, I'm unsure that anything I do now will really make a difference. From here on out running means wearing sweatshirts and the plastic, the cold air that hurts your lungs, not coming back until you made weight. These are short runs, short and frequent.

Sometimes I hate wrestling, for a lot of reasons. I hate not eating, getting dehydrated, my face getting messed up. My lips get chapped and in practice I split them, the blood gums up and dries on my teeth, so dark it looks like I don't have any. I hate the two hours we have after school before
we have to bus off somewhere for our matches, where I'm hungry and I can only be distracted to do a little bit of math, something I don't have to think about. There's the tournaments on Saturdays, where I weigh-in at seven and get home at ten at night. The finals where the lights go down except for one right over the center mat and you stand up and wait for your match, half-watching the lighter weights. Every morning I wake up thinking about my match, making weight, or going to practice. Every night I think the same things about the next day. I break the season down into the days and weeks until the end. The whole season I would tell myself, you love this, you fucking love this. Otherwise you would never be here.

Living like this there are things you forget. You forget what the sun looks like or what it's like to play in the snow. You forget about the passage of time right up until the end. But then there's things I don't know if I'll ever forget. At the regional tournament I scored an upset into the finals; they played "We Are the Champions" during the introductions as I walked in a circle around the mats, next to the guy I met in the finals. I don't look at him. I followed up the rows back to the wall, see my parents and some of my teammates, hands clapping politely over the sound of the speakers. I pass by the head table. On the wall they project a transparency with my match, my name, and the names of my parents. There are American flags on the headgear and the music cuts abruptly. We line up on the back side of the mats, hold our hands over our hearts and I close my eyes and I try to figure out how I got here but decide then not to think about it too long. I didn't know how much I'd miss it, or what I'd miss waking up and not hurting every day. But when the wrestling starts, the actual match, I forget more; I
forget that if I lose I will still live, that all the points and rules aren't for real.

There are a few people out jogging, but not with me. I chase them down and pass them. I can't stand the thought that someone is out training and I am not. I take the hills. Come on, you son of a bitch, I tell myself, your heart won't break. I stride out on the flats coming back to my house. I work it. There are lights behind me on the street, following me but I choose to ignore them until I am standing in front of my driveway, my arms over my head.

"You were moving," Joe says. He's rolled down the window on his truck. "I followed you the last few blocks."

"Yeah," is all I can say. I walk between the passenger door and the front of the truck.

"Here, get in. Standing out there in your shorts you're going to cramp up in a minute." I know Joe is right. He leans over and throws the door open for me. I close it behind me. Sitting in the cab I realize how dark it is out. Joe is listening to Willie Nelson's "The Ballad of the Red-Haired Stranger," which he would make me listen to last summer, claiming he was educating me. It's down low but he flips it off.

"So how does this Saturday stand next to our last Saturday."

"I ran longer and didn't clear any ski trails so far. I went to a dance at the high school last night."

"Did you see that girl you told me about? What was her name?"

"Amanda," I say. "No."

"I don't know her." Joe moves the car out of park, one hand resting on his leg, holding on to the bottom of the wheel. "Where does she live?"
“Just off Ashland. I don’t know the number, I’d know it when I see it. Why do you want to know that?”

“I want to see where she lives. Let’s go park in front of her house.” He doesn’t look at me. “She’ll never know. We’re working maintenance, we have an alibi. I’ll say we have to read the gas meter. I’ll think of something.” I ask him if it isn’t kind of late for us to be out working, but I guess he doesn’t hear me.

When we got within a block I tell Joe where to go; we pull up to the curb across the street from her house and kill the lights. The neighborhood is dark and still. The porch lights aren’t on but you can see lights from within the house, light that seems trapped, as if it does not move. Both of us are looking up to her house.

Joe leans over and pops “The Ballad of the Red Haired Stranger” in, turning the volume down low. He sits back in the driver’s seat, settling in, and offers me a piece of gum.

“Do you have plans for next year?” he asks.

“I’m working on that.” I tell him. He nods, chewing his gum.

“Is she pretty?”

“I guess so.”

“Do you think she’s home?” Joe asks me.

“Yeah. I do. I think so.”

“I bet she’s thinking about you. Right now.”

“I doubt it. I bet she doesn’t know who I am.”

“I know some things you don’t. Are you going to go out with her?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’d have to ask her. I don’t want to be
chickenshit about it,” I pause, settling the night back into the quiet playing of
the tape deck. “I just don’t want to do something I’m going to regret.”

“I was different from you at your age, different from your dad too. I
drank some and I spent a lot of time chasing after girls. A lot of that I look at
now as wasted time. I used to write love letters. I found a few of my old ones,
drafts, where I misspelled something and started over, or copies I made
because I thought it was so good and I didn’t want to forget what it was like.
Some of the women I wrote to I wouldn’t have remembered if I didn’t find
these letters. I was disappointed reading them, though, they were so plain. It
wasn’t like I remember it at all.”

“But I don’t regret it.” Joe runs his hand through his hair as he talks, I
slouch down in my seat, half watching him and half watching the house.
“Everything turned out fine in the end. To be honest, there’s only one thing I
regret. Can you live so long without regretting anything? I haven’t told
anyone, just Lindsay, I’ve been too ashamed. It was in eighth grade football.
We had the team to beat, it never quite panned out like we thought it would
in high school but Russell Cooke, he was in our backfield, he ended up
getting a tryout with the Lions and made it to the final cut. I was as big as he
was then, he blocked for me. And we were playing this team from the city
that we thought we should have just rolled, we should have just blown them
out of the water. I don’t know what it was. We took the bus down there and
there weren’t any fans, just these kids with greased hair, these black kids, they
weren’t even that big.

“We were behind the whole game but it was close, we weren’t used to
it being so close and right at the end, it was fourth and goal, we were down by
four. And they gave me the ball, the line bending in a V in front of me and I fumbled. I dropped it, no one even hit me. No one ever knew.

"It wasn't the last football game I ever played in, and it probably wasn't the worst thing I've ever done, but it's the one thing I've never been able to make up for. If there is a heaven and I find myself in it I'll have that play again. Maybe over and over again, through all of eternity. That's what heaven is to me, it doesn't even matter if I make it in the end zone, just that I get that chance. Heaven's a lot of different things to a lot of different people, you have to wonder how they decide who gets to pick." We sit awhile longer, just like that, before he starts up the truck and drives me home.

It's nearly 7 o'clock when he drops me off, and I watch as he pulls in reverse out of the driveway and heads back into town.

"Was that Joe?" my mother asks, shuffling into the front hallway.

"Lindsay called here about fifteen minutes ago, he left this morning without saying anything and she didn't know where he'd been all day."

"He must be heading home now." I say.

"Good," she says. "I'll call Lindsay and tell her. There's some chicken in the oven and some rice, you can reheat the peas in the microwave. We didn't know where you were so we went ahead and ate without you." She puts her arm around my shoulder. "Try to tell us next time where you're going."

Tonight I dream about watching Amanda sitting on a rock by the river. I think my dreams are the only place I'm honest with myself, they're not like pictures or a journal, which someone else might find. I sit on a rock
upstream and know that if she wanted me to join her she would have invited me over in the first place. I sit and wait, watching the river sluice through the valley, all the snow in the high country, the glare and the shadow of the sun on the spruce. I watch her, the side of her face as she stares off and wonders, but I didn't know what about. She never notices me. It's my dream but in it she had secrets, and in it she had the kind of peace that told me she would always love this place, this dream country, more than me. How can you love people next to the cold white river and the big open sky?

I can go anywhere I want in my dream except over to her, anywhere I choose. She'll never follow me but it doesn't mean I can't go. I climb up through the brush, up chimneys through the rock, overhanging and out on the face of great tubes of petrified sandstone, too scared to stop until I reach the top of the ridge and look down, and there is less to see than there was at the bottom. Just the tops of trees, looming above all the shadows. I stumble down, a pine cone falls from a tall tree as I watch from above, unknown, as she swims in the rapids below me. I am on rock again. She squeezes her hair out as she stands in the water, swimming in her clothes because there are others around.
CHAPTER 4: 
FAKE AND GO

It's Monday morning. As I walk to my locker I hope that Steve or somebody doesn't come flying out of nowhere to tackle me, because I've decided to ask Amanda out. It isn't a very well thought out plan but I figure it's time.

There's nothing to stop me as I walk down the hall. Time doesn't slow to a crawl, my legs don't feel heavy, my head doesn't feel like it's held underwater. Instead I hear everything clearly: conversations, someone dropping their books, someone throwing a tennis ball against a row of lockers, catching it as it bounces and throwing it again. I wonder if criminals, when they finally decide to break the law, feel this way. That there wasn't really anything holding them back all along.

Amanda is standing in front of her locker, staring inside it, looking blankly. It's as if I'll have to tap her on the shoulder to get her attention. Or maybe I'll look the other way and bump into her.

"Uh, Amanda," I say. As I speak her name she looks up at me like I've suddenly transported to this spot, at least that's how I feel. This close our eye levels are nearly even, I'm only a few inches taller than her. There is no one else within thirty feet. Looking into her eyes, and her looking back, it feels like thirty miles.

"I was wondering if you wanted to go do something sometime. I don't know exactly what, I'm pretty open to that, but I was wondering if you wanted to anyway."
I expect maybe she will move her eyes away shyly but she doesn’t.

“Ok,” she says. “I’m not sure what we should do either. Dan, I think he’s a friend of yours, last Friday was trying to get me to tell you we should go lift weights. I don’t know about that. I thought he was trying to make fun of me.”

“Dan has a lot of ideas. I don’t think he was,” I say. There is a pause that wants to be filled. “It’s Monday. Don’t people usually wait to do things on the weekend?”

“I don’t know, it depends on what it is,” she says. “If it’s breathing I might not be able to make it.” She smiles.

“Maybe I could write you a note. That’d be something I could do.”

“That’d be nice.” She rocks a little bit as she stands there. “I’ll look forward to reading it.”

“I better write it then.” She smiles; it surprises me when she smiles, it’s like she’s been saving it up. I smile, walking sideways back to my locker.

“What were you talking to Amanda about?” asks Dan.

“Nothing,” I say. “The weather.” I imagine I am speaking coldly. I’ve decided to tell Dan less and less. He is probably my best friend but he still doesn’t know my mom’s going to have a kid. It’s going to hard not to notice soon, but it’s not something I’ve felt like telling everyone.

“You and I are going to have to have another talk. Am I going to have to do this for you?”

Writing the note was also Dan’s idea, though I didn’t tell him. When he was first interested in Tracy he looked over her shoulder to get her combination and then went into her locker and stole her math notebook. He
went a few pages past her last set of notes and wrote "My heart burns like napalm over your lush and fertile native landscape," signed his name and returned the notebook to her locker. He doesn’t know where it came from, he says he was inspired. Dan and Tracy have been going out for a year now. I’m almost sure that they’re having sex, but Dan isn’t always the most reliable source about a number of things.

I sit through my classes in the morning. I’m looking for inspiration and dutifully following along taking notes. Alexander Hamilton doesn’t do it for me. Chelation doesn’t do it for me. The Scarlet Letter doesn’t do it for me. I see Amanda once in the hallway between classes; I hold my pen up to my lips as if I were composing.

I start working on it in chemistry class. “Hi,” I write, and I think about leaving it at that, it’s a start. I don’t know what to say in my note; it was a bad idea, I think about calling Joe up for advice. I don’t know where to begin it or where to write it without someone looking over my shoulder. I’m not the kind of guy who writes notes, you don’t see me scribbling down my observations on small sheets of paper. It’s suspicious.

Above all I don’t want to scare her. I decide to maybe talk about my day. There are things I could tell her about the wave of her hair, how she doesn’t wear earrings, or the depth of her eyes, but I don’t want those things on paper to stick around. There is something permanent about a note. I think of it like the trash on the side of the road, the faded cardboard and the bottles, that somehow it’s always going to be around for people to look at. I’m sitting in the library during my free period before lunch. I’m surrounded by shelves of books, many of them paperbacks and most of the authors dead,
though; and since most of them have never been read, probably most people won't be that interested in my note either.

The first twenty minutes of my free period I had a meeting with the college counselor. While it's only October, the deadline for most schools is January 15 and that's going to come up quickly. He makes me take the booklet I need to sign up to take the SAT in December. For the rest of the time I decide to do a little work on my history paper about the Oregon Trail and the plight of the pioneers. The first book I have is kind of a road guide to it, it lists all the towns in the order of the traditional route so you can recreate the historic journey with your car. It also has little biographical sections about what each of these towns was like during the days of the Wild West. I'm reading about Rawlins, Wyoming. Back in 1880, this guy George Parrott, known as "Big Nose George" and his partner tried to rob a train by derailing it. They ended up shooting the sheriff and the deputy who came after them, and stealing their horses.

Maybe I'll write to Amanda about this. Four months later they caught him and Big Nose George was tried in Rawlins and sentenced to be hung. Because he was such a desperado, they kept his legs shackled while they were waiting to do it. But he used a knife to file through one of the shackles, and that night he knocked out the jailer with it. Before midnight a mob formed and took Big Nose George from the jail. He was made to climb a big box beside a telegraph pole with a rope around his neck; when he wouldn't jump they kicked the box out from under him, but the rope broke from the impact. Another noose was tied and this time they made him climb a ladder. When he reached the top they pulled it away but he wrapped his arms around the
telegraph pole and hung on until he dropped in exhaustion. That's where I see him the most clearly. I can feel how he clung to this pole and I wonder how long he lasted, was it minutes or hours, was it days; you have to know there wasn't a whole lot else for him to conserve his strength for. Afterwards Dr. John E. Osborne, who was later the governor of Wyoming, pronounced him dead and was allowed to take patches from George's body, which he had made into a pair of shoes.

I watch Amanda at lunch again, while I eat a chicken patty on a bun. I start to think about this meal, about how many chicken patties I've eaten since my first day of grade school and how I've never had one at home; and how, before long, sometime before I walk out of this building on June 6th, I may have eaten my last chicken patty without even realizing it. Amanda is having the same thing, I guess we all are. Even though I talked to her and asked her out, she feels further away than usual. I'm just distracted; I feel like I'm underwater, the afternoon is hazy and the voices of my friends seem muffled. It's just me, Dan, and Matt today. Steve's been skipping class, I think it's because he's flunking English. Matt skipped with him a few times, but came back to school because he was bored. They couldn't go anywhere, everyone they knew was at school and someone would recognize and report them if they walked around town. Steve's mom operates a beauty parlor in her basement so they had to hang out at Matt's and watch the movies his dad has on tape. I guess they got in some big argument about The Deer Hunter; "Fuck him," is all Matt will say about it and none of us know what Steve is doing when he's off by himself.

Dan is carrying on about nacho cheese. "Is nacho a separate kind of
cheese or is it just Spanish for ‘melted cheese,’ just like ‘sombrero’ means any kind of hat, not just the big wide-brimmed one. Face it, have you ever seen solid nacho cheese? But then how could they have nacho-flavored Doritos?"

Calculus is right after lunch. I think about how I will slip her this note, if I should steal her notebook, wrap it around a pen, or drop my pen and hand it off as I lean over to pick it up. What if I’m seen, the note is taken, and read out loud? Or not read, what it says left up to the imagination. For Amanda I’d like it to stay in the imagination I think, there is something romantic about casting my message in a bottle; I’d never have to see her read it after taking forever to write it.

In the end I fold it in half and hand it to her when we are both seated in class. It begins: “Amanda, I thought I asked you out this morning. Right now I am thinking that I sent you this note. But I’m not sure.” I don’t know why I’ve done this, I said in the draft before this, there are so many stupid reasons to like someone I don’t know. She doesn’t read it right away, but smiles and we go on with our lesson.

At the end of the day I find a note in my locker from Amanda. “By now I’m gone,” it starts. “Not gone forever, just for the day, though I guess I wouldn’t know. Some things disappear when you come close, like when you step in front of a light or walk into a spider’s web. I’ll be there on Saturday. I’m not one of those things.” Hers is more poetic than mine; I wonder what it means. It is signed, plainly, “Amanda.” I hide it in the pages of my history book and read it several times, before and after my run.
Amanda and I talk a little bit after school in the hallway, after the last bell rings and everyone else has cleared out. We exchanged notes again in calculus class; I brought up "Big Nose George" in mine and she says she laughed. I was kind of nervous that she wouldn't like it, there's a guy dying up there, but I felt more natural writing it, like I wasn't trying to be something I'm not. We're still on for Saturday. She's going to work on some things in the art room, and we're both trying to figure out what we should go out and do. "What do you make in there?" I ask, interrupting our goodbye, and she promises she'll show me when she finishes something. I'm going to visit Ron, who called me last night.

"Let me show you what I've done with the place," he says when I show up. "Just don't go around telling everyone about it." He fiddles slowly with some mechanism on the gate. The gate, like the rest of the black iron fence, is covered with climbing thorns that snake their way through it. Ron's house is probably a little older than the ones I saw on my run over, the houses built as the town expands slowly outward. It is, for the most part, just as nondescript as the others, stained wood siding and brick trim; except for, that is, the gate, the floodlights, and the security bars over all the windows.

Ron is obviously proud of his house but gives me the tour with a very deliberate slant. He shows me the raspberry bushes he planted and talks about how he'll eat some of them and make preserves, but it's really important to leave them alone for the first couple of years so they can
establish themselves. He shows me his workshed and the chickens he keeps. The whole thing is pretty domestic, like a small farm.

In the garage he points out all the features on his truck. I bump into a green plastic garbage can that sounds like it’s full of broken glass. Off the side of the driveway is a Cutlass Supreme. Ron shows how the spacious trunk stores a week’s worth of bottled water and rations, mostly MRE’s, that military food, and a few cans of Spam and peaches. He explains to me the importance of having a mobile unit to work out of if something should happen to the house.

“You don’t plan for accidents,” he says. “Accidents are what happen when you don’t plan.” Ron speaks quickly, brushing over his words. Ron isn’t nervous, that’s not him, we both know that if disaster strikes he’ll be the only one around left standing, but he does seem more self-conscious than usual. It’s not much of a change, Ron’s not a guy who doubts himself a lot and this is his life; it’s just a pause like when you stop and find yourself finally saying something you’ve thought about for a long time. I see digging tools in the trunk, and a shotgun and a 30-06 mostly covered by a dark green poncho. I also see a set of jumper cables.

“You’ve got a pretty good set-up here,” I say.

“You always forget something,” Ron says, in his regular voice. “It never turns out like you plan. You didn’t come all the way over here for us to stand around feeling good about ourselves, though.” Ron sees that I am still watching as he closes the trunk. “Let’s work out.”

He leads the way into the house through the garage door. He grabs an orange book off the counter, with several bookmarks in it, and we head down
the basement through a door right past the entryway to the kitchen. Ron flips
a switch at the bottom of the stairs.

"You can look through the book while I warm up." Ron's basement is
cinder block, painted off-white, and recently, by the look of it, with several old
exercise mats spread out along the cold cement floor. There's a set of weights
and a bench in the corner, a heavy bag hanging from the ceiling, and a jump
rope on the wall. Ron is wearing dark blue sweatpants and a grey t-shirt that
says "Army" on it, the kind you get free for sending the card back to the
recruiter. I wonder if he has more than one of them. I put my gym bag down.
I brought my wrestling shoes but decide not to put them on.

The book is called Warrior's Guide to Knife Fighting by John M.
LaTourette, Ph.D.; though it doesn't say anywhere on it what his degree is in
and I'm curious where Ron found it, it doesn't sell at the mall. I'm guessing
the author is the bad looking dude dressed in black on the cover with a big
mustache and a knife. Ron bounces as he stretches, reaching over to touch
his toes. He does his push-ups without going all the way up. I skim the book,
the sections on overkill and "the meal of death" before looking at the pictures
of the knife-fighting sequences in the back. Each one has a name to
remember it by.

"Ok, I'm ready. Let's get started," says Ron. He claps his hands
together.

We practice with me holding the book out and reading off the moves
while Ron goes through the motions of slicing me up with a rubber knife,
bought specially for the occasion. He got me one too. Our first move is called
"Mongol's Delight"; I can see why they liked it. I punch at Ron in slow
motion, he cuts open my forearm and grabs my wrist, kicks me in the nuts, then rips open the side of my neck. All of this is done deliberately and with painful concentration. Then I take out my knife and we switch positions. We go through several moves like this: The Ripping Panther, The Slashing Kimono, The Obscure Needle, and The Blade of Death.

Ron suggests we spar and with our rubber knives we begin to circle each other; I look into Ron’s eyes and see there is nothing in them that’s joking. This couldn’t be more serious to him. He switches his knife from hand to hand, feinting several times before lunging at me. I bat at it but he reminds me that everytime the knife touches in real life it draws blood, it begins to pull your life away.

I realize this is serious to me too. I want to make fun of the names, but more powerfully I don’t want to die on the floor of this basement, even if it is just pretend. If I had this book at home I’d hide it in the closet but I’d read it cover to cover just as Ron has done, falling asleep at night with it; and when I woke up I’d start to look at people a little differently.

I catch Ron’s right arm with my left hand as it comes down on me. He twists his wrist, trying to cut at me but I slash down along his bicep. He knees at me but I snap the arm down, he shrugs his shoulders to protect his neck and I cut him down the side of his head. I switch hands on the rubber knife and bring him out into a Russian tie; he hunches forward as I lock down on the elbow. From behind I stab at his kidneys; the knife bends and slides off his neck as I try to drive it into the base of his skull.

“This is great,” says Ron, catching his breath with real enthusiasm. “It’s like the Greeks. Men of different ages, brought together, training for
war." He wipes sweat off his forehead.

"I don't know if that's a comparison I want to make." I get defensive about that, when the hockey players call me "mat fag", especially now that I'm not supposed to fight.

"What do you mean? Just because they had sex with other men?" Ron asks. "They only did that because they were warlike, independent, and hated women so much."

"Yeah," I say.

"They were very disciplined and distrusted their senses, they knew that women would only deceive them. That's why they hung out with other men. It was kind of a rite of passage," Ron stands with his hands at his hips, pausing to breathe deeply, "rather than consort with women and slaves, men of different ages would spend time together and the older men would teach them virtue. They would initiate them into masculine activities."

"You've studied up on this."

"Don't they teach you anything in school. Come on," Ron motions up the stairs, "let's take a break."

The basement leads directly into the kitchen, Ron goes into the cupboard, pours me a glass of skim milk, and motions for me to sit down on one of the sturdy looking wooden chairs. His kitchen, by contrast to the other things I've seen, is pretty much like everyone else's. He's got some kind of filter over the water faucet though. I wonder if it's there to take out the fluoride.

"I think we get a bad rap," Ron says, joining me. "I'm not a Nazi; blacks and Jews, they're ok. We hold these truths to be self-evident, right,
that all men are created equal. It's not American to hate like that. You hate people, no way around it sometimes, but I deliver the mail to everyone and all of the time. I believe what I do is important. I believe in our way of life.” He takes a drink of milk and leans back in his chair. His back is to the window, and in this light I can see some grey in his hair.

"But there's nothing more American than survival," he continues, "and your way of life's got to go before some things if you're a man in this country. I don't think that bombs are going to drop out of the sky but you've got to be blind not to see something's changed. It's not a conspiracy. I can't buy that ten people orchestrated the assassination of Kennedy and kept a secret for thirty years. Shit; except for the mail the government can hardly do anything right."

Ron takes a slug from his glass, notices mine is empty, and finishes off his. "You want another round?" he asks, walking over to the refrigerator. He comes back with the carton. "I used to drink a lot of beer but that doesn't make you stronger, like this does. I should get myself a cow, or a goat. People are too dependent, without ever realizing it most of the time. The second amendment comes second for a reason. Your rights aren't worth a shit if you're not willing to defend them, to fight for what you love."

It makes me nervous when Ron talks about love. It's my plan to get out of here before he brings up the Greeks again.

"People don't talk much about love," he says as he sits down, "I don't suspect they ever did." I'm thinking that I can take Ron but if I do I'll have to kill him on this very floor so he doesn't blow up my mom with a letter bomb.

"I love this country," he begins. "I love my job. I love this time of
year and shooting ducks, the wind, the time just before the sun sets or just before it rises. Sometimes I wonder why some people love people and some love things, if it's the same kind of love. Sometimes I deliver a piece of mail and it's a love letter, you can feel it when you hold it, it's almost a shame it ever gets opened. But most of the mail is junk, more now than seventeen years ago when I started, it gets thrown away without ever being looked at. What do you make of that. You tell me.”

Ron hasn't touched his milk. His stare is not at me but past me. “I wonder what would happen if this country were invaded. I'd escape to the hills where the rivers never run out of water and the nights never run out of sky. And I'd damn well almost never run out of ammo, and if they left me be, I'm not sure I wouldn't just stay put. But if they came near, well, if you truly love something you're the most vicious thing on earth.”

I nod in agreement. “I've got a proposition for you,” Ron says. I've feared this moment. Ron puts down his glass.

“I've got some vacation coming up that I have to take before Christmas, a couple of weeks. I was going to drive down to Mexico, the only thing is I need someone to look after the homestead.”

“Why Mexico?” I ask. I'm trying to imagine Ron in a sombrero. It occurs to me that sombrero is the Spanish word for hat in general.

“It's sunny,” he says. “They have beaches and ancient ruins and stuff. Plus down there it's easy to get antibiotics without a doctor's prescription. So anyway, you've had a look around the place, do you think you can take care of it?” Ron gets up to turn on the light over the table. It's starting to get dark earlier. “I know you work some for Joe Smith, that's a recommendation as
far as I'm concerned. He's a good man."

"Yeah," I say. "When are you leaving?"

"Next Monday," he says, "after work. I'll draw up a list for you. All you really have to do is take care of the chickens and watch for intruders. I'll leave some food for you to eat, maybe a couple of books out you might be interested in. And I'll pay you. I'm not hurting."

"All right," I say. "It's a deal." We shake on it before I run back the way I came. As I am leaving I pause for a moment after Ron has returned inside the house. Through the window I can see him in the same spot at the kitchen table, reading.

Amanda and I play ping-pong on Saturday morning for our first date. It was her idea. In the summer she works at the Y, doing daycare for retarded kids. They have a table in the basement and they let us in for free.

I meet her there, she introduces me to a couple of people behind the desk and within seconds I can only remember that one of their names is Sarah. They give us two paddles and a ball and we walk downstairs. We both take off our jackets and then our sweaters, I'm wearing my state tournament t-shirt, she's wearing one with a koala bear on it. We play for a little over an hour on an old table on wheels, the net sags toward me. We're in a room by ourselves with a window, outside it there's a small indoor track, 27 times around it is a mile and a few people are running. We don't keep score and leave around noon when the little kids file in on the inside of the track with their play mats.

We walk aimlessly for a block or two, trying to think of what to do
now. From the other side of the street Brent waves and crosses over to join us. He's wearing a red windbreaker and pair of jeans, I see he has on a necklace of beads when he gets close but nothing unusual. I'm wary but I make the introductions.

"You'll have to visit me at my new place," he says. "It's in the basement of a house off Pine Street. I move in on Saturday."

"Do you need a hand bringing your stuff over?" I ask. Amanda is rocking back and forth on her heels beside me, looking off to the side. Brent is looking at her more than me, though it may just be that he wants to try to include everyone in the conversation.

"No. I don't have that much, I've simplified my life. It's been strange going through the things at my parents' house, those remnants of my past life." Brent sticks his hands in his pockets while he talks. "I don't want anything I don't need, but there are some things I don't need as much as others. When I see the things I once thought I needed it's hard for me to recognize myself, what I was."

"Like what?" Amanda asks.

"My mother keeps my old toys in a box, I suspect it's because she thinks I'll have kids and they'll want to come over and play with them. My favorite toy as a kid was GI Joe, this was back when he was 12 inches tall. I had this arctic exploration playset: it had this white camouflage suit, goggles, snowshoes, a sled, and a net to catch the Yeti with. When I played GI Joe he never shot anyone. He just went out and caught the Yeti."

"I have a friend who was talking about how she used to play with Barbie, and how damaging that is to young girls." he continues, lecturing.
"Barbie may be an astronaut, a biochemist, and a rock star; and that's all cool. But deep down she's just a plastic body, an idea that traps young girls." He waits for a response.

"Sure," says Amanda.

"I wonder if, in the same way, GI Joe warped me. I've never seen a Yeti but I know they exist, there are accounts of them I've read about how they come down to the high villages in Tibet and eat sheep. They are part of the cycle of nature, I respect the role they play and the unassuming way they do it. I envy their solitude. But deep down I still sometimes feel that I want to see one racing along, then stopping and looking around, his head held high against the backdrop of a snowy ridge. I'd like to follow his tracks in the snow. And if I had my net and camouflage suit, would I stop there? I don't know." He pauses, a breeze flutters his windbreaker, which seems a size too small. "What are you two up to?"

"I don't know." I say. I look at Amanda. "What do you want to do?"

"I don't think 'want' is what it's all about," Brent says. "You'll do what you do. I remember the moment I first attained enlightenment, I was sitting in the library in Boulder, reading a book. I realized I didn't want to read a book, I didn't want to stand up or go anywhere either, I didn't want to eat or sleep. But my mind was clear. I had completely overcome desire. It wasn't like someone jumped out and hit a gong, I just sat there, not wanting anything anymore."

"Wow. Ok," I say.

"Well I would join you, wherever it takes you, but I have to go to work." He brings his palms together and bows as he leaves.
“How do you know him?” Amanda asks.

“He works with Dan,” I say. “I’ve really only met him once, I think he just likes to talk.”

“He’s a strange guy,” she says. “I think I remember him from years ago; he used to shoot baskets for hours at the junior high by our house. He’d be there by himself, every night. If someone else came to play he’d just leave.”

We go and each buy a cup of tea and sit and drink it. Then we walk down by the lake. We talk about what Brent must do with all his free time. I tell her that my mother is pregnant. Amanda tells me about how she doesn't much like high school, how there's a lot of people she just doesn't have anything to say to. She says she spends a lot of time in the art room, it gives her time to think. She tells me that she didn't think I was a jock. She'd look over and see what I got on my math tests, I didn't do a very good job of hiding it. She says she heard that I was a good wrestler. We sit together on a bench in the park and watch the ducks. Her arms are crossed. Ducks are amazing, Amanda tells me. Every fall they fly off a thousand miles south before winter comes, and every spring they fly back to this exact same place. We watch the ducks swim tight circles, then waddle up on shore and peck the hard ground.

I had a talk with my parents today. My dad wrote me out a check for the SAT and told me to send it in, my mom gave me a book of stamps. She told me that every day she comes into my room and sees the same letters from colleges sitting on my dresser, untouched. College is a lot of money, they told me, but if that's what you want to do we'll find a way. You just
have to decide what you want to do, and time is getting short. A Marine recruiter called me up last night and I talked with him for about twenty minutes. I guess we'll have to see what happens.

At the same time, my mom and dad also talked with me about housesitting for Ron. They don't much like the idea.

"It's not that we're saying he's a bad guy," my dad said. "But he's had a rough couple of years. We'd prefer it if you wouldn't get involved with him." Because I'm getting paid and I'd already agreed to do it, not to mention that Ron will be in a foreign country while I'm at his house, they'll still let me, as long as I make sure to check in with them every day.

I call up Amanda on Sunday night. I have the number written on a small piece of paper but I doublecheck it against the phone book. I wonder if I'm in love because I feel stupid, how hard is it to use the phone? I wait for an hour after dinner and dial from upstairs, and let it ring. A kid answers, about 9 or 10.

"Hello, is Amanda there?" I ask. "I'm calling for a math assignment." The phone drops to the floor. I sit for a moment.

"Hi."

"Hi there."

"Let me switch phones. You can talk to Hugh for a minute."

"Ok." I hear the phone being turned over. "Hi," I say. "What are you up to tonight?"

"I'm watching SeaQuest. I did my math homework." He begins to describe the plot to me. I listen carefully, for the lack of anything better to do. In the middle he stops. "Are you related to Amanda too?" he asks.
“Ok, you can hang up the phone now,” Amanda says. “Not you.”

“Good,” I say. “How are you doing?”

“You needed the calculus assignment?”

“No, actually I already did it.”

“I wouldn't have let you talk to my brother if I knew you were going to lie to him.”

“How was your day?” I ask. “I thought I might call. I'm not very good on the phone, I hardly ever talk on the phone unless the market research people call and I pretend I'm my dad. Everyone else hangs up and I feel sorry for them. But I thought this was the right thing to do.”

“I'm glad you called.”

We start talking about our days. I went for a run and raked leaves. I spent some time with my dad, I didn't mention that we were watching football. Then I did my homework. As I said it, it didn't sound like a whole lot. Amanda told me that her oldest brother raked leaves and her little brother ran and jumped in the piles. She read the paper. Then she went for a walk and did her homework. Our days were even. I wondered what part she left out, maybe she was having her period or something.

We stretch this into an hour, talking about nothing more, exchanging blood types, stuff like that. I'm not even sure what was said. I think at one point I started telling her about the plot of tonight's episode of SeaQuest. Finally somebody yells for her to get off the phone. Amanda tells me she'll talk to me later and we hang up.
"I was driving the other day," says Steve. While I talked to Amanda on the phone last night, our relationship hasn't progressed to the point where we would sit together at lunch. So it's just me and Steve right now, she hasn't showed up yet, sitting at the table eating. He's finally come back to school after being gone most of the past two weeks and is trying to tell me about it.

"Middle of the day," he says, "sun was out, the windows were rolled down and there was this Neil Diamond song on the radio, 'Thank the Lord for the Night Time'. That's the kind of music my dad listens to. I make fun of him for it, I tell him it's old person music and when I start getting into it I know I'm too far gone. But I've got it cranking and I'm going 75 and there's no one around; white, red, and yellow bugs making a pattern on the windshield, I straddle the yellow line and take my hands off the wheel; and I can see for miles in front of me and miles behind, and there's no one around.

"I was heading back into town and I stopped for a hitchhiker, a guy just standing at the crossroads with a paper bag. I popped the door and realized how loud the radio was, I mean, when you compare it to the rest of the world. The guy was wearing a jean jacket and hadn't shaved; he had a paper bag full of candy bars and was eating them one after another, he had one in his mouth the whole time. I was trying to talk to him, he told me how he just drifted around and he figured it was time to be moving on soon; all I kept saying was that I liked these backroads because there weren't any cops around
and you could drive fast, I just kept trying to pull it off that I was older than I am. And I took him all the way up to the trailer park outside of town, he just got out and nodded and I didn’t feel like going fast anymore, I just drove on back home. I just figured, man, I've got to do something with my life. So here I am." I nod. Matt and Dan sit down with us, and Steve repeats the same story for them. Listening to them, or half-listening to the same thing, I realize how tired I am of eating this same lunch at the same table with the same people, every day and every year, just not going anywhere. I ask Steve what it is he plans on doing and I don't get a response. They keep on talking.

I moved into Ron's house today. I now have in my possession six keys and a typed five-page single-spaced set of instructions in a plastic folder. "A man who's got a lot of keys is important in this world," he told me as he handed them over, adding "Everything's pretty low tech, less to go wrong." as he handed me the five-page list. He didn't leave any phone numbers. I walk around, I turn on lights, but I don't feel ready to touch anything yet. I was in his library today; he has everything from Counterterrorism: Hijacking Tactics to biographies of Vince Lombardi to the Time-Life series about Vietnam. On his top shelf he has two iron bookends of horses leaping away from snakes, the only real decoration in the house besides the aerial map of our town on the dining room wall. I reach and pick up a horse and find it's lighter than I expected; I unscrew the bottom and there's a hollowed out chamber with wire, fishing line, hooks, a folding knife, and a sharpening stone. I also find a nine volt battery and a folded Polaroid of the woman Ron used to live with, on the beach at Park Point in Duluth. It looks like the fall
and it's windy, her blond hair's been whipped up and she's wearing her white coat, looking cold. Everything's packed inside the bookend with green plastic Easter grass to keep it from rattling around when you shake it. The statue must be fireproof, that's my only explanation for it. It makes me wonder what else I'll find as I look around here; I mean, there's six things of Draino under the kitchen sink but that's out in the open, I know there's something more. I haven't told any of my friends I'm staying at here, I don't want them hanging around all the time. I haven't mentioned anything about this to Joe either, though maybe my parents have. Joe has never mentioned Ron, though I know they spent time together and he's not usually very tightlipped about other people's business.

My friends have seen me talking with Amanda. It's not something I hide, and now that I'm this far in I've got the message from them that I'm on my own. It's not their deal and just not something they'll talk about. When we all eat lunch together I'm more self-conscious, I know I'm being watched and I have to work at being spontaneous around them. Captain's practice starts in just over two weeks, I'm as ready as I ever was but I'm tired. I want it to start just so I can break up the routine, so I can stop waiting and do something, stop pushing just myself. This is a part of my life I can't tell Amanda about. She knows I wrestle but she doesn't know what it means. It's like my dark secret; I can't think of her going to one of my matches, I don't want her to, she wouldn't understand. My greatest fear is that we'll be walking together and someone will jump out at me, and I'll have to take them out. She'd think that all along I was just pretending to be something I'm not. But that's not it.
I run into Brent again Wednesday in the SuperValu parking lot, wearing the same thing as last time. Ron left me some money to buy some fresh fruit and vegetables so I did. I'm coming out with a single bag when I meet him as he walks across toward me.

"Small world," I say.

"It is," he replies, giving kind of strained smile, "and a strange one. I've moved. You'll have to come and visit."

It's only been a few days since I last saw Brent but I've asked Dan about him, what he does all day. "I don't know," he said. "I guess he just walks the earth." I saw him from a distance yesterday afternoon as classes let out, on the edge of the school grounds, watching from the side as people boarded buses or walked out the front doors past the flagpole to go home. We end up walking a block and sitting on the parking lot fence across from the church, drinking orange juice; country style, I sift it through my teeth to see if it has as much pulp as the carton claims.

"It's strange coming back to this place, this town," he says. Brent leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "I know that I've become a different person but it's not what I expected." I ask him what his plans are in the future and he says he doesn't know. I'm waiting for him to mention Amanda. I tell him that I'm housesitting for Ron but not to spread it around, he nods his head, pursing his lips and leaning forward a little more. A black and grey dog crosses the street and comes trotting toward us, swinging from side to side as it runs.

"Hey, boy." Brent pats its stomach and fumbles with its collar. "Hey Buck," he corrects.


Buck noses over toward me and the grocery bag at my feet.

"Back off," I say. "Dogs don't eat bananas."

"I had a dog that did. Oddly enough his name was Huck, I named him. He was wandering through the neighborhood and we fed him so he stuck around. I remember we tried to give him to the guy who was putting in our deck, he already had three dogs so it wouldn't have made much of a difference. But the guy brought him back after a couple of days, all he did was fight with the other dogs. He was always getting into fights, but the thing was, he always lost. Still he was totally gentle, you could jump up and down and ride on his back and he still wouldn't do anything. He was pretty old when we got him and he lived another fifteen years after that, but I don't think I ever heard him bark."

I squint into the wind and pull up the hood of my sweatshirt.

"I always thought of him as a god," Brent continues, "that somehow he was sent to me for a reason. When I lived in Colorado I read the Mahabharata, well most of it anyway. I'd read the Bhagavad Gita and that was just a chapter in it, I didn't know that. There's these three brothers and they're on a battlefield, only they're about to go to war with these teachers and holy men, these people they respect. The middle brother, Arjuna, he's really confused about what to do. Bhima the youngest brother, he's kind of like you, he wants to rip their arms out and beat them with the wet ends. But Dharma, the oldest brother, doesn't want anything to do with it, he wants to become enlightened. He goes off into the desert with this dog and wanders around for forty days, seeking a vision. Finally this god appears in front of him and says "Well you passed the test, you can come up to heaven and
become enlightened, only the dog has to stay behind”. And Dharma looks at the god, and at the dog, his faithful companion, and says “I don’t think I can do that”. And there’s a flash of light and it’s revealed the dog was also a god all along and this was just his last test and he passed it.”

A woman in a blue robe appears from the garage level of the apartment complex across the street. She shuffles quickly out to the sidewalk, looking both ways.

“Buck,” she screams. “Goddamnit Buck, get over here.” Buck drops his tail and his ears and stays on our side of the street as he starts toward her slowly, turning back toward us twice. She walks into the middle of the road and grabs him. “You don’t run away,” she pronounces loudly, smacking him on the backside after each word. Then we watch as she drags him by the collar back where she came from.

I think about what Brent said after he leaves, as I walk back to Ron’s. Last year I was waiting around outside after practice; I was getting picked up by Mrs. Barrington. I haven’t really talked about it with anyone since it happened. It was the week before state, the Friday after I qualified and my parents were just out of town at this Bed and Breakfast up north, it was their anniversary and my dad called into the radio station and got a free stay. Mrs. Barrington works with my mom and I’d be fine on my own but she insisted that she look after me some. The Barringtons have two older sons who’ve moved away and a daughter, Denise, who’s a year younger than me. Mrs. Barrington keeps trying to set us up. Denise is always getting her legs waxed and entering these beauty pageants but I think she’s a hog, she’s nice enough
but I just can't. Her parents were trying to get me to be her escort at one of the contests, they were going to go out and buy me this $200 suit. Her mom is always telling her how pretty she is. When we're in the car she asks me things like "Tell me, are there any girls at school as pretty as Denise." I usually end up coming out with a "Umm, no, you bet".

I was waiting out in front of the school. When people asked me about it I said he threatened to kill me. I was waiting with some guys on the team and Tyler Nuss, who was on the basketball team, who was standing there and dribbling a ball. Mark Pagel, our 189 pounder, came up and grabbed it out of his hands.

"Give me my fucking ball back." Tyler repeated it several times. It sounded kind of ridiculous. The ball got passed around. Finally I gave it to him.

"Good," he said. "I would have killed you."

"I'm waiting," I said.

"You wanna go. Right here, asshole."

"Let's take it to the Trail." The Trail is a ditch just across the street where people go to fight. I wasn't about to do anything on school property, where they could bust me.

"Right here pussy," he said. I grabbed the ball out of his hands and threw it out where it bounced to the Trail.

"The ball's mine until you come and get it." A crowd followed us to the Trail. Tyler was a senior and a lot bigger than me, he stepped in and grabbed me and ripped my favorite shirt; I'd thought I'd lost it the beginning of the school year but had just found it that week behind my bed. And I just
came up and head butted him right in the face; blood splayed down across the
top of my chest. He staggered back and started swinging wildly. I hit him a
few times before I came around and went belly to back on him hard. Then I
started hitting him on the ground until he was holding his arms in front of
him trying to roll over face down in the ditch.

I got up and jogged out past the small crowd of people, my shirt
covered in mud and blood. Mrs. Harrington was waiting for me with the
engine running. She’d seen the whole thing. I opened the door to the car.

"Just don’t bleed on the seats," she said. She offered to take me out to
McDonalds but I just wanted to go home.

I had showered and put on a new shirt, a nice shirt, when the police
came and drove me down to the station. They read me my rights on the way
and took my picture when I got there. Then they led me into a room, two
cops were in there, and asked me what happened. When I said it was self-
defense they showed me a picture of Tyler with his nose broken and eye
swollen shut, in the hospital with fractured ribs and a punctured lung.

"That seems a little hard to buy," they said.

I sat alone in that room for an hour after they were done questioning
me, left sitting bolt upright by a desk in a room with the door closed, watching
the silent slow flow of the station at night, a couple of drunks and me. I knew
enough not to say much and incriminate myself, but I think that at the time I
just didn’t remember it as well as I do now. I remember wondering when I’d
get to call my parents.

I got to leave before anyone else spoke to me when Matt and his dad
showed up. Matt’s on the junior police reserve, that means he’d get out of
school to stand by an orange cone if the president comes to visit, and his dad owns Jimbo’s Gun Shop, where some of the cops come to shoot on the weekend. So they knew pretty much everyone on the force. Mr. Anstey comes storming in wearing this long fur lined coat, Matt following right behind him wearing his letter jacket. Matt’s dad looks like a gangster, for all I know, waving his arms and I couldn’t hear what he said but one of the cops who brought me here came over and brought me out.

“All I’m saying,” I heard him barking, “is that my heart goes out to that kid but he started a fight with the wrong SOB.” I stood there looking dumb. Mr. Anstey signed something, I think for me. Then he put his arm around my shoulder. “Come on,” he said, and led me out.

I guess he brought Matt, who was a witness, to give his account of the story. He didn’t lie but I don’t know that he told the complete truth. The cops like Matt, and Mr. Anstey too, but he’s a pretty intimidating guy. He’s incredibly loud. I remember going to a movie with him when I was a kid. There used to be another gun store in town and there was some bad blood between them. Both Matt’s dad and the other guy were a lot alike, big guys who talked all the time. We were waiting in line and he spotted him up ahead.

“Hey you fat fuck,” he yelled. “Going to see the Muppets by yourself?” I remember the guy looking back and not saying anything, his six-year old daughter and her friend in the line in front of him.

We drove home in silence with me in the front seat and Matt in the back. He pulled into my driveway and left the engine running. I hadn’t left any lights on in the house.
“Hey,” he said as I started to open my door to get out. “It happens.”
He extended his hand and I shook it. I went back into my empty house, Matt and his dad watching as I fumbled with the key.
I stayed with my parents last night, instead of at Ron's house all alone. I called them and they drove over to pick me up. My knee hurts this morning, it hurt last night, the left one on the outside of the cap. It's stiff from yesterday, or even last week, and I feel it as I lie in bed. I straighten it out and try to relax it. My alarm goes off at ten after seven and every nine minutes afterwards as I stretch my arm out to press the button. It's 8:22 by the time I finally get up and eat.

I was going to run stairs today over at the football field. I try to do a speed or hill workout every Saturday. I sprint up the stairs ten times, hop up on each leg twice, then on both legs two stairs at a time twice. Then I repeat. Instead I look over the new SAT book. It was a gift from my mother, it has sample tests and a list of words I should know. She gave it to me last night when I got home, along with my mail. She's really gained some weight, but that's supposed to be a good sign, that the baby's healthy.

I have a bowl of Cheerios and an orange, I'm just not that hungry when I don't train. I have all these extra hours I don't know what to do with, I don't have much of anywhere to go I haven't already been. My dad's working on making a crib in the garage, he's really good at those sorts of things. Over the sound of the power sander, I can hear that he's listening to "Car Talk" on his old clock radio, like he does every Saturday.

I page through the paper and think about being injured. I think about stretching more and ice. I guess the thing about an injury is that once it's
there it's always there, sitting in the back of your mind for the next time you test it.

Outside of the summer I don't usually work for Joe Smith, but I'm doing it again this morning as a favor to my mother. Lindsay's mother died on Thursday, it wasn't a surprise, she'd been sick for awhile, so she went with the kids down to Mankato, that's where she's from. She wanted Joe to come with her to the funeral but he said he had too much to do. I heard my parents talking about it last night, in the other room; I guess she's worried about him, he's been stressed out and hasn't been spending any time at home, he just hasn't been himself. If he's overworked, my mom thought that I could help.

I get dressed and walk the half a mile or so downtown, where the dump truck is parked in front of the municipal building. I don't see Joe initially, but when I get closer I find him lying on his back beneath it.

"How's it going, Joe?" I ask him.

"Well, as the main falling off the ten story building said, 'So far, so good.'" The top half of Joe's body is underneath the tail end of the dump truck. "Could you hand me a flat head screwdriver?"

"Shouldn't someone else be working on this?"

"I feel a certain responsibility for this one. It'd be easier," Joe starts pounding loudly on something with the butt of the screwdriver, "but that's the problem. Yesterday Rolf came to me, I was pulling out a stump, with this new insurance loophole you get with some national affiliation and asked me what I thought about it. I told him I think it robs people of their
individuality."

“What’d he say?”

“What could he say? He’s my boss, he never thinks about things like that. And I took it because that’s 200 bucks at the end of the month, and I have a family. But it hurts the people trying to make it on their own, outside the big conglomerate. I’m thinking about Jim Ray. I used to log with him in Grand Marais. He’s got a wife named Hillie, he brought her back with him from Germany after the war. Her kidneys are failing and he can hardly work anymore. He logs with his son-in-law and they split it right down the middle. But where did we ever lose that, that kind of loyalty where you grow up and see your dad and go work with him and there’s that legacy. I think that’s why I have this job, so my kids can see exactly what I do. Then maybe they can decide to do something else.”

“I don’t know exactly what my dad does,” I say. “He’s a general contractor.”

“I do, your dad at least. My dad designs incentives to increase worker productivity.” Joe crawls out from underneath the truck and starts to put his tools away. “Like if you recruit ten new people you get a toaster, when with what they pay him you could probably buy everyone a toaster and still come out ahead. I doesn’t make a lot of sense to me. I know a guy who drives a backend loader, but he graduated first in his class at the main U. in civil engineering. He could do whatever he wants but he drives this loader because his dad did and he gets a kick out of it. That’s how it should be.”

“Does that mean I get to drive?” I ask.

“I’m not sure even if I should drive, though I guess we should go and
do some work." He drops his tray of tools into the back and I climb in the cab. Joe circles around the truck and checks something before he joins me. The truck starts loudly.

I feel like bringing up Amanda but I don't know how to do it. Joe drives like a man who is not pressed for time, driving out past the park, taking big turns and signaling them way in advance. He says nothing, just stares straight ahead at the road.

"What are we doing this morning?" I ask.

"We've got an older woman with a maple growing between power lines, and some dead elms she's concerned might blow into the house with a good ice storm. Usually you hire people out for this, but I'm doing it as a favor."

When we pull up, Joe directs me to stay in the truck and meets the woman on her front porch. They talk with their backs turned to me, Joe pointing at up at different branches on the elms. Then he motions for me to grab a saw and come on out. I walk around the side of the house with Jeanie, the old woman, following the yard along a crooked and peeling picket fence. If she is five feet tall it's just barely, and her white hair is curled tightly, like she went somewhere to have it done. There is a pile of rusted tools and equipment in the corner, back where there used to be a shed. Old mops and boards lean against the house. Smoke rises from chimney. There is a Mazda RX-7 out front that belongs to her daughter, who is inside the house and doesn't feel well.

She shows me two things: a maple in back, growing out between power lines, and a wild scrubby tree on the narrow side yard against a panel
fence, growing out and over into the neighbor's yard in a tangle of living and
death branches over a patch of rhubarb. I decide to leave the maple for Joe.

"We planted them to keep the neighbors from looking in the
windows," she tells me. "Now I just look out and get depressed, they're
taking over the whole yard." She watches as I work, pulling her green felt
cloak around herself. It is longer than she is and drags along the ground. In
the front, I hear Joe firing up the chainsaw. I cut out some lower branches.

I tell her she can get at her rhubarb now; she tells me how she doesn't
make pies anymore, but she bought an apple pie last week and ate the whole
thing in one afternoon. I climb higher in the tree and let her talk, stopping
her several times to ask if this is the branch she wants off. She was from
Mississippi and married a serviceman she knew for five weeks when she was
15, she was 20. Her mother had forbidden her to date until she was 16 so they
eloped north, following the river; her mother could only be angry with her
for a few weeks but once she left she never went back, just once for a day and
she got heat stroke.

I saw through the branches easily, very few of them are any larger than
a forearm. She had a son and a daughter before her husband died of a heart
attack at 41. Her son took it hard and went on to become a paramedic. He
married, but after eight years his wife told him she just didn't love him
anymore. He drove his motorcycle out into the rain, the police told her going
out in that condition was worse than going out drunk. They were all very
quiet as they stood on her doorstep to tell her the news, they came to her
before his wife. There was little they could say, they all liked him a lot.

She talks to me about her health, her surgeries, and her little black dog
named Grizzly Bear, who she kept in the house and was 17 years old and blind in one eye. She said she didn't have the energy to walk him anymore and that he wasn't well, that he toddled around in the day but would scream in the night. I feel too young and just listen; what right do I have to say anything, I'm seventeen, as old as the dog, and still live with my parents in my hometown, in my dad's hometown, the place I've spent every year and every summer. I stand there and cut away the dead branches from the living ones, sawing them away or reaching for the brittle twigs and striking them away from the tree, while she continues to speak.

I look back toward Joe, who is sitting in the cab of the truck. He remains there while I finish and load the brush into the back. He is chewing gum, several sticks of Big Red, and he doesn't offer me any as I get in. I have the idea he's been drinking, there's nothing to back it up, just a smell, the quiet, the way he's hiding something. Joe throws the truck into gear. He doesn't say anything to me; I don't know what I would say to him either, and he drops me off in front of my house and drives on.

I have to stop by Ron's to feed the chickens and collect the eggs, and I finally end up calling Amanda's about an hour and a half later than I planned on. A man answers. "Who are you?" he asks. I tell him. "Never heard of you," he says. When Amanda comes to the phone I tell her I'll head over to see her; instead we agree to meet at the park, just a little over halfway. She sounds distant and the connection is bad. I tell her I will see her soon.

I run anyway, I'm forgetting about my knee, and I'm at the park well
before her. Winter is coming; it is cool and overcast and the only birds in the trees are black ones. A wind blows across the lake. Ice, formed along the shores, has broken off and drifts into the middle. It makes the lake a patchwork of open water and these sheets of different thicknesses, some thick enough to reflect the light and some thin enough to show the dark water beneath it. I stretch out and am sitting on a swing when I see her walking up, her hands tucked back into the sleeves of her jacket to stay warm. She is carrying a book. I begin to stand but she joins me on the neighboring swing.

"How are you?" I ask.

"I don't know. Tired."

"I didn't mean to drag you out," I begin.

"No," she says. "That's all right."

This park has a lot of memories for me. I tell her about how this is where Matt had his bike stolen when we were ten and how we used to swing up as high as we could, then let go and fall backwards off the swing, doing a flip before we landed. I can't do that anymore, I'm too big. I think about a game we had where we'd see who could jump off the highest point on the jungle gym. I never lost. Next to me Amanda is not swinging but swaying, she pushes herself along with her feet but they never quite leave the sand.

"Who was that on the phone?" I ask.

"Who?"

"The one who wanted to know who the hell I was."

"That was my dad."

I'd never heard Amanda mention her dad before, or even that she had one, though I guess it kind of figures. I know she told me her mom is seeing
a guy named Phil. "What does he do?" I ask.

"Not a lot," she says. "Be gone mostly."

There is a long pause between us. I've stopped swinging. "He left when I was five. My mom kicked him out, I don't remember much, this is back when we lived in Michigan. They argued a lot and he didn't come home sometimes. We'd eat dinner late, that's what I remember from being a kid, we'd eat around eight o'clock, just my mom and me, like we were waiting for him even when it was clear he wasn't going to show up. She'd never make me go to bed. Either we'd both get tired or he came home, then she'd send me to my room. I was tired all the time and my teachers sent letters home."

"I'd listen in on them sometimes but I couldn't understand what they said, just the noise. I'd just be in the room with the light on, with my toys on the floor, just looking at them the whole time. Once they shut me in my room with Ollie, he's my dog. He was just a puppy then, my dad had brought him home for my birthday. They were arguing for a long time about something and Ollie had to go to the bathroom, he kept whining and I couldn't make him stop. He started barking and scratching at the door; I was trying to drag him back by his collar when my dad burst in, yelling at me for listening. I told him I wasn't and he hit me, twice, once for lying he said. That was right before he left."

"Did he ever come back before now?" I ask.

"Once maybe. He didn't keep in touch, he didn't send anything, not even a birthday card, though we had heard he'd gone off and got another family. We moved here to live with my grandma. When I was nine, my mom told me he wasn't my dad, he was impotent and couldn't have kids,
and I didn’t have to have anything to do with him if I didn’t want to. I don’t know if it’s true or not, I’m not much like him.” She brushes the hair away from her face. “She hasn’t told me much else. She was real young when she got married. I don’t think she was ready to be a mother.”

“Is your grandma still alive?” I ask.

“No,” Amanda says. “She died a couple of years ago. She was in a home.”

“Oh,” I say.

“It happens.” Amanda brushes her hair away from her face with her sleeve. I’m not sure what to say.

“What’s it like with him back?” I ask.

“Well Phil, I told you about him, he moved in with my mom just a couple of weeks ago, they’d been going out for about a year. He brought Scott and Hugh with him; Hugh follows me around, Scott does too even though he’s in ninth grade. I don’t think he has many friends, he spends all his time trying to teach himself karate from a book. So now we’re like one big happy family, that’s what Dad says. He sleeps on the couch and he’s either there or in the kitchen. He just keeps saying that, that and he’s going to leave in just a couple more days, he just wants to see his family. He must be in some kind of trouble to be here, he didn’t seem to come for any reason. I can’t understand why he’s here, it’s like he wants to say something and is looking to me as an ally. When I was a kid he used to be able to peel an egg and keep the shell intact, that used to really impress me. Well now he keeps doing it, everytime I walk into the room it seems like. He’s been trying to give me advice, but mostly he just gets on me about what I eat.”
"You look cold," I tell her, "should we get out of the wind?"

"Yeah. I guess maybe a little," she says.

We sit behind a big tree at the far end of the park, watching the houses across the street and the occasional car that goes by. We can see them and they can see us. We sit shoulder to shoulder, staring straight ahead; she shivers gently, almost imperceptibly.

"Would you like to borrow my sweatshirt?" I ask her. She shakes her head but I feel her weight against me. I shift a little to let her move in next to me, trembling slightly as she breathes. I put my arm around her, like I would a friend, hand resting firmly on the far shoulder, and she closes her eyes.

"I guess I just need a lean," she says, moving next to me.

I have dreamed about this moment, what I think it is, when I am needed. But now that I'm here I don't know. Amanda is warm against me and I think I can feel her smiling, only just a little. I see the cars drive by and know, though it seems like hours already, that this is just an interlude for us before we have to stand back up. Amanda is just resting before she heads back home. The book she brought, that she left the house with saying she was going to the library, lies at our feet; and though we are touching I don't feel like something's been settled or decided, instead it's like I'm on a ship and can no longer look back and see the land.

If Amanda needs me I'm not sure, or sure what for yet. I hold her but I can't say anything, not now, and she talks with a hurt in her words. She just hints at it, and I want to think I understand, but I'm not sure and it makes me uneasy; pain is something I can't show, I'm not sure how to react to it. You just don't see wounded things in the wild, Joe told me this last summer. A
bird dragging a wing or a rabbit limping, it's not real, they're just trying to draw off predators. Often they're mothers, buying time, trying to get their young to run. If an animal's really hurt it'll go off by itself to die. It'll curl up at the base of a tree, in the leaves, and lie there with its big eyes open.

She hugs me tightly as we say goodbye, and as she walks away, looking over her shoulder, I'm just not sure where I'm going. Home, I guess. Tomorrow Amanda is going on a picnic with her family, her father has insisted they all drive out to the shore together in Phil's minivan. She says that she'll call when she gets back, or else talk to me on Monday if it's late.
I arrive back home about an hour before dark. My mother is in the kitchen, making a hotdish with wild rice and cream of mushroom soup. I tell her I was with Joe, cleaning up an old woman's yard.

"Be sure that you don't forget Denise Barrington's party tonight." She tells me, before I can leave the room. "I saw that you left your invitation lying on the floor. Mona called me up and told me to be sure to remind you, this really is a big deal to Denise. She told me that if you're afraid you don't know anyone you should bring one of your friends."

"Hmmm," I say.

"Don't dread the inevitable," she responds. "You might want to clean up and put on a nice shirt before you go."

I call up Dan before I get in the shower, praying that he's home. As it turns out he's sitting by the phone working on a crossword. "You ever notice," he says, "that when you do a crossword 'erect' is always one of the words. What's up with that?" I explain my predicament and he tells me he'll call Tracy to see what she had planned tonight and then get right back to me.

"You could always ask Steve," he says before he hangs up. "He hasn't said anything, but I think he wants to nail her. That might take some pressure off."

"Wow, she made the cut." I pause. "I'm thinking I'd like to make a fairly early exit."
“Gotcha,” says Dan. He calls back in a couple of minutes and says he'll drive. He picks me up after dinner, my parents wave to him but don't say anything besides “Have fun” as we leave.

“I've got a bad feeling about this,” I say.

“That's your problem,” says Dan. “You think too much. Just try to relax and have fun.”

The Harringtons live in a very colonial looking house, fake pillars and white wood siding, all lit up tonight, with neatly trimmed hedges and a spacious lawn. There are a couple of those big orange pumpkin leaf bags in the yard, and other tasteful Halloween decorations in the window, which I feel are also very appropriate for Denise's birthday. We park down the street and leave our jackets in the car and walk toward the house.

Mrs. Barrington is waiting at the front door, where she greets us warmly and offers to take our coats. We shrug and she warmly directs us down to the basement, where the party is just starting. “Be sure to say hi to your mom,” she tells me.

We walk into the basement, where the lights are down low and a handful of Denise's friends are bouncing up and down and clapping their hands to “YMCA” by the Village People. Drooping strands of crepe paper are taped to the ceiling. Dan sticks his hand into a bowl of potato chips sitting on the pool table.

“This isn't a party,” he says, “it's a neutered festival. Let's eat these chips and split.”

Denise comes running up from the side and throws her arms around me. She is wearing some kind of new Norwegian sweater and I can smell her
hair and feel her breasts pressing against me as she buries her head in my shoulder. I'm thinking that she's drunk, not that I have any reason to suspect she's been drinking but that's just the way she acts. She seems to add an extra syllable to every word she says.

"Hey birthday girl," says Dan. He looks at me.

"I'm so glad you could come," she says. "This is so much fun. Can I get you something to drink?" I ask for a mineral water. From my experience with the Harringtons, I know there will be plenty of them. Dan asks for a Coke, Denise pats me on the shoulder as she skips off toward the cooler. I look at Dan and he only has time to shrug before she returns.

"Are you having fun?" she asks. Dan pops open his Coke.

"Yup," he says.

"Oh, it's Nikki and Erin," she says, as the next two people tentatively make their way down the stairs. I have to turn around to see them. "Let me go greet them, I'll be right back."

We move, without thinking about it much, from the pool table back into the corner.

"That Denise," Dan says. "She's not a subtle woman."

"You know," I say. "There aren't a lot of guys here."

"Yeah I know," Dan says. "If they decide to play spin the bottle we may not make it out of here alive."

I start to ask him if he'd ever played spin the bottle. "Damn," he says, looking past me on the wood paneled walls. "Check it out. It's a roach."

"Where?" I say. "Pick it up."

Dan drops to his knees and scrambles along the base of the wood panel
wall. Then he stands triumphantly, holding it belly up between his thumb and forefinger. "Denise would freak if someone found a bug this big at her party," he says. I know he's thinking about that bowl of chips.

"You know what," I say. "If there were a nuclear war, or a comet hit the earth, that roach would be one of the few things still alive. We'd all be dead and that thing would be crawling around, looking for something to eat. It doesn't seem fair."

"It isn't fair," says Dan, holding the bug up to squash it.

"Wait a minute," I say. I look around for dramatic effect. "They won't miss us. Let's go upstairs and nuke it."

"Yeah. Now you're thinking." At first Dan tries to cram the roach into his shirt pocket, then gives up and cups it in his hand. He nonchalantly holds it to his side, pretending he has a backache. I think, that if anyone asks, I'll tell them we're looking for more refreshments. No one does.

The thing about the Barrington's house, I've noticed before in the little time I've spent here, is that everything is white: all the carpet (they have carpet in the bathroom), the tile, the walls, the refrigerator, the toaster, the stove; you can see your reflection in practically everything. Above the kitchen table is a little sign that says "Bless this Mess," but there's absolutely nothing out of place.

"How long should we cook him for?" asks Dan, popping open the microwave door.

"Let's start slow. I say 15 seconds on low." Dan presses the buttons and we watch as the light comes on and the bug spins slowly on the rotisserie, scurrying forward and reversing directions as it turns. It doesn't seem in the
least bit phased.

"We're not scientists," says Dan. "I say five minutes on high." We lean back against the counter and watch it cook.

"Look at him wiggle," I say.

"Listen," Dan says. "Do you hear the Barringtons? Are they going to come down and find us?"

"No," I say. "And if they do you'll talk our way out of it. What else can we microwave?" I walk over and open up the refrigerator door.

"Grab an egg," says Dan. "It's cool, it doesn't explode until somebody touches it."

"It might be a week before anybody uses this thing again, Dan."

"You might be right."

"How's our bug?" I ask.

"I think he's sleeping," Dan calls. "You know what would be great, those chocolate covered marshmallow bunnies. The chocolate melts away and then they blow up."

"How about this?" I pull out half a watermelon. "Do you think it'll fit?"

"We'll make it fit," says Dan. We slice off and end so it can squeeze in. Dan makes a little tray out of foil to put it on to collect the drippings so it doesn't make such a mess. In the process, it occurs to me, we've probably squashed our roach. I bring this up to Dan.

"Fuck the roach," he says. "He had it coming. How long?"

"Thirty minutes," I say. "Let's go back downstairs while it cooks so no one suspects anything. We'll come back and check on it."
Down in the basement, back in the darkness, they’re now having a limbo contest. It’s worse than I remember it. I wonder what Amanda would think of this.

“Here comes trouble,” says Dan. I wince privately as Denise comes up and wraps herself around my right arm.

“How about a kiss for the birthday girl?” she coos. She is batting her eyes, I can imagine her doing this in front of a mirror.

“Actually,” says Dan, “we brought gift certificates.”

Then suddenly she’s upon me, and I can tell she closes her eyes when she kisses because mine are wide open. I find myself somehow going along with it, it is her birthday and when the ball bounces into my hands I should probably run with it. I feel her tongue brush against the back side of my teeth. If nothing else, she has fresh breath. In the background is the unmistakable sound of Dan coughing up something large.

“Thank you,” she says, stepping back with her hands still on my shoulders.

“We should get going,” says Dan.

“We told Dan’s dad we’d get back and chop some wood for him,” I lie.

“You’re always doing such manly things.”

“We may do some push-ups afterwards,” adds Dan.

There is a pause. “I really wish you didn’t have to go so soon,” Denise says. She has not let go of me yet. I am bracing myself for a long goodbye when, inexplicably, the smoke alarm goes off. There is a flash of chaos before all our grade school training pays off and we file up the stairs in an orderly line, the calypso music left playing. I am thinking the whole thing is an act of
God until, in the hallway towards the side door, I see black smoke billowing from the kitchen. Outside the partygoers remain in a loose huddle; girls in shirt sleeves hold their arms across themselves and lean against each other, shivering in a classic disaster pose. Neither Dan or I say anything.

Mr. Barrington has gone into the garage and come out with a fire extinguisher. He wants to go back into the house to put it out, but Mrs. Barrington won’t let him and they’re yelling at each other.

“You’ll be overcome by the fumes,” she screams. “Let the professionals take care of it.”

“Let’s get out of here,” says Dan.

“But if we leave now,” I whisper back, “won’t they be suspicious?”

“There’s a burning watermelon in the microwave. This is definitely our best move.”

Others are leaving with us; we resist the urge to run to our car and peel out ahead of them. As we drive away, we hear the approaching whine of the fire engine. Otherwise there is silence.

“Where should we go?” asks Dan. His tone of voice implies we probably can’t go far enough.

“I don’t know,” I say. “I was thinking we should go chop that wood for you dad. How about that?”

“I don’t know,” he says, “I was kind of hoping that when the smoke clears we could go back and check on our roach.”

Though we don’t say it, as we circle the town, we are both thinking what it would be like to run off today, heading north in the Thunderbird; I’d get a manual labor job and Dan, with his experience, would find work in
some Canadian convenience store. I wonder what kind of life that would be; we'd be like draft dodgers during Vietnam, ducking trouble. In a few weeks we'd melt right in, and the people there would forget we came from anywhere; just as around here, the people would stop asking where we'd gone. We just drive around for maybe half an hour before Dan drops me back off at home.

On Sunday morning my mother is sitting at the kitchen table, dressed and reading the paper when I come downstairs. Both of us are used to getting up early but she's been doing it a lot longer than me. She looks up.

"I talked to Mona Barrington last night. They had a fire at Denise's party, somebody put a watermelon in the microwave."

"A watermelon?" I say. "How could that start on fire? Isn't it mostly water?"

"Well Denise was devastated by the whole thing. When the house started on fire, everyone left, she was bawling all night. Denise thinks it was one of her competitors who sneaked in to ruin her party."

"I hear those beauty pageants can be pretty cutthroat. This kind of thing must make you glad I wrestle." My mother's only been to one of my matches, they make her nervous. If I saw you doing that in the back yard, she's said, I'd call the cops.

"Well Mona's on edge about it, she said they were going to go pick out a guard dog today so this kind of thing wouldn't happen again."

"I don't know," I say. "Dan and I must have left before all of this happened."
"You know," she says. "You really should be nicer to that girl. By the way, someone named Amanda called. I forgot to tell you."

I go with my mother to go visit my grandmother. I do that most weekends. Since my grandpa died two years ago she's been through a series of nursing homes, passing in and out of our house in between. My mother didn't want to do this but she had to. In the daytime my grandma was almost lucid, sitting and reading the same copy of Reader's Digest all afternoon. In the night she shook and her eyes were wild; she didn't recognize anyone, not even mother, her only child. I came upon her once a year ago. It was near dawn and she was at the dining room table working a puzzle of a forest full of fallen trees, repeatedly trying to pound in a piece with her fist. When she saw me she screeched.

My grandpa had saved up so that when he retired he could travel and see the world. I think he got as far as Mexico before his heart gave out. Now all that money goes to the nursing home and my mother isn't happy about the kind of care she's receiving. It's hard on her and I go along with her for moral support. I just stand there, nobody says much anyway. Today we went at lunchtime and she stared blankly at us, and said nothing, eating a canned pear half with cottage cheese on it. In the background a group of seniors assembled their chairs in a circle while a woman, who seemed to be not much older than me, stood in the middle and tried to entertain them with a puppet show.

We drive home in silence. My mother doesn't have any brothers and sisters, there's no one else to do this. My father is an only child too. My mother had four miscarriages: two before I was born, then she lost twin girls
at six months when I was six and another at three months when I was ten. I'm the only one who lived, the only one who ever saw the light of day.
While Steve's been cutting class and driving around, he's also been writing a story. I think it's pretty clear to everyone he's not going to pass English, he can't spell and he doesn't show up, and his dad's going to have his ass for it. But he has this plan to make it up and show everyone how he's been misunderstood by writing a story for the literary magazine.

The deadline's in a couple of weeks, though it doesn't come out until May, and he wants us to read it to tell us what we think. I'm the third one to get to it, after Matt and Dan. It's long, sixteen pages, and I can barely read his handwriting, but I think it's pretty good. The main character, this guy named Dave, goes on a trip to Europe to explore his roots. He runs out of money and doesn't want to ask his parents for any more, so he decides to join a monastery.

His parents are proud, they're pretty religious, but he hates it there. They've changed his name to Brother Rudolph and make him take a vow of silence and eat bland food. He'd quit, but the thing is he's already quit everything else in his life: the basketball team, karate, guitar lessons, the correspondence course in electronics. He figures out the only thing he hasn't quit is caving, something he used to do with his high school biology teacher. He arranges a bake sale, and the monks earn the money for the expensive caving equipment.

On a cold autumn morning, all the monks gather to see him descend into a deep and dark cave. He ties his rope off to several trees to keep it from
getting cut on the edge, then he slowly begins to slide down it. Suddenly he slams into the wall, the monks have removed one of the ropes that keeps his main rope from rubbing against the lip of the cave. In a panic, and without thinking, he screams, "Fuck." He feels terrible because he's broken his vow of silence and now he's going to die and go to hell. He starts singing hymns then to make up for it. Finally he realizes it's warmer in the cave than he first thought, that he'll live, so he relaxes and begins to sing the kind of songs you'd hear on a classic rock station (it's here I can really see the influence of all the time Steve spent driving around). They eventually rescue him. It turns out they removed his rope because the archbishop arrived on a surprise visit and they needed to use it to pull his car out of the ditch. It also turns out the cave was a giant amplifier, and everyone within twenty miles heard every word he said. His bags were waiting for him at the road.

I don't know what I'm going to say to him, I talk to Amanda about it. She says she'd have to see it first. Matt and Dan are already talking about it in the middle of the morning.

"They won't print it," says Dan. "It says 'fuck' in it."

"What do you mean?" says Matt. "It's fucking great."

The secretary comes in during calculus class and interrupts to ask if Amanda could come down to the office. You can tell a lot by the way things are worded; it's "will" if someone's in trouble and "could" if somebody's died, usually that is. That's what I'm thinking; Amanda's eyes meet mine as she leaves the room, leaving her books behind, and I can see that she is scared.

She's waiting outside the door when the bell rings. She walks in,
copies the homework off the board, and bends over to zip up her backpack.

"Are you all right?" I ask. Our teacher starts to come over but she waves him off, no visible emotion in her face.

"Yeah," she says, "I think so."

We walk from the classroom, Amanda behind me, into a crowded hallway. I wonder if people aren’t just hanging around, trying to find out what’s up with Amanda. Maybe the halls are always like this, I just don’t usually notice. We walk silently down the first flight of stairs. I stop at the bottom where the sophomore lockers are. I turn towards her.

"Hey," I say.

"It was my dad," she says. "Nothing big, he said he just stopped by to tell me to take school seriously. He said he didn’t want me making the same mistakes he did."

"That’s strange," I say. "Couldn’t he have waited until you got home?" As soon as I say it I wonder if I’m being insensitive.

"Tell me about it," she says. "This weekend was really weird, I’ve been waiting to tell you about it, just some time when we’re alone. There’s something about my dad that’s scary. We drove to Tettegouche, that state park on the shore and had a picnic. The whole time kept talking about how he was going to make up for the time he missed; he kept telling my mom he was going to pay for me to go to college, no need to worry, he’d come up with the money. He and Phil don’t like each other; Phil got a little bit drunk and said some things and my mother’s been a nervous wreck."

Two girls, one who’s been checking her make-up in a mirror on the inside of her locker for awhile now, are listening in on our conversation.
“Maybe this isn’t the best place to talk about it,” Amanda says.

We drop off our books. I wait for her outside the bathroom and we walk down to the lunch room. This is kind of a jump in our relationship, eating together. It’s not something we’ve talked about before this. We are in line together, surrounded by a group of sophomores, all of us relatively anonymous. And if there’s one thing to be said for going out to lunch at school it’s that you don’t have to worry about what to order. They are having chicken patties on a bun today, the woman takes my ticket. Amanda, in line ahead of me, hands me a tray.

We carry our trays up to the balcony. My friends sense something is wrong when I come up the steps behind her. I don’t know if we think we are being discreet by sitting in the corner but we do. We each have an identical meal. A chicken patty on a white bun, carrots, a small salad, and a single carton of skim milk, all on a blue tray with a white napkin. All the colors are so stark, so distinct.

“Isn’t it strange that people go out to eat?” I say. “That’s what they do to get to know each other, they talk and watch the other person eat. But if you bother a dog while it’s eating it’ll bite you.”

“Do you have a dog?” she asks, unfolding her napkin and putting it in her lap. “I’ve never asked you that.”

I tell her no, that my mom’s allergic but that I had a guinea pig when I was little. I fed it shortbread Girl Scout cookies and it went blind. My friends are watching me. Matt is showing his support by waving to get my attention, then miming like he’s Babe Ruth, calling out to his shot to deep center and delivering the ball from the stadium in a slow triumphant swing. Dan is
giving me the thumbs up sign; I don’t know what they think I’m saying. I just get the feeling they’re eventually going to throw something. The group that Amanda usually sits with is somewhat less phased. They’re leaning forward, discussing something. I wonder if they’ve been forewarned. I wonder if she expects me to eat with her every day now, if that’s what she wants. I didn’t put any ketchup on my chicken patty, I didn’t want to spill in my lap. It’s dry and flavorless. I think about saying something about it but I don’t, I should be more relaxed than I am. I look at her plate and she is having the same thing.

“We’re eating lunch together,” I say.

“Yeah,” she responds.

“It’s not that big of a deal, is it? Nobody really notices.”

“Well, not except for your friends.”

“Yeah,” I say.

“Don’t be embarrassed,” says Amanda. “They’re entertaining.”

There are long pauses in our conversation where it seems like I am chewing loudly. We don’t talk any more about her family. Mostly we just look around us. “Will you come and see me after school?” she asks. “I’ll be in the art room, there’s something I want to show you.” I nod and we finish our lunch.

I go to see her when I finish lifting, maybe an hour after class lets out. I blast through my sets, supersetting everything; and when I see myself in the mirror, eyes narrowed and my upper lip curled back, I think how it’s good I’m going to find her instead of her coming down to this weight room. I can’t imagine her here, in this basement room with pipes running along the
ceiling, where everything is either colored black, grey, or rust. I finish off wrist curls. My forearms burn out early in the third set, but I ride it; it's fatigue that makes us cowards. Life's like dancing with a bear, my coach told me; you don't stop when you get tired, you stop when the bear does. I throw the bar down as I finish, no one notices, and I walk up the stairs to get a drink, catch my breath, then follow the hall down to the art room.

Amanda is alone and standing sideways at the window, wearing a smock that is smudged grey. She has clay on her hands. I think I will watch her for a moment, study the way her hair falls off her shoulders, but she notices me too soon, she won't stay there. She comes over, says hi, and we stand there. I ask if I can see something she's made.

She hesitates. "You know that's why I asked you here. I can't promise you much," she tells me. "It's just that you talk about wrestling and running, even if you don't mean to, and that's what you do. I listen, I'm not sure I understand, but I listen. I wanted to show you what I do. You don't have to like it, that's not what's important." I try to say something but end up making a kind of gesture with my shoulders; I follow her to the back of the room. The tables have paint stains and sheets cover everything else. Back by the kiln she turns on a small light over a drying rack.

"This is one of mine," she says, picking out a piece from a middle shelf. I can't tell what it is, a kind of a sphere with thick ridges, hollow and caved in on one side. She hands it to me. It's heavy in my hands. She watches me hold it. I don't look up.

"It's a heart. I sculpt hearts." she says. "It's abstract. I know you wanted to ask what it was."
"This is a heart." The words echo away from me. I said it, I didn’t ask it.

"They’re not like you think. They’re not like Hallmark Cards or Valentine’s Day. But they’re not real hearts. I started trying to make real hearts. I took out an anatomy book from the library, I took the plastic model from the biology room and tried to convince myself that the more I studied the more I was making a real heart; no one makes real hearts. With the aorta, the superior vena cava, those bicuspid valves, it was just a heart with holes in it. But I knew I could never feel inside it, that my hands only smoothed and never shaped the clay in my hands. So maybe I gave up. I left the bumps on there and glazed it blue and fired it. And then I put it on a shelf, another heart that doesn’t beat. And I kept making more of them. I don’t know what else to make. I guess it doesn’t matter. Nothing in art is real.

"This is real," I say. "If I dropped it, it would break."

She washes her hands and I walk her home. She wears her backpack on both shoulders and talks about the sky and how beautiful it is in the fall, the crispness in the air just before winter. I walk beside her and we brush together, we are that close to touching. Except for an occasional passing car the streets are empty, we’re alone.

A red Mercury Sable slows down as it passes us, nearly coming to a stop. The man driving leans his face over to the passenger window. I don’t recognize him. I meet his eyes and I don’t see anything, it’s like he’s trying to stare through me. Amanda stops, then the car speeds on. She just stands there.
"That was my dad," she says when I look at her. "I think I better walk home alone from here."

"Are you sure?" I ask.

"I think so." She takes my hands in hers and holds them before they slide away and she says goodbye. We watch each other as we leave, and it is nearly dark by the time I walk the whole way back to Ron’s.

I found some of Ron’s guns this morning, Saturday, right before the sun rose; I couldn’t sleep. Last night the house felt emptier than it has up to now; I turned all the lights downstairs and did crunches and watched cable. The guns were in a locker in his bedroom I discovered I had the key for. He’s serious; there’s not much you’d want to hunt with them. I didn’t want to handle them too much, I didn’t even want to see if they were loaded. I just locked up the house and went on a run back home.

My dad is letting me keep his car overnight to run some errands, though I had to invent a few to get it. I went to the grocery store right after it opened to buy a few things: some lettuce and vegetables for a salad, a loaf of bread, a box of tea, and a jar of spaghetti sauce. Dan called and then stopped by when I got back to Ron’s. He was playing with everything he could get his hands on, I just kept praying he wouldn’t find anything and want to use it. When I was in the bathroom he ran upstairs to see if Ron had a Playboy under his mattress, but mostly I kept him in check.

I told Dan about Amanda’s dad and he thought that was pretty weird. He told me that he saw a car just like it outside the Holiday station a couple of days ago. Brent noticed it; there was a man sitting in the driver’s seat for
what must have been two hours, never leaving the car, never coming into
the store. They were just about to call the cops when he drove off. Dan also
says that he thought he saw the car and the same guy parked out in front of
the bank. We talk a little bit about Amanda; he punches my shoulder and
tells me he has to head off to work.

I’m washing vegetables at the sink when I see a white Ford Escort pull
in front of the house. A tall pale woman gets out, wearing a long white coat.
I have seen her before, but not for several years.

I meet her at the gate, she is shaking it lightly with a tired,
expressionless look on her face. I can see her clearly through the brambles.

“Let me get that,” I say, and pull the gate toward me.

“Is Ron here?” She pauses. “Does he still live here?”

“He’s on vacation right now. Come in.” I think this house must be
more hers than it is mine, and I lead her through the door, back into the
kitchen. It is late afternoon, a dark and grey day but I haven’t turned any of
the lights on. I sit at the table; she examines the kitchen, sliding her hand
from counter to counter, picking up each of the appliances. It occurs to me
suddenly how accomplished of a housekeeper Ron really is. Everything has
it’s place; all the screws are organized by size in clear plastic drawers in his
workshed, all his forks match. He bakes bread and cans preserves.

“All American made,” she murmurs. “Where is he?”

“He’s in Mexico. He had some time off so he flew down there.”

“I was hoping he’d be here.”

“If you want,” I say, “You can leave him a note.”

“I think we’re a little past that point.” she says.
In this light I see her not as aged, but weathered. It's the same woman, that's clear, and the same coat and car, but it shows on the edges of all of these things that she has left, and been gone, and now returns to not quite the same place. I remember seeing her and Ron together at the high school wrestling matches when I was in seventh grade. I'd go to them with my dad and we would watch in silence, they seemed so important then, I would think about the time when I'd get my chance. I remember watching those two, hunched together, talking in low voices silent beneath the occasional roar of the crowd. Because of what happened last year, how I came out of nowhere, I liked to think I was a natural; but I realize the years lead me to this point, right here, as much as they do her.

There is a silence that is not defiant, it just is. "Why am I back?" she asks out loud. Her voice is sharp. She looks at me but I still don't I'm the one she's talking. "Maybe it's just that I ran out of places to go to, now I'm recirculating back around. I'm surprised that Ron isn't here, that he'd leave, that you're here instead."

I know she doesn't know me, to her I don't have a name, and she doesn't have to tell me anything. Maybe because of these things, maybe because we both know that's not much of an answer, she continues. She doesn't talk loudly; he voice is hoarse and I almost have to close my eyes to listen. "I just left a man I love. I think he's finally my true love. He's a baker, I lived with him for two years and haven't thought much about the past. He just built a brick oven, it's his pride and joy; I can't tell him what to do with his life, but it's that oven I hate. I've crawled inside it and pressed against it, red and rough to the touch, and seen that it is something more
than about us. It is a thing to outlast us, to find generations later, like plastic; it's a trap, another thing that keeps us from living right now.” She fidgets, her back up against the refrigerator. I wonder what she would be saying if Ron was here, if he had asked this question. "The bread I understand," she says, "the oven I don’t; I don’t taste the difference. There is no difference, it's only in the way that men think they own the things they create. It's the same with this house, the thorns out front and the bottled water inside; if the world ends, fuck it. It's adolescent, this shrine to keep things from ever changing."

"Ron never told me why you left," I say.

"No. He probably didn’t.” I am looking at her, waiting and wondering if she will walk to the door or pull up a chair. She does neither.

"You know," she says, and the tone in her voice leaps, "Ron doesn’t have a dog. That’s strange. I thought when I left he’d go out and buy a really big dog, keep it in the backyard and feed it raw meat.” She looks out the window as if she is expecting to see something move. She looks grey in the shadows, and older as she pulls her coat tightly around her, as if in a draft. I try to remember her name.

"If you really want to know," she says, “I left three years ago now and haven’t been back since, or even thought about it. I’d been pregnant but neither of us knew it at the time, I only suspected it. When it’s your body, you know.

"Ron and I went up hunting for grouse, like always, he carried the gun and I followed behind him. On the way back, driving along the highway, we saw a carnival off to the side of the road and decided to stop. Ron won me a
stuffed pig but I think he was embarrassed, most of the other prizes were of
naked women lying across Corvettes and all the ex-cons with cheap ink
tattoos working the games were leering at me, I think we were the only other
people in the place. Ron wanted me to go on a ride with him called the
Tempest, you strap yourself in and the arms of the machine rise up and twist
you all around. He said he didn’t want to go on it all alone. I already had a
headache and didn’t want to; I clutched my pig and thought I was going to
throw up the whole time, I wasn’t sure I was going to make it back to the
truck. There was a sign at the base of the ride, warning pregnant mothers.
Three weeks later I miscarried a son.

"Ron blamed himself when I told him. I never should have, he never
needed to know. And after that he never listened to anything I said, started
buying more guns and kept building the walls in closer. I couldn’t live like
that so I left."

I weigh my words carefully. "Do you miss him?" I ask.

"I'm here," she says. "I'm not sure what it is I miss." Right then
the phone rings. I ask Amanda if I can call her back, but the woman is already
leaving.

"Hey," I say. She is not rushing but is already out the door. She is
fiddling with the gate and draws her hand back as if she has caught it on one
of the thorns. She pauses and looks back at me, waits as I come along her and
punch in the combination that lets us swing the gate open.

"What should I tell Ron?" I ask.

"That's up to you," she says, and walks back to her car without turning
around.
I call Amanda back and she tells me that Brent called her up to ask us over for dinner. "He was going to call you, which would make sense because he knows you better. But he thought he remembered that someone told him you were housesitting for Ron, and he was afraid to call in case he was wrong. Meanwhile my parents are going crazy with all these strange men calling up."

"Am I included? What other strange men are you talking about?"

"Should we go?" she asks. "I know you were going to cook me dinner."

"That's all right," I say. Deep down, I'm relieved. I'd like to get out of this house for awhile; though if there's one place I'm safe it's here. "Maybe we could come back afterwards and I'll make you a cup of tea. I'm good with boiling water."

"Yeah," she says. "Ok. I'm kind of curious." We decide we probably don't have to dress too formally and I tell her I'll pick her up. She says she'll meet me at the curb. She is standing there when I drive up, not in front of her house but at the corner of her street. She is wearing the same blue and green sweater I saw her in the night of the play. I tell her it looks very nice.

"I wonder what he'll serve us," Amanda asks as we drive towards Brent's. "Last I checked, I thought he'd given up on the world of the senses." I nod and agree that doesn't leave a lot of promising options. I ask her if we shouldn't bring something over for our host, if that isn't what you do when you're invited to dinner. Amanda thinks this is a great idea, but I can't think of anywhere to go except Holiday. Dan is behind the counter, with Tracy leaning against it chewing gum and reading a magazine, when we walk in the door. Neither of them seem surprised. I tell them our dilemma and Dan
offers to give me a discount on a frozen pizza, but Amanda finds a small geranium for $1.99. The tag that comes with it says it will be red when it blooms.

"I think he'll really like that," Tracy says.

Dan rings up our purchase and hands me the receipt. "Have a good time youngsters," he says. "You get along now."

We arrive at his place a little late. Brent lives in one third of a basement of a one-story house with a washing machine outside it. We circle it once and that's how we find the door we want. We know not to go in the front.

When Brent said "we" have to have you over, I see now what he meant. He's living with a girl with long brown hair named Anna who, despite the very loose batik dress that matches her hair, is noticeably large breasted. She meets us at the door.

"I'm so glad you could come. You're our first guests." She seems ecstatic when Amanda hands her the plant, and she looks around, trying to find the best place to put it before she decides on the card table in the middle of the room. Much of the room, the one other than the kitchen, is taken up by the futon. Brent smiles when we walk in. He lights some incense and bows his head, inviting us to make ourselves at home while he works on the rice. Anna is making stir fry at the stove; every minute or so she calls in to ask if we're allergic to or if we like a certain spice. Before dinner Amanda and I each have a glass of water out of plastic cups and mill around the room. Above the futon Brent and Anna have a black-light poster of a whale leaping through space, surrounded by stars and galaxies. We ask permission, then
turn off the lights and watch it glow in the dark. Brent and Anna both come out of the kitchen to watch it too, standing very close together.

The stir fry is pretty good but it has a distinct flavor. Amanda and I try to guess what it is, she thinks it's ginger. After my second plate I nudge her, we've decided to forego the table and are sitting cross-legged on the floor, and point up to the bottle of Lemon Fresh Joy by the sink when I think Brent and Anna aren't looking. Amanda bites her lip.

We are quiet through most of dinner; Brent doesn't talk as much with Anna around, and besides, it's hard to find much to talk about with someone who doesn't have any plans for the future and doesn't trust his senses. Anna asks Amanda questions about high school, I listen to and watch Brent watching them. I don't know what I think about finding him with Anna. They sit together on the floor, and brush their knees against each when they think we're not looking. Part of me thinks he's a hypocrite; then part of me thinks that if he can find someone there's hope for everyone. Amanda and I can't talk about it in front of them, but that's the feeling I get from her too.

After dinner we leave the dishes in the sink. Brent pulls out his guitar and plays some songs on it and sings, it's a side of him I've never seen. He starts to rock, like he forgets who he is; I can't say I know him that well but I never expected I'd hear song lyrics coming out of his mouth, stuff like Jimi Hendrix's "Crosstown Traffic." He plays for nearly forty minutes, we all sit in a circle and listen, before he breaks a string on a spirited rendition of the Who's "Squeeze Box."

"Whoa," he says as the room resonates and goes quiet. "Only one way to play it though."
Before long we’re putting on our coats. I shake Brent’s hand and Anna gives each of us a big hug and thanks us again for the plant, telling us she can’t think of a better gift.

“Be sure to come again soon,” she says, and I’m trying not to prolong the goodbye because she looks cold standing in the doorway in her thin dress. “It’s so good to have friends.” They both wave to us as we get in the car.

Amanda and I begin laughing about the stir fry as soon as we leave. We drive around for a while, listening to the radio and trying to think of what we should do, wishing there was a comet or something we could look at, something simple, before we decide to stop at the Haunted House we’ve heard advertised twice. We park on the edge of the dirt lot and get in a line that isn’t long but moves slowly. Amanda has her hands up inside the sleeves of her jacket and the collar up high as we wait outside the haunted house. They’ve set it up in an old warehouse outside of town, and the dirt parking lot is nearly full of cars. From the outside it doesn’t look large enough to fit so many people. From our spot in the line we can see where the maze empties back to the outside, through a doorway draped with black paper streamers. Every few minutes three or four people run out of it screaming, as if there is one last shock before the end.

With her sleeve Amanda points through to the entrance, where they are selling t-shirts for fifteen bucks that read “I Survived the Haunted House” and have a black cat on them. “How can they be selling those before you even go in?” she asks.

We step inside where it is heated, warmth rises from somewhere below us. The line snakes around to the desk where you buy your ticket and
is full of couples, or pairs of couples, holding hands and holding on to each other. Amanda's shoulder brushes mine. We're both looking around.

"It's five bucks," someone in front of us says, "but at least it goes to a good cause."

"For five bucks," we hear a loud male voice respond, "if something jumps out at me I'm going to smack it."

"I actually did that," I tell Amanda.

"What?" We speak in low voices. "Hit someone in a haunted house?"

"Yeah. I was maybe only about six or seven and I was in the front of the line. I had just crawled through some boxes into a dimly lit room, I took a few steps and a guy dressed like the Grim Reaper grabbed me. I screamed, I thought it was death itself coming for me while my parents waited outside, and I had one of those fight or flight reactions. I wasn't a very big kid, my shoulder only came up to about the Reaper's waist, and I hit him just below that."

"What happened?"

"Well he started breathing funny and said a few things that he probably didn't mean to. I got kicked out, they escorted me out the back way to my parents. They were kind of bewildered."

"You must have been proud," she says.

"Actually," I say, "I'd mostly forgotten about it until now."

The line moves slowly forward. We pass a section of wall with a large sign up saying that children under the age of eight are not admitted. "Word must have got around," says Amanda. "You have a reputation." We come
up to the table and buy our tickets. With it, we get a coupon you can redeem
for a free bag of popcorn at one of the gas stations that's sponsoring this.

We are led through the curtain by a woman wearing a wedding veil,
her face painted a pale white. She seems younger than us and giggles in a way
that isn't menacing, it's like she doesn't know what to say.

Amanda follows me in the darkness, up a ramp, around a corner, and
down again. We find our way by feeling along the particle board walls. The
first thing we pass is a man strapped to a table in a room with a strobe light.
There's a saw that's supposed to be cutting his legs off while he screams for
help; Amanda and I stand and patiently watch. Winding through we see a
mummy and an electrocuted man, we see a coffin filled with slime that's
supposed to be someone decomposing.

"Pretty scary, huh?" she says.

We enter a long dark hallway. I can't see anything but I feel something
moving in front of me and my fists come up as one of the undead, a man in
dark robe, turns on his flashlight to illuminate his face. He looks more scared
than I am as he steps back into his alcove. I take a few steps forward.

"Amanda," I say softly. I reach out and feel her hand in mine. We take
a few steps and as we brush I feel her hand tighten and we fall together. Her
arms are around my shoulders, her hand brushes against the back of my neck
as we kiss, the sound of rattling chains and a vampire cackling in the distance.

"That was just like I imagined it," she says.

"Yeah," I go, "me too, but it wasn't scary at all." We stay closer
together now, just like that. A couple of ghouls follow us for a few steps, but
we walk out past another mummy and outside through the streamers quietly
and see that the line to get in is much longer now.

As I start the car, Amanda reaches over and turns on the heat, then settles back in her seat. "Would you still like a cup of tea?" I ask. She nods.

We drive back to Ron's house. I've left one light on, in the kitchen, and as we come up the walkway I think about the first couple of days I was housesitting here, how in the dark I always thought if I took a wrong step I'd fall into a Burmese Tiger Trap or that there was something just out of reach that could grab me. Now that I've been here almost a couple of weeks it's starting to feel like home, like my house now. Amanda looks at the security fence and its tangle of thorns.

"It's like a castle," she says. "A forbidden castle. In a fairy tale." I turn the key in the gate and open it.

Amanda follows me as I turn on all the lights in the house, then we talk and drink three pots of herbal tea. It's something I never really drank before I came here, but Ron's got a whole cupboard full of it. Each tea bag has a wise saying on it, something about friendship, reflection, or love; part of why we keep drinking is to see what the next one will say, but they don't really tell us anything we haven't heard, and after the first couple of cups we stop reading them out loud.

We alternate taking turns going to the bathroom, and we talk. We talk about tonight, the dinner and Brent and Anna, about how it feels grown-up to go over to someone's house to eat. We talk about my mom and her pregnancy and what my dad does at work; we talk about Joe and how Lindsay and the kids haven't come back from Mankato yet, and how no one's supposed to know that. We talk about Tracy and Dan, and for a long time
about Ron, how I know him and what it must be like to live in this house all alone. I finally tell her about his old girlfriend stopping by today. Amanda talks about her family, just a little bit, about Hugh and Scott, what it's like to inherit a family, and how they're all hoping her father will leave and he can't take a hint; he just drives around in his car all day and comes home late, like he always did, and how she's never been sure if it's even her dad. She tells me she knows her mom thinks a lot about getting old, and realizes she's settling for Phil, and we talk some about us. We talk so much more around each other than we do around anyone else and I tell her how it's different, how she watches me when no one else does, how everyone else I know just goes on, talking, like it wouldn't even matter if I was there. I see her eyes getting heavy, the silences longer, and I know we are dragging our conversation on because we're not sure how to make it end.

"Maybe I should take you home soon," I say. "It's pretty late."

"I don't want to go home tonight," she says. "I don't."

We sit for awhile longer, neither of us saying anything. I try not to look at the clock, I don't want to know how late it is, as I wait for her one last time in the bathroom. Then I turn off all the lights and we go upstairs. In the darkness, on Ron's bed, she pulls me toward her and I am surprised how she holds on to me. She murmurs something and I think to ask if she's sleeping but instead I stay still as I can and feel her breathing and listen to the night. That's all the further we go, and, lying together with our clothes on, we fall asleep some time before it gets light.
CHAPTER 10:
BELLY TO BACK

This isn't the way I wanted to meet her parents but it's what I have to do. It's Sunday morning and it's early, most people haven't gotten their newspapers yet. I see them lying on front porches in their orange plastic bags as we drive past, slowly. But I know it isn't early enough. I don't want to go in with her, I didn't want to leave Ron's house, but I can't just drop her off, wait here with the engine running to see that she gets in ok. There's just something cowardly about it.

We park the car at the curb, there's an old truck and a Mercury in the driveway, and she gets out before I do; when she shuts her door the sound of it reverberates through the neighborhood. I shut mine and it's quiet again. I look around for a moment before I catch up to her, walking up the long driveway to the house cut into the hill. I've been here before, I've run past here and I sat across the street with Joe. But I've never been any closer. I notice that the porch light was left on, it looks conspicuous now that the sun is up. Then I am beside her on the driveway, and we can't help walking fast.

The door is unlocked and as we enter into a carpeted room with a TV and some tables and lamps and chairs, a brown vinyl couch that I guess is supposed to look like it's leather. For a moment, I think the house is empty, and that everything is going to be all right; no one even noticed we were gone. Framed on the walls are pictures of young children, some of which must be of Amanda but I don't have the time to look at them, old school pictures and those family portraits you have done at department stores in the
mall. There's a painting of a lighthouse over the TV. I can't help wondering if this is the wrong house.

"Amanda. Is that you?" calls a woman's voice. The entire family is in the kitchen, though there isn't room for them all around the table. They have been talking but before another word is spoken I already feel that I know them far better than they'll ever know me, and none of them seem anything like Amanda. There's an old brown dog curled up in the corner, asleep. That's Ollie. There's Mom, a grey-blond woman who still doesn't look old enough to be Amanda's mother, wearing a t-shirt, purple sweatpants, and glasses. She isn't wearing shoes. Hugh is in a pair of Spiderman pajamas, and Scott; I swear I've seen Scott before but I just can't place him. There are dishes in the sink and drawings on the fridge that must belong to Hugh; most of them are of castles. There's Phil and Amanda's dad, who she still calls Dad, though I'm only guessing which is which; one is wearing a white t-shirt and sitting back in his chair, rubbing the top of his forehead with his left wrist. He's the first to notice me; he's thin but he brings a cigarette up to his mouth, and flexes a tight ropy forearm. The other is wearing a maroon sweater vest, one that might have fit better a few years back, and is sawing away at some kind of cake in a foil pan. "Honey, where have you been?" It's only then that they all see me, or that I register.

"Would you like a piece of cake?" Phil asks, hesitantly rising from the table.

"Where the hell have you been?" asks her father, before I have the time to tell Phil no. "Answer your mother."

"Jerry," says her mother. "It's not going to be like that." She speaks in
a voice that tries to be kind, practiced but not wholly convincing.

"Let's all try to stay calm," says Phil. "I'm sure there's a rational explanation to all of this."

"Fine," says Jerry. His voice narrows but does not rise. He puts an arm around the back of his chair. "Offer him a fucking slice of Sara Lee after he and my slut daughter run around all night. You think I can pretend I don't know. There's your fucking explanation. What do you have to say for yourself?"

"Hugh, Scott," says Phil. "Why don't you go to your room?"

"Fuck you." says Amanda. "Who are you to say anything? You're not my dad." I stand beside her, thinking that if I was going to say something here the time is past. I don't think we've done anything wrong, I just can't explain it, now that somehow I've ended up in the middle of things and I can't really explain why I'm here. A lot of criminals must feel this way. Amanda tries to stare down her father; last night is so far away from this morning, but she had to know it was going to turn out like this. She had to know when I followed her through that door.

"What do you mean by that?"

"You know what I mean."

"Jerry, why are you back?" breaks in Amanda's mother. "Why do you have to show up again and try to ruin everything. Didn't you do a good enough job the first time?" Hugh and Scott haven't gone anywhere. Neither have I. I step closer to Amanda but she doesn't look at me.

"What do you mean by that?" he asks Amanda.

"You know."
"Hey," says Phil, putting his hand on Jerry's shoulder, who spins and throws Phil to the floor, knocking over Hugh and his chair as he goes down. Everyone else leaps up. With the light from the glass porch doors behind him, he throws the table over on Phil: silverware slides off the side of it, a coffee cup shatters, and plates bounce and spin on the ivory colored linoleum floor that orange juice now runs across in a trickle of veins. Amanda's mother screams. Amanda turns and begins to leave. I hurry her in front of me, trying not to touch her. Hugh is crying, Scott is in some kind of karate stance. I don't want this to happen, not here. This isn't good.

Amanda is facing the other way, toward the door, and I turn as I hear Jerry coming, just as he tries to hit me from behind. He comes running from the kitchen and slams me against the living room wall. He grabs me by my jacket and tries to push me again and I think he will kill me. He swings at my face but I duck, and he catches me on the side of my head. There is something familiar in his eyes, the way he says nothing. Amanda runs toward us and her mother screams as I bring my hands up from underneath to lock out his elbows. I spin as I pull through and arm drag him into the wall, not even thinking about it, knocking over another table that catches me in the knee as I wrestle him to the ground, as he scratches and claws at my eyes, missing and scraping my face. I think to hold him there, pin his bony arms but I can't, it won't end it, he just comes after me again; he bites at me and thrashes, the screaming stops and I let go and I'm hitting him, an old man, a father, the first I've fought; he elbows me in the gut and I start choking the shit out of him; sneering, wheezing, I begin banging his face against the floor, punching him in the back of the head when he rolls over and my fist hurts. It's only
then I realize where I am, sometime after he stops making noises. I know I have to stop, but one more time, I hit him one last time; as I raise my hand up again I listen to how loudly I'm breathing. When I look up, everything is quiet.

"Is he all right?" Phil asks, and I know after a moment that he isn't talking about me. All eyes are trained on me, except the dog's, who didn't seem to wake up. For a moment, when they saw me getting my ass kicked, they cared, they screamed, they felt something; I was one of them. But I'm untouched, except for the blood down my front and the ache in my hands, and they've all backed away. Amanda won't look at me, she is the furthest. They know me better than I thought. Having never taken my jacket off, minutes after I arrived, I leave. Nobody says anything and I don't look back.

I buy gas with the three dollars I have in my pocket at the Holiday store on the way out of town. Dan isn't working.

"You want a Lotto ticket with that?" The woman behind the counter asks. She pretends not to notice the blood.

I shake my head. "I don't feel real lucky yet today." I feel older than I am when I say it.

Outside I stand with my car door open and look up at the sky. It's different than last night: blue and clear, the light blocks out all the stars, which in the darkness had seemed so close.

With fog down along the road, I go to my low beams and drive out past the burned-out section of forest from the big fire back in '93, on my way out of town. I drop into the turns and accelerate out of them; I set up on the inside
of the curve in case my tires begin to skid out wide. Then the trees clear and I reach the highway, the green signs which make every mile the same, just as maps do to every living river and mountain. I think about when I was real little, six or seven, and there was a rabid dog loose in town; it was on the radio and all the mothers were calling each other up, saying to keep their children inside. I got on my bike and went out looking for it. You crazy goddamned kid, they all screamed, leaning out their windows, go home. But I wouldn't. I never found the goddamn thing but I wouldn't go home, and they whipped my ass when I finally did.

I turn on the radio and sing along softly, and when I see other cars I pass them, the Saabs and Hyundais with shiny aerodynamic colors; I pass them because I can. Any of these cars could blow past me if they choose, they could speed up and catch me, but once they are behind me they disappear. It's only me who is willing to take it past the limit, to blow down this highway without thinking that someone is watching.

After about an hour the Ford runs out of gas. The police find me down the road, not far from the car, maybe only a couple of miles.

There are a lot of ways to grow up, and when it comes down to it you don't have to choose, life will do it for you. My father told me this, not on the drive back from the police station but maybe two weeks later, one Saturday when we were home alone in the house together. There are wars, famines, natural disasters, the kinds of things that just happen and force you to shut up and make a choice. Adolescence, I guess, begins when you realize the world doesn't give a shit about you and ends when you stop taking it so
personally. My dad's dad died when he was 17. He didn't mention this, he's never really said anything about his father, but I have to wonder how everything changed for him afterwards.

No charges were filed against me, though they held me for the day while everything cleared. Amanda's father was taken away by the police when he left the hospital. I don't know what for but I haven't been asked to testify. Phil had to do rescue breathing on him after I left. "It's a good thing he was there," the cops told me. "After four to six minutes the brain starts to die." And I haven't seen Amanda since, no more than from a distance, in passing. She's skipping calculus, or is gone or something for awhile. She doesn't call me, doesn't want to talk to me. Dan thinks we should bust the abstract ceramic heart she gave me, misshapen and blue, that I still have up in my bedroom, but I tell him not to. It's a solid piece of clay and it probably wouldn't break, just chip.

I could hear people whispering about me that first week, giving me a wider berth in the halls; in class I would catch people checking out the cuts on my hands. But then it died down. Mike Price, who was going out with Becca Ralston, got beat up in the Burger King parking lot by Pat Collinge, who graduated a couple of years ago and was convinced Mike stole the oil filter out of his truck. Then talk settled down about these things too. It's like the first day of the school year, after you've been gone all summer and you come back thinking you're a completely different person. That feeling lasts all of a half an hour. I see the same people in my classes, at their same lockers, and eat the same things I've been having for lunch since I began school. I see the couples too. Week by week and month by month they might not be the same
people, but from a distance you can’t really tell.

It snows and then it melts again. On the Sunday before practice begins I decide to run intervals along Tischer Creek, but when I get halfway up on my first one I stop, I sit down on the rocks by the bridge, and watch the water flow through the shadows beneath the trees. I break pieces off a stick and throw them upstream, then follow them down as they quickly disappear out of sight. I think about something Amanda told me that last night when we were driving around in the car, listening to the radio and humming along. I told her that I couldn’t sing and she said that even if someone is a terrible singer, who can say that the song in their head isn’t more beautiful than someone else who sounds much better? As it gets darker the sticks get harder and harder to see.

Ron invited me over when he got back, about a week after it happened. He had already heard the whole story. "When I was a kid," he told me, "I went out with a girl whose father was a pilot. He flew early on in Vietnam but was hired by the airlines and was gone most of the time. Her mother loved me, I spent a lot of time over there and she left us alone. Mostly we just watched TV.

"One night her father was home. I had dinner with them and was pretty nervous. Afterwards I was sitting on the sofa watching television with him, there was a boxing match on and I was getting into it; he was watching me and we started getting along pretty well."

"'Here,' he said when it was over. 'I want to show you something.' He stood up and I followed him toward the basement door. I'd never been down there before; I asked once and they just told me it was "Daddy's Room."
We walked down the stairs and he turned on the light and there were gloves on the wall, jump ropes, speed bags, heavy bags, and a ring; not elevated but with the ropes like a real one, in the center of the room with a light hanging over it. 'Come on,' he said. 'Get in the ring.'

'I didn’t want to do it and he kept telling me he wasn’t going to hurt me. Then I put the gloves on but I wouldn’t hit him. He was toying with me, I could tell he wasn’t hitting me as hard as he could but it stung; and when I started swinging he backed up, waiting until I stopped before he snapped my head back again. That was one of the worst moments of my life. I have dreams about doing what you did.

'I got you a sombrero too,' he tells me, quickly filling up the pause in the conversation. He pulls it out of a bag. 'Everyone down there's wearing one. Try it on.' I put it on and nodded. 'Anything else worth mentioning happen around here?' He asks me.

'No,' I say. He pays me in cash.
CHAPTER 11:
SIX MINUTES

At night after practice I go home, do my homework, and go to bed. I've won my first tournament, but the last two matches were by points, I didn't dominate. I sit up with my dad for awhile, watching TV and reading Newsweek. When I talk to him he doesn't always finish his sentences, they trail off somewhere else and aren't replaced. The phone rings after he has gone to bed. "I'm wondering if you can help me out," Amanda asks; "this is hard," she tells me. I haven't spoken to her in weeks. A part of me doesn't remember her that well; I almost want to hang up on her, but I still tell her I will meet her in the morning.

Saturday feels warmer than it is. I call my coach and tell him I can't make it to practice, I make it sound like it's something to do with the police and he doesn't push it. "Make sure you run today," he tells me. Old people are outside, going for walks, when Amanda pulls in front of our house at nine. I tell them my parents I'll be back later and go out and meet her. On the way to her house we stop off at the grocery store to buy film; it takes us a minute, the photo display is right up front by the checkout lines. There is a lot we have to say as we drive to her house, but we talk mostly about my job last summer, the weather, and nothing at all.

When we pull into her driveway her mother is in front with the dog, Ollie, an English Springer Spaniel. He runs up and down the length of the yard, which leads downhill to the street. Amanda loads her camera and her mother calls to the dog.
"He doesn't listen when he's outside." I can't find any real way to reintroduce myself to her mother. She proceeds to tell me about when they would let him run free, he would follow the deer tracks and run all over town and the police would chase him. And then he'd run home. They'd chase him all the way, and as soon as he got back into the yard he'd turn around and bark at them. They'd walk up to the door and knock and complain and Ollie would just sit there.

"Don't pee on my flower bed," she shouts, walking across the driveway as if to shoo him away. She was dressed up in a skirt and wearing an overcoat. We watch him race around the yard.

"He isn't making this easy."

Amanda's mother has to go to work so we bring him inside. Amanda gives him the last of the dog treats and throws the box away. Amanda, her mother, Hugh, and Scott bring him into the living room. It has big plate windows and it's cold, but it lets in all the light, even though the sun's not out. Ollie looks unusually frisky. They take pictures of him, trying to get him to do all his old tricks, he lies down and shakes, and for moments he stands still, but he won't look into the camera. Pictures are snapped sporadically. Ollie sits at my feet at the base of the couch. I scratch his head and lead it toward the camera, but lean away, not sure if I belong in the pictures. Scott throws him a dog treat he saved. It hits Ollie in the head.

"This is worse than the holidays," Amanda says, to no one in particular. I don't know what it means.

Amanda's mother leaves amid tears to go to work. It was nice to meet you, she says, choosing not to remember, before giving one last look at the
dog. The rest of us go downstairs to see the hole in the basement wall Ollie used to squeeze through. He follows us, slowly flopping down the stairs. We look at Ollie we look at the hole. I stand behind Amanda and Hugh. He bends down and wrapped his arms around Ollie's midsection. He looks up at the hole.

"Nope, not any more."

We wait for Ollie to rest before we head back upstairs. Scott makes him a peanut butter sandwich, shrugging his shoulders and saying something like "as long as he's still hungry." We walk into the family room, where Hugh has been sitting. Amanda has me take pictures of him and then herself, alone and kneeling with her dog. We sit waiting. Hugh begins to cry.

I am waiting outside, I help Scott put the topper on his truck, he's turned sixteen, and watch him drive off to work. Amanda is still inside. I walk behind Ollie, he seems like a good dog. I scratch his ears and he wags his tail; I wonder if he knows what's coming or how Amanda's mother came to the decision to put him to sleep, how many bad days it takes.

Ollie pads off to the side of the driveway, to the patches of crust left behind by the first snow. He isn't that big, his deep brown hair sticks up on all sides, and as he trots he kind of rolls from side to side. The dog looks at me and I fake toward him. I take a few steps and begin to chase him but he turns around and chases me and I run, not so fast at first, out along the side of the garage. Ollie runs beside me, loping into my ankles. I cut right into the backyard and he swings wide to follow.

Ollie's eyes are wide and glazed as he runs to catch up. I take off again,
not quickly, and I realize it's his last day, he's had his last meal, and now there's nowhere to run to. Amanda is inside with her younger brother but the dog is already gone, that's why they're crying, because he's gone. And I never knew him until now, didn't know how his joints hurt and his heart was weak, how he hadn't run away in three years and he couldn't even climb up the stairs. All I know is what I see here, not the puppy who climbed on my bed or leapt on me after school either.

He is breathing hard as he comes on to me; I wonder what he imagines he sees when he follows me, or if he imagines anything at all. I take off running. At first I think that we will run away, I will lead the dog out of here, but then I remember how he always came back home. He keeps after me as I run. Too fast and I might lose him but I can't help it and I can hear him behind me, breathing. I never had a dog. I'm going to kill her dog, that's what I'm here for; while she waits inside we're going to run to the outskirts of town, faster the further we get. I can hear him wheeze two steps behind me and I don't turn around, but I know his heart will fail, he'll drop to his side and we'll bury him in the cold earth where he lies. I'm breathing too, and in between my gasps, I only hear myself and stop. I turn around and he's standing there, ten yards behind me. I walk back to him and he sits and wags his tail as I get closer. I kneel down next to him and he licks me in the face.

I sit up as I hear the door opening in the front. Ollie follows me as we walk around to the front, slowly. Amanda is coming down the stairs. She has her coat on and is carrying a leash.

"I think it's time." she says quietly, quieter than usual. "We're going to be late."
When we are called from the lobby we walk down a hallway to the back. The room is windowless and bright, yellow wallpaper and framed pictures of kittens and puppies, but it feels just as antiseptic as any doctor's office. There is a sink and a box of gloves. There is a door on the other side of the room where the veterinarian will enter.

Ollie grunts a little bit as I lift him onto the table. Amanda stands on the other side. "We should have given you a bath," she says, as she tries to smooth down the fur on his neck. The veterinarian introduces himself as he comes in the room, he has a stethoscope around his neck and has already prepared the needle.

"Would you like another moment?" He asks us.

"No," says Amanda. "This is it."

He directs us to stay where we are. Amanda holds the head, I hold the body. Ollie is on his side and I am lying across him and have his front paw as if I'm pulling him back into a half-nelson. I'm doing what I was brought along to do, I hold the dog and look straight ahead. The veterinarian puts on a tourniquet, a piece of rubber tubing, but only then does Ollie begin to shake, not squirm or try to get up. The vet uncaps the needle and motions for me to hold his paw down. I can't see Amanda's face.

He pauses for a moment as he feels for the vein. My mother does this same thing at the hospital. He points the needle down, held between his thumb and forefinger, and as he plants his wrist against the paw he slips only an inch from me. I can imagine the needle sliding into my hand: I stumble back in the chair behind me as he goes into the backroom for another one, he brings an extra just in case; and for the first time I wonder how many times
he's done this. In what I know are only seconds he relocates the vein. I watch the needle enter, blood mixes inside the tube, and the plunger goes down. He steps back and drops the needle in a sharps box and looks down at his watch. None of us move. Ollie is warm, sleeping. The veterinarian takes the stethoscope from around his neck and listens to Ollie's chest.

"He's at rest now," he says. "Now he's moved on to the next world."

None of us move. Then I let go of Ollie before Amanda does and step back. Once I let go he is gone. Amanda holds on to him. The veterinarian asks if she'd like to take the body with her. She shakes her head. I wait for her.

Outside the sky is covered with clouds but it is grainy and overcast; you'd need a watch to tell how close you were to sunset. The parking lot is unpaved, there are brown puddles where the gravel has worn away, that we step around on our way from the office. The veterinarian is off of a frontage road, high above the highway, and we can see it but we're far away from it. We walk together, just the two of us now, to the back of the car and stand for a moment. I look at her. There is something I should say but it doesn't come out. I'm here but dead is dead forever, and we're alive. This is only a time to listen. Amanda stands in her blue wool coat, her eyes aren't looking down but facing out over the highway. We watch together and listen to the wet sound of sand beneath tires, somewhere off in the distance.

"When he said that Ollie's resting in the world beyond," Amanda's face doesn't move, "that was really stupid." And she begins to cry, the first time I have seen her, and I hold her, or we fall together, surrounded by wind
and empty spaces. We are near, standing out away from the car, and together because we have a history now, something to fall back on. She cries and I can't, but I kiss her on the forehead and she draws tighter, burying her head against my shoulder. I close my eyes and I am confused, like a man dying in the cold, in the late stages when I start to feel warm again and want to lie down; just before it's too late when I'm trying to hang on to the cold but only half care.