THE APOSTASY (AND RETURN)
OF LENNY GORSUCH

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of North Texas in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

by

Guy R. Guidici, B.A., M.A.

Denton, Texas

August, 1998

This comic romantic novel engages the question of how the Christianity of the southern, fundamentalist world of the Texas bible belt, finding its primary cultural assumptions about human existence challenged by the more confusing elements of a modern sensibility, a sensibility over-laden with strange-attractors, mechanistic psychologies, relativistic physics and ethics, evolutionary premises, newly proclaimed rights and freedoms, a deterioration in cultural political naiveté, and the advent of an increasingly incomprehensible set of technologies, can survive.

The "central" character is a young, slightly deformed man raised by his ostensibly "Christian" grandparents who, through a rather odd set of legal circumstances and physical events, not only become wealthy, but somewhat powerful in their immediate community. He finds himself involved with a young woman, raised in an equally "Christian" household, but, as is true of any romantic plot, the relationship between the two is destined, by virtue of circumstance and the meddling of other characters, to struggle and mishap.

In the end, the text, in its own fashion, asserts that the Christian impulse can survive the modern era by virtue of one of its central tenets: faith, in the Christian world, is very much the same as life itself, a process of waiting and expecting. Its greatest threat, rather than something intrinsic to the modern period, is perhaps that of the dogmatism and misunderstanding of the characters who most loudly proclaim it to others.
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If I were forced to commit myself to some sort of statement concerning the
governing aesthetic behind the narrative which follows, I’d have to begin with something
of an inexcusable admission, and that is that the style employed here is less a product of my
own sensibilities than it is a product of the sensibilities of others. This style began as a
response to the overwhelmingly negative criticism I received from my peers on more than
one occasion concerning my former efforts. I began to aim at what they liked, and that aim
ended with what now stands.

My own belief is that there are two marks of beauty and originality, if either truly
exists, in any work; one is that of the style; the other is of authorial control of a newness in
ideological or thematic content. The first, oddly enough, is necessitated by the fact that
tales of the general human condition are in plentiful abundance and that very little remains
to be said about what this species experiences; that which remains is instead a matter of
how we say what is said. The second is necessitated by the occasional shifts in apparent
premises about what general existence happens to be; when paradigmatic shifts take place,
our experiences may remain remarkably similar to the experiences of those of former
people in former ages, but we must necessarily engraft those experiences into the new and
revised context of their origins or face the overwhelmingly legitimate indictment that we
lose verisimilitude because we deal within the realm of the anachronistic. When our myths
change, so must our story-telling.

Style, I’ll maintain, is all-important to the creation of future works designed for
future readers, and I’ll also maintain that one of the beauties of this language, and perhaps
others (I won’t make so bold as to suggest that the possibility is universal), is that English
is remarkably open to certain shifts and play in expression and sentence structure. Yet, while we have clear ways of writing that remain conventionally accepted, and may be less than logical at times, and while the language is open to experimentation, to exploit the possibilities for shifting syntax is to defy a reader's expectations and to inadvertently muddle what may actually be fairly conventional meaning. Somehow, while our more recent iconographic tastes can easily include the creative torturings found in the cinematic discourse of a Yoda, to adopt syntactical disruption as more than the idiosyncratic rumblings of a character, to formulate said disruption as narrative itself, is to adopt a failing creative strategy for communication; to do so is to inspire feelings of frustration and anger in many a reader, and worse yet, to lead a reader to reject the idea that a story is being told at all. Twisting of syntax may make for a certain music where dry prose had once stood, may lead to a newness of expression, may lead to a revitalization in the novelty of a novel or short story, but, in the end, readability recedes even as experiment progresses.

Given these observations and personal experiences with experiment, the strategy I've adopted for the following is to keep the narrative relatively simple, overtly conventional, and within the clear boundaries of the story teller rather than those of a story writer. The teller here, in an effort to embrace the comic, is an adopted persona, cynical, satirical, somewhat egotistically judgmental, and relatively transparent throughout. Nothing in the narrative is meant to defy conventional style, and if push were given to shove, I'd have to admit that the stylistic simplicity, save an overabundance of parenthetical clauses, a flaw to which I've always been inclined, is equally reflected in a simplicity of language. My inherent tendencies toward portmanteauialism have been kept at bay, and, if anything, the narrative relies on more hackneyed metaphors than it should, overemploys more use of gesture than is at all inspiring, and frequently loses vivacity where vivacity should exist. As I've stated, the writer's original art is in part stylistic, but, unfortunately, I've put that aside for the moment.
For the sake of clarification through differentiation, I offer the following example of what stylistic co-optations have taken place in the narrative. The current version includes the following passage, taken entirely at random:

"Wearing a gray suit, a black Windsor at his collar, on an old and bellowing horse, Pa rode up the street, paused near the courthouse's statue raised to the Confederate dead, dismounted, dropped the reigns, patted the horse twice on the neck, and with a broad and radiant smile, walked up the walk and onto the steps as the town cheered. There, behind the former mayor, who stood behind one thin microphone and stand, he turned to face the brightly colored sea of his constituents. Nestled into that crowd, their elbows linked, Elise, Ma, and Moncus stood teary-eyed as he grinned, giving a few quick waves."

The style to which I'm more inclined, that which I take to be more original and to be more aesthetically pleasing to my own ear, would render the same passage as something like this:

"Tall thrust, aseat upon old and bellowing an animal loaned, moment and beast reminiscent of what once had been an unembellished surrender before tomb-statue now raised to the long southern dead and those moments anachronized glorious, Pa, at his collar the Windsor above and within his suit gray-dyed, up the street rode, new radiant and abroadening his smile. Disembarked there, onto the steps walked the man before cheering his town, the microphone stand thin before himself and mayor the former. Turning, faced Pa, brightly colored the sea of constituents, balloon-speckled, raggedly aripple as if breezespun along lines loose-woven of gimmee-capped skulls and overtly puffed hair. Into that crowd, nestled, linked their elbows into brief cluttering similitudes genetic and spiritual alike, Elise, Ma, and Moncus, teary-eyed stood grinning while the man waved acknowledgments"
quick to the prides civic and perhaps noisy, to the din of what had become a
secularist worship."

The latter is not only more difficult to produce, toying with what can be done with a
phrase or even part of speech, but several hundred pages of a similar style, replete with
shifts in verb location, ambiguities in modification, sometimes absent articles, and altered
vocabulary, may understandably annoy or bore anyone, save the writer. Hence, that style
has been left to another day and different context.

Given the above explanation as to why the style is what it is, albeit that that
explanation leaves much to be desired, little remains except to explain how the text operates
in terms of content, to give a brief synopsis of what has been an effort to convey an
apparent shift in ontological attitude and reformulation of old things in modern terms. The
question the text undertakes to explore is as simple as the style: in some southern
fundamentalist sort of world found vaguely within the Texas bible belt, what happens
when we slap the primary cultural assumptions about existence up against the confusing
amalgamations of the modern sensibility? In other words, how can Christian faith, in its
several forms, stand up as a viable ideology in a world overladen with strange-attractors,
mechanistic psychologies, relativistic physics and ethics, evolutionary premises, newly
proclaimed rights and freedoms, the deterioration in a cultural naiveté about political
machination, and the advent of technologies increasingly incomprehensible?

The answer to those rather sophomoric questions is a simple one: despite all
appearances, nothing essential has changed. To place Christianity in the position of
ideological dinosaur, or perhaps mule, is to mistake ephemera for authentic value. Nothing
in the world is truly new save what may be a few elements of human cognition, and
cognition is little more than a product of widening rather than truly revolutionary
perception. Goethe, Ovid, and the author/s of Genesis gave us the thinking that ultimately
became Darwinian; Sophocles gave us a chunk of the existential through his Jocasta; Plato
dumped a four-dimensional postulation on us; and, ultimately, in the grandiose terms of cosmology, we have always viewed ourselves as having been caught up in a world driven along by incomprehensible events, be those of poor Utnapishtim, whose response to the cataclysmic flood is shoulder-shrugging, “well, gods are like that,” Job’s puzzled faith about a righteous life suddenly gone sour, the evolutionary grounding of the species in the completely arbitrary elements of sexual selection and the chaotic rumbling of random variation, or, in recent years, the assertion that this is a chaotic universe and that chaos is simply a higher, self-defying sort of misunderstood order in the first place. Mother Night and her progeny are nothing new to any of us.

We are limited by chance, dwell among ideologies that attempt to deny the profound accidentalism of individual existence, and ignore the simple, and perhaps common, faith of a Sermon on the Mount. While we struggle to understand experience, the message of that text remains one of waiting. It was the answer to what may have been the invocations of the people who scrawled upon the walls of the caves at Lascaux; it was the answer to the dwellers in Plato’s prisonhouse; it was the answer for those caught up in Heisenberg’s problem; and it remains a viable answer to those of us who today don’t even know how little we actually know. Waiting is faith, and the requisite moralities of tolerance, selflessness, kindness, and an internalized, self-regulatory abandonment of externally imposed, occasionally arbitrary, laws may naturally follow from acceptance of this principle alone. If we wait, we accept that which is, that which once was, and that which will finally be, but we do so in the context of expected fulfillment rather than in the implied anarchies of a pure and absolute existentialism or hubris-motivated nihilism.

As the concluding chapters of the text postulate, the privileging of linear progress or regress may be a product of human naïveté about the nature of waiting. At the level of individual experience, human existence seems to be diachronic; it is composed of a “maturation” through moments and minutes, hours and days, and years and decades, and
so on. Yet, to assume this linear progress to be everything relevant is to assume away the synchronic; the truth is that human life is composed of an incomprehensible web of interwoven and weaving identities and existences whose original causes can never be clearly identified. To discover the first formula for the universe, hence, to establish diachrony as a central element of progress, is probably impossible; all initial conditions necessarily originate at a beginning plus one, even those of conception itself. Thus, if the truth be told, all that we seem to be left with in our terms of a linear conception of the infinite is an equally infinite sense of the ongoingness of things. Without clear origin, chaotically and inexplicably, things go on.

Obviously, any novel progresses in this same fashion, but it does so not solely because time's arrow simply keeps at its own work, but because each novel moment is so deep in its inter-connectedness with other novel moments that no character can fully comprehend why progress occurs. That is the nature of mystery and suspension. Stuff simply happens. Characters are driven to wonder why that stuff has happened. Readers, on the other hand, are often led into the assumption that they do indeed know causes. This fact is indicative of the great lie perpetrated more often than is healthy in the modern world; not only must characters remain in the dark as to causes, but so must readers; given the paradigm of the world, they cannot really know the answers in a truthful tale.

Here, as the narrative of Lenny's life progresses, the explanations provided to the reader recede further and further from view, and, as is true in any honest work, the plot falls into an episodic narrative composed of fractilizations driven less by clear causality than by a synchrony of what seem to be disconnected events. All that is left to the characters' understandings, bound, in a fashion similar to that of most of us, to a naïveté of diachronous self-conception is either the prideful attempt to determine their own futures, a Moncus or a Ma, or the authentically Christian humiliations of waiting, and waiting—and waiting. Most are lost, essentially flat, have no sense of identity because identity
presupposes self-objectivity, experience nothing new in the world, but they plod on. They
tend to dance individually upon a perpetually chaotic line, unaware that they truly stand
together within the eternality of a very human and limited sphere of perception. Material
progress changes nothing significant for them, although they think that it does, and
spiritual progress occurs only because they are doomed to an acceptance of the simple faith
of waiting, a re-enactment, recursion into what has been and always will be.

The answer to the modern dilemma that the text attempts to give is that faith remains
viable in our ephemeral world, not solely because it answers a need created by some
perpetually recreated human angst, but because it is human nature in the first place; we are
hard-wired to eat, sleep, defend ourselves, and procreate in the context of passing time.
This clearly presupposes an incomprehensible and hopeful purposefulness to a species
forever inclined to embrace change as if change was itself the equivalent of purpose.
Change is not necessarily progress; existing is.

As Lenny Gorsuch is meant to realize in the hands of both a bum, an itinerant
preacher, and a number of other characters around him, today may be the product of the
events of yesterday, tomorrow may be the product of today, but, ultimately, each moment
remains a recapitulation of the same eternal purpose: to continue and to be, both products of
the human ability to wait. The act of existing is in itself faithful and redeeming; it is only
his early failure to recognize this fact that hinders him from the supposition of “grace.”

Ultimately, the text claims that the questions listed above are non-questions; every
moment for all of the characters here, as complex as the composition of that moment may
be, as I take to be true for all of us, is, in its very nature, God given and that should be
enough.
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CHAPTER I

IN SOMEONE'S IMAGE

Lenny was one of those poor deformed kids who was born without parents, or rather, who was born and no longer had parents. Instead, he was in the hands of the parents of his parents, which was a fitting arrangement, especially since the sins of the fathers have to be visited on the etceteras etceteras. Yet aside from this more or less irrelevant problem, Lenny had one minor imperfection that always seemed to monumentalize itself: his left arm was an oddly crooked bit of genetic error.

At birth, when the doctor handed him up and out, and the nurse had swaddled him and then passed him along so that he was then passed from hand to hand, and afterward, while he lay calmly unaware in his little stall among the other, healthier infants, all of his family members had overlooked this fact of arm. Since it was a glorious day, they tended to look the other way, after all, little babies “just don’t look like them babies in commercials, now do they?”

At toddledom, all of his family members had simply gotten used to it, and, as cute as the little buggers tend to be, muttering “mommy,” “daddy,” and “french fry,” it’s hard to admit that there’s something really wrong with them.

At little-boyhood, after leaving a rather cryptic note involving “Vegas” and “sorry about your savings account, Mom,” his parents had simply disappeared. Now, having been frustrated at their own attempts to rear children, Lenny’s grandparents took him in, re-evaluated everything that had happened in their shared lives, gave the kid a long and bubble-filled bath, watched as he splished and splooshed about in the tub with the
duckies and boats, and suddenly, shockingly noticed it: glaringly, astonishingly, his left arm was indeed a muddle.

Bent on rectification, they quickly consulted with a couple of wise and calm doctors, city men who, once they discovered that the dwindling Gorsuch clan had no current health insurance and that all financial savings had disappeared with the problem’s progenitors, assured all parties involved that the “cosmetic” had very little to do with “the child’s” future “quality of life.” Both men offered hyperbolic and heart-warming anecdotes about paraplegics, quadriplegics, three-legged dogs, Siamese births, brainless births, babies without livers, babies with monkey hearts, babies with cattle insulin, babies with freckles and moles and extra digits scattered here and there, and then, of course, as seal to the whole essentialist argument, both men independently referred the concerned parties to the whole fictional business of Charles Bovary and Hippolyte.

While the first of the two saw the allusion alone as argument enough, the other felt more inclined to go to the source. He read a few particularly gruesome sections aloud, in a low and serious monotone, all full of blackening flesh and cries of pain, occasionally peeping up over the well-worn book, peering over his silver rimmed spectacles as if to ensure himself that the elder Mrs. Gorsuch’s conviction was complete, and then, convinced that it was, he closed both the book, and poor Lenny’s case.

But, of course, despite these efforts to gain her native trust—her conviction? Well, the white coat, the deep voice, the hundreds of aging, dusty, and yellow-leafed books, the leather and the wood, and the little golf-ball trophy that read “hole in one” just didn’t carry the sort of weight with her that they should have. In fact, the argumentum Hypolitum was actually a point on the side of medical treatment rather than against it.

A mother’s a mother even when foster, and when her maternal interests touch upon reasonable doubts, she will do anything to discover the whole truth. In Mother Gorsuch’s life, this meant that she had to discover some way to reconcile the family’s,
which is to say her own, deeply rooted Evangelical sense of the basic wrongness of all things "left," and the fact that this was the very arm by which her son was crippled. To have it rot off seemed, if anything, just.

Should they heal it? Should they let the evil thing remain? There was only one thing for the poor woman to do, and that's exactly what she did. She chose to seek additional advice, this time in a domain less secular, less cold, less scientific, and, as we all must one day realize, less pecuniary and woody.

It was late one still Sunday afternoon, as her husband, from his perch in the weathering hammock, snored into the trees and sky above, that she surreptitiously gathered little Lenny under one pale blue seersuckered arm, nudged him into the family Pontiac, and small and frail and unlicensed, punched the pedal and rolled out into the great unknown. They bounced away in a flurry of dust, Lenny leaning upon the hot sill, lolling out his gritty tongue like a dog. Ma Gorsuch, propped up on a pillow, leaning upon the wide thin wheel, chewing an aging lip with one loose denture, peeping up over the dash, her gray hair fluffed loose of its bun, and one green picnic basket thrust slippery between them on the bench seat.

They drove out past the McCulliver home, its mawking peacocks and paired cottonwoods, past the old wooden bridge where the delinquents carved little love notes to the devil, past the long turn where the slightly senile Jimmy Franklin, thinking that he'd seen the ghost of Himmler, had once overturned his old pickup, past the fairyland power substation which hummed and rummed along in the night, past the three little unkept red plastic flowered styrofoam and wire crosses meant to warn the world of the evils of drink, and finally up to the big old building that had once been part of Nub's Mill and Factory Boot Outlet.
There, behind the building and screened from the road, one at a time, they paused to take care of their business. And then, without speaking, they ate what she’d packed in the basket. And then they drove on.

Down past the empty crossroads where the highway was meant to have run, down past the junkyard where the blue and white subcompact that had once been her very own son-in-law’s (his very own father’s) still lay waiting to get mashed, down past the bingo hall and crematorium, and finally, two or three hours away from her husband, his grandfather, they pulled onto the beige dusted road that led down to the tent hall meeting.

Brother Michael. And the Gatekeepers of Love. Or so Elma Nelson had told her.

Beside her, Lenny was all grit and grins. Foolishly enough, the boy thought that they’d come to a circus. He figured it’d be elephants and rhinos and jugglers and acrobats for the rest of the day. But no.

By the time that the two of them, out near the drainage puddle behind the tent, Lenny shouting navigational advice about chuckholes and divots, had parked the car in a slow slide of dust next to half a dozen others, he was onto her. There wasn’t an animal sound one, no rides, no clowns, and the vocal strains that drifted from the tent weren’t at all like the expected rhythms of a barker, or of laughter and applause; they were more like the sound of wind in a milk-bottle, low, smooth, building and falling, sometimes crackling, but far from joyful or juvenile.

“Ma,” he said to her when she’d come around to his side, tossed the door open and leaned in to unbelt him. “What’re we doin’?”

Harrid, she popped loose the belt’s clasp, tossed it off of his lap, then gathered his bony right set of biceps up in her hand and pulled him stumbling out of the car. While he stood peering into the dust of the lot, she slammed the over-large door closed behind him. “We’re seein’,” she answered, encouraging him along toward the tent. “‘Bout your arm.”
Without understanding, Lenny just nodded.

Rain-yellowed, striped in faded latitudes of blue and white, the tent, two-stories tall at its highest, loomed before them, pinnacled, its bedraggled flags hanging limp at each of its five corners and peak. When they stepped through the open and cavernous flapped doorway, it became apparent that the day’s heat had driven the preacher and his invisible staff to lift the far wall; still sweltering inside, it was rolled all the way up.

The preacher, tall, bent and bearded, head-to-toe in black, poised sweating upon a dilapidated wooden dais behind a podium, his back to the huge and blank space that looked out on a few heat-shimmered trees and cattle. He paused to give a cold glance at the two of them as they searched around the interior. They stood, lost momentarily in the shadows of the molded and yellowish light that filtered through the canvas above, flat-footed on the trodden dried mud and grass of the “floor,” watching from between two sections of chest-high bleachers. Perhaps twenty-five people, randomly spread, were sprawled upon the splintering planks, fanning themselves with pocketbooks and pieces of cardboard, yawning, and, at present, supplementing the preacher’s gaze at Lenny and Ma.

Watched, from all sides, standing between those bleacher sets, Mother Gorsuch squeezed Lenny’s arm and scowled. “Don’t see no Gatekeepers here,” she told him underbreath. “Nelson said there’s s’posed to be gospel singin’. Spirit. Big choir.”

“Maybe they’re at supper,” Lenny told her.

“Maybe,” she said, and as everyone watched, she shoved him further into the tent. Naturally, he veered to the left, but still obsessed with her superstitious dread, she caught his good arm again, and spun him to the right, pushing him forward, slightly astumble.

They sat; she smoothed her skirt and hitched at her brassiere; then she smiled at the unspeaking preacher.

Round-faced, and flushed with heat and delirium, he nodded at them.
She nodded back.

"I am glad," he told them. "That you have chosen to come on out here on this
good Lord's Day."

A few "amen"s rumbled around them, mysteriously unannoyed at the intrusion.

"Me too, preacher," Ma Gorsuch told him, and she meant it. "Me too. Glad to be
here--glad to be able to be here."

"As are we all," he said, and slid back slightly from the podium, both of his
sweating hands clinging at its edges. "As are we all."

There were a few more "amen"s.

"And you?" he said to Lenny beside her.

Lenny just stared. She nudged him with her right elbow. He continued to stare.

"He is, preacher," reddening, she spoke for him. "He said so just outside of this
tent. Just a few moments ago."

for here on this good Lord's Day?"

Lenny stared again. "I," he stumbled. "Just came with my--," and he stopped,
open-mouthed, confused.

"His grandma to get some advice from someone who knows," she interrupted.

At the podium, the red-cheeked preacher lifted a hand and stroked at the edges of
his beard. Somewhere behind him, outside the tent, a scissortail danced from limb to
limb, and a cow leaned its head forward, lowing. He lifted an eyebrow and listened
outside for a moment, then dropped his hand and nodded. "I see," he said. "And what
sort of advice might that be?"

"His arm," she told him, and much to Lenny's embarrassment, she pulled him to
his feet on the bleachers, then spun him so that the preacher, along with everyone else,
could see it.
There it was. Short on tendons or something equally necessary, it was bent at the elbow, forever crooked as he stood or walked or danced or bathed or slept, just crooked up in an unstraightening “V” upon which his hand dangled, naturally, and eternally, just dangled there limp at the wrist like a caught fish.

Old Mother Gorsuch held up the arm like she might hold out a bad piece of meat to the butcher who’d sold it, shook it, then held it out before her. “What do I do with this?”

The preacher lifted his left hand to his mouth and ran a concealing and thoughtful index finger along his upper lip. He glanced away for a few seconds. When he looked back, his cold blue eyes twinkled a bit. “This,” he told them. “Is a complex theological matter. Why,” he suddenly boomed and waited. “How,” he boomed and waited again. “Can an all forgiving, all loving God,” and he upswept his gaze into the bleachers where it bounced from person to person probing along, and then finally back to its initial subjects. “Allow good people, strong people, simple people,” and he blinked at Lenny and Eleanor. “To suffer so much, when they have done so little.”

Out in the stands, like an amen, someone shouted “why,” then quieted.

“It is,” he told them, rocking back from the podium, stiffening. “A question we all might ask. It is,” he said. “A question we all deserve to have answered. It is,” he muttered. “A question that we all must face one day, especially those of us who live our lives in good Christian faith.” He stood straight up and released the podium, his palms out. “It is the question of the saints themselves.”

“Amen”’s resounded around them, like pinballs caught between flippers and bells.

Beside Lenny in the stands, Ma Gorsuch squirmed, frowning. She pulled the still-standing boy back down to a seat beside her. “Preacher,” she said in the diminishing sound.
And at the podium, startled now, he gazed at her.

"That ain't my question."

His face slackened as his improvised sermon slowly cluttered up before him.

"My question is, what'll we do 'bout it?"

The preacher closed his eyes and swallowed, then opened them again. "'Bout what."

"'Bout this here arm," annoyed she said, shaking it slightly again. "Do we do the surg'ry or not?"

The preacher stared. Somewhere off in the bleachers on her left side, someone gave a rude and fictitious cough.

"They say it just might get the gang-green and need cuttin' off."

On the dais, like a marionette, the preacher twitched suddenly; it was almost as if something had tugged at one of his strings.

"So?" insistent, Ma Gorsuch called to him.

"Mother," he told her, directed again, calm. "Might I ask which arm that be?"

"Done showed you," she told him, and lifted it once more. Beside her, Lenny yawned in the heat and watched the cow as it chewed off under the trees. "Left one."

"Ah," he said. "The left one. You know," he told the rest of the crowd. "The Lord not only asks that we suffer in His mighty name, that we bear His burdens with a light heart, knowing." The "amen"s readied themselves. "I said knowing that no burden is so large that He cannot carry it, that all burdens are not burdens at all, but are truly gifts of the Lord, gifts by which He tests us, hardens us, strengthens us--." He waited a moment while the "amen"s now resounded. "Not only this, but He also asks that we keep the deeds of our one hand," he told them, raising a hand. "From the knowledge of the other," and he raised the other. "And while our two hands are here for doing the deeds that He asks, we also know," and his arms fell. He grasped the podium and leaned
forward, squinting toward Lenny and Ma. "He also tells us, that lest we be driven to
stumble, we must cast off the hand, the limb, that offends us. He asks that we pluck out
the eye that--."

That was enough for Ma Gorsuch. It was clear. God's rather lucid injunction was
that Lenny should suffer. That meant a life with the offending limb as crippled as the day
he had been born. Or not. He could suffer life because they had gone to the doctors and
it had been cast off. Or not. Of course, casting it off would be something more along the
lines of atonement, but then again, as the body was the temple of the soul, leaving it there
would be an eternal reminder of his wicked parents.

That arm would remain crippled.

Or not.

To Ma Gorsuch, there in the stands in the heat, the sound of the preacher in her
ears, it seemed that as evil as it was, no matter the choice that they would make, either for
that operation or for living on with the deformity, it would still be little Lenny's burden to
bear it--and that burden was itself part of the greater rightness and justice of God
Himself. What they chose to do was irrelevant. Lenny would suffer, and suffering was
good.

"God be praised," she whispered there beside Lenny in the stands, firmly
convinced by the wisdom of the inescapable end. "He knows, He knows," she said.
"Our deeds are but illusions sent by the devil, and our efforts are but vainglory and
pride."

Beside her on the bleachers, Lenny, little knowing what had just happened, stared
up at her and whispered one careless, "Amen."

And thus, in all of that simple proclamation of a word that no one can usually
define, Lenny had agreed to abide by the deeds and doings of the deity no matter how
fickle or poorly considered those deeds and doings might seem to be. And, of course, as has been true of many a good hero, he was doomed to violate that unwitting covenant.

Kindergarten posed little challenge to him. What can a bunch of paste-sniffing and Kleenex eating little babblers say or do to threaten a world-view so hardy as his happened to be? His peers spent far too much of their time and attention focused on the difficult tasks of washing up before snacks, in finger-painted experiments in expressionism, and with committing the universal fact that streets must be crossed at corners to memory to notice his arm at all. No one even noticed this most fundamental of differences at the time most suited to it: while their dirty red and blue and green and yellow appendages were always referred to in the plural, his was always mentioned in the singular.

Elementary school proved to be the same way. Knowing when to signify one’s basic needs by holding up a hand, scrawling out figures or letters between those slim little blue lines, or even learning to occupy time and space via the upper cornered doodle, brought little of their attention to the difference at all.

But Junior High, Junior High. There it would be different. Advent of hormone and growth spurt, of Reebok and Nike, of strut and of primp, there the difference was both noticed and equally felt.

Ma Gorsuch had listened to a variety of well-rounding educators, all of whom had stressed the significance of music to the citizen, had also become aware of an astonishing lack of proper reeds among her own familiar church orchestra, and after consideration of crosses to bear, struggles to overcome, and so on, had herded little Lenny into the Junior High Band. Despite warnings and pleadings on the parts of various officials, who pretended a real capacity for music, and despite the horrific secularization implicit in Gershwin, she settled upon the clarinet as his primary vehicle of both salvation and roundedness.
Lenny did indeed struggle. He held his hands the wrong way in order to reach levers and keys and holes, squeaked and cracked his way to some degree of proficiency, and took pride—what little there was—in his efforts at *Andante* and *Where, oh Where Has My Little Dog Gone*.

But meanwhile, those hormones and their requisite tokens of gender affiliation grew and grew all around him. To be a seventh-grade boy, to play the clarinet, and to be eternally limp-wristed was, to put it lightly, a nightmare waiting to happen.

One quiet fall afternoon, sometime after the rude and noisy beginnings to *A Christmas Medley*, he waited, as he always did, books in his pack, clarinet and case in hand, at the bus stop behind the school.

It all began behind him. One kid, over-old and already sprouting a bit of irritant acne and pubic beard, shouldered a second, and they exchanged words.

“Watch it, boy,” the gap-toothed and pustuled kid spoke.

“Who you callin’ boy, boy?” smaller and tan, the offender pondered.

“What, boy?” acne wondered.

“Boy?” tan inquired.

And suddenly they paired off into the classic chest-prodding ambivalence of that go-on-you-hit-me-first hegemonic justice of the young.

Lenny, held his ground while the other kids began to back away into the appropriate circle. After a few more offending and precarious shoves, the acned kid stumbled into Lenny, lost his balance, and fell to his knees.

The circle, as one body, giggled.

Distracted now, the boy pondered up from his dust at Lenny, then stood up slowly, wiping his knees. That was it. That was all. Little more need be said.

Hormones and tokens always at the fore, limp-wristed Lenny’s arm momentarily took up all of his attention. It’s true, Lenny had, as all such people seem to say, always been
aware that he was indeed different, but now that difference was suddenly acknowledged, and vocally belittled from the quarter before him.

The entire crowd gasped at the revelation.

While the first, tanned boy fused with the circle, it adjusted itself to incorporate Lenny and his opponent. Befuddled, clarinet in hand, Lenny stared at acne who stared back.


"I will," naively, Lenny, who at the time had far more of Ma Gorsuch in him than was truly necessary, said. "If you'll stop bein' a stumblin' block to the rest of us."

Overwhelmed by the theological outburst, the bully's jaw fell slightly, his gap momentarily radiated, and then he closed his mouth and scowled. He did what all good sinners must do and reached out with one stern finger, touched Lenny's chest hard, and stepped in close. Jabbing in order to add inflection where inflection wasn't really necessary, the kid spoke. "I said you'd better be careful, Gorsuch. Boy."

"I said that I would," rather sheepishly Lenny told him. But then, feeling the circling eyes upon him, and having heard the playful exchange many times before, he suddenly and inexplicably opted to enter the adolescent world. He repeated what he'd just said, and added the significant closure. "I said that I would, boy."

With that, acne did what he must, leapt back and assumed the stance. With four fingers now, he jabbed Lenny in the chest, and then swatted a closing fist up into Lenny's face. He turned to the crowd, opened his fist and guffawed. "Got the freak's nose," he told them. Approving, they laughed, and he swung again, flat-palmed, inches from Lenny's nose.

Frightened, Lenny stepped away from the feigned blow, watched acne grinning at the others, and forgetting all about his cheeks and their doctrinal turnings, misunderstanding the basic rules of pubescent posturing, with his good, and thereby over-
developed, right hand, clarinet and case still dangling, he swung hard and flat at the base of the kid's skull.

The impact was profound.

The whole world opened up before him.

Future met present.

The black case dimpled at its own center while the handle stung in his hand. In front of him, the bully fell to his knees again while the crowd giggled and ooohed.

Really angered now, acne climbed up from the ground, probed his hair with a hand, then lowered his head and came on.

Lenny struck him full in the face with the edge of the case.

Acne's nose broke. Dancing, he two-handed clung to it.

Lenny, now aware of opportunities opening, raised the case and struck him again. And again.

And suddenly, Lenny Gorsuch was simply armswing and weight, no longer the child who had been, but Gorsuch before the stumbling Goliath, and, as was inevitable, Goliath was falling and scrambling away. Blow after blow he struck chasing him until the case opened and like dominoes his clarinet parts sprinkled out over the ground.

Finally, the kid just lay there.

And the authorities arrived.

Before he knew what had happened to him, Lenny was restrained, whisked off, shuffled into cells ugly and pale and cold and stainless, held before a judge who then determined that by all of the unwritten rules and common laws of all the playgrounds in Western history, technicalities not withstanding, Lenny Gorsuch had indeed struck first, and he was then stuffed into a dark and locked van which ultimately dumped him into a chain-linked, barbed wired, beige-stuccoed, children's stockade.
Something, obviously enough, had gone very wrong.

And so, with each of her visits, Ma Gorsuch agreed.

“Boy,” she would tell him as they sat at one of the picnic tables sequestered in the small outdoor cloister, its chicken wire mesh overshadowing above. “I knew the devil was in it. Always. Knew it.”

And inside, Lenny went on with his education. He learned the basic rules of things, ate the stale food, balanced the red gritty jello with his plastic forks, spoke to the shrink and the chaplain, later laughed with his cohorts over what had been said, and nightly practiced the necessary mantras. “Yeah,” he would say to his hypothetical shrink while the other boys of his dormitory scowled on. “I got the low self-esteem on account of my arm. I’m different and I know it now. It’s okay to have feelings like I have—you know, to get mad—but they got to stay feelings. Other people got feelings too. And they’re okay too, you know?”

And the curses and invectives of the applauding crowd would rain down on him. He was good.

Then, after he’d gone through this litany, he’d drift on to the imaginary chaplain. “I know, I know,” he would say. “It’s pride that really made me do it. Just plain old human pride. My arm’s my arm, and that’s my burden to bear. But, no burden to bear so great that God won’t keep His ever-watchful eye upon me. He’ll carry me on through anything, anything ‘t all. Just got to watch my pride. Get thee behind me.”

And the crowd, again between curses, would shout out its “amens.”

Finally, six months later, Lenny Gorsuch made good.

When they came to speak to him on that February afternoon, he mouthed all of the new phrases he’d learned. The administrators smiled and nodded. This one, unlike so many others, had been redeemed.
So they released him. Seven months later, over-sized and over-educated, he was back in school.

And of course, since he was now a jailbird, most of his classmates, while curious, stayed away from him, especially since the tales of that day had grown over the months. He usually had a wide berth in the hall, found himself alone at his locker, and found himself surrounded by empty seats at lunch, yet sometimes, hormone is hormone. And when the really brave of the boys, testing their warrior natures, came and fiddled with his flipper, or nudged him a bit too hard in the hall, he did what all good and civil men, afraid of incarceration, choose to do.

Deep in the right pocket of his ill-fitting jeans, he would shove his good right hand in order to restrain it, look down upon his worn and scuffed shoes, smile a sad little smile over the hand that fate had dealt him, and all the while he would know what really mattered, that deep in that pocket, far from view, he had extended one long and meaningful central finger.
CHAPTER II

A PLEASING ODOR

Lenny probably would have been doomed to spend the rest of his life in something vaguely reminiscent of that same, classically lower middle-class posture, the silent finger in its civil, protective pocket, except that a fortuitous series of events drove the family right out of the world that it had known and into a class above and beyond itself. His prodigal, and somewhat profligate mother would never have returned, his kinclaiming “father,” or, to be honest, series of “fathers,” would never have begun drifting into town only to avoid the subsequently instituted genetic screenings, and Lenny himself would certainly never have discovered how well-loved he really was: he would never have realized how necessary he was to the nation’s own respective bit of well-being.

This particular change occurred some nineteen months after his return from the detention facility, and began, innocently enough, with Pa Gorsuch’s request that the family put a little extra life into its usual Saturday dinner, a dull affair that consisted primarily of high-fat, low nutrition, well-charred patties of ground beef with a bit of potato.

As Pa sat at breakfast, hovering above a cooling bowl of creamed wheat that he’d secretly laced with both sugar and a whopping tablespoonful of cocoa, he took his right thumb, placed it atop his lower lip, and shoved upward and backward while sucking the gritty cereal down with his tongue, his ill-fitting dentures finally settling into place against his palette. “Ma,” he then said. “Let’s cook us that roast today.”

And from across the table, with a new Watchtower spread open before her, a
beige and steaming cup of decaf nestled in one palm, she glanced up and away from her
bit of dogmatic nonsense, a newsprint article about the inherent wickedness of birthdays.
Halloween, Valentine’s day, Easter bunnies, and Ronald MacDonald, and grinned. She
closed the tract, feeling almost ecstatic, rose and whisked herself over to the frigidaire.

She pulled open the plastic upper compartment, wrestled for a few frail moments
with a frost-covered pile of rock-hard paper-wrapped burgers and cube steaks, and,
finally exasperated, leaned to the counter, lifted the ice-pick, and hacked at the bunch till
things began to fracture. After a good nine or ten blows, she leaned into the cold and
pulled out one large and lean, equally rock-hard, frosted, wrapped roast.

At the table behind her, Pa licked at a few chocolately grains of wheat on his lips,
Looks to be just ‘bout as solid as con-crete.”

“Pa!” she spat, excited and disgusted at once. “That’ll be enough of that kind of
negative talk in my kitchen.”

“Sure,” he told her, and leaned back to his elbows, hunched over the bowl and
slurping a bit more.

She lay the glacial chunk that was the roast on the counter tiles and watched it.

“Could put it in the sink to thaw,” he muttered, unlooking.

“Could,” she said, her gnarled old right hand raised and clutching her chin. She
glanced at the clutter of pots, pans, and plastic flowered dishes overtopping the sink’s
brim. “But can’t.”

“Maybe stick it in the oven for a while.”

“Maybe,” she agreed, but then she remembered something she’d heard on the six
o’clock news, one of those little health-watch snippets between one story about how
ignorant and immoral young people have become these days, and another about young.
blind children who spend all of their time training seeing eye dogs. "But can't 'cause of them germs growin' and all."

"Ah," he said, giving a short little "tsk" by popping the sides of his lips apart. And he sighed. "Well, s'pose to be a sunny out there anyhow. Guess we could barbecue up some frankfurters or somethin'."

"No," short and sweet and firmly committed she told him. With both of her old hands propping knuckling into her hips, the offending roast lying before her, white-papered and unyielding, she sighed. That roast was more than a chunk of beef torn from some poor and idiot cow. It was a resurrection of former hopes and holidays. It had been planned, scrimped and saved for. Penny by penny she'd snuck her change into the secret nickel jar she kept, and finally, blood-heavy and soft, she'd smuggled it into the shopping cart when Pa's back had been turned.

Planning to make it a birthday surprise, she managed to get it home undetected and had shoved it into the back of the freezer, but, unfortunately for both her and her husband, between that day, and the anniversary of Pa's birth, she had discovered that God had put the stamp of disapproval on those sorts of celebrations. The birthday had come and gone while the roast just lay there, clotting.

Occasionally she'd opened the door to peep at it while the frost gathered. Occasionally, all the while secretly mourning the whimsies of God, she'd taken a lustful old fingernail and dug a little trench through the frost on its top, popped the finger into her mouth and sucked the cold out of it. Pa had discovered the thing long ago, but little motivated to change in general, let alone that of diet, he'd never really indicated that he would ever want it at all.

Now that the occasion to cook and eat the thing had arisen, after all, how could the celebration of one of His days and its glories have even the slightest tincture of blasphemy. Ma Gorsuch was not about to let the thing go. While all of the thin
carnivores of her day and age might settle for liver and onions, burgers and steamed carrots, or even a variety of fowl, the mere thought of a good healthy chunk of juicy beef will get even the most omnivorous of them salivating.

It took Ma no more than another forty-six seconds to generate a far more effective strategy. While the news report had mentioned a number of dangerous ways to thaw food, that report hadn’t even mentioned the thing that occurred to her. Nor had The Watchtower forbidden it. And, even more importantly, the idea was all-natural, all-healthy, all-eco-conscious, and it didn’t involved scrubbing all of those loathsome dishes and pots and pans. She’d seen her grandson and his Scout troop broil chicken in a solar-oven, a long and tedious process that had left only two of them ill, and now the sheer reflective capabilities of living in a mobile home sank in.

“We,” she told Pa, who’d snuck a hand over to her cup and taken a few wincing sips at her coffee and its unsweetened bitterness. “Could set it on the roof.”

The man stared at her. He took a paper napkin from the holder and dabbed it at his lips.

“Like them Scouts. Wrap it up in foil and set it up on the roof. Sun’ll thaw it nice and slow-like. Probably be done by noon and I’ll pop it in the oven. Be supper by three. Carrots and potatoes.”

He crumpled the napkin and lay it beside his empty bowl.

“Come on, Pa,” she pleaded. “Got to eat it someday.”

Thoughtfully, he sucked a few more grits from under his plate. “Guess it’ll take gettin’ the ladder outta the shed,” he mumbled while she beamed back, leaning against the sink.

And before anyone had any idea about what was really happening, before anyone had even the slightest inkling of how profound the moment’s impact on their paired lives might be, Ma Gorsuch had peeled the butcher-paper from her roast, Pa had clumsily
banged, crashed, and arthritically dragged the aluminum extension ladder from their
dilapidated shed, and had placed it against the mobile home’s roof out back. Its two
swiveling feet propped carefully between the upstanding tufts of marigold and weed in
their ever-changing flower-bed. Pa clung to the ladder with one hand, accepted the foil-
wrapped roast with the other, and apelike, quivering, climbed to the roof where he
brushed away a scatter of browned and yellowing leaves, muttered something about
“needin’ to clear them gutters out,” and lay the thing on the roof.

Below him, with one hand touching the ladder, “to keep it balanced,” and the
other raised uncertainly to her cheek, Ma watched and grinned.

He came down the ladder, dusted his hands, and together they stared up at the
roof like two straw-stuffed dummies waiting for a change of clothing or a few crows to
frighten.

Later that afternoon, in what looked to be an overjoyed burst of anticipatory
energy, Ma had gone ahead and washed her precious pots and pans. Pa had watched
three full wrestling matches, each of which concluded after the evil and often anti-social
Ninja Demon had employed a series of illegal moves, including one final and insulting
effort to toss the referee over the ropes. Pa had just begun to watch the day’s “Real-Real-
Real-Real-Real Bad Reel,” the Italian-made, American-dubbed “Hercules and the Ice
Pirates of Quinzor,” when she strolled into the living room, deliberately fiddled with the
rabbit ears until the set went fuzzy, and said, “Now get out there and get me my roast.”

They both stepped through the banging aluminum door, down the four steps to the
brick path, and over to the ladder. There, much as he’d done before, Pa clambered
clumsily to the top and found the roast. He began to climb down when Ma suddenly
thought it best to make sure that all was well.

“Wait, Pa, she called up to him as he clung to the ladder with one hand and an
elbow looped around a rung. “Whyn’t you check it first?”
“Check it?” he pondered, the warm foil cupped in one hand.

“Yeah,” she told him. “Unwrap it a bit and see if it’s ‘tall frozen.’”

As they’d been married long enough for Pa to know that argument, reasoned or unreasoned, had little effect on the basic direction of will in his aged wife, Pa, unspeaking, foolishly agreed to do the deed. There, a good five and a half feet from the ground, he let go of the rung. He leaned into the ladder, elbow still linked to its bar, still clinging to that roast, and he reached around the frame and began to unfold the foil wrapping.

Three quarters of the way through the process, Ma, standing with that one hand thoughtfully returned to her chin, suddenly detected a small waver in the stability of the ladder. It took her only a fraction of a second to realize that the whole kit and caboodle, ladder, husband and beef, were teetering dangerously close to a fall, and that that fall, by virtue of given trajectory, would deliver all three violently to a spot atop the brick path.

Thinking quickly, she did what she felt was appropriate. Rather than struggle through the doomed motions of someone trying to prevent the inevitable, after all, she was small, light, and as frail as a bird, she chose to control the fall itself. She stepped closer to the ladder, reached out with a hand, and shoved it hard in the direction of the flower bed.

Above her, Pa, a bit befuddled by this strangely aggressive action, dropped his jaw. His denture popped loose, and briefly flailing, he, the ladder, and the unwrapped roast plummeted into the marigolds.

There, peacefully, he lay tangled in the aluminum rungs, the golden-orange flowers nestling in around him. Ma gathered up the roast, began dusting the dirt off of it, and then noticed that her husband, far from spitting out the anal invectives she would have expected, seemed to be snoring. Rattling and buzzing, he breathed through his nose, his half-lidded eyes rolled slightly upward, the eggish whites glazed and dull.
“Pa?” she wondered, setting the roast upon the path.

“Pa?” she wondered again, now leaning and touching him on one upthrust hand. One of his shoulders seemed to be altogether out of place: it jutted up and forward in a way that reminded her of Lenny’s misshapen arm. A bit frightened, she began both to shake his good arm and to pat his cheek until it reddened and her fingers began to sting. He let out one long and loud snore, paused before inhaling, waited a bit longer before taking a breath, waited a bit more, and then, finally continued to wait.

“Pa!” she shrieked, standing fully upright, both of her hands clutching her cheeks, completely baffled about what to do.

As the birds sang up in the trees, the ants continued to build their various mounds, and the cars poked along out on the highway, they were there in the yard together, more coupled than they had been in years.

Finally, again snoring loudly, he drew a breath in, still limp on the dark earth of the flowerbed, the ladder atop him, his mangled shoulder rising with each breath. A few minutes he breathed while she watched.

“Oh Pa,” she said, and with that rushed into the house to make the necessary call.

The voice on the line explained the intricacies of cardiopulmonary resuscitation as she listened without hearing. It then promised that help was on the way.

She returned to Pa’s body and knelt beside it to make a quick prayer. There in the marigolds, unaware of the dirt and her knees, Godward she mumbled a few words about the sinfulness of hiding grocery store purchases from husbands, of insconsolable avarice, of having forgotten to give up the celebration of Independence Day the year before, and of having thought that she could control the very fate and destiny of falling husbands and roasts and ladders.

This was all clearly an instance of retribution for some hideous degree of backsliding and retrogression.
A few hours later, greatly distraught after having been dumped off in the hospital emergency room by a couple of young men who were a bit too flippant in the face of such tragedy, the real revelation happened. It was the thing that would change their lives forever. It had nothing to do with the fundamental health of Pa Gorsuch, who, despite a brief period of unconsciousness in the hospital, during which Ma’s self-admonitions had become an open plea-bargain, “Don’t let him be paralyzed, God, and I’ll get right.” had simply knocked a shoulder out of place and was now no more than a bit dazed about what had happened. Instead, it had to do with the cheery bedside chatter of a young physician’s assistant and the people who shared their hospital room.

As he’d probed and prodded at Pa’s shoulder, this young assistant had off-handedly asked if there had been anything wrong with the ladder. Both Ma and Pa assured him that there hadn’t been, that the fault was solely their own, or perhaps in the overly soft soil of the flowerbed. and he, the assistant, after prodding a bit more, snickered that that was “too bad. After all, we are a litigious people.”

That had meant very little to Ma and Pa at that moment, but as they quietly lay waiting for both x-rays and a treatment that was more similar to basic chiropractic care than the medical community is prepared to admit, the unseen people who shared their room began to talk. Apparently, while the young husband had been having a hand stitched up, the result of a brief experiment with a jig-saw, their two-year old son had grown bored with the long wait.

He’d clambered out of control and onto a table, and long before his mother could react, he’d slid across a few out-dated magazines, and flopped backward, skull first, onto the hard-tiled waiting room floor. He’d then put up a mighty fuss, disturbed all of the nearby patients, and then vomited all over himself and his mother.

Immediate, worried, and overly kind medical assistance had come within seconds.
From what the eavesdropping Ma Gorsuch could gather, as she sat holding Pa's healthy hand, the hospital staff had hurriedly finished stitching the father's wound, and then turned all of its collective attention to the frenetic son.

Behind the gray dividing curtain beside them, Ma could hear them talking, hushed, tense, as the boy slept. The husband tried to console his wife. "Listen, they're not afraid that he has a cracked skull or concussion at all. They're just worried that we might turn around and sue them. This way, they're covering their own behinds. He doesn't even have a knot on his head."

At that moment, Ma Gorsuch, her roast slowly rotting on that sun-warmed brick path far away, her husband lying on the bed beside her, slightly misshapen, put together both the off-hand phrase of the assistant, the quietly annoyed mutterings of the people nearby, and the sheer and momentous possibility of a culture as legally philanthropic as our own. The reflected light of this new awakening shone outward and downward upon what had been the lifelong history she shared with her husband, and her future, as they sat and lay amidst the bleached sterility of the sheets, the gray aluminum bed rails, and the little aluminum trays and plastic cups of water; the very future of her family suddenly spread itself out before her in one entirely fateful vision that radiated equally upon her past, as if the morrow might reveal the foolishness, ugliness, depravity and deprivation of its own predecessor.

Suddenly, she knew what they'd been as well as what they could be.

"Pa," she said as the man flinched a bit in his pain, his eyes closed. "We've been a foolish family."

"Don't I know it," he agreed. "Put a roast on the ..."

"No, no, no," she told him, releasing his hand, clutching the bed rail in both of her fists, and rising to lean over him.
When he opened his eyes, her face seemed to hover above him, her smile sultry in its own aged way, and she took a soft hand to brush his forehead. “God.” she whispered. “Has shown me the way out of this desert. The milk and the honey’s gonna be ours.”

From his bed, the prostrate Pa blinked up at her. “Oh no,” he mumbled, reclosing his eyes. “Not again, Ma. Not again. We give up valentines and chocolate and pork and now--.”

The first thing that occurred to her, given the context of the hospital room and so on, was the most obvious. Lenny’s arm rose to mind. Not only had she heard of medical malpractice, and the relative ease of persecuting overly wealthy physicians for rather trivial, human mistakes, but she’d heard that suits against them were fairly common, in fact insignificant events in their own lives. They all had insurance to cover such things. And insurance, oddly enough, three-quarters of the time ensured that the patients’ suit would wind up paid off long before any appearance in court.

She reflected on Lenny’s condition, the fact that treatment had been counseled against, and then put this fact together with his later, violent outburst. Obviously enough, proper medical advice would have prevented Lenny’s stay in the detention facility. His deformed arm, and its subsequent and resulting childish persecution, had made him temporarily violent. Being temporarily violent, had in turn, led to a stained legal record, left him older than he should have been in school, made him something of an outcast, and, if anything, had ruined the entire package of possibilities they’d always known as “Lenny’s future.” No one would date someone deformed and criminal, nor would anyone hire him; even Floyd down at the Double L and O, Laundromat, Lube, and Oil in One, refused to employ jailbirds.

Surely, thought Ma, that combination of psychological damage and ruined prospects should amount to something.
But no.

It turned out, after she’d made a few phone calls to, and had a visit and free consultation with, one of the local lawyers who advertised on television (the best by reputation—he brought flowers to the very bedsides of the injured), that she had signed certain documents which clearly stated that she had not only fully understood the medical advice she had received concerning her grandson, but that with this in mind, she had also refused treatment. While the lawyer agreed that she might have a case, he also felt that the fight to undermine the credibility of those signed documents would be more than worth his time and effort. “Far better,” he told Ma, who sat wearing a brightly floral Sunday dress, her white gloved hands propped upon her purse. “If the man who’d delivered the boy had snipped or bunged up something in his elbow during the birth. Far better,” he said. “If some truckdriver had side-swiped you and injured that arm. After all,” he concluded. “You can’t sue God for a bit of muddled up DNA.”

With that in mind, Ma Gorsuch, crestfallen at her dwindling future, drove the long drive home, ran two stop signs, and virtually whizzed through a late yellow light. She finally managed to reach her own driveway, secure and depressed.

She related the whole conversation to her husband, who again dozed under his hat in the hammock, his shoulder and neck still bound up in a thick, white plastic brace, and, always less hopeful than his wife could be, he seemed unimpressed. With his gift for perpetual lytotes, he muttered simply, “Too bad you didn’t run up ‘gainst a truck. The way you drive.”

And that was all. For the moment, Ma Gorsuch’s plan to milk the goat of civil kindness died on its vine. It was not to awaken again until winter, after a brief torrent of freezing rain had fallen, loudly, rattling on the roof of their aluminum home.
CHAPTER III

A TEMPTATION

In the meantime, while Ma Gorsuch's plans fell to an immediate naught, Lenny had grown older and wiser. For one thing, despite the inherent godliness of the instrument, he'd given up the clarinet. His reputation as thug and criminal could hardly support such a habit. He'd also begun to rely on that well-buried middle finger less often. He had begun to practice something hitherto unrecognized in the Gorsuch clan: wit.

His native intelligence had been clear to most of his fellow inmates, and now it began to surface in the classroom. Not only did he ask questions that indicated brains and a certain intellectual yearning which impressed his instructors, but he had also begun to impress his peers.

Someone, in an act of public spirited philanthropy, had purchased the school's sole computer, and while most students bickered and fought for the opportunity to play games on it, blasting this or that spaceship to bits with a frenzy of key-punching and groaning, Lenny would sit spell-bound. Clumsily leaning forward in his twisted way, uncomfortably crouched to get his left hand on the keyboard, he explored all of the possibilities of software, danced upon the chaotic and frequently pointless waves of the internet, and, far more importantly, doggedly thumbed his way through a series of relatively mindless, highly egocentric "web pages" and their electronic contents, newsnotes, editorial ramblings, and hypertextual connections.

He discovered news releases from the House of Representatives.

He found political debate.
He learned all there was to know about speech-making.

When school elections, a highly figurative affair, surfaced during his Junior year, the candidates were drawn along the standard lines. There was the jock party, composed of one football quarterback and the starting center of the basketball team, both of whom asserted that the fundamental concern of the student body was its lack of something that they could only vaguely define as “spirit.” There was the sociable party, composed of one varsity cheer-leader and her hand-selected running mate, a less threatening and homely young woman whose family had wandered into the money which subsequently enabled her to throw fairly large, unsupervised parties at lakeside. Their concerns, of course, rivaled those of the jocks, but they also maintained that better relationships with the faculty and administration were crucial: they insisted that “dialogue and exchange of ideas” were necessary to the school’s well-being. And finally, there was the third party, led by a soft-spoken young man who dressed in the faded military green of a fatigue jacket during the cooler months, the dark and less robust black of concert T-shirts during the warmer, and who sported a pubic sprout of beard and one pearl earring stud. He had no running mate, but he did hold the intriguing idea that the electorate should support him because, as he told the assembled student body in the first of three scheduled election assemblies, “Well, why not?”

The body politic, as is natural, was divided between the two major contenders, jock and sociable, but Lenny was struck with the grave and significant philosophical assertions of the third party. “Well, why not?” had been a question that had initially surfaced in Lenny’s own mind on the day of the beating, had found greater fruition on the day that he’d lied his way out of reform school, and now, somehow, it had gained even more importance. To Lenny, it seemed to be the basic unspoken premise behind each and every political exchange to which he’d been exposed. Despite the cluttering obfuscation of manufactured rationale and reasoning, “Why not me?” seemed to be the
standard, unproclaimed argument of each and every speech. It, in a realm of debate that was increasingly focused on “This is why you don’t want them,” was, despite its grammatically negative construction, a positive claim. It was summary. It was bold. It was, above all else, honest and somehow affirming.

“Why was the west won?” Lenny found himself wondering. Because someone said “Why not?” he found himself answering. Why did Ford build an assembly line? Why not. Why did we set foot on the moon? Why not. Why did people become millionaires? Why did Caesar cross the Rubicon? Why did Shakespeare bother with plays? Why did we cross the Atlantic? Why did a bunch of half-starved, ill-equipped civilians raise their pitchforks against a red-coated militia? Why did a bunch of half-literate Southern yokels, ill-equipped farmboys, raise their skinny dark arms and unworking rifles against what they took to be a blue-suited aggressor? Why did a small, mouse-eared billionaire give the White House his best shot? Why did a young and stupid revolutionary take aim and fire down from a bookhouse and into a President? Or, in the end, why did anyone even bother to weep for anyone else, ever?

The entire, unchangeable answer was obvious: Why not.

And so, Lenny Gorsuch, one mildly cool Thursday afternoon, while stumbling along down the over-crowded hall of his high school, touched Michael “Dub” Dubinski’s green shoulder and grinned at him. “You need me. Need writing.”

Dubinski, who’d always been one of the loner-types who worried his teachers by avoiding all social interaction, frowned back through the jostle of bodies around them. “I,” he answered. “Thought I’d said everything that needed saying.”

“You did,” Lenny answered him. “But you didn’t get the spin. Look where you are.”
“I don’t spin,” Dub replied, not with the disgust of someone who felt himself to be above-it-all, but with the blunt honesty of someone who never intended to win. “I like the truth.”

“Ah.” said Lenny. “So do I. But you’ll never get elected.”

“Maybe,” said Michael. “That ain’t the point.”

Lenny grinned while the jabbering sportswear advertisements and their correlative bodies bounced around and upon their squared-off shoulders.

“Why not?” he asked.

And with that simple reiteration of his own phrase, Michael Dubinski suddenly felt the touch of power implicit in his own assertions, suddenly smelled a brief and wisping drift of possibility and prerogative. “You know,” he said. “You may be right.”


That afternoon, Michael Dubinski, under the tutelage of the criminal Gorsuch, abandoned his youthful angst in favor of the possibilities inherent in political victory. As they sat in the noisy fluorescence of the Dairy Queen, malts and pad and paper before them, they sketched out a clearer agenda. They outlined a platform founded in principles that assumed the greatness of their peers, a platform founded under the firm belief that a student body, by virtue of its sheer size and weight, could not only be led to believe in its own authority, but did indeed have that authority. They traced out a denial of the basic conceptual framework that administrators had so long relied upon. They put the foundational, sublimating notion that the corpus of students at a public high school had only one essential ability, and that was to control “pep” and student “spirit,” to the test, and then they plunged on into the possibilities of what would be an expanded domain.

Rudely, they derived formulae by which students were to evaluate their own teachers. They created hypothetical committees by which administrative actions, from the choice of a noontime menu to the allocation of funds to student organizations, were to
be overseen. They created mechanisms by which curricula were to be evaluated, changed, and shoved through both administration and schoolboard alike. They compromised nothing, trusted themselves in everything.

And somewhere far away, totally unaware of the growing threat, the sociables were sneaking wine from a parental cupboard that always seemed to be going dry, and the jocks were sharing a few brews, lying on their backs, talking in a slurred bliss about which clouds reminded them of which female body parts.

The next morning, as the sociables and jocks nursed their own aching heads and queasy stomachs, three days before the next school assembly, Lenny and Michael coursed the hallowed halls, a stack of four-page, stapled documents, and a series of crudely drawn posters wondering "Why not?" under their arms. They’d typed all night, scrawled all night, and attached manila pockets to each poster. As they walked unobtrusively along, they deliberately found the posters of their opponents, bright sheets of poster-board covered by exclamation marks and magic-markered aphorisms in the school’s colors, taped their own beside them, and then put stacks of the documents into each pocket, easily to be taken.

Four hours later, all of their posters were gone.

The explanation was simple. They hadn’t, as was clearly called for in the school’s policy manual, had their posters approved by the administrator in charge of school elections. Nor had their sticky-fingered opponents approved of what was going on next to their own spirit-filled missives.

The only real problem, for administrator and opponent alike, was that the Gorsuch-Dubinski team’s foray into the political arena had already reached a significant number of people. Some of the pamphlets were not only in circulation, but when they were read, were heartily acclaimed. Even when unread, people sang their praises. The
school paper had gotten a hold of one, and editors, sneaking the final print-up past their faculty advisor, sent the full text of the "Why not?" document into the official news.

When the advisor canceled the Monday edition, again grounded in a school policy requiring his full approval of all new stories, the whole campus, amazingly enough, threatened to blow. For the first time in the thirty-six year history of the Bobcats, there was a generally circulating rumor that at least one-quarter, if not more, of the student body was going to walk out.

And behind it all, Lenny, the salvaged apostate, spent his day quietly, unassumedly, wondering at how in the world he might get his computer to successfully download a brief document listing the day's television schedule.

That Monday evening, ignoring all of the shows which were offered, including one made-for-tv drama about a young pilot who'd miraculously survived for four days behind what were then enemy lines, one weekly comedy starring the poorly acting son of a retired circus performer whose main mission in life was to somehow get laid by as many women as possible, and one weekly news talk show whose subject for the week was "Families, are they really necessary anymore?" Geoffrey Huffman, V.O. Resby, Matilda Crane, and Katherine Moncus, unofficial policy-makers for Frisco's lone school district, met to discuss the situation. Oddly enough, given their history of fumbled efforts to solve multiple problems, this time they put their collective fingers right on the appropriate target: Lenny.

Sitting clumsily, their bellies caught between the carved up desktops and the overly-rigid wooden chair backs that came with them, the concerned adults passed one thick, beige manila folder from hand to hand. Each opened it, gave a cursory glance at the contents, and thumbed solemnly through the sheaf of official looking documents before passing it on. After it had circulated the room, Geoffrey, "that's a G and not a J"
Huffman, principal and least comfortable of the group, like the laughing Buddha felt himself along his belly with both hands, smiled and asked for suggestions.

V.O. Resby, a rather gaunt, big-nosed parent whose thin-lipped, scatter-brained son had, over time, failed to make the basketball team, the debating squad, first chair in the trombone section, student council, and any friends of even the remotest note, motioned that they simply let the infamous campaign run its course. "After all," he told the group. "Even if they win, they're just a bunch of kids. Give 'em a couple of committees and let a couple of the suggestions pass."

"Or," Miss Matilda, "Tilda," Crane, advisor to the Math Club and among the school's perpetually aging yet unmarried and obviously searching faction, butted in. "Let 'em win and give 'em a taste of real decision-making. Let 'em get all of their time eaten up with trying to get a hold on just one resolution. Let 'em wear themselves out with going from committee-member to committee-member, with writing and re-writing every move. Let 'em waste the best years of their--."

"'Tilda," Huffman interposed. "Let's not let personal experience color our--."

"No, no," Resby stepped in. "That sounds like it just might work. I mean, if we can get those kids to try out their one big plan, lose at it, try out another and lose at it, and then maybe to even try out for--."

"Hang on," the fourth member of the group broke in. All immediately fell silent. The speaker was Ms. Katherine Moncus, "practically PhD" in psychology, barely MA in child-development and adolescent psych, and school counselor and advisor. She was a woman who, oddly enough in a town as heavily patriarchal as Frisco, had, by virtue of sheer fright, acquired a phenomenal degree of authority in most public matters. Barely educated in the ways of those secretive souls who understand, tabulate, classify, and reconfigure the minds around them, the citizenry of the small town respected her more than they did even the Sheriff or Mayor. When they spoke to her, most not only
intuitively knew that she kept hidden files on the psyches of their own children, but that any conversation, no matter how brief, was open to her rather cruel dissection and analysis. They knew that the slightest slip of the tongue, the smallest stammer or quiver of an eyebrow would reveal their own deep desires to do-in certain parents and/or copulate with others, and that somehow, this little woman would reveal the ugly truth behind the little white lies of their civilization, would expose and exploit the very animals which lived within their own pathetically human frames. And so, as they sat while she adjusted her innocuous little black half-framed librarian's spectacles, file spread open before her, they each waited with indrawn breath.

"We," she told them. "Are threatening to give up the very authority upon which this community rests. Children," she went on. "Are children, and it is our prerogative and duty to institute the necessary limitations to which all adolescents are ultimately drawn."

While Resby and Crane momentarily shifted their respective buttocks upon the chairs and Huffman read over a few particularly repugnant, and to some degree accurate, bits of graffiti chiseled into the desk, one of which concerned himself and an obese student of some years prior, Katherine Moncus, practically PhD, took a finger and slid one sheet of paper from the folder. She lifted her glasses from the bridge of her nose and peered at it.

"This Gorsuch kid," she said, uplooking and allowing her glasses to slide back down to nosetip. "Demonstrates a particularly dangerous composite of anti-social tendencies."

More rigid than before, her three fellow conspirators nodded together.

"I see that he was convicted of an assault upon a fellow student."

"Yes," whispered Resby, his voice level and quiet. "He was. Some time ago."
Moncus glanced at him, her eyes cold. “Were his instructors informed of this rather cogent fact?”

Huffman looked back down to his graffiti, struggled for a few seconds, working his mouth around a few unspoken explanations, then sighed, his eyes closed. He swallowed. “We,” he said. “Didn’t feel that it was necessary, given the circum--.”

“Of course not,” she told him, annoyed. “But now it seems that that fact is particularly relevant.”

Still oblivious as to the ultimate destination of her drive, and still wondering at just how serious that point might reflect on his own career, given that it was indeed an indictment of himself, Huffman, elbow placed squarely atop a brief and obscene poem about a sodomite named “Dave,” leaned his forehead to his fingertips and began massaging at the wrinkles he found there. “Okay,” he said. “So you want to get me to res--.”

“Good God, no,” she spat. “Resignation’s an idiotic idea. I want you to recognize that there are certain district policies that require both full parental and faculty awareness of the Gorsuch history. We,” she told the group, a bit too proudly. “Are obligated to disallow all course credits received between the period of the Gorsuch reinstatement and an hypothetical full disclosure of his record at sometime in the future.”

Somewhat amazed at how she could chew out a sentence like that, and somewhat relieved, Huffman looked up, lifting his head from his fingers, and returned them to his belly for a while. “You mean--.”

“We need to inform each member of this faculty of his past, requesting that they read his file in its entirety, to inform the board and assembled PTA of the file’s contents, and then secure, in writing, from each parent, board member, and faculty member, a full consent for Mr. Gorsuch’s future attendance at this high school. And,” Ms. Moncus,
practically PhD, smiled at them. “In the meantime, we have to remove the little bugger from this institution.”

“We should—,” said Resby, whose silly son had in his litany of complaints included several directed at Lenny’s monopolization of the computer terminal. “I mean—.”

“Yes,” she told him. “We need to inform his guardians that as they were completed in a manner that was not in direct compliance with the policy established by the good voters of this district, all courses at this high school are now null and void. The boy,” she said. “Is just plain shit out of luck.”

“I see,” said Huffman, the full dimensions of the discussion finally dawning.

“Yes,” whispered Crane beside him.

“Yes,” whispered Resby.

As to the offending Dubinski, all parties agreed that the contents of his own rather thin counselor’s file ironically marked him as entirely unremarkable. Without the direct involvement of the Gorsuch reprobate and revolutionary, poor Dub was as inconsequential as the average flea. While he might win the election in question, a gift due to the actions of the delinquent, the child would be able to do nothing that might contravene the basic wishes of his elder functionaries. His file seemed to suggest that he was a puppet, and a puppet they would see that he remained.

With all of this in mind, and giving themselves one full week to complete all necessary paperwork and bureaucratic wrangling, the group resolved to suspend student elections for two weeks. They agreed to clandestinely inform the editors of the school paper and all homeroom teachers that this was the case, that certain administrators had acted rashly and were now more than willing to return all governance of student affairs to the students themselves. Assuming that rumor would take care of the seething population at large, they agreed to inform these same parties that the new delay was designed to do
nothing more than re-establish the basic time-line of the electoral process. They were returning the time that they had foolishly stolen from the people who rightfully possessed it. Liberal homeroom teachers and editors alike would openly celebrate the victory of democracy.

And, of course, there is really no need to mention the fact, but this delay, as is true of any delay of such magnitude, was to permit odd events to completely undermine their immediate, heartily acclaimed actions in that lonely little classroom.
It was, as all good weather persons agreed, a freak event.

What none of those bow-tied, giggly, joke-telling people knew was that somehow or other, while the Frisco daffodils had sprung up foolishly in all of their yearly glory, a newly burst butterfly, emerging from its long and dark residency as a more lowly lifeform, dampened by a brief rain, and located on a sapling in the North of France, flicked its wings with a certain muscular violence. In spite of all scientific debate over the likelihood, this caused the slightest of ripples, a mere flutter, in a breeze out of Rouen, which gathered itself over the Seine’s warming waters, compounded itself into a dip in the winds over Prague, and miraculously enough, grew to a small tremor within a larger gust over a tiny village thirty-seven miles to the south of the now infamous Sarajevo.

This, in turn, and equally miraculously, adversely affected the trajectory of one well-aimed mortar shell which had been fired by a group of poorly dressed, highly propagandized, young men who were then bent on establishing the ethnic dominance of all syphilitics in the region. That misguided mortar, aimed at a lone jeep on a hill, had, much to the surprise of the men who had fired it, exploded in the midst of one of the “enemy’s” secret gasoline storage sites. Cleverly disguised as a dilapidated old barn, complete with rats, owls, and what was at best a skeletal roof, this structure, on fusing with the hot and metallic shards of both mortar and thirty-four cases of small caliber shells, two five gallon cans of gasoline, and three bottles of recently appropriated vodka, blew itself outward with what was a monumental force, spitting out a whirlwind of
worm-eaten wood and dried hay. This then, between the scattering tufts and smoke, not
only killed two goats and wounded a farmboy who had gone out to fetch a bucket of
water so that his mother could make a mush and onion pie for brunch, but likewise
caused a fluctuation in the breeze out of the south.

Gaining even more momentum, this breeze, in its insensible maturation, expanded
upward as well as outward, shoved its way into one of the great air currents above us, and
there generated a slight shift in the basic pattern of fronts over the Western Hemisphere.
While it’s more or less impossible to elaborate much further upon what continued to
happen up there, events did include one drunken merchant marine who had taken a jug of
homemade “hooch,” poured it on a table in a brothel and set the liquid afire, one old cow
that had eaten more green alfalfa than was good for its digestion, two toddlers who
knocked over a swingset in Michigan and had begun to scream bloody murder, and an
ant-ridden Mimosa tree in southern Oklahoma, a tree that finally gave up the ghost and
came crashing to the ground.

Nevertheless, as surprised as the weatherpersons were, the result for the Gorsuch
family was spectacular.

Even as the unofficial school representatives were working their way through the
necessary paperwork in order to rid themselves of an objectionable set of election results,
the rain that had threatened the city for days began to fall as anticipated, but, it had begun
to fall frozenly.

Unfortunately, for the unofficial school representatives, while freezing rain might
slicken the highways and keep most shoppers at home, it does very little to impede the
progress of our more dedicated members of the United States Postal Service.

When Ma Gorsuch boldly risked the elements and set foot outside of her rattling
home that morning, desperate to pick up one more stack of the mail-order catalogues she
continually received, she discovered, nestled between them, a small, inconspicuous
envelope with no heading, no return address, and no indication of content. She fell to her usual seat at the coffee table in the livingroom, and, always interested in probing to the bottom of any mystery, Ma forwent her ritualistic thumb through the day’s catalogue stack, took one bony old index finger, and tore the envelope open. It took her forty-six seconds to read through the twelve-point type, forty-nine more seconds to fully digest it, and seven seconds to stand up.

"Pa!" she screamed at the kitchen, a full minute and forty-two seconds after having come in.

There, enjoying a moment’s solace, the old man sat at the kitchen table in his neck and shoulder brace, pointlessly spinning the plastic yellow double-tiered Lazy Susan full of spices, cocoa tins, and Equal containers, thinking nothing.

"Pa," she shrieked again, now prancing into the doorway.

For a moment, knowing that she’d just gone out to get the mail, he concluded that the Publisher’s Clearinghouse people had sent them something, but then, on considering her inflections, he dropped the thought. Lifting a finger from the tray, he paused from his enterprise, and gazed at her.

"They done threwed him out of that school," she panted. Tossing the unfolded and official-looking letter to the table’s brown surface, she began to pace. "They done threwed him out."

"For good?" he asked, now spinning the letter so that he might read it.

"Read it yourself!" she said frantically. "Read it yourself. Say he’s a threat to the community!"

"What’s he done?" the old man wondered.

"Read it yourself!" she shrieked at him. "It’ all about that Wright kid and the beatin’!"
Calmly enough, Pa read the letter for himself, considered it for a few moments, and then slowly folded it back up, flat along its creases. He held it between his thumb and forefinger, then crumpled it in half. Behind him, she continued to pace, muttering and muttering. "Guess," he said. "That's what comes with bein' a juvenile del-\--."

"Delinquent nothin'!" she exploded at him. "That boy's done right with himself. He's done right now. He's done paid his debt."

Letter still crumpled between his fingers, Pa turned stiffly around to her. "You always said the Devil was in--."

"Devil's in them!" she bellowed. "God A'mighty. It's that Devil's in them."

Dropping the letter to the table, Pa reached up, fingered his shoulder brace and shifted it, trying to rub it against an itch somewhere beneath. "Well," he told her as she continued to vent, now pouring it all out into the sink by washing a few dishes. "Never was too sure 'bout that," he said.

She slammed a pot from side to side in the sink, one hand grasping the handle, the other slapping a sponge within. "Not sure about . . . ," she muttered underbreath.

"Yes sir," he said itching.

The pot slammed again.

He turned, still stiffly, slid his chair back a bit and watched her bent, muttering form, her daisy-sprinkled back looking taught. She lifted the pot from one sink and slammed it down into the rinse, then lifted a plate and gave it an unneeded scouring.

"Says it's a rule," he said.

She slapped the plate into the rinse and began scouring another, arms and elbows thrusting back and forth at her sides.

"Says," he said. "The boy can go on back. Just got to redo them classes."

She whirled around, plate aloft and a few drizzles of white dish-washing foam flung to the floor. Even as she stood, her back to the sink and plate in hand, she
continued to scrub at the dish, the water and soap and old food dribbling to the floor at her feet.

Pa watched the water gathering around her blue terrycloth slippers, wondered about when it was that her ankles had gotten so veiny, and she gasped at him. “Over. Over! That boy worked too hard to get hisself right to be—hard! And now some, some—.” And she whirled back around to the sink. “Rule,” she spat, slamming the dish into the rinse with the other.

“Rules’re rules,” slightly forlorn, Pa told her.

“Fools,” she muttered, now shoving plates and pot into the pink Rubbermaid drainer. “Rules’re for fools.”

“Maybe,” he said. “But—.”

“We,” suddenly she told him, upright, her feet in the puddle, her hands wrapped twitching around a dishtowel and drying. “Are gonna go down there and straighten them people out.”

“Yeah,” he gazed up at her. He lifted the letter again. “But this here says they’ve got a policy ‘bout—.”

“Policy-schmolicy,” she said, dropping the crumpled towel to the sink behind her and dusting her hands. “Get dressed, Pa. Just go and get dressed. We’ll go give them folks a piece of our—.”

And with that, ignoring the fact that school was out for the day, Ma Gorsuch darted from room to room readying herself, with her husband, the dishes, the pot and the Lazy Susan, all remaining quietly behind her. The only thing that moved in the kitchen was the letter itself as it slowly uncrinkled, insectlike, on the table before Pa.

Twenty-seven minutes later, despite inclement conditions, Ma Gorsuch, still unlicensed, again took to the wheel of their old Pontiac, her husband, because of his brace, unbelted in the passenger seat beside her. They slid from the drive and onto the
road, all of that pelting rain now diminished to a drizzle, and fled down the highway at forty-two miles per hour.

All of this would have led to little or nothing, except that a few miles "t'other" side of what was Barg's Gravel and Sand works, a very young, very worried, and very unpunctual young truck driver and welder for the maintenance division of a very large oil refining institution had decided that he'd better get on the ball before someone up there decided to give him the pink slip. While his cohorts at the division had gazed out on the ice-slickened highway and had opted to stay inside playing penny-ante poker for the day, he had decided to be the "company-man." His sole end for that morning was to do nothing but his duty.

The only thing wrong with this new and basic drive to actually do what must be done, and to do it quickly, was the fact that the rain was so cold, and his company shirt so thin, that when he loaded the pickup full of its necessary torches and three-foot cylinders full of various gasses, he did so with impressive, and therefore somewhat negligent speed. Called to a rig twelve miles out, he sped down a highway that, by virtue of an eighteen foot, clearly marked overpass, happened to cross Ma and Pa's path. And, as fate would have it, as fate always seems to do, both Ma and Pa and this young driver reached that overpass within seconds of each other.

By a confluence of destiny grounded in negligence and circumstance, as that young driver was about to enter the bridge over the highway, he imagined, through the fogged windows of the truck, that a large and black, floppy-eared dog had suddenly leapt into his path. He did what was natural, even in unusual circumstances, and both touched the truck's brakes with a spectacular violence and spun its wheel mightily to the left.

Much to his surprise, while the truck responded to one directive, it failed altogether at the other. As he touched the bridge at last, the whole vehicle slid sideways slowly, the passenger side of the truck now at its fore. He turned the wheel to the right
and into the skid, but, rather than a gentle correction, the right rear tire simultaneously touched a bit of a cement curb near the guardrail. When the bump on the curb had combined with his own efforts to steer, he discovered that both he and the truck had simply flown around one-hundred and eighty degrees. Now, he and his side of the truck were at the fore, and still they were spinning. After another ninety degrees of drift, he found the hood and the grill, upon which he stared through the windshield, sailing along at was undoubtedly the truck’s aft.

Impotently pumping the brakes, spinning the wheel from side to side, this young welder and his truck, as if intentionally experimental, slid icily along, in an odd and slow motion, across the overpass, the vehicle facing in entirely the wrong direction.

When he finally came to a stop on the far side of the bridge, a miracle in and of itself, his rear wheels rested rather sweetly against the embankment of that side.

Pulse racing, adrenaline pumping into his arms and legs, he felt slightly nauseous, especially since he could now look right out through the wrongly facing windshield and see not only from where he’d come, but could likewise perceive the very hauntings of mortality that the scene necessarily impressed. He breathed a few breaths that hung cold and frosty in the air before him, slowly released the steering wheel from his white-knuckled fingers and palms, quietly lay his hands atop his lap, and then, interested only in seeing where he and the truck had been going when they’d come to a stop, he glanced into the rear view mirror.

There, aside from the highway’s lazy drift onward, he saw what the cold and wet and thin-shirted actions of the morning had gotten him. Most of the cylinders, nestled along the sides of the truck bed, had jostled themselves to a new stability, but the three rearmost had teetered all of the way over. Since the truck was perched on a slight incline in the road, those three tanks slowly rolled over the security chain he’d forgotten to
fasten, fell over the tailgate that had fallen open, and gently bounced out of his mirrored field of vision.

Still enthusiastic after his brief adventure, the young welder clumsily grabbed at the door handle, yanked it up, and stepped out. Thankful that he was alive, he was still angry, and above all else, he hoped to regather the cylinders, to lift them back into the truck, and to link them up as they should have originally been. Slipping on a bit of the ice, he held himself up with an arm propped on the truck’s side, worked his way to the rear, and three-quarters of the way there discovered that all three cylinders had not only rolled out of the truck, but had gone over the edge of the overpass’s embankment as well. Now, as he watched open-mouthed, each one was gathering momentum as it bounced over frozen tufts of grass and ice-slickened earth. Like oblong bowling balls tossed down an escalator, they rocketed away.

As he watched them and considered a variety of ways by which to explain all of this to his boss, he became aware of a sound in the air that was neither his own breath, the cylinders’ bounce, nor the truck’s engine.

He gazed in the direction of the sound. There, on the far side of the overpass, he spotted an old blue Pontiac, a vehicle that never should have been out in this weather.

He looked down at the cylinders.
He looked back at the Pontiac.
He looked back down at the cylinders.

And then he knew. As certain as the day was cold, those three cylinders were going to roll out onto the highway at the same moment as the car would pass.

As if he might somehow arrest the progress of the three tanks, he darted down the hill, all the while waving his arms overhead and shouting at the top of his lungs. Slipping and sliding down the steep slope, he fell headlong into a bit of slush and dead grass, rose and ran, fell and slid into more mush, rose, and finally watched helplessly as the car, its
driver suddenly aware of the advancing threat, reacted exactly as he had done. She spun
the wheel to the left, stood on the brake, and spinning, the car continued down the
highway until it, the passenger and driver, slammed metalically into the cement sides of
the overpass.

The three cylinders rolled harmlessly into the road in front of the car, bumped
each other and came to a stop.

There, in the mud and the cold, the welder slowly sank to his knees on the
hillside, and, aside from his genuflection, did the only thing that he could think of to do.
“Geeze,” he said to no one and nothing. “Geeze.”

Down below him, Ma and Pa Gorsuch sat in their twisted up car, a bit stunned,
but still very much alive.

The windshield in front of Pa had spiderwebbed as he, unbelted, had bounced his
skullcap off of it, and he bled a bit, and Ma, the steering wheel cracked where she’d
propped herself against it, rubbed at her wrists.

“Well I’ll be,” she said.

“Sure ‘nough,” Pa gasped, a dribble of blood trickling through an eyesocket and
down the side of his nose to his chin.

“You saw it,” Ma said.

“Yessir,” he said.

“Big metal deals rollin’ on the highway.”

“Surely so,” he told her. He clumsily pulled a handkerchief from his shirt pocket
under the brace, and dabbed at his head. “I surely saw it. Yessir.”

For a few seconds now they sat quietly, both of them looking out through the
fractured windshield. There, off on the embankment on the left, they spotted the young
man.
“Lookit that,” Pa mumbled.

But Ma, ever-watchful, saw more than the poor little man out there rising to his feet. She saw more than the youth and muck and looks of pure, unblemished, frightened contrition. Under the gimnec cap that he’d gathered up, below the bill that he now painfully wiped off, below the shock of blonde hair that had fallen into his eyes as he’d stuck the cap back on his head, down above his stomach where he wiped the mud from his hands, she saw the logo and the colors.

She gave out a small whistle.

And there in the car, in a synesthetic wonderment at the munificence and mercy of God, Ma Gorsuch suddenly smelled both the oil and the money beyond that logo. She tasted the very taste of the lucre that lubricated the capitalist machinery that so obviously employed that young man, and she wept.

Pa watched the tears fill up her old eyes, and began to hold out a hand when suddenly she turned to him, and like some groom four hours after the wedding, she began yanking and tugging at the velcro fasteners to his brace. He struggled against her, tried to fend off her clutching hands, but superior will, superior strength of character and of physique took the day. While he sputtered alongside her, she grappled away until, in her hands, the brace had slid over his neck and down from his arm. It was now completely free and in her hands.

“Quick,” she told him, spinning around in the seat, the contraption in hand. “Get rid of this thing.”

“Ma?” he asked her.

“Not now, Pa. Not now,” she told him. She threw the whole thing back into the footwells of the rear seat, rose to lean over the bench to the back, and fiddling for a few seconds, shoved it as far out of sight as she might. Satisfied, she reared up, spun to the front, and grabbed her neck with her right hand. “Ooh,” she said weakly. “Oooh.”
"You hurt Ma?" he asked her with an abundance of authentic compassion.

"Shut up, you old fool," she answered.

"But Ma?"

"Grab your shoulder like I do."

Slow on the uptake, but quick to obey the ever-widening prerogatives of his better half. Pa Gorsuch lifted his hand, touched his shoulder, and unconvincingly said, "Ooh."

"No, no, no," Ma told him, now aware that the young man was walking toward them. "Like this: oooooh," she said. "My neck, oh my, oh oh oh, my neck, my neck."

Pa lifted an eyebrow, but tried. "Oooh," he said, feigning a quick wince. "My neck, my neck, my--."

Backhanded she swatted his old bicep and frantically outspat a breath. "No, no, no! Your shoulder! Your shoulder!"

"Ah," he said nodding, now in full comprehension. "Ooh, my shoulder. My poor, poor shoulder."

"Yes," she hissed at him, trying to hide a grin. "There you go. There you go."

Together then they "oohed" and they "ahhed" and they moaned and lamented cruel destiny and age, their poor car, and the lost feeling in the tips of the tops of their toes as the poor, young, soon to be unemployed, welding representative of one of the largest oil conglomerates in the United States of America, finally reached their much abused car.
CHAPTER V

YIELDING THORNS

It took only nine hours for that famous attorney, the man with whom Ma Gorsuch had already spoken and from whom she had received discouragement, to have two identical floral arrangements placed next to the Gorsuch hospital beds. Nestled in each was an identical card, "Hope you’re not in too much pain. Yours when you need me most, Jacob Paley, attorney at law."

It took only sixteen hours more for the man himself to arrive, and it then took only fourteen minutes for Ma to agree to his suggestions. While his breathless language, buried in jargon, was a bit too complex and professionally idiosyncratic for her to grasp, the general idea was not only clear, but lay well-within the boundaries of her intentions. She, Pa, and the Doctor of Jurisprudence all agreed that the party-of-the-first-part, the representatives of the elderly Gorsuch family, were due some sort of financial remuneration from the parties of the second, third, fourth, fifth and whatever else part might come to mind. After all, a major oil conglomerate, necessarily placed in a position tantamount to that of the public trust, must care for its citizens, especially citizens so loyal as to keep three of its credit cards somewhere close at hand.

Mr. Paley pointed out that, from what he and his extensive staff had gathered, liability for their painful and crippling injuries lay along several fronts. First of all, the oil company definitely owed them something for their torment, and then, according to Paley, as the tailgate had fallen, obviously the result of some flaw in design or manufacture, and as the shape and structure of the truck bed was ill-suited to the purpose
for which the truck was being used and sold, the manufacturer of the truck likewise owed them. He assured them both that while he had no evidence of anything of the sort, he was certain that some engineer somewhere, after all, major automobile manufacturers employed thousands of them to do nothing but check for mistakes, had indeed written a memo warning of the defects. That memo undoubtedly disappeared, and this fact was worth a fortune. Then there was, of course, the safety chain manufacturer. The chain should have been designed with some warning system to inform the driver that it had been left unattached, something along the lines of the well-proven and relatively cheap technology of seat belt buzzers and bells.

If each of these things weren't enough, it was equally clear, in the eyes of the law, that the young, soon to be unemployed welder owed them a bit, as did the group of comparative idiots who manufactured cylindrical, and hence, easily rolling, metal containers full of dangerously compressed gasses. “You,” he told them at that point, must be suffering great degrees of psychological trauma, especially since you’d been so close to what might have been an explosion that would have killed you.” As far as he was concerned, while it might be stretching a bit, the national weather service might drop them a dime or two since they hadn’t given adequate warning of conditions, the school might cough up a couple of dollars since it had provoked their trip in the first place, the regional and local highway authorities might be squeezed for a quarter or so since they’d failed to sand or salt all of the dangerously threatening overpasses, and finally, the farmer, fictional or real, whose unrestrained dog had been crossing that driver’s path should be good for at least a few pennies.

“In the end,” he finally told them, seated between their two beds, a pocket calculator in hand. “We’re looking at numbers along the lines of this.” With that, recognizing Ma’s authority over the household, he handed the calculator to her. He watched as her eyes widened. He took the calculator back, punched a few more numbers
into it, and mumbled, “Of course, I’ll be taking about this much, which should leave you something in the order of,” and he passed it back again. “Just about this much in the clear.” And he grinned at Ma. “Of course, that’s before Uncle Sam takes what he will.”

Ma tried to smile, but she was obviously too stunned to do so, so Paley passed the calculator to Pa. He raised himself from the pillows a few inches, dropped a jaw and a denture, took a thumb and shoved the plate back into place, and then fell back to the bed. He whistled one short burst as he lay there.

“Well,” Paley said. “I know it’s a disappointment, but keep it in mind that that’s a low estimate.” He rose from the chair, took the calculator from Pa and slid it back into the pocket of his sport-coat. He fiddled a bit with the flowers he sent, up-propped a few wilting buds and brushed back a broken leaf or two, then smiled at them both. “We have to keep in mind that we all need to consider all of the possibilities here. After all, the only things we can’t sue for a thing like this,” he said, stepping into the doorway. “Are God and DNA.”

“Yes,” whispered Ma.

Paley knocked twice on the jamb, turned and looked back over a shoulder as he stepped through. “Incidentally,” he smiled. “Matter like this, of such dramatic negligence and all, is sometimes . . . well, it’s worthy of media attention. You understand.”

From the paired beds, both of the old folks nodded.

“Good,” he said. He patted the wall and walked out.

In their beds, frail and draped in their half-backed white medical smocks, their plastic hospital wrist bands dangling from their wrists, the Gorsuchs stared. Finally, after several minutes of silence, Ma looked up at the ceiling, breathing out toward its freckled acoustic tiles and stains, and whispered. “Be praised. Lord, be praised above.”
Some two weeks later, when they had both been released from the hospital, the basic machinery of Lenny's expulsion had ground to a halt. Aware that lawyers had been consulted, all parties quickly agreed to wait out events in the courtroom before taking their final steps. Lenny was out of the school for a "probational period" while the proper authorities "looked over his case," and much to everyone's satisfaction, the school's population collapsed back into its usual contentment.

All was going well.

Three days after this outburst of peace and the Gorsuch homecoming, off in the distant city of Houston, David Mathai sat bored in his office, twisting his paperclips into a variety of shapes and then flicking them across the room toward the gray trash can. Brought in by an equally bored secretary from the pool, the file on the accident and the pending suit crossed his desk. Unimpressed with the yokels in towns like the one in question, he followed the usual, secret protocol. As most truths can usually be ascertained by subterfuge, he called the Gorsuch household, informed Pa that he represented an early evening news talk show, and more or less invited himself down, all with the understanding that he was simply the front man for a variety of reporters who were always insatiably interested in any story such as his.

One illegal cigarette poised over his over-stuffed ashtray, which was likewise poised upon a stack of yellow pads, he told Pa that he really looked forward to the visit. He breathed a bit of smoke at the ceiling.

Pa was, as is natural when gazing into the eyes of fame for the first time, not only all ears, but fully hospitable. He promised him a good southern meal.

Mathai hung up the phone, stuffed his cigarette into the ashes and butts, threw a few books and the file atop a white linen coat in his satchel, and strolled out, telling his fingernail-filing secretary that he was "on the Gorsuch thing." He took the long elevator ride to the basement parking garage, climbed into his BMW, and drove to Frisco.
There, he continued with protocol, pulled into the hospital parking lot, stopped, clumsily pulled the white coat from the bag, stepped from the car and pulled it on. He adjusted the black bordered nametag on his lapel, closed the bag, and walked into the thick medicinal smell of the hospital's records office.

There, the nurse, heavy and wearing dark, thick-rimmed glasses, was a bit hesitant, as is customary, but by virtue of the unbuttoned coat, nametag, and snotty demeanor in perfect keeping with his claim that he was a VA specialist brought in to examine the progress of each of the Gorsuch patients, convicted of his medical authenticity, she surrendered the files.

He strolled into the waiting room, and, knees crossed, lay the red folders atop the creases and opened each.

Unfortunately, for the oil company in question, the staff of the hospital, while of notoriously average appearance, had one shining light. Miss Talisha Doonsman was not only blond, but tan, long-limbed, and was progressive enough to refuse to wear either stockings, pantyhose, or heavy brassiere. At the moment that Mathai sat staring at the first sheet of file number one, she walked into the waiting area, sat down, crossed her own legs, and began chatting with a nervous middle-aged man who waited for his wife to come out from under the slight intoxication of a day surgery.

As Talisha was lithe, friendly, and radiantly concerned, David, while entirely unnoticed, could not help but glance again and again, and again and again, at her sweet, angelic, white-linened form. His concentration drifted from its original purpose. The files shifted slightly in his lap. He failed to read beyond the first page of Pa's file, failed to find what would have been obvious under subpoena, that the shoulder injury was actually roast- rather than accident-related, that the temporary dementia and confused behavior had ample precedent in the male Gorsuch line, and that it had also been associated with that fall from the ladder. As to Ma, the neck bit was a standard
whiplashish thing, but all previous records of hypochondriacal visits to a miscellany of specialists were ignored. The numbness and slight degree of paralysis, while of medical concern, were also medically problematic, and this, he likewise failed to notice.

After all was said and done, only Miss Doonsman was to remain clear and complete in his mind.

A bit forlorn over his own bachelordom, he returned the files to the nurse at the counter, returned to the car, and drove on to the Gorsuch home.

There, the stiff, well-dressed, well-grieving and well-counseled Pa Gorsuch met him at the door. Shuffling as if unable to fully lift his feet, Pa brought him inside. The place smelled of cumin and cayenne, red beans, rice, and cornbread. In the kitchen, a room easily visible from the doorway, Ma put up an heroic struggle, one-handed and groaning over the pots and pans. At Pa's request, Mathai sat down into the springs of the old sofa, a few blankets thrown over the cushions, and from this vantage, he took a long, detective's look at the room. The sofa was obviously shot, his palms and his thighs told him that. The coffee table's skinny lathed legs were scuffed up and stained, and while the surface was buried in back issues of *TV Guide* and *Reader's Digest*, he assumed that it would look the same way. The easy chair no longer looked too easy; in fact its cushioned leg and foot platform seemed to be forever extended; even the handworn mechanical handle at the recliner's side looked like it'd been broken at the base. The upright piano looked all right, propped up alongside of the television, three yellowing doilies atop it, two candlesticks, a metronome and its pendulum, and a family photograph. While the facts that the candlesticks bore green candles which had never been burned, and that the metronome was set at a very slow speed might have been of some interest, they weren't. Instead, what took his eye was that photo.

There, nestled shrinelike at the center of the piano, faded and a bit cloudy under the dusty glass, Ma sat in flowers, her collar and cuffed lace, faux pearls and a thin silver
cross at her neck, her white gloved hands just visible on her lap. Pa, inside what looked to be a rented and ill-fitting suit, sat stiffly beside her, his beard less gray and more groomed, his cheeks a bit less sunken than now. But neither mattered.

What mattered was that between them, standing in a gawky sort of adolescent way, was a boy. He wore a well-pressed white dress shirt, replete with hair-thin vertical red stripes, a deep, unadorned thin blue tie, a standard blond boy’s haircut, and, well, the arm. Dangling at chest level, there it was. One great big hunk of heart-rending, tear-jerking, judge-busting, authentic rural America.

Mathai closed his eyes and breathed while Pa fell into the recliner with a touch of numb-braced difficulty.

“So,” said Pa. “You want to put us in pictures.”

Mathai blinked his eyes open and feigned a smile. “Do,” he told him. “Rightly do.” He swept an arm around the room to encompass it all. “Just want to try to get us some sort of an angle on you. You know, some sort of...”

“Lead?” Pa grinned, proud of his own experience with talk show TV.


“Is,” Pa told him. “Cept’n our daughter. That there’s her boy, my grandson Lenny. Fine boy.”

“Ah,” Mathai nodded. He cleared his throat, uncomfortable with certain bits of tact. “I... see that something’s wrong...”

“With his arm,” Pa helped him, used to that sort of discourtesy. “Born that way.” He gazed over at the picture, smiled a sad little smile, and sighed a sad little sigh. “Then his ma up and left. Left us to do all his raisin’.”

“You,” even more alarmed, Mathai asked. “Are raising your grandson--alone?”

“Yessir,” Pa told him, unwittingly digging the lawyerly tomb even deeper. “All by our lonesomes. Don’t even know where his ma lit out to. Somewhere out West.” He
shifted in his chair, groaned and stuck a thumb between his trousers and belly to adjust the belt. "Mighty hard," he said, removing the thumb. "On nothin' but my pension and all. But," he went on as Mathai wilted into the springs. "He's a good boy. Never done us a bit of harm. Makes nothin' but 'A's in school. Knows all 'bout com-puters and that sort of nonsense. That," the old man told him, suddenly pointing up to a crude wooden wallhanging suspended over the TV, almost lost behind the rabbit ears. "Is somethin' he done. Just took it 'pon himself to take my solderin' iron and burn that for Ma on Mother's Day. Mathai stared at it; while the letters were broad and diffuse in the wood, one thing was certain, the title above the scrawl was "The Lord's Prayer."

With that recognition, coupled with all of the insinking ethos of the Gorsuch family household, Mathai's face fell completely. While he'd been expecting to find what he usually found, a couple of old hicks who'd gotten wind of money and had suddenly decided to grab a quick ride on the gravy train, here he'd found something entirely new to his own experience. Goodness. Sheer, wholesome, altruistic, unimpeachable, unstoppable, sweetening, sickening goodness. And it looked him square in the eye. He cleared his throat again, let his tongue do the talking. "That's a downright beautiful gift," it said.

"Was, was," said Pa. He grinned. "It most rightfully was."

And Ma, who'd been puttering and groaning all the while, stepped down the step from the kitchen. "Well," she told them both, hands on her hips. "These here beans is done and so's the cornbread. But darned if I got the strength to lift 'em out to the table." She raised her right hand to her left elbow and rubbed at it. "Can't feel a thing in this darned old arm."

Mathai slid forward over the cushion until he was propped elbows upon his own knees, then rose slowly, dejected, but still faintly hopeful. He stepped past the much
shorter Ma, up into the kitchen, and there, lifted the pot to their table along with the two cake pans of cornbread.

"Well," Ma told him, sliding in behind past him to her own chair. "Look at that, Pa. And they say young folks got no manners these days."

Mathai sat. Pa mosied on in and took a seat beside him. Ma, two-handed and gulping and gasping, poured the tea into their glasses along the sink, each one crackling and clinking with ice as she passed them along to the table. "There," she said. She sat down, hands in her lap.

"Right nice, Ma," Pa told her. He spun the Lazy Susan, lifted the pepper and sprinkled some into the pot.

Ma gave him the eye but he ignored it; instead, he bent his head forward as far as his brace would allow, and began to slowly intone, "Lord, thank you for this day."

Nearby, Mathai, suddenly uncomfortable, bent his own head and wondered about what in the world to do with his hands. "Thank you for the food on this table, and for all the good things you've done for us all. Thank you for our health," here Ma groaned a bit, but Pa remained unflappable. "Thank you for people who worry and care for us all so often, people like this nice young man and the people who sent him to us. Thank you for Lenny, and look after his ma, wherever she is. And thank you for you and your wonderful gift. Amen."

"Amen," Ma whispered, still rightfully convinced of the deity's hand in all that was happening. She dug clumsily into the pot of beans, ladled them into the three bowls, only dropping a few embarrassing splotches to the table, and sat.

Mathai, aware of the spicy assault on his nose, the theological assault on his reason, and the visual assault before him in the bowl, stared into the brown mush that left him feeling somehow unworthy, yet slid his spoon into the bowl, lifted and ate. The three of them ate in silence, each Gorsuch happy with not only the fare but with the
circumstances that surrounded it, while Mathai felt a bit nauseous, not so much at the food as with the thought of what he now had to do.

When they had finished, before waiting to find out whether Ma had prepared an equally hospitable and underclassed desert, he begged leave, returned to the livingroom, took his cellular phone from the case, and facing away from the old couple, he made a quick call. As he stared through the window behind the recliner, watching a squirrel twitch its way along a limb, a blue-jay close above and swooping to irritate it, the ringing stopped and his immediate superior answered. "Settle," he said. "Before the press get wind of this. Settle, and just move on."

Within days, each of the rather large oil conglomerate's fellow litigants, of which, now that the dedicated Paley had been generating options, there were no fewer than thirty-six, had received word that the biggest, baddest fish of them all had investigated the Gorsuch claim and had opted to concede. As in those moments when a more powerful ally opts to sign the dreaded pact, or those instances in which younger children notice the behaviors of their elders, each followed the lead of its betters.

In something that almost resembled a run on a bank in its bandwaggonish way, the money suddenly began to roll into the Gorsuch home.

The unofficial school authorities, well aware of what money can buy, were suddenly informed by certain district and regional liaisons that an irrevocable token of generosity would certainly be coming, that is, would be coming if the guardians of one Leonard P. Gorsuch remained in the district. There was, the unofficial authorities were told, some reason to believe that should the family stay, there would be "a great inflation of current tax receipts." The windfall was bound to lead to something good.

And so it was that Lenny Gorsuch was returned to school, all class credits intact, his reputation suddenly enhanced, and all of that wicked past left behind him. He had received a most noteworthy absolution.
Anyway, the election, now that things were back upon their proper courses, went exactly, well, not quite exactly, but close enough, as the Dubinski-Gorsuch team had planned. They had expected to win, and they did, all revolutionary doctrine intact.

What they hadn’t expected was the fame that victory would bring. The two opposing parties, equally aware of the change in Lenny’s financial status, quickly made rather grandiloquent gestures toward reconciliation. The jocks, prompted by their coaches’ collective promptings and the promise of an hypothetical new gym and weight-machine, established a new stadium/arena rule that gave front row center seats to all student political leaders. The sociables, motivated by the basic instinctive underpinnings and fabrications of sociability, attracted to what was not only new money, but the greatest amount of new money the county had ever seen, offered to invite them to at least “three tremendous bashes.”

While the seats were never used and the “bashes” never arranged, both Lenny and Dub nevertheless found themselves the center of what was to be one of the greatest datefests in the history of the school and state. They found themselves being offered, in fact, encouraged to take more geographically explorative, scientifically experimental, and even biologically consumative prerogatives with the female anatomy than those of which any PTA or parent could or would approve.

Somehow, despite all of that, both boys did hold themselves back from the final prize, as it were. They also did an equally amazing thing; recognizing the flow of contemporary history, they posted all of their declarations and the tenets of the campaign to a public high school electronic bulletin board. These doctrines began to surface in a variety of school campaigns around the nation, frightening, as they had in the case of Frisco, teachers, parents, and administrators everywhere. For all the world, all around the country it looked like adolescent children, inspired by the work of our two heroes, finally
began to seize the autonomy and adult authority that all of their previously increased spending power had already established. Having already bought out the agendas of the entertainment industry, both musically and cinematically, having restructured television, from cartoons to the nightly news, having forced a new strategy upon all marketers of anything anywhere anytime, and having completely disarranged the trends of clothing manufacturers, these guys suddenly realized that the fundamental prosperity of a nation gifted by an ever-expansive Gross National Product had, as correlative event, given them full, although as yet politically disenfranchised, adulthood.

As all of the nominal adults cringed around them, as the war between teen and authority began to burn a little brighter than it had before, the teens began to take the high ground.

And, of course, as Lenny and Dub fiddled and fuddled their way through their Senior years, launching themselves from backseat to backseat, both were more or less unaware of the change that was occurring. All that either of them knew was that they had discovered that this strap led to this, that snap was hidden here, and that all of their college applications seemed to be coming back in droves. Each contained an affirmative reply, most were accompanied by full-color catalogues, and just under half contained personal letters addressed by a variety of Deans and/or Presidents. Each school promised the greatest of educational experiences and futures to be had in this region of the galaxy.

As to the revolution, aside from the addition of two pep-rallies, a Senior “skip-day,” off campus lunch privileges, the firing of one drunken geometry teacher, the removal of one out-dated history text, and a liberal revision of the school’s previously unenforced dress-code, nothing was done. As the realistic Resby and Crane had foreseen, committees formed were, by nature, committees inactive. Problems were put to committee, committee members had band-meetings, chess-club dates, cheerleader
tryouts, basketball practices, visits to dermatologists and orthodontists, and, as is true of either House or Senate, they never met in full.

But the student body loved them. Aware of this proliferation of representatives, they knew that their desires were being acted upon. A firm peace held the day. The desires of all parties concerned, post-teen, pre-teen, and teen apparently were fulfilled. The town, its churches and supermarkets, with its sudden influx of both found money and democracy, was essentially happy.

Lenny and Dub, in turn, did the right thing. Frightened by the thought of the Ivy League, its weird accents and secret styles, distressed at the thought of the West Coast and its loons and hippies, they opted to attend one of the state's universities together; after all, a team is a team, and a victorious team, outside of professional sports, isn't something you lightly abandon.
CHAPTER VI

MANY NATIONS

While the small Texas town of Frisco rested, far off at an ambiguous point to the north and east, in the somewhat lowly hedonism of cheap plastic riverboat reconstructions, fictional historical claims, and ten thousand shops dedicated to Mark Twain memorabilia, a woman too old for both the exotic dance and the meatier requirements of Vegas, too young for the gray hair she continually bombarded with an auburn dye, and too absent of mind to recognize that huge breasts, low-slung outfits, and a new repertoire of wrinkles had driven her down a very ugly road, from Vegas to Reno to where she now dwelled, lived in an increasingly distressful web of poverty and threadbare immorality. She presently sat in her own efficiency apartment, a vague little room attached to a truck-stop motel.

Rested against her bed’s headboard, she fiddled at the television clicker, flicking from station to station, bored, and although she’d never admit it, lonely. The hours before work, at which she dealt blackjack with the embarrassingly quick and mechanical hands of a professional, were always like this. Somehow, the powers that guided programming, both local and cable, had conspired to throw nothing of interest her way.

Evening by evening she clicked and she flicked, her now necessary bra strap peeping out from her bright, frilly Victorian blouse, her mind elsewhere, confabulating, warming up to the calm monotony of the placating phrases she nightly spat out to the tipsy and drunken men who inevitably “busted” at her hands. She replayed her own rejections of come-ons by conference-tempted husbands, shifted them slightly where she
deemed them inadequate, toyfully played with new styles for delivery and tone, each equally insulting and flirtatious at once.

There in the room, she looked at her clock radio, shut off the TV, lay down the remote, then leaned and switched off the alarm before it buzzed. She rose from the bed, stepped the two steps into her bathroom, up-shoved at her bouffant brunette hair, again adjusted her bra strap, dabbed at a bit of lipstick on her left incisor, and gathering her purse, left the apartment.

She caught the motel shuttle to her riverboat, grinned familiarly at the driver, and sat.

They waited a few minutes until no one else showed, and then they drove off. Down past Airport Drive. Around the loop at Oak Creek. Past the exit for Bonnie Brae. Up the Boulevard and through three lights that, miraculously enough, were all green. And they stopped under the marquis of the River-Sprite Club and Casino. Buffet only three ninety nine. Authentic paddle wheel and Christmas lights. Docked. Forever. Noisy in its sheer stillness and historicity.

There, she smiled at the driver again, gave a short wave, stepped down the club's walk and back to the women's dressing area. She nodded a few times at the scowling waitresses, their over-rouged faces nestled in plumes, again checked her hair and her face at the mirror, and then walked out to the tables. Along the walls, the foolish and cowardly continued to pump nickels and quarters into the machines that occasionally dumped out additional pockets of change, off behind her own green-felted table the Chino board lit and unlit as a few people watched, and around her, trays and drinks, empty and full, were propped up shoulder high, floating as if upon air.

She stepped to the rear of the crescent-shaped table, two players and drinks propped at its walnut rim, tapped Mellissa, equally Victorian and likewise downfallen, and muttered, "Call it a day."
"Why honey," said Melissa, gathering cards back into the deck while the players lifted their drinks; both shook their heads and exchanged a pair of bored and empathetic shrugs. "Ain’t you a sight for these here sore eyes."

"Players?" she asked *sotto voce*.

"Nah," overly-loud answered Mellisa, rising. She smiled at the two men. "Pretty tame night. Annie got caught in some catfight a while ago."

She lifted a brow.

" Took one out in cuffs, sent the other back to her husband. Business wives," she muttered.

"Annie?"

"Played it like a queen. For all it was worth. Hub-hub hubbing it right there at the table. Weepin’ like a willow. Somebody," she said, grinning like a bandit. "Slipped her a twenty."

"Not bad," she said, and she tapped the deck to the felt, then snapped through a shuffle.

"Couldn’t we all get so lucky," said Melissa.

"Yeah," she said, smiling at the players. "Go again? I’m a lot luckier than this bimbo here."

Melissa grinned and stepped out while both the men nodded, unspeaking.

She dealt her way through both of the players, through four more, and was well into her third batch, allowing the cutest of that group to win two times, when she noticed the old couple standing awestruck, their mouths agape, staring around into the noise and confusion.

Her hands fumbled twice at the cards, spilling the deck, and as the gamblers muttered out grievances, she touched the button hidden under the table. She looked up at
the ceiling’s mirror, gestured over a shoulder and mouthed “Break.” She lay the deck on
the felt and apologized.

“The hell,” said one of the players while the other four stared at her blankly.

“Listen,” she said. “I’ve seen someone. Gimmee a minute.” And she outheld
one hand to show them that her fingers had begun to quiver. “See,” she lied. “Arthritis
and a palsy. Gimmee a minute.”

The five sat on their stools and twizzled their drinks while slowly, imperceptibly,
the great boat rocked in the Missouri river.

The old man and the woman, so confused in the lights, the bings and bangs of the
bells, and the continually rumbling mutter of patrons, were Ma and Pa Gorsuch. They
had finally gone off to celebrate the honeymoon they’d never taken. Back then, Ma’s
belly, at least two months swollen by its basic regenerative function and long before
she’d acknowledged the sinfulness of a life that had caused the change, the two had had
neither the money, the time, nor the essential joy-filled drive to celebrate that
honeymoons require. They’d simply agreed about the “right thing to do,” had notified
the preacher, done it, and then returned, like their own progenitors, a bit too solemnly to
Pa’s little home outside of town. The only things that had seemed even remotely like a
honeymoon had been the button-topped shoes and seven tin cans tied to their borrowed
car’s bumper, the rice some buddies of Pa’s had dumped into what was now their bed,
and the six little kajingling sleigh bells they’d tied noisily dangling to the bedsprings.
That night, the only noise from the bells had come when Ma’s quivering young body
shook as she sobbed, guilt-ridden, uncertain, and terribly afraid. It had been two full
weeks before there had been anything at all like a conjugal moment, and even that took
place in relative silence. The bells, after that first night, had been removed, and rather
than returned to the Christmas display from which they’d been taken, they’d been thrown
into the dustbin.
The pain of those initial matrimonial moments, their correlative groans and labors later, had long since faded along with most of the memories. Now, Ma and Pa, their new money and lives in hand, had decided to do what they had always secretly wanted to do. As Clemens was the only literary figure to which they held and reverence, the story of Tom and Becky the most romantic thing they'd ever encountered, they'd always wanted to visit the river, the cave, and the primary objects of that sincerely innocent past.

Leaving Lenny to his newly purchased computer and friends, they'd climbed into Dora II, the newly bought Pontiac, wrestled with all of its new-fangled improvements and buttons and dials, and driven north. Somewhere up there, Ma knew, not only had Twain met little Tom and his Huck, but the astonishingly well-toothed and well-raised Osmonds were said to be lurking, forever bursting with song.

Despite its marquis, the Casino was a bit of a surprise to them both. They'd assumed that there'd be some sort of old west floorshow and a giggling good time. Guns and rootin' tootin' cowboys amidst their happy-go-lucky showgirls. Instead, they found only a few sprinkles of good tourist cheer, and those were altogether masked by the overwhelming taste of local failure coupled with inconsolable desire. The people on the boat frowned, jostled each other with little or no awareness that they were not alone; it was as if they were the sole ranchers of ill-luck, butting their respective ways through a few hundred head of oblivion cattle, and even the personnel, gaudy and frivolously dressed, looked more bent on finishing a series of unpleasant chores than joyfully interested or innocently playful.

"Gosh," said Ma, stepping aside from a head-leveled waitress who seemed to ram her way through the crowd rather than wriggle between its gaps. "This ain't no Sunday picnic."
“No sirree,” said Pa, only marginally aware of her, instead finding himself overwhelmed and oddly aroused at the states of relative undress that surrounded them. “No sirree, Bob.”

Off in a corner, one of the Casino’s personnel, the middle-aged dealer explained her problem to Marty, the late twentieth century version of what had once been a displaced plantation overseer.

She’d already learned that the rumor floating from table to table was that the old couple was ensconced in a fine hotel, a rumor whose source happened to be one of the old African American bell-hops of that same establishment, a man who, trapped in an embarrassingly subservient job, continually blew a full twenty-percent of his weekly tip income at the craps tables, desperate to relieve himself of a fully sycophantic lifestyle. His complete narrative included the facts that the two people, husband and wife, had blown into town with an exorbitant amount of money, oil money, and had been incredibly tight-fingered about its spread. As hicks, it was understood they were out to see the sights, not to gamble at all. Lookers, not players.

Marty, while fully informed of all of this, and carefully plotting to circle both the waitresses and the four resident prostitutes in an effort to either get Pa to play a bit or to so disgust Ma as to get them out of the club altogether, now found that one of his chief dealers had been reduced to quivering incoherence by their presence. While he’d never taken an interest in his “girls” and their private lives, beyond one or two dilly-dallyings prior to their hiring, he now saw that those very interests were needed in order that they might reestablish the highly lucrative order of his gaming tables.

Off in his poorly lit and cramped office, with both hands upon her sob-twitching shoulders, his dark mustache working its way atop the waves of his thoughtfully chewing upper lip, he breathed into her face, and squeezed her into a hug. Nestling her into a
shoulder, he patted her back, slipped one notorious hand down, and unnoticed, swept his fingers along the curving rise of her buttocks. She continued to sob and to blather.

“Honey,” he mumbled into the hair-sprayed tinge of her bouffant. “It’s okay, it’s okay. Just tell me.”

Finally, after a few more sweeps of his hand, each a bit more provocative than the former, she leaned away from him, began wiping at the darkened smears of her eyeshadow and tears, and mumbled. “My parents.”

This was a line and circumstance with which he was familiar. His waitresses seemed to spit it out on a regular basis, and even one of his best prostitutes had once wept it at him, but here, given the age and maturity of the speaker, it was a bit unexpected. Old guys always seemed to track their daughters down, usually with the assistance of some local private investigator who was impotently threatening, morally self-righteous, and obsessed with the legal implications of hiring minors. Usually, explaining his own dupedom and his innocence about their ages, Marty would surrender them, secretly whispering a vow to help them return. Then, of course, in front of the detectives, he went on to standard parting procedures, cynically wishing them all the luck in the world in their completion of high school or junior college. Now, since he generally hired older women to run his tables rather than wait bar and that that was a skill less easily replaced, he was disconcerted.

“There, there,” he told her with a pat as she wiped at the tears. “They’re not gonna hurt you.”

She pulled back his rolling desk chair and sat, breathing hard. “You don’t get it,” she said uplooking. “They’re good people.”

“And so’re you,” he lisped. “I don’t see what the--.”

“Good people,” she whimpered.
He glanced through the open door and into the casino. The busboy breezed past, his white apron red with rouge splotches. "And wealthy," he sighed.

"Yeah," she said. "Where'd they get that--?"

"No matter," he told her and two-handed lifted himself to a seat on the desk. "Still can't hurt you." He licked at the base of his mustache.

She looked up at him, her hair a bit flattened, her makeup an unmentionable gray blur and her eyebags more prominent. "No, Marty," she said. "You don't get it. I can hurt them."

"Ah," he said, responding to a muddled line that was still overwhelmingly familiar. "But they're adults," he said. "They're strong and wise enough to understand. Pain," he told her with a gesture approaching contempt. "Is usually fleeting. They'll forget all of this. Besides," he weasled on. "You're an adult. What can they do?"

"They can cry," she said. "And worse than that," she fell forward in the swiveling chair, her elbows on her knees and upon the brown Victorian dress, its lace uncomfortably shifting up around her neck and chin. "They can pray for me."

While the line was equally common, after all, it was usually the religious who bothered to hunt out their recalcitrant children, or the secular who suddenly had found in the long absences of those children, religion and intercessory pleading, this line for the first time in Casino history, bothered Marty a bit. Mary, for such was the name she'd given him, had always been quite the campaigner. She'd seen her way through two fistfights, nine incidents of completely intoxicated unconsciousness, one exploded vein in some old geezer's brain, and a full-blown coronary arrest, and none of these had touched her stoic determination to continue and deal those cards. She had a knack for dealing out just enough winning hands to keep them at the tables, and an uncanny ability to keep up a running banter which kept the men enamored, even when their wives were nearby. As far as he was concerned, her years in Vegas and Reno had been part of the beautiful
curriculum of despair that had ultimately paid off right here at home, and she was the best of his shuffling and dealing faculty core.

But this fear of divine intervention, that was altogether an item with which a man like Marty Who-had-no-last-name might successfully deal. That was old Karma, old life, old ghosts come to roost. That was even more powerful than the usual call of middle class homes and their stuffed bunny rabbits or teddy bears named Tah-tah, their shag-carpeted splendors of herculeon fabric and free glossy eight-by-tens, their stand-offish cats named Katy O’Kitty and bacon-scented Saturday mornings together over pancakes and milk. That was big stuff.

“I see,” he told her, still aseat on the desk, and he really did, although only briefly. “But then again,” he went on. “They don’t know that you’re here yet, do they?”

She shook her head.

“Then,” he smiled. “They have no reason to pray, yet. Perhaps,” he told her, fiddling around on the desk until he’d found his copy of the employee roster. He lifted it to his lap and studied its squares, the penciled in names and occasional cross-hatchings, and continued to smile. “We can readjust your schedule while they’re in town. Perhaps we can give you an early weekend. Surely,” he grinned. “Good people, like your parents, won’t be hanging around much longer, at least in a place like this.”

Momentarily forgetting how clever he was, the poor, sniffing woman nodded.

“Sound okay?”

“Sure,” she said.

He handed her a Kleenex he’d pulled from a drawer, a tuft from a box he kept handy for moments like these, and sighed. “Well,” he said. “I guess we can call in Sandy to take your table. She’d probably like to shift that weekend anyway now her kids’re out of school and all.”
With that, much to his surprise, a previously unknown nerve revealed itself. The woman again burst into sobs. The few bits of Kleenex darkened and filled within a few seconds. He replenished her supply, tucked a handful into her breast pocket, lingering a moment as he shoved them in, and then sneaked her out of the Casino proper, down the employees' plank to shore. There, he loaded her into the shuttle and gave a wink to the driver.

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to Marty, Ma and Pa had not only grown more disgusted with what was Marty's most complementary environment, but the shuttle, as part of a riverfront monopoly, not only serviced the lower class hotels of Mary's neighborhood, but served the fancier districts as well. Passing the old couple on the patrons' plank, he nodded and wished them a good evening, happy that they'd taken their tight-fisted business elsewhere. Without looking back, he plodded on along, whistling, touching the cold pipe hand rails with a finger. He never saw that they clambered aboard the same van which contained their prodigal daughter.

The reunion was as disgustingly bittersweet as those things can be. After the initial shock, all the parties suddenly sobbed with one voice; the progeny renewed her earlier outburst with what seemed to be an illimitable font of new tears; the progenitors put forth their own salt-dribbling arguments in agreement. The driver, although embarrassed by it all, made it a point to readjust his mirror. They cuddled and cried, hugged and slavered, squeezed and sniffled while he watched, fascinated.

Finally, despite the fact that it was far too early to make the usual run, he grew tired of the incoherence and babbling that make up the greater part of such reunions, started the van, switched the radio to its usual rancorous station, tweaked the volume up a tad, and drove them all to the Gorsuch's hotel. While they still sniveled, he grinned and loudly wished them all a lovely night as they disembarked.
They strolled through the glass doors of the building as they were opened by one frowning man, and, like a tag-team of wrestlers bound together by arm and by leg, made their way through the lobby, rode the elevator up, and managed to bump and grind their mutual way down a hall and finally through the narrow door into the room.

There, they fell to the king-sized bed, their sheer bulk and mass loosening its overly taunt sheets and comforter, and together began to simultaneously babble again.

Some nine hundred and ten rather twisting and boring miles away, aseat in the living room, family photo peering down from that same old piano, the Lord’s Prayer dangling from its wall, and the scent of boxed macaroni and cheese in the air, Lenny and Dub stared down at the pile of supplies they’d gathered in order to make the college experience all the more bearable.

First, and of primary importance, the two young men had loaded Lenny’s new stereo into the living room where it now lay, its wires and plugs and components piled up like some neurologist’s surgery. Then they’d stuffed his CD’s into a large box nearby. Next, they’d gathered his computer and its wires and plugs and components together, piled them alongside the stereo, tossed in an impressive accumulation of disks and computer CD’s into a correlative box, and had begun piling clothes atop of it all. As both youths had nothing greater than fictional notions about the impoverished reality of the authentic university experience, they’d thrown six suits, complete with vests and conservative ties into the pile, twelve dress-shirts, four sets of leather shoes, and one pair of jeans apiece. Underwear was an issue altogether out of consideration, and socks were of minor notice. At the moment, they, with other items like toiletries, had been relegated to the long list of things to be remembered later.

They’d gathered rolled up wall posters. Four sported one bikinied young co-ed or another, who, in a variety of tangled poses somehow managed to clutch respective bottles of beer, smiling out at their viewers alluringly, seductively. The other two sported the
tatooed and leather stars of two occasionally hospitalized, overly macho rock bands. One of these would ultimately die collectively when its privately owned jet sailed explosively into a windsheer and runway with one of its members at the helm, all at the cost of nine jiggers of whiskey and the promise of twice the standard pay to the pilot, and the other of which was to disappear from the music scene, take its collected resources and open a twenty million dollar chain of “healthy” ice cream and yogurt shops.

Lenny and Dub, of course, knew nothing of these hideous climaxes to their idols’ dramatically over-sexed lives; they chose them solely as effort to assert their own incredible sense of the “cool” and to escape what the big city college types would probably consider a combination of Freshman idiocy and down-home hickishness. Somehow intuitively they knew that their newly discovered status as high school demi-gods and political wunderkind, would mean nothing.

Much to that same end, they had also tossed in four bumper stickers for their dormitory door. One revealed that they preferred women who in turn preferred life while staring at a ceiling, another proclaimed that a conservative nationally known radio talk show host had discovered the hidden truth, a third proclaimed the majesty of a popular presidential candidate, and the fourth announced that they were members of a secret fraternity of men called “OUAAR Lucky,” over-sexed, under-supplied, but always, always ready.

They tossed in their last moment ideas, some suntan oil and a pair of bathing suits, a frisbee, a football, and a pair of gimmee caps, and then sat down to the macaroni and cheese, which, after their untutored scorching, tasted remarkably like old bathwater and tennis shoe. They dumped in a bit of picante to cover the taste, and, their feet nestled in suits and CD’s, happily ate what nature, in all of her benevolent abundance, had provided.
It was half way into the splendor of this meal that a knock fell on the mobile home’s door. Picking his way through the mountains of cable and clothing, Dub opened the door, his fork, the pot of noodles and melted orange flavoring in one hand. There, almost sheepishly standing, he found a forty year old man, thin lipped, a bit dusty, slope-shouldered, and more fair-skinned than was common in that latitude. He looked a bit acne-scarred for his age.

“Yeah?” Dub asked him, still a bit reticent despite all of his glory and fame, thoughts of noodles alive in his head.

“Hi,” the man said, his two hands clasped at his waist, his fingers interwoven and his thumbs atwiddle. He smelled faintly of beer. “I,” he said and suddenly looked Dub in the eye. “Am lookin’ for the Gorsuch household. Someone up the road says this is it, but I wasn’t too sure.” He looked the house up and down and from side to side.

“It is,” Dub told him while Lenny, more or less uninterested, dumped more picante into his own bowl.

“Well,” the man said, unclasping his hands and extending the right one, still staring down. Unconsciously, Dub outheld his own and they shook. “Seems,” he said. “I’m your father.”

Dub, who’d always assumed that the man he’d once called Daddy and now called “Pop,” the man whose face accompanied his own in all of the photo albums back home, from infancy to Disneyland to the more recent birthday celebrations, Christmases, and graduation itself, was taken aback. He flinched, stepped backward and let the screen door slip to a close between them.

Gray mesh now between them, the man winced. “Look,” he said. “I know this must come as a shock and all, but I got word you were here and thought I’d better make things right.” He looked through the screen and managed a smile, pleading. “Lenny,” he said. “It’s been a long, long time.”
The legitimacy of his own birth and life miraculously restored, Dub opened his mouth widely, knowing, and said, "Ah." He swung the door open again and gave a sideward nod toward the interior. "Wrong guy," he said. "Lenny’s the other one."

"Oh," the man said, lifting a brow. "Sorry. Must of just about scared you. Been a long, long time."

"Yeah," said Dub. "Len?"

"Yeah?" Lenny murmured from the recliner and bowl.

"Your dad’s home." He glanced through the screen. "From work?" he asked. Lenny looked up.

"Lenny?" leaning against the doorframe, the man peeped in.

"Dad?" Lenny pondered, one cheek’s corner upturned.

"It’s me son. I done come on home."

The truth was that, despite his paternal assertions, the man at the door had no idea as to whether his claim was either honest or accurate. All that he really knew was that the woman in question, the big-hearted daughter to the Gorsuch pair and mother to the young man inside, had been in close proximity to himself at one time, and that one afternoon some eighteen years prior to that moment had called him and informed him that, like her mother before her, she had unwittingly discovered herself to be in the act of nurturing one more unseen addition to the human species. "It happened," she’d said, and that was all.

As a young and foolhardy man, determined to remain unfettered and unencumbered by all of the trappings associated with that act, and very well-aware of the temper and well-circulated threat of the then younger and more robust Pa Gorsuch, he had done what he had considered the most life-preserving thing that he could. He had climbed into his car, ostensibly to pick up a pair of bottles of orange pop, had found
himself on the highway that led out of town, and had vanished into thin air, the highway’s inexplicable attractions suddenly too great for his true explorer’s soul.

For a while, one rumor in town had it that he’d been high-jacked and sold into the white slave trade out of Texarkana, another had it that he’d robbed a bank out side of Truth or Consequences, but the truth was that he’d only made it as far as Midland, where he found himself tossing chains and carrying pipes around on one of the thousands of oil rigs that had sprouted there. Like all good rough-necks, he’d taken immediately to the analgesic effects of beer, lost two fingers on his left hand, and had learned to religiously cling to the diners and dives of that fine city’s outermost regions. With a new name, and an increasingly worn new face, no one had seen or heard of him since.

Until now.

He’d gotten wind of the recent Gorsuch windfall, by virtue of a newly arrived young, unemployed welder and repair truck driver whose bitter, rampaging tongue was already well known. That driver, predisposed to lamentations about his own fate as well as to curse the justice that would make a couple of old frauds wealthy, could find no other work in or around Frisco, and had drifted along a path that landed the two men together.

Now, this man was ready and willing to restore himself to what was now his wealthy son and sole heir.

Lenny, up to his knees in the trappings of the student, clutching his bowl of macaroni and cheese in his bad left hand, was somewhat stunned. Nevertheless, schooled in the hospitality of the rural, he invited the man in.

After a quick glance around the room, the man sat down on the sofa, made a few token gestures of appreciation, and said nothing. Dub, still standing, said nothing either. Neither did Lenny. They just sat there.
Some two hours later, after the man's alcoholic needs had pressed him too greatly, he stepped through the door and promised a short return. Instead, it was a week before he sheepishly knocked again, and within that week, as evidence of Lenny's mother's rather clumsy attempts to ensure his own legal and moral legitimacy, two more men, each narrating tales remarkably similar to this one, had breezed back into town, knocked shyly at the door, and announced that they'd come back to make everything right at last.

Given that Lenny had never before been confronted with such an abundance of parental good will, let alone such a preponderance of parents at all, overwhelmed and finally packed, he phoned Dub and suggested a date for departure. Before his grandparents had returned from their two week honeymoon trip, their prodigal daughter in tow, without giving much public warning, the two young men fled the scene altogether.

College, it was understood, had called them at last, fathers and mothers be damned.

For Lenny and Dub, that first moment of freedom, the first week of their arrival as Freshman, was more or less uneventful; they did the standard things.

They almost blew up the stereo in a brief dormroom competition with the Juniors who lived down the hall, found themselves critically embarrassed by the community showers and used them only at atrociously late, ice-cold, hours, lusted, critically wounded by the slim and tanned coeds who apparently couldn't see them at all, and, baffled by both lunchroom protocol and the complexities of class registration found themselves entirely confused.

They meandered their respective ways from building to building, perpetually late because of the distances, books and notebooks and pencils stuffed uncomfortably underarm, and they listened in their classes, often to little avail. Schooled in the fact that
classes required attendance and doodling and yawning, they never took notes, and they certainly never cracked open those fairly expensive, yellow highlighted, anciently fundamental textbooks. Lectures were held in large lecture halls, assistants alone took role and gave cursory comments on their work, and the lectures seemed to make little or no sense. Class time had once meant recapitulation of their books' unread content, and now, the mellow old speakers behind their podiums, struggling with lapel microphones and wincing at feedback, seemed all but coherent. They appeared to be totally and uncontrollably digressive.

Given this situation, both young men found themselves singularly unimpressed with the promised "educational experience." Their first bubble-sheet exams would eventually come back with scores much too low for passing, their facelessness irked them, and the fundamental studies of constitutions, supplies and demands, long novels and old indecipherable poems, were of little or no interest. While neither had yet formulated any idea as to what really was of interest intellectually, neither did either recognize the necessity of anything they were taking.

Instead, what truly intrigued them both was the unpromised education, the thing that universities and colleges tend to universally suppress from mention. There was, first and foremost, "party, party, party," a course concept entirely exploited, poorly mimicked, and fully misunderstood by the MTV youngsters at high schools. Pizza and balloons, a football or basketball game, or burgers and a few surreptitious beers were nothing, if not token signs of immaturity. Here, in the authentic realm or the adult experience, Lenny and Dub found their first real taste of maturation with all of its promise.

The first of these moments involved the standard "back from our boring summer" get-together arranged by their dorm wing's Resident Assistant. One week into the semester proper, he'd gathered enough beer, twelve packs and a pony-keg, to intoxicate most of the campus, cranked up his two thousand watt stereophonic monstrosity until its
speakers had begun to crackle and distort, and then he'd invited the whole wing into his one-windowed, pale, blue cinder-blocked room. As all wing members understood that this action was not only illegal in the eyes of the non-student, non-resident authorities, and as all understood that it signified something of the R.A.'s willingness to overlook infractions of a similar kind in the future, they all bonded spectacularly. The upperclassmen appropriated four new freshman to their unofficial fraternity, welcomed their own mutual return, and engaged in what was ultimately a warm-up exercise for the coming year.

Marginally afraid, as the entire affair was wholly foreign to them, Lenny and Dub, fully suited, paced down the dark and narrow hallway, under its overhanging yellow light fixtures, atop its occasionally cracked gray tiles, and alongside the closed, heavy wooden doors of the dormrooms. They passed a few that sported posters like their own, sophomores still trying to seem comfortable and cool, past a few that sported messages more cryptic and even chemically suggestive, and finally stood outside the rumble that was the room of their superior, peace-keeping, university functionary.

They glanced at each other nervously, each afraid to give his own reservations voice, adjusted their ties, and Lenny slowly outheld his good arm, and knocked.

The door vibrated from the musical cacophony of drum and bass line within, and no one responded.

He knocked again, louder.

No one responded.

He turned his fist and pounded three times with the heel of his hand.

Muffled, shouting, a voice prompted someone to open the door.

As it swung inward, the noise astonished them both. Bass and drum were now coupled with the high-pitched screech of an over-taxed voice and the sound of what had
to be a half-dozen broken electric guitars. The kid that opened the door, one of the other two Freshmen, smiled a weak little smile through a set of braces, and shrugged.

They stepped into the room.

It took only a moment for both to recognize the mistakes that had surfaced in packing two weeks before. Around them, seated in a variety of school chairs that had been requisitioned for the event or standing in the room's center with gesticulative arms outspread, all of the party's established members, beercans in hands, paused. The three people who stood in the semi-circle in front of Lenny and Dub, each teetering close to the low and cheap coffee table nearby, were the first to respond. Each, one after the other, gestured with his beer can, pointed at the two, then burst into slobbering laughter. The rest of the room followed suit.

While Lenny, used to this sort of thing, wondered whether this was some response to his arm, Dub immediately recognized its true source. The two of them, reddening and suddenly feverish, looked remarkably like a pair of Republican churchgoers while the rest of the room was no more than a motley assembly of shorts, blue jeans, T-shirts, and tennis shoes.

As Lenny continued to redden, Dub, despite his native introversion, instinctively acted. He stiffened, grinning at the members of the room around him, took his right hand, adjusted his collar, and, licking his lips, gathered his face into an altogether moribund look of disapproval. Flicking his hand so that it slapped Lenny's arm, he caught Lenny's eye, turned, and, arms wide, gave the room a deep, formal bow. He rose, faced the R.A. who sat on a sofa at the opposite corner, and bowed again.

The room burst into laughter and the tinny noise of beercan slapping applause.

Thankful, Lenny gave a foreshortened bow, and the red began to fade from both of their faces.
Their characters decided and heartily approved of, the R.A., postured like some Roman minister of state, ushered them in with a regnant hand, gestured over a shoulder with a thumb, and mouthed the words, “Beer’s back here.”

Dub clambered though a variety of backslaps and renewed laughs in order to secure two pacific beers, and Lenny, still uncomfortable, took a seat in one of the stiff-backed chairs. Conversation resumed its dull roar around them, the trio at the room’s center still oblivious to the fact that it wasn’t the center of talk at all, and Dub clambered back, handed Lenny a can, and sat beside him.

Lenny lifted the can up to his dangling left hand, clumsily slid the nail of that hand’s forefinger under the tab, and struggled until the can popped open with a sigh. He saw no pile of tabs or trashcans or ashtrays, so after a moment’s consideration, despite the tales of people who’d swallowed them and wound up in a variety of surgeries, he dropped the tab into the can. He took a few drinks, then, like the rest of the assembled wing, held the cold sweating beer between his thighs.

Beside him, less clumsily, Dub carried out what was virtually the same enterprise.

From that point until ten o’clock, save three more trips to the beer, a full two hours and eight minutes, that’s exactly what the two of them continued to do. Unspeaking, they swilled and nodded at voices they could only hear dimly, smiled and acted as if they weren’t bored. So far as either could tell, lesson number of one of the great party curriculum included little more than an ascetic dedication to deafness and isolation, a determination to develop the appearance of “cool.”

Around them, people shouted and laughed, drank and staggered for more.

Finally, at ten, that pre-determined and holy moment that began “quiet hours,” they received lesson number two. A number of the guests, including the other pair of Freshmen, had woven their way from the room, and now, Lenny and Dub, still in the
same two chairs, a bit more fluid than originally, sat with only the more dedicated students, the R.A., and five other upperclassmen.

The stereo was dimmed to what was a fairly low rumble and they could all suddenly hear each other. Conversational responsibility fell to the trio that still remained at the room's center, their extroverted impulses finally fulfilled. There, the three bumbled against each other with outstretched, beercan clutching hands, hands that both inflected, interrupted, and kept each other aloft. On the table before the somnambulant R.A., there stood, as signifier of community, a pyramid of aluminum capped by a crumb-scattered bowl of what had been corn chips. Beside all of this, eerily enough, was a full, darkened red, unopened bottle of picante sauce.

The three upperclassmen at the center, each with a gimmee cap worn backward, each slightly slurring his speech, and each in a T-shirt that advertised one brand of sportswear or another, clumsily argued some vain point about their respective states of masculinity. At a pause, provoked by a numerical evaluation of feminine conquests, for reasons unknown, Dub coughed.

While that rather unobtrusive gesture did indeed have an authentic expulsory function and wasn't meant to be some critically skeptical gloss upon the sum total of what had just been offered, all three gazed at Dub with interest.

"Well," said the tallest of them, sun-blond, mustached, most notorious for having come to one of the school's usually politically correct Halloween bashes dressed as a small German dictator. "Looks like we've got us a couple of Freshmen."

A chill ran through Lenny's body.

A second of the three, sporting a dark and thick beard and mustache, notorious for nothing but a tendency to keep his short, well-padded frame stuffed with anything that involved carbohydrates and sour cream, nodded. "Up late, aren't they."
“Yessir,” said the third, this one clean-shaven, well-trimmed, and clearly hickish, well-known for his overaverage use of the dorm’s fire extinguishers and a tendency to shout, though he claimed never to have seen any films by Capra, “Hee-aw!” for no apparent reason. “Looks like we got us some.”

Again a chill ran through Lenny. While the party itself had seemed to establish an unbreakable bond between each of the wing’s members, this clearly indicated otherwise. He’d heard of “hazing,” had even heard of death and/or sterility as its results, and while the convention had been outlawed, he also knew, as evidenced by the table loaded with beercans, that these people had little or no sense of the authority of rule. He shifted uncomfortable beside Dub, set his fourth, half-emptied can to the floor next to a chairleg, and looked at the R.A..

The man simply sat there, smiling in sweet stupefaction.

“Say,” said the Hitler impersonator. “You wanna see me freak out a couple of freshmen?”

The other two agreed that the idea sounded interesting.

Lenny and Dub gave quick and respective swallows. Although they’d loosened the knots to their ties upon their entrance, each reached up and loosened his again.

The man stepped past the sofa while the R.A. let his head fall back to watch; he gathered two unopened beers, then stepped back into the room’s center. There, like some kamikaze ingesting the last steeling bit of nerve-deadening saki, he opened one can, muttered “Cheers,” and drank it off in two uninterrupted gulps. He walked to the table, lifted the unopened bottle of hot sauce, twisted it open with a small pop, repeated the toast, and, in two similar gulps, drank the whole tomato-filled, sixteen ounce amalgamation of spice and vegetable down. Wincing, he opened the second beer, drank it dry with a sense of relish, and belched.
He glanced at Lenny and Dub.

Both sat spellbound.

He smiled. He licked his lips at them. He took the empty can, crushed it flat along its length between his palms, and began folding it back and forth along a central crease until it tore open. "Yes," he whispered.

Lenny and Dub watched. The R.A. grinned and shook his head as if embarrassed.

Snarling, the man took the ragged edge of the can half between his teeth, folded it back and forth until a chunk tore free, and then, insanity of insanities, he began carefully folding the aluminum between his teeth, biting it down, folding it, biting it down, and folding it, until the chunk was no more than a square of yellow colored metal, a half-inch all around. He turned to Lenny and Dub, held the thing out on the tip of his tongue, then curled it back into his mouth and swallowed.

The other members of the room gave an "ooh."

He turned, mouth open, and, with his fingers, pulled back his lips and cheek so that all could see how empty his mouth was.

The R.A., still smiling, waved it off with a hand.

The guy belched again, rubbed his stomach and sighed, satisfied.

Lenny and Dub sat in stunned silence.

While this gaseous bit of culinary bravado might have been enough for a full lesson number two, each of their instructors seemed to feel that the point was somehow incomplete. After a few minutes of idle chat, the third of the trio, noted for his use of the fire-extinguishers and formerly member of a now defunct fraternity, suggested that they all might definitively answer the earlier question about manliness by exchanging a few good "licks."
All agreed, and, while the remainder of the group stood laughing and offering their own speculations about the diminutive size of the paddle he probably owned, he left to get the board.

Lenny and Dub, now more secure in their own presence, sipped a bit more beer.

By the time that Mr. He-aww returned, his four foot long, five inch wide, and inch and a half thick board bearing three Greek letters near the grip in hand, the R.A. had risen from his couch, stretched and shaken a few stiffnesses from his spine and shoulders. Unwilling, as host and the only member of the wing with a permanent girlfriend, to allow the decision to go on without him, he spoke. "Lemme give it a try."

The other three "oohed" and "ahhed" him for a few moments, and then, in nursery school fashion, he and old He-aww played a quick game of rock-scissors-paper to determine who'd give the first blow. As he chose rock, and He-aww chose paper, the R.A. bent himself calmly at the waist, and, there before the confused Lenny and Dub, grabbed his own ankles.

While the real heroism of the act they were about to witness little impressed either of them at the moment, especially since both had been whipped at one time or another in their own lives, and as neither had bothered to read about the game's original players, one Sir Gawain and his Green Knight, they grinned at the scene. After a few practice swings, like a baseball player who intended to knock one "clean out of the park," Hee-aw struck at their R.A.'s hinder parts with such a violence that the man tumbled forward onto his hands and knees, his voice unwittingly outgasping in an animal sound that rivaled the noise of the stereo earlier.

While Hee-aw grinned over him, board dangling in hand, the groaning R.A. slithered face down on his elbows, grimacing, along his own cold tiles. Both fists clenched, his whole body rigid, a few tears popped from his eyesockets.
The two roommates sat stunned. Sucking down a couple of beers and a bottle of picante was nothing to this. The real hero lay before them. They looked up from the quivering and prostrate R.A. to Hee-aw who now seemed concerned about what was either the fate that awaited him, or with the health of his friend. He swallowed.

“Well,” trying to sound unflapped by the thing he’d just done, Hee-aw laughed.

“Guess it’s my turn.”

From the floor, still face-down and rigid, the R.A. rose completely to his elbows, and with one floor-whisking hand, waved him off. “Nah, nah,” he said tightly. “That’s okay. Call it a draw.”

The relieved Hee-aw, while he should have, as both Hitler and Heft were quick to point out, forced his prostrate friend to rise and give a reciprocal blow, he agreed to the terms offered, and instead helped his pain-riddled friend to his feet.

“Gimmee the ice,” the R.A. gasped, his body limp over Hee-aw’s shoulder.

And while they might have stayed to witness the far more communally binding event that followed, the intimate healing of the wounded comrade, Dub and Lenny, determining that enough had been enough, quietly rose and, unnoticed, slunk from the room.

As the night passed on, lying there in their beds, the two both then got to overhear a good dose of the third lesson. Next door to the wing’s cluster of toilets, they listened as many a good student banged open the swinging doors, helplessly drawn to the average Friday’s culminating event, noisily upward emptying himself of the night’s contents.

The flushing was simply spectacular.

And that was “party-party-party.”

The second thing which most intrigued the two about college life during those first weeks was the presence of an inordinate number of healthy, highly fertile, necessarily intelligent females. Those high school floozies who’d been so kind as to
throw themselves into their mutual paths had been no more than children relative to these. Everywhere the eye might rest or the lungs might breathe, these women dumped a phenomenal number of pheromones into the air, and they all interacted with men as if men and women were somehow meant to converse as well as probe each other.

That “party-party-party” was a course that might be conflated with the “babes-babes-babes” aspect of education was a concept that hadn’t occurred to either of them. “Party” meant brotherhood and beer, not humanity and daiquiris, and that latter course, only open to a select population of older, more experienced students who’d filled the necessary prerequisites, was at best, still a distant hypothesis.

Their first experiences with this new class of female were disappointing. They were rejected altogether.

Their own feminine peers seemed, to the two of them, to be little better than the high school girls they’d left behind, giggly, small-talking people as much drawn to the elder males as Dub and Lenny were to elder females.

Neither Dub nor Lenny understood the necessity of lightweight, weather-bound banter, or the standard “what’s your major” sorts of exchanges needed in early relationships, and neither did they understand the necessity of sometimes feigning interest in things that were naturally uninteresting. Neither could muster a good, “oh really, I’m fascinated by the moral implications of Sartrean thinking on predation among the canines,” to save his own life. Given these sorts of youthful flaws, both young men were doomed to nothing more than surreptitious, fairly well-disguised conjecture.

Nevertheless, certain similarly-aged females began to notice them right away. While Lenny’s arm and Dub’s stand-offishness prevented either from contact with anyone who even remotely resembled the characters on their dormroom posters, both attracted females of a certain and specific vein. Dub, with his dark and foreboding sort of iconoclastic ways, attracted young women inclined toward suicidal poetry, black
clothing, short skirts, ankle-tattoos and an abundance of golden jewelry. Lenny, on the other hand, naturally attracted heavier women whose hearts were abundant; people who were perpetually sorry for anyone marked by difference; somehow convinced that different people are not different at all, they either tried to change the persuasions of campus homosexuals or they latched onto people like Lenny.

As this odd cluster of admirers gathered behind the two young men, less than vocal, and as yet undesirable, Lenny and Dub went on with their lives, relegating each woman to the status of “friend.” As each additional “friend” had the odd affect of inspiring more followers to come along, before either man had any knowledge of what had happened, each controlled what was virtually a harem of jealous, vindictive, somewhat pathetic women.

Their dormitory reputations, grounded in the “joke” with the suits at the party, likewise continued to grow as the women seemed to simply que up nearby. While most of the guys in the dorm held to higher standards of beauty than were displayed, most, to be truthful, also led sexual lives which were as conjectural and surreptitious as those of Lenny or Dub. Hence, by assuming certain activities to be implicit in the existence of these harems, they admired both to something approaching an excess.

Studs as they were, Lenny and Dub went on attending their classes, unreading or writing, taking weekly刷新ers in party-party-party, now joining their fellows in the purgative Friday night ritual, all the while oblivious to what was really happening.

This went on for the first seven weeks of the semester, and then, finally, the whole thing suddenly came out into the open.
CHAPTER VII

AND SHE LAUGHED

At about the same time that the much younger Lenny was being hustled off on that trip to the roadshow preacher who gave rise to his unrectified arm, there was a girl of the same age and rural experience who lived some four hundred and twenty miles from Frisco. Brunette, with her hair lopped off into a boyish sort of look, she was, as working children are inclined, pleasant and cheerful, smiling sweet little smiles through a small mouth with a set of overly thick canines which had been shoved too far forward to meet any conventional sense of physical beauty. While her tanned freckles, petite little bulb of a nose, and grinning little heart-shaped face were becoming, when people gazed upon her, they saw only the lips that pulled back too far, exposing too much gumline, and that brought that jumble of teeth into prominence.

If only she’d been less happy, more closed-mouthed, less inclined to smiling, her later years would have been markedly different.

This little girl, Samantha Harpool, unlike Lenny, was being raised by her proper progenitors. No one had skipped town, no one had left her to her elder relations, and no one had embarked upon a path which reeked of common American money-grubbing and short-sightedness. Born to one of the hundreds of small ranch families in the region, to a mother and father who had already provided her with three brothers, she was being raised “proper.”

This meant that she and her mother ran a daily routine that consisted of house-cleaning, clothes washing, and the lengthy preparation of a “supper” of potatoes and beef,
while her father and brothers rose before sun-up, shoved faded jeans over their thickening thighs, pulled on pairs of respectively dusty, worn-heeled boots, threw on fresh faux-pearl studded cowboy shirts, and climbed into their chipped up old pickup to toss hay to their morning clustered heard of cattle.

This also meant, that while both of her parents envisioned a better life for their children, intended that the boys attend the state’s largest agricultural college while Samantha married relatively well, that “discipline” would be the central tenet upon which the family rested. It took discipline to beat the sun out to the pastures and field, took discipline to sit through Sunday morning’s three hour Evangelical reveries, took discipline to recognize that sore backs and aching muscles were a necessary part of the week’s earnings, and took discipline to understand that the golden pot at the foot of the rainbow often contained nothing more than the basic wages of subsistence alone. It took discipline to know that with an honest integrity of spirit, all else was unhealthy fantasy best left to Hollywood and the makers of elitist, leftist culture.

It took discipline to recognize that pain and struggle were our only due portions after the advent of original sin.

Thus, as requisite mechanism by which to further the ends of this sort of thinking, right next to the stone fireplace near the heavy oak front door, right next to the aged and cracked half-wagon wheel that adorned the mantle, Samantha’s father had hung a two and a half inch wide, eighth of an inch thick leather strap. At some point in its own history, this eyesore had been an animal without name, had then become a hunk of a tooled guitar strap that had never sold, and had finally been pared by one half of its width, chopped down to a roper-sized belt.

There, many a time, Harpool had gone for assistance. There, many a time, he’d sought refuge from toddler and child alike. There, many a time, frowning, he’d gone to carry out the most reprehensible duty of parenthood.
Eventually, four children along, he'd come to refer to the reddish and limp thing dangling there, supple and darkened with palmsweat, as “the belt of knowledge”; after all, wisdom was the whole problem with the species, young or old, and the title seemed appropriate. God, or Eve perhaps, might bring death into the world, but old Harpool could bring a lot of order into the childish chaos of his own garden.

The children were known to throw veritable conniptions over the belt’s utilization. They would stuff their little britches full of rags and old towels, and would even occasionally “misplace” the thing altogether, but the truth is that the strap, like many a scientific theory or philosophical assertion, was, as the Nazis or Stalinists had discovered, self-affirming. It was the one, thick, gravely philosophical, self-authenticating principle in many a lifetime. Wicked behavior begot a few reddening welts on the rump, and these slaps in turn begot a modification of behavior—unless, of course, the recipient of the blows was either irrational or without sensation at all. While fuzzy-headed theorists might cringe at the beastliness implied by the existence of such a device, its use did get the desired results.

And so it was that the Harpool clan could take pride in the behavior of its youngest members, especially after each had fully understood that, “they used it on me, and it didn’t do me no harm.”

They said “Sir” and “Ma’am” with the necessary frequencies, never said “Yeah,” never left the lid up on the toilet, rarely threw tantrums, and virtually never squirmed or spoke during a Sunday’s more long-winded services. They were better than the average children, more sedate, less demanding, and more satisfied with the lean nature of their lives.

Each child, as product of this sort of education, save Samantha, was also more easily equipped to deal with the otherwise heart-rending elements of their paternal vocation. Things had to die. People had to kill them.
The eldest brother, first to undergo the youthful rituals of animal husbandry, took care of his nameless pig with all of the delicacy and compassion of a Roman Centurian. He beat it, as has to be done, into believing that even as a mature, four hundred pound beast, it was still his physical inferior, and on its maturation, he slaughtered it with a certain joy, sharing its edible portions with the family with an insensible relish.

The other two boys did the same.

When it came time for Sam to carry out the ritual, the story was a different one. Perhaps it was the overwhelming femininity underlying all of that tom-boyish appearance, or perhaps it was something else. Nevertheless, she was more frivolously attached to her animal than she should have been. Like her brothers before her, she’d joined the local chapter of the Four-H Club when it was time to do so, and like her brothers, she chose to compete in a variety of regional stock shows. Unlike them, however, despite all of her father’s infliction of wisdom and knowledge, she cared.

With the kindness and talkativeness of someone who needed a pet, or, perhaps of a young woman who happened to live in an environment so overwhelmingly male, she raised her steer from the moment of its birth through the embarrassing and painful moment of its de-ballopping, through a few visits from the vet, and well into the latter days of its life. Based upon a story that she’d found in an old schoolbook that had been holding up one leg of a wobbly chest, she named it Io, shortened the name to “I,” and when it wasn’t following her around like some overly-huge dog, she followed it.

Storms frightened Sam to death, and more than once, the family caught her out in the barn trying to soothe both herself and the beast while the winds and rains beat down upon the roof, and, at the end of an average day, she would usually report things like the fact that “me and I went down to the tank today, thought I’d get stuck in the mud but he didn’t,” or that “me and I took a sprint ‘long the creek and I scared up a bunch a’ bees out of a log, but didn’t get stung,” and so on.
Pronoun and noun confused everyone until the family finally gave up. As far as most were concerned, girl and steer had become one item in the basic constellation of existence.

Io was the first thing she’d visit when school let out. He was the last thing she’d see before the sun went down. Timmy and Lassie had nothing on the two; they were horribly, terribly, embarrassingly, in love.

All of this concerned her father a bit, made her brothers laugh, and didn’t really seem to matter to her mother at all.

Nevertheless, Samantha Harpool and her steer, whether it be trotting about on the green playing something of “chase” or “tag,” or whether it be riding along on I’s back playing something of “ride-a-little-pony,” were very close friends. When I began to take a few ribbons in local shows, well-brushed and fed, Sam boasted to the family and world-at-large that Io’s innate love and kindness were what made him so beautiful. “Just look at them eyes,” she’d say. “Just you look.”

The real problem, the problem that would eventually toss Sam into Lenny’s path, began when Io finally reached that destined age at which ribbons were to be converted into proper fare. While Sam had always understood that this was to be the final goal in the long race toward her own initiation into adulthood, she also understood that there was a fundamental disjunction between what she had done, rearing and raising an animal which now smiled at her approach, trusting her completely, and what she was meant to do.

There were nights spent out in the barn until her father whisked her back in, days spent playing hooky in order to be with the steer, and evenings spent in thoughtful prayer for something of an heavenly reprieve or pardon.

None of this worked.
One fine Saturday morning, fresh from a bit of biscuit and creamed gravy, the whole family helped to prod Io into one of their horse trailers, loaded up into the cab and bed of the pickup, and made its way into the freshly alfalfaed scents of the state’s annual stock competition and auction. There, they unloaded the steer and led it into its holding pen, then wandered away up and down the aisles and pole fences of the convention center, witnessing the merits of the competition.

Laughing and proud, they finally determined that Io was foremost of this assembly of the damned, and brothers and parents went on to the central building in which the auction was to be held. Samantha remained behind with Io.

There, her feet nestled into the scatter of hay and manure, a bit numb, she sat on a stack of sodapop crates next to her friend, her head heavy, saying nothing. Off and on around her, like high-pitched brass, the other animals complained of their conditions, burst into the lows and bellows of the frightened and condemned. Io, on the other hand, sleek and heavy and stupid, simply chewed, wide-jawed at whatever it is that his kind continually chew.

As Samantha was little inclined to understand that fate was always inevitable, her eleven year old’s mind spun itself through a series of salvaging possibilities and escapes from destiny. She considered opening the pen, trotting off down the aisle and away into the anonymity of the big city. She fantasized about a fire and Io’s role in saving an abundance of human and animal life, a thankful crowd promising that he should forever live well-kept. She thought about some cyclonic storm destroying the whole convention, about a declaration that God’s hand had put a stop to the slaughter. She thought... well, she just sat there gazing at her old buddy, and thought.

Finally, after twenty-five or thirty minutes, as her family watched a few sheep being escorted off to their new owners, the quick-tongued and almost indecipherable babble of the auctioneer keeping the prices high, Sam heard a few visiting voices
mumbling about the pathetic condition of some of the horses they'd seen earlier. The loudest of the three, baritone and deeply affected, proclaimed that the owner had probably never given that horse a reasonable rub-down or even touched it with a curry comb. The other two voices, higher and what might have been sons, agreed, and one suggested that they'd "never be able to sell that nag in a million years."

Laughing, the voices faded from her range of hearing.

It took only a few moments for Sam to combine the ideas of that final assertion with her own ruminations, and, suddenly grinning at the shimmer and gloss of poor Io, she decided to act. Hands thrust down into the manure of the floor, she rose from the stacked crates, and upthrew a few handfuls at the steer. He turned and gazed at her dumbly, not so much annoyed as mildly curious. The splotches had their affect. Samantha could see all of the possibilities hidden by those greenish brown smears. Quickly, she gathered up a few handfuls more, and stepping to the animal, she wiped and she smeared more and more filth onto its flanks.

Io gave a brief and fluttering bellow, his sides expanding wide and then contracting.

She began gathering and smearing, gathering and smearing, until a good portion of her well-kept friend was looking quite a bit less well-kept. While it was impossible to hide his bulk, a few pads of this or that tucked here or there made him look terribly unhealthy, lumpy, and probably foul-tasting. She kept at it until both her arms and the animal were more or less covered in muck. Tiring, she wiped the hair from her forehead, leaving a smear. Delighted at this artistry of the farmyard, she clasped her cheeks in her hands, leaving two globs where the pink cheeks of youth had been. Satisfied, she wiped her hands on her dress, obscuring the florals and pastels that had been there, and finally, she stood stock-still, admiring her work.
There, beside her small form, Io looked like some remnant of a third world hurricane.

This, she knew, was going to work.

But, at that very moment, an hour after her departure, bored with the glories of the auction, her mother returned. Previously unconcerned, the woman, in a similarly floral dress, looked between the slats of the pen, and gasped.

“Oh Sam,” she whispered, her fingers clutching the gate. “What’ve you done!”

Sam glared back through the slats, set her jaw rigid, and scowled, her misshapen teeth exposed. “Nothing!” she spat. “I done nothing.”

Her mother gave a quick “tsk,” and equally convinced of the efficacy of the strap, although unwilling to use it herself, whisked away down the aisle.

“There,” Sam told Io. “That’ll teach ‘em.”

Io, in dumb nonchalance, undisturbed by his new look, simply chewed.

Five minutes later, the brothers tagging along behind, her hard-breathing father slammed open the gate and stood framed by its posts, his cold, blue eyes a bit heated under his brow. “What’s this?” he asked her in a voice altogether too calm.

She said nothing.

“That’s your dow’ry girl,” he said. Behind him, gawking, the brothers struggled to get a good look, their crew-cut heads popping up along the rail and then bouncing back as they wrestled each other for the view.

Her muck-darkened fists clenched at her sides, Sam faced him and stood between Io and the man. “They can’t have him,” she said. “They won’t get him.”

All of his reservations about her relationship to the animal now come to full fruition, her father did the only thing that he knew to do. “Get them boys outta here,” he told her mother. And he began unbuckling the huge, silver-plated, rodeo belt-buckle he wore. “Get ‘em back aways.”
Behind him, outside the stall, Mrs. Harpool tried to wrestle her wrestling sons away, but one after the other, they ducked her arms and returned to clutch at the fencing. Harpool whirled on them, his belt finally pulled from its loops, and with it dangling in his hand, he threatened them all. "Git back or you be next."

The three boys darted away, their mother scuttling behind them.

Harpool turned back to his daughter and the muck. "Bend on over," he told her while he folded the belt around his hand. "Be quick now."

She stared back at him. "No," she said. "I won't let 'em have him."

"Girl," he said and stepped fully into the pen as she backed.

The gate banged shut on its hinges behind him. "I said, 'bend on over.' Quick."

"They can't--," she blurted, but the leather snaked out and left a sear across her left calf.

"Girl," he said again.

With the now burning inflection of that first blow in mind, coupled with an awareness that she was going to get whipped anyway, Sam bent, much like the manly R.A., and grabbed her white socks with her filthy hands. He whipped her a few times while she whimpered, biting back all indication of the real pain she felt.

Off down the aisle, her brothers hooted at the slaps that they heard, each enthused by the fact that he wasn't the recipient, each aware that this was by far the worst thing that Sam had ever done, while Mrs. Harpool shook her head sadly, very much upset that her daughter had gone so terribly wrong.

Around them, a number of milling ranchers and farmpeople lifted a few ears listening, but more or less used to the sounds, and more or less similarly convinced of their efficacy and justice, they only clucked their tongues and wondered at the embarrassment of having to publicly punish a child like that.
After three heavy blows, her father stopped and slipped his belt back through its loops. As he buckled it again, he told her to "Git on up," and stepped back to the gate. "Get that animal cleaned up," he said as he stepped out. As afterthought, he turned and stared back through the slats as she rubbed at her backside. "I'd best see a blue ribbon hangin' on this gate when I get back." He ambled away as his sons took a few quick peeks at Sam then they, along with their mother, followed the man back into the auction.

Sam, in turn, her lesson learned, took a bucket from a nail, made a good twenty-five trips to the spigot outside of the barn to fill it, and washed Io down. She combed and brushed at his nap, then finally took her blow drier and slowly dried his huge hulking body completely, with plenty of fluffing as well. Tentatively returning to her stacked crates, she took a cautious seat, and awaited his doom.

Sure enough, as Mr. Harpool had been well aware, the well-tended animal was of blue-ribbon quality. The judges pinned the ribbon to the gate; the buyers peeped in and muttered their grave estimations of his worth; and both sets of people wondered aloud at how such a dirty little girl could possibly have raised such a tremendous animal.

The auction took place while Sam, unwilling to set foot into the arena, watched from the entrance. A wealthy buyer bought him for a fiftieth birthday’s celebration and barbecue, and he was returned to his pen.

There, as Io leaned through the slats, the blue ribbon dangling next to his nose, Sam, outside of the pen and squat on the floor in her dress, leaned forehead to forehead against him, sobbing quietly.

A few steps down the aisle, Mr. and Mrs. Harpool, their sons elbowing each other and giggling, looked on proudly; their daughter had now become an authentic member of the family and profession.
A few steps further down, a reporter, sensing the pathos of the whole scene, snapped the photograph of girl and beast; it then appeared in the Sunday special interest section of his large city newspaper.

All would have turned out well for the family except that the event hadn't taught what they'd wanted. Samantha went on living the life of a cowherd and cowherder's daughter, never naming another animal so long as she lived there, but she lived with the conviction that everything that had taken place had been wrong. Tortured by Io's last looks of pure faith and innocent trust, she grew up with one thing in mind, and that was to get the heck out of the industry altogether, be that as rancher, or as wife to a local.

Her brothers went on to their agricultural college, as was their due, and each returned with an argumentatively steady and unyielding insistence on modernization and scientific improvement. Granting them their superior, although theoretical, knowledge, and eager to pass the vocation along to his sons, Harpool adapted and improved, took the necessary subsidies and tax breaks, and finally, bored and altogether insignificant, sold out altogether, at significant gain, by dropping cattle and beginning to herd animals more exotic. The brothers moved on, joined a large corporation which leased small ranch properties to the idle rich, and married well into upper management.

Samantha, on the other hand, took the little bit of money that Io'd brought, bought herself an all black wardrobe of short skirts and darkened makeup, passed her way through Junior High and High School unnoticed, and finally went to her counselor demanding that they find a university appropriate to her now morbid poetic attitude.

Distraught, and having found the good belt of wisdom to be less and less effective over the years, the mellowing Harpools finally conceded to their daughter's all out rebellion, and watched as she went off to school, wishing only that she'd do the right thing and marry some bright young man who might keep her in line.
That bright young man was, of course, at least in the mind of Samantha Harpool, something of the spiritual equal to Io himself. He was to be fun, in a dull sort of way, compassionate, and a good deal less aware of his ultimate destiny, no matter how bleak, than the people who herded him along through the styles of higher education.

Given these facts, the moribund Samantha Harpool, joined by her dark-suited sisters, could only fall in love with an appropriate target.
CHAPTER VIII

AND HE LAUGHED

It all began sometime late in the first half of their respective sophomore years. Dub and Lenny, as noted, had gathered a strange following of people to whom they were more or less oblivious, and Samantha, like her peers, had noticed this following. Attracted, at a distance of no more than three dining hall tables, by the oddity of the ill-formed Leonard Gorsuch and his unspeaking roommate, she found herself sitting in the back of a classroom near each of them. The instructor, one of the silly new breed of university educators who insisted that his classmates know as much as he did, especially since “knowledge” in the age of Heisenberg had ceased to be, picked on both of the young men on a regular basis, forever plying them with questions for which there were no definitive answers.

As was the case with the self-authenticating “belt of knowledge,” the fact that people in the room were either frightened and/or contemptuous enough to spit out answers at all confirmed the instructor’s belief. He had no answers. They did. He might wander loosely along in his leather-elbowed, sweatery way, traipsing through the realms of the relativistic Empyrean, but they did not. Somehow, they knew. And they knew that he knew they knew.

While no one was really certain what in the world the course was, it might have been history, might have been literature, might have been political science or botany for that matter, on reading Gilgamesh, this instructor demanded that someone tell the group whether it was all right for a king to sleep with every husband’s wife. He himself
couldn’t be sure. They knew: Back then, it was fine. Now, it’s loathsome and reprehensible. At least here. On this street. In this house. At this moment. According to them.

On reading The Iliad, he demanded that someone explain how it was that Achilles could be such a weeny. And they explained that he wasn’t, at least not now. He was then. With Dante, he demanded that they all explain how it was that science and religion had oppressed us all for so long. Everybody agreed. They didn’t. But they had. And they might.

No one knew what the hell he or she was supposed to say on an exam.

But the guy did do quite a song and dance up there, dragging everything from old movie clips to vacuum cleaners into the classroom, and so, if not “learning” anything, they were all nevertheless entertained. Given the party-party-party curriculum to which most were already devoted, that sort of thing counted.

Dub and Sam connected immediately following the first exam.

The single essay question of that brief effort was “Would Homer have slept with Calypso? Why or why not?”

Dub, who, when unassisted by Lenny, always dealt with matters in the most general of terms, had said “No. But it’s impossible to prove a negative.” And then he’d rambled on with an incoherent bit of reasoning that dragged on for five pages and mentioned absolutely nothing from either of the texts assigned.

As far as he could tell, that was the point of the class.

Sam, who always dealt with matters in the most heartfelt and specific of terms, had answered “Yes,” and then gone on to focus on a variety of factors, including an insistent focus on the sharing of wealth, the primitive justice of physical punishment and Homer’s response to it, and the strange ritual of cleaning the muck off of each other before slaughtering an animal.
The instructor, moved by Sam’s emotional and fallacious answer, unmoved by Dub’s cold and calculated reasoning, lambasted Dub and poured accolades upon Samantha. When the exams were returned, Dub lamented as Sam flew into raptures. He gazed at her there in the chair beside him, her cropped and blackened hair looking all the more perky, and scowled, having detected someone who’d betrayed the basic homogeneity forged in taking a seat in the back of the classroom.

She turned to him, and unaware of anything save her own grade, grinned.

“What’d you get?”

“Shut up,” he said, shoving the exam into his notebook’s spiral.

“Oh,” she told him. “Sorry.”

“Yes, right,” he told her. “Real, real sorry.” He closed the notebook and rose from the seat.

“But I am,” she said. “You don’t deserve anything less than a B. It was unfair.”

Dub, still unpracticed at this sort of circumvention of truth for the sake of male-female relationships, looked down on her as she sat smiling, her dark eyeliner giving her all the more appearance of sympathetic pain. “Yeah, it was,” he said. “That guy didn’t even give us any hints about what he was gonna be looking for.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “He didn’t even give a review.”

“And he didn’t even lecture on what he asked.”

“I know, I know,” she told him. “The only reason I passed is that I read the Cliff Notes.” This was a well-calculated lie. She couldn’t afford the Cliff Notes, let alone bear to read their obnoxiously boring summaries and commentaries.

“Oh,” he answered. He’d skimmed the Cliffs himself, but now it dawned on him that first of all, he should have studied them a little bit more closely, and second, that she did rightfully belong back here with the back-seat crowd after all. “Maybe I should try that next time.”
“Maybe,” she said, and then, inspired by that lunchroom attraction, she made the
cliché move. “Maybe we can study them together. You know, it might help you. Might
help us both.”

Lenny, who’d done about as well as Dub on the exam, suddenly butted in, a third-
wheel, from Dub’s far side. “Yeah,” he said, giving Dub’s elbow a slight slap. “Maybe
we could do that.”

Above them, behind its plastic grating, a fluorescent tube began to hum.

Dub felt the blow of Lenny’s slap, but briefly caught up in Sam’s overly-toothy
smile, trapped by her looks of pathetic concern, failed to turn toward him. “Okay,” he
said. “Maybe we could.”

And so it was that Samantha Harpool gained a bit of a foothold up the ladder in
the harem.

Studying, or Sam’s well-studied recitation of the Gorsuch-Dubinski’s unread facts
from the texts, became a weekly enterprise for the three of them, usually in one or the
other of the two dorm rooms, well before quiet hours. They soon became twice-weekly,
thrice-weekly, and finally, they were all less engaged with books and proper learning
than with gossip and giggling.

Other harem members took to scrawling obscene messages about their rival on the
bathroom walls, took to issuing small bumps and elbowings to her when she passed them,
and finally, after a month or two, gave up altogether. Each faded away, donning a new
set of silver spikes, rubbing in a new box of jello, adding one more body part to their “to-
be-pierced” lists, and pursuing her own new target, leaving Lenny, Dub, and Samantha to
their scholarship. The guys in the dorm lamented the loss of their heroes, muttered about
their being “whipped,” mythologized about threesomes, but nevertheless continued to
admire them both; after all, Samantha, despite her teeth, gumline, and poor taste in
clothing was still quite the catch.
Things went along fairly well. The young men's grades steadily improved over the semester, and their tendencies to actually open their books were on the rise. Somehow or other, given the provocations of this studious young woman, both felt compelled to make themselves her educational equal. By the time that the semester had reached its halfway mark, all three were firmly implanted in the "B" range, and much to their shared surprise, all three had developed some ideas about what sorts of things interested them.

Sam was drawn to philosophy, a far cry from the husbandry she'd learned to despise; Dub was drawn to history; and Lenny, still tainted by the success of his high school experience, was drawn to the science of politics.

All three, it would seem, despite the influences of their environment, were becoming healthy young adults.

In the meantime, back home, Ma and Pa Gorsuch had moved onward and upward into a large house on a local lake, and had found themselves saddled with their recuperative daughter's second upbringing. They also found themselves driving away a series of respective fathers to their grandson.

Why and how it is that a newly moneyed family, so concerned with its youngest member's absence, hadn't managed, in almost two years, to climb into a car and to have driven six hundred miles to his new home, is inexplicable. Perhaps Pa's stiffened shoulder prevented it. Perhaps Ma was bound and determined to let the young man test out his fledgling wings. Perhaps they were both afraid that their daughter might take to the highway again, or perhaps they were just too silly to have thought of it at all. It doesn't matter.

What matters is that they had never visited, and now, after one and a half years of Lenny's absence, at least one of these men was becoming belligerent. He had invoked the law, a matter that the Gorsuchs well understood, and he now threatened to go the full
nine yards, to have Lenny dragged kicking and screaming into a lab somewhere so that his genetic material might be seized and analyzed with respect to his own.

Thus, they demanded that he return home for the holidays. Toward this end, his mother began a short epistle, one of a series of those already delivered, unanswered, begging to see him, even if only for a short while, and Ma appended this with a note of her own. There, explaining the legal circumstances, she broadened the plea into a financial threat, and then closed with a restatement of their new address, complete with a hand-drawn map of how to get there.

Midway through finals week, as Dub sat in his one evening course, a three hour bear that proclaimed itself to be “pre-cal,” Lenny picked up this letter from his campus mail slot, gave its handwriting a distasteful frown, and handed it to Sam. They trudged back through the December nip, their breaths hanging before them, and as usual, returned to Lenny’s room.

He took a seat at his desk and ran his good hand through his hair. “Well,” he said.

Sam fell to his unmade bed, rumpling his pillow, and rolled to her back, the unopened envelope in her hands, clutched between dark-nailed fingertips, an arm’s length above her face. “Junk mail?” she asked him, turning it over in her fingers.

“Oh,” he said. “My mother.”

Samantha, who, despite her austere upbringing, had never felt anything remotely similar to Lenny’s obvious dismay at seeing his mother’s handwriting, and rolled to an elbow to face him. “So what’s it say?”

He sighed and touched a finger to a loose pile of blue-lined notebook paper.

“You know I don’t know.”

“Yeah,” she said. “I know.” They sat quietly for a few seconds. She knew he’d never gone home, knew something there disturbed him somehow, but in the full semester
that they’d hung out together, they’d somehow managed to avoid all discussion of his authentic past. Her attentions had always been focused on Dub. “So what’s it say?”

He let his hand fall flat to the paper. “Why don’t you read it for me,” he said. “Gimmee a report.”

She watched as he turned fully away from her, his shoulders slumped and his loose-hanging arm dangling a bit more loosely than usual. “Go on,” he said. “Read it.”

She pulled herself up to a cross-legged seat in the rumple of brown sheets and comforter, took a finger, opened the two pages, and read them. She looked at him. He dawdled at the paper with one finger again, sadly, quietly.

“Says you have to go home for Christmas. Says the lawyers want you take a test to see who your father is.”

He inhaled sharply through his nose, let his head rock back upon his neck, and blew out a long breath.

“Sounds serious,” she said, laying the letter beside her. “Maybe you should read it.”

He straightened up, nodded and slowly climbed onto the bed beside her. He opened the letter on his lap and began to read.

Disturbed by this change from his relative nonchalance, concerned with the sudden wilting of a friend to whom she usually could turn for an uplift, she clambered rather clumsily behind him, put both hands on the muscles of his shoulders and neck. “Tense,” she said, vaguely reminded of Jo’s lean flanks. “Very, very tense.”

He nodded, reading the letter for a second time.

“Not good to be so tense,” she told him, squeezing a bit, slowly working herself up to a lack-luster massage.

“No,” he said, half-listening. “Probably isn’t.”
“Unh-uh,” she said.

“But,” he mumbled and twisted to look her full in the face. “My mother... hasn’t exactly been around, you know?”

“Yeah,” Sam lied. “I know.”

“It’s not like,” he struggled, tossing the letter onto the pillow. “I have any reason to see her. My grandparents raised me. I’m not even sure what she looks like.”

From somewhere down the hall there was a slamming of doors and a smatter of shouts. A few seconds later there was a small bang on the wall followed by the hollow plastic sound of a frisbee scuttling across the hall floor. There was a padding of sock-muffled feet, another bang and scuttle of plastic. Someone said “Hee-aw,” and the game went on.

“That’s too bad,” she told him. “Not to have a--.”

Suddenly he lifted his lame arm out twitching at her, as if she might never have seen it before. “See this?” he scowled.

Concerned, she nodded.

He fluttered it at her again. “She did,” he said, and much to Samantha’s surprise, his voice began to break. “She did,” he whispered, dropping the arm back to his side.

“So-,” he began, but the voice literally caught in his throat. He peered at her, blinking and swallowing atop the bed.

“So?” she said softly, touching his bad hand for the first time in their brief lives together.

“So,” he said, his hand warm between her fingers. He shrugged. “She left.” He wiped at his eyes with his good forearm and grinned, sniffling. “That’s all.”

As she watched her friend bite back what might be an embarrassingly intimate torrent of very unmasculine tears, Samantha, for reasons that can only be related to the
pain of having lost her first and best friend, lifted the hand and touched it to her darkly
lipsticked lips.

He twitched a moment, almost as if something had shocked his hand.

“What’d you do--,” he said, but all else was lost as Samantha Harpool, her
consoling and broken heart suddenly outstretched and touching the closest lame and
pitiable object around, nestled him into her own shoulder and rolled both of them prone
to the bed.

Within moments, the letter was altogether forgotten, as was all of the
despondency it had provoked, and there on the twin-sized, plastic, anti-bed-wetting
coated mattress, Lenny and Sam did what only comes naturally after a moment of
youthful affliction.

Off in his lab, Dub struggled with his numbers and letters and odd Greek symbols,
completely unaware of the change that had just come over his relationship to his two
friends.

This change, one easily discerned at a distance, made itself manifest to him
immediately upon his return. While he'd become used to finding Lenny and Sam
together when he came home, just as Lenny was used to finding Dub and Sam together as
well, on this night, the whole atmosphere of the room had been altered. When he swung
open the door, and found his roommate and friend, each fully clothed now, sitting atop
opposite beds, greeting him simultaneously, both seemed unwilling to look him in the
eye.

Sheepish and embarrassed by the mutual and odd paranoias of the “first-timer,”
the two sat uncomfortably as he dropped his books to his own desk. Both felt somehow
certain that scent, if not the pure and radiantly brightening halos of attached sexuality and
dawning romance, would give them away. To Dub, who neither sniffed out anything
unusual in the dampened, cavernlike musk of the dorm, nor could see any energies
dancing upon the astral plane, the whole attitude of the two suggested only that he’d been the topic of a recently interrupted, probably disparaging conversation.

He turned from his desk and the books. “So,” he said to them both, their eyes unmeeting his, their hands probing about at the lint of their beds. “What’s up?”

In a flurry of blurred and overlapping phrases, the two answered him at once.

Confused, he stared. “Oh,” he said. He slid his desk chair back and fell to its seat. “I still can’t get that crap,” he told them in order to fill up what threatened to be silence. “I don’t even know how to factor an equation, let alone know how to carry out any of those damned transformations.”

Neither looked at him. The lint remained too interesting.

“So,” he said flatly. “I repeat: what’s up?”

Much to his dismay, and in partial affirmation of his own paranoia, Lenny and Sam gave each other quick and hesitant glances. Samantha looked back to the bed and began scratching at one cross-legged ankle. Lenny looked at her. “We were just sittin’ here talking,” he said with a small degree of petulance.

Dub felt his ears warming, one further indicator of the truth of his suspicions.

“About what?” he said. Trying to appear nonchalant, he looked at his book, flipped open its cover and began thumbing through the sheaf of its pages. He’d found that someone had drawn a series of cartoons along the margins; if he flipped along at just the right speed, two half-inch tall figures would jerkily spit rather overlarge globs of phlegm at each other. He paused at the page on which both were very literally covered in cartoon spit. “‘Bout what?” he asked again.

There was a long pause, neither Lenny nor Samantha, caught up in their moment, had planned for the simple exigency of an alibi.

“Nothin’,” Lenny finally told him.
He closed the book. The warmth in his ears now spread to his cheeks. "That so, Samantha?" he asked coldly.

"Sure," she said, unlooking. "Just this or that."

"Well," he told them both. "Guess that makes your evening about as exciting as mine."

Outside in the hall, the frisbee stopped with a sudden slam, and a fraction of a second later, there was a loud shatter of glass on the hall floor. "Shit," said a voice. A second voice laughed and answered it. "You break it, you bought it." The first voice giggled. Closer to their room, a door groaned open and the R.A. spoke. "What the hell are you people doing?" There was a high-pitched jumble of explanation. "Well," the R.A. muttered. "Get a broom and clean it up. Now." The door groaned closed again.

"Dub-,

"Look," he intruded. "Whatever it was, forget it."

"You don't under--

"Yeah, I do," he answered her rapidly, breathlessly. "I understand exactly what you've been doing in here." He breathed a few shortened breaths, his hand flat upon the book's cover, and he looked from one of the two to the other.

Both Lenny and Sam seemed to sigh sighs of relief, their torsos together inflating and deflating. They both smiled. They both exchanged one of those little meaningful looks so loaded with sweet and deliberate intimacy as to embarrass and disgust all third party witnesses.

And suddenly, despite all of the ambiguities that had woven the moment together, as if a voice had spoken down upon him, Dub understood. "Well," he said and vented a short whistle. "So that's it, huh?"

"Well," Sam said. "I guess so."
Dub made it a point to look at his watch.

Sam rose, and clumsily gave Lenny a kiss. She left.

For a few minutes, the two young men sat staring at the door after it’d closed.

"So loverboy," Dub said finally. "How’s it feel?"
Dub and Lenny drove home to Frisco late in that same week, hardly having seen or spoken to each other. Lenny was a bit overly touched by the onrush of sudden sentimentality associated with his new condition, and Dub was a bit overly annoyed with the recognition that what had been a trialectical unit of conversation and youthful activity was now a dialectical unit to which he was only uncomfortably and historically attached. While their lives might continue along in a sort of naive parallelism, the situation had been irrevocably altered.

Frisco was no different than it had been. After a brief goodbye, Dub returned to his parents and their little house, to its unkempt lawn which was still being used as an additional driveway and parking space for the family's unworking second car, and Lenny drove on, his map in his lap.

He circled past the old school, drove down the highway as directed, hung a left at the new Wallmart, passed the town's third Dairy Queen, and then followed a series of gravel lanes that criss-crossed each other, each sided by white, welded fence lines, cows dangling their heads between the bars. Finally, after a left, a right, a second right, and a quick jaunt along a dry creek bed, miraculously enough, he drove up to his new two-storied home. Ranch-styled and set back atop a well-manicured lawn, its few old oaks, tall and unleaved, stood around it, looming down over three wrought-iron benches, a tire swing, and their new car. He sat in the driveway behind it, and peered out through the windshield, digesting, aware of the lakesmell drifting in from the far side. It was unlike
anything he'd ever known.

The reunion with Ma and Pa was beautiful and replete with appropriate "sugars" and hugs and backslaps. They all chattered aimlessly, Lenny and his life central to most inquiries, all laughing about "how grown up" he'd suddenly become, all overcome by the new college radiance that poured out of his sloped shoulders and thin-set green eyes; the smell of a celebratory brisket hung in the air, dark and sweet and pungent.

The beam-ceilinged livingroom was open all of the way up to the second floor, and there it was bordered by the staircase and railings of that story. The room had been cleared of all of the familiar old furniture, save Pa's broken recliner. Underfoot, they'd had a plush gray carpet laid down, as soft and giving as any thick lawn, and they'd tossed a thirty-seven inch monstrosity of black plastic and stereophonically televised cable into a corner near the sliding glass door. Outside, the wooden planked deck, overhung with a trellis of now dormant grapevine, led to a wooden planked path that ultimately opened upon an aluminum roofed lake deck. There, gently rocking in the lake's winter wake, a canvas-covered cruiser lay tied.

As they chattered and bragged and toasted Lenny's adulthood with tea, he could only feel himself cowed by the cathedralesque qualities of the house. Even the smell of that brisket, oven-warmed in the kitchen just up two steps off of the livingroom, vaguely transcended his own experiences, especially those of the big city university. Dormitory food had enforced a certain cinder-block and cheap-caloried asceticism upon its residents, and this home was, well, sheer luxury.

Nevertheless, as he took a seat behind the walnut and cut-glass coffee table, centered by ferns that seemed authentic enough, still familiarly laden with Readers' Digests, and fell into the comfort of a thirteen foot sofa, Ma and Pa remained much the same as they'd always been. Both were grayer, both were paunchier, but both were familiarly accented, familiarly shallow and unassuming.
His mother, whose rightful name of Elise had been restored, was as yet offstage. All parties, under the guidance of a local psychologist who'd recently discovered the wonders of the serotonin uptake inhibitor, had agreed that a mother and son reunion should be delayed until the boy was comfortable. She was, at the moment, breathlessly perched with one ear at the door of her bedroom upstairs.

"So," after all of the banters of greeting had dwindled, Ma wondered, "How you been, boy?"

Lenny, the fern before him, more than a touch uncomfortable with the thought of actually sitting upon, let alone dirtying, a sofa so clean or floor so immaculate, leaned forward and lay his good hand on one of the magazines. "Been just fine," he told her. "Just fine."

Pa fell into his chair and crossed his ankles and socks upon the broken footrest.

"Good, good," Ma told him. "And your friends?"

"They're just fine too, Ma," he said. "Just peachy."

"Good, good," she nodded, still hovering around at the room's center. "Good, good."

"And," Lenny added, uplooking. "How're you, Ma? You doin' okay?"

"Sure," she told him, and she laughed a brief, overwhelmed laugh as she gestured around them. "Just lookit this."

"Hardly believe it," Pa said from his lowslung chair. "Just hardly believe it."

"Guess that's right," said Lenny.

All three of them laughed.

Upstairs, her head resting against the door, Elise sighed.

"How's ole Dub?" Pa wondered. He took a thumb and reseated his new, but equally ill-fitting upper plate.
Lenny glanced at him, wanted to spit something out about what had been, the party-party-party, babes-babes-babes experiences and lessons that they had passed, to mention something about the now suddenly maturing alienation, and to mourn what would undoubtedly be a nightmarish future as roommates, but he didn't. Instead, he nodded. "He's just fine. Havin' trouble with math, but he's fine."

"Got all your grades," said Pa. "Look to be doin' just fine up there."

"Sure 'nough," Lenny answered. "Sure 'nough." Again he was tempted to burst into what would have been a rather flavorful, yet well-edited, explosion of song about the young woman to whom he owed most of those grades and all of his recent allegiances, but he withheld it all. "Got a study group together," he told him. "Helped me out some."

Pa laughed in the chair. "Sounds like Dub could use one of them groups himself," he said.

Lenny winced. "Right," he said.

"Sure does," said Ma, laughing as well.

For all the world, with all of the laughing that had been going on, the three of them seemed not only imbecillic, but completely estranged as well, and this recognition, while his grandparents had yet to make it, was well understood by poor Lenny. He slid back on the sofa and leaned into its cushions, frowning.

"Well," his grandmother finally said, still grins and giggles. "Better check out that brisket."

"Just keep it off the roof, Ma," Pa told her. "Wouldn't want to go makin' us another bundle of money."

"Pa!" she scolded, stepping from the room.

"So," Pa said, giving Lenny a long and highly perceptive stare. "What's a matter?"
Lenny swallowed.

Pa nodded in the chair and gazed up at the unturning fan that dangled high up in the rafters overhead. They were silent for a full minute. The slow ticking of the wall-clock filled the room. "A long time back," he told the ceiling as Lenny looked on. "I had me a friend named Richard. Richard Masalon. Called him Dick o' the mastodon. Everybody did." He paused and grinned at the old joke. "Don't rightfully know if that's true or not, but must 'a been 'cause he sure 'nough seemed to do all right. With the women, see." He opened an eye and took a peep at Lenny who frowned, listening. "Well," he went on. "Ole Dickie and me, we got on real well till we both came 'pon a young lady by the name of Susanne Buronson. Had a twinkle in her eye and a skip in her walk—know what I'm talkin' 'bout, Len?" He peeped again.

Lenny nodded even again, his fingers gently pushing one of the *Digests* along the table's surface.

"Made out like we was all best a' friends," he said. "Made out like we was all pals. But," he stopped. "I couldn't get that twinkle and that skip outta my mind. Not for a minute. Everywhere we was, I kept watchin' that skip. Everywhere we was, I kept seein' that twinkle." He sat up, leaned over and yanked at the chair's wooden lever until the recliner popped all of the way upright. "I was sixteen," he said. "Nineteen and fifty-three."

Lenny sighed.

"You know what sixteen's like, Len?"

He nodded.

"Yeah," Pa said. "Sure you do. We all do. Nineteen ain't much different."

In the kitchen, Ma banged around at the oven.

"So," he told Lenny. "I fell for that girl. Fell real hard. But we was just friends. She told me so, see? Right there in front of what used to be Everett's Burger Emporium,
right there on the walk out front of what's Downtown Hardware and Videos." He frowned and gazed down at his own lap, then sighed. "Right there over a malted and fries." He looked up again. "Couldn't eat for a week."

Ma banged around some more, shoveling carrots into a pan with the potatoes.

Upstairs, Elise took four steps back from the door and sat down in the rocker next to her nightstand.

"Dicky done married her," Pa said. "Done up and married her. Joined the army in fifty-five. Moved off and made it all the way to Captain. Went off to Viet-nam. Came on back. Gave her the divorce. Came on back home and had us a couple a' sodas one Sunday. Just like old times. Yessir," he said. "Couldn't never be friends after that. Couldn't never be friends."

Lenny looked at him, waiting. He seemed finished with the whole story. "Why not?" he finally asked.

"Well," said Pa. "Way I figure it all, first off, met Ma down at the roller rink and wound up gettin' hitched up. Second off," he thought for a moment. "Just can't bear a man who's done gone and broke your heart that way. Even when the whole reason it got broke's long gone."

Ma banged the oven open again and slid the vegetables into the oven next to the brisket. She slammed the door shut.

"Me and Dicky could of stayed friends," Pa said. "We should of stayed friends. Nothin' like friendship. Man to man." He took a thumb to his plate, shoved it into place, and smiled at Lenny. "Don't even know what came of that boy." Lenny smiled a sad little smile in return. It was, in fact, so sad that Pa assumed that he'd struck the right chord. While he could see that his grandson had exhibited all of the signs of the broken-hearted, he mistakenly thought that Lenny had displayed all of the antagonism toward Dub that suggested Dub's complicity in a crime similar to that of Dicky; he was, of
course, wrong. Instead, Lenny, suddenly aware of the silences in the car on the trip home, aware of Dub's red-faced inquisition and stand-offishness after that evening's important event, perceived the truth about his friend. The wonderful colors of his first authentic relationship with a female were suddenly less pastel, less sedate, and very much more expressionistic than they'd been before.

Somewhere down along the line, he knew that he'd have to make what would undoubtedly be a loathsome choice. And the thought of having to make it left him more than a little bit nervous.

Meanwhile, Dub, happily reunited with his own conventional family, sat in his small bedroom, vaguely aware of the decision facing Lenny. Feeling nauseous at his own lack of control over that outcome, he gave a forlorn sigh. Either Samantha, with whom he was pathetically enamored, would have to take her beautifully worldly dress and pale limbs elsewhere, or he himself would have to go.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, Samantha had, in turn, met her parents with all of the joy of the expatriate's return to totalitarianism. Her mother was as she'd always been, busy and overly taxed with the burdens of life, and her brothers were back from their own educational trials, bearing contrasting views of world and farm alike, and her father was himself.

While her parents were shocked at the style of her dress, her brothers, as equally worldly college men, were able to read the signs and to provide interpretations based on experience. She was undoubtedly a drug user, a frequenter of clubs and dance halls, someone who'd wind up studying English, Philosophy, or some even less lucrative or meaningful profession, and above all else, she was probably one of the girls with whom good young men failed to socialize.

They informed their profoundly worried parents that she was probably doing so well in her classes because: a) she was involved in some wicked shenanigans with her
instructors, or b) she was party to the tests and essay files of some horrendous fraternity member. The pride they'd been taking in her grades was to be put at naught; the boasting they'd done to their fellow church-goers and neighbors would end only in embarrassment.

On the evening of her return, with a few longing glances at the now inappropriate strap, her mother and father lay her old sack dresses, replete with florals and belted calf-lengths, upon her bed, ordered her to don one, and then, as she carried out the act assigned, they gathered up her new wardrobe, carried it out and stuffed it into the incinerator out back. That night, the whole family gathered around that charred cement monument to the old days, and watched as the smoke rose from what had been a new daughter. Her makeup disappeared, and Christmas promised only to bring her a few new frocks, something more appropriate to a woman of her age and upbringing. The matter of her return to a university so fraudulent about its *en loco parentis* role, was left immediately undecided. If the symptoms of withdrawal should surface, or should she sneak off to go dancing, that decision would be clear.

Of course, as Samantha had no drug experience to speak of, nor desired any head-banging dance and frivolity, they had to probe more deeply before a decision could be reached. Mother and father clung to every word she spoke, carefully listened for a betrayal of social proclivities, carefully screened for the full-fledged outbursts of what must have been an all-out adoption of atheism, and yet found nothing. All that they discovered was that her wardrobe didn't matter much to her, although it once had, that she attended a regularly meeting study group, whose parties remained nameless, and that she usually entertained herself by playing a few video games, going for walks to a local ice cream parlor, or setting out for a nearby playground to swing or to slide. Aside from her admission to video-game playing, which is openly acknowledged to be satanically based, nothing could be found.
She was as sweet and lovable as she'd been when she'd raised Io. She was as tomboyish as she'd been when she'd played in the creeks around the ranch. She was as unatheistic as she'd ever been, and she was as unobtrusive as she'd been through many a mealtime. From what they could see, her elder, worldly brothers had exposed more of their own collegiate depravity than anything of her own.

That is, this is all that she exposed until she'd been home for a full four days. At that point, with Christmas knocking at the door, their minds were very nearly changed.

She and her mother stood side by side pounding out dough into what were to be cookie-cutter biscuits for the day's breakfast. With flour-smeared hands, they chattered amiably about the church's last pot-luck casserole brunch, ran through the recent gossip gathered at the last quilting bee, plunged on into a discussion of the price differences between one supermarket's collection of fresh fruits and another's, and finally paused over the subject of one of her brothers and his recent attraction to one of the girls with whom Samantha had graduated two years before. As both son and girlfriend were getting to be of an age that hinted at old maidishness and perpetual bachelordom, the talk of the town had it that they would eventually engage, and would probably marry.

While her mother's ostensible concern was with whether this young woman would be an appropriate in-law, it only took five or six minutes for Samantha to recognize that her expressed worries included herself. Sam was far too old to play the local markets, and her university experience placed her well out of the range of most of the unmarried and rural inhabitants of the region. The tale that she wove about her eldest son and his earlier unsuccessful struggle along the romantic front was obviously meant to stand as a parable and warning to her daughter. The message was clear. So far as Mrs. Harpool was concerned, Sam was in ever deepening waters.

Perceiving this concern in her mother, Sam opted to lay all of her worries to rest. With appropriate embellishment and expurgation alike, she outlined their meeting, the
scholarly association, the eventual outburst of romantic inclination, and the pain of their present separation.

Mrs. Harpool was relieved. She wandered off, her hands now slicing out circular patties of dough and laying them atop the cookie sheet, lamenting the conditions of those poor young women who had never tasted the delicacies of love's sideboard, praising the glories of her own first experiences, and delivering accolades about the secret sanctimonies of the wedded state.

The two women were thus engaged when the Harpool males piled themselves into the kitchen, sprawling their groggy frames upon the table and seats of the dining area, each a little less than enthusiastic about another long day's work at winter feeding. After a few grumbles about the fact that breakfast was clearly uncooked, drinking at their mugs of coffee, the men listened while the women chatted on.

"Ah," said Sam's eldest brother, hands outthrown upon the backs of the chairs beside him. "So this is what's keepin' us waitin' on the grub."

"Gossips," said his younger sibling.

"Now boys," Mrs. Harpool told them, sliding the first cookie sheet into the oven.

"Your sister had a little bit of news."

"News?" said her husband, his arms outthrown as well.

"Sure enough," she said. "Samantha's found herself a friend. Of the male persuasion."

The brothers gave a long "Oooh," and laughed.

"I see," said Harpool.

"Seems they study real well together."

The brothers gave a second, more highly inflected "Ooooh."

"I see," said Harpool. He waved his sons quiet. "And what do they study?"
"Everything," her mother answered. Sam stepped to the sink and began to rinse the flour from her hands.


Sam turned the faucet off and faced them. "We get along just fine."

"Bet you do," said the eldest.

"Shut up, Jeb," Harpool frowned.

"Now Ken," her mother said, hands wrestling in her apron. "You should listen to the girl."

"I am."

"Tell him, Sam," she nudged.

Samantha stood there, less than willing to say a word, but altogether obligated to do so, she spoke. "His name’s Leonard," she said.

Both brothers looked at each other, broke into ridiculing laughter, and simultaneously shouted, "Lenny!"

Harpool quieted them again. "And what’s this Leonard do?"

Confused for a moment, Sam stared at him. "He’s a student," she answered.

"Now girl," Harpool said flatly. "Don’t you go backtalking me just because you been away at--."

"That’s what he does," she whined back, looking at her mother, longing for some sort of assistance. "It’s what they all do."

"Sure," said the younger brother. He raised his voice in mockery. "But what’s his major?" Both sons laughed uproariously again.

Harpool stared them both down. "Okay," he said. "Then what’s the young man’s major?"
For a moment, Sam was at a loss for an answer, especially since none of the three friends had bothered to declare a preference for anything at all, though they each had inclinations, and then she turned toward her father. "He's studying the science of politics."

In many a household that answer would have provoked something of admiration, but here, where intelligence was measured in the concrete mundanities most appropriate to trade, and where, despite a fifteen year stint along the agricultural dole, "politics" meant "government," and government meant taxes and the concerted effort to gather up all of the nation's privately held firearms while simultaneously aborting most of its children, the claim had a singularly negative effect.

The brothers grew silent.

Harpool lifted a lip. "Politics," he said. "That a science?"

Recognizing her own mistake, Sam quickly spun upon her heels and stepped to the stove. She set the cast iron skillet to a burner and began to heat it.

"I said," he said. "Since when is cheatin' the public out of its hard-earned money and takin' away our rights a science?"

"Nah," her younger brother piped in. "You said, 'That a science?'"

Harpool turned toward him slowly, lifted a hand and poked an index finger toward the young man, eyeballing his son down the ridge of his knuckles. "Don't you get to backtalkin' me neither."

Her brother swallowed and nodded, then brushed at an itch on the edge of his nose.

Harpool turned back to his daughter who lay a few thick strips of bacon into the pan. She watched as they loosened and began to quietly sizzle. Her mother glanced into the pan, then peered through the window on the oven's door.
"Somebody's got to fix that mess," she said to the pan. "Somebody's got to do something right for a change." She took a fork and prodded at the strips.

Harpool nodded slowly and lifted his mug for a sip.

She turned toward him again. "Lenny's just the one that might be able to do something."

He continued to nod and lay the mug down. "I see," he said.

All would have gone well enough at this point, given that Harpool did indeed have to admit that somebody out there probably should take it upon him or herself to fix the mess, but Mrs. Harpool, forever interested in reducing familial tension, had no idea that the argument had essentially ended. As her daughter cracked three eggs into the grease of the pan full of bacon, she turned to her daughter in order to shift the subject, and asked, "So what's this Lenny look like?"

Inspired, Sam went on to give one of those love-blinded descriptions that fawned all over his hair and his eyes, drifted a little bit into his skin and his height, and then, almost accidentally she mentioned the one physical fact to which all of Lenny's witnesses had to take note. "Of course," she began. "The only problem is that darned arm of his."

She faced the room and held her hand chest high, her fingers adangle. "Like this. Got something the matter with his tendons or something. But," she said, and turned back to the pan to carefully flip the eggs in the grease. "It doesn't matter. The rest of him's fine." And she smiled a bit too knowingly.

Turning the bacon, she couldn't see what the revelation had done. Part and parcel of the great collective mistake that had so engrossed Ma Gorsuch in those early days, the rest of the Harpools had always assumed that a son-in-law, albeit one from some high falutin' university, would always have the ability to help out on the homefront, at least if economic times should get tricky. Mrs. Harpool had always assumed that she'd be able to parade through the town to show off her daughter's new beau, the three of them
waltzing along, young man between them, each woman propped on an arm. The two brothers, while they hadn’t really done much in the way of conjecture, had somehow, in the back of their heads, envisioned a brother-in-law with whom they might wrestle or fight or punch a few dawggies with some masculine relish.

Now all of that was shot to hell. And on top of that, God had put the mark on the boy.

“He’s a cripple?” said Harpool, hopefully skeptical.

“Not a cripple,” Sam said, flopping eggs to a plate. She tossed a couple of bacon strips beside it. “It’s just his arm’s kind of screwy.” She walked to the table and lay the plate in front of her father. “No big deal.” And then, perhaps driven by the light-headedness of standing over a stove that dumped carbon-monoxide into the kitchen by the pailfull, the young woman went on to mention all of the pertinent facts about Lenny’s history. She told the family of his absentee mother, of his stint within the correctional kingdom, and of what she’d assumed to be the impoverished state of his family.

There in the kitchen, the breakfast slowly being consumed, it turned out that despite her assertions Lenny and his arm were, after all, a very big deal.

That night, after the long day’s work, as her parents lay in bed, their nightshirts draped over their legs, they discussed the entire situation at length, and ultimately, given their initial considerations upon their daughter’s return, decided that they’d found the one certain thing that made her university experience impossible to continue. There was no way in the world that Samantha Harpool could go back to school. Like Io before him, Lenny Gorsuch was to become a thing of her past.

Back in Frisco, the younger Gorsuch female, fortified by a healthy dose of her neurochemical prescription, had finally come out to meet the son she’d never known.

He, in turn unfortified by any additional neurochemicals whatsoever, found her to be a bit shallow, a tad loathsome, and more than a bit too mercenary for his complete
liking. Despite her new attire, her change from former environment coupled with a good
dose of homespun religion and faith, she was still the same unknown woman who’d
bailed out on him all of those years ago. Instinctively, he knew that while she might
mouth all of those maternal platitudes and spit out all of the butt ends of her guilty days,
she was still the sort of human being inclined to “get” when the going got tough. Right
now, he could see, life was easy and secure, Ma and Pa seemed to be too parenty and
kind to a woman of her type.

They’d met over the brisket a few hours after his talk with the self-satisfied Pa,
who, even now, harbored an idle longing for some future relationship with the dreaded
and unattached woman of sparkling eyes and twinkling step, and between a variety of
feminine sobs, Lenny had more than once given the house’s back door a quick and
longing glance. The woman was as muddled as his arm, a repository of quivers and
incalculably lengthy and digressive phrases.

No drug in the world might change that.

He had listened and nodded, smiled and saddened, eaten the meal without
reciprocal joy, and then wandered off to his own new room, less concerned with the
reunion than with Sam’s absence. Above all else, given the stress of the evening, he
needed someone authentic to talk to.

The next day was even worse. The Gorsuchs had procured one “eternally merry”
and “virtually indistinguishable from the original” Christmas tree that had been fashioned
from a variety of petroleum distillates and then shoved into a box, and the three eldest
members of the household had decided to plant and decorate the thing. While a seventy-
two degree day grinned down at them, its breezes dancing upon the lake, the family
sipped at scalding cups of cocoa and cider, their old Christmas albums caroling along
about dashing through this and drumming about that, a variety of choral invocations of
Santa and lofty proclamations about winter howling around them. They decked out the
tree, threw a few strands of finishing silver over the whole thing, and clapped rapturous hands at the continual wonder of it all.

Lenny, unaccustomed to celebrations of this sort, especially since Ma had once declared holidays to be of divine contravention, helped them along, but did so clumsily and without any of the real sentiment necessary to those sorts of moments. He was simply forlorn and lonely.

When all of this frivolity had ended and the cider and cocoa cups lay cold, their sediments thickening in the mugs, the family wandered out onto the planks of the patio out back. There, they sat watching the festooned sailboats drift along under their nylon wings, listened while the ring-beaked gulls squabbled with a few bobbing cormorants over caught fish, and they said very little. Other than the sudden influx of money, Ma and Pa had had nothing happen to them. Elise had nothing to talk about, save her own embarrassing history. And Lenny could do little justice to all of the “learnin’” that had been pumped into his head.

After a half-hour of this meditation upon lake and inhabitant alike, all three perked their ears at the sound of a car approaching along the gravel drive. It slowed, stopped, and the door groaned open. There was a sound of boot upon gravel, and then the door banged closed. As the three eldest members of the family sat curiously, mouths slightly agape, and Lenny found himself suddenly hoping that Sam had run away and hitched a ride to his very door, a forty-five year old man came wandering around the edge of the house.

He stepped gingerly down the path, a light brown work shirt tucked into his faded and darker brown pants. At the edge of the deck, he stopped and gave a hesitant wave.

“Oh no,” Ma muttered from her deck chair, suddenly twisting away to gaze out at the water again.
"Yep," said Pa.

Elise simply gasped and cringed for a moment.

"I'm here," the man said, as if they all should have expected him. He shrugged.

"Guess we oughta do what's gotta be done."

Lenny watched him as he scratched at the stubble of gray at his chin and cheeks.

Underbreath, Ma cursed a short and euphemistic curse.

"Couldn't 'a waited," said Elise. "Just couldn't 'a waited."

"Guess not," said Pa. "Got a right to know whether the boy's his cub or not."

And Lenny suddenly recognized the man before him as the same beer-addled fool who'd knocked on the door of the mobile home so long ago.

"Do need the boy," he told them, still standing next to the deck, unwilling to take another step. "Be back soon enough for ya', reckon."

Lenny glanced at his immediate and known kinsfolk, watching each eye unwilling to meet his own eye. Behind them, over the lake, a gull swooped down into the cormorants with a splash. A moment later it rose, its bill empty.

"Guess I'm the boy," he said to the man.

"Yep," said Ma. "You sure are."

"That there's Chester," mumbled Elise, still unlooking. "Got some sort of court order on you."

Lenny nodded, aware of the circumstances that had finally forced his return.

"Damn that Paley," Pa said. "Couldn't even give us a week of peace."

This was, of course, true.

Jacob Paley, famous Doctor of Jurisprudence, had been visited by the more or less reprehensible Chester, who'd been very busy after that moment of Lenny's escape. He'd found Paley, who'd felt one brief touch of conscience, but had then quickly recalled the legal ethic itself. Paley, having procured a great deal of wealth for both the Gorsuch
yokels and himself, had met this Chester and been intrigued by him. After all, to take back what he himself had given to the family was in no way less than reasonable. Paley and Chester had worked out an immediate agreement in which Chester would receive the pitiable sum of twenty percent of all funds that might attend a financial reunion of father and son.

Paley would receive the eighty percent needed to do what had to be done.

The plan was simple: the grandparents had never sought legal custody, hence the child was still equally property of mother and father; the mother was of disreputable character, psychologically unfit to care for her child, and he, Chester, could easily wind up sole custodian. The grandparents, unwilling to see their grandchild suffer in the certain state of impoverishment that would follow, would fork over a good deal of money for his continued education and upbringing, not to mention the probability of inheritance, and they, Paley and Chester, might make the killing that Chester had so long ago envisioned. It was all above board and legal.

The only two problems lay in first convincing a judge that Lenny needed a new parent quickly, before the current age of legal adulthood, twenty-one, was to be lowered to the age of sixteen, an age now being established by the retrograde actions of a governor and state legislature, both of which faced an election season and were suddenly obsessed with arresting the statistical rise of juvenile crime, and next, establishing true paternity.

The first problem might be solved if the newspaper editors of the state would point out that the juvenile crime rate would miraculously fall by the same number of points as those juveniles who had suddenly become adults; a letter or two might solve that. The second would be more challenging. To this end, the two men had conjured up a cocaine-addicted lab technician who was willing to draw a bit of blood from both youth and man, to accidentally tip a bit of the contents of the one vial into the other, and then to
send both off to an appropriately reputable institution of genetic testing. Chester could procure the powders necessary for incentive, and Palely could establish the legal proceedings to follow.

So there on the deck, disgruntled grandparents, parents, and child could do very little to prevent the future unfolding before them.

Order in hand, Chester gave Lenny a nod and a beckoning wave, and Lenny, while his family frowned nearby, rose and walked out to meet him.
While Lenny may have refused to take the man's extended hand, with his grandfather trailing behind, he nevertheless followed him out to the car. When they reached the vehicle, a Ford Gran Torino absent one headlight and adorned with overly-wide rear tires, Pa called out for Lenny to "Keep a mind that all things go proper," and then gave a slight wave as the two climbed in and finally backed away.

As anyone who might consider the plan, as concocted by lawyer and client, might see, the whole enterprise was shot full of holes. The likelihood of custodial transfer from mother to father was extraordinarily slim and Paley's motivation had less to do with his own expectations for success than with his recent bad luck in the market. Nevertheless, with the aid of one small bag of white powder laced with foot deodorant and baking soda, the results of the Lenny-Chester test came back with a positive correlation.

Son, mother, and grandparents were forced into the beginnings of a legal agreement that, however unlikely it might be, Chester Sikes was to be his new parent.

Since Chester, under the guidance of Paley, had been told to "make it all look good," he spent the season doing everything within his power to make himself look interested in Lenny's well-being. He insisted upon rights to visitation, though they had yet to be legally bestowed, and, unsupervised, dragged poor Lenny off bowling, on trips to a local and primitive mall, and to a variety of batting cages and putt-putt golf places, all in the interest of getting to know his son. Most of the time he was able to hide his beer habit from Lenny, usually relying on frequent visits to either the toilet or to the car...
in order to keep himself stable, and most of the time he kept his drifting attention focused on finding out who Lenny actually was. He couldn’t load his son up with gifts, nor could he talk badly of Elise, both of which were the traditionally sanctioned tactics of any successful custody fight, but he could get chummy.

Lenny made the best of it. While his family mourned his occasional absence, each member foolishly certain that the law would soon take the boy away, he putted his little orange golf balls, aimed and rolled at pins, gave clumsily one-handed swings of the bat, and wandered around under Christmas lights, trees and decorations. all the while dreaming of Samantha.

Oddly enough, the two men did bond in their own way. Chester, above all else, when intoxicated was a sentimentalist. He was quite the talker, was more or less inclined to the true affections that only the alcoholic can know. With each trip to toilet or car, he would return just a hair closer to believing in the authenticity of their fictional relationship, and again and again he found himself longing for the chance to discover the real scientific truth that still lay hidden.

When he got word that the time of Lenny’s return to school was approaching, he finally caved in to his habits, and under their emotional sway blurted it all out. They were with Dub at the Three Kings Bowlerama, two games down, and when he came back from a sixth trip to the restroom, there in the noise of pin-clatter, thuds and hollow rolls down the lanes, he took Lenny by the shoulder and gave him a fatherly hug.

Back in the booth from which the dull-witted professional-wannabes sprayed aerosols into shoes before handing them out. all eyes watched the act. Long suspecting something odd in Chester’s hanging about the restrooms, they found all suspicions confirmed.

But there in the lane, Lenny and Dub simply heard Chester babble out that he “wished you was truly mine,” his sunken cheek pressed into Lenny’s shoulder, the ball
uncomfortably between them. Dub looked away, and Lenny emerged from the hug as quickly as he could.

"Thought I was," he mumbled.

"I dunno, I dunno," Chester told him. He stepped into the semi-circle of bright plastic chairs, yellow and bolted to the floor near the score table and ball return, then sat down suddenly. "I just don’t know."

"You’re drunk," Lenny told him, a bit surprised at the thing that he’d never noticed before.

"Yes, I am," said Chester. "Oh, yes I am."

Meanwhile, one of the alley attendants, having been assigned the task of making further and more detailed observations, walked up to the ball racks behind the party and began to polish the dull-surfaced balls with a towel.

"I am so drunk that I’m in love," said Chester.

The man grinned back at the booth and gave his cohorts a signal with an upraised thumb.

"Just plain in love with it all," he said. He leaned back in the chair, his head falling hard upon its back, his eyes trained on the ceiling and lights above. "Just plain in love."

Lenny and Dub exchanged looks. This, they knew from one portion of their final lessons in party-party-party, was usually a precursor to an unfortunate and kneeling visit to "Ralph."

"Look," said Lenny. "Maybe we should go now, Chess."

"Call me dad," said Chester, his head still thrown back. "Just go on. For once. Just plain old ‘dad.’"

"Can’t do it, Chess."
Dub rose from his seat at the score table and gave a nod. “Maybe I’ll get me some fries,” he mumbled.

Lenny winked at him. “Need somethin’ from the snackbar, Chess?”

Chester waved him off and began muttering about love and parents and loneliness and oil rigs and barrooms in Midland and elsewhere.

“Guess not,” Lenny told Dub.

“Guess not,” said Dub and he wandered away, his head shaking.

The guy polishing the balls took little notice as Dub passed him. He kept his attention focused on Lenny and Chester.

“Chess?” said Lenny.

“Len?” said Chester.

“You got somethin’ you need to be tellin’ me?”

Chester snapped his head up from the chairback, rocked forward and gave Lenny a long and glazed look. “Never done it,” he said.

“Done what?”

“Never done your mother,” he said. “Thought I did, but hey,” he shrugged. “No matter how I try, can’t remember.”

“She does,” said Lenny. “Told me so. Called you up and told you about it. You left.”

The lackey paused at his polishing.

“Yeah, yeah,” answered Chester. “I know.” He stared down at his red-tongued shoes. “But I don’t remember it no more.”

“Well,” Lenny said, upright, the ball still cradled in his bad arm’s crook.

“Remembering that you used to remember’s as good as remembering at all. Or so I see it.”
“No,” muttered Chester, a bit belligerent. “Ain’t the same at all. There you are.” he said. “Maybe my own blood and flesh and I don’t recollect the deed that done it. Done made you.”

Lenny, easily remembering a similar deed that he himself had only recently committed, suddenly imagined himself losing the memory. Somehow the whole possibility frightened him. To lose something so monumental, so consequential to himself and to another, and to lose it with respect to the creation of what might be an as yet undetected third life, was a hideously tragic proposition. Aware that his own human existence was now somehow losing part of its progenitive significance, losing one of the bases by which he himself had begun to suddenly matter, he whispered a brief imperative. “You gotta remember.”

“Don’t,” said Chester, his shoes still overwhelmingly interesting. “Know I did. Know I used to know. Don’t know it now.” He looked up. “‘Gotta’ don’t get a man anything in this world. Don’t amount to a hill o’ beans.”

Lenny looked away and down the alley. The four remaining pins stood waiting for him to roll the ball. “Look, Chess,” he said to the pins. “Some things don’t matter. Some memories don’t mean anything.”

“Right,” said Chester. “You a college boy. All growed up and studyin’. Memories don’t matter. Right. What you study then?”

Given what had also been a recent awareness that human thought and history did tally up to something above and beyond its constituent elements, Lenny could only admit his own lie. Rather than voice it, he took three steps to the foul-line and threw the ball. After a long several seconds, it struck one pin, knocked it lengthwise into a spin, and the spin itself took down the remaining pins. “Spare,” he said to the alley. “Dub’s supposed to be up.” He turned, leaned and penciled in the score, then fell into the seat.
“We best wait,” said Chester.

“Guess we’d best.”

“Doctored the blood,” Chester sighed as the pin-setter lifted itself, the ten neat ordered columns standing, wavering.

“What?”

“Doctored the blood. Test didn’t prove nothin’.”

“What?”

“The money,” said Chester. “Least it was the money, then. But,” he shrugged.

“Never had no son to go bowlin’ with before.”

Lenny turned slowly to face him, caught the eye of the guy polishing the balls, and the man suddenly flipped his rag up as if finished and walked away. “You,” he muttered. “Keep draggin’ me around to all of these--.”

“Paley says I got to.”

“You had--.”

“But Len,” he pleaded, the percolate affections still there. “I kind of had myself lots of fun.” He paused. “Didn’t you?”

Lenny, shocked and uncertain at what he was supposed to be feeling, could only admit that he had, in a pathetic and tension-filled way, enjoyed their few blue-collar moments together. The father-son thing had had its attractions. Down in the deepest recesses of his heart, he had indeed found some satisfaction that he hadn’t sprung from the stones, had indeed been sired by some poor human animal with an all-too human and cowardly soul. “Yeah, Chess,” he finally said. “Guess I have.”

“So,” said Chester. “Now you know. I might not be your daddy a’ tall.”

“So,” he echoed. “Might not be.”

“But you might,” said Chester. “You just might be. Just,” he trailed off. “Just I can’t remember, see?”
“Yeah, I see.”

“But I guess that means I ain’t got any right to be askin’ you to call me daddy.”

“No, Chess. Guess it means you don’t.”

They were quiet for a few seconds while the bowling alley rattled on with its own contentions and arguments.

“But you could.”

Lenny glanced over at him, overwhelmed. There, drunken on the benches of a bowling alley, the man who had been a parent suddenly had become a might be a parent and on top of that, the truth was that he probably knew Chester as well as he knew the woman who was certainly his parent and for whom he now employed the word “mom.” Every bit of the stuff that made him begged for him to do the irrational, to make the grand leap of progenitive faith and to embrace the idea that had always lacked in his life. He pitied the man, pitied the occasion, pitied poor Dub who was off eating fly-speckled tater tots and awaiting some signal to return.

“Nah,” he finally said. “Couldn’t do it, Chess. Just couldn’t.”

Chester’s face fell completely, but then, oddly enough, brightened again. He gave his thighs a bit of a slap. “Well,” he said. “Guess that’s how she is.”

“You’re right there, Chess.”

And they smiled at each other.

The next day, immediately before the good doctor Paley burst into a set of ranting bellows and obscene observations, a slightly hungover Chester Sikes told his lawyer that the jig was entirely up. Paley threatened to put the law on him, after all he’d been involved in both fraud and the exchange of a controlled substance, but, regaining the better part of his reason, the lawyer finally rolled over and gave in. His temporarily unbalanced books would have to remain unbalanced and his financial deterioration would
have to be rectified in a more honest way. He wrote off the whole Gorsuch enterprise, sent Sikes packing, and went on with his business.

Sikes, convinced of his own intimacy with a pleasant young man who might indeed be his son, packed up his own few belongings, shoved them into his Torino, and, with promises to keep in touch, drove off to find housing in the very city in which Lenny’s university lay.

Lenny and his family, all of the legal heavy weather abated, went on with the clumsy boredom of the post-holiday season. They greeted the New Year with three-hundred and sixty-five black-eyed peas, thanked the deity for all tender mercies, and finally parted company. Ma and Pa cried, Elise sniffled and dabbed at her eyesockets, and all parties agreed that Lenny would return home on a more regular and more frequent basis. Two years had been at least a year and a half too long, anything less than three months would rend hearts. Ma was tempted to threaten him with financial recrimination if he failed to show up, but Pa talked her out of it, especially since familial love should never be grounded in individual prosperity.

Lenny and Dub returned to school, settling back into the dorm with little more than a toss of unopened suitcases upon their beds, and immediately set out to find the third member of their study group. They pounded on her door, only to find her nameless roommate inside. She informed them both, with something of a downcast demeanor, that Sam’s father and brothers had arrived only the day before, had gathered up all of Sam’s possessions, save the ruby-red lava lamp that bubbled on the nightstand, and then cynically had wished her well in her studies.

Samantha was gone, no explanations offered. The only thing that the roommate could suggest was that it had had “something to do with some boy or something.”

Lenny and Dub, while in the dark as to why, knew very well the nature of the boy in question. They returned to their own room in equally crestfallen states. They sat at
their desks and said nothing. Each wondered at the possibility of pregnancy, though neither was willing to voice the suspicion, and both wondered about the possibility that Sam, over the month-long break, had found someone else, someone more localized and preferable to either of them.

Their questions were unanswered for almost a full week. At that point, the roommate received a letter from Sam, something smuggled out under the auspices of last moment university concerns and a need to directly contact the registrar, and they learned the truth. The parents had been disgusted by the idea of a Lenny Gorsuch, politician in utero, and especially by the idea of their daughter’s association with that idea. Like Montague and Capulet before them, Lenny and Sam were to part ways forever.

The thing about this arrangement, as anyone knows, is that in cases of young love, restriction by any and all authorities are met with equal and opposing effects to the contrary. Young love has never been more effectively fostered and promoted than by the egregious addition of threat. Love thrives upon the expended energies of its challengers, and rarely, if ever, has it simply dwindled or dissipated in the face of struggle. Both wave and particle, it is both mighty and weak, fully dependent upon its own conditions.

Lenny and Samantha were now doomed to an enterprise that could only grow in its own proportions with each expended effort to the contrary. The only chance that their affections might dissipate lay in proximity, boredom, and over-exposure. The idiot Harpools could never perceive the complexities that would arise from their late-night decision, nor could they comprehend the final outcome. In terms of human existence, they were trying to stand up and repudiate the very laws of the cosmos.

Back at home, under the tutelage of a newly purchased book designed to empower and console the parents of children who had gone sour, Rough Love, the Harpools set about weaning their daughter from her cultish obsession with a boy whom they despised. The initial regimen included a set of padlocks upon her door, a set of window locks upon
her windows, a sparse diet of low-calorie, and hence, low energy, carbohydrates, proteins and sugars. The Harpools understood the rough choices before them. The child must be caged, starved a bit, and cut-off from all outside interaction and influence. They would, in turn, be her only interactants, her only providers, her only source of sustenance and well-being. She would, if the rough standards were religiously kept, eventually concede to her keepers, recognize her own debt to them, and find complete restoration. Love would win the day.

According to this text, once this epiphanal recognition occurred, the child was bound toward an apotheosis itself. She would return to the fold, dedicated to them, her wicked willfulness replaced by natural feminine submission, and her prideful lust for self-destruction absolutely diminished.

This done, matrimony, as logical consequence of her maturation, would again be deemed an option, so long as her potential mate had read and kept to his standards according to the tenets of Rough Love’s sequel, And Their Eyes Were Opened.

With all of the precepts of the book in mind, Samantha was loved roughly. She ate the ill-tasting food that her mother prepared for her, listened passively as each family member took his or her turn at dutifully reading various sermonesque bits of material aloud to her, and above all else, she hardened. It was, as if the whole debacle with Io hadn’t been enough, more fuel to her own fire. Now she was cast well down into Tantylos and had only her own hopes and desires to sustain her, all rough loving be damned. As far as she was concerned, the one book they’d left to her, the Revised Standard Version, upon which they all swore open allegiance, contained nothing, at least in its latter half, to justify anything that was happening to her. Without feigning at all, she prayed to God, assuring Him that she understood the full necessity of faithful suffering and devotional dedication, and this, while its purpose contradicted their own, fully relieved her family.
Given this change in her, they redoubled their efforts to gain her submission.

Given this, she submitted only to the God who didn’t seem at all like their own.

Never once did she thank her parents or siblings for their rotten food or didactic companionship. Instead, she quietly envisioned the tortures of Cainae which awaited them all, hopefully after her own martyrdom.

Lenny still hovered in her mind, although she would never openly admit it. As she knew, God worked in fairly mysterious sorts of ways, and among the ones she most longed to see carried out was for Lenny, drawn and propelled by the loving hand of Christ, to limp in, an avenging angel, free to set her free to be his finally, eternally.

But that sort of action takes time. It took, as she knew, a good two-thousand years for the promised land to pop onto the official scene, and even then, the milk and honey looked remarkably like rock and sand and heat. So she waited.

Mrs. Harpool, three weeks into the program, noted her daughter’s heartfelt thanks for the food she nightly carried into the cell, and misunderstanding to whom Sam actually gave these thanks, convinced her husband to remove the locks all around. Sam, far from having the perceptive sensibilities of a hamster whose cage had been left open, took no notice of the changes. Instead, she remained in her room, emerging only to eat the more healthful fare which had been restored along with the company of the family, or to sit crocheting a variety of mittens and scarves while the men chatted amiably among themselves.

The Harpools considered the change momentous. Their only daughter, at least six months ahead of Rough Love’s itinerary, showed clear indications of having become a recuperative prodigy. She wore no makeup, hid her head on public excursions to church, and showed no interest in any of the young men who seemed so drawn to her rural femininity.
It was only three months after her return home that mother and daughter sat down to chat about an appropriate future. The men had finished breakfast as before, had grunted the same morning grunts as always, and then gone off to work with the family’s latest agricultural improvement: where Io had once been stabled, they now housed no fewer than nine foul and uncivil, bipedal and flightless emu.

As the men stood in the barn and fretted about the absence of egg-laying going on, especially since the eggs were worth their weight in silver, Mrs. Harpool and Sam took their seats in the den, needles clicking, respective bundles of yarn piled high in what had once been a picnic basket. The room was quiet. The sun shone through the two paired windows of the room. Mother and daughter sat in opposing rockers.

“So,” said Mrs. Harpool who wrestled with what was almost a dropped stitch. “Noticed Mark Daniels givin’ you a looksee on Sunday.” She waited. Sam ignored her.

“You two up to somethin’ in that youth group?”

Sam knitted away.

Outside, in one of the two pecans, an early cicada went off with a rasping pointedness.

“Nah, Mom,” she answered. “He’s just got the lookses. That’s all.”

Mrs. Harpool nodded and rocked. “Maybe he might be prompted to do a little more.”

“Maybe,” said Sam. “Don’t know I’d want him to.”

“Mmmm,” she answered. “Hear his family’s doin’ all right for itself.”

“Maybe.”

“Hear his daddy’s a deacon. Got himself a business makin’ jewelry cases.”

“Sure,” said Sam, almost unlistening. “Say they make those little felt pads that go in store windows. Necklace necks. Ring fingers.” She looked at her mother who nodded and knitted, her feet nestled in light.
"That so," said Mrs. Harpool. In her hands, the long, silver needles flashed a few times. "Hear they got seven people workin' for 'em."

"That so," said Sam.

"Sure is," she said. "Say they're workin' on gettin' some big chain to start buyin' them cases." She paused. "Gonna do all right, I'd say."

"Imagine they will," Sam told her, unlooking.

"Yes they will," Mrs. Harpool mumbled. "And Mark's s'posed to manage it all when it comes through. His daddy's darned near ready to retire. I hear." She waited.

Sam squinted at her own working hands, then slowly began to undo a long row of red loops. She began the row again.

"Mrs. Roberts tells me Mark's a fine young man. Got himself a fine reputation. Never," she said with a bit of dramatic flair. "Been in any trouble with no one. Right nice to the girls."

"That so," said Sam.

"Tis," she continued. "And Mr. Smith down at the high school says he did just fine in school. Never been trouble to no one. Never been in a lick o' trouble. Kept at his books, took woodshop three or four times just to learn how to make things. Right handy."

"Ah," said Sam.

"Said he's got a right nice talent makin' a ring box. Puts the felt on real nice."

"Yeah."

"Yeah." Mrs. Harpool returned to her knitting with a renewed sense of discipline. "Might can teach them workers better ways to do it. Might could turn 'em out faster that way. Might could," she said. "Might could get that place way off the ground."

"Might could," said Sam. She looked at her mother again, from her hands and into her face. "Mark Daniels talks like a lady."
Mrs. Harpool was momentarily taken aback. She lay her knitting on her lap, both hands tight upon the wad of yarn.

"Say he can drink tea with a pinky out to here." She held her hands apart to demonstrate, then knitted on. "Say he's got an eye the wrong way."

While none of this was true at all, nor was it particularly of any concern to the university-liberalized Samantha, the suggestion had the desired affect. Her mother, between swallows, cringes, and few frightened stammerings, looked out one of the windows and into the daytime. A few minutes longer, they sat in silence. Again the cicada rasped.

"Don't believe a word of it," she finally said. "Don't you believe a word. You hear that Samantha? That boy's a good boy."

"That's what I said, Mom," Sam grinned. "That's the way with..."

"You wash out that mouth," she spluttered, one needle pointed at the doorway.

"Right now, little girl. You hear? Get that filth out of there."

Sam shrugged. "You forget, Mom. I've been there. Seen it."

With this unprecedented reminder of all that had gone wrong with her daughter, Mrs. Harpool rocked forward and held herself still. She looked at her daughter, deeply afraid that the cure hadn't taken its eternal effect, then coughed. She breathed in, held it as if she might be listening to Sam's thinking, then sighed. "Then why," she concluded. "Does that boy keep lookin' at you."

Caught, Sam could only smile. "You're right, Mom. Absolutely right. Just don't see myself goin' out with someone who makes boxes for a living."

"Shame on you," scolded her mother. "It's a right honest calling. Right honest work."

"Sure it is."
"And." said her mother suddenly, unwillingly. "It ain’t got a thing to do with raisin’ and slaughterin’ and butcherin’ no pigs or cows or six foot god-awful ugly birds."

As this was the first time that Sam had ever heard her own mother disparage the family vocation, Sam found herself suddenly stunned. She gazed blankly at her mother. "Thought you wanted me to be a farm girl."

Her mother gazed back at her. "Never told you that."

"Then why the--."

"That’s them." she said with a gesture toward the window. "Back-breakin’, hard labor for no money--ever. Blood on our hands." For a moment she peered at the pecan. "Like that cow of yours."

"Steer, mom."

"Steer," the woman spat. "Who rightfully cares. Followed you around like a puppy followin’ its mama." She looked back at her hands and the lump of yarn in her lap. "Right down criminal thing."

"Criminal?" she whispered.

"Daughter," said Mrs. Harpool with a sniff. "That kind of behavior’s best left to the menfolk. Not for us. Not our kind."

"I," Sam mumbled. "Didn’t know you felt that way."

"Your father. Your father and them boys. Always talkin’ like I was gonna rot in the netherworld if I stopped you from doin’ it."

"Then why didn’t you tell me that--?"

"No say in it," she told her. "No say at all."

Sam sat still as mother slowly rocked back and forth, each time lifting her toes as the chair rolled back, then dropping them flat as it rolled forward. The floor underfoot gave a few creaks. Outside, the cicada sang again.
"Mom," she hesitated. "Why'd you let them bring me home?"

Her mother slowed in the chair, then stopped. "Do you know what it's like?"

Sam looked at her blankly.

One arm propped upon the rocker's arm, her mother shifted herself on the cushion. "Do you know what it's like bein' here alone with them men?"

Sam blinked.

"Always cookin', cleanin' up, wipin' up the mud they traipse through here every noontime, every evenin'. Always talkin' 'bout this cow or that one. That bale or this one. This one needs hornin' that one needs wormin'. And now these birds and their eggs and their skins and which one isn't eatin' or sleepin' or--do you know?"

She shook her head.

"All I ever had in this world to talk to was you."

Sam lifted a brow.

Her mother laughed suddenly. "And you never passed gas at my table or belched like some godzilla monster."

Sam swallowed and smiled.

"When it comes right down to havin' a friend in this house, I got either you or that cat."

"Mom," Sam spluttered, without purpose or design. "I gotta get out of here. Somehow."

Her mother nodded in agreement. "That Mark Daniels," she said. "Just occurred to me, see?"

"I need to get back to school."

"Can't rightly see that," she answered. "Mighty long ways away."

"I don't like Mark Daniels."
"There's others."

"Mom," she found herself scolding. "There aren't."

"Listen, Samantha," her mother said flatly, sadly. "You didn't see yourself. Looked like a harlot. Looked like somethin' your brothers told us we didn't want to see."

"I'll do it differently now, Mom. I'll be the same person there as I am here. Now. You've just got to trust me."

"Did that already, Sam. Did that already. Touched by the devil up there. Be waitin' for you to come on right back into his lair."

"Mom," she said again. "I got it now. I've got it. He can't touch me anymore."

While her daughter's tone of voice and clearly submissive attitude were not lost on Mrs. Harpool, she had many times read of the pleas and stratagem used by those people who'd been loved roughly, and this, coupled with her own egocentricities, left her adamant.

"There's others," she said. "Plenty of them."

"Like dad."

"He's a good man, Samantha," Mrs. Harpool. her point finished, lifted her knitting again, and as if the flashing needles might forge some sort of spiritual shield between herself and the honest recognition of the truth, she began scissoring away at the knots, weaving them tightly, mechanically toward their final end.

"Yes," said Samantha. "But there are other kinds of good in the world."

"Maybe so, girl. But I've never seen one. Not in all of this life."

Out in the pen, unheard by the women, the three Harpool men bickered as they oafishly chased one of their future sources of bootleather, trying to get her into a corner so that they might shove a tube full of high-energy vitamins down her long throat.

Mark Daniels, on the other hand, oblivious to that fact that his peeps over at Samantha during Sunday's services had been noted, stood in front of one of the bathroom
mirrors of the restroom near his office, leaning close enough to get a good look, and wondering at how so many zits had come up in only one night.
CHAPTER XI

LEAVING EGYPT

This Daniels, as Mrs. Harpool had noted, was the son of one of the church deacons, a man who took pride in attending every church function to which he was allowed, and who had indeed created a very quickly growing empire to which his son would be heir. Trained as a “carpenter”, which meant little more than that he had taken a circular saw and hammer to many a job site as a youth, he had thrown together enough tract homes at an astonishing rate to save enough capital to get out of the industry before a local recession put an end to home starts. With his rudimentary skills, more crude than really called for, he’d put together a series of odd jobs involving wood, saws, and glue, and then finally settled at making two or three sets of the display items he now sold.

One large chain of discount stores had taken advantage of his unreasonably competitive prices, a product of his own naivety, and from that point on, he had expanded. His cases proliferated in the number of styles; his “plant” eventually incorporated the machinery for a bit of cheap injection-plastic molding. and he found one out-of-work, bearded iconoclast of an artist who was willing to design both ring-trays, necklace displays, watch garages, and anything else that would look both expensive and appealing. The artist master-minded catalogs, case displays, window mounts, and sales brochures. and he. the elder Daniels, found his business booming among the smaller jewelry stores of America.

The family was now, as Mrs. Harpool had rightly observed, precariously involved in bidding for a second large contract, this one involving over nine hundred and twenty
discount stores, each of which would need to purchase well over four thousand dollars worth of display pieces. The company's vision for the future included the importation of several hundred new émigrés as the hands necessary for the mind-numbing assembly and gluing, and eventually, given recent changes in economic agreements with our neighbors to the south, the establishment of a second plant just across the border, a plant free to run unimpeded by environmental protection statutes, and staffed entirely by people willing to work for less than forty-four cents per hour. Assuming that the language barriers would be crossed, especially since it wasn't hard to learn the necessary phrases "sit here and do this," "put piece A into slot B," and "now add glue," the future looked bright. After a few bribes spread here or there among the necessary officials, all would be done.

The company, now retitled "Squiresend" and given an austere logo, an unfilled cornucopia's horn in gold against a pair of deep green maple leaves, by its artist, was bound to soar. The younger Daniels, aware of this, checked out a few textbooks from the local library's meager pickings, and was now in training to assume the more migratory position of C.E.O. and national representative to the family firm. He had, as Mrs. Harpool had heard, no black marks upon his record, had always been industrious, and was not at all the effeminate being Samantha had suggested. If anything, the artist was as close to effeminacy as anyone in the county, and he, as artist, was permitted to exercise his will however he pleased, so long as that will was carefully and discretely employed elsewhere. A few monthly trips to the big city "for ideas" were often encouraged if not condoned.

Nevertheless, Mark, who had been in the bathroom examining his own complexion, and had now tucked a few tufts of white toilet paper atop a few of the bumps that he himself had burst, heard a commotion outside of the room. Mr. Harpool, at his wife's prompting, had strolled into the forward office. There, between the four cubicles, he now stood gravely out of place, his boots slightly dungy, his clothes still bearing a few
flutters of white and gray emu down, and his rancher's shirt unbuttoned to reveal the large reddened "V" of a working man's tan.

Daniels washed his hands, plucked off the white paper wisps, rubbed at a couple of points that refused to coagulate, and then leaned forward and tried to wash his face to get rid of the freckles of blood.

Sam and Mrs. Harpool, shortly after their conversation, had come to an agreement, albeit tentative. Sam had agreed to give Daniels one try, all in the interest of placating the father and as a display of good faith, and Mrs. Harpool had agreed that her husband should hear nothing of Sam's recent admission with respect to her truncated stay at the university.

As it was inappropriate for a young woman to ask a young man out, and, as it might be a good length of time before Daniels might get up the gumption to make such a request, they had agreed that Harpool should extend the offer for an evening's meal, an offer that was clearly meant to suggest a reciprocal and unannounced interest on the part of Sam.

Harpool found a chair in what he was told was Daniel's cubicle, fell into its cushion with a bit of stiff-limbed discomfort, and crossed one boot over a knee. He began wiggling his foot at the ankle. He touched a pile of papers on the desk. He flicked the desk lamp on and off.

The other office personnel, a secretary-receptionist, Mrs. Daniels herself, and the artist gave each other questioning looks, returned shrugs, and went on with what they had been doing.

Harpool fidgeted.

Mrs. Daniels filed a nail.

The artist drew a few lines on a piece of graph paper.
Finally, Daniels emerged from the bathroom, brown paper towel crumpled in his hands. He tossed the towel into the waste basket, and acting surprised, stepped into his cubicle.

Harpool rose and the two shook. The artist muttered at his paper. Mrs. Daniels paused and peered at her cuticle.

Harpool’s hand dampened by that of Daniels, he wiped it on one thigh.

“Well,” said Daniels who gestured down at the seat. Harpool sat again, this time with both feet flat on the gray carpet. “What can we do for you, sir?”

“Just a friendly visit,” Harpool told him.

Daniels sat down behind his desk, and, slightly annoyed, turned his desk lamp on again. “Well,” he said again. “I guess this as good a time as any. How’s business? Hear tell you’re raising ostriches or some thing.”

“Rightly so,” he nodded. “Emus.”

“Ah,” said Daniels, as if knew anything at all. “Like ostriches, right?”

“Surely.”

“Hear tell that’s a booming business now.”

“Hope so. Slowin’ a little.” This was true; much of the emu industry had actually grounded itself upon trade in eggs and birds to other budding emu ranchers, and the larger market had failed to develop as well as planned. The truth was that emu producers had been busily cutting their own throats; there seemed to be a bit of an emu glut at the moment and the birds and eggs had significantly cheapened. He frowned. “Hope it goes right with you.”

“Hope so.”

They sat for a few seconds.

“Listen,” finally, Harpool spoke. He leaned conspiratorially forward.
For a moment, Daniels imagined that the man might be suggesting that the Squiresend corporation adopt a new covering fabric of emu. He lifted a brow, suddenly considering the positive qualities of such a change. Ostrich was by no means inexpensive and the larger firms made plentiful use of the hides.

"It's about my daughter."

He lowered the brow and pursed his lips in an unconscious and silent whistle.

"She was," said Harpool, never one to lie with any honest conviction. "Sort of hopin' you might come on up for a bit a supper."

Daniels felt his heart flutter. Business be damned. He nodded, waiting.

"Be a right nice meal," said Harpool. "Put up a steak or two, maybe throw together a bit of pie."


Harpool smiled a sheepish smile. "That'll make Samantha right happy." He rose from his seat, brushed a trickle of sweat from his brow, and then hitched at his jeans.

Daniels rose in front of him. "Right kind," he said.

The artist and Mrs. Daniels, both of whom, in the interest of future gossip, had given up on their respective tasks, exchanged a pair of amused grins.

"Bout Friday at six or so," said Harpool as they shook hands again.

"Friday," said Daniels. "Bout six."

"Well," said Harpool. He noticed the artist peering at him through the crack between the cubicle walls. The man looked away quickly. "That 'bout covers it."

"Good, good," said Daniels. "See you then."

"See you then," Harpool echoed, and with a nod, he turned and walked out of the office.

"Well," said the artist when the door closed. "Little Markey's made good." He rolled his eyes and gave a flick of one wrist. "Got it made."
“Shaddup, Cecil.”

“Oooh,” said the artist. “Touchy, touchy. Ain’t he touchy Susan?”

Mrs. Daniels gave an equivalent “oooh.” She slipped the fingernail file to the desk next to the phone. “Always did have an eye for that girl.”

“And so refined,” mocked Cecil.

“Shaddup,” said Daniels again. “You wouldn’t know refined if it bit you on the–.”

“Mark!”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said as he sat down again. He stared at the paperwork, lifted his pencil, and doodled the rest of his distracted day away.

When the day of the dinner arrived, a meal composed of a few steaks, thick, well-tended and with just enough pink to appeal to our more primitive natures, potatoes, inappropriately mashed and scooped and trickling an odd gravy, and cobbed corn, Sam spent the morning locked in her room, staring down with her tear-welling eyes at a few as yet unwritten billet-deux, trying to compose something to talk her out of her own betrayal of love.

At noon, grunting outside, her father loaded his old smoker, a pig-shaped composition by an old welding buddy who’d traded it for a side of lean beef, with freshly hacked mesquite. He added a few sprinkles of white gas, lit the whole jumble of green branches, and then watched them smolder into a thickening smoke.

Her brothers were off being brotherly and witty in the world at large, which meant that each had found an equally bored young woman in town and had treated her to lunch at the D.Q.

Daniels, on the other hand, spent his morning running through a few of the Harpool’s books. Like an actuary at work, he gathered the figures for infant bird mortality, studied the patterns established on his monitored graphs, and decided that he
could easily tell which eggs were least likely to sprout healthy chicks. He marked
through a few pages with a yellow highlighter, took note of which birds the family ought
to sell, and noted those that they should not.

Already he knew how to gather himself into the Harpoolian fold. Already he’d
become enamored with the chance to resurface his cases. To hell with the flannels and
felts and suedes of the past. Emu-skin cases, dyed a good ostrich pink or pearl, could be
the wave of the future. In his vision, all the rings and watches of all the world would rest
on God’s own beautiful and anachronistically over-sized birds’ hides.

When the time for the meal finally arrived, father, mother, daughter and Daniels
sat uncomfortably around the steam and smell of a meal entirely fresh. They prayed
together, or so they thought; Daniels surreptitiously peeped through squinting eyes in
order to study the group, beaming woman, proud man, and somewhat dislikeable,
frumpily dressed, dark-haired, yet lascivious daughter.

At prayer’s end, he sighed.

Mother and father took this to be a good sign, respectfully heartfelt. Daughter
took it to be what it was, nerves and a vague secular discomfort with where to place the
hands, how to posture the torso, and with a need to squelch all obscenity along with the
desire to hurry matters.

At first, they ate quietly. Harpool still twinkled out proudly, sincerely glad that
the earlier wrongs were well into the processes of rectification. His wife, always acting
as menial, kept an eye on the tea glasses, keeping one uneating hand perched and ready to
act when action was called for. Sam frowned in her florals, occasionally glancing at
Daniels, waiting. Mark kept his attention focused on preventing his fork from tinkling
against his teeth.
Finally, following the promptings of his own mother, whose advice superseded that of his father, who had only reminded him not to belch aloud at the table, Mark selected a target. "Mrs. H.,” he smiled. “This is some mighty fine cookin’.”

Mrs. “H.,” who’d never heard herself addressed as such before, reddened a bit around the collar and gave a short nod. “’Twas nothin’,” she told him. And she twitched toward her husband. “Mr. Harpool saw to the meat.”

Harpool righted himself a bit.

“Sure enough, Mr. H.,” Daniels turned. “Don’t believe I’ve ever tasted a steak quite so juicy. We generally make a poor habit of dryin’ ‘em out.”

“Was a right fine cut,” beamed Harpool, one hand dabbing at a cheek-corner.

“That an onion-butter marinade?” For a moment he tightened; his mother had suggested the question, telling him that no one in his right mind used any onion-butter, whatever that might be, and that no one in his right mind wanted to have his culinary secrets easily guessed. “You’ll see,” she’d said. “He’ll set you straight.”

“No, no,” Harpool did as she’d predicted, continuing to beam. “That’s a bit of butter, few sluices of Terry-Yaki, and a crumble of garlic. Sat overnight that way, then splashed some on.”

“Don’t forget that wood,” Mrs. Harpool intruded, equally proud of the second of her husband’s two private recipes as of any of her own making.

“Wood?” Daniels asked on cue. “You marinade the meat with wood?” He took a tentative jab at the meat that remained on his plate, feigning a touch of sudden reticence.

“No, no, no,” laughed Harpool. “Cook it with fresh green mesquite.” With knife in his upraised right fist, he took a short jab toward his own steak. “Got to be green. Else it don’t send up that smoke smell.”

“Ah,” said Daniels, laughing at his own pretended idiocy. He glanced openly at Sam for the first time during the meal. “Your daddy ought to open himself a restaurant.”
Harpool grinned while his daughter scowled, unblinded. This, was a fine young man.

“And,” said Daniels, still following assigned protocol, and now dipping his fork into the potatoes. “Your momma too.” He took a bite and swallowed. “Yessir. Never eat like this at home.”

“Well,” said Mrs. Harpool. “I’d think you’d be eatin’ like kings, down there with all them jewelry boxes and all.”

For a moment, Daniels found himself caught off guard. This was practically an opening to “talk business,” as his mother had predicted, but the conversational direction in no way indicated that some egocentric outburst was in order. He caught himself. “Yes ma’am,” he grinned at her. “You’d think so, but just ain’t so. Bachelor and all. Yessir,” he shifted his gaze back to Sam. “If it don’t come frozen or in a can, just got to kiss it good-bye.” Sam scowled away so he looked back at her mother. “Not that I like it like that. I expect, Mrs. H., with two grown boys and all, you know exactly what I mean.”

“Well,” he finished, sliding back from the table an inch or two to pat his stomach with both hands. “That sounds right grand, but I might need to let it settle a while first.”

This was also at the suggestion of his mother who understood the need to delay conclusion. Despite the fact that his dialect was becoming difficult to maintain, Daniels felt the need to go on.
“Course, course,” said Mrs. Harpool. “Maybe you two young folks can sit out on that back porch for a while. Got a swing and all. Might could watch the bats.”

“Bats,” he wondered.

“Keep the mosquitoes down,” said Harpool. “Them and the night birds.”

“Ah,” he said.

“Get to twitchin’ ‘round like circus tumblers up there.” Forgetting her own sense of decorum for a second or two, Mrs. Harpool demonstrated with her hands. She lay them back to her lap.

Daniels and Harpool laughed a bit more than was called for, and Sam, flat-lipped, stared at her own hands in her lap, her unwritten letters to Lenny suddenly come to mind. Thoughts of birds and bats and bugs were unappealing at best.

“Well,” said Daniels, now scooting his chair back a good eight to ten inches. “Guess we’ll have to go see the show.” He laughed and rose slowly, laying the unused napkin next to his plate.

He stood alone for at least twenty seconds as the two parents gazed disapprovingly at Sam.

“Samantha,” her mother finally scolded. “See to our guest.”

“Yes ma’am,” Sam conceded. She rose as well. “Porch is this way.” She paraded, unwatching, through the kitchen door, past the washer and dryer in the rearmost room, took a step through the outer screen door, and waited.

He followed her.

“Round this way.” Side by side then, the porch hollow underfoot, they stepped along the beams until they reached the swing. There, Daniels caught one of the chains from which it dangled, swung himself onto the pillowed seat, and held it unmoving.

“No thanks,” she told him. She gestured at the sewn floral seat cushions atop the slatted bottom. “Clashes with my dress.”
Daniels grinned at her. "I see." Not one to misunderstand, he watched as she climbed atop the porch's wooden railing, flattening a few beige and weather-loosened curls of paint. She stared at and then away from him. "Dress almost seems to clash with you," he said quietly.

She nodded gently.

"Seems," he shrugged. "You might even clash with all of this, if you ask me."

"Didn't."

There were no bats above, as it was probably too early in the evening, but short bursts of ratchet-noise, the dinnertime conversation of the nighthawks, smattered out above them.

"I see," he said. "Probably put your whole soul into those pies too."

"Right," she said. There was a touch of breeze in the twilight. The smell of the smoldering mesquite and the last sizzling remnants of beef touched her. Inside the house, her mother moved, the dishes clattering together as the table was cleared for the planned desert.

"Nice dinner just the same," said Daniels. He lay one arm across the swing's back. It felt hard and uncomfortable under his elbow, but he left it there.

"Yep," she said.

"Not like that in Manhattan."

"Imagine not." She turned to face him, laying her hands upon the railing next to her thighs.

"Looks like you've done that quite a few times," he mumbled. "I'd probably tumble right off backwards into those bushes down there."

She gazed at him as he let himself drift back and forth in the swing, his feet touching the porch. He smiled at her. "Gonna make millions," he suddenly said.

"Gonna hire some clown to run the show down here. Gonna get out of this burg."
She stared.

"Let them count the parts for a while. Let them cut those boxes a while. Let them watch this whole rotten town rot right back into the ground it came crawling out of. Cattle," he snickered. "Jesus."

She stared.

He winked at her.

"That so?" She smoothed the dress over her thighs.

His eyes twitched down, watching the motion, then up and away. "Yes. That's so."

"And you'd be looking to take someone with you. Some clean little country-bumpkin who--."

"I," he breathed. "Came to eat dinner. Came to eat something besides frozen burritos."

"Oh," she said.

Behind Daniels, inside, Harpool began to flick from channel to channel, finally resting on one of the evening's live-action cop shows, a show that substantiated all of his suspicions both theological and geographical about the greater world. They both listened for a few seconds to the walkie-talkie static and buzzing talk between dispatcher and patrol car.

"Just like them," he muttered. "Sit here and complain about that state of affairs, all the while entertained by them."

"Every night," said Sam.

"That or game shows."

She nodded.

"Or maybe a few soaps."
She nodded again.

"Everybody wants out," he smiled. "Everybody."

Her mother suddenly shouted back an answer to a question that they hadn't heard.

"Just talking," the voice, slightly annoyed, claimed. "They're just talking."

Above them, the nighthawks continued to feed.

"That all we doing, Samantha?"

"Dunno, Mark," she said. "Just waitin' on desert. She smoothed her dress again, outheld her left leg and briefly looked at a mark on her shin.

His eyes danced down again, lingering.

She smiled to herself, let the dress fall back over her calf, and touched a hand to her collar.

His eyes twitched up again.

"Yessir," she said. "Think we're just waitin' on dessert."

"Always thought that dinner had to settle a while first."

"Country boys always do," she told him. This time, as if checking an itch, she outheld her right leg, turning the foot outward a bit, tugging up a few inches at the dress.

In the swing, Daniels swallowed. He felt like saying something, but somehow he knew that whatever it was would get lost in a sudden stammer or clumsy-tongued betrayal. Instead, he allowed himself to swing a bit more.

Having observed this slight nervousness in a young man who only moments before had seemed so calmly sardonic, and, oddly enough, beginning to feel that she might never see or hear from her boyfriend again, Sam suddenly began to listen to the inner voices of a thousand snickering sisters of sit-coms and romance novels, each begging her to act, to establish the green-eyed devil as some way to prod Lenny into action. Here, with a previously empty and now palpitating heart, lay a quick possibility; all she would have to do is sneak one letter off to an appropriate and mutual friend.
She let the leg fall and lay her hands back into her lap. "What's the matter?" she asked him.

He paused in his swinging. "I'm not sure what--I mean, I don't know what you mean."

"You look uncomfortable."

"Sorry," the rather pathetic Daniels said. "I just started thinking--."

"About dessert?" she grinned at her own undetected euphemism.

"Yes--no. Maybe. I've lost track of what we were talking about."

Lifting an eyebrow, she watched him without tact. "So did I. Had something to do with everybody wants out."

"Yeah," he told her like a schoolboy. "Yeah."

"Think I do too?"

He watched her, now caught eye to eye, as she sat dressed like something out of a little girl's novel, and with that odd, objective circumspection that must fall upon any rat in a maze, he suddenly knew something of what was actually happening there on the porch and fell into a renewed and disinterested calm. "Something here," he told her, prodding one bent index finger down toward the porch and then unfolding the hand.

"Tells me that that's especially true of some of us." He looked her up and down slowly, openly lecherous. "Who was it? Some local boy?"

She smiled at him. "I'm a gentleman."

"I see." He smiled back at her. "Some college boy."

She sat unmoving.

"They know?" he said, jerking a thumb toward the commercial noise of the livingroom.

"Why do you think I'm here," she muttered. "My health?"
"Uh-huh. Down at the D.Q. they all make out that you just flunked your way out. At least that’s the story your brothers’ve been spreading." He frowned at her.

"Women’ve all been betting that we’d see that pretty belly swell up soon. Never happened." He shrugged. "No joy in Mudville. Least until McGary’s girl came home after the prom. Couldn’t stand up. I’ve heard," he mumbled. "She’s a Cox now. One of a family of three."

Samantha swallowed; despite her adopted worldliness, she felt a bit uncomfortable with the knowledge that she had been the primary subject of small-town rumor and speculation.

"Some folks still figure you just lost it."


She swallowed again.

"Listen," he said. "I just--."

"Just?"

He glanced at his shoes resting there on the grain and leaf-crinklings below. "Just don’t like being toyed with. Not on a pretty night like this one. And it is," he sniffled. "A pretty night."

She nodded at him. "I wasn’t meaning to toy with you. Never my intention."

They stared at each other. Inside the house, the channels began noisily to flicker from station to station again. Against the window’s curtains the light danced in blues and greens.

"Sure it wasn’t," said Daniels. "Sure."
Behind them, the blinds suddenly lifted and both of them turned to stare at Mrs. Harpool's gazing face. The woman rapped on the window's clear pane and nodded with a sideward jerk toward the interior. "Gettin' late," she mouthed.

"Yes ma'am," Daniels answered aloud. "It surely is." He turned and smiled at Sam as the blinds clattered shut. "Time to be gettin' back. Leave you here at the farm."

Sam looked at him, hard and squarely. "Desert's waiting."

"It is."

"I," she said. "Can't help what I feel."

"Doesn't sound like the college woman in you."

"Is. Isn't. Heart's the same."

They sat.

Inside, the Harpools whispered together about how well it was all going. Each agreed that the delayed departure was of proto-matrimonial significance. Though the issue had never been fully addressed, both husband and wife had seen the same economic advantage of the match as had Daniels, Emu and jewelry cases might bond forever; the ship might finally arrive in a mutually beneficial way.

"I know he'll come for me," she said.

"Probably already did that," Daniels laughed at his own obscenity.

"Did," she frowned.

They sat.

"Maybe," he began to wander. "The money's an issue."

She glanced at him.

"I mean, maybe his family, now that they're moneyed and all, maybe it's an issue."

"How do you know that?"
He shrugged. "Told you already. Lots of talk when you got back. We know more than you know we know."

She stiffened. "And you know it's the money."

"Nah. Know that he has it."

She touched her ear and scratched.

"Know that new money can get pretty finicky about its choices. Mates. Good girls, bad girls. Wise selections, unwise."

Beside him, Sam dropped her hand and sniffed, completely unaware of the deep-seated and mercenary instincts of the man on the swing.

"No," she said.

"Yes," he nodded. "Of course, we could, with a bit of proper prodding, we could--."

She frowned at him.

"Could say, money up your family a bit."

"Could we."

"Yes." He let the swing rock back and forth, took one casual glance at the blinds, and puckered. "We need skins," he said. "Lots of skins."

"Uh-huh."

"Somehow," he grinned at her. "Your father sees our own connection as one linked to a connection between our two industries."

"Uh-huh."

"A bit of a fib, coupled with a bit of contractual wrangling might benefit us both. Money all around."

"And," she nodded. "After we wrangle?"

"The fib," he smiled. "Becomes irrelevant."
“Was that,” she wondered. “A proposal?”

“Of sorts,” he shrugged again. “A proposal to make a proposal. And on that proposal, I propose that we unite the families. Say, a few months before the proposal is concluded.”

“And?”

“And, as some proposals fail to conclude, we somehow fail to conclude.” He gestured back and forth between them. “Bit of secret dalliance perhaps, on one of our parts.”


“Of course,” he grinned. “There are cities and trips. All business. Got to make those trips.”

“And you might be caught.”

“Needn’t say that. Let the hands of the D.Q. do what we want.”

“And,” she wondered. “When we break the contract? When our alliance breaks? Won’t the emu alliance fall through and you bankrupt us?”

“Won’t,” Mark grinned. “Have my word of honor.”

She outspat a laugh. “And when an admitted liar proposes a proposal, should we accept his integrity?

“Don’t let your father break the contract once we’ve got it. He’s a reasonable man.”

“Desert’s waiting.”

“Do we,” he asked as she stepped down from the railing and shifted her dress. “Have something of an agreement?”

“Of course,” she answered, now pulling her hair back and smoothing it. “You have the word of the almost Mrs. Daniels on that. Liar to Liar. Cheat to cheat.”
“Good,” he grinned. “We have a proposal in supposal.”

“Yes.”

Daniels fell from the swing and stood upright. Together then, they walked through the screen door, past the washer and dryer, and paraded into the house, hand-in-hand, a bit squeamishly, but, as all should be, as naturally as they might appear in a small, courtly sort of town.
CHAPTER XII

FROM THE MOUNTAINTOP

During all of this planning on the parts of the members of the Daniels-Harpool clan about its hypothetical and propitious future, events in Frisco continued much as they always had. Lenny was now back in school with a mind toward pleading his own academic case, having yet to inform anyone of the intoxicated Chester’s revelation. And, as all remaining parties remained equally misguided, though Chester still seemed somewhat repugnant, the family moved a few rakes, paint cans, and a mower to one side of the smaller of their two storage buildings and moved the man in. There, he was permitted one two-burnered Coleman stove and stove-stand, a surplus military cot in the requisite green, a twenty-five dollar sleeping bag from Sears, and a few shelves for his sundry dry goods, gathered rices, beans, and dusty bags of flour. Toilet habits were limited to escorted visits into the house’s interior, and more often than not, on late night demands, he found himself creeping out onto the dock to relieve himself into the star-sprinkled ripples of the lake itself.

As the man was well aware of Lenny’s generous silence, he kept silent about all grievances that he might have felt about his treatment. He took the corner-spread spiders as something of allies against the evening’s flies and mosquitoes, took rain as a natural form of air conditioning, and lived as happily as he might have had he been forced to return to life inside his station wagon, a life formerly relegated to the series of rest stops that had once fallen along the path that was itself his home.

Inside the “big house,” as he privately and ironically referred to the better
quarters, Ma, Pa, and Elise lived as they should. Worried eyes were always centered on
Elise, but a combination of Zoloft, occasional visits to the doctor who dispensed it, and
the introduction of a VCR seemed to keep her securely tethered to the home front.

Pa was as sedentary as had been his inclination in the last several years, and Ma,
thankful for the rightness of things, slowly gave up her Watchtowers in lieu of more
standard, less personally involved religious fare.

The only truly significant alteration in the town was one of its unrestricted
growth. Cheap property, once considered little more than wasteland along a variety of
creek beds, suddenly appealed to dozens of developers who’d noticed a trend away from
boxy apartments and traffic snarls. Where mobile homes had once stood in tinny
opposition to hail and wall clouds, more and more two-story dwellings, side by side on
minuscule lots, began to rise from the dust, nettles, and muddy banks.

With them, as is natural, came children. Droves. Dozens.

And, of course, with children came the pressing necessity of classrooms. And, of
course, with city-bred children came city-bred problems.

The first of the two issues was solved in the time-honored manner. The city
jammed aluminum portable buildings onto the lots that had once housed the basketball
courts, onto lots that had once housed outdoor eating stations, onto lots that had once
housed jungle-gyms and piles of play sand, and finally, in one case, onto a section of land
that had once been the high school’s front lawn. The original “victory bell,” which
students had from year to year rung after intermittent football conquests, was
unobtrusively moved off of campus altogether and now stood encased in a rental storage
building, quietly awaiting an eventual return to its original glory.

The second problem was more difficult to solve. City problems, despite the
number of funds allocated to research and experiment, had yet to disappear, and now,
there in Frisco, there was little hope for alleviation. They surfaced with a few bits of
spray paint on the town square, drifted into a few touches of classroom belligerence, and finally snaked their way into what was open rebellion against the state’s laws against illicit drug use.

As xeroxed sheets of paper, each announcing the recent development of new, highly potent hallucinogens hidden in children’s’ stickers and tattoos, began circulating between school officials, began appearing in convenience store windows, and began landing on the desks of local law enforcement officials, and when the spinster math teacher, Matilda Crane, found two of her students inside her portable classroom smoking something that reddened their eyes and somehow prompted them to use the word “cool” to a certain excess, the town became concerned.

Word had it for some time that one of the few remaining mobile home dwellers, a “loner-type,” ex-lieutenant and hippie who professed to raise “herbal remedies” for exhaustion and that “needed extra male boost,” was also raising herbs of an illegal sort as well. After breaking into his home, the town’s officials found two spindly plants stuffed into a closet, little more than bonsai, a few bits of jewelry replete with peace-symbol anachronisms, a table covered in powdered oak leaves, local barks, and ground up caffeine tablets, one strange-looking pipe, a stapler, a box of Glad snack bags, four magic markers, and a stack of thin paperboard sheets, each bearing a reported trademark, hand-drawn, folded and hole-punched for attachment to the bags.

Disappointed in their efforts to find this to be the source of youthful degradation, the officials on hand gathered his plants into a garbage bag, sat the man down and, while flickering their cigarette lighters meaningfully, explained that he needed to “get along to where they want your kind,” and left him. Two weeks later, his property was in the hands of one of the developers, and he himself was in San Francisco, taking the profits of the property’s sale and beginning one of the most lucrative herbal marketing businesses to ever hit the national market. While he would one day look back fondly on his eviction,
he made no effort to thank any of the parties involved, and they were to forget him entirely.

With this failure in mind, the now official school board met. They sat huddled again, much as they had before, and listened to their only expert on such matters, Ms. Moncus, practically Ph.D.. While she was quick to admit that one of the problems was that the town’s newfound growth had been inspired by an influx of undisciplined, middle-classed children who’d been raised in manners foreign to Frisco, she was also quick to point out that the conditions of the city had been brought on by the town itself.

“What do these damned buildings have to say to these kids?” she pondered aloud to the group.

As was usual, more literal than figurative, her peers could only stare. Huffman, grayer, his belly a bit larger and he himself mellowing in that concluding calm inspired by aging, listened to the groan of the hollow floor and the smatterings of twigs and acorns on the roof, and shrugged. Resby, whose under-achieving son had lost his scholarship and only means of attending a university to a minority candidate, sighed, frustrated, and glanced at a broken wall outlet into which someone had plugged an overhead projector. Crane, who taught in one of the portables, scowled at Moncus, and hissed. “They’re cold. They’re hot. They’re noisy. They’re dull. They’re gray and they very well might house vermin underneath them all.”

Moncus gave her a look.

“I’ve put dogs in better kennels than they are.”

Moncus grinned. “There you have it.”

Huffman and Resby, both surprised at the correctness of the answer to a question they hadn’t really understood, watched her.
"These buildings," she told them, her finger jabbed onto the desktop and back-bending at the initial knuckle. "Are slovenly monuments to what children can only perceive to be our own reprehensible lack of concern."

Resby returned to his wall outlet. The grayish cord dangled from the grayish wall, piled upon itself like a coiled snake, then led up to the brown boxed housing around the projector's bulb. At its top, cockeyed, a transparency had been left by someone, and, squinting, he could see only the words "Like all great thinkers, Santa Anna . . ." For a moment, he tried to remember who Santa Anna was.

Huffman, concerned with Moncus's proclamation against them all, shifted his belly, his belt buckle grating him above the navel, and sighed. "Uh," he said. "I’ve never said anything like that. In all my life. In private or public."

Moncus gave him a look similar to that that she’d given a tick she’d found in her bed sheets the night before. Slowly, in the terms that she’d long before learned to use in order to exploit her inferiors, she told them. "The buildings tell our students that we just don’t care about them."

"And," piped in Crane. "What does someone’s 'care' have to do with some dope-smoking little brat in my building at seven-thirty a.m.?"

Moncus, herself tasting a bit of the loneliness of spinsterhood, and therefore feeling kinder to her counterpart than she might have otherwise, gave a short sniff, reigned in her tickish stare, and breathed. "It’s a bit hard for us to see, 'Tilda. But even the best of children will act up if no one pays them any mind."

"I pay them plenty of mind," said 'Tilda. "I pay them enough mind that I’ve spent my whole life in that--."

"So," Resby burst in. "You want us to paint these up? Put up a few posters? Stick a few charts with gold stars and red circles and little blue or white smiley-things? All so the little snots can grind their cigarettes out on the new carpets during class?"
Huffman caught himself nodding at Resby’s wisdom, then stopped as he realized that Moncus had frowned disapprovingly. Quickly, he shook his head in disgust.

“We,” intoned Moncus. “Need to get rid of the things altogether. Get new buildings. Expand the school or build another one. Rats in a little box eat each other.”

They all listened to the building.

Huffman found himself hearing the distant voices of increased responsibility and power. A larger building meant larger prerogatives, greater status, increased authority, and, for a brief instant, a look of firm-lipped pride crossed his face.

Then it passed. He looked down at the desktop in front of him, read the secretive signs of student disapproval carved there, and bit his lower lip. Responsibility lay before him. Responsibility and the gruesome task of retaining a position to which he was now barely equipped to keep. “Second school,” he suddenly blurted aloud.

Moncus looked at him.

He realized that he’d spoken. “Has to be a second school. We’re too large now already. Who knows what might happen. ’Nother principal there. Divide and conquer.”

“Yes,” said Crane for no reason other than to speak. “Geoffrey’s got it. Most of our troubles’re comin’ out of those illiterates down south of the highway.” For a few seconds she listened to the echoes of her own past, to the whispers she’d heard in a foreign tongue, whispers in a language to which she had no knowledge, and then heard the following laughter, uproarious and certainly directed toward her very own person. “Put ’em all south of the highway.”

Moncus smiled at her, well aware that the now pristine Crane, lured by rumors of blood-spun Latinate romance, had once connected with a well-endowed young Mexican farmhand and finally, too late, had learned that “romance” had little or no connection to matrimony at all.
"Knock out a few of those ramshackle old homes they've got down there."

Resby nodded since he himself had listened to his son's lengthy lamentations about that scholarship. "Yes," he seethed agreement. "Best for all of us."

The three turned to Moncus.

"We seem to be acting too hastily," she smiled. "Sometimes the better part of valor is to engage in thoughtful circumspection."

They stared at her.

"Cart's before the horse," she frowned.

They nodded.

"Our first concern has to be with available funding."

"That's the city," said Huffman, already experienced at the slow-starvation that a city council can inspire.

"People," said Moncus. "Like plaques."

He stared at her.

"There are," she went on. "People in this region who have money."

Resby gave a short and disapproving cough.

Huffman wiped a hand across his brow. "These... people," he said, again shifting his belt buckle above the desktop. "Are probably a bit sore with us still. We did try to toss their grandson out of--."

"We do have the advantage of spin," said Moncus who now sat with both elbows upon the desk, her fingers steepling together before her mouth in a thoughtful ripple.

"We might point out that we eventually violated the very mandate of the voter in order to reinstate him."

"Yes," said Huffman. "We did do that."
"We did," she went on and lowered her fingers into paired fists. "Risk our own jobs, societal roles, and credibility on behalf of a young man who might have exploded. The responsibility and the suffering was ours alone."

"I'd had no idea how kind we were," said Matilda.

"Me neither," said Resby. "They owe us something."

"And if," interjected Huffman, his own hands sweaty and flat on the protruding edges of his thighs. "These people aren't so interested in plaques?"

"People," answered Moncus, resteepling her fingers, again tapping them together, tip to tip, in a slow and deliberate movement. "Also find themselves irrevocably drawn to power."

"And?"

"And we might try to ascertain to which category the Gorsuch people belong." She leaned back, lifting her arms above her head in order to lace her fingers, cracked the knuckles and dropped her hands to rest pillowing behind her own skull. "We involve them in the process."

"Committee 'em," muttered Resby.

"Committee 'em," whispered Crane.

"Yes," said Huffman. "Worse comes to worst, committees."

With that in mind, the now official school board set out to make some determination as to the Gorsuch willingness to join forces with the community in establishing either a new school or in expanding the one which now stood. As all members agreed that Catherine Moncus, practically Ph.D., could be the only emissary appropriate to the fact finding mission ahead, there was a motion, a second, and complete agreement that she should go.

The following day, she rose early, entered her garage, found her bank of file cabinets, rifled through her files, renewed her acquaintance with the Gorsuch case and
reviewed later notes on events which had since transpired: the advent of wealth and the mechanisms behind it; the return of the disreputable mother and the tendency to now correct her behaviors and attempt to reestablish her as reputable member of the community; the return of the “father” under legal injunction and the subsequent housing of that father; and the university education of the grandson, who, according to records gathered by virtue of her own position as secondary school counselor, was performing his scholarly duties at at least two steps short of the desirable par. As to love interests and continued association with Dubinski, she could only speculate based on the general patterns of adolescent behavior.

With all of these cogent facts in mind, Moncus called Elise Gorsuch, and drove out to the Gorsuch home. There, she first encountered Chester and learned the truth about his housing. Obviously, while the family had granted biological association of father and son, it had yet to reintegrate the man as full and participatory member. They had granted him contact, but had yet to surrender power or wealth.

She next met Ma at the door, found the woman to be frumpish and cheaply dressed in old fashioned clothing, protective, difficult, and less than willing to allow her unsuperintended communication with the mother. Finally, coercing the woman with a bit of inflated speech-making, she was to sit downstairs in the “parlor’ while Ma went up to bring her down. Moncus made a quick check of the room. There were religious icons and clocks, photos and sale-bought prints of cheap paintings, popular magazines, and two television remotes, although there was no television visible. There was a piano, the same beaten relic as had always been there, and a family photo atop it. Chester’s face conspicuous only in its absence. “Money,” she thought aloud. “But with little or no desire to spend it.”

For a moment she thought that she’d found all that she needed. The plaque strategy would undoubtedly fail while the authority bit might work.
And then Ma and Elise came trundling down the staircase.

Elise, despite her drift toward middle age, was striking.

Moncus had expected more of the housecoatish frumpery that she’d seen in the woman who’d greeted her, but she was wrong. The daughter was dressed as if she had stepped directly out of the screen on which some old black and white movie happened to be showing. Long, flowing tresses, curled a bit at the tips, touched her shoulders; pearls, probably real, dangled in three strands from neck to bodice, and a sheer, white dress that narrowed tightly at the waist fell into a series of cascades which draped the stairs as she walked, her white slippers flashing from below.

Moncus inhaled slowly through pursed lips, clicked her tongue once, then rose from the couch.

The two women, unlikely pair that they were, stepped into the room, and Ma introduced the two of them to each other. Elise held out a hand, dangling wrist-bent as greeting, and the three sat.

“My,” said Moncus. “That’s a lovely gown.”

“Thank you.” Elise nodded. “Catalogues.”

“Not from Penny’s,” Ma pointed out.

“That I see,” said Moncus.

“Part a the strategy,” Ma told her.

Moncus looked at her. “Strategy.”

“Sometimes takes a bit of finery to bring a person on home.”

“Home?”

“Back to the rightful life,” Ma said.

Elise simply sat.

“Rightful life.” Moncus kept at it.
"Yes, ma’am," said Ma. "Dress her up right fine enough and all of that--."

Elise closed her eyes and swallowed.

Ma glanced at her. "That behavior counter to God’s will takes a step backward."

"Ah," nodded Moncus. "And you, Elise? Has it--."

"Yes ma’am," Ma answered. "Like a charm. One day hustlin’ blackjack with the sinful; next day lookin’ and actin’ like a princess."

"I see," Moncus responded, looking at Elise. "So you’re following a behavioral model of therapy."

"Whatever," said Ma.

"I’m doped," Elise smiled gently.

Ma twitched.

Moncus grinned.

"A bit of this and that," explained Ma. "That and the good book."

"And your son," pondered Moncus. "How is he?"

"Fine," said Ma, oblivious to all that Moncus knew. "Right fine college boy."

Now.

For a moment, Moncus imagined that she saw anger in the glint of Ma’s eyes.

"Good," she said. "Whatever we did seems to have worked."

"Yes," said Ma. "Whatever we," and she stressed that final word. "Did."

For a few moments, nothing was said. Moncus, given the need to change the surface of the school, saw that Ma’s notion that surface change somehow had moral affects might work to her own advantage, and she likewise felt that the religious tendency might work in her favor, especially since the focus of both community and individual participation was so strongly rooted in most religious beings, but Ma spoke before she could begin to work the conversation toward that end.
“Why’re you here, Ms. Moncus.”

“I--,” she stammered. “Explained that to your daughter in our phone conversation. I’m volunteering my expertise on the matter of her reintegration into--.”

“A lie,” said Ma. “A damnable outright lie. There’s some water under our bridge, woman.”

The two women stared at each other. Elise gazed at the piano.


“We,” said Moncus, off balance and off guard, unfamiliar with the practical necessities of immediate improvisation. “Find it unsuitable that a moneyed family, such as your own, should be uninvolved with local affairs.”

“Unsuitable,” Ma hissed.

“An unfortunate term,” Moncus swallowed. “I meant to express the idea that we find it deeply saddening that a family with the potential to do so much civic good has yet to be called upon to participate.”

“Money,” said Ma. “You’re lookin’ for our money.”

“No,” whispered Moncus. She glanced at the catatonically slow-blinking Elise who still gazed at the piano in stupefaction. “We want to see that you gain office.”

Ma stiffened, as surprised at what had been said as was the woman who’d said it.

She looked at her daughter. “Office,” she muttered.

“Yes,” said Moncus. Unable to recover, she could only plod on more deeply into the muck she was creating. “Mayor.” The moment the word came out, she regretted the choice; school board would probably have been enough.

Ma, who had been, as was obvious in the way that she dressed her daughter, schooled in the thinking of an earlier generation, was stunned. “You,” she mumbled now. “Want Pa to be the Mayor?”
Alarmed at the thought, knowing what her files had to say about the intelligence of the subject now under discussion, Moncus still found herself doomed. Her only choice was to suggest that she had been referring to Ma, but Ma was obviously too great an opponent for even herself. “Yes,” she said. “Pa.”

“Well, I’ll be,” Ma marveled at her daughter. “Pa. Mayor.”

Moncus found herself nodding. “Yes ma’am,” she said. “It’s time for some changes ‘round here.”

“Yes ma’am,” said Ma, her eyes sparkling. “That it is. That it is.”

That evening, nestled in the living room somewhere between a game show and re-runs of a new sitcom, Elise nearby, still stony-eyed but now standing in informal clothing, Ma broached the subject with her husband. Pa, though befuddled, made his best effort to comprehend the magnitude of what was taking place. He was hesitant, although enthusiastic, a bit frightened, and somewhat amused at the prospects. His chair, the same broken recliner, groaned as he wiggled nervously atop its springs, and out of sheer habit, he prodded repeatedly at his new, now comfortably fitting teeth.

Ma, who paced in front of the television, as yet unwilling to touch the antenna in order to engage his full attention, explained what she took to be the intricacies of the campaign that awaited them. Between ten minute bursts of plot and canned laughter, she suggested the appropriateness of the undertaking in the eyes of the deity while keeping one secular eye focused on their previously unconsidered sense of the noblesse oblige. She explained that they had become landmark figures in the community, though little had changed, reminded him that he had once participated in a war to salvage freedom and democracy for nation and world alike, and even went so far as to reach up to the mantle to pull down the small and unobtrusive case which housed one of his standard-issue medals.
"This," she told him as he sat sock-footed, crumbled potato chips in his lap, a muted but big-breasted woman holding a can of soda up on the screen in front of him. "Is reason enough." And she dangled the medal, its reddish ribbons laced between her index finger and thumb, the dark and round bit of metal swinging pendulously beneath. "It's enough."

"Maybe," he said. On the screen, a small black car leapt through a sharp and mountainous turn between red-trunked trees. "Maybe so." The motion of the screen stilled; the camera focused on the same car, glinting upon an untrodden beach, the sun setting behind it. "But we don't know nothin' 'bout that sort of thing."

Ma, her voice one half step up from what it had been, slightly tinctured by a shriller edge, stepped toward him. "This," she said again while swinging the medal at him. "Tells us we do. Do as much as anybody does."

In his chair, Pa leaned to the left, his head tilted in order to see around her. He lifted the remote and unmuted the television. It burst with laughter. He frowned at having missed the joke.

"Pa," she said with one quick glance back at the screen. "They done asked us to."

The medal bounced against her knee as her hand fell.

He looked at her.

They done asked us," she said. "And never mind about Lenny or Elise. They know all 'bout them."

"Ma," he mumbled, still struggling to see around her form, now touching a bit of gray grizzle on his right cheek. "We just mightn't win."

"They asked us," she said. "They asked us."

He lowered his hand to his lap and began sifting through the scatter of chips trying to find one that was still whole. "Fine, Ma," he told her. "Fine. Whatever you
say. Just remember,” and he muted the television again, enough of the show already lost as to merit its complete silence. “We lose, it ain’t my doin’.”

“I will,” she sighed, clapping hands and ribbon together. “I will.”

In the meantime, Catherine Moncus, practically Ph.D., embarrassed by the results of her reconnaissance, had avoided all contact with her fellow conspirators. Instead, she drove home trying to puzzle out some sort of justification for what she’d done. As she pulled up the two long strips of cement, gravel and grass between them, which were her driveway, it finally came to her. As mayor, a man such as Pa Gorsuch, a man whom she’d never met, would probably bow to the whimsies of all persons to whom he was obligated. In a position of power, such a person would, in fact, enable the official school board to get exactly what it wanted, and if that weren’t rationale enough, she could, as was her historical inclination, “lobby” each member of that board individually. Anyone could get what he or she pleased, new zoning, old zoning, an absence of zoning at all. Matilda could get a center for singles, Resby could get some sort of political appointment for his son, Huffman could get some figural appointment without responsibility, and she herself, well, she thought, as she opened the car’s door, that could wait for a while. She was, despite all of her training and experience, oblivious as to her own desires, let alone unconscious motivations.

She closed the car door, made her way down the stone path to the house, climbed the three gray steps which lay between her well-trimmed hedges, clomped across the porch with its spindle banisters, paraded past the two cats that whined about the food they’d been getting, and stepped into the house. Through the living room she walked; onto the linoleum of the kitchen she scuffled, and down through the door and into the garage she ambled. There, in the hot and musty hollow that had never seen a car, she paused to grin at her own foresight. Along the walls lay the cabinets, dark, undusty, spread out with a carpet between them.
For a few moments she poked a finger upon several cabinet faces, searching for the right set of letters, muttered a complaint about her need to create better, more legible signs, and finally found what she’d been looking for. With a thumb, she shifted the drawer lock to one side, then pulled the drawer out. She rifled for a few seconds until she found the file on the current mayor, and then she lifted it and lay it atop the cabinet. She rifled a bit more, then found the file on his family, and withdrew it as well, laying it alongside the other. She closed the drawer, gathered the files and stepped back into the house.

There, following a ritual as old as was her presence in the town, she lay the files upon the kitchen table, turned away to fill the kettle and set it upon the stove, went to the cupboard, took two cookies from a tin, lifted a tea bag, set it in a mug and returned to the table.

“Yes,” she mumbled as the kettle heated. “These people seem to think that their mandate is irrevocable. That,” she said glancing at one of the two cats which had entered the room. “Is due to their own belligerent negligence of debts that they owe.”

The two cats began to eat, neither noticing her.

“Yes,” she addressed the cats again, now taking a nibble at one of the cookies as she opened the mayor’s file. “Romeo, Juliet, you can take a person, grant them the thing that they long for, and still find yourself unnoticed, your prerogatives unheeded. Remember that,” she warned.

And she nibbled again at the cookie, dusting a few crumbs from the file with a hand’s back.

As she had essentially placed the present Mayor in his position, it took her only four hours and twenty-two minutes to comb through her materials concerning both the man and his family. It took another hour and thirteen minutes to note down all of the materials that she considered relevant to the Gorsuch campaign.
The current Mayor, despite his relative inconsequence to the world beyond Frisco’s borders, had certain grandiose visions concerning his own wisdom. With that in mind, he had established a republican structure of government around himself. He professed to be a political democrat, but his theory of governing had been grounded in the idea that elected officials were not necessarily elected representatives. Naively enough, given the state of the nation, including the more or less recent series of high school student uprisings inspired by the Gorsuch-Dubinski team, the Mayor had adopted a synthetic notion of “steersmanship” and “stewardship.” He would listen to his constituents, but he damned well did as he pleased. After all, he had been elected to lead, not to follow.

Noting his overuse of those two very loaded terms in a variety of speeches, from dedications of statues to offerings of honor or funerary addresses, Moncus wrote the fact down. The current Mayor considered his own wisdom to be superior to that of the people.

Her next task was simple. All she needed to do was to discover some significant absence of wisdom by which to demonstrate his own internal flaw. It turned out to be easy. While his political decision-making had been less repugnant than the town might notice, the man had a less fortuitous private life. His wife, a healthy woman some twelve years younger than he was, had, over the course of their marriage, followed the lead of her own roving eye at least six times. There was one local UPS agent, a high school senior who’d come to clean their pool, a flight attendant who lived in her home town, a dentist, the manager of a used car lot, and one bachelor who made his living by manufacturing plastic manhole covers. At present, there were rumors concerning her “voice lessons” with a local minister of music.

Moncus, ignoring the coexistent problems of the Gorsuch clan, took note of these rather cogent facts and innuendoes.
She also noted the son. Raised in a Montessori school, the boy had run amok. He professed to be an artist, an un-manly sort of occupation, produced replica bathroom walls in tile, complete with toilet paper holders and rolls, and scrawled positively obscene bits of graffiti all over the sides of his work. The young man claimed that the artistry lay in the fact that his walls were "home" bathroom walls rather than public, and that the "defamiliarization" of the home wall would in turn raise our familiarization with what we permitted in the public domain. All financial success in New York markets and anality aside, this could be problematic for the Mayor.

She wrote it all down.

She also made note that the Mayor's personal financial responsibility had been negligible. He had financed the son's first failing artistic efforts, replicas of cave paintings done in original dyes with primitive painting materials on stone that he himself chopped from rock faces by hand, and had failed to finance the son's second, more lucrative efforts with toilet walls. He had invested too late in the personal computers manufactured by a now vanishing corporation, had invested in the local mobile home market just as the new housing market had begun its boom, and twice he had been under investigation for his own role in the collapse of a local savings and loan. He'd spent a fortune, yet had failed to rise above the moderate level of income with which he'd begun.

This was a man who consistently, yet impulsively, acted too late or too early. He missed opportunity when opportunity practically screamed at him, took it when it begged him to leave well enough alone. She wrote it down.

Finally, her attentions upon the daughter, she discovered next to nothing. The daughter had been well-adjusted throughout her public education, had gone to college to study nursing, and had married a young intern at the hospital in which she eventually worked. The only point of note about the young woman was that she'd left as soon as leaving was possible, and, despite letters begging her to visit, had returned less often than
was statistically standard. While this might be a weak argument about paternal wisdom in the world at large, in a town so patriarchal as this one, it might be worth a few votes.

Moncus led the entry with a question mark in the margin, and scrawled the point down.

While the files revealed less than she’d hoped they might, unfortunately she’d chosen the man less for his flaws than for his strengths, she still felt satisfied that what they revealed might do what she wanted. The only problem that she could foresee was with Ma Gorsuch. Authority and political stature might appeal to the basic drives of the woman, but that overwhelming sense of the right and its religious foundation might make her resistant to the strategy at hand.

Perhaps, thought Catherine Moncus, her tea cold on the table after so many hours, her cats long curled and napping, the appeal to wisdom, grounded, ironically enough, given Ma’s role in her own household, in the basic paternalistic Christian sense, would appeal to her as well as to the population at large.

"It might," she muttered aloud as she closed the files. "Become a significant test of the strength of the campaign."

And she smiled.
CHAPTER XIII

THE PEOPLE MUMBLE

Four hundred miles away, the youthful Harpool-Daniels camp put its own campaign into motion against the unwitting and elder Harpool clan. Samantha had settled into a routine appropriate to that of the betrothed maiden, dressing in the flowery chintzes her mother had always adored, binding her hair into loose and undyed buns, and splashing only sparing quantities of flesh and pink-tinted makeup only where blemishes had begun to surface. She took unusual time in adjusting her lace collars and cuffs, and exhibited an even more renewed and welcome interest in slapping together biscuits, mixing creamed sausage gravies, and snapping green beans into the colander with a certain relish. She even took it upon herself to dabble with the task of gathering and piecing together odd bits of material in order to make her own, or perhaps, given her real abilities, her eventual daughter’s, wedding quilt.

Outside, where nameless cattle had once wandered, her father now walked between the dozens of chain-linked and orderly pens in which his precious birds stood and preened in their own dust. He shuffled feed into their coffee can feeders with a regularity by which people might set their clocks. He shoveled their thick and sometimes, after rain or heavy dew, viscous wastes into a wheelbarrow, wheeled it down to the pasture’s end where an itinerant creek ran, and dumped it, as yet unaware of the market for highly acidic fertilizers or of recent changes in environmental regulation. When they appeared, he gathered the overly large eggs, delicately carried them into the warm bulbed incubator that had once been a hen house, and, given that there was
momentarily no one to sell them to, kept them well-tended.

The birds were noisy, and, by virtue of their sheer bulk and stupidity, to some degree frightening, but, oddly enough, Harpool felt an attachment to them. Perhaps it was because they weren’t mammals; they were more stupid and needed far more attention. Perhaps it was because one of his own first acts of husbandry had been to kill a pet chicken that he’d named “Little.” Or perhaps it was simply because he’d begun to age nicely. Nevertheless, as he clucked, or rather gave a somewhat hoarse coughing noise at them, gathered an occasional feather, or worried about impending hail, he felt close to them all.

Mrs. Harpool, like her husband, was pleased with her daughter’s continued change, felt proud of the success of her sons, and felt satisfied with almost everything except the noise and the occasional embarrassment of having to describe the family’s occupation to regional newcomers. She cleaned and cooked, and cooked and cleaned, oversaw the speed at which the relationship between her daughter and her intended grew, prepared dainties for their porch-swinging evenings, and failed again and again, blaming it on humidity or lack thereof, to get her own special divinity to wholly emerge from a pan. Above all else, her sense of the wrongness of all of the family’s previous bloodletting began to dissipate.

After a few months of biweekly and reciprocal visits between Daniels and Sam, Daniels took a step forward in their affairs. He suggested that parent and boyfriend should meet together. Harpool suspected that something else was up, but Mrs. Harpool, in an unconscious act of displacement, found herself blushing at the thought that a plea for Sam’s hand might be underway. To her dismay, the latter was untrue. Daniels requested nothing more than the chance to learn more about how the birds were raised; after all, he had hinted, they would, as both family units desired, probably one day join their vocational concerns.
The two men met over coffee at a local diner. Seated atop the slickened and darkened indentations of the booth's bench where many a dusty and blue-jeaned buttock had rested, Daniels listened with a virulent intensity to Harpool's descriptions of the duties, costs, and joys of the farm, and, finally, Daniels asked to visit in order to see it all for himself. As this had been part of Harpool's agenda in the first place, the two men retired to the homestead.

On arrival, the two men found an eighteen wheeled truck backed into the drive, its engine still smoldering. Harpool parked his pickup behind it, killed the engine, and the two climbed out. Mrs. Harpool, in their absence, had just given up on trying to innocently entertain one of the buyer-salesmen who periodically attended the open-slatted, modified cattle trucks which took the birds away, and now the truck's driver sat on Harpool's porch, smoking and biding his own time, reflecting on his per diem, some sixteen cigarette butts in various stages of ashen death circling his feet, a jar of Mrs. Harpool's sun tea beside him. The buyer-salesman, once a used car dealer who'd broken a tooth in a foolish experiment in opening a beer bottle, rose from a seat beside him and stepped toward the pickup.

In boots that glistened, even in the dust, he ambled up in a learned gait as the two men stretched out the discomforts of their own drive. He held out a hand. "Mr. Harpool," he said.

"Sir," said Harpool, taking his hand. They shook and Harpool gestured at Daniels with an unconcerned nod. "Daniels."

"Mr. Daniels," said the dealer, who freed Harpool and greeted Daniels. He leaned back and sidled a foot forward in the dirt. "Well?"

The driver flicked a butt into the dust, rose and smothered it with a toe.

"Well?" he said again, grinning, this time upholding the boot, his ankle bent to reveal the inside calf.
Harpool looked at the boot, cocking his head. "Nice," he mumbled for no reason at all save that that was what people did.

The buyer bent, pulling a handkerchief from his back pocket, then dusted the boot's top. He rose again. "Gen-u-ine," he grinned without self-concern.

"Ostrich?" Daniels asked, struck both by the pride of the bearer and the close-knit nibs of what must have once been quills.

"Surely," the buyer beamed, his broken tooth hovering over his lower lip. He looked to his left and right as if to ensure their solitude. On the porch, the driver lit another cigarette from a Zippo. The lighter snapped shut with a metallic sound and he dropped it into his shirt pocket. The buyer leaned closer to Daniels, "If that's what you say." He lifted an index finger to his lips. "Shhhhh." He winked. "At's how we package 'em."

Daniels stared.

"Emu," Harpool explained to him without immediate judgment.

"Passes for the article itself," the buyer added, proud and nonchalant.

"I see," Daniels nodded.

Harpool, now a bit disgusted with the impropriety of it all, looked at the bored driver, and then at the darkening mess at the man's feet.

"So," the buyer spoke.

Harpool looked back.

"Hear tell you picked us out some dandies today."

"Did," said Harpool.

"That's what the missus tells me."

"Didn't lie," he said.

The three men stood uncomfortably together for a few moments as Harpool seemed to ponder some greater issue in his own mind.
“So,” said the buyer again.

Harpool turned his head aside and continued to stand stiffly, his head angled downward.

“Mr. H.?”

“Well,” he finally mumbled, slowly, with one glance over at the buyer’s boots, almost as if he was searching for a lost friend in the grayish gleam. He looked away.

“Guess we better get at it.”

The buyer lifted a hand and flagged the driver. “Show me what we got,” he said.

The driver ignored him.

“This way,” Harpool, turned, directing them both though the pens, although from any angle of entrance, they were all too lucidly arranged to require his guidance at all. He stepped down the driveway and toward the path leading to the rear of the house.

Inside, her hands wadded in her apron, Mrs. Harpool watched them through the window.

The driver tossed his last, unfinished cigarette into the dust, stubbed it out with the same toe and finally rose from the porch.

They entered the gate that led down the long first aisle between the pens, the buyer at the rear, and he again signaled to the driver who’d moved himself to the back of the rig. The man silently began to open the trailer, pulling its doors back and latching them open, and then, groaning, he pulled the ramp up and out from its stowing slot, extending it down into the dirt. Inside the shadow-slatted interior, it smelled of sawdust, bird, and wastes. He walked away and followed the two into the runs.

Next to the men who walked, standing pen to pen like dogs along a kennel or puppies in a pound, quirky and twitching, their cocked heads and overlarge dark eyes below overlarge and thick lashes, the birds began to dart into the chain-linked corners. Only a few of them fled entirely to the rear, usually the youngest alone. Most came
forward, their bodies bent low under their black and gray plumage, their necks extended as if in greeting.

With a thumb, never looking at the birds themselves, Harpool gestured at the chosen. “Selma,” he said. “Trudy, Pete, Walker, One-toe, Borris, Dahlia,” and so on. Behind him, the driver, who had caught up with them, opened the pens as indicated. The birds, momentarily backing away from him, pecked at little or nothing on the floor, and then cautiously, jerkily, stepped into the aisle. Next to Harpool, the buyer, who had pulled a small spiral notebook from his shirt pocket, quickly noted the names that Harpool was giving him.

The men reached the far end of the compound with its taller, barbed wire-topped fence, turned down the connecting aisle, and proceeded up the next row. Harpool continued to spit out names, the driver still opened doors, and the buyer still scrawled. Daniels meandered along nearby, bored, but amused at the sheer bulk of the product at hand. The group did this for two more aisles, each of its members beginning to sweat into the dust, and Harpool stopped abruptly, some two steps before the pen that lay closest to his own house.

They all turned and looked back to see the birds jammed up into the aisle behind them. Sixty-three emu had followed Harpool as they’d walked, and all sixty-three now stood and pecked and scratched like concert-goers in front of an unopened auditorium. Daniels, shocked, and now frightened at what looked to be an impending tragedy, muzzled his way past his future father-in-law, and then, safely behind him, stared at the bobbing sea of black birds and spindly necks.

“Damn,” said the buyer.

The driver scratched at his own slightly sunburned neck.

Harpool, the stoic, placed both knuckling hands on his hips.
"We did it again," the buyer laughed. He reached back and prodded at Mark’s ribcage. "Every time. Always start at the wrong end of the pens. Like a clogged drain back there." He laughed again and shoved the spiral back into his pocket. "Got to swim back on through them reptiles."

"Birds," Harpool corrected, unthinking.

"Whatever," he said. "So, if I remember correctly, last time, we put you on point, Mr. Harpool."

"And," the driver suddenly spoke up. "Last time we couldn’t get out for them damn birds nuzzlin’ their way up to ‘im."

Daniels, though frightened at everything around him, managed a faint grin. "So,” said Harpool. "Guess that means I better bring up the rear."

"Till we get back to the trailer," the driver muttered. "Then you best go on up inside."

Harpool nodded. He turned to his future son-in-law. "Get on up," he told him, and stepped aside.

Daniels again stared into the thick clump of birds, a clump as wide as the average hallway, as long as the interior of a seven-twenty-seven. They jostled. They pecked. They scratched. With heads as large as softballs, beaks as big as a shepherd’s snout, legs as long and more muscular than his own, and brains the size of kidney beans, there were very few more repugnant things in the world that he could think of to do.

"Get up now," Harpool prompted, reaching out, clutching his elbow and shoving him toward the encroaching mass. "‘Fore they get to peck’n at each other."

"Or us," laughed the buyer. "Could go turnin’ on us."

Harpool frowned at him. "Never do that. Never."
"Sure, Mr. Harpool," the buyer grinned. "Go on Daniels. Do this one thing and we'll never have to test your manliness again." He laughed aloud.

Daniels took five halting steps, passing two birds, each of which glared at him threateningly. He sidled past three more, his back against the pens' leading edges, and took a glance back. "Couldn't we just climb over that fence?" he wondered.

"Get up now," Harpool told him, his voice taking on the edge it had so often had with his children. "I told you: get on up."

"Up the center," the buyer snickered. "Less likely to get mashed into the chain links."

Daniels turned away from the men and single file they began to follow behind him, trailing in his body's wake. He outheld his hands before him, palms out-facing, instinctively protecting his genitals, and he touched a few birds, gently shoving them to one side.

"Get along now," he heard Harpool's voice behind him, irritated. Mistakenly assuming that Harpool had spoken to the encircling mass of birds, he began to mutter the words repeatedly as he walked into the thickening mass. "Get along now," he whispered while touching the twitching bodies, the stalk heads rising and bobbing before him, level with his chest. "Get along now," he spoke whenever a bird's glance caught his eye. "Get along now," he quivered as a wide-toed foot would land heavily near his own.

Behind him, he could hear the buyer and driver laughing and joking at his own expense.

After some twenty-six slow feet from where he'd started his journey, one of the birds, noticing a strange tuft of brown leather on the ground before it, struck down with a short and violent peck. He froze, wide-eyed, hands still outspread as the bird struck at his foot again. He prodded at the leathery neck. It struck again. Foot raised, he danced away hopping, his back and buttocks resting on one more black-feathered body behind.
him. The body moved. He stumbled forward. The birds jostled behind him and before him, trying to avoid his fall. Clutching, he caught himself with his fingers shoved into the chain links of the right side of the aisle and then pulled himself up, grasp by grasp, until he stood flat, his face somewhat painfully pressed into the links. He opened his mouth and breathed.

Behind him, the two men laughed obnoxiously while Harpool silently scowled.

"Looks a sight," said the buyer.

"Does," said the driver.

"Like a monkey at the zoo."

"Best not toss him no peanuts."

"Boy," said Harpool. "Get down off'n that fence and head on up that there aisle."

Daniels opened his eyes.

Harpool now stood behind him; the man reached out, caught his shirt and tugged it until it untucked from his pants and began to tear along one seam. He released the fence, inhaled, closed his eyes again, and, guiding himself with the fingers of his right hand as they bumped painfully along the fence's mesh, he began to walk with little more than faith and Harpool's prompting behind him.

Forty-seven jostled steps later, he emerged from the birdclump, opened his eyes, and fell to a squat.

The driver and buyer emerged behind him, took a look at the birds, back at Daniels squat on the ground and laughed at him even again. The buyer stepped over and clapped his shoulder. "Worse than a day at the mall." The two men passed him and proceeded along the fence line.

Harpool caught him under one sweaty armpit, lifted him upright, and shoved him after them.
“Maybe,” said Harpool from behind him, the birds now noisily scuffling along in trail. “That jewelry box stuff done taken somethin’ away from you.”

Daniels nodded, his head light, his feet heavy. “Never,” he said. “Seen anything like that. Never.”

“Like bein’ in an ant bed,” Harpool muttered. “Get used to it.”

“Maybe,” said Daniels.

“Don’t worry none,” Harpool suddenly soothed, remembering his own initial trepidation’s about the strangeness of the business and its constituents. “It’ll come to you.”

“Maybe.”

The strange parade made its way along the fence until it touched on the first aisle, and then continued until it reached the truck’s ramp. There, driver, buyer, and Harpool began to load the birds into their tiny, new, and transitional pens. After an hour or so, all of the birds were loaded, and only one stall lay empty.

Harpool climbed from the truck as the buyer stood on the ground at its base, hands along the truck bed, his head leaned to peer into the interior, counting. He leaned out. Harpool dusted his hands on his jeans. The driver lit another cigarette and lifted himself to a seat next to the upper end of the ramp. Uninterested, he looked away. Daniels, embarrassed, frowned into the truck, unsure about what to do with himself.

“Well,” said the buyer. He pulled his notebook from his pocket. “Got room for one more.” He glanced at Daniels, then shrugged at him. “Send Daniels to get it.”

Daniels’ face slackened.

“‘At’s enough,” said Harpool.

Misunderstanding what had just happened, Daniels sighed in relief.

“Oh no,” said the buyer. “Can’t go wastin’ space like that. Paid for it.”
“Can,” said Harpool.

“No, no. no,” said the buyer. “Costs on the margin.” He smiled. “Got that one bird. You know.”

“Ibis,” Harpool said, a bit wistfully.

“Ain’t layin’ too well anymore, is she?”

Harpool slowly shook his head.

“Gettin’ to be mighty stout.”

He nodded, just as slowly.

“Looks to me like she’s gettin’ to be an extra mouth to feed.”

Harpool looked at the ground before him, the jumbled prints of the birds’ feet in the dust. “No bother,” he mumbled.

“Come on, Harpool,” the man wheedled. “Costs on the margin.” He winked at Daniels. “Told you when we started up this whole she-bang that you’d best not be namin’ them birds. Told you to do what you did with them cows. ‘Just give ‘em numbers,’ I told you. ‘Just hang numbers on them pens and farm ‘em all out quick.’”

Daniels, distraught at what he saw happening, and a little bit confused at the revelation, after all, Sam had told him that none of her father’s animals had ever had a name, not even their dogs, which were known respectively as “boy,” “you,” and “dog,” looked at Harpool, then at the buyer.

“Out quick.’ ‘At’s what I told you.”

“First,” Harpool mumbled, embarrassed. “She was the first one.”

“No sir, never give ‘em a name.”

“Shut up,” said Harpool. “Don’t know nothin’. ”

“Do,” said the buyer. The driver tossed his cigarette away from the truck, then began watching his own legs as they dangled. “I rightly do.”
“By hand,” Harpool mumbled. “Fed each and every one of them birds by hand. Watered ‘em. Need me.”

And suddenly, deviating from his position as observer, Daniels intruded. “Good God,” he whispered to no one at all, but in a tone of voice more contemptuous than otherwise.


Daniels, taken aback, let his mouth fall open and then shook his head. “Nothing,” he answered.

Harpool took one thick finger and jabbed him in the chest. “Better be nothin’,” he frowned. “Best be.”

“They’re just,” shrugged Daniels, nodding over his shoulder into the truck. “Just a bunch of birds. Big, ugly birds.”

Stunned at the callousness of Daniels’ previously human heart, Harpool gathered himself fully upright, inhaling, turned slightly, and, excluding the occasional bout with one of his children, did something that he hadn’t done since his senior year in high school. He struck Daniels full on the jaw, squarely, knocking the younger man into the dust and tracks and bird waste.

The buyer, never one to miss a signal, jumped back and away from the men; the driver leapt from his seat and backed as well.

Daniels, flabbergasted, shook his own head several times, rose to a knee, and groggily peeped up at his future father-in-law who remained hovering above him.

“You’d best,” the man said down to him, both fists clenched, both feet planted. “Take that back, boy. Lessen you want a touch more wisdom.”

“Hey, look,” said Daniels, touching his own jaw and wiggling it slightly. He grimaced and fell to a seat on the ground. “I didn’t mean anything by it at all. Just--.”
“Right you didn’t,” said Harpool. He turned toward the buyer. “Just take her,” he muttered, his fists loosening. He turned quickly toward the house. “Just you take her.” And he walked away as quickly as he could.

As he passed Daniels, who cowered intelligently below him, Daniels could see that the man’s blue eyes had begun to well with tears.

He rose from the dirt and dusted himself, head shaking.

The buyer took a few steps toward him, leaned forward and gave his lapels a quick dusting, helping to straighten his collar, then shook his hand. Daniels blinked at him, his jaw already beginning to throb and stiffen.

“Thank you, friend,” said the buyer. “I like to never have gotten that bird off him.”

Daniels frowned.


Daniels nodded.

“Reckon so,” he said. “Don’t try ice packs. No sir. Just keep it loose.”

“Loose,” said Daniels.

“Sure ‘nough,” he said. “Do lots of talkin’. Best thing for it. Enough used lemons sold, you learn that sort of thing.” He grinned and flagged the driver. “Heard the man,” he called. “Go get her.”

The driver nodded and walked off into the pens.

“So,” the buyer went on. “You an in-law?”

“Hope to be.”

“Ah.” He looked at him. He clucked his tongue over the broken tooth and let it rest there a moment. “Just maybe,” he smiled. “Ole Harpool’s needin’ someone to give him a hand with this. You know,” he winked. “A hand a bit firmer than his own.”
Daniels took a quick look toward the house, its windows dark, the sun tea jar still propped up next to the porch post. He nodded. "Maybe."

"Hope to be seein' more of you," the buyer told him.

"Undoubtedly."

"Thanks again," he said. "Get along up now," he called to the driver who ushered the doomed bird out into the aisle. "Got to make Fort Worth by five."

The driver lifted a brow, then shrugged.

After the two men had departed with their ungainly cargo, Daniels felt some degree of reservation about what was obviously an altered relationship to the Harpools, and therefore elected to leave. He stood by the pickup until Harpool returned, unspeaking, and drove him back to the diner for his own car. He planned, for the moment, to avoid immediate contact with the parents, but kept a positive attitude about the future. The best strategy that he could come up with was that once contact was reestablished he should avoid the subjects of the terminal blow or the soon to be late "Ibis" altogether. Perhaps the balms of time and distance would moderate the passions to which Harpool was apparently inclined.

Mrs. Harpool confirmed this and relieved him of all fears when she came forward that same evening. With a bit of motherly concern for his jaw and what was apparently a peace-offering of what were warm blueberry muffins, she led him to understand that the events of that day had been provoked by Harpool's unprecedented passion for his work. There had been a gathering cloud of unusual stresses building over the period of months during which Harpool had personally tended his wards, and this had been coupled with a burst of moral doubt inspired by the character of his buyer and by that of the boot manufacturer as well. He had discovered that the boot-maker, ostrich claims aside, had also begun to sell the birds, once skinned, to certain poultry packaging firms who passed them off as "turkey parts," or "chicken-by-products" which went into a variety of human
as well as animal foods. While the money had been consistently good, Harpool daily struggled with the thought that he needed to somehow cut himself off from his current middleman. If such were to be the case, it only made sense for him to become his own partner, tending the stock, slaughtering it himself, and shipping it wherever it needed to be shipped. Issues of costs, the need to hire help, and the problem of establishing a personal market aside, the thought of personally butchering his hand-reared animals now sickened him. When he’d lashed out at his future son-in-law, as Mrs. Harpool saw it, he had been lashing out at himself, at the world of the broker, at the world of the corrupt, and at a world which required that the dominant animals eat or clothe themselves with the submissive.

Daniels respected the offerings, took the explanations to heart, and explained that all was now water under the bridge. The blow, he told the overly generous Mrs. Harpool, was forgotten, the entire incident a thing that had never happened. He explained that he hadn’t realized how deep Harpool’s personal investment had been in his own stock, that he had had no idea about the moral quandaries which confronted the man, and that he knew nothing about the difficulties of future finance with which the man wrestled.

All the while, of course, he kept his own personal interests in mind. The capital required for a project such as that that Harpool was envisioning would be substantial, and while the issue of fraudulently labeled products and parts could be legally troublesome, that practice had its own lucrative appeal. Beyond connecting skins to display cases, he had had little thought about the remaining portions of the birds. Now, he saw that there were plenty of other matters to consider. Fat content came to mind. Health considerations arose. And, surely, there was some Native American trinket shop somewhere that would buy the feathers once the birds had been plucked, calling them eagle or hawk.
In the end, Mrs. Harpool went home, her burden considerably lightened, and she informed her husband of Daniels’ magnanimity and humility. Harpool, in turn, forgot Daniels’ displays of weakness in the pens, and everyone was once again happy.

As to his relationship to the daughter, that was another story.

Since the issue of the blow to the jaw might still interfere with plans, were it not made abundantly clear that he truly had forgiven it, he and Sam put forth a redoubled effort to display their own uniform and mutual attachment to each other. They met for evenings at the local ice cream shop, spent nights out in the romantic twinklings of fireflies and stars alike, spent a few mornings sharing unhurried walks along the slowly restocked emu pens or atop railroad rails, and pointedly made effort to hold hands whenever and wherever possible.

Unfortunately for both of them, as they dwelled in a community significantly short on the interposing attractions of the modern world, their acting, by virtue of the sheer weight of constant conjunction, began to get the best of them. When apart, the absence of the other was notably painful; when together, the presence of the other was notably easeful. The two, in the midst of their self-interested ends, became increasingly less self-interested.

When Daniels found the pressing necessities of business once again forcing his return to New York, a two week adventure designed to further legitimize the stature of the family firm, the lonely nights in his Fifty-third street hotel room were almost too much to bear. He phoned home with news of the events of his dull business days, asked about the Harpools, made certain to announce the next day’s complete itinerary, and, as much as was possible in the language of double-speak, to communicate his own fidelity to Sam. While he couldn’t be certain of her own activities, he wanted her to somehow understand that now was not the time for their planned falling out. There were no New York harlots with which she had yet to contend.
The trip was uneventful, save the fact that one more chain of stores had taken his family’s products under “very serious” consideration, giving a wink and a nudge toward an expiring contract four months away, and save the fact that his last evening in town resulted in one of the island’s well-promoted rituals.

Daniels, momentarily lost in study of a subway map’s intricate web of colored neurons and dendritic connectives, marked himself in his lip-chewing angst and uncertainty as a traveler rather than a local, and fell under the watchful eyes of a couple of predators. Ignoring the red-capped “guardian angels”, the pair followed him down a few steps in the wrong direction, offered him advice, and then emptied his pockets of all possessions, including a Swiss army knife, at which they laughed, two-hundred and twenty dollars in traveler’s checks, and sixteen dollars and ninety cents of cold, hard cash. With no desire to leave him with a forever fouled vision of the city, and under no predisposition toward seeming overly avaricious, the two left him his slotted hotel room key and knife, clapped him on the shoulders and wished him a fine and profitable time for the remainder of his stay.

He, in turn, replaced the lost checks, thought very little of the cash, found himself more angry at their mockery of his knife, after all, it did have a corkscrew and pair of tweezers attached, than at the threat to his life, and finally finished the trip with an eye toward silence on the entire event.

When he got home, he checked in on the business, ran a few figures past the firm’s officials, and took off to visit Sam. Two bottles of champagne secreted into a picnic basket, he took her out to a local lake, and they dined and drank to his financial success, the Harpool family oblivious to the presence of alcohol and the real nature of the meeting.

Half a bottle into that meal, Daniels, despite his vow to keep all dark, in bits and pieces, began to tell Sam the whole story. Evening woodpeckers giggled in the trees
nearby, a few killdeer pleaded with each other off in the marshes along the lake's banks, and the trees stood unmoving in the absence of any breeze. They laughed about it all, their cheeks flushed, their ears a bit warm, and their respective bodies loosely stretched side by side atop the flat warmth of a synthetic and green-checkered blanket. He avoided mention of his own emotional response to the insult of his knife, slurred a good portion of what he said, and occasionally slipped into something of syntactic confusion, but, admirably enough, he kept the whole story comical, with himself as the butt of his own joke.

The picnic basket lay next to them throughout all of this; a candle was lit upon its top; and the lake lay flat, darkened along its own edges; at times it seemed to lap at itself as fish struck at a few early mosquitoes.

"Yeah," he told her. "Told me to enjoy my stay."

Sam, assuming the suggestion to be embellishment, gave it a hearty laugh, her canines protruding. "You wish them well?"

"Did," he said. Somewhere up beyond his head, in the relative obscurity of the surrounding trees and on the ground, he heard something rustle in the leaves, perhaps a late-foraging sparrow or early wandering rodent. "Wished them a pleasant stay in the flophouse."

She laughed again.

It rustled again, crisply, almost twitching.

"Never been so scared in all my life," he said.

Sam pulled herself up into a lotus on the blanket, lifted the bottle and took a long drag from its neck. She set it down and wiped her mouth with a forearm. "Even more than with those damned birds?"

He opened an eye and watched her, her long hair loose, now fallen to her shoulders. "Never," he said. "Nothing is as scary as those, those--."
"Reptiles," she said, pulling her hair behind an ear.

"Dinosaurs," he said closing his eye again.

She sniffed and looked down into her lap. She lifted the bottle and momentarily cradled it like a brandy snifter, then shook it until the froth doubled. "At the brim," she murmured. "Beaded bubbles."

"Hey," Daniels grinned and then sighed. "To the lees."

She stared at him as he shifted onto his side and rested his head on a palm uplifted at the elbow. "Not as backwoods as you think."

"I knew that," she answered. She blinked a few times, then looked out at the lake. There were long lightened patches along its surface now, outspreading ripples that eventually flattened into a darkened sheen. She inhaled and sighed.

"Sam," he said, watching her, the champagne talking more than it should. "We don't have to do any of this."

She nodded.

"There are other firsts in this world."

She nodded again.

Above them, an evening sparrow began dancing along the limbs, cheeping as it did so. The candle flickered on the basket.

"He may never come back."

She blinked, and, equally under the influence of drink, her head a bit wobbly on its neck, forgot to resist. She nodded slowly. "Might not," she agreed.

The sparrow fluttered away. Over the lake, ten or twelve nighthawks began wheeling, batlike, their voices short and vaguely reminiscent of cicadae.

Daniels, stretching, pulled himself up into a lotus as well. He took the bottle from her lap and drank three long gulps, the liquid seeping down one mouth's corner. It
burned for a moment in his throat, then warmed his belly as he wiped his chin. He sighed. "Suppose not," he mumbled.

"Suppose," she said. She took the bottle back tossed her head back and drank the remainder of its contents off. After a few seconds, she tossed it out onto the leaf-scatter that surrounded the blanket.

Never one to fall behind at anything, Daniels pulled the second bottle out, fiddled for a few seconds with the foil wrapper, and finally managed to twist the plastic cork free with little or no significant pop. He leaned back and took a few swallows from its neck.

A fish splashed out on the lake, again whitening the surface in a series of tight ripples.

"But then again," he said. "You never really know, do you?"

She shook her head, leaned over and took the bottle from him, then sighed and took a long, gurgling swallow.

"Careful there," struck by her sudden change in heart, Daniels warned her. "This ain't sody pop," he mocked.

"Right," she scowled, shoving the bottle toward him.

"No need to let some crippled kid ruin the rest of your life."

Squinting through the evening and over the candle at him, she smiled. "Watch it."

"Ah," Daniels told her. "So it goes."

"It does," she told him.

"But," a bit more drunkenly he told her too loudly. His head fell back a bit, his chin angled itself toward the horizon. "There is always room for change." Now, more passionately, he let his head fall back into its proper place and peeped back at her over the basket and candle. He swallowed and lifted a brow as his head wobbled with ever so slight a tremble. "There is always room."
She lifted a lip's corner over one canine, and lifted the bottle in toast. "To change," she finally said.

Inspired at what now, in his current condition, seemed to be an open proclamation of love, he lifted his hand as if it was clenched around an invisible glass outheld for a toast and rapped his knuckles against the bottle's thickened side as she held it. She drank. He took the bottle and drank as well.

"There," he finally said, three quarters of the second bottle already gone. "To change again!" he toasted, even more loudly. This time, she feigned the glass and rapped the bottle with her own knuckles.

Somewhere off along the lake's far shore, two fishermen exchanged bawdy jokes, wrestled with their tangling lines, and spat phlegm onto the surface, all with an eye to attracting fish.

"I." Daniels, now discovering that particular lucidity inspired by the absence of sobriety, found himself slurring his speech more often than not, grinned. "Have never spent such a fine evening with anyone. Ever." He smiled painfully at her.

Samantha, equally inspired by the same essential causes, grinned back at him, as dizzy and light-headed as she might have been had she just stepped from a roller coaster. Suddenly feeling the onset of intimacies unlooked for, she turned to him, opened her mouth, and belched.

Aware of what had just passed between them, Daniels, his eyes, now half-shuttered, outspat a short and saliva-filled laugh, gathered himself up, shoulders back, head proud and high, swallowed twice, opened his own mouth and belched an answer.

Both fell forward onto their own laps, giggling uproariously, entirely unaware of what was really happening.
Eventually, the laughter passed. Sam raised herself, stared over the candle at him as he wiped his mouth on his shoulder and clumsily licked his lips. "I," she said. "Have never spent so fine an evening with anyone. Ever."

Both fell to giggling again.

Across the lake, one of the fishermen twisted the hook from the mouth of an under-sized bass, considered keeping it anyway, and, finally, as it wiggled desperately suffocating in his hand, tossed it back into the lake with a splash. His partner lamented the loss, and shrugged, his own line again tangled in the complex snag of a set of exposed roots along the bank.

Sam and Daniels sat quietly again after the splash, each smiling, each managing to sit upright with more effort than was customary. Behind them, the mysterious thing, an as yet unidentified object in the great equation of their relationship, which had ceased to crackle some twenty or thirty minutes previously, crackled again.

Daniels turned clumsily toward it.

"What the hell is that?" Sam demanded drunkenly.

"Don't know," he answered. "But," he said with a bit of machismo flair, rolling onto a knee and pulling himself upright. He staggered a few short steps toward the sound. "I aim to find out." He kicked at the leaves, hesitantly, and took a few paces more, bending down in order to see the ground through the darkness.

Whatever it was fell silent.

He continued to study the earth underfoot. "Right here," he told her.

Behind him, one arm atop the basket, Sam leaned her head upon that arm and peered at him, her ear uncomfortably flattened. "Careful," she giggled. "Might be a snake." The candle, having burned an incredibly long time, flickered.

"Right," he said, taking her seriously. He kicked at the leaves and straightened upright. "Come on out you, you... copperhead," he muttered. The request went
unanswered. "All right," he sneered down. "Enough of this charade." He walked forward another two paces, found his face suddenly wrapped in the lightly silken strands of a spider's web, jerked, two-handed clutched at the clinging invisibility along his scalp line and cheeks, fell backward, and finally sat down abruptly, still pulling the web from his face as the mysterious animal rustled off and away into the woods.

"Damn," he said, both palms flat in the leaves.

"Get him?" she asked.

"Nah," he answered rising. He waddled back to the blanket and fell to a seat, the broken leaves which had clung to his pants now clattering its surface. "Plum got away."

"Let's drink to that," she suggested.

"Yes," he said.

She lifted the bottle. They toasted the freedom of the escaped animal. The fishermen continued to fish. Daniels felt something tiny, inauspicious, creeping between and atop his arm hairs. He outheld the arm, noticed the round, speckle-backed body of a tick, thrust his arm out, and spat out a sound unequaled in its clear expressions of terror.

Shocked, on all fours, and suddenly alive with the outpouring of adrenaline such a sound inspires, Sam rushed clumsily around the basket, paused before him, and, her fingers probing, squinted at his offending and extended arm. She found the problem, lifted it away between finger and thumb and tossed it into the night. "Good God," she said. "What a weenie."

"Look sister," he drunkenly told her, his index finger propped out and dancing between what he perceived to be two distinct images of her face. "I got guts. I got more guts," he spat. And now, finally giving up on determining which was the real Sam and which was the phantom, he pointed his finger heavenward. "More guts," he said, pausing again as if thoughtful. "More guts in my little--," and his voice trailed away.
With that, overwhelmed with booze, beauty, and the shocks of sudden terror, Mark Daniels simply slumped over backward, flat upon the blanket. For a few seconds he stiffened; he raised his head an inch from the blanket, and then fell, flatly and liquidly loose, mouth opened, his arms thrown out limp at his sides.

Sam stared down at him, again on all fours, prodded twice at his cheek, then fell to a seat next to his head. "Damn," she said to the candle. She took the bottle and drank a few more swallows.

By the time that she returned home, sobered, having returned Daniels to his house, and thoroughly repulsed at having had to witness the ugly out-pourings of his stomach, the family was alive with the knowledge of how late the evening had run.

While both elder Harpools disapproved of the hour of her return, neither waited up to see her clumsy entrance; instead, they lay awake until they heard her plod into her own room, and then, upon hearing an answering stillness, both whispered together of the night's significance.

Within four days, most of the town had accepted the idea that marriage would soon be forthcoming, and the revitalized rumors down at the D.Q. had it that the marriage would take place within the next three months, with or without shotgun.
CHAPTER XIV

THE GOLDEN CALF

Of course, back in school, neither Lenny nor Dub had any initial idea that any of the above had transpired. Their own intellectual assumptions were that a rescue of the undoubtedly oppressed Harpool daughter would be unthinkable until her former roommate had received word of its possibility. Both young men knew that the day would come, continued their classes, now that the group had been so rudely disbanded, with an average and occasionally failing effort, and both, despite their own constant attendance upon each other, felt a loneliness unprecedented.

When word of the now widely publicized betrothal did finally reach them, by virtue of a note from Mrs. Harpool to that former roommate, Lenny momentarily took it upon himself to widen his studies in party-party-party, and Dub found himself dwelling more and more upon the beauties of the missing Sam, all dental protrusions and implied conflicts with his intimate aside. Neither considered the source of the information at hand, and neither took it upon himself to make any effort to substantiate the claims firsthand.

Instead, now that they no longer found themselves dormitory icons of youthful virility, the two detached themselves from university housing altogether. They began to associate with a culture that ran counter to that of the businesslike ethic of the dormitory, and took up residence in a local co-op. The house, little more than a tax write off for its absentee landlord, had been lovingly raised from the good Texas soil some hundred and twenty years prior, all as testimony to the undying devotion of a young wagon dealer for his petticoated fiancee, and it now stood in significant disrepair. Two-storied, wooden
planked, lawnless, and covered in the thick fragmentation of many a new coat of paint, it was a neighborhood eyesore and was rumored to be the source of a recent rat infestation in nearby properties.

In the interior, on the far side of a set of double-swinging entry doors, neither of which bore a lock any longer, there was a living room loaded with the pale salmon colors of furniture manufactured in the nineteen fifties, its space-heater nestled in one corner of what was now a sealed fireplace, and a nearby "dance-room", empty of any furniture save the stereo system, its wooden floors, a mantle-piece and fireplace, a room which lay broken from its foundation along one interior wall so that the whole room stood at a rather propitious slope, at least as far as dancing was concerned. The interior also bore five bedrooms; four were upstairs. Two of these were tiny and held little more than beds and piles of clothing, and one lay downstairs, an addition to the house some seventeen years before, long and carpeted on the far side of the dance room, the heat generated in a register underfoot along one wall. Along with the bedrooms, there was a parlor upstairs, a room carpeted by a multicolored and spiral rug and adorned with a sequence of multi-tiered and hand built wooden lofts; in its corner there also lay a fireplace, attached to the sealed opening below and sharing the flue, and one long wall was lined with tall windows upon which to gaze at the more legitimate neighbors. There was also a kitchen below, gray tiled, with a stove and tiled countertop, a refrigerator bearing a series of liberal bumper stickers, and a small table, coupled with four folding, vinyl padded chairs.

The whole place was hot when it was warm, cold when it was cool, drafty, and smelled of the slow mold of rotting wood, but for its residents, late hippies and hippie-wannabees, it had always been home.

Lenny and Dub moved into the downstairs bedroom, threw one mattress against the corner of a wall, and built another two-by foured loft on which to throw a second mattress. They ate macaroni and cheese mixed with cans of vegetables, instant rice mixed with cans
of vegetables, and enormous quantities of peanut butter, none of which was mixed with cans of vegetables. The other four house members ate in much the same fashion. Their nights were noisy with dancing, hedonistic bouts of chaotic rumbling, short, more often than not terminated by crawling into bed fully clothed, the simplicities of sleeping bags providing all necessary cover. Sometimes, before bed, all residents assembled on the roof that sloped over the front porch, climbing out through the gable window, and together they watched the traffic as it ambled along below them in bursts, or they stared reflectively at the blackened and limbless trunk of what had once been an oak that had shaded the walk through the front yard. There, on the rooftop, former residents had hallucinated with the casual ease of the time period in which they had dwelt, had talked of "reality" and civil disruption. Now, without hallucination, they talked of life, God, the universe, politics, and of the intermittent need to get more ice cream or beer.

With its residents learning to openly hug each other, it was all a pleasant enough life, punctuated only by exams and the long and easeful habits of the unemployed. Some were bound to eventually practice medicine, others for the bar, and others for the disreputable vocations of the managerial class, but as yet, none of those tomorrows haunted any of them.

After some three and a half months of this lifestyle, one of the household's members, on discussion of one more orgiastic feast, suggested that the dance room's slope seemed to be growing even more skewed from the horizontal plane than it had been only a few weeks before. The others, while they had been afraid to openly admit it, noted that they'd been making the same observation. While the house seemed to be standing, after all, with age comes a certain beauty in persistence alone, all readily admitted that at the current rate of progress, the dance room and correlative, unused rear porch, much like the coastline of California, would soon rupture into an open break with the rest of the house.
With visions of a broadening chasm and party-goers vanishing into its depths, all parties agreed that something had to be done.

Propping the house up on its sinking foundational posts was out of the question. No one had any money, and no one could imagine attempting the undertaking without professional assistance. Canceling all future dancing events was also out of the question. The whole function of the house would be put into peril. Telling the landlord? Well, that invited his attention and likewise invited official recognition of the problem, including the looming potentiality for condemnation and temporary, if not permanent, eviction.

"Well," finally Dub pondered, aware also of the fact that the front porch room had begun to exhibit the same symptoms of structural disease as the dance room. "We could try to figure out why it's happening."

As universities tend to promote that sort of causal curiosity, they each agreed to the wisdom of this first step. They also agreed that a relevant acquaintance, named Wade, could probably do the best job at this; he had, as far as they knew, spent the two previous summers framing single-story dwellings in his own home town.

Two days later, four days before the scheduled party, Wade walked through the house, "ahem"-ing and "ah-ha"-ing with dignity and distinction as he probed about its corners, stamping here, and whacking there until he'd made a determination. "Chimney's doin' it," he told the assembled household. "All of those bricks are breaking it right down the spine."

Each of the residents eyed the other, and then, with all of the oblivious trust of a patient before a doctor, they all nodded in concerted approval.

"So what do we do?" Lenny asked him.

"Well," he sniffed, shrugging. "Tear it out of there."

"Yeah, right," Lenny doubted him.
"Got to be done," he mumbled, shrugging again.

Leaving Wade to his own private thoughts, the household assembled in the living room, debated the possibility of carrying out such an enterprise, concluded that it could and should be done, and opted to throw the old bricks out of the window that opened onto their front roof and lawn. From there, they further concluded, they could carry the bricks to the now swampy and leaking storm cellar out back, toss them in, and be done with it all. If they carried it all out at night, not even the neighbors would know what had been done, building codes, disgruntled landlords, and permits be damned.

And so it was decided.

With Wade at the fore, they met that evening, sent him spelunking up through the fireplace and chimney of the second floor, and formed a long gang by which he passed clumps of broken brick and long-loosened mortar down and out, along the upper hallway, through the opened window, and finally out into a wide pile of red dusty rubble near the base of the dead oak.

Someone, after half an hour of drudgery, suggested that they augment the experience with a few bloody marys, and before anyone knew what was happening, they were working at a phenomenal rate.

Four hours later, the entire chimney had been removed from the house. The second story's mantle had been torn from its moorings and now lay against a wall; a gaping hole stood open and square in the parlor room's corner; and the first floor dance room's fireplace opened into a cavity through which they might stare up into the darkened hollows of wooden planks and gray dust that led all of the way up into the attic. They joked about using the shaft as a new dumbwaiter, about establishing a set of pulleys in the attic and connecting them to some box by which to carry beans, rice, or drinks from the kitchen to the parlor, laughed at the several successful attempts to climb up and down from dance room to the second floor, and finally realized that the parlor hole was life-threatening,
especially when their disreputable habits, as evidenced by the empty pitchers and celery stalks now lying around the house, were taken into account. They threw a mesh of coiled wire in front of the hole, nailed it to the walls, and hung a wooden plank onto the wire, something that they later intended to supplement with a warning, skull and crossed bones, a red circle and slash, or the simple and common yellow of a caution sign.

Once they'd finished with their interior concerns, they plodded outside, reformed the now tired gang, and, using a series of metal buckets, they began to shift the lawn-spread rubble from the yard and into the opened storm cellar where it splashed into the stagnant pools within the visible darkness.

After all had been finished, they met out on the front porch roof again, the night long established, the city lights glittering off in the distance. It was then that, inspired by the presence of the roof's slope, each comrade independently realized what they might have realized before they had acted. The dance room had sloped downward and away from the chimney. If the weight of the monument which had just been extracted had had anything to do with what was happening, the slope of the floor should have been toward the house's center, not toward the back yard.

Wade did his best to assure them that his diagnosis had been sound, and continued to maintain that, given time, the bulk of the walls would resettle and result in a new and increasingly level set of floors. Yet, everyone else doubted him. While most were pleased with the warmth and aching of arms and backs, somewhat happy with the sense of rare and successful physical accomplishment, they were also reasonable enough to recognize that there was an equal probability that now that the weight was gone, the center of the house would rise even more quickly, throwing dance floor and walls completely away and into the neighboring property.

Lenny found himself aligned with the latter opinion. He had one-handed given his best, operating at twice the rate of his peers in order to maintain the same speed along the
gang, and perhaps it was this additional physical exhaustion that weakened his spiritual
fortitude against adopting the former perspective. As twilight began to ease itself along the
eastern horizon at his left, he turned toward Dub, who sat forward and to his right, and
sighed. "We killed it," he lamented.

Dub, thoughtful and equally aligned with the party now regretting the event, though
less burned with Lenny's sense of foreboding, turned back and gave an almost
imperceptive nod. "Getting' close to that."

"Nah," said Lenny. He looked down toward the limbless oak, the white-painted
and rusting wrought-iron armadillo at its base. "It's dead. Just plain dead."

Wade, to the left of both of them, leaning back against the house's wooden siding,
frowned in their direction. "Look," he muttered. "It was holding up the center of the
house. The walls were sinking. The center needs to sink too."

Ignoring his pleas on behalf of his revised architectural wisdom, Lenny and Dub
continued to talk.

Dub touched his own tennis shoe and flicked away a stone that had fallen between
the laces. "Maybe it was time."

For a few moments, they both stared at the oak, and then, for reasons impossible to
discern, Lenny found himself thinking about Sam, although he never admitted it to anyone
else. "Can't put it back now."

"Everything dies," said Dub

Lenny glanced up from the tree, away from the armadillo that, for equally unknown
reasons, inspired thoughts of Io and muck. "Maybe not," he found his mouth wondering.
"Maybe it's just the actions of people."

"Or their inactions," said Dub. "Still, it'd die."

"Sure," Lenny said. "Thanks from the mouthpiece of a throw-away people."
Off in the distance, like the rumble of a slow train, the freeway began to echo itself into life.

"Look--," Wade began from beside them, still intent upon salvaging the scene and his own role in its creation.

"I," said Lenny. "Never wanted it to end."

And with that, Dub suddenly realized that Lenny's mood and response to the moment were due to causes not actually associated with the house or the dance floor or chimney at all. "Everything," he reiterated with a disproportional stress. "Dies."

"Built this for his fiancee," Lenny answered, who long ago had picked up the slowly accumulating embellishments about the narrative of the house, a story that had grown from generation to generation of residents. "They," he went on, now using his good hand to point down at the sidewalk that ran along the street's edge. "Rode up right there."

Dub followed his gesture.

"He got her down out of the buggy, walked her up that walk, and carried her through our doors." He dropped the hand and glanced back at Dub. "We killed that."

"Look--," Wade tried to interrupt again.

"We killed all of that. The tree, the house, the whole damned life they led. Their ghosts are probably hanging around out there waiting for us to just get the hell out of here, parasols and buggy whips and frilly little hats and bonnets in hand."

Dub swallowed. "There was nothing you could do, Len. Once things get into motion--." He shrugged. "They just get into motion. That's how it is."

"Then why," Lenny mumbled. "Are we here?"

Wade, increasingly aware not only of his growing inconsequence, but also that the conversation had become both private and too esoteric for his own fundamentally concrete
soul, pulled himself up from his lean against the wall, eased himself past both of the
speakers, and stepped into the open window frame.

Dub watched as his back and legs eventually vanished through the opening.

"Because we are," he answered, recently taken with existential precepts.

"And so," Lenny said. "We're just supposed to let things trickle on around us, climb into the stream. Are we," he turned to his friend with undue belligerence. "Just supposed to climb into the bucket brigade of events and people and keep slingin' those damned dirty bricks out the window till the house comes down? Till the ghosts follow us around forever?"

Dub swallowed again. "Maybe it's all we can do."

"That's a pretty damned cynical outlook," said Lenny. "Got better things to do with my time than that."

Dub sniffed, gazing down at the walk. "They drove up right down there," he gestured. He looked back at Len. "And they're dead. And we're here."

"I wonder," Lenny reflected, ignoring him. "If they got married in the courthouse, or whether it was a big church fru-fra."

"Never know," said Dub.

"Did she cry when he brought her home?"

"Never know," he said again.

"How many kids did they have? Are their descendants still around?"

Dub shook his head slowly. "It's gettin' late, Len."

"Early," he answered with a nod toward the east.

"Maybe so."

"I," said Lenny with a sigh. "Have to do something. Got to know, you know?"

He turned to Dub. "Got to."
A few of his own feelings on the matter beginning to surface, Dub smiled. "Guess so. Listen," he suddenly muttered. "Len, you do her wrong and I'll--." 

Lenny glanced at him, raising his crippled arm to scratch an itch on his own chest. "Won't," he said. "Can't."

They then retired for the morning, woke at noon, and met together near the house phone, a broken beige instrument kept secreted in the stairwell's corner. Lenny dialed his family's number, listened to a few rings, and, on hearing his mother's voice on the far end, handed the receiver to Dub. Dub cluttered his way through a hello and asked to speak to Chester. Five minutes later, Chester answered and Dub handed the receiver back. "Chess," said Lenny as Chester mumbled in surprise and welcome. "Listen, bud, I need a favor."

Lenny listed for a moment as the man babbled about his own desire to meet any request. "I need to visit someone," he said. "Need a car."

Three hours later, after manufacturing a long and unnecessary explanation for departure involving employment in a distant city, Chester arrived at Lenny's college house. With a bookpack stuffed with three T-shirts, one pair of cut-off shorts, several pairs of rolled socks, two pairs of underwear, one stick of deodorant and a toothbrush, Lenny climbed into the station wagon, gave indication of their destination, and the two set out together for the Harpool home; Lenny, as he had chosen to provide Chester with a six-pack of German beer as payment, sat at the wheel.

They drove down the rather unremarkable freeway and into the equally unremarkable, flattened scenery of the plains. A few truckers honked at them, offended at their slow rate of progress, a highway patrol officer followed them for some time, offended at the condition of the car, and all in all, the trip went well enough. Chester chatted aimlessly about things back home, at least as far as he could tell from his perspective on the
lawn and dock, Lenny kept silent most of the time, and they stopped only twice for breaks at restops along the way.

When they finally reached a destined turnoff onto a narrow and occasionally rough surfaced highway, Chester giggled at what he took to be a regional joke. They had passed a small and impermanent sign that promised salvation ahead. Lenny thought little of this until they had passed a second sign and then a third. The salvagers, as it were, had taken each one, much in the keeping of the marketers of Burma Shave in a previous epoch, and had painted only one or two words on it. The combined text, once a driver had put it all together, read, "Salvation ahead. Witness the good news as only the good can bear it. You can't hide from Jesus, so you might as well quit trying. Brother Michael and the Gatekeepers of Love, directly ahead."

As anyone might guess, given the nature of the message, the history of poor Lenny, the conversation with Dub that morning, and the nature of the quest itself, Lenny had very little choice about what to do. The conjunction of events, circumstantial or metaphysically deliberate, could only have one conclusion and that was that he and Chester would have to stop when the signs indicated that stopping would be in order.

As Chester peered through the windshield, now trying to finish a beer while simultaneously making efforts to hide it from view, the two men pulled off of the highway as directed, drove down between two fields of miscellaneous grasses, and onto the grassy lot that had once been parking for the show.

Brother Michael's venue, while remaining appropriately humble, had grown since their last meeting. He now had two tents within which to operate, the original and a second which had been purchased from a disbanding circus troupe, a larger gathering of attendant Gatekeepers, an assistant minister, additional seating, two tractor-trailers with which to carry the miscellaneous goods and crew, and three RVs in which the crew were housed.
At the moment, their tour of the local region was in the process of breaking up. One tent was down, now a yellowing heap of canvas, rope, and wooden pillar, surrounded by some five men who waved and directed and heaved and hoed from respectively even positions around the tent's circumference, and, as Lenny and Chester could see from the car as they stopped, the second stood empty, its rows of collapsible metal bleachers piled together along one of its outer walls.

Unworried, Lenny climbed from the car, walked to one of the RVs, a square-fronted Winnebago, stood near its door and listened. Chester finished his beer, hid the bottle under the front seat, and followed him.

They stood together near the door. From inside the vehicle came a giggling blend of voices, one male and one female, coupled with what sounded like the random bangings and crashings of a pair of kittens trapped in a cupboard full of silverware. Embarrassed for a moment, but feeling the pressings of necessity, Lenny pulled back the feather-light screen and pounded on the closed door.

The noises ceased. There were a few whispers and then a sudden flurry of rustlings.

Finally, a man opened the door, his shirt slightly askew, his face a healthy flush. Behind him, a young woman hid in the darkness, draped with a sheet which she clutched at her breast, peering out past the kitchenette.

"Yes," he said.

"Brother Michael?" Lenny wondered, frowning, jerking his head back.

"Nope," the man answered.

Lenny shook his head. "No," he said. "I mean, is he here?"

"Yep," the man told him.

Lenny waited long enough to feel annoyance, then inhaled. "Where?"
The man turned a contemptuous sort of eye back toward the interior, coughed, and licked his lips. "Where's the Bro'?'" he asked the woman.

"Down to the tents," she told him. "Least he was."

He turned back toward Lenny, and for some unknown reason, winked at him.

"Down to the tents. Least he was."

"Thank you," said Lenny since it was really the only thing he could say at the moment, and he and Chester plodded down across the grass toward the laboring men.

Behind them both the door clattered shut. The locks clicked and both the man and woman began talking and laughing together again, apparently having taken up where they'd left off.

It took only a moment for Lenny to find Brother Michael, due less to his own rather hazy memory of events so long ago than to the fact that the good minister was obviously in charge. His shirt off and wrapped at his waist, revealing an aging but still muscular torso, the now gray-bearded man called out instructions from over the tent, directing his crew to appropriate tuggings and foldings, and bellowed in a voice that could only be suited to his immediate vocation.

After circling the tent until they stood somewhat behind him, Lenny and Chester paused, with Chester gazing down at his own feet on the turf. "Brother Michael," Lenny called out.

The minister turned and stared at him, sweat trickling down along his own noseridge.

"You remember me?'" he pondered, a bit more egotistically than made sense.

"Do I?'" said Brother Michael, his voice still low and musical.

"Fifteen, sixteen years ago," said Lenny. "My grandmother and I visited you."

The minister lifted a brow. Despite his career as an itinerant, never one to feign intimacy where intimacy was in fact absent, he pursed his lips as he studied Lenny and
probed his own recollections, then shook his head and gave a slight shrug. "Sorry, son," he said, and he truly was. "That was a long, long time ago."

Lenny lifted his lame arm and shook it briefly. "My arm," he said.

"See that," said the minister.

"We came about it."

"Did you," he said. He wiped his palms together several times to free them of dirt, then stepped toward Lenny and Chester, untying his shirt from his waist as he walked. He stopped some ten feet away, took the shirt between his hands and gave it one good cracking shake as if cleaning a rug. He began pulling it on, arm by arm across his back, white, short-sleeved and dirty, and then slowly, methodically began buttoning it, one slow button at a time from bottom to collar, the tails hanging down. "I'm right sorry, son," he said. "I don't recollect meetin' either you or your grandmother 'tall.

Behind him, the men gathered together and heaved one side of the tent over into a fold. Brother Michael glanced back at them. "Keep at it," he called over the canvas as he buttoned the last button. He looked toward Lenny and Chester. "Can sit a spell," he told them with a flourish toward a makeshift pair of benches off to one side, each facing the other, an orange ten gallon water jug propped up between them. Over them, there stood one spindly little elm, its leaves yellowed and thin.

Lenny and Chester walked to one bench and sat. He followed.

"Well," he said, taking a seat before them, leaning his elbows to his knees, his beard touching his collar. "What'll I do for you—today."

Lenny stared at him. "I have a problem."

"As do we all," said Brother Michael.

Chester glanced back at the car, given the beer, its poorly shaded spot was unsuited to his preferences.
Lenny reminded the minister of what he and his grandmother had discovered from him, told him of their initial meeting and concourse, and of the results. The minister nodded and smiled at what he wisely understood to have been Ma Gorsuch's decision about the arm, and then frowned ever so slightly at what he perceived to be Lenny's current indictment of himself. "I see," was all that he found himself able to say.

"Listen," said Lenny. "All of that aside, I have to decide something. Now." He then proceeded to address the problem of the moment. To return to save Sam from her rightful family, or to drag her away from her betrothed and potential family, or to avoid both, was a choice that he'd made the day before, but now, given the mysterious confluence of events, doubts had crept in. He communicated to the minister that he now felt that there was time to turn back, time to allow the universe and its maker to see to it that the right would prevail, that justice would be done without his own inexperienced meddlings in the rightful chain of causes and events. Unfortunately, he told Brother Michael, the actual moment of decision had loomed up in the present, and he hadn't realized it until they'd left the highway.

Never one to mince words when it came to matters of moment, the minister thought briefly about the dilemma posed, dwelled on Lenny's soul and his psyche, considered the young woman's betrothal, and decided that, like all maturing adolescents, Lenny needed to get some sort of consolation and confirmation for what soon would undoubtedly be a broken and grieving heart.

With all of that in mind, he chose to assuage the pain of that terminal moment, chose to give Lenny a bit of the wisdom by which all such partings are eased. He decided to explain the true nature of "woman" to him.

He began, as was most practical, with the text that, given the bulk of the Book, was most frequently finished by its perusers. "Woman," he said, lifting himself up from his
knees and stretching. "Was put here on this world in order to end the physical loneliness of man."

Lenny swallowed, already dissatisfied by what promised to be one more cryptic answer to a simple problem.

Brother Michael eyed him. "And so," he said. "Man would always crave her. She is--," he shrugged. "She was meant to be a suitable companion to an animal that had no place among the animals."

Lenny gave a slight nod. Chester looked up into the elm overhead, noted a few ants along one limb, and sighed.

"And so," said Brother Michael, ignoring him. "Man began to view woman as his spiritual compatriot as well. Part to counterpart."

"Anima to animus," mumbled Lenny, closely watching the minister. Behind his beard and his cold blue eyes, the man frowned.

"It was--it is--a mistake." Used to interruption by congregational members, both planted and inspired, he stopped and waited a moment. "Incomplete at her creation," he said. "Composed from the completeness of man, she sought her own completion, desired that which was not her own due part." He paused again, let his voice fall to a dramatically quiet tone. "She sought the wisdom of discernment and distinction."

Chester coughed. Brother Michael gave him a momentary scowl.

"Yes?" said Lenny, still annoyed.

"And when she had devoured the very thing whose absence had kept this world intact, by whose absence," he let his voice rise, then lifted a hand and wavered it from side to side. "Whose absence had maintained the order and peace of the planet, she found herself alone, superior to that which was more whole. Lonely," he said, hand falling to his knee. "She brought man to the table of his own destruction, willfully encouraged him to
join her. And he did. He stopped. He figured that talking Lenny off of women altogether would have the right effect.

Lenny, on the other hand, stared at him, waiting, altogether oblivious of the point.

Brother Michael, whose years on tour had now taught him of the occasional thickheadedness of his listeners when confronted by metaphor, gazed at him and thought. "Woman," he finally muttered. "Brought wrong into the world and brought Man to the wrong as well. All because she sought the companionship of equals where equality did not exist."

Lenny found himself nodding, although he still saw no connection between this and his own problem save the fact that both were inherently heterosexual in suggestion.

"You see?" said brother Michael.

He slowly shifted from the nod and into an honest headshake. "No, Minister. I don't."

Brother Michael stiffened a bit, then ran a meditative hand up to stroke his own beard.

Chester turned his own head and began watching the men at the tent. They lifted the fold and folded it over again; one of them stumbled forward atop the upper edge, righted himself, and patted it as he might pat an unruly elephant.

"Man will always seek woman and woman will always seek man," said Brother Michael, now dropping his hand back to his lap. He interlaced the fingers of both hands, and lifted them slightly. "And they will never wholly find each other."

As that sounded more like the opening to an answer than what had proceeded it, Lenny perked his ears.

"There will always be heartbreak."

Chester twitched and gazed at the minister.
"And so it is," he said softly. "That we are warned against them all."

Behind them, at the tent, the men suddenly shouted at each other. The third fold had somehow wound up skewed and more civilian than was desirable.

"As Paul tells us," said Brother Michael. "Women are to be avoided whenever possible. Only when it is impossible to avoid them should we make our associations, and then," he stopped and stared at Lenny. "And only then should we, must we, marry."

Lenny sighed. While the message was clear, obviously enough, its ameliorative purpose was not. The preacher was counseling against the trip that he was taking. The deity to which the man subscribed would have him turn back upon his quest, and would have that poor fallen shmoe marry her instead. While it was an appropriate, if not direct, answer to the question posed, it wasn't the answer he'd truly sought. He scowled and looked away.

The preacher, there on his bench facing his two-personed congregation, equally mellowed by his experience with pronouncing messages that people somehow, inexplicably could not accept, drew a deep breath through his nostrils and then exhaled. He blinked twice. "Listen," he finally said. "Forget it."

Lenny, misunderstanding, shut his eyes, counted a set of three breaths, and opened them.

Brother Michael looked at him sadly. "Let me tell you the truth," he mumbled.

Chester and Lenny, equally taken aback, looked back.

The preacher leaned back on his bench, propped his left calf up onto his right thigh, and began to wiggle his foot in a slow and thoughtful set of circles. "Let me tell you about how I became a holy man."

The two men watched him, then, somehow embarrassed, shifted their gazes earthward. Lenny found himself watching the preacher's planted foot; Chester found himself gazing at a gum wrapper lying nearby.
"I was studying drama," Brother Michael said, his voice level and entirely human.

"And I got to acting out the part of the preacher-man."

Puzzled, Lenny looked up at him.

"It was a gag," Brother Michael confessed, the first time that he'd ever actually voiced the idea. "We used to laugh pretty good at it over dinner. Could bless a plate full of meatloaf and canned string beans with the best of 'em." He smiled for a second at the recollection.

Still puzzled, Lenny shifted slightly on his seat.

Over at the tent, the men had fixed the problem and now dusted the tent bottom's exposed surface with their hands. Chester leaned down, lifted the foil wrapper and folded it once along its length.

"Learned the story," the preacher went on. "Learned the whole thing. Then, before I knew it, my acting wasn't so much acting any more."

Chester reopened the wrapper and now folded the two uppermost corners down along the central crease and into a triangle. He then folded the two edges inward again.


Lenny lifted a brow, cleared his throat, but said nothing.

"We," the preacher said wistfully. "Act for a while, and then we become the things we once pretended to be."

Chester folded the wrapper together at the crease, then folded the sides back upon themselves into a pair of right-angled wings. The men at the tent rolled one more fold over and began to dust its now snakelike form.

"I," said the minister. "Still have one central conviction about this species. Can act ourselves in, can act ourselves out." He looked at Lenny. "Acted yourself into love," he said. "You can act yourself right out of it. Or not."
Lenny nodded at him, swallowed and worked at a bit of spit. "So," he said once his mouth was wet again. "Should I?"

Brother Michael looked away, watching his crew now struggle to fold the tent's length back upon itself. "Got it wrong," he sighed, still watching.

"I do?"

"Nah. They do." He nodded at the men. "Every time I let them do it themselves."

He smiled.

Chester lifted the gum wrapper airplane, gave it a few hesitant jabs toward the watercooler, and then tossed it. It spiraled and fell near the spigot.

"While I," said the preacher, watching the wrapper as it landed, his voice again wistful. "Have my Book and its consolations, and the compassion and companionship of my God, there is one thing that's still wickedly true." He looked back at Lenny, uncrossed his legs and again let his elbows fall to his knees. "I am a lonely man." Slowly, he looked up at Lenny who sat slowly blinking. "From acting. You understand?"

Lenny nodded, smiling in return. "I think I do."

"Well then," the preacher said, straightening and clapping both palms to his thighs. "That's probably enough said then."

"Yessir," said Lenny, now rising from the bench. "Probably so." He held out his good arm, shook the brother's hand and turned to walk back to the car. After four briefly uncertain steps atop the grass, he turned back. "Preacher," he said.

"Yes," the man answered him, still seated and alone.

"Ought to try talking that way more often." He raised his bad arm into view. "This might be different."

Brother Michael laughed. "Nah," he said. "Don't believe it would be."
And Lenny turned back to the car, Chester behind him, his gum wrapper plane clutched like some Protestant rosary, as Brother Michael, a bit stiff-jointed, rose from the bench, stretched, and began his walk back to his misguided crew.

Once in the car, Lenny and Chester sat for a few seconds unspeaking, Chester now at the wheel. "So?" he finally said, one hand at the ignition, the other atop the wheel. "Find it?" He turned the engine over and gave it a few pumps of the gas.

"Think so," said Lenny, gazing out at the tent which was already in the process of being unfolded for refolding. "Let's get going."

Chester shrugged, and gave an open-palmed gesture indicating that he still needed a destination.

"Just drive," said Lenny, closing his eyes. "Just drive, dammit." He slumped back against the headrest.

Chester shrugged again, fiddled with the gearshift, backed while spinning the wheel, then straightened the car and drove toward the highway.
CHAPTER XV

PLANNING A SACRIFICE

Back in Frisco, as always seemed to be the case, much had transpired in the several months which had passed. What had originally been little more than suggestions for political office had, in turn, become convictions, and those convictions had led to a short and well-orchestrated campaign. Pa Gorsuch, in a somewhat matriarchal community that forever envisioned itself as wholly, proudly, and successfully governed by men, was dubiously and skeptically presented as a patriarch rivaling David himself, always able to keep his rather odd tribe successfully in line. The Sheriff and his six deputies, forever concerned about gang infiltration, under the promise of a new and state-of-the-art patrol car, four Kevlar vests, and one pair of automatic rifles, backed the Gorsuch ticket. The schoolboard, as should be obvious, under the tutelage of Moncus, fell into line behind them, and the general electorate, noting the now rectified daughter, the successful, although maimed grandson, and the economic rise of the household, began to lean in Pa’s direction as well.

With the special proddings, revelations, and reasonings generated by the Moncus files, the election was a success. Pa’s flaws, in the course of the campaign had been duly noted, although they were largely ignored in lieu of his “image,” and in the unimpeachable wisdom of an electorate which felt itself in control of a bumbling representative with a solid wife and little or no self-interested concern, all parties save the direct loser considered themselves victorious.

The inaugural was a beautiful thing. The courthouse trees were festooned with
ribbons and bows. A local chapter of female anachronists put together a start-to-finish weaving display on the grounds, complete with baskets full of tufts shed from buffalo hide and gathered at a federal game preserve, the spinning of those tufts into threads, and attachment to the loom for a final product which finally wound up a deeply brown rug that, when wet, smelled faintly of a cattle lot. Local hippies sold pottery, a group of retirees presented the town quilt, a sixteen foot long, four foot wide iconographic history of all that had been built in the region, with the town hall and new Walmart given special prominence. The high school band put together its own program of somewhat atonal music from its collection of marches. And, finally, as capstone to the entire affair, the whole town gathered in front of the courthouse, its balloons and scurrying children weaving about, and there awaited presentation of the new mayor.

Wearing a gray suit, a black Windsor at his collar, on an old and bellowing horse, Pa rode up the street, paused near the courthouse’s statue raised to the Confederate dead, dismounted, dropped the reigns, patted the horse twice on the neck, and with a broad and radiant smile, walked up the walk and onto the steps as the town cheered. There, behind the former mayor, who stood behind one thin microphone and stand, he turned to face the brightly colored sea of his constituents. Nestled into that crowd, their elbows linked, Elise, Ma, and Moncus stood teary-eyed as he grinned, giving a few quick waves. After some degree of silence and decorum had been established, and after the band had ceased to play, the ceremony took place. The former mayor passed him the gavel, he took a vow upon a bible before the court clerk, and then, after giving two short waves, he began to mumble a few words as had been scripted by his wife and her well-intentioned counselor. He told the town of its increasing significance to region, state, and to nation at large. He invoked the freeway and its new lease upon lifeblood due to the latest and greatest of treaties with our neighbors to the south. He told them of looming economic prospects, of the central and religious moral superiority of town to the larger and
reprehensible urban points of blight, and exclaimed that while all was already wonderful, wonders should never cease. With that, he began to warn of the problems that might surface even as the good plan unfolded itself. With growth there would undoubtedly be instability and confusion. And then he told them of the all-too necessary addition and improvement of the city’s future soul: the schools. “It will be hard,” he explained. “But that is the burden of the present, to see to it that tomorrow is an improvement upon its own yesterdays.” Although Moncus had no idea of how similar it had been in tone to some of the things Lenny had once spoken, she was especially proud of that line.

The town, its ego sufficiently stroked to ease the burden of the revenue-gathering implications of the latter half of what it was told, was raucous with the joy and paradisical world within which it envisioned itself. Had it the opportunity of withdrawing its manifold wallets to dump the contents into available coffers, at least then, in the passionate heat of its own intensity, it would have done so, spending itself into a present poverty so that the richness of the future might prevail. For a moment, the implied threat to the pocketbook was ignored.

The rest of the day, inspired, in part, by worklessness and the glitter of pinwheels, was little more than a protracted continuation of the former part. Pa was wrestled from well-callused hand to well-callused hand, clutching and shaking his own bony fist within thickened palms and fingers of the working class, and he received more clap-spawned bruises on his shoulders and biceps than he’d ever care to remember. The police, momentarily vestless, had to break up only two fist-fights, each provoked by the usual territorialisms associated with liquor or beer, and the band eventually so weakened its lips as to collapse even further into flattened atonality before giving up the show. The quilters went home, three with ribbons, two without, and the weavers finally gathered up the remaining fluffs of buffalo, loaded their looms into gateless pickup beds, and went home as well.
Ma, Elise, Moncus, and the dazed and bedraggled Pa did the same, each for his or her own private reasons exhausted and mercifully joyful. That night, all retired early, and all slept the sound sleep shared by both the toddler and the prominent alike.

The next day, as it was Pa’s first day on the job, was eventful. He rose early, stiff and sore-shouldered, donned the dark and blue-tinted suit that Ma had laid out over the bed’s footboard, ate a quick bowl of grits flavored with blueberry jam, and caught his ride into work in the town’s car.

There, he puzzled his way through the courthouse’s must and up along its staircase’s iron handrails to his new office. With the grin of someone who’d just finished the last long hill of a roller coaster, he put his hand upon the cold brass knob, twisted it counter-clockwise, and, with a touch more effort than he’d predicted, he pushed the walnut door, solid and bearing a dot-matrixed greeting from his new secretary, open. The room into which he then stared was large and darkly paneled with only one window that looked out upon the store fronts of the square. From where he stood in the doorway, he could just see the edge of the awning of Ivy’s Antique Emporium, the windows above Spider’s Hardware, and the long and cluttered brickfront and painted sign of McGoy’s pawn and music shop. The two opposing walls, at his left and right, bore case after case of books, all leather and hard-bound volumes, some more obviously dusty than others, and a few bore signs of human contact, finger-shaped draggings in the dust of the bindings where the former mayor had given them his last, melancholy and parting touches. The third wall, windowless and beside him, held only the central door within whose frame he stood, a printed painting of the town’s founder on the left, a high-collared and black-bearded old Puritan with rouged cheeks, a pinstriped vest, and a silver watch-chain looped down from a pocket, and, on the right, now hidden behind the open door, three photos of that very town square at its inception, each photo slightly yellowed, and each slightly blurry, but each replete with wooden signboards, divotted streets, and unmoving horses and buggies.
Before him, atop a clear plastic rug-guard which lay atop the deep and night-blue carpet, lay his overly broad, equally walnut desk, its inlaid surface empty save a phone and intercom near the single, generic, brass placard which, in all caps, read simply, “MAYOR.” For a few seconds, Pa Gorsuch, small and frail in the wood, reminisced upon Roosevelt, felt a few doubts about his own adequacies to the tasks before him, especially since those books were anything but friendly, but then, remembering his assistants, he smiled, stepped inside, and closed the door behind him.

He discovered, among other things, that the room’s previous resident had, in his own despairing vacancy, taken all writing instruments, pads of paper and yellow Post-it notepads along with the heavy leather chair which had once stood behind the desk. The man had claimed the chair to be his own, although town records would eventually suggest otherwise, and now Pa stepped over the carpet and popped one of the buttons on his intercom; he gave rasping orders that all of the missing items be restored or replaced.

His secretary, a young woman fresh from college, promised that all would be done within the hour. In the interim, he sat on the desk’s corner, juggling the brass placard between his hands, and stared at the portrait of the town’s founder. He wondered at the complexities of the cravat at his throat, glanced at his own Timex and considered the possibility of acquiring his own watch and chain, preferably in gold, and mouthed the word “fob” four or five times simply because he found it humorous. He then rose, turned, approached the window and looked down at the paired rockers in front of the hardware store. He took note of three clarinets propped up in the pawnshop’s window, and watched a pair of pigeons as they preened on the bespeckled ledge above the awning next-door. Finally, below him, John Eversson, the “spider” of his own business’s title, his black widow tattoo just visible as a dark splotch peeping out from a work shirt’s rolled sleeve, began to sweep the walk between his rockers. He swept along the sidewalk’s cracks, ran the broom along the edges of the entrance, tossed what little dirt he’d gathered out past a
parking meter and into the gutter, then sat in one of the chairs, his broom leaning behind
him.

Unseen, Pa smiled down at him.

After four or five rocks in the chair, the man took a pouch of tobacco from his shirt
pocket, and with all of the expertise of a Montana cowboy, rolled himself a cigarette, put
the pouch away, and lit the tube. He breathed smoke, then leaned his head against a
thumb, the smoke smoldering up alongside his temple.

Aside from the pigeon, the wisps of smoke, and a few intermittent rocks of the
chair, all was quiet.

Pa turned away from the window. He glanced at his watch. Nine-fifteen. Only
seven hours and forty-five minutes remained in the day.

Keeping in mind that his secretary would eventually come walking through his
door, Pa decided that it would be best if she caught him at his mayoral labors, so he
stepped to one of the bookshelves, found one of the volumes which the former resident had
lately touched, and pulled it down. Still facing the shelf, he let it fall open in his left hand
and began rifling through its contents with his right thumb.

Land statutes. Page after page of them. Some were highlighted in yellow,
especially those which concerned something called "special cases of easement and easement
restrictions."

He paused. He lifted a brow and remembered a few vague insinuations about his
opponent’s success at changing zoning restrictions around town. Surely, he suddenly
thought, this sort of thing could put a man right square in the middle of a few choice deals.

And then he thought of Moncus, practically Ph.D..

Then again, he considered, in his own way, the fact that the greater part of
innocence was probably ignorance. He closed the volume with a distinct abruptness and
shoved it back onto the shelf.
His secretary opened the door just as he did so, smiled at him, and clumsily, her hands full, handed him two yellow legal pads, a box of black ball point pens, and a gray, heavy-duty stapler. He took each, one by one, lay them on the desk in a loose pile, and turned to find her struggling to pull a half-open folding chair through the doorway. He walked over, took this from her, and looked at her curiously.

“Sorry, sir,” she said, more flustered than she needed to be. “This is the best we can do till Friday.”

“Friday,” he said, folding the chair closed.

“Yes sir,” she told him. “Pittman’s Movers’ve got to pick up the one I ordered and they’re booked straight through.”

He nodded at her, young, fair-skinned, her brown framed glasses thicker than her position warranted. She dusted her hands. “Guess that’s it for now,” she grinned.

“I,” he said slowly, carrying the chair to his desk and unfolding it. “Hear a Mayor’s s’posed to have appointments.”


He sat down in the chair, virtually disappearing behind the over-sized desk, and stared at her blankly.

“Couple on the first day. Couple on the second.”

He continued to stare.

She turned away, then paused in the doorway as she was leaving, looking back at him as he sat in the chair, his whole body too low for the desk, his elbows propped up on the surface like a child’s might be. “Not till this afternoon,” she soothed. “I’ll check the book and let you know.”

His head hovering just above the desktop, he nodded. “Thank you, Miss—.”
“Mary,” she grinned. “Just Mary. And I’ll get you a couple more chairs before they get here.” She turned away, began to swing the door closed, and turned back even again. “Mr. Gorsuch, sir?”

“Yes,” he nodded, tiny and silly behind the placard which he had replaced.

“If you have any questions, any at all, I’m right here.” She nodded once. “Right here.”

“Thank you,” he responded. “Thank you very much. Mary.”

“Yessir,” she said and closed the door.

The morning continued much as it already had for another two hours and nine minutes. At that point, Mary rushed in to announce that Washington was on the line. She put forth a request that he take the call on the intercom so that she might listen in on one of the conversations between the powerful, and he granted it. The somewhat patronizing voice of their local House representative, one Mr. Navee, formerly of a local convenience store, came over the line, congratulated him on his victory, gave assurance that his own watchful eye was perpetually on Frisco, added a request that Mr. Gorsuch keep in mind all of the good things being done in Washington as he helped his colleagues undo everything that had been previously done, and gave the standard invitation that they meet in Washington at any time that Pa happened to be in the neighborhood. With well-wishes mutually exchanged, the six minute call closed, and both Pa and Mary felt proud to have been so touched.

“Wow,” she told him, and he reiterated the thought with his own “Gollee.” At that point, both felt bonded by the shared experience, and of all odd things in this world, a mutual dedication had begun.

At two-thirty, after a lonely lunch at a diner on the square, Pa returned to his office and found his first appointment waiting. Mary had dug up two more folding chairs, and as she understood Pa’s need for guidance and consolation, she joined the meeting, ostensibly
to take notes for the official record. Only one of the two men who'd arrived, the elder, was permitted to take a seat as the other hovered in the background, irritated at the secretary in his own chair, and equally irritated at what was clearly indication of his own inferiority to her.

The matter was idiotic. The two men represented a local highway “trading-post” and “rattlesnake farm,” from which weary travelers might pause to take refreshment and peruse a collection of assorted Taiwanese trinkets, and the two sought to have their establishment approved as a private “zoo.” While their primary purpose, as they told it, was to bring Frisco’s children a bit of zoological adventure, both Mary and most of the town’s hunters knew the men to be in contact with a large and underground network of game-providers for private sport. Assuming the new mayor to be innocent of all knowledge of their real aspirations, the two had sought conference with him before that innocence might be lost.

They presented their case, found the Mayor open to their suggestions, and without knowing Mary’s previous counsel that Pa tell all parties that he would “take the matter under very serious consideration,” accepted this “consideration” less with any real understanding that it was political-speak for the “we’ll think about it” that any parent knows than as an implied affirmative. They shook hands, departed, and made a few phone calls to a game outfitter outside of Houston, promising eventual success in establishing the enterprise.

Mary, meanwhile, explained the true motives of the two men, told Pa of the legal ramifications of big-game hunting on local lands, especially of endangered animals, and suggested that they contact the necessary federal authorities. To arrange some sort of “sting” might add a few points to the new mayor’s public rating, although said rating had yet to come into being.
“We can hold them off on their zoo till we need a boost,” she told Pa. “Never
know when that might come in handy.”

“Sure,” he answered her, perfectly well-satisfied with his first public act.

The second appointment involved the establishment of a stop sign where a yield
sign currently stood. The constituent to whom this mattered had taken the issue to the city
council twice before, had been told, in the first instance, that it would be taken under “very
serious consideration,” and, in the second, that said sign would be changed once funds
could be allocated for the switch. Now, as the constituent pointed out, she had finally
come to the top, had skipped the meddling incompetence of the bureaucrats who were
theoretically members of Pa’s new demesne.

Pa, again under the tutelage of his secretary, told the woman that he had yet to
study the intricacies of the current budget, but that it undoubtedly had been burdened by a
great deal of waste and hidden political pork-barreling. He was certain, he explained, that
once his soon-to-be created Committee on Budgetary Mismanagement had undertaken its
tasks and had its recommendations forwarded to the council, said funds would be
forthcoming.

The woman, who had lost two cats to the vehicles on her street and now dreaded
the loss of a third, put forth a momentary fight, but he fended her off by suggesting that
they should perhaps examine other, cheaper possibilities, things like the introduction of a
speed bump, for example. Eventually, she left his office, bearing the smug expression of
someone who had finally won a long and protracted conflict. Mary and Pa simply
exchanged winks.

The rest of that first day on the job, Mayor and secretary sat in the office drinking
coffee and eating the occasional afternoon doughnut, discussing matters of import as well
as of inconsequence, and sometime near the close of day, Pa told her of what he
understood to be the whole reason for his presence. As best as he could tell, his one
function was to rectify the situation at the local schools, although he had yet to receive proper instructions about what was to be done.

Mary agreed with the basic precepts and propriety of what was planned, and, although she knew little of the developing itinerary, made it clear that she could consider her own inclusion in the scheme to be both a duty and a privilege. Pa joked that he’d take that matter under some “very serious consideration,” and they then called it a day.

The second day on the job, Mary explained that, due to their essentially rural base, practically all of the power in the town and region lay in the hands of the county commissioners, a fact which Moncus and her conspirators had wholly overlooked. She outlined the Mayor’s true prerogatives: to bang down the gavel on the long-winded, to plead and cajole members of the city council and the commissioners themselves, to make hasty and handy speeches to inspire the population, and to shake a lot of hands, reassure a lot of minds, and to see to his own re-election. His power lay only in his ability to steer the town’s constituents in one direction or another; the commissioners and council, under the leanings of those constituents, would then fall into line.

“So,” he muttered through his clenched set of bridges, still silly in his folding chair.

“I’m a fig-gerhead.”

With a bit more sadness than she should have felt, Mary nodded over her glasses.

“And with Moncus in all of this,” she told him. “You’re more a puppet than you probably can imagine.”

He stared at her. “Puppet,” he whispered.

“Yes sir,” she said. She waited a few long seconds, then smiled at him. “Of course, you really don’t have to be.”

“I don’t,” he mumbled.

“No sir.” She shoved her glasses back up into place with a thumb. “Where they’re right, they’re right, so it’s not a bad thing to be a puppet. Only problem’s when they’re--.”
“Wrong,” he said.

“Yes sir.”

Pa glanced up at the founder’s portrait and its heavy brows, an ironic contrast to the pink of its cheeks. “They’re wrong.”

“That’s right, sir,” she agreed.

“And,” he mumbled again. “You can give me a hand when that happens.”

She winked at him, grinning more than she should have. “Of course.”

The third day, Mary was involved in some petty bureaucratic filing and typing of standard forms, so Pa slept most of the day away, his head resting upon his desk, his mouth fallen open, his bridge loose from its roof.

The fourth day, he brought a thirteen-inch television to work, lay it on the desk and spent the day as he usually had before the pressures of political office had descended upon him.

Over the weekend, after a quick debriefing with Ma and Moncus, both women realized what had happened.

As Mary had honestly and accurately informed the mayor, stop signs, liquor permits, and local statutes were the sole province of city officials. Bridges, roads, the larger issues of corporate expansion, and all of the significant reapportionment of non-city lands, including those now available and necessary to a new school, somehow lay in the domain of the county alone.

After allowing Pa to excuse himself, now that his feeble brain had been thoroughly ransacked, the two women sat together in the Gorsuch living room, both annoyed and flustered by what had been recognized. Finally, Ma, who still maintained a desperate pride in her own position as first lady of Frisco, turned to the psychologist, and unwilling to accept the titular truth of her status, muttered, “What can we do ‘bout this?”
“Well,” mumbled Moncus, her feet flat on the light green carpet, her undersized and open-toed flats exposing the gnarl of her big toes. “Since the county’s pushing for some corporation to open up on the property we were going to give to the new school, and since we now find that they have the last word, we’ve only got two choices.”

“And they are?” asked Ma.

“One,” said Moncus, a thoughtful palm raised before her face, its thumb prodding at her fingertips, and her eyes upon a bit of grit below her nails. “We restructure the allocation of power here in Frisco. Remake the town’s charter. Call a general election on the issue. Revolution.”

Ma nodded at her, leaning close upon her own knees.

“But,” Moncus thought for a moment more. “Given the turnout and general frivolity of the last election, I wouldn’t expect much from the voters. Probably spent by now. Worn to the bone.”

“So?” said Ma.

“So we probably have to employ our second option.” Moncus gave one last glance at her nails, looked up and lay her hands on her lap. “Make them do what we want.”

Ma watched her.

“I know two of them,” she said. “Both came out of Jefferson while I was there. Went to college.” She suddenly gave Ma an odd look at the recollection to whom she was currently speaking and of their first relationship. “Both a couple of kids. One of them, the snottier of the pair, has a father in Congress.”

Ma found herself trembling at the thought.

“Father got him to take a vacant seat without any challenge. Name wasn’t even on half of the ballots because the commission figured it wasn’t necessary. Still, there’s something of an issue there. Could’ve written in someone else—if the post had been posted. Constitutionality.”
Now, Ma found herself suddenly shivering.

"The man even managed to get a D.U.I. erased from his kid's record," Moncus went on, now with even greater contempt. "Had his father paying for his car insurance, even while he was serving as one of our commissioners. Claimed that daddy had forgotten to pay up." She paused and eyed Ma. "That sort of thing might be a problem for someone invested with so much responsibility."

Ma tried to calm herself. "And t'other one?" she asked, her eyes now aglitter with prospect and peril at once.

"That," said Moncus. "Could be difficult. He's a bit too squeaky-clean. But, the two were and are fairly close associates in most things."

"And?"

"And that suggests that a few skeletons might be lurking back there. Birds of a feather."

"And?" Ma said again, even more impetuously.

"And, where skeletons may not exist, we can always infer or embellish."

Ma, still touched with the fervor of the righteous, was suddenly taken aback. "I can see," she said. "Revealing the truth of a man's character. But," she concluded. "Can't see as how's staining that character can be justified before God."

"We could," said Moncus, thoughtfully irritated by the insipid desires of her cohort, and already scheming to bring the young man in question into close contact with a youthful, overly affectionate, and underaged young woman whose name she kept at the front of her files for just such an exigency. "Simply set up a test of that character. If the test fails, no matter. If the test succeeds, then the man himself will have admitted his own flaw."

"I see," said Ma, a bit less skeptical, though altogether American enough to recognize potential entrapment when she saw it. "But--."
“Even Abraham’s role as leader couldn’t be established until he had met his own trial. A temptation,” said Moncus. “To sin is sometimes a valid test.”

Ma frowned.

“We can have no half-way covenants here in Frisco,” she told her. “The Resby boy might be a lenient sort of substitute for one of them, should one of them fall.”

Ma, although she knew nothing of early colonial history and the more rigid strictures of Calvinism, found herself leaning toward agreement. Right was right, and where it prevailed, it prevailed. Where it failed, well, as far as Ma could see, it failed. And that, of course, given Job and Abraham and Eve and Adam, was enough. She turned to Moncus, who sat smiling. “Ms. Moncus,” she said.

“Yes, Mrs. Gorsuch.”

“You are indeed a friend.”

“Yes,” said Moncus. “Indeed.”

With that, Ma rose, shook out the stiffness of political tension, and gestured toward the kitchen door. “Care for some tea, Ms. Moncus?”

“Why yes,” answered the psychologist. “I certainly would.”
CHAPTER XVI

WAITING BELOW

That very same evening, reading as she sat in her little-girlishly pink and sparse bedroom, Samantha Harpool, whose affection for Mark Daniels had gotten the best of her, and who still felt a bit guilty over what she now perceived to be an eventual and culminative jilting of Lenny, despite what was a continued and longing attachment, heard three taps from a sequence of pebbles on her pane.

She rose from her bed, drew aside the curtains, unlatched the window, raised it and leaned out. “Mark,” she scolded down in a loud whisper into the night of the lawn. “Really. You’re going too far with—.”

“It’s me,” from down alongside the house, nestled in the shadows of bushes and trees came the corrective.

“Me?” she whispered again, confused.

Little did she know that, in the absence of his two friends, Jonathan Dubinski, knowing that Lenny had planned to be there already, had grown lonely in his chimney-less derelict, and found himself dwelling upon her own irrepressible beauty and charm. “Dub,” the voice told her, this time with a bit of the excessive vigor that irrepressible beauty and charm inspired.

“Dub?” shocked, she whispered. She turned a worried ear toward the house’s interior.

“Yesss,” he hissed. “Me.”

He stepped from the shadows and onto the lawn, his shaggy-headed countenance
revealed to her as he stared up. She looked down, frightened, saw something of an extra set of shadows across his cheek and brow which revealed a haggard and desperate sort of look, the same sort of look that he'd worn on the night that he'd caught her and Lenny together, and suddenly she felt herself dizzying in the onrush of deliberately concealed memories, the collapsing of friendships, the lost nights and evenings, the vanished camaraderie of days, the laughters of all of that inconsequence and the sheer magnitude of all that was now gone. She touched her hand to her throat, caught herself upright on the sill, and peered down.

"I missed you," matter of factly, Dub told her from below.

She nodded down at him. "Dub," she whispered, a catch in her throat, unexpected, equally well-concealed. "I missed you too. Yes," she let him know, her voice almost breaking. "I really really, really missed you too."

Unfortunately for Lenny, as Dub had ventured forth on his own trek, the zealously paternal Chester had heard the entire message of the itinerant preacher as well as he had. He had, with the sudden conviction that he could right himself, and with a touch of the emotional self-interest of the solitary, upon noticing Lenny's exhausted slumbers on the seat beside him, taken his own directions, as it were.

When the young man finally awoke under the jarring of the car's sudden halt, he sat up, wiped the sleep-grit from his eyes and stared out at what was definitely not his intended destination. "Dammit, Chester," he spat through a somnambulently dry mouth. "Where the hell are we?"

Chester, shoving the gear-lever into park and removing the key, turned to him and shrugged. "Hey," he said. "You done talked to God. Now you need your family."

"Aw, for chrissakes, Chess," Lenny scowled. "The least you could've done was take me on back to school."
"Flunkin' out anyhow," said Chester. "Boy needs his Ma. 'Sides," he added, a touch too sheepishly. "Now we can get to bowlin' again."

Lenny fell back to the headrest, his eyes squeezed shut. "Chester, Chester," he mumbled. "Don't you know how much I hate to bowl?" Since he was still too tired to put up much of a struggle against the current stream, he agreed, after a few moments of negotiation, to take up temporary residence in Chester's shed while Chester notified appropriate parties.

Despite all warnings against such an unescorted visitation, once Lenny had been secreted away, Chester then sneaked into the house, crept up to Elise's room and informed her of her son's presence below. The two sneaked down and out into the yard, and, with Chester hovering outside the shed's doorway, Elise stepped in to comfort her only child.

Sullen, Lenny glanced at her, refusing to rise from his seat on Chester's cot.

"Lenny," she said tearfully. "Son."

"Yes," he said.

"I missed you so much."

"Sure," he shrugged.

She swallowed back what would have been a sob. "Never left you," she whispered, standing uncomfortably in front of him. "Never did."

He frowned up at her.

Her head shaking, still whispering, she went on. "I left here," she said. "Here. Not you at all."

"Look," he told her, still frowning, half-hearing and less than half-caring. "We both know you took one look at me and ran off because you couldn't take it."

Puzzled, she watched him.

"This," he said, lifting the bad arm. "This... mutilation... that's all it took."
Her jaw fell. She swallowed again. Never in all of her sessions with experts, or, in all of their warnings, role-playing, and prodding about the eventual reunion with Lenny, had they suggested the possibility of such a dramatic misapprehension of what had actually occurred. “Lenny,” was all that she could say, shaking her head slowly. “Lenny.”

Outside, Chester kicked at a stone along the walk, his hands in his pockets, his evaluation of the decision to bring Lenny home growing more and more negative.

“It’s not a mutilation,” she told him, and while he winced at her approach, Elise fell to a seat next to him on the cot. Chester’s green metal stove lay before them, the silvery sheen of a can of Coleman fuel beside it. “And it had nothing to do with anything.”

“It had everything to do with everything,” scowled Lenny as they both stared at the stove. “Everything.”

For a few minutes they sat in silence, neither one able to impose an intimacy upon a relationship to which little of the intimate could be assigned. Chester kicked another stone, then took a hand from a pocket and wiped at his nose.

“You’ve left school,” Elise finally said.

“Did.”

“Now what?” she asked him.

“Gonna get married,” he muttered.

“Ah,” she nodded. “Nice girl?”

“Is.”

“And what about school?”

“What about it?”


“Don’t know,” he said.

“You know,” she said, turning toward him. “Marriage isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”
“Yeah,” he told her. “You know that well enough.”

They looked at each other, person to person, stranger to stranger.

“I,” she finally smiled at him, a weak and pitiable expression. “Do. And despite all of that,” she said. “I know how it is.”

“You do.”

“Yes,” she said. “Sometimes,” she went on, sighing and suddenly overtaken by the desire to find a cigarette and a shot of something clear and biting. “It gets right lonely out here. Even Chester can get to lookin’ okay some nights.”

Outside, Chester perked an ear, his own self-interested motivations and the lesson from that preacher becoming clear.

“Listen,” said Lenny. “I’ve got a life. Mutilated as it may be. And I’ve got to do something. Somehow.”


“And you?” he mumbled.

She reached out and touched his shoulder with a calm hand. “Lenny,” she said. “I may have been gone, may have wrecked my life with whorin’ and gamblin’ and booze, but still, I had you. You.”

In the midst of all of this poignancy, Mother Gorsuch, who, from a window had seen the car arrive, seen the two men climb out, and had noticed her daughter’s entrance into the shed, had determined that it had been Lenny who had climbed from the car. With some sense of the final appropriateness of his rectification coupled with a touch of revenge against her co-conspirator, she left the window, lifted the phone, and dialed Moncus’s number.

When Moncus answered, slightly sleep-addled, Ma grinned into the mouthpiece. “Resby boy be damned,” she said. “Lenny’s done come home.”
At the same time that all of this was taking place, back at the Harpool homestead, the elder male, after an over-abundance of iced tea during his evening's final meal, found himself startled awake by the pressing necessities of his middle-aged bladder. Rising from a dream, he found himself groggily annoyed at the interruption and at the dream's lack of closure. There, inside the dream, he'd been trapped inside a stadium after a football game, had found tier upon tier of the orange plastic seats bearing half-filled cups of lukewarm, unfrothed beer, and had found himself, uncharacteristically, drinking, anxiously, guiltily from each one. Finally, forced into the gray interior of the stadium restroom, he only then discovered that there were no urinals or stalls. Instead, along one wall he came upon an elongated blue-plastic kiddy pool in which two little boys and one dark-haired little girl splashed and laughed. Confronted with the problems of this context, he still had to "go" with a certain desperation, yet the only outlet for his building needs involved three children whose faces he could not clearly see, whose eyes, he could nevertheless tell, were all turned upon him; still, he found his hand fumbling at his rodeo belt-buckle and the metal zipper clasp below it, unzipping; the hand, as if of its own volition, had fallen, and then, well, the dream had ended before he could witness the final and inevitably disgusting conclusion.

Now, he stumbled from beneath the quilt, tossing his portion over upon the bundled form of his wife who lay unmoving, placed both feet onto the hollow floor of the bedroom, and, with his right hand extended, felt his way to the bed post's worn upper knob. He turned in a centrifugal semi-circle, his hand still upon the knob, followed along the footboard and projected himself into the hallway. With the fingers of his left hand tracing his path down the darkened hall, dodging the box fan they'd set upon a stand along the right wall, he found the bathroom and stepped inside. He closed the door, flicked the light on, and blinked at a few scuttling black-chitinned roaches as they darted up a wall and
back into the safety of the cupboard and its soaps, medicines, and assorted toiletries and towels.

There, he did what he had to do, cringed at the noise of the toilet’s flush in so quiet a house, flicked off the light, and, blinded again, tripped his groggy way back down the hall, this time following the wall with the fingers of his right hand. He made it into the bedroom, found, after much waving about in midair, the bedpost and footboard, made his way to the bed and sat down into the mattress’s worn and pillow-soft springs.

It was then that he simultaneously noted the red blink of his digital alarm clock, an indication that the power had gone off at sometime during the night, and that there had been some sort of additional darkness in the hallway where the shadow of Sam’s white door should have been.

Bumbling about on the shelves near the clock, his fingers found his wristwatch. He lifted it, peering hard at its face, and he touched a button along its outer edges only to then see that it was now three forty-two in the morning. He lay the watch back to the shelf, and considered Sam’s open doorway. It had been, ever since the days of the lock and key suggested by *Rough Love*, absolutely unheard of that the girl would leave her door open. Both her desire for privacy and the implied parental preference of lock and key, had assured that fact.

Now, the door was open.

He rose again from the bed, and again following the lead of his hands, made his way to her room’s opening. He reached into the shadow to make sure, and the shadow was empty. He stepped in, held his breath, and listened. Aside from the fan’s rattle and hum out in the hall, all was quiet. He stepped toward her bed, and his eyes, now adjusting to the darkness, squinted at what should have been the five and a half foot shape of her form. Instead, there were only sheets and the shape of her two pillows.
“Well, I’ll be,” he whispered.

He stepped to the bed in order to fully confirm what he already knew, slapped his callused hands upon its top, and quickly spun away, walking to the room’s entrance. Blinking hard against its nuisance, he flicked the light on. Samantha was indeed gone. And it was now almost four o’clock.

Unwilling to wake his wife, even in the face of such spiritual tragedy, Harpool managed to find their room again, to discover his worn terry-cloth bathrobe, to throw it on, tied loosely around his waist, and to dig around in his closet until he’d found his work boots. Boots in hand, he then hurried downstairs, fell into a kitchen chair, and shoved his feet into them. He left the laces unthreaded, quickly clomped out to the pickup, climbed in, started it, and recklessly drove to the Daniel’s home.

There, he slid into a stop in the graveled drive, leapt from the truck, forgetting to either kill the ignition or slam its door behind him, and clomped his way up to the front door. He grabbed the knob and tried to gain unwarranted access, but found the door, a subtle marker of the Daniels’ clan’s foreigness, locked. He pounded.

Nothing happened.
He pounded again.
There was some distant movement in the interior.
He pounded even again.
“Just a second!” a voice bellowed.
He slammed the heel of his hand into the door a final time.
“Dammit!” the elder Daniels shouted at him from somewhere inside. “I’m coming, dammit!”

Practically panting, the night around and the neighbors asleep, Harpool stood back on the porch and glared at the closed door as if his eyes might burn it open.
Finally, it swung back, and out protruded the gray metal of the paired barrels of an old shotgun. "First one’s squirrelshot," Daniels muttered, blinking. "Second’ll take your head off."

Harpool stared at the gun for a second, then glared at the rather grizzled countenance of Daniels. "Listen up you, you . . . jewel-box farmer," he spat. "Your boy’s done run off with my child!"

While Daniels kept the shotgun leveled at Harpool’s midriff, he withdrew his finger from the trigger and lowered the first hammer from its cock. "What?" He turned his head, gave a sudden and gravely cough, and swallowed his own dislodged phlegm.

"Your boy," breathless, Harpool repeated, his bathrobe loose and exposing more of his torso than was either civil or moderate. "Took my little girl."

"Oh come on," Daniels said, dropping the gun and turning away.

"Is it?" came the voice of the frightened Mrs. Daniels.

"Harpool," he told her. "Actin’ crazy out here."

She peeped from a distant doorway to their bedroom and into the living room and her eyes widened at the sight of the booted, bathrobed form she saw there.

"Did it," the form said. "Took her right outta her bedroom. This very night."

"Why, Pap," she said, cupping one shocked set of fingers over her mouth and nose.

"Ah," Daniels said. "We’ll see." He left the distraught Harpool standing on the porch and walked back toward Marc’s room.

"Whole alliance is off!" Harpool shouted at his back.

He waved a disgusted hand as he moved.

By the time that he’d reached Marc’s room, the young man was out of bed, had pulled on a shirt and pair of slacks that he’d slung over the bedpost, and, barefoot, had stepped into the hall.
“Where is she?” Daniels asked him, stepping by, hopefully proud that his son might not only have given in to the softer pleasures of life, but that he might have made a successful conquest as well.

“Who?” his son asked him from the doorway.

He turned the light on. Aside from a rumple of bedclothes, there was no sign of the girl. Daniels walked over to the closet and threw it open. “C’mon out,” he said kindly.

No one came.

He leaned in, pulled a few shifting hangers and correlative shirts, coats, and dangling pants back and forth, and then leaned out again. He looked at his son. “She here?”

“Who?” said Mark again, this time shaking his head.

“Harpool girl,” he answered. “Where is she?”

“I dunno,” said Mark.

“Damn,” said Daniels, more disappointed at his son’s failed complicity than at Harpool’s intrusion.

He returned to the living room, gazed out at Harpool, who still waited on the porch, and frowned. “Ain’t here and he’s in bed.”

“Can see he’s dressed,” Harpool muttered, looking around and over the man who now approached the doorway. “Can see he just got himself back in.”

Daniels turned around, his hopes renewed, and saw his son there next to his mother, stupidly blinking, but certainly, save socks, shoes, and a tie, dressed.

“Just get in?” Daniels grinned at him.

“Nah,” said Mark, who now yawned.

“Then why you dressed up so pretty.”

“Oh, for God’s sake,” the young man sighed. “These are my clothes for tomorrow. You know. Lay ‘em out at night. Put ‘em on in the morning.”

“Always gets up too late,” added Mrs. Daniels, her hand now fallen to her side.

“Then where is she?” said Harpool.

“If,” muttered Mark, feeling both the weight of this affront and the initial disgust and suspicion of someone who has been betrayed. “I just got home, then she just got home.”

The three looked at him dumbly.

“Give her a call and see if she’s back.”

Daniels turned to Harpool. “Boy’s right,” he said.

“Fine,” said Harpool. “Let’s try it and we’ll see who’s tellin’ tales here.”

Uninvited, he bull-dozed his way into the house as Mrs. Daniels, slightly afraid, led him to the phone. As he dialed the number, Daniels turned to his son and whispered. “She’ll be there, won’t she?”

Mark shrugged. “Don’t know,” he said. “Wasn’t me.”

“Damn,” Daniels hissed, unaware of how hard it might be to reunite the families, given Harpool’s moral strictures, had his hopes actually been fulfilled.

As Harpool glared at the three family members, his laces and boots below him and unmanly, they glared back. “She there?” he suddenly spat into the mouthpiece. He waited a moment. “Then go and check, woman. See if she’s done come back.” He waited again.

Mark drew in a long breath, then blew it out. Things had been going so well. This whole moment was one suited to “b” movies or the conspiracy that they’d originally fleshed out together. It was not suited to what they’d now, or, at least what he thought they had now, become. Beside him, his mother lifted a hand and patted his shoulder.

“Then check outside,” grumbled Harpool into the mouthpiece. “Prob’ly saw the truck was gone and so she’s hidin’ out there. Give her a shout.” He waited again.
So did they.

Outside, one of their cats, a field mouse in tow, began to squawk about how much he wanted to come in.

Harpool began to nod as he listened at the receiver. He looked up at the three people who were patiently looking back at him. He continued to nod for another few seconds, then blew a strong breath from his nostrils. "Right," he said. "Yep. Unh-huh. Right. Right. Yes." Disgruntled, he slowly lay the phone back into its cradle. He stared at it for a moment, then turned up to face the others. "Not there," he said. "She tried everywhere. Not there."

"Well then," said Daniels.

"Guess I owe you an apology," said Harpool.

"You owe it to Mark," said Mrs. Daniels, again patting her son's shoulder. "Whole affront's to him."

"Yes ma'am," agreed Harpool. He looked at Mark, whose shirt tails dangled, wrinkled over the upper edge of his slacks. "I'm sorry, son," he told him. "I am rightly sorry."

"Good," said Daniels as Mark nodded.

"Looks like the girl's backslidin' again," Harpool told them with a bit more exhaustion in his voice than he had intended. "Just plain backslidin'."

He clomped slowly over to the door, stepped out to the porch and turned back. He tightened his bathrobe and reknotted it at his waist. "I am rightly sorry for this intrusion," he said.

"Best be," said Daniels.

Harpool stepped down the stairs and began the short plod toward the pickup. Behind him, stepping into the doorframe, Daniels called. "Listen," he said sternly. "Damn thing's off, Harpool. I can get my hides anyplace I damn well please." He waited long
enough to see the pause in Daniels’ step, then stepped back and slammed the door behind
him.

Harpool, rather foolishly, outside with the cat, the mouse, and his open and
running pickup, sighed and shook his head.

By the time that he got home, Sam, Dub, and Mrs. Harpool were seated in the
kitchen, waiting for him. The two wayward children had spent the evening and much of
the night out on a long walk to one of the nearby creek beds, had fallen into conversation
about old times, new times, and the state of their respective psyches. Now, they sat in the
kitchen, in their rather overwhelming innocence, unworried by Harpool’s return.

At his approach through the livingroom door, down through the livingroom and
into the kitchen, Dub rose to shake the man’s hand, but at what was a clear refusal on
Harpool’s part, sat down again. Mrs. Harpool, less interested in scolding the two of them
than her husband, had made a pot of weak coffee, and now Dub lifted his cup and took a
long and somewhat soothing drink.

The brazenness of this apparent ambush further irritated Harpool, and besides that
fact, his bathrobe was somewhat ungainly and difficult to keep closed, so he refused to
take his seat; instead, he stood, his hands thrust into his bathrobe’s pockets, clownish and
scowling.

Sam informed him of who the violator happened to be, explained, to no affect,
where they had gone and why, and briefly recounted their general and relative relationship
to her old and now forbidden flame.

“So,” said Harpool to Dub, his voice more calm than the impulses behind it,
perhaps because the book had warned him of a day like today, of an attempt by parted
lovers to reconnect. “You an emissary for your political buddy? Too cowardly to show
himself up here?”
Dub set his cup down, smiling. "No," he said, making certain to delete the habitual and conclusive "sir" from his answer.

Uncomfortable in the monosyllabic response, Harpool swallowed. "Emissary for someone else then."

"No," Dub told him again. "For myself."

Confronted by the unencroachable directness of the newfound enemy, finding himself at a loss in his usual dominance, Harpool, as he swallowed a second time, suddenly found his gaze shifting to that of his daughter. He expected for her to say something, wanted her to speak, to put up the sort of defensive front that had marked all of their earlier, reunited conversations, but the young woman said nothing, did nothing, just met his gaze with a mute smile and a slight nod.

For the first time in a very long time, he noted her eyes, saw the resentment in them that had surfaced at the time of Io's departure from this world, and also noted how much she'd grown to looking like a mature and fully finished woman. He couldn't see her hips because of the table, but this absence only invited him into a sudden recollection that they had widened substantially since she'd come home; they had neither the fat nor the excess of some women, but had come to full fruition under his very nose. All that her physique currently lacked, in so far as his thinking was concerned, was that low slung and central puff of pudge that might mark her as mother as well as woman, and he suddenly realized this. While he might continue to try to suffocate the devilish spirit within her, he could do nothing about the controlling and irresistible forces of biological imperative.

He swallowed a third time, unaware of any gaze save her own, and felt, rather than consciously perceived, the odd and correlative condition of her mind. To punish it, to try to restructure its will or its whimsies, no matter how reprehensible those wills or whimsies might be, would and could do very little any longer, or so the eyes told him. She might act within the narrow borders of his own granted prerogatives in the household, but the mind,
like the very body itself, had become its own subject rather than the comfortable entity that had so long been one of his own. In that last swallow, he admitted to the watching daughter and to himself that while he might stand in the doorway, the belt of knowledge or the bullwhip of wisdom in hand, might prearrange a matrimonial alliance, in part due to loyalties to locale and in part due to familial economic concern, her own heart and mind and body would make their own final determinations. It was a changed world, and she was a changed being.

"I see," he nodded at her.

Her smile broadened, not so much for what seemed to be a victory of sorts, but for his changed tenor.

He pulled back the chair, forgetting the robe, feeling broken and in need of some sort of neither truce nor cease-fire nor surrender, but for an honest-to-God reconnection by virtue of constitutional renegotiation, and sat. His wife, one last vestige of the former empire, rose, poured a cup of coffee into his favorite mug, lay it before him, and retook her own seat in what had initially seemed an alliance against him. He lifted it and breathed across the steam and rising clouds on its surface. "So," he said calmly. "Had a hook-up with some sort of politician, some kind of city boy, and now this young man." He turned to Dub. "What exactly are you?"


Uncertain as to whom this might refer, to himself, to his daughter, or to the disreputable Gorsuch boy of her past, Harpool turned to his daughter again. He inhaled, waited, and then exhaled. "So," he mumbled. "What is it about you, Samantha?"

She gazed into her own mug, steam rivulets dancing across the dark surface.

"Is it a smell, or a look, or what?" While he meant the question to be somehow complementary, after all, his own initial connection to Mrs. Harpool had been based on
little more than a bit of the two former qualities, neither Sam nor Dub had understood the intention.

   “It’s who she is,” Dub told him rather flatly. “Looks and smell have nothing to do with it. If you knew her a little better than you do, you might be aware—.”

Harpool raised a hand to shut him up, then turned to face him. “I know that, son,” he said. “Honestly. In my heart I know that.”

Dub quieted.

   “So,” he said. “Maybe I need to know something about what’s going to happen here.”

Dub watched him, took a sip from his own mug and lay it back to the table. “Man was meant for woman,” he said, unaware of how ridiculous, naive, and stupidly young he sounded.

   “Believe,” said Harpool. “You’ve got that backwards.”

   “Guess I’m not a preacher,” said Dub.

   “Well then,” Harpool said, still feeling the inconclusiveness of Dub’s answer to an earlier inquiry. “Why not tell me what you are.” He looked at the man, his eyes upon the fatigue jacket’s pocket and the fading and eastern European name printed above it.

   “I,” stammered Dub. “Am in love, sir.”

Harpool nodded slowly. Somehow, both men had forgotten that Sam was involved. “I guess then,” he said, now turning toward his wife. “There’s nothin’ to be done about it.”

   “No sir,” said Dub as Mrs. Harpool shrugged.

   “She’s a grown woman now,” Mrs. Harpool agreed. “All growed up.”

He looked at Sam. “That for the good?”

She smiled at him. “It is,” she said, less whole-heartedly than she recognized.

   “Honestly.”
Nothing more needed to be said.

The next day, after a few futile hours spent attempting to regain lost sleep, of all the odd things in this world, Harpool, with an eye toward learning about rather than further evaluating Dub, took the man out into the garden of emu pens and began tending the birds which now still remained in his care.

The two women took up the tasks assigned to their lot by a former era, and carried two baskets of wet clothes and linens out onto the lawn to be hung dry. While the Harpools were a fairly modern clan in the general infrastructural sense, Mr. Harpool preferred the natural stiffness and must of line-dried clothing to either the sweet smell of drier-sheet softeners or the slightly pungent and electrical odor of bare drier itself. While it might cost his wife a good deal of time at the clothes-line and above an ironing board, she neither complained nor insisted on a move further into the century.

She and Sam set about their business with the same unharried and unquestioning sense of duty as always, first laying the baskets upon the ground, gathering up a few clothespins, placing three or four between their lips, and then shaking the damp clothes free of the baskets and into the air, lifting them up to the line and pinning them upon it, the pastel men’s garments taking flight up alongside the bright florals of their own dresses and blouses.

As they worked, they chatted as they always had, through the sides of their mouths, the clothespins dangling and bouncing like wooden cigars in their lips, their tone amiable, and with the certainty and intimacy so long associated with the solitude of their labor. They began with a discussion of the weather, of how well their clothes would fare in the bleaching sun and dry wind, then wandered into a discussion of how little either of them enjoyed the strange and clinging odor of Harpool’s birds and their wastes. They finally paused along in the midst of a giggling bit of reminiscence about how their dresses
had once smelled of the sweet and fresh cleanliness of alfalfa laden manure on Sunday mornings in church.

There, one hand lifted and laying a yellowing sock upon the line, Sam pulled a clothespin from her mouth, clasped it over the sock between the elastic, vertical lines of the ankle and calf and the smoothness of the foot, and turned to her mother. She pulled the two remaining pins from her mouth. “Mom,” she said, punctuating herself to indicate the seriousness of her concern. “There’re three of them.”

Her mother, now straightening the shoulders of one of her own dresses, fiddling with the shoulder pads over the line and yanking the cloth relatively flat, nodded. “Guessed that,” she said through the corner of her mouth. She pulled a pin loose and stuck it over one shoulder.

“I know that Lenny’s still waitin’ on me.”

Her mother nodded, withdrew a second pin and attached the opposing shoulder to the line. “Prob’ly so.”

“And,” said Sam, well aware of the implied degree of confidentiality and circumspection of such moments, knowing that whatever she might say, while it might travel so far as the rather broad and far-reaching conversations of local women, would never fall upon male ears. “The thing is that Mark and I—we—we weren’t ever supposed to be an item at all.”

Untroubled, her mother stepped to a basket, pulled out one of her husband’s shirts and shook it. She stepped back to the line.

Sam lifted a second sock, equally yellowed, and threw it over the line. “We just did it to make you two happy. We did it so that we could just break it off later and go our own separate ways.” She took a pin from her mouth and clasped the sock. “We planned it like that.”
Her mother spread the shirt on the line. "Why would you do such a thing?"

"He wanted to go to New York to marry some girl he'd find up there. I wanted to
find a way to get back to school. Someday."

"I see," her mother said, pinning the shirt.

Off above them, some fifty feet away, the cottonwood that had been there for at
least seventy-five years dropped a few bits of fluff into the breeze. Mrs. Harpool watched
one as it drifted down past the T of the clothesline's pole and touched itself to the grass.

"But something happened," Sam said, reaching into the basket and gathering up
one of her own printed blouses. She gathered a palm full of pins and stuck them into her
mouth. "We really liked each other," she said through the bouncing muffle of the pins. "I
mean, we really started to like each other."

Her mother nodded, but went on with what she was doing.

"And then Dub showed up here last night."

"And old things started comin' back to you."

Sam looked at her. "Yes," she said, still muffled.

"And now you've gone and gotten to know you've got feelings for him too."

Sam pulled the pins from her mouth, one hand bearing the wet dangle of her blouse
against the line. "Mom," she said, now clearly.

Her mother stopped her mechanical movement and turned.

Another wisp of cotton drifted down between them.

"What do I do?"

"Well," her mother said, still untroubled, returning to her task. "One thing you
can't do is explain that to your father."

"Don't I know that," Sam breathed, shaking her head slightly.

"He's a good man," her mother added. "But he never did well with matters of the
heart."
“Nope. I know that.”

“Never did,” her mother continued, clasping a pin to a pair of men’s briefs. For a moment she took note of them. She took a finger and prodded it into a gap between the elastic waistband and the backside. “Never know when to give a thing up.” She pulled the finger from the hole and leaned down to the basket again. “They get attached to a thing,” she smiled. “And can’t let it go. But be darned if they’ll ever admit to that attachment.”

Sam watched her as a jay lifted itself from the cottonwood with a flutter of blue, and then gave a high-pitched and borrowed squawk.

“Like that, they are,” said her mother, unpausing.

While Sam knew that her mother was somehow trying to communicate one of the metaphorical and substantial truths of the region, she saw very little of its connection to her problem. “And?” she said.

“And when a man feels attached, he certainly can’t see how he’s attached to other things as well. New things.” She lifted another pair of underwear, hung them on the line and cradled them in hand as she gazed at her daughter. “Got a pair here just waitin’ to get worn down. Don’t feel attached to ‘em till they are.” She bent down toward the basket again. “He’s attached just the same. Just don’t know it, yet.”

“So?”

“So, you’ve got an attachment to three young men. He’ll never see how that’s possible without wearin’ one of ‘em out first, and even then,” she grinned. “Seems how that’s the one you oughta settle for. Never see how’s they’re all just as fine a pair as the others. Least to you.”

Sam glanced at the grass under her feet, a spattering of long-toothed green against the white surfaces of her canvas shoes. “Okay,” she looked away from it. “Won’t tell him. But,” she sighed. “What do I do?”
Her mother paused at clothes-hanging even again, gave a small shrug, and pursed her lips. "Heard some time ago that there were more women'n men in this world. If that's so, two of your young men have got a fine chance of doin' okay without you. Just do fine at findin' somebody else."

"And me?"

"You?" her mother shrugged. "That's another story."

"I know that. Maybe you should tell me it."

"Wasn't so complex when I was young."

"Yes it was," Sam muttered underbreath, but her mother ignored her.

"Not so many choices and half of 'em you knew right off was bad. Too much drink. Too little work. Too much of too little. Always obvious."

"Sure."

"Yep."

"So?"

"If I was you," Mrs. Harpool told her. "I'd quit worryin' about it at all. About them. You got a life to be leadin' and what kind of life you want's the kind of life you oughta be choosin'."

"I--."

"Want New York and hide-covered jewel'ry boxes, you know what to do."

For a moment or two, Sam simply stood in the yard, a dress cradled limply, like a flag over her paired hands. "Yeah, but Mom, what happens if I don't know the answer to that. Yet."

"Well, then," her mother answered. "Guess you'll just have to go relyin' on that 'yet' for a while."
Another white tuft of cottonwood drifted down between them, and this time, both
women watched as it touched the grass and began to dance across the spears until it
stopped, clinging like a moth to a weed that had surfaced on the lawn.

"Yes ma'am," her mother nodded to herself. "Just have to rely on that 'yet.'"
CHAPTER XVII

THE DESERT BECKONS

If the truth be told here, the simplicity of Mrs. Harpool's observation, still buried in a hodge-podge of anachronistic assumptions about what a woman's final ends had to be, was effective, but for all of the wrong reasons. Sam's worries had little to do with where she might wind up in terms of with whom and whose career, but had more to do with worries about why. Lenny had been a first, a milestone, albeit statistically later in life for a woman of the late twentieth century, especially, although inadmittedly, in rural areas; Daniels had equally been a first, a co-conspirator of a different sort, a deliberate circumvention of parental plan, and an under-the-nose of the oppressor sort of manifestation of individuation in the face of trial; and Dub, well, Dub had been something of a first spectre, a ghost which haunted the relationship, propelling it, tugging it along in a gentle fury of triangulation to which she'd effortlessly lived in deliberate ignorance. Lenny was the man to whom she'd made a physical attachment; Daniels was the man from whom she'd learned to simultaneously walk two realms; and Dub was the man who somehow represented all that had been educational, in more ways than were currently clear to her.

This "yet" of which her mother had spoken, or, to be honest, had seized upon, grounded in a self-sacrificial abdication to the time and destination of unregistered tomorrows, was, in essence, an overtly painful choice to adopt inaction, to choose not to choose, to sign away one of the fundamental rights and sufferings assigned to this species, and while suffering might at first seem repulsive, it was part of the defining, refining, and ultimately and paradoxically freeing bits of existence that a less narrow vision might
acknowledge.

Dub, finding that Lenny had never arrived, had driven back to school.

Daniels holed up in order to reconnoiter and to re-evaluate his own emotional attachments.

Lenny found himself stalled, now tempted by the possibility of a political career without the need for any further education, especially without the linguistic taxations and schizoidal memorizations involved with the law.

And Sam, well, as is apparent, Sam sat inside her bubble of "yetness," learning that her own confusions could have little bearing upon the actions of others.

Over the next two months, very little happened to any of the intertwined parties. Pa forwarded his proposal that they establish a sequence of speed bumps in front of his now catless constituent's home. As Mary had suggested, given the prospective annoyance of daily jarring, she backed down on her request for a stop sign, and nothing further transpired. Dub took his midterms and did well enough, though without any real joy. Sam sat easing her own burdens with an occasional heart to heart with her mother over coffee or steamed cocoa. and though most conversations were little more than recapitulations of their last, she felt herself somehow lightened. Lenny, under the guidance of his grandmother, who was in turn guided by Moncus, became greater acquainted with his mother, who in turn grew greater acquainted with their arbiter, Chester, and Daniels returned to his office, ignoring his father's injunctions, still formulating a deal with the momentarily outcast and untouchable Harpool clan and its wealth-inspiring birds; he even went so far as to have the artist secretly draw up a series of additional sketches for future, bargain-priced emu-hide jewel displays. Moncus, under further injunctions from Ma, aware both of the Gorsuch money, Ma's role in retaining a Lenny-Pa alliance for future school buildings, and of Ma's ethical pigheadedness, backed off on her former plan to create the necessary skeletons in county commissioner number two's closet; instead, at the close of the second month, she
decided to play it openly, to seek a private meeting with the son of the House republican to see if he might agree to their educational demands without any need for the further involvement of Lenny; she could, after all, point out that Pa was now Mayor and influential enough to assign the grandson to a more local post.

The meeting was set for a Wednesday, but, as happens more often than not, there was no need. A fortuitous event came her way. Tuesday of that same week, the two commissioners, the son of the representative, Navee, his friend, and a third party, one Davis Scott, a middle aged clerk in the records office agreed to their regular lunch time poker game. None of the three was noted for any authentic skill, and none had played for more than a two dollar pot in his life, but the two young commissioners, by virtue of the losses correlative to play, felt that the meeting not only brought them closer to their respective staffs, but equally gave them some insight into the workaday world of the common citizen; after all, both had learned the game while lunching at a shared, temporary job a few summers before, and both had felt that it had been the only thing that connected them to the real, long-suffering wage earners of the warehouse which had then surrounded them.

The game began as always, they passed the janitor in the hall, an African-American man who'd always been there, and with brown bagged lunches open on the desk before them, the glad bags translucent atop the wood grain and within a few crumbs scattered around, quickly dealt the cards, the three penny-ante cents lying darkly between them. They laughed open-mouthed about secretaries and underlings, flipped cards around, and ate, occasionally flipping a Frito or Cheese-it one-fingered into the pot to sweeten it.

Finally, a good ten or twelve minutes into the spoit, they left talk of the people around them and began to do what all such political aspirants are inclined to do; they began to discuss matters of import from the political spheres above them. Local rumor had it that one of the two National Guard armories in the region had been slated to receive a garrison
of UN troops as "supplement," although, if truth be told, the recommendation had only been that two UN officials should drop in in order to further review the federalistic structure of the national militia, all as an effort to re-evaluate the UN's command structure, and that rumor had blown itself up into a great dirigible of a truth, including black helicopters, secret street signs, the anti-Christ and everything else conspiratorially possible save, perhaps, the admission of aliens and UFOs.

Navee dealt the hand with an admirable proficiency, and glanced at his own cards. A pair of threes was all they offered. He tossed the others back and shoved in a few pennies.

His cohort in commissioning, who went only by his unfortunate last name, Coffee, equaled the bet, tossed back two cards and eased himself into the chair. "So," he muttered, trying to keep himself unrevealing. "What's your dad got on these UN people."

Davis performed his own poker rights and upped the bet a nickel. "Yeah," he puzzled. "What's comin' down our pipes?"

Navee glanced back at his hand again. The cowardly daily rule of aces wild now gave him three of a kind, but he failed to appear in the least bit enthusiastic. He hadn't heard a word from his father, but like any good male, he felt himself less than free to admit any ignorance. "Puttin' 'em in close to the border, but not too close."

"Ah," the two others nodded together. Word had it that the Mexican government, long noted for its excesses atop an impoverished basis, would still, despite all treaties, fall into the hands of a vicious and inhumane junta of one form or another. Said eventuality would require peace-keeping, especially if an anarchical moment should occur.

He tossed in the dead cards and shoved in a matching bet, then upped it two pennies. Expecting agreement, and forever echoing his father's public line, he muttered onward. "Looks like subjection of our government to the UN, eh?"
Coffee nodded and folded; the seven cents was more than he was willing to meet.  

"Sure," said Davis, tossing two cents in and tossing out two cards. "But probably best to control them without looking like we are." He upped the pot another nickel.  

Navee flipped two cards across the table's surface. Davis leaned forward and picked them up. "Put the UN in there and we're off the hook. 'Hey,'" he leaned back again, his cards fanned against the table's edge. "It's not us, boys. It's that damned UN made us invade you.'"  

Davis perked a brow.  

Navee, who had always been a confusing agglomeration of the laissez faire on national matters and international aristocrat when it came to matters of economic policy and "alien" sovereignty, frowned and flipped a nickel to answer him. "Ought to take pride in doing it ourselves," he said flatly. He shoved in three more pennies. "Shouldn't ought to hide behind Jew bankers and their cohorts in New York."

"I seem," said Davis, who'd long ago learned that flustering an opponent was crucial to victory in the game at hand, and had equally learned where Navee's irritant buttons lay. "I to remember that your father once suggested that the UN needed more involvement in the drug war. You know, back in the last budget battle."

"That's a global concern," Navee swallowed. "This is regional."

"Didn't feel that way in Nineteen sixty-three."

"He wasn't there in Sixty-three."

"Ah," Davis smiled. "I guess," he feigned a mumble and met the three cents, then tossed in three more. "I just have trouble with the contradiction. "You know--."

Navee met him and threw in three more. As far as the standard stakes of their lunchtime jousting was concerned, they'd passed the high end for a single hand some five cents before.
"I mean," Davis went on. "The contradiction. Involve them when it's our problem; keep 'em out when it's somebody else's. Seems to me that a bad government down there, or anywhere, is a global sort of issue. Ought to get global involvement."

"Listen," said Navee with a bit more exasperation and condescension than is wise in any conflict. "We get rid of the bastard government, they'll thank us. We get rid of the drug trade, they'll hate us. Whole damned country runs on drug dollars."

"Ah," nodded Davis. He tossed in three cents.

Both men ignored the call and lay their cards face down upon the table.

"This is a matter of our future."

"Nothing's happened."

"Might happen," Navee breathed. "We ought to get 'em the hell out of here and prop those people up down there. Buy up some Pesos."

"They're not very nice people down there."

"Bastards'd be our bastards," Coffee piped in, cautiously leaning to the table and flipping each of the two competing hands over.

"Yeah," his voice a bit stretched, Navee agreed, unthinking. "You got no national pride?"

Despite the fact that the hand was over, and despite the fact that Navee had won it with three fives of his own, Davis, calmly and as self-righteously as he could be, moved on. "You," he said with an uptilt of his chin. "Haven't heard the word. This is a new era. Global community." He grinned. "Said so yourself on the drug thing. So'd your dad."

Unwittingly, Navee found himself sliding his chair back from the table. Davis, unaware of where he'd just stepped, kept grinning.

"You know," he said. "New world order."

Navee's face slackened. He spoke with more calm than his movement had suggested was either appropriate or honest. "What?"
"You know," said Davis, unconsciously sliding himself toward his opponent.

"New World Order."

Coffee took an arm, and with a quick sweep across the table shoved the change toward his friend.

"You fascist bastard," Navee whispered.

Davis leered at him. "Well," he intoned. "You yourself are a communist."

Navee's eyelids flickered.

"Daddy paid your bills. Covered your butt. Sounds like a government bailout to me."

"Communist?" Navee whispered again. the hideous word all the more hideous because it had been directed toward himself. He rose slowly, both hands upon the table, fingers touching atop the change as it lay dormant below him. His right hand, as passively as a tarantula meandering atop the asphalt, closed upon some of it, gathering it into a clenched palm. "You Nazi swine," he muttered.

"Parochial Wasp," Davis told him.

"You, you--," Navee answered, but before he could think of another thing to say in the exchange, his right hand, fully clenched, as if of its own accord, lashed out, the fingers opening and the charge hurtling forward with requisite thunks and tinklings and metallic violence.

Davis, who indeed was as caught up in the tensions of the moment, despite the fact that he neither remembered what he'd had to say or could be certain that he believed any of it, took the coins full in the face, and found himself responding to the multiple stings; like many a man similarly, yet liquidly, insulted at a toast, he stood upright and with one flat palm slapped his employer with as much physical invective as was possible.

By the time that the janitor, a man who had been listening at the keyhole the whole time, indebted to Moncus for his daughter's continued education at the local high school
and now used to reporting enough of their lunch time conversation as to keep the woman
well abreast of all that was transpiring in the county offices. entered the room, Windex and
paper towels in hand, the men were engaged in a protracted and ridiculous struggle atop the
table, cards scattered around, change rattling down to the floor, and Coffee himself
desperately trying to part them.

This janitor, now provided with all of the information that Moncus might need in
order to undermine Navee's career and to establish a Gorsuch presence in the
commissioner's office, paused only for a moment, and then, as all male children have
practiced in many a play time, he raised the Windex bottle, adjusted the nozzle from spray
to stream, placed his finger upon the white plastic trigger, and fired repeatedly into the
hodge-podge of bodies until each became aware of the stinging ammonia in its nostrils and
eyes.

It was, of course, enough.

The Honorable Navee could no more eradicate the soon to be public knowledge that
his son had been slapped by and then attacked an underling while involved in an illegal
game of chance than he could pay the man's way out of the looming civil action. While
Davis might have forgotten and forgiven, given his clear provocation of the young man, the
response of all three to the Windex assault had been overwhelmingly brutal and the janitor
saw to it that he should have his day in civil court, lost hours, harassment, a threatening
workplace environment, and so on.

There was but one thing for Navee to do, and that was to quit his post, to accept his
father's offer to employ him as a clerk in his office on the hill, and to get out of town,
agreeing to appear in court when and if that ugly day should arrive.

Lenny, as they say, given his grandfather's position and less than confrontational
style during a time of local prosperity, was a shoe in. The special election that was held
two weeks after his predecessor's resignation was more one of form than fact. Like Navee
before him, he was the sole candidate on the ballot, and write-ins were virtually without support.

Finally, after the long years of waiting, without the necessities of degree, sloganeering, or Dub-directed political platform and intelligence, Lenny Gorsuch's aspirations had begun to be met.
CHAPTER XVIII

WISDOM AT LAST

Pa, meanwhile, as Lenny took his share of the county reigns, kept doing what he'd been doing all along. By now, he'd spent enough time watching Spider open the store and take cigarette breaks along its front below the office as to get bored with the whole affair. The world outside his window had a certain day to day similitude that was uninspiring at best: once he'd given up on occasionally loitering about the halls of the courthouse, he grew more and more fond of sleeping the day away.

Now that Moncus had found a second proxy by which to carry out her plans, all sense of an eventual confrontation with the woman, as hinted at by Mary, had disappeared; he agreed to the school which was to bear his name, and that was enough. As far as Pa could tell, his sole role as leader of the town was to meet with citizens or city counsel, to adopt a pose not unlike that of a kindergarten teacher overseeing her children at recess, to see to it that the occasional clashes of personality led to anything short of bloodshed.

There were, it has to be admitted, moments of city import; after all, development along the waste lines and creek beds continued at their initially alarming rates, and now and again, council members fell into heated disputes about which strips could bear convenience stores and gas stations, which locations could be reserved for multi-family housing units, and which areas would be allocated for standard suburban enclaves. Over all of this, Pa listened, nodded, and kept his eye on the egg timer, overseeing the time allotted for each speech. He was, all would agree, a stern hand during debate, though none knew it, easily annoyed by anything that ate up his potential free time.
But, as is often the case, most of the time such issues were off of the agenda. His primary role was, as Moncus had initially established it, to act as "communicator." The city halls were opened more often to citizen-input than they had been, and every citizen seemed to seek his day. As in the case of the dead cats and the stop sign, most of the issues were mundane. People wanted new speed limits, usually a matter for the state legislature; they craved exception to environmental statutes, a matter for the federal courts; and they generally stood before the council, babbling with the microphone nervously, sweating and stuttering along between the punctuating pauses of the frequent "uh . . . and"s of what were generally hypotactic narratives. Pa, in his grandfatherly way, with his assistant, Mary, at his side breathing answers into his right ear, consoled his people, told them that all would be taken into consideration, and that he would immediately forward their grievances to the appropriate functionaries.

Sometimes, the grievances fell into his own political domain, things like "My neighbor waits till animal control is closed for the night or weekend and then lets his four Rottweilers out loose to wander the neighborhood and no one seems to be able to stop him and if he keeps it up I know four dogs that're gonna be dead soon," or "I seen this strange man hangin' around outside the Seven Eleven at night in front of the pay phone and I know he's up to no good out there," or even the astonishingly liberal, "I think your people in the county courthouse have been violating my civil rights by putting up a nativity scene every Christmas, and that's a mixing of church and state and I don't want my tax dollars going to that sort of thing," or the more conservative, "I noticed that my child's second grade teacher has had four boyfriends in her house this month and I don't think we need that kind of role model standing in our classrooms in front of our children and pushing them into some sort of immoral absence of family orientation and moral value and . . . ." These, he took in stride, giving stern warnings about the emotionally high-charged threats that emerged, giving certain promises that things would be looked into, and warning all parties
that it might take some time, but "we'll do what we can as soon as we can." More often than not, he introduced the last phrase with a heartfelt, "Well, when you're mayor you face many decisions and chores, and sometimes, for some of them you just have to wait until you have time, even though you want to do something about them now."

Somehow, this all worked like a charm.

Eventually, the dogs would go home, the strange men would mosey on, Christmas would pass, the school teachers would settle on one or another of their beaus, and the citizens would nod approvingly at his success. The matters reserved for higher government were, as he promised, passed along, usually in the form of well-edited notes on town stationary, and the man managed to make it clear that the villains behind the complaints had not only been informed, but had agreed to take matters into consideration as well. As higher government tended to move even more slowly than that at the local level, most people were happy with what he had done, and waited, willing for deliverance.

The only thing of any real note about his administration of the town was, as has been noted, the need for his signature on documents concerning zoning. He did what he could according to the dictates of the council, and once squabbling had ended over such matters, put things to their appropriate votes, passed the resolutions, and allowed owners all rights to the sale of properties as the council had stipulated.

This meant very little, except that his assistant, aside from her aspirations to some higher form of sycophancy, had also the flaw of being more avaricious than appropriate to her current position.

Over time, she found that he was less likely to read a single word of any document if she forwarded that document to him between the hours of one and four PM, his primary nap time. At any time outside that range, he was willing to at least skim the contents; most of the television shows he watched during other hours were re-runs or reiterations of previous shows, and, while he watched them, he was willing to entertain himself with
other things as well.

She also found that while Pa was the grand patriarch over an enormous estate, he had neither legal nor economic advice as to what to do with it. Federal taxes, as far as she could tell, would eventually eat the thing up entirely. With this in mind, given her abilities as civil administrator, he agreed to have her act as his private administrator as well.

Over his first several months in office, while gazing at a multicolored map, something of an economical topograph of the town, she had found a small strip of privately owned homes that stood between adjoining and surrounding strips of businesses. The value of the homes had fallen significantly, which was of little interest to the owners since all had paid them off years before and the devaluation had actually lowered their tax burdens, but their presence, as a yellow blot in a pool of commercial green, had bothered her. Now, some ten months later, a federal court, in a decision about a larger city, had decided to privilege a commercial shopping mall over private residences. The city had invoked its right to easement, and was forcing the residents to sell all under the auspices of a city's right to its own commercial health. The situation in Frisco, given what the map had to say, was at least similar. From what she could tell, after a quick perusal of tax records, the properties, even at a significantly higher price than currently valued, were worth a commercial fortune.

She found, after a few days of hunting, a developer from a major city who, after a few words about the possibilities in a growing market and statistical evidence that this was the case, agreed that a small and central strip mall might be a lucrative venture. He forwarded her sixty-thousand dollars in cash, money that, as he explained with something of a sly grin, was meant for "good faith" and to "loosen things up", and then agreed that he'd step in once the "intruders" had been expelled.

With all of this in mind, Mary returned to the office, shoved the money into a desk drawer under lock and key, and glanced over some of Pa's financial papers. She then went
forward to the six residents, one by one, and explained the situation. They would be given
the assessed value of their homes plus a bit more to cover moving costs and so forth, and
the city would avoid the necessity of crushing them by forcing them to leave anyway, and
that at only the value assigned by the assessor. She showed them the case, explained the
necessity of a business core to any community, and promised further contact. Most were
old, couldn't believe what they were hearing, had little ability to consider the cost of
equivalent housing, and all were tired of the influx of people which had come with the
businesses which now surrounded them.

To put it rather simply, inexplicably, within three weeks, all had agreed to sell out.

Pa was oblivious to all of this, but when Mary showed him the looming possibility
for an investment in which to hide much of his wealth, and promised a rise in business
investment in the community, he did as she told him. The two of them, Mary, with a loan
that he unwittingly gave his own signature guarantee, bought the houses, expelled the
residents, and waited.

Two months later, at the assigned time of three-twenty in the afternoon, the
developer knocked at Pa's office door, and, with a few winks at Mary, explained that he
was looking to invest in a growing town, given that he could find the right place to do his
investing. Pa drowsily slipped into his standard office speech, telling the man that they'd
have to look into the situation, but Mary bumped his shoulder and mentioned the properties
they'd acquired, homes that currently drained their funds, but could now obviously begin
to replenish them.

Pa, in an inkling, understood that this was a gesture that would benefit both his
town and himself, and without any concern about why in the world a contract had already
been drawn between himself and the developer, or for the lost tax write off, took the sheets
of paper Mary handed him and signed off on the deal.
Mary and the man left him to return to his afternoon nap, and together they drove to
a wet town in which to celebrate the simple victory. She had, in a matter of only four
months, quadrupled her money.

This was all very fine except that the town records clearly stated that the zone
which had just been sold was still marked single-family residential. The developer, when
informed, grew angry and then calmed himself, addressed the council, told them what they
wanted to hear about growth and prosperity, and, without offering any knowledge of with
whom he'd made the deal, referring only to the six little houses occupying the strip, got
what he wanted. One month later, after Pa's approval of the rezoning, the houses were
razed and building began.

The sixty-thousand dollars, as Mary was aware of Federal statutes involving large
cash transactions at banks, lay in the desk drawer, waiting for a time that it could be
funneled into appropriate accounts.

Lenny, for his part, took quickly to government. His former proclivities for
revolution disappeared behind the realities of what counties could do, and, as he was
forced to play it by ear, he relied on Moncus more often than not. Coffee, his younger
cohort, had long been used to the tasks at hand, and aware of her stern presence in the
courthouse, as well as of the embarrassments involved in his relationship with the former
commissioner, did little to dissuade Lenny from doing whatever he planned.

The school found its land. There was a small increase in the road and bridge tax.
They took the time to restructure the bureaucracy of the county, collapsing several
institutions into one and firing and hiring as the restructure called for, and, though it was
not part of the job, secured a series of agricultural subsidies for the outlying regions by
appealing to the ex-commissioner's father, who now saw his own status in the House
threatened by the failings of his son.
In all of this simple activity, Lenny, for the moment, forgot about Sam; after all, politics, like fortune before her, as a social construct, is a woman, a fact which may in turn explain why she is so frequently ravished by powerful and sublimating men. He simply did his job, answered the questions of local reporters about any given day's activities, and returned to the family fold, a family, when all else was told, was as close to a case of having become a rural set of Kennedys as the region had ever seen.

At night, Ma took her aging hands to the piano, battered about on the keys, several of which remained dead and most of which were out of the complete clarity of tuning, Elise wandered slowly and ethereally about the house, her grin radiant in its slight insipidity and pharmaceutically governed pleasantness, Pa lay before the larger TV, his socked feet uppropped on the easy chair's stool, and Chester poked about in the yard, often sitting beside Lenny on the dock, both still feigning a relationship that didn't exist, both still bound to each other by a subtle friendship and mutually maintained lie.

Frisco, for all of its self-obsession and worries about growth, was unimportant, and although no one openly admitted the fact, everyone knew it. Young people degenerated; old people lamented the fact; and the city folk kept escaping into its insignificance with a deliberation more philosophically revealing than any demographic postulation might suggest.

It was much later, in a hot time of the year, that Moncus developed a sudden and violent urge to expand her own horizons. It was true that in Frisco she had been a king maker for some time, had always envisioned herself as a moral proprietor willing to create the people who would then implement her proprietorship, but her eye, though she had never admitted it to anyone, had always been set on things higher.

Her town had grown. Her people had seen a rise in financial, educational, and ethical prosperity, though the final assertion seemed somewhat debatable. There were only a few avenues by which to extend that success: one was to the state, and, of course, one
was to the nation itself. The state, with its firm foothold in the oil industry, its secret clutches upon agriculture, and an ever-expansive grasp on the uses of silicon and microcomputing, was inadvertently healthy. Certainly there was crime, in fact its prison expenditures exceeded those of its educational system, but that was a perennial problem, something of a correlative adjunct to economic well-being. Not much could be done there.

But the nation, there was a thing.

Only a few years before this she could never have imagined that any of her protégés could find implantation above. Now, with the assistance of an ever-wary and often dramatic rather than informative press, the nation looked a shambles. Aside from an abundance of jobs, nothing was right. As her practically Ph.D. educational history sometimes reminded her, if the nation, with all of its talk of e pluribus pluralism was taken to be a single identity, that identity was clearly that of a psychotic dwelling within a sequence of cinematic hallucinations, unquestioningly assuming their reality, recognizing its own staggering pluralism of attitudes and yet hating them all, and, despite all of this, maintaining a vision of its own messianic importance to human history. It was proud, yet it hated itself, spent two-thirds of its waking hours engaged in trying to eradicate itself, either by postulating a certain and unvarying moral rectitude from which deviation would be a crime, or by embracing its own diversity and privileging a chaos of national wills and whimsies. To put foot within the national door, to heal its sickness, although the appropriate soporific had yet to be found, that was a job far more satisfying than official schoolboard member or unofficial mayor and commissioner to a little region living under the shadow of the ever-looming megalopolis to the immediate south.

Just as people are inclined to find themselves suddenly possessed with the fever and fret for a new car, Catherine Moncus found herself overwhelmed with what can only be called a sickness, the mad desire to extend her fingers into the dome of the capitol. The Senate was too high, but the House, by virtue of its inherent regionalism, was in reach.
Navee, while nothing he had done had been repugnant to her, was a wild card, and worse yet, he, like most, had been educated above and beyond the call for most politicians; in fact, he knew so much that his decisions, like those of any of the buffoons on the hill, could run counter to each other and he would never feel the discomfort of such a fact. And even worse than this, he was schooling his son to replace him, a son who already knew of her presence here and had scoffed at it.

Both men had had the audacity to ignore her.

It was with all of this, only a month before there would be the beginning of a falling crispness in the air, that she suddenly decided that a challenge must be issued, and it couldn't be Pa; he was too old and too easily swayed by underlings around him. It had, despite their earlier relationship and his relatively new position in the commissioner's office, to be Lenny who would one day, as the Constitution would permit, rise.

The first thing that she did, as she had done at least once before, was to seek out the grandmother. They met in the evening and sent Chester away so that the two could have a private moment on the dock. With webbed lawn chairs facing the lake, the air warm enough to comfort Ma's old bones and cool enough to keep Moncus from sweating profusely, they sat and spoke seriously of the matter.

"The boy," as Moncus decided to call him. "Has an eye for the political arena."

"Does," Ma answered her.

"Could see it back then."

Ma glanced at her. "Anyone could," she said. And she said it again, this time stressing the first two syllables of the first word. "Any... one... could."

Moncus inhaled and held her breath, chewing her lower lip for a moment. "I," she said with some difficulty, breathing. "Am sorry for that."

"Yes," said Ma. "As it should be."
"And I am thankful for your assistance so far."

"And you need?"

"Well," she said. "The boy has shown enough promise here in the county that it only makes sense for him to start thinking of a better sort of future. Within the next decade."

Ma nodded agreement, though she had never really considered the possibility that Lenny should have to leave for any other city save that in which he might finish his interrupted education. Her assumption was simply that there was some piece of county business that would benefit all parties involved.

"He's going to be facing an election," Moncus told her, and she pushed her glasses back up the bridge of her nose with a finger. "It's not quite so simple as the one before."

Ma looked at her hard, trying to read the text that she had yet to see. "You bailin' out on us?" she asked, a perceptive sort of question, given that Moncus had gotten exactly what she had wanted out of the family thus far.

"No, no, no," Moncus shook her head with a certain violence that indicated honesty. "It's just that we might consider another use of our resources. A county-wide election can be as expensive as," and here she took a long breath. "Something more national will be."

Ma stared at her.

"There is a House election coming up in four months."

"Didn't know it," said Ma.

"Of course not," said Moncus. "The man hasn't bothered to prepare himself at all. Can't imagine a challenger at all."

"And," said Ma. "Can see why. Sent us enough money from up there to keep himself in. Pops up on the national news often enough. Be stupid," she smiled. "To go 'gainst all of that."
Moncus nodded, then stopped. "Maybe not," she shrugged. "One day. If the right seeds were sown at the right time."

Ma laughed through her nose and brushed at a gnat that had been hovering before her. "You got dirt on him?"

Moncus grinned. "Always dirt," she said. "But not this time. Got nothing. Just his idiot son and that won't amount to a thing here."

Ma spat out a bit of a sarcastic cough, found herself gazing away from the woman entirely, and swatted at the gnat again. "Sounds like you're in trouble there."

"Unless," said Moncus.

"Less what?" said Ma.

"Unless we have something. Something with which to play it—straight."

"And that'd be?"

"The boy did it before," she suddenly admitted. He put his finger right on what those kids needed. He had something then."

Ma found that she had turned her gaze back to the woman. Moncus, thin, her glasses loose in a tiny trickle of sweat, appeared almost desperate for something. Her eyes had widened expectantly, her hands, while they had been loose in her own lap, now clung to each other in what formed a single, prayerful fist.

"Twas that other boy," Ma shrugged. "Twas them together."

Moncus's face fell. "He's gone," she said. "Off at school still."

"Know it," said Ma. "On account of the girl."

Moncus, who despite her years of professional experience and training, had had very little personal experience with matters of the heart, save the Latino debacle, and so knew relatively nothing of the seriousness with which triangulated relationships tend to either disintegrate or explode, could only stammer. "And she's gone too." She sniffed at an odd smell drifting in from the lake's surface, a bit like dead fish, a bit acidic. "They
could get together again."

Ma, due to an ambiguity of pronoun, mistook the woman's meaning entirely here. While she knew that they had been discussing the political alliance of a Dubinski-Gorsuch team, she, in her closely romantic way assumed that they had changed alliances under discussion. Ma Gorsuch, as had been her own experience, had always believed that behind every good or successful man was a better and more thoughtful woman, and she now guessed that Moncus, who certainly, by virtue of her files knew more about Sam and Sam's insight than she now did, meant that Lenny and his old girlfriend might be able to replicate the political intelligence of what had formerly been a fraternity. "I see," said Ma.

Moncus, who was also under the delusion that they were now in agreement about the pronoun she had used, found herself a bit excited. "We could get them together again; could see what sort of ideas they can generate about what we need in Washington. Could keep them in line when they're out of order, and see to it that we run a good, solid, honest campaign in a couple of years."

This whole idea of an honest campaign, while Moncus would have preferred otherwise, was something of a new challenge to her, and, while she had as yet to consider the stress of carrying out such a thing without the comfort of the great security blanket of her metal filing cabinets, for the moment it appealed to her.

Ma, who, in all of her dealings with her confidant of the moment, had yet to have proven her own abilities, or those of her men, in a forthright and honest manner, was happy to hear that she could now reconcile her political aspirations with her own theology. Thus far, she'd found herself thanking the All-Mighty for his political gifts while simultaneously having to ask for His forgiveness for the methods by which they had been procured. The conflation of the two spoke to her own theocratic impulses.

Above and beyond these few and momentary considerations, Ma also found herself somewhat entertained by the idea that she could play matchmaker, a role that she had yet to
undertake, with either daughter or grandson. Lenny was fast approaching the age at which certain voices would undoubtedly begin to mutter about the leanings of unattached bachelors, and she herself had more than once found her thoughts turning to such worrisome speculations. This, at the very least, was a chance to halt things from progressing in that direction. Once again, two birds could be killed with one well-aimed stone.

"So," she finally said. "All we gotta do is plant the right seeds in the boy's ear."

"Let nature run its course," said Moncus.

Ma nodded. "But," she added, thoughtfully. "Nature can take its time on these things."

"I," said Moncus. "Know that the boy's heart's in it. He wants it. He'll do what he needs to do."

"What he's told to do," said Ma.

"That's the ticket," said Moncus. "Just don't let on that you're telling him."

The two women sat together for another half hour, each engaging in her own private fantasies about what might be done from the hill, and when things had grown chill enough on the lake's edge, they separated.

After Moncus had gone, and Chester had returned, Ma, knowing Chester's intimacy with Lenny, spoke briefly to the man, and learned what she could about Lenny's former girlfriend. She learned the name of the town within which she dwelled, of the parental objections to her grandson, learned Lenny's love had once been authentic and that as far as Chester knew, the girl's probably still remained so, and she learned that the intimacy, while it met with her own ethical objection, placed Lenny in the position of what must be a great physical discomfort and physical desire.

She went in from this conversation and developed a simple plan: call the girl, make it clear that Lenny was pining away for her, and schedule a rendezvous; get Lenny, tell him
that the girl pined away for him, remind him of the pleasures of the attachment, and schedule a rendezvous.

Despite all time and circumstance, the two people were meant to be together, and she would see to it that all would be fulfilled.
Despite the fact that Lenny had entered into an era of wholly sublimated celibacy, it was fairly easy for Ma to do as she'd planned, planting reminders of what he'd given up. Dinner conversations were loaded with indignant references to the open and disgustingly ubiquitous presence of sex in the culture, and she made a pointed habit of lifting magazine photos up for his viewing, of gesturing at the semi-nude women who paraded across the television screen, and of reading an occasionally offensive bit of narrative to the family. Sprinkled between these moments, she informed the household, always in his presence, of the latest romantic linkings and unlinkings in the township, and was sure to tell tales of couples who had found each other years after having been parted. Matrimony, she held forth, was one of the supreme acts of human satisfaction available, and had with it certain pleasures.

Lenny, for his part, initially held out rather admirably against the assault upon what had become his political sensibilities, but, as he found himself often admitting, usually before he drifted into sleep, certain elements of bachelorhood were entirely dissatisfying. His thoughts more and more often strayed from the rudiments of office, and more and more fell upon the rudiments of the female anatomy.

On one Thursday afternoon, Ma stepped into the living room and realized that Lenny held one of Elise's Glamour magazines in his good hand. It took him a moment to realize that she was there, and when he did, he closed the journal with more violence than was necessary, and tossed it to the table with more bored flippancy than was required. She
made an excuse for entering the room, turned, and immediately placed a call to information, seeking the phone number for one Harpool, who lived only a relatively short distance away.

That night, via the phone call, she ascertained that Samantha, though confused, still held a certain fondness for her grandson. She told the young woman about how much Lenny had been suffering, about how afraid he had been to call her, about how much he respected her parents' desires to keep them apart, and how she herself had decided that his health had to take precedence over whatever whimsical intrusions her parents had seen fit to impose over the months of separation.

Sam, stunned by all of this, fell into a relative swoon. She sat to her bedroom floor as if she'd just had word that someone close to her had died, and from there burst into an avalanche of tears, not solely because of her own heart's affirmation, but because the "yet" that had yet to arrive had finally seemed to become clear.

After the call had ended, Sam acted as quickly as her heart might have prompted her had it acted alone. She caught her mother between dinner and a last coffee, met her over a sink full of dishes with a towel in hand, and, as her mother washed, took each clean dish and dried it. While the action was appropriate to any household as anachronistic as her own, it was odd; for the last several months, drip-dried platters and silverware had been the primary fare; Mrs. Harpool, unassisted, in an effort to hide her daughter's shortcomings in after-dinner cleanup duties, had taken to wiping dried spots away before setting the table.

"So," she told her daughter, a thin, blue dish handed up and out of its cloudy rinse.

"Something you want to talk about."

Sam nodded and dried the dish.

"Not tryin' to go back to school, are you?"

"No ma'am."
"Then it's the boys."

"Yes ma'am."

In the living room, the remaining Harpool men suddenly laughed in unison; the sound of a few shoulder slaps punctuated the moment.

"Dallas must've scored."

"Or got the ball."

"Or something," said Mrs. Harpool, feigning athletic ignorance. She wrung her hands in her floral apron and leaned with one haunch against the sink. "What about them."

"Lenny's grandmother called me."

For a moment, Mrs. Harpool stiffened, less at the mention of Lenny, for whom she had no real feelings one way of the other, save the fact that an alliance with him could do little to aid the family in the way that Daniels could, than at an additional suspicion. She'd seen enough romantic movies in her day to know that parental involvement in the great matchmaking game more often than not told of complete male degradation into drunken lasciviousness and the need for rescue by a good, spiritually redeeming woman. "What'd she say," the woman muttered, ears open to any subtextual warning.

"He's pining away for me."

Another uproar rose from the living room, this time bearing the long-voweled grunts of what must have been some moral outrage. There were no slaps on shoulders, only a few stamps upon the floor's hollows.

"Pining?"

"Yes ma'am," Sam told her, now leaning back against the range top beside her mother. "Afraid to call me because he knows you don't want us to see each other. Afraid to see me." And here, she embellished a bit, adopting assumptions whose truth she preferred to exist. "Doesn't eat, can't sleep. Just like your average man. Heartbroken."
"I see," said her mother, inhaling. She sighed and quickly fished for an answer.

"Probably took to the drink."

Sam snickered.

Sideward, her mother gave her a look.

"More like Mark," she laughed.

Her mother turned to face her and leaned forward, a thin wet line horizontally dull across the back of her dress from the sink's overflowings. She leaned on one hand, stolid.

"Like Mark?"

"Sure," Sam shook her head thoughtfully, not quite so aware of his early college strengths as she might have been. "Lenny never liked the drink too much. Mark can get to looking mighty silly."

Her mother stared down at a sack of bread flower near the cabinets alongside the stove. This was a thing she'd never known, had never suspected. Perhaps it explained the boy's inability to shepherd the birds, perhaps it explained his occasional "trips" to distant places. She'd seen it on TV, had read of it in her magazines. Pretended business trips in order to dry out. Even world leaders used the excuse. "Well," she said quietly.

From the living room, another uproar arose. Someone shouted, "Hit him!" and there was a moment of silence as indrawn breaths refused release. Then all three men bellowed and back-slapped to some point of macho satiety, and there was a shuffling on couch and chair springs and surfaces.

A moment later, Harpool, grinning, stepped into the kitchen, looked at both women and grabbed Sam's shoulder in an unprecedented one-handed hug. "Took him out," he laughed. "Took him right out."

Both women stared at him, but he was oblivious to either Sam's bemused expression over her mother's naïveté or to his wife's receding pallor and astonishment.

"Where's that other bag of chips?" he frowned in well-studied ignorance, his head twisting
from side to side as if it should already be visible.

Mrs. Harpool nodded at the pantry and jerked a finger toward it. "Second shelf. Like always."

He yanked the door open and puzzled about within for a few moments, then suddenly stood up, the bag crinkling, clutched in his fingers. He swept the door closed. Both women stared at him.

For a moment, confused, he could only assume that something was personally awry, so he checked his shirt to make sure that nothing had stained it, felt along the buttons and found nothing askew, leaned further over and glanced at his belt and zipper, and then stood fully upright again, the bag dangling beside him. He looked from mother to daughter and back again. "Interrupt you?" he pondered. "Somethin' important?"

Mrs. Harpool, still frowning, nodded.

"What?" he said.

"Can't see Mark Daniels any more."

From the living room, one of his sons shouted that he needed to get back to the game. Much was happening and both sons were weakened by hunger. Longingly, he turned to the doorway, his adrenaline still up, then back to his wife. "Okay," he said, unthinking, already aware of the Daniel's patriarch's decision of some months ago, but equally unaware than he had fully conceded to the authority of Mrs. Harpool without even so much as a demand for a simple explanation. "So be it."

He turned and headed back toward the noise.

"And she's gonna see that Lenny boy again."

This stopped him. In the door frame he turned back to the two. His sons shouted again, something about letting the womenfolk get on with their ways. He leaned into the living room, underhanded tossing the bag to a son, said "shaddup," and faced his wife and daughter again. "The cripple?"
Mrs. Harpool nodded firmly.

He took a step toward her. Sam found herself suddenly flustered; open-mouthed and wide-eyed against the stove, she stared at her mother.

"The politician?"

The woman nodded again.

While Sam still hadn't woven her way completely along the paths that her mother's mind had turned, the "yet" whispered to her from its hidden corners within, and she found her mouth closing around a few words, her eyes slipping into a narrowness of feigned thoughtfulness of focus, and her body falling back into a more casual sort of lean against the range top. "He did," she found herself telling him. "Influence the people who gave us that tax break on poultry, game, and exotic birds. We've got subsidies that help us stay alive here."

"Daughter," said Harpool, pausing two steps inside the room, shifting his gaze into her hardened face. "What're you tryin' to tell me now?"

"I'm telling you," she answered with the conviction of Moses, her tongue wrapped around words foreign to her own brain, words more revealed than properly digested and formulated. "He did it all for us."

Her father seemed stunned.

"For us," her mother echoed the delusion and lie, equally unthinking. "The boy knew what was going to happen to all of us and got them to put forth that law. And," she paused only long enough for her own mind to curl itself back into argumentative play.

"The Daniels boy is a drunkard."

While he had never himself seen any indication that the lie his wife had now spoken might be true, he himself had also felt rather deeply the pain of knowing a daughter would eventually take to herself a man of one sort or another and had always resented the fact, a little girl lost. He blinked twice, once to try to repudiate the claim, and a second time to
find it in agreement with his subconscious resentments. "I see," his own mouth spoke.

He looked at his daughter. "Is this true?"

She could do nothing. That initial plan she and Daniels had hatched seemed to have come to its fruition, albeit in a different form than projected; the wiles of a second woman had suddenly become the wiles of drink, and, as opportunity had arisen, despite her own feelings for Daniels, she nodded and accepted the truth of her mother's hyperbole. "Yes," she said, stoically. "He is."

From the living room, the two sons set up an uproar again and again called their father, begging for him to at least get back in time to see the replay in all of its slow-motioned visual clarity and analytical commentary, but Harpool turned to the door and again shouted, "shaddup!" From the living room, the two men muttered something about crises among women, and returned to their talk of the game.

"Why," said Harpool. "Do we have to settle on this, this," he fumbled for a few seconds hunting for the name, but couldn't find it. "Crippled kid? There are others around here."

"There aren't," said his wife. "There are no other boys around here unless you're askin' her to go and dip into the high school children."

"Ain't so," he said, although for the life of him he couldn't think of a single name appropriate in age for his daughter.

"Is," said his wife. Suddenly and without precedent, she turned her back on him, and with fingers aquiver, she began to wash dishes again, this time with a determination that would scour even the hardest baked grime away. She handed a saucer up to Sam without looking and dropped it while Sam scrambled, barely catching it in order to dry it.

Harpool didn't know what to do. He couldn't tell whether he was witnessing a collapse of the regimen prescribed for his daughter's earlier failings, a need for a new regimen designed for his spouse, or whether his own comfortable solace over the last
several months had been somehow a matter of blindness rather than success. "I--," he stammered.

"Sam is gettin' too old to be foolin' with the yokels 'round here," his wife suddenly spat at him, again handing a saucer up and away, unlooking. In front of her, around her wrists as she probed for silverware, she watched minute bubbles of grease gathering. "We're makin' an old maid out of my only daughter."

She'd said it. For years the relationship had been silently ignored in the household, for years it had been subverted by his authority, but now it was out. The sons, now tossing an opened bag of chips back and forth, scattering bits of corn refuse across the spiraling weave of the living room rug, all under the assumptions that the floor fairies would come and collect the mess, had always been his and his alone, but the daughter, after the unfeminine debacle involving Io, and after the failed attempt to make love into something incomprehensibly rough, had been hers, was now hers, and would always be hers. To have shoved the girl into the nightmarish life of spinsterhood by governing a heart where a heart had its privileges would be to commit a crime against both women at once.

Harpool swallowed.

Sam stared at the floor.

"My daughter," said Mrs. Harpool, lifting a knife and spoon together from within the thickened water. "Has a right to marry whoever she wants." She scrubbed both between a folded sponge. "Ain't our say." Clattering, she tossed both to the counter as Sam mechanically lifted them and dried them. "She's a growed up woman."

Harpool continued to gaze at her back as she now struggled with a few forks. As she lifted them from the water, he turned to Sam. "Is that so?" he mumbled.

Sam, still afraid to look him in the eye, shrugged and took the forks. "I," she said. "Don't really know."
Her mother rose up out of the sink, her fingers dripping, and spun toward the younger woman. "Don't you lie, girl," she said. "Don't you dare go and lie in front of me. On me." She lifted a wet thumb and jerked it over a shoulder at her husband. "Not even for him and his own self."

Sam stared at her mother, into the cold brown of eyes that had once been called hazel, at the uplifted and angry thumb, at the sweat wrinkled across her over-aged brow and at the overtightened series of hairs pulled back wiry along the scalp line. Too much, Sam found herself thinking, is being revealed here, too much for him, too much for me. The sheer and uncomfortable weight of that lovelessly upraised thumb, grease spattered and slightly adrip, still quivering under what had to have been a decades-old anger, made the young woman suddenly feel a deepening nausea, a sense of cold shock that made her only want to seek refuge from standing, even if it was only to fall to the floor near the flour, to curl and to vanish in order to leave the two to negotiate the terms of some new relationship for which she wanted no say. "No, mama," her mouth said.

"Tell him, girl," the woman muttered, thumb and hand fallen to lie flat atop the sink's edge. "Tell him what you told me when we was hangin' clothes."

For a few seconds, Sam tried to recall exactly what had been said, but, as always happens, replay was impossible; all she could remember was a vague and nebulous feeling that had emerged, only the one haunting word remained. Slowly she shook her head, more upset by her failure's affect on her mother than upon herself.

Her mother closed her eyes and turned to her husband. She opened them. "She loves them all," she told him.

"All?"

"All three of them."

Again, the man swallowed, more or less oblivious to the implication of his wife's upraised thumb of a few moments before, yet nevertheless frightened at what was an
overwhelming passion present in what was usually an unimpassioned environment. He remembered mention of Dub, had seen evidence of his presence, and he now put one and one and one together. "All three," he said in something only half a decibel beyond a whisper. He looked at his daughter, at the pallor below the deepening auburn tints of her hair, at the full lips thinned and colorless, and for one moment felt for her. The rules of his own existence had determined that "normal" was undoubtedly a reliance upon some one centrally assumed tenet of being, be that in making a hamburger, in siding with a team, or in matters of the heart, but now, suddenly, in his wife and daughter he became aware of the possibilities for complexities in others, for personally devastating tidbits of chaos; the one might actually be many, and the many might tear and hack at the condition of the bearer so much and so effectively as Ibis had torn and hacked at him for so long. He did the only thing that he could do. "I," he told both women, although he as yet thought that he only spoke to Sam. "I'm sorry."

The three stood together as the sons, having given up on the return of their parent, shouted at each other and eventually ate their way into the crumbs at the bottom of the bag, and the two teams, good and evil, continued to pound at each other in the midst of an existential yet lucrative pointlessness.

Two days later, emerging from the moment with something of a dread, after having openly recognized a bond between people at least as ancient as writing itself, that of favors owed and gifts exchanged, Harpool surrendered his daughter to the crippled Gorsuch, with an understanding that she had to see him in order to make up her own heart; any intrusion on his part was to be viewed as a failure in the final act of parenting, that of letting go.
Harpool, as he now saw it as his duty as concerned rather than leading parent, called Ma Gorsuch on the third day after the discussion. He had intended to talk to Lenny directly, to give the man his official man-to-man okay and to explain away all of his previous hostilities, but Ma lied about Lenny's presence. As Lenny had yet to openly announce any intentions toward his old flame, she saw herself as an immediate go-between and told the man of her grandson's rise to political power, played along with Harpool's hints about Lenny's role in agricultural subsidies and tax breaks, and explained how much the young man had suffered in the absence of love; she gave a lengthy and detailed summary of the physical and mental results of the younger man's pointedly chivalrous desires not to offend the sensibilities of Harpool, and dropped any number of hints that she needed to hear that Sam suffered as well.

Harpool, who had had very little awareness of Sam's emotional turmoil, provided what he could, even told Ma of his own attempts to get his daughter to link up with local men, and put forth his own lie; ignoring the third party, he made it abundantly clear that her heart had always been Lenny's. He played up the sufferings that his wife had told him of later, tried to echo the can't-eat-can't-sleep narrative of Ma, and suggested that the two be brought together again in order that both might reaffirm the emotions that they'd allowed so heavily to prey upon them for so long.

Ma thought the idea was spectacular. She burst into an overjoyed explosion of compliments directed at Harpoolian wisdom, leapt into something of a self-betraying
harangue about how the political condition of the county might now see even greater improvement with her grandson's return to complete focus, and suggested a simple mechanism: the girl could visit the Gorsuch Homestead, under her very own eye, and the two could spend all of the time they needed together without the sorts of fears and pressures that might accompany a meeting held in the proximity of a potential father-in-law. Together, they set a date two weeks away; Ma gave the man directions to the homestead, and after hanging up the phone, she made immediate contact with Catherine Moncus.

Both giggled like schoolgirls over what was now underway; Moncus gave a few further suggestions about how to unsublimate Lenny in terms of his political career, and Ma lay out a full trap in which to cast the young man, including as much honesty about what had happened as was possible: he couldn't know how much he had been suffering because he was not an objective observer of himself; everyone else had been witnessing this. She even shifted the register on the home's bathroom scale so that he could see that he'd lost ten pounds over their months spent apart.

Lenny, as anyone could expect of a post-adolescent male as chaste as he'd suddenly become, found his already irritated hormones running wild under the pressures of memory.

Two weeks later, Samantha Harpool stepped from her car under Chester's wary and approving eye, rang the bell and was brought into the Gorsuch home as her parents, with a quick and tearful wave, drove off.

At first, it was a clumsy meeting under the onlooking eyes of both grandparents and dazed mother, a moment in which Ma dominated the conversation by establishing and reminding the pair of their mutual regard for each other, dropping veiled hints about not only the spiritual bond between them, but of the physical couplings she suspected had once existed, and slowly the clumsiness began to drift into renewed intimacy.

Sam told the story of her months' long imprisonment, overstated her ambivalence toward Daniels, even telling of the plan they had hatched together in order to set both of
them free, and Lenny coughed up an appropriately sardonic tale of his political career, of
the absence of women, and of his role in the county's development thus far. Their
interests, obviously enough, now that the common bond of scholarly suffering had been
removed, had diverged considerably, but once new tales had been told, the bond resurfaced
in the form of reminiscences both sweet and bitter. Dub, despite his relationship to both,
was a topic under mutual repression.

By the end of their second day together, a day spent touring offices and meeting
and greeting people who were, to Sam, complete strangers, including Moncus, who now
that she had realized Ma's misunderstanding of that pronoun, gave Ma one single and
approving nod, the two were unclear as to whether the initial flame still remained. With
this suspicion in mind, Ma set them alone in the house together, dragging husband and
daughter into town for a movie and dinner together. She left a meal on the stove, made the
time that they'd be away clear to the couple, including what could only be called a
licentious old wink at the pair, nodded at one bottle of wine in the refrigerator, and left
them wholly alone, save Chester, who was told, from his post at dockside, to keep a close
eye on which house lights were switched on, or off, in their absence.

Chester did his job admirably. At seven-twenty, the kitchen lights went off. The
living room's lights went on. At eight thirty-nine, the upstairs lights went on and off in
slow succession as if the couple was undertaking a renewed tour of the house. At nine-
seventeen, after the guest bedroom light had remained on for at least twenty-four minutes,
it switched off. At ten twelve, the light flickered on for a good five minutes, and then, at
some time approaching ten thirty, oddly enough, through the living room window he could
see the two of them standing against the blinds peering out, apparently wrapped around
each other.

At ten forty-five, like a dog greeting its owners on return, Chester dashed down the
drive and reported all of this to the family as it arrived. Ma gave a satisfied grin and
squeezed her daughter's hand. "There you go," she said before they made a purposely
noisy entrance. "Little bit of fertilizer and the worst o'crops'll take to root."

Her daughter squeezed back. "Need you to work on me, Ma," she smiled. "No
one's better."

Pa snuffled and it took the two women a good ten minutes to talk him out of
slapping his grandson on the back with a "way to go, son," or some equally ludicrous
compliment.

The next morning, the immediate family made itself absent until noon.
The next evening, it made itself absent until nine.
The fourth day, it stayed in, but pretended to be unaware of the couple's now
apparent engrafting.

One month later, long after Samantha had returned to her own parents' home, she
became slightly worried about a rather minute change in her usual routine. Two months
later, she became downright frightened by the change. Midway through the third month,
alone, and with no one available with which to discuss things, she found all of her
suspicions confirmed.

As they say, these things happen.

On the one hand, Sam knew that she couldn't be held wholly responsible for what
had now begun to be apparent to her in its manifestations as early morning nausea and an
uncomfortable, tingling pain and itch against her brassiere, but on the other, as all of her
high school health films had warned, the result would inevitably be her responsibility
alone. And this disturbed her.

As she sat in something resembling an existential dread, alone in her room, still
sparse and girlishly pink and lavender, still bearing the now opened locks that had once
been used to restrain her against just such an exigency, she found her mind drifting from
man to man, as if the solution might lie there, rather than remaining at all centered on her
own situation. Daniels, in all of the rebounding idiocy to which his kind had often been referred, had already moved on to a teenaged girl from the local high school, a young woman who saw the relationship to an older man as if it was some badge of honor professing her prodigious abilities in the field of finding a mate. Dub, though he had made the one visit that had inspired what had almost become a feud between the two families and had so confused her, was, when push came to shove, entirely too hypothetical to inspire any real passion. And Lenny, well, while the pure physicality of things, as was clear in her current condition, was entirely uninteresting, and while parental approval suggested something of daughterly obligation, especially since the struggle had lasted so long, was, to tell the whole truth, not someone with whom she was really any longer in love. Her father, in his own way, had been right about how to squelch that. Lenny, in the potentiality so long ago, had been far more intriguing than he was at fruition.

She sat dwelling on these sorts of things for some time, weighing the men in their respective balances, before she suddenly became aware that that's what she was doing. Like many a young woman before her, she was trying to decide which man with which to align herself. It'd be relatively easy to propose a lie, to seduce either of the two innocents and then maintain that the child had come early.

When she realized that this was the ultimate catalyst to her ruminations, a prime mover grounded less on the truth than on the question of which of the three was most likely to make good, or most likely to provide full financial comfort in the now looming future, she stopped. The issue wasn't one of whom she needed to choose, but one of whether she should choose at all. She argued the points with herself as her mother rambled around downstairs, doing what she was inclined to do on weekdays, found that there was no comfortable answer to the question, and finally rose from her bed. She stepped to the mirror overhanging her deep grained chest of drawers, a chest once built by some now dead ancestor of her father, and stared into it. There, she saw what others saw, the full
mouth and overlarge teeth, the almond eye sockets around almond eyes, the cheek pudge that would certainly get pudgier now. and slowly, very slowly, she lifted her blouse. She now looked at what they couldn't see. With one hand, watching in the mirror, her palm flat and warm, she rubbed the white belly with a subtle wonder grounded in discontent, fully across her navel and back.

"This is me," she whispered, a realization that she had yet to confirm, as always is confirmed, in the social world. "I am become this."

Slowly, she lifted the hand, stared at the uncovered lump that was more a product of sedentary life than of gestation, and lowered the blouse.

Downstairs, her mother paused from her duties and called her, just as she had done in those first few months when she had allowed Sam to bathe alone, the name suddenly transformed into a question, the bond between them as yet unbroken by experience and trust.

Sam ignored her, still staring at herself in the mirror. Now, she lifted an eyebrow. Now, she lowered it. Now, she lifted a lip's corner. Now, the second corner. Now, she lowered them. Now, she lifted both brows wide as if in wonder. Now, she lowered them. "What a face," she found herself mumbling. "It does what I tell it to do. Or doesn't. Does what it wants. Says things, does things, all on its own." She lay her hand back atop her belly, the blouse between palm and stomach. "That's how it goes," she whispered.

As she began to turn from the mirror, she realized suddenly that moments before she had heard without hearing the sound of muffled steps upon stairs and a plod in the hall. Her mother stood in the doorway, eyes dull inside a slackened countenance. Quietly, in something of consternation, the woman muttered as if it were a sigh, "Sam."

Sam lowered the hand from her belly and felt her own shoulders sag. "Mother," she answered in a voice remarkably the same in tone and texture as what she had heard.
Her mother out-breathed once through her nose, looked down, and then fully entered the room. She glanced at a pair of shoes jumbled at the bedside, socks inside out and slightly yellowed at the soles atop them, then turned and fell to the old and soft bedsprings under the comforter. She leaned forward until her forearms lay upon her own lap, then looked back at her daughter. "I see," she said.

Sam opened her mouth for a moment, waiting for something to emerge, something conciliatory and justifying at once, but nothing fell out. She closed it and shrugged, her head wobbling slightly as it shook. She looked down at the shoes.

"I--," her mother said, now looking at the shoes as well and returning the shrug. "I just don't know."

"Either do I," Sam mumbled. She looked up from the shoes and watched her mother for a moment until the woman raised her head and caught her eye. "I've been trying to decide what to do," she said.

"Not that," her mother quickly responded.

"Oh no, no, no," she frowned. "Not that at all. I've been trying to decide what to do because I'm not sure," and again she shrugged, this time with a glance at the mirror. "Mom," she muttered more annoyed than friendly in tone. "I'm not sure I love him. Not anymore."

For a moment there on the bed, her mother considered mumbling something about the odd effects of hormones on a person's emotional condition, but realizing how stupid it would sound, she simply nodded. "Sam," she said with a flat slap to the bed beside her. "Sit."

Sighing, Sam did as she'd been asked.

"Listen," she said. "We talked about this once."

Sam nodded.
"I thought you'd understand."

Sam swallowed.

"You've done something terribly stupid."

She nodded again.

Her mother looked at her and lay a hand on her daughter's knee. "There's right, and there's wrong."

Her daughter frowned at the hand, feeling as if it had all of the encroaching force of spider dropped from its web above.

"Does he love you?"

"Probably."

"Sometimes," her mother said with a few taps of her index finger atop the kneecap.

"That's all you're free to ask yourself. There may be no other questions possible."

They sat for a few seconds saying nothing, and Sam, twisting under the force of the unmoving hand, finally spoke. "Mom, this is the late twentieth century."

Her mother snorted, lifting the hand away, its venom less than affective, and rolled her head along with her eyes. "Right," she said. "That justifies everything. Makes it all okay."

"It should," Sam told her.

"It doesn't. There's many a happy couple out there that started out this way. Ask anyone," she paused, her voice falling. "Anyone. Many a marriage wouldn't have happened if it hadn't been for something like this. Many a person wandering around right now," she paused and gave her daughter a significant look. "Wouldn't be here, here in the late twentieth century if it hadn't been for something like that."

Sam's lips flattened.

Her mother frowned at her as if wrestling a decision down. "If not him," she said.

"It'd be someone else. That," she nodded. "Leads to this, Sam. No way out of it."
Someday, one day, we'd still be sittin' here with the same situation."

"No mom," Sam told her. "We wouldn't. I'd be somewhere else."

The veiled barb had its effect. Her mother rose, flustered, and took four steps toward the door, then turned. She gestured toward the mirror. "Look at yourself a little less, daughter. That," she said quickly. "Is what brought you here. If that wasn't what was meant to be, if that wasn't how things have always been done, that mirror'd have been mighty empty right then." The woman spun and walked through the door, her steps now solid and resounding as they receded down the stairs.

Dumbfounded, Sam listened to the distance growing between them, then quietly, calmly, from her seat on the bed, stared at the empty mirror and sighed. She'd always suspected what her mother had just openly admitted, but had never been certain; now that certainty had crept in, she realized that, while it might be something of a shock and might bespeak a certain paternal hypocrisy, it changed very little about the world except in relationship to the truth.

"So what," she found herself thinking. "So what if that's how it's been done. It's not how it's done anymore. The most I owe anyone--him--is the knowledge of what's happened. And the most he owes me is some acknowledgment that this is how it is. He owes nothing. I owe nothing. Nothing has changed except that I will become two. Someday. Someday, probably. If all's well."

And then she weakened when she realized that she'd thought that "well." Perhaps unconsciously, her mother's injunction against studying self-reflection at this moment had made its way home. She was not to become two in one. Now, yes, certainly that was the case; she was a two encapsulated in something of a one, but all truth be told, soon enough, she wouldn't become or continue to be one at all, and the two that would suddenly exist would be authentically distinct; the bellyswell would cease, and something else, one and one, would be. And that last term, the final one, did already, even its own simple and
unformulated potentiality, incur an obligation to a third term, a third one, a one that she might not love, but did indeed care for, a one for whom once there had been sincere affection, a one for whom affection, for all she knew, might once again exist.

It might be an anachronism, but the basic biology of the event that would soon transpire argued for a loss of autonomy. Intellectually, she knew that all parties would lose. The him, the self, and even the yet-to-be, but this loss was now inevitable. Unless, of course, she exercised a certain choice, but, while her own more or less liberal leanings might grant the choice to others, she could never exercise it herself. It hadn't even entered her mind at the outset of her musings; it hadn't even seemed plausible. At the moment of her own awareness of her condition, the thing within had already become a thing without. It was a living, breathing baby that, oddly enough, bespoke an allegiance to the world and an existence that repudiated chaos and the onrush of the entropic human vision.

A lame arm, butterflies or ice storms might somehow wreak havoc on the turn of human events, but the upsweep of life itself forever ingesting energies in order to combat that havoc was nothing to scoff at. All the blackened makeup and clothing of the past, all of the asinine poetry celebrating the blackness spawned by the second law of thermodynamics could do nothing in the war against a yet-to-be that actually was inevitably yet-to-be. In all of this, Sam felt herself realizing that the "yet" to which she had been aligned for so long, had found a very, very real connection to an "is." "Was" and "may be" had transformed themselves rather miraculously into a "will be," a "shall" and an "is."

"Damn," she whispered as all of this flooded her head in a sophomoric outburst of impersonal awareness. She lifted the central finger of her right hand and muttered, "This is me." And then, like a boy scout salute, she lifted the index and ring fingers beside it. "And this is mom and dad." She lifted the pinkie and thumb, paused and raised the index and central fingers of her left hand as well. "And these are my grandparents." She counted briefly. "Six," she muttered, "It took six to make one." She paused, went back another
generation, struggled momentarily with the math, and stopped. "And thirty if I count them.
And . . . sixty two if I step back one," and she stopped, touching upon something
unfathomable. "Unless," she suddenly giggled. "We start counting cousins who marry
cousins."

But she had driven her own point home. Step back nine or ten generations and the
figures would be enormous. Step back twenty or thirty and the figures would approach
incomprehensibility.

"All for one," she breathed. "And one--," and she touched her belly with both
hands. "Or maybe two for--," she stopped. Lenny made three. Elise and whomever made
five, Ma and pa and whomever and whomever made nine, and suddenly, staring at the
actual contents of her abdomen, she collapsed. "Oh my God," she said, falling backward
atop the comforter. "Baby," she addressed the thing within, her legs dangling over the
bed's edge, her hands atop her stomach. "It took millions to make you." Downstairs, she
heard her mother drop something heavy onto the kitchen floor; ringing metallically, it must
have been a pan. "I must owe you." She paused, reflecting on what she'd just considered.
"And them." she added in what was almost an afterthought. "Something. Don't know
what, but it's got to be something."
CHAPTER XXI

ON THE MOUNTAINTOP

By the time that she had reached Lenny and told him of the wonderful news, he had made a few determinations himself. Moncus had made it clear that he should run for office again, and had put forth the proposition that he should ally himself with the current House representative, acting as a local supporter, ingratiating himself as often as was possible at the three thousand mile distance, all with an eye toward the election that would follow the one that they both immediately faced, and he had agreed to do so.

Navee, in turn, had agreed to Lenny’s support, despite his son’s fall from power, and made it clear that local officials could expect him to arrive in time for the county election, all praises and accolades in hand.

The only problem with the deal they’d struck was that Navee saw very little chance that he might lose his current post. The offer that Lenny extended was accepted for only two reasons. One was that no sound political thinker would turn down the sort of support offered, and the second was that the extended hand hinted at something of a future political threat. As the more politically astute of the two persons involved, Moncus, by proxy, and Navee, in fact, he shook the hand of the dog set out to bite him, and fired up his own electronic set of files in order to protect himself in the future.

Within four weeks of the initial agreement, Navee had learned of Lenny’s high school career. The original revolution, as forwarded along electronic lines from school to school had spread in an unprecedented way. All parties in Frisco were oblivious as to what had happened. The years between then and now had led to a complete and reckless
explosion of youthful revolt. Schools were in shambles not only because they had been slowly starved into destitution, but because an elder, wiser curriculum had collapsed in the face of a series of student strikes. Riots, or near-riots had exploded in no fewer than sixteen school districts in California, and Texas herself had barely escaped rioting in four of its own.

Above and beyond this clear relationship between scholastic degradation and what was clearly to be a future opponent, Navee also managed, after a few veiled threats about bills involving banks and credit unions, about real estate development and city prerogative, and about federal funding for local law enforcement, to find out about the connection between the mayor of Frisco, his bank account's superabundance, a few odd changes in local zoning, and the financing for what had become the current Gorsuch campaign for county commissioner.

On the one hand, the man was tempted to withhold the card until the moment of crisis in his own career might fully present itself into view; on the other hand, he had been at the game long enough to know that it's best to eradicate a gnat long before it has become a swarm. Nevertheless, he was satisfied, for the moment, to wait until the local and latest elections were over, especially since the Gorsuch clan might, after all was said and done, remain satisfied with its modest victory. It was possible, though unlikely, that the extended hand was no more than that—a bit of political hubris grounded in nothing more than some hypothetical second term in a county seat.

Unfortunately for the Gorsuches, a constituent, who found it nothing more than an amusement, called to deliver Navee some very disarming news. A billboard had gone up along a major roadway in Frisco, somewhat loudly advertising the wealth available on the far side of the Oklahoma border, a veritable pile of money housed in one of the nation's largest bingo halls owned by its indigenous peoples, and the physiognomy found on the sign, bent down over half a dozen bingo cards, perched atop a torso bespeckled in gold
chains which were vaguely reminiscent of the disco era, and controlling a pair of upraised hands that clutched magic markers, bore a remarkable resemblance to that of the representative himself. After a few calls, Navee determined that the sign had not only been approved by the county and its commissioners, who oversaw all such advertising in terms of local standards, but that the mayor of Frisco himself also happened to own the billboard upon which the sign appeared. After a few more calls, he learned that the artist who had designed it had been hired by Pa Gorsuch, had been given clear instructions as to its appearance, right down to the fluorescent troll dolls next to the cards, and had been directed by one Catherine Moncus, an unofficial advisor to the commissioner with whom he had just made agreement.

All of this was actually true. Mary, in the interest of diversifying Pa's interests, had bought up a number of billboard towers along the highway, and Moncus, her eye forever on the future, her psychological training in hand, had designed the billboard with the sole intention of slowly and subconsciously destroying the Representative's image among his commuting constituents.

As he was no fool, Navee downloaded the information he had on Lenny and the Gorsuch family onto two floppy disks, shoved both into a rather smallish envelope which he mailed to a friend in Wisconsin, and had that friend anonymously mail one disk to Frisco's only newspaper, and a second to the biggest newspaper in Dallas.

Within days, the story had drifted from newspaper to news station, from news station to local television, and from local television onto the wires and into the national press. A nation outraged by its uppity children, afraid of the internet and its corruptions, and always attracted to both small town marginalia and political corruption in general, raised its middle-classed outcry. Not only had one of the central demons among the many demons of youth been found, but the family had cheated its way to the top, cheated its way along once it had gotten there, and was now engaged in gathering even more money along
lines that were the local equivalent of a Trump or Miliken.

Within a day and a half of a phone call from an investigative reporter from a national dinner-hour show, Lenny, determined to save things, had torn apart his and his grandfather's offices, seeking any and all paper that might implicate either of them in anything, desperate, now that certain issues involving the campaign had arisen, to keep his grandfather out of jail.

It was, of course, then that he found the money which Mary had hidden in the desk drawer. Less than bold in terms of her willingness to undergo personal risk, she'd left it there while waiting for some uncertain and personally imposed statute of limitations concerning graft to pass.

It was, of course, then that he realized that he was involved in an innocently undertaken sort of set of actions which were in no way innocent, just as he had been caught in the youthful idealism of his naive high school past. And it was then that he realized that, as county commissioner, in part involved in all regional zoning regulation, that prison was not out of the question for himself as well.

Stunned, he carried the cash back to his own office and sat contemplating some viable means by which to escape.

And the phone rang.

For a few seconds he stared at it. After the fourth ring, afraid to confront whatever news agency might be on the far end of the line, he finally conceded the case against answering it, and lifted the receiver.

Sam, he was then informed by her own quivering voice, was a good two and a half months pregnant.

This news was altogether too much for him to bear. He could do nothing but stammer out a few "okay"s, and, after listening for several minutes to her own fears and excitement mingled into a breathlessness that disturbed him, hung up the phone without
any form of commitment at all. He gathered the money, the paperwork he'd found that implicated his grandfather and himself, and then, fully grasping the modern meaning of "paper trail", suddenly realized that second and third parties had copies of all of the documents he'd discovered as well. Successfully shredding the evidence might take months of investigation and an untoward number of burglaries, neither of which appealed to him. He had, he thought, destroyed his own life, had apparently destroyed Sam's, and, as he had been educated and should have known that something had been running amiss in the mayor's office, had ultimately destroyed his grandfather's as well.

There was little to do now. Dub had been politically astute, at least in the terms of adolescent desires, but he had not. Dub had seen their actions as local; he had not. And now Dub could be anywhere in the world. No answers lurked there, and if they did, they were at best unavailable.

Originally, Moncus had led them into much of this mess. Undoubtedly now, at best, she would dump her own files into hostile hands and attach herself elsewhere at the first call; at worst, she might have dumped the information into the hands of the press in the first place, offended over some trifle or having spotted some higher alliance. There could be no solution there.

Ma and Pa, to tell the truth, might not even comprehend what was happening, and Elise certainly couldn't. Chester was little more than a frivolity. Nothing lay there either.

Very little was left to him, save perhaps Sam, but she had been out of his existence for so long that, despite the recent news of their reconnection, it seemed unfair to rectify the wrong by establishing some attachment to her. An incarcerated spouse was nothing to hand a bride; an incarcerated father was nothing to hand a newborn.

And himself? Well, all be told, prison was way down on the list of things that experience begged him to do; after all, he had been there, albeit that it had been long ago, done that, and knew that that sort of thing, while it wouldn't be admissible in determining
his guilt or innocence in the current case, would probably have its affects on his
sentencing, and would certainly affect the vivacity with which the prosecution would
pursue its case. Undoubtedly, something long, empty, and among men who, to be blunt
about it, had long ago learned to abandon all social taboo, lay before him. He couldn't
even fool anyone there this time. They'd be on to him.

All of this would become his life.

As he sat there behind the desk, eyeing the phone as if it might ring with some clear
answer to his problem, it seemed almost easy to accept this, but within a few hours of
waiting, acceptance began to drift its way along into something else entirely. He could
leave a note, one cold and short epistle making it clear that he himself had led Pa into
signing the foolish documents at hand. It might be entirely untrue, but the fiction might
fool a judge into such lenience that Pa would, at the very worst, face probation and a life
free of his bored mayoralty. He could likewise leave a note telling his family about Sam, a
quick plea for them to care for her since her own family would undoubtedly expel her.
And he might even drop a note to the editors of the local papers, accepting all blame,
placing no responsibility for anything that had happened on anyone but himself. And,
perhaps, he might drop a note to Moncus, asking her to purge her files of his name and his
life so that history might entirely forget him; she might, in a burst of human feeling, do as
he asked since he would no longer be relevant. All of these things, while they might be
partially fabricated, could, he knew, be something of a highly compressed confession, a
last moment purgation of a soul which had, though he couldn't really see how or why,
gone most certainly awry.

Yet, even all of that seemed silly. It was the wrong religion, even if he felt that he
had religion anymore, and, if anything, if there was a deity to whom judgment was
reserved, that deity would undoubtedly see through the whole agnostic desperation that the
actions bespoke. Nah, it was the seventh circle at best, if such a thing existed. And if it
didn't, well, it was undoubtedly an end to what would be a life that couldn't be called living. Orders to rise. Orders to sleep. Orders to stand on one side of the lines. Orders to shower. Thick handed probings for contraband. Peers who screamed at each other, crazy with confinement. Perhaps even himself aloft in those cries.

"Well," he finally muttered. "What good is a deity if it ain't for this," and he shrugged and looked up from the desk and the papers and the money. "Don't know if you're there," he said. "But I could use some help down here."

And, as marvelous as it may sound, the phone rang. He smiled sardonically, and muttered, "That was quick," then lifted the receiver. Ma was on the far end of the line.

"Is all of this true?" she asked him as if she'd just found out about the legal complications arising and had never watched the news.

"Yeah, Ma," he told her. "It's all true. We're in some mighty deep trouble."

There was a moment of dead silence on the line; not even the static or background conversational bleed-throughs came across. "Lenny," she said. "That isn't quite the answer I was lookin' for."

He frowned at the desk as she said this. There was something terrible, awfully familiar about the phrase. It was distant, but the familiarity of the voice and the insistence and intonation struck somewhere inside him.

"Ma," he suddenly said. "You remember that preacher?"

She sat silent on the far end.

"The one you took me to."

"Yes," she said, almost embarrassed at the reconnection to a past with which she had equally lost all contact. "I do, Len. Talked out both sides of his mouth."

"I don't think so, Ma."

"I don't understand, Len."
"You just didn't get the answer you wanted."

"You tell me," she said quickly, sounding almost angry. "What did I want?"

"Ma," he sighed. "You wanted me to have already been all right. You wanted it all to have been all right already. Wanted never to have had to ask the question in the first place. Never to have had to find out what to do."

"Maybe," she said, her voice inflecting upward as if she didn't believe him. "But what's it got to do with--."

"It's not all right, Ma," he said more calmly than he'd imagined. "You have to ask the question, it means it's not all right. You oughta know that by now."

She was silent again.

"Ma," he said. "You need to find Sam again. Got to take her in."

Taken aback, she asked him why.

"They'll throw her out soon."

The woman on the far end of the conversation didn't need to ask about the reason because she was old enough to know what he had meant. The temptation to be caught as the girl apparently was now caught had been strong enough with Elise so long ago, and in this case, she couldn't help but feel her own complicity in whatever had happened. "I will," she said. "Len?"

"Yeah, Ma?"

"What're you gonna do, son?"

He smiled. "Ma," he answered her. "If you have to ask the question, you probably already know the answer."

"Lenny--," she spat out with a sudden outgushing of injunction and pleadings, but he set the receiver back into its cradle, still smiling.

He then blew out one long breath, as if he'd just finished a very long day at some entirely dissatisfying occupation, sniffed one healthy sniff, and sighed. Far away, he
imagined Ma somehow trying to convey the news to his grandfather, mother, and perhaps
even his pseudo-father out back, tried to imagine what they might do, whom they might
contact, and then he simply shrugged. He opened his desk drawer, pulled out the black
satchel he'd taken to carrying from place to place, usually empty, save a few sheets of
paperwork and a pair of legal pads, opened it, stuffed in the bundle of cash, closed it,
zipped it, and lifted the phone again. This time he placed a call to his own central office
number, aware that the shared secretary would listen to the messages left there,
theoretically to forward and screen those appropriate to her employers' interests, and would
then find this one.

"Uh," he said, uncertain as to how to begin such a thing, and then plodded
amiably, and clumsily on. "By the time that you get this, everything will undoubtedly be
known, so I just wanted to let you know that . . . uh . . . it was all my doing. If anyone
else can be implicated, the only thing with which they can be charged is an undue trust in
me. All anyone else may have done is sign, without reading the papers I--," and the
machine on the far end of the line made a noise. He couldn't be sure whether it had hung
up before he'd finished, so, practicing the better part of wisdom, of measuring twice in
order to cut once, he hung up and redialed the number. It beeped at him, so he went on.
'They didn't do anything with any knowledge of what they were doing. They just signed
what I told them to sign and did what I asked. It was all my doing." He paused for a few
seconds, unsure about how to close it all, and then inhaled deeply again and sighed into the
receiver. "By the time that you get this I'll be gone. If anyone asks where I am, you can
just tell them that I've gone fishing somewhere. I'm sure they'll drag me up eventually.
Sorry, this has been Lenny--and, by the way, do me the favor of saving this message in the
file. Someone will probably want to hear it, will want to use it in a courtroom somewhere.
Good bye, and best of luck."
He hung up the phone.

After several minutes of gazing around the office, trying to decide whether to jam any of the papers into the satchel alongside of the money, he decided that it was probably fairer to all parties involved to leave them out in plain sight rather than to make them track them all down in whatever distant locations their copies were now kept. He lifted the satchel, shoved it under his bad arm in the same way that he'd often shoved that clarinet case, rose from the chair, walked to the gray-paned door, swung it open, stepped out after one quick glance at the words "commissioners office" painted across it, and closed it behind him.
CHAPTER XXII

BAPTISM

By the time that he'd finished driving south and into Fort Worth, calmly reposed in the car that he'd essentially stolen from Chester, and reached the paper bag, beer bottle, and tin can lined banks of the river, the Trinity, within which he intended to cast his life, a gesture meant not only to resolve all of the problems that he faced but also to somehow ironically echo a baptism that he'd never remembered having received, Lenny found that dusk had fallen.

Satchel in his good hand, he abandoned the car at a curbside, crossed the iron bridge that stood near a set of government housing projects, and became a well-studied and pale figure inappropriate to the area save on Fourth of Julys. A few residents concluded, given both the car's appearance and his stiffly determined pace, that he must have been an inappropriate target, either an underpaid social worker seeking some appointed and absentee parent, or some quietly disguised patrolman seeking one of the local, untaxed, twelve or thirteen year old mobsters and occasional stool-pigeons. He'd kept the satchel for no good reason save the habitual and rather ironic knee-jerk response to leaving something of value in an unattended car, and now, the mud-colored and graying water ambling along closer to and below him, he realized this fact and laughed aloud.

"Damn," he said to himself.

To his shock and dismay, a voice responded. "Don't call for no swearin'," it said, old and crusted, from below one of the nearby trees. "No sir. No call."

Caught, albeit by someone currently invisible, he turned toward the voice. "How
can you know that?" he asked it.

From under the tree, as if a bag of musted old clothes had suddenly decided to lift itself from its rest, a figure rose, white-bearded and rumpled under a wad of loose silver hair. It stretched, coughed, then bent and spat violently at its own feet. Crook-backed, it stood and looked at him. "Never no call," it said.

Lenny, whose sense that this was among his last moments on earth gave him an undeniable sense of complete freedom, laughed at it. "I'd think," he said callously. "That you, among all of us here, would have a clear right and desire to swear up a storm."

The figure, uninsulted, laughed and plodded out from under the limbs. "Maybe so," it said as it closed on him. "That just may be so." It stopped a good twelve feet away.

Even in the darkness now falling, Lenny could see the overly wide face, pinkened by too much sun and wind and too little melanin, unshaven and broad-nosed, and even at that distance and slightly upwind he could smell the smell of something long surpassing any bodily odor, the scent of sweat tinctured too sweetly, almost hinting at the smell of some dead thing.

"You know," Lenny grinned at him. "There's a river right there. Could bathe once in a while."

"Pah," the man answered without glancing toward the water below. "Couldn't offend nobody then."

Lenny tilted his head back, then nodded with more vigor than either the moment or his own comprehension called for.

"Got a cigarette?" the man wondered.

"No," Lenny told him.

"Quarter?"

"Nope," he said again. Despite the sixty-thousand dollars in the satchel, the answer was honest. For a moment he considered handing the money away, some last second
effort to gain a few points along the philanthropic scale of Christian existence, but he withheld it.

"Pah," the man said again, this time waving a hand in disgust. "What good are you?"

The desire to hand it over left him entirely. "I," he said. "Don't know."

The man cocked his head to one side, righted it and laughed. Perhaps it had been something in Lenny's tone of voice during the last answer, perhaps it was something in his brow-waddled countenance at the moment, or perhaps it was something driven out by a mind so slightly addled as to make it overly perceptive, but the man gave a "tsk." "Shame, shame," he said.

"What's that?" Lenny mumbled, embarrassed.

"Go wastin' a life so."

"You mean livin' under a bridge?"

"Nah," the man answered, this time nudging his jaw toward the river. "Tossin' yourself into that shit-hole."

Lenny twitched visibly. He tried to cover himself with humor. "Ah-ahh," he said, lifting a finger to scold. "Never no need to go swearin'."

The man laughed at him again. He stepped forward another eight feet, then fell back into a lumpy seat in the grass at Lenny's feet, downhill and facing the river.

"Sometimes gotta talk the talk before they'll cough up a quarter. You know, just a good man down on his luck," he said. "Dickheads."

Lenny, looking down at the man's back, suddenly felt an odd thing happening somewhere down in his gut; the whole thing quivered, then tightened almost painfully, quivered and tightened again, and finally, in one last effort, his abdomen forced a giggling laugh through his nose. He opened his mouth and more laughter fell out. He fell to a squat behind and to the man's right, still laughing uproariously, and then tumbled all of the
way to a flat seat in the grass as the whole episode finally passed.

Together, they watched the water.

Off over the bridge, a few teenagers came slinking back out of hiding. A pair of them wandered over the bridge's expanse and stood watching them through the darkness.

"Good men don't go down," the old man told him. "Ain't no luck in this shit-hole world. Just is and what you do with it."

"You?" Lenny mumbled.

"Hell's bells," the old man muttered back at him over a shoulder. "One too many nips at the bottle. One too few times back in the shelter after eight. Done locked me out. 'You,' they told me. 'You ain't been in here for Sunday service in four weeks. Ain't made evenin' prayers in a month. Who feeds you, boy?' Damn," he said. "Who feeds me." He looked up and over at Lenny. "Who feeds you?"

Lenny shrugged, a few memories of Ma and her rituals before dinner dancing back into his head. "I dunno," he answered.

The old man snickered. "Good Lord feeds me," he grumbled. "Right there out of every trash can I piss on to call my own. Last week," he grinned. "Took me out one entire ham, two loaves of sour-dough, one head of lettuce, and three perfectly good tomatoes." With one hand he backslapped the side of Lenny's knee. "But damn sure never find a pack of cigarettes. Looks after me that way." He grinned at the river below them. "Feeds us, He does," he said. "Learned so at the shelter."

"And," Lenny mumbled again, allowing his voice to do as it pleased. "Who feeds them?"

The old man winced. "That's the thing," he said, suddenly serious. "S'pect that we do. Somehow. 'Thout us, no show to sell. Hell," he went on. "'Thout us, ain't even no need for a gov-ornment of the U-nited States. Tear up my boxes under that over-
While Lenny's impulse here was to burst into something of a political argument, after all, he and Pa had discovered the significance of stop signs, stop lights, fund allocation, and local militia some months before, he restrained himself. Instead, as the old man droned on, surprisingly, he found himself thinking about how each human being in this world, no matter how placed, was inclined to think of him or herself as somehow significant to the grandiose scheme of the cosmos. The old man, no matter how politically naive, had found a way to make himself matter to his superiors, to impose relevance upon a self that was obviously bound to a certain and somewhat pathetic inconsequence. Others be damned in their perceptions. Self-conception had its place here.

"You," Lenny interrupted him in the midst of the unheard tirade against a local movement to fine the homeless for their homelessness. "Never wanted to just check yourself out?"

The man paused in mid-sentence, broken and yellowed teeth peeping out from his facial hair. He thought for a few seconds, and then closed his mouth. Twice, he blinked. "Never," he said. "Never, ever. Too much to do."

And then, much to Lenny's surprise, the old man began to list off all of his duties on this planet, counting them on his thick and wrinkled extended fingers, completely distracted from his former point. As Lenny learned, confirming his own suspicions, the man, by virtue of a constantly filling bladder, saw himself as integral to the survival of several cement-potted plants outside nearby buildings, as necessary, by virtue of an ever-growing and unpaid collection of "loitering" fines, to the employment of several police officers and to the credit side of the city's accounts, as important to the self-esteem of the people who passed him on the street, as significant to the theologians whose gifts were not so much directed toward sustaining a congregation as to gaining converts, as meaningful to the squirrels and birds of the local parks, as rudimentary in the development of new and
unheard theories about existence, and, after some additional twenty or so items, as
important because he was the only man around who was actually in the process of saving a
human life.

"You jump in," he grinned back at Lenny. "I'll just bail you right out of there."

"Why?" Lenny pondered. "You don't even know--."

"'Cause 'Homeless Man Stops Would Be Suicide' sounds like a fine headline to get
me better grub," the man snickered. "Right back to good man down on his luck." The
man lifted a finger and pointed it at Lenny, then slowly twisted his wrist until the finger
was pointed at himself. "That's me, not you," he grinned. "Is down on his luck. Won't
give a damn about you. Just me."

While this blatant self-interest seemed a bit reprehensible, Lenny found himself
grimacing back. "Ain't fair," he smiled.

"Who told you life was fair," the man laughed at him. "Ought to catch a service at
the shelter. Straighten you out right there."

"Damn," Lenny said.

"'At's right," he answered. "For damn sure."

They sat for a few long minutes in the deepening green of the evening, a few lights
dancing atop the river's currents, currents that found themselves clearly defined by snags,
logs and occasional stones, and Lenny sighed. Even this he couldn't do well. Finally,
considering the possibility that the man beside him was being totally and self-centeredly
honest, Lenny looked at him. "I've got sixty-thousand dollars in this bag and I'll hand it to
you if you'll just walk away."

"Right," unlooking, he answered sarcastically. "That's what people do. They try
to take it with 'em. Jump right in with it."

"Really," he said.
The man turned back toward him, the bulbous nose momentarily catching a bit of light. "And," he said slowly. "What'll I do with it? Got Mad-Dog aplenty already."

"Buy your way out of this, this--," Lenny's voice failed to continue.

"Shit-hole," the man reminded him.

"Why not?"

The man frowned down at the river, lifted a stalk of grass from beside himself, and broke it. He shoved it between his teeth, the outspread fingers of the stalk bearing seed that bobbed in front of his face. He then began to recite his litany of life's purposes again.


"Best give it up to the shelter," the man said. "Always seem to need it. Some of the residents don't have quite so much," he paused. "To do with themselves."

Off on the bridge, the teenagers exchanged mutual shrugs. Used to a slow watch and wait, but not quite so used to those as long as this one, both turned and walked home again. They figured that Lenny was out recruiting for one of the shelters and no more. "Troll," as they'd always heard the old man referred to because of his place of residence, would undoubtedly be a hard and even longer sell.

Lenny, unaware of their departure, rose from the grass as the old man watched. He dusted his knees with his good hand, then his seat, and lifted the satchel from off of the bank and shoved it under his bad arm again. "All right," he said, beaten. He dug into the satchel, pulled out a twenty dollar bill, leaned down toward the old man, and handed it away.

The man took it, clucked his tongue, and shoved it into a shirt pocket. "Tellin' the truth, eh?" he asked.

"Yessir."

"Damn," the man grinned.
"That's right," Lenny told him.

The old man nodded. "We have something we tell people at moments like this one," he said. "Usually for a cigarette."

"And that would be?"

"Hey," the old man said with a wink. "God bless you, friend."
CHAPTER XXIII

GRACE

As Lenny's career had ended with almost the same vigor as with which it had begun, and as the old man's final irony could not be avoided, he did the only thing he could think of to do, and that was that he said goodbye, walked back to the car, satchel still under his arm, climbed in, and, without a map, began to drive. As he passed a Goodwill store just in the process of closing for the night, he stopped, bought a "new" outfit, shoved himself into it, tossed his old clothes into a dumpster, and, after shoving his bad arm into a knotted and makeshift sling for no particular reason, drove on. Periodically, he stopped along the road he chose to take, one headed into the west, slept or bought gas and food, sometimes walking into convenience stores to make inquiries. Three and a half days later, he began finding answers to his questions, and one and a half days after that, he found himself where he had wanted to be.

He drove onto the lot where the Gatekeepers had been doing their thing, this time much reduced from their prosperity of his last visit.

Despite his new and haggard appearance, one established by his five days without bath, proper bed or breakfast, this time, Brother Michael knew him immediately. "You done acting?" the man wondered at him as he approached.

"Am," Lenny answered.

"That some recent surgery?" the brother asked, nodding at the arm.

"Nah," he grinned. "Part of the outfit." He looked down at the sling and then fiddled a moment until the arm came free. "Maybe should've been real. Once."
"Back then?"

"Back then."

"It'd all be different."

He thought a moment about what might have been, had that day never been at all.

"Nah," he grinned. "Be the same. Events might have changed."

Brother Michael, who was seated in a webbed lawn chair now, stretched out along his shoulders, his fists upclenched and rising as if he was lifting a set of freeweights. "I see," he said. He dropped his arms onto the chair's aluminum rests. "Sounds like the acting's still with us. A bit."

"That's who I am," said Lenny. "Just that way."

The minister nodded again and smiled at him. "Times've tough out this way too," he said. "TV folks gettin' an edge that just keeps nudgin' me farther and farther away. As they say," he shrugged. "Market's dried up. Satellites and cable." He gave a tilt of the head toward his Winnebago. "Got a dish on that thing to watch 'em. Nothing to put out my own broadcast."

"What's a man to do?" Lenny grinned at him.

"Aye," he smiled back. "What's a man to do."

"Could broadcast somehow. Live," he said with the air of an impresario. "From the outback."

"Still, no equipment."

"Could find it. You know, along the way here."

Bother Michael eyed him for a moment. "On the road--."

"With Brother Michael. Got a whole network waitin' for you. Twenty-four hours a day."

"Ah," the man said. "Got to faith heal. But just haven't got that in me. Either too tough or too fraudulent for we lesser disciples."
"Suppose so," Lenny said. "But still got room for the grassroots. Just good ole honest preachin'."

The brother stared at him. "And what would I say that they haven't heard?"

"Ain't what you're given that matters."

He snuffled a laugh. skeptically.


"Spoken like a sermon I once read."

"Get what you've got. Wait on the rest 'cause waitin' is the only expression of authentic human faith."

"I detect," the brother mumbled. "A bit of that actor again."

"Nah," said Lenny. "That's just me. Just me." As standing near the preacher had left him uncomfortable, he sat down, then fell to an elbow and stretched himself lengthwise.

"And you told me that you were an actor."

"We all," said Lenny, who looked up from the ground. "Have our gifts."

The minister nodded and watched him.

"Matter of usin' 'em," Lenny said.

"All right."

"The right way."

"Okay," the preacher grinned. "What're you sellin' me?"

"I've got sixty-thousand dollars in my bag." He waited for the thought to settle home. "Not the cleanest money I've ever touched, but it's money. Waitin' to get used the right way. And I owe somebody," he said. "I know it."

Brother Michael sniffed and cracked his neck.

"I know of three phone numbers to the right people in certain industries who might sell you a bit of broadcast access. Old constituents who have a love of technology."
He sniffed again.

"I've got one good damned arm and I've already killed myself back in Dallas.

"Dallas?" the man wondered.

"It's a long and tedious sort of story," he answered. "Could tell you if we had the time. Together."

"Oddly enough," the minister muttered, reaching down to a beaten black-bound book beside him on the ground. He lifted it and rifled a thumb through its pages. "Always sort of liked those sorts of things."

They sat for a few minutes.

"There was a young woman," the preacher suddenly remembered. He glanced at Lenny. "Many a man's taken refuge in a monastery or two. Moments like that."

Lenny shook his head. "She's well taken care of. And I'd never have run here. Like I said, I owe somebody somewhere."

"That reason enough to dump off a life and a bunch of money on an old man in an RV?"

Lenny looked down again. "I prefer a circle to a line." He looked up. "I have insight enough to know that that's what you people are all talking about."

"A line," the man drifted away for a moment, then returned. "Is the one thing we cling to because freedom always looks like a process, never a recapitulation, never a recursion. always new, always fresh. An invisible end to which the moth is always drawn. forever receding and recessive." He looked at Lenny. "How can we evolve if tomorrow is just today all over again?"


"Meaning," the brother told him. "Exists only in movement."
"Meaning," Lenny answered. "Is the perception of truth, however faulty that may be at the moment. And truth can't be a product of eternally shifting grounds. Look at your book."

"Why not? A butterfly in the breeze alters the grounds of things. A hailstorm in springtime brings down one tent--."

"And an arm misshapen destroys more lives than its own."

"So?" the brother said, his lips pursed thoughtfully. "That's how it is." Below him, the webbing of his chair creaked.

"That's here," said Lenny. "And it's that that imprisons us. The line."

"And you would have me say what?"

"Impermanence is a bad idea."

"I do believe," he said. "That you're stumbling into heresy. There are seasons and times for lots of things out there."

"And each is alike. Each is shared."

"So?"

"So a circle is complete. Beginning, middle, and end, all undifferentiated. I believe that that's theologically sound."

"And why," grinned the preacher. "Should I care? My car's low on gas. My kid's on drugs. My job is boring and pointless. My dog has fleas and my cats are always bringing home dead things and leaving them on my front stoop."

For a few moments, Lenny Gorsuch lay puzzled. He rolled from his elbow and onto his back to stare upward. "I don't know," he said.

"There's the rub," the brother muttered. "You're right back to waiting. And people don't want to hear that. They want to see writhing arms unwritten. Want to hear the right thing to do." He nodded at the arm. "Want to know what to do about an evil left arm. Double-talk doesn't work out here anymore. In the grassroots." He laughed. "And you
want to perk up my bus."

"What's happened to you?" Lenny asked, lifting his right leg and crossing it over his left knee, still lying flat on the ground.

"Market's drying up. You know, if I'd just thought of painting little, plastic Icthuses in silver, and putting a little adhesive on the back . . . be sittin' pretty right now. Right there in Boulder. Skies, a yacht down south for when that got boring, a horse or two, a pretty little wife and two kids. Acupuncture clinic next door. Little crystals and massage when I'm low. That," he finished. "My friend, is how it is."

Lenny sighed. "Should've done it."

"Invented 'em?"

"Nah. Jumped into the river."

"You're easy to shake. And that river strikes me as mighty like a line."

"Guess it may be. I may be."

"You know," the minister said from his chair, embracing a more familiar text. "Tom and Huck did what you did. Faked a death or two. They went back."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. That's almost a circle there. And the best of Presidents still confided in Nixon."

Rolling his head, Lenny frowned up at him.

"If I were you, I'd take my little chunk of a line and get back to where it belonged. If I were a priest, I'd tell you that you were forgiven. Maybe you are. What I can say is, 'hey, no debts here'," and he shrugged a glance skyward. "'Or there.' You're fairly insignificant in the terms of the cosmos, friend."

Lenny sighed, befuddled by a line of reasoning which had spawned itself in a metaphor which he himself had begun.
"Got a phone in the RV," Brother Michael nodded. "I'd use it."

Lenny nodded toward him, rose slowly and walked back to the car. There, he swung open one of the rusty-hinged doors, leaned in and lifted the satchel, then carried it into the Winnebago while the preacher watched him. He opened its door, climbed the two steps, hunted for a moment and found the phone. He called his grandmother, told her that he'd be back soon, hung up, and set the satchel on the minister's kitchen counter. For a few seconds he hunted around near the phone, then found a pad of paper and pencil and scrawled a quick note. "Not out of obligation," he wrote. "Nor for any services rendered, so much as it is out of respect." He re-read the note, then lay it next to the satchel, and walked out.

Without waving, and as the minister watched his back, he climbed into his car, backed it and drove away. From that day forward, he was never to know what happened to the minister or the money again.
CHAPTER XXIV

SALVATION

Oddly enough, by the time that he returned to his family and swelling girlfriend, his idiotic flight and terrifying hints on the phone had been forgiven entirely and were ostensibly forgotten. Even the most dramatic of insults, the most heinous of threats can be easily overlooked when lightly besprinkled with the pale dusts of psychoanalytic evaluation, stress and disorder, careers and selfhood, angst and neurotic bursts, let alone the driving impetus of a story about one prodigal child. All of these had led to a forgiveness on the homefront that even the most theologically grounded of persons found he or she had to readily agree to.

The county, untinctured by city-bred blood-lust, discovering that all crimes were more a product of dim-wittedness than of deliberation, forgave both him and his grandfather for the same sorts of reasons, and he simply refused to run for re-election, a fact for which the voters issued a protracted and well media-documented sigh of relief, some having been touched by his high-school revolutionary ideas, yet all singularly and sincerely happy that he had not died after all. Jokes abounded on local radio talk shows and circulated among his constituents, but most were less well-barbed than they might have been in a crueler, less scientific age, or in a meaner, less rural place.

One month after his return, like many a man before him, he found her willing, and made good, transforming what had been his girlfriend into his wife. Four and a half months after that, she began to complain about strange and recurrent waves of tension and pain in her belly.
Stop watch in his hand, seated next to her on the couch, he timed what they both took to be contractions, and, together, they finally determined that the frequency and duration of the pains spoke not so much of a false labor as of their child's impending arrival. They phoned Ma and Pa, and the Harpools from their new home, then waddled together to the car, essentially propping each other upright, and made the fifteen minute drive to the local clinic.

There, befuddled and anxious, they were ensconced in a pale blue room adorned with large, framed photographic prints of trees, oceans, and flowers, and appropriate wires were jammed here and there into and upon Samantha and connected to machines that beeped and binged and spat out volumes of narrow margined paper zig-zagged with red and black seismic representations of what her organs happened to be doing.

The family slowly gathered outside in the clinic hallway, tiny styrofoam cups of burned coffee in hand and spilled creamer and littering red stir sticks on table around it, chatted, as it had had little opportunity to get to know its new constellation, uncomfortably with itself, and at five twenty-seven on the following morning, a nurse arrived in the birthing room, muttering about effacement and dilation, prodded Lenny aside from his position as "coach", and began a litany of "push"es and "breathe"s somehow meant to ease the burden of the process itself.

At five after six that morning, the nurse reported sight of the baby's crown, and at six-fifteen she sent for the doctor. He arrived, and with salad spoons on a tray beside him, sat on a swivelng stool at Samantha's socked and upgathered feet, and plunged himself head first into the event. Suddenly, with all of the minor violence of a spat piece of gum, the child emerged, slightly elongated and compressed into a distortion of the human form, one tightly squashed life-squawk bursting from its as yet unfashioned and malleable face, and the doctor whisked it, ankles clutched together in one of his hands, aloft, separated it from its mother, and then handed it up to be cleaned and swaddled.
In the hall, the family, on hearing the cry, gave an odd and inappropriate cheer.

The nurse did as she was meant to do, muttered, "has he peed yet?" to which the doctor, as it was a question pertinent to the issue, yet inappropriate to the moment, gave a quick scowl, and then she lay the boy across his mother's chest.

"Might tell the grandparents," the doctor told Lenny.

He, instead, stood transfixed, looking down at the tiny animal as Sam sobbed.

"Look at him, Len, look at him," a few times, and he didn't move toward any grandparents at all.

The doctor snuffed a bit of disapproval at him for having failed at what is perhaps the first task of any father, and, after peeling away his plastic gloves, stepped to the door, opened it, and gave a one-handed invitation to the gathered crew.

The first person through the door was Ma Gorsuch, shuffling her way through with an aggressive elbow toward Elise and a second toward Mrs. Harpool.

The others followed her.

As Sam cradled the infant and Lenny wove his way to the metal bedrail beside her, the Gorsuches, the Harpools, and the doctor surrounded the couple and child. Nervously, Lenny touched the baby's cheek, then touched a tear from Sam's chin.

Behind him, Ma pushed her way forward until she stood looking at the baby.

"Check 'im," she said. She leaned, on toe tips, up over the rails and touched the swaddling. "Check 'im."

"He's beautiful," Sam told her from the bed, the child in her arms.

Lenny nodded from above both of them.

"No, no, no." Ma said, bracing herself against the rail and reaching out to take one of the blanket's corners in hand.

"Ten fingers, ten toes," the doctor, sensing what she was about, told her from his place outside of the immediate circle.
"Yes, yes," she muttered, as yet skeptical of the medical establishment. She closed her fingers on the blanket's edge below the boy's chin as Sam continued to hold him and began to "coo." Quickly, Ma pulled the blanket back with a bit more haste than anyone in the room found comfortable, then unfolded it to completely expose the boy's torso. With her free hand, still on toe-tips, she lurched forward over the rail and onto the mattress itself, and grasped the child's tiny left hand. She pulled it out until the arm was fully extended, let it spring back, then grabbed it and extended it again.

The crowd, frightened at her desperation, stood hushed around her. Even the doctor, who knew relatively little of her motivations, found himself silent and curiously watching.

She fell from her toe-tips and slid back over the rail to her proper place, still intruding in her small-framed way between the child, the mother, and Lenny. "It's whole," she whispered to herself. Then she turned to gaze up at her grandson. "It works," she pronounced, a bit of a twinkle in her old eyes.

Sam gazed at the child as Ma rose to toe tips again, this time away from the bed and propping herself upon Lenny's good elbow. She leaned clandestinely upward, lifted a hand to Lenny's cheek and turned his head so that his ear faced her. "It's whole," she whispered to him, almost as if this was the one answer to all of the unasked questions which might haunt him at the moment.

Pa looked at Elise and shrugged. She shrugged back.

Puzzled, the Harpools glanced at each other, a bit annoyed at their total exclusion from what was clearly some modern ritual of the birthplace, then looked back at Ma.

Then, as if oblivious to all parties, and completely unaware that Lenny probably had more rights to the child than did she, she leaned back over the bedrail, extended her arms and took the boy from Sam and clutched him to her own aging chest. She smiled as she fell back flat-footed, running a finger over a wisp of thin hair stuck to his forehead, her
eyes glistening now. "Be praised," she said aloud.

While it had been unexpected, the room, unable to conceive of itself responding in any other fashion, murmured its general assent.

"Yessir," she said again, now running her finger over the boy's protruding arm. "Be praised." She turned from him for a moment, and gave the group a satisfied smile. "He's whole."

And, unclear as to what she really was trying to say, uncertain as to the simple profundity with which she suddenly seemed blessed, aware only that one tiny cry from behind a room's secretive walls next to a piece of high tech hardware that, given a bit of prodding, could equally land a human being on Mars, predict an earthquake, or perhaps calculate the structural integrity of a highway overpass, had promised something to everyone everywhere and always, the room once again gave its assent.

"God be praised," a third and final time Ma Gorsuch pronounced, her vision now blurred by an onrush of old tears. "It's whole."

And she passed the child onward and up to her grandson.

"But," she mumbled as he "cooed" over its tiny form, now leaning down to share him with Sam. "I'll guess we'll still have to wait and see."

And again, for reasons unknown, the room, including the doctor, gave its assent.