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The critical introduction to this collection of short fiction argues that writing is reading and that reading is writing. The argument draws descriptions of writing as reading from such diverse sources as Sherwood Anderson, Roland Barthes, Neil Simon, J. Hillis Miller and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, as well as from the author's own experience. Descriptions of reading from phenomenological and subjective criticism, including the theories of Georges Poulet, Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish and David Bleich, affirm the creative role of the reader, show that the reader, in fact, writes the text in the process of reading. The introduction concludes that reader, writer and text are all constructs of language, that both reading and writing are, ultimately and primarily, thought.
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Our schools have long recognized the connection between reading and writing, as well as the benefits each brings to the understanding of the other. Even so, reading and writing tend to remain each to its own side of some imagined fence. Writing teachers assign their students a poem or a story to read and then to write "about," ever mindful of the studied text's separation from that which is written about it, always yielding to the published text's right-of-way. Writers speak of reading a situation or a character, of writing in their heads, of letting the story write itself and of, then, writing it all down.

Reading and writing are more than merely linked, though, more than mutually informing, more than parts of the same process; reading is writing, and writing is reading. J. Hillis Miller says that "reading . . . is a kind of writing. . . . Every act of writing is an act of reading, an interpretation of some part of the totality of what is" ("Composition" 41).

The stories which follow interpret, jointly and severally, "some part of the totality of what is." They are my readings of people, places, books, poems, situations and other texts, spanning from Edward Hopper's "Early Sunday
Morning" to greasy spoon diners and family reunions, from my brother's short-lived summer job to Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and "The River," from my own accidental near-career to other people's children and other men's wives, from king-sized condoms to Elizabeth Bishop's "The Man-Moth" and Dante's Purgatorio.

Writers read to write because, as Roland Barthes claims, they have no other recourse. "[T]he writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them" (146). While Barthes uses the term "writings," he clearly describes the reading which writers must do.

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author/God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture. (146)

Going a step further, Miller says texts (he calls them poems) do not just mix writings; they actually consume each other:

Any poem . . . is parasitical in its turn on earlier poems, or it contains within itself earlier poems as enclosed parasites. . . . If the
poem is food and poison for the critics, it must in its turn have eaten. It must have been a cannibal consumer of earlier poems. ("The Critic as Host" 225)

Scott Cairns advises his writers' workshops with the same eat-and-be-eaten metaphor. He says writing programs, if they do nothing more, must teach a style of reading that is "engaged, strenuous and primarily predatory" (156).

Each writer, though, hunts in a different part of the jungle, and each cooks up the catch in a particular way. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn contends the work of each writer must necessarily be unique. "No new work of art," he says, "comes into existence (whether consciously or unconsciously) without an organic link to what was created earlier," but he prefaced this comment, saying:

[t]here is a long-accepted truth about art that "style is the man. . . ." This means that every work of a skilled musician, artist or writer is shaped by an absolutely unique combination of personality traits, creative abilities and individual, as well as national, experience. (3)

Where I come from, people like to tell stories, meaning both that they like to talk and that they like to lie. I grew up riding the rhythms of the spoken language. I write with my ears. I listen for a certain pulse. The writing starts just as often with a snatch of dialogue as with a
situation, a scene or a character. I read with my ears, too. This both slows down my reading enough to make Evelyn Wood weep and leaves me with little patience for tone-deaf narrative.

Reading is significant because the reader constructs a text just as the writer constructs a text. Neither mere sponge soaking up interpretations provided by the writer nor mere decoder sorting out hidden meanings embedded in a text, the reader, literally and necessarily, becomes a writer in the process of reading. The reader writes a new text, one occasioned by the reading of the original text and necessary to lift the original from its liminal existence, whether that existence be paper and ink or free-floating experience. The kind of reading usually called writing is, indeed, an effort to pin down this experience, to give it context, literally to put it with (or in) a text.

Sherwood Anderson also relates his writing process or, in this case, writing predicament, to the reader’s process and the reader’s problems:

You as a reader will, some evening or some afternoon, be reading in my book and then you will grow tired of reading and put it down. You will go out of your house and into the street. The sun is shining and you meet people you know. . . . If you are an honest housewife, the iceman has come, or there drifts into your mind the thought that
yesterday you forgot to remember some detail concerned with running your house. Little outside thoughts come and go in your mind, and it is so with me, too. For example, when I have written the above sentence, I wonder why I have written the words "honest housewife." A housewife, I suppose, can be as dishonest as I can. What I am trying to make clear is that, as a writer, I am up against the same things that confront you, as a reader. (23)

Anderson's words point, in pragmatic fashion, toward the impossibility of the fixed text. No reading or writing can occur in an environmental or, as Solzhenitsyn notes, historical vacuum.

Anderson also hints at that duality of mind necessary to writing. This duality, this split personality, shows up twice during the writing process. Anderson's example is of the second occurrence when writers re-read what they have written. Some unexpected line at the end necessitates a change in an earlier line. The writer suddenly realizes, once some raw material is dug up, once some words line the page, that the original notion was wrong or, at least, not what the writer wants to write. The text begins to change itself, in Miller's metaphor, begins to consume itself, even as it is written.
The first manifestation of this split personality results in, or perhaps from, the generative spark of the writing. The writer, sometimes for no apparent reason or for reasons beyond his control, becomes a reader. Neil Simon calls the writer "[a] strange phenomenon, this two-headed monster who finds himself totally involved in situations, and [who] then suddenly and without warning steps back to watch the proceedings" (4). The writer "steps back" to read, to gain perspective, to see the potential contexts he takes it upon himself to fill with writing.

Simon adds that while "[t]here is evidence that this phenomenon is prevalent among that strange breed called writers . . . it is even more prevalent among that stranger breed called comic writers" (4). Humor, like irony, requires distance. Few of my characters, I think, would find humor in their own situations. Those who do, such as Dave in "Sitter" and the narrator of "Roofer", for instance, look at things more as I do than the others. I have always been able, if not cursed, to see whatever happens, even as it happens to me, from a distance, as if I were floating forty feet above. Everything looks funny from up here.

Using a phenomenological methodology, Georges Poulet's description of reading echoes his description of writing, too. He considers reading and writing as mental processes and as experience. When the reader, any reader, not just that reader intending to write, reads, the text actually
becomes an object in the mind. Describing reading as an "experience of interiority," Poulet says there is a remarkable transformation wrought in me through the act of reading. Not only does it cause the physical objects around me to disappear, including the very book I am reading, but it replaces those external objects with a congeries of mental objects in close rapport with my own consciousness. And yet the very intimacy in which I now live with my objects is going to present me with new problems. The most curious of these is the following: I am someone who happens to have as objects of his own thought, thoughts which are part of a book I am reading, and which are therefore the cogitations of another. They are the thoughts of another, and yet it is I who am their subject. . . . I am thinking the thoughts of another. ("Criticism" 58-59)

Speculating that this "other" may too quickly and too simply be assumed the author of the book, Poulet says, "Such an interpretation of reading is not false. It seems to justify what is commonly called the biographical explication of literary texts." He insists, however, that each text, lives in me its own life. The subject who is revealed to me through my reading of it is not the author, either in the disordered totality of his
outer experiences, or in the aggregate, better organized, and concentrated totality, which is the one of his writings. . . . [T]he subject which presides over the work can exist only in the work. ("Criticism" 61)

In writing, too, Poulet discovers an other, an alien consciousness, a subject, but in writing this subject is the writer's self:

Each literary work, of no matter what kind, implies, for the writer, an act of self-discovery. Writing does not mean simply to allow an unstemmed rush of thoughts to flow onto the paper; writing means rather to construe oneself as the subject of those thoughts! "I think" means first and foremost: "I reveal myself as the subject of that which I think." I am a spectator of the phenomena that take place in me. ("Poulet on Poulet" 47)

Poulet implies that the subject, both in reading and in writing, is constructed by and of the language of the text. The distinction between the subject (reader/writer) and the object (text) fades.

Like Poulet, Wolfgang Iser believes "that a text can only come to life when it is read," going so far as to demand that critical inquiry be made "through the eyes of the reader" ("Indeterminacy" 2-3). Rather than obscuring
the line between subject and object as Poulet has, though, Iser’s theory of reading brings subject and object together. Reading produces, as I have described above, a second text, which Iser calls the "literary work." Lying between the two poles of reader and text, the work depends on the act of reading for its very existence. "[O]ne must take into account not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to that text" (The Implied Reader 274).

Stanley Fish’s affective stylistics, even as it evolves from its original statement, also affirms the creative role of the reader. Fish insists that texts "are not meant to be solved, but to be experienced" by the reader (149). Texts have no existence apart from this experience, an experience regulated by what Fish calls "interpretive strategies." "[M]eanings come already calculated . . . because language is always perceived, from the very first, within a structure of norms" (318). These interpretive strategies produce everything we know about a text; they "account not only for the meanings a poem might be said to have but for the fact of its being recognized as a poem in the first place" (322).

David Bleich’s theory, while more strictly subjective than Fish’s, has incorporated some of the language of Fish’s inter-subjectivity. Bleich maintains that

[i]f a literary text is to be anything beyond a piece of "sense data" it must come under the
control of a subjectivity; either an individual’s subjectivity or the collective subjectivity of a group. The only way a work of literature has consequential meaning is as a function of the mind of the reader. . . .

Naturally, the work of literature is also an object. But it is different from most objects because it is a symbolic object. . . . A symbolic object is wholly dependent on a perceiver for its existence. An object becomes a symbol only by being rendered so by a perceiver. (749-750)

Whether, then, by allowing Poulet’s mental object to take shape or by assuming Iser’s relatively more active posture, whether by constituting meaning through experience using Fish’s interpretive strategies or by creating the text, outright, as Bleich’s symbolic object, the reader produces the text or, more accurately, a second text. In this sense, the reader writes the text in the process of reading. Though they differ on how much the original text influences the final product, these critics agree on the creative necessity of the reader and of reading.

Toward the later stages of this critical shift toward the subjective end of the spectrum, the reader assumes all authority for the construction of the text. Text and reader, in fact, merge, each becoming indistinguishable from the other. Each, in a sense, constitutes the other. The
reader, then, both constructs and becomes a construct of the readings, which are writings. In effect, both the reader and the writer write themselves.

I write myself through the consideration and development of ideas in my writing, as well as through the application of imagination and experience to my reading. Perhaps the clearest examples of writing myself, though, are my characters. While some of these characters and their experiences are closer to me and my experiences than others, all, even those based on real people, even those who are my readings of people I know, are me in some way or another. Those characters who look at things the same way I do also seem to lead lives more similar to mine than do Galen or Abe Jack or Eugene from the first two stories or than do any of the characters from the last two stories. All the characters, though, both express my thoughts and are constituted by those thoughts. They are all products of my reading, just as I am.

These theories of reading and writing describe a convergence, the fusion of subject and object, reader and writer, reading and writing, reader/writer and text, text and text. The word "describe," itself, provides a metaphor for this convergence with at least one dictionary defining the term as "to present a mental image by means of words," a definition clearly suited for both reading and writing as well ("Describe" 270).
This convergence eventually renders the parts indistinguishable from the whole and from each other. This is possible because the parts, writer, reader and text, as well as the whole, what we call both writing and reading, are constructs of language. Barthes says

[T]he hand [of the "modern scriptor"], cut off from any voice, borne by a pure gesture of inscription (and not of expression), traces a field without origin -- or which, at least, has no other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins.

(146)

Walter Benn Michaels, drawing on the nineteenth-century "Pragmaticism" of C. S. Peirce, argues that the destination, as well as the origin, of the text is language, or, less specifically, a system of signs:

In Peirce's view ... the self is already embedded in a context, the community of interpretation or system of signs. ... "[T]he content of consciousness, the entire phenomenal manifestation of mind, is a sign resulting from inference," and since "every thought is an external sign ... man [hims[l] is an external sign." This is to say not only that the self interprets but that the self is an interpretation ... [and, therefore,) not only that reading is
constitutive but that readers have themselves been constituted... (401-402, quoting Peirce 240-241)

If both the writer and reader, then, dissolve into constructs of language, into interpretation, into texts, language, itself alone, remains as the producer, product and consumer. This renders obsolete the old heuristics which show the text passing from writer to reader with ultimate authority for meaning vested in, usually, just one of these three components. These models are replaced by one in which reader, writer and text combine in a whirlpool of potential. Readers and writers, both using interpretive strategies, become the media for a language activity, called both reading and writing, which is, ultimately and primarily, thought.

Beginning as reading, each story in this collection is a text waiting for re-creation by reading. Taken as a whole, the collection offers still another text. All are interpretations, constructions—my own—both of that free-floating experience which has only potential context and of that only relatively more stable stuff called writing which appears here re-created in a different context. The writer reads, but the reading must stop here. The stories wait to be written.
The whole shadow of Man is only as big as his hat.

Elizabeth Bishop
"The Man-Moth"
SUNDAY

A bead of sweat clung to Galen Lokey’s nose, and another tickled his ear. Galen thought of the big fans that would be spinning high above the church sanctuary by now, their draft leaving the congregation dry and cool. He looked at the griddle, then at the back door of the diner, then at the slice of bologna on the counter in front of him. The sweat broke loose, landed on the bologna.

"Huh? You got an answer for me, Son?" Abe Jack asked. "What in the Hell are you doing?"

Galen scratched the stubble beneath his chin. Since losing the two middle fingers on his left hand, Galen had been able to scratch both sides of his jawbone at once. "Frying baloney," he said, pointing with a mammoth meat cleaver toward the griddle where forty slices of bologna bubbled and popped in a lake of grease.

Abe Jack dropped his chin into his chest and looked to be studying the bow of his apron string sticking out from his stomach. He lifted his hand with thumb and forefinger extended as if he were holding an aspirin between them. "I’m about this far off your hide, Boy." He raised his head. "I can see you’re frying baloney, Dumbass. What I don’t know is why in Christ’s name you’re frying enough to feed the whole damn state!"
"Well, I didn't know exactly where you wanted them slits cut. So, I figured I'd try me a whole mess of positions and you could pick the one you liked the best." Galen smiled. He hadn't cut as many slices as he'd wanted to, but he was pleased with what he'd done. "I like that one over there on the left hand side of the top row." He pointed the cleaver again. "If that there slice of baloney was a clock it'd be saying eleven-fifteen. That's when second service over at the church'll be starting. At eleven-fifteen."

"If I hear one more word about church, you'll be needing one for your funeral!" Abe Jack grabbed the spatula from the counter and lifted a slice of bologna off the griddle.

Galen watched the bologna, its slits running in opposite directions from the center, as Abe Jack balanced the spatula with one hand and dug into a sack of white bread with the other. The slits had opened over the heat, making Galen think of two funeral parlor fans, opened and placed hub to hub.

He thought of all the old ladies, those his grandma played dominoes with, sitting in their pews, fanning themselves, crying. He was so young, they'd say. The Lord must've needed him for something. He'd be up front of the dark church, lying still, cool, dry and peaceful. Abe Jack dropped a slice of bread onto the counter and then slapped
the bologna on it. Grease bled through the dry veins of the bread and escaped onto the counter.

"Uh, excuse me, Sir," Galen said, "but maybe the customer'd want us to toast that there bread for him."

Abe Jack choked the bread sack in his fist. "No, he wouldn't!" Abe Jack's left eye began to open and shut violently. "Shitfire! Now you got my eye twitching!" He leaned within an inch of Galen's face. "You see this, Boy? You see this eyeball blinking at you here? Huh?"

"Uh, yessir, I do." Galen looked earnestly into the spasming eye. "It's like it's sending out a message in that Morrison's code." The bread sack slid to the floor, and Galen bent to pick it up.

"Let it alone!" Abe Jack snapped, then drew a deep breath. "Get me a plate for this sandwich." Abe Jack pointed to a shelf next to the back door. Galen started in that direction, but Abe Jack blocked his way. "Wait a minute. I ain't through, yet," Abe Jack said. Galen kept his eyes on the shelf with the plates. "You listen close, now." Galen turned his head to the side so his ear was facing Abe Jack. "You get a bowl. You put some Rice Krispies in it. You slice a banana over the Rice Krispies. You pour some milk over all that, and you bring it out front." Abe Jack put his hands on his hips. "You think you can do all that?"
"Yessir." Galen walked to the shelf, took down a small, plastic plate, and carried it back with both hands. He smiled as he held it up to Abe Jack.

"Good boy." Abe Jack put the sandwich on the plate. "Now do the other like I told you." He squeezed through the double doors leading to the front of the diner.

Galen took down a plastic bowl, one big enough to beat a cake batter in, then fished a spoon from the dishwater in the sink.

Rice Krispies were his favorite, but his grandma never bought them much. They could get bacon and eggs right outside the door, she'd say. Why'd he want to pay good money for burnt rice? He'd tried making them himself once, ten years ago when he was about nine. His grandma still brought it up from time to time, especially when she had to cook with the pan he'd blackened on the bottom.

He found the cereal, filled the bowl about half full and took a banana and a carton of milk from the refrigerator. He sliced the banana on the bread board with the meat cleaver. He held a slice under his nose. His stomach growled.

He'd seen bananas in the store when he went into town with his grandma, but she wouldn't buy them either. They been touched by coloreds, she'd say. Galen thought probably he'd eaten stuff touched by them before, but he couldn't tell her that.
He held the milk carton high over the bowl, so the milk foamed up as it swirled into the cereal. Galen held an ear close over the bowl. Milk tickled his face in a fine, cold mist.

Galen went through the double doors with the bowl in his left hand and the spoon between his right thumb and forefinger. "Where do these here Rice Krispies go at?" he asked.

Abe Jack leaned on the counter with his eyes closed. An open package of Alka-Seltzer and a glass of cloudy water sat in front of him on the counter. Without looking up, he pointed toward a small, white-haired woman.

The woman raised her hand. Galen looked around the small dining room. Only the woman and a man with a cigarette hanging from his lips sat at the counter. The rest of the space was empty. "There ain't hardly nobody in here," Galen said. If he hurried, he thought, he could make it to church before they started singing anything too hard.

"Ain't never anybody in here on Sundays except me and Juanita," the man said, the cigarette bouncing as he talked. "Most everybody's in church, or watching the Cowboys on TV in football season." The man laughed and the cigarette fell from his mouth onto a half-eaten sandwich. "Preachers really hate them Cowboys. No one's ever in church when they play at noon." The man stuck the cigarette back in his mouth and whisked some ash off the sandwich with
the side of his hand. Galen wanted to see if he would leave the cigarette in when he ate.

"Ah, Christ, Siphon," Abe Jack said, raising his eyes. "What did you have to go and say church for?"

"Why can't I say church? I say it all the time."

Siphon balanced the cigarette on the rim of the plate and picked up the sandwich.

"Because you'll just get him started again. That's all I been hearing all morning." Abe Jack began to dance around behind the counter waving his arms. "I got to go to church. I got to go to church. I'm going to go to Hell. I'm going to go to Hell." Galen turned to watch Abe Jack, but saw Juanita pull something from her mouth.

"I never had much use for churches, myself," Siphon said. "Easter and Christmas. I figure if that won't do you, you're wasting your time anyway." Siphon put his cigarette in his mouth. "Now, my wife goes near every Sunday, so that's got to count for me some, too." He pointed at Juanita. "Miss Juanita, here, is a Catholic, so she's got to go in person. They let out early, though. Don't they, Juanita?" Juanita spread bits of banana peel on a paper napkin. Siphon bent toward it. "What you got, there?" he asked. "A bug in your cereal?"

"It ain't no bug, Smartass." Abe Jack leaned over the napkin. "Uh, pardon the French, Juanita."
"It's the peel on the banana." Juanita held a pair of bifocals over her eyes and scooted the banana slices around with her spoon. "The bananas still have the peels on them."

Abe Jack plucked a slice from the bowl. "Well, I'll be damned." He pivoted and held the slice in front of Galen's face.

Galen took it and popped it in his mouth. "Thanks. I didn't get me a chance to eat me no breakfast this morning," he said. Abe Jack lunged at Galen, who stepped backward against a pie case. The sandwich popped from Siphon's mouth as he grabbed Abe Jack's arm over the counter.

"You don't want to be hitting him now, Abe. It's Sunday and he's just a kid," Siphon said. "Besides, he's got him a gimpy hand there." Abe Jack relaxed his arm, and Siphon dropped back to his stool. "Just simmer down. Ain't no use getting yourself all riled up over something like this. Not on Sunday."

Abe Jack retreated to the cash register, and Siphon picked up the remnants of his sandwich from the counter and inspected them. "What happened to your hand there, anyway, Son?" he asked. He tore off a piece of bologna and ate it.

"Well, I was working over at the sausage factory before I started working here." Galen stepped toward Siphon, watching Abe Jack from the corner of this eye. "It was a Monday through Friday job. Sometimes they'd make us work on Saturdays, but never no Sundays or nothing like that." He
held up his right hand. "I lost these two fingers in one of them grinding machines they got over there." Abe Jack came back along the counter. "They fired me then on account of they said I was careless and tore up one of their best machines."

"Well, don't that beat all?" Siphon said. "Say, what was they grinding when the machine got your fingers?"

"Baloney, Siphon," Abe Jack said. "They was grinding baloney, and you're eating that boy's fingers right now."

"Good." Siphon looked at Abe Jack and bit into the sandwich. "Now when I get an itch in my belly there'll be something down there to scratch it."

"Uh, Sir, would it be okay with you if I left now?" Galen asked. "It's a quarter after, and there ain't nobody else in here, and I think you done trained me real good and I--"

"And you ain't going nowhere except back in that kitchen and fixing Juanita another bowl of cereal." Abe Jack put the bowl in the new cook's hand. "Peel the damn banana this time. Go on. Get."

Even through the squeak of the swinging double doors, Galen could make out the church bells. Galen listened, walked to the griddle, counted out the time, eleven hours. The bells went on ringing, celebrating, then beckoning. Holding the cereal bowl in his good hand, Galen peeled the bologna slices off the griddle and stacked them one by one
on the bread board. He stuffed a slice into his mouth, put
another into his pants pocket, and turned the bowl over on
the pile of bologna. Milk, cereal and bananas streaked the
sides of the pile like an erupting volcano.

Outside, the air billowed up and slapped Galen in the
face. Thick and slow with humidity, Galen felt as he had
many years before when he ran into a damp quilt his
grandmother had hung out to dry. The quilt came off and
covered him lying face down on the loose grass and sand
under the clothesline. Underneath, Galen felt hot and
muggy but shaded and, somehow, safe. He raised his head and
soothed his eyes with the diminished light. He ran his palm
along the ground under his face. Blades of grass killed by
his grandmother’s feet and lack of rain leapt about in a
morbid dance.

Now, the film on his glasses clouded over. He tried to
skim the grease with his index fingers but only smeared a
translucent spiral on each lens. He pulled off the glasses
and stuffed them into his shirt pocket. He squinted his way
to the church two blocks away.

Galen groped for the handle and leaned backward,
pulling the door open with his body’s weight. Inside, he
stood, bathed in the comforting darkness. The congregation
stood with their heads bowed.
At the front, the preacher, robed in white, stood waist deep in water. He held his hand flat on the head of a small, shivering boy, also in white, and prayed loudly.

"Lord, we present this little sinner to You. He has confessed his sins and knows he is unworthy. We ask that You have pity on this evil boy and accept him into Your fold..."

Galen slid silently to his left, onto the pew against the back wall. Sweat soaked through the dirty white uniform he kept when the sausage factory let him go.

He heard the sloshing from the baptistery and wanted to run and dive into the cleansing water. He pulled his shirt tail from his pants and wiped his face.

Galen put his glasses back on and watched the scene in front through the film. The boy, who looked about eleven years old, stood with his eyes clenched shut and his mouth pulled back in a trembling grimace. The preacher spoke to the ceiling.

"We only ask that Your will be done..."

If a thing was God's will, it'd happen without having to pray about it, Galen thought. A body ought to pray for things he wanted, for stuff God might not have thought of.

Galen wondered what would happen if God didn't accept the boy. What if he didn't want him? Would he just drown him right there?
He leaned forward and put his hands on the pew in front of him. He heard the door of the church open and looked back. Abe Jack stepped inside, blinking.

As Abe Jack passed up the center aisle, Galen stepped sideways to the middle of the pew. An old woman blocked his way out the other side. Galen bowed his head and watched Abe Jack, his heart racing. His sweat began to flow again.

When Abe Jack got about half-way to the front, he turned and started back. His head swiveled slowly from side to side, his eye opened and shut to a silent Harry Belafonte beat. His flickering stare stopped on Galen. Galen watched Abe Jack’s pulsing eye, listened to his own pounding heart.

When Abe Jack started toward him, Galen fell to his knees screaming incoherently. He had only seen this sort of thing once before, but he remembered how it had gone. He just made up as he went along, trying to keep it loud and furious, hoping he didn’t use anything that might be a cuss word in another language. He flailed his arms up and down, and beat on the pew in front of him, knocking the old woman back onto her seat.

The preacher stopped praying and sloshed to the front edge of the baptistery. The boy looked around him out into the congregation.

"Hallelujah!" the preacher said. "The spirit of Our Lord is truly among us." Some nodded and amen-ed in agreement.
Galen began to chew on a hymnal he pulled from the cubby hole in the back of the pew. His mouth was dry, and he wondered if he'd be able to get some grape juice after this was over.

Abe Jack stopped at the edge of the pew and stood with his mouth open. Galen started to crawl toward him on his hands and knees. He reared back and, waving his arms above his head, shouted something that made no sense.

"He says that he is a messenger from God!" the preacher said, standing with his hands on the side of the baptistery, his eyes closed in concentration.

Galen stopped and looked at he preacher. He hadn't expected anyone to understand him. He stood on the pew and shouted some more.

"He says those standing nearest to God stand in one of two places!" The preacher's voice began to tremble and grow shrill. "They stand either in the direct fire of his heavenly light or they curl in the pitch black darkness of his shadow!"

Galen began to scream louder and to dance around on the seat of the pew. The entire congregation shouted encouragement. The old woman at the end of the pew stood up too quickly and passed out in the floor.

Abe Jack looked around, edged toward the door. Galen jumped from the pew and threw himself between the door and
Abe Jack. He dropped to his knees and wrapped his arms around Abe Jack's ankles.

"Let go of me! I ain't got time to mess around with your loony ass!" Abe Jack kicked at Galen, who began to moo.

"Don't let this man leave!" the preacher shouted. Several men and women ran toward Abe Jack. "He is a sinner who must be turned from sin! Lay your hands on him, Brothers and Sisters! Draw away the evil inside him!"

Some grabbed Abe Jack to hold him there. Others wiped their hands along his belly and his back, screaming oaths at the demons coiled inside him. Abe Jack's eyes grew wider between pulses. He covered his slick head with his hands and yelled. "Get away from me, you preacherfied sons a bitches!"

Galen held on tighter as Abe Jack began to squirm and wiggle. Galen's grip came loose as Abe Jack's boot hit him in the chest. Sitting on the floor, gasping, Galen could breathe in only down to where the boot struck him.

"Bring him forward," the preacher called. "Let us cleanse his soul of the demons which resist salvation!" Eight men grunted under the screaming sinner's weight.

"Sing, Brothers and Sisters!" the preacher shouted. "Sing in the glory of this sinner's redemption." Two dozen voices began several different hymns.
Galen stood and rubbed his chest. He saw Abe Jack high on the shoulders of the congregation. "Put me the hell down!" Abe Jack shouted. "I'll kill every one of you bastards. I mean it."

"Brothers and Sisters, immerse the sinner!" The preacher stepped aside and the little boy jumped out the back of the baptistery. The singing stopped. Abe Jack was pushed up and released.

"I baptize thee in the name of the Father..."

Water splashed over the baptistery and rolled down the steps of the platform. Abe Jack's apron came loose and tossed above him on the water's raging surface.

"...and the Son..."

Galen turned and walked to the door.

"...and the Holy Spirit..."

He stopped and looked back toward the front. He pulled the slice of bologna from his pants pocket and bit into it.

"Dammit!" Abe Jack yelled, breaking through the surface, shaking water from his ears, blowing it from his nose. Galen pushed open the door, stepped back out into the light.
EUGENE

Eugene scrunched low in the back seat as his father aimed the Ford between two Lincolns on the chalk parking lot. A dirty, white cloud surrounded the car.

"You made me wash the car so it could get covered with this shit," his father said to his mother.

"Eugene washed the car." Eugene's mother pulled a compact from her purse and touched up her dark red lipstick. "Didn't you, Baby?"

"Same damn thing." His father killed the motor. "I'm the one that had to make him do it."

Eugene lifted the yellowed floor mat with the toe of his sneaker. He dug a toothpick wrapper from between the seat cushions, crumpled it into a ball and rolled it around on his palm. The rutted, dusty parking lot made him think of "The Rat Patrol." He wondered if it was still on.

"I just don't understand it," his mother said as she unfolded from the front seat. "They aren't supposed to be here. They're supposed to be at the picnic table under the canopy. Ever since I can remember they've been under that canopy. This isn't right. This isn't right at all."

Eugene's father came around the back of the car. "I expect somebody else got there first," he said. "It don't make no difference. We'd burn up out here either way."
knocked on the car window. "Get out of there, Boy. You ain’t staying in the car."

Eugene pushed the door open and slid to the ground. His sneakers made prints in the chalk as if it were snow.

"I’ll be damned if I ever come to one of these things again," his mother said. "I swear something goes wrong every time." His mother set sunglasses over her contact-lensed eyes. "Mamma knows I hate these things with a passion and, still, she begs me to come. If she had her way, there’d be a reunion every week and I’d be at every one of them smiling my damned fool head off and trying to talk to all these people I’m supposed to know."

"Hell, if you hate it so much, what’d we come for?" His father held down the cable bordering the parking lot with his boot. "I’m missing football for this."

"Oh, how terrible." His mother stepped over the cable. "I guess you’ll only get to see nine hundred and ninety nine football games this year." She turned and looked at Eugene. "Damn!" she said, "I forgot to get the potato salad out of the car. Eugene, go back and get it, Honey, will you? It’s on the floorboard in the back in a blue bowl."

"I’ll get it," his father said. "We’ll be waiting all day if you send him." He dug into his left pants pocket. He dug into his right pocket and slapped his butt. "Did I give you the car keys?"
"No," his mother said. "Don't tell me you left them in the car. We'll be stranded here forever."

His father slipped two fingers into his shirt pocket and retrieved the jingling keys. "Did you want me to go ahead and get the lawn chairs out of the trunk?"

"You might as well," his mother said. "See if you can find someplace in the shade to set them up."

"The nearest shade is in Texarkana." His father turned. "Eugene, you go on and stay with your Mamma."

"Your grandmother would never let me hear the end of it if we hadn't come to this thing." His mother pulled her purse strap onto her shoulder. "She'd have moped around and mumbled for months about how her only daughter couldn't even take her place at the family reunion when she was sick. If she's faking those spells, I'll kill her."

A voice called, "Ruby!" Eugene turned to see a woman trying to wave, hold a straw hat on her head and guide a little girl through a patch of spearweeds and Johnson grass.

"Beth," his mother said. "That's my cousin Beth." She waved back.

The weeds seized the little girl and clung to her legs like tentacles. "Step over them, Amanda," Beth said. "Why, Ruby! I'm so glad you came." They hugged and patted each other on the back.

"It's been so long," Ruby said. "I'll swan, is this Amanda?"
"Yeah, that's the little one."

"She's grown so much. You can't hardly call her the little one anymore, can you?" Ruby knelt down. "Hi, Honey, do you know who I am?"

Amanda shook her head.

"I'm your cousin."

"Hi," Amanda said.

"Looks like these weeds got a hold of you." Ruby picked spearweeds from the girl's white socks. "Hold still a minute, Honey."

"She's always into something," Beth said.

"Wait until she's older," Ruby said, looking back toward Eugene. She pulled a long blade of grass from under the strap on Amanda's shiny black shoes. Eugene thought they looked like the shoes worn by animals in cartoons.

"Amanda," Ruby said. "This is your cousin, Eugene."

Amanda looked up at Eugene, squinting in the sunlight.

"Say hello, Eugene," Ruby said.

"Hello." Eugene looked at the ground. Amanda hid behind her mother.

"Oh, now, Amanda," Beth said. "Don't be that way. I think she likes you, Eugene." Beth looked at Ruby, who stood now, brushing grass and sand from her hose. "This one's going to be a big one, isn't he?"

"Oh, yeah," Ruby said. "We didn't think so at first, but he shot up like one of those weeds."
Eugene's father lumbered up to them carrying two lawn chairs under one arm and a plastic bowl under the other. He set down the lawn chairs and handed the bowl to Ruby.

"Ray, you remember Beth, don't you?" she said. "She's my cousin from Athens."

"Howdy," Eugene's father said. "Hot enough for you? Any cooler down in Athens?"

"I guess it's about the same," Beth said.

"What happened to the rest of the potato salad?" Ruby asked. "This bowl was full."

"The rest of the potato salad is smeared halfway to Arkansas in the back seat of the car," Ray said. "The lid came off."

"Oh, Lord, and I just bought that bowl. I must have forgotten to burp it."

"Well, next time, would you burp the damn bowl before you put it in the car? It's going to smell like potato salad for a week."

Eugene followed everyone to the clan gathered amongst the folding chairs, wooden benches and card tables covered with old newspapers and bedsheets. The lone picnic table stood in the center, rising from a concrete pedestal and shrouded in an old crocheted table cloth.

Three hams and a roast were posted in the table's corners. Four chickens knelt along its back edge. Rows of tupperware containers, some covered, others not, were spread
prone upon the table and filled with tunafish salad, chicken salad, pea salad and coleslaw. Six bowls of potato salad hovered near the corner with the roast. The sun had transformed a cherry Jello mold into Jello juice which dyed a bloody circle on the tablecloth. Saran-wrapped desserts surrounded the table’s centerpiece, an institution-sized can of Van Camp’s pork and beans crowned by a hand-held can opener.

"Amanda," Beth said. "Why don’t you go with Eugene and play with the other kids?" She dropped Amanda’s hand. "You don’t mind, Eugene, do you?"

"He don’t mind," Ray said. "Go on."

Eugene started to walk off.

"Take her hand, Eugene," Ruby said.

Amanda walked over and held her hand up to Eugene. He took it and looked at his mother.

"Be careful now," Ruby said.

Eugene looked out at the park. Two boys played frisbee with a tupperware lid. Another group looked like they were playing hide-and-go-seek.

He walked over a pecan tree several yards away, where he dropped Amanda’s hand and fished a pocket knife from his jeans. He opened the knife and stabbed the tree.

Amanda stared up at him. Eugene looked straight into the tree and concentrated on its bludgeoning.

"Go away," Eugene said.
"Play," Amanda said.

"I don't want to play. Go play with those idiots over there."

Eugene watched the knife sink into the tree again and again. He had completely torn away the bark in one spot, leaving the wet, green wood exposed. Amanda stared at the spot.

"I told you I don't want to play. Get out of here."

"Why you doing that for? Don't you like trees?"

"Trees stink."

Amanda leaned close to the tree and sniffed.

"I don't mean they stink, Stupid," Eugene said. "I mean they're lousy. They grow where you don't want them to and they won't grow where you want them." He stabbed the tree and left the knife stuck in the wood. "Hey, I saw you fighting through them weeds back there. You're a regular Tarzan." Eugene laughed. Amanda looked toward the hide-and-go-seekers.

Eugene pulled the knife from the tree. "Here, give it a couple of stabs."

Amanda took the knife and ran her fingers along the fishbone handle and shiny steel blade.

"Watch it. Don't cut yourself," Eugene said.

Amanda swung the knife into the tree, and it fell from her hands.
"You got to hold on to it. Tight. Here." Eugene picked up the knife, put it in Amanda’s hand and wrapped his own around it. She tried to pull away. "Hold still a minute. I’m trying to teach you something." She closed her eyes as Eugene pushed her hand and the knife into the tree.

The bark seemed to have pulled back on either side of the blade, allowing it to enter. Amanda pulled the knife out and plunged it back in.

"Now you got it."

Eugene wiped a bead of sweat from his upper lip and squinted into the sun. He blinked toward the creek, then down at Amanda. The knife continued to pull her into the tree. He took the knife from her hand.

"That’s enough for now." He looked back toward the creek. "Let’s go down by the water. It’s cooler there I’ll bet."

He walked quickly, stopping every few feet to allow Amanda to catch up. "Can you swim?" he asked.

Amanda shook her head.

"Well, I can teach you that, too, if you want. Just like my Daddy taught me. Everybody should know how to swim."

They reached the edge of the water. The creek usually ran swiftly through the park, brimming its banks. It now stood a full foot below normal and crept around the rocks lining its sides.
"Take off your shoes and socks," Eugene told Amanda as he sat down to do the same.

Amanda unbuckled her shoes and laid them next to each other with her socks rolled up on top.

"O.K., now, there's no reason to be scared on account of it's only water." Eugene picked her up and stepped to the edge of the bank. He raised her over his head and pitched her into the creek. Amanda screamed, then hit the water with a smack.

Shouts came from around the canopyless picnic table.

"Amanda! Amanda! Where are you, Honey?" Beth cried.

"Eugene! Where the hell are you, Boy?" Ray called from beneath a mimosa tree.

"Amanda!"

"Eugene!"

A man ran past Eugene and straight into the creek. He came up gasping and reaching blindly for the girl. He caught hold of her arm and pulled her to him. Two cousins or uncles or whatever took her from him and spread her on the bank.

Eugene bent over and picked up the girl's shoes, tossing one and then the other into the water. He watched as the shoes slowly spun close together, then floated apart as they inched downstream.
THE BIG CITY
Dad made me buy a pair of waffle-soled work boots from K-Mart. They were cheap, but not nearly so cheap as you’d think something from K-Mart would be. I had to buy the boots for the job.

"OSHA regulations," Dad said.

"Jesus," I said. I didn’t want the damn job in the first place. Now, I had to fork out fifty bucks for the privilege of wearing lead weights that squeaked and made my feet sweat.

"You know, Dad," I said, bent over, re-tying the damn things for the twentieth time. "Even Indians use nylon shoe laces now. Where the hell have roofers been?" I finally had to tie the boots in a hard knot to keep those Bronze-Age leather laces from coming loose and jerking me flat on my ass.

I stomped around the house the night before the job started, breaking the boots in. That was Dad’s idea, too. "You’ll get blisters," he said, "until you get used to them." I decided I’d get used to the blisters before I ever got used to the boots.

And you talk about bullshit; I had to be at this job at six o’clock in the fucking morning. "Are they crazy?" I asked my dad. This was not rhetorical. In four years of
college, I had registered for something as early as an eight o'clock class only one time. Spanish. It would have been my only D as well, but I opted to drop the class, saving my GPA. I even got into law school. Muy bien.

I was sure anyone who started work at six in the morning must be bonkers, but my Dad just kept grinning at me like he had ever since I came home in the boots. I think I reminded him of himself. He's in construction. He owns a construction firm, to tell you the truth, so he doesn't wear boots much anymore. He puts a pair on when he wants to pretend he's just one of the guys.

When I was a kid, he wore boots all the time. I'd forgotten all about them until I saw myself standing in front of one of those little mirrors that sit on the floors of shoe stores. You've heard stories guys tell about when they first realized they were turning into their dads. The guys usually looked in a mirror and screamed with horror. I could only see myself from the ankles down, but I have to admit I shuddered a little.

When I was accepted into law school, I called my dad. I thought he'd be thrilled, and he was. "But," he said, "you'll have to find a way to pay for it yourself." I applied immediately for every sort of grant and loan in the book, but I would have needed a truck backing up to my house to deliver enough money. "There comes a time in everyone's life when he has to learn how to compromise and pay his own
way," Dad said when I explained the situation. "If you want it bad enough you'll find a way to get it."

I thought at first this was just a new twist on the old "Do you think money grows on trees?" line he always gave me when I hit him up between the regular checks. Then it became clear that Dad had attained a new level of resolve. For his part, he said, he'd get me a summer job with one of the sub-contractors his company used. For my part, I'd buy boots. He'd loan me the money. Heart of gold, my dad.

I decided to postpone the inevitable as long as I could. I hung around school after graduation until the lease on my apartment ran out. Between "Gomer Pyle" re-runs and vocational school commercials, I concocted a scheme involving a Graduate Audit error which, when corrected, left me three credits short of graduating. Shazam. Summer school awaited me.

I practiced breaking the news to my dad. I decided the credits had to be taken to fulfill the science distribution requirement. "Biology 308 - Human Sexuality" was on the schedule for second summer term. I was trying to figure out a way to register for an extra lab period when my Dad called and said my diploma came in the mail. Surprise, surprise, surprise. By mid-June, I had no choice but to go home.

* * *

The alarm went off at five o'clock. Dad set the thing when he brought it into my room the night before.
"Here," he said. "You can use this. Your mother's set the radio in our room."

I had just spent a half-hour peeling the boots off my feet. I looked up at him. "You're not getting up?" I asked.

"Oh, I'll get up around six-thirty, seven o'clock like I always do." He started back out the door. "Listen," he said, "you'd better eat some breakfast before you go. It'll be a long time before you get any lunch."

It would also be a long time before I got any daylight. When the alarm went off, it was dark. When I got out of bed twenty minutes later, it was dark. After I put on a t-shirt and a pair of jeans I was prepared to waste and jammed my now-swollen feet into the now-damp boots, it was dark.

The thought of breakfast made me sick. My feet felt like bowling balls on the ends of my legs. I hobbled out to my car. Crickets chirped in the driveway. Were we supposed to climb on top of a building in the middle of the night?

Closing the car door muffled the crickets. I stuck the key in the ignition, propped my arms on the steering wheel and sat peering into the heavy dew covering the windshield. My head bounced off the steering wheel. This woke me up. I rubbed my eyes and flipped the wiper switch on and off. The blades rose and skimmed the water away.

I turned on the lights and backed out of the driveway by feel. The dew was just as heavy on the back glass, but I
was the only idiot on the road at this hour, and I knew from memory where our mailbox was. I rolled my window down. The streets were one blinking red light after another, but at least all the stopping kept me awake.

I pulled onto the gravel parking lot behind the quonset hut that housed Above-All Roofing & Gutters. The two dozen or so other buildings in the industrial park were metal as well but of the double-wide-mobile-home-on-cinder-blocks variety. Above-All Roofing & Gutters was in the only building without a roof.

I had been in the building once before when I applied for the job, filling out an application, leaving "Work History" blank. I threw the Daily News for about three months when I was twelve, and I graded freshman papers some my senior year, but I didn't feel that either job contributed to my unique qualifications as a roofer. I gave the form back to a girl sitting behind a metal desk topped by a "Vicki, Office Manager" name plate. She was the only person in the office. Vicki looked about sixteen, but reasoning that no sixteen-year-old could have risen to her august position, I assumed she must have been older.

"Jim is out on a job," Vicki said when I gave her the form. "He'll call you later."

Jim did call. The brains behind the Above-All dynasty interviewed me on the phone. Evidently I impressed him. Or
it could have been the eighty thousand in business my Dad sent his way every year. It's hard to tell.

When I stuck my head in the door, I saw the lamp on Vicki's desk lighting one corner of the office. Several men in jeans and boots like mine sat on and around the desk. Some held styrofoam cups and ate sweet rolls from cellophane. One guy leaned back in a chair with his head against the wall and a "Johns-Manville Building Products" cap over his face.

I looked for Vicki, but she wasn't there. I tried to figure out which one of the guys might be Jim. None of them looked to be in charge. I moved a couple of steps closer and shoved my hands in the pockets of my jeans. A guy sitting in Vicki's chair reading an old issue of Playboy looked up. He pointed.

"Hey, who the hell's this here?" he asked a guy wiping his mouth on a Twinkie wrapper. They all turned and looked at me except for the guy asleep against the wall.

"Hi." I introduced myself. They all continued to stare. They obviously hadn't received the memo. I mentioned my Dad's name, certain I had stumbled on a mouth breathers' convention by mistake.

The guy who first saw me slapped the sleeping guy on the leg. "Gary, wake up," he said. "Guy here wants to talk to somebody."
Gary straightened in the chair and took the cap in his fist. His blond hair was pulled back in a pony-tail. He squinted up at me through swollen, blood-shot eyes. This man needed sleep even more than I did. "Yeah?" he asked. I briefed him on the weighty conversation he had just missed. "Oh." Gary rubbed his face. "Uh, listen, if you want to talk to Jim, he don't usually come in until about eight."

That figured. "Well, I don't think I need to talk to Jim, really," I said. "He told me to talk to the crew foreman."

"Oh." Gary looked at his watch. "You're here to work?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. I hated to hear it put so bluntly.

Gary leaned over the top of Vicki's desk. "You got boots. Good." I wiggled my sweaty toes against one another. When Gary stood, the others stood, too. "Got any gloves?"

"No," I said. "No gloves."

"Richie," he said to the Twinkie-eater. "Go get the college boy some gloves." Richie left into the darkness at the back of the office. Gary reached over and switched off the lamp. The others headed for the front door.

Gary picked up a clipboard and came out from behind the desk. "The gloves'll cost you ten bucks out of your first paycheck," he said, "but you got to have them."

"I know," I said. "OSHA regulations."
"Huh?" Gary stared at the clipboard.

"Yeah, I figured I'd have to have some." We couldn't let my hands go without sweating and getting all pruney, could we?

When we got outside, the guy who had been sitting in Vicki's chair now sat on the passenger side of a half-ton truck. Two others tried to wrest him from his position, but he had wedged himself between the side panel and the glove box.

"Come on, Leonard," one of them said. "You got to ride up front all last week."

"Kiss my ass," Leonard said.

"All right, cut it out," Gary said. "Let's go. Where the hell is Richie?"

"He's getting gloves," I said.

Gary looked at me, blinking. Sleep matted the corners of his eyes. "Get in the truck," he said. "Richie! We're gone!"

Richie trotted out the door and shut it behind him. I climbed into the back of the truck with the other two guys. Richie hurdled the side of the bed. I clutched the tailgate to keep from falling backward over it. A pair of leather gloves landed at my feet. The sun had risen high enough by now that we didn't even have to use headlights.

"What took you so long, Richie?" asked a guy wearing a faded Run-DMC t-shirt and an earring. He had an "S" shaved
into his hair. "Getting a few extra strokes in? Twanging the wire?" He and the guy next to him laughed and high-fived. Richie kicked at them both from across the truck.

"You're one to be talking, Stewart," Richie said. The truck crunched through the gravel.

"Don't talk no trash about me, Home. That's white folks' stuff," Stewart said. "I got all I need waiting on me at the crib." Stewart was missing a tooth or two and talked with a lisp. It was hard to imagine anyone or anything waiting on him for an extended period of time.

I sat at the very back of the truck, looking out over the tail-gate. Prison movies came to mind. I imagined Gary tilted back in a rocking chair with a shotgun across his lap and opaque sunglasses covering his eyes.

The image startled me. I had seen it before. In ninth-grade gym. Gary staring down at me through sunglasses. Gary Mitchell. He looked a lot older than I thought he would, but it was him. Back in high school, he wore sunglasses even in gym, where he took ample pride in beating the shit out of me, my friends, and the odd stray kitten that happened to get in his way.

I swallowed some spit and road dust. I tried to be casual only because I couldn't be invisible. I looked at Richie and Stewart and the other guy out of the corner of my eye. I didn't remember any of them personally, at least, but they looked the same as the guys Gary hung around with
back then. Jesus, I thought. My foreman was a teen-age thug.

The truck pulled into the parking lot of an apartment complex and stopped between a stack of composition shingles and a pyramid of tar paper bolts. What appeared to be a huge barbecue pit stood on the other side of the shingles. Everyone jumped off the truck. Gary called out assignments.

"Ruben, you and Richie finish up that decking on the north end," he said. "Leonard, you got the oven."

"Oh man, Gary," Stewart said. "I'm supposed to get the oven this week."

"Leonard hurt his back," Gary said. "He can't climb." Leonard looked down at his boots.

"Oh bullshit, Gary." Stewart flung his arms around. "Leonard, you lying, goldbrick motherfucker."

"Come on, Stewart," Gary said. "I need you to show our new man how to spud that center section, anyway."

"Fucking bullshit, Gary." Stewart climbed back into the truck. This just kept getting better. It wasn't everyday that I got the opportunity to both re-enact humiliating episodes from my childhood and spend time stranded on a roof with a really angry guy.

"College Boy!" Stewart called. I walked back to where he stood bent over the open tool chest. He raised up and handed down two garden hoes. The blades had been pounded flat with a sledge hammer or something.
"We sure won't get many weeds with these things," I said, smiling feebly. Stewart handed me a push broom and a metal dust pan. He jumped from the truck.

"You ever done this before?" he asked.

"No." I didn't know exactly what he meant, but it seemed a safe answer.

"It's pure dee bullshit," he said. "At least it's early. Don't nobody want to be spudding past noon. Grab a couple of those fives." Stewart pointed at a stack of metal buckets.

I swung the hoes and the broom onto one shoulder, stuck the dust pan in my armpit, and tried to pull two pails off the top. They were stacked inside one another and a vacuum locked them together.

Stewart had already started up the ladder leaning against the tallest part of the apartment building. I set the tools on the ground and twisted two pails free. I picked everything up and lumbered toward the ladder. One of the hoes twisted from my grip, the handle bouncing off the pavement. I fell forward, catching my balance just before my face hit the parking lot but just after I dropped everything except the dustpan, which dug deeper into my armpit.

I stood and picked up everything again. I felt the tools rising from my shoulder and slipping out of my hand. Stewart was about half way up, looking down at me, grinning.
I spun around. Gary held the tools over his head. I
started to duck and run, but Gary just went around me and
held the tools up to Stewart. "Don't let Stewart fuck with
you," Gary said, taking the pails from me and relaying them
to the roof. "He's your best friend once you get to know
him, but he'll fuck with you." Gary slapped me on the back
and walked away.

I stood there, staring in front of me. What just
happened? I couldn't explain it, but I felt like I did when
I went to homecoming at my high school the year after I
graduated. The hallways looked smaller and older and there
was this funny smell. Everything seemed different, and I'd
only been gone a few months. I mean, with the exception of
throwing out about three years worth of well-worn, well-
hidden pornography, my mom hadn't changed my bed room in
four solid years.

"Get up here, College Boy," Stewart yelled. "I want to
ger this shit done." Up until that moment, I had been
pleasantly unaware of any fear of heights. I had flown
across the Atlantic, peered over the rail into the Grand
Canyon and jumped carelessly about the observation deck of
the Sears Tower. This ladder, however, seemed particularly
fragile. It creaked with each step I took. I couldn't even
feel the rungs through the thick soles of the boots.

When I got to the top, Stewart extended a hand. I
grabbed the edge of the roof, instead, and pulled myself
over. The roof was flat. It looked like stagnant lava. A few scattered pebbles dotted swirls of faded, cracked, bubbled tar.

"It’s easiest if you start at a crack," Stewart said, handing me a hoe. He demonstrated, pushing the blade of the other hoe under a bulge and scraping back a hunk of tar, tar paper and gravel. When I tried, the hoe just skidded across the surface. "You got to push harder than that," Stewart said. "You got to get under it." He pushed up another wide ribbon.

After a while, I managed to tear up a few tiny chunks and scrape up a little dust. Stewart loped about the roof, stroking rhythmically as if the hoe were an oar, pushing waves of the black stuff in front of him.

I was glad to have the gloves. My fingers ached and stayed curled even when I took them from the hoe to push my hair back out of my face. I felt stronger in the gloves, like I ought to be working on a dock or cutting stone.

By nine o’clock, over half of the roof’s slate base showed through, and I realized why Stewart wanted to get the spudding over with. Sandwiched between the sun and the roof, I felt like Velveeta in a skillet. While Stewart had the presence of mind to carry a water bottle in his tool belt, I resorted to drinking my own sweat as it trickled down from my forehead, surged through my eyes and hung from my nose in drops.
Stewart banged his hoe against a turbine. He kicked at the turbine with the heel of his boot. "Shit," he said and dropped the hoe. He pulled his shirt off over his head and wiped his face. He sprayed himself from the water bottle and called back to me. "Hey, Mr. College Man. Here." He tossed me the bottle.

As much god as man, Stewart. I shot a stream of water into my gaping mouth and felt it wash away the debris collected on the inside of my throat. I wiped my face on my shirt. I started to pull the shirt off, but noticed the sunburn already starting to come out on my arms.

Stewart stood with his hands on his hips, staring down at Leonard who sat on the ground next to the oven. Leonard stoked the fire burning in the bottom, sending black smoke and oily fumes into the morning dankness. We breathed as if through a dirty dish rag.

I walked over and handed the bottle back to Stewart. "Thanks," I said. He took the bottle, but continued to watch Leonard. "He’s got the easy job, huh?" I said.

"What ever Leonard does is the easy job," Stewart said. "Lazy Ass." Stewart picked up the hoe and started banging the bottom of the turbine again. He stopped and straightened. "I can’t get this loose," he said. "Come push on this mother with me."

We leaned into the turbine, but it didn’t budge an inch. We pushed against it until we both breathed hard.
"Fucking motherfucker," Stewart said, pulling off his gloves and slamming them to the roof. He certainly echoed my sentiments.

I kicked the turbine. I didn't feel a thing through the boot. I kicked it again. The boot just bounced off it. My feet were invincible. They weren't getting the turbine off, to be sure, but they couldn't be hurt either. "We got to steam it off, College Boy," Stewart said. "Go down there and tell Leonard to get off his ass and get us a bucket of steam."

As I dropped down the ladder the temperature fell with me. For a couple of seconds, I managed to catch what little breeze there was in the air. As I approached the oven, the air returned to soup.

"Hey, Leonard," I said. Leonard poked at the ground with a stick. "Uh, could I get a bucket of steam?"

Leonard stopped poking and looked up at me. "What?" he asked. His face was red and dripping with sweat.

"Stewart sent me for a bucket of steam."

Leonard smiled. "Stewart wants a bucket of steam?" he asked. "What's he want it for?"

"To get a turbine loose, I think."

"Go back and tell Stewart to kiss my ass."

I looked at Leonard. I wanted to run to the nearest pay phone and call someone to come and get me, but I had felt that impulse off and on all day long.
"How's it going?" Gary came up from behind me.

"Stewart put you to work, yet?"

"Yeah." I looked at the ground. I thought maybe he hadn’t recognized me, a situation I wanted to perpetuate.

"Good. We need to get this job done by the end of the week. We got three more waiting," he said.

I wanted to get out of there. I looked back at Leonard. "I need--"

"College Boy needs a bucket of steam, Gary," Leonard said.

Gary laughed. "Stewart tell you to get him a bucket of steam?" he asked. He and Leonard smiled at each other.

"Yeah." I had never seen the desire for or prospect of steam make anyone so happy. Of course, my experience with steam was limited almost exclusively to showers and tea kettles.

Gary looked at Leonard, then toward the roof. "Didn’t he send you for a bucket of steam one time, Leonard?"

"No, he sent me for a left-handed spud hoe," Leonard said. "He’s done it before, though. I think maybe he sent Richie for a bucket of steam."

"Well," Gary said, "I’d say it’s time we got the man a bucket of steam, then." Leonard stood as Gary took a pail from the stack. "Is that a lid behind you, there, Leonard?" he asked. Leonard picked up the lid and clanged it against the palm of his hand like a tambourine.
"What you aim to do?" Leonard asked.

"You'll see." Gary carried the bucket and lid to a spigot sprouting from the shrubbery. He ran some water in the bucket, then carried it back to the oven. I scanned the roof for Stewart, but he wasn't watching from anyplace he could be seen.

"Drip me a little black in here," Gary said. Leonard opened the tap on the drum and a thick goo hissed into the bucket. Gary slapped the lid on top, pounded it down with his fist. "This is pretty heavy," he said to me. "You sure you want to haul it up there?"

What I wanted was for someone to explain what the hell was going on. Who were these people and what was I doing here? "Sure," I said. "I'll take it."

Gary started to hand the bucket to me, then pulled it back. "You know Stewart's fucking with you, right?" he asked.


"Stewart's going to shit," Leonard said.

I walked the bucket up the ladder in front of me one rung at a time, sweating, stopping, wiping my face. Gary and Leonard held the ladder steady at its base. Stewart
leaned over and held down his hands. I put the bail of the bucket into them and climbed onto the roof.

"What the hell were they doing down there?" Stewart asked. He pried the lid up. A thick gray cloud surrounded his face. I stepped backward fully prepared to jump the three stories to the ground. Stewart shook his head and began to laugh. I looked down at Gary and Leonard who laughed, punched each other and slapped themselves.

"You live, Home Boy." Stewart laughed big and loud. I'd never seen anyone laugh like that, just pitch his head back and laugh because he thought something was funny and he didn't care who knew it. I started to laugh, too. With Stewart going on like that, there was no choice. "You carried that motherfucking bucket all the way up here?" he said, then started laughing again. He punched me on the arm. I kept grinning and waited for him to turn around before I rubbed the spot he hit.

About ten-thirty, we finished the spudding and climbed back down the ladder for lunch. My stomach had growled for the previous hour. Even with lungs full of soot, I was starving.

A silver-panelled lunch wagon sat in the parking lot. One of the panels was thrown back, exposing an assortment of plastic-wrapped, heavily-processed delights. "Don't get the hot dogs," Stewart said. "I got one once had a toenail in
it." A toenail would not have fazed me. I could have eaten around a toe at that point.

I bought three cans of Beanie-Weenies and a Dr. Pepper, which I drank while waiting to pay for the stuff. I filled the cup with water from the spigot, then dumped it out on my head. I couldn’t stop sweating. I filled the cup again and went back to the truck where Stewart sat, eating.

"You looking mighty white, College Boy," Stewart said. "You better sit your ass down." I climbed up beside him and peeled the top off one of the cans. Even as I scraped out my last bean, though, I dripped sweat onto the tail-gate.

Gary walked up and dropped his clipboard beside me. "You two about finished up there?" he asked. I looked at Stewart.

"Yeah, spudding’s done," Stewart said. "College Boy liked that. Might need Leonard to help if you want the tar and gravel down today."

"You’ll get Leonard," Gary said, "but I got to borrow this one for awhile." He looked at me, took off his sunglasses, leaned on the truck. "You ready to take a ride?" he asked.

I belched. What the hell did "you ready take a ride" mean to these guys? Was it like "you want to smoke a joint," or like "you want a mouthful of bloody chiclets?" Finally, I just nodded.
"Get in the truck, then." he said. "I got to run you back to the office. Jim says you got to fill out some shit. W-4, insurance papers, typical bullshit."

"Aw, fuck the forms," Stewart said. "We got work to do. Jim's just doing this so he can take that phone in the truck off his taxes. If he misses us so damn much, why don't he get his ass out here instead of calling us all the time?"

"I told him what we had to do, but you know Jim," Gary said.

Stewart grabbed his crotch. "I know that's right," he said. "Tell him I got his lunch waiting on him whenever he gets hungry." He jumped off the tail-gate.

I dropped down. My legs had started to stiffen, and my knees wobbled. I grabbed the tail-gate to keep from falling over. Stewart waited for me to let go, then slammed the tail-gate shut. I looked at him. "Guess I got to fill out forms," I said. I felt like a traitor.

"We'll save some for you," Stewart said. "You don't want to miss tar and gravel."

We got in the truck, and Gary rolled down his window. "I'd run the air," he said, "but we'd just get to liking it too much."

"Yeah, probably," I said, rolling down the glass on my side.
The wind whipped through the cab. Gary yelled over it. "How you liking it so far?" he asked.

"It's okay," I yelled back. Everything seemed to move more slowly in the truck. I thought the wind might dry me off, but I was sweating too hard. My skin started feeling funny, like it was getting too big.

We stopped at a light. My ears buzzed. "We don't really have to fill out those forms right now," Gary said. "I just thought it might be a good idea to get you out of the sun. You looked like you was dragging bottom." His voice sounded like it came from the next car over. "You'll get used to it before too long."

"Yeah," I said. "I'm okay." I leaned my head against the back wall of the cab.

"Say, didn't we go to the same school for awhile?" Gary asked.

"Yeah," I said, "we had the same gym class in ninth grade." I sat up straight. Why was I reminding him of that? I must be tired, I thought. I'm starting to ramble.

"Yeah, I thought I remembered you," Gary said. "I wasn't really paying much attention back then, though. I dropped out right after that." The light changed. The wind picked up again. "Jim says you're in college. That right?" Gary asked.

"Just finished," I said. My head felt heavy. I let it fall back against the cab.
"Finished?" Gary glanced toward me. "Wow. Ain't that something?"

I shrugged. "Yeah, well."

"I thought about going to college," Gary said. "Got my GED, then got my wife pregnant."

"You're married?" I asked, straightening up in the seat. "You've got a kid?" I couldn't help but think he was the same age I was. Which, of course, he was.

"Hey, don't look so surprised," Gary said. "I know I'm ugly, but I ain't that ugly." He yawned. "Man, I got to get some sleep," he said. "This moonlighting shit is killing me."

"You've got another job?" I asked. My head was starting to spin.

"Yeah, I've been working the second shift at Frito-Lay since my daughter was born," Gary said.

"Jesus," I said beneath the wind. Saint Gary. In the last four years the hardest thing I had done was determine the minimum effort required to pass a course. I developed it into an art form.

My head was reeling by now. Big wide loops. While I was gluing paper cups to the ceiling of my best friend's frat house, simply because paper cups and glue turned up in close proximity, Gary was rearing a child. Well, maybe not. He obviously wasn't getting to see her very much. Too busy
providing for her well-being. Saving for her college education.

I tasted bile in my throat and decided I'd probably exceeded my Beanie-Weenie limit. When Gary stopped the truck at another light, I opened the door, intending just to throw up. I must have leaned over a little too far, though, because I found myself standing in the street. The sunlight bouncing off the hoods of cars blinded me for a second or two. I squinted and stumbled forward. I heard Gary call me and honk the horn, but I just walked through the stalled traffic, steadying myself against the cars I passed.

A blues guitar twanged from somewhere. I felt Stewart and Leonard pushing me into a tin-roofed shack too small for me to stand up in. I heard Gary's voice. "Any man who forgets his gloves spends a night in the box," he said, "OSHA regulations."

I tripped on the curb, fell, rolled over onto my back and covered my face with my hands. Wide ribbons of tar paper snaked past my eyes. I saw the box again, this time with Gary in it. I lifted my head, shook it, opened my eyes. Across the street, steep, pretty, wood-shingled roofs rose up over the traffic and shimmered in the heat.
SITTER

Abby liked me. This much. She stretched her arms out to her sides, her fingers pointing toward opposite ends of my apartment. Since honesty often proves too heavy a burden for anyone over five years old to bear, and I was so rarely in the presence of anyone under five, I knew I should savor the moment.

"That's nice," I said. I felt my face grow flushed. I nudged her glass of grape juice away from the edge of the coffee table. "I like you, too, sweetie." I poked her belly with my index finger. She squealed. "So, who else do you like?" I asked.

She twisted back and forth, her head tilted in thought. She wore tiny blue jeans and a tiny t-shirt with a purple stain covering the face of a turtle who already wore some sort of a mask. "I don't know," she said.

"Oh, come on. You like your mom and dad."

"I like Mommy. I like Daddy. I like Dave. I like Miss Turner. I like--"

I reached out and held her shoulders. "Wait. Who's Miss Turner?"

She looked at me with utter incredulity. "She's my teacher!"
"Well, I didn’t know." I rolled my eyes and turned up my palms.

Abby giggled. "Do that again."

"Do what?"

"That thing."

"What thing?"

"That thing you did!" She pushed against my chest.

"Show me what thing."

She rolled her whole head and flapped her arms up and down. A grin forced up the corners of my mouth. "I don’t think I remember how anymore."

***

Richard, Abby’s father, had dropped her off a half-hour earlier. He was headed for the hospital where Ellen, Abby’s mother, kept a still, cautious watch over the arrival of their second child. Abby would soon have a brother.

I was a friend of the family. I met Abby’s mother first, several years earlier, when we both worked on the same congressional campaign. Abby was only a baby herself at the time. She and her father hadn’t even moved to town, yet. I didn’t meet them until later.

I could never decide what to call Abby’s father. Everyone, even Ellen, who chose not to use his last name, called him "Richard." Richard Chapman. Ellen Rafferty and Richard Chapman. I tried calling him "Rick" at first, but it just didn’t suit him. I thought about trying something
goofy like "Chard," but I couldn't find the right moment to squeeze it in. And I didn't want to call him "Dick" without his expressed permission. "Richard" seemed so damn formal.

He called me "David." I had always been "Dave" to almost everyone. Even when I could have been "Davy" without suffering any sort of castration anxiety, I was "Dave." Richard, though, and my mother, called me "David." I was Richard's best friend. Ellen had told me so.

"I really appreciate this, David," he said. Nine o'clock on Saturday morning and he had on a tie. "We really appreciate it." He handed me a shopping bag. "I hope there's enough in there to keep her busy. I made her pick everything out herself this time."

"I'm sure she'll be fine," I said. Abby tugged slightly on her father's grip. She watched my cat, who eyed them both from under the couch.

"She's got a bunch of toys in there," Richard said. "And there's some grape juice. It's the only thing she'll drink this week."

"I thought she looked a little purple," I said. Richard stared at me. "It's a joke." I glanced down at Abby. "She hardly looks purple at all."

"Oh." He let loose of Abby's hand and stepped backward through the open doorway. His sport coat fluttered up from a gust of wind trapped in the courtyard. Behind him, fallen leaves whirled in a circle close to the ground. "Damnit!"
Richard tugged his coat down. He leaned over and looked past me.

I turned and saw Abby on her knees in the middle of the floor. She and the cat hissed at each other.

"I don't think she heard that. Do you?" Richard asked.

"No. She's busy."

"Yeah, listen, I've got to get on out there. Thanks again." He looked past me again. "Abby, you be good, now."

I could see only two short legs sticking out from under my couch. "I'm sure she'll be fine."

"Do you still have the hospital's number?"

"Yeah." I tried to remember. "I should have it somewhere."

"Okay, I'll see you about five, then?" He turned and walked away.

I leaned around the door jamb and followed him. "Sure. Say 'hi' to Ellen for me. Tell her to hurry it up with that baby." He disappeared around the corner of the building. "Bye, Rich. Richard." I shut the door.

***

Abby's barrette fell out of her hair. When I saw it laying on the carpet, I thought, at first, that the cat had killed a bug. "Do you know how this thing works?" I asked Abby, holding her barrette up in front of her.

"No, how?"
"Well, that's just it. I don't know." I pulled the metal posts open. "Lean a little closer." I tried to get the thing to take hold, but, when she moved her head, it just hung from her blonde hair as if she had walked under the drooping branch of a barrette tree. I took it back out. "Look," I said, setting it next to the television. "I'm putting this up here. Don't let me forget it when you leave."

"Okay." She slid a small, wire bicycle up the leg and across the top of the coffee table. The bicycle was mine. My only toy. A roach clip, actually. Her own toys huddled together in the shopping bag.

She pushed the bicycle off the edge of the table. "Oh, no!" she shouted. "Look out!" The bicycle bounced off the carpet. She picked it up and pushed it off again. This time she did it in slow motion. With both hands, she turned the bicycle end over end. "Oh, no! It's a cliff!" Another hapless victim plummeted.

***

Two weeks before, Ellen and Abby dropped by my office at school. They looked like two of those porcelain dolls that fit one inside the other: Abby a smaller replica of Ellen who was tiny herself. Tiny and round. Ellen wanted to know if I could babysit. That was the first time.

"I'm checking into the hospital tomorrow," she said. Abby began to climb the bookcase behind my desk.
"Already?" I asked. "The baby isn’t due for a month."

"The doctor wants me flat on my back. Completely immobilized," she said, looking around me. "Abby, get down from there."

I reached back and grabbed Abby around the waist. I turned her upside down. "What’re you doing up there?" I asked. "Take a sudden interest in great literature?" Ellen laughed. Abby screamed. I held her over the waste basket. "Maybe we should just throw her away," I said.

"No!" Abby screamed.

"What do you say, Mommy?" I asked. "It’s up to you."

"Maybe we should keep her for now," Ellen said.

I turned Abby upright and held her in my lap as I sat down. She picked up a pen from the desk top and began to draw on my class rolls. "You just marked my entire three o’clock class absent," I said and shoved a blank legal pad under the pen. "Of course, I never take roll, anyway."

"I see you’ve let this office become a mess again," Ellen said. She had come in once and cleaned it for me. I lost an entire set of mid-term exams in the process, but the office smelled like Ellen for a long time afterwards.

"I prefer to think it reverted to its natural state," I said.

"I wish I had thought about it sooner," she said. "I’d have cleaned it again. I’ve been bored silly sitting at home."
This pregnancy was a fragile thing. Ellen had some trouble with Abby, but she was only thirty-two, then. That trouble had stemmed primarily from Ellen's size -- four feet and eleven inches, ninety-two pounds -- and Abby's -- nineteen inches, nine pounds and six ounces. Now Ellen was almost thirty-seven; her body more accustomed to jury selection and closing arguments than the perpetuation of the species. The baby would be delivered by Caesarean. The doctor had to decide when he wanted to do it.

"I'm hoping he waits until after the twenty-first," Ellen said.

"Why's that?"

"So he'll be a Scorpio."

"That's important to you is it?" Ellen didn't believe in God or the Tooth Fairy. She wouldn't let anyone talk to Abby about Santa Claus. She'd just be disappointed, Ellen said. Ellen would deny ugly things that squatted square in the middle of her desk, spoke to her in a high-pitched voice and filled the room with the smell of fresh-baked apple pie, simply because they didn't mesh with her notion of reality. But she wanted the baby to be a Scorpio.

"No," she said. "Not important. Anything's fine. If he were going to be a girl, Libra would be good. Scorpios make better men. That's what I read, anyway. I've been reading too much, maybe. I don't really care."
"Good. You shouldn’t," I said. Somehow, I thought, she shouldn’t know the baby was going to be a boy, either. One of those tests -- amnio, sonogram, something -- had told her the baby was a boy. Another told her it was healthy. Still another told her she was not. At least no one referred to the baby as "it."

***

Most Saturday afternoons, I grade papers. I was sitting at my kitchen table reading a student’s first college composition. It was about the Soviet Union, his favorite country. He hadn’t actually been there, but he had read a book about it. Apparently the book had only gone so far as the death of Leonid Brezhnev. So, too, the composition. I wrote "Nyet! Nyet! Nyet!" in the upper right hand corner of the first page. I don’t believe in letter grades.

"I’m hungry now," Abby said. Every ten minutes for the last hour and a half, I had asked her if she wanted lunch.

"Is there anything you don’t like to eat?" I asked.

"I like peanut butter." She put her fist in her mouth and began to twist.

"Yuk." I made a face. "Peanut butter is icky."

"No, it isn’t."

"Yes, it is. It’s goop."

Abby yanked on my arm. "No, it isn’t!"
"It's all gooey. Like boogers!" I reached down and lifted her off the carpet, over my head. "Would you eat boogers?" I shook her.

"No!" The word trembled. I stood up still holding her high.

I knew immediately I had to sit back down. I had to get her to the floor without dropping her. Abby hung limply for a minute. Then she shook herself.

"Don't stop! Shake me some more!"

"Abby, stop! Please." The pain shot from my back down to my knees. I lowered myself onto the chair, then lowered her to the floor. My escaping breath blew Abby's hair about her face in wisps.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing. I'll be okay in a minute."

"Does your back hurt?"

I looked at her. "Yeah. How did you know?"

"Daddy does that."

"Daddy?"

"Yeah. Daddy says he can't pick me up because his back is off."

"Out." I smiled. "Yeah, I heard about that. Well, this is temporary. I just lifted you the wrong way or something." Richard was over forty years old, for God's sake. I had nearly ten years before I would start to fall

***

Richard hurt his back playing racquetball. We played regularly. Once about every four or five months. I was hopeless athletically. I wore Keds high tops. Richard had been on some sort of team in college. It might have been the swim team. One of the minor sports, anyway. Richard had about a dozen different racquetball ensembles. His socks always matched his shirt.

Richard won every game, but I had one shot that he couldn't do anything with. I'd put the ball up high in the corner, with just enough spin to send it off the adjacent wall before he could react. Even if he moved quickly enough, the ball was well out of his reach.

Soon after I learned Ellen was pregnant, I called Richard at his office and asked him to play. It was the first time I had extended the invitation. Normally, I tried to beg off when he asked me. I didn't have a cut-throat attitude about winning, but I had no particular desire to hear his usual, "Good game, David," after he speared me for the twentieth time, either. I wanted to see him. They would be a big family, now, with two children. They would have to buy a bigger house. They would probably get a dog.

I played the best game I had ever played. Richard was terrible, determined as ever, but terrible. He grew more
frustrated with every point he lost. Actually, he managed
to stay in the lead, but it was close for a change. My
signature bank shot was dead on.

Richard had tried to have the shot outlawed. Ellen
said he even did a four hour on-line search -- from her law
office so they wouldn’t know about it at his -- that cost
him a hundred and twenty dollars an hour. He was looking
for some sort of a rule. I don’t think he ever even found
"racquetball."

The ball came off the first wall. Richard, to his
credit, anticipated the shot. He was in the best position
possible. The shot, however, was not one of my best. It
spun wrong. The ball lurched straight back over Richard’s
head. He jumped and twisted to get his racquet on it. He
fell to his knees, then rolled onto his back. I leaned over
him, wiping sweat from my eyes.

"Don’t touch me!" he said.

"Okay," I said. I hadn’t planned on it. "What’s
wrong?"

"My back."

"Can you walk?"

"Not yet!"

"Okay, okay." I looked through the glass behind us,
but no one was there. It was six o’clock in the morning.
Richard had a key to the club through the efforts of some
connection at his firm, so we always went at ungodly hours
when no one else would be around. After about ten minutes, Richard got up. The game was over.

Richard stood under the shower and let water beat on his neck. He bent over and let it pound the small of his back.

"I hope you realize my game was off today," he said.

My eyes were closed against the shampoo, but I could imagine the expression on his face: his lips pursed, his eyebrows arched, his eyes in a controlled blink. "Yeah, it seemed to be," I said, sticking my head under the water. The surge filled my ears and pressed against my temples.

"I've been preoccupied."

"I would imagine so. How's the little mother?"

"Ellen? She's fine." He shut off the water and wrapped a towel around his waist. "That's not it, though." He pushed open the clouded glass door and stepped out into the locker room.

"So, what is it?" I said opening the locker.

"Something at work?" Something earth-shattering in the world of the over-paid and self-perpetuating?

"Yes, David. It is. It's a woman at work."

I hid my head behind the locker door. I pressed the towel against my face. "So, how far has this thing gone?"

"Look, it's not a thing. I thought it was just fun and games at first. When Ellen got pregnant, I tried to stop it, but I can't. This is not like the other times."
"So it's gone pretty far, then?"

"Yes, David. It's gone pretty far. Are you satisfied?"

"Hey, I'm just trying to determine what we're dealing with here. Is this going to continue? You're about to have another kid."

"I'm fully aware of that, David. That's what I'm saying. I tried to end it. I'll have to end it."

"Yeah, you will." I shut the locker door.

Since he always had more clothes to put on, I was dressed before Richard. I left the locker room and waited beside Richard's Porsche. The sun was high enough to begin drying the morning dampness from the parking lot. The pavement was splotched.

Richard came out and unlocked his door. I waited for the click of the passenger side unlocking with my fingers curled under the door handle. "Look," Richard said. "I want you to know I'm trying to end this." I wrapped the safety belt around me. The warning buzzer cut short.

"Hey, it's your business."

"I needed to say something to somebody."

"No problem."

"So, this is in confidence, right?"

I looked at him. I didn't want to let him off the hook. "Yes, it's in confidence."
"Good." He shifted the car into reverse and backed out of the space even though there wasn't another car on the lot and the exit was directly in front of him. "It's hard. I know you and Ellen are close."

"Don't worry about it." I looked out the window.
"Say, why don't you just drop me off at the school? Then you won't have to go out of your way."

***

Abby sat in my lap. We watched bowling on television. We weren't allowed to watch football. Abby wasn't, anyway. Something about bowling made me long for a golf tournament to watch.

"Change the channel," I said. Abby held the remote control against her legs and pressed the buttons. Pain shot through my back every time she moved.

"Don't jerk around so much. Remember what I said?"

"No."

"I said you could only sit in my lap if you were very still."

"But you said to change the channel."

"Change it gently, Dear."

Now we were watching something about selling real estate part time by using credit cards. Abby giggled.

"You like this?" I asked.

"That man looks funny." She pointed at the screen.

"All his hair is gone."
I could feel every inch of my own thinning scalp. "He's just bald," I said. "You might find that very attractive when you get older."

"Will my baby brother have any hair?" Abby turned around while I held my breath.

"Not at first. Probably not much."

"My daddy has hair."

"He's a grown up. Babies don't have much hair when they're born, but they grow it later."

"You have hair."

"For the moment, yeah."

"How come that man doesn't have any?" She turned again.

"Worry," I said through clinched teeth. "Worry and guilt and sexual deprivation." She stared at me. "Some men go bald when they get old. Older." She lowered her head and changed the channel.

***

I called Ellen every year on her birthday. She told me about the new baby on the birthday just passed.

"Guess what?" she said.

I hated that. I hated games. I hated them with everyone, but with Ellen it was difficult simply to stay in my chair when she said something like "Guess what?" It was difficult to keep from pulling the cord out of the wall and
heaving the phone through the glass pane of the painted-shut window in my office.

Just talking to her, my anticipation pushed hard against tolerance. My imagination constantly homed in on her voice and sought out or sought to create those things I wouldn’t let myself hope for.

I ground my teeth together and pressed the phone against my head. I cleared my throat. "I can’t guess," I said. "What?"

"I’m going to have a baby."

A baby. Another baby. Two of them, now. A whole family. They would still need that point three of a child to be fully nuclear, but they would get there someday.

"That’s great, Ellen," I said. "When is it due? Does Richard know?"

She laughed. "Of course Richard knows, Silly," she said. "Dear, silly Dave."

"Yeah, well, that’s me."

I remembered Ellen telling me she didn’t want any more children. She said she had Abby for the wrong reason. She thought it would make her feel right about being married. Not that it didn’t work, to some extent, but it wasn’t the proper reason to have a child.

"You must be excited," I said.
"Yeah, well, you know." She was quiet. I could hear her puckering and unpuckering her lips. She did that when she was thinking. "I'm going to quit working," she said.

"Why? You love your job."

"Yeah, well, it's not so great. The doctor said I should cut back anyway."

"Do I have to go out and find another lawyer?"

"Of course not," she said. "Richard will be your lawyer."

"Maybe I'll call legal aid."

She laughed. "I'll still be your lawyer. I can handle one client. One that never needs me anyway."

That settled it. I would be Ellen's one and only client. Dear, silly Dave.

***

A commercial was on the television, now. It was for the Marines. A sword was forged; lightning etched a scroll design onto the blade. The voice-over played on the word "mettle" as the new Marine thrust the sword into his scabbard. I felt the sword enter through my left arm pit and exit just under my right hip.

"Can we turn this off, now?" I asked, trying to breathe only when absolutely necessary. Abby lay on her stomach in front of the coffee table, systematically drawing on every sheet of a full ream of sixteen-pound bond typing paper with a green felt-tip pen.
She looked up at the screen. "Yeah," she said. She made long slashing motions with the pen. The paper buckled under the pressure.

I looked for the remote where my neck would turn. "Do you have the buttons?"

"No," Abby said. The television would stay on forever. I tilted forward at the waist. The remote sat on the coffee table. I caught its end with a finger and pulled it into reach.

Some babysitter. If Abby needed me for anything, she would be in junior high before she got it.

I needed drugs. I had some codeine left over from having my wisdom teeth removed. What would I do if they knocked me out, though? What would Abby do? Wake up, Dave, the cat's on fire!

Moving by inches, I found the phone and called information. Richard should know. He had a right to know he had left his daughter with Quasimodo. I got the hospital's number and asked for Ellen's room.

Ellen's mother answered the phone. She and Ellen's father had driven in from New Jersey the night before. Richard wasn't there. Mrs. Rafferty told me he took Abby to a birthday party and Ellen was sleeping. Mrs. Rafferty, meanwhile, was put out at Mr. Rafferty.

"Anyone is his right mind would have flown," she said. "But not Ed. 'The good Lord put me on this earth and He's
the only one that's going to take me off it.' Pretty high-toned talk for a man who hasn't been to church in forty-two years, wouldn't you say?"

"Well, I couldn't really say one way---"

"Is something wrong, Dave?"

I tried to move so my voice would sound less strained.
"No, Mrs. Rafferty, everything's fine. I just wanted to see how Ellen was doing."

***

Several months after we met, Ellen threw a housewarming party. She opened the door for me and told me to stand in the foyer and wait for her. I wasn't all that late getting to the party, but it had evidently started early for Ellen. She ran into the dining room table as she cut through to the kitchen.

I braced myself for the introduction. "Richard," Ellen said. "This is Dave." He was much taller than I would have imagined. Ellen would have to stand on a box to kiss him. He looked older than Ellen, too. "Dave, this is my husband, Richard." She patted him on the butt.

"Nice to finally meet you, Dave," he said. "I've heard more about you than anyone these last few months." He had very small hands for a person his size. Smaller than mine.

"Nice to meet you, Richard. Mr. Rafferty."

"It's Chapman," he said. Ellen spit wine on me.
"Oh, Dave. I'm so sorry." She wiped at my coat with her hand. "It's white. It won't stain. See? It's a good thing I wouldn't let you take your coat off." She jerked my scarf from around my neck and used it as a towel. "Take this thing off. Mr. Rafferty, here, will hang it up for you." She jabbed Richard in the ribs with her elbow. He took my coat and left.

"So what's the big joke?" I asked.

"I'm the only Rafferty in this house." She downed the rest of the wine. "Whole damn house is full of Chapmans. Richard Chapman. Abby Chapman. Just one Rafferty."

"I didn't know. You should tell me these things."

"And miss all this fun?" She drank from the empty glass. "This just won't do," she said. "Let's go in and get a drink." She hooked my arm in hers. She whispered, "Talk to Richard. He needs a friend. He doesn't make them easily."

"I'll talk to him, I guess." It wasn't like I knew anyone else.

"But don't spend all your time with him." I shivered at the touch of her hair on my neck. "I invited a couple of women from my office. They'll eat you up."

It was as good a party as parties could be when I didn't know anyone except the hostess who became virtually incoherent shortly after my arrival. In between small talk
with Richard and flirting with Ellen's friends, I made a serious attempt at matching Ellen drink for drink.

About two o'clock, the women all left and I realized I still had to drive home. This was an adult party, so I couldn't crash in the bath tub. I poured the contents of the glass I held down the kitchen sink. I headed for the bathroom to splash water on my face.

I heard a door slam. Richard came toward me up the narrow hallway.

"Hi there," I said and pressed flat against the wall when I realized Richard didn't intend to stop and chat. He stormed past, his face red, his jaw pulsing. Trouble making friends? This charmer? Ellen came out of the bathroom. Her eyes were puffy. Her nose glowed. She looked like a sick little girl. I wanted to make her chicken soup. I bit my tongue to keep from laughing. "You look like you've had the flu for about a week."

"I wish I had." She put her hand on the wall. "I'm a terrible person."

"No, you're not." I stepped closer.

"I was supposed to pick Abby up from the sitter's."

"Where does this sitter live?"

"Only about two blocks away. But I can't drive."

"Or operate heavy machinery."
"Dave, will you do me a favor?" She held a button on my shirt between two fingers. "Go with Richard. He’s upset. I’m worried about him."

"Sure. I’ll go." I thought the cold air would do me some good.

I got my coat on and found the garage. Richard was warming up the car. I knocked on the passenger side door. He unlocked it.

"Mind if I tag along?" I asked.

"I’m just going up the street here," he said.

"I’ve never ridden in one of these before." Not that I would remember riding in one this time even if I found out what one of these was.

"Get in," he said.

I shut the door. My whole body was numb. My teeth were chattering. I could hear them, but I couldn’t feel them. The garage door lifted with a clatter. The car rolled back slowly.

"Listen, I’m sorry I ignored you back there," Richard said. "It’s just that Ellen and I made an agreement. I would take Abby to the sitter’s and Ellen would pick her up." The tires spun on a patch of ice at the end of the alley. The car bucked, then lurched forward.

"Yeah," I said.

"She’s done this before, you know."

"What’s that?"
"Gotten drunk and made an idiot of herself."

"Oh." I found it difficult to affect an intonation dropping me squarely in the middle of the argument, so I relegated myself to simian grunts and gestures with an occasional word taught to dolphins.

"Here we are," he said. "If you'll do me a favor and just wait here, I'll go get her. I'm going to let you hold her if you don't mind. I don't have the baby seat in this car."

He wanted me to hold her? I was having trouble holding my own head on top of my shoulders.

Jesus, it was cold.

I lay back against the seat. My stomach kicked. Instinctively, I opened the car door and threw up on the sitter's fluorescent, curb-side house numbers.

When I lifted my head, a tiny, sleeping body dangled in the air. I took her and leaned back inside. "Hi, I'm Dave," I whispered. Abby was a roasted chestnut.

***

I took the codeine.

Abby slept, face down, in front of the television surrounded by typing paper and bits of graham cracker. My poor, terrified cat slept, hidden somewhere. As long as they were sleeping, I thought, I would, too. I propped myself between pillows on the couch. I could hear her
better from there and I didn’t think I could lie flat anyway.

I listened to her breathing. Soft and light and sweet like a perfume spritzer. Just a nap, I told myself. Time to make repairs.

***

I first met Ellen over a splinter. I threw an arm-load of pine sign posts into a pile next to the "Robinson for Congress" placards we were supposed to tack to the posts. I yanked my hand back and put it to my mouth.

"What happened?" I heard a voice behind me. I turned and felt my heart thump. I knew there was some reason I had volunteered for this stupid campaign. Blonde hair. Gray eyes that showed through to what must have been an alert, keen, aware mind. Aware enough to be working on a congressional campaign, anyway.

I took my hand out of my mouth. "I just got a splinter." I held up my palm.

She took my hand. "Let’s see it," she said. She rubbed the splinter with her thumb. She pressed my palm against her teeth. I felt them scraping and gripping the splinter. I felt the splinter slip free. She held it in her teeth and spit it out. She rubbed my palm again. "There you are."

"Thanks," I said.
"You do realize you have to be my friend for life now," she said.

"You mean I won’t kill you in the Coliseum."

"Yeah, that’s right. So what do I have to do for you to be my friend for life?"

"Tell me your name."

When I found out later that Ellen had never drunk tequila before, I volunteered to show her how. Then, I offered her a place to sleep when she couldn’t drive home. She didn’t want to go home. Her house was empty. The furniture was still in New Jersey with Richard and Abby. They had stayed behind after Ellen’s transfer, while Richard found a new job and sold their old house.

I offered to sleep on the couch and let her take the bed.

"I’m not taking your bed," she said.

"It’s up to you," I said. I put sheets on the couch and tossed the cushions on the floor. "It doesn’t fold out, but it isn’t bad."

We sat on the sheets talking. The couch felt different with sheets on it. Cooler. Softer.

"Thank you, Dave," Ellen said. "You’re sweet for letting me stay here."

"Well, I feel a little responsible."

"No, you’re not. I hate that house."
"You just signed a thirty-year mortgage note," I said. "You better learn to like it."

"I hate that it's empty." She leaned against me. "It won't be for much longer," I said.

She turned her head. Our faces sought each other out in the tequila haze. Our lips touched our lips touched our necks touched our fingers. I ran my hand through her hair, up the back of her neck; pressed her closer.

The sheets billowed up around us. They kept us hidden and kept us together: clouds in the haze.

***

The codeine helped. When I woke up, I could almost stand straight. It was a quarter until five.

"Abby," I said. "Wake up." I shook her with my foot. "Abby, come on, Sweetie. You've got to get up. Your dad will be here soon." I tried to roll her over on her back.

"No!" She covered her eyes with her hands. The grain of the carpet was etched on the side of her face.

"Fine. Just lie there. We'll haul you out of here like a sack of potatoes." Keeping my back still, I lowered myself to my knees and picked her shoes up off the floor. "Potato Girl." I leaned as close to her face as I could manage. "Get up, Potato Girl." She giggled. I stroked her forehead. "Come on, Abby. Help me clean this mess up. Your dad will never let you stay here again if he sees this."
Abby gave me one of the pictures we picked up from the carpet. There were five people and one cat in it, all of them green. She pointed them out to me.

"That’s Mommy. That’s Daddy. That’s me. That’s the baby. He’s smaller than me. That’s Kitty. That’s you." I was the only person sitting in the picture. The cat was sitting, too. The others were supposed to be standing behind me, I guessed. They appeared to be floating above me, though. Abby would learn perspective when she got older.

Richard knocked on my door about five-thirty. "You’re too late," I said. "Abby had a five o’clock appointment."

"What?" he said.

"Come on in, Richard." I stepped away from the door. Abby was under the couch trying to kiss the cat goodbye.

"Isn’t this where I left?" he asked.

I laughed. "Yeah, pretty much."

"Come on, Abby. Time to go." He looked around the room. "Do you have her stuff?"

I got the shopping bag from the kitchen. "Same as when you brought it. Except for the grape juice. She drank some of that."

Abby came out. "Can Dave come home with us?" she asked.

"Yeah, Richard, can I go home with you?" Richard stared at me. "Hey, no problem. I can tell when I’m not wanted."
"Thank you, David, for keeping her," he said. "I wouldn't have been able to watch her at the hospital. They won't let kids in the room unless you sneak them in. She would have been bored."

"So, whose birthday party did you take her to?"

"Is there a party?" Abby asked.

Richard took her hand. "Maybe," he said. "Maybe you and I will have a party." He looked at me. "I broke it off, David. I broke it off this afternoon."

"Can Dave come to the party?" Abby asked.

"That's good," I said. "I just called the hospital to check on Ellen."

"She's going crazy in there. You should go see her."

They left. I put Abby's picture on my refrigerator with scotch tape. Abby's artwork covered Ellen and Richard's house. I had nothing on my walls, much less on my refrigerator.

I put sheets on my couch that night. The cat could have had the whole bed to himself, but he curled up at my feet. "Aren't you glad that crazy little girl is gone?" I scratched him between the ears. I slept. Ellen, Richard, Abby and the baby floated above me.
"It feels good inside you." The President closed his eyes. The warmth trickled outward and enveloped him.

"Be still," the alien said. "It's not as good if you're moving. Let me do the work." She pulsed over him, kissing every inch of his body.

The President inhaled deeply -- through his nose as the alien had instructed him to do. A high school football injury had rendered his nose unfit for providing adequate respiration throughout most of his adult life. He seemed able to breathe freely now, though.

A faintly sweet smell reached his nostrils. Tapioca, the President thought. So much better than the musky smell of human sex.

"This is just so good," the President said. "This is the best."

"I'll take that as a compliment coming from you." The alien moaned and arched her body. The President arched with her.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked.

"Word gets around," she said. "One hears things."

"What sort of things?"

"Like I know about the Senator's wife."
The President's body stiffened. "That's over. How did you know about--?"

"And the Dutch Ambassador."

The President felt his erection shrinking. "Wait a minute. How--?"

"And the Secretary of Energy."

"One time. It happened one time. We worked on that conservation thing all night long--"

"Shh, Baby," she said. "Don't get upset. You're getting all tense." She squeezed him back into position. "We know about all that. It's part of what makes you attractive."

"How did you--?"

"It doesn't matter," she said. "Relax, now. Don't hold back on me. Pretend I'm that mail clerk at the Pentagon."

The President tried to stand, but she yanked him back to the sofa. "I never did anything with her! I just saw her yesterday!"

"And you wanted to nail her?"

The President's breath came rapidly. The alien had his arms pinned to his sides. He couldn't move. "Sure," he said. "I guess."

"You guess? You certainly responded." The President felt a soft pressure like that from an open palm sliding
down his belly. "Good thing you had your jacket on. That could have been embarrassing."

The President feared he might begin to hyperventilate.

"How do you know all this?"

"We monitor. We told you that."

"But I never said anything to anybody about her."

"Listen, Baby, we've already explained that we're a more advanced being. Can't you just be happy for us and stop asking so many questions?" The pressure slipped inside the President's thigh. "Now relax, Honey." Her voice was a blended salve: equal portions of a cat's purr and a gentle breeze through a crystal wind chime.

The alien contracted rhythmically along the length of her body. The President submitted to the contractions along the length of his. He imagined an automatic carwash: the big brushes spinning, sliding through the soap and warm, surging water.

The President opened his eyes and peered out at the Oval Office through the pink-gold gauze. His desk and credenza, the flagstaff and the portraits along the far wall appeared bathed in a mixture of Dom Perignon and cold duck. Something even tickled his nose. His hand moved to scratch it.

"No," she said. "Don't move."

"My nose," he said. "I'm going to sneeze."
She pulled tightly around his nose, relieving the twitch. Then she stroked it and sucked the tip. The President tilted his head back and his mouth fell open.

"Oh, Dear God," he moaned. "This is just so good."

***

The alien had come to the Oval Office a half-hour earlier as an official envoy from the delegation quartered at the United Nations Plaza Hotel. A week before, she had landed with eight others in Shea Stadium during the bottom half of the sixth inning. The game was called with the Mets up by two.

The President first heard of their arrival while dozing through a McGyver re-run. The network broke in and a young reporter described the event in a quaver.

The First Lady looked up from the stack of letters she was answering and said, "Turn it up, Dear." The President punched at the remote. His brow furrowed. "Isn't this exciting?" the First Lady said, stepping closer to the television screen which showed several gauzy objects floating onto the outfield. "Did you know about this?" she asked.

Know about what? The President shook his head. He thought, at first, people in the stands must have been throwing their underwear at the players. That hardly seemed something he would have known about beforehand, or something that justified interrupting McGyver. At closer range,
"Did they bring any women with them?" the President asked his U. N. Ambassador over the phone several days after the landing.

"There’s no indication that they really make a distinction along those lines, Mr. President," the Ambassador said. "Some of them seem more feminine. Some seem more masculine. It’s not clear if they reproduce sexually, or what."

"Find out," the President said. He picked up his pipe from the marble ashtray on his desk. "For scientific
reasons." He turned the pipe upside down and rapped it on the ashtray. "It might be important."

"Don't you think we should have some Secret Service or the FBI here, Mr. President?" the Ambassador asked. "No one feels comfortable with them just roaming around."

The President sucked at the dry stem, picked bits of dead ash from the tip of his tongue and blew until a shallow whistle emerged from the bowl. "I didn't realize they were roaming anywhere, Hal." He took a leather pouch from his jacket's inside pocket. "I thought they just hung around the hotel."

"We're just worried that the police won't be able to handle it alone, if they ever do leave their rooms."

Holding the receiver between his shoulder and cheek, the President dipped his pipe into the pouch and stirred the tobacco. "Listen, Hal, extend my personal invitation for one of them to come see me at the White House."

"They've refused to make any overtures to national governments, Mr. President," the Ambassador said. "They want to stay outside politics."

The President packed the moist leaves into the bowl -- tightly enough to burn evenly, loosely enough to allow air to pass through them. He remembered the aliens' address to the United Nations General Assembly. Their leader explained that they had been monitoring Earth for quite some time. They had come only to observe, the leader said. They would
perform some experiments, take some notes and whatever was
given to them in the way of artifacts, tokens and souvenirs.
Then, they would leave. Any cooperation they received would
be appreciated, but, he emphasized, cooperation was not
necessary.

"Our being here should be evidence enough of our
ability to get what we want," he said.

The U. N. voted unanimously to cooperate. The aliens
were put up at the hotel, where they stayed in their rooms,
watched television, ordered room service, played with their
food and harassed the chambermaids.

"Listen to me, Hal," the President said through
clenched teeth holding the pipe in place. He waved a lit
match just inside the bowl's rim. "Tell them that as the
host country -- and Shea Stadium was still part of this
country the last time I checked -- I think it would be
gracious of them to send a representative to pay me a visit.
It doesn't have to be that thing that spoke at the U. N.,
Hal. Another one, tell them. Tell them we'll pull out all
the stops. State dinner. We'll drag out all the foreign
ambassadors, all the Senate Committee Chairmen. The works,
Hal."

"I'll extend the invitation, Mr. President."

"You do that, Hal." The President drew a red glow to
the surface of the tobacco. "And, Hal?"

"Yes, Mr. President?"
"Tell them to send a woman or whatever it is they have." He blew a tight column of smoke out into the office. "It'll go over better with the press."

Two days later, the President sat at his desk waiting for the alien envoy and pondering the rose sent to him by the First Lady on their recent anniversary. Once, the rose had stood tall in the bud vase. The red blossom arrived tightly closed atop the turgid stem, but it spread open overnight, exhaling into the Oval Office the breath of love, of love-making, of lust and sensuality.

The last gasp, the President thought. The unwatered stem now drooped over the rim of the vase. The brittle, browning petals littered the top of the credenza.

The alien would arrive at the Oval Office momentarily. The President had met her at Andrews and after the usual press conferences and hand-shakings -- which were adapted, for her benefit, to Japanese-style bowings -- they returned to the White House where the First Lady treated her to an informal tour.

The President slumped in his chair. It had been months since he had successfully completed an act of love or lust. Everything would start well enough, but would start only in a crowded hallway with the curve of a black-stockinged leg, or in a policy meeting with the straining buttons on the silk blouse of a business suit, or in a press conference
with the pale underside of a firm, raised, entreating arm. Lately, he started all the time. He had taken to keeping his jacket buttoned.

His follow-through needed work. By the time he could maneuver the situation into an active phase, he could no longer act. The proud, indifferent instrument of his greatest triumphs failed him.

The President needed something to give him his old confidence back. He reached down and re-positioned his trousers. Watching those living negligees slink across the Shea Stadium grass on CNN over and over again, he knew what he had to do. His fate, and the fate of the nation, depended on it.

When the alien arrived at the Oval Office, she asked if she could sit on the sofa. "Your chairs are not well-suited for our bodies," she said, reclining. "This is much better."

The President offered her some brandy out of habit. She didn't drink. She didn't eat, either. She was photosynthetic. She got her energy from light.

"Not that I can't do some very good things in the dark," she said.

With her lying back on the couch that way, the President could see up into her hollow interior. At the
same moment, he realized with a sudden shiver that she was naked. He slid closer to her.

"Have you found the Earth as you expected it?" he asked.

"I haven't really seen a lot of it," she said. "The hotel is pretty much as I expected." A subtle ripple coursed her body. She sighed. She was soft, smooth and pliant.

"Will you be staying much longer?"

"No," she said. "Not much longer. We'll be finished soon."

For such a small thing, she gave off an enormous amount of heat. Her body gently billowed with what appeared to be her every breath.

He looked at her, trying to find her eyes. None of the old moves were going to work with this one.

She reached out and stroked his face with a satin fold. "Do you want me?" She leaned closer.

The President swallowed. "Does it show?" He smiled. "Like an exploding star," she said. "And you locked the door when I came in. You were either planning to fuck me or kill me."

The President laughed. His hands shook as he held them out to her. He touched her tentatively. "I'm not sure where--"
"I'll show you, Baby," she said. "I'll show you everything you need to know." She slithered around his neck, loosening his tie. His shirt buttons pinged off the coffee table and the lamps. She reached for all his clothes at once with nimble, fingerless passion.

He was naked. The throb from his groin told him everything was working this time. "I want you," he whispered.

"I want you inside me," she moaned.

"Oh, yes." The President caressed her satin form, searching. "I, uh, I don't--"

She moved away from him onto the carpet. "Lie on your back," she said. "With your head sticking out over the arm rest." She scrunched down like a sock.

The President obeyed. She slipped down over his face, massaging him as she unrolled.

"Close your eyes until you're all the way in. You can talk, but try to breathe through your nose as much as you can. It'll be better that way." She slid down over his chest and belly. She passed his navel and stopped. "Say, do you need this thing here or can I cut it off?"

"Cut it off?" He tried to shield his penis with a crossed leg. "No! Hell no!" He started to squirm away from her, but she tightened around him. "What do you mean? We'll need it."
"No, not really. In fact, it's not going to be as good with this thing just sticking up there in my way."

"I need it."

"Not with me, you don't. Trust me. I was created to please you."

Good attitude, the President thought.

She crept down another inch. "Look, can you hold it down or something, at least?"

The President reached down and pressed his penis against his belly with the palm of his hand. "Like this?"

"That'll do. Keep it down." She continued her slide, swallowing him wholly.

* * *

The President imploded. The Oval Office spun giddily around him. An inverted orgasm: it hit him first on the surface of his skin at thousands of points all over his body. The points ran together, concentrating, heading for the center, culminating just behind his testicles where all feeling and thought, all light and matter merged: a black hole of sensation.

The President awoke. His skin felt like the First Lady's did after she had soaked in Calgon for two hours; like a silken prune. He ran his fingers over his chest. Smooth and hairless. Friction, he guessed. He pulled up into a sitting position and checked the spot where his
appendectomy scar had been. The alien said she had made some improvements, smoothing down scars and moles. Now, she hovered around the office. Recording, she said.

"Hey there, Sweetie," he said. "Don’t you want to float back over here and snuggle a little?"

"No." She stopped in front of the portraits of former Presidents. "There’s no time for that. I’ve got to go back. We’re leaving tonight."

"Tonight?" he asked. "Why do you have to go back so soon?"

"We’re finished. You were the last item on the list."

"I was what?" The President stood.

"We wanted a copy. Your high success level and strong sex drive -- somewhat unusual in combination -- made you a good candidate for cross-breeding experiments."

"Cross-breeding?"

"Our scientists have a theory that they can develop a super being by cross-breeding ourselves with humans. We have superior intelligence. We have accomplished more and evolved further than most species in the universe."

The President sunk back down to the sofa. "So what do humans bring to this equation?"

"You’re cute." She made a copy of Nixon’s portrait.

"Well, you’re not so bad yourself, really. I mean, you take a little getting used to, but you’re soft and you smell nice."
"What you see was created to please you. I'm a mold of sorts."

The President rubbed his face. "So you made a copy of me?"

"I made a recording of you. An image and a mold. We'll construct a prototype when we return."

They hugged good-bye. The President would have to make apologies at the dinner. She was suddenly called back or something.

He bent to pick up his shirt from the floor. The buttons were secure on the fabric again. He walked around the office, putting his clothes on, trying to figure out how he would explain his improvements to the First Lady.

Grabbing a sock from the credenza, he noticed the rose. Full, again. Bright new petals bursting from the swollen stem. He pulled the flower from the vase and held it to his nose. He dampened his handkerchief and wrapped it around the stem. He would hide it in the bedroom, and, that night, under the covers, he would surprise the First Lady.
Gil and me hauled that load around for more than two days before Gil would even admit he was itching. I knew something was wrong with him because, one, he scratched himself more than usual -- in places he didn't usually have a call to scratch -- and because, two, he was changing color. Gil'd always looked kind of green under the skin, but now even the green was fading out.

Myself, I didn't itch so much, but my head was stopped up, and my eyes watered. It could've just been sinus though. It was the time of year for it.

"I tell you one thing," Gil said, trying to talk, drive, and reach down the back of his shirt with a broken-off piece of radio antenna all at once. "This is the last goddammed time we take a job from the government."

"It wasn't the government," I said, wiping my eyes on the sleeve of my shirt. "It was the city."

"What's the city, if it ain't the government?" Gil asked. He scratched, swinging that antenna up and down like the rocker arm on a 1957 Belair. His face screwed up like screwing up his face would somehow help him find the right spot.

"Well it ain't like the President or the Post Office or nothing," I said. "It was that Department of Public Works."
"The Department of Public Works, yeah," Gil said. "That was just where we picked the stuff up." He pulled the back of his shirt tail out and tried to attack the itch from a different angle. "Ain't no telling where they got it from."

I watched the road suddenly change color: black, then brown, then guardrail. The truck lurched to the left. I braced myself against the dash and clutched at the seat. "You trying to kill us?" I yelled.

Gil wrestled the rig onto the highway, then eased back off onto the shoulder. "If I was trying to kill you, you'd be dead." Gil pulled his sunglasses off and wiped the bridge of his nose. He sat for a few seconds, breathing hard, swallowing, staring at the windshield but not quite through it. "I got to take a shit," he said and cut the engine. He pulled the antenna out of his shirt, tossed it in the floorboard at my feet, and reached under the seat for toilet paper.

Gil went around back of the trailer just as he'd been doing off and on all morning long. He wouldn't admit to it, but this wasn't normal either; Gil normally showed more control. Don't get me wrong, Gil liked his morning sit-downs more than any man I'd ever met. To his mind, only two other things even compared.

He once told me this notion he had about why the three most essential human actions were also the most pleasurable.
He said God made them that way so we’d want to do them all the time and so what needed doing would get done. The three things he listed were fucking, eating and taking a shit.

He didn’t list drinking, but he was pretty drunk at the time. I was, too, but it didn’t help me make any better sense of it. I tried to figure it out, but I kept getting this image of Gil squatting on the crapper, getting a blow job and eating a turkey leg. It was scary. I mean, why a turkey leg?

Between Gil’s scratching and his stopping every few miles to enjoy one of life’s necessary pleasures, we weren’t making hardly any time at all. Fortunately we didn’t have to deal with any traffic. It was almost eleven o’clock, and since we’d first pulled onto the road at six that morning, I might’ve counted two dozen cars -- if I’d been counting, which I try not to do.

Counting can drive you crazy if you do it too much. I heard about this guy from Wichita Falls who started counting things on the road like you do when you’re a kid and your family takes a long trip to see a dead relative. The game works better if you’ve got a brother or a sister or something, but this guy played it with himself. He’d decide he was going to count eighteen Fords, which is easy or twenty-seven Mercedes which ain’t, then he’d count them.

So, one day he decided he’d count ten Toyotas. Just ten, not even particularly challenging. He counted nine
pretty much right away, but then an hour passed, then two hours. He drove a load of microwave brownie mix from Denton to Shreveport and never counted that tenth Toyota. He dropped the load off, stopped in Bossier City for some crab boil, and drove it all the way to Conway, Arkansas. Not Toyota one.

This went on for a couple of weeks. He'd pick up something here and drop it off there, all the while keeping one good eye open for Toyotas. I don't know if he checked the parking lots, or if they even counted, but, if he didn't check them, he might should have, and, if they didn't count, he might ought to have changed the rules.

People said he started getting real quiet. Said he'd just sign the manifest and not say a word. He'd just stare off into the distance. He started writing nine o'clock as his time of arrival or departure no matter what time he really came or went. Then, he started changing all the dates on the forms, even the computer-printed ones, to "9/9."

Then -- this is what they say and I don't know how they know it -- somewhere between Ardmore and the Texas border, he took out his pocket knife and cut off the little toe on his left foot. Crazy as a june bug set afire. I couldn't ever figured out the connection between toes and Toyotas myself, but, evidently, he had.
Now, I didn't know what Gil had against working for the government. It didn't make me no difference. In fact, we got us a nice job hauling surplus cheese a couple of summers back. Gil kept hollering over at me to keep an eye out for a rig hauling saltines. Said we'd flag him down and start hunting us case of red soda pop. Gil liked that job, too. We just picked the cheese up and dropped it off where they told us. Excepting the fact that neither of us had a decent shit for almost two weeks after, something that bothered Gil in particular, it worked out good all around.

Jobs was hard to come by. Still are. I just preferred jobs where you knew what you was hauling and where you was hauling it to. What we had now was about five hundred fifty-five gallon drums all marked "Hazardous Chemicals" and such. They made us sign forms that said we wouldn't try to open the drums and if we did the city nor none of its officials would be responsible. Gil signed the forms because he holds title on the truck, but I didn't have a mind to go sticking my nose into no hazardous shit anyway. Especially shit that stunk like those drums did.

Two days earlier, when we picked the stuff up, them that gave it to us told us to take it to a dumpsite outside of a town in west Texas called Dawn. At least the site was outside of Dawn when they told us to take it there.
But by the time we pulled into the gravel lot the next morning, there was this huge crowd of people at the site. Huge by this far out in west Texas standards, anyway, meaning about thirty. I didn’t count exactly how many, of course. Some carried signs and banners. Most crinkled their noses like they’d already caught a whiff of what we was hauling, and they didn’t like it anymore than I did.

When we got out of the truck, this fat, sweaty little guy with a look on his face like he had a turd hung sideways handed Gil a piece of paper, shoved little ham hock fists into his hips and pushed his chest out. This last would have been hard to catch — his chest didn’t move all that much in relation to his belly — but I was watching him pretty close, because, after eight years on the road, I got where I knew when some jackass was fixing to piss on the cozy fire of the stress-free lifestyle I’d chosen for myself.

Gil stared at the paper for a minute, handed it to me, then looked down at the guy. He pulled his sunglasses off and scratched the bridge of his nose with an earpiece.

"That’s a court order telling you you got to cease and desist dumping that load on this property," the fat guy said.

Gil set the sunglasses back on his nose. "I can read," he said. Then he spread his legs out a little and squared his shoulders to the guy.
I was almost sure that Gil could read; I could even remember a time or two when he must have read, but I knew he didn't like to. I was designated reader and navigator, both jobs suiting me just fine. I liked reading, and I liked trying to figure out what a place would look like just from the drawings on the maps.

I got a headache, though, trying to read the order and watch Gil at the same time. I didn't figure he'd hit the fat guy, seeing that Gil was almost a foot taller -- probably half a foot taller than anyone I'd ever come across -- but I'd been wrong about who Gil would hit before, and I wanted to catch Gil, to cool him off, before things got out of hand.

I couldn't figure out every word of the order right off, but I could tell we had to wait to dump the stuff until after a town council meeting that evening. It looked like someone wanted to annex the land around the dumpsite so the town would have jurisdiction over it.

While I'm east Texas born and bred, I'd be the first to admit there's a sort of uncluttered beauty to west Texas, but I couldn't for the life of me figure out why a town would want any more of this land than it absolutely had to have. The order said stuff about protecting the environment, the wildlife and such. I wasn't exactly sure what was in those drums, but I couldn't figure out what could be done to this environment that hadn't already been
done. And I couldn’t see any wildlife around that could be killed by anything except maybe the heel of a boot or the blade of a garden hoe.

We went into town where Gil tried to call the city, but he kept getting a busy signal for two solid hours. We bought some burgers, and I ate mine and most of Gil’s because he said he didn’t feel like eating. Said he’d swallowed enough dust and bile to fill him up.

I couldn’t eat enough to get full, myself. Ever since we set out with the load, I’d been eating everything I could get my hands around. Gil said I must’ve had a hollow leg.

We waited in the truck outside the First Baptist Church where the fat guy’s name, Cade Marcus, was on a portable letter board in the parking lot. Just under his name was the church’s motto, "Prudence, Justice, Fortitude and Temperance." He was head deacon and, as it turned out, town mayor and candidate for the state senate.

In town there was just enough concrete to keep things from cooling off at night the way they did out in the country. After we’d been sitting there for over an hour, Gil opened his door and said he was going to take a walk. I figured him to go inside the building to soak up some free air-conditioning, but he just walked off down the street.

I thought I’d go see what was taking so long to decide that an empty hole and a tract of sun-scarred earth wasn’t worth worrying about. When I got inside, the air
conditioning practically froze my shirt to my skin. I figured the fat boy had control of the thermostat, too.

I followed the sounds of shouting and clapping to the meeting in what I guessed was a big Sunday School classroom. Cade Marcus was talking. He was standing up and waving his arms and talking to a spot high on the wall behind me instead of to the fifty or so people sitting on folding chairs in front of him.

"Ever since I come to this little corner of God’s Country, from the land of my ancestors in Utica, Oklahoma, I watched in silence as the big cities have dumped whatever they didn’t want on helpless Dawn," he said. He took a handkerchief from his shirt pocket and wiped his face, but he was the only one sweating. "Now, seeing as you’ve chosen to bestow on this humble Sooner the mantle of town guardian, the responsibility of overseeing this town’s best interests, I can keep silent no longer. I say it’s time we told these people to go back." Everyone clapped a little, and he went on.

When he finally sat down, they took a vote and Dawn grew by almost eleven and a half square miles. Then they took another vote, and the new mayor and guardian of that hole in the ground announced that no unauthorized dumping would be allowed in said hole.

I felt my sinuses well up, and before I could even get my shirt tail out, I sneezed. The sound shook the room like
a bugle-call. Cade Marcus glared at me a couple of seconds, but he seemed about done for the evening. They did take one last vote, and the mayor announced that it would be illegal to authorize any dumping whatsoever, henceforth and in perpetuity.

I was backing out the door, wiping my nose, trying to figure out how I was going to tell Gil what they'd done, when he ran into me coming up the hall. "What the hell are you doing in here?" he asked.

"I came in to cool off," I said. "It don't look so good, Gil." Gil didn't look so good either, but I knew better than to say that.

"Don't matter no more," Gil said. "Got a call on the CB saying the bastards want us to take it somewheres else anyway." He looked behind me into the room. "They got a crapper back there?"

"Didn't see one. Where they want us to take it now?"

"I'll tell you later." Gil walked stiff-legged down the hall, checking all the doors and scratching his armpit.

Gil was gone for almost an hour before he came back and told me we were headed to an abandoned salt mine near a place called Pleasant Valley. When I got to a map, I found Pleasant Valley southeast of Lubbock in Garza County.

We was headed there when Gil almost ran off the road and killed us both. When he came back from behind the
truck, for about the fifth time that morning, he'd only been
gone a little over half an hour, I reckoned. I didn't know
exactly because clocks and watches got too close to counting
to be of any use to me. Back in Boyd City I could get
within ten minutes just by looking at the sun, and I could
do almost as good on the road.

Night time's a little harder to figure out. As long
as I got some light, even the least little bit like at
twilight or dusk or just before sunrise, I could do all
right. But in the dead of night, I just had to guess.
There's folks I'd met who claimed to know the night sky and
who said they could tell the time by the position of the Big
Dipper or something, but that stuff was way beyond me.

Gil stuffed the toilet paper back under the seat. He'd
always be sweating and a little paler each time he came back
from behind the trailer, like the color was just leaking out
of him. This time was no different. Gil started the engine
and pulled back onto the highway. We didn't say a word the
rest of the way to the salt mine.

When we got there, the place was locked up. Somebody'd
strung barbed wire, in a spiral like they do in the war
movies, all around the opening of the mine. They'd done it
and run, though. Then trusted in the wind to cover their
tracks, and it had. We walked around and hollered a little
but found neither a soul nor a memory of one.
Gil was pissed. Said he knew something like this was going to happen. He pitched a rock over the wire. "All those goddamned forms ever do is get you into trouble," he said.

We talked about driving the truck through the wire and dumping the shit ourselves, but we didn't carry a hand truck, and neither of us, especially Gil, particularly cared for lifting anything, much less two hundred and fifty pound drums of some shit we promised not to fuck with.

We got into trucking in the first place to avoid lifting things. And to get some fresh air. I met Gil when we was both working at the paint factory in Boyd City. It was a godforsaken place. You couldn't get those fumes out of your clothes nor off of your skin. Women wouldn't even get near you unless you promised them some free paint or something.

We both worked up in the mixing department, throwing seventy pound bags of pigment around from seven in the morning until three in the afternoon. When you slit the bags open and dumped them out into the mixing vats, the pigment dust would cling to the fumes from the benzene and the sulphur and the varnish. Dead men have better air to breathe in.

One day, Gil hurt his back. The foreman put him on this new line of pastels that we made a lot of for a while. Pastels, for some reason, took more pigment and other dry
stock than any other paint. Gil would swing seventy or eighty bags a batch, four batches every day. He didn’t hurt his back until the foreman made a mistake, though.

Gil was working a small vat, but the foreman gave him a batch sheet intended for the big, double batch vat up on the fourth floor. Gil told me the numbers didn’t look right. Said he told Leonard, the foreman, that something was wrong. Leonard just told him to quit gold-bricking and get to work.

By the time Gil dumped almost a hundred and fifty bags of dry stock into the vat, he had about fifty gallons of space for over two hundred gallons of liquid. Gil called Leonard over. Leonard snatched the batch sheet off the hook and studied it with his mouth open and his lips moving.

They had to call the Production Manager in on that one. He told them to fill it with as much water as they could, run it off into drums, carry it to the fourth floor, and dump it into the big vat. That’s when Gil grabbed his back. Leonard passed the job onto the graveyard shift.

Gil knew a lawyer from somewhere. When workers’ compensation denied his claim, Gil sued the paint company. They settled the case out of court, and Gil got a big chunk of money. He never told me exactly how much but asked me if I wanted to go in on a rig with him. Said he knew about a Chapter 11 auction where we could bid on a nine-year-old Kenworth.
So I quit the paint company, drew out what I had in the retirement and savings, and gave it to Gil. He said it sufficed to make me a junior partner. I got forty percent of the profits, but Gil called the shots and drove the truck, which was just fine by me. This wasn't something I'd have ever done on my own. I never liked making a lot of decisions, and I never had no desire to be no entrepreneur.

It seemed strange him not letting me drive the truck, though. For one, even though it was Gil's name on the title, I owned about eleven thousand dollars of the damn thing. For another, we could've got a lot more business and made a lot better time if he'd have let me drive at night.

Gil must have been the only trucker in the country that refused to drive after dark. Said he had night blindness. Said they liked to not give him his commercial license because of it. He had an "A" restriction on the license -- he was supposed to wear eyeglasses -- but I'd never seen him wear anything except sun shades.

We got back in the truck and circled the mine one last time. Then we turned around and headed back into Pleasant Valley. We found a pay phone at a place shaped like an ice cream cone. It just sprouted up out of the dirt -- remarkably clean vanilla, considering the swirling dust, with chocolate syrup and a cherry.

Between Gil's digestion and the city's red tape, I expected we'd be there awhile, so I ordered us a couple of
cherry vanilla malts. Gil went to the back to call the city.

The guy at the counter wore a little name pin that said "Hatoum." While he fixed the malts, Hatoum told me how he owned the place, ice cream cone and all. The building was made entirely out of polystyrene. Hatoum knew only the English necessary to get around in a town with a population of 153, so by the time I figured out "polystyrene," Hatoum was going on about how he got the cone to its present site. "They put together at factory," Hatoum said. "Then I rent big truck like yours and carry here on back."

I blew my nose into a handful of little white napkins and stirred the cherries around in my malt. Hatoum told me how he ordered the building from a business opportunities ad in the newspaper while still in Lebanon. They sold him both the cone and the parcel of land. He got to choose from several different locations.

"I point to map and finger land on Pleasant Valley," Hatoum said.

"Too bad your finger couldn't have found someplace cooler," I said.

Hatoum shook his head. "No, no, no," he said, "Hot good for ice cream. Make people want to buy." While I hadn't thought about it that way, I had to allow as that it made sense. "Is not heat, anyway," Hatoum said. "Is humility."
I looked up at him. "You mean 'humidity?'" I asked. "You think this is humid, you ought to go to Houston."

He turned his head and looked through the clouded plate glass window. "I must wash cream cone with hose twice a day."

Gil came back from the pay phone, scratching the back of his neck with one hand and carrying his sunglasses in the other. I expected him to be gone longer. I wondered if the cone had come with toilets. "We got to go into Lubbock," Gil said. He set his sunglasses down, took up the cup and leaned against the counter, scratching the small of his back against it.

Hatoum grinned at him. "You use phone?" He asked. "Phone work okay?"

Gil looked toward Hatoum out of the corners of his eyes. "Yeah. Works good." Gil looked back at his malt. "Why we got to go to Lubbock?" I asked. "We got to wait for a call there."

"You wait for call here," Hatoum said. "Phone work good." Gil looked at me then turned toward Hatoum. I wondered if maybe Hatoum put the phone in himself.

"They don't know to call us here," Gil said. He stirred his malt. "We got to go to a motel. The Day-O Motel."

"We're supposed to take the shit to a motel?" I asked.
"No," Gil said. "I told you we got to go the motel and wait for a call."

"Who we waiting on a call from?"

"Bea."

"Who?" I asked. Hatoum leaned over the counter.

"Bea," Gil said. "She works for the city. She's going to tell us where to go."

"Why didn't she just tell you while you had her on the phone?"

"Because I ain't talked to her, yet, that's why. She ain't in, and don't nobody else know where the shit's supposed to go."

"What happened to the salt mine?"

Gil ran out of malt. He sucked against the bottom of the cup. "Don't nobody know that anymore neither," he said. "I spent twenty minutes on hold for them to tell me they didn't know who I was, what I was hauling, or where I was hauling it to."

Gil set the cup on the counter, hitting Hatoum on the nose with the straw. Hatoum jumped back. Gil pulled a piece of phone book paper from his shirt pocket. "They give me this address to the Day-O Motel and said I should go there and wait for Bea to call me." He handed me the paper. "Come on. You can look this up on the Mapsco. They said to get there before six."
We bought two more malts -- they were the first things Gil seemed interested in eating in over a day -- and got back in the truck. Hatoum was unwinding his water hose as we pulled back onto Highway 84.

By my reckoning, we hit the junction with Loop 289 in Lubbock about two o'clock in the afternoon, but the traffic was backed up like it was rush hour. They had all but the far left lane coned off on 84, but we couldn't see why. The right lanes were empty behind the orange cones. There was no sign of freshly spread tar or new stripes or torn up pavement. We couldn't find any report of construction on the radio, and no one on Channel 19 knew what was going on.

After creeping about four miles in three-quarters of an hour, we saw one guy leaning against a shovel. "Look at this guy," Gil said. "Traffic's backed up for ten miles because of some faggot with a shovel." As we pulled near him, Gil blew the horn. The guy looked around like the horn woke him up. "Roll your glass down," Gil said.

I rolled the window down, let the heat cut straight through the air conditioning, and waved the guy toward us. He loped over, dragging the shovel behind him. Sparks flew from the blade scraping against the concrete. A cold shiver ran down my backbone, and I hoped no one in line was leaking anything flammable.

The guy walked over and peered up into the cab through these little wooden goggles that had just tiny slits to look
through. The sun hung above the driver's side of the rig, so the guy was looking right into it, but he didn't even lift his hand over his eyebrows or nothing.

Gil leaned over toward my window. "Hey, Buddy," Gil said, "what the hell's going on?"

"Don't rightly know," the guy said. He picked something from his nose and wiped his hand across the old Lakers t-shirt he was wearing. Time and sun had bruised the purple and faded the gold. "Road Crew dropped me off here and said they'd be back to tell me what to do."

"How long ago was that?" Gil asked.

"I'm not sure," the guy said. He reached out and touched my door. He traced the lettering painted there. Both doors had Gil's name, "Owner," and "Poetry, Texas" painted on them. Poetry, Texas didn't exist anymore, if it ever had, but Gil always claimed he was from there, claimed that's why his handle was "Poet."

"Which one of you is Gil?" the guy asked.

"Me," Gil said. "How long do you figure this goes on?" Gil pointed in front of him. The cones and traffic stretched as far as I could see.

"I wouldn't want to say," the guy said. "The truck that dropped me off come from the other direction, then it turned back around." The traffic in front of us moved about twenty feet. "The cones was here when I got here."
Gil straightened and pulled the truck ahead. "Hell of a lot of help he was," Gil said. "Bet you ten bucks he works for the government, too. Put that glass back up. It's burning up in here."

I leaned out the window. The guy was following us. I noticed the white pants he was wearing and the white shirt tied around his waist. Both had numbers stencilled on them.

"You guys going to Lubbock?" the guy asked when he reached my door.

Gil turned toward me. "Roll the glass up," he said. "If we ever get there," I said. Gil glared at me. I don't know why I didn't just roll up the glass, much less why I kept talking to the guy. "You from the county?" I asked.

"Hell, no, Man, they brung us all the way out from Crosbyton. I guess we done fixed all the roads around there." The guy leaned on the shovel again.

"What are you in for?" I asked. Gil tried to pull the truck forward, but he only had about a foot of room.

"Theft," the guy said. "Not no armed robbery nor burglary nor nothing like that. I just took some stuff." He looked down at the ground and laughed. "I just ain't never satisfied with what I got. Somebody else's always looks better."

"Roll the goddamned glass up," Gil said between clenched teeth.
By this time I had no intention of rolling the glass up. "What are them goggles for?" I asked, then added, "if you don't mind me asking."

"Well, usually a body wears these goggles for snow blindness," the guy said, "but I wear them because I ain't got no corneas." Gil turned his head to listen. "Corneas is what covers your eyes. Mine got burned off during one of them eclipses of the sun. They tell you not to look right directly at it, you know. Shouldn't have never told me not to do it, I guess."

Horns started blowing behind us. I looked up and the traffic was moving fifty feet ahead. Gil hit the gas. I rolled the window up as the guy vanished behind the trailer.

The traffic started moving and the cones ended about a mile up the road. One lane became two, then three. Gil sighed and rubbed his back against the seat.

"What do you suppose he expected to see?" I asked him. "Who?" Gil pumped at the gas. The rig jerked a little.

"The guy back there with the shovel," I said. "The convict. What'd he expect to see when he looked up at that eclipse?" Gil didn't answer. He was looking at the speedometer needle, which, despite now-frantic accelerator pumping, dropped past 50, then 40. Horns honked behind us. A guy in a jeep shot past us on the right and waved his middle finger at me.
"Godammit all to hell," Gil said and pulled out the lever for the hazard lights. Smoke began to trickle from under the hood. Gil tried to pull the rig off onto the right shoulder. I watched out the window to tell him when it was clear, but one car after another followed the jeep around us, all speeding under disgusted feet, most honking too late to warn of anything other than sheer aggravation.

Gil settled for pulling the rig as close to the median guardrail as he could. He cut the engine and dropped his head on the steering wheel. Sweat dripped from the tip of his nose onto his jeans. I pressed against my door just in case he started looking for something to hit, but he wiped his mouth on his shirtsleeve and kept his head propped on the wheel.

I looked away and out my window. The rig took up over half of the far left lane, and almost all the drivers that passed looked up at me like I planned the whole thing just to piss them off. I heard Gil open his door, and when I turned around, he was hunched over, hanging his head out of the truck, heaving cherries onto the median. I rolled my window down.

The cars cut it as close to the rig as they could, their tires chattering over the lane dividers. Traffic was so heavy and steady that it sounded like when I was a kid and clothes-pinned a playing card onto my bicycle wheel so
that it'd slap against the spokes. We called it machine-gunning.

The smoke from under the hood poured out thicker and blacker now. The cars hit it like it was almost a solid thing -- a curtain or a filter of some sort -- disappeared behind it, strained of all signs of anger except their fading horns. I heard Gil shut his door.

"Damn Arab poisoned me," he said. Cherries still clung in bits to the whiskers on his chin. I handed him an oil rag I had in my pocket. "We got any water left down there?" Gil pointed a shaking finger at the bottle by my feet. He clenched his fingers into a fist, relaxed them, shook his hand.

Gil soaked the rag and wiped his face. He held the rag against his forehead. I thought for a minute the color was starting to come back into his face but decided it was just the dirt and red dye bleeding from the rag. It streaked his face so that he looked like that ice cream cone of Hatoum's, pasty vanilla and oil rag syrup.

"Hadn't we better call for help?" I asked him. "Ain't no way we're getting out of here by ourselves."

Gil sat up straight. "Jesus, what time is it?"

I looked out the windshield and up at the sun. "A little after four," I said.

Gil stared out my window at the traffic lining up and slamming into the smoke. He picked up the handset and tried
to roust somebody up on an emergency channel, but the battery was low, and we could barely hear anything.

Gil called out our location into the static because the receiver sometimes goes out just ahead of the transmitter. "You think they got that?" he asked.

"Yeah, I figure somebody did," I said. In those situations, you learn to count on being heard even when you can't hear yourself. Gil laid back against the seat with the rag spread out over his face. I pulled my cap down, wiped my nose, and shut my eyes. I dozed to the rhythm of the rattling traffic.

I woke up with a pounding in my head that I hadn't felt since the morning after Gil and I entertained us a couple of bowling alley waitresses back in Boyd City. I thought Hatoum really had poisoned us until I figured out the pounding was coming from the front of the rig.

Gil still had his head over the back of the seat, still had the rag over his face, only now the rag had sunk into his open mouth. I watched Gil sleep through a three alarm fire in the coffee shop next to a motel we stayed at in Fort Worth, but he had a fifth of Antique bourbon in him at the time.

I looked out the windshield at this guy jumping around between the front of the rig and the back of a wrecker. He'd pound on something with a crowbar, then hop back and pull a lever, making the wheel-lift drop and scrape against
the concrete. I guessed he planned on just towing us out of there without so much as a "howdy" or a "kiss my ass."

I pulled the rag off Gil's face. My heart jumped. I had to look away a second and swallow before I could turn back. The veins in Gil's face showed through like his skin was onion peel. The big vein from his temple to his jaw ran as wide and blue as Rand-McNally draws I-45 from Dallas to Houston. I shook him awake.

He opened his eyes and stared, but I didn't think he saw me. I wasn't sure he was all the way woke up. "Gil!" I yelled, but I wasn't any louder than that damn idiot and his crowbar.

Then, I done what I thought I could never do. I hit Gil square on the jaw. Not no slap, neither, because I knew that wouldn't do no good, but a closed fist roundhouse right. I couldn't get as much room as a man likes to have when he wants to hit someone, even someone he's hitting out of the goodness of his heart, but I compensated by twisting my shoulder back a little farther than I normally would have. I landed a punch that would have knocked nine men in ten out cold, but it just woke Gil up.

Gil's eyes fluttered, then opened and closed in time to the beat of the crowbar pounding the front of the rig. Gil covered his ears. "What in the hell is all that racket?" he yelled.
"Wrecker," I shouted about two inches in front of his face. "Crowbar."

Gil leaned toward the windshield, trying to hold his eyes open long enough to make out what was going on outside. My eyes blinked, too, breaking up the tow truck driver like one of them books that make it look like people are fucking if you riffle the pages.

"That look like a wheel-lift wrecker to you," Gil said. "That’s what I thought it was, yeah."

"The son of a bitch’ll pull the axle clean off." Gil fumbled at the door handle, shouldered the door open and slid to the pavement. "Ah, Jesus Christ," he said and shook vomit off his boot.

I checked for a lull in traffic and opened my door. Gil was following the driver around, trying to get his attention, but the driver wouldn’t look at him, like he couldn’t stop for some reason.

"Hey, Buddy, you can’t use a wheel-lift. The load’s too heavy, and I already got a bent axle." Gil was walking slowly, all hunched over. "Listen, Pal, you’re going to need a flatbed." Finally, he just stuck an arm out and leaned on the front of the rig. I wondered if he was going to puke again.

The driver climbed into the back of the wrecker. He turned around and looked at me for a second. Not at me, really, more like on the ground behind me. He had on a cap
with "H & W Garage, Lubbock, Texas" printed on the front. A patch sewn to the chest of his blue work shirt said "Abbot."

When Abbot turned around and started going through a tool box, I twisted and looked at the ground. I shuffled to the side to move my shadow out of my line of sight, but I still didn’t see whatever he was looking at.

When I looked back up, Abbot was carrying two jack stands around Gil’s side of the cab. Gil was still leaning against the rig. Abbot meant to unhook the trailer, I guessed, and just leave it sitting on the median.

I walked along the side of the wrecker. "H & W Garage" was painted on the door above the slogan "We Could Tow the World" and a little picture of the world on the back of a wrecker. I thought about Hatoum’s ice cream cone bouncing on the back of a flatbed truck.

Abbot jumped in behind the wheel of the tow truck and started pulling forward. I heard a moan and found Gil slipping down to the pavement between the rig and the wrecker.

I ran back, grabbed Gil up, and half carried him to my side of the cab. I managed to get him in far enough to clear the door frame, then I crawled in over him. The wrecker was groaning, and when Abbot started honking, I realized the rig was in gear and the brake was on. I released the brake and put the rig in neutral. I raised a
hand to give Abbot the go ahead, but he was already pulling onto the highway.

Traffic had died down some, which bothered me because rush hour must've been about over. That figured to happen around six. The sun looked to be hanging only at about five fifteen, maybe five-thirty, though, which made me feel a little better. Gil faded in and out all the way to the garage, but he was fairly well awake and propped up on the door by the time Abbot pulled us in.

The H & W Garage was a big, crowded place. Maybe twenty or more bays stood in front, and I could see through the open front bays to more bays in back. All the ones in front looked to be full, with more rigs and pick-ups and cars and vans and even one bass boat on a trailer standing along the edges of the parking lot.

Abbot got out of the wrecker and disappeared around the front building as soon as we pulled in. Nobody rushed out to meet us; no one seemed nearly as interested in us being there as Abbot had in getting us there.

"Crazy bastard runs around like he's got the St. Vitus Dance," Gil said. "When he gets us here, we sit around like we're invisible." Gil reached over me and hit the horn. He picked up the damp oil rag from the seat and wiped his face. Then he just sat there with his jaw hanging open, the veins under his skin showing through clearer and clearer.
"Why don't I go see if I can roust somebody awake?" I opened the door and got out before Gil could object. I had to get out of the truck. Whatever was wrong with Gil was getting real big, and the cab was just too crowded for all of us.

I could breathe a little better outside, even in the hundred degree air. My sinuses seemed to be loosening up some, too. I breathed deeply, pulled hard against the inside of my cheeks, and spit on the ground. I wiped my mouth on my sleeve.

They had the air-conditioning running full blast inside the garage office. A woman wearing a wig she must've bought out of the Montgomery Ward catalog punched at a computer between long drags on an unfiltered cigarette. The computer was covered with greasy fingerprints and had a sticker in the shape of a spark plug on the side. The woman didn't look up when I came in even though a bell rang above the door.

"Excuse me," I said.

"Okay, you're excused," she said and kept on punching and dragging.

"I could use some help," I said, leaning over the counter. She did look up this time, but only for a second.

"You'll get no argument from me, Hon." The computer beeped. "Bastard lame-ass cheap piece of shit." She slapped the spark plug.
When she stopped swearing long enough to light another cigarette, I asked, "Who do I talk to about getting a truck fixed?"

She pulled the cigarette out of her mouth, looked me square in the face, suggested, "Veterinarian?"

How did I get here, I wondered. "Look," I said, "I don’t know what your problem is, Ma’am, but I got a truck that you towed in here setting out in the parking lot." I pointed. "I got to get to the Day-O Motel, and my friend needs to see a doctor."

"Don’t sound like it’s me who’s got the problem, now does it?" She stood up from her chair and walked to the counter. She took a pencil and piece of paper and peered out the window. "That a Kenworth?"

"Yeah," I said. I gave her the license and registration. Gil came in, holding his stomach. I turned to the wig woman. "You got a crap-- uh, a toilet, a restroom?"

"A facility?" she asked without looking up. "A pot, a shitter?" She raised the pencil over her head and pointed it behind her. "Back there," she said. "Don’t go stinking up the place." She reached into her shirt pocket. "Here." She put a book of matches in my hand. "Strike a match when you’re done."

Gil was already headed around the counter, so I pitched the matchbook toward him. It slipped through his fingers.
When he bent to pick it up off the floor, he fell against the wall, making a thud that shook the counter. The wig woman looked at Gil.

"This the one that needs the doctor?" she asked me.
"Uh, yeah, maybe," I said under my breath.

Gil picked up the matches, straightened, with some effort, to his full height and looked at me. "Who's saying I need a doctor?" he asked.

"He was." The wig woman pointed her pencil at me. I shuffled my feet and looked at the floor tile. Gil took a step toward me, but stopped there.

"Look, Gil," I said, "all I meant was maybe a doctor could give you something for your, your--"

"My what?" He looked like he might explode any second, but he didn't move any closer. "My what?" he asked again, louder.

"Your complexion, for one," the wig woman said. "You anemic?" Gil looked at her. "Maybe you got the sugar diabetes." She went back to writing. "My husband's a diabetic. He gets dizzy spells and I give him those little Snickers bars you hand out at Halloween."

Gil turned and walked slowly toward the restroom. The wig woman turned the paper around and held the pencil out for me to take. "Sign here," she said. I picked up the form and read it. "He's in the hospital now." I stopped
reading and looked at her over the top of the form.
"Hemorrhoids," she said.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"My husband," she said. "I just told you my husband
was in the hospital."

"Sorry," I said and looked back at the form. I
couldn't make head nor tail of what they aimed to do or what
they aimed to charge us for it.

"Damndest thing you ever saw," she said. "They got him
strapped to the bed on his belly with his ass stuck up in
the air."

"What do you think this is going to cost?" I tapped the
paper with the pencil.

"We got insurance," she said. "What's it to you?"

"No," I said. "What's it going to cost to fix the
truck?"

"That's kind of hard to say until we figure out what's
wrong with it."

"How long is it going to take?"

"Same answer."

"So, how long is it going to take to figure out what
it's going to cost and how long it's going to take?" I

"Look, Hon," the wig woman said. "These forms don't
grow on trees. They cost money." She took the form from my
hand and smoothed it out on the counter top. "Now, you just
sign here and we'll have a look at your truck. When we know something more, we'll give you a call. Let's say tomorrow morning sometime, if we can get to it."

"You ain't asked for a phone number." I said.

"Didn't have to," she said. "You told me you was going to the Day-O Motel. I'll call you there."

I was beginning to wonder if anyone ever did anything at the Day-O Motel except wait for phone calls, but when Gil finally came out of the restroom -- the wig woman made him go back in and light another match -- and we walked to the motel, which turned out to be just a couple of blocks away, I found out phone calls was just a side business.

If I'd have thought about it, I'd have counted on seeing a whore or two outside the motel and in the lobby. Counted on and appreciated. Except for lazy cops and cheap diesel, there's nothing a trucker hopes for as much as a nice, warm whore. Even in the hottest weather.

What I wouldn't have counted on, even if I'd thought about it, was close to thirty of the best looking women I'd ever seen in my life sitting, lying, leaning and just sort of floating around all the crushed red velvet in the lobby. There was men, too. Boys really, maybe a dozen. I've never been such a good judge of a man's looks, but I'm sure they kept busy with them that likes that sort of thing.

The women could've been movie stars, all of them. Silky, shiny hair in every shade you could hope for. Clear
skin. Big, white even teeth, all smiling at me. Bodies ranging from hard to pillow soft. Something for every taste. I’d walked into an all you could eat buffet, and I was plenty hungry.

Gil looked bad and was getting worse, but he wouldn’t hear talk of a doctor whatsoever. He looked around the lobby in a daze. I probably did, too, but he wasn’t seeing what I was seeing. I figured the sooner I got him lying down, the better.

As bad as Gil looked, he didn’t look as bad as the guy behind the front desk, a skinny guy wearing a Goodwill shirt that was a size too big. That’s what I thought, anyway. When I got closer, I could see he didn’t have on a shirt at all. His cheek bones pushed at his skin. His eyes looked like, at any minute, they might slip back into their holes like a couple of shiny, black crawdads with stolen bait.

I took the book and started to sign it, but Gil pushed me out of the way and took the pen from me. "Don’t start taking over. I ain’t gone yet," he said. He signed his name slowly, turned the book around to the desk clerk, laid the pen on the desk, gently, like he was afraid of breaking something.

"You got a message," the desk clerk said. He wrote something next to Gil’s name, then turned and took a piece of paper that was stuck through one of the key hooks on the back wall. He handed Gil the paper and a set of keys.
"We need two rooms," I said. Gil looked at me. The desk clerk slid me the book.

"What the hell we need two rooms for?" Gil asked. "You're eating up all the profits."

"I'll pay for my own room," I said. "I thought I might like a little privacy." I knew Gil wouldn't have the strength to argue no matter what I said, so I just signed the book and slid it back across the desk. The clerk handed me the keys.

"So, what's the paper say?" I asked Gil. He looked at it. "The room got a phone?" Gil asked without raising his head.

"No." The clerk reached down and set a phone on the desk. "Got a phone here, though. No long distance. Local calls are fifty cents apiece."

"I got to call long distance," Gil said. "How much is that?"

"Can't call long distance on that phone," the clerk said.

"Why not?" I asked. The desk clerk looked dumbfounded, like he'd never been asked that question before.

"Just can't," he said. "No long distance." Gil bent over the desk. The week before, he might have tried wiring the clerk to the phone and using him as a long distance antenna, but this time Gil just kept bending until his head rested on the desk.
"Where's the nearest pay phone then?" I asked.

"Right here." He pointed at the phone on the desk.

"Fifty cents."

Something just snapped inside me, I guess, and, without so much as a thought, I was over the desk with a headlock around the clerk. His scrawny neck felt like I could've broke it in two. Gil leaned over the desk, pulled at my arms, told me to let go. The look in Gil's eyes is what I remember. It was far away. I mean, he was there, telling me to let go, but his eyes were looking somewhere far away. Not ahead but behind, somehow, into the past. I let go.

I fell against the back wall, poking myself with hooks, sending all the keys down around me like a rain shower. I sat in the floor, breathing heavy. "Are all you people idiots?" I asked the clerk who was holding his neck, but not breathing hard at all. "It's like you all speak a different language or something. I ain't hardly understood nothing or nobody since we left Boyd City."

The clerk stopped holding his neck and started scratching his head like he might answer me. I knew that, whatever he said, I would want to hit him, so I stood up. I noticed another phone under the desk. "What's that?" I asked him, pointing. "It's a phone, don't even say it. Can it get long distance?"

"Yeah," the clerk said. "That's a business phone, though."
"Well," I said, "that's what we aim to use it for." I picked up the phone and set it on the counter in front of Gil. He started dialing.

"He can't use that phone," the clerk said. "It's reserved for internal business communications only." I just stared at him until Gil hung up the phone.

"We missed the call," Gil said. He handed me the paper. It said only, "Bea missed you, keep trying." I looked at Gil. "The number's been cut off," he said.

I looked down at the clerk who was bent over picking up all the keys from the floor. From that angle he looked just like one of them racing dogs, pacing around, working off all those pre-race jitters. "Hey, Buddy," I said. "Sorry about your neck." He looked up at me. "It's been a hell of a day."

He stood up, faced me. "I been through Hell, too," he said, not breathing. He offered his hand, and I shook it.

"What do we do now?" I asked Gil.

"I don't know." Gil leaned on the counter and took off his sun glasses. "I'll think of something. It'll have to wait until tomorrow morning, anyway"

I looked past him into the lobby now draped by the setting sun with a fiery red light. The whores glowed. A cute little blonde caught my eye. Then a redhead, then another blonde.
From the way Gil hugged the counter, I figured he'd skip the Day-O's buffet, and I'd have to finish his again. I thanked God for night blindness, and was, for once, just as happy not to drive after dark.

I managed to whittle my choices down to just two, one helping for me and one helping I'd have to handle for Gil. A man learns his limits after a while. They were the two cleanest, sweetest women you'd ever want to meet. You could've taken them to church and not been the least bit embarrassed. They both had every single one of their own teeth. I was in a dream the whole night.

The next morning came too damn early. The sunlight sliced through the flimsy red shades and made a bee line for my eye. I pushed Rachel off me and got out of bed. Once I'm awake there's just no point in trying to get back to sleep, so I figured I'd go get Gil. I found my shirt under the other one, Leah. She'd have been Gil's. It was a good thing he just stumbled off to bed. She liked to have killed me, and I was the very picture of health compared to Gil. I nudged Leah off the shirt and put it on.

I was ready to be done with that load we was hauling once and for all. Whatever it took. I knocked on Gil's door, but he didn't answer, so I went in slowly. I peeked around the edge of door first, just in case Gil had recovered enough to get in the buffet line. He was alone, though, looking like he did when he fell asleep in the
truck. I figured I'd have to hit him again, but he sat up
when I got closer to the bed.

"I'm through," he said, staring about a foot straight
in front of him.

"What?" I asked.

He looked at me. "I'm through. It's over."

I figured he must still be asleep. I walked over to
shake him awake. I thought he'd stopped scratching, but
with him there in nothing but his BVD's, I could see the
long red marks of his slashing fingernails and the scabbed
places where he'd drawn blood from his see-through skin.

"Here," he said. He stuck out his hand. I held me my
hand out, and he put the key ring in it. "You drive," he
said.

"We ain't got a truck," I said.

Gil pointed at a piece of paper on the night stand. A
message was scribbled there in the same hand as Bea's
message. "Garage called about twenty minutes ago," Gil
said. "Timing belt and a freezer plug. It's done already."

"We ain't got no place to go," I said.

"That's your problem."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you're driving," Gil said. "You're in charge."

"Come on, Gil," I said. "What's going on?"
"Ain't nothing going on except I'm retiring." Gil laid back on his pillow. "From now on, I'm just along for the ride."

"How am I supposed to know where to go?" I still held the keys like they was a dead fish or something. "I ain't even talked to these people. Not to Bea. Not to Nobody."

Gil smiled for the first time in three days. "Follow your gut," he said. "I've tried to figure it all out, but this is as far as it goes. I'm through talking."

He meant it, too. From then on, whenever I asked him something, he'd nod or shake his head or, mostly, just shrug his shoulders. It got to be aggravating as hell in almost no time at all.

He gave me Bea's number. I called again, and sure enough, I got one of them tones that deafens you so you worry more about being deaf than you do about whatever it was you were calling about. This was followed by a recording telling me I reached a non-working number. I had already figured that out.

We went back to the garage and got the truck, then back to the highway, where Lubbock's finest had already slapped a red sticker on the trailer. They hadn't put a boot on it, though. I expected they planned on towing it in whenever they got around to it.

The cops or somebody else had busted the latch on the trailer doors. The drums was still inside. I hoped for a
second or two that they'd be gone, that they'd be somebody else's problem. I tied the doors shut with my belt, then I re-coupled the trailer.

I hadn't driven the truck since I tested for my commercial license so I planned on taking it slow, especially once I had the trailer on. The last thing I needed was to jack-knife the trailer.

Gil had done it once north of Austin, filled the highway from shoulder to shoulder with about four thousand gallons of Rio Grande Valley orange juice concentrate. The fine was more than we made on the trip. And that was just orange juice. I mean, it was pretty sticky and the flies swarmed something fierce, but it didn't kill no wildlife or nothing. I didn't even want to think what they'd charge for a lake of hazardous chemicals, even though I doubted the flies would've been near as bad.

I pulled out onto the highway and realized I still hadn't figured out what I intended to do. I looked over at Gil. He just sat there, pale, his eyes closed, peaceful. I remembered Gil got directions from the CB once so I flipped it on. I started running through the channels and kept driving.

The highway was empty. We made great time. When we reached the mountains, I thought I might have some trouble, but the truck took the slope like it was a runway. I just wished we had someplace to go.
When I flipped the CB to channel nine, I heard a woman’s voice call my name. Not my handle, I didn’t have one; Gil always did the talking before. My name. I picked up the handset and said "Yeah, right here," but she just kept calling. Not like a question, not like she was looking for me, but like she could see me already and was calling me over. "I’m right here," I said. "What should I do? Where are you?"

"CB" she said. I slammed the handset against the steering wheel.

"I ain’t in the mood for no jokes, Lady," I said. "My friend is sick, and I got to get rid of this load."

"CB" she said again.

I held the handset out to Gil. "Gil, talk some sense into this woman. I can’t get a straight answer." He didn’t take the handset. I looked over and slammed on the brakes so hard that I winced then waited for the sideways tug of the jack-knifing trailer. The trailer stayed behind me, but Gil was gone.

I pulled the rig onto the shoulder and got out. I looked down the highway at where we’d come from. No Gil. I ran around to the other side of the truck. The passenger side door was shut. I looked underneath the trailer. Nothing.

I climbed back in behind the wheel, pulled the truck onto the median and headed back the other way. I hadn’t
paid much attention to the scenery or the mileage, so I just had to guess when I'd got back to where I was when I last saw Gil. Then I went up the other side of the highway again. All the while, I tried to get Bea or whoever it was back on channel nine. I got nothing but static.

I don't know how long I made that loop, or how many times, before I finally pulled over and started talking to myself. I might've started crying. One thing, maybe the only thing, I knew for sure. Like it or not, I called the shots now, and if I didn't find Bea, I wasn't ever going to find Gil or get rid of that load.

I pulled back out onto the highway, heading straight into the sun. I flipped the visor down and spotted Gil's sun shades sitting on the dash like a silver bullet or some holy relic that the sick or desperate might walk a thousand miles just to see, just to touch and be cured. After a short wrestle with my own good nature, I put them on. They fit funny, but I could see through them.

I told myself I'd just wear them until I found a crossover or an exit where I could turn around and put the sun behind me. It didn't seem to make any difference which way I headed, anyway. I just wanted to keep driving.

Because I'd seen west Texas highways before, I drove almost ninety miles before I even started worrying about not coming on an exit. I waited on the next mile marker to see how far I'd come from Lubbock or how close I was getting to
I wasn’t real sure by this point exactly where I was or which direction I was headed in, but there didn’t seem to be any point in trying to figure it out.

I drove another ninety miles before I checked the odometer. The marker never showed. No exits, neither. And, not only no crossovers, but somewhere during my search for mile markers, the oncoming lane disappeared behind a field thick with sagebrush. I expected the brush hid some sort of a gully, but I wasn’t stopping to check.

I watched the sun set through Gil’s shades. When the sun disappeared where the road ended, I pulled the rig onto the shoulder. I punched at the CB and just at the dash in general. I even started hollering, "Hey, Bea, can you hear me?" before I slumped over in the seat.

The sky flickered on, one, two, four, then about twenty all at once. I stretched out and propped my head on my hands so I could see it through the windshield.

I didn’t know why, but looking up at the night, I remembered the guy from Wichita Falls who cut off his toe. He missed the point of the game, I thought. Finding the last Toyota had nothing to do with it; it just meant the game was over. The point was to keep driving.

The sky sparkled something pretty by this time. I was thinking it was like I had driven inside a big ball, and somebody on the outside was sticking a pin in it, making
little holes, letting in some of the light. And the moon was a big hole, big enough you could stick your whole head through it if you could just figure out how to get up there. I pulled Gil’s glasses off, threw them in the floorboard, and for the first time in a good long while, I tried to count the stars.
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